

SQUADRON LEADER EDWARD HEARN

Born 20th March 1921 - Passed away 29th AUGUST 2015

Squadron Leader Edward Hearn, who has died aged 94, was the bomb aimer of a Lancaster that was severely damaged over the target and his courage resulted in the award of an immediate DFC; a Bar was added after he was shot down over occupied France.

On one night in June 1943, Hearn and his crew were tasked to attack Cologne. Over the target, their Lancaster was hit by anti-aircraft fire. The damage was extensive and the windscreen around the pilot's cabin was shattered, flying splinters blinding Sergeant Cecil Wilkie, the pilot, who managed to stay at the controls. Fragments of shrapnel also injured Hearn and another member of the crew. Despite his injuries, Hearn stayed at his post in the nose of the bomber and directed Wilkie to the aiming point before releasing the bombs.

Still unable to see, Wilkie flew the aircraft by touch, aided by the flight engineer. Hearn directed the two men to avoid searchlights and the heavy anti-aircraft fire in the area. Later, Wilkie regained limited vision in one eye and was able to fly the Lancaster back to its base near Lincoln.

Wilkie was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, second only to the Victoria Cross. Hearn received a DFC and two other members of the crew were decorated. The combined citation concluded: "In most harassing circumstances these members of aircraft crew displayed courage, fortitude and determination of the highest order."

Edward Harty Elliot Hearn was born at Folkestone on March 20 1921 . He left school at 14 and started working for the land agency office of Lord Radnor in Folkestone. He joined the RAF in January 1941 and began training as a pilot in Canada but after 200 hours he was re-trained as a navigator. In March 1943, he joined No 50 Squadron at Waddington near Lincoln where he flew as a bomb aimer. His arrival coincided with the opening of the Battle of the Ruhr, when Germany's industrial cities were attacked

After recovering from his wounds, Hearn attended a specialist bombing course before returning to No 50 Squadron as the bombing leader. He attacked Stettin and Berlin before Bomber Command turned its attention to targets in northern France in support of the build-up for the Allied landings in Normandy. Many of the targets were railway marshalling yards and other lines of communication in what was called the Transportation Plan, designed to prevent the transfer of German reinforcements to the beachhead area.

On August 7 1944 the Lancasters of No 50 Squadron were tasked with attacking a strong-point in the battle area. One of the bomb aimers reported sick. Hearn was not

scheduled to fly on the operation but, as the bombing leader, thought it his duty to volunteer to take the sick man's place.

Over the River Seine, a German night fighter shot down his Lancaster. Three members of the crew were killed but Hearn managed to bail out. He hid in a wood for three days before meeting a Frenchman who gave him shelter and put him in touch with members of the Resistance; they escorted him across the Seine, heading west in the hope of meeting the advancing Allies.

With the German army in retreat, the villagers of Marais-Vernier sheltered him until word of his position was passed to a British Army unit. Finally, on August 28, an officer in the airborne forces collected him and he was soon returned to England.

Hearn was awarded a Bar to his DFC for his "unflagging zeal, courageous bearing and coolness in face of the enemy". After service in India, he left the RAF in September 1946.

Post-war, he managed building projects and, after some years in the North of England, worked for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in France. Later he was a partner with a British firm in Brussels.

In 1947 he returned to France to thank those who had sheltered him. During the visit he met his future wife, Paule, and they were married in 1949. He was chairman of the RAF Escaping Society in Belgium and president of the Royal Air Forces Association branch in Brussels.

Edward Hearn is survived by his wife and their two sons.

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