

Squadron Leader **Herbert PILLING** AFC

29178 - 107 Squadron Royal Air Force

30 June 1940



Herbert Pilling was born on 8 December 1907, the son of George Herbert Pilling, secretary to a salesman of a cotton spinning company, and his wife Alice. The family lived in King Street and then Drake Street in Rochdale, Lancashire.

Herbert attended King William's College on the Isle of Man, leaving in 1923¹. It seems that he initially followed his father into the business as a raw cotton salesman, living at Stone Lea, Manchester Road in Rochdale, but a few years later he joined the Royal Air Force, being commissioned therein in 1930 (see Photograph 1²).

He served in No 1 (Fighter) Squadron flying Hawker Furies, and in September 1938, after further flying training and promotion, he was posted to 24 Squadron RAF, a 'communication' squadron based at RAF Hendon³.

At Hendon, he was put in charge of 'A' flight and flew a variety of aircraft, particularly on VIP duty. It is suggested that he carried Neville Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, Paul Reynaud⁴ and Édouard Daladier⁵ to and from London and Paris for meetings of the Supreme Allied War Council, whose purpose it was to agree on the co-ordination of British and French war production in the early months of the Second World War.



In late 1935, Herbert had married Vera, but her lineage has not been absolutely identified⁶. Neither has the reason why the couple moved to West Hampshire. Nevertheless, they were living at Trentham Cottage, Rockbourne in 1940. Sqn Ldr Pilling was posted to the RAF Staff College at Andover in May

¹ Details kindly provided by King William's College and The Buchan School at: www.kwc.im.

² By kind permission of World War 2 Cemeteries at: www.ww2cemeteries.com/ecques-churchyard.html.

³ No. 24 Squadron Operations Record Book.

⁴ French Foreign Minister.

⁵ French Prime Minister.

⁶ Possibly Vera Marvin, the wedding taking place at Hawarden in Flintshire in late 1935, but this has not been confirmed.

1940⁷, which may explain the move. But that course ended abruptly as soon as it assembled, due to the German *blitzkrieg* offensive.

Instead, by now a squadron leader, he was sent to No. 17 Operational Training Unit at RAF Upwood in Cambridgeshire to convert to Blenheim bombers, and thereafter was posted to 107 Squadron⁸, based at RAF Wattisham, near Ipswich, which was equipped with the Blenheim Mark IV; a three-seat, twin-engine light bomber (see Photograph 2⁹).

On 30 June 1940, shortly after the Dunkirk evacuation, the squadron flew a bombing mission against a German airfield at Merville in northeast France, from which German bombers were flying raids against targets in England. Sqn Ldr Pilling piloted Blenheim R3870, one of three lost on this operation, all shot down by 'flak'¹⁰.

His aircraft crashed at Ecques, Pas- de-Calais. Sqn Ldr Pilling and Sgt Holman Denison, his wireless operator and gunner, were killed, and the observer, Sgt Francis Roche, was taken prisoner. The two that died are interred at Ecques Churchyard (see Photographs 3 and 4¹¹). Sqn Ldr Pilling was aged 33. On his gravestone is engraved, '*Greater love*



hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends'.

Sqn Ldr Pilling was posthumously awarded the Air Force Cross (AFC)¹² in the 1941 New Year's Honours list. No citation has been discovered, but the non-operational condition of the award makes it likely that this was for his work with 24 Squadron RAF before the war.

He is also remembered on the war memorial at King William's College¹³.

It appears that Vera Pilling relocated to Mellow Thatch in Rockbourne in about



⁷ RAF Staff College records.

⁸ 107 Squadron RAF badge © UK Crown 2017. By kind permission of The Ministry of Defence.

⁹ © IWM (MH 140). Blenheim Mark IV.

¹⁰ Anti-aircraft fire.

¹¹ Photographs 3 and 4 By kind permission of World War 2 Cemeteries at: www.ww2cemeteries.com/ecques-churchyard.html.

¹² The AFC is a military decoration awarded for an act or acts of valour, courage or devotion to duty whilst flying, though not in active operations against the enemy.

¹³ www.kwc.im/alumni/roll-honour-1.

1941, but she had left the village by the end of the war, marrying Thomas Ashton Lye at Healey in Rochdale in 1944¹⁴.



This information has been gathered using local knowledge from the families, records held by Ancestry.com, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, The National Archives, and in on-line and published histories. For a full list of these, please visit the [Acknowledgements List](#) and the notes on the pages.

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Every effort has been made to ensure that the information in this entry is correct. If you know otherwise, or can provide any additional information about the servicemen whose lives are described in the biographies, please contact the Author by email at:

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Notes

Return to Roll of Honour Names

¹⁴ Rochdale Observer Saturday 12 February 1944 (Page 2). Courtesy of www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk and The British Library Board.