

WARWICK JIM

Squadron Leader

JAMES BROWN WARWICK, DFC

Royal Air Force No. 156612

James Brown Warwick was born in Belfast in 1921 at 986 Crumlin Road Ligonel. The house itself was called 'Avonlea'. His sister Elly lived there the rest of her life and I had the pleasure to meet Elly for the first time during the unveiling of a plaque in Steenberg in memory of Wing Commander G.P. Gibson VC, DSO*, DFC*, and Squadron Leader J.B. Warwick DFC, at 19 September 1974. My wife and I became very close friends with Elly and she told us a lot of her brother's life, as well of his career in the RAF.

Jim, as he was called, was educated at the Boys Model School which at that time was on the Cliftonville Road and at the Oranges Civil Service Academy near Queens University in Belfast. In late 1938, at the age of seventeen, he moved to London and in December of that year joined the Imperial Civil Service and worked in the offices of the Air Ministry in Berkeley Square House. While he was employed at the Air Ministry, he met another Ulsterman, Tony Smith, with whom he became very good friends. On the 13th September 1939, ten days after outbreak of the war Jim and Tony left Kings Cross railway station in a special train which took them to Harrogate, to which nearly all the occupants of their office had been evacuated for an indefinite period to escape the expected bombing of London.

When they arrived at Harrogate station they joined a queue and were eventually given a street map and a document which required a Mr. Stockman to provide them with bed and breakfast, evening meal and full board at the weekends for 21 shillings a week. It was a cosy three room council house where the Stockman family lived with their son and daughter. It meant that there was one double bed between them. They soon found out that due to the circumstances 'doubling up' was the norm and they stayed with the Stockman family until the end of January 1940, by which time they found a much better accommodation. In those days the expression 'good friends' had an entirely innocent meaning and before Jim and Tony went their separate ways they almost spent all their time together at the local pubs, cinema, theatre and at the weekends cycling long distances all over West Riding, they even enrolled at the same dancing school. Their extravagant lifestyle was financed by the allowances they received for as much as they were able to staying in the office for night duty as Air Raid Warden and first aid duty.

After Dunkirk, the production department of the Air Ministry was hived off to become the Ministry of Aircraft Production and at the end of July 1940 the Minister, Lord Beaverbrook decided that they were to return to London, where Jim and Tony worked at ICI House which was at those days on the embankment, near Lambeth Bridge. The Ministry also occupied the adjoining Thames House which had three floors underground, and when the bombing started, rooms in the lowest floor were turned into offices and accommodation for those who were taking turns on duty firemen, air raid wardens and first aid workers.

In March 1941, soon after St Patrick's Day, Jim joined the Royal Air Force and Tony met him on the 26th December 1941 just before he was being posted to Canada to start his navigational training. From Canada he was posted down to Florida for six months for advantaged navigational training.

Begin February 1943 he returned to England and was posted to 1661 Conversion Unit. On the 29th April 1943 Jim was posted to 49 Squadron which was based at Fiskerton in Lincolnshire and was equipped with the Lancaster.

Jim completed two operational tours with 49 Squadron.

A list of some of Jim's operations with 49 Squadron:

Date	Target	Remarks
13.6.43	Bocham	Navigation excellent.
15.6.43	Oberhausen	„SBC’ Hung up. B/A injured, rear turret fuselage, port tail plane, Perspex above B/A position, and starboard inner engine cowling damaged by fighter. Attack by Me 110, aircraft successfully engaged the enemy and saw the port engine burst into flames, side slip and disappeared into cloud below.
13.7.43	Turin	
25.7.43	Hamburg	
26.7.43	Essen	Early return, port outer and port inner both failed.
28.7.43	Hamburg	
30.7.43	Hamburg	
04.8.43		Promoted to Pilot Officer
10.8.43	Mannheim	
11.8.43	Nuremberg	
16.8.43	Milan	
18.8.43	Peenemunde	
31.8.43	Munchen Gladbach	
01.9.43	Berlin	
04.9.43	Berlin	
07.9.43	Munich	
13.9.43	Hannover	
18.9.43	Hannover	Shot up many night fighter interceptions.
02.10.43	Hegan	
03.10.43	Munich	
05.10.43	Frankfurt	
19.10.43	Hannover	
21.10.43	Leipzig	Early return, crew turned back at Standel with one engine failed and another failing.

19.11.43	Berlin	Navigation excellent. The turrets froze up.
04.11.43	Berlin	Early return. Mid upper turret completely iced up, rear turret 'sluggish' because of icing.

After having completed two tours of operations, Jim was on the 14th January 1944 posted to Number 1485 Bombing and Gunnery Flight at Bardney, and on the 4th February 1944 promoted to Flight Lieutenant. The next day, 5th February 1944, he was posted to 1661 Heavy Conversion Unit for instructional duties and on 15 February 1944 awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and also promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader. On the 25th August 1944 Jim was posted to 54 Base at Coningsby as Station Navigational Officer, this meant that he was now screened off operational duties.

THE FATEFUL DAY 19 SEPTEMBER 1944

Following the Dam Raids W/C Gibson was to carry out a number of non-operational duties in an advisory capacity, but one had the impression that he was desperate to return to operational flying. With this in view Gibson was attached to No. 54 Base, Coningsby on the 4th August 1944 as Operations Officer.

Sometime during that fateful 19th September W/C Gibson was told that the Navigator who was assigned to him, Pilot Officer D. Thomas, was not available. On hearing this Gibson was not pleased and immediately went to the Officer's Mess where he met Jim Warwick. How Jim was recruited by Gibson for this operation nobody knows. Gibson had in fact no proper authority over any individual aircrew at Coningsby nor at Woodhall Spa, but as Operations Officer he was Jim's immediate superior.

Whatever words were said between the two officers nobody knows but Jim Warwick had to fly with Gibson that night. The distinction between an officer's wish and a direct order can be very slender. It is known that Gibson has been informed that Warwick had never flown in a Mosquito before and that he in fact was the Station Navigation Officer and therefore non-operational.

In 1992 I had at Woodhall Spa a long conversation with Warrant officer Alan B. Webb who was one of the 627 Squadron Engineering Officers on the 19th September 1944 and he told me in detail what happened.

"I was given the task by Wing Commander Gibson to take Squadron Leader Jim Warwick out to their aircraft and to give him some instruction on the Mosquito cockpit. I had met Warwick for about ten minutes and did my best to show around the cockpit and explained him the routine operating the Fuel Cocks." Warwick told me that he had never before flown a Mosquito.

"During my instructions I was rudely more or less thrown out of the aircraft by Gibson and being a Warrant Officer I did not argue with a bad tempered Wing Commander".

"Wing Commander Gibson gave brakes OFF at 1940hrs and took off for his target Munchen-Gladbach and the adjacent town of Rheydt."

During a reunion of 617 Squadron in Holland in September 1994, I was introduced to Flight Lieutenant George Laing DFC, 97 Squadron Path Finder Force, who flew on that night as Illuminator.

George provided me with much information in regarding to the attack.

On arriving over the target they found it was shrouded in mist. After the first markers were dropped, Wing Commander Gibson dropped into the mist to check where they had fallen, and not being completely satisfied asked for a second lot of markers to be dropped. This was done and again Gibson dropped into the mist to check the positions of the markers, but during that time contact was temporary lost although after some time it was resumed. Twenty minutes after the last markers were dropped the last bombs went down on Munchen Gladbach and Rheydt, whereupon the boys went home.

But while returning home, over the town of Steenberg, tragedy was about to strike these two brave young men. Steenberg is a small rural town in the province of North Brabant. On the Van der Riet farm, the family was asleep. It was about midnight when they all awoke, startled by a terrible noise, followed by a dreadful bang. Leaping from their beds, they rushed to a window overlooking the fields in front of the farm, from which direction the noise seemed to have come, and some way off they could see a reddish glow and a tongue of flames. It was difficult to estimate the distance, due to a layer of ground fog over the pasture. They assumed that it had been a bomb, and after gazing for a while, recovering from the shock, and seeing the flames die down, they returned to bed.

The next morning, the farmer, Mr. Van der Riet, went out to start his daily work. He crossed to a small shed to collect his tools, and to his horror he found a human body slumped against the wall. Upon closer inspection he could see that it was in fact just a limbless trunk with the head hanging loosely. Utterly shocked, he rushed back to the farm to inform his wife and sons of his discovery, and they too were filled with horror at the gruesome sight. They deliberated on what to do, and Mr. Van der Riet decided to notify the Chief of Police of Steenberg, Mr. Van der Kassteele, who in turn informed the German Ortskommandant. The Ortskommandant immediately ordered one of his subordinates to seal off the road to the farm, the West Havendijk, and the crash site. At about 0700 hours on the morning of September 20, two Auxiliary Policemen, Tiny van Mechelen and Chris Stoffelen, were on their way to their observation post at South Steenberg, where they were assigned as lookouts for so-called JABOs, (low flying Allied fighter-bombers), They were instructed to warn traffic on the main road to Bergen op Zoom as soon they spotted a JABO in the sky. The JABOs attacked and destroyed any vehicle on the road, making no distinction between civil and military traffic.

As Van Mechelen and Stoffelen reached the area near the West Havendijk, they were stopped by German soldiers who were informing every passer-by that they were not allowed to go in the direction of the Van der Riet farm.

Tiny van Mechelen asked one of the soldiers what was going on and he was told that an aircraft had crashed near the farm.

Wearing the armband of Auxiliary Police on their sleeves, Van Mechelen and Stoffelen were given permission to go to the crash site. Upon arrival, it was obvious that there was not much left of the aircraft, the largest parts being an engine and a main wheel. Other than this, they could only see small fragments. Walking the field, they picked up some small pieces, and much to their astonishment, they realized that it must have been a wooden aircraft. Neither of them knew it was a Mosquito. There were about twelve German soldiers on the field, amongst them the Ortskommandant and the Army Chaplain, Ober Lieutenant Blok. Van Mechelen begged the Ortskommandant for permission to search for and collect any mortal remains. This was initially

refused, Van Mechelen being bluntly told that *terror flieger* (terror flyers) deserve no grave. After a long discussion with the Ortskommandant and with the support of the German Army Chaplain, he was finally given permission. From the shed they took a reed basket, into which they placed the body, and using a pronged pitchfork they carried the head. Van Mechelen carefully removed the ID plates, upon which the name J.B. Warwick and the number 156612 were clearly legible. These he slipped into his pocket.

In the meantime, Mr. Bakx, an inhabitant of Steenberg, joined them, and the three men went out into the field to search for the limbs. It is unknown how or why Mr. Bakx was given permission to join them.

After a lengthy search they eventually found two legs and two arms, and then realized that a second flyer had been in the aircraft when they came across part of a third foot. As the limbs were being placed in a further basket, Van Mechelen noticed a golden ring on one of the fingers. To prevent the Germans from taking it, he tried to remove it, but the hand was too swollen. Being a butcher by profession, he sliced off the finger with his penknife, and removed the ring which he also slipped into his pocket. Van Mechelen was butcher by profession. Upon returning to the field, they found a piece of skull, a severed and a leather portfolio.

By this time, the Ortskommandant was becoming restless and ordered them to stop the search, to leave the area and remove the remains to the mortuary in the Blauwstraat. Van Mechelen handed over to the Chief of Police, Mr. Van der Kasstele, the items which they found. A few days later, Mr. Van der Kasstele sent the ring, the portfolio and the ID plates to the Headquarters of the Netherlands Red Cross in The Hague, where they were later lost during an air-raid on Bezuiden Hout.

Meanwhile, preparations were being made for the funeral. The inhabitants of Steenberg planned to bury the remains with honour, with a party of Air Raid Wardens acting as pallbearers, and the coffin draped with the Netherlands National Flag. When the Ortskommandant heard of this, he was very upset and gave orders for the funeral to be executed *sofort* (immediately), or at least before 4pm.

The Deputy-Mayor, Mr. Chris Herbers, (the Nazi Mayor had already left Steenberg), went to see the Ortskommandant, who after some discussion, gave permission for a small party to accompany the coffin to the Roman Catholic Cemetery. No flag was allowed, nor any show of honour. As the funeral had to be conducted at such short notice, there was no coffin available and it was extremely difficult to get the materials to make one. However, Mr. G. van Loon, the Director of the sugar factory was able to provide the wood, and Mr. C. van Eekelen, the local carpenter, made the coffin. Mr. Kees Léautand, the coppersmith was asked to provide a metal plate with the engraving:

156612 J.B. WARWICK
AND UNKNOWN SOLDIER

This was fitted to the lid of the coffin. The nearby village of Halsteren provided a hearse, on which the coffin was carried to the cemetery, followed by the Deputy Mayor, Chris Herbers, the Town Clerk, J.L.M. Jurgens, Priest Verhoeven and Clergyman, J.K. van den Brink.

It was a very short, austere ceremony. Priest Verhoeven read the customary psalm, the *Profundis*, and Clergyman Van den Brink said the Lord's Prayer in English.

Around the time when the mortal remains were being committed to the earth, Jim Warwick's mother had just started her ironing, when the ill-fated telegram arrived. Intuitively she felt that the envelope held a terrible message. She sank down onto the stairs and with shaking hands tore it open. She read with deep dismay that her son was reported missing. With her head shaking in

disbelief and with tears streaming down her cheeks, she mumbled, 'No, no, it can't be true, no ... not my Jim.'

She had been sitting there for some time when the doorbell rang. It was the lady living opposite, who had seen a telegram being delivered, and knowing Jim flew as a navigator in the RAF, had come over to ask if everything was all right. She immediately realized that something awful had happened when she saw the desperate expression and the tears of Jim's mother. Upon reading the telegram herself, she tried to comfort Mrs. Warwick and encourage her by saying that it only stated that Jim was missing; it did not say that he had been killed. However, Jim's mother was inconsolable. She had already lost one son – true not due to an act of war, but as the result of an incurable illness. Now she was being deprived of her other son. And indeed, the lives of two young men, still on the threshold of their youth, had abruptly come to an end.

STEENBERGEN NOVEMBER 1944

Just behind the advancing Allied troops, the Identification Squad moved in and was told about the aircraft which had crashed less than two months previously.

In the meantime a wooden cross had been erected, upon which was painted:

156612 J.B. Warwick
and unknown soldier
19 - 9 - 1944

A civil servant informed the CO of the Identification Squad, Captain S.T. Watson, of the details of the crash and provided him with an engine number and the list of the few items found at the crash site, which were sent to the Red Cross HQ in The Hague.

Due to a profound investigation of Captain Watson, in February 1945 the name of Guy Gibson was added to the wooden cross and it was in the spring of that year that the inscription was altered to:

RAF
Wing Commander Guy Gibson VC, DSO, DFC
and 156612 Sqn/Ldr. J.B. Warwick
19 - 9 - 1944

Some years after the War the Commonwealth War Graves Commission replaced the wooden cross by two headstones.

TWO HEADSTONES... BROTHERLY SIDE BY SIDE