

## Memorial Ceremony, Nørreskoven, Als

16 SEP 2021, speech by Anders Straarup

Thank you for inviting me to make this memorial speech! It's impressive that so many people on [Als](#) back memorial ceremonies, both around 1864 and at the 9 monuments to airmen who crashed on Als – nearly the same number of monuments as in Funen and in Zealand.

Above we specially honour the 14 young men who lost their lives 77 years ago when [their planes](#) collided over Als and pieces of wreckage were scattered over a large area. Indirectly we also honour all other Allied airmen and the millions of others who fought to liberate our part of the world. Fortunately the Germans were defeated.

In a couple of months we can look forward to having a choice between a number of politicians who have very different ideas about our future. That would have been impossible if the Allied forces had not won the war! Since 1949 Danish soldiers of all services have cooperated with colleagues in NATO, and the Home Guard which is connected with the armed forces has gained growing importance in all branches of the defence. A great number of Danes have served in other parts of the world. (I did not do that during my first period of service before I left the Army as an officer of the reserve in the field artillery.) They can be proud and we greatly appreciate their service. Freedom is worth defending.

The young airmen did their duty without speculating too much about the orders they received. They might be on a very dangerous bombing raid, and then they could look forward the day when they had completed, normally, 30 operations. After that they would be transferred to service without direct confrontation with the enemy. Mathematically they had very bad prospects. Still they kept flying, and we must admire them for that.

[Figures from the Bomber Command Museum of Canada](#) about airmen of the Commonwealth in Bomber Command that were in charge of the bombers: Of every 100 airmen who joined Bomber Command, 45 were killed, 6 were seriously wounded, 8 became Prisoners of War, and only 41 escaped unscathed (at least physically). Of those who were flying at the beginning of the war, only 10 % survived. All of them were volunteers. Many of them were trained in Canada where German planes could not disturb them. There were classes for each crew position – pilots, navigators, gunners and so on. Some of you may have tried to put together teams of specialists. How did that work? The airmen were gathered in a big hall with the message: Well, chaps, sort yourselves out. Every pilot knew that he had to gather a full crew, and each of the others looked for a pilot to whom he could entrust his life. A little like a public dance-hall. Who is taking the initiative? The system worked very well, but it was not perfect.

[A complete overview](#) says that 55.573 from Bomber Command were killed. In round figures: More than 38,000 from the Royal Air Force, 10,000 from the Royal Canadian Air Force, 4,000 from the Australian Air Force, 1,700 from Royal New Zealand Air Force, 900 from the Polish Air Force + over 30,000 from the United States Army Air Forces. Figures from the database on AirmenDK from [463 planes](#): Of [3,089 airmen](#), nearly all of them shot down over Denmark or Danish waters, 1,030 rest in Danish soil (further there have been 140 Americans, now we only have 5) 938 with no known grave, 639 prisoners of war, 92 reached Sweden and 45 reached England. Most of them from the Royal Air Force, but also from many other countries! On my website I have more about every single man and very much about a number of them.

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others I have been able to tell in detail about crashed planes on Als, including the two [Halifax](#)-planes from which we now commemorate the 14 airmen who perished here a little after midnight on 16 September 1944, at 01.05 hrs. Of 490 planes on a bombing raid on [Kiel](#) 6 were lost, including the 2 whose crews we commemorate here. Planes were normally on the same route and in about the same altitude to bomb during 10-30 minutes. You could defend each other and you could hide in the crowd. Often the bombers flew at a distance of only 30-50 metres between them, even at night. Strange that there were not more collisions.

Another current example is from south of Langeland where two American B-24 Liberator bombers during a formation flight on 20 June 1944 at an altitude of 20,000 feet collided so that one of them had its tail cut off. [Both planes](#) crashed into the sea. Only 3 of the 20 airmen were rescued from the Baltic Sea, the rest of them perished.

Sergeant [Wagner](#), who was in the tail section, was washed ashore on Ærø 19 days later. He had a fine burial in [Marstal](#). On 21 August 2021 wreaths were laid by the acting American ambassador, the Danish Armed Forces, and the Municipality of Ærø. The Fleet Diving Unit of the Royal Danish Navy is trying to find and identify more parts of the wreckage of one of the two planes, and - if possible - also the remains of perished airmen if any were to be found. You may see more from the main page of AirmenDK with the link [Marstal 2021](#) at Memorial Ceremonies. At the top of the main page I have the links [Nørreskoven](#) og [Als](#).

We are happy that very dedicated people of the area are making plans for an Air Force Memorial Center Als.

Tonight we remember the 14 airmen with gratitude and respect for their effort that helped secure that we can live in peace and freedom.

We will remember them.