

Sqn. Ldr. Harold Swanston 70659 RAF



Harold Swanston (front centre) 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. It 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.

Jock Swanston was a pre-war regular and a popular figure at Elsham. He came from Testwood, on the outskirts of Southampton, where he lived with his wife Edith. He was the son of George and Jessie Swanston.

Those killed with him were the flight engineer Sgt. Dennis Hadden, navigator F/O Eric Dane, 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 104.

Photographic source: David Fell.