

F/O Robert Bruce Melville J/18235 RCAF

Robert Melville was a Canadian wireless operator who was killed during one of the most intense periods of operations in the entire war for Bomber Command. He and his crew had joined No. 166 Squadron at Kirmington early in July 1944, flying operationally for the first time later in the month.

Robert was one of three members of his crew who died when their Lancaster was hit by flak during a daylight attack on a rocket site in northern France on 31 August. It was the crew's 18th operation, 12 of them being flown in August alone, mainly against V1 and V2 sites and in support of military operations.

The target was a V2 site at Agenville, near Abbeville. Ten Lancasters from 166 took part in what proved a successful attack but two were shot down by flak close to the target. Another eight 166 aircraft also took part in a similar attack on a V2 site at St Riquier at the same time.

Robert and his crew were flying in Lancaster III NE170 AS-I, which left Kirmington at 1325 hours. Over the target the cloud base was much lower than predicted and AS-I was hit by flak, a wing caught fire and the Lancaster crashed near the village of Fillievres, not far from the rocket site. Five of the crew successfully bailed out and later evaded capture before being picked up by Canadian troops.

Robert, who was the 28-year-old son of Charles and Winnifred Melville, came from the small town of Midland in central Ontario. He was a former pupil of Midland High School and is remembered on the school's war memorial.

Those killed with him were the two gunners, Flt. Sgt. Geoffrey Canning and Flt. Sgt. George Rhodes. All three are buried in Fillievres British Cemetery. The surviving crew members were the pilot F/O Frank Elliott RCAF, flight engineer Sgt. Jim Comley, navigator Sgt. Norman Linton and bomb-aimer Flt. Sgt. Murray Oliphant RCAF.

Five crew members of the second 166 Squadron Lancaster lost over Agenville survived, including the wireless operator P/O Donald Pleasance, later to become one of the country's leading stage and film actors.

Robert's name can be found on IBCC panel 073.

Photographic source: 166 Squadron Association.

