Mosquito MK NF XVII HK304, Woodside Field Flitwick 24th February 1945
A cold and windy Saturday, 27th November 2021, saw the unveiling of a memorial in the gardens at the Rufus Centre, Flitwick, Bedfordshire. This stone is to commemorate two Mosquito aircrew, killed when their aircraft crashed into a field between the villages of Flitwick and Steppingley.



Image credit: Jesse Billington

This crash, and the story, is beginning to slip out of living memory. That this memorial now exists is thanks to the hard work and research of Flitwick resident Mark Rankine, with the help of local Ward Councillor, Cllr Gareth Mackey' town council, and the support of Flitwick Town Council and Mayor Andy Snape.

The Crash

At 10:50 on the 24th February 1945, de Havilland Mosquito NF Mk XVII HK304 of No. 51 Operational Training Unit, took off from RAF Cranfield in Bedfordshire for a Ground Control Intercept training exercise. At the controls were pilot Sgt Jacques Bonnewit, aged 25, and navigator Sgt John Muncaster, aged 20.

At 12:28, Sgt Bonnewit completed the exercise, and was instructed to reduce HK304's altitude from 10,000ft to 4,000ft: normally, at this point the next transmission would be requesting permission to land. It was sunny with a very slight haze, no cloud, and a moderate west-southwesterly wind.

Witnesses on the ground noticed the aircraft approaching from the southwest. There were often aircraft in the skies, and this would be routine for an aircraft performing a wide, left-hand circuit into RAF Cranfield. This time, however, as

the Mosquito approached Steppingley at 12:32, witnesses reported it to spin down, dive, then recover at an altitude of around 1,000ft. At that point, the wings and part of the tail were seen to break away; the fuselage and centre section of the wings plummeted to earth and crashed into Woodside Field, between the villages of Flitwick and Steppingley. Both Sgt Bonnewit and Sgt Muncaster were killed.

Police Constable G.C. Upchurch was in his garden, when he became aware of an aircraft flying nearby. All sounded normal until there was a sudden bang: he looked up to see the aircraft spiral down until it hit the ground. "He noticed that the outer part of the wings and tail surfaces appeared to be missing but that the engines were in place and that a large number of detached pieces seemed to be hanging in the air above the main part." He estimated it broke up at a height of 1,000ft.

Mrs Finedon also witnessed the accident from her garden, on the east side of the road from Flitwick to Ampthill. Again, all seemed normal, until she heard a "spluttering cracking noise", followed by an explosion and pieces coming off the aircraft. To quote directly from the crash investigation report, her "… impression was that the wings went up above the rest of the machine with other pieces. The body remained complete. It all happened very quickly and the aircraft started to drop down into a spin at once."

Wreckage was strewn over the area. The fuselage burst into flames on impact. Most of the aircraft landed in an area about ½ mile by ¼ mile immediately to the west of where the fuselage landed. A trail of smaller pieces extended roughly ¾ mile further to the east-northeast.



Locations, using Google Map data (February 2022)

Flitwick has expanded dramatically since the 1940s. Although there isn't a map from the time of the crash, descriptions of the debris field and extent of scatter, together with testimony from other eyewitnesses, hint that the area circled is likely where the fuselage and much of the wreckage landed.

The investigation concluded that the accident was likely to be due to the failure of the rib structure of the starboard radiator upper nose fairing. This occurred at about the time Sgt Bonnewit resumed normal level flight after descending to 4,000ft. This resulted in the tearing away of the wing upper skin, causing temporary loss of control and sending the Mosquito into a roll and spin.

It was considered the evidence pointed to the probability that Sgt Bonnewit had regained control, but the manoeuvres overstressed the airframe such that the wing structure catastrophically failed. Detailed examination showed both wings suffered almost symmetrical failures: the front spars ruptured outboard of the engine nacelles, and the rear spars at the outer end of the outboard tank bay.

It appeared neither of the crew tried to escape the aircraft during its descent.

The Aircraft

De Havilland Mosquito NF Mk XVII HK304 was originally built as a Fighter at Leavesdon in June 1943, but was converted into a Night Fighter in September

1943 by Marshalls in Cambridge. It entered service with 25 Squadron, based at RAF Coltishall. During this time, it shot down a V-1 Flying Bomb. On another 25 Sqn mission, HK304 and its crew at the time, Plt Off Barney Travers and Nav Off Alex Patterson, shot down a Messerschmitt Bf109G-6 flown by Fw Martin Shulze of 1/JG301: Fw Shulze managed to bail out before his aircraft crashed, This is the only known time a 25 Sqn Mosquito shot down a Bf109G. Shulze earlier in July 1944 had claimed shooting down a four engine plane near the town of Breteuil in this area, (SE) at 01H1757, Lancaster JB486 DX-F of 57 Squadron was lost at this time, the seven young crew members who are all buried Poix de Picardie churchyard in France. 1/JG301 was responsible for protecting V-1 launch sites against Allied night air attacks.

In November 1944, HK304 transferred to 456 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force at Ford in West Sussex, before a brief stay with 68 (Night Fighter) Squadron at Coltishall in January 1945. HK304 then moved to its final posting with 51 OTU (Operational Training Unit) based at RAF Cranfield. Investigators noted that prior to its final flight, the airframe had accumulated 458 hours and 20 minutes of flying time: it was due its next 20 hour inspection at 459 hours.

What was RAF Cranfield is linked to aviation to this day; Cranfield University, still famous for its contributions to aerospace, occupies the site. It originally opened in June 1937, though 51 OTU moved in during August 1941. 51 OTU trained night fighter pilots and radar observers to fly Havocs, Blenheims, Beaufighters and Mosquitoes. This unit stayed at RAF Cranfield until May 1945, when it was disbanded after the end of the war in Europe.

The Aircrew

Jacques Bonnewit was born on 22nd December 1919 in Amsterdam, Holland to Hijman and Reina Meijer Bonnewit. Bonnewit escaped from Belgium on 8th August 1940, and joined the RAF.



Image credit: Aircrew Remembered

He began his initial flight training in Torquay with 5 Initial Training Wing at the start of 1942, and completed the bulk of the rest of his flying training in Canada over the next couple of years; he passed through 31 EFTS (Elementary Flying

Training School), then 34 SFTS (Service Flying Training School), 32 SFTS and then 17 SFTS. He moved back to England to 12 (P) AFU (Pilot Advanced Flying Unit) at Grantham, and joined 51 OTU, RAF Cranfield, on 12th December, 1944. This was his final posting.

Few details are known about his flying career; the crash investigators concluded he had his logbook with him at the time of the crash. It's believed he had completed around 200 hours of flying, both dual and solo, and had flown about 25 hours in Mosquitos. He was rated "average", and thought of as a good, steady pilot.

After the war, Sgt Bonnewit was repatriated in 1949. He lies buried in the Pelouse d'Honneur de la Force Aérienne at the Brussels Cemetery at Evere (row 4, grave 8).

Less is known about the navigator, Sergeant John William George Muncaster. He was born in Maryport, Cumbria, England, to Duncan and Sarah Muncaster. He's interred in Maryport Cemetery, Sec O, Grave 180. It has proven harder to trace Sgt Muncaster's living relatives. Mark Rankine has been in touch with local councillors in Maryport, and it seems if there are any, they've moved away from the Maryport area. If anyone has any information they would like to share, we would be very grateful.

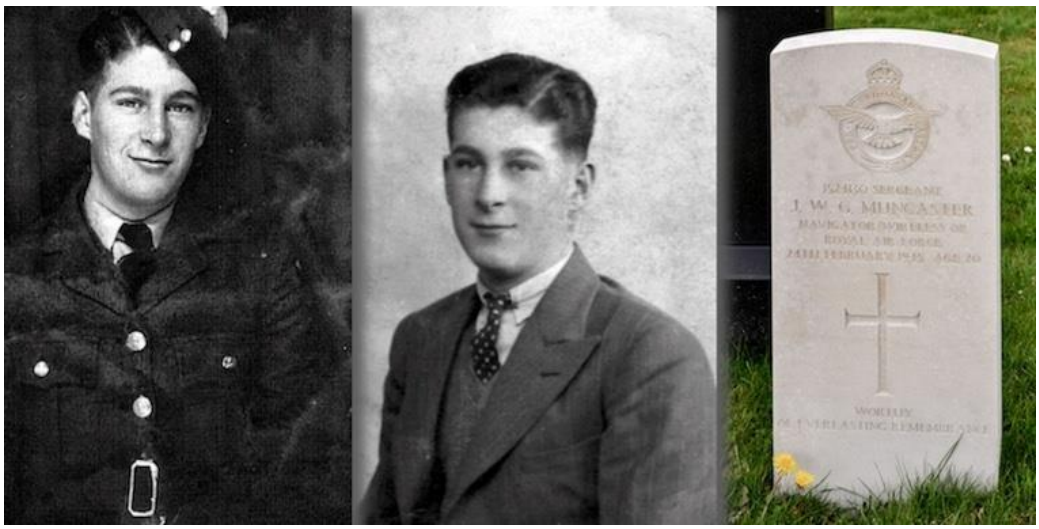


Image credit: Aircrew Remembered

The Memorial

In the run up to the VE Day Celebrations, during the first Covid lockdown in 2020, Mark Rankine came across this photograph of Madame Bonnewit by her son's grave.



The mother of Sgt. Jacques Bonnewit spends time reflecting.

Image credit: Aircrew Remembered

Struck by her emotion, and knowing that nothing had been done in the area to remember the crash, he decided to take action. Along with local councillor Gareth Mackey, he launched a campaign to raise money to build a lasting memorial to the crew. This raised thousands of pounds: it was generously supported by the communities of Flitwick and surrounding areas, as well as Sgt Muncaster's home town of Maryport.

Mark also had this diorama built with the support of the scale aviation community, showing HK304 at the airfield, as it would have been at the time of the crash.



Image credit: Mark Rankine



Image credit: Mark Rankine



Image credit: Lindsay Rumbold

Thanks to the hard work of Mark and Councillor Mackey, the memorial stone was unveiled on the 27th November 2021, in the gardens of The Rufus Centre, Flitwick. The Rufus Centre is very close to the field where the crash occurred, and is the closest public space for such a memorial.

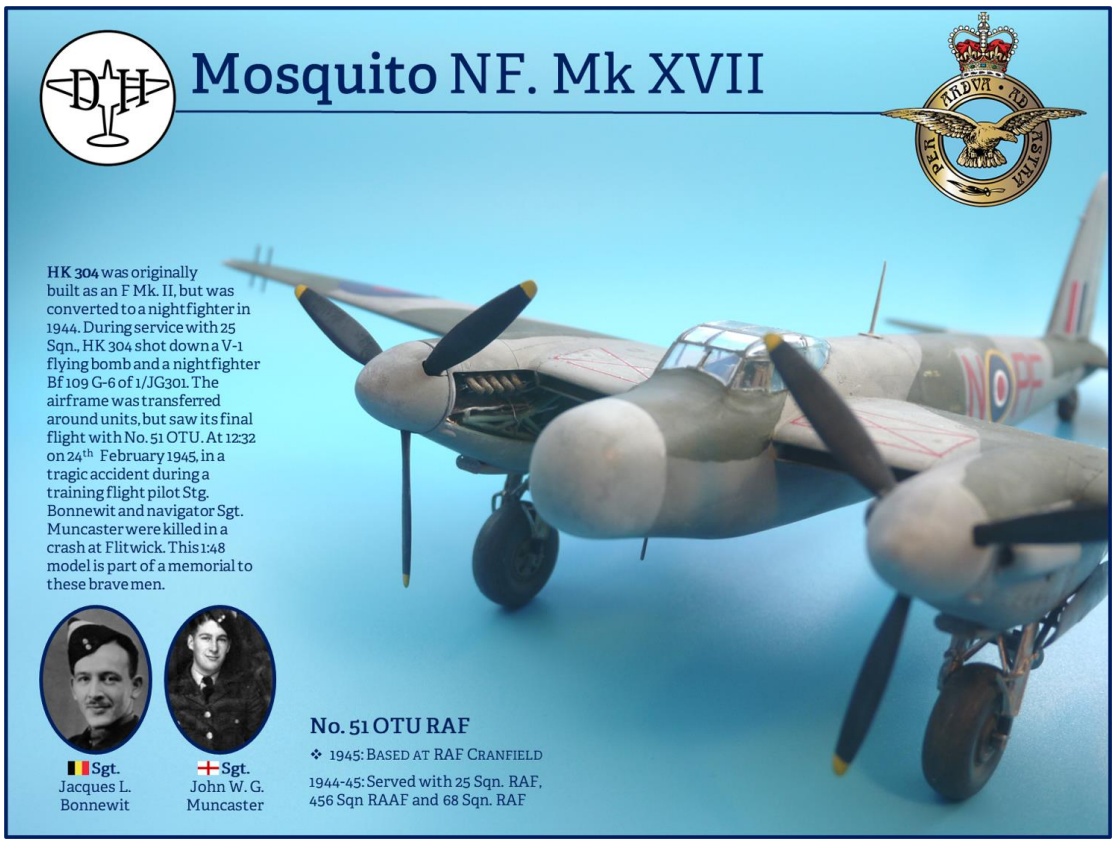




Image credit: Jesse Billington



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Amongst other local residents, and town councillors, the ceremony was attended by the 1985 (Flitwick) Squadron Air Training Corps, the Flitwick & District Royal British Legion, Alan Brackley, Chairman of the de Havilland Aircraft Museum, and Mrs Fiona Rogers, the daughter of Air Commodore Ted Sismore DSO, DFC & Two Bars, AFC, AE. The dedication and consecration was given by Rev Canon Nigel Washington, and HM Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, Helen Nellis, gave a short but moving speech. I attended on behalf of The People's Mosquito. The memorial was unveiled by HM Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire, and Mrs Fiona Rogers.



Image credit: Jesse Billington

Mark commissioned artist Robin Woolnough to create an image of HK304 flying over Flitwick, as it would have been in 1945. A limited number of these prints are for sale to benefit charities including the RAF Benevolent Fund, the de Havilland Aircraft Museum, The Princes Trust, and The People's Mosquito.

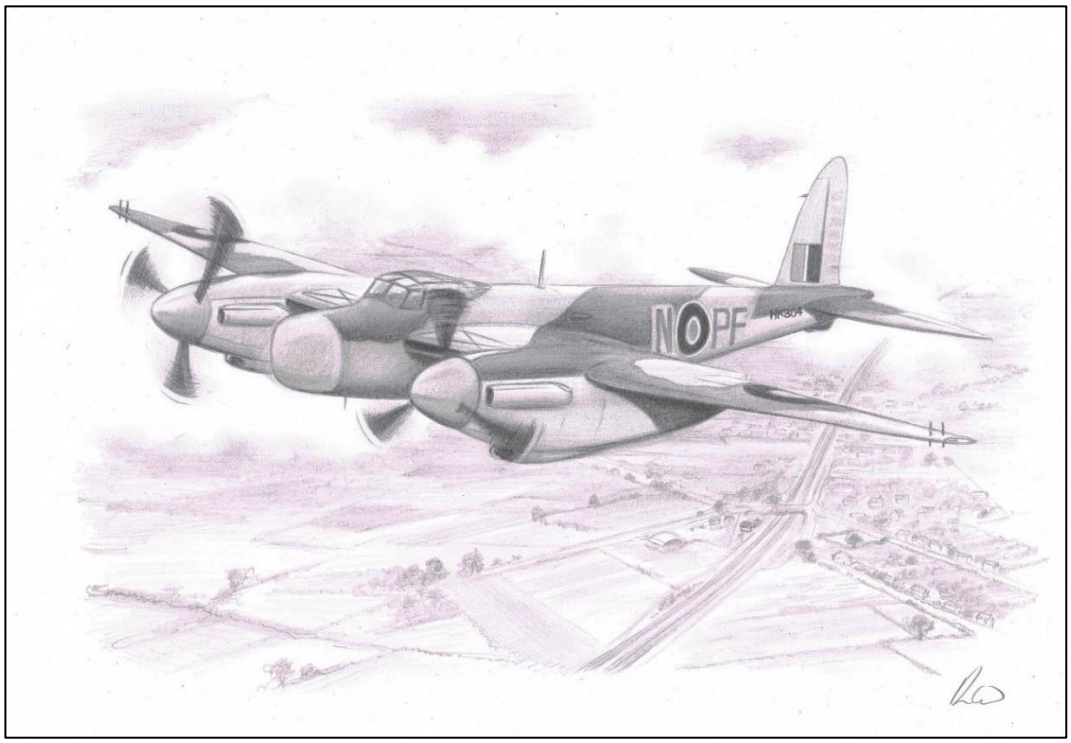


Image credit: Robin Woolnough

Thanks to:
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Alan Brackley and the de Havilland Aircraft Museum
The People's Mosquito

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