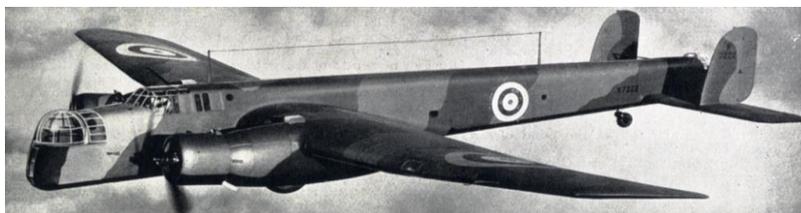


Proposal for a Memorial to be erected in Saltcoats – Aircraft Crash

This is a proposal for a memorial to be erected for the crew members of Royal Air Force (RAF) Armstrong Whitworth Whitley V Z9362 which crashed into the sea two miles off Saltcoats harbour on Sunday 2nd May 1943 and for the local fisherman who rescued one of the airmen by boat.



Photograph of an Armstrong-Whitworth Whitley bomber - Forces War Records Archive

Background

Saltcoats in Ayrshire, Scotland, is well known as a picturesque seaside town, close to the heart of the countless people who spent childhood holidays there, and those who will always call it their home. The people of Saltcoats are known for their generosity of spirit, friendliness and camaraderie. Looking across to the harbour on a clear day, seeing Ailsa Craig, Arran, and other more distant islands, it is difficult to imagine that this beautiful landscape was the scene of tragedy and heroism when a stricken aircraft passed over Saltcoats and crashed into the sea two miles off the harbour, with the loss of three lives.

At the time of the crash, the world had been at war for almost four years with death and destruction of monumental proportions underway on a daily basis across Europe and beyond. The United Kingdom had avoided a Nazi invasion, but aerial bombardment across the country was a constant threat. In Scotland, the Luftwaffe mainly attacked targets in Clydebank, Glasgow, Greenock, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee, resulting in the loss of thousands of lives and many more injured. Villages, towns and cities everywhere lost family members who were fighting for their country.

The crew of Armstrong Whitworth Whitley Z9362 of 24 Operational Training Unit were being prepared for active service. They were tasked with undertaking a night navigation exercise and at around midnight on Saturday 1st May/Sunday 2nd May 1943 they took off from Honeybourne, Worcestershire, England. Five airmen were onboard, and with the constant threat of Luftwaffe intruders they could have been engaged by an enemy fighter aircraft at any time during the flight. Approximately one hour and fifty minutes after take-off, white smoke and sparks were seen to be coming from the port engine due to an internal glycol (coolant) leak. The engine stopped and the captain ordered the crew to prepare to abandon the aircraft. Half an hour later the starboard engine stopped working as it had been operating beyond its specified limit, and the aircraft went into a spin before it crashed into the sea.

Sergeant EHG Dyer, who had been in the rear turret, baled out and was met by a young 15 year old local lad John McCallum (now 94 and still living in Saltcoats) and his dad. They met Sergeant Dyer on the road bridge at the railway station and gave him directions to the police station in Green Street.

David Shedden, a fisherman based at Saltcoats harbour, rowed out with a companion into the darkness towards the sound of calls for help, and rescued Sergeant LN Atkinson who had baled out and had come down in the sea. He was a New Zealander who had travelled to England to work in forestry and who had transferred over to aircrew duties. David was a soldier in World War One who saw combat with the 5/6th Battalion, Scottish Rifles (more commonly known as the Cameronians).

Tragically Flying Officer JC North-Lewis, Sergeant EJ Beer and Sergeant DE Watts were killed. Sergeant Watts was never found, and it is unknown if his remains are still in the aircraft wreckage.

Memorial

Local knowledge of the incident was raised in May 2022 through Facebook activity. There is interest in the erection of a permanent reminder of the sacrifice and bravery of the RAF crew and of the Saltcoats fisherman who led the sea rescue. Work has been carried out to contact family members of those involved. Sadly, no relatives have been traced for Sergeant Watts, who was twenty-one years old at the time of his death. Although he is commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial for service men and women with no known graves, he has not been laid to rest. If a local memorial goes ahead, the people of Saltcoats will have honoured his memory in the next best way. Visitors, including those who travel around the country and Europe to visit Bomber Command memorials would remember the sacrifice of Sergeant Watts, his fellow crew members, and the lifesaving actions of fisherman David Shedden. One possible location may be in the memorial garden for Flying Officer Kenneth Campbell VC.

Approximate cost of a memorial:

A substantial engraved boulder-type monument would cost in the region of £3,300.

David Shedden with his wife and mother or mother-in-law:



Photograph provided by David Shedden's great niece, Julie Newland Thomson.

More information:

For more information on the incident and those involved, a 51 page report is available - email contact Ian McCallum at saltcoatswhitley1943@gmail.com

'Lest we forget'