



5003 Airfield Construction Squadron

Royal Air Force

R.A.F Ashford - 22 May 1944

Like several other similar airfields of its type, R.A.F. Ashford in Kent was in use for only a relatively short period of time during the Second World War. Naming the airfield R.A.F. Ashford was something of a misnomer, as it was located approximately two and a half miles to the south-west of the market town of Ashford, and was actually situated in the parish of Great Chart, between the A28 main road, and the (then) sparsely populated hamlet of Chilmington Green. To enable the Advanced Landing Ground to be constructed, a lot of the initial work was undertaken by army personnel of the Royal Engineers and Pioneer Corps. From August to October 1943, R.A.F. Ashford was used by 414 and 430 Squadron's of the Royal Canadian Air Force, equipped with North American Mustang fighters, and for a short time in October 1943, by 65 and 112 Squadron's of the Royal Air Force, both of which found the runways at R.A.F. Ashford liable to damage their Spitfires undercarriages. Further work on the runways providing aircraft parking areas and ordnance protection, was carried out early in 1944 to prepare R.A.F. Ashford for American use. As part of the upgrading of the airfield, American engineers added additional length to the two runways, the perimeter track, and also constructed more hangars. On Wednesday 5 April 1944, approximately half of the 406th Fighter Group, 9th USAAF personnel arrived, comprised of airmen of the 512th, 513th, and 514th Fighter Squadron's, USAAF, who had made a thirteen day crossing to Liverpool on board the 25500 ton troopship Stirling Castle, which had been requisitioned from the Union-Castle Mail Steamship Company for use as a troopship in 1940. Thursday 6 April 1944 saw the arrival at Ashford of the remainder of those who had made the Atlantic crossing. Most of the accommodation was in tents which had been erected on farmland and in the orchards adjoining the site of the Advanced Landing Ground, but a number of nearby farm buildings and requisitioned houses were also put to use, with Little Chilmington Farm used for the main stores. A few days after the arrival of the air and ground staffs, their aircraft arrived in the form of Republic Aviation P-47 Thunderbolt's, followed by others during the next few days, and soon the Advanced Landing Ground, designated Station 417, USAAF supported in excess of sixty aircraft, and eventually numbered seventy eight. Primary role of the three 406th Fighter Group squadrons was providing tactical air support for the U.S. Third Army over the battlefields of northern Europe, and took only seven minutes to reach the French coast from Great Chart. Early in May 1944, Lieutenant Bernard F. Dugan, of the 514th Squadron lost his life

in a heroic deed by which he saved the lives of three of his comrades, an action for which he was later posthumously awarded the Soldiers Medal. After all preliminary tasks had been disposed of, the 514th Squadron prepared for its first flight, which was a squadron formation flying their P-47 Thunderbolt's, which was led by the squadron commander Major Gene L. Arth. The flight leaders on that occasion were Lieutenant J. C. Bloom, Lieutenant R. L. Saux, Lieutenant F. L. Dowell and Lieutenant J. E. Wilkes. On Monday 21 April 1944, Major Arth and Lieutenant Dowell joined the 337th Fighter Bomber Squadron of the 362nd Fighter Bomber Group, for the purpose of orientation in combat flight. Each was required to participate in three such missions before assuming the responsibilities of flight commander in their unit. It was during this acclimation period that Major Gene L. Arth became the first war casualty of his squadron. He was killed on Tuesday 22 April 1944, while on his second mission of the day, whilst in the act of strafing a train two miles west of Lingen, Germany, Major Arth's aircraft was hit several times by enemy anti-aircraft fire causing his aircraft to crash. Having carried out many successful combat missions, several of which were attacks on railway rolling stock, marshalling yards and other similar targets, on Sunday 21 May 1944 aircraft from Station 417, USAAF successfully carried out an attack on rolling stock at Tirlmont, resultant of which claims were submitted by pilots of hits on five locomotives, two trains, and sheds in the marshalling yards. Very early on the morning of Monday 22 May 1944 the Luftwaffe struck back at Station 417/R.A.F. Ashford, by dropping a one thousand pound bomb which was doubtless intended to wreck havoc amongst the Americans, but it was the personnel of the 5003 Airfield Construction Squadron, Royal Air Force who suffered the most casualties, including the loss of fourteen men. The Operations Record Book for the 5003 Airfield Construction Squadron, Royal Air Force, is now held at the National Archives, Ruskin Avenue, Kew, Surrey, TW9 4DU, which gives the following details for that fateful day:- "RAF Ashford, (Kent). Bomb Damage: On the night of 21-22 May 1944, at 0035 hours (12.35am), a 1,000lb HE bomb was dropped on the tented site, accommodating the reserve flights, M&E, MT, and Plant flights. Total casualties were 30, 14 proving fatal. 26 tents were damaged beyond repair, and a further 14 rendered unserviceable. The camp field kitchens were demolished and 2 water bowsers and 2 items of MT were damaged. Primary Conclusions: The vital necessity of a medical orderly and first aid staff complete with medical supplies, stretchers etc. on each site not covered by, or within reach of RAF Station or USAAF Station medical facilities." 5003 Airfield Construction Squadron, R.A.F. was amongst the 28 R.A.F. Airfield Construction Squadrons which were numbered 5001 to 5028, that were formed as Works Squadrons on 1 April 1941 for the maintenance and construction of airfields. It was not until 1943 that their name was officially changed from Works Squadrons to Airfield Construction Squadrons, as it was at that time deemed to be a more fitting and appropriate title.

Roll of Honour

Monday 22 May 1944

BARKER, ROBERT MEGGISON. Corporal, 1193827.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 35.
Husband of Eva Barker of South Shields, County Durham.
Buried Harton Cemetery, St. Georges Avenue, South Shields, Tyne and Wear.
Grave Ref: Section 9. Grave 8082.

BERRY, MAURICE JOSEPH. Aircraftman 2nd Class, 3032196.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 18.
Son of Joseph and Alice Berry of Erdington, Birmingham.
Buried Birmingham (Witton) Cemetery, Moor Lane, Birmingham, B6.
Grave Ref: Section 56. Grave 10520.

CREED, DOUGLAS. Aircraftman 2nd Class, 3032263.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 18.
Son of Frank and Ellen Creed of Aldershot, Hampshire.
Buried Aldershot Civil Cemetery, Hampshire. Grave Ref: Section W. Grave 34.

DAWSON, HORACE SYDNEY. Leading Aircraftman, 1131855.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Buried St. Pancras Cemetery, High Road, East Finchley, London N2.
Grave Ref: 1131855.

DODD, CHARLES. Aircraftman 2nd Class, 1782187.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 20.
Son of Charles and Kate Dodd of South Grangetown, Sunderland.
Buried Sunderland Cemetery, Ryhope Road, Grangetown, Sunderland, SR2
9RS. Grave Ref: Ward 11. Section A. Grave 8736.

EDWARDS, JAMES. Corporal, 339344.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 25.
Son of Jack and Fanny Edwards.
Husband of Annie Maria Edwards of Burham, Rochester, Kent.
Buried St. Mary's Old Churchyard, Burham, Rochester, Kent.
Grave Ref: N.W. corner.
Commemorated on the Burham, Rochester, Kent civic war memorial.

FIELDHOUSE, ARTHUR RAYMOND TREVETT (RAY).

Aircraftman 2nd Class, 1812827.

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 19.

Son of Arthur Fieldhouse and of Louisa Winifred Fieldhouse (née Trevett) of East Ham, London.

Buried City of London Cemetery and Crematorium, Aldersbrook Road, Manor Park, London, E12 5DQ. Grave Ref: Square 75. Grave 111657.

GIBBINS, MICHAEL JOHN LEONARD. Aircraftman 2nd Class, 1891512.

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 18.

Son of George Malcolm and Emily Caroline Gibbins of Brixton, London.

Buried City of London and Tower Hamlets (also known as Bow Cemetery) Southern Grove, Mile End, Tower Hamlets, London. E3. Ref: Screen Wall. Section R. Grave 4901. All of the 279 Commonwealth war casualties of both world wars who are at rest in the above cemetery are recorded on bronze panels affixed to a screen wall. In addition there are also 4 Dutch Merchant seamen named on the Screen Wall.

GOODHALL, GEORGE HENRY. Leading Aircraftman, 1318442.

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 22.

Son of Henry and Mary Goodhall of Clifton, Bristol.

Buried Bristol (Canford) Cemetery, Canford Lane, Bristol, BS9 3PQ.

Grave Ref: Section OO. Grave 388.

HORWOOD, SAMUEL FRANK. Aircraftman 1st Class, 1290372.

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 34.

Husband of Edna Edith Horwood of Southville, Bristol.

Buried Bristol (Greenbank) Cemetery, Greenbank Road, Bristol, BS5 6HL

Grave Ref: TT. 562.

IRVINE, JOHN. Aircraftman 2nd Class, 2225523.

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 18.

Son of Alfred Irvine and of Sarah Grace Irvine of Littleborough, Rochdale, Lancashire.

Buried St. Barnabas Churchyard, St. Barnabas Drive, Shore, Lancashire.

Grave Ref: Row 6. Grave 4.

KERMAN, WILLIAM JAMES. Leading Aircraftman, 1441811.

Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.

Buried Fulham Palace Road Cemetery, (also known as Fulham Old), Fulham, London, SW6 6RR. Grave Ref: Section 1. Grave 11.

KERSH, HYMAN. Aircraftman 1st Class, 1440746.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 36.
Son of Samuel and Rebecca Kersh.
Husband of Alice Margaret Kersh of South Shore, Blackpool, Lancashire.
Buried East Ham (Jewish Cemetery) Marlow Road, London E6 3QG.
Grave Ref: Block U. Grave 11.

TRUPHET, GEORGE JENNINGS. Leading Aircraftman, 1196674.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. Aged 36.
Husband of Lillie Truphet (née Woolston) of Turvey, Bedfordshire.
Buried Turvey Cemetery, Carlton Road, Turvey, Bedfordshire.
Grave Ref: Grave 720A.

By using the excellent "Geoff's Search Engine" an additional six casualties of the 5003 Airfield Construction Squadron, Royal Air Force were found. As all of these additional casualties lost their lives post Monday 22 May 1944, it is likely that some of them, or even all, had been survivors of the attack at R.A.F. Ashford, and it seemed fitting that they too should be commemorated on this 5003 Airfield Construction Squadron, Royal Air Force, Roll of Honour.

ALEXANDER, ALBERT EDWARD. Leading Aircraftman, 1215985.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Died Sunday 22 April 1945. Aged 38.
Son of William and Florence Alexander of Reading, Berkshire.
Husband of Kathleen Annie Alexander of Reading, Berkshire.
Buried Reading Cemetery, Berkshire. Grave Ref: Division 54. Grave 11726.

DUGAN, JOHN. Leading Aircraftman, 1543460.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Died 31 October 1945. Aged 41.
Son of William and Elizabeth Dugan of Southport, Lancashire.
Husband of Alice Dugan of Southport, Lancashire.
Buried Southport (Duke Street Cemetery, Lancashire).
Grave Ref: Section 15. Grave 323.

EARL, GEORGE WILLIAM. 2nd Class, 1880482.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Died Tuesday 31 July 1945. Aged 43.
Son of George Harriss Earl and Margaret Earl.
Husband of Lucy Agnes Earl of Hassocks, Sussex.
Buried Keymer (SS. Cosmas and Damian) Churchyard, Sussex.

FREEMAN, WILLIAM. Flight Lieutenant, 89457.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Died Tuesday 17 July 1945. Aged 58.
Husband of Dorothy Freeman of Woodside Park, Middlesex.
Commemorated at St. John Crematorium, Woking, Surrey. Panel 2.

PACKHAM, PERCY SYDNEY. Leading Aircraftman, 1460248.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Died Saturday 20 January 1945. Aged 41.
Son of the late Reuben and Margaret Packham of Burgess Hill, Sussex.
Husband of Elsie May Packham of Burgess Hill, Sussex.
Buried Burgess Hill (St. John) Cemetery Extension, Royal George Road, Sussex.
Grave Ref: Section A. Grave 270.
Percy died of a brain tumor, two days after returning to his unit from leave. His late father Reuben Packham, was killed in action on 8 August 1918, whilst serving in the 7th Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment, and is at rest at Beacon Cemetery, Sailly-Laurette Somme, France.

WILLIAMS, GWYLIM MATTHEWS. Leading Aircraftman, 842401.
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve.
Died Monday 6 November 1944. Aged 39.
Son of Hugh and Ellen Williams.
Husband of Lillian Dorothy Williams of Hampton Wick, Middlesex.
Buried Teddington Cemetery. Grave Ref: Section C3. Consecrated Grave 2523.

Our prime reason on this occasion for establishing the names etcetera of the fourteen, 5003 Airfield Construction Squadron, Royal Air Force personnel who sadly lost their lives on Monday 22 May 1944, at R.A.F. Ashford, was to hopefully assist the parishioners of Great Chart, Ashford. We welcomed being contacted by a Great Chart resident with a request for help, who explained that in addition to the planned restoration of the village civic war memorial, it was also intended to establish a permanent remembrance corner in the parish church of St. Mary's. It is very commendable, that in addition to honouring the men from Great Chart, who died in or resultant of the two world wars, it was also going add the names of the men who died on the above date, and also those of twenty one members of the USAAF, that the 'team' at Great Chart have found, who left on missions from USAAF Station 417/R.A.F. Ashford, never to return. It was also learned that staff from the Kent County Archives at Maidstone, has visited Great Chart primary school to give a talk concerning those who were lost in the two world wars. It would seem that probably as a direct result of the visit by the archives staff, and doubtless also to the ongoing local efforts in commemorating the local Great Chart, the R.A.F., and USAAF victims of war, it was noticeable that at the remembrance parade through the village to the civic war memorial on Remembrance Sunday, the majority of the participants were Great Chart school children. In view of the above, it would seem likely that those people associated

with Great Chart who died in war, be they British and American will probably be remembered and honoured in the village for many more years to come. Needless to say, www.kentfallen.com sincerely wishes well all who are involved with the ongoing war remembrance project at Great Chart.

