

A photograph of four men in military uniforms standing in a field. From left to right: a man in a light blue beret and camouflage uniform; a man in a red beret and brown jacket; a man in a red beret and olive green jacket; and a man in a light blue beret and camouflage uniform. They are all looking towards the right. The background is a blurred landscape with trees and hills.

Memorial at tragic wartime crash site

IT was a tragic incident in the midst of wartime that these former servicemen aim to remember.

On April 4, 1944, an exercise to prepare for D-Day aimed to help those who would use gliders and parachutes to drop soldiers behind enemy lines. An RAF plane was towing a Horsa glider, inside which were soldiers from the airborne infantry.

The night was very dark, and low cloud meant the pilots had to fly very low. There was no ambient lighting, as the blackout was in force. Sadly, the Stirling plane hit a tree to the east of Warnford Park. The Horsa glider crashed, killing all 27 soldiers on board. The Stirling flew on with catastrophic damage and crashed near Romsey, also killing all six of the aircrew.

Exactly 78 years later, on April 4 this year, a memorial stone will be dedicated on the South Downs Way, between Exton and Old Winchester Hill, to remember those who lost their lives in this crash. Current and former service

personnel will join local clergy to recall the sacrifices that these 33 men, and countless others, made in two world wars and conflicts since.

Among them will be retired paratroopers Major Will Pike and Major General Jonathan Shaw, Warrant Officer Paul Dockrell, and Lt Col Ewen Stuart, who recently visited the site.

The Rev Tony Forrest, rector of the Meon Bridge benefice, will lead the service, which will take place from 10am-12noon that day. The memorial stone will be sited on a hill which provides a panoramic view of the flight path and crash site.

Tony said: "Every Remembrance Sunday, we recall the enormous sacrifices made by all those in the military and civilians in conflicts around the world. Yet sometimes it is good to focus on individual incidents and recall exactly the circumstances in which people lost their lives.

"In this case, it was part of the extraordinary preparation for the

(left to right): Warrant Officer Paul Dockrell, Major General Jonathan Shaw (retired), Major Will Pike (retired), and Lieutenant Colonel Ewen Stuart on the site of the memorial stone

most significant operation of the Second World War. Without these exercises, that D-Day invasion may not have been successful. We owe them so much."

In 1943, the 7th Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers had been converted to the airborne infantry role, utilising gliders. Through 1943 and 1944 exercises took place to prepare their division for parachute and glider operations.

As part of Exercise Dreme, the RAF Stirlings, towing their gliders, conducted a circuit from RAF Keevil in Wiltshire to East Sussex, with the gliders to be released over RAF Brize Norton. The glider that crashed contained members of No. 3 Platoon, 'A' Company, 7th (Airborne) Battalion, King's Own Scottish Borderers.

For details of where to find the site on April 4, please see: www.portsmouth.anglican.org/glider.