

The John Magee Jr. Memorial Project

Malcolm Smith, John Gillespie Magee Jr. Foundation

Pilot Officer John Gillespie Magee Jr. RCAF was born in 1922 in Shanghai of an American missionary father and a British mother. He died on the 11th December 1941 at the age of only 19 in a tragic accident while flying with the RAF defending the skies over the UK and Europe. Returning to his base at RAF Wellingore and descending through cloud, his Spitfire collided with a training flight from RAF Cranwell. Both planes crashed in a field to the east of the village and both pilots were killed. The grave of John Magee is in the village of Scopwick close to Wellingore.

Despite his short life, the name of John Magee Jr. echoes still around the world - because John was a fine poet as well as a pilot. His most famous and iconic poem "High Flight" includes the lines:

*And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

This extraordinary and moving poem has been read at countless services and commemorations for aviators and in celebrating the thrill of flying. Despite its fame and the abundance of inscriptions on plinths and monuments around the globe, there is no complete monument to John Magee himself. This is being corrected by erecting a memorial sculpture of John Magee at the place of his last posting and final flight - in Wellingore, Lincolnshire.

After primary school in China, John was educated in England, including time at Rugby school where he met Elinor Lyon, the headmaster's daughter, who was also a budding poet and was to have a big influence on John's life. With the outbreak of war and the invasion of China by the Japanese, the family returned to America which was a neutral country at the time with travel restrictions on visits to Europe. John was determined to become involved in the conflict and return to England. As an American citizen, he crossed the border to Canada to join the Royal Canadian Air Force. After basic training, he was posted to 412 Squadron RCAF based at RAF Digby in Lincolnshire but with a satellite airfield at RAF Wellingore. John was billeted in Wellingore from October 1941.

Flying high in a Spitfire was the inspiration for "High Flight" in September 1941. It was written on the back of a letter sent to his mother. The original, hand written copy now resides in the Library of Congress. In Wellingore, and shortly before he died, he wrote the poem *Per Ardua* which again displayed his prodigious talent.

The village of Wellingore in Lincolnshire is therefore a very fitting location to commemorate the life and work of John Magee. The village receives many visitors on the trail of this remarkable young man, but there is no marker or sign of John to show them. The airfield has returned to farmland with a few remnants of runways and defensive pill-boxes visible. The memorial project will place a 9ft high bronze statue of John Magee in a landscaped park within the village with plinths inscribed with his poetry. A small Visitor Centre is planned to hold the archive of material about his life and work and encourage educational projects.

The project was formed and is managed by the John Gillespie Magee Jr. Foundation, a charitable company created by a group of local volunteers. The sculptor chosen for the project is Mr. Antony Dufort FRBS, SPS, MA, a highly acclaimed artist with many significant works on display, including portrait sculptures of HM The Queen, Margaret Thatcher and David Cameron. His work can be viewed at www.antonydufort.co.uk.

In July 2017 the first result of the commission was received in the form of a bust of John Magee. This was unveiled at the Royal International Air Tattoo and viewed by the Chiefs of Staff of the RAF and USAF, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier and General David Goldfein, and by the Deputy Commander RCAF, Major General Tammy Harris. They warmly supported the project as highlighting the enduring links between their nations and the shared appreciation for John Magee's poetry.



In July 2018 the second milestone was reached - the superb maquette model of the complete statue. This required extensive research to ensure that each item of the uniform and kit depicted on the statue will represent how John Magee would have appeared in Wellingore in December 1941. Copies of both the maquette and the bust are being made available for sale as an aid to raising funds for the memorial.

The immediate goal is to raise about £120,000 which will allow commission for the construction of the full, 9ft high, bronze sculpture and take about 12 months to complete - with the time being used to obtain donations of additional funds or materials for the landscaping required and to organise the design and placement of the Visitor Centre.

For further information please visit the Foundation website at www.mageejrfoundation.uk which has further news items, a copy of the video interview with the three Chiefs of Staff and many references to books and information about the life and poetry of John Gillespie Magee Jr.

