

HALIFAX CRASH ON CLEEVE HILL

Introduction

Halifax Mark III MZ311 (EY-M) of RAF 78 Squadron took off at 20:36 hours on 25 August 1944 with 5 other aircraft from RAF Brighton to lay (Mark IV) mines off La Rochelle in a minefield codenamed Cinnamon. At approximately 02:20 hours on 26 August while returning to base MZ311 crashed into Cleeve Hill near Cheltenham, Gloucestershire (approximately 170 miles south of home base). At the time of the crash, Cleeve Hill was covered in thick cloud, although this was not part of an overcast in the local area. There is no official report known which provides a reason for the MZ311 to be flying at that low altitude in the vicinity of higher ground.

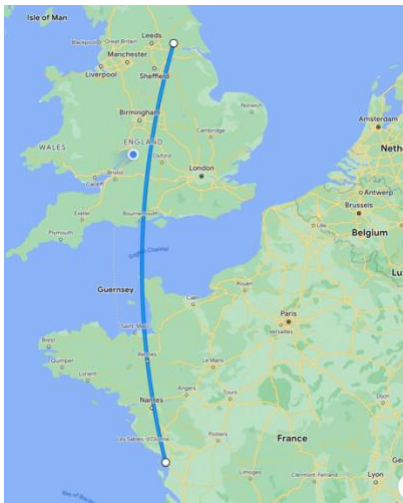


Figure 1. Locations of RAF Brighton and La Rochelle

The crash site is believed to be high up on the escarpment, above ‘The Ring’ (Scheduled Ancient Monument) and close to the edge of the golf course 17th fairway, although the point of impact cannot be precisely determined since debris was apparently strewn over a wide area. This is the area recollected by eyewitnesses to the crash scene. Coordinates offered in RAF records are some way off and do not tie in with the crash scenario.

The most conclusive evidence for the location comes from the chance discovery of a small fragment of the wreckage among gorse bushes in August 2020. The fragment bears serial numbers which positively identify it as part of a Halifax bomber, probably a section of an outer wing.

We are fortunate in having first-hand recollections of the incident from local residents who were children at the time. One of the first people on the scene was Walter Hilsden, a boy who lived at Nutterswood, a small settlement on the edge of Cleeve Common. He arrived well before the RAF secured the site and was met by the grizzly sight of bodies still in the wreckage. He picked up a fragment of the aircraft, but that appears to have been lost over the years.

Bernard Parkin, another local resident who was 14 at the time, recorded in his 1944 diary for Tuesday 29 August that he climbed to the top of Cleeve Hill with friends: “When we got by ‘Malvern View’ we saw a crashed Halifax and went to have a look at It. It was a very bad crashand all Canadian crew”. He even included a sketch of an aircraft in pieces.

Ann Dembenski also vividly recalls visiting the crash site as an 11 year old girl. Although the wreckage had been removed by that time, she and her school friends picked up handfuls of ‘silvery tape’ (chaff) which had been scattered over a wide area. She recalls a feeling of great sadness in the local community over the loss of young lives, with people saying, “only a few feet higher and they would have made it”.

The RAF report of the post-crash examination and wide dispersion of wreckage also mentioned by the locals indicated a more horizontal final path before impact of the aircraft (at approximately 200 knots) than the more vertical path likely had the aircraft struck the summit from above.



Figure 2. Fragment recovered in 2020

In December 2022, a small monument to the crash was put in place, and unveiled by Air Marshal Sir Dusty Miller – the President of the Cheltenham Branch of the RAFA.



Figure 3. Unveiling of the Monument

Crew of MZ311 (alphabetical order)

- **Flying Officer Elton Eugene FREEMAN.** RCAF (28223). Navigator. 29 YOA. Buried Brookwood Military Cemetery 43.E.6. Son of Eugene Ellis Freeman and Bada Christine Freeman of Fosterton, Saskatchewan, Canada.
- **Flying Officer John Alexander GLENN.** RCAF (J/36021). Air Gunner. 19 YOA. Buried Brookwood Military Cemetery 43.E.9. Son of Alexander and Nora Glenn, of Ferris, Ontario, Canada.
- **Pilot Officer Hugh Brannan HAMILTON.** RCAF (J/89908). Air Gunner. 21 YOA. Buried Brookwood Military Cemetery 43.E.8. Son of James and Janet Hamilton of North Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada.
- **Sergeant Emmanuel Henry HARRIS.** RAF Volunteer Reserve (1423759). Wireless Operator 20 YOA. Buried Blaenavon Cemetery Sec. B. Grave 794. Son of Samuel and Beatrice Harris of Blaenavon; Husband of Mary Selina Harris of Blaenavon.
- **Flight Lieutenant Charles Maurice HOWES.** RCAF (J/25977). Pilot. 22 YOA. Buried Brookwood Military Cemetery 43.G.1. Son of Charles and Bertha Howes, of Folkestone; Husband of Rosemary Howes.
- **Flight Sergeant John McARDLE.** RAF Volunteer Reserve RCAF (1684019). Flight Engineer. 23 YOA. Buried Liverpool (Allerton) Cemetery Sec.8.Gen. Grave 709. Son of John and Adelaide McArdle of Liverpool; Husband of Jean Ella McArdle (Nee Winterbottom) of Aigburth, Liverpool.
- **Flying Officer George William McCARTNEY** RCAF (J/28883) Air Bomber. Buried Brookwood Military Cemetery 43.E.7. No age or NOK details found.

RAF 78 Squadron

78 Squadron RAF had members of many nationalities. Five of the crew of MZ311 were Canadian, and two were RAF. RAF Bomber Command lost 55,573 people during WW2. 10,250 of these were Canadian.

The crew was flying their 25th operational sortie. At this time of WW2 although survival prospects while serving as aircrew in Bomber Command were slowly improving from the horrific attrition rates of months earlier the probability of survival was on average about 50 percent over a standard period of service usually taken to be 30 operational sorties.

78 Squadron completed 5120 sorties with Halifax and lost 158 aircraft which was a 3.1 % loss rate. The unit suffered more losses and a higher percentage of personnel/aircraft loss of any Halifax Squadron. 78 Sqn is believed to have dropped the greatest tonnage of bombs in 4 Group (approximately 16,900 tons).

These fairly typical figures of achievement and attrition remind us of the horrendous cost paid by Bomber Command as it sent out its youthful crews night after night.

Cinnamon Minefield

The identification “Cinnamon” was the code name for the minefield laid by RN and RAF off the ports of La Rochelle and La Pacille to inhibit the passage of German U-boats to and from these important U-boat bases. Other minefields had comparable names. Submarine U-667 was sunk by a mine as it transited to La Pacille in the vicinity of the Cinnamon minefield on 26 August 1944, the same day that MZ311 was lost after laying mines in the same minefield. The submarine was lost with its entire crew of 45.



Figure 4. U-Boat Pen at La Rochelle

At that time of the war the RAF and RN were likely to have had good knowledge of U-667's movements from the very capable signals intelligence (SIGINT) organisation developed during the previous 5 years. It is possible the minelaying operation which MZ311 and other aircraft of 78 Squadron took part in specifically targeted U-667 but there is no specific evidence for that conclusion. It is well known that U boats based in the Bay of Biscay were considered an unacceptable operational threat. The RAF therefore was devoting particular targeting attention to that area. For their part the dangers of the Bay of Biscay had led U-boat crews to call it Totenallee or “Death Row”.

It seems appropriate to remember MZ311 and the aircraft's gallant crew, their contribution to our freedom and their loss, high in a lonely and remote spot of the Cotswolds. The next stage in this story will be a major event on 26 August 2024 – the 80th anniversary of the crash – to formally dedicate the memorial. The dedication will be by Air Vice-Marshal The Venerable

Ron Hesketh – a member of the Cheltenham Branch of the RAFA and a former Chaplain-in-Chief to the RAF. Air Marshal Sir Dusty Miller will lead the event.

Although the dedication will not be until August 2024, planning for the event is already underway. Many relatives of the crew have been identified and contacted, and some will attend the dedication. Representatives from the Canadian High Commission and various military, ex-forces and civic organisations are expected to be there.

The service of dedication will be at the crash site and start at 12:00 hours. The site is on a hill-top near to Cleeve Hill Golf Club, where parking will be available. It is recognised that all-terrain transport will be required for those who are unable to walk to the crash site.

Further details will be provided nearer the date.

Much of the information in this document was provided by Cris George, a former member of the Royal Australian Navy Fleet Air Arm. He became interested in the event and has been instrumental in both investigating it and initiating its commemoration.

The commemoration is being organised jointly by the Cheltenham Branch of the Royal Air Forces Association (RAFA) and the Cleeve Common Trust.

*All your operations were planned with great care and skill.
They were executed in the face of desperate opposition and appalling hazards,
they made a decisive contribution to Germany's final defeat.
The conduct of the operations demonstrated the fiery gallant spirit which animated your
aircrews,
and the high sense of duty of all ranks under your command.
I believe that the massive achievements of Bomber Command
will long be remembered as an example of duty nobly done."*
-Winston S. Churchill