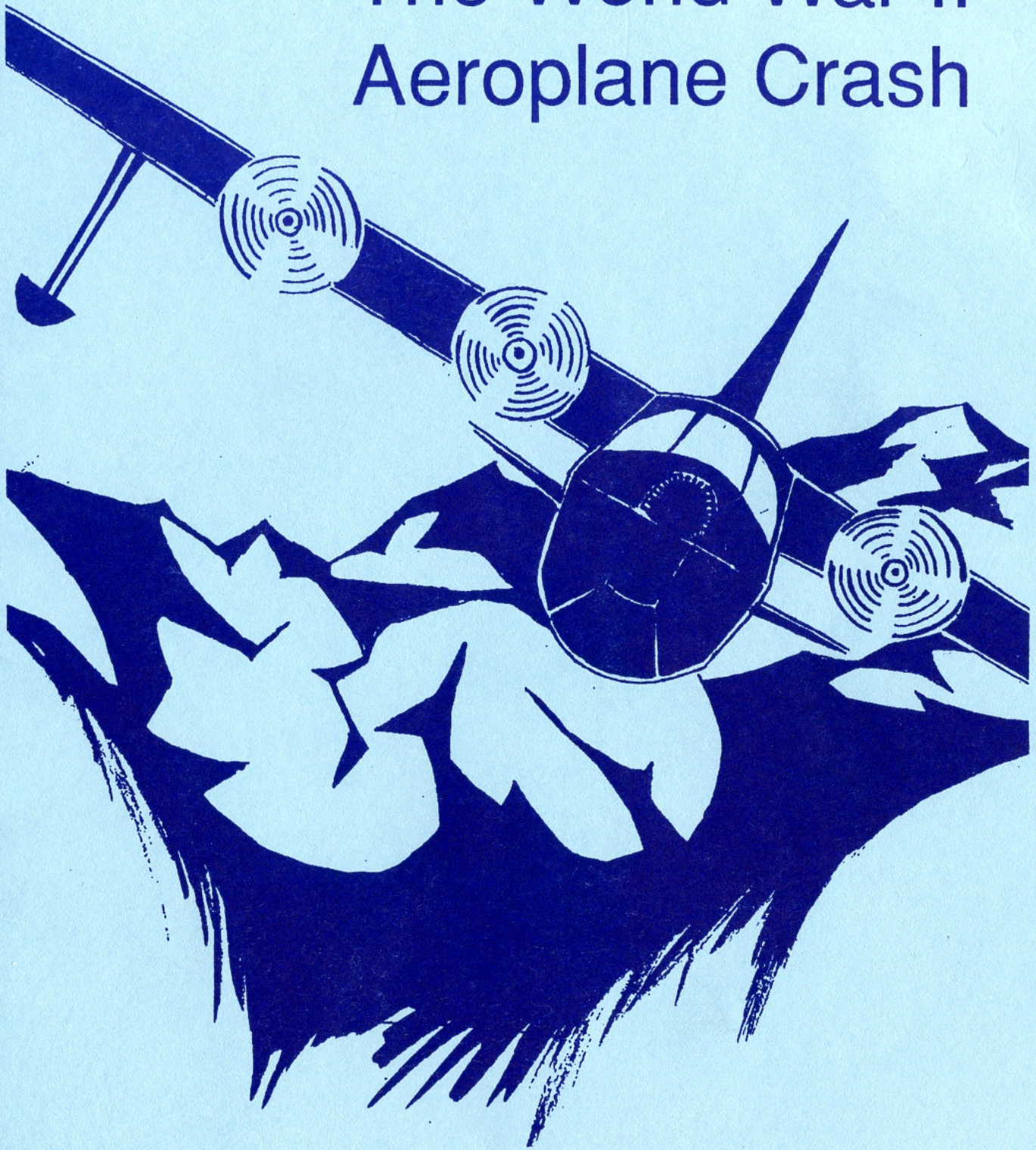


The World War II Aeroplane Crash



in the
Blue Stack Mountains

Liam Briody

The World War II Aeroplane Crash in the Blue Stack Mountains

It was when serving as a Garda in Donegal Town in the late 1950's that I first became aware of the 1944 aeroplane crash in that sub-district from Sergeant Hughes, John McMahon, Jim Nolan, John McGeltigan and others who had responded to the emergency from the south side of the Blue Stacks.

On transfer as a sergeant to Glenties in 1967, I became responsible for policing that Sub-District (which includes the Croaghs and the Northern side of the Blue Stack range) and I became acquainted with people who had been involved in the rescue and subsequent activity arising out of the incident.

It was not, however, until researching local history in the 1980's that I became really interested in ascertaining details of the tragedy.

As there was no inquest and no newspaper or media reporting of such incidents during the war, little was known of the purpose of the flight; its destination; its cargo; and especially its crew, which was put at varying numbers.

Having interviewed many people including the late Sergeant Tadgh O'Connor, who was serving in Brochagh and was in charge of the rescue operations (but had never to submit a written report on the matter) and after much painstaking research of the archives in Dublin, Belfast, Enniskillen and various centres in Britain, I eventually identified the twelve man crew, their names, ranks and numbers.

ATLANTIC PATROLS

During the Second World War, the Atlantic was regularly patrolled by the Coastal Command of the Royal Air Force for submarines etc. Although this country was neutral, there was an agreement between the De Valera and Churchill administrations that aircraft could use a forty mile corridor above the river Erne for air traffic between the Atlantic and the Air Force Base at Castle Archdale, Enniskillen. This permission was not publicly admitted at the time, but was much later revealed and was known to Officers in charge of aircraft. A condition of the corridor's use was that craft had to fly high. Even in normal patrolling that route was not always adhered to by personnel in charge particularly of craft returning.

One of these patrols, a Sunderland Mark III plane or flying boat number DW-110, attached to Squadron 228, with a crew of twelve, set out from Pembroke Dock, Wales, at 10.46 on the 31/1/1944.

The crew consisted of Flight Lieutenant H.C. Armstrong; Flight Officer M.V. Wareing; Flight Lieutenant M.L. Gillingham; Flight Officer J. Trull; Sergeant C. Greenwood, 1129218; Flight/Sergeant F. Green, Royal Canadian Air Force, 184005, Sergeant J. Parsons, 1315937; Flight Sergeant A. Gowens, 1055929; Warrant Officer J. Richardson, 523921; Sergeant E. Copp, 614970; Sergeant C. Hobbs, 1644857; and Sergeant J. Gilchrist, 1338328.

It was a relatively new craft, built by Short & Harland, Belfast; delivered in September, 1943 and taken on charge by Squadron 228 on the 20th November, 1943.

The patrol was to relieve another from the same Squadron which was already out. The personnel of that craft reported good weather conditions, only five-eighths cloud, in the patrol area. However, the weather conditions at Pembroke Dock were by now bad enough to justify the diversion of that flight to Castle Archdale, where it landed safely at 14.54 on 31/1/1944.

The patrol area included the Bay of Biscay and off the west coast of Ireland and the duration could be many hours. This particular patrol

covered that area and should have terminated at Castle Archdale, Enniskillen, after approximately thirteen hours.

On ending its Atlantic Patrol, DW-110 was instructed to divert to Castle Archdale on account of weather conditions in Wales.

Because this was not a regular return route, the plane was seen, heard and generally noticed by many people around Glenties heading towards the mountains.

John Conaghan, Straboy, Glenties who was after coming from a Woodwork class in the McDevitt Institute, remembers the plane passing over just between Charlie Gildea's and the house where he then lived (where Michael Ward is now). He thought it would not make it over the Drumnalough Hills.

Joe Gallagher, Straboy, was at the gate of the long lane leading to his house, when it passed over him. By the time he had reached his house, he had heard the crash and seen the flashes of light.

Sean McGettigan, Mill Road, Glenties was returning to his Straboy home when he heard the plane passing over him.

Peter Campbell and his late wife, Bridget, Tangaveane (on the other side of the Drumnalough Hills) who left the making of their St. Brigid's crosses and went outside, took particular notice of the craft as it passed over them.

The outline of the plane could be seen by these people (there were no lights on it). Apart from its low altitude, there was nothing irregular in the engine noise.

The plane did clear the first rises and continued some miles to a place known as Leachtas before crashing.

Seven of the twelve crew members were killed.



SURVIVOR'S ACCOUNT

One of the crash survivors (now the only one known), Jim Gilchrist in a 16-9-1986 letter, states:

"I found myself lying on my back on the mountain with explosions and fire all around. I don't know how long I had been lying there but it was raining quite hard and my face and clothes were very wet. I don't know how I came out of the aircraft but I was lucky to have only wounds to the head and hands. I was still in my leather flying jacket and flying boots but both my leather flying helmet and gloves were missing, which wouldn't have been the case had everything been normal.

I was a bit confused but it soon dawned on me what had happened. I was able to get to my feet but couldn't get near the aircraft because of the fire. I called out, and from the darkness some distance away (but could not see) came the voice of Gowens asking if I was from the crash. He asked if I was injured and told me to remain in position and that he would come towards me. Gowens had been in the upper turret at the time of the crash and was conscious throughout the impact luckily suffering nothing worse than slight bruising and a nicked ankle as he evacuated the turret and tumbled to the ground. Considering that his turret was almost central above the bomb bay, with explosions and fire all around him, his escape was a miracle.

I asked what had happened and whether he knew of the fate of the other crew members. He told me that he had been as near to the aircraft as possible and that there was no sign of life. He was able to say that he could see bodies in the fire but no survivors. I was feeling pretty shocked by this time and we managed to find shelter from the wind and rain and

Jim Gilchrist in 1944



This is a photocopy of
a wartime picture taken
on the Squadron in 1944
after the crash Jim

away from the fire by a large rock. We decided that the only thing to do was to rest and look at the situation at first light. I managed to find some cigarettes (I don't smoke now) and matches and we sat against the rock to gather our scattered wits. I still had my Mae West, but Gowens had lost his. I was able, therefore, to inflate mine and we both sat on it in an attempt to keep off the wet ground. Some time later I must have drifted off to sleep and awoke to find the dawn casting a cold light on the mountain.

We were very stiff and my wounds were a bit painful and as we were getting to our feet, we heard a groaning noise and saw Tubby Richardson, the Flight Engineer, crawling around some rocks towards us. I couldn't believe my eyes nor my ears when he said that there were two other survivors: Joe Trull, the Navigator and Hobbs another Flight Engineer. Tubby confirmed that all others were dead. I gave Tubby the signal cartridges from my Mae West (2 Star Reds) and we told him not to move and that we would attempt to contact help. I told Tubby to fire a cartridge if he saw anyone, as a guide to the crash site."



RAISING THE ALARM

Gilchrist and Gowens, who saw no sign of human habitation and nothing but desolation around them, decided on a route of descent along a mountain stream and eventually reached McDermott's, Croleck (The Croaghs), about 10.30 am. on the 1-2-'44.

McDermott's was a new house, built in 1942 under a Gaeltacht grant Scheme, and probably the most visable dwelling in the valley. It was not then surrounded by trees as it is now.

There Mrs Catherine McDermott, whose husband, Peter, had died the year before, and five of her young children "who looked very frightened when they saw us - which was understandable - but they soon understood the situation and were very kind and gentle to us both" (Gilchrist) took them in and provided all the comfort and assistance possible. She sent Joe, then in his teens with Gowens on bicycles to raise the alarm and report the accident to the Guards at Brockagh - a journey which Joe well remembers.

About 11 a.m. Gowens reported the crash to Sergeant O'Connor. Having got the required information, the Sergeant left Gowens with Garda Lydon and, with the District Nurse, a Pat McGinley, Joe McDermott and Dan McMenamin went in the latter's hackney car to the Croaghs.

By this time a third survivor, Tubby Richardson, having first approached another house, was at McDermott's.

Sergeant O'Connor, familiarly known as just Tadhg, 4796, a native of Lispole, Tralee, joined the Guards in 1923 and served in Brockagh from 1943 until he retired in 1967, described the scene to me as being like a town burned and bombed. The pilot and co-pilot were charred black - roasted alive in the cockpit.



THE EVACUATION OF THE INJURED AND THE DEAD

The rescue party's first and most dangerous task was to move the survivors clear of the exploding bullets, which were scattered everywhere and created a great hazard.

The nurse was Breege Cannon, a native of Straleel, Kilcar, Co. Donegal. Having trained in Wales, she was then District Nurse for the Glenfin area. In 1945 she became Sister Madelene of the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Drogheda. Among her experiences and ministries since was a twenty year spell in Nigeria. Although limited because of arthritis, she still pursues in 1993, an otherwise active ministry in Drogheda.

She recalls the mountain crash; how little she could do for the survivors; how affected some of those involved in the rescue were (not having the training she had); and the laborious climb for most but not for her who had often climbed Slieve League while growing up beside it.

The dead and injured were taken to McDermott's upon the arrival of an Irish Army contingent with their Chaplain, Father Patrick Deeney whom I later knew as P.P. in Ballyshannon. The army unit was responding to a phone message from the Superintendent's Office, Garda Siochana, Letterkenny at 13.00 hrs.

From a Rockhill Army Report, of the 7th February, 1944, to the Officer Commanding, Western Command, the Army's role is reported as follows:

"The Army Party consisted of one officer: Commdt. T. Morris, six armed and eight unarmed men, the latter to carry stretchers and assist the M.O. and his staff in bringing down the wounded.

A number of depth charges and bombs found near the scene were destroyed by Captain Craigie, Ordnance Corps, on 2-2-'44. The Armament consisting of nine guns were dismantled and handed over to Comdt. Morris by Captain Teague, Air Corps and are at present held by the Battalion Q.M. These, together with other articles of equipment

salvaged will be handed over to Captain Moore R.A.F. by Commdt. Morris when the former officer is available.

The seven deceased were brought down the mountain on the following day, again under supervision of Commdt. Morris, and handed over to F/Lieut. Quail R.A.F. at approx. 14.00 hrs. on 2-2-'44."

The Irish Army personnel were assisted in this painstaking task by quite a number of local people as well as members of the local Security Force, Glenties, including Packy Phelan, Peadar McHugh, Jimmy Molloy, Dan Maguire, Barney McMonagle, Thomas Brennan, Francie Houston and Josie Boyce.

The latter, who was driver of the McDevitt factory lorry, clearly recalls in November 1993 being at his dinner, when summoned by Phonsie McDevitt to convey those named to the area.

Accompanied by Garda Sergeant Charles Gallagher, Glenties, who would have requested the assistance and the transport, he arrived at McDermott's at about 2 pm. on the 1/2/'44.

Francie Houston and Boyce both recall relieving a party of local people about half way down the mountain with a stretcher bearing a crew member with a broken leg and arm and taking him back to McDermott's

Members of the Red Cross from Glenties, including Rosaleen Mulhern and D.D. Sweeney, were also present.

The McDermotts, Joe and John, vividly recall their particular parts in the operation and where the seven bodies lay beside the house for a considerable time before removal by Royal Air Force and British Army personnel under a Wing Commander Gibbs.

(Gilchrist) "We were taken to the Police Post and then eventually by ambulance, which had been organised through North/South liaison, from Castle Archdale with the Doctor and Crew in plain clothes. Gowens and I were put in an R.A.F. Hospital in Irvinestown and Trull, Richardson and Hobbs, who all suffered more serious injuries, in a nearby U.S. Army Hospital."

According to a confidential report dated 2nd February, 1944 from Department of Defence, Parkgate, Dublin, to Chief of Staff (and others) the survivors were conveyed by ambulance to Northern Ireland on the evening of the 1-2-'44 and, a sentence in manuscript is added that "Seven dead handed over at Belleek at 23.59 on 2-2-'44."

THE SITE

The site of the crash is about a two hour walk from the Croaghs, at an altitude of some 2,000 feet, convenient to the white quartz peak capping on mountain now owned by Philip Thomas, Suchill, Letterbarrow, Co. Donegal.

It is still strewn with thousands of small pieces over a wide area as well as portions of the four engines and some sizeable portions of bodywork (even though the removal of items by every means possible (including itinerants penetrating with their draught animals as far as possible up the mountain) developed into an industry at the time and has since been continued by visitors removing souvenirs).

Much of the construction material was duralumin and shows little sign of deterioration even after fifty years exposure to the elements at such an altitude.

In a report from Western Command, Custume Barracks, Athlone on 12th February, 1944 the crash and scene are described as follows:- "The plane crashed at approximately midnight on the night of the 31/1/'44 but was not reported until 13.00 hours on the 1-2-'44. The explanation of this is that the plane crashed in a very isolated and uninhabited locality on the Blue Stack Mountain and the first intimation that a crash took place was when one of the survivors, Sgt. Gowans, walked into Cloghan Garda Barracks and reported the matter."

Referring to the Army Party dispatched the report continues:-

"I might mention that the conditions under which these men had to work were appalling as they had to walk 6 or 7 miles through muddy and bog soil up the side of the mountain to the scene of the crash."

The height of a house would have allowed the craft surmount the face in question and continue.

LOGGED DETAILS

The Log Book, page 4, for the activities of aircraft based at Pembroke Docks, shows anti-submarine patrols on 20th (1); 21st (3); 28th (3); 30th (2) and 31st (2) January, 1944 and records that at 1045 on that date "F/Lt. H.C. Armstrong (DW-110) on A/S patrol, diverted to Castle Archdale but did not arrive."

The records for No. 228 Squadron, signed by Wing Commander G.A. Lombard show that on 31-1-1944 an A/S patrol in Sunderland, DD. 847 which had gone up from Pembroke Dock came down at Castle Archdale at 14 - 54, and that the anti-sub, special patrol in D.W. 110 went up from Pembroke Dock at 1045; and that at 1815 the aircraft acknowledged signal from group diverting to Castle Archdale. At 2050 the plane gave the "E.T.A." (estimated time of arrival) as 2330. Nothing further was heard and the brief record ends with "Aircraft failed to arrive at Castle Archdale".



THE SEVEN DECEASED

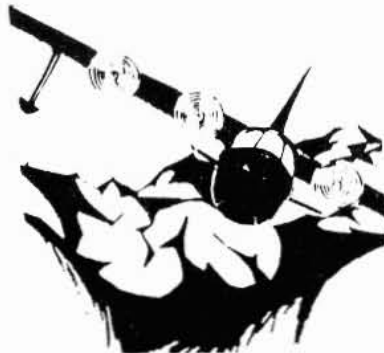
Three of those who perished were buried in the R.A.F. plot attached to the Church of Ireland in Irvinestown, Co. Fermanagh, where they are annually honoured on Remembrance Day.

Their tombstones are inscribed as follows:-

- (1) 614970, Flt. Sgt. Copp; Flight Engineer, aged 24, "in loving memory of our son".
- (2) R. 184005, Flt. Sergt. Green R.C.A.F., Air Gunner.
- (3) Flt. Lt. Gillingham, Pilot R.A.F., aged 22. "Morning thoughts, Evening memories, Everlasting love.

The other four are buried, and their tombstones are inscribed, as follows:-

- (1) 42383, F/Lt. (Pilot) Howard Charles Sheffield Armstrong, age 24, Plot 18, Section O, grave 43, in Carlisle Cemetery, Cumberland.
- (2) 129072, F/O (Pilot) Maurice Vincent Wareing, row AC, grave 14, Erdington Roman Catholic Cemetery, Birmingham.
- (3) 1129218, Sergt. (Air gunner) Cyril Robinson Greenwood, age 21, Plot D. grave 6, Pendlebury Churchyard.
- (4) 1315937, Flt. Sergt. (Air Gunner) John Ernest Parsons, age 22, grave 1548, Keynsham Cemetery, Somerset. He was married.



THE SURVIVORS

Of the survivors, "We all eventually recovered and sooner or later returned with the exception of Hobbs, to the Squadron" (Gilchrist).

Joe Trull was again involved in a crash on the 10th December, 1944, and was one of two killed. Arthur Gowens died in the mid 1970's. I have no further information on Hobbs, or Richardson.

It is understood that a subsequent enquiry did not attribute the cause of the crash to negligence but did add a rider.

The recommended safety height for aircraft around the northern portion of this island is (I understand) 3,700 feet.

THE PILOT'S DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS

Armstrong, when piloting the Sunderland J.M. 697 and accompanied by Parsons, Gowens, Greenwood, Copp, Hobbs and Gilchrist from the crew of DW-110, was involved in a daring rescue of the crew of a Sunderland which ditched after engine failure in the Bay of Biscay.

For this he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (D.F.C.).

The following is a synopsis of a detailed description of that event from Don Wells, the New Zealand Air Force Second Pilot, now living in Vancouver, Canada.

"In December, 1942, 422 RCAF became my Squadron and I became a crew member of a Sunderland Flying Boat.

The following April, we moved to Bowmore on the Isle of Islay.

On September 2nd, 1943, we took off about 11 pm. When patrolling off the North West corner of Spain, I sighted a surface vessel heading due East. The Skipper turned towards it immediately and when we got a little closer we saw it was flying the Irish Tricolour and had the name Eire painted on the side of the hull in large white letters. We swooped over it and it was apparent that she was a trawler with nothing particularly suspicious about her.

About 9 am. I wandered back to the ward-room. I noticed that a box of chocolate bars had been left open on the table. I reached for one but my hand never reached the carton for, at that moment I heard the sound of an engine back-firing. I whipped around in order to look out the starboard

port-hole and with a horrible numb sensation saw that our starboard outer engine had a white hot fire burning in the air intake below the engine. Very soon a terrific explosion rocked the aircraft and I was knocked back against the galley hatch where I opened my eyes and peered out to see what had happened.

The whole starboard outer engine was hanging down, bare of its cowling and held there by a few pieces of metal. The propellor was gone and the engine was covered with flame and black oily smoke. It was swinging back and forth and seemed to be bashing against the float on the outer wing. As I watched in awe I saw the engine and float break loose and go tumbling towards the sea, taking a good bit of the starboard wing with them.

I helped to remove one of our dinghies from its storage place. The sea was still a good drop below and we were into wind and descending rather rapidly. The warning horn sounded the "Prepare to Ditch" signal. Glancing out I saw that the sea was very close and I braced myself against a doorframe.

When we hit, a mountain of water came through and the hull quickly assumed a nose-down position. We pushed the dinghy out. We were sinking very quickly by the nose. I jumped and landed about ten feet from the dinghy. I pulled myself into the dinghy.

I was rather surprised to be alive and I helped others into the dinghy. A second dinghy was in difficulties having been punctured by a bit of metal. From the emergency equipment, the dinghy was repaired and inflated.

The twelve crew members were now in the two dinghies. Only one suffered injuries. Before ditching, an S.O.S. had been sent but it wasn't certain that it had been received. The navigator reckoned we were approximately 150 miles from the nearest land and that land was probably the North Western tip of Spain.

The two dinghies were tied securely together and the drogues were put out to prevent wave-top tipping.

That evening we broke out the spray sheets (part of the dinghy

equipment) and in preparation for the night put them over our heads. A good part of the night was spent in a seemingly fruitless task of bailing with boots.

Morning brought the first issue of rations, one Horlicks tablet plus a half inch of water in the bottom of a small cup.

About six that evening, Sept. 5th, the wind rose and we took turns holding the connecting lines between the two dinghies so as to prevent the rubber tabs on the sides from tearing off.

An aircraft was heard and sighted in the distance but, despite the igniting of two flares, went on its own way.

On Sept. 6th at about four in the afternoon we were found by an Americal Liberator, purely by accident. The Liberator flew past us quite low in order to have a look at us.

A parachute bag fell into the water about 1,000 yards away. The skipper peeled off his shirt, dove into the sea and returned with the bag, which contained a dozen oranges, three packs of cigarettes and a scrawled note which said "Don't go away, help is coming". The Liberator then disappeared to the North.

We were resigned to spending another night at sea when a Sunderland Flying Boat appeared. The wind had increased and we could see that a landing would be both difficult and dangerous, the take-off even more so. But the big flying-boat did a beautiful landing and started taxi-ing towards us, almost hidden in the spray. The engines were cut out upwind of our position and the flying boat drifted towards us. We paddled like mad to get on the port side where several crewmen stood in the doorway, one with a rope. By this time we were all rather weak and some of us had to be helped into the doorway as the aircraft rose and fell in the waves. But we finally made it and were given a hot drink before being stowed away like baggage in various corners. I was stuck in the bomb room and a blanket was thrown over me.

The take-off was an event which I would not want to experience again. I was sure the hull would collapse before we got off but the pilot managed somehow and we turned towards the North.

Someone brought me a cup of tea and I promptly fell into a deep sleep and stayed there for a couple of hours. About midnight I awakened as we seemed to be taking violent evasive action. One of the crew came by and told us that we had been a little off-course, and had flown over the city of Brest. "I went back to sleep and did not awaken until we landed at Pembroke Dock in Wales. We ran out of fuel after taxi-ing for a few minutes and had to call for help. A pinnacle came and took us in tow but another hour passed before we reached the moorings. I was eventually hoisted into a waiting ambulance."

The other eleven rescued crew members were Jaques De le Paulle (Pilot), Romeo Freer (a second Pilot), Ken Middleton (Engineer), Art Joyce (Second Navigator), MacPherson (rear Gunner), Bill Holroyd, Junior Fisher, Ralph Ruskin, Jollymour, Bolton and Earl Hiscox, (Navigator).

Jim Gilchrist recalls swimming out to attach a rope to the dinghies.

GARY PENTLAND

Soon after beginning serious research, Joe McDermott put me in touch with Gary Pentland, Gortin, Co. Tyrone. He was bubbling over with enthusiasm and eagerness to glean information on the subject.

We shared our information, and after exploring many avenues with disappointing results, an advertisement placed by Ian Pentland, Gary's son, in Flypast (an aviation magazine) seeking information brought several responses.

AN EXPERIENCE THE SAME NIGHT

One of these was a letter of 3-6-1985 from Mr. D.A. Sinclair, Victoria, Australia, with a detailed description of a patrol on the same night and an evaluation of the facts as then known surrounding the crash of DW-110. The following are extracts:- "While I had no direct connection with the crash of DW-110, I was 'caught' in the same circumstances as probably led to that crash and my experience may be of interest.

On that night I was Captain of Sunderland J.M. 683 of 461 Squadron

also diverted from Pembroke Dock to Lough Erne. At briefing for the flight (an Anti-Submarine Patrol over the Bay of Biscay) it was anticipated that we would be diverted to Lough Erne but we were not issued with the W.T. crystal for the frequency of the beam from Lough Erne area into the Atlantic since, as my memory goes, it was not available.

We were in fact diverted which required a flight up the West Coast of Ireland with a starboard turn into the corridor into Lough Erne. Without the crystal the turn had to be made on a dead reckoning position.

In normal circumstances this would have posed no problem (I cannot recall ever being in real need of ground aids). But the night was far from normal. The weather was as bad as I had experienced, at least to that time and, more probably, ever. Navigation depended on drift sight taken by the tail gunner on flame floats. My memory is that the tail gunner gave readings something like "15; port 5 starboard - can't see it no more". And with this the navigator had to make do. Although the Navigator assumed (and he could do little else) a very strong wind, it was clear from the after events that the wind was either much stronger than assumed or had a larger Southerly component, or both. Events suggest that it was at least 70 to Nth. from the South West.

However, we hopefully turned in for Lough Erne and found the Coast. Despite the fact that the night was completely overcast we could see the outline of the coast from the Breakers, but saw that it bore no relation to the coast we expected.

During the time we were flying about trying to identify "something" the WOP (Wireless Operator) was seeking a QDM from the ground Station without success because of the poor W.T. conditions. Finally he received a Q.D.M. (Course to steer) of 180 in the very poor category. This however allowed us to establish that we were a long way out of position and to identify the Coast. The very rough schematic enclosed shows that we were a long way North.

Now knowing that Lough Erne was approximately South we set off directly overland at 4,000ft. Shortly after crossing the coast I found that cloud was forming below us. I decided that this was not for me and turned

back to coast crawl to the Lough Erne Corridor, which we did and landed successfully.

Two points: There was a very large altimeter error due to the change in barometric pressure since take off.

I note from my Log Book that we were airborne 14 1/2 hours which for many Sunderlanders was quite long. I was fortunate in having a relatively new aircraft with good consumption. Maybe D.W.-110 was not so lucky and fuel became a problem."

It appears that Mr. Sinclair came with an Australian Squadron to England in 1939 to equip with Sunderland and fly home but instead stayed for the duration of the war.

He has died since 1985.

Another response to the "Flypast" appeal came from Harold Hollsworth, Bangor, Co. Down, who would have been on the ill-fated flying boat DW-110 that night had he not been hospitalized for a severe throat infection that morning.

He was one of Armstrong's rescuing crew on Sunderland J.M. 679.

SURVIVOR RESPONDS TO APPEAL

A further appeal for information was placed in the Spring, 1986 issue of "AIR MAIL" (Journal of the R.A. Forces Association).

Months afterwards this appeal brought a telephone call to Ian Pentland from a man who said he was a survivor of the crash, Jim Gilchrist.

Amid great excitement, communications opened up, by telephone and in writing, between Gilchrist and the Pentlands.

In his letter of the 16th September, 1986, to Gary, Jim gives a touching account of the crash and rescue operations (already quoted) and states:- "The whole crew were great friends and we lived and flew together to become a great team in the fight against the U-Boats.

On the day of the crash we had been on a special patrol off the coast of France and it was because of bad weather that we were diverted to Castle Archdale for landing".

MEMORIAL PLAQUE

In parallel with this communication, Gary Pentland became absorbed in accompanying others (including myself) on trips to the scene and contemplating a suitable memorial there.

A large white cross and uniformed figure painted in 1981 by Francis Kennedy, Gordon Simms, Charlie Doherty and Eamon Timoney, all from the Donegal Town area, on a cliff face had completely disappeared.

Gary decided that the site did merit a permanent memorial and, with this in mind, a plaque was devised; the inscription discussed, and decided upon in consultation with Gilchrist, and plans made to insert the plaque in the face of the rock.

The arduous task of transporting suitable equipment to excavate a recess in the granite rock face began and many Sundays were anything but days of rest for Gary and those who responded to his invitations to accompany him "for a day out".

Near the scene, white quartz cap in background on 7 / 8/ '88



From left: Drew McElwaine, Kevin Molloy, Anthony Briody, Joseph Briody, Ian Pentland, Martin Briody, Liam Briody, Charlie Patton, Tommy McKeon and Gary Pentland.

The equipment included an electric generator; an angle grinder; and engine driven cutting disc; and a variety of much smaller implements. These were manhandled up the mountain by a team of willing helpers.

After numerous trips, an inset was excavated to take the plaque in the face of the granite rock that had withstood the elements from time immemorial.

SURVIVOR RETURNS

The possibility of Jim Gilchrist visiting Ireland had already been discussed and, when the work on the plaque was nearing completion, this invitation was again extended by the Pentlands.

Eventually, against all the advice from Official Agencies in Britain and some reluctance from his own family, because of the political situation, Jim succumbed to the invitation and agreed to come to Northern Ireland and perhaps even "risk" coming to Donegal.

On this, his first visit to Ireland since the 1944 crash, Jim was met by Gary at the Airport and taken to Gortin. He was accompanied by his wife, Georgie. That night, Gary and I, in secrecy out of respect for the advice given, arranged a visit to McDermott's and perhaps even the mountain for the following day.

Early on the 9th September, 1988, a dry but overcast morning, Martin Briody (my son) and I arrived at McDermott's. After speaking with them, I told them I was expecting Gary and some friends to meet me there but I did not disclose who the friends were.

Gary, accompanied by Jim and Georgie Gilchrist, Bill Parker, and Seamus Gormley soon arrived for an experience not to be forgotten by all but a memorable once in a lifetime emotional meeting tinged with both joy and sorrow, for some.

As well as Joe and John McDermott, who permanently reside in the Croaghs, by coincidence, their two other brothers, Peter and Patrick and the latter's wife, Peggy, were on holidays from England.

After the usual exchange of acquaintances and introductions, Jim Gilchrist went to meet Joe McDermott who was by now tending to his normal farming chores knowing not who had arrived with Gary. While Jim was prepared for the meeting, it took Joe some time to realise the significance of the encounter.

After 44 years



Joe McDermott and Jim Gilchrist meet.

Meanwhile, Georgie Gilchrist and Peggy McDermott, a Cork born but English reared lady, established that they had both come, from the populous South of England, to a remote valley in County Donegal to discover they had lived within two miles of each other for years.

After light refreshments, tempered with a helping of something stronger to celebrate the meeting, the Party – Jim and Georgie Gilchrist, Bill Parker, Seamus Gormley, Gary Pentland, Joe McDermott, Martin Briody and I – set out for the scene of the crash.

**Enjoying the Wild Scenery and a Rest.
McDermott's house hidden in trees below.**



Georgie Gilchrist, Joe McDermott (and his invaluable dog, Coley),
Bill Parker, Jim Gilchrist and Seamus Gormley.

The ascent took four hours, during which many experiences were exchanged between the different individuals making up the party. The weather was acceptable, if not ideal, and for this we thanked God because in bad conditions the climb could not be undertaken.

At the site, Jim, in silence, alone and at length pondered, visibly engrossed in his memories, as he probed through the debris and examined many pieces of the remains of the plane.

It was then time to sit down, rest the weary legs, and have some refreshments.

UNVEILING THE PLAQUE

After this, Joe McDermott welcomed the Gilchrists: Jim unveiled the plaque in memory of the dead, and Georgie laid a wreath of flowers at the foot of the rock.

In doing so, Jim spoke of the accident; his colleagues by name on the night; his descent to raise the alarm; and expressed grateful thanks to all who made it possible for him and his wife, Georgie (whom he admitted was the heroine of this particular day) to effect this sad but satisfying experience which he never thought remotely possible.

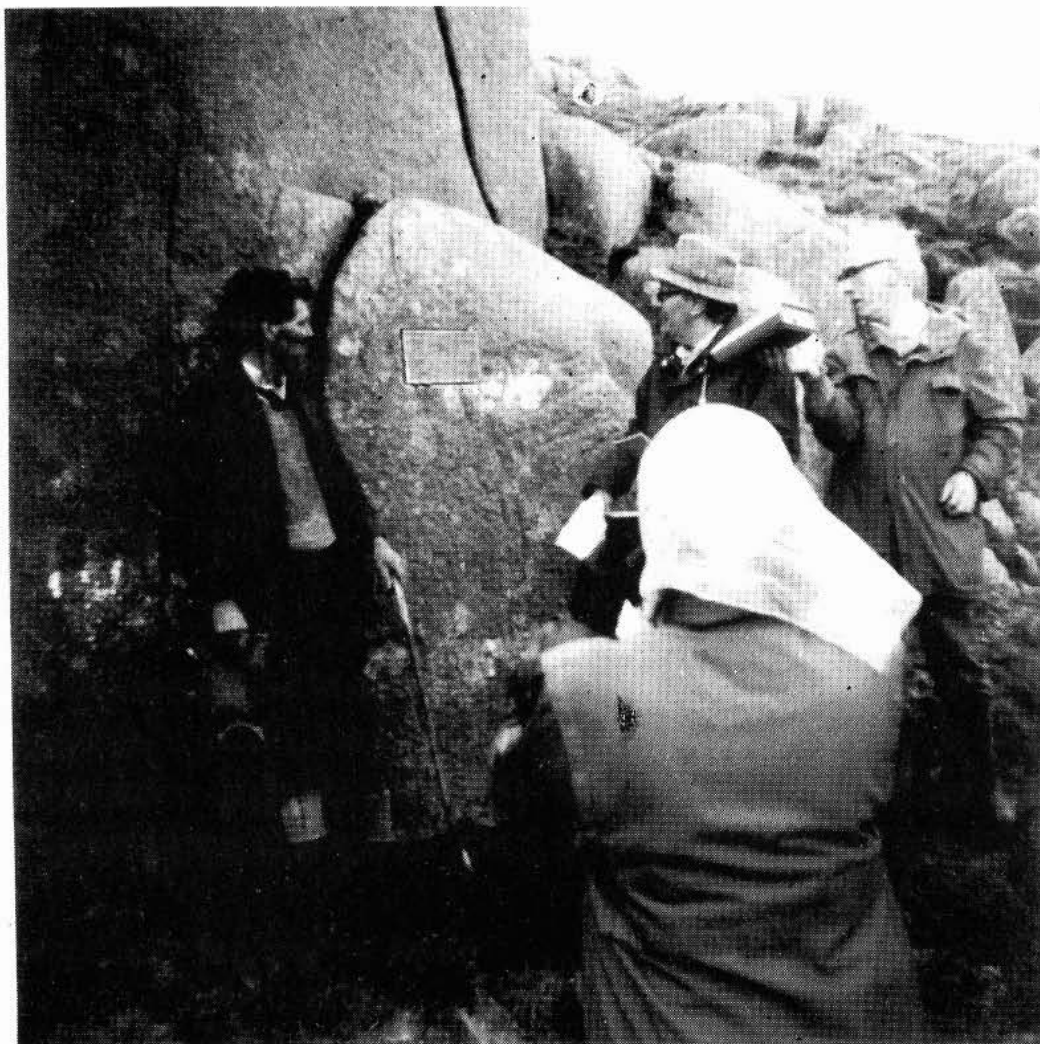
I also welcomed the party; thanked the Gilchrists for coming, expressed gratitude to Gary for his durable memorial; and added other fitting remarks for the occasion.

The Plaque is in Bronze and bears the following inscription:-

In memory of
F/Lt. H.C.S. Armstrong DFC
F/Lt. M.L. Gillingham
F/O. M.V. Wareing
F/Sgt. F.T. Copp
F/Sgt. F.G. Green RCAF
F/Sgt. J.E. Parsons
Sgt. C.R. Greenwood

*All of 228 Sqdn. R.A.F. who died here in the crash Sunderland D.W.
110 during World War II on Jan. 31st, 1944 at 23.45 hrs.
To the end, To the end, they remain.
Unveiled 1988 by S/Ldr. J.K. Gilchrist, Survivor.*

Unveiling the Plaque



Joe McDermott, Jim Gilchrist and Gary Pentland. Georgie Gilchrist back to camera.

While the monument will honour those named, it should also be recognized as a reminder of the single-minded efforts of Gary Pentland to reach this fitting climax.

To date, he can account for twenty trips to the site and the considerable financial cost over a number of years relating to the provision of the memorial was borne by him.

Even after unveiling, some work continued. The return down the mountain took two hours and allowed the original descent by Gilchrist and Gowens to be partially reconstructed and discussed.

Bill Parker, Kesh, Co. Fermanagh, represented 422 R.C.A.F. and particularly the rescued crew of P. 422.

He is a native of Nova Scotia; joined the Air Force straight from High School in 1940 and, after training in Calcary and Paulson, Canada, was posted overseas to Wiltshire. Having undergone a familiarisation course on the British Air Force methods, he joined 422 Squadron.

Seamus Gormley and Martin Briody had already assisted in the preparation of the site.

CELEBRATION IN McDERMOTT'S

Meanwhile back in McDermott's, Peggy, Patrick, Peter and John had all been busy organising and preparing for the return of the Party. The kitchen had been turned into a mini banquet hall, heated by the glowing turf fire, and nothing was spared in food or drink in celebrating this unexpected occasion for both the Gilchrists and McDermotts.

Among many experiences exchanged afterwards, Jim Gilchrist recalled, having gone to the rear of the plane to relieve the gunner there, minutes before the crash. Had he not so exchanged, he would most likely have been among the dead.

Jim particularly recalled the hospitality received from Mrs. McDermott, regretting that she could not now be thanked personally, and the assistance given him and eventually his colleagues by the young McDermotts.

In McDermott's Kitchen. Fed and Refreshed.



Seated: Georgie Gilchrist, Joe McDermott and Peggy McDermott. Standing: Jim Gilchrist, Liam Briody, Martin Briody, Peter McDermott, John McDermott, Patrick McDermott, Bill Parker and Gary Pentland.

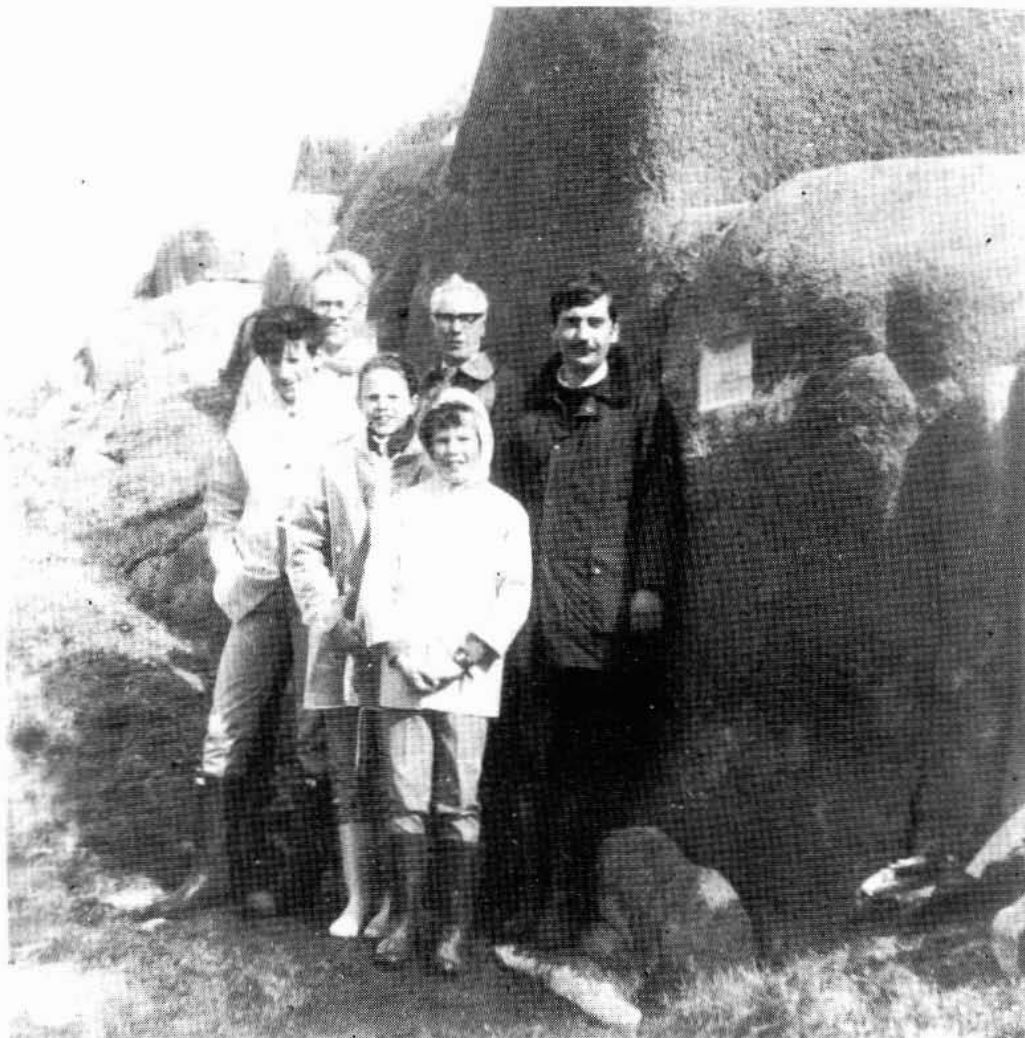
Gilchrist continued his Air Force career, serving in some thirty-seven countries before retiring in 1983 as Squadron Leader. As a civilian, he continued his involvement with aviation business.

Jim and Georgie Gilchrist have five children: James Stuart Charles; Adrian Stephen Grant; Caroline Georgie Mary; Sarah Anne Louise and Susan Emily Jane and in 1994 twelve grandchildren.

The following day, Jim sat into the Gun Turret in which he was sitting at the time of the crash. This had been taken down from the scene on a previous occasion by Gary and others (including myself) and was in Gary's possession in Gortin, and Jim demonstrated its use and equipment,

although it was minus its .303 machine guns, the ammunition pans, gun sight and super structure.

With the good will of Gary, this historical item has found a permanent place of repose in St. Connell's Museum, Glenties.



Back: Jim Rafferty, Gary Pentland and Pearce Henderson and
(front) Anthony, Mary and John Briody on 4-6-'89.

THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY

The 31st January, 1994 was the fiftieth anniversary of the crash and in order to mark it a group of five people ventured to the site.

They were Gary Pentland (who was responsible for the memorial plaque), Pauline McHugh, Glenties (whose brother, Peadar, was one of the Local Security personnel there for the rescue operation), Claire Alexander (nee Hammond, a mature student pursuing a B.A. Communications course at Goldsmiths College, University of London,

and researching and recording material for a recording project), John Briody, my fifteen year old son, and I.

After the first half hour, the weather was exceptionally bad with continuous cold rain, strong wind, and very dense cloud allowing no visibility other than for about thirty yards.

After three hours we reached the site; had some refreshments; a very brief (recorded) ceremony and started the return journey.

Being unable to identify any landmark within the vista available, the descent took another three hours. But for St. Anthony, Patron of travellers and efficacious finder of the lost, of whom Pauline is a dedicated devotee, the journey might have taken longer. That Saint's colleagues of a different era in the Franciscan Order regularly traversed this mountain in the Penal Times to service the people of the Croaghs and North of the Mountain from their base near Lough Eske.

Jim Gilchrist sits in the gun turret which is now in Glenties Museum.



On return to McDermotts, we enjoyed a warm welcome and prepared refreshments in the heat of the glowing fire with Joe and John.

Gary had arranged a telephonic link-up between Jim Gilchrist and the people in McDermott's to coincide with the actual time of the crash (11.45 pm.) but, unfortunately, modern technology failed him when McDermotts' phone broke down. However, that did not prevent the celebration of the ancient eve of St. Brigid's Day ceremony.

Communications was, however, effected the following day.

The anniversary was also marked by a Mass in Killymard (parish wherein lies the crash site) said by An tAthair Eoghan O'Frighil P.P. and organised by Kevin Quinlan, Diamond, Donegal Town.

Those attending included Joe McDermott, Mary Kelly (a native of and last school teacher in the Croaghs), Mary McLoone, a native of the Croaghs living in Letterkenny, Keith Homer, and his wife (nee McGinty), Commeen.

Conal O'Duffaigh, whom I met with Charles McGlinchey, N.T., Commeen, researching, also featured event on Radio na Gaeltachta with interviews i nGaeilge with McDermott's and commentary by Padraig Ui Cnaimhsi, Historian.

Highland Radio broadcast an interview with Jim Gilchrist.

In 1993, he (Gilchrist) had been featured by Jack Hayden, Letterkenny, in a Retreat Programme.

Local papers also recalled the event.

50th Anniversary



Pauline McHugh, Claire Alexander and Sergeant Briody.

NA CRUACHA GORMA (THE CROAGHS)

Mrs. McDermott is dead since 1969. Of her seven children, Joe and John (both having spent many years in England) now live in the homestead which played such a memorable role in the epic experience of their youth, and which for Gary Pentland and I has been a haven of hospitality during our visits to the Blue Stacks.

The other family members are: Mary in Florida; Bridie, Sally, Peter and Patrick in England.

Not so well known about the same house and family is the fact that it was there that Sean O'hEochaidh, the famous Folklorist, stayed during his sojourn in the Croaghs.

For two years (1948-'50), working six days a week he laboured, writing and making gramophone records of material from the residents, who were claimed to have the purest and most uncontaminated Irish in the Country.

In 1993, Sean fondly recalls his memories and the friendships he cultivated in this (as he then stated) "the last outpost of Celtic civilisation in Europe".

The invaluable collection is with Comhairle Bhealoideas Eireann, University College, Dublin, which section is presently headed by Doctor Seamus O'Cathain, who is very familiar with Na Cruacha Gorma.

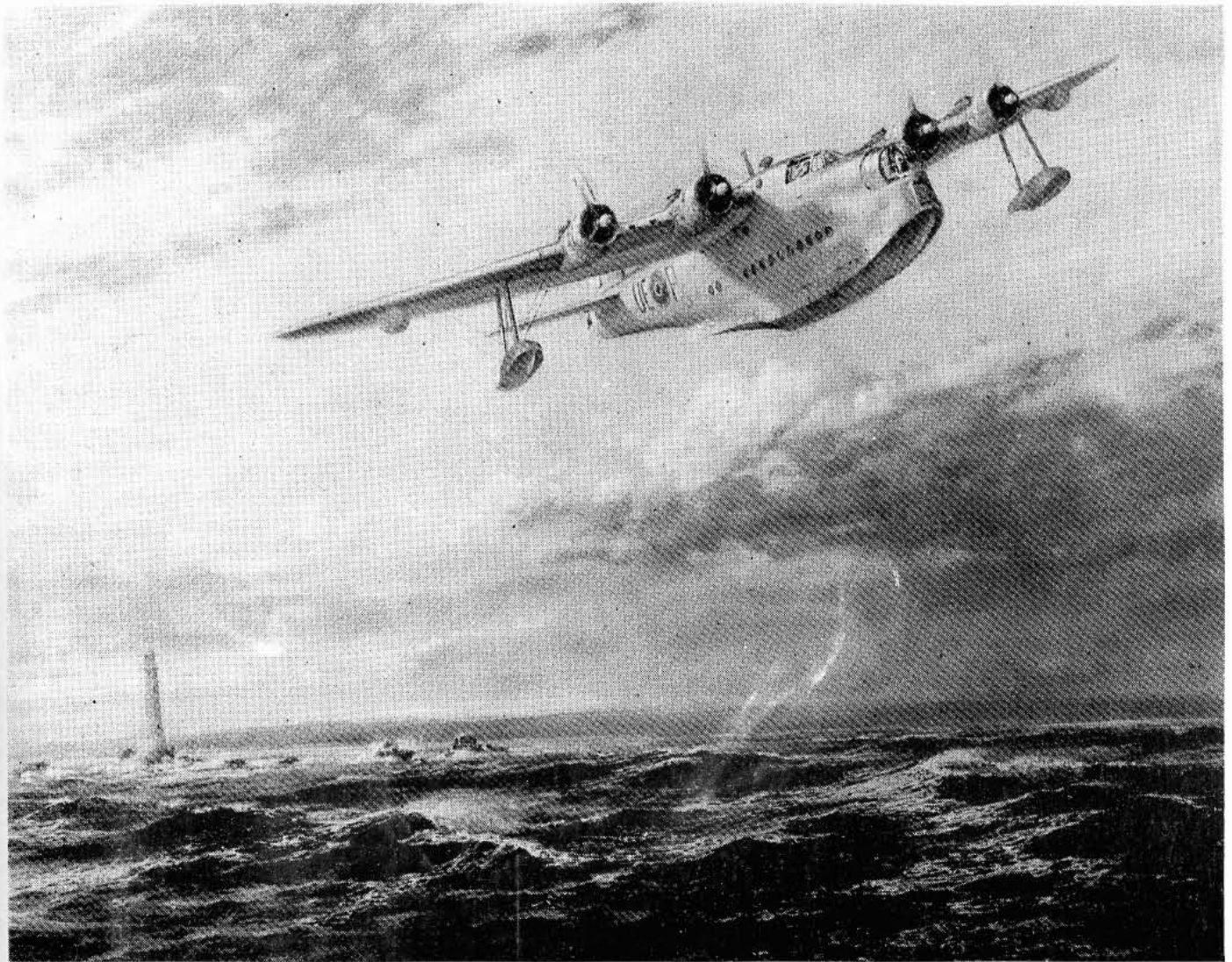
Was it not then collected, this material would have since practically disappeared as has the community from which it emanated. Sean then numbered twenty-seven households there. In 1993, there are no more than a dozen people permanently living there in half a dozen houses.

How lucky posterity is that by the labours of Sean so much of the Irish language and lore of this once vibrant community is preserved for future generations.

I am grateful to Johnny Boyle, Highlands Hotel, Glenties, for designing the front cover (as he did for my 1986 publication).

In addition to those already named, I wish to acknowledge assistance from the British Records Office and personnel of the Irish Military Archives.

Liam Briody, The Rock, Glenties, Co. Donegal.



This painting shows an aircraft from my Squadron (228) with the correct identification letters - UE - about to set course on an Anti U-Boat Strike Operation down the French Coast

The aircraft shown is correctly typical of the type we flew in 1943/4

To Liam
In gratitude
Jim Gilchrist



Liam Briody, Jim Gilchrist, Bill Parker at site of crash.

This booklet is about a World War II plane crash in the Blue Stack Mountains, Co. Donegal, on 31st January, 1944.

In 1986, I published "Glenties and Inniskeel", a Local History which contained a Chapter on this subject.

Since then, a Memorial Plaque has been erected on the site and the only known survivor has been traced and returned to the scene.

Liam Briody, The Rock, Glenties, Co. Donegal, Ireland.