

Lajes War Cemetery, Terceira

In late 1943, the Royal Air Force, with the reluctant approval of the Portuguese government, took over Lajes Field on Terceira Island in the Azores. The main purpose for this was to facilitate the search for the German U-boats that had been inflicting serious damage on the British merchant fleet. Subsequently, an agreement was reached for the base to also be used by American planes, significantly reducing the flying time between the US and Europe, with Lajes becoming known as the “crossroads of the Atlantic”. After the first death, of a British engineer, on 3 November 1943, the British authorities requested permission to bury their dead in the Angra do Heroísmo municipal cemetery and this was agreed. Subsequently, however, the municipality decided to allocate a plot of land close to Lajes to serve as a war cemetery in perpetuity. Lajes War Cemetery is now maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC). It is locally known as the *Cemitério dos Ingleses* or the British Cemetery.

By Andrew Shepherd

Background

During most of World War II Portugal stayed determinedly neutral. This required the *Estado Novo* dictatorship’s leader, António de Oliveira Salazar, to balance the competing claims of the Allies and the Axis in two important areas: the supply of Portuguese wolfram (tungsten), an important metal for manufacturing munitions, and the provision of air and sea bases from which the warring sides could operate. As the British and Germans competed for supplies the wolfram-producing areas became reminiscent of Gold Rush towns in the US and elsewhere. Prices skyrocketed and some of the small farmers who turned to mining instead of agriculture became very rich. Salazar responded to this chaos by setting up an export quota system. He resisted attempts by the Allies in 1944 to persuade him to ban exports to Germany, fearful that this would lead to Portuguese shipping being attacked by German U-boats, as had happened in 1941.¹

Regarding military facilities, the British and Americans had for a long time been pressurising Salazar to give them access to Lajes Field, which they wanted in order to hunt for U-boats and to reduce the flying time between the east coast of the US and Europe, as the alternative route was via Brazil and West Africa. However, such was Salazar’s reluctance to comply with the Allies’ request that he continually found reasons to postpone the decision. He had already strengthened the Portuguese defence of the Terceira base in 1941, telling Hitler that this was Portugal’s contribution to the defence of Europe, while telling the British that this would secure British lines of communication with the Mediterranean. Having concluded that Germany was losing the war, he finally agreed to the Anglo-American request in August 1943, with Winston Churchill referring to the 1373 Anglo-Portuguese Treaty when announcing the agreement in Parliament. In truth,

¹ Shepherd, Andrew. *António de Oliveira Salazar and the British*. BHSP Newsletter 7. 2020. <https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/antonio-de-oliveira-salazar-and-the-british>

Salazar probably had little choice but to give in, as there were active British and American plans to invade the island and seize the airfield, under the code name “Operation Alacrity”.^{2,3,4,5,6}

Under the agreement, the British were given rights to the ports of Horta and Ponta Delgada as well as the airfields on Terceira and São Miguel. On 8 October 1943, British Royal Air Force units first disembarked at Angra do Heroísmo on the south coast of Terceira, and from there trucked equipment and supplies over what was then a narrow and rough road to what they called “Lages Field” in the northeast of the island, a journey of around 20km. Hangars, a power plant and living quarters were constructed, and enough Marston mats were brought in from the US for a runway of around 1500 metres. In total, the three British anti-submarine squadrons at Lajes were to sink 53 U-boats and frighten away many others. Once operations began the number of merchant ships lost declined rapidly.⁷



A Vickers Wellington at Lajes during WWII (British Government)

The Cemetery and burials

Lajes War Cemetery is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) cemetery located a short distance from Lajes airport. It is locally known as the *Cemitério dos Ingleses* or the British Cemetery.⁸ It is the only CWGC cemetery in Portugal although there are, of course, Commonwealth War Graves to be found elsewhere; in the British Cemetery in Lisbon, in St James Churchyard in Porto, in the churchyard of the former St. George’s Anglican church in Ponta Delgada and in the British Cemetery in Funchal, as well as in municipal cemeteries in Horta on Faial island, Portimão and Sagres in the Algarve, and Loriga in the Serra da Estrela.

In early November 1943, British officers, together with the RAF chaplain, the Reverend Pearce, and the Reverend H.L.O. Rees, who went on to become the Vicar of Kensington, requested the municipality of Angra do Heroísmo to permit a cemetery for British servicemen who might die on

² *ibid*

³ Pease, Michael. *Portugal: A WWII Enigma?* BHSP Annual Report 38. 2011.

<https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/portugal-a-wwii-enigma>

⁴ Stewart, Curtis. *The Agreements for the British and American use of Bases in The Azores in WWII and the role of Portuguese Timor.* BHSP Newsletter 10. 2021. <https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/the-agreements-for-the-british-and-american-use-of-bases-in-the-azores-in-wwii-and-the-role-of-portuguese-timor>

⁵ Hugill, Antony. *Operation Alacrity.* BHSP Annual Report 5. 1978.

<https://www.bhspportugal.org/library/articles/quotoperation-alacrityquot>

⁶ 65th Air Base Wing History Office. *A Short History of Lajes Field, Terceira Island, Azores, Portugal.*

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e25b3811195f14156e54b35/t/5f0b74220f4f095f7e6ec608/1594586150735/Lajes+Field.pdf>

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Commonwealth War Graves Commission. <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/2086504/lajes-war-cemetery/>

the island. It was agreed that the Council would reserve a space in the municipal cemetery, with the British paying fixed fees for either a common grave or a permanent concession. However, the council soon decided that it would be better to create a cemetery just for the British, which was duly done in the Nossa Senhora de Fátima neighbourhood, close to the Lajes base.⁹

Initially the cemetery contained both Commonwealth and American war graves, some of which were moved in from the municipal cemetery. The remains of the American servicemen, many fewer than the British, were later repatriated. The oldest grave, of one of the Royal Engineer Sappers sent to build the airstrip, has the date of death as 3 November 1943. It was his death that probably prompted the British request to the authorities of Angra. The cemetery now contains 49 graves, of which 35 were British, seven Canadian, three Czech, two Australian and one each from New Zealand and Poland. Most of those interred were airmen or engineers but the Commander of HMS *Hesperides*, Charles Alexander Colville, the 3rd Viscount Colville of Culross, is also buried there.¹⁰ HMS *Hesperides* appears not to have been a ship but a land-based listening and repeating station. It had been closed down and Colville was on his way back to the UK when the plane he was in crashed on departure. A member of the merchant navy, sailing on board the SS *Freetown*, is among those buried in the cemetery, the only non-military burial.^{11,12,13}

At the entrance to the cemetery, there is an inscription in English and Portuguese, stating that “The land on which this cemetery stands is the gift of the Portuguese people for the perpetual resting place of the sailors, soldiers and airmen who are honoured here”.



Two views of the cemetery (Photos: Author)

Causes of death

The main causes of death were plane crashes. However, two of those buried in the cemetery died from natural causes, suffering from tuberculosis and polio, while others had accidents on the ground, such as one airman who was accidentally electrocuted, another who was hit by a propeller, and a third who was the rear gunner on an Avro Lancaster queuing to take off for Canada when it was hit by another in the queue. One airman died from “injuries sustained in a physical training accident”. Three died while off-duty: one after too much alcohol, which led him to suffocate on

⁹ Mata, Paulo. *Notas sobre o Lajes War Cemetery*. Pássaro de Ferro. 2013.

http://www.passarodeferro.com/2013/11/lajes-war-cemetery-passaros-de-eter_8650.html

¹⁰ A Petty Officer from the same station is buried in the Horta municipal cemetery

¹¹ CWGC. <https://www.cwgc.org/find-records/find-war-dead/search-results/?CemeteryExact=true&Cemetery=LAJES%20WAR%20CEMETERY>

¹² Mata, *op cit*

¹³ RAF and Commonwealth Air Forces Roll of Honour - The Unaccounted Airmen Project.

<https://www.rafcommands.com/database/wardead/index.php?qname=&qcntry=Azores&cur=0&qunit=&qnum=&qme m=LAJES%20WAR%20CEMETERY&qdate=>

his own vomit, another after a fall that fractured his skull and one as a result of a non-specified “off-duty accident”.

On 4 December 1943, a Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress of No. 220 Squadron of the RAF took off from Lajes on an anti-submarine mission. It crashed into the sea two and a half miles north of the airfield, killing all onboard. The cause of the crash remains unknown. Of the eight British and Australian crew members, three were buried at the cemetery. The others are remembered at the Commonwealth Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede and it is assumed that their bodies were not recovered.¹⁴ On 13 December of the same year, a Lockheed Hudson was returning from an anti-submarine patrol when it flew into high ground in very low clouds five miles west of Lajes. The four crew members, two Canadian and two British, are buried at the cemetery.

In early 1945 three fatal accidents took place within a period of one month. On 20 February 1945 a De Havilland Mosquito fighter plane crashed during take-off, killing the Polish captain and British flying officer. Both are buried at the cemetery. On 8 March 1945, a Consolidated B-24 Liberator of No. 220 Squadron headed out of Lajes to carry out an air-sea rescue mission. During take-off the outer starboard propellor touched the runway, causing the plane to swing violently to the right and crash. The eight crew on board were killed. All are buried at the cemetery.¹⁵

The worst accident took place a week later, on 14 March. Another Liberator, this time of No. 246 Squadron, with 19 on board, including Colville, crashed shortly after take-off. All are buried in the cemetery. The circumstances leading to their deaths are not entirely clear. One report says that while in its initial climb the aircraft banked to the right and crashed in a huge explosion.¹⁶ Another says that the plane did not turn right as instructed but turned left and flew into high ground. Questions were asked in the British Parliament about this crash, possibly because of the presence of Colville on the plane. Blame was attributed to the Czech RAF pilot.¹⁷

The above accidents do need to be seen in context. To give some idea of the number of movements at Lajes Field, between late December 1943 and the end of June 1944, 1,900 US planes passed through Lajes without mishap. In fact, the first fatal crash of an American plane at Lajes did not take place until after the war.¹⁸ Given the frequently difficult weather conditions, poor navigation facilities and the surrounding hills, it is perhaps lucky that the cemetery contains only 49 unfortunate souls.

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ <https://www.baaa-acro.com/crash/crash-consolidated-lb-30-liberator-viii-lajes-19-killed>

¹⁷ <https://asn.flightsafety.org/wikibase/221687>

¹⁸ There remains a US presence at the base