

Shackleton Crew remembered 50 years on

The afternoon of Saturday 6 December saw a very full St Eval Church for the Memorial Service for the crew of Shackleton VP254 of 205 Squadron, RAF Changi, lost over the South China Sea on December 9 1958, whilst on an antipiracy patrol.

The idea of some form of recognition for the 50th anniversary began with a casual conversation between Rector Graham and Geoff Lovegrove on a Tuesday morning after the Benefice Communion. They were standing in front of the Cross on the south wall of the Church and decided that some form of remembrance would be appropriate. This was early in 2008 and after this the idea, like Topsy, grew! The original idea was to have a short service after the Benefice Communion on Tuesday 9 December, the real anniversary. Correspondence with relatives of the one family we knew about persuaded us that Saturday would be a better day to allow people who work to attend the service.

Over the coming months by spreading the word through various RAF organisations and contacts, relatives of several other crew members were found as well as other people associated with the crash. In addition, delving through John Shapland's historical St Eval Collection, letters from other interested people were found. Contact was made with John Elias who was the captain of the crew who found the cross on Sin Cowe Island and with Alan Nichol who was the regular co-pilot on the crew but did not fly on that day due to illness. Through all the emails flying around we even managed to reunite some people with friends with whom they had lost contact.

When it came to planning the actual service it seemed very fitting to ask the Venerable Brian Lucas to take the service together with Graham. As the RAF St Mawgan Padre in 1971 Brian had met the 205 Sqn Shackleton when it landed at St Mawgan carrying its precious cargo. The cargo was the 205 Squadron Font Cover now in St Eval Church and the wooden Cross.

The story of the Cross, although associated with a tragic event, is a fascinating story which was the subject of an article in this magazine several years ago, which has now been expanded into a small booklet available in St Eval Church. The planning of this Commemoration Service has been incredibly interesting because of all the additional people with whom contact has been made. It is quite difficult after all this time to trace everyone, but at the service was Doreen Bowater, widow of

co-pilot Flt Lt Stanley Bowater and Nancy Taylor, widow of F.Sgt Dancy the Air Engineer (*his was the only body ever found and was buried under the cross on Sin Cowe Island*) both had several of their family with them. Also present was Martin Sixsmith, brother of Sgt Sixsmith and Mrs Audrey Hext, sister of Sgt Peter Marshal. Mrs Anne Dorrell, sister of Sgt Peter Barnsley could not come to the service but very generously paid for all the flowers. We found that the relatives of the captain Flt Lt Boutell were in South Africa and they sent a message to say they would be thinking of everyone on the day. Also present was John Postlethwaite who had been on duty in Changi Operations in 1971 when the Shackleton carrying the cross and font cover took off.

Apart from a general feeling that there was a certain amount of interest in the service we had no idea how many would actually come on the day - which made the catering of the refreshments quite difficult for the stalwart ladies of St Eval! It was therefore incredibly gratifying to find that by 3pm the church was very full with just under 90 people present. The service was simple but moving and the Act of Remembrance took place in front of the cross. Mrs Taylor and Mrs Bowater both laid wreaths and the names of the crew were read out.

During the service a facsimile of the Shackleton Register was presented to the church. This register lists all the names of aircrew that have lost their lives in Shackleton aircraft. The original is held at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire. This register will take its place alongside the other two memorial books at the rear of the south aisle.

Refreshment time after the service provided an opportunity for people with a common interest to chat together. From relatives and friends of the crew we learnt how hard it had been at the time, not just because of their loss, but because little support had been provided to the families by the RAF authorities. Some of the families had never met one another as they all lived out in private accommodation. It was left to friends and other family to help pick up the pieces. The crash took place on 9 December and before Christmas all the families had left the Far East and contact in most cases with other crew members was lost. When the cross was returned to St Mawgan in 1971 none of the families were aware of the fact and it is only in the ensuing years that some of them have learnt of its location and managed to visit.

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For some of those who came to this service, although 50 years on, it provided a form of closure for a very sad event. Most had not had the solace of a funeral as F.Sgt Dancy's body had been the only one recovered and even his wife, Nancy, had been too upset at the time to attend.

Meeting so many family members and hearing their reminiscences, and the fact that the church was so full, made the organisation and all the preparations for the service into a very rewarding and worthwhile experience. Thanks to Graham and all the members of St Eval for hosting the service.



Mrs Bowater and Mrs Taylor and the Venerable Brian Lucas holding the facsimile of the Shackleton Register which was presented to St Eval Church



Mrs Bowater and Mrs Taylor in front of the Cross with the wreaths which they laid during the Service.

The Shackleton Association

There were a number of members of the Shackleton Association at St Eval Church on 6 December and the following is an extract from the Association's Website:-

The Association was conceived and founded in 1987 by John Botwood, who quickly assembled a dedicated group of mainly ex RAF members who had been associated with the Avro Shackleton during their service career and who were determined that the memory of this great aircraft should never be forgotten.

It is not a Preservation Society. It was realised at the outset that there would not be resources to purchase and maintain a Shackleton in flying order, or even to have one of our own as a static exhibit. Nevertheless, the Association is keenly interested in the preservation of the Aircraft for future generations.

Membership is open to anyone who is sympathetic to the Associations aims and objectives. Although the majority of members are currently ex-aircrew and groundcrew who have been associated with the Shackleton over the years, serving members of the Royal Air Force and indeed anyone who is an enthusiast of the Avro Shackleton, is welcome to become a member.

The Association publishes a quarterly magazine "*The Growler*" where many memories are invoked and numerous friends are reunited after having lost touch due both to time and distance.

