

WO John Coates Smith 645575 RAF



John Smith (rear, far right) 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 wireless operator was WO John Smith. 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.

John was the 23-year-old son of Henry and Hannah Smith of Stamford Bridge in Yorkshire.

Those killed with him were the pilot Sqn. Ldr. 'Jock' Swanston, flight engineer Sgt. Dennis Hadden, navigator F/O Eric Dane, bomb-aimer WO Ron Boyd RAAF, 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 099.

Photographic source: David Fell.