



remembrance ni



Aircrew from Northern Ireland were among 106 lost on RAF's darkest night in raid on Nuremburg

Aircrew from Northern Ireland were lost in a raid on Nuremburg, Germany, on the night of 30/31st March 1944.



There were two in Lancaster JB736 of 103 Squadron. They were **FO James Guy Johnston**, (Centre front row) aged 28, son of William and Mary Guy Johnston, of **Eglinton**, Co. Londonderry, and **Sgt William James Gwynne**, aged 21, (Second from left, back row), son of William James Gwynne and Annie Gwynne, of **Omagh**, Co. Tyrone.

Lancaster JB736 took off from RAF Elsham Wolds at 2116 hours on the night of 30/31st March 1944, detailed to bomb Nuremburg, Germany. Nothing was heard from the aircraft after take-off and it failed to return to base.

The Crew were :

RAF 135076 FO James Guy Johnston, Captain (Pilot) (Killed)

RAF 1566687 Sgt William James Gwynne, (Flight Engineer) (Killed)

RCAF J/23906 FO Joseph Jean Andre Ducharme, (Navigator) (Killed)

RAF 137611 FO John Christopher Patrick Doyle, (Air Bomber) (Killed)

RAF 1097466 Sgt Gordon Thomson, (Wireless Air Gunner) (Killed)

RAF 1590719 Sgt Frank Fealy, (Mid Upper Gunner) (POW # 3442 – Camp 357)

RAAF 424729 Flt Sgt Brian Phillip Boyle, (Rear Gunner) (Killed)



Rheinberg War Cemetery - The cemetery contains the graves and memorials of more than 3,330 Second World War Commonwealth servicemen, of whom more than 150 remain unidentified. More than 2,880 served with various air forces of the Commonwealth. The site of Rheinberg War Cemetery was chosen in April 1946 by the Army Graves Service for the assembly of Commonwealth graves recovered from numerous German cemeteries in the area. The majority of those now buried in the cemetery were airmen, whose graves were brought in from Dusseldorf, Krefeld, Munchen-Gladbach, Essen, Aachen and Dortmund; 450 graves were from Cologne alone. The men of the other fighting services buried here mostly lost their lives during the battle of the Rhineland, or in the advance from the Rhine to the Elbe.

On the outward flight the aircraft was hit by flak and crashed north east of Bilkheim at 0100 on 31st March. The village of Bilkheim is 8 kms SSW of Westerburg. Six of the crew were killed and Sgt Fealy was captured and became a POW. Those killed of this crew are buried in the Rheinberg War Cemetery, Kamp Lintfort, Westfal, Germany. Rheinberg is 24kms north of Krefeld and 13kms south of

Wesel. 48 Australians were lost on that Operation in multiple squadrons.



The headstones of FO James Guy Johnston Sgt William James Gwynne

Sgt Fealy who sustained burns to both legs, later reported “the aircraft was hit and communications between self and the rest of the crew was cut. As I made my way to the next communication point, the aircraft lurched and finally dived. It depended on my own initiative whether I should bale out, which I did through a hole in the bottom of the aircraft where the H2S scanner had been blown away. Estimated height was 5/8000 feet. I believe none of the others baled out.”

Besides the six killed on this aircraft, another 106 from that raid were buried in Rheinberg War Cemetery alone. UK (80), Canada (20), Australia (11) and New Zealand. The crew were posted to 103sq at Elsham Wolds in February 1944 and did their first Op to Stuttgart on the 15th March 1944, their second to Frankfurt on the 18th March 1944 and their final Op to Nuremburg, being one of the costliest in men and aircraft)

Frank Fealy was born in Leeds on the 25/11/1924 and enlisted in the RAF when he turned 18. He was repatriated in May 1945, promoted to Warrant Officer and demobbed shortly after.

Family tribute in The Sydney Morning Herald to NI crew mate

There was still much sorrow expressed in The Sydney Morning Herald "In Memoriam" section of the newspaper on (Wednesday 31st March 1948, the 4th Anniversary of that disastrous raid. There were many notices placed by those remembering their family members who were lost over Nuremburg that night. However one stuck out from the Australian in this crew, Sgt Brian Phillip Boyle must have written to his mother about a friend in his crew (It reads)

"GWYNNE"-A tribute To the memory of Sgt. William James Gwynne, also four other members of the crew, pals of the late Sgt Brian Boyle. Inserted by Brian's Mother"

There were also separate In Memoriams from the Mother and Family of Sgt Boyle.

Larne Flight engineer lost in combat

Sgt John Hillis RAF 1567503, Flight Engineer, was in Handley Page Halifax III HX241 EY-P which left Brighton, Yorkshire, at 2223. Posted to 78 Sqdn on 22-10-1943. He was from **Inver, Co, Antrim.**

The Crew were -
F/Lt Harry McCormick Hudson RCAF, J20047, Pilot
From (Tampa bay) Largo, Florida, USA Posted to 78Sqdn on 22-10-1943

F/Lt Alan George Talor. DFC, RAF, 120348 Navigator

From Beckingham, Kent, England Posted to 78Sqn on
28-10-1943

F/O William 'Bill' Uyen RCAF, J23464, Bomb Aimer
From Hamilton, Ontario, Canada Posted to 78Sqn on 23-10-1943

Sgt John Hillis RAF 1567503, Flight Engineer
From Inver, Co, Antrim, Ireland Posted to 78Sqn on 22-10-1943

Sgt Harrold 'Harry' Monks RAF, 1580257, Wireless Operator
From Hyde, Cheshire, England Posted to 78Sqn on 22-10-1943

F/Sgt Leslie. Nugent RAF, 1534643, Airgunner
Pow 3538, Luft 357, Survived the war.

Sgt John W. Morris RAF, 1589893, Airgunner
From Hexham, Northumberland, England Posted to 78Sqn on
22-10-1943

HX241 was shot down by night fighter on March 31st 1944 at 0115
hours above Allendorf (now Stadtallendorf)

Previous investigations stated it could have been Lt. Hans Schaefer
of the 7. Staffel des Nachtjagdgeschwaders 2 (7./NJG 2) who with
his crew, radio operator Sergeant Heinz Manter and gunner Ogfr.
Gliebmann Charles, was in a Junkers Ju 88C-6 that has launched
in Langendiebach to this mission.

Approaching from behind down under, the JU 88 fired his guns,
hitting the HX241 just missing the mid-upper gunner and setting
the plane on fire.

The HX241 EY-P Handley page B Halifax III of the 78 Squadron.
began his run at 22:23 hour as one off the 16 bombers that taken
off from the airfield of Brighton and flew to rendezvous over the
North Sea to the first turning point which was set to be at 51° 50'
North 2° 30' East with the Lancasters and Halifaxes of No 1, 3, 4,
5, 6 and 8 Groups that would make up the main bomber stream, on
there way to Nuremberg.

At this point over the North Sea, they started a steady climb, switching off all lights and when the turn was completed they were heading a course of 130°. The leading aircraft crossed the Belgium coast at 23:22 hour at approximately 8000 feet and at 23:45 hour the stream reached the next turning point at 50° 30' North 4°36' East, just south of Charleroi; there they altered course to port, gradually climbing to there bombing height to to make the run to there last turning point before the target, at Fulda Germany 50° 32' North 10° 36' East.

For this night F/O J.D. Lane was replaced by Sargent John William Morris as rear gunner, because the W/C (Wing Commander) had asked him to fly a little notice with a ' sprog ' or rookie crew who had not been flying over Germany. The proper navigator, Robertson, from Saskatoon was ill, and could not fly. (He was always air-sick, but flew). It was something more serious that night. Robertson was eventually lost on November 21 1944

Unfortunately the HX241 didn't make it to the last turning point, as they were shot down by a enemy aircraft over Stadtallendorf, approximately 30 km North of the the planned route.

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As told by the sole survivor Leslie Nugent from the HX241 after the attack by night fighter:

“I realized the plane was doomed and, in all probability, the rest of the crew were already dead. I was on my knees becoming weaker and weaker without oxygen and started to feel for the escape

hatch situated mid-way between my own turret and the rear turret. Next thing I knew was that I was hard up against the rear turret. I had no control over my actions but something guided me back and unwittingly felt the door handle. One twist and I was out, spinning through the air like a top.

I didn't need to jump – the air rushing past plucked me out like a mammoth vacuum cleaner picking up a fragment of dust.”

After being shot from end to front by a night fighter, the Halifax HX241 approached the village from the west already burning, circled once and broke in half before crashing.

The main part of the airplane crashed with a full load of bombs on the premises of the factory for chemical recycling of the present Rheinstaße. The broken tail section crashed at the site of today's outdoor swimming pool.

F/S Leslie Nugent came unhurt down with his parachute, but was soon taken prisoner in Allendorf.

Because of the fact that there was another crash of a Lancaster at Erksdorf not far away and also at Wahlen a Bomber was shot down, the German authorities that night could not decide which plane he had been in.

The burgemaister and the local people buried the six crew members in the local cemetery. The funeral services being conducted by the local Lutheran Minister.

Al in all cases in the Marburg district the graves were well looked after. There was a plain wooden cross inscribed “Hier ruhen 6 unbekante Englische Flieger – Maerz 1944”

In a museum in Ebsdorfergrund there is still one of the Browning Machinegun of the bomber, which was found at the point in the forest.

Roll of Honour

+RAFVR 1567503. Sgt John Hillis.

78 Squadron. Died 31/03/1944. Age 26. Son of John Scott Hillis, and of Margaret Jane Hillis, of Inver, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland. Hanover War Cemetery, Neidersachen, Germany

+RAFVR 135076 FO James Guy Johnston.

103 Squadron. Died 31/03/1944. Age 26. Aged 28, Son of William and Mary Guy Johnston, of Eglinton, Co. Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Rheinberg War Cemetery, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany

+RAFVR 1566687 Sgt William James Gwynne.

103 Squadron. Died 31/03/1944. Aged 21, Son of William James Gwynne and Annie Gwynne, of Omagh, Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland. Rheinberg War Cemetery, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany

The Nuremberg raid

The [1944 Nuremberg Raid](#) almost share the same date with the Great Escape in Stalag Luft III. In fact the events are just days away from each other. But why is the other remembered and the other not?

There was so much bloodshed that time even old pros were left stunned. Massacres of whole squadrons happened before the very eyes of their comrades. A number of aircraft blew up mid-air like fireworks in the night as each was packed with three tons of bombs and 1,500 gallons of aviation fuel. Sadly, the blown-up planes also took with them the lives of the crew inside – the lives of seven brave men in each craft.

Pilots of the remaining war planes needed not only to dodge enemy night fighters outfitted with the Germans' new, secret yet deadly weapon, searchlights and the anti-aircraft guns all firing for them. They also had to steer clear away from the parachutes of

their comrades, those who managed to bail out from their fired up planes. There were those who made it to land in one piece. However, the land offered new dangers for them.

That same week, Hitler ordered the deaths of 50 Allied airmen who took part in the Great Escape.

But even in the most horrible times like the 1944 Nuremberg raid, many airmen did not fail to show heroism.

Tom Fogaty gave out orders for his crew to bale out when his controls got busted. But when the flight engineer's backpack malfunctioned out of reach, he gave his own parachute staying with the falling plane. Miraculously, though, he survived.

Bombarded by enemy planes, the Halifax bomber 22-year-old Cyril Barton piloted was sure not to come out unscathed. His crew had baled out through the confusion but the young pilot continued on to his target. Cyril Barton went on to receive the Victoria Cross for the bravery he showed that night on the Nuremberg raid. But then, he also died at that fateful time.

Rear gunner Flight Sergeant Bob Gill was aboard a Lancaster bomber from 35 Squadron which was part of a Pathfinder unit that night of the Nuremberg raid. Their main responsibility was to be in the front line leading the way.

When 90 years old and with a Distinguished Flying Medal to his name, the WWII veteran summed up the whole campaign in this short sentence: "it was a disaster."

Bob Gill was right. The 1944 Nuremberg raid was the worst night in the whole Royal Air Force's history and continues to be stamped into many minds until this day. the new

The family of Victoria Cross recipient Cyril Barton never fails to cherish the memories left by the young wonderful man who was admired by his crew even to their dying days. His family returned to Tyne & Wear to reopen the hospital wing where their brother died from his injuries. The said wing was named Barton Centre in honour of the late WWII airman.

The Nuremberg Raid was a night when over 100 Allied bombers who were on the same mission were lost. Morning dawned with over 700 men missing and as many as 545 of that number dead. Over 160 of those who participated in the raid went down and became POWs.

The Royal Air Force lost more men in the Nuremberg raid than in the whole Battle of Britain.

With casualties these high, why did the government chose to skim over the Nuremberg Raid and forget it?

Before that fateful night hundreds of warplanes carrying thousands of men had already been lost due to the sustained attacks the Allies had been completing on Germany's industrial heartlands.

The Nuremberg raid was in its fifth year of WWII and victory for the Allies was still unsecured. They had yet to establish a secure foothold on the Continent. With the Bomber Command men taking the war to the enemies, they were an asset to boosting up Britain's morale aside from the critical strategic importance they had for the army.

[Arthur Harris](#), the bomber boys' commander-in-chief, still held to his belief that hammering German infrastructure, blocking its supply lines and draining its people's will was the only way the Allies could gain victory.

But that strategy came with a colossal price. Almost half of the men who served under Harris died – 55,573 from the original 125,000.

As pilots and navigators gathered into their briefing rooms, some sighed in relief that they wouldn't be running into any other deadly air defenses in Europe going to Berlin. Many of them had lost their friends in recent months' raids on the German capital and other major cities.

However, as their new mission was explained, some began to form doubts as they saw the long red line stretched out across the map. Their route took them directly across Germany for 265 miles. Sound judgment would have had them on zigzag route causing

confusion to the enemy. But then, that would take more fuel, thus, resulting in carrying a lesser number of bombs.

The other thing that raised the men's doubts a notch higher was the weather – the moon was almost full and there was little sign of cloud covers. A bright moon meant they were easy prey for the night fighters of the Luftwaffe.

Future Chief of the Air Staff Sir Michael Beetham (sky commander during the Falklands War) commented how he expected that the mission would be called off but when it wasn't they had no choice but to go on.

Commander Arthur Harris, however, based on his view that this was his last try at slashing deep into Germany before the shorter nights set in which would limit his bombers' nocturnal range and the coming invasion on Normandy that would shift his attention to France.

He had commanded four diversionary raids which involved 162 bombers to trick the Germans that the Allies were targeting Hamburg or even, perhaps, Berlin. However, the enemy was not tricked for long since the coming force into Nuremberg stretched for 70 miles across the sky in one straight line. The night was clear. It was easy to spot them. And with the RAF vapour trails so clear, the German did really spot them.

John Nichol in his throbbing account of the Nuremberg Raid, *The Red Line*, pointed out that upon spotting them, 200 night-fighters from the Ruhr and the Rhine sped up the sky to meet them. Unknowingly, many of the enemy's war planes were equipped with something new and deadly. They had new guns which pointed upwards. They could shoot down from below allowing them to hide while firing up the bomber's exposed underbelly.

Bob Gill later recalled that while it was easy to see up at night, seeing down was a feat. Clearly, the Germans had the upper hand.

German ace Martin Becker achieved six kills within 30 minutes. The explosions shook the RAF crews. Due to the good weather and the full moon, they were offered a good view of other bombers firing up killing off their friends. As Reg Payne, Sir Michael Beetham's

wireless operator, puts it, it was a shock seeing the shower of flames and smoke coming from a dying aircraft occurring in front of his own eyes. What was more disturbing was that he knew there were seven people inside that plane, his comrades, and they were dead.

To add to the bombers' difficulties were the strong winds blowing them off course. The flying fleet was pushed north to its red line closer to the heavy defences the Germans put up in the Ruhr.

Jeff Gray, who was to become a BOAC pilot, admitted that he and his crew missed Nuremberg, their target, by miles. When they got to where the German city was supposed to be, they couldn't see anything. When a searchlight opened, they dropped their load on it and soon, it went out.

Above it all, that Nuremberg Raid in 1944 only did little damage on the city. Only 256 buildings were destroyed with 75 enemies killed – a mere fraction to what the RAF suffered.

Harris, who was knighted but was never given a peerage acknowledged to other wartime officials, and later divulged in his writings, that if the Navy fought two or three major battles in a war and the Army's amounted to a dozen, Bomber Command had to fight over a thousand in the three and half years he served as its commander.

Others will undoubtedly question his summations but the above statement would surely explain why no one from his senior staff questioned his decision the night of the Nuremberg Raid. He had outlined his plan for the night earlier on and wanted a colossal force – about 700 bombers – to rain down 2,600 tonnes of explosives on the German industrial city.

Nuremberg had been a hub of industrial activities during Nazi Germany with several tank and engine factories based there. Most importantly, it had a symbolic importance to the enemy. Hitler staged many of his rallies here and even called it at one point as the most German of all German cities. Nuremberg had also been left untouched for months.

Acknowledgments

CWGC

Nuremberg Raid, The Red Line by John Nichol

Sydney Herald

War History Online

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The **remembrance ni** programme is overseen by Very Rev Dr Houston McKelvey OBE, QVRM, TD who served as Chaplain to 102 and 105 Regiments Royal Artillery (TA), as Hon. Chaplain to RNR and as Chaplain to the RBL NI area and the Burma Star Association NI. Dr McKelvey is a Past President of Queen's University Services Club. He may be contacted at houston.mckelvey@btinternet.com

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