

## Back in 3 hours - 75 years ago

Translated from article with photos

### [Tilbage om 3 timer-75 år siden](#)

in the newspaper [Dagbladet Holstebro Struer](#) on 14 October 2019

Front page: A photo of Evald Sønderby by Johan Gadegaard, caption:

**On Tuesday it is 75 long years since one night a bomber was shot down over Idom. Evald Sønderby will never forget that night and he makes a virtue of passing the story on to younger generations.**

We have never met as a family without talking about that night.

### FACTS Memorial ceremony

On Tuesday 15 October the parochial church council of [Idom-Raasted](#) will hold a small ceremony to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the event.

The crash left traces not only in Idom where the soldiers are buried in the churchyard. The ceremony is also a greeting to the bereaved in Canada, who lost a husband, a son, a father or a brother.

The memorial service is initiated at 1. p.m. in Idom Church by Vicar Rasmus Valentin Christensen. Subsequently there will be a wreath-laying ceremony at the graves in the [churchyard](#).

Residents of the area and representatives of the [Jyske Dragonregiment](#) will be present. After the ceremony there is a common coffee table in [Plexus Idom-Råsted](#), where Evald Sønderby, Lind, will give the outlines of what happened right after the crash, which was near his childhood home.

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## I'll be back in three hours, he told his future wife - 75 years ago

One night a plane was shot down over Idom. On Tuesday it will be 75 long years ago. But is there a expiry date for a tragedy like that? Isn't it time to forget and move on? Not for relatives, residents of the area - and the future.

**WAR** by Palle Hyldahl Brændgaard

**IDOM:** Evald Sønderby's first memory is *not* the night when 7 men died near his childhood home. *Neither* is it when he heard stories that the eldest pupils at his school were allowed to visit the crash site the following day.

It was said that they were still able to see parts of bodies at the site, such as a boot still with a foot in it.

*Neither* was it the recollection of another story forever etched into the memory when you hear it: How parts of the bodies of the dead soldiers were loaded a little at random into 7 coffins with a potato fork, but at least only one head in each coffin.

No, the first memory of Evald Sønderby, 79, is from a bright peaceful day in March. He was playing at the barn when a company of German soldiers came marching by. Evald was born during World War II. Denmark was occupied when his mother was still nursing him, but this day in March he was old enough to remember. He remembered the snowdrops along the base of the house. Here the soldiers settled for a break. One of them spotted little Evald and could not resist the sweet toddler.

I remember I was taken up, and in the soldier's pocket was a snowdrop that they liked to pick. Was the family afraid of the Germans? - No. My mother was not afraid when the Germans came, but she was afraid that the Englishmen would come too, because then she knew very well what would happen.

### They shouted with joy

Literally there was a dark cloud over Denmark on 15 October 1944. A German night fighter rushed out of the cloud and attacked Halifax III [MZ901](#). The heavily loaded bomber was at the rear of the formation that had taken off from England. In the encounter with the agile German the Halifax was like a tired and heavy boxer against an energetic rattlesnake. The fight ended with a knockout in the first round. A few rounds of gunfire were heard in the space over the home of the Sønderbys near Idom. The bomber was hit and crashed into the ground.

Meanwhile Evald's elder brothers followed the events from behind the windows of the farmhouse. They identified the planes with names of their own invention. The 'growler' was in the air that night. The distinct sound was behind the nickname.

Evald was 4½ years old then. The 7 soldiers fighting for their lives were 20-33 years old. 6 of them were Canadians.

They had shouted with joy the day they enlisted for the war. Now they were going to experience the world, relatives have told Evald Sønderby later.

They were an experienced crew with a number of missions behind them - enough for a well deserved leave. However, they volunteered for this special mission. Actually there was only

one problem. One of the regular members of the crew had fallen ill. Instead they got hold of [Hugh Joseph Loughran](#) from [Belfast](#).

They persuaded him by claiming it would be a peaceful and uneventful mission. Loughran was about to get married, and he told his fiancée to keep the tea warm, as he would be back in 3 hours, Evald Sønderby states.

On Tuesday 75 years have passed. They failed to return. Instead they are buried at Idom Church.

### The poor boys

The Halifax had flown so low that parachutes could not be used. The only option was to make a forced landing.

Before that the pilot had dropped the load of mines meant for the waters near [Læsø](#) to fight U-boats. Instead he dropped the mines over a bog so they plunged into the swamp. The forced landing was to be between two rows of fir trees, but the plane hit a hilltop and exploded. The 6 persons on board perished, and so did the seventh who was found in a nearby beet field. Evald Sønderby's father had no doubt of the fate of the men that night. "They are dead. There is a smell of burnt flesh," my father said. My mother cried.

"The poor boys," she said, Evald Sønderby states.

The Germans did not dare to remove the dropped bombs, so instead they decided to blow them up on the spot.

The Germans came and said that they would be blown up the next day at 4 p.m.

For some odd reason my parents took us into the tool shed, and we were sitting there with our neighbour when we heard a tremendous bang. I can still feel how the earth was lifted more than a foot up. The explosion was 200-300 metres from our home, but in Holstebro, 7 km away,

the explosion made shop windows break, Evald Sønderby explains.

The hole after the bombs was so big that it was filled with water from Høgsbjerg Bæk, a nearby little stream, so we had a nice skating rink, he adds in an attempt to see at least one small advantage of the tragedy.

The fact is that even 75 years later the air crash is not forgotten.

### The Squadron Leader

Later Evald Sønderby became a teacher in Lind. When the 75th anniversary is commemorated again on Tuesday, he'll return to the place where he came from, as so often before in that context. But isn't there an expiry date even for tragedies?

We have never met as a family without talking of that night, so it has really marked us. I remember that [TV Midtvest](#) (our local TV-station) made something about the accident 10 years ago, and they kept asking me, "What did you feel? What did you feel? What did you feel?" But this is not about me. It is a part of the history of Denmark and of the world that we have to remember. The children who visit the plot today have absolutely no idea what it means - actually that is why it is so important that we still remember, Evald Sønderby states.

A few days ago he had an e-mail from Carolee Fitz-Gerald. Her father [Virgil Lee Riley](#) was among the deceased in 1944. She was 1½ years old then, so she never got to know him. Today she is too old to travel to Denmark, but she appreciates the memorial ceremony, and it is in her thoughts.

Over the years Evald Sønderby has also had contact to others who had their lives changed. On an earlier occasion the sister of the 20-years old [John Peter Grace](#) has told him what it

meant when the headmaster and the vicar entered the classroom. Later she has visited her brother's grave.

Of course she cried a lot, and I remember how she told me that she wished her parents had known how her brother was buried. They thought he was buried in a grass field.

They never talked about his death any more, Evald Sønderby adds.

However, both soldiers have had lakes named after them in their home country.

But the deaths did not only affect an area and the bereaved families. The Squadron Leader who helped persuading Loughran from Belfast never recovered.

Many times he has regretted his decision, and it haunted him for the rest of his life, Evald Sønderby explains.

Caption, page 11: **In 1984 the bomb rack was made into a cross after it had been [standing](#) in a meadow in Idom for a number of years. It is a reminder of a time when residents of the area had a constant fear of invasion and war, Evald Sønderby explains. Photo: Johan Gadegaard.**