



This photo shows the crash site of the Airspeed Oxford in which Pilot Officer David Merry, 21, from Trinidad, and 19-year-old Leading Aircraftsman George Conway, from New Zealand, lost their lives early on May 6, 1944. (Photo from The Logbook Project)

# WW2 airmen who died in training crash near Penhold to be remembered

Two flyers left WW2 training base near Penhold in May 1944 and never returned

PAUL COWLEY / May. 3, 2022 5:00 p.m. / LOCAL NEWS / NEWS

A ceremony will be held Wednesday near the Red Deer Regional Airport to remember two airmen who died on a training flight from there in 1944.

Pilot Officer David Merry, 21, from Trinidad, and 19-year-old Leading Aircraftsman George Conway, from New Zealand, took off on a night-time training flight in an Airspeed Oxford at about 11:45 p.m. on May 5, 1944 from what was then Royal Air Force No. 36 Service Flying Training School.

Their twin-engined plane did not return.

Harvard Historical Aviation Society president Jodi Smith said her group feels it was important to acknowledge those who put on a uniform.

“Even though it was training, it was training to fight for our freedom,” she said. “For us, and our society, that’s an important piece of the work that we are doing.

“These kids were so young when they were here.”

And some, like Conway and Merry, are still here, she added. “They’re just in our cemeteries now.”

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The sad story came to the Society’s attention because of a unique project launched by the son of St. Lucia-born pilot Cyril Devaux and aviation history enthusiast Lars McKie, of Sweden.

Devaux’s pilot’s logbook has survived and his son, Nick Devaux, and McKie have sent it around the world as part of a global goodwill and education project dubbed The Logbook Project.

The project has involved gathering the Second World War stories of more than 100 people from around the world. Dozens of signatures have been collected and some have even donated additional photographs.

Devaux’s link to Merry and Conway came through his training at No. 3 Service Flying Training School in Calgary. Devaux’s logbook shows he and another pilot spent hours in the air on May 7, 8 and 9 searching for the missing

plane.

The pair reached out to Society historian William Mackay, who filled them in on some of the background of the flight school.

The society managed to pinpoint the location of the crash, which now sits on farmland owned by Elizabeth and Dirk Appel.

When approached, the Appels were happy to host the ceremony, which will take place at 8 p.m. on May 4. That is the time and date that Remembrance Day ceremonies are held in Netherlands, where the Appels were born before moving to Canada and becoming successful dairy farmers.

After the crash in 1944, British Commonwealth Air Training Plan stations across Alberta put planes up in the air to try to find the missing training aircraft.

More than 400 sorties were flown from five different bases before the crash site was finally spotted, almost invisible in a stand of scorched poplar trees about two kilometres southwest of the airport.

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The bodies of Merry and Conway were found near the scene of the crash. The plane, which was mostly wood and fabric construction, was almost entirely destroyed by the impact and the fire that was ignited.

A Royal Canadian Air Force investigation concluded that the plane got into trouble when it ran into a thick wall of

smoke from forest fires burning up north towards Edmonton. The wind had blown the smoke south towards Penhold.

Investigators believe that after encountering the smoke Merry tried to return to base but got lost. As he flew low in hopes of spotting landmarks the plane clipped the trees and then plummeted into the ground.

Merry's body was found in the burned wreckage. Conway's body was found about 200 metres away. It appears that his seat was dislodged with him still strapped into it as the plane disintegrated. He undid his harness and parachute and was able to crawl away but died soon from his injuries.

A funeral service was held for both men on May 12 at Red Deer's St. Luke's Church. They were buried with full military honours in Red Deer Cemetery.

They were the last two airmen to be killed in training accidents at the flight training school, where about 1,500 men were trained during the war.

Anyone interested in attending the ceremony should meet at the Harvard aircraft at the Red Deer Regional Airport parking lot about 7:45 p.m.

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An Airspeed Oxford similar to the one in which Pilot Officer David Merry and Leading Aircraftsman George Conway died early on May 6, 1944. (Photo from The Logbook Project)



A funeral was held for leading Aircraftsman George Conway, 19, from New Zealand, and Pilot Officer David Merry, 21, who died in a crash around what is now the Red Deer Airport. (Photo from The Logbook Project)



Leading Aircraftsman George Conway, 19, from New Zealand died in a crash near the modern-day Red Deer Airport on May 5, 1944. (Photo from The Logbook Project)



Pilot Officer David Merry, 21, from Trinidad, took off on a night-time training flight in an Airspeed Oxford about 11:45 p.m. on May 5, 1944 from what was then Royal Air Force No. 36 Service Flying Training School at what is now Red Deer Regional Airport. The plane did not return and the wreckage and the bodies of Conway and Merry were not found until five days later. (Photo from The Logbook Project)



An Airspeed Oxford similar to the one in which Pilot Officer David Merry and Leading Aircraftsman George Conway died early on May 6, 1944. (Photo from The Logbook Project)