

Sergeant Ellis Markson RAFVR

Service Number: 2211419

1st October, 1905 – 9th August, 1944

Early Life: Birth to the Outbreak of World War 2

Ellis Markson was born on 1st October, 1905 in Manchester, UK and was an only child to his parents, David Markson and Sarah Markson (née) Goldwater. David Markson was born in Manchester on 11th February, 1875. Sarah Goldwater was born in St. Petersburg, Russia ca. 1880. From Census records, it appears that Sarah Goldwater's family immigrated to Edinburgh from St. Petersburg sometime in the late 19th century (1888-1895). David and Sarah were married at the Graham Street Synagogue in Edinburgh on 25th August, 1904. On their Marriage Certificate (*Image 1*), David's profession is listed as a "Rubber Worker". A "Rubber Worker" was employed in the raincoat/hat/boot business, and it is likely that David Markson was in Edinburgh to develop his trade as Edinburgh was home to Scotland's great rubber factory, the "North British Rubber Co. Ltd. On Ellis's Birth Certificate (*Image 2*), David's profession is listed as a "Macintosh Maker Journeyman". This comports with family records that David's family were raincoat manufacturers in Manchester and it appears that David was working as a salesman in the family business at the time of Ellis's birth. The earliest photograph of Ellis when he was a baby (*Image 3*) was taken in Edinburgh. The photographer's signature is printed at the bottom of the photo: "Ingram, Tollcross Studio, Edinburgh". Research confirms that W. Ingram had a photography studio at 180 Lauriston Place in the Tollcross district of Edinburgh at this time. Only one photo survives of Ellis with his parents. (*Image 4*)

David Markson was the fourth of twelve children, so although an only child, Ellis had many first cousins in this large clan. Aside from the Markson relatives living in Manchester, others of the clan lived in Glasgow and sometime during Ellis's adolescence he moved with his parents from Manchester to Glasgow. Among the family papers is a letter from Mr. J.C. Scott, M.A., Rector of Hutchesons' Grammar School in Edinburgh (*Image 5, 5a*). The letter states:

"This is to certify that Ellis Markson has been a pupil in this school since September 1919; that he has taken here the second and half of the third year of the Intermediate course studying English, Mathematics, French, Science and Drawing; that he has always been among the best,

and latterly quite the best of his class; that his conduct, diligence and progress have been of the highest order; and that I regret very much he has not been able to finish his course here, as I am quite confident he would have done much credit both to himself and to the school.”

Hutchesons’ Grammar School was founded in 1641 and still exists today. An inquiry to the school confirmed that Ellis Markson joined on 9th September, 1919 (age 13) and left on 25th February, 1921 (age 15) to move back to England. He attended a school in John Street, Glasgow prior to Hutchesons’ and the family lived at 16 Cleland Street, Glasgow (in the Gorbals District).

Ellis’s childhood and young adulthood were spent in a triangle of three cities, revolving around family and business: Manchester, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. No information has come to light about any further education undertaken by Ellis upon the family’s return to England, or what he did for a living once he finished school.

Ellis met Ethel Corran in Liverpool, sometime in 1927. Born in Dublin on 14th September, 1902, Ethel was the sixth of eight surviving children born to Naiman and Rebecca (née Englesbeck) Corran. They met in a dry-cleaning shop called *Sunray Dry Cleaners* when Ellis brought in his laundry for dry cleaning. *Sunray Dry Cleaners* was owned in partnership by Ethel’s brothers: William (Willie), Chaim (Hymie) and Marks (Moses). William and Hymie lived in Belfast where they operated other businesses, and Marks lived in Liverpool. The brothers “employed” Ethel and three of her sisters (Jane, Fanny, and Sarah) in the dry-cleaning shop, but did not pay them! Ellis was in Liverpool to take a ship to America. His mother’s sister, Rachel, and her husband immigrated to Brooklyn in 1913. Sarah Markson hoped that her son would have better opportunities in America, but this was not to be. Ellis and Ethel fell in love and Ellis never boarded the ship to America. They wanted to get married, but there was opposition to the marriage (probably from Ellis’s mother, Sarah), so they eloped to Belfast where they married at the Belfast Registry Office on 2nd November, 1927 (*Image 6*). Ethel’s brother Hymie paid for them to have a traditional Jewish wedding which was solemnized at the Shaw Street Synagogue in Liverpool on 12th February, 1928 (*Images 7, 7a, 8*).

Ellis and Ethel settled in Liverpool. From the time of their marriage to the outbreak of World War 2, it is not clear what Ellis did for a living¹. However, during those years four children were born: Jeanne Betty born on 13th May, 1929; twins Norma² and Sylvia born on 17th July, 1934; and Samuel born on 2nd December, 1935. A fifth child, Davina, was born on 20th December, 1943. (*Images 9, 10*)

National Fire Service: September 1940 – April 1943

Ellis Markson applied to join the Auxiliary Fire Service on the day war was declared - 3rd September, 1939³. His AFS Record of Service offers an interesting insight into the process of recruitment as well as the complete lack of preparedness in terms of uniforms and equipment. Ellis was medically examined on 15th September, 1939 and accepted as f/t AFM No 5850 in South Docks Division, assigned to the AFS station nearest to his home at Granby Street School (*Images 11, 12, 12a*). He was 5' 6^{1/2}" tall, 41^{1/2}" chest, boot size 5 and hat size 7. At this time, the only equipment he was issued with was a steel helmet and respirator. On 10th January, 1940, he completed anti-gas training and on 26th February, 1940, he was issued with a uniform, axe, axe belt and pouch. On 26th April, 1940, Ellis was certified as efficient and on 29th June of the same year, he passed the Leading Auxiliary Fireman's course and was promoted the same day, but on 28th August, he reverted to Auxiliary Fireman. On 1st June, 1941, the South Docks Division was disbanded and Ellis transferred to the Essex Street Division.

On 18th August, 1941, the UK Government nationalized all the professional and Auxiliary Fire Brigades into the National Fire Service. This was a huge organization and at its peak in 1943, numbered some 343,000 men and women. It was run on military lines with the country divided into regions and subdivided into Fire Force Areas. Ellis served in No. 26 Fire Force with its headquarters in West Derby.

¹ His National Fire Service Record lists his profession as "Commercial Traveller".

² Norma was my mother. She passed away in 2009.

³ Before WW2, the Fire Brigade was run by the Police and in Liverpool there were 200 firefighters manning 13 engines. In 1938, anticipating war with Germany, every local authority in the UK was required by an Act of Parliament to form an Auxiliary Fire Service. Initially the AFS comprised 40% full time paid fire fighters and the rest were part time, reporting in whenever there was an air raid warning. Training was basic, taking just 30 hours. In Liverpool there were 400 pumps, all but 20 being 2-wheeled trailer pumps. The pumps were supposed to be towed by requisitioned cars, but there never more than 130 of these, the rest being pulled by hand – quite a job over cobbled streets in an air raid in the blackout! At its peak, there were about 5200 members of the AFS and they fought most of the Blitz fires.

Royal Air Force: 27 April, 1943 – 9 August, 1944

By 1943, the worst of the Blitz was over and Ellis volunteered for service in the RAF. By this time, he was 37 years old, way above the usual age of recruitment and given his service in the NFS during the Blitz, had certainly “done his bit” for the war effort. Ethel told her children and grandchildren the reason Ellis volunteered was because of “what Hitler is doing to our people over there”. By 1943, news of Hitler’s Final Solution had leaked out and as a Jew, Ellis felt he had to do what he could to help defeat Nazi Germany.

Ellis’s RAF Service Record shows that he enlisted on 27th April, 1943 at Recruitment Centre #3 which was RAF Padgate in Warrington, just outside Liverpool. On 21st June, 1943 he reported to 1 ACRC – Air Crew Reception Center #1 located at Lords Cricket Ground, London. On 3rd July, 1943 he was assigned to 14 ITW – 14 Initial Training Wing located in Bridlington, near Scarborough. From Scarborough he moved to Elementary Air Gunner School in Bridgnorth, Shropshire, where he arrived on 2nd August, 1943. Next stop was 11 Air Gunner School at RAF Andreas, Isle of Man, where he reported on 27th August, 1943. Upon completion of this training, he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant at a daily pay of 8 shillings. On 12th October, 1943 he was assigned to 12 Operational Training Unit, located at Chipping Warden near Banbury, and on 26th November, 1943 he went to 1651 Conversion Unit. On 11th January, 1944 he was assigned to 31 BASE. Upon completion of all this training, Sergeant Ellis Markson was assigned to 161 Squadron at RAF Tempsford in Bedfordshire on 11th May, 1944.

Although Ellis wrote letters home from RAF Tempsford, Ethel knew nothing about this airfield or the role it played during World War 2. This was due to the fact that it was a highly secretive airfield, constructed on farmland requisitioned in 1940 for the war effort, on the orders of Sir Winston Churchill. (*Images* 13, 14) It became the home of two special duties “Moonlight Squadrons” – 161 and 138. These two squadrons worked exclusively for the SOE (Special Operations Executive) and were tasked with ferrying agents, supplies, and weapons to the Resistance in occupied enemy territory, hence the nickname of the squadrons – the “Tempsford Taxi Service”! They were called the “Moonlight Squadrons” because their clandestine operations were governed by the phases of the moon, as they needed the moonlight to allow them to map

read and navigate across enemy territory, flying at low altitudes to locate the various drop zones prepared by the Resistance. It should be noted that the motto on the Squadron Crest - “Liberate”, inside an open handcuff, symbolizing the objective of breaking the shackles of servitude – illustrates a clear statement of the Squadron’s mission (*Image 15*). The Halifax bombers used in this squadron had been modified for these special operations. Amongst some of the changes, the dorsal gun turret was removed and the rear guns were fitted with anti-flash shrouds to minimize flashes when firing at night, leaving the mid-upper turret gunner with no guns. As a result, this gunner became the dispatcher.

Everyone who served in these squadrons signed the *Official Secrets Act*, so there is little surprise that Ethel knew nothing about her husband’s war service. The story in the family was that Ellis was a rear-gunner on either Lancaster or Halifax aircraft and that he flew under Bomber Command, which to them meant bombing missions over enemy territory. It wasn’t until 50 years after the end of World War 2 that some of the secrecy surrounding these squadrons began to lift. By that time, Ethel was no longer alive.

Once Ellis arrived at RAF Tempsford, he had to wait to be assigned to a crew. He flew his first mission on 7/8 July, 1944. The documents detailing the operations are copies from Top Secret Operations Record Books that have now been declassified. There are four types of records:

1. A typed copy of the Battle Order of the Day. This was a detailed list of the planned operations of the day, with information of the number and type of aircraft, list of crew, duration of sortie, petrol load, all up weight, take off time, time over target, estimated time of return and name of operation. Sometimes sorties were cancelled, in which case this document serves solely to illustrate a mission abandoned.
2. A page titled “Detail of Work Carried Out”. This was a hand-written summary of details of each sortie upon return from the mission. Details include location of drops and what was dropped.
3. Report of Operations. This was a very detailed hand-written report by the pilot upon completion of the mission.
4. A typed version of the pilot’s report outlined in #3.

The Crew

Although Ellis's training took one year, he and his crew were killed in action on his 10th mission, just one month and two days after his first mission. The missions commenced on 7th July, 1944 and ended on 9th August, 1944. Each mission comprised a crew of seven: Captain (Pilot), Navigator, Air Bomber, Wireless Operator, Engineer, Dispatcher, and Rear Gunner. In the case of this crew, six of the seven were the same on all ten missions: (*Image 13, 14*)

Pilot	F/Sgt. J.W. Nicholls, age: 22
Navigator	W/O J.B. Grady (RCAF), age: 26
Air Bomber	P/O G.E. Rhead, age: 28
Wireless Operator	Sgt. A.A. Rivers, age: 23
Engineer	Sgt. B.C.F. Dean, age: 27
Rear Gunner	Sgt. E. Markson, age: 38

Three crew filled the role of Dispatcher: Sgt. Thompson flew three missions, Sgt. Hayward flew four missions, and Sgt. C.G. Bragg, age: 20 flew the last three missions, including the ill-fated one. (*Images 16, 17, 18*)

Despite the fact that most of these missions were flown by the phases of the moon, this was not always the case. Operations flown by Ellis Markson can be found on a separate link on the front page.

The Final Mission

Tom 53, the final mission flown by F/Sgt. Nicholls and his crew, was a dual mission being flown with another Halifax piloted by F/Lt. George Abecassis. Their task was to supply an underground cell in the Picardie region of France under the command of Captain Etienne Dromas. The supplies being dropped that night were: 15 containers, 7 packages, 20 pigeons and leaflets, all to be dropped between the villages of Beaumont en Beine and Cugny. The Germans were very active in nearby St. Quentin where they based their regional Gestapo Headquarters.

This meant that great caution had to be taken by the Resistance to avoid detection. In addition, German night fighters were active in the area, adding another danger to the drop zone.

One of the members of the French Resistance (in the B1 section de L'Hisme) waiting on the ground that night for the supplies being dropped by the two Halifax aircraft, was 20-year-old Roger Charbonnier. Mr. Charbonnier was one of two eyewitnesses to the crash. Incredibly, he is still alive (age: 97) and remembers every detail of what happened on that fateful night.

F/Lt. Abecassis took off in Halifax Z LL453 at 23:45 followed by F/Sgt. Nicholls in Halifax Y LL358 at 23:55. The duration of the mission was expected to last a little over four hours. Pinpoint navigation was required to find small villages, then dead reckoning was used to set a course to the target area. Once found, the aircraft flew in a little over stall speed, in this case at 130 mph at a height of approximately 400 feet. Time spent over the target area ranged from 10-15 minutes, depending on how clear the signal from the Resistance on the ground was. The ETA over the drop zone was between 01:52 and 01:58, however, F/Lt. Abecassis struggled to find the signal from the Resistance on the ground. He finally located it at 02:09 – an electric lamp flashing in Morse. Mr. Charbonnier filled in the details: the Morse sent was the letter “C”. He was the one on the ground flashing the signal! Once the signal was located, F/Lt. Abercassis dropped 15 containers and 7 packages. His debriefing note states: “When making drop, an aircraft was seen ablaze about 3-miles to the south east”.

From the Ground at the Drop Site

The French reception committee, including Roger Charbonnier, was at the drop zone well before the scheduled arrival of the Halifaxes. They heard a German night fighter flying up and down the area. By the time the two Halifaxes arrived, the night fighter had disappeared, so it was decided to flash the Morse signal to bring the two aircraft in. F/Lt. Abecassis flew in low, dropped his load and climbed away to allow the second Halifax to come in. The signal was given and F/Sgt. Nicholls responded. As he came in, there was a burst of gunfire from the German night fighter. The aircraft was hit and was on fire. It banked and crashed into the field, bursting into flames. Because it was flying so low, none of the crew were able to bail out and all were killed. (*Image 19*) Mr. Charbonnier related that he and another comrade by the name of Henri Boulant went in the direction from where the smoke was coming. It took them about 15-20

minutes to reach the crash site. He said that the plane was burning, bullets were exploding due to the heat and they found two of the crew who had been ejected from the plane. They were dead but not burned. They didn't see anyone else. Henri Boulant went to inform their superiors what they found, and Roger Charbonnier remained alone at the scene waiting for his return. Daylight was breaking when he heard a motorbike. It was a German soldier in the upper side of the field where the plane was burning. The German soldier looked at Roger Charbonnier, and left on his motorbike in the direction of Cugny. Henri Boulant returned with two comrades. Mr. Charbonnier told them of the arrival of the German on the motorbike and was given an order by Lieutenant Choin to leave the scene immediately. He didn't see the burned bodies of the other crew as the plane was still smoldering.

The bodies of the crew were removed from the crash site and placed in coffins numbered 1-7. The order of burial from left to right is as follows: W/O J.B. Grady, F/Sgt. J.W. Nicholls, P/O G.E. Rhead, Sgt. B.C.F. Dean, Sgt. A.A. Rivers, Sgt. C.G. Bragg, Sgt. E. Markson. The last grave on the right is an unknown soldier from World War 1 (Cugny is located in the Somme). (*Image 20, 21*) Two days later, the crew were buried in the Cugny Communal Cemetery. Fearing an outburst of anti-German feeling, the Germans forbade the villagers from attending the funerals. In defiance, and at great personal risk, the entire village turned out to shower the caskets with flowers and pay their respects. The Gestapo looked on and did nothing. (*Images 22, 23*) Josée Preud'homme, younger sister of Klébert Preud'homme who was a member of the Resistance gave me a photo of the villagers who buried the airmen in defiance of the Nazis and at great risk to themselves. On the back of the photo is a detailed description of what happened at the burial. (*Images 24, 25, 26*)

After the War

After the war, the seven crew plus the unknown soldier from World War 1 were left in the Cugny Communal Cemetery, where they still lay today. Initially, Ellis, like the other members of the crew, was buried with a cross on his grave. When the permanent tombstones were erected by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, this error was corrected and his tombstone has a Star of David. (*Images 27, 28*)

To this day, the people of Cugny tend the graves and honor the aviators who came to their aid during World War 2. They commemorate every anniversary and turn out en-masse to welcome every relative who visits. You leave feeling that there is a special and emotional bond with these warm and generous people, and that you will be forever linked because of the events that took place in the early hours of the morning of 9th August, 1944. My mother made several failed attempts to visit her father's grave. She finally made it on a cold day in November, 2004. It was a very emotional visit for her and she shared her feelings in a letter she wrote to me after her visit: "I am so glad that I was able to visit my father's grave and meet these wonderful people. They were so kind to me and hugged and kissed me. I felt like I knew them all my life...I am very glad that my father is buried in that village because these people honor all the crew. It was the best experience of my life."

In 1971, Captain Etienne Dromas requested permission from Her Majesty, The Queen to place a memorial in the field where the plane crashed. Permission was granted and a stone memorial with the names of the crew was erected where it still stands today. (*Images 29, 30*)

Captain Dromas was instrumental in setting up the Musée de la Résistance et de la Déportation de Picardie, located in the nearby town of Tergnier. The museum has a very impressive exhibition of the history and work carried out by the French Resistance in the Picardie region during the years of German occupation. There is a special exhibit about the events of the night of 8/9 August 1944, including some remnants of Halifax Y LL358. (*Image 31*)

It is believed that Lt. Erhard Duttman, flying a JU88 plane shot down F/Sgt. Nicholl's Halifax. This tallies with F/Lt. Abecassis' account: "As I flew south on the deck, a JU88 crossed our bows 2000ft above but he didn't see us...That JU must have got him (F/Sgt. Nicholls) as he looked for the target". Lt. Erhard Duttman was killed in action on 1 January 1945. He was flying a JU88.

French Resistance Medal

On 19 July 1942, General Charles de Gaulle established a commission whose purpose it was "to investigate the creation of a decoration intended to reward the merits of people who played an active, key role in rallying the territories behind Fighting France. On 20 August 1942, the

commission settled on the name *Médaille de la Résistance Française*. The French Resistance Medal was thus instituted in London on 9 February 1943 by ordinance of General de Gaulle, as leader of Fighting France. Its purpose was to recognize the remarkable acts of faith and bravery which, in France, throughout the Empire and abroad, have contributed to the resistance of the French people against the enemy and their accomplices since 18 June 1940. This was the second and only other decoration created during the war by General de Gaulle, after the Order of Liberation.

The French Resistance Medal was exclusively awarded by decree of the leader of Fighting France, the President of the Provisional Government of the Republic, then, from 1 January 1947, of the President of the Republic. It was no longer to be awarded after 1 April 1947, except in the case of the Resistance in Indo-China, for which the date was extended to 31 December 1947; it may still be awarded posthumously under the same conditions, but only to people killed during the war.”⁴

On 10th August 2019, a very special and emotional ceremony was held in Cugny. The occasion was the 75th anniversary of the crash of Halifax Y LL358. Hundreds of people were present, including Mr. Roger Charbonnier, Mr. Michel Bono, Mayor of Cugny and many other officials. (*Images 32, 33, 34*) At the ceremony Sgt. Ellis Markson and W/O J.B. Grady were awarded the French Resistance Medal. (*Images 35,36,37*) Posthumous awards of this medal are exceedingly rare, and I had the great privilege of receiving this medal on behalf of my grandfather. The honor of receiving the medal should have gone to my Aunt Davina, however, she was unable to travel all the way from Australia at that time. To mark this occasion, she donated Ellis’s Medals and papers to the town of Cugny. They are now proudly displayed in a special case in the Town Hall. (*Image 38*)

Sgt. Ellis Markson was a war hero as were all those who fought and died fighting the Nazis during World War 2. Often overlooked are the widows and children left behind. Ethel Markson was left alone to raise five young children under very difficult circumstances. (*Images 39, 40*) At the ceremony I read aloud the telegram she received, informing her that her husband was missing in action. (*Image 41*) I also read a very moving letter she received from a stranger. The letter is dated 20th December 1944 and says:

⁴ <https://www.ordredelaliberation.fr/en/find-out-more-about-medal-recipients>

“Dear Mrs. Markson,

You don’t know me & I don’t know you but enclosed you will find 3 pounds. It is my way of saying thank you to a man who died that we might live. I knew your husband & held him in great regard. I know you are Jewish Folk & this is not your season, but it is a time when decent folk try to bring a little sunshine into other’s lives. Don’t try to find out who sent it, just spend it on yourself & kiddies. Ginger⁵ gave his life that we might remain free & left his little ones without a dad. May you get a little happiness out of this. God Bless you & your bairns. May the Lord be with you now and in the future years.” (*Images 42, 43*)

“Never Again” is a phrase often invoked in reference to World War 2 and the Holocaust in order to prevent such events from ever happening again. “Never again” doesn’t mean anything unless you know what happened and why. As those who lived and fought through World War 2 die out, the responsibility of commemorating the sacrifices made by them falls on us. This collective responsibility is best summed up in the timeless words of the Kohima epitaph:

“When you go home, tell them of us and say: For your tomorrow we gave our today”.

Written by Debra Rosen

Granddaughter of Ellis Markson

All photographs are from family albums and may not be copied

⁵ Ellis Markson had red hair, hence his nickname: “Ginger”.