



Heritage Newsletter



Issue 23

Portrush hero was last airman to die

(by Hugh McGrattan)

PORTRUSH, along with the rest of the Free World, was celebrating. It was August 1945 and the Second World War was over. Japan had surrendered unconditionally on the 14th and a ceasefire declared. Soon, the boys would be coming home.

Of course, there were heavy hearts in many households where loved ones would not be returning. In the Lovell home at Ballywillan Road, however, that sense of grief was to be particularly intense.

Stuart, the elder of the two sons of Mrs. Clare Lovell, was already dead, shot down a mere 18 months previously in a low-level raid by his Typhoon squadron on a Nazi airfield in France. Now, with the war in Europe already won and all fighting in the Far East ceased, a second dreaded telegram had arrived, containing the news that second son Tony was also dead, the victim of an accident.



Wing Commander Anthony Lovell, the quiet young man from Portrush who died in August 1945 as the war ended.

That news on 17 August that the seemingly invincible Tony Lovell had been killed, by a cruel twist of fate on the very moment of peace, was a devastating shock to the whole community. He was 28 years of age and was the last Irish airman to die in World War Two.

Wing Commander Anthony Desmond Joseph Lovell was a much-decorated war hero. Sadly, his name is today almost unknown in his home town of Portrush, perhaps because he was not a victim of enemy action, but of an accidental plane crash in England.

Acknowledged as one of the RAF's finest pilots, he was the holder of five gallantry awards and credited with the destruction of 22 enemy aircraft. He died instantly when his Spitfire crashed on a training flight, moments after having taken off. In many respects Tony Lovell was a most unlikely fighter ace. Slight, quiet-mannered and almost delicate in appearance, he was devoutly religious and imbued with the highest of principles. Polite and considerate to an exceptional degree, he lacked the brashness and bravado that marked many of his fighter pilot colleagues.

Born in Ceylon, he came to Portrush at an early age with his widowed mother, who was from Belfast. At Ballywillan Road the Lovell family – mother, two sons and a daughter - resided with Mrs. Lovell's sister, Miss K.D. O'Neill, still remembered as honorary secretary for many years of the Royal Portrush Ladies' Golf Club.

CHRISTIAN DUTY

Tony was educated at Ampleforth, the famous Catholic college in the North of England, and from an early age had declared his intention to enter the ministry of the Church, either as a priest or a monk. But the war intervened. Appalled by the threat posed by the rise of Nazism, he felt that his Christian duty was to take up arms. So, he joined the Royal Air Force straight from school.

The war was only a few weeks old when, in December 1939, Pilot Officer Tony Lovell first went into action as a 19-year-old Spitfire pilot with 41 Squadron. Six months later, in May 1940, he destroyed his first enemy aircraft over the beaches of Dunkirk.

Tony Lovell's superb skill as a pilot was apparent. His "score" of victories quickly mounted, but unlike most fighter pilots, he never referred to his airborne successes as "kills". If the enemy airmen he had shot down died in the encounter, it is said he arranged Requiem Mass for them in the airfield chapel. If the downed enemy aircrew survived, he visited them in hospital, taking gifts of cigarettes and chocolate.



Tony Lovell (second from left) as a Flight Lieutenant with 41 Squadron colleagues at Hornchurch, Essex, in 1940.



Buckingham Palace, March 1941, and Tony Lovell is pictured with his mother and sister after receiving his first Distinguished Flying Cross from the King.

By the time the Battle of Britain ended, in October 1940, Tony Lovell was a flight commander. Further promotions followed and he subsequently commanded fighter squadrons in Egypt, Malta, Italy and Corsica.

During five years of almost continuous combat flying, he was twice awarded the Distinguished Service Order – an award second only to the Victoria Cross - and the Distinguished Flying Cross, also twice, as well as the American DFC.

The first DSO citation declared that his courage, flying ability and tactical knowledge had been "an inspiration to all who have flown with him" and were "of a quality seldom, if ever, equalled".

At the close of 1944, his combat career finally ended, Wing Commander Tony Lovell was posted as chief instructor to an operational training unit in Egypt before returning to the United Kingdom. His first posting home in three years was also as an instructor, this time at the School of Air Support at Old Sarum in Wiltshire. And it was there that Tony Lovell died, around 11.30am on 17 August 1945, in an accident shrouded in some mystery. Crossing himself, as he always did before he flew – and it was no empty gesture but the action of a devout Christian - he took off in his Mark 12 Spitfire, a powerful and advanced version of the iconic aircraft that had served the Allied forces throughout the War.

HAZARDOUS

Almost immediately after the wheels had left the ground, the aircraft was observed to roll slowly to the right. It was later disclosed that this was a hazardous manoeuvre he had perfected over the years. But, as the aircraft rolled a second time, the aircraft lost height and a wingtip clipped an unseen hen house just beyond the end of the runway. A second later the Spitfire had cart-wheeled through some telegraph wires and into the hillside. The aircraft disintegrated. Two farm workers who rushed to the scene found the pilot already

Tony Lovell had celebrated his 26th birthday only a week previously and had more than 1,500 hours flying to his credit, 1,200 of them on Spitfires. He died needlessly, it seemed, and colleagues were shocked and astounded on learning he had been killed in such circumstances. There was talk that the control wires to the ailerons in the aircraft's wings had been accidentally reversed before the final flight, as had occasionally happened in previous accidents, but no evidence of this ever came to light. Others believed that the strain of six years of flying, fighting and killing had finally taken their toll on his sensitive and highly-strung mind and body.

The Court of Inquiry, which included several of the RAF's most eminent pilots, found that in all probability an error of judgement on Wing Commander Lovell's part had led to his untimely death. It was a typical summing-up of countless wartime accidents – "Pilot Error".

Tony Lovell's body was brought home for burial, the funeral arrangements being carried out by the Royal Air Force Air Sea Rescue Unit then based at Portrush Harbour. He was laid to rest, with military ceremony appropriate to a hero, in the family grave at Ballywillan Cemetery. Fifty years later, in August 1995, a ceremony was held at his graveside paying tribute to all Irish men and women who had died serving with the Royal Air Force in wartime. Wing Commander Anthony was officially declared to be the last Irish airman to die in World War Two.

End.

Our thanks to Hugh McGrattan for this excellent account of a Portrush Hero. 7th November 2020



The family headstone in Ballywillan Cemetery which marks the last resting place of Wing Commander Lovell and also records the death of his elder brother, Flight Lieutenant Stuart Lovell, who was buried in Brest after being shot down in January 1944.