



**Flying Officer  
John Fraser Drummond DFC  
No 46 Squadron's  
Merseyside Hero  
1940**

# John Fraser Drummond



<https://themerseysidefew.com/pilots/john-fraser-drummond/>

The picture shows John Fraser Drummond with No. 46 Squadron at RAF Digby in late June 1940. At just 21 years old he had already seen action in Norway for which he was to be awarded a DFC and was about to participate in the Battle of Britain, a conflict that four months later would take his life.

## Introduction

I've driven past Thornton Garden of Rest many, many times as it's on my route to Anfield but I've only had one occasion to go through the black iron gates. That was for my first experience of bereavement when my granddad was cremated there in October 1992. So it was with a slight sense of unease that I drove through those gates looking for the graves of two of The Few, Kenneth Macleod Gillies and John Fraser Drummond.

Thornton itself is in the Borough of Crosby, roughly seven miles north of Liverpool city centre but only six miles from my home. It's hard to believe that I've lived so close to two of The Few all my life. A picture of John Drummond's grave in the book *The Battle of Britain Then and Now*, taken in the late 1970s, shows the base apparently covered with green glass chippings. Right now the grave is in need of some repair.

I pulled up weeds and grass then stepped back to read the inscription on the headstone. Under the RAF brevet it says,

IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
**F/O JOHN FRASER DRUMMOND**  
R.A.F. D.F.C.  
BORN 19 OCT 1918, KILLED IN ACTION IN THE  
BATTLE OF BRITAIN 10 OCT.1940.  
"HE FLEW THROUGH WINGED DEATH  
TO REACH THE SKIES"  
ALSO HIS FATHER  
**WILLIAM HASTINGS DRUMMOND**  
DIED 24. SEPT 1967.

John was killed in action just nine days before his 22nd birthday. The reality of just how young the Fighter Boys of 1940 were hit me hard so I decided then and there to make John Fraser Drummond DFC the first of The Merseyside Few I would write about.

A particular special thanks to the Drummond family whose input, generosity and encouragement have been invaluable in helping me complete this piece

## Early Life

John was born at 70 Moss Lane, Liverpool [[Google map](#)] on 19 October 1918 in a nursing home run by a midwife, Bertha Tyson.



John Drummond's birthplace, 70 Moss Lane, Liverpool

He was the second child of William and Nellie Drummond who already had a daughter, Helen, born in June 1917. John spent his earliest years at 47 Warbreck Road before the family moved to 34 Cavendish Road, Blundellsands in 1924. He attended a Church of England Primary School near to his home but the family moved again to 4 Far Moss Road in 1930. The family would stay here until John's father's death in 1967.

At the age of eleven he attended Deytheur Grammar School, as a boarder, in the small Welsh village of Llansantffraid, Powys [[Google map](#)], close to the English border. The school was closed in 1967 and most of it demolished in 1971 but the old school house remains and is now a 750k private residence.

In January 1934 John started [Wellington School](#), Somerset, again as a boarder. He was placed in Willows House and went on to represent them at tennis, cricket and cross country. He took part in the school's Officer Training Corps, earning his A Certificate in March 1935 before becoming a Lance Corporal in May. He was quickly promoted to Corporal before finishing as a Sergeant. In July 1935 he passed his School Certificates in scripture, English, geography, elementary maths and chemistry. He left Wellington in April 1936 with the Senior Prize for divinity. In 2004 The Battle of Britain Historical Society presented a plaque to Wellington School, recognising John's achievements as a pilot.

Upon returning to Liverpool, John took up an apprenticeship with Vincent Murphy & Co Ltd of Derby Road, Bootle, the timber merchant his father worked for as a salesman. This work didn't satisfy John and, influenced by a family holiday to Germany circa 1936 from which he believed the Germans were preparing for war and not wanting to fight in the trenches as his father and uncles had, he was determined to pursue his ambition to fly. So his parents relented and he applied to join the RAF. He passed his medical on 18 November 1937.

## 46 Squadron in Norway

John began his training at The Civil Flying School at Hatfield on 4 April 1938 before moving to RAF 5 FTS at Sealand, Flintshire in June. The London Gazette of 24 June confirmed that John had been granted a short service commission as an Acting Pilot Officer on probation with effect from 4 June 1938.

Some of his peers who were also granted short service commissions that day went on to fly in The Battle of Britain;

Maurice Brown (611 and 41 Squadrons)

Aston Cooper-Key (46 Squadron)

John Cutts (222 Squadron)

William David (87 and 213 Squadrons)

Noel Francis (247 Squadron)

Maurice Kinder (85, 607 and 92 Squadrons)

James O'Meara (64 and 72 Squadrons)

Donald Smith (616 Squadron)

John Strang (253 Squadron)

Hugh Tamblyn (141 and 242 Squadron)

John Waddingham (141 Squadron)

## 46 Squadron

After completing his flying training he joined 46 Squadron at Digby, Lincolnshire on 14 January 1939. Originally equipped with Gloster Gauntlet Mk II single seater bi-plane fighters, the squadron was re-equipped with Hawker Hurricanes in February 1939. They were to see action just 6 weeks after the outbreak of World War II when, on 21 October 1939, Squadron Leader PR Barwell and Pilot Officer RP Plummer attacked a formation of twelve Heinkel 115s five miles east of Spurn Head, shooting 3 down and damaging another.

As a result of this action King George visited Digby on 2 November to compliment the Squadron on the role they had played in protecting coastal shipping from enemy action. He spent around ten minutes with the pilots, including John. The next six months though were uneventful, consisting in the main of providing air cover for the shipping convoys steaming along the east coast. There followed a brief move to Acklington, on the Northumbrian coast, from December to mid January 1940 where John carried out anti-aircraft co-operation flights, playing the part of enemy planes so coastal guns would be practiced and ready for the inevitable raids.



John Drummond on his crashed Hurricane, Digby, March 1940

## The Norway Campaign

In May 1940, the squadron was selected to form part of the Expeditionary Force in Norway, which had been invaded by the Germans on 9 April. Their Hurricanes were embarked on HMS Glorious and arrived 40 miles off the Norwegian coast on 26 May. The Hurricanes had to take off from the deck of Glorious but as the sea was flat and calm there were doubts that they could do so. Air Ministry figures suggested a 30 knot wind was necessary. The ship's engineers managed to get HMS Glorious up to a speed of 30 knots so enabling all 18 Hurricanes to take off successfully. 46 Squadron assembled at Bardufoss in the far north of the country [[Google map](#)] and began operations on 27 May.

John saw action shortly after his arrival when, on 29 May, he took off from Bardufoss in Hurricane L1794. He sighted four enemy aircraft at 12,000 feet south of Narvik and moved into attack the nearest, a Heinkel 111. Although John hit the starboard engine he had been hit by return fire causing his cockpit to fill with smoke. He turned to go back to Bardufoss but his engine failed. He had no choice but to bale out. He landed in the near freezing waters of Ofotfjord and was picked up by HMS Firedrake, an F-Class destroyer later to take part in The Battle of the Atlantic. John Drummond had scored his first solo kill, a He111 of 2/Kampfgeschwader 26.

Four days later, in the early afternoon of 2 June, John took off in Hurricane W2543, with Sgt Taylor, for a routine patrol over Narvik. An hour or so into the sortie he spotted two Junkers JU 87s attacking a destroyer in Ofotfjord. He went after the first firing around five six second bursts. Smoke coming from the starboard mainplane confirmed he had scored a hit. John watched as it force landed, bursting into flames.

The 7 June was certainly John's busiest day during his time in Norway. It was also the day he cheated death by an inch, and earned his Distinguished Flying Cross.

He was in the air at 0400 hours patrolling the Narvik area when he spotted three He111s flying in formation. He attacked the first plane but it disappeared into a cloud, so he attacked the other two, hitting the starboard Heinkel. The other one attacked his Hurricane causing him to seek cover in a cloud. On emerging from his cover John saw the damaged Heinkel heading towards the border with neutral Sweden, and so John returned to Bardufoss claiming this as a victory.

After some rest John was in the air again at 1715hrs patrolling Narvik with Flight Officer Mee. They sighted four He111s at around 10,000 feet. Mee attacked the port enemy aircraft and John the starboard. John hit his target causing it to turn for cloud cover. John left it there and went after another of the He111s. Spotting two he attacked one, hitting the rear gun but was hit himself by the other one. A shell pierced his windscreen, clipping his goggles and helmet before ricocheting out of the cockpit hood, making a large hole in the process. John returned fire again but lost the enemy planes in cloud. He claimed one victory and two damaged.



John Drummond (left) with 46 Squadron in Norway

On landing John learnt that Operation Alphanet had been activated and the squadron had been ordered to evacuate Norway immediately. They had to fly their Hurricanes back to HMS Glorious. Perhaps because of the day he had had – two sorties in fourteen hours – John was not chosen for this task. Instead he went with ground crew of 46 Squadron on the SS Arandora Star. [For more about the fate of the SS Arandora Star, see the [Additional page](#)]

At 0300 on 8 June HMS Glorious was detached with the destroyers Ardent and Acasta to head for Scapa Flow while the other carrier, HMS Ark Royal, and the rest of the fleet remained behind to escort the slower main convoy. At 1545 the German battle cruisers Scharnhorst and Gneisenau spotted Glorious and opened fire directly hitting her bridge. Glorious returned fire but was hopelessly out-gunned. By 1720 she was dead on the water and sinking fast. She took with her eight 46 Squadron pilots and their Hurricanes. John Drummond disembarked at Gourock on 13 June and returned to Digby the next day.

His overall score in Norway was four victories and two damaged enemy aircraft for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The citation in the London Gazette of 26 July 1940 read,

*The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the undermentioned awards, in recognition of gallantry displayed in flying operations against the enemy:—*  
*Awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.*  
*Pilot Officer John Fraser DRUMMOND (40810).*  
*During operations in Norway, this officer shot down two enemy aircraft and seriously damaged a further three. On one occasion, as pilot of one of two Hurricanes which attacked four Heinkel 111's, he damaged one of the enemy aircraft and then engaged two of the others. Despite heavy return fire, Pilot Officer Drummond pressed home his attack, silenced the rear guns of both aircraft and compelled the Heinkels to break off the engagement.*

The Squadron re-formed at Digby becoming operational at the end of June.



John Drummond at RAF Digby, June 1940

The next two months consisted of convoy and defensive patrols. John was posted to RAF 7 Operational Training Unit at Hawarden where he taught Czech and Polish pilots the rudiments of combat flying in Spitfires. He was briefly posted back to 46 Squadron where, amongst other duties, he was chosen to lead a flight of three aircraft escorting The Lord Lloyd, Secretary of State for The Colonies, from North Coates to Hendon.

On 5 September he was plunged right into the thick of the Battle of Britain when he was posted to 92 Squadron, first at Pembroey then at Biggin Hill.



John Fraser Drummond, by Cuthbert Orde

## Death

John awoke on Thursday 10 October to find the weather showery but bright. No doubt he would see action again today. Since the deaths of his grandmother and aunt John had flown almost continuously, claiming four victories, two probables, two damaged and one shared. He had also seen four colleagues killed in action.

At 0710 hours, he took off in Spitfire QJ-X with the rest of squadron to patrol Maidstone. After 40 uneventful minutes they were vectored onto a Dornier 17 just east of Brighton. All nine Spitfires descended on the enemy aircraft but experienced real difficulty in firing as their windscreens were iced up meaning the deflector sights could not be used. Two of the Spitfires got in close, fired some bursts and got out. The Dornier flew on.

John and Pilot Officer Bill Williams both attempted beam attacks from either side of the Dornier. They missed and continued turning blindly towards each other. Their Spitfires touched, the starboard wing of John's machine striking the tail of Williams'. John had to bale out but did so too low for his parachute to open. He was still alive after hitting the ground so a priest was able to administer the last rites before John died in his arms. His Spitfire crashed close to him, landing on a flintstone wall that bordered Jubilee Field and St Mary's Convent in Portslade [[Google map](#)].

When his body was examined, John was found to have been wounded in his left arm and leg. Bill Williams, it later transpired, had been shot through the head so was already dead when their machines collided.

Censorship meant John's death was noted in the vaguest of terms in the next days Brighton Evening Argus. It simply said, 'Our losses yesterday were five aircraft but the pilots of two are safe'.



Air Ministry telegram informing family of John's death

### Funeral

John Fraser Drummond's funeral took place at St Michael's church, Blundellsands, on Tuesday 15 October 1940. The service was attended by the Mayor of Crosby among other local dignitaries and the chosen hymn sung was Abide With Me. He was buried in Thornton Garden of Rest just four days before his 22nd birthday. His short life had only known childhood, school, barely a year at the timber merchants and less than three years in the RAF.

Today, the first thing that strikes you about the grave is its size and grandeur. It's a ten foot square kerbed memorial with a stone flower container at its foot and three pointed stones at intervals along each side. The headstone has two grey granite pillars either side of the inscription. The twelve concrete flags which form its base are visible but clearly the passing of time has taken its toll as they are very uneven with grass and weeds growing between the cracks. There are some green glass stones scattered across the grave but not nearly enough to cover it.



John Drummond's grave

John Drummond was the third person to be interred in Thornton Garden of Rest [[Google map](#)]. It stands in Lydiate Lane, built on a site purchased from the Earl of Sefton in 1936, and owned by the Crosby, Litherland and Waterloo Joint Burial Board. It was opened, consecrated and dedicated by Dr AA David, the Lord Bishop of Liverpool, on 23 July 1940.

John's final resting place is Grave 3 in Section A. There are photocopies of the layout of the Garden available on entry. It is in a plot next to the crematorium and on the right as you advance down the driveway.

### Germany Calling

John's death did not go unnoticed in Germany. During his nightly radio broadcast Lord Haw Haw had this to say about the action that took John's life: "A single reconnaissance aircraft, returning from photographing the holocaust of London, was attacked today by six Spitfires. Its gallant crew showed great courage in destroying three. The aircraft crashed in France but the photographs have been saved".





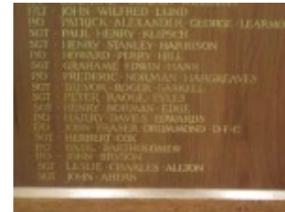
Alexandra Park war memorial in Crosby



John Drummond on Crosby's Alexandra Park war memorial



John Drummond in St Georges Chapel's Book of Remembrance



John Drummond on St Georges Chapel's Roll of Honour



John Drummond in St Georges Chapel's Battle of Britain casualties list



St Clement Danes Book of Remembrance



John Drummond in St Clement Danes Book of Remembrance



Wellington College memorial plaque

### **First Light**

Just as I completed my research, I learned that BBC TV were filming a dramatisation of Geoffrey Wellum's book *First Light*, and it was to include John Drummond played by Alex Waldmann. The [BBC page](#) has some information, with more in their [press pack](#).