

SACRIFICE – NOT ALWAYS IN UNIFORM.

RAF Coltishall opened on 23rd June 1940 but although operational, construction of the station was far from finished. On the 19th August 1940, an incident occurred which, although tragic, brought home to the local Norfolk population that this was very much their war as much as that of the RAF personnel.

The whole story resurfaced as the result of a question posed in the Station magazine in April 1978. What were the holes on the inside of the main doors on the southern end of No 3 Hangar? Soon after the tale emerged.

The Station Operational diary for the day in question in 1940 reads: "Fair day but cloudy. A bombing raid was carried out by an enemy raider who suddenly came through the clouds and dropped six bombs, doing little damage to an unfinished hangar but killing and injuring several workmen." On that day in 1940, No 5 Hangar was nearing completion and there was a radio playing at a mobile canteen nearby. The voice on the radio was that of William Joyce, known to all at the time as the German propagandist Lord Haw-Haw. He was telling the listeners that RAF Horsham St Faiths (now Norwich Airport) was nearing completion and the Germans would finish it for us. Then he said that Coltishall would be all right. Just as the broadcast ended, the German raider mentioned in the operational record book dived out of the clouds. Three of the bombs landed in the vicinity of No 3 Hangar with 2 crashing through the roof. These exploded inside the building and some of the marks on the doors were caused by splinters. As a result of the raid, No 5 Hangar was never completed and the demolished building's remains were buried on the site.

Well known aviation historian Francis K Mason, himself a Vampire pilot from Coltishall, provided more detail of the events that unfolded on that fateful day. His research revealed that the raider was a Heinkel 111 of Kamfgeswader Nr27 flown by Major Freiherr Manfred Speck Von Sternberg who attacked the station about mid-day. He had been on a mission to bomb Liverpool but evidently lost his way over the midlands and turned east breaking cloud over Kings Lynn. Shortly after he spotted RAF Coltishall and made a single attack from the west. His stick of bombs fell in a line across the hard standings killing and injuring a number of civilian contractors during a shift change. The release pattern of a combination of bomb types for the Heinkel meant that the heavier bombs would have fallen in or near the hangars. The damage to the inside of the doors suggests that the aircraft's belly gunner also strafed the building. One of the first bombs dropped was near a Bofors gun on the western edge of the airfield and this is believed to have caused casualties amongst the Army gun crew.

Amongst the contractors that day three men, who had been expecting no more than to do a normal days work, saying farewell to their families in the morning like thousands of others that day but were killed due to enemy action. All were local: Mr Sidney Rix of Stratton Strawless, Mr Lawrance Stone of Coltishall village and

a Mr Burton of Marsham. Research is ongoing but it is believed that Mr Stone is commemorated on the Horstead war memorial.

The buildings at the Former RAF Coltishall continue to bear witness to their part in history in so many ways, from the remains of camouflage paint on brick work to the scars of war as seen on the inside of the doors of No 3 Hangar. The history of this illustrious station spans 66 years and generally relates to those in uniform. However, the efforts and indeed the sacrifice of those civilians, mostly local Norfolk people, who played such a vital part in the building and operational life of RAF Coltishall must not be forgotten. It emphasises yet again how much a part of the county and its people the Station was and continues to be.

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