

Family of World War Two pilot blamed for fatal crash call for him to be exonerated after fresh witness accounts emerge

By [Leon Watson](#)

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Seeking justice: The family of RAF pilot Denis Evans, pictured here, claim they have new evidence exonerating him of blame for a plane crash that killed nine people

For 67 years he's taken the blame for a World War II horror crash that killed nine people including himself.

But now the family of Flight Sergeant Denis Evans believe they will finally be able to clear his name after new evidence of an RAF 'whitewash' emerged.

The pilot, 20, was at the controls of a Halifax bomber that plunged into houses minutes after taking off in March 1944.

All seven crew members were killed along with two civilians who were sleeping in their homes in a suburb of Bournemouth, Dorset.

The official RAF report recorded the cause of the crash as 'pilot error' and stated the young flyer wasn't paying attention to his instruments.

But a campaign has now been launched to lobby the Ministry of Defence to posthumously clear Sgt Evans'

name after two eye-witness accounts were recently unearthed.

They both state that one of the aircraft's four Rolls Royce Merlin engines was on fire moments before the Halifax spiralled to the ground.

The plane had only reached 600ft having just taken off, giving the pilot no time or room to save the aircraft or its crew.

Experts and historians have pored over the official RAF reports that were classified after the war, witness accounts and the history of the aircraft.

And they have concluded the plane was doomed from the moment it was airborne and there was nothing Sgt Evans could have done to avoid the crash.

It is thought the RAF blamed him to avoid damaging the morale of Allied servicemen ahead of the D-Day invasion two months later which would involve Halifax bombers.



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Aftermath: Picture taken from a local paper of wreckage left behind in Bournemouth, Dorset, after the crash in 1944

Now Sgt Evans' niece Pauline Richardson is backing the campaign to clear his name that is being led by residents of the Bournemouth suburb where the crash happened.

Mrs Richardson, 65, of Newport Pagnell, Buckinghamshire, said: 'We knew that my uncle died in the war but had no idea how or where.

'My father was also an airman in Bomber Command but he never spoke about the war or his brother. I don't know if he felt a sense of shame because of the cause of the crash.

'But my uncle being blamed for the crash is simply wrong and I'm glad this campaign has been launched to rightfully clear his name.'

Neil Smith, a historian for the RAF's 51 Squadron, said: 'The RAF report didn't mention that the engine was on fire.

'They probably wanted to tidy it up very quickly afterwards for morale purposes and give the appearance there was nothing wrong with the aircraft and it was perfectly safe to fly.

FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 1944

Searching the Wreckage

This picture of the wreckage of an aeroplane which crashed at North Bournemouth early on Tuesday indicates how near were the houses it missed in its fall.

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Tragedy: Local paper report on the crash which killed nine people in 1944

'They put down pilot error as the cause but it wasn't the pilot's fault. There was nothing he could have done about it.

'Sgt Evans' brother was also a pilot and I think it is likely that he saw the report and read that his brother was blamed for the crash.

'It is not fair to have any element of blame on Sgt Evans' name or his family's name.'

The Halifax mark II bomber JP 137 took off from RAF Hurn - now Bournemouth Airport - shortly after midnight on March 21, 1944.

It had been headed for a British base in Morocco where the crew were due to take part in a Secret Operations Executive mission.

Within two minutes of taking off the plane got into difficulty, turned left and spiralled to the ground.

Some experts believe Sgt Evans' turned the aircraft around in a bid to get back to the airfield while others believe the plane was paralysed and he wasn't in control.



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Destruction: A huge area was damaged, including several residential buildings, after the crash in Moordown, Bournemouth

It crashed into two properties in the Moordown area of Bournemouth.

The crew - Sgt Evans, navigator Sgt Henry Roberts, Sgt George Alexandra, Sgt Stanley Gent, Sgt Kenneth Green, Sgt Reginald McGregor and Flying Officer Stanley Appleton - died almost instantly.

Two local residents, Dorothy Bennett and Percy Chislett, were also killed.

The matter remained buried for the next six decades until two years ago when locals started planning a memorial at the crash site.

It was only then that people and amateur historians started researching the crash and came across Russell Barnes, 81, who witnessed the shocking aftermath of it as a boy.

Mr Barnes, a retired police officer, revealed he had previously met two people who saw one of the engines of fire.

More research revealed that the rudders on the Halifax mark II bombers were prone to jamming - a fault that would have left Sgt Evans with no control of the aircraft.

Amateur historian Roger Shore, from Bournemouth, said: 'The engine must have failed almost immediately after take off. It was doomed right from the start.'

'It does seem as if blaming the pilot was probably just a convenient "whitewash", to minimise the flaw in the tail design.'

A spokesman for the MoD said it was too early to comment on the campaign but added: 'We would consider any evidence presented to us in relation to this historic case.'



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