

F/O John Thomas Irvine Challes 39041 RAF



John Challes was an experienced Canadian pilot in a Wellington that was lost in a disastrous operation, which led to a major change in Bomber Command tactics.

Early on the morning of 18 December 1939 he was on board one of nine Wellingtons from No. 9 Squadron that joined 15 others on an armed reconnaissance off the naval port of Wilhelmshaven.

The object was to seek out any of the Germans' capital ships or, failing that, to bomb any naval vessels. All aircraft were under orders not to make any attacks on the land. John was piloting Wellington IA N2939 WS-H that took off at 0855 hours from Honington. After a rendezvous with Wellingtons from two other squadrons, they headed for the German coast.

The aircraft were picked up by what was one of the first radar units operated by the Luftwaffe and up to 60 Me109s and Me110s were scrambled to intercept. The result was carnage for the RAF. Twelve of the twenty-four Wellingtons were shot down, five of them from No. 9 Squadron, and others badly damaged while two of the attackers were downed. Twenty-three of those on board the No. 9 Squadron aircraft were lost.

John's aircraft was seen to be attacked by Me110s before the Wellington broke up and crashed into the sea off Wilhelmshaven, killing all six on board. It was a chastening event that ultimately led to Bomber Command to switch to night-time operations.

John is remembered on the Runnymede Memorial. He was brought up in St Catherine, Ontario, and attended Queen's University in Kingston, where he decided to join the Royal Air Force to follow his dream to fly. He was granted a short service commission in 1936 and later served with No. 70 Squadron in Iraq before joining No. 9 Squadron in September 1939. He was the son of Mr and Mrs J A Challes.

The others who died were the second pilot P/O Alistair Bourne, observer Sgt. Frank Mason, wireless operator/air gunner Sgt. Thomas English and air gunners LAC Gurth Cox and AC1 Alexander Telfer.

His name can be found on panel 018.

Sources: *Bombers First and Last* by Gordon Thornburn; No. 9 Squadron.