

WW2 burial in the Netherlands



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A full military burial ceremony has been held in the Netherlands for the British and Canadian crew of an RAF Stirling BK716 which went missing in 1943 after leaving a Norfolk air base.

The 28 September service at Jonkerbos War Cemetery was led by Rev. (Squadron Leader) Josephine Critchley, Chaplain at RAF Honington, and was attended by family members.

Representatives of The Royal Air Force (RAF), Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), The British Embassy in the Netherlands and local dignitaries were present. Personnel of the Queen's Colour Squadron (QCS) bore the coffin and laid the remains to rest with military honours.

The ceremony was organised by the MOD's Joint Casualty and Compassionate Centre (MOD JCCC), also known as the 'MOD War Detectives'.

The crew of Stirling BK716 No 218 (Gold Coast) Squadron RAF crashed on 30 March 1943 with all seven crew members on board. The crash site was later located in lake Markermeer, in the municipality of Almere, and the remains recovered in 2020 by the Joint Aircraft Recovery Team of The Netherlands MoD. Stirling BK716 took off from Downham Market on 29 March 1943 for a raid on Berlin, but shortly afterwards the crew was designated "missing believed killed".

Following the recovery, which happened as part of the National World War 2 Aircraft Recovery Programme of the Netherlands, and working alongside the Recovery and Identification Unit of the Royal Netherlands Army and The RAF Air Historical Branch, JCCC confirmed from the wreckage's unique engine plate that it was that of Stirling BK716. Human remains were few, and it was impossible to assign them to

individuals, but all were remembered at today's burial.

Flying Officer John Frederick Harris RAF

Flying Officer Harry Gregory Farrington RCAF

Flying Officer John Michael Campbell RAF

Sergeant Charles Armstrong Bell RAF

Flight Sergeant John Francis James McCaw RCAF

Sergeant Ronald Kennedy RAF

Sergeant Leonard Richard James Shrubsall RAF

Personnel from the Queen's Colour Squadron bear the remains of the crew of BK716 to their final resting place. Copyright: Sgt Samantha Crowe, Imagery Technician, Canadian Armed Forces.

Tracey Bowers, JCCC said:

It is lovely to see so many families here today to witness this burial. We thank all the crew for their bravery in defending our freedom and allowing us to live our lives as we do today.

Niece of RCAF Flying Officer Farrington, Margot McLeod travelled from Ontario Canada, she said:

It's so important for us, and for our mother, who is 96. Harry was all the family she had, so she now knows where he is. He got married before he died and his wife was my godmother, so she used to talk to me about Harry – I feel we knew him. Mom's always talked about him too, and his picture hangs in her house. She keeps him so close in her heart and is so thankful that she now knows the story of what happened to him and that he has a resting place.

The ceremony, conducted by Rev. Critchley, included poems and readings chosen and delivered by family members, and reflected how close the international crew would have been to each other.

Barbara Bradbury, the niece of RAF Flying Officer Campbell, travelled from Auckland, New Zealand to attend the ceremony. She said:

This ceremony has provided a lot of resolution for our family: I'm very moved by it. I grew up with the grief of knowing his plane had gone down but nothing else. I was the first person in the family to be contacted by a researcher looking for relatives and it was quite exciting to be involved, and it was outstanding to hear the plane had been discovered. John was a very creative man who did a lot of writing and made cinefilms, and now we have gone on to learn more about the other crew members of BK716.

Rev. Critchley said:

In life, we know not what happens when we die...as we have paid tribute to the fearlessness of the BK716 crew, what we do know is that they are at rest and at peace, in the safety of God's love, gathered safely home.

Director for the Central and Southern European Area at the CWGC, Geert Bekaert, said:

It is a privilege for us to care for the lasting resting place, at Jonkerbos War Cemetery, of those who gave their lives in March 1943. Whilst it has not been possible to individually recover and identify them, the names of all seven crew members of RAF Stirling BK716 are engraved on the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede, honoured there in perpetuity.

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