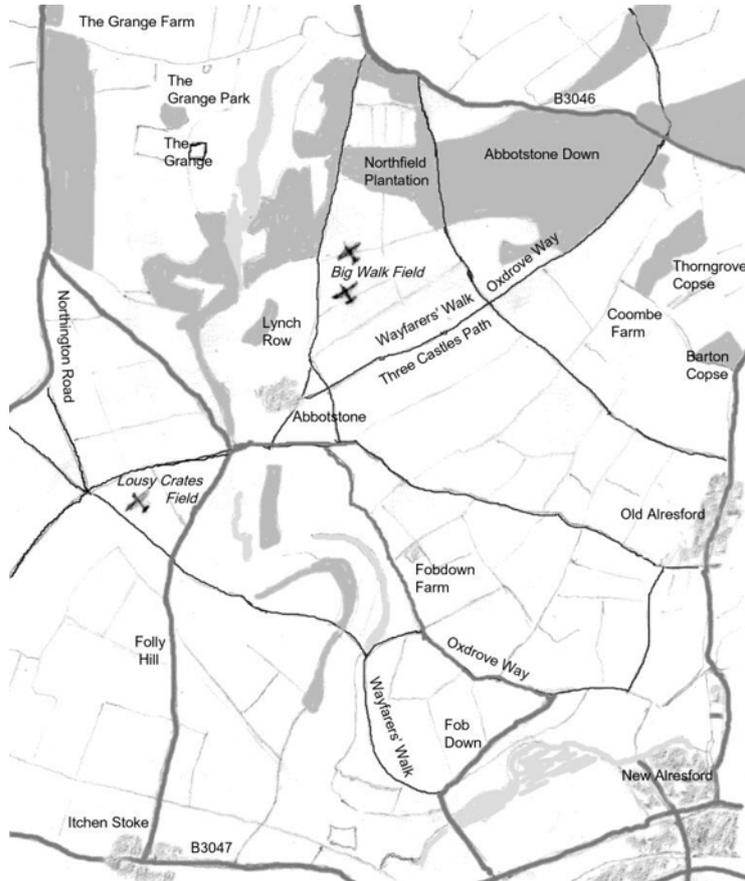


# A Bad Day in Abbotstone

22<sup>nd</sup> July 1944; British newspaper headlines were revealing that the bomb plot of two days before had failed to kill Hitler. In Normandy, Montgomery's "Operation Goodwood", an attempt to break out from the Caen area, petered out with heavy losses.

In Abbotstone that day, fourteen year old farm boy Stan Upton was helping men to plant mangels. Overhead they heard the sound of Rolls Royce Merlin engines, and looking up the men saw pairs of Spitfires manoeuvring hard, their black and white D-Day recognition stripes bright against the sky. Suddenly the sound changed - a sickening "crump" as three aircraft collided was followed by the scream of two Spitfires plunging into Big Walk Field while the third, port wing torn off, spun like a sycamore seed into Lousy Crates Field. All three pilots, F/Lt H.W. Adams, F/Sgt J.G.L. Hughes and F/Lt B. Lees were killed.



Looking towards Big Walk Field



Lousy Crates Field



The pilots were from 26 Squadron, R.A.F., which was not an interceptor unit but serving in the army co-operation role within 34 Reconnaissance Wing, 2<sup>nd</sup> Tactical Air Force, based at Lee-on-Solent. From May 1944 two RAF, four Fleet Air Arm and one US Navy squadron shared a pool of Seafire L.III (navalised Spitfire) and Spitfire L.F.Vb aircraft, spotting for the naval guns during the early stages of the Normandy invasion. The Spitfires were a relatively old model at this stage of the war, frequently referred to in the RAF as “clipped, cropped and clapped”; the beautiful ellipse of the Spitfire wing clipped by having the wingtips shortened to give higher speed and a faster rate of roll, the impellers cropped to optimise the engine for low level performance, and the airframes having seen hard use. That said, under about 12,000 feet the L.F.Vb was still capable against most of the opposition, which was why the US Navy had put their slow spotter floatplanes (usually catapulted from battleships and cruisers) ashore, formed their pilots into Squadron VCS-7 and given them a quick conversion course to handle aircraft with about three times the power and twice the speed of their previous mounts.

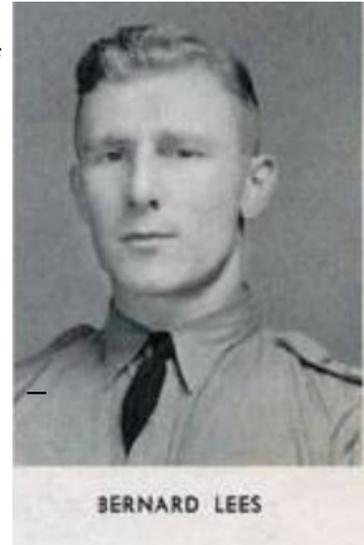
(<http://spitfiresite.com/2010/04/spitfires-of-the-us-navy.html>)

By mid-July the Americans had returned to their ships but 26 Squadron was involved in army support, anti-midget submarine and anti -E-boat patrols in the Bay of the Seine area. (Rickard, J (pending), *No. 26 Squadron (RAF): Second World War*, [http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units\\_ad\\_w/RAF/26\\_wwII.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units_ad_w/RAF/26_wwII.html))

On July 22<sup>nd</sup> six of their pilots were tasked with an exercise to practise pair formation flying and deflection sighting (*R.Nixon*). F/Lts Adams and Lees formed one pair, F/Sgt Hughes and F/Lt Hartley another. The RAF aircraft accident cards for July 22<sup>nd</sup> are available, and record the findings of the enquiry (giving the location as “Old Alresford”). It was found that Adams and Lees had “carried out an unauthorized attack” on Hughes and Hartley, followed by the collision. Hughes was exonerated, but senior officers questioned the standard of flying discipline in the squadron. Of course, fighter pilots need to have aggression and be willing to take risks, but, sadly, sometimes in any training mistakes will be made. Let us then remember with honour:

Surname	Rank	Service Number	Date Of Death	Age	Regiment/Service	Nationality	Grave/Memorial Ref.	Cemetery/Memorial Name
ADAMS , HAROLD WILLIAM	Flight Lieutenant	118559	22/07/1944	23	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve	United Kingdom	23. D. 9.	BROOKWOOD MILITARY CEMETERY, SURREY
HUGHES, JOHN GEORGE LAWRENCE	Flight Sergeant	948182	22/07/1944	22	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve	United Kingdom		BLACKWOOD (OUR LADY AND ST. JOHN) ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCHYARD, LANARKSHIRE
LEES, BERNARD	Flight Lieutenant	125534	22/07/1944	26	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve	United Kingdom	Grave 1079.	EATON (ST. ANDREW) NEW CHURCHYARD, NORFOLK

Additional information for Bernard Lees : Awards: G M  
Son of Clifton and May Lees; husband of Bertha Lees, of  
Clapton, London.  
([www.cwgc.org/search/casualty\\_details.aspx?casualty=2763551](http://www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=2763551))



As a PC serving on G Division of the Metropolitan Police in 1940, along with two colleagues, George Lees was awarded the George Medal for bravery during an air raid. The policemen crawled into the basement of a collapsed building in Finsbury, shored up the debris and rescued a trapped woman.  
(<https://twitter.com/PoliceTrust/status/1285805621808373765>):



Spitfire Vb, W3314 in which F/Lt Adams was killed was a “presentation” aircraft – a product of a Government scheme for any group which could raise £5,000 to “buy” a fighter and give it a name. W3314 was donated by Leicester hosiery trade in 1941 and when new it carried the title 'HOSIERY FLIGHT LEICESTER' (Roy Nixon, Leicester, researcher)

Now Alresford Historical & Literary Society, with generous support, has created a memorial to these young men. Sited at the junction of the Oxdrove Way and the Itchen Stoke – Abbotstone road, it overlooks all three crash sites, and has an explanation board incorporating a QR code giving access to eye-witness Stan Upton recalling the event.



A fragment of one of the Spitfires, most likely F/Sgt Hughes' BL638, has been found by Jamie Sanderson and kindly donated. The author has mounted the panel on a base given by Paul Taylor, and this will be displayed in the Alresford Museum.

Pictures (except Lees) by the author.

*Glenn Gilbertson*