

AIR MECHANIC 1ST CLASS JOHN STANLEY CLARKE

99044, 57 Squadron, Royal Flying Corps

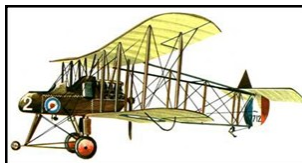
Died aged 19 on 10 October 1917

Buried with honour at *Harlebeke New British Cemetery, Belgium*; IC 15

Commemorated in Tewkesbury on the Grammar School Memorial



Harlebeke New British Cemetery



*FE2d Fighter-bomber **



*De Havilland 4 Bomber **
[* www.spartacus-educational.com]



RAF 57 Squadron
(post April 1918)

JOHN STANLEY CLARKE was born in Wrexham, Wales, in October 1898, the eldest son of Ernest Clarke and Emily Agnes (formerly Collins). Ernest, whose family came from Beckford, near Tewkesbury, pursued a somewhat nomadic existence: aged 20, he was a Grocer, lodging in Cheltenham, then in Birmingham in 1898 at the age of 27 he married Emily, who came from March, Cambridgeshire. John Stanley was born in the same year and the birth of subsequent children charts the itinerant life of the family: in 1901 Ireland, 1904 Workington, and in 1905 Gateshead. By the time of the 1911 Census, Ernest had returned to Beckford where his occupation, 'Bazaar Proprietor – Out of Employment', explains his lifestyle. However, Ernest had ensured that John was enrolled at Tewkesbury Grammar School from 1909 to 1912 when he left at the age of 14 (the minimum school leaving age for boys at that time). Before enlisting for military service, John was employed as a Clerk at Birmingham University.

On 8 May 1915 John enlisted as a Private in the Army Ordnance Corps, although, at the age of 17, he was ineligible for active service. With the rapid expansion of the British Army, the Corps undertook important logistical tasks such as supplying, maintaining and repairing armaments and munitions. Eventually, on 7 October 1915, John was sent to France, qualifying for the '1914-15 Star' campaign medal.

In June 1917 John transferred to the Royal Flying Corps in which, by the time of his death, he was paid in the rank of Air Mechanic First Class (equivalent to L/Cpl.). According to his medal roll, however, he was an Acting (unpaid)

Sergeant. John joined 57 Squadron, a fighter-reconnaissance unit equipped with FE2d fighter bombers, which had crossed to France in December 1916. In May 1917, the squadron began to convert to De Havilland 4 bombers and moved up to Ypres, starting long-distance reconnaissance, bombing and photography raids. In July, oxygen breathing apparatus and negative lens bombsights were introduced and both bombing and photography improved. In all its work 57 Squadron met strong opposition from enemy fighters and suffered severe losses.

It was in this type of warfare that John Clarke was killed, having become a Gunner Observer in 1917. On 10 October, as the *Third Battle of Ypres* approached its penultimate phase, he was involved in a bombing operation behind enemy lines to Oostnieukerke, Belgium. His plane, piloted by Sgt. Frank Victor Legge, failed to return and they were reported as '*missing in action*'. Subsequently a German Jasta 36 pilot (Leutnant Heinrich Bongartz) claimed to have shot down their aircraft over Westroosebeke. Sgt. Legge was taken prisoner but John Clarke was killed. His Commanding Officer, Major Pattinson, wrote: '*I am very sorry to lose him, as he was an excellent gunner, and put up a good fight recently against a number of German machines, shooting one down. He was very popular with all ranks in the squadron.*'

Air Mechanic 1st Class John Stanley Clarke's body was recovered and buried by the Germans; after the war he was re-interred in *Harlebeke New British Cemetery*. **He was the first of our heroes to be killed in the youngest fighting unit, the Royal Flying Corps.**