

How Interesting!

During 2011, Magna will publish notes about twelve notable and interesting graves and headstones, in and around Holy Cross Church and environs, written by Neil Richardson.

For October, we look into the death of Sergeant S. J. Slade



This is the headstone of Sergeant S. J. Slade, similar in design to the 1.7 million Commonwealth War Graves Commission headstones all over the world. Sergeant Slade was one of “The Few” as Winston Churchill called them, flying aircraft to defend the British Isles during the Battle of Britain.

Those were dark days when Hitler’s proposed invasion of Britain was still a strong possibility. The role of flyers was to defend us in the air in combat like “dog-fights” or else to go on dangerous missions over Germany to bomb the engine-room of the German war effort in places like the Ruhr Valley and Cologne.

If Germany had seriously damaged the RAF and Bomber Command, gaining aerial superiority, then “Operation Sea Lion” or the invasion of Britain by ship and aircraft might have provided us with a very different future to the one we have and enjoy today!

The optimistic symbol of the Royal Air Force is visible on Sergeant Slade’s headstone, an eagle with outstretched wings and the motto “Per ardua ad astra” “Through struggle to the stars”! How powerful and true that proved to be in the Battle of Britain.

It was a desperately needed role and a desperately dangerous place to be, up there in the skies, with little to protect you against attack apart from your guns and your quick reactions. Sergeant Stanley Slade died in 1941 at the tender age of 26. The grief of his family, and the families of so many thousands of young men and women, and the whole community, can only be guessed at by younger generations for whom war is a far distant thing, not even a memory, and having only the same reality as anything else seen on our television screens.



It is thanks to the many young men like Stanley Slade that I may now write about our good fortune in having no major war in Europe since the end of the second world war in 1945. The debt is profoundly significant, and to be honest, our Remembrance Sunday activities are just the tip of the iceberg of national thanksgiving for their sacrifice. I think that the recent resurgence of interest in Remembrance Sunday and Armistice Day is a collective realisation of just how massive was the suffering of the “war generation” and how much we owe to them for the dignity and fortitude in which they faced up to the challenges and met them head-on.

I consulted the RAF Forums on the world wide web concerning Sergeant Slade and discovered the following information –

“Blenheim No. L 6790 was involved in a fatal accident at 1126 hours when it collided with H.T. cables while low flying. The pilot P/O D. Coard and crew of two (No. 903494 Sgt. S.J. Slade, and No. 989007 Sgt. H. Doughty) were all killed outright. The aircraft was totally destroyed.”

His father was to revisit this grave just two years later for the burial of Stanley’s mother, Rose. Perhaps grief was a part of the causes of her death?



This is a Blenheim (Types 142M, 149, 10) like the one which Sergeant Slade and his colleagues flew on that fateful and terrible day in 1941.

It looks so small, especially when compared to the huge flying mega-buses we travel on these days en route to our foreign holidays in Europe and beyond. It would be terrifying just to fly in one, let alone fly in one whilst being attacked by other aircraft determined to shoot it down to destruction on the earth.

I often wonder if we should mark Sergeant Slade’s grave with a special tribute on Remembrance Sunday?



In summer and in winter, the Old Church has stood for centuries proclaiming faith in God the Holy Trinity and in the Cross of Christ to all who pass by and to any who may show interest. One only has to open the door!