

During the German invasion and subsequent occupation of Belgium, many sacrifices were made with dramatic consequences in many families, including the families of our allies. With this in mind, the town council organized this memorial in collaboration with the friends of 115 Squadron.

At this place here seven young men lost their lives in the struggle for our freedom, and it is therefore important that we continue to remember this. A monument like this must continue to connect current and future generations with the past. Not only to learn lessons from it, but also and above all to realize time and again that freedom, democracy and the values of our Western society are not so obvious.

75 years ago, 7 soldiers got into an aircraft in the full extent of their lives, and aware of all the dangers, they left for Germany to bomb strategic targets based on the idea that the air war would help bring the Nazi regime onto its knees. And they did this even though they were all too well aware of the fact that the British bombers had a high loss rate.

Whitchford, a village in the county of Cambridge. We write April 24, 1944. Here was the airfield of 115 squadron, and since the afternoon there was already an increased activity. The squadron prepared for a new operation, as did the crew of Flight Sergeant Bennett. Sergeant John Plummer was perhaps thinking of his one year older brother Kenneth who had gone missing on 23rd November 1943. His Halifax had gone lost without a trace.

At five minutes past 10 o'clock in the evening., F/S Bennett pulled the Lancaster off the runway. The bomber with serial number HK542 was one of the several Lancaster's that the squadron would deploy that night. In total, they left with 637 aircraft to bomb a major traffic junction in Karlsruhe. The way back did not go according to the planned flight route, there must be a reason for this that could not be traced however.

Due to the many night operations, the Germans had worked out a considerable reinforcement of their line of defence. Not only searchlights and anti-aircraft guns were deployed, but the best pilots of the night fighters also operated from airfields in Belgium and the Netherlands. Through their radars they were meanwhile aware that the bombers were flying on a homeward course. The alarm sounded in Sint-Truiden.

Oberleutnant Heinz Schnauffer hung in the air at 12 minutes past midnight with his Messerschmitt. He did not have much hope for it, because not only did rainwater seep into his cockpit, their radar had also failed, which made them electronically blind. It took more than two hours for them to get into the bomber stream who were returning home.

And so the Lancaster crew crossed the path of the most successful night fighter crew. Because the fact that they were noticed was mainly due to the German gunner Wilhelm

Gänsler, who had managed to find the bombers with his exceptional night vision - cat eyes so to speak.

At 3 minutes after 2 o'clock he led his pilot to their first victim. At an altitude of 5800 meters, Schnauffer went in to attack and after a few bursts of fire, the Lancaster was on fire. Nobody could leave the bomber which crashed close by.

Barely twenty minutes later they hung, just north of Mechelen, under a different Lancaster of the same squadron. Also those boys didn't stand a chance. With screeching engines that were on fire, they crashed into Pasbrug, near Sint-Katelijne-Waver. No one survived. That night the Royal Air Force lost a total of 19 aircraft during this operation to Karlsruhe, of which Schnauffer had shot four of them alone.

In the days after the crash, the seven airmen were salvaged by a German salvage command from Brustem airfield. They were buried on a place which was created at the German airfield. Thus the families received the so-fared telegram at home: missing in action. After the war they were all reburied at the Commonwealth cemetery in Heverlee, where they still rest today.

They were:

Pilot Flight Sergeant Peter Bennett from Engeland - 20 years

Flight Engineer Sergeant John Plummer from Engeland - 19 years

Navigator, Flight Officer Adolf Hoffman - from Australië - 21 years

Air Bomber, Sergeant James Zegerchuk from Canada - 22 years

Wireless Operator, Sergeant Norman Forth from Engeland - 22 years

mid upper Gunner, Sergeant William McKelvie from Schotland - 24 years

rear Gunner, Sergeant Alan Holt from Engeland - 20 years

And I would like to end with a quote which I have recently read:

Retrieving memories and commemorations are a signpost for peace!

Let us not forget them, ever!