

Unveiling of memorial plaque to fallen British soldiers at Højer sluice

Speech by mayor Jørgen Popp Petersen from the Municipality of Tønder on 20 August 2026
translated by Anders Straarup.

Dear all

Welcome to the dike at Højer.

We are gathered here today to unveil a memorial plaque. A simple plate with a few words, but behind the words a story of courage, war, losses, and humaneness is hidden.

Nearly 85 years ago in the night between 19 and 20 August 1941 a drama took place over exactly this area. A British Wellington bomber was on the return flight from a bombing raid on Kiel. The crew just had to manage the flight back over the North Sea, but here at Højer the plane was hit by German flak and crashed into the Wadden Sea.

Six young men lost their lives. They were sons, brothers, friends and colleagues. They had families, dreams, and a life ahead. Instead Tønder became their last resting place.

It is a destiny that reminds us that World War II was not only fought far from Denmark. Also here in the border region war left its marks. The sky above the marsh became a part of the battlefield of Europe.

It is important to remember that even if Denmark in many ways was far from the worst of the horrors of World War II, then war was not without human costs here. That is also the case in our own border region.

About 20 people from the Tønder area lost their lives due to internment in concentration camps during the war. In the last few years six so-called stumbling blocks (snublesten) have been laid at places where some of them lived till they were arrested or shot.

It is important that we render visible the human losses and sacrifices that wars bring, because behind the numbers and the historical events there are always people – with families, friends, dreams, and lives that should have been lived.

When we remember their names and their fates, we give them a place in history, because if their fates are forgotten, the people behind the story might also be forgotten.

Memorial plaques, stumbling blocks (snublesten) and other memorials help us maintain the human perspective – and remind us why peace never must be taken as given.

Today it is hard to imagine that night. It is quiet here. You hear the wind, the birds and the tidal water. But just the silence makes it even more important that we remember, as peace is never to be taken as given.

Some of the most remarkable in this story is also what happened after the crash. When the

six airmen were buried at Tønder Cemetery it was with full military honours. The coffins were wrapped in the Union Jack, and even the German Wehrmacht showed respect to the fallen airmen.

This memorial plaque is not only about six British airmen. It is about all the young people who were sent into a war they had not created themselves. It is about the price that freedom has had. And it reminds us about the responsibility we have today to guard peace, democracy and cooperation between nations.

At a time when war again has become a part of the reality of Europe, history alas has become more present. It makes memorials like this even more important. They help us to remember what happens when peace collapses.

I would like to bring my sincere thanks to the Danish Air Force Association in the border region for the initiative and the great work to make this memorial plaque a reality. Thanks to all who have contributed with knowledge, permissions and other kinds of help.

When we in a moment unveil the memorial plaque, we do more than just mark a place of history. We give six young men their place in history and in the landscape. We tell future generations that here something happened that must never be forgotten.

History lives on, when we tell it. That is why this memorial plaque is not only a memory of the past. It is also a promise to future that we will remember, learn and guard peace.

Thank you.