

The talk given by Graham Lawson in the Braemar village hall, on 21st November 2010, related the story of a remarkable Czechoslovak airman, Jan Vella, who, during the Second World War, was forced to flee his homeland, leaving his family behind, to make the long journey through Europe to fight for freedom from a foreign land where he made 66 operational flights and earned a DFC.

His courage, determination and charismatic personality earned him great respect from those he came into contact with during his lifetime, and even more than 60 years after his death the story of his life continues to make a mark on many people.

Born in Kladno, 30 km west of Prague Jan Vella flew with the Czechoslovak Air Force in the 1930's before becoming a train driver for a decade until the outbreak of war in 1939.

After fleeing Czechoslovakia to England he joined the RAF flying both fighter and bomber aircraft before finally becoming an Instructor. He died in an aviation accident in 1945 while en route to London to collect his DFC along with four other Czechoslovak airmen. Squadron Leader Karel Kvapil (Pilot), Flying Officer Leo Linhart (Pilot), Flying Officer Valter Kauders (Wireless Op/Air Gunner) & Warrant Officer Rudolph Jelen (Pilot).

The aircraft, Oxford PH404, took off from RAF Tain on 10th January 1945 on a non operational flight to Hornchurch near London. Although the weather was good at time of take off there was a met report forecasting adverse weather. It never arrived at Hornchurch and nothing more

was heard and since no wreckage had been reported the aircraft was presumed lost at sea.

It wasn't until 19th August 1945 that the fate of Oxford PH404 and the crew of five was discovered when two hill walkers found the wreckage while hill walking on Beinn a'Bhuid. Dr James Bain and Flight Lieutenant Archie Pennie, both from Elgin, had decided to spend their Sunday climbing Beinn a'Bhuid and neighbouring Ben Avon. They set out from Inchrory, and on nearing the summit they found scattered aircraft debris which led them to the wreckage of the Oxford aircraft with the bodies of the airmen.

They made a note of the aircraft number and location and after descending the mountain went to Tomintoul and reported their discovery to the local police. They also reported the details to the local police in Elgin when they returned home.

The following day, Monday 20th August, a recovery team including Police Officers and members of the RAF Mountain Rescue Team from RAF Dyce made their way from Tomintoul towards Beinn a'Bhuid to attempt a recovery of the airmen. Local assistance in locating the crash site was provided by Captain D McNiven, proprietor of the Richmond Arms in Tomintoul, and Mr William Stewart, a farmer from Clashnoir, Glenlivet.

A base for the recovery operation was set up near Inchrory. The Ambulance and transport wagons also waited at Inchrory as they were unable to travel any nearer the mountain due to the rough terrain.

By Monday night the recovery team on the mountain had removed the bodies from the wreckage and made efforts to prepare them for removal down the mountain. It was not possible to further progress with the recovery that night, and indeed some of the recovery team were in doubt as to whether it would be possible to remove the bodies down the mountain at all.

To assist in bringing the bodies down mules from an Indian regiment based at Braemar were transported by road to Inchry. It took ten days to complete the recovery operation with the recovery team working in a very remote location on steep, uneven and boulder strewn ground.

The Mountain Rescue Team burnt the remains of the wreckage at the crash site to avoid it being mistaken for any other lost aircraft in the future. Only the engines and a few other small parts of the aircraft were not burnt. It was a gruelling operation for all the men involved.

The bodies of the five airmen recovered from Oxford PH404 were taken by road to an Aberdeen mortuary and placed in coffins. From here they were taken by train to Brookwood Military Cemetery near Woking in Surrey. They were buried there on September 3rd 1945 in the Czechoslovak section of the cemetery.

The wreckage of his aircraft still lies in a very remote location on Beinn a'Bhuid in the Cairngorm Mountains.

In 2005, a group of Air Cadets from Aberdeen, under the guidance of the Wing Chairman, Sqn Ldr Sandy Reid, a

former RAF pilot who trained on Oxfords in that area, undertook to find out more about the wreckage of Jan Vellas aircraft and their enquiries led them to Linzee Druce, who researches WWII aircraft losses and is a keen hill walker living in Aberdeenshire. She was able to give him detailed information about the loss of the aircraft and the crew onboard. Armed with this information he raised funding for a memorial plaque to commemorate the crew and the many other airmen who have lost their lives in the Cairngorm Mountains. This was placed at the crash site in September 2005 and a service of dedication was performed at the site by The Reverend James Wood. Later the same day a small service took place at the War Memorial and Wellington Memorial in Braemar led by The Reverend John Forbes and The Reverend James Wood for those unable to make the journey up Beinn a'Bhuid.

Publicity about this event in the local press came to the attention of Philip Kammer. He had visited the crash site in the 1970's and had found the remains of a gold watch which was inscribed with the name of F/Sgt J Vella. At the time of finding he contacted the RAF to see if they could assist him to reunite it with the family of the airmen but they were unable to and it was forgotten about until 2005. Philip contacted Linzee Druce via her website and she was able to contact Lt Col Arnost Polak, Secretary of the Free Czech Air Force Association in London and veteran of 311 Sqdn who served at the same time as Jan Vella then a flying officer.

Lt Col Polak used his contacts in the Czech Republic and was able to locate the daughter of Jan Vella. It was discovered that the DFC had disappeared during the Russian occupation after the end of WW2. Sandy Reid then

made enquiries with RAF Records at Innsworth about issuing a replacement.

In October 2006 Sandy Reid, Philip Kammer, Arnost Polak and Linzee Druce travelled to Prague to attend a ceremony at the British Embassy during which the watch in a presentation casket was handed to the daughter of Jan Vella and a presentation was also made of the DFC that she had never received.

With the assistance of Flying Officer Donna Greig, 107 Squadron, Sandy prepared an illustrated album of the whole project which was also presented to the daughter of Jan Vella.

Jan Vella and his fellow crew members are by no means the only airmen to have lost their lives in the vicinity of Braemar during WWII. There were numerous crashes in the hills, glens and mountains surrounding Braemar. Most of these were training flights as Bomber Command had Operational Training Units at Kinloss and Lossiemouth which had regular flights in the area.

These flights were generally operated by newly trained aircrew who were learning to fly together as a crew under the supervision of one or two experienced aircrew who had already completed a tour of duty over enemy occupied territory.

The aircraft they flew in were not considered of a high enough standard for operational duty in the front line squadrons, and it's possible that this, together with the inexperience of the crews contributed to their demise.

Beinn a'Bhuidh claimed the lives of another two airmen when in October 1940 a Wellington on a night navigation exercise from 20 Operation Training Unit at Lossiemouth crashed at Bruach Mhor (*see additional page, (within Talks/Presentations) entitled 'Bruach Mhor', for further information on this crash*). It is believed that the pilot mistook the snow covered mountain for cloud. Five of the seven men onboard survived the crash but three would later lose their lives during flying operations.

Ben Macdui saw the loss of five airmen onboard an Anson which crashed during a navigation exercise from 19 Operational Training Unit at Kinloss in August 1942. A plaque at the crash site commemorates the crew.

In the space of six months in 1944 two Halifax aircraft from 1667 Heavy Conversion Unit in Sandtoft, Lincs were lost, both on night cross country exercises. One came down near Glenshee Post Office, the other in Glen Isla with a total loss of fifteen airmen.

These are but a few of the aircraft which came down during the war in the vicinity of Braemar, there are many more. Standing next to the village war memorial is a memorial which stands as a poignant reminder of this. The engine of Wellington R1646, which crashed in Glen Clunie in January 1942 with the loss of all eight airmen onboard, sits on top of a granite plinth. The plaque attached to the plinth commemorates not only these eight men but all aircrew who have lost their lives in the Cairngorm mountains.

By Linzee Druce (www.archieraf.co.uk) , Sandy Reid,

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(Local Braemar resident John Duff, recalls that he came by the Beinn a' Bhuidh crash-site some 40 years ago, but it was a while before he was able to find out what had happened).