

FLYING OFFICER WILLIAM HARRY FRANKLIN DFC (R33-38)

He was born on 12 May 1922. While at the College he competed in the Ashburton at Bisley, and his family later presented the Franklin Cup, in his memory, to be awarded each year to the best shot at the College.

At the age of 17 he joined the Army Air Corps in Cambridge and during WW2 he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, 161 Squadron. After training was complete, he was posted for a while to 51 Squadron, who's Commanding Officer was then **Wing Commander Percy Pickard DSO DFC (26-32)**.

He was killed in action on 19 March 1943. At the time he was the navigator in a Halifax engaged in parachuting agents and supplies into occupied Europe. On the night of 19th March, his aircraft was due to make a drop in southern Norway where there was a heavy water plant. After take off nothing more was heard of either aircraft or crew. The operation was his 43rd at the age of just 20.

He was posthumously awarded the DFC with effect from 17 February 1943 "In recognition of gallantry and devotion to duty in the execution of air operations." The award was later presented to his mother by King George VI.

He is named on the Runnymede Memorial in Surrey - picture.



Following his death, his parents privately printed a book on his life, written by Van and June Milne and the Society has a copy. The following is the introduction :-

On the afternoon of 19/3/43, a Handley Page Halifax of 'B' Flight, 161 Squadron based at RAF Tempsford, was being made ready for the night's work. At the same time, the crew of DG244-Y was on its way to the Ops Room to be briefed. Details of this operation, code-named Vega 3 may never be made public, though it is known that the dropping zone was in the area of Nottoden in southern Norway, where there was a heavy water plant. Although attached to 3 Group, Bomber Command, 161 Squadron did not carry out bombing operations. Its war was clandestine. 'A' Flight, using Lysanders and Hudsons, delivered agents and equipment to French Resistance groups, landing behind enemy lines and picking up 'passengers' to take back to England. These could be agents on the run, Free French VIPs or recruits for training in subversion and sabotage.

'B' Flight, equipped with Whitleys and Halifaxes, were employed in parachuting agents and supplies to any part of Occupied Europe; France, Holland, Norway, Poland or Czechoslovakia.

161 and its sister Squadron 138, both operating from Tempsford, were categorised as Special Duty, allied to the Special Operations Executive (SOE), itself the wartime arm of British Intelligence. SOE prescribed the operations which 161 and 138 then carried out. It was hazardous work. Aircraft operated usually alone, unescorted, more often than not at low level to avoid radar detection and in moonlight, when dropping or landing zones could be identified with greater accuracy. Skill and security were paramount. Crews were hand-selected from among the most experienced and highly qualified airmen of Bomber, and sometimes Fighter Command.

On the night of 19/3/43, the weather was clear and the forecast good when the crew of DG244-Y climbed into their aircraft. At least three of them were on a second tour of operations. Two had already been decorated. Their Halifax was the Mark V, the latest version, built by Rootes Securities and powered by four Rolls Royce Merlin XX engines. It was armed with mid-upper and rear gun turrets and had been taken on strength only five months before.

The aircraft took off at 1950 hrs and nothing was heard of it thereafter. There was no report of bad weather on the route and no signal from the aircraft. There was no subsequent communication from the agent who was to have been dropped, or from the Norwegian Resistance. Since no wreckage was ever found, it is thought that the Halifax must have come down in the sea before reaching its target. It may have been jumped by enemy fighters based in Denmark or Norway, or brought down by anti-aircraft fire from an enemy coastal vessel or

convoy. A lone aircraft, without fighter cover, it relied only on the expertise – and the luck – of its crew. For the seven members of DG244-Y and the brave agent they carried, luck had at last run out.

One member of this crew, the navigator, Flying Officer W H (Bill) Franklin, aged 20 and on his 43rd operation, is the subject of the Memoir. A month before, he had been recommended for the Distinguished Flying Cross, an award later presented to his mother by King George VI.