

RAF Wellington Crash near Bratto, Pontrémoli 24/25 November 1943



On the night of 24 November 1943, seventy-six Vickers Wellington Mark III and Mark X aircraft of 205 Group were dispatched from Oudna and Djjeida in Tunisia to attack the ball bearing factory at Villar Perosa near Turin. Among them was the Mark X aircraft HZ552/M of 40 Squadron RAF manned by Flight Sergeant F H Haegi (pilot), F/O W A Eagles (navigator), Sergeant R S Colvin (air gunner), P/O J C Harthill (bomb aimer), and Flight Sergeant W C Andrews RAAF.



The sortie was at the extreme edge of the Wellington's operational range and, despite being given a favourable forecast, the weather conditions turned out to be atrocious – 10/10 cloud in banks with icing at comparatively low levels was encountered from sea level to over 15,000 feet. Haegi's aircraft was forced down near Bratto, probably as a result of icing to the wings. The villagers heard the explosion but it wasn't until the following morning that the remains of the plane and the five young British airmen were found, scattered across the hillside. Four of the bodies had been dismembered, but one was intact – possibly because the airman had tried (unsuccessfully) to parachute from the aircraft immediately before the crash. Deeply distressed, the villagers gathered up the bodies and buried them in the cemetery.

Sometime later a local sculptor carved a memorial cross incorporating a child's impression of a plane. When the war ended, the bodies were exhumed and moved to the Staglieno Commonwealth War Grave cemetery in Genova, and the cross disappeared. It remained lost until it was found in 2009 stored in a nearby shed.

Such is their abiding affection for these unknown airmen who lost their lives on Italian soil that, every year, the people of Bratto hold a mass for them. In the local museum of the resistance, there is even a photograph of the pilot (above left).

“We shall never forget” one woman said, at the 2009 *festa* held in her house. “Even if the British no longer think of them, we will always remember”.

Sometime after the crash the grandfather of one of my contacts in the village, Paul Pini, found a foot in a boot when he was digging in the fields – he buried this grisly reminder of the carnage where he found it because, he said, “it seemed the right thing to do”.



Crash near Polverara

Another Wellington was lost in the Lunigiana that night, the second crashing North of La Spezia near Polverara during a reportedly violent thunderstorm. This was a Wellington III, call sign "F", registration HF694 which took off from Oudna, Tunisia at 1647hrs loaded with six 500lb bombs and two 250lb bombs. The crew was: Sgt Douglas Henry Betts (pilot), Flt Sgt Horace Peter Hurnell (navigator), Sgt Stephen Fraser Smith (air bomber), Sgt Cyril Thomas Bowman (wireless operator/gunner), and Sgt Stafford Alfonso Barton (rear gunner).

A local teacher described the crash scene and mentioned that the bodies were protected and interred by villagers. Eventually they were exhumed and re-buried in the Staglieno cemetery at Genova.

Mission outcome

In all, seventeen of the seventy-six 205 Group Wellington X's despatched failed to return. None of the seventy-six aircraft that flew the mission found the target.

According to the War Graves documents, the cemetery at Genova has the bodies of 28 airmen who died on the 24th November 1943: 9 from 142 Sqn, 9 from 40 Sqn, 7 from 104 Sqn and 3 RAAF. The cemetery at Milan has the bodies of more airmen who died on that night including those from 37 and 142 Squadrons.

Type of aircraft employed on mission: Vickers Wellington Mark X (Tropicalized)

40 Squadron flew tropicalized Wellington Mark X's from North Africa bases. The main changes for operation in the desert were sand filters in the carburettor intakes and larger 1,675hp Bristol



Collection of Bert Parker

Hercules engines. These air cooled radial engines were much preferred over the liquid cooled Merlin engines, in Wellington II's and Halifaxes that were also used in this theatre, which would often overheat and were more affected by dusty conditions. The tropicalized Wellington Mark X were also slightly lighter than the Mark III with an empty weight of 26,325 lbs and

when fully loaded was 31,200 lbs. Another quality of the Mark X was its improved performance over other marks to fly on one engine which aided many crews to return to base over the Mediterranean.

References

David Gunby's history of 40 Sqn, RAF - 'Sweeping the Skies' pages 243-245

Aircrew Remembered web site: <http://aircrewremembered.com/haegi-frederick.html>

Roma Tearne: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2010/may/29/bratto-lunigiana-tuscany-italy>

Frederick Henry Haegi

Nationality: United Kingdom, Rank: Flight Sergeant (Pilot) RAF

Extra Info: Son of Rudolph Edwin and Margaret Jane Haegi of Colindale, Middlesex.

Regiment: Royal Air Force, Unit Text: 40 Squadron,

Casualty Type: Commonwealth War Dead, Grave Ref: I. A. 12-15, Cemetery: Staglieno, Genova

Memorial located: Finchley Catholic High School London N12: Flt Sgt 659090