

Pilot Officer Ernest Henry Tansley 149542 VR

Ernest Henry Tansley was born on 22 January 1914, West Ham, Essex. The middle son of Albert Edward and Mary Ann Tansley.

Brothers - Albert Edward 1911 - 1992 and Frederick George 1915 - 2001.

Ernest married Irene Florence England on 30 November 1935, in Thundersley, Essex. She was the daughter of Herbert Percy and Elizabeth Charlotte England, born on 24 July 1915, Thundersley.

Children - Peter John 1936 - 2001, Anne Elizabeth 1940, Robert Ernest 1944.

Ernest started work as a clerk for a Shipping Agency in London, later as a Foreman Stevedore at King George V Docks in London. When war broke out, he was one of the many dock workers who were transferred to Gourock Docks in Scotland.

Being in a reserved occupation, Ernest was not required to enlist but he did so, at Edinburgh, on the 19th March 1941 to join the RAF. As a Volunteer Reservist, he was put on the reserve list and was eventually called up at the beginning of August.

4 August 1941 - joined No 1 Air Crew Reception Centre at St. John's Wood, London.

23 August 1941 - now as AC2 1345042, he moved to No. 4 Initial Training Wing at Paignton, Devon where he spent about eight weeks.

17 October 1941 - now an LAC he went to No. 18 Elementary Flying Training School at Fairoaks, Surrey. This was one of 12 schools controlled by 50 Group Pool and Ernest would have learnt to fly the Tiger Moth.

After a short spell which included some embarkation leave, he arrived at Heaton Park Holding Centre in Manchester, awaiting news of his overseas posting to America.

21 November 1941 - Ernest's journey began by returning to Gourock Docks where he had previously worked and boarding the waiting troop ship which would take him to Canada to train under the Arnold Scheme. Firstly they disembarked at Halifax, Nova Scotia and then journeyed onwards to the Royal Canadian Airforce Station at Moncton, New Brunswick.

2 December 1941 is when they arrived at Moncton.

18 December 1941 - the long journey south had been made to Maxwell Field Airforce Base in Alabama where he stayed for about a month.

11 Jan 1942 - arrival at Carlstrom Field, Arcadia, Florida where he learnt to fly the Boeing Stearman bi-plane. This was the first of three flying schools for Primary, Basic and Advanced training.

29 March 1942 - arrival at Cochran Field, Macon, Georgia for the Basic training course. This was a U.S. Army Airforce School run along the very strict West Point system. Here Ernest would learn to fly the Vultee Valiant BT 13A mono plane.

Because Ernest had been hospitalised on two occasions with the measles and then a septic arm, he was required to repeat the whole six week course.

5 July 1942 - this was the final Advanced training course at Moody Field, near Valdosta where they had the AT-6 Harvard and the twin-engined Curtiss AT-9 and Cessna AT-17.

He graduated from here on 6 September 1942 when he received the coveted USAAC silver wings. As he was chosen to train as a Bomber pilot, he was to be sent back to the UK. He journeyed back to Moncton in Canada to receive his RAF wings and to await a ship for home.

After several weeks wait, Ernest boarded the "Stirling Castle" and arrived back at Gourock Docks on 7th October 1942.

Now a Sergeant Pilot, he was sent to No. 3 Personnel Reception Centre in Bournemouth and was able to meet up with his wife whom he hadn't seen for over a year.

3 November 1942 - now at Windrush in Oxfordshire, the home of No. 6 Pilots Advanced Flying Unit where he was trained to fly the twin-engined Airspeed Oxford. During Christmas week he was sent on a B.A.T. course at Bramcote near Birmingham to fly Fairey Battle aircraft.

2 March 1943 - left Windrush for No. 16 Operational Training Unit at Upper Heyford, still in Oxfordshire. On No.51 course he would have learned to fly his first twin-engined heavy aircraft, the Vickers Armstrong Wellington.

Stationed here for about 12 weeks, Ernest would now have chosen the other members needed for his crew.

After two weeks leave, this new crew met up on 28th May at 1661 Heavy Conversion Unit, Winthorpe in Nottinghamshire. This is where the Manchester, Sterling and Lancaster aircraft were based. The crew were in 'C' flight which was attached to R.A.F. Scampton in Lincolnshire.

Their last training flight ended here on the 5th July and Ernest and crew were posted to 57 Squadron at Scampton on the 7th July 1943 after two long years of training.

12th July 1943 - this was Ernest's first taste of going on Ops as he accompanied Lieutenant Jack Russell, an American pilot, on a raid to Turin. He was flying as a second pilot and was allowed to fly the Lancaster, ED 655 on the homeward flight until they reached England. Landed at 08:49 on the 13th.

24th July 1943 - this was the first time Ernest experienced an operation with his own crew, flying in ED 655. It was the first of four raids on Hamburg code-named 'Operation Gomorrah'.

25th July 1943 - target Essen in the Ruhr. Take off 9:49pm, back at Base about 2am. ED 655

27th July 1943 - Hamburg again, taking off at 11pm and one of four planes landing back at Dunholme Lodge 4:20 am. ED655.

9th August 1943 - target Mannheim. Take-off 23:28 safely back at Base 05:32 on the 10th. ED655.

10th August 1943 - target Nuremberg. Take-off at 10pm returning at 05:35 on the 11th. This time flying in W4797.

12th August 1943 - target Milan, an eight and a half hour trip flying in W5008.

15th August 1943 - back in ED655 the target was Milan again. They lifted off just before 20:30 and touched down 4:30 on the 16th.

17th August 1943 - this was the important raid on Peenemunde to attempt to destroy the experimental rocket site. No.5 Group, to which 57 squadron belonged, would be in the last wave with No.6 Group and would be in most danger as they would be flying time-and-distance bombing in bright moonlight. A total of 596 bombers took off; forty were shot down with a loss of 288 aircrew plus two more from Mosquitos. 245 of these young men were killed and 45 taken P.O.W. 5 and 6 Groups, as expected, suffered the most casualties losing six times as many men as the other groups. Taking off in ED 655 just before 10pm they returned safely to Scampton at 04:14 on the 18th.

22nd August 1943 - Leverkusen was the target this time. Take-off was at 9:35pm returning 4 hours and 50 mins later.

23rd August 1943 - after a short sleep, Ernest found they were on Battle Orders again that evening. This time the target was Berlin, his first time to the "Big City". Take-off was at 20:35, landing back at Scampton at 4am on the 24th. W4948 'S' - Sugar.

27th August 1943 - again in W4948 'S', target Nuremberg. Take-off shortly after 9pm landing back at Dunholme Lodge about 4am.

It was at this time that the squadrons based at Scampton were moved in order that concrete runways could be laid down to replace the existing grass. 57 went to the newly built airfield called East Kirkby.

On the 29th of August 1943, Ernest made the short flight in ED655 to their new home.

12th September 1943 - on this date Ernest returned to Scampton to attend Course No.1 for Newly Commissioned Pilots and back at East Kirkby, as it was the moon period when no operations were ordered, all aircrew personnel underwent a week long training programme.

22nd September 1943 - Hanover was the target and ED 655 took off at 19:08. They returned to base shortly after midnight, after having shot down a JU 88 and scaring off a second one.

27th September 1943 - Hanover was the target once again and in JA 872, take-off was at 7:45 pm and on the return, landed at Mepal at 01:25, because of bad weather.

28th September 1943 - the short flight was made back from Mepal.

29th September 1943 - set off to bomb Bochum but did not reach the main target. Returned three and a half hours later after bombing the last resort target ...Texel airfield. JA 872.

3rd October 1943 - the target was Kassel. Take off was at 6:45 in the evening and the crew returned safely five and a half hours later. ED 994 was used this time.

7th October 1943 - the target was Stuttgart and take off time was 8:19 in the evening in ED655. Returning at 3:35 on the morning of the 8th, there was another operation lined up for that night.

8th October - this was to Hanover in ED655 again. Taking off at 22:47, they returned safely to East Kirkby at 3:41 on the morning of the 9th.

It was the 18th of October until another raid took place because it had been the moon period when no operations were carried out. The crew were on home leave during this time and Ernest had been taken ill.

3rd November 1943 - was the first operation of the month and the crew found themselves in possession of a new Mk. 111 Lancaster, JB 529 DX-W. The target was Dusseldorf and take-off from East Kirkby was 17:06, returning back at base at 21:24.

10th November 1943 - this time to bomb a railway junction set amongst the mountains in Modane. Take-off in JB 529 was shortly after 9pm.

14th November 1943 - this was to be a dinghy search in JB 485 accompanied by one other aircraft. The search was for an American crew who had ditched in the sea but was, unfortunately, unsuccessful. After a three and a half hours search they were diverted to Manby, a gunnery training school as East Kirkby was fog bound. Returned to East Kirkby the following day.

18th November 1943 - this operation was to Berlin, the start of what was to be known as "The Battle of Berlin". JB 529 now bearing code letter DX-P took off at 17:25. This was a long eight hour trip.

26th November 1943 - this was to Berlin again and P-Peter took off at 5:10 pm. On return, they were diverted to Pocklington owing to bad weather at East Kirkby.

They returned to East Kirkby two days later.

Ernest wasn't needed to fly on another Op. until December.

2nd DECEMBER 1943.

What a sad day this turned out to be....

Battle Orders once again showed the target to be Berlin. Ernest in JB 529 DX-P, and with an extra crew member on his first trip as a second pilot, was one of the first to take off at 16:19 and his estimated time of arrival should have made him the third to reach the target. Unfortunately, the aircraft met with unexpected winds en-route differing so much from those forecast that many planes were blown completely off course, ending up many miles off target.

650 aircraft should have been on this 'Maximum Effort' raid but 200 Halifaxes were withdrawn because of fog over their airfields in Yorkshire. After take-off, nearly a tenth of the remaining planes had to turn back when they encountered severe icing, technical problems or suffered crew sickness. This left just 415 to continue with the mission.

Because the bomber stream was late arriving and was very scattered because the strong winds had blown them off course, there were many fighters waiting to pick them off. 'P' for Peter was shot down by a night-fighter at approximately 23:00 hours German time, over the small town of Trebbin about 25 miles south of Berlin.

All eight crew were lost, even though Ernest stayed in his beloved Lancaster until the end trying to avoid a small row of houses and hoping his crew would have time to bail out. Although the houses were saved as Ernest managed to land in an adjacent field, the rear gunner had been shot and was still in the turret. Only one crew member had managed to open his parachute and Ernest, of course, was still in his seat.

A gentleman who had witnessed the combat said that despite the loss of two thirds of the wing and engines, the flames emanating from the front of the aircraft and other serious damage to the fuselage caused by the explosion, the pilot was still clearly flying his crippled Lancaster in an effort to land in a nearby field. In his words "It was an aeronautical miracle".

A very sad end for eight young heroes who will always be remembered with pride.

COMBAT REPORT

Lancaster x (ED. 655) of 57 Squadron over target on night 22/23rd September 1943 2142 hours at 18,000 feet.

No moon, coned in about 25 searchlights over target, no other unusual phenomena.

Monica gave warning of enemy aircraft just after bombs had been dropped and Lancaster was commencing to carry out banking search again. As enemy aircraft (identified as JU.88) came in to attack, searchlights went out. M.U. was first to see E/A on port quarter up approximately 300 yards. M.U. and R.G. simultaneously opened fire (firing 200 rds.) and hits were observed. E/A returned fire causing damage to Lancaster. E/A dropped starboard wing and dived to starboard leaving a smoke trail behind. When E/A was directly below Lancaster, flame was seen to emerge from starboard engine, but it was impossible to observe if E/A crashed, as another E/A then came in to attack from starboard quarter up. E/A (also identified as JU.88) came into attack at 600 yards range and R.G. opened fire (firing 50 rounds), but hits were not observed. E/A did not return fire. R.G. ordered the pilot to turn to starboard and dive, E/A broke away to starboard and was not seen again.

First E/A definitely claimed as destroyed.

M.U. could not get his guns to bear on second E/A.

Damage to Lancaster – Engine sub-frame Cat AC.

R.G. Sgt. MOAD – No. 3 B & G. S. McDONALD, MANITOBA.

16 O.T.U. UPPER HEYFORD, 1661 CON. UNIT, WINTHORPE

M.U. Sgt. LEWIS 24 C.A.O.S., MOFFIT, RHODESIA,

16 O.T.U. UPPER HEYFORD, 1661 CON. UNIT, WINTHORPE

Signed

Gunrary Leadrer, No. 57 Squadron.