

JOCK & BILLY WILSON

A remembrance presented at the OCs 2019 Service

In recent years, we have remembered an Old Cestrefeldian whose name is on the First World War Memorial board. This was particularly appropriate last year as we commemorated the centenary of that conflict.

This year, I would like to say a little about two brothers, whose names are on the Second World War board, Jock and Billy Wilson. For those who fell in the First World War, we have biographical details on our website, thanks to the research undertaken by OC Mike Briggs. At present, we do not have equivalent information for those who fell in the Second World War and this is perhaps a project which the Trust could undertake. However, in the case of Jock and Billy, I have been able to draw on a chapter dedicated to them by their brother Bob in his autobiography. We are very pleased that Bob, his wife and his brother are here with us today.

John, better known as Jock, and Billy were the sons of William and Catherine Wilson, both of Scottish parentage which was the reason that Bob was selected to play football for Scotland, the first English born player to do so. Their father was the Borough Engineer in Chesterfield and their mother became a magistrate. They lived on Ashgate Road in a house named "Threepwood" after the Scottish farm where their father was born. Jock was born in 1922 and Billy in 1923 and in due course they had a sister and three other brothers, of whom Bob is the youngest. Both brothers were given the second forename of Primrose, their mother's maiden name, as was Bob, who likens this to the words to the Johnny Cash song, "A Boy named Sue".

All the brothers attended Chesterfield School and shared the athletic prowess of their father, who Bob describes as "a good footballer, even better cricketer and a fabulous golfer". At the Chesterfield School sports day in 1940, Jock, Billy and brother Don were awarded a total of eight silver cups and fifteen plaques. The Cestrefeldian in April 1942 records that "Jock had the respect and admiration of all the boys in the school, his qualities as a leader were exceptional, and to quote the words of the Headmaster 'He was one of the best school captains one could wish to meet". Billy inherited the Primrose family's artistic streak, both with his sketching and handwriting and he was an accomplished musician on the piano and drums, once giving a solo concert at Chesterfield's Regal Cinema.

Jock's pilot's logbook shows that he first flew with an instructor on 10th December 1940, when he was 18 years and seven months old. He flew solo for the first time on his seventeenth day of training and after five months and seventy-six hours of flying time, Serjeant J. P. Wilson was given a piece of paper on his nineteenth birthday permitting him to fly the plane on which he had set his heart, the Vickers Supermarine Spitfire. He was posted to 65 (East India) Squadron based at Kirton-in-Lindsey, Lincolnshire, and on 12 August 1941 took part in his first operational mission, an offensive sweep over the Dutch coast at Rotterdam. Further operations followed, including acting as escorts to bombing missions, and he often flew three or four times a day with little respite. In September 1941 he was transferred to the 222 (Natal) Squadron at North Weald in Essex and had the bonus of flying a more up to date Spitfire VB

with better firepower. He was involved in "Rhubarb" missions, flying at low levels to shoot up targets of opportunity, escorting Blenheim bombers and fighter sweeps around France. In October 1941 he was given a few days' leave, when he visited home with two colleagues and during which his youngest brother, Bob, was born. He was also able to be with the whole family for Christmas, and again in early February 1942. On 27 February, he set off on a "Rhubarb" mission with another pilot. Both planes disappeared from radar over the French coast and, while the other pilot managed to bale out in the sea and was rescued, Jock's plane was hit by ack-ack fire and he crashed near the town of Marck. He died nine weeks before his twentieth birthday. Initially reported as missing in action, his parents hoped that he might have survived being shot down, but eventually accepted that this was not the case. It was not until after the war that the Air Ministry was able to confirm that he had been shot down in Marck. He had initially been buried there, but his remains were exhumed and re-interred in the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery at Pihen Les Guines, Pas de Calais. His final letter to his parents reassured them that if he was killed, he would die neither afraid nor unhappy and that no effort can be too great to preserve the absolute freedom of the country he loved.

Billy had enrolled in the Air Training Corps in Chesterfield only two weeks before his brother's death and, according to a friend, all he really had on his mind was to get into uniform and avenge the death of his brother, determined to follow his brother's brand of courage and leadership. He would have loved to also be a fighter pilot, but difficulty with rudimentary mathematics and a lack of time to become more proficient in this led to him directly becoming a rear gunner, otherwise known as a "Tail End Charlie", with Bomber Command. Training for this loneliest and most dangerous crew position was as standard and demanding as for a pilot and took a year. Crews had to be trained together so they could work as a team. He experienced five different aircraft, the last one of these being a Lancaster. Major operations were nearly always flown at night and Billy took part in seventeen operational flights over a number of different targets. It was a lonely, but vitally important role in the rear of the plane, one which required a head for heights. He flew from several bases, including RAF Oakington in Cambridgeshire from where his final mission took place on 16 December 1943. His plane was shot down by a German night fighter and crashed at Wilsum, a small German town close to the Dutch border. All seven crew members were listed as "missing presumed lost" and, although it subsequently transpired that two had survived and had been taken prisoner, Billy was not one of them, one of over 55,000 from Bomber Command who died during the course of the war. He is buried in Reichswald Forest War cemetery and there is a commemorative window to him and his brother in Rose Hill United Reform Church in Chesterfield. His parents received a letter from him written before his final flight and the RAF also returned to them his notebook in which they found this poem, which Bob reproduces in his book:

**Have no fear of me when I fly by night
For I may wander freely mid the stars
And taste the wild intoxication of heaven.
Have no fear for me in the wind and the rain
For I am one with the sky and racing clouds forever.
I know that in an hour begrudged of time**

**My spirit whirling through the sky may
Come to rest upon the edge of darkness.
But waking I shall discover the brightness of eternity.
So in the beauty of the Universe shall I take delight
And in destruction, death and sorrow
Shall find my freedom.**

Tony Hine
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