Eulogy to Flying Officer Clare Arthur Connor DFC.

A very good evening and many thanks for your attendance on this special occasion.

On behalf of the village of Brattleby I would also like to offer a very warm welcome to our special guest Elizabeth Connor Du Boyce – widow of Flying Officer Clare Connor DFC – and her family.

This renewed connection between the Connor family and Brattleby is due almost entirely – although I hate to admit it – to the Internet, resulting in my meeting Diane – Elizabeth's daughter and her family – for the first time last year.

Amongst many things we discussed was the possibility of Elizabeth making the trip to the great metropolis of Brattleby in 2010; I did wonder however, as she would be 90, would this be an issue?

What I didn't understand was, there are two sorts of 90, there's the common sort and there's the Elizabeth Du Boyce sort, two completely different things.

I have to say, I'm not normally nervous when meeting someone for the first time, but I readily admit to a few butter-flies prior to our meeting on Friday, we'll put that down to anticipation.

In fact, over recent weeks, I headed all my e/mails to Diane –
THE IMPENDING ROYAL VISIT.

By anyone's standards a truly remarkable lady.

We are here tonight to commemorate the life of a truly remarkable MAN, Flying Officer Clare Arthur Connor DFC.

I'm reliably informed Elizabeth first met Clare in a pub in Bridgewater; she was 19 and Clare 25. They married on the 16th of March 1940 and came to Brattleby around August of the same year, where they were billeted at Manor Farm, currently the home of Richard and his family.

By this time Clare was fully operational with 83 Squadron flying Hamden's out of Scampton 3 nights a week on bombing missions into Holland and Germany, as was a certain Guy Gibson of the same Squadron.

On the night of 15th of September 1940 while on a bombing mission over Antwerp Connor's plane was struck by Anti- aircraft fire and sustained heavy damage.

"I could see we were in trouble when I saw the reflection of flames in my windscreen" he said. "the flames were getting very close to the back of my neck".

Two of the crew bailed out over France, leaving Connor wrestling with the controls as the radio operator Sgt John Hannah an 18 year old Scotsman attempted to put out the fire; in doing so he suffered severe burns, his parachute was completely burned out.

During the ensuing mêlée, thousands of rounds of ammunition exploded in all directions as the fire melted away the cockpit floor, leaving a gaping hole under Connor's feet.

Despite this Pilot Officer Connor managed to fly the aircraft back to base, critically aware Hannah was unable to bail out - although he himself was in the position to do so. Without doubt this action saved Hannah's life.

Air Vice Marshall 'bomber' Harris wrote the following day, "I strongly recommend the immediate award of a DFC, the condition of this aircraft has to be seen to be believed".

On the 10th of October 1940 the now pregnant 20 year old Elizabeth accompanied her husband to London, where he received the DFC from King George sixth – Hannah being awarded the VC.
Hannah said afterwards, "Pilot Officer Connor should have received the VC not me".

Elizabeth proudly wears her husband's Distinguished Flying Cross tonight

With the events of that day and thoughts of impending parenthood occupying their minds, this must have been a time of great happiness and pride for Elizabeth and Clare.

However, on the 4th of November 1940 happiness and pride turned into tragedy with the news Pilot officer Clare Connor DFC had been shot down over the North Sea and killed.

Two peoples lives full of love, happiness, hope and expectation turned into utter despair in a little over three weeks.

Elizabeth returned to Somerset to be with her parents and 4 months later their daughter Clare was born.

After the end of the war in 1945 – when it again became safe to cross the Atlantic by boat, Elizabeth fulfilled her husbands wish that their child be raised in Canada – a long way from home for a Somerset girl.

Even after 70 years, I know this period of Elizabeth's is still very painful and for this reason – I will not pursue it further.

If I may – I would like to read a short poem – by Sarah Churchill – daughter of Sir Winston – Which I think speaks volumes.

Entitled "The Bombers".

Whenever I see them ride on high –

Gleaming and proud in the morning sky.

Or lying awake in my bed at night –

I hear them pass on their outward flight.

I feel the mass of their metal and guns –

Delicate instruments and deadweight tons.

Awkward, slow, bomb racks full –

Straining onward from downward pull.

Winging away from home and base –

As I try to see the pilots face.

I imagine a boy who's just left school –

On who's quick learned skill and courage cool.

Depends the lives of his friends and crew –

And the success of the job there to do.

And something happens to me inside –

That is deeper than grief, yet greater than pride.

And though there is nothing I can say –

I always look skyward as they go on their way.

My thoughts and prayers are with everyone -
As I steel my heart to say –
Thy will be done.
God bless you Elizabeth – and be assured - Clare will be safe with us.

MS 30th September 2010