

# Birch, Harold Charles

**Age:** 19

**Nationality:** English

**Rank:** Sergeant

**Unit:** No. 32 OTU

**Occupation:** Pilot

**Service No:** 158281 (RAFVR)

**Birth:** 31 March 1924  
Nottingham, Nottinghamshire,  
England

**Home Town:** Aspley, Nottingham  
England

**Death:** 14<sup>th</sup> January 1944

Crash of Handley Page Hampden AN136,  
Mount Tuam, Saltspring Island,  
BC, Canada

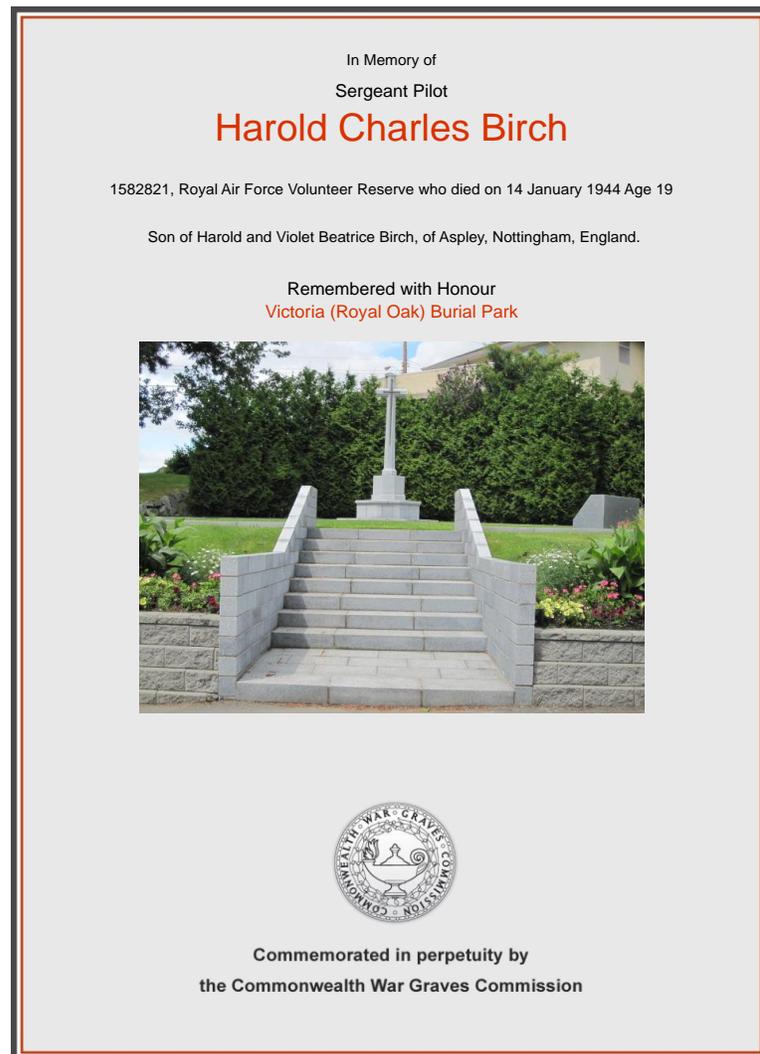
**Burial:** Royal Oak Burial Park,  
Victoria, BC, Canada



# Biography

Harold Charles Birch was born 31 March 1924 in Nottingham, England, the first child of Harold Birch, a cleaner in a tobacco factory, and Violet Beatrice Godfrey, a lockstitch gown maker. There were two younger children. In 1939, Harold Charles was working as a dyer's and butcher's clerk. He joined the RAFVR and trained as a pilot.

On 14 January 1944, Harold, a student pilot in No. 32 OTU, Patricia Bay, BC, Canada, was alone, night flying in Handley Page Hampden AN136, when it struck the top of nearby Mount Tuam, Saltspring Island. He was killed on impact; his body was recovered and he was buried in Royal Oak Burial Park, Victoria, BC, Canada.



## Details of Crash

On 14 January 1944 Harold Birch was authorized to practise night flying circuits and landings in Handley Page Hampden AN136. He was to take off at 7:40 pm and the flight was to be for 1 hour 20 minutes. He was advised that the circuit passed near to Mount Tuam on Saltspring Island and that he should look out carefully and return if the weather deteriorated. The circuits were to be flown at 1500 feet, 500 feet lower than the summit of Mount Tuam.

Harold's instructor gave him the normal two demonstrations on the Hampden: the first on characteristics when flying on one or two engines, finishing with a single engine landing and one or two circuits; the second on steep turns and various types of landings. Harold, who had about 14 hours experience on Hampdens, seemed sensible and reliable, an average pilot unlikely to take unnecessary risks.

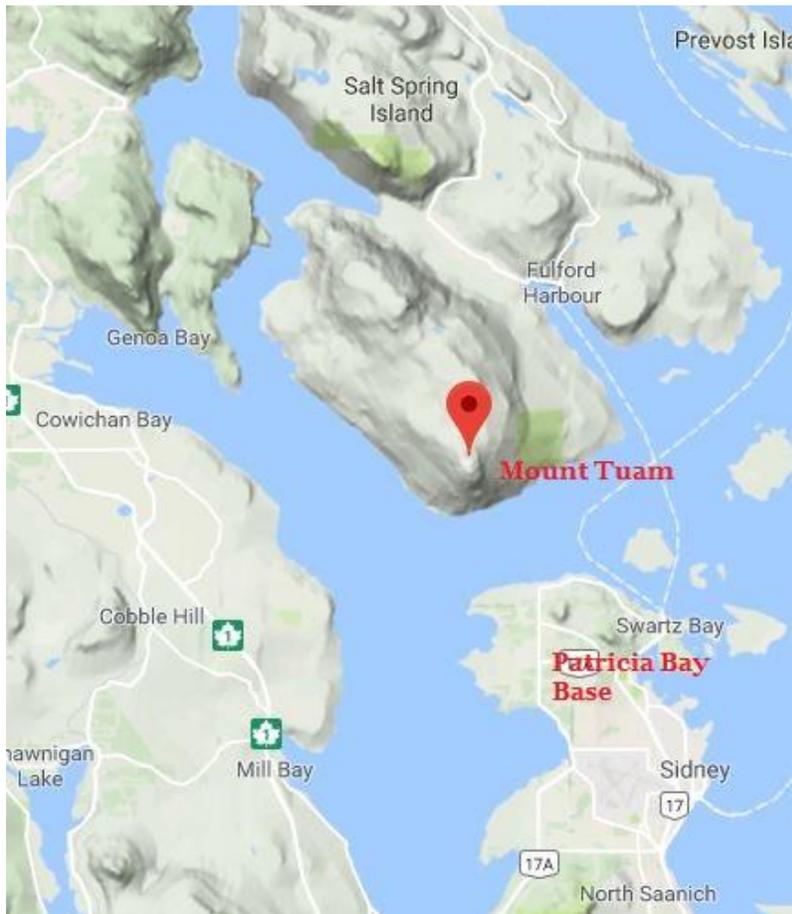
During the downwind leg of a circuit Harold simply disappeared; no explosion or fire was reported. Another pilot flying the same circuits reported that it was a very dark night and definitely possible to not see Mount Tuam.

When the aircraft was located the next day, January 15<sup>th</sup>, it was found to have flown through a swathe of trees for about 200 yards, hit the mountain and burned. It could be identified as Hampden AN136 but the body was not identifiable. No photographer or camera was taken on the recovery team due to the difficulty of the climb. Harold had multiple injuries and had third degree burns to his entire body. The body was recovered for burial.

Mount Tuam was two miles north of the specified circuit. Harold had flown wide of the circuit, possibly due to wind conditions and, not realizing he had done this, had failed to see the mountain, which had no beacons.

In his remarks, the Investigating Officer into the accident writes:

*“This was one of those unfortunate accidents due to obstructions close to the circuit. I am informed by Works and Building Division that the towers for the beacon were completed on 31 January 1944 but they have no information as to whether the beacon is yet in operation. They are ascertaining this from Western Air Command”.*



BHC