

Recalling bravery that saved a town

PICTURE: SUSANNAH BINNEY

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WORTHING will pay tribute to a wartime bomber crew who sacrificed their lives to save the town from destruction.

Next month, the town's mayor will unveil a plaque on the pier commemorating the deaths of the seven courageous airmen in 1944.

The Lancaster bomber, laden with 90,000lb of high explosives, crashed in flames on the beach opposite Heene Terrace on December 17.

Seconds earlier, it had skimmed rooftops in the town and people packed into the Plaza Cinema in Rowlands Road heard the roar of its engines as the stricken plane passed overhead.

The resulting explosion, shortly after dusk, shattered hundreds of windows on the seafront and Montague Street was showered with shards of glass.

Miraculously, no civilians were hurt but the crew died instantly and only one body was recovered.

Had the Lancaster crashed on the town, it would have wiped out a large part of West Worthing, resulting in hundreds of deaths.

Historians believe the pilot, Flying Officer Edward Essenhigh, fought desperately to stop his doomed aircraft plunging into houses and causing carnage.

He tried to land the



MATES: John Beck, third from left, back row

Lancaster on the beach but it probably hit an obstruction and exploded.

The crew has already been honoured once by the town when newly-built streets in West Durrington were named after the victims - Essenhigh, flight engineer Harry Varey, wireless operator Fred Rees, bomb aimer Andrew Thomson, mid upper gunner James Moore, navigator Len Bourne and rear gunner Gordon Callon.

Now a stainless steel plaque costing £275 will be unveiled by the mayor, Councillor Eric Mardell, on December 12 in a ceremony which will be attended by relatives of the dead, former RAF colleagues and ex-servicesmen's organisations.

The plaque was paid for by the Worthing Combined Ex-Services Association and the 49 Squadron Association.

The Lancaster, part of 49 Squadron, took off from Fulbeck in Lincolnshire for a raid on Munich in Germany but what happened next is a mystery.

Tom Gafield, secretary of the 49 Squadron Association, took part in the same raid and believes the Lancaster might have been shot up and badly damaged by an enemy fighter.

He thought a mechanical fault was unlikely to be the cause because the bomber had only recently been delivered from the factory production line.

John Beck, 79, of The Cliff, Roedean, Brighton, who completed 29 missions with the squadron, said: "The pilot definitely saved Worthing from disaster."

Minutes after the crash, firefighters were on the scene and managed to drag Callon's body from the wreckage. He is buried in Littlehampton but no trace of the other six crew members was found.

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TALE OF COURAGE: Former 49 Squadron flier John Beck