Sgt Lawrence Jesse Stokes 740503 RAFVR

Lawrence was born on 10 December 1913 in Atherstone, Warwickshire, the son of Ernest Stokes and Harriet Stokes nee Rathbone. In September 1939 he married Mary Mildred Ratcliffe in Atherstone.

Educated at Atherstone Boys School, on leaving education Lawrence was employed as an engineer with Messrs Alfred Herbert Ltd, Coventry.

Lawrence joined the RAF in 1937, and by 1939 had qualified as a Sergeant Pilot, joining 98 Sqn when they were based at Chateau Bougon, near Nantes, France. The squadron operated as a supporting unit to the AASF fighting squadrons, supplying replacement crew and aircraft as needed.

When France capitulated, the AASF began the withdrawal to England. Just two weeks after Dunkirk, Operation Aerial was launched - the evacuation of the servicemen and civilians who had been left behind and involved over 130 British and allied vessels. There were an estimated 40,000-60,000 men, women, and children waiting to be rescued at St. Nazaire, Brittany.

On 15 June 1940, the CO of 98 Sqn left Chateau Bougon Aerodrome, Nantes in the last aircraft belonging to the squadron. The Adjutant was left in charge of the remaining personnel, numbering 13 officers and 230 other ranks. The party was given orders to proceed to St Nazaire on 16 June to embark for England.

RMS Lancastria arrived in the mouth of the Loire estuary late on 16 June. Her normal complement in troopship configuration was 2,180 including 330 crew; however, the Captain was told to take as many as he possibly could.

Troops were ferried out to Lancastria and the other larger ships by destroyers, tugs, fishing boats and other small craft, a round trip of three or four hours, and by mid-afternoon of 17 June she had embarked an unknown number (estimates range from 4,000 up to 9,000).

At 15:50 the Lancastria was within minutes of hauling up anchor when a lone JU88 bomber from Kampfgeschwader 30 began its bombing run. Lancastria was hit by three bombs and sank within 20 minutes. Estimates of the death toll vary from 3,000 - 6,500, the largest loss of life in British maritime history.

George was one of at least ninety-six 98Sqn personnel lost in the sinking of the Lancastria.

Originally buried in Bouin, Vendée, France, in September 1947 Lawrence was transferred to Pornic War Cemetery, Loire-Atlantique, France

Lawrence is commemorated on Wall Panel 248