

The Many Lives of William Spurrett Fielding-Johnson, 'FJ' to his friends

As a cadet officer at Rugby School, he **joined the Leicestershire Yeomanry in 1913 as Second Lieutenant** and was despatched to the **Western Front in November 1914**.

On 13 May 1915 FJ was on the front line in the Second Battle of Ypres with 'B' Squadron in a 300-yard-long trench. After prolonged overnight shelling, German soldiers attacked at first light, overrunning part of their position and forcing them out. FJ and his Major, the two remaining 'B' squadron officers, led the surviving men down the trench and managed to join 'C' Squadron but here their situation worsened, as now they were attacked from front and side. 'C' Squadron's Major ordered sandbags across the trench in a desperate attempt to defend their position but soon he and all other officers were killed along with most of the men.

In a fast-deteriorating situation, FJ found he was now the last officer left from both squadrons and with just 13 men. Facing annihilation, he decided their only hope was to try and cross the railway line behind them to join a brigade of Dragoon Guards on the far side. Yet to do this they had to traverse an expanse of open ground, covered by German machine guns. FJ got the men to carry sandbags with them to build and rebuild parapets as they crawled their way across the railway under continuous fire. Somehow all of them made it to safety. He then joined the **3rd Dragoon Guards**.

For his coolness and conspicuous gallantry, he was awarded the **Military Cross (MC)**, then the second highest award for bravery.

Leaving the regiment in **October 1915** he joined the Royal Flying Corps as an observer, involved with reconnaissance.

FJ and his pilot took off for a shoot one afternoon in **January 1916**, but at 100 ft their aircraft stalled and spun to ground, which killed the pilot instantly. His colleagues were close at hand and pulled the two men from the wreckage and were amazed to find that, although unconscious, FJ was still alive. Recovery took a long time, but he returned to duty, electing to train as a pilot and **in October 1917 he joined 56 Squadron**.

Over the next seven months he earned the accolade of flying ace, achieving the shooting down of five or more enemy aircraft. Now he was Acting Flight Commander, but **his posting finished in May 1918**, and he was sent back to England with a second **Military Cross (MC)** for his great skill, daring and good leadership of fellow officers.

FJ moved to **Compton Bassett in 1930** when he bought Manor Farm from the Co-op; later on, he added Streete and Dugdale Farms. He was a hands-on man, very popular and much respected in the village. The juxtaposition of a dairy farmer in a small community and his flying and battlefield skirmishes in two world wars is extraordinary but describe the verve and single-mindedness of the man.

When the **Second World War was declared on 1st September 1939**, FJ was 47 but immediately volunteered and was given a commission as pilot officer on the 3rd and promoted to flying officer on the 7th!

Active service commenced in **June 1940** as a rear gunner with **214 Squadron**, for which highly dangerous job the life expectancy is estimated to have been around five sorties. By **September 1940** he had flown 19 sorties and was then transferred to staff duties.

But in **March 1942** FJ was back in the air as **Commanding Officer of 1483 Flight** training aircrews and he also participated in every sortie that his unit took part in; this earned him the **Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC)** in **September 1942**.

Just after D-Day in **June 1944** he was wounded during a mission as a replacement air-gunner, and after three months recuperation, he joined **180 squadron as Squadron Leader**.

He was also responsible for the physical and mental well-being of aircrews, dealing with the frayed nerves of airmen due to operational exhaustion. FJ's calm, friendly manner and natural authority made him the ideal person to consult for advice.

His diplomacy was soon tested in late **October 1944** at a pre-flight briefing, when an air-gunner complained of feeling unwell and his captain accused him of cowardice in front of the assembly; it was FJ who calmed things down and volunteered to take the place of the sick gunner.

So it was that FJ climbed into the top gun turret of a **B-25 Mitchell bomber** with a South African Air Force crew, taking off to bomb the bridges at Venlo, south of Arnhem, in broad daylight. Reaching their target, bombs were dropped, and they headed home. At this point they were hit by ground fire under the port wing. FJ saw from his top gun turret a stream of fuel gushing from the wing tank, so he radioed his pilot to suggest that power be cut to the engine to reduce the risk of fire. This was tried but suddenly the port engine burst into flames. As fire took hold of the aircraft, the pilot gave an order to bale-out and the two gunners nearest the rear escape hatch donned parachutes and jumped; the navigator became stuck in his confined space but was freed just in time to parachute out of the burning aircraft. All the crew eventually found each other on the ground, just inside allied territory and made safe passage back. This experience enabled them to be members of the exclusive **Caterpillar Club**, open only to those who parachuted out over land from a doomed aircraft.

FJ's only son Hugh also joined the RAF, flying Mosquito fighter-bombers. In **December 1944** FJ and Hugh achieved the distinction of both having been awarded with the DFC, thought to be the only case of a father and son in active service. Sadly, two months later Hugh and his navigator were shot down over Germany.

FJ returned to a life on the farm in Compton Bassett as well as chairing the family business in Leicester. His wife Noel had ably run the farm while he was away and was instrumental in the many awards for their 'Effjay' herd that came their way.

After FJ died suddenly on 10 February 1953 during a board meeting in Leicester, Noel (his 2nd wife) carried on with the farm before finally selling up in 1963. **Noel died in 1975** and is buried in **St Swithin's churchyard alongside FJ**.

FAMILY OF WILLIAM SPURRET FIELDING-JOHNSON

Great Grandfather	John Goode Johnson	1798 – 1872		
Great Grandmother	Eliza Fielding	1803 - 1878		
Grandfather	Thomas Fielding-Johnson	1828 - 1921		
Grandmother	Julia Christiana Stone	1855 – 1859		
Grandfather 2 nd Wife	Agnes Paget	Marr 1863		Died 1917
Father	Thomas Fielding-Johnson Junior	1856 – 1931		
Mother	Florence Lyne Paget	1856 – 1933		
Self	William Spurrett Fielding-Johnson	1892 - 1953		
1st wife	Gwendolen Edith Whetstone	Marr 1918	Div 1929	Died 1935 Road accident
Son	Hugh Henry Fielding – Johnson	1921 – 1945		Killed in action
2nd wife	Noel Earle nee Downes Martin	1900 – 1975		Married 1931