



Graves of airmen in Idom Churchyard

Published by the Parochial
Council of the Parish of
Idom-Råsted. Text by
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Updated 2021 by
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www.airmen.dk/c040.htm on
AirmenDK www.airmen.dk

It looks peaceful when you walk past the graves of airmen at Idom Churchyard, and the white headstones do not make a great fuss about themselves, but behind all of them is hidden a dramatic story never to be forgotten. It became a turning point in the history of Idom and in the life stories of seven families.

Idom became the last resting-place for these seven young men due to a number of coincidences. They flew for a free world and just happened to be in the air nearby. Residents of Idom became first-hand witnesses of a sea of fire that they would never forget. And all of the epilogue tells exactly how conditions were in Denmark then.

We have to go back to the time when Vera Lynn sang about The White Cliffs of Dover and We'll Meet Again. The tide of battle had definitely turned for the Germans a few months after D-Day, and it was in that certainty that seven young men let themselves in for what was to be their final destiny.

On Sunday 15 October 1944 more than 500 Allied bombers took off from airfields in England. The mission for 22 Halifaxes from The Royal Canadian Air Force was to drop mines in the waters near Læsø. They took off from Skipton-on-Swale at 18.30 hrs and made landfall at Søndervig on the west coast of Jutland a couple of hours later. Here they turned north, using the northern tip of the Ringkøbing Fjord as a landmark.

This was to become the last flight for one of the crews. Over Vind the plane was attacked by a German night fighter. During the aerial battle that followed the farm "Kirkegård" in Vind was hit by burning debris. Its outhouses burned down.

Halifax MZ901 was hit so seriously that it had to make a forced landing and a field near Simonstrup in Idom was spotted. However, the pilot was unable to carry out a proper landing, so the plane crashed. The four mines, each 1,500 lb, were dropped just before the landing, and they did not detonate, when they hit the ground. The plane burst in flames at the landing, and six airmen perished in a sea of flames from fuel and ammunition.

One of the crew members was not found in the wreckage. He had tried to save his life by bailing out at the last moment. Unfortunately his parachute did not have time to open up properly. His body was found two days later in a field of beets. The man who found the body later told about scratches in the ground near the body indicating that he had survived his jump for a short time.

The plane hit the ground near the farm “Engholm” at about 22.50 hrs. The glare could be seen from all of the parish, and the neighbours quickly came to the site. They realized that due to the flames it was impossible to do anything for the remaining six crew members on board. Subsequently it was not possible with certainty to identify the individual members of the crew, due to the blazing fire.

The Wehrmacht arrived at the site the next morning and ordered the remains of the Allied airmen to be pulled to the closest hedgerow where they were buried with a small ceremony. Vicar Frank in Idom tried to obtain permission for a decent funeral, but his plea was rejected brusquely.

The bombs had landed in a marshy meadow near the Høgsbjerg Brook and there they lay undamaged. Later the Germans decided to detonate the bombs at the site. This damaged buildings within a kilometre. The bang could be heard as far away as Holstebro, and some people in Struer thought that it was an earthquake! The remains of the plane were cut up and sent Germany to be reused.

With great probability the plane was shot down by the German pilot Johann “Hans” Dreher and his crew in a German Junker 88 C-6. They were stationed in “Fliegerhorst Grove”, which after the war was taken over by the Danish Air Force and renamed “Airbase Karup”. Dreher, 25, and his crew crashed at York in March 1945. It became the last German plane to crash in England.

After the war it was decided to give the airmen a decent burial, and this took place on 15 June, the day of our national flag. The bodies were disinterred and placed in seven coffins that were taken to a field south of Idom Church. Along the route residents of Idom had strewn twigs of fir on the road as a last honour to the fallen.

All night the coffins stood in the field with a guard of honour of local members of the resistance movement. The sight of the coffins covered by Union Jack has stuck in the memory of many residents of Idom. The next day about 60 Canadian soldiers from a Wing of the RCAF stationed near Flensburg came to Idom to take part in the funeral.

The burial commenced at 15.00 hrs with a ceremony in the field with the coffins. Several hundreds of residents of the area attended the ceremony together with representatives of the resistance movement. After speeches by Vicar Frank, the Canadian Army Chaplain Handley Perkins, and Colonel Otto J. Feddersen from Jydske Dragon Regiment on behalf of the resistance movement the coffins were carried to a large common grave west of the church.

The grave was covered by fir and flowers, and via a short ramp the coffins were carried down into the grave by Canadian soldiers and members of the resistance movement together. Vicar Frank was in charge of the graveside ceremony together with the Army Chaplain. The latter's participation had not been planned on beforehand, but on his own impulse he took earth with his hand and sprinkled it on the coffins. 13 Canadian airmen fired three rounds of salute of honour, and "The Last Post" was played on a trumpet. At last "Always dauntless" was sung by everybody.

The ceremony was recorded by the press section of the Canadian military, and on the following day it was broadcast over Canadian radio. In the hectic months after the end of the war the authorities hadn't managed to send an official message to the relatives of the deceased airmen at home in Canada. They had only received a short note that the plane had crashed, and that everybody on board was 'missing'. One of the families happened to listen in to the broadcast from the funeral during which the names of the deceased were mentioned, and in this way received the final message of the death of their son in an indirect manner. The official message that their son was dead and had been buried in Holstebro – not Idom – only arrived a month later.



The Wehrmacht denied the fallen airmen a proper burial, but subsequently residents of the area planted a small garden on the graves with seven bushes of roses surrounded by a small hedge. Very often there are fresh flowers on the graves.



In the autumn of 1945 there was a public subscription in Idom to mark the graves and maintain them in future.

Iron crosses were placed on the graves together with some plants.

In 1951 the present gravestones came from England.

All Allied soldiers who lost their lives during the two World Wars have got similar gravestones in light sand stone.

As the individual airmen here in Idom have not been identified, the headstones are placed in alphabetical order.



Photo: Evald Sønderby 1964

When bombs from the plane were detonated an iron bar from the bomb rack went deeply into the marsh. It stood there for many years as a visible memory of the crash. In 1985 the piece of wreckage was salvaged by soldiers from the barracks in Holstebro and taken to Idom Church. Here it was cut up and made into a simple cross which is now placed behind the graves.



Each of the seven coffins were carried into the churchyard by three members of the resistance movement and three Canadian soldiers. After the burial here in Idom they went on to Gørding to participate in the burial of an Australian airman who had fallen down there on 7 October 1944.

Source of photo: <http://www.aircrewremembered.com/guild-robert-douglas.html>