

Harry James Gibbs. 1925 to 1943.

Harry John Gibbs (known in the family as Harry Boy) was the son of Harry and Mary Gibbs.

Harry was serving in the RAF when he gave this map to my mother, his aunt Lily May Leader. (Maiden name Gibbs. The reason for giving away the maps was that they were out of date. Looking at the map you will see France is divided into two military zones, German occupied and to the South Vichy France. By 1943 the area came under complete German rule. The maps were printed on silk and could be concealed in small places such as a matchbox and were issued to airmen as an escape tool.

In the RAF by 1943 Harry was trained as an air gunner and posted to No. 51 Squadron, No.4 Group, Bomber Command, RAF Snaith.

On the night of 22nd – 23rd May 1943 Harry took part in a heavy raid on Dortmund, Germany and his aircraft was shot down and the entire crew killed on the return leg over Holland.

Harry was flying in a Handley Page Halifax Mk-II Serial No HR836. The aircraft was built by Cricklewood and Radlett was brand new and on its first operational flight.

The Halifax came down from a height of 18,000 feet and crashed on marshland at Oegstgeest on the outskirts of Liden, Netherlands (map Ref N52' 11.436. E004' 28.945).

The raid on Dortmund was costly No 4 Group sent out 199 Halifax's that night and 18 failed to return. The Crew of HR836 was : Fl/Off. John Edward Rigby (pilot). Fl/Off. Thomas Herbert Green (bomb aimer). Fl/Sgt. Henry Grayham Freeman (navigator). Fl/Sgt. Merto Earl Zapfe (tail gunner). Sgt. Allister Milner Hood Black (flight engineer). Sgt. Aubrey Edgar Perrin Rochester (radio operator). Sgt. Harry John Gibbs. (Gunner).

In the Oegstgeest Protestant Church grounds there are 17 official war graves 7 of these headstones are for the crew of HR836. Although Harry was posted missing until his obituary was published in the Flight Magazine on 13 the April 1944 almost a month after his death. It later became known that Gibbs, Freeman and Rigby remain within the wreckage deep in the ground.

After the war The Dutch reclaimed the marshland and built a housing estate over the area and in 2013 the residents raised the money for a memorial and a monument was unveiled in the middle of what is now a road in the modern Haaswijk neighbourhood.

Halifax HR836 was shot down by German night fighter ace Heinz Vinke of II/Jg1 flying a Messerschmitt Bf110-G4. Vinke was himself shot down and killed on 26th February 1944 while on a search patrol over the Channel by Fl/Lt Raymond Cheval Lallamont and F/o. George Hardy flying Hawker Typhoons of No. 198 Squadron RAF. At the time of his death Vinke had destroyed a total of 54 allied bombers.

No. 51 Squadron RAF are still fly operations for NATO the with surveillance aircraft purchased from America, the Boeing RC-135W Airseeker, Joint Rivet.

No.51 made the news just two weeks ago in September 2023 while operating on a surveillance patrol in international air space over the Black Sea it was attacked by Two Russian Sukhoi SU-27s and had two air to air missiles fired at it. Luckily one failed to operate and the other missed.