

Remembrance Service MRC November 2025

In May and August this year, we remembered the 80th anniversaries of Victory in Europe and Victory over Japan. The Second World War stands as “the greatest man-made disaster in history” resulting globally in at least 45 million civilians killed, 15 million soldiers killed, with a further 25 million maimed either physically or psychologically. If that figure is hard to get your minds around, try this. Across the world, an average of 27,000 people lost their lives **every day** between September 1939 and August 1945, due to war.

What I was keen to do this morning is tell you something of the casualties whose names appear on the Memorial to those who lost their lives from the predecessor school, Midhurst Grammar School, which is on the wall in the reception area. Go and see the names and remember what they did! But they aren't just names, they were individuals. A son, or father, brother, or husband or sweetheart, all made the ultimate sacrifice, and all should be remembered, as we are doing today. Here are the stories of three of them.

C French

Cyril French lived in Easebourne. He joined the RAF from school and flew Stirling bombers for Bomber Command in 90 Squadron based at Tuddenham in Suffolk.

In preparation for D-Day, on March 4th 1944, Cyril volunteered to replace a sick pilot for a night mission to drop supplies of weapons, ammunition and other supplies to the French Resistance based in Bourges, in central France.

His aircraft, one of 19 from the squadron flying special operations that night, took off at around 8pm with his 6 aircrew. They followed a roundabout route to the drop area in order to mislead the enemy. The weather that evening was

ideal and the night was frosty and clear, and visibility was perfect.

Most of the flight was carried out a low level - flying just above the trees, in order to avoid being detected by German radar. After about an hour of flying, the aircraft was slightly left of its intended course and while the navigator was requesting a change in course, the aircraft was illuminated by a searchlight. Anti-aircraft guns opened fire and the aircraft was hit. In fact, the aircraft had just crossed the perimeter of the Avord airbase in central France which was being used as a German training and bomber base.

The Stirling was badly damaged, and Cyril ordered his crew to bail out as he tried to regain some height to help his crew. Cyril battled with the severely damaged plane but unfortunately the plane crashed near the village of St Hilaire de Gondilly.

The crash site was littered with arms, ammunition and military supplies so the Germans knew these were for the French Resistance. Sadly, they didn't pay the normal military courtesies, and it was left to the villagers to collect and bury his body in a grave in the village. 80 local people attended his funeral which was a very brave thing to do in those times in order to pay their respects and honour Flt Lt French. The six crew members who baled out survived the war. When he died, Flt Lt French was 20 years old.

AF Dancaster

Arthur Frank Dancaster was from Rogate. It is likely he was in the Air Cadets which was a successful group within the school in the lead up to the war. After he left Midhurst Grammar School he joined the RAF. He trained as an air mechanic on looking after aircraft that allowed pilots to fly to defend our country. In August 1940 after training, he was an aircraft fitter servicing Blenheim fighter-bombers in 53 Squadron based at RAF Detling near Maidstone in Kent.

On 13th August 1940 in the build-up to prelude to the Battle of Britain, the German Airforce the Luftwaffe, heavily attacked Detling airbase. The operations room received a direct hit killing the camp commander, destroying the landing field, blowing up a hangar and causing 67 deaths, Arthur being one of them. He is buried in Maidstone Cemetery. When he died, Arthur was 20.

AG Burningham

Albert Gordon Burningham lived in Chichester and was the son of a retired policeman and attended Midhurst Grammar School. At the start of the war, he was commissioned as an officer and joined the Royal Sussex Regiment and after training he was posted to the 5th Battalion in the Western Desert. In October 1942 he was part of the 8th Army under General Montgomery which fought the Germans and Italians under Field Marshal Rommel. After 13 days fighting the Germans were crushed and forced to retreat from Egypt and Libya. The 5th Battalion were infantry, transported in lorries, whose role was to follow the tanks of the armoured divisions to mop up resistance and occupy and hold territorial gains. For his part in this battle, Albert was part of a two-company night attack on a position known as Snipe. One company was successful, but Albert's company were attacked by machine guns and suffered 80% casualties and all officers killed, including Albert. He was initially posted missing, later amended to presumed killed in action. His body was never found and he is listed on a panel to the missing at Al Alamein Memorial in Egypt. He was 24.

A last thought. There are perhaps three lessons:

First, war causes terrible suffering, not just for service personnel but also for civilians caught in its crossfire, something we continue to see in conflicts around the world today.

Second, to continue to enjoy freedom and democracy, it is not enough simply to cherish them; we must be prepared to defend them as our forebears were called upon to do twice in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

Third, to defeat tyranny it is not enough for nations to stand alone. Only by joining together can nations and peoples bring peace and prosperity to places where there is conflict and suffering long after the fighting has finished.