

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Association I would like to welcome you all to St Denys' Church this afternoon. To those who do not know me my name is Peter Coulter and I am involved with the 550 Squadron Association because my father-in-law F/Lt James (Jim) Cassidy, who was a Navigator in the RAAF, flew his second tour with 550 Squadron from North Killingholme.

As always there are many local people and people who have travelled from all over the UK and Ireland to be here with us today. Welcome.

We are also pleased to welcome today visitors from The Netherlands. Last year Paul Batenburg, a member of a scheme whose members adopt a grave in a CWGC Nederwert cemetery in Paul's case 550 airman Lesley Harvey RCAF, joined us. Paul is accompanied by his grandson Tyl. We welcome also Arno and Mariska Gommans who do the same wonderful job for Henry Black's grave in Venray. Henry Black's son, Norval Black, is also with us today meeting for the first time the family who take care to remember his dad. There are 693 graves in CWGC Venray, 17 of them 550 airmen; and every one of the 693 has been adopted by a local family. That simple stark number says so much; not only about the men who sacrificed all, but also about the people who never forget that sacrifice.

We warmly welcome our visitors Annaxue Yang (daughter of Charlie Baldwin an air-bomber with the F/O Cowper crew) and Lynn McGettigan from Australia. That's one mighty hike to be here and we are so delighted that you are also able to be here with us today.

It is wonderful to see that people will travel from near and far to be here, even if only for a few brief hours, to remember the Squadron and its service personnel. Welcome all.

I have some apologies I should mention. Don And Val Kentish are not able to be here today. They first attended with Don's mother Helen (a cousin of pilot F/O Eric Allen killed on Operation Thunderclap, the Dresden op February '45) in 1995, and have attended every year since. Also Gary Berg (a nephew of F/O Berg the navigator with the S/Ldr Smith crew lost over the NL in June 44) and Steve Parker (nephew of Sgt. Parker a gunner in the W/O Ansell crew lost on return over DK in August 44). Continuing the Danish connection Prof. Ole Seberg, who has done so much in respect of that crew lost over Denmark, has sent his apologies for not being able to be with us this year. Also Jack Harris, one of the founders of the Association, who will be 103 in September this year.

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the formation of the squadron and the commencement of operations from RAF Waltham in November 1943. It was not until the beginning of January 1944 that the squadron could move to a newly created home, North Killingholme Station, where it stayed until squadron disbandment at the end of October 1945. This year also marks 30 years of reunions in North Killingholme the first reunion having been held only the year before in RAF Hendon.

The Association was represented at two commemorations in Rebecq, Belgium this year at the site of the loss of the P/O Purney crew of JA712/BQ-H. In Sink Niklaas in Belgium the P/O Dukelow crew of LL851/BQ-V were also remembered in commemorative services.

In Venray in The Netherlands association members Stephen and Janet Roke visited to lay a wreath for Reg Brown of the F/O Dodds crew and were able to meet many of the Venray adopters who make those special efforts remembering the Dodds crew.

On behalf of the Association I would like to express thanks to all the communities and individuals in Belgium, The Netherlands, France and Denmark where memorials to 550 Squadron air-crew have been raised. These young men are still remembered in the communities where their lives were sadly cut short. Thank you.

The operational life of 550 Squadron was also short; two years from first flights out of RAF Waltham to disbandment in North Killingholme. We remember this weekend the men and women of 550 Squadron and the efforts and sacrifices they made, in that very short time of operations from North Killingholme. We also think of the men and women of the Association, the people here today, and the ones who could not be with us today, but who nonetheless are part of the "550 family" that extends over all parts of the globe.

I'll conclude with a couple of items of thanks. First our thanks to Mike Leeman for looking after the "550 shop" in the village hall and the fantastic job he does looking after our wonderful museum. To Kath Robinson who finds that when Mike gallivants off for a holiday she suddenly has an unexpected influx of visitors for the museum. Having close at hand so many people who are happy to give their time to ensure that 550 Squadron is remembered is indeed a blessing.

Thanks also to Sylvia Pexman and her team of ladies who provide the tea that we will enjoy later in the Village Hall. Every year the quiet of the village is disrupted for a brief period by this invasion of friends and relatives of airmen who once, so briefly, called this place "home". But we find only warmth and appreciation and we enjoy some wonderful hospitality. Thanks also to our organist Wendy Pankhurst and to minister Rev. Trevor Riess for leading our services of remembrance today.

This evening at dinner George Turner will say thanks to the many people who have done so much for the Association over the years. I will only mention the one person who will not be mentioned this evening. George looks after the Memorial Stone and the surrounding area. The site of the Memorial Stone is an important place. It marks a point close to the former airfield, so visitors seek it out. Chance passers-by stumble upon it and learn of the brave men once stationed here. George, thank you for maintaining it so well year-round, especially at this Reunion time and also on Remembrance weekend when it really is the place for us to gather and remember. I have been asked to note that that if you wish to take any photos at the Memorial Stone today then please do so by 17:00 as thereafter most items will be removed for safe-keeping.

Finally! Thank you, to all of you for being here today. You each have your own special personal reason which has compelled you to be here today. Perhaps it is an airman who did not make it back. Or perhaps one who did and lived to tell the tale. Whichever is the case above all it is for someone who served regardless of the cost and who, for a short time, called North Killingholme "home". We will remember them.