

ENSIGN CEREMONY AT SOUTHWELL MINSTER

In common with a great many R.A.F. stations thrown open to the public on Saturday, to mark the anniversary of the Battle of Britain, Newton, Wymeswold, Ossington, Scampton and other aerodromes in the East Midlands, were visited by thousands of people, who were able to see Lancasters, Liberators, Stirlings, Mosquitos, Typhoons, &c., at close quarters, also Britain's fastest jet planes in flight.

At Southwell Minster, the presence of hundreds of airmen and airwomen, including approximately 20 pilots who took part in the Battle of Britain, the officers, warrant officers and airmen of No 12 Group, Fighter Command, remembered those of their number who made the supreme sacrifice in the air defence of the country, when they presented a Royal Air Force ensign together with a memorial tablet, to be placed permanently in the Air Force Chapel.

The impressive ceremony was conducted by the Bishop of Southwell (Dr Russell Barry), the other clergy being the Provost (the Ven. H.C.L. Heywood), the Chaplain-in-Chief R.A.F. (Air Commodore the Rev. J.A. Payne), Archdeacon J.P. Hales, the Chaplain at headquarters No 12 Group (the Rev. A. Doxey), and the Bishop's chaplain (Rev. E. Lunn).

The whole of the R.A.F. personnel were seated in the chancel close to the high altar and distinguished visitors had seats near the choir. Among those present were the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief (Air-Vice Marshal Sir James M. Robb), Air Officer Commanding No 12 Group Fighter Command (Air-Vice Marshal J.W. Baker), the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Nottingham (Coun. and Mrs F. Carney), the Sheriff (Coun. W.B. Blandy) and Mrs Blandy, Gen. J. Beckett, Sir Joseph Nall, and Sir Albert and Lady Ball.

Sacrifice for freedom

The colour party comprised six members of No 12 Group Fighter Command, with the commanding officer of the R.A.F. station at Watnall (Sqdn. Ldr J.F. Houchin) as standard bearer. After the introit and the singing of an anthem, "Goodly is our heritage" composed by the Minster organist (Capt. G.T. Francis), the colour party advanced to the high altar, and stood during the singing of the National Anthem. The air officer commanding No 12 Group then presented the ensign to the Bishop, who placed it on the altar and read a prayer of dedication. Then followed the hymn "Inheritance", prayers by the chaplain-in-chief, and the hymn "For all the Saints".

A procession was formed to the Air Force Chapel, and the ensign being placed in position over the memorial tablet, the bishop dedicated the tablet, which had the following inscription:

"In proud memory of the officers, warrant officers and airmen of No 12 Group Fighter Command, Royal Air Force, who gave their lives in the air defence of this country during the years of the world war, 1939 - 1945.

This ensign was given as a symbol of their comrades' determination to uphold the great traditions of freedom and justice for which their sacrifice was made.

And in that faith they died"

The choir then sang the anthem "Lead us Lord", and the trumpeters sounded "Last Post" and "Reveille"

(Taken from a newspaper report (? from the Newark Advertiser?) of the service which took place on Saturday 15th September 1945 at 11.30 a.m. The rest of the report consists of extracts from Bishop Barry's sermon but have not been copied here as the full text of the sermon follows).

N.B. The Air Force Chapel referred to in this passage was situated in the north transept chapel - now the Pilgrims' Chapel.

No 12 Group Fighter Command also had services in the Minster on the same weekend in 1946 and 1947 (?perhaps in subsequent years as well?)

ADDRESS BY THE RT REVD F.R.BARRY, D.S.O., BISHOP OF SOUTHWELL, on Saturday 15th September 1945, at the Service for the Presentation and Dedication of a Royal Air Force Ensign in memory of the Officers, Warrant officers and Airmen of No 12 Group Fighter Command, Royal Air Force, who gave their lives in the Air Defence of this country in the years of the World War, 1939 - 1945.

It is a great privilege for us to welcome the Fighter Command here today and to receive this ensign of the Royal Air Force which you have given us to be displayed continuously in this ancient mother Church of Nottinghamshire to be a memorial to those who come after one of the greatest hours in English history, one of the deepest secrets in her soul to which we must now live in ten-part loyalty.

Five years ago everything was in jeopardy, not alone our national interests, but all those precious values of truth and justice, of liberty and kindness for which we stand, which have made us great and for which, under the hand of God, we are called to stand in the world of tomorrow. In that darkest hour we never doubted that the righteousness and love of God would prevail over cruelty and hate. What the world, free today, owes to the Royal Air Force, cannot be expressed, but with and behind the few there were the many kindled into a pure flame of dedication and high resolve, matchless courage and answering trust, and within and behind all that there was something more; it was our ancestral Christian heritage of faith in God and the power of the Spirit; today this ensign, the emblem and reminder of that hour of agony and splendour, has been dedicated on this altar in this house of God in the Name and in the faith of him who passed by the way of sacrifice and trial, the liberator and Saviour of mankind.

We cannot now easily recapture the emotional exultation of the time, but if we are to prove not unworthy of the great deliverance which has been given to us, if we are to keep faith with those to come, then we must live in steadfast loyalty, dedication and brotherhood of truth in God and service to mankind. It is for us now, highly to resolve that those who have fallen shall not have died in vain; to cleanse the world of the evil stain of war; to repair the wastage; to heal the wounds, and in the inspiration of our faith, to rebuild in liberty and justice in the law of God and in the truth of Jesus Christ. May God, who has brought us thus far upon our way, give us the fidelity to see it through.

In 1984 the furnishings were moved to the present site of the Airmen's Chapel and there was a service of dedication on Sunday 11th March that year. The introduction to that service refers back to the service which was held by No 12 Group Fighter Command in September 1945, but adds:

" The original altar remains but the ensign given in 1945 has been replaced by a new silk ensign presented by Royal Air Force Newton, although the symbolic remembrance by No 12 Group remains".