

Sgt R.W.Johnson – Royal Air Force Voluntary Reserve

Robert William Johnson was born in 1922, the son of William Johnson, a carpenter, and his wife, Milly, who lived at ‘Cotswold’ in Parsonage Lane, Westcott.

In 1942 Robert was serving as a Sergeant Observer in 78 Squadron as part of Bomber Command. At the start of the war the Squadron had been designated as a training squadron and stationed at Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire. It was in July 1940 that it returned to front-line duties as a night bomber squadron, stationed at Dishforth and equipped with Armstrong Whitworth Whitley V bombers. On 25th August 1940 the Squadron took part in the first bombing raid on Berlin - in retaliation the Germans attacked London and other cities. This tactical change was the turning point in the Battle of Britain; it took the pressure off RAF airfields which were no longer under constant attack and the battle swung in the Allies’ favour.

In early April 1942 the Whitleys were retired from Bomber Command and 78 Squadron converted to Handley Page Halifax IIs; it was with these aircraft that the Squadron took part in the first ‘1000 bomber’ raid on Cologne on 30th May 1942. The Squadron moved to Middleton St George in June 1942 and then returned to Linton on Ouse in September.

On 1st October 1942 Robert Johnson was the observer (navigator) in the crew of Handley Page Halifax MkII aircraft W1036, coded EY-J. The aircraft took off from Linton on Ouse at 18.10 hours and crashed near Schleswig on a course for Flensburg. The reason for the aircraft’s loss is not known, but it is likely that it was hit by flak. Robert and three other members of the crew were killed – Sgt John Gregory, the pilot, Sgt Sidney Waldman and Sgt Thomas Turpin RCAF. The other three crew members survived. Sgts Markillie, Morrison and Hunt, who had to have a leg amputated, were captured and held as prisoners of war.

This raid appears to have been particularly hazardous. Bomber Command reported that 27 Halifaxes from 4 Group took part in the operation. Twelve crews reported good bombing results, but twelve other aircraft were lost, almost half the force. The losses included another aircraft from 78 Squadron, BB236, code EY-B; again four of its crew were killed and three were made prisoners of war.

Robert Johnson and his fellow crew members are all buried in Kiel War Cemetery which contains the graves of 983 Commonwealth airmen and 9 Polish airmen who were lost in bombing raids over northern Europe. The graves were brought to Kiel from cemeteries and churchyards throughout Schleswig-Holstein, the Friesian Islands and other parts of north-west Germany.