

REPORT ON THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE 206 SQN CAIRN LOCHAILORT

The morning of Thursday 21 Dec 2017 dawned at the Lochailort Inn in Moidart with a little cloud but thankfully no rain. The manager of the Inn – Mrs Eilidh Gillies – had kindly made the resources of her establishment available to us as a base despite the fact that she was scheduled to close the next day. Derek Straw, Stephen and Sheila Harvey, David Pierce, and Mark Harris together with myself, my son and grandson had arrived at the Inn the night before and in the evening we swapped our recollections of the times over a dram or two.

The plan was for all the participants to assemble in the lounge between 0930hrs and 1030hrs the next morning and after a good Scottish breakfast, we were joined by Ken Bowker and Jean Bowker and Alan Moir from Moidart together with Ray Sefton and Fiona Wild representing the MRT's. Shortly afterwards, four members of the Davidson family (Mrs Davidson is the sister of Fg Off MacLean) arrived along with Wg Cdr Bruce Farquar (Commanding Officer No 206 Squadron) and the RAF Lossiemouth Padre, Rev. Andrew Tucker. To complete the group, we had arranged to meet Ian Thornber and Jimmy McDonald at the Cairn at the appointed time.

The day before, Geoff Lovegrove who was serving at RAF Kinloss at the time of the crash, had arranged a service at the St Eval Church in Cornwall, conducted by the Rev. Andrew Tucker, to commemorate the lives lost 50 years ago. St Eval is the site of a WW2 RAF maritime flying station and the village church retains a spiritual connection to maritime aviators particularly to those who flew Shackletons.

Back at the Inn at Lochailort, we held a wee introductory session for the 22 participants many of whom were meeting for the first time. For very good reasons, not everyone could make the climb so at 1045hrs 18 stalwarts moved from the Inn to the trail some 2km down the main road to the east of the Inn. The local press had taken an interest in the pilgrimage and Martin Briscoe from the Oban Times was made very welcome and invited to join the group.

At 1100hrs we were ready to go and off we went led by Ken and Jean Bowker from the Moidart Historical Society as our local guides. It took just over an hour to get to the site and we were fortunate that it remained dry and not too cold. On the way we came across two walkers who turned out to be from the Royal British Legion Scotland at Fort William. They knew of the crash site and had decided independently to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the tragedy. I suspect that they were just as surprised to see us as we were to see them. They joined up with us and on arrival at the cairn, the Rev Andrew Tucker distributed printed copies of the act of remembrance and we gathered together to pay our respects.

We started with prayers led by Andrew followed by the reading of Psalm 23. After a passage from Revelation 21:1-4, I read a lovely poem composed by Mrs Yvonne Swinney on behalf of the family to commemorate the life of Fg Off Terry Swinney. This was followed by the reading of "Finals" a eulogy of the tragedy written by Derek Straw and read by Wg Cdr Bruce Farquhar OC 206 Sqn on behalf of Derek who was not able to make the climb. Andrew then lead us through a few moments of meditation and prayers after which David Pierce read out the names of the crew with some reflections on their personalities. After a two-minute silence Stephen Harvey, the son of Sqn Ldr Harry Harvey, laid a 206 Squadron wreath at the base of the cairn on behalf of all the families and relatives of the crewmembers.

The two British Legions guys had brought a memorial cross with them which they laid alongside the wreath. Mark Harris, the son of Flt Sgt David Harris placed a permanent metal commemorative plaque in the ground adjacent to the cairn in honour of his father and the Davidson family (sister of Plt Off Iain Maclean) placed a similar plaque in honour of Iain alongside that of David.

It was a most moving service conducted with respect and dignity by the padre and all of us were in our different ways greatly affected by it. After a further 15 minutes of reflection, we made our way downwards as the light began to dim and the weather started to draw in. We arrived back at the trailhead where some of the party had to depart because of flights and trains. Most of us retired to the Lochailort Inn for a well-earned coffee and to say our goodbyes before dispersal.

It was an extremely poignant day. It was a privilege to meet all the different people who were involved in so many different ways in the tragedy half a century ago who had now re-assembled to pay tribute to those brave souls who lost their lives at 13.05 hrs on Thursday 21 December 1967.

John Channon
206 Sqn 1967

Edited for website use by Ken Bowker, 15th January 2018.