

PO John Jack Laurens DFM 171908 RAFVR

John Jack was born on 5 January 1918 in Wolseley, Cape Province, South Africa, the son of Johannes Gerhardus Jan Laurens and Maria Elizabeth Mary Laurens nee van Schalkwyk. In 1939 he married Margaret Johnson Cooke in Westminster, London. They had one son.

Educated at the Observatory Boys' High School, Cape Town, in 1933 John joined the South African Training Ship "General Botha" as a naval cadet. In 1936 John travelled to the UK where he enlisted in the Grenadier Guards and on the declaration of war served as a member of the British Expeditionary Force in France and was one of the lucky few to escape from Dunkirk in 1940.

Following the retreat from Dunkirk John applied for, and was accepted into, the RAF as aircrew and was sent to Canada for pilot training. Receiving his wings in 1943, John completed his advanced training at 1656 HCU, RAF Lindholme, Yorkshire and in October 1943 he was posted to 101 Sqn at RAF Ludford Magna, Lincolnshire.

On 25 January 1944 John was awarded the DFM. His citation read:

"FS Laurens has participated in numerous sorties, seven of which have been against Berlin. One night in December 1943, when detailed to attack targets in this city, FS Laurens displayed great skill and determination to complete his mission successfully in the face of difficulties. Some nights previously he attacked targets in the same area. During the bombing run his aircraft was hit by aircraft fire and was thrown out of control. FS Laurens skilfully regained control however, and executed a determined attack. This airman invariably displayed skill, courage and determination."

On the night of 19/20 February 1944, a major offensive to Leipzig was planned by Bomber Command with 823 aircraft allocated to the op. Twenty-one 101 Sqn Lancasters participated in the raid. Leipzig, the 5th biggest German City with 12 aircraft factories, 8 machine and weapons factories and other war-related industries, including the production of textiles and synthetic oil. Leipzig was also one of the most important railway hubs of Central Germany. The raid proved to be the heaviest loss from Bomber Command with 78 aircraft failing to return. At 23:38 John and his crew departed RAF Ludford Magna in Lancaster III DV267 (SR-K), tasked with ABC duties.

Whilst outbound, near Oldenburg, John's aircraft was intercepted from beneath by Ofw Rudolf Frank of the 3./NJG 3 from Vechta airfield, Germany, flying a Bf 110 fitted with upward firing guns. With the fuel tank in the port wing on fire, the fire extinguishers were used and the propeller was stopped and 'feathered'. The crew jettisoned their bombs and headed home. Although the port wing engine had stopped burning, the fire had taken hold in the wing tanks between the port side engines. When the aircraft began to disintegrate, at 04:43 John ordered the crew to bale out. The aircraft crashed at Boerakker, 17km WSW of Groningen, Holland, and John's body was found in the wreckage of the aircraft. This was his 20th op, and he had just been granted a commission. Five crew members survived and became POWs.

Also Killed: PO Cassian Henry Waight (WOp/AG); Sgt William Frederick Donald Bolt (AG)

John is buried in the Leek (Tolbert) Protestant Cemetery, Groningen, Netherlands

John is commemorated on Wall Panel 61

Photo Source: www.robertchristie.co.uk

