

22nd 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. These pictures mark where the aircraft fell.

The pilots were from 26 Squadron, RAF, which was not an interceptor unit but serving in the army co-operation role within 34 Reconnaissance Wing, 2nd 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/adwRAF/26_wwII.html)

On July 22nd 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. 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 these men (all UK citizens) with honour:



F/Lt. Harold William Adams, RAFVR, aged 23. Buried in Brookwood Military Cemetery.

F/Sgt. John George Lawrence Hughes, RAFVR, aged 22. Buried in Blackwood (Our Lady & St John) Roman Catholic Cemetery, Lanarkshire.

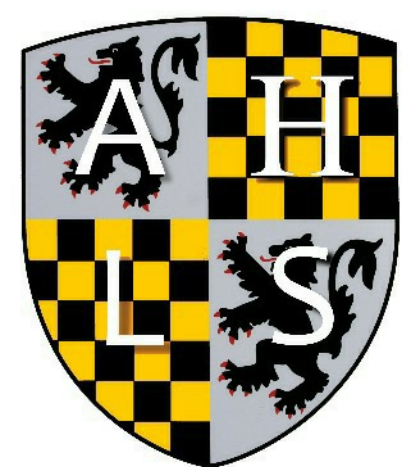
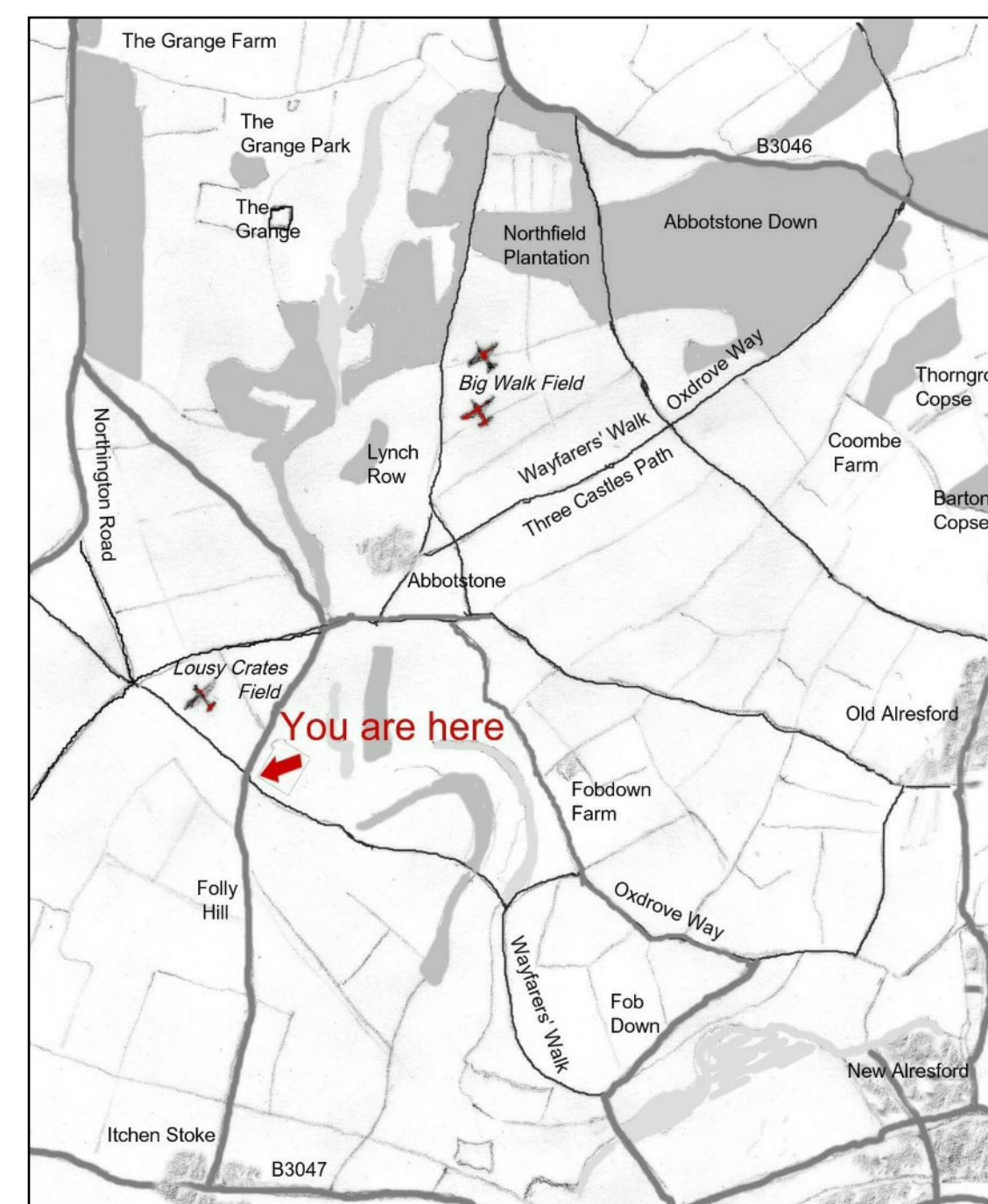
F/Lt Bernard Lees, GM, RAFVR, aged 26. Buried in Eaton (St Andrew) New Churchyard, Norfolk.

Son of Clifton and May Lees; husband of Bertha Lees, of Clapton, London.

(www.cwgc.org/search/casualty_details.aspx?casualty=2763551)

The Metropolitan Police web-site records a George Medal awarded to a Police Constable Bernard Lees in 1940, but doesn't give details.

(www.historybytheyard.co.uk/gallantry_list_1939-1945.htm)



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