

F/O Eric John Dane 144340 RAFVR



Eric Dane (front left) with his crew at Elsham

On a disastrous night in early May 1944 Bomber Command lost 42 Lancasters in an attack on a German military depot at Mailly-le-Camp in France. The attack, though accurate, was marred by confusion over the target and communication problems, all of which helped German night fighters score heavily.

Aircraft from No. 1 Group suffered particularly badly and 103 Squadron at Elsham lost three of the 12 aircraft it provided for the raid, which took place on the night of 3/4 May. There was not a single survivor from any of them.

One of the aircraft, Lancaster ND905 PM-B, was piloted by Sqn Ldr Harold 'Jock' Swanston, the 32-year-old A Flight commander. His navigator was 23-year-old Eric Dane. The aircraft was caught as bombers were instructed to circle to await instructions and crashed near the French village of Villers-le-Chateau, five miles from Chalons-sur-Marne. Unbeknown to the controller, the area they were ordered to circle was close to a Luftwaffe night fighter beacon.

Eric was one of two brothers to be killed with Bomber Command. His elder brother Gerald was a Halifax pilot who died almost exactly a year earlier while flying with 78 Squadron on a raid on Bochum. Eric was a former pupil of Ashford Grammar School and came from Belvedere in Kent. He was the son of Herbert and Beryl Dane.

Those killed with him were the pilot Sqn. Ldr. 'Jock' Swanston, flight engineer Sgt. Dennis Hadden, bomb-aimer WO Ron Boyd RAAF, wireless operator WO John Smith, mid-upper gunner Sgt. George Casey RCAF and rear gunner Sgt. Jack Rankin RCAF. All are buried in Villers-le-Chateau churchyard.

His name can be found on IBCC panel 026.

Photographic source: David Fell.