

Sgt Robert Corrie Custance 1396887 RAFVR

Robert was born on 23 September 1923 in Woodbridge, Suffolk, the son of the Rev Martin Custance and Kathleen Custance nee Paulley. In 1943 he married Lily Queenie Palk in Hampstead, London. Educated at Christ's Hospital, Horsham, West Sussex, on leaving education Robert was destined for a career with Harrods, Knightsbridge.

Volunteering for aircrew duties, Robert joined the RAF and trained as a Navigator. On 2 December 1943 Robert joined 101 Sqn at RAF Ludford Magna, Lincolnshire from 1656 HCU.

On 16 December 1943 Bomber Command crews were tasked with a raid on Berlin. Of the 498 aircraft despatched that night, 101 Sqn contributed 21 crews. Around 16:30 Robert, operating as the Navigator, and the crew departed RAF Ludford Magna in Lancaster I LM389 (SR-Y). This would be this newly mustered crew's first, and last op.

The crew successfully bombed the target area; however, as the Bomber Command aircraft returned from Berlin, the weather had deteriorated significantly, with fog blanketing most of the airfields in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. Robert and the crew were ordered to divert to Yorkshire, probably aiming for RAF Holme on Spalding Moor.

At 00:27 on 17 December 1943, whilst trying to identify somewhere to land, the aircraft was descended into the ground in a small wooded area to the north of the village of Eastrington, between Selby and Goole, East Yorkshire. Only the 2 gunners at the rear of the aircraft survived.

Black Thursday, as the day was soon called, saw the loss of twenty-five Lancasters during the Berlin operation, but a further thirty-one lost due to the fog over England -crashed or abandoned when their crews baled out, or in the case of two unfortunate crews collided over Lincolnshire.

Of the 328 aircrew who lost their lives that night, more were the victims of the weather than enemy action.

Also Killed: PO Norman Maylin Cooper (Pilot); WO Herbert Percy Davis (AG); Sgt John Gregory Hayden (WOp); Sgt Robert Kenneth Rye (FE); Sgt Reginald William Melville Spelman (AB)

Robert is buried in Highgate Cemetery, London

Robert is commemorated on Wall Panel 26