

Reginald George Stringer: WW2 Flying Hero commemorated in Lye Cemetery

In 2015, Ray Griffiths, a veteran of the Second World War, asked local historians, Jean Weston and Marlene Price, to look at a grave in the Lye & Wollescote Cemetery which had become completely obscured by a nearby yew tree and a rampant holly bush. Ray thought that the inscription on the headstone may make reference to a WW2 casualty in whom he was interested. The grave was sited next to that of Pharoah Adams, a well-known local butcher and generous benefactor to the townsfolk of Lye during WW1 and the General Strike of the 1920s. Jean and Marlene set about cutting back the holly bush and yew tree to reveal the headstone which had become detached and was lying on the grave in a horizontal position. The inscription showed that the grave was that of Pharoah Adam's son, Samuel and his wife Elsie, both of whom had died in the 1950s. At the foot of the stone, however, were the following words:

Flying Officer Reginald G. Stringer DFC
In action Bay of Biscay
12 April 1943 Buried in Spain

Initial research confirmed that Flying Officer Stringer was the son-in-law of Samuel Adams, but delving deeper into the events of his death revealed a poignant wartime story of love and loss involving other lives than those at first discovered.

Reginald George Stringer, son of John Blower Stringer, was born around 1914. Nothing is known of his early life but at some point he met Patricia Adams, daughter of Samuel and Elsie. Also, he may have been recruited into the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve some time before the start of WW2.

The Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) was formed in July of 1936 to supplement the Auxiliary Air Force, the object being to provide a reserve of aircrew for use in the event of war. Recruits were confined to men between the ages of 18 and 25 years of age who had been accepted for part time training as pilots, observers and wireless operators. By 1939 the Reserve comprised 6,636 pilots, 1,625 observers and 1,946 wireless operators and, when war broke out in 1939, the Air Ministry employed the RAFVR as the principal means for aircrew entry to serve with the RAF. A civilian volunteer accepted for aircrew training took an oath of allegiance and was then inducted into the RAFVR. Usually

he would return to his civilian job until he was called up for aircrew training. During this waiting period he could wear a silver RAFVR lapel badge to indicate his status.

On the 1st of September 1939 Hitler declared war on Poland and two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany, and an uncertain future loomed. It was not uncommon at that time for couples to marry with some haste before being parted from their loved ones and so it was with Reginald and Patricia. A short announcement in the *County Express* stated that Patricia Adams and Reginald Stringer were married by special licence at Stourbridge Register Office on the 9th of September, less than two weeks after war was declared. At the time of their marriage Reginald was twenty-five years old and employed as a representative for a Municipal Electric Sales Department. He lived in Edgbaston, Birmingham and his father was deceased. Patricia was aged twenty-two and lived in Meriden Avenue, Wollaston. Her father Samuel Adams, like his father Pharoah before him, was a Master Butcher.

It must be assumed that soon after their marriage Reginald was called up to the RAF Volunteer Reserve and first joined No. 254 Squadron, formed as a shipping protection squadron and equipped with the Bristol Blenheim fighter. In January 1940 the Squadron made convoy patrols off the East Coast; reconnaissance missions were added in April and the squadron also provided fighter escorts for anti-shipping strikes. Almost two years into the war the *London Gazette* of 15th August 1941 carried the announcement that, on the 5th of July, Reginald George Stringer had been appointed as Sergeant. A year later in 1942 Reginald was promoted to Flying Officer. It may have been during this time that he transferred to No. 248 Squadron.

The 248 Squadron was formed as a night fighter unit and spent most of the war serving with Coastal Command. In May of 1940 the Squadron joined Fighter Command at RAF Dyce in Aberdeenshire before returning to Coastal Command in June. The following year the Squadron converted to the much more capable Bristol Beaufighter which had speed and firepower. Developed at the Bristol Aeroplane Company at Weston-super-Mare, the Beaufighter entered service a year after the outbreak of war at a time when it was sorely needed. It was a two seat day and night fighter, a long range reconnaissance fighter and, as a three seat, an anti-shipping fighter and torpedo bomber.

In September of 1942 No. 248 Squadron was based at Talbenny in Pembrokeshire and had the role of opposing German Junkers 88 fighters that were attacking Allied anti-submarine aircraft over the Bay of Biscay. From January 1943 until February 1944, No. 248 Squadron with their Beaufighter V1C's was based at RAF Predannack on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall from where they continued their reconnaissance patrols over the Bay of Biscay.

The squadron frequently entered into combat with enemy aircraft in which Flying Officer Reginald Stringer would have taken part. It was on one of those patrols in April 1943, when piloting a Bristol Beaufighter, that he was killed during an encounter with a Junkers 88 off the coast of Brest. He was buried in the Bilbao British Cemetery which contains fifty-eight other WW2 casualties, twenty of them being from the RAF Volunteer Reserve. The *London Gazette* of February 1945 reported that Flying Officer Reginald George Stringer had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross posthumously effective from 10th August 1943.

That seemed to be the end of the story until more recent research has brought to light further details of the action on that day in April 1943 revealing others who were involved in this tragic incident of war.

On Sunday the 11th of April 1943 two Bristol Beaufighters took off, almost certainly from Predannack Airfield, and flew across the Channel to patrol the heights near the port of Brest in Northern France. As is already known, the pilot of one of those aircraft was Flying Officer Reginald Stringer but he was accompanied by Pilot Officer Stanley Hunter acting as his Navigator. Off the coast of Brest they encountered a lone German Junkers 88 and became engaged in aerial combat which resulted in the German plane and one of the Beaufighters crashing into the Bay of Biscay. Only one body was recovered from the sea, that of Flying Officer Stringer. The body of Pilot Officer Hunter, sadly, was never found. He was the son of Samuel and Mary Elizabeth Hunter of Grimsby in Lincolnshire. Stanley had been married for a little over a year to Joan Eva Hunter (nee Moore) but, as with Reginald and Patricia, the couple had been separated by war soon after their marriage. Pilot Officer Stanley Hunter is commemorated on Panel 132 of the Runnymede Memorial. This memorial, unveiled in 1953 by Queen Elizabeth II, overlooks the River Thames and the riverside meadow where Magna Carta was signed by King John in 1215.

The headstone on the grave of Flying Officer Reginald Stringer in Bilbao British Cemetery bears words that would have been submitted to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission by his young widow, Patricia. They read, *'In Precious Memory of my Beloved Husband, Remembered Always Darling'*.

Reginald and Patricia had lived in Hill Grove Crescent, Kidderminster and his name appears on the War Memorial near St. Mary's Church and, following the deaths of Patricia's parents in the early 1950s, Reginald's name was added to their headstone in the Lye & Wollescote Cemetery. Today the holly bush which once covered the grave has been completely cut away and, with funding raised by the Friends of Lye & Wollescote Cemetery, this grave, along with several others, has recently been repaired and the headstone restored to its upright position.

In June 2002 a memorial plaque was placed at the entrance to Predannack Airfield honouring all ranks and nationalities who had served there in WW2. The closing words of this simple dedication are perhaps a fitting epitaph to those two young men, Flying Officer Reginald George Stringer, aged 29, and Pilot Officer Stanley Hunter, aged 22, who gave their lives for their country on that April day seventy-five years ago:

'Like a breath of wind, gone in a fleeting second, only the memories now remain'



Flying Officer Reginald Stringer's name on the Adams headstone