

The 1941 Bomber Crash and the Airman's Grave: Remembering the Men who Died

Early in the morning of Thursday 31 July 1941 a Wellington bomber returning from a raid on Cologne during the Second World War crashed on the southern slopes of Ashdown Forest, resulting in the deaths of its entire crew of six. The site is now marked by the 'Airman's Grave', which in fact is not a grave but a memorial to the men who perished that was established by the mother of one of the aircrew.

The men belonged to 142 Squadron, 1 Group, Bomber Command, and were based at RAF Binbrook in north Lincolnshire. They were Flight Sergeant Harry Vidler, captain and first pilot; Sergeant Vic Sutton, second pilot; Sergeant Wilf Brooks, observer; Flight Sergeant Ernest Cave, wireless operator/air gunner; Sergeant Stan Hathaway, wireless operator/air gunner; and Flight Sergeant Len Saunders, rear gunner.

In a previous article (*Ashdown Forest News*, Autumn/Winter 2021) we discussed the general background to the crash and the creation of the memorial. This article is intended to focus on the airmen themselves. We hope that by so doing these brave men, currently merely names on the memorial, will become more real and recognisable in the minds of readers.

FLIGHT SERGEANT HARRY VIDLER

The captain of the Wellington, Flight Sergeant Harry Vidler, was born in 1913 at Hessle, a suburb of Hull overlooking the Humber. His father was well-known as an amateur football official in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and Vidler himself played football, but he was a very keen sportsman more generally. His adventurousness got him into local newspapers when, aged 19, he attempted to swim across the Humber, a distance of over a mile. He was seized by cramp, sank into the water and had to be rescued by friends who were accompanying him in a boat. He was taken ashore for artificial resuscitation and then to hospital, where he made a slow recovery.

At the time of his near-drowning Vidler worked for a large insurance company, and he was employed as an insurance agent when he enlisted with the RAF Volunteer Reserve in January 1937. In September 1938 he obtained a Royal Aero Club Aviator's Certificate at Hull Aero Club flying a Gypsy Moth biplane.



In due course Vidler joined 142 Squadron at RAF Binbrook. He first appears in its record books in October 1940 as a sergeant piloting a Fairey Battle, a three-man light bomber, on two night-time raids on Ostend and Calais, seeking to disrupt enemy shipping. On both of these his 'observer' (i.e. the navigator and also bomb aimer) was Sergeant Wilf Brooks, and for the second his wireless operator/air gunner was Sergeant Ernest Cave. Both were already experienced airmen who had flown in very challenging combat conditions when the squadron was based in France as part of the RAF's Advanced Air Striking Force. Both became mainstays of Vidler's Wellington crew.

In the autumn of 1940 142 squadron disposed of its fleet of Fairey Battle bombers and over the winter re-equipped with new Wellington long-range medium bombers. It seems that Vidler took advantage of the lull in squadron operations, for in November 1940 he married a local girl, Kitty O'Connor, in Hull. Brooks and Cave attended as groomsmen. The following year, on 14th August 1941, just two weeks after his father had died, a son was born. He was also called Harry.

In January 1941 Vidler made the first of a series of twelve cross-country training flights captaining one of the new Wellingtons. As captain and first pilot Vidler was the most important member of the aircrew. His job was to fly the Wellington throughout the operation and to co-ordinate the actions of the other crew members. He was responsible for the lives of all the crew and the aircraft whilst in the air. If an emergency evacuation of the aircraft was necessary, he had to stay at the controls and be the last to leave.

It was during this period that Vidler's aircrew came together. On his first flight he was accompanied by Brooks and Cave, and by a second wireless operator/air gunner, Sergeant M. Cohen, about whom we know very little. The following month Sergeant Len Saunders, a rear gunner recently arrived at the squadron, joined the crew. The final member of the six-man crew was the second pilot. This was a trainee role, with the novice gaining experience while under instruction from the captain. During the training exercises the incumbent tended to vary from flight to flight, but after bombing operations began the position was filled on a regular basis by Sergeant Victor Sutton.

142 squadron's first bombing operation with its new Wellingtons took place in April 1941, and Vidler's own first operational sortie in one took place the following month. This was a 'fresher' operation, where inexperienced crews took on a shorter-range target. In this case two Wellingtons from the squadron were sent to attack Calais. It was a failure, as both aircraft were forced return to base before reaching the target, in Vidler's case due to severe overheating in one of the aircraft's two engines. Notably, the squadron's record book commended him for "*a good landing...with full load with one engine stopped and with his undercarriage up.*"

Vidler led twelve more bombing operations against enemy targets, mostly in north-west Germany, and all but one at night. The earlier sorties, made in various Wellingtons, went ahead successfully and without major incident until his tenth sortie, a raid on Hamburg, when Vidler landed his aircraft back at base with one engine on fire after it had overheated due to loss of coolant. He did so successfully – further evidence of his skills as a pilot. His twelfth sortie was particularly dangerous, when he and his crew and five other Wellingtons from Binbrook joined a daring daylight attack by 100 aircraft from Bomber Command on the German battleship *Gneisenau*, docked in the heavily defended French port of Brest. All 142 squadron's planes took hits, and one was forced to land in southern England with a dying rear gunner. Vidler and crew however successfully found their target and safely returned to base.

Six days later, Vidler and his crew made their thirteenth and final sortie. The target was Cologne, for the fourth time in three months. The night-time Bomber Command operation they took part in involved 116 bombers and was a notable failure. Very bad weather en route and over the target with thunderstorms, dense cloud cover, and severe icing resulted in three aircraft being lost and six more crashing in England; other aircraft were scattered in the chaos. Crews could only report back 'Cologne believed hit'. Six Wellingtons were despatched by 142 Squadron. One crashed on take-off. Two abandoned, one due to icing, the other due to engine trouble. Another, unable to locate the target, attacked Bonn instead. One pilot thought he might have found and bombed the target, but there was no certainty about this. Vidler's Wellington did release its bombs on target – according to a message that was sent back to base – but then, tragically, returning to England with a faulty port engine and flying in very poor visibility, the aircraft crashed in flames on Ashdown Forest with the loss of all six aircrew.

Harry Vidler was aged 27 when he died. He was cremated at Hull Crematorium, where he is commemorated on the screen wall. His death notice in a Hull newspaper simply reads: "*No flowers, no mourning was his wish. We shall always remember you. Mam, dad, John [his brother]*", and a second notice below it: "*Loving memories, Ever in my thoughts, Kitty*".

SERGEANT VICTOR SUTTON

The crew's Second Pilot, Sergeant Vic Sutton, was born in Dover in 1917. He was five years old when his father, a regular soldier who was a sergeant serving with the British Army on the Rhine, died from wounds sustained in the First World War. He was buried in Cologne, a city Sutton lived in as a child for 14 months. His mother, Elsie, now a widow with four young children, subsequently returned to London. But a few years later, in 1931, tragedy struck again with the death of her eldest son, Bert, in a motorcycle accident aged 18.

Sutton went to a local grammar school in New Cross, and then worked for two years at an electrical company in Sidcup. Family members recalled that he was *"like a movie star, dashing, charming and handsome"* and that he *"was fascinated by flying"*.

He enlisted with the RAF as a reservist in January 1936 at the age of 18. According to his sister, his decision to join the RAF was a sudden one. An electrician in civilian life, he trained as an aero engine mechanic, about which he wrote home enthusiastically. Moving from station to station, including stints at Hornchurch and Manston, he received a series of promotions, and by February 1939 was a Leading Aircraftman.

In April 1940 he married a Yorkshire woman, Lily Porter, who had joined the RAF as a volunteer WAAF. After a whirlwind romance they tied the knot in Glamorgan, where she and her mother were living at the time.

Sutton's life however was not unblemished. As a teenager he committed the first of a series of motorcycling offences that ultimately resulted in imprisonment. In January 1934 he was disqualified for a year for driving while uninsured, and in August 1935 he was disqualified for two years for the same offence. Two weeks later he was fined for speeding. In September 1935 he was disqualified for five years for driving while uninsured, and in April 1939 he was sentenced to two months' imprisonment for driving while disqualified and while uninsured, and disqualified for six years. But there were also positives: during the year he was imprisoned he was also awarded three good conduct badges, while his character was rated as *"very good"* throughout his progression through the ranks.

With the rapid expansion of the RAF Sutton took the opportunity to apply, successfully, to become a pilot. He began his training in August 1940 and in April 1941 he was promoted to pilot with the rank of sergeant. Probably not uncoincidentally, in the same month Sutton was back in court again, this time applying to get his driving ban lifted. He told the bench that he was a bomber pilot who went to and from the camp at all hours of the night and morning and that he had been relying on lifts from friends. The police opposed his application in view of his *"bad"* record on the road as a civilian. The magistrates however were indulgent and the ban was lifted. The chairman's final words were *"You may go, and may good luck go with you"*.

Two months later, on 9 June 1941, Sutton reported for duty with 142 Squadron at RAF Binbrook, and joined Harry Vidler's Wellington aircrew as second pilot. This was a trainee role where aspiring pilots would undertake a series of operations to prove their worth, and if successful could expect to be promoted to first pilot and captain. Although only in the squadron for seven weeks before he was killed, he took part in at least six but perhaps as many as eleven bombing missions (the records are incomplete on this point). Sutton died in the crash on Ashdown Forest just five days after his 24th birthday.



Press reports of Sutton's death seized on the fact that he had been bombing the city where his father was buried and where he had lived as a boy. According to an article in the *Daily Mirror* headlined "*Bombed City of Memory*", Cologne was "*a city which had two sad memories for a little English mother.*"

A memorial service was held the following month in Sidcup. According to one newspaper "*Victor was an accomplished pilot, he loved flying, and was attached to a bomber squadron. He had taken part in many day and night raids on enemy targets in Germany and other countries.*" Another report said he was "*A young man of fine character and ability*" and a third that "*He died as he lived, a hero.*"

After Sutton's death Lily, married for little more than fifteen months, returned to her birthplace in Rotherham, Yorkshire. She soon remarried. Sutton's remains initially were interred in her own family's burial plot in Rotherham, but the following year they were transferred to the Sutton family grave at Brockley Cemetery, Lewisham. His epitaph reads:

Sgt/P V.R. Sutton, R.A.F. One of many unsung heroes who sacrificed his life on his 30th trip after bombing Cologne 31st July 1941. Aged 24. At the going down of the sun and in the morning we will remember them.

Following his death, Elsie Sutton ensured that the memory of her son and the rest of the aircrew was kept alive. At first she placed a simple wooden cross on the site of the crash which was then surrounded by a ring fence with flowers inside. From this developed the enclosure that is now known as the Airman's Grave. Mrs Sutton later moved from London to Nutley, perhaps to live closer to where Victor had died. She died in 1979, aged 90, and is buried in the same family grave as Victor.

SERGEANT WILFRED BROOKS

The Wellington's observer, Sergeant Wilf Brooks, was born in 1917 in Ramsgate, Kent. He was educated at Chatham House School, a grammar school founded in 1797 where his fellow pupils would have included the future prime minister Edward Heath and humourist Frank Muir. According to newspaper reports, Wilf was a popular member of the local technical institute's cricket and football teams. He was musical too, and played accordion at local concerts. Before the war he worked in the office of a local motor engineering firm.

Brooks joined the RAF as a reservist two months before war broke out. In early 1940 he was serving with 142 Squadron when it was part of the RAF Advanced Air Striking Force in northern France. By this time he had already been promoted to sergeant. He flew in the squadron's Fairey Battles as the observer, which in practice meant being the navigator and bomb-aimer. During many daylight and night-time tactical bombing operations in north-eastern France, attacking enemy columns, bridges, and other infrastructure, Brooks was exposed to great danger. On one occasion his aircraft was shot down by German fighters; he was reported missing, but days later he re-appears in the squadron's record books on operations again.

After the Fall of France in June 1940, 142 Squadron was evacuated to England and in due course established itself at RAF Binbrook. From here Brooks flew twice more in Fairey Battles, attacking Channel ports. As already noted above, on both occasions the pilot captain was Harry Vidler, and on the second occasion the third crew member, the wireless operator/air gunner, was Ernest Cave.

Brooks joined Vidler's Wellington aircrew in January 1941, and flew on all Vidler's training flights and bombing operations. As the Wellington's observer Brooks was responsible for keeping the aircraft on



course, reaching the target, aiming and releasing bombs, and then returning home safely. He needed to maintain high levels of concentration throughout the flight, which could last well over six hours. All these sorties, with one exception, were at night. Brooks would have been second in importance to Vidler among the aircrew and vital to ensuring the success of his missions.

Brooks was aged 24 when he lost his life in the crash on Ashdown Forest. He was buried in his home town of Ramsgate with military honours. His gravestone also carries the name of his younger brother, Alfred, a sapper in the Royal Engineers who was killed, aged 25, in Burma less than three years later. Their epitaph reads *They died so that we might live*. Sad to say, Wilfred Brooks had been engaged to a local girl, Norah Higgins, and they had hoped to marry after the war.

FLIGHT SERGEANT ERNEST CAVE

Ernest Cave was the first of two wireless operator/air gunners in Harry Vidler's aircrew. He was born in 1920 at Wallasey, Cheshire, the youngest son of Harold, a master bootmaker, and Elizabeth Cave, and had a sister and two brothers. He joined the RAF in 1938 as a reservist aircrafthand.

Cave first appears in 142 Squadron's operations record in April 1940 as a leading aircraftman flying in Fairey Battles in northern France, around the same time as Sergeant Brooks. In fact, they sometimes took part in the same operations, and although they never flew together in the same aircraft, it seems likely that they knew each other; indeed, as we have seen, later that year Cave and Brooks were the groomsmen at Harry Vidler's wedding.

As already pointed out, 142 squadron's operations during the Battle of France in 1940 were extremely hazardous. In May 1940, when seven Fairey bombers were sent to attack enemy columns on the France-Belgium border, Cave was wounded in the arm and taken to hospital, and he was wounded twice more before the end of the month. But he continued to take part in frequent operations until the squadron evacuated to England following the fall of France.

After returning to England in June 1940 Cave was promoted to sergeant. In December 1940 he was sent to Harwell Operational Training Unit, which trained night bomber crews to fly Wellingtons, and the following month he joined Harry Vidler's Wellington aircrew, taking part in all their training flights and bombing operations. On 1 July 1941 the squadron was notified that Cave had been promoted to temporary flight sergeant with effect from 1 April – certainly an achievement for someone who had started out in the RAF as an aircrafthand and was still very young. But thirty days later he was killed on Ashdown Forest, aged 21. He was buried in Rake Lane Cemetery in Wallasey alongside other members of his family. His inscription reads: *Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few.*



SERGEANT STAN HATHAWAY

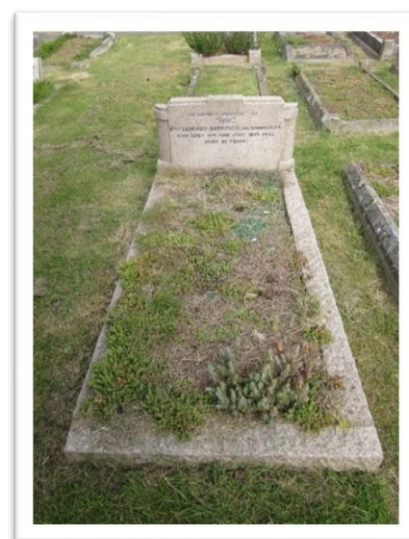
Stan Hathaway, the second wireless operator/air gunner in the doomed Wellington, was born in 1916 in Stockton-on-Tees, County Durham, the son of a farm bailiff. He enlisted with the RAF at Padgate in Lancashire (as most recruits from the midlands and north did) in 1939, soon after war had broken out. We have discovered little about his career after that. But we do know that on 21 June 1941 he reported for duty at 142 Squadron, and that when he joined Harry Vidler's crew for the fateful night bombing mission to Cologne on 30 July 1941 – taking the place of Sergeant Cohen – he was undertaking his first such operation. As it turned out, it was his last. He was 24 years old when he was killed. Stan was buried in his family's plot at Preston-On-Tees. The inscription on his gravestone reads: *TO LIVE IN THE HEARTS OF THOSE LEFT BEHIND IS NOT TO DIE.*



FLIGHT SERGEANT LEN SAUNDERS

Vidler's rear gunner, Len Saunders, had the most dangerous job inside the Wellington. Tail gunners sat confined in their turret throughout the flight, manning two Browning machine guns, highly vulnerable to fire from enemy fighters, which would usually attack from behind. Life expectancy was short. The first death sustained by the squadron with its Wellingtons was of a rear gunner in June 1941, and only a week before the Ashdown crash another rear gunner was killed by cannon fire from a Messerschmidt fighter. It took great bravery to take on such a role.

Len Saunders was born in 1920, the youngest son of Frederick and Julia Saunders, of Whitstable, Kent. On leaving Simon Langton School, Canterbury, he joined the clerical staff of Herne Bay Gas Company, and remained there until he was called up as a member of the RAF Voluntary Reserve, which he had joined before the war. In December 1940, and now a Sergeant Air Gunner, he was one of seven air gunners posted to 142 Squadron from OTU Harwell. He joined Vidler, Brooks, Cave and Cohen as rear gunner for their second practice flight in February 1941, and proceeded to take part in all subsequent training flights and bombing operations. In July 1941 he celebrated his 21st birthday at home in Kent with his family; just a few weeks later he was killed on Ashdown Forest. The following month the squadron was notified of his posthumous promotion to Flight Sergeant, effective 1st June.



Len Saunders was buried in Whitstable cemetery. In addition to the many tributes from his family and friends at his funeral, there was one *"in memory and admiration"* from his fellow employees at the Herne Bay Gas Company, and another from its directors *"in memory of a brave and courageous member of our staff"*.

EPILOGUE

Harry Vidler's Wellington crashed on Ashdown Forest on the morning of Friday 31 July 1941 with the loss of all six aircrew. Their bodies were removed the same day to the mortuary at RAF Kenley. Because it was wartime there was no press coverage of the tragedy. The deaths of the men, their funerals and memorial services were reported later in local newspapers, but, understandably, minimal detail was given about the precise circumstances. They left behind grieving partners, families, friends, and colleagues, and in Vidler's case a child who never knew his father. Bomber Command aircrews were young and had short life expectancies: those who somehow survived a full

tour of 30 sorties were fortunate. In total 55,573 Bomber Command aircrew were killed during the war, another 8,403 were wounded, and 9,838 taken prisoner. According to one calculation 44% of those who flew died, but it has been argued that the real death rate was more like 65%. All RAF aircrew were volunteers. It is impossible to imagine the bravery of men like Vidler and his crew in flying their aircraft to defend their country with the odds stacked so much against them. We owe them so much.

Martin Berry

Ashdown Forest Research Group

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