

## Genderingen Memorial Speech

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to say how honoured I am to be invited to make this speech on such a special occasion. This memorial must be very unique in that it remembers fallen military personnel from both sides of a conflict. A huge thanks must go to those involved in the construction of the memorial and the arrangements for today. Memorials like this are very important to pay homage to those who gave their lives for the freedom of others and to also act as a reminder of the suffering that war can cause. It used to be said that they send a message that this should never happen again but as we know only too well this unfortunately been ignored. All I can say on that matter is, and I'm sure along with everyone here, that peace comes to Ukraine very soon.

I have been asked to speak in memory of my uncle Flying Officer John Joseph Berg DFC who served in the RAF as a Navigator and who lost his life having been shot down over Heelweg on 17 June 1944 and is buried in Wisch General Cemetery. He was only 23.

John was born in 1921 in the East End of London to Sarah and Sidney Berg and six years later my father Ralph was born. As I understand it John was a very bright boy and there were aspirations of him doing very well in life. Unfortunately, those aspirations were cut short with the outbreak of war. He volunteered for the RAF and was sent to Canada for officer training. From the photographs that I have it seemed to be quite a trip having travelled the whole of the USA to Florida, Washington and New York to name just a few and somewhere along the line qualifying as a Flying Officer. In May 1943 he was posted to 100 Squadron as Navigator flying 26 sorties up to August 1943. In November 1943 he was awarded the DFC although despite quite a bit of research I am still unable to find out exactly why. I can remember, as a child, seeing it in pride of place in a cabinet at my grandparents house. After a few other postings John was posted to 550 Squadron at North Killingholme on 27 May 1944, only a few weeks before that fatal flight for which had volunteered. He was married to Frances Greenberg, a local Grimsby girl, and, as I understand it, she drove him mad to marry her but he wouldn't purely for the reason that he may not return from a mission. Eventually he capitulated and they did marry just six weeks before the crash.

I grew up obviously knowing what had happened to my uncle but knew very little about the circumstances or anything else. One evening about 15 years ago I was just about to turn off my computer when I decided to Google John just to see if anything turned up. Well, that started the journey that has led me here today. The first thing I found was an article on the BBC War Archives website quoting an article from a book about cycle rides around Holland. It mentioned a plaque in the memory of Flying Officer Leslie Pulfrey who had managed to bail out of the plane before it crashed about 6 km away. The War Archives article was written by Joe Pinguey the nephew of Leslie Pulfrey. That sent me on a search for Joe which was quite difficult as there wasn't anything else about him online. I saw that he lived in Pennistone near Sheffield so I contacted the local radio station who knew of him and put him in touch with me. So here we were, two nephews of two airmen who lost their lives on the same flight. We got to meet the following year at a 550 Squadron Association reunion. Joe started to send me all the information that he had about his uncle and especially the crash. I couldn't believe what I was reading, a Dutch police report of the crash, another report in German as obviously Holland was occupied at the time, and all sorts of information and photographs. Even details of the German pilot who shot down the plane. However, the most poignant was a report from Roy Kay, members of his family are here today, who was the only person who survived the crash. For me this was the most special document as it detailed the whole story from when the plane was hit until his arrival back in the UK with the help of the Dutch resistance which wasn't until September 1944 six months after the crash. His return to the UK also confirmed that the rest of the flight crew had perished and that was when my grandparents were told finally that John had died. Until then he was missing presumed dead. That must have been horrendous for them.

This story also led me to meet my friend Jacques who's mother-in-law was a 18 year old girl who found Roy Kay and got him through to the Dutch resistance. It is thanks to Jacques that I am here today. Jacques was also instrumental in having a memorial plaque installed at the crash site and does a lot of work investigating planes that crashed during the war.

I have so many stories to tell that I would be here all afternoon. Things like how I met up with John's brother-in-law, how he told me that Frances had eventually remarried. They had a daughter who lives locally to me and who I have been in touch with, and how Frances was actually living in a home only 3

km from where I live but sadly she passed away a year before I found out. As you can imagine I would have so loved to meet her.

I would like to finish by remembering the crew members of Flight ME840:

Sqdn Leader Gavin Strang Smith

Flying Officer Leslie Pulfrey

Flight Sergeant Ralph Townsend

Flight Lieutenant St John Tizard

Flying Officer James Heath of the Royal Canadian Air Force

And Roy Kay who having survived the crash passed away a few years ago.

Along with all military personnel who lost their lives in Holland during the Second World War.

And lastly to the people of Holland who, from my experience, have never forgotten the acts of the Allies during the war and show a huge amount of respect.

Thank you