

A tribute by Eric Este, a friend from his school...



Wing Commander James Hardy Marks DSO and Bar, DFC

A remarkable story of leadership and heroism

Jim Marks was born in 1918 and came to live at 8, Knight Street, Sawbridgeworth in 1920. He went to Fawbert and Barnard School and then to Newport Free Grammar School (1930-36). A tall, fair-haired well built young man, he was an excellent sportsman with a quietly authoritative presence.

On leaving school in 1936, he obtained his civilian flying ticket and joined the Royal Air Force in 1937. He quickly was able to fly solo (April 37) but was thoroughly trained as a pilot at No. 10 Flying Training School, Tern Hill. On 24th May 1938 he, along with others, was selected for an Empire Day Display at Martlesham Heath; in January 1939 he was with those who gave a display to an Arab delegation and the top ranks of the service. It was always the best pilots that were chosen for displays.

When war was declared on 3rd September 1939 the initial policy was to drop leaflets on the Germans in the 'phoney war'. He was engaged in these raids but on 1st November he was instructed to fly to RAF Dishforth for an Inspection by King George VI and the Chief of Air Staff, Sir Cyril Newall and Sir Hugh Dowding.

He then resumed as either first or second pilot on leaflet raids. Although the war was 'phoney', the flak was not!

In January 1940, the policy changed and his aircraft was among the first to drop bombs on Germany at Sylt. He encountered heavy flak. He was then engaged on raids on places as far apart as Posen, Prague, Warsaw, Hanover, Trondheim (at 1000 ft) and Oslo, etc. etc. and he was mentioned in dispatches "*for gallant and distinguished services*". [\[CLICK HERE for details: Ref 1\].](#)

In May 1940, German forces advanced and he was out most nights. For example on May 20th whilst attacking bridges in France his aircraft suffered a direct hit which disabled the hydraulic system and he had to land without flaps – a difficult undertaking. The following night May 21st, he raided Cologne and returned on one engine. On May 23rd Quesney Cross-roads in France. May 25th Walcheren, May 27th Neuss railway junction and so on.

On June 1st, Flying Officer James Marks was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). "*He has shown tenacity of purpose, a high courage and thoroughness of planning and execution which is beyond praise*". [\[CLICK HERE for more details: Ref 2\].](#)

In June 1940, Jim Marks suggested that it could be helpful to use the fires at Rotterdam as a navigation reference point to achieve more accurate bombing of targets. The first attempt was a failure and, although frustrated, he persuaded his Squadron Commander that they should go out the following night and try the system again. This time it was a success, the targets illuminated by flares were successfully bombed. [\[CLICK HERE for more details: Ref 3\].](#)

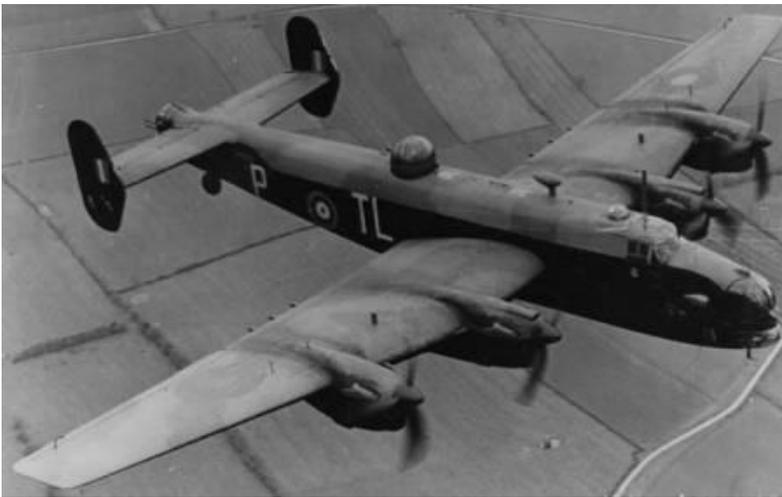
On 6th June, Mr Churchill instructed the Chief of Air Staff to be prepared to bomb Italy, if and when they declared war. On 8th June Italy declared war and on 10th June Jim Marks was involved in a raid on the Fiat Works in Turin. On the return flight over the Alps both engines failed – but his training enabled him to get them re-started. His log book merely says "*rather hectic*". Altogether he took part in 11 raids in June. There was then a respite during which he was assessed as "*exceptional as a heavy bomber pilot and navigator*".



In March 1941 he was engaged in operations again and bombed the Scharnholtz and the Gneisenau in dock at Brest. In April 1941 he attacked Emden and was attacked over the target. He was saved by bullets hitting the 500lb. bombs that he was carrying; one engine was put out of action and his Whitley's tail rudder was partly carried away by the M.E.110, which it is thought then crashed. Jim Marks ditched the bombs and coaxed the aircraft back to Bircham Newton. This was approximately 400 miles of which at least 50 were over enemy country. On the way a 500 lb bomb had to be released by hand. The Commander In Chief issued a personal commendation to all ranks for "*the courage, pertinacity and airmanship displayed by the crew*". Jim was mentioned in Dispatches for the second time. [\[CLICK HERE for more details: Ref 4\].](#)

In April 1941, he was promoted to Squadron Leader. Throughout May and June he was engaged on raids over Germany: the 1000 bomber raid on Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen again, Dusseldorf etc.

In July 1941 he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO). Wing Commander, DFC and DSO at the age of just 23 years. [\[CLICK HERE for more details: Ref 5\].](#)



He then moved temporarily to No. 35 Squadron and trained to fly Halifax bombers, again assessed for flying and navigation as "*exceptional*".

[\[CLICK HERE for a link to the official website for the Squadron\]](#)

He bombed Berlin and the battleships in Brest, this raid being in daylight. In March 1942 he was promoted to Wing Commander and made Squadron Commander.

On 30th March he led the squadron on an attack on the Tirpitz. Although the ship was heavily defended, he went in at 200 feet (his log says 150 feet). He repeated the attack on 27/28th April and was awarded the Bar to his DSO. [\[CLICK HERE for more details: Ref 6\].](#)

Both King George VI and Winston Churchill came to inspect his Squadron.



There were then raids on Germany (Essen, Hamburg etc.). Wing Commander Marks, now Station Commander and Squadron Commander, considered that the front turret gun on the Hurricane was a hindrance and so he had it removed from his aircraft and replaced by a Perspex section. The Air Vice Marshall was impressed and he joined a party taking the aircraft to Handley-Page at Radlett. The modification was accepted and incorporated in Halifaxes from October 1942.

His log says that he was awarded a Bar to his DFC on August 15th, but official records do not confirm this. If such an award was contemplated, it may have been for the idea of a Pathfinder Force. In June 1942 the idea for helping bombers find their target more easily was developed to become the Pathfinder Force. He and his Squadron and two other Squadrons formed the Force and Wing Commander Marks led his Squadron on the first Pathfinder raid which was on Flensburg.

On 19th September, when he was about to be made Group Captain, he stepped in at the last moment to take over a pilot's place on a raid attacking Saarbrücken. On the returning flight, the plane was shot down; although he kept the plane in the air for three of his crew to parachute into captivity, he was killed.

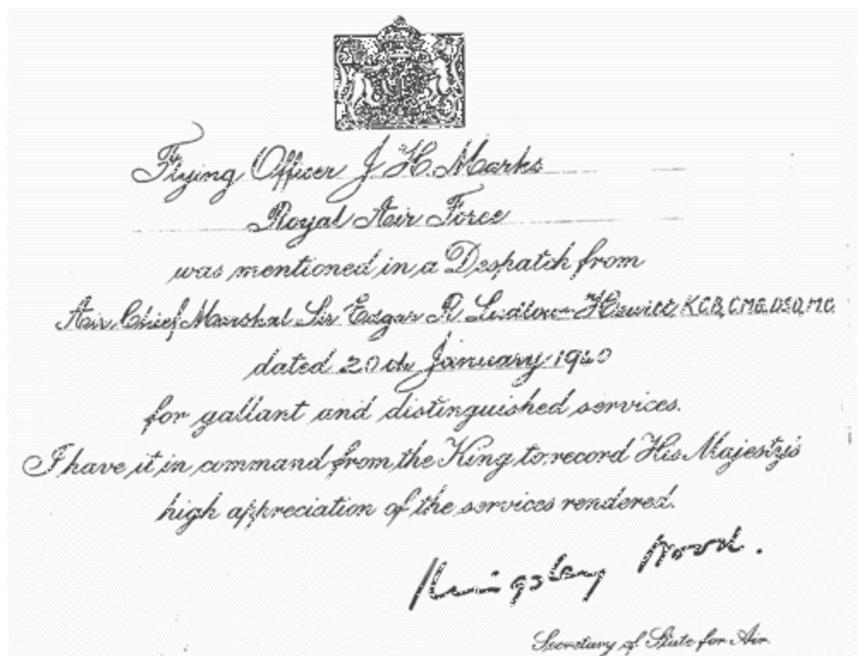
On the 50th Anniversary (19th September 1992) a memorial to him and his crew was unveiled at Blesme in France, where the plane had crashed. The photograph shows the Mayor and the sole living survivor, the Flight Engineer, Mr W.G. Higgs (Bill) at the unveiling ceremony.

There was a memorial service and the representatives and the crowd were led by a band from the Memorial to the Church and then on to a Memorial Dinner in the Town Hall.



Twelve years later, on 19th September 2004, Jim Marks' life was again celebrated with the unveiling of a plaque in Sawbridgeworth's Memorial Hall by his sister, Mrs Joan Walters. The event, was organised by the Rotary Club, The Memorial Hall Trustees, The Air Training Corps and the Town Council.





[Click here to return to text](#)

Reference 2 (transcript):

Recommendation for Honours & Awards

Christian names: JAMES HARDY Surname: MARKS

Rank: Flying Officer Official: 39670

Command or Group: No. 4 Group Unit: No 77 Squadron

Give particulars of the meritorious service for which the recommendation is made, including the date and place.

On the night of 30/31 May, 1940, he was detailed to attack an important bridge. Although being heavily fired at, he carried out three runs at 1000 feet.

On the night 23/24 May, 1940, he was detailed to attack a cross roads. Owing to cloud he could not see the ground. He therefore waited over his target for an hour and a half for the moon to come out and enable him to carry out his task more accurately.

On the night 25/26 May, 1940, he was detailed to attack a certain cross roads. Finding the weather over his target to be too bad to enable him to distinguish his point of aim, he flew west, saw finer weather coming, so waited one and a half hours in the neighbourhood of his target in order to ensure accurate results.

He has now completed 22 operational flights. Both as a second pilot, and since he has been a Captain, he has shown a tenacity of purpose, a courage and thoroughness of planning and execution which is beyond praise. As Captain of aircraft he has not only led his crew in the air but has applied himself to their training on the ground with the same thoroughness that has characterized his work in the air.

State what recognition is recommended: award of D.F.C.

State appointment held or how employed: Captain of aircraft

Signature of Commanding Officer: (signed by J Hunter) Rank: Group Captain

Date: (unclear) Unit: (unclear) Station: DRIFFIELD

Covering remarks of Air Officer commanding.

Strongly Recommended

Signature of Air Officer Commanding (signed by A Cunningham) Air Commodore.

[Click here to return to text](#)

Reference 3 (transcript):

PLAYERS VERSUS GENTLEMEN

Group Captain Hamish Mahaddie recalls that his first experience of any disciplined process of target finding was in June 1940 when serving as a pilot in 77 Squadron on Whitleys. Flying Officer Jimmy Marks, later to lose his life when a Wing Commander and CO of 35 Squadron, suggested that the great fires still burning from the Luftwaffe's attack on Rotterdam might be used as elementary signposts for night bomber aircraft attacking targets deeper into continental Europe. He proposed a carefully timed flight commencing over the Rotterdam blaze and ending with the release of flares to pinpoint the target and allow for a reasonable concentration of bombing. All the crews agreed that this was a splendid idea and in the ideal conditions of an early summer night, facing little or no opposition, they set out to put it into effect.

Each aircraft in the elongated stream of 12 or so thought they did precisely what had been agreed, but not one single crew member saw any of the flares dropped by their squadron colleagues and accordingly dropped their bombs on an unscientific best-estimate of the target's location. Marks was frustrated but undismayed and secured his squadron commander's agreement for a repeat performance the following night. This time only four aircraft participated with the four most experienced navigators and great care was taken to re-calibrate the Whitleys' airspeed indicators and re-swung their compasses. Stop-watches were used to time the flight in from the still-burning Rotterdam fires, and at the end of the timed run the agreed signals of Very lights and flares were visible to all from aircraft which were within a three-mile radius of one another. One flare clearly illuminated the target, a concentration of armoured vehicles and troops in a distinctive area of woodland, and more flares were dropped before bombing began. Mahaddie believes that an effective attack resulted, proving the value of disciplined navigational skills exercised by a small number of experienced practitioners.

[Click here to return to text](#)

Reference 4 (transcript):

COMMAND ROUTINE ORDERS BY AIR MARSHALL SIR RICHARD E.C. PIERSE, K.C.G., D.S.O., A.F.C. PART I. ADMINISTRATIVE

A.23. Notable War Services.

The Commander-in-Chief desires to bring to the notice of all ranks in the Command the courage, pertinacity and airmanship displayed by the crew of a Whitley aircraft which was detailed to bomb docks and shipping at Emden on the night of 7th/9th April, 1941.

The Captain of the aircraft, No. 39670, Squadron Leader J.H. Marks, D.F.O., was just about to bomb when he was attacked from the rear by a night fighter. The first burst hit the starboard engine, which stopped, thereby immobilising the rear turret. A second attack from below would have had far more serious consequences but for the protection afforded by the 500 lb. bombs. On its final attack from head on, the night fighter approached so close that it is presumed it must have struck the rudder of the Whitley with its wing. Half of the rudder was severed completely, and when last seen the fighter was banking over steeply in a dive as though one wing was damaged.

At this time, in spite of jettisoning bombs, the aircraft had lost height to 700 feet, and the Captain decided to make for Norfolk., and at this height, limped across some 50 miles of hostile and occupied territory. The Air observer, No. 745646 Sergeant Southon, F.A., pulled up the floor boards and discovered one 500 lb. bomb which had not dropped. This he released by hand, after which the aircraft climbed gradually to 1,000 ft. and a successful landing was made at Bircham Newton.

It is considered that the courage and behaviour of the whole crew during this flight was excellent.

The remaining members of the crew were:-

2nd Pilot – 9033910 Sgt. Woods. J.
W/T. Op. – 967329 Sgt. Collis. A.P.

Rear Gnr. – 967309 Sgt. Weir. W.D.

[Click here to return to text](#)

Reference 5 (transcript):

Recommendation for Honours & Awards

Christian names: JAMES HARDY Surname: MARKS

Rank: Flying Officer Official: 39670

Command or Group: No. 4 Group (Bomber Command) Unit: No 58 Squadron

Total hours flown on operations: 318.55

Number of sorties of carried out: 52

Recognition for which recommended: Distinguished Service Order

Appointment held: Flight Commander (Flying)

Particulars of meritorious service:

This Officer has completed a further 27 operational sorties since being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He has continued to show great courage, resourcefulness and unflinching devotion to duty.

As a Flight Commander, his powers of leadership, enthusiasm and ability to carry out his job under any conditions, have been an inspiration to all whom he has come in contact.

Date 21. 7. 41 Signature (signed by AM Clark) Rank: Wing Commander Unit: No 58 Squadron

Covering remarks by Station Commander

I cannot speak too highly of this young officer and I heartily endorse every word his Squadron Leader says. A splendid type of officer in every way. He has richly deserved the award of the Distinguished Service Order.

Date 23rd July, 1941 Signature (signed by ??WCurtis) Rank: Group Captain, Commanding Air Force Station, Linton-on-Ouse, Yorks

Covering remarks of Air or other Officer Commanding

Strongly recommended for award of the D.S.O.

Date: 31/7/41 Signature (signed by ?N. ?ar??) Rank: Commanding No 4 Group

[Click here to return to text](#)

Reference 6 (transcript):

RECOMMENDATION FOR HONOURS & AWARDS

Christian names: JAMES HARDY Surname: MARKS

Rank: A/Wing Commander Official: 39670

Command or Group: No. 4 Group (Bomber Command) Unit: No 35 Squadron

Total hours flown on operations: 389

Number of sorties of carried out: 56

Recognition for which recommended: 1st Bar to the Distinguished Flying Cross ? DSO

Appointment held: Squadron Commander

Particulars of meritorious service:

This Officer led his Squadron on a bombing raid on the German battleship "TIRPITZ" on the 27th/28th April 1942 in addition to having taken part in a similar attack the previous month.

The enemy had concentrated heavy defences over the target area and this was well known to this officer, but despite this fact he came down to about 200 feet and flew through the fiercest of defences to press home his attack, releasing his

bombs on the ship or at any rate close to the ship.

In addition to his own magnificent example of courage, his superb leadership, sense of duty, enthusiasm, cheerfulness and determination which he exhibited at all times were largely responsible for the gallant way in which the other crews of his Squadron went in to the attack.

For this I very strongly recommend that he be awarded immediately the First Bar to his Distinguished Flying cross.

This officer received his D.F.C. after completing 37 sorties and 249 operational hours, and his D.S.O. after 43 sorties and 291 operational hours.

Date 21st May 1942 Signature (signed by ??WCurtis) Rank: Group Captain, Commanding Air Force Station, Linton-on-Ouse, Yorks

Covering remarks by Station Commander

(blank)

Covering remarks of Air Officer Commanding

A born leader who by his own personal example sets a high standard of courage and skill on operations. Strongly recommended for a First Bar to his Distinguished Service Order.

[Click here to return to text](#)

[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO start of article on Wing Commander James Hardy Marks DSO and Bar, DFC and Bar](#)

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