

## Flight Lieutenant William Alfred Colson DFM (141402)

William Alfred **Colson** was born on 8th January 1915 at his grandmother's boarding house in Paddington, London. His mother was Gladys Colson, nee Jeffery. She was born in 1898 also in Paddington, and his father was Alfred Colson, a Car attendant on the Great Western Railway, born in 1890 in Ilford Essex. They were married in 1914.

Billy was mainly brought up by his grandmother, Maud, in Paddington where my mother, his second cousin, spent a lot of her childhood with him.

He married Florence Amelia Burden (known as Millie) on 4th April 1936 in Paddington. He was 21 years old and she was 22. His marriage certificate states that he was an electrician, but another source said that he was a bricklayer.

We do not yet know when he first went into the RAF but he was in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. He was in 9 squadron and served full tours in Whitley Bombers, Halifax Bombers and Wellingtons. He flew with rear gunner Harry Irons DFC and pilot Flt Lt Dick Stubbs

He was promoted to Flight Sergeant in January 1943 and received the Distinguished Flying Medal in May 1943. This was with 9 Squadron. These achievements are published in the London Gazette, 13th April 1943 and 18th May 1943.

At some point in 1943 he transferred to 97 Squadron (Pathfinders) which was an elite Squadron. He was stationed at RAF Bourn, a few miles from Cambridge.

Billy was an observer, navigator and also a bomb aimer. Bomb aimers sometimes took over the front gun turret.

He had two children, Billy Junior and Beryl.

On the night of 16th/17th December 1943 the Lancaster's from Bourn set out for a raid on Berlin. The fog was already very bad and the crews thought that the mission would be called off. Bomber Command had not made a raid on Berlin for two weeks and the orders were that they should go.

Billy should not have been flying that night but the bomb aimer of F-Freddy was unable to go, so Billy took his place as the bomb aimer with F-Freddy. The man who should have gone was Ivor Glynn Stevens who, we found, survived the war.

On the homeward journey, after the raid, the Lancaster's began to return to base at Bourn, just after midnight on 17th December, but there was dense fog and the crews could not find

the airfield and those that did could not see the runways. There was no flare path and they were running out of fuel.

Some of the Lancaster's with enough fuel made it to nearby airfields, but 5 Lancaster's crashed at Bourn with terrible loss of life, men burned and injured. Billy's plane, almost safely home, made two approaches and then overshot the runway crashing on the edge of a road where it burst into flames. The pilot, Squadron Leader Donald McKenzie, the flight engineer, Pilot Officer John Towler- Pratt , and Flight Lieutenant Billy Colson were killed. The other four members of the crew were badly injured but survived. This night was called Black Thursday.

Billy was buried in Willesden New Cemetery, London in the civilian section but with a military headstone. Section E, Grave 2342.  
He was 28 years old.

Wyn Harrison