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Vickers Wellington Mk. IC N.2887
Central Gunnery School, R.A.F. Sutton Bridge, circa 1943

THE LAST FLIGHT OF:

WELLINGTON X.3985

A narrative of the last flight of Wellington Mk. III, X.3985, which crashed at Box in Wiltshire on 27 February 1943, killing the five air crew onboard. One of the deceased was P/O Charles NICHOLS, who lived at Bickington, near Barnstaple in North Devon.
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The Last Flight of Wellington Mk. III, X.3985

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Introduction

The village of Bickington in North Devon lies astride the main road from Barnstaple to Bideford. It is a linear settlement, with groups of cottages spread over a distance of about one and a half miles. It lies within the parish of Fremington, its larger neighbour which is the next village towards Bideford. Although Bickington did not have a parish church, it had a chapel (latterly a United Reformed Church which closed recently), a primary school, a private college, one (later two) public houses, and a small range of shops. Until recently, it was an agricultural community, but now it is a commuting village for Barnstaple and elsewhere.

Charles Henry NICHOLS was born in Somerset, but grew up in the village of Bickington. He attended the primary school there, and gained a place at Barnstaple Grammar School. On leaving school, he gained employment with the General Post Office in Barnstaple, but then the Second World War came. As with so many men and women, the coming of the second major conflict in Europe within half a century changed their lives inexorably. As a young man, Charles NICHOLS no doubt thought that he 'should do his bit', so he enlisted in the Royal Air Force. An air crash before he completed his training brought his life to a premature end, and he now lies in St. Peter's churchyard in Fremington, in the only Commonwealth War Grave there. This is his story, and that of his colleagues who died with him in February 1943.

The Vickers Wellington

The Air Ministry issued Specification B.9/32, in 1932, for the design of a heavy bomber. Vickers developed a design, using the geodetic structure designed by Barnes WALLIS, who was a senior engineer for the company. The airframe was constructed with a metal structure, and covered with fabric. Vickers used this method for the single engine Wellesley bomber, which was then entering service with the Royal Air Force. The prototype Wellington made its first flight, at the company's airfield at Weybridge, Surrey, on 15 June 1936.

The first production Wellington Mk. I aircraft were delivered to No. 9 Squadron in October 1938. They were fitted with two 1,050 Bristol Pegasus Mk. XVIII engines. These aircraft had a turret in the nose and tail, and a retractable Nash & Thompson ventral turret under the aircraft. The Mk IA Wellington had powered Nash & Thompson turrets instead of the original Vickers design, and in the Mk. IC, the ventral turret was discarded, but two beam guns were added. The Wellington Mk. II had two, Rolls-Royce Merlin Mk. X engines, each developing 1,145 hp, as the Bristol Aircraft Company anticipated a shortage of Pegasus engines. In fact, the shortage arose in the supply of Merlin engines, so the Mk. III design had two Bristol Hercules Mk. III or XI engines, each developing 1,370 hp, a marked improvement over the Merlins. The Merlins were liquid cooled, in-line engines, while the Hercules were air cooled radials. The Mk. IV Wellington was fitted with American Pratt & Whitney R-1830-S3C4GT Twin Wasp radial engines. The Wellington Mk. V and VI were experimental, high altitude versions, and the Mk. VII was cancelled.

The final bomber version was the Mk. X, which was delivered to the R.A.F. from July 1942 onwards. This version was constructed of light alloy instead of mild steel, so the geodetic structure was lighter, yet stronger, than its predecessors were. The Mk. X had two Bristol Hercules Mk. VI or XVI engines. At the beginning of the Second World War, Bomber Command had eight squadrons equipped with Wellingtons. Very early in the war, the R.A.F. found that daylight bombing operations against Germany were not feasible, as they resulted in heavy losses of aircraft and aircrew. Simply, British bomber aircraft were too vulnerable to German fighters and air defences to operate effectively. The British switched to night-time attacks, with the Wellington becoming the main aircraft used by Bomber Command, until the four-engine 'heavy bombers' began to make an appearance in 1942. By the autumn of 1943, the Wellington had been replaced in R.A.F. Bomber Command in operations over Germany.

The Wellington continued in effective use as a bomber in the Mediterranean, and South-East Asia. The first Wellingtons arrived in Egypt in the Autumn of 1940, and they remained operational in the bombing role until the end of 1944. Wellingtons flew more operational hours in the Middle and Far East than in Western Europe.

The threat posed by German mines around the coast of the United Kingdom grew to serious proportions by early 1940. The advent of magnetic mines in particular was a major problem, so as one of the British responses, a Wellington Mk. I bomber was fitted with a ring around the entire aircraft, which was magnetised by a generator on-board the Wellington. This created the Wellington DWI Mk. I aircraft, which proved to be of limited effect operationally. The use of Wellingtons in the maritime role had commenced, with No. 221 Squadron being the first equipped with Wellingtons for the maritime reconnaissance and strike role.

The German and Italian U-boats had commenced operating in the Atlantic from French bases after the collapse of France in June 1940. They could operate with impunity at night and because of their low silhouette and silent approach they were virtually undetectable. The scientific development of air-to-surface radar was part of the breakthrough, but although radar could detect surfaced submarines, it was not discerning enough to be able to attack a submarine. Using the generator as fitted to the DWI Mk I aircraft, and the vacant space left by the former retractable ventral turret, a searchlight was fitted and trialled in a Wellington aircraft. The first aircraft modified were Wellington Mk. IC versions, but with the A.S.V. Mk. II radar and searchlight (known as a Leigh Light) fitted, these modified aircraft were known as General Reconnaissance Mark VIII versions. No. 1417 Flight was formed at R.A.F. Chivenor to operate these new Mk. G.R. Mk. VIII aircraft, which grew into No. 172 Squadron in early 1942. Their impact on the U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic was dramatic and long-lasting.

The Wellington G.R. Mk. XI was a maritime version of the Mk. X aircraft, and although fitted with the A.S.V. Mk. II radar, few (if any) were fitted with the Leigh Light. These aircraft were used for shipping strikes, particularly in the Mediterranean region. The Mk. XII Wellington was another maritime version, some of which were fitted with the Leigh Light.

The invention of the centimetric A.S.V. Mk. III radar, with a revolving scanner, led to two further General Reconnaissance versions of the Wellington. Both the G.R. XIII and G.R. XIV had the new radar installed in the nose, covered by a blister, and were powered by the improved Hercules Mk. XVII engines. The Mk. XIII was used for shipping strikes and could carry two 18" torpedoes. The G.R. Mk. XIV was fitted with the Leigh Light and armed with depth charges to attack U-boats. It is believed that the maritime versions of the Wellington accounted for in whole, or in part, the sinking of twenty-seven U-boats.

A total of 11,461 Wellingtons were built at Weybridge, and satellite factories at Chester and Blackpool. The last Wellington built by Vickers was delivered to the R.A.F. on 25 October 1945, one of the few R.A.F. aircraft to be built throughout the six years of the Second World War. The last Wellingtons used by the R.A.F., were retired from their training role in 1953.

The Wellington usually had a crew of five: the pilot, observer/navigator, wireless operator, Air bomber, and air gunner. Those Wellingtons operated by Coastal Command usually had an aircrew of six, with a second pilot, no air bomber (the navigator operated the Leigh Light, and the pilot dropped the depth charges), and three dual role wireless operators/air gunners. These three men would rotate around between the W/T (wireless telegraphy), S/E (special equipment, or radar set) and rear turret seats during the ten-hour long sorties.

All versions of the Wellington were 60 feet, 6 inches in length, with a wing span of 85 feet, 10 inches. As the engines became more powerful, from the 1,000 horsepower Bristol Pegasus Mk. XX fitted to the Mark I aircraft, to the 1,675 horsepower Bristol Hercules Mk. XVI engines in the Mk. X, XIII and XIV, so the performance of the aircraft improved. The maximum speed of the Mk. I of 245 mph, rose to 254 mph with the Mk. X and derivatives. The ceiling increased slightly from 21,600 feet to about 22,000 feet, but this was irrelevant in the maritime reconnaissance roles, as the usual operating height was only about 1,500 feet.

R.A.F. Upper Heyford and No. 16 Operational Training Unit

R.A.F. Upper Heyford was a pre-Second World War airfield, located about eight miles north-west of Bicester in Oxfordshire. Work began on the new airfield on 1 June 1918, and it opened in July of that year. The Canadian Air Force was formed at R.A.F. Upper Heyford by the redesignation of two R.A.F. Squadrons, and the posting in of Canadian air and ground crew. The airfield closed by 1920, and returned to agricultural use. It was only dormant for three years, for in 1923, following the French occupation of the Rhineland and with the German failure to pay war reparations, Upper Heyford was chosen as a new strategic bomber base, and required land purchased in 1924. The first aircraft, from the Oxford University Air Squadron, arrived in October 1927, and an operational squadron, No. 99, arrived in January 1928.

In September 1939, the two resident squadrons of Bristol Blenheim aircraft were deployed to France, and R.A.F. Upper Heyford became a training base. No. 16 Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.) was formed at R.A.F. Upper Heyford on 8 April 1940 by the redesignation of No. 4 Group Pool, which comprised No. 7 and No. 76 Squadrons. At this time, each Group within Bomber Command used two squadrons in a training function, which in 1940 were more properly redesignated as Operational Training Units. No. 16 O.T.U. was equipped with Handley Page Hampden and Hereford aircraft. On 15 July 1940, No. 16 O.T.U. transferred from No. 4 Group to No. 7 Group within Bomber Command. On 11 May 1942, it was renumbered as No. 92 Group, in line with the restructuring of Flying Training Command. Also around this time, No. 16 O.T.U. re-equipped with Vickers Wellington aircraft, as the Hampdens were now obsolete within Bomber Command. The runways at R.A.F. Upper Heyford were resurfaced between March and December 1942, during which period No. 16 O.T.U. was based at R.A.F. Barford St. John. No. 16 O.T.U. disbanded at R.A.F. Upper Heyford on 1 January 1945.

The Circumstances of the Crash

At 12.00 hours on 27 February 1943, Vickers Wellington Mk. III, X.3985, took off from R.A.F. Upper Heyford, Oxfordshire, on a cross country navigation exercise. The five air crew were:

118056	F/O G. BRAYSHAW, R.A.F.V.R.	Pilot & Captain
133460	P/O C. H. NICHOLS, R.A.F.V.R.	Navigator
130874	P/O D. O. MOSS, R.A.F.V.R.	Air Bomber
1332563	Sgt B. C. BURTON, R.A.F.V.R.	W/Op
R/123285	Sgt C. E. VYSE, R.C.A.F.	AG

The Wellington was fitted with two Bristol Hercules Mk. XI radial engines. About three hours after take-off, the Wellington developed engine trouble, so F/O BRAYSHAW decided to land the aircraft at R.A.F. Colerne in Wiltshire. He made an approach to land there, but he was not satisfied with his approach and decided to go around again. During this circuit, F/O BRAYSHAW struggled to maintain control of the Wellington, which gradually lost height. It struck a tree and crashed at Hazelbury House Farm, Box. This location was about six miles south of Colerne airfield and on land above Box Tunnel, through which the main Swindon to Bristol line of the Great Western Railway ran. On crashing, the aircraft burst into flames and all five air crew died instantly. The time of the accident was about 15.00 hours.

Court of Inquiry

The R.A.F. undertook an enquiry into the air crash, and reported:

On 27 February 1943, the crew of X.3985 was tasked with a cross-country bombing exercise. At 15.00 hours, the aircraft was seen to approach Colerne airfield downwind in a gentle right hand turn, and at low speed, with the port engine turning over slowly.

The aircraft was in a position to land downwind with the undercarriage retracted, but it continued to turn towards Box, where in an attempt to climb, the aircraft stalled and crashed at Hazelbury House Farm, near Box. It was stated that the aircraft was unable to maintain height on one engine, although it could not be determined whether the engine failed, or not, as the crew may have been practising one engine flying.

Accidents Investigation Branch

This air crash does not appear to have been investigated by the Accidents Investigation Branch of the Air Ministry, or else the record of any inquiry has not been located.

The Air Crew

118056 Flying Officer Graham BRAYSHAW, R.A.F.V.R.

Graham BRAYSHAW was born on 21 August 1917 in Greetland, near Halifax, Yorkshire, the only son of George (6 April 1875 – 27 December 1946) and Amy BRAYSHAW (nee KITCHEN 6 April 1875 – 23 April 1952). Graham had two elder sisters called Margaret WOLFENDEN (nee BRAYSHAW 28 October 1906 – 2 March 1959) and Isabel THOMPSON (formerly HOLT and nee BRAYSHAW 24 February 1910 – 17 January 1996). His father was the co-owner of Brayshaw and Dickinson Mill in Stainland, Yorkshire, and the family lived in a house called 'Rockville', on Hollybank Road, Stainland. Graham was educated at Heath Grammar School, Halifax, and at Rydal School, Colwyn Bay, Caernarvonshire. He studied for and was awarded a City and Guilds of London Certificate.

After leaving school, Graham BRAYSHAW took up employment at the family's worsted spinning business, Brayshaw & Dickinson Ltd., at Town Ings Mill, Stainland. This business had been incorporated as a private company on 13 June 1910 and purchased the Mill's freehold in 1911. Graham was appointed a Director of the company in 1938. He was the Managing Director of the company at the time that he joined the Royal Air Force. In addition, he was a member of the Bradford Exchange. Although committed to the family's business, Graham BRAYSHAW was also active with Stainland Methodist Church, and was involved in the Scout movement in Huddersfield.

Graham BRAYSHAW enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve on 7 October 1940, at No. 3 Recruit Centre at R.A.F. Padgate in Lancashire. On being enlisted, he was given the rank of Aircraftman 2nd Class and the service number of 1025097. He appeared before No. 6 Air Crew Selection Board on 8 October 1940, i.e., the day after he enlisted, and was recommended for training as a pilot or observer. On 3 January 1941, he was transferred to Reserve No. 9 Receiving Wing, at R.A.F. Stratford, which was an administrative posting as BRAYSHAW had to wait for a place to become available within the pilot's training scheme. On 8 March 1941, he reported to No. 10 Initial Training Wing at R.A.F. Scarborough in Yorkshire. This unit had been formed on 13 December 1940 and used requisitioned hotels and property to house the airmen under training.

Similar units were established in seaside towns including Aberystwyth, Newquay, Paignton and Torquay. Here the recruits learnt about basic aerodynamics, navigation, signals, as well as 'square bashing', i.e. drill training.

After completing his initial training, Graham BRAYSHAW was promoted to the rank of Leading Aircraftman as a pilot under-training with effect from 14 May 1941. The British Commonwealth Air Training Plan, also known as the Empire Air Training Scheme, was by now coming into full operation. This allowed pilots and observers to receive the first elements of their training in Canada, Rhodesia and South Africa. Later, some training was undertaken in the United States of America. The trainee pilots and observers could learn to fly in good weather, in a place that had no blackout, and without the threat of enemy aircraft attacking them. Graham BRAYSHAW arrived in Canada on 13 June 1941 and was posted to No. 1 Manning Depot in Toronto. Ten days later, he was posted to No. 20 Elementary Flying Training School at R.C.A.F. Oshawa, Ontario. This is where he first flew an aircraft, probably a biplane De Havilland Tiger Moth. Having passed this element of his training, he progressed on to No. 5 Service Flying Training School at R.C.A.F. Brantford, Ontario. Here LAC BRAYSHAW was trained to fly twin-engine aircraft having been streamed for either Bomber or Coastal Command. He qualified as a pilot on 21 November 1941 and was awarded his flying brevet ('Wings') and was granted promotion to the rank of Sergeant. Having impressed his instructors during his training, on the same day Graham BRAYSHAW was granted a commission as a Pilot Officer on probation and given the new service number of 118056.¹

On his return to the U.K. just before Christmas 1941, P/O BRAYSHAW was posted to No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre (P.R.C.) at R.A.F. Bournemouth. This was another holding posting while places were allocated on the courses required for each pilot or observer. On 6 January 1942, P/O BRAYSHAW was posted to No. 6 Air Observers and Navigation School (A.O.N.S.) at R.A.F. Llanbedr, Cardiganshire. The course he studied here was in relation to advanced navigation over Western Europe and the seas around the U.K.. On 1 June 1942, he was posted to a (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit ((P) A.F.U.) where he learnt the advanced techniques needed to fly in war-time conditions in the U.K.. Finally, on 8 December 1942, the now Flying Officer (F/O) Graham BRAYSHAW was posted to R.A.F. Upper Heyford in Oxfordshire and to No. 16 Operational Training Unit (O.T.U.).² This was the last stage of training before reaching an operational squadron, and is where he teamed up with other air crew to form a bomber crew. It was towards the end of his course at No. 16 O.T.U. that Graham BRAYSHAW died together with his new colleagues.

Graham was very close to his family and local community. His sister, Isabel, records in her 1941 diary the arrival of regular letters, and the occasional cable from Graham when he was away. For example, on 16 June 1941: *Had two cables from Graham to say he's in Canada at Toronto Flying School.*

¹ All commissions in the R.A.F.V.R. were termed 'emergency commissions', which meant that it applied only for the period of hostilities, i.e., wartime, and would not be applicable after the conclusion of the war.

² P/O Graham BRAYSHAW was promoted to the rank of Flying Officer, war substantive, on probation on 1 October 1942. War substantive meant that this promotion only applied during the period of hostilities and his substantive rank remained Pilot Officer.

Other examples are:

- 4 July 1941: *Graham flew solo for the first time on July 4th, just 6 months after joining up.*
 8 November 1941: *Graham sent Mother and I some butter from Canada.*
 22 November 1941: *We had a telegram from Graham to say he has got his "wings" and leaves Brantford Friday 21st Nov.*

While on leave, there are several diary reports of family meals, outings, and Graham taking or collecting his nieces, Anne and possibly Leueen to and from school. Despite the chaos, uncertainty, and, unspoken dangers around them, they all tried to retain a semblance of normality in their precious time together.

Isabel, one of Graham BRAYSHAW's sisters, kept a diary for 1943, poignantly recording the events and her feelings surrounding uncle Graham's loss. She makes a direct link with the family of Dennis MOSS, one of the other crew members. Her diary entries include:

- 16 January 1943 *We had a surprise when Graham walked in on a 48 hrs leave.*
 17 January 1943 *Graham came up for an hour & then went back on the 4.53pm bus. (From her diary entries, this looks like the last time uncle Graham was with his family.)*
 01 March 1943 *Terrible news indeed has arrived today. Graham was killed in a flying accident last Sat. 27th Feb.*
 02 March 1943 *No news so far of Graham being brought home. Mother is marvellous, the dear sweet soul.*
 03 March 1943 *Graham was brought home soon after lunch, what a difference from what we had longed for so long, his long overdue leave.*
 04 March 1943 *Eric's birthday, he would have been 40. Graham was laid to rest next to Eric, so they are together again. Geoff PRIESTLEY came to represent the R.A.F.. (Eric Holt was Isabel's late husband who died suddenly in 1938 while on holiday in North Wales. He is buried with his parents in the adjacent grave in Stainland to uncle Graham & his parents.)*
 05 March 1943 *Margaret & Frederick went to Dennis MOSS's funeral, another victim of the crash. (Margaret is uncle Graham's older sister; Frederick was her husband.)*
 13 March 1943 *Lovely day. Mrs Moss, Dennis's widow, came to tea with her little son, Christopher.*
 20 July 1943 *Graham's things have arrived today.*
 21 August 1943 *Graham's birthday (26th). How we wish Graham was here. (At this time, Isabel, with her daughter, Anne, was visiting her sister, Margaret at her home in Surrey.)*

There is another poignant entry in June 1943:

17 June 1943 *Father has heard that Geoff Priestley is missing from a raid over Duisberg. (Geoffrey Douglas Priestley had attended uncle Graham's funeral to represent the R.A.F.. His Lancaster bomber was shot down on its return from the raid and he and some of his companions were buried in a War Grave in Amersfoort, Holland. Another flying tragedy that year.)*

It is to Graham's father George that the last words must go. It was always said that George never really got over the loss of his only son. George's diaries record some spare, yet poignant reflections, written immaculately in pencil:

27 February 1944: *Nice covering of snow, not deep. 1 Year since Graham went to heaven.*
 21 August 1944: *Graham's 27th birthday.*
 27 February 1946: *Three years since our beloved Graham died.*
 21 August 1946: *Dear Graham's birthday, 29.*

Graham BRAYSHAW was buried at Stainland Methodist Chapel, in Elland, Yorkshire on 4 March 1943, in a private family grave. Graham's father, George, died at his desk at the Mill on 27 December 1946, aged seventy-one years. Amy died on 22 April 1952 in Eastbourne, Sussex, aged seventy-seven years. Graham's parents were buried in the same grave as their son, which was at the time a family plot. As a result of an enquiry from Isabel (Graham's sister), the grave was formally adopted by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (C.W.G.C.). Her primary intention was to preserve the memories of Graham and their parents in perpetuity, in the tender care of the Commission. After sorting out a variety of administrative considerations, the Commission kindly agreed to do so. The new headstone was erected on 5 November 1993.

133460 Pilot Officer Charles Henry NICHOLS, R.A.F.V.R.

Charles Henry NICHOLS was born on 13 September 1923 in Withypool, Somerset. He was the son of Henry NICHOLS, who was born on 9 October 1890 at Alwington, North Devon, and his wife Florence NICHOLS (nee HOBBS), who was born on 2 November 1891 in Barnstaple, North Devon. In the 1901 Census, Henry was living with his family at Upcott Farm, Monkleigh, North Devon as his father was an Agricultural Labourer. Henry married Florence in Barnstaple in 1919, with their daughter Ruby May NICHOLS being born on 27 December 1920, and three years later, Charles Henry was born.

In 1939 the family were living at 2 Lyndale Cottages, Bickington, North Devon. Henry was employed as a gardener, and Florence undertook unpaid domestic duties, in other words, she was a housewife. Charles went to school at Bickington Council School (a primary school), from where he gained a place at Barnstaple Grammar School. After leaving school, Charles gained employment at Barnstaple Post Office.

Charles enlisted in the Royal Air Force in early 1942 and was granted the service number 1314602. He commenced training as a navigator, which included a course at R.A.F. Penrhos in South Wales to learn bomb aiming and gunnery, as Navigators were also trained as bomb aimers in this period of the Second World War. On completion of his training, Charles NICHOLS was commissioned in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve in the rank of Pilot Officer (on probation), with the service number 133460 with effect from 18 November 1942.

A funeral service was held for Charlie NICHOLS at Fremington Parish Church on Thursday 4 March 1943, with the Reverend R. P. NEILL officiating. The principal mourners were his parents, his sister May, his fiancée Miss Joan JORDAN, his uncles and aunt Mr. H. NICHOLS and Mr. and Mrs. S. HEARN, and five cousins. The R.A.F. were represented by F/O TOMLIN, Sgts WATSON and WILLCOX. Mr. F. SNELL represented Barnstaple Head Postmaster, with Mr. W. P. HUTCHINGS, and Mr. S. SUMMERHILL attending on behalf of the Barnstaple Post Office staff, and Mr. C. HUTCHINGS representing the Barnstaple G.P.O. outdoor staff. Mr. R. M. S. PASLEY represented Barnstaple Grammar School, and the Headmaster of Bickington School, Mr. FORD, also attended, as did some children from the latter school. There were mourners from the Bickington and Fremington Nursing Association, the Home Guard, Fremington First Aid Point, and Fremington Air Raid Wardens. In total, there were about two-hundred mourners in attendance. Many of the mourners brought flowers in remembrance of P/O NICHOLS. After the service, Charles Henry NICHOLS was laid to rest in Fremington churchyard.

Henry NICHOLS died in Barnstaple in December 1964, aged seventy-three years; and Florence died in Barnstaple in March 1977, aged eighty-five years. Charles's sister, May, married Kenneth George GOODMAN, and they had a family together. She died on 10 May 2012 in Bath, Somerset.

Charlie NICHOLS fiancée, Joan, still lives in Barnstaple, and remembers him well.³ Her grandmother ran the New Inn public house in the village of Instow, near Bideford, and her parents lived and worked there.⁴ She had volunteered with the Red Cross during the war, and worked in the Barnstaple area. Joan was a trained dancer, and ran her own dance school from a young age. She organised several shows for the armed forces across North Devon, mainly in Instow and Bideford, and after the war ran her own ballet and dance school. Joan received a letter of condolence from Bob, who was a colleague of Charles at Upper Heyford. Apparently, Charles was known as 'Nick' by his R.A.F. colleagues, no doubt as a shortening of his surname of NICHOLS.

Bob wrote:

It seems to me to be such a sad ending to what was just beginning to be the actual job we both joined up to do.

³ As at March 2019.

⁴ The New Inn is now called the Wayfarer. It was damaged by a German bomb dropped on Instow during the Second World War, which exploded in the road nearby.

Joan also knew Captain Keith Langler FORD, Royal Marines, who died in an air crash at North Molton on 19 December 1941. He was returning from his base to North Devon with a colleague for Christmas. At the time, Captain FORD, who was also an Air Observer, was lodging at the New Inn where Joan was living with her parents. After the Second World War, Joan married Eddie CURTIS and they had three children. Joan now has six grandchildren, and five great grandchildren.

130874 Pilot Officer Dennis Oswald MOSS, R.A.F.V.R.

Dennis Oswald MOSS was born on 8 October 1912, in Dewsbury, Yorkshire. He was the son of Councillor Dennis MOSS, the founder of Dennis Moss & Son Company Limited, which was a cloth finishing business. His mother was Martha MOSS (nee HOLMES). Councillor Dennis MOSS was a distinguished local man, who had been Mayor of Morley in Yorkshire in 1940. Dennis Oswald MOSS was also a businessman in his own right, and a director of Albert Mills (Morley) Company Limited. Dennis Oswald MOSS attended Leeds University, and in July 1938, he married Ruth BRIGGS, the eldest daughter of an Ossett mill owner. She was a graduate from London University. In 1939, they were living at Rydal, Rein Road, Morley, Yorkshire, with Dennis's occupation shown as a Master Woollen Cloth Finisher.

Having enlisted in the Royal Air Force, Dennis MOSS undertook his training in South Africa. He was commissioned in the rank of Pilot Officer (on probation) on 10 October 1942, with the service number 130874. Following his death, there was a memorial service held at Queen Street Methodist Church in Morley, before Dennis Oswald MOSS was buried in Morley Cemetery. Dennis and Ruth had one son, Christopher, who was still a baby when his father died. Seventy-five years after the death of his father, Christopher was able to attend the site to lay a wreath and pay his respects to his father.

1332563 Sergeant Barry Charles BURTON, R.A.F.V.R.

Barry Charles BURTON was born in Bromley, Kent, on 28 May 1922; the younger of two children born to Thomas Charles BURTON (a blacksmith) and his wife Alice Annie (nee THOMAS). Thomas and Alice were both from Brighton, Sussex, and moved to 14, North Street, Bromley around 1911. In 1939, Barry lived at home with his parents and he worked as a clerk with a local firm of estate agents. His elder brother, Stanley Thomas Frank had married his wife Julia, and they moved into 11. Glebe Road, Bromley, which was a five-minute walk away from his parent's home. Stanley had followed his father's career and worked as a blacksmith.

Stanley worked in a reserved occupation but served as a Fire Watcher. This role involved going out during enemy bombing raids and watching the fall of incendiary bombs onto roofs of buildings. Access then had to be gained onto the roofs to either remove or extinguish the incendiary bombs before they caused significant damage. Stanley died as a result of enemy action on 31 January 1941 at the forge behind his childhood home. He left his widow and a new-born son.

Barry joined the Local Defence Volunteers in 1940 (which later became the Home Guard), before joining the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve at either Uxbridge or Weston-Super-Mare on some date after November 1940. On completion of his training, he was posted to an operational Lancaster squadron, and survived his aircraft ditching in the North Sea in the winter of 1942/43. Barry BURTON was sent on survivor's leave before being posted to No. 16 Operational Training Unit at R.A.F. Upper Heyford. Sgt BURTON is buried in Block G., Grave 274 of the Bromley Hill Cemetery, which is now within the London Borough of Bromley.

R/123285 Sergeant Cecil Edward VYSE, R.C.A.F.

Cecil Edward VYSE was born on 4 September 1917 in Ontario, Canada; the son of John Benjamin and Emma VYSE (nee JOHNSTON). His family ran a farm at Beaverton, Ontario, which is where Cecil was born. Their religion was Presbyterian. VYSE attended a local school, and as soon as he left school at the age of sixteen years, he started working on the family farm. At the time of his enlistment, Cecil was 5' 8" in height, weighed 135 pounds, had brown eyes and dark coloured hair.

On 10 January 1941 he enlisted in the Grey and Simcoe Foresters, a Militia regiment of the Canadian Army (service number B/538736). VYSE enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force on 6 August 1941 at Toronto, being granted the rank of Aircraftman 2nd Class and the service number R/123285. Having completed his initial training at No. 1 Manning Depot, R.C.A.F. Toronto, he moved to No. 4 Wireless School at R.C.A.F. Guelph on 23 August 1941. On 6 November 1941, he was promoted to the rank of Aircraftman 1st Class, as he had spent nearly eleven months at R.C.A.F. Guelph. This is an unusually long time to be spent at one training school. He was promoted to the rank of Leading Aircraftman (LAC) on 6 February 1942. VYSE spent two periods in hospital, the first commencing on 2 August 1941, and the second commencing on 8 October 1942.

On 5 July 1942, LAC VYSE was posted to No. 1 Bombing and Gunnery School at R.C.A.F. Jarvis Bay in Ontario. He qualified as an Air Gunner on 9 October 1942; receiving his Brevet and promotion to the rank of Temporary Sergeant on the same day. On 10 October, Sgt VYSE commenced his fourteen days of Embarkation Leave. He embarked at Halifax on 28 October, and disembarked in the U.K. on 5 November 1942, being posted to No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre. He was posted to No. 16 Operational Training Unit on 8 December 1942 and there joined up with F/O BRAYSHAW as part of his air crew.

Posthumously, he was awarded the Defence Medal, the War Medal, and the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal. The Ministerial Card was sent to Mrs. Emma VYSE on 17 March 1943, the Royal Message on 27 April, and the Memorial Cross on 30 April 1943. The Memorial Cross was actually presented to her on 18 May 1943. The conduct of Sgt VYSE throughout his service was graded as 'Very Good'.

Conclusions

The Second World War was an international war that affected men, women and families across the globe. The sudden loss of Flying Officer BRAYSHAW and his crew in a Wellington X.3985 was just one amongst many, but, nevertheless, still a unique and personal incident, a tragic example of the everyday impact of this momentous conflict. The story of one man from a small village in North Devon, who died with his colleagues in an air crash while still under training, is not in itself remarkable in terms of the overall conduct of the war. To his family, and the community he came from, his death was a tremendous loss. This is borne out from the details of the funeral of P/O NICHOLS, and the number of people who attended and the number who brought flowers to the service. This was replicated in Stainland, Morley and Bromley for the families of the other three British victims, while the Canadian victim was buried far from home in Bath. It is touching to note how the BRAYSHAW and MOSS families shared their grief together.

In a way, these were the lucky ones, as many families were unable to say goodbye to their loved ones, as they may have died at sea, or overseas, or simply been reported 'Missing'. This was not restricted to the United Kingdom, but occurred in many other countries across the globe. This is part of the nature of war. In peacetime, sons bury fathers: in war time, fathers bury sons.

In Memoriam

27 February 1943 – Vickers Wellington MK. III – X.3985

No.	Surname	Forenames(s)	Age	Date of Death	Rank	Role	Service	Service Number	Place of Burial	Grave
1.	BRAYSHAW ⁵	Graham	25	27/02/43	Flying Officer	Pilot & Captain	R.A.F.V.R.	118056	Stainland Methodist Chapel	Grave 386.
2.	NICHOLS ⁶	Charles Henry	19	27/02/43	Pilot Officer	Navigator	R.A.F.V.R.	133460	Fremington Churchyard	
3.	MOSS ⁷	Dennis Oswald	30	27/02/43	Pilot Officer	Air Bomber	R.A.F.V.R.	130874	Morley Cemetery	Sec. B., Grave 1127
4.	BURTON ⁸	Barry Charles	20	27/02/43	Sergeant	WOp/AG	R.A.F.V.R.	1332563	Bromley Hill Cemetery	Block G., Grave 274.
5.	VYSE ⁹	Cecil Edward	25	27/02/43	Sergeant	AG	R.C.A.F.	R/123285	Bath (Haycombe) Cemetery	Plot 51., Sec H., Row T., Grave 255.

<https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2414062/brayshaw,-graham/>

<https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2441632/nichols,-charles-henry/>

<https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2409380/moss,-dennis-oswald/>

<https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2427918/burton,-barry-charles/>

<https://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/2691782/vyse,-cecil-edward/>

⁵ Son of George and Amy BRAYSHAW, of Stainland, Yorkshire. City and Guilds of London Certificate. Inscription: *IN LOVING MEMORY OF HIS MOTHER AMY 23 APRIL 1952 AND HIS FATHER GEORGE 27 DECEMBER 1946.*

⁶ Son of Henry and Florence NICHOLS, of Bickington, Barnstaple, North Devon. Inscription: *IN PROUD AND LOVING MEMORY OF CHARLIE*

⁷ Son of Dennis and Martha MOSS, of Morley, Yorkshire; husband of Ruth MOSS (nee BRIGGS). A.T.I.

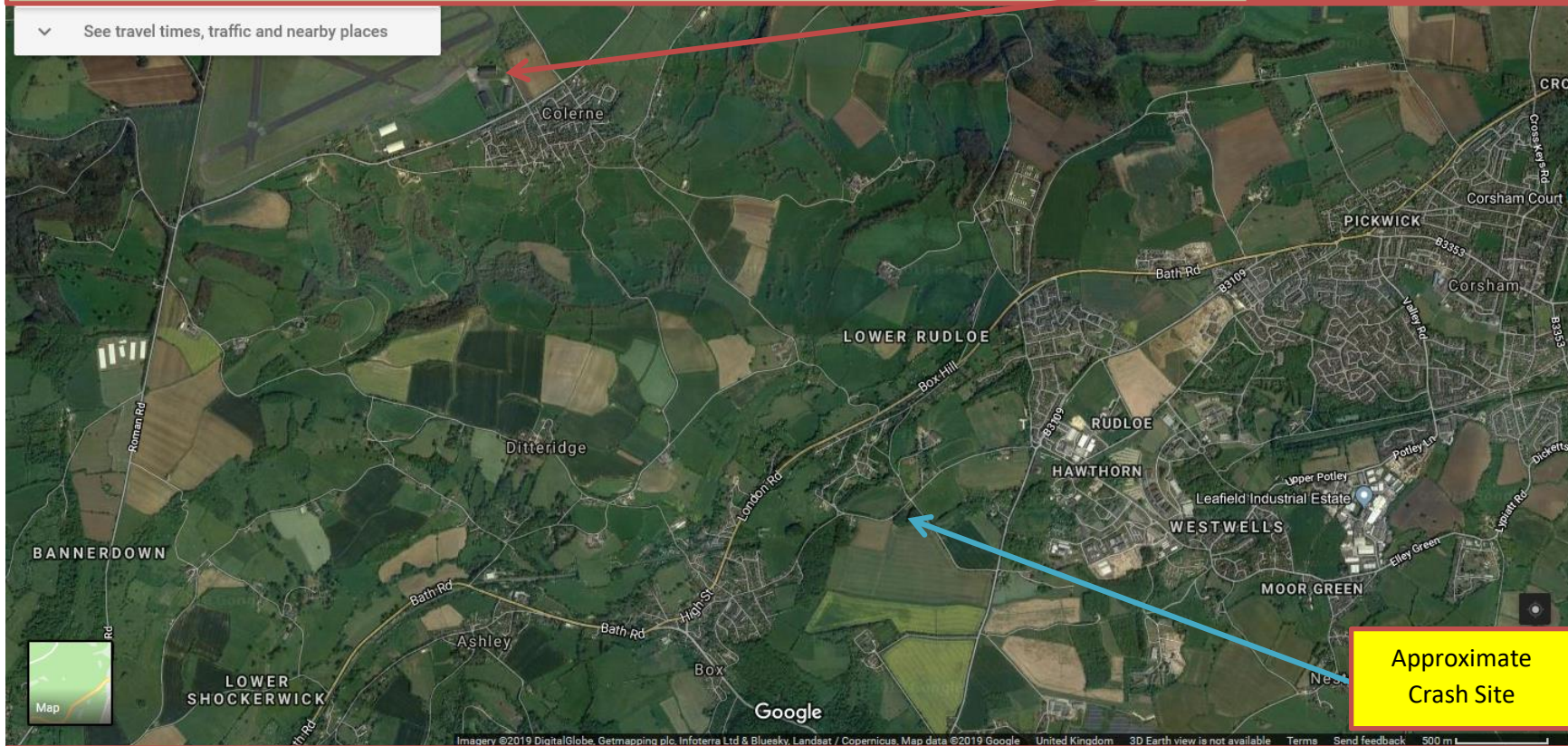
⁸ Son of Thomas Charles and Alice Annie BURTON, of Bromley, Kent. Inscription: *HE GAVE HIS YOUNG LIFE THAT ENGLAND LIVES. AT REST WITH GOD.*

⁹ Son of John and Emma VYSE, of Beaverton, Ontario, Canada. Inscription: *THINK OF HIM STILL AS THE SAME, I SAY HE IS NOT DEAD HE IS JUST AWAY*

Map of the area to the south of R.A.F. Colerne

R.A.F. Colerne

▼ See travel times, traffic and nearby places

Approximate
Crash Site



Above Left – The location of the crash of Wellington X.3985 near Box in Wiltshire. The location is not believed to have been a wood seventy-five years ago when the aircraft crashed, but it has grown up since the Second World War and is now the home of a children’s adventure park.
Above Right – Looking across the Box valley, with Colerne on the sky line of the hills on the opposite side of the valley.

The Author – 2019)



Left – F/O Graham BRAYSHAW

Right –P/O Dennis Oswald MOSS, R.A.F.V.R.

Courtesy of: Graham THOMPSON and Christopher MOSS



Above Left – Charlie NICHOLS as an Airman Under Training.

Courtesy of: Joan JORDAN

Above Right – The grave of P/O Charles Henry NICHOLS at St. Peter's Churchyard, Fremington.

The Author – 2018



Above Left – The cottages at Bickington where Charlie grew up. Lyndale is the stone faced cottage between the white cottage and the first parked car. It was subdivided into two homes as Charlie’s grandparents lived in one and Charlie and his family in the other. There was an internal connecting door between the two.

Above Right – The former county or primary school in Bickington, further up the main road towards Barnstaple.

The Author – 2019





Above – Leading Aircraftman Charles NICHOLS (Back Row – Second from Left) while under training as an Observer. The rank insignia of a Leading Aircraftman can be seen on the left arms of the men in the front row, and the white band in their caps signifies that they are under training. This photograph was probably taken at R.A.F. Penrhos in South Wales.

Courtesy of Joan JORDAN



Above – The official course photograph of Course No. 47, probably taken at R.A.F. Upper Heyford. Of interest, all the airmen are wearing the Observer's brevet (including P/O NICHOLS) with the exception of P/O PARR and P/O BEATTY who wear the then new Navigator's brevet.

Courtesy of Joan JORDAN



Above Left – The grave of Sgt BURTON and his family in Bromley.



Above Centre – The headstone of Sgt VYSE's grave in the Haycombe Cemetery, Bath.



Above Right – Photograph of Sgt C. E. VYSE taken from a Canadian newspaper.

The Author – 2016

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 The Air Historical Branch *Form 1180 Accident Card*

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Additional information on Charles NICHOLS provided by Joan JORDAN.

Additional Information on Sgt Barry BURTON provided by Joanna BURTON.

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