

PO Stephen George Esson 40376 RAF

Stephen was born in Aberdeen on 29 May 1919, the eldest son of Lt Cdr George Forbes Esson and Margaret Esson nee Stephen. Educated at Aberdeen Grammar School, on leaving school Stephen joined the cadet ship HMS Conway between 1935 -1937 where he took the aviation course and became Cadet Captain. When he was eighteen, he gained his flying license and in 1938 he was commissioned in the RAF. Stephen was the RAF lightweight boxing champion of 1938, and runner-up in the Inter-Services boxing championship in 1939.



On 23 June 1940, from 11:00, eleven aircraft from 107 Sqn departed RAF Wattisham to commence solo raids on various targets in the Ruhr area. At 13:35, Stephen and his crew took off in Blenheim IV R3688 (OM) tasked with an operation to bomb Soest airfield. For unknown reasons, the crew decided to turn back and attack the alternative target of Schiphol airfield but were shot down by a Bf 110 'Zerstörer' of the I./ZG 76. The aircraft crashed at Willemsoord, 6km NW of Steenwijk, Netherlands, exploding as it hit the ground.

In March 1946 the father of the Observer, PO James Tozer, finally discovered the circumstances of death and place of burial of the crew when, after a chance meeting with some Dutch servicemen, he was given the contact details of the local Burgomaster and he received the following information:

".....On the 23rd of June, 1940, I was in the woods on bicycle and heard the humming of a heavy aeroplane. A moment later I saw it. It was not very high in the air. Then a German 'plane' could be seen and a fight started. It was a very short fight. The British machine went suddenly down without burning and crashed in the nearby fields. I went there immediately, but some Germans were already there and did not allow me to come quite near. At last I could get hold of the names of the occupants: Esson, Murchison and Tozer. I am so sorry that no letters, identity disc, or anything else were left to send to you. The Germans took everything with them. Your son was dead and so were Esson and Murchison. They cannot have suffered for a very long time for it all happened very, very quickly. A few days later, the 25th of June, the funeral took place and the bodies were buried in the cemetery at Willemsoord. It was a funeral with military honours, the Union Jack laid on the coffins. I was there to represent the municipality of Steenwijkerwold, but I was not allowed to speak. But I had the honour to lay the flowers ordered by the municipal council on the grave. A big crowd watched in absolute silence. Flowers are being laid there regularly. The grave is constantly looked after and kept. That is our duty. On the grave a cross is placed on which the names are mentioned. I know that it must be very hard for you to receive this letter but I understand that you want to know the truth and as much as possible. I told you what happened I can do no more. Believe me, sir, we shall look well after this grave in the beautiful and quiet cemetery at Willemsoord. Your son may rest a long way from his home, but he rests among friends who will never forget what he and thousands of others of your heroic country have done for the peace and freedom in the world. May God bless you too....."

Also killed : PO James Johnstone Tozer (Observer); Sgt George Ross Murchison (WOp/AG)

Stephen is buried with his crew in a collective grave in the Steenwijkerwold (Willemsoord) General Cemetery, Overijssel, Netherlands

Stephen is commemorated on Wall Panel 161

Photo Source: Aircrew Remembered