

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Association I would like to welcome you all to St Denys' Church this afternoon; the church is full which is wonderful to see. There are many local people and people who have travelled from all over the UK and Ireland. We also have friends from Belgium, Denmark and Australia with us. It is wonderful that people will travel from all over to be here to remember the Squadron and its service personnel.

I thought I was going to have to say how disappointing it had been to not be able to see a flypast of the Lancaster (due to the weather), but I can clearly scrub that line as we have just had the most wonderful flypast over the church. Brilliant!

This is the first time, that I am aware of, that Jack Harris has not given this speech in the church. So I have big shoes to fill.

My name is Peter Coulter and I am involved with the 550 Association because my father-in-law F/Lt James (Jim) Cassidy was a Nav in the RAAF and flew his second tour with 550 Squadron from North Killingholme. I first became involved with the Association when I took Jim to RAF Coningsby in 2007 for the unveiling of the BBMF Lancaster painted in the livery of BQ-B the "Phantom of the Ruhr". Jim had flown his 2nd op with 550 in what was the Phantom's 121st and, as it turned out, last operation. The aircraft was grounded by his pilot, S/Ldr (and Flight Commander "C" Flight), Willie Caldwell immediately after the flight as "un-airworthy". In fact several crews had reported that the Phantom was flying badly prior to this last operation. So S/Ldr Caldwell did what any self-respecting Flight Commander would do, he decided to take the Phantom for a test flight to check it out. It just so happens that this test flight was a six-hour jaunt over enemy held territory. Some test flight!

This has been a big year for the Association. It is the 75th anniversary of the formation of 550 Squadron in November 1943. It is the 100th anniversary of the formation of the RAF. It is the 20th anniversary of the unveiling of a memorial in Westerlo, Belgium to the 550 Squadron Lancaster DV309, P/O Hinde and crew.

The Association attended three commemorations in Belgium this year; the unveiling of a new memorial plaque in Sint Niklaas to the P/O Dukelow crew, the celebration of 20 years of raising of a Memorial Stone in Westerlo, and the commemorative event in Rebecq to the P/O Purney crew; plus two other crash sites in the south of the country close to the border with Germany, were also visited and wreaths laid on the memorials there on behalf of the Association. A new memorial to the S/Ldr G S Smith crew was unveiled in the Netherlands. A crash site, with memorial, in France to the F/O H Jones crew was also visited and respect paid to the members of the crew lost there. The Association was represented at the annual Belgian remembrance ceremony at the Cenotaph (in the event actually in Horse Guards) in London in July, attended by the King and Queen of the Belgians, an event first started in 1934 by King George V to remember the sacrifice of Allied forces for Belgium in WWI and now also WWII.

About a fortnight or so ago some photos were posted online by a research group in France trying to trace the relatives of Sgt Frederic Harold Habgood (of the F/O Jones crew just mentioned a few moments ago). A bracelet, an identification tag, bearing the name and service number of Sgt Habgood had been discovered. This was discovered in an ash pit of the crematorium of Natzweiler-

Struthof Concentration Camp in, France. Sgt Habgood had been captured and was thus a PoW. Yet he was transferred to Struthof by the Gestapo and executed by hanging there on 31 July 1944. He was just 21 years old. This heart-rending, and indeed horrifying, artefact and associated story reminds us in a brutally direct manner of the dangers faced by every crew man each time they stepped aboard there is aircraft. The determination, resolution, quiet courage these young men displayed night after night after night as they set off knowing the dangers that lay ahead commands our greatest respect.

When the memorial in Westerlo was unveiled 20 years ago a number of our 550 veterans were in attendance. Sadly this year this was not the case. Time has a habit of marching on. However, a large contingent of Association members were present, as were many local people and representatives from the veterans organisations in Belgium. This time, as back then, a convoy of WWII military vehicles took people from the church to the Memorial Stone. As part of the ceremony local children told the story of the crew in Flemish and English.

This year marks 100 years since the formation of the RAF out of the RFC at the end of World War I. Since that time the RAF has often been at the forefront in the struggle against forces of oppression across the world, not least in World War II when the Nazi shadow bestrode Europe. So in this particular year remembrance is especially important for these "magnificent men in their flying machines" who flew, fought and sometimes, sadly, did not return. In Belgium this year we were able to visit the crash site of the first airmen, two men of the RFC, lost in action in August 1914 in an AVRO aircraft. Through the activities of the Association and remembrances here in North Killingholme and everywhere else that the Association is represented at, we, you, play a part in ensuring that the men and the women of the RAF and WAAF, and of course their comrades-in-arms in the RAAF, RCAF and RNZAF, are kept alive in the memory.

We here today remember the men and women of 550 Squadron three-quarters of a century ago and the efforts they made, and the sacrifices they made, in two short years of operations from North Killingholme that saw the tide of the war turn towards victory. We also think of the men and women of the Association, the people in this church and the ones who could not be with us today but who nonetheless are part of our "family", who have since then worked to ensure that that sacrifice has not only not been forgotten but, rather, is actively remembered.

Finally, as I am sure all of you know Angela and Jack married on Tuesday 14th August. A couple of years ago I had cause to ring Jack at home. Jack was not at home, and thus I was in receipt of what was, and indeed still is, to my mind one of the best answerphone messages I have ever encountered. "You have reached Jack Harris. I am afraid I am not available at the moment. Please leave a message or, if you wish, you can reach me at my girlfriend's house!" Jack has been a driving force in the Association since its foundation and Angela has been at his side for some years now, helping him with that task. We wish Angela and Jack every happiness in this new phase of their lives together.