

Remembrance can take many forms.

This is the true story of an eight year-old girl in the south of England during the Battle of Britain. She saw an RAF fighter pilot in his parachute being machine-gunned by a Messerschmitt 109 as he drifted towards the earth over Ashford in Kent. She felt that that had been a terrible price he had had to pay for protecting her. Many years later, Jean Liddicoat, as she had become, was a grandmother living in Staplehurst. Her grandson questions her about the Battle of Britain, which he is studying in school. She answers him, and he says to her that in the cemetery next door is the grave of an unknown airman which has been left neglected and forgotten. She goes to see it and, sure enough, on the headstone are the words,

"An airman of the 1939-1945 War ... Known unto God".

Jean tidies up the grave and makes it look beautiful. Then she starts making inquiries. After eight years of investigating, she discovered that on 5 September 1940, during the Battle of Britain, eight RAF pilots were killed, but only six were identified. She therefore knew that the unknown airman must be one of two men. She also discovered that he had in his possession at the moment that the Spitfire plunged into the ground a half-hunter silver pocket watch. Its mechanism had stopped at the moment of impact. What was more, the unknown airman's sister, Margaret, who was approaching 92 years of age, had come forward and identified the watch as being exactly the same as the one given to her brother.

Jean Liddicoat now knew who the airman was, and she found out as much as she could about him. His name was Freddie Rushmer, and he was a flight commander of a squadron which had more confirmed victories in the Battle of Britain than any other in both the RAF and the Royal Auxiliary Air Force. On the day on which he did not return from his mission, there was absolutely no time to go searching for a fallen comrade in the war being waged for Britain's very existence.

Freddie Rushmer had never had a funeral service, so one was arranged at All Saints Church in Staplehurst. RAF officers from No. 603 (City of Edinburgh) Squadron and representing the present Tornado squadrons attended, but did not expect a large congregation nearly 60 years after the Battle of Britain. When they arrived, they found to their astonishment that the church was full to overflowing with local residents-some were standing outside. Whoever the unknown airman was and whatever he did, they wanted to remember the man whom they believed had died to safeguard their freedoms, who had died for them.

Told by James, Lord Selkirk of Douglas, to the House of Lords 10th November 2011