

Sergeant William John (Bill) VICK

Service number 610957

Royal Air Force

Died on 30 October 1942, aged 24

Bill was born in South Wales and moved to Wells with his family in 1929. He worked for Willmott's Transport and St Cuthbert's Paper Mill. In 1938, he joined the RAF and served with 501 Squadron at RAF Filton and RAF Tangmere. He took part in the Battle of France in 1940 as an anti-aircraft gunner. After returning to the UK, he transferred to an RAF Maintenance Unit. He was sent home to Wells on sick leave and on his 24th birthday was taken to Bath Military Hospital where he subsequently died.



Airmen crowd the deck of a steam packet during the evacuation of British forces from Brest

Photograph by Mr S.A. Devon, RAF official photographer, © IWM C 1742

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205211894>

Bill's birth was registered in Bedwellty, an old urban district of Monmouthshire, in the third quarter of 1918. He was the son of George Henry Vick and Jane née Morgan, and was born in September or October 1918.

The family's life before coming to Wells was told in the *Wells Journal* of 5 May 1961, on the occasion of his parent's golden wedding anniversary:

[Bill's parents] were married at Gelligaer Parish Church, Glamorgan, on May 3rd, 1911. Before they were married Mr. and Mrs. Vick lived next door to each other in the mining town of Bargoed, in the Rhymney Valley. They were married from there and lived there [in the valley] until they moved to Wells in 1929. Mr. Vick told our reporter that he started work at the age of 12 in a colliery in the Forest of Dean. When he was 14 his family moved to Bargoed and he took up employment at the pit there. Mr. Vick recalled that when he started work he was paid 3/- a day for an 8-hour day. He had to walk four miles there and back. Owing to illness, Mr. Vick had to leave the pit and in 1929 moved to Wells where he worked for Mr. George Willmott [a haulage contractor and motor engineer on Princes Road] until his retirement in 1955.

Prior to coming to Wells, the family lived at 61, Pencoed Avenue, Pengam,¹ which, like Gelligaer and Bargoed, is about 8 miles south east of Merthyr Tydfil. After leaving Wales, they first lived in

¹ A Garden Suburb development carried out in co-operation with the local mining union.

Haydon, which is just outside of Wells, past the Horringtons, on the old Bath Road. In 1931 the family were living at 25, St Thomas Street, but they moved to 14, Burcott Road in late 1938, and were still there in 1961 when George and Jane celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

When they came to Wells in 1929, William had two elder brothers, George and Albert, and four sisters, Violet, Myra, Hilda and Lilian. In 1931, his sister Sylvia was born, and in 1936, Violet, aged 14, died after being ill for some time.

The story of William's early life was given in the *Wells Journal* of 6 November 1942:

On leaving school Mr. Vick entered the employ of Mr. G. Willmott [where his father worked] and was later employed at the St. Cuthbert's Paper Works. He left the Mill in 1938 to join the R.A.F. After completing his early training in this part of the country he was one of eight picked from several hundred men to form the 501st Bomber Squadron. As a gunner he served in France with the R.A.F. and he remained in that country until just before the capitulation, when he escaped from Brest. He was then transferred to the motor transport section of the R.A.F. and rose to the rank of Sergeant.

501 (County of Gloucester) Squadron was founded in 1929 as part of RAF Bomber Command, and was based at RAF Filton in Bristol. When Bill was posted to it in 1938, it was flying two-seater Hawker Hind bi-planes. In December 1938, the squadron became a fighter squadron, and received its first Hawker Hurricane on 8 March 1939.

Soon after the outbreak of the war, 501 Squadron moved to RAF Tangmere in West Sussex, just north of Bognor Regis. On 11 May 1940, the day after the start of the German invasion of France and the Low Countries, the squadron flew to Betheniville in France; the pilots in their Hurricanes and ground staff in civil and military transport aircraft. Bill's role in France was as an anti-aircraft gunner protecting the airfields. During the next month they moved westward, providing air cover during the retreat of the allied forces to Brittany, and ended up in Dinard on 16 June.

From Dinard, half of the squadron sailed back from St Malo on the 18th, arriving in Southampton the next day, and the rest, including the aircraft, returned via Jersey. So why Bill came back via Brest is a mystery, but it was one of the major evacuation ports especially for RAF ground personnel so perhaps he had become separated from his squadron.

Bill married Vera Smith at Christmas 1941, in Warrington, Lancashire. In September 1939, Vera had been living with her parents at 33, Howard Street, Warrington, and was working as a box mender. After they married, Vera moved to Wells and worked for the Wells and District Co-operative Society.

Bill's death was reported in the *Wells Journal* on 6 November 1942:

He was taken ill about eight weeks ago and was sent home on sick leave. He did not recover and on his 24th birthday he was removed to Bath Military Hospital where he passed away on Friday last [30 October] ... The first part of the funeral service was held in St. Cuthbert's Church ... The coffin, which was covered with the Union Jack, was conveyed to Wells on an R.A.F. lorry and was carried into church by six sergeants. A Flt.-Lieut. of the R.A.F. and the Q.M.S. of the Bath Military Hospital also attended, with Aircraftman Walker, his pal from the Station where he was serving ... [Wreaths were sent] from Officers and Men of the 16th Maintenance Unit, R.A.F. Station, from the Sergeants Mess of the same station, and from His Comrades and Pals of R.T. Section.

It seems likely that Bill was serving with the 16th Maintenance Unit based at RAF Stafford. However, the following week the *Wells Journal* said that the wreath was from the 6th Maintenance Unit, which was based at RAF Brize Norton; one or the other must be a misprint.

Bill is buried in Wells Cemetery in Section 3, Row P, Grave 30, along with his parents and his sister, Sylvia. He is also remembered on the rolls of honour at Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

After Bill's death, Vera went back to Warrington, and on 25 November 1943 she married Denis Healy there.

Bill's brother Albert served in Burma with 136 Field Regiment, Royal Artillery.