

(From Bradford Telegraph and Argus)

## Honouring Second World War plane crash hero who saved Drub village

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He was prepared to sacrifice his own life to save others.

And now, 70 years after the plane crash which could have devastated the village of Drub, near [Gomersal](#), a memorial stone has been unveiled in memory of the pilot - Tom Scotland - whose skill almost certainly averted a disaster.

For Bill Duncanson, it is a fitting honour to the brave hero he initially spotted drinking a pint, no doubt to settle his nerves, after crash landing the plane in fields close to Drub.

Bill was five at the time when he peered through the window at the man being looked after by locals in the Savile Arms pub near Bill's childhood home.

Sixty years after the crash, Bill used the skills he honed as a police officer working in Hong Kong to track down the pilot he last saw walking across the pub car park and getting into a military vehicle.

Only then was he able to find out exactly what happened to the brave 20-year-old who remained at the controls after telling his crew to bale out.

Tom was piloting a Halifax bomber on a training flight over Hunsworth during the Second World War when it caught fire due to a problem with the propeller.

After his crew baled out, Tom intended joining them, but seeing buildings running alongside as he prepared to exit, he knew the plane was too near the ground for his parachute to take effect.

He climbed back up to the controls and was prepared to meet his fate, yet, astonishingly, he walked away from the smoking wreckage with a neck injury, no doubt, scratching his head in wonder as to how he'd survived.

Contemplating the sheer size of the Halifax - a hulk of aviation engineering - and the speed at which it would have landed, it was a wonder he was able to walk away from it alive.

The experienced airman went on to complete 62 missions. They were made of stronger stuff in those days.

The plaque in his memory was unveiled on Sunday July 7, following a gun salute and a wing waggle of respect by a Battle of Britain memorial flypast in Tom's honour from the nearby Yorkshire Wartime Experience taking place in Hunsworth.

"Tom would be delighted with it. He had great affection for that area and the people who helped him," says Bill.

Show organiser and military vehicle enthusiast Stuart Wright learned about the intriguing story when Bill visited the Yorkshire Wartime Experience in Hunsworth last year. He had intended attending with Tom but, sadly, Tom was too ill to travel.

However, Tom did get the opportunity to visit the area 15 years ago and reminisce with locals who remembered him.

It is a twist of fate how Bill came to know Tom. He was five and playing with pals on fields in his home village of Hunsworth when he spotted the plane flying low over head.

Bill recalls that growing up during the war, he and other youngsters were used to seeing low-flying planes, an experience they found exciting rather than frightening.

"Christmas 1943 I was five and I was always out with three other boys. We all lived within about 50 yards of each other," he says.

Bill's pals are Arthur Hobson, now living in [Oakenshaw](#) and the late John Jackson and Granville Clarke.

"We were sat on a pit hill and I remember hearing an aeroplane coming towards us. It passed over the top of the hill and 400 yards from us it sank down into the valley," recalls Bill.

The plane hit the top of Whitehall Road and tore off the top of a wall before hitting the ground.

"It skidded on up the hill to Drub village," says Bill. "It hit the hill and a few moments later burst into a huge ball of flames."

Bill discovered that the pilot was being looked after by locals in the Savile Arms. Intrigued, he cycled there to try and get a glimpse of the village hero.

"In those days children weren't allowed in the pub, so I looked in and there was this guy in a flying suit knocking back beers," smiles Bill.

Eventually the pilot emerged from the pub. "This man I had seen in the flying suit walked out and passed me - a real life hero," recalls Bill.

Within a few days the remnants of the wreckage were cleared from the fields, leaving little trace of the events that unfolded there.

Generations of residents have grown up in the area since, unaware of the plane crash, but Bill's curiosity and determination to track down his hero led to a twist of fate.

When he finally tracked Tom down, he discovered he was living ten miles down the road from Perth, Australia, where Bill emigrated 27 years ago!

But it wasn't a straightforward search, as Bill originally set out to find the pilot of what he thought was a Lancaster bomber. It wasn't until he realised it was a Halifax that the story unfolded.

"I retired to Perth and he was an Australian, back in his home town," explains Bill.

After a brief telephone conversation confirming that Tom was the pilot of the plane, the pair met and Bill learned the full story of how the plane crashed. Every year after that they shared a glass of whisky together at Christmas until Tom's death last year.

Tom knew of the plans to place a memorial at Drub - an idea Bill and his pal Arthur Hobson had toyed with years ago. For it to be completed, and unveiled, this year is particularly significant as it is the 70th anniversary of the crash.

“Suppose Tom had jumped out of the plane. Where would it have gone then? Nobody really knows. This is a memorial to a man’s courage, and his skill and luck that he got it to stop,” says Bill.

Arthur, who championed the idea for a memorial, says his memories of the crash are very vague, but he did get to meet Tom while visiting family in Australia.

“He was a lovely fella,” recalls Arthur. “The memorial is important because it is the history of Drub. If Tom had jumped out with the rest of the crew the plane would have gone into houses. We are talking about a 20-year-old lad here - he realised what was going to happen and stayed with the plane and guided it. How many 20-year-olds would have stayed with a burning plane?”

Tom’s son, John, who flew from Australia to attend the unveiling ceremony, acknowledged his father’s affection for the area and the people who helped him.

John gave a moving tribute to his father, and talked of how his wartime experience had impacted on his life.

“I was born in 1954, nine years after the end of the war, but I grew up with a father who still didn’t sleep at night and was still having nightmares,” says John, referring to the post traumatic stress many servicemen suffered after the war.

John said his father often talked about his crew, the relationship they had and the crash in Drub.

“He ended up with neck injuries which dogged him for the rest of his life. He spoke about the people of Drub and the boy with the trolley cart who wanted the tail of his aircraft. These are the stories Dad would tell us, but I never really got to understand the full significance of this event in his life,” he said.

He realised how lucky Tom had been to survive came when his father returned to the crash site a week after it happened. “It meant a lot to Dad at that time and forced him to think about purpose - why am I still alive?” said John, adding that his father’s experience in Drub in many ways paved his way in life. He became a civil engineer and, eventually, a missionary.

Tom wrote two books. *Voice Of The Stars*, about his wartime experiences, and sold more than 20,000 copies. “He was a wonderful father, grandfather and great-grandfather and I want to thank you for this surreal experience in being here on behalf of my family and in bringing full circle the experience he would have loved to have been part of,” said John.

During his stay, John visited the Yorkshire Air Museum at Elvington near York to see a Halifax bomber like the one his father had flown.

Erica Amende, secretary of the Spen Valley Civic Society, which secured funding for the memorial stone through the Community First Funding scheme, says: “Spen Valley Civic Society’s aims are to help people understand the heritage and history in the area. This is a bit of history not many people know about, and wouldn’t have done if Bill hadn’t pursued his wish to find out what happened to the very brave man who was piloting the plane.”

Performing the unveiling ceremony, Batley and Spen MP Mike Wood paid tribute to Tom’s heroic actions. “I don’t see today as a sad occasion but an occasion when we celebrate an act of real heroism. This was a hero,” he said.