

65566 FLT/LT RICHARD JOHN CHAMBERLAIN, DFC

139 Squadron, RAF

Reported missing in action 13 October 1941

Flight Lieutenant (Flt/Lt) Chamberlain, the son of Frederick and Grace Dellawreathe Chamberlain of Crowmarsh Battle Farm, was a civil engineer for Oxfordshire County Council before the war. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in September 1941. The Times of 11 September reported:

On the morning of August 12th 1941, Blenheim bombers carried out simultaneous attacks on the power stations near Cologne. A strong force attacked the station at Knapsack, while a smaller force attacked two stations at Quadrath. These missions involved a flight of some 250 miles over enemy territory which was carried out at an altitude of 100 feet.

At Knapsack the target was accurately bombed and machine-gunned at between 200 and 800 feet, and at Quadrath both power stations were hit from chimney height. The turbine house at one of the two stations was left a mass of smoke and flames.

The success of this combined daylight raid and the co-ordination of many formations of aircraft depended largely on accurate timing throughout the flight. That complete success was achieved in spite of powerful opposition from enemy ground and air forces, is a high tribute to the calm courage and resolute determination displayed by the officers and airmen who participated, in various capacities, as leaders and members of the aircraft crews.

On the above mission, Flt/Lt Chamberlain was flying a Blenheim (V5826), which took off at 09.49 from Horsham St Faith, Norwich with two other crew, Sgt Jewell and Pilot Officer Crombie. The aircraft was badly damaged and Pilot Officer Crombie seriously wounded, but a successful landing was made back at base at 13.07. Three other aircraft failed to return.

At 12.15 on 13 October 1941, Flt/Lt Chamberlain, DFC took off from Horsham St Faith in a Blenheim bomber (Z7273), with his crew, Sgt Jewell and Sgt Beale, accompanied by five other aircraft. Two aircraft turned back shortly after take-off due to mechanical problems, while the remaining four rendezvoused with a fighter escort over Manston, en route to bomb the ship lift at Arques.

The target was bombed from 13,000 feet, but due to the intensity of the attacks by enemy fighters, all aircraft were damaged. In a secret combat report, filed by the surviving crews and not declassified until 1972, it was reported that a squadron of German ME 109s attacked the escorts, with many dogfights above and around the formation. The Blenheim flown by Flt/Lt Chamberlain was attacked by at least two ME 109s and sustained damage to its starboard engine which was seen by Pilot Officer Sullivan in the No.3 aircraft to be burning fiercely. He then watched as the crippled aircraft descended, noting that nobody baled out and that the aircraft appeared to be under control. He lost sight of it at about 7-8,000 feet.

The crew were reported as missing, and were subsequently confirmed as killed in action. The three remaining aircraft managed to return to St Faith (NA Ref. Air 27/960, Air 50/216/3).

The following obituary appeared in The Times on 6 June 1942:

Flt/Lt Richard John Chamberlain DFC previously reported as missing, now presumed killed in action, enlisted in the RAF Vol. Reserve, in which he was a Leading Aircraftsman when he received his commission in May 1941. He was awarded his DFC in September that year for gallantry displayed in flying operations against the enemy with No.139 Squadron.

Flt/Lt Chamberlain, aged 21 when he died, is buried in Boulogne Eastern Cemetery (plot 13; row C, coll. grave 1-3).