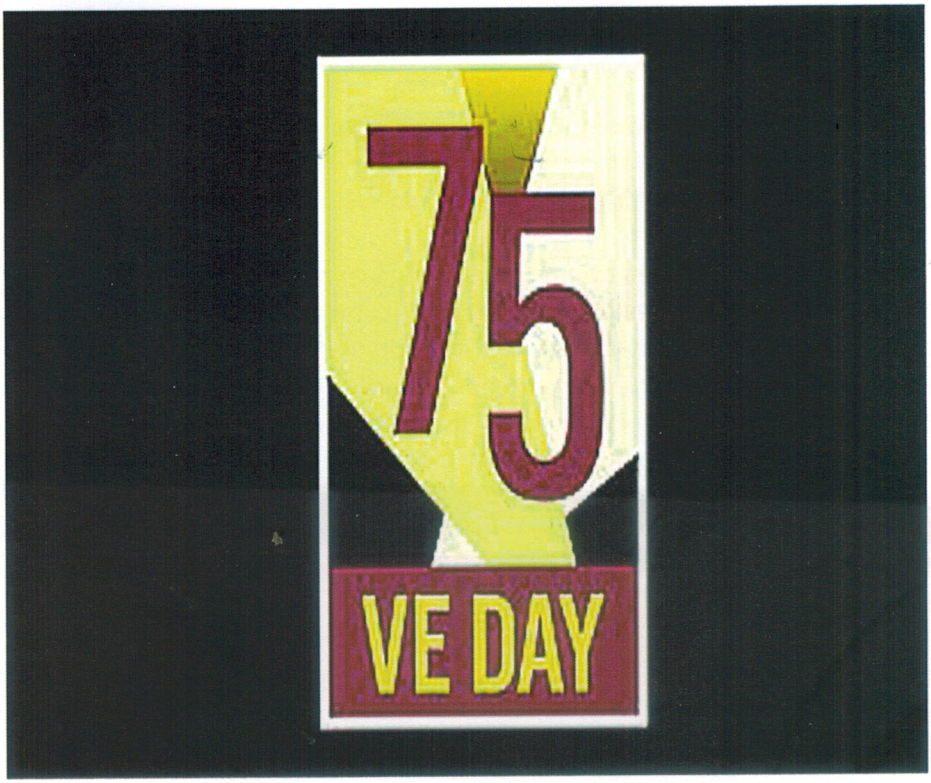


LITTLE MILTON REMEMBERS

1939–1945

LITTLE MILTON'S WORLD WAR TWO DEAD REMEMBERED

887,000 British and Commonwealth troops died in WW1. Ten men from Little Milton were part of that number. Sadly the "war to end all wars" did not result in the overthrow of tyranny and the triumph of democracy.

The invasion of Poland led to Britain declaring war on Germany on 1st September 1939. The death toll in WW2 was catastrophic. Civilian deaths were estimated at 40 million in addition to the 35 million members of armed forces killed around the world. WW2 ended in Europe on 8th May 1945 (VE Day) but not until 16th August in the Far East, fighting Japan. As a nation we commemorate this as VJ Day.

Little Milton lost five men in WW2 – their names are commemorated in St James' Church, and this leaflet aims to give a little information about their lives.

During September 1939, the Government conducted a lightning census called the 39 Register. Data collected was used to produce identity cards, to issue ration books (rationing started in January 1940) and to administer conscription. The 1939 Register is available online and was the starting point for gathering information about Little Milton's dead. I am grateful to my work colleague Dr Alan Cowland of Flackwell Heath who has been immensely helpful in obtaining information.

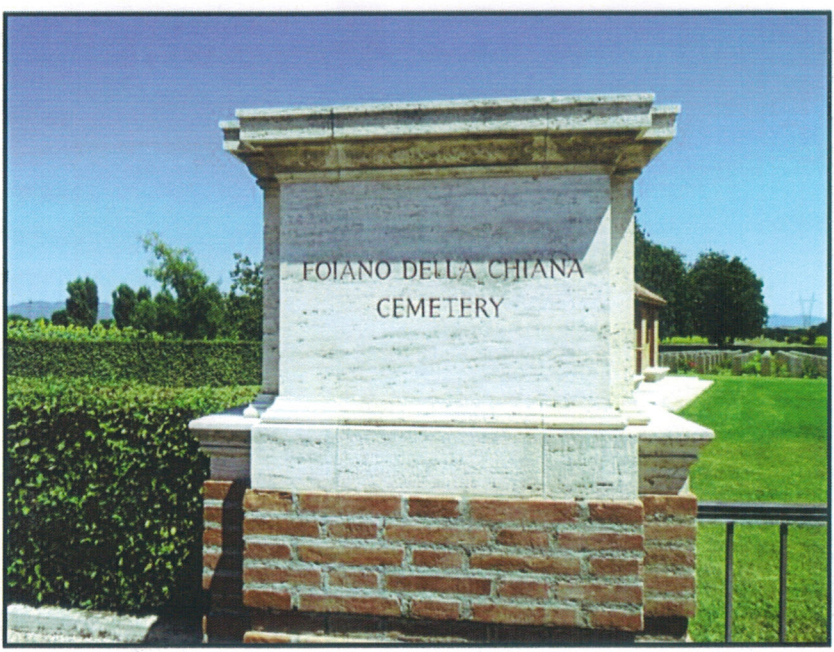
Sgt George Avery, RAF

So says the inscription in the church. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records one George Avery in the RAF. He died in India in 1946 and is described as an aircraftsman, not a sergeant. George Avery is buried in the Kirkee Cemetery near Pune in India. He was the son of Mrs Avery of Hastings—there are no Averys listed on the 1939 Register for Little Milton, begging the question—who is our George Avery?

Guardsman William Coles 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards

William was born in 1922 to William and Eva of Haseley Road, Little Milton. His father was a shepherd. William had seven sisters, but appears to be the only son. William joined one of the oldest regiments in the army and was killed on 28th June 1944 during the long hard advance northbound through Italy. William was just 22 when he died and he is buried at Foiano Della Chiana War Cemetery near Arrezzo in Tuscany. In hilly countryside, the Germans were making a tactical retreat using well defended sites. I have a copy of the regimental war diaries for the weeks around William's death if anybody wishes to read further.

William Coles' family must have moved away from Little Milton after the war. They were not related to the current Coles family.



Sgt Thomas Patrick Freshney

Thomas was born 8th May 1915 and his death certificate shows he died 30th March 1941. The 1939 Register records the Freshneys living at 19 High Road (?), (which could be Belchers Farm) Little Milton. Thomas was one of five children. Their parents were farmers.

Sgt Freshney's short life is a bit of a mystery. Although the church memorial, and his gravestone in the churchyard show him part of the Heavy Anti Aircraft Battery Royal Artillery, his death certificate records that he was a sales representative for Players Cigarettes of Nottingham. Thomas died at his home, Belchers Farm, of kidney disease.

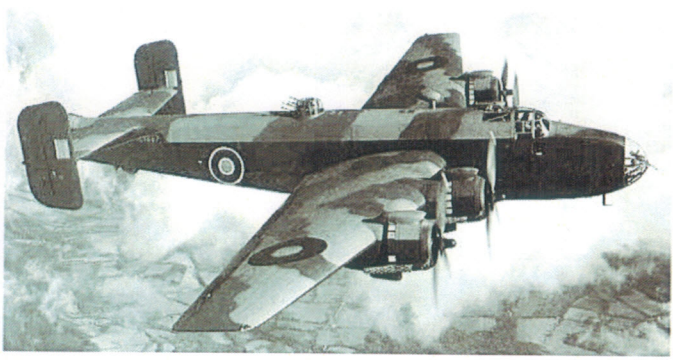
Thomas may have been invalided out of the Royal Artillery due to ill health or injury. His family grave in our churchyard shows a younger sister, Helen who died aged 19 in 1938 , and below it Thomas's name with the badge of the Royal Artillery at its base. Both their parents died in the 1960s. Today we remember a man who died, aged 26, in his family home in the High Street, Little Milton.



Pilot Officer Peter Milton Jennings

Records show that Peter's father (John) was a grocer in Little Milton, ' probably living in a house now called The Old Stores. Peter, born 31st October 1915, attended Lord Williams School in Thame and the 1939 Register describes him as a Grocers Assistant, age 24. He joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve (VR) which was a training step to joining the RAF. In the summer of 1943 he married Bridget West and their son, John, was born in March 1944.

Sadly Peter was killed before the birth of his son. On 20th February 1944 his Halifax bomber crashed five minutes after take off from RAF Lisset Airfield in Lincolnshire (near Bridlington). His entire crew were killed.



The chances of an airman reaching 30 missions (at which they could stand down from operations) was just 55%. Peter was on his 24th mission and his navigator Norman Caffrey on his 28th.

After 23 missions, Peter was becoming an experienced pilot. He had been in several extremely dangerous situations on previous raids. In a book on his squadron`s history, Peter gets at least two mentions; once over Hannover on 22nd Oct 1943 , damage to his wing was caused by incendiary bombs dropping from a friendly aircraft above!, and previously over Hamburg in July he almost collided at night with another Halifax, and in taking avoiding action in his own words " I went over too violently and the Halifax turned over on to its back. With the rudders stalled, I managed to recover control at 8000 feet and although every engine cut out I was able to restart them"

Bomber Command fatalities in WW2 were the highest percentage of any group of our armed forces. 55,573 men perished taking the war to Germany. A brief note regarding the bombing raid that Peter was on. His aircraft was one of 823 tasked with bombing Leipzig. His Handley Page Halifax was one of 15 from 158 squadron flying that night. The raid was one of the costliest of the war. It's a long way to Leipzig and German night fighters shot down 50 bombers. 20 were lost to flak and 4 were lost in collisions. In all 78 aircraft failed to return. Most of the aircrew of 546 were killed. The 9.5% losses incurred on this one raid was one of the highest of the war.

Why did Peter`s aeroplane crash ? It is believed that the heavily laden aircraft developed an electrical fault in its elevators (which control the pitch of the aircraft). His aircraft was only on its 3rd operational flight .

Peter`s wife remarried after the war and moved to New Zealand.

Peter's grave is in our churchyard, but his name is also inscribed on a black marble plaque situated on a bridleway in the Lincolnshire countryside where the crash occurred. The plaque, originally set down by Laurence Caffrey, brother of the doomed navigator, was inscribed with the names of the 7 man crew. It became overgrown and was rediscovered in 1993 by a 12 year old local girl, Georgina Wood. The plaque was rededicated at a squadron reunion and lies near the village of Atwick, near Hornsea.





Georgina Wood who located the memorial plaque in 1993 and maintained it for many years.

https://www.158squadron.co.uk/memorials/jennings accessed 22.04.2020

Gunner Joseph Whitfield LAA Royal Artillery

Joseph was born on 19th February 1910. He married Margaret Hall in Thame in December 1931 and they had 5 children. Their marriage certificate show his occupation as Gunner Royal Artillery, but the 1939 Register records him as a builders labourer. Interestingly, wives were described as unpaid domestic servants .

Joseph rejoined 35 Light anti-aircraft battery of the RA and was despatched to defend Singapore. Great Britain was at war with Japan from 7th December 1941, and in February 1942, Joseph was one of the 80,000 British and Commonwealth troops which surrendered to 34,000 Japanese. Winston Churchill described the Fall of Singapore as the worst disaster in British military history .

Many prisoners of war in Asia died in captivity; working on the Burma death railway or forced labour projects in Japan.

Records show that Joseph was being held at the Fukuoka POW camp in Japan. He was probably mining coal. Joseph's Japanese death certificate records he was taken ill with acute colitis, probably caused by the severe conditions under which prisoners were kept. He died on 18th December 1942 and is commemorated on the Yokohama Cremation Memorial. Joseph was 32 years old.

Covid 19 has hindered our celebrations of VE Day and 75 years of peace in Western Europe. But perhaps it will remind us that WW2 did not truly end until victory over Japan was achieved on 16th August 1945.

If you have any more information about our lost soldiers and their families, please do contact me

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