Sgt Karel Kunka 787252 RAFVR



Karel was born on 27 July 1913 in Oslavany, Brno, South Moravia.

A Sergeant in the Czechoslovak Army, following the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Germany, on 15 July 1939 Karel crossed the border from Czechoslovakia to Poland where the army formed the new Czechoslovak Legion fighting alongside Poland in defence against the impending German invasion. As the German forces continued their move through the continent, Karel fought in the Battle of France before, in June 1940, the Czechoslovak troops were evacuated to England from Dunkirk.

On arrival, Karel was amongst several soldiers who had served in Czechoslovak Army units in the Battle of France to volunteer to transfer to the RAFVR. After a brief stay at RAF Innsworth, Gloucestershire, most of the airmen moved to RAF Cosford, which was to become the Czechoslovak Depot. Here, the men were sworn in as members of the RAFVR. Karel was detached for training as a WOp/AG at No.1 Signals School, RAF Cranwell, Lincolnshire and for bombing and gunnery training at No.4 Bombing and Gunnery School at RAF West Freugh, Stranraer, Scotland before joining 311(Czechoslovak) Sqn.

On 23/24 September Bomber Command was tasked with an attack on military targets in Berlin. A combined force of 129 aircraft, including three 311 Sqn crews, were allocated to the raid.

At 21:35 on 23 September 1940 Karel, operating as the Wireless Operator, and the crew departed RAF East Wretham in Wellington 1a L7788 (KX-E).

Whilst over the target, Karel's aircraft was coned by searchlights and hit by flak, fracturing the oil pipes feeding the starboard engine. As the crew continued the return to base, when over Holland the oil pressure dropped, the airspeed reduced, and the aircraft began losing height. Knowing that they would be unable to make it back to England and that they would be coming down in enemy occupied Holland, the crew set about destroying the radio and navigational equipment, which might be of benefit to the enemy. At 04:35 on 24 September the pilot made a forced landing in a field near the village of Leidschendam, not far from the Hague. The crew all survived the crash landing and, having exited the stricken aircraft, they tried without success, to set it on fire to prevent it from falling into enemy hands.

The crew split into two groups and set off in the darkness heading for the coast. The first group was arrested in the morning; however, Karel's group was able to evade until just before midday on 25 September when they were discovered in a granary in Wassenaar by the German military using tracker dogs. Unable to accept the idea of capture, Karel shot himself in the head with a Verey pistol. He was taken to the Zuidwal Hospital in The Hague and operated on but succumbed to his injuries on the 26 September. The other members of his crew survived the war in captivity.

The Germans were able to repair the Wellington at nearby Schipol and after having re-marked it with Luftwaffe crosses (although the aircraft strangely still retained it squadron codes of KX-E), they carried out a series of test flights using the aircraft.

Karel is buried in The Hague (Westduin) General Cemetery, Zuid-Holland, Netherlands

Karel is commemorated on Wall Panel 195

Photo Source: findagrave