Robert Bell





Photo of cwgc courtesy of Bill Berry

Leading Aircraftman Robert Bell, 1594318, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve 78 Squadron Code EY Died 5 September 1945 Buried Mazarques War Cemetery Marseilles, France

Robert Bell was born on the 14th April 1925, the eldest child of four born to Henry (Harry) Bell and Hilda Clough who married at St. Paul's Church, Hanging Heaton on the 14th February 1925. Henry, a labourer aged 23 years gave his address as Horbury and Hilda, aged 21 years was from Hanging Heaton. In 1911 Henry Bell was living with his parents and six siblings at Mitchell's Yard, Horbury. All of the children were born in Horbury except the youngest who was born in Ossett. In 1911 Hilda was living with her parents on Peel Street, Batley.

By 1939 Henry and Hilda had moved to 20, The Green, Ossett, just two doors away from Dr. Stephen Brandon Stoker at Sowood House. Henry and Hilda were living with their three children, two of whom were of school age. Another name is redacted and is likely to be Cyril Bell. A fourth child was born in 1943. Cyril's father Henry was working as a blanket raiser in a local mill and his mother, Hilda, had taken temporary work as a weaver. The family moved to Hanging Heaton in the early 1940s and were living there at the time of son Robert's death.

On the 5th September 1945, 78 Squadron suffered its worst aircraft accident to date when Dakota KP235 crashed on take-off from Istres in France in the process of transferring to Egypt. All four crew were killed (two were brothers, Flying Officers Arthur and Guy Venables). 78 Squadron had recently re-equipped from Handley Page Hastings to Douglas C-47 Dakotas.

Seventeen men were killed, four of them air crew and 13 ground crew who were being transported to the Middle East. 15 died instantly. One, Corporal Joseph Hutchinson, died the next day. All are buried at Mazargues War Cemetery in Marseilles. Seven men escaped injured. The fate of one passenger is still unknown.

The aircraft was taking off at night in poor visibility and a thick mist beyond the end of the runway, the presence of which Flying Control did not warn the pilot. It is thought that the pilot saw the bank of mist ahead and, thinking it to be high ground, pulled the nose of the aircraft up and stalled. With insufficient height to recover, the aircraft struck the ground and was destroyed.

The *"Ossett Observer"* carried this report of Robert Bell's death:

"Robert (Bob) Bell, RAFVR, who as we announced last week, was one of 15 killed when an RAF Dakota on its way to SEAC Air Command, crashed near Marseilles.

Bell was the son of Mr. and Mrs. Henry Bell, who formerly lived at The Green, Ossett and about four years ago removed to Hanging Heaton. He was educated at Southdale School, and worked for a time at the Maypole Dairy Shop, Station Road, Ossett. He afterwards worked for G. and J. Stubley, Batley, joining up two years and four months ago."

Leading Aircraftman Robert Bell, son of Henry and Hilda Bell, of Hanging Heaton, Batley, Yorkshire, died aged 20 years on the 5th September 1945 and is remembered at Plot 11. Row A. Grave 12 in Mazargues War Cemetery, Marseilles, France. The inscription reads on the grave reads: *"In a beautiful garden of memories, dear son, we walk with you every day. R.I.P.*"

Robert is remembered with Honour at the Royal Air Forces Association Club, Batley, Batley War Memorial and Ossett War Memorial in 2018 after research by Ossett.net.



Researched with kind thanks by Ossett.net

References:

1. *"Ossett Observer"*, 22nd September 1945.

2. Commonwealth War Graves Commission web site