

The Bomber Crash and Airman's Grave – 80 Years On

Were you a witness to the events of 31 July 1941 or to their aftermath? Or (perhaps more likely) do you know or did you know someone who was? The Ashdown Forest Research Group is trying to gather as much reliable eye-witness information as we can to add to what we have already. Memories after 80 years may be rusty, but we'd still like to pull together everything we can get.



The Airman's Grave

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the crash during the Second World War of a Wellington bomber on the southern slopes of Ashdown Forest. It resulted in the tragic loss of all six aircrew and the site of the crash is now marked by the Airman's Grave. "Grave" is a misnomer, however, as it is in fact a memorial which had its origins in a small wooden cross erected by the mother of one of the airmen.

The crash happened at 04:56 hours GMT (6.56pm local time – double British summertime was in operation) on the morning of 31 July 1941. The bomber had set off with five other Wellingtons from RAF Binbrook in north-east Lincolnshire at 00:01 hours GMT (2.01pm local time) to join a night-time attack on Cologne by a force of 116 bombers. It crashed on Ashdown Forest returning from the raid.



Vickers Wellington Mark II Bomber

The crash was attributed by the squadron's commanding officer to "Very poor weather and a faulty port engine". What caused the port (left) engine to fail is unknown; possibly it was due to enemy action such as anti-aircraft fire. But it must have been a struggle to keep the twin-engined aircraft flying and level. The official report for the incident concludes that "The Wellington hit the ground at

a slight angle and caught fire". Some eye-witnesses reported that the aircraft was found lying upside down after the crash.



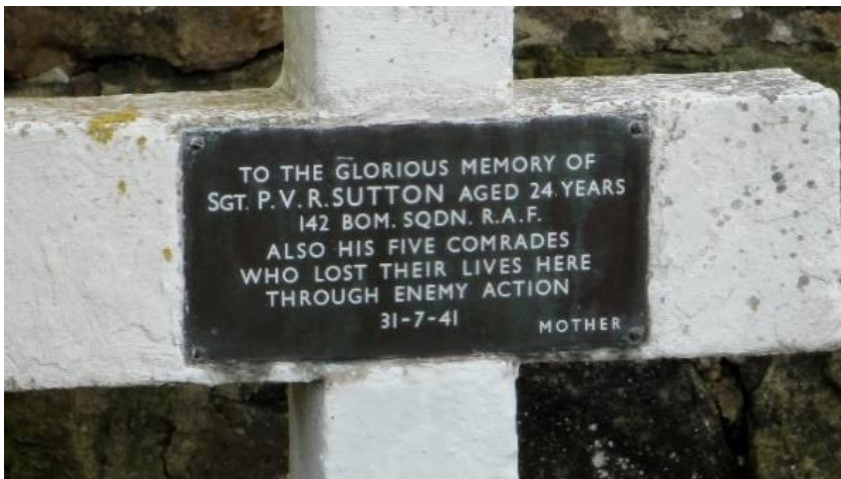
First Pilot Flt. Sgt. Harry Vidler

There is a mystery about how the stricken aircraft came to be flying through south-east England so far from its base. Was the pilot hoping to land on the Ashdown Forest airstrip near Wych Cross? Why had he ignored suitable airfields on the way? Had he got lost? Was bad weather a factor in the crash? There was low cloud blanketing the region that morning which would have made landing the plane even more hazardous and could also have led to disorientation.

Wartime censorship meant there was a news blackout. We've searched for post-war newspaper reports containing eye-witness accounts of the incident, but without success. And after an interval of eighty years there will be few people alive today who may have been eye-witnesses to the crash, the attempts to rescue the crew, or the aftermath. Nevertheless, we have made a renewed attempt – particularly through social media, organisations such as the Friends, and local history societies – to gather as much information as we can from people who were there at the time, or who knew people who were there.

There may be some inaccuracies and inconsistencies in people's recollections but the images that are left in our minds are still striking: of a stricken aircraft already on fire flying over Fairwarp towards the Forest where it then crashed, and of local people, including children, running or riding their bikes to the scene and desperately but vainly trying to rescue the airmen from the conflagration. Peter Freeland, a regular contributor to Ashdown Forest News who was four years old and living in Nutley at the time of the crash, wrote to relate how he and his grandmother heard a revving aircraft engine, its pitch rising higher and higher until it screamed; but they saw nothing. Was it the doomed Wellington?

All six members of the young aircrew died. They were Flight Sergeant Harry Vidler, first pilot, aged 27; Sergeant Vic Sutton, second pilot, 24; Sergeant Wilf Brooks, observer (navigator), 25; Flight Sergeant Ernest Cave, wireless operator/air gunner, 21; Sergeant Stan Hathaway, wireless operator/air gunner, 24; and Len Saunders, rear gunner, 21. Their names are commemorated on a plaque at the Airman's Grave, but they were cremated or interred elsewhere: at Hull, Lewisham, Ramsgate, Wallasey, Stockton-on-Tees, and Whitstable.



Commemorative plaque at the Airman's Grave

Elsie Sutton, the mother of the second pilot, Sgt. Vic Sutton, was devastated by her son's death. A serviceman's widow who in 1931 had already lost one son aged 18 in a motorcycle accident, she later moved from south London to Nutley, close to where the Wellington had crashed. She seems to have been absolutely determined to

ensure that Vic and his fellow crew members were not forgotten. It was Mrs Sutton who was instrumental in the creation of the walled enclosure surrounding a cross that has become known as the Airman's Grave, and donated £150 to the Conservators to ensure its upkeep. In recent years this simple, roughly built memorial has become the focal point for a moving Remembrance Day service now attended by thousands of people.

We have begun research into the men and their backgrounds. We found out for example that the first pilot, Harry Vidler, had learnt to fly just before the war (in a Gypsy Moth – a far cry from a Wellington bomber), while Stan Hathaway, a wireless operator/air gunner who had been with the squadron for less than six weeks, was a last-minute replacement for a regular crew member. Our research is uncovering more about all of these men, and we hope to report on our findings in a subsequent article.

We are seeking more eye-witness information. If you can help, please email the Ashdown Forest Research Group at enquiries@ashdownforestresearchgroup.uk

Ashdown Forest Research Group

<http://www.ashdownforestresearchgroup.uk/index.php>

