

Lionel Fairfax Furner JOHNS (1919 – 1943)



42298 Sergeant
L.F.F. JOHNS
Navigator
Royal N.Z. Air Force
90 Squadron
30th May 1943
Age 23



Sergeant-Navigator L. Johns, of Auckland, killed on active service.

Photo: NZ Weekly News 1943
(with permission of RNZAF Museum, Christchurch)

Lionel Fairfax Furner Johns was born on 25th August 1919, the only child of Leslie Lionel Johns and his wife Edith Maud nee Furner of New Lynn, Auckland, New Zealand, who were born and married in London.

Lionel attended New Lynn and Mount Albert Grammar Schools and on completing his education, he became an accountant employed by the British General Electric Company in Auckland. He was well known in musical circles and enjoyed playing chess.

He joined the Initial Training Wing at RNZAF Levin as an Air Observer under training on 25th January 1942. RNZAF Levin was opened on 20th October 1939 as an Initial Training School. On 7th March 1942, it had units for both Fighter and Bomber Training. Lionel embarked for advanced training in Canada on 5th April 1942, and was attached to the RCAF from 30th April. From May – September 1942, Lionel was at No 4 Air Observers School in London, Ontario. On 22nd June, he was re-mustered as an Air Navigator under training when he earned an Air Observers badge.

On completing this training, he was attached to the RAF as a sergeant embarking for the UK on 25th September 1942. On his arrival he was based firstly at the No 9 (Observer) Advanced Flying Unit in Penhros, Caernarvonshire, Wales prior to joining the No 11 Operational Training Unit based at RAF Westcott in Buckinghamshire. Here Lionel would have been flying Wellingtons.

On 2nd May 1943, Lionel joined 90 Squadron RAF which was equipped with Short Stirling Bombers and was, at the time, based at RAF Ridgewell, an airfield which was opened in December 1942 as a satellite of RAF Stradishall.

Ridgewell airfield was an early example of stations completed to Class A heavy bomber airfield design for the RAF. It had three intersecting runways each 6,500 ft in length, thirty-six hardstands, two T-2 hangars and accommodation for 2,900 men in temporary buildings.



RAF Ridgewell

On Saturday 29th / Sunday 30th May 1943, Stirling aircraft from 90 Squadron took part in a raid on Wuppertal, Germany. In total 719 aircraft took part in this raid and of these 36 were lost.

Stirling I EF397/K took off at 2310 captained by Plt Off E A Norton, RAF with Lionel on-board. It was their first operation. On return to England the bomber was diverted to RAF Stradishall, Suffolk because the penultimate aircraft to land at RAF Ridgewell had burst a tyre and was obstructing the runway.



The Stirling flew over Stradishall, (photo left) the highest point in Suffolk, where the cloud base was down to about 500 feet. At 200 feet it then proceeded to make a circuit, but on turning back towards the airfield at 0440 it struck the ground with its port wing tip and crashed 2 miles north of the airfield. Of the seven crew, only the rear gunner survived, injured.

NZ42298 Sgt Lionel Fairfax Furner Johns, RNZAF, Navigator, NZ422656 Flight Off, Air Bomber John Vernon Gustofson, RNZAF (the only NZ'ers on that flight), together with Sgt George Arthur Francis Johnston (age 23) of Dublin, Ireland were buried in Haverhill Cemetery, Suffolk, while the other three airmen who died were all returned to their home towns in the UK for burial.

The crew of Stirling I EF397/K were:

Pilot Officer 129558 Edward Norton

Flight Engineer - Sergeant 1340748 Edward George Brooke - RAFVR, 90 Squadron RAF.
Buried in Cadder Cemetery, Lanarkshire, Scotland.

Navigator - Sergeant 42298 Lionel Fairfax Furner Johns - RNZAF, 90 Squadron RAF.
Buried in Haverhill Cemetery, Suffolk.

Air Bomber - Flying Officer 422656 John Vernon Gustofson - RNZAF, 90 Squadron RAF.
Buried in Haverhill Cemetery, Suffolk.

Wireless Op / Air Gunner - Sergeant 1128694 William Christie Beck - RAFVR, 90 Squadron RAF.
Buried in Harton Cemetery, South Shields, Co Durham.

Air Gunner - Sergeant 1485790 George Arthur Francis Johnston - RAFVR, 90 Squadron RAF.
(originally from Dublin) Buried in Haverhill Cemetery, Suffolk.

Sergeant 1474536 John Olav Bradshaw RAFVR. He was injured in the crash. Sergeant Bradshaw returned to flying duties but was killed over Belgium on 14th July 1943 whilst still operational with 90 Squadron. He was buried in Heverlee War Cemetery, Belgium.

Reported killed on active service, Sergeant-Navigator **Lionel Johns** was the only son of Mr. and Mrs. L. L. **Johns**, of Portage Road, New Lynn, and was 23. He was educated at the New Lynn and Mount Albert Grammar Schools and before joining the Air Force was an accountant. He was well known in musical circles and was a champion chess player.

The New Zealand Herald reported the death of Lionel on 3rd August 1943.

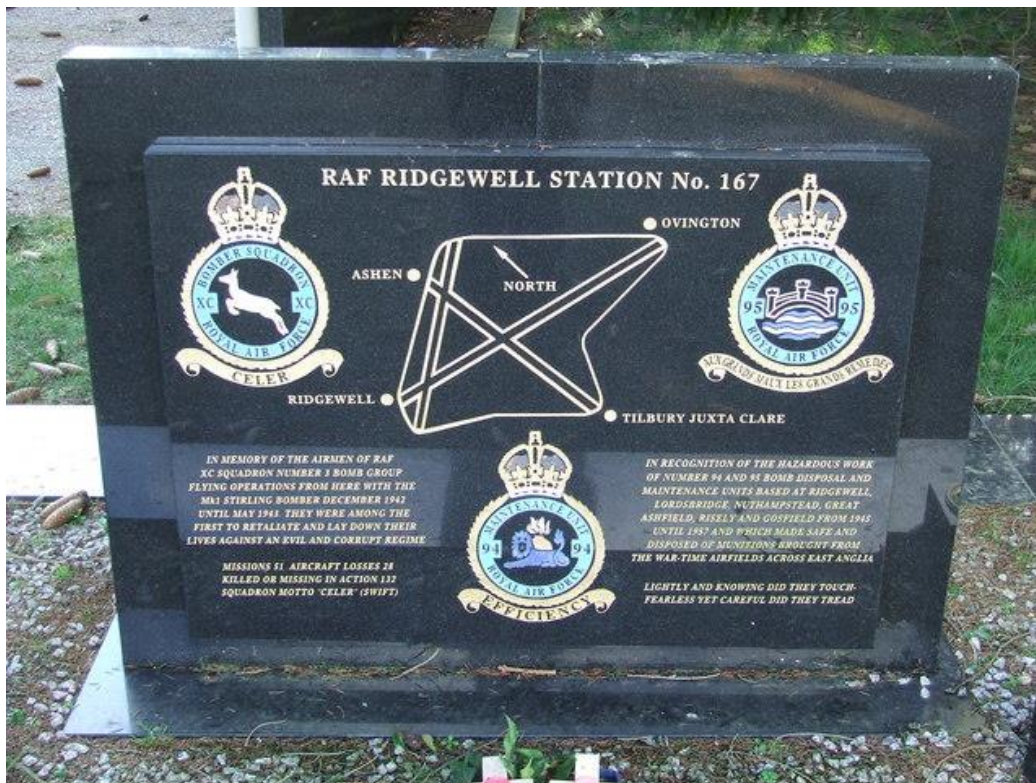
On the anniversary of his death the following year his parents placed the following memorial in the Auckland Star.

JOHNS, Flight-Sergeant-Navigator **Lionel Fairfax Furner**, R N Z. A F., 90th Squadron, R A F.—In loving memory of the dearly loved, devoted only child of Leslie and Edith, killed in aircraft crash at Stradishall, Suffolk, England, after returning from a successful raid on Wuppertal, the Ruhr, Germany, on Sunday May 30, 1943; aged 23 years.

He is staying in England,
The place of his ancestors,
So far from New Zealand,
The homeland he loved.

We also pay a tribute to the memory of the other gallant gentlemen of our son's crew (Stirling bomber), who died with him. Interred R A F Cemetery, Haverhill, Cambridge, England. Inserted by Mr. and Mrs. **Johns**, Portage Road, New Lynn

The day after the raid, 90 squadron relocated at RAF Wrattling Common where it remained until 13th October 1943. From 30th June 1943, the airfield at Ridgewell was used by the USAAF 381st Bombardment Group (Heavy), arriving from Pueblo AAB, Colorado.



There is a memorial to the airmen of RAF XC (90) Squadron located on the site of the USAAF airfield hospital, where a small museum is also located.



Haverhill Rocks UK placed a painted poppy stone on Lionel F F Johns headstone in Haverhill Cemetery.

In 1911 Lionel's father, Leslie Johns was just 16 and living in East Dulwich with his parents, two brothers and a sister. He was working as a nursery man which is possibly when he developed an interest in horticulture. He married Edith Maud Furner in 1916 and shortly afterwards they emigrated to Auckland.

The following information is credited to Andrew Gibson, who researched the Lionel Johns Memorial Cup for the Auckland Rose Society bi-monthly magazine.

Lionel's father, Leslie Johns, is listed as being a member of the Auckland Rose Society when it was formed in 1945.

In 1957 Lionel's parents presented the Lionel Johns Memorial Cup to the Society.

Auckland Rose Society

Flt.Nav. Lionel Fairfax Furner Johns

RNZAF RAF

Killed on operations

May 30th 1943

Photo: Sheree Gare



It was agreed that it would be awarded for 'Champion Bloom of the Show' (now known as the 'Queen of the Show'). In 1968 a new cup, was presented to the Society which replaced the Lionel Johns Memorial Cup in that category and it is now awarded for the 'Champion Exhibition Bloom of the show'. The current holder of the cup is Sheree Gare of Ohaupo, Waikato, who won it for an outstanding example of 'Racy Lady'.

During the 1959 Convention there was a visit to the Johns garden in Portage Road, New Lynn, which was described in society records with the comment, 'one could describe it as a memorial garden', no doubt to their son.

The Auckland Museum holds a collection, donated by Lionel's parents, of letters from the period he was on active service. Lionel was a prolific letter writer and there are just over 100 letters in the collection written by both Lionel and his parents.

In a letter written six days before his death he describes spending time on leave with his girlfriend and their visit to Kew Gardens, the description of which he concludes to his parents with the comment '...Kew Gardens has nothing on our place'!

Not long before he died, Lionel had posted gardening books home to his parents. The letters also mention the family garden a lot, describing a large garden with numerous vegetables & flower plantings, along with what sounds like a fairly decent sized oak tree.