

# 2019 HHAS Remembrance Day Ceremony at Springbrook

Remembrance talk by Jodi Smith

Our society has taken responsibility for preserving the history of the two pilot training bases built during WWII in Central Alberta as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. They are: No. 32 Elementary Flying Training School near Bowden (now the Bowden Institution) and No. 36 Service Flying Training School here at Springbrook, both of which were RAF bases during WWII. Initially both bases were staffed entirely by RAF personnel. Operation of No. 32 was contracted to the Edmonton Flying Club in the summer of 1942. It was staffed by civilian personnel including about 100 women out of an overall civilian staff of about 260. Flying instruction, aircraft and other technical services seems to have been carried out by RAF personnel. No. 32 E.F.T.S. Bowden was closed on September 8, 1944.

If you were at here in Springbrook 75 years ago today this aerodrome would have been very quiet. By the end of October, the last of the Air Speed Oxfords had been ferried away and nearly all the RAF personnel had departed. The few remaining RAF personnel were in the process of shutting down the base, a task that was to be completed by the end of December, 1944.

Starting in May 1943 the planes used for training pilots at Bowden were Fairchild Cornell PT-26As. There was a construction fault in the main spar of the wing of these planes which resulted in the wings falling off when they were stressed during training flights. Both deaths at Bowden (F/SGT James Fowler and LAC Charles DeWever) in 1944 occurred when one wing fell off the PT-26A Cornell No. 14498 they were flying.

For more than half of 1944 both bases were bustling places training a lot of students. Thirteen service men died while on active duty at the two bases during the 1944 calendar year, three at No. 2 E.F.T.S. Bowden and ten at No. 36 S.F.T.S. Penhold. They were buried far from their homes; in Innisfail for students from Bowden and in Red Deer for students from Penhold. Nearly all of them were young and single. They left behind their parents, siblings and perhaps a girlfriend either back home or in Central Alberta. Today we remember them.

They are:

**SGT/Pilot Gordon Richard Bennett** age 22 from Ealey, London, England who died on August 26, 1944 when his Fairchild Cornell Mk.II, No.14498 crashed.

**LAC Kenneth Guy Biggs** age 20 from St. Annes-on-Sea, Lancaster England who died on March 17, 1944 in a crash of his Oxford Mk.II aircraft No.272

**LAC Philip Arthur Carter** age 20 from London, England who died on January 26, 1944 when his Oxford Mk.II aircraft No.BG435 crashed

**LAC Maxwell John Clarke** age 22 from Perth, Western Australia who died on January 2, 1944 when his Oxford Mk.II No. AS674 crashed

**LAC George David Conway** age 19 from Bluff, Southland, New Zealand who died on May 5, 1944 when his Oxford Mk.II aircraft No.46, X6734 crashed

**LAC Charles Erasme De Wever** age 22 from Wilsele, Louvain, Belgium who died on August 26, 1944 when his Fairchild Cornell Mk.II, No.14498 crashed

**LAC Gerald Robert Flisher** age 19 from Monkseaton, Northumberland, England who died on April 24, 1944 when his Oxford Mk II No. AT464 crashed

**F/Sgt James Cecil Fowler** age 33 from Liverpool, England who died on May 14, 1944 when his Fairchild Cornell MkII No.14396 crashed

**F/O Ronald Edward Lay** age 31 from Colchester, Essex, England who died January 2, 1944 when his Oxford Mk.II aircraft No. AS674 crashed.

**LAC Jack Mann** age 22 from Scunthorpe, North Lincolnshire, England who died on April 24, 1944 when his aircraft, Oxford Mk.II No. AT464 crashed

**F/O David Merry** age 21 from Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, British West Indies who died on May 4, 1944 when his Oxford Mk.II aircraft No.46, X6734 crashed

**Pilot/Officer Donald John Stewart** age 31 from West Ewell, Surrey, England who died on July 23, 1944 by drowning in Sylvan Lake.

We have done our best to identify all of the men who died while training at Bowden and Penhold each year on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their death. Most were buried in the cemeteries at Innisfail and Red Deer but some were repatriated by their families. These men are more difficult to identify. During the past year we have discovered the names of two student pilots, members of the RCAF, who were training at No. 36 S.F.T.S in 1943 and who died when their plane, an Oxford Mk.II, No. AS734 crashed on July 14, 1943 north of Eckville, AB while on an armament training exercise. They are:

**LAC James Harold Woodill** age 22 from Longview, Washington State, U.S.A. He is buried with his parents at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, Glendale, California,

**LAC Alexander Gillis Sutherland** age 24 from Hamilton, Ontario (he was born in Leith, Edinburgh, Scotland). He is buried with his parents in Woodland Cemetery, Hamilton, Ontario.

Today we remember them as well.