Wartime experiences of F/Lt Rhys Thomas 144642 DFC A brief biography by Bryan Thomas. April 2018

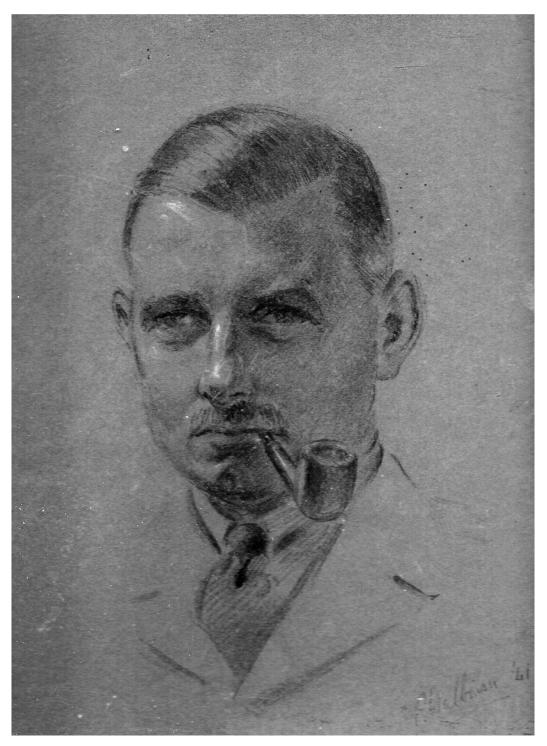


Figure 1 Rhys Thomas. A sketch by his brother-in-law Peter Walbourne

The majority of RAF Bomber Command pilots who flew Lancasters in WWII would have been born during or soon after the end of WWI. Rhys Thomas, however, was born in January 1911 and so was quite a bit older than the average WWII pilot which, I believe influenced his RAF career path.

His family originated in North Wales, but he was born in Essex and was trained as a cost clerk. In his early twenties he was a Special Constable in the Police and he volunteered for the RAF at the outbreak of WWII, becoming a member of the RAFVR. It is likely he started active duties sometime in 1941 and no doubt he spent time in the classroom and on the parade ground before taking his first flight in November of that year in a DH82 Tiger Moth with the rank of LAC. Five weeks later and with less than 13 hours flying experience he made his first solo flight.

Towards the end of March 1942 and with just over 100 hours in the air (and a few more on Link trainers) at No.9 EFTS he moved on to the next stage of his career as a trainee instructor, having passed out of pilot training with a "Well Above Average" assessment. His move to instructor was likely the result of his being older than average and, theoretically at least, able to command respect. So his next move was to No.5 SFIS in Perth, Scotland. Here he met his future wife Helen Lorimer who was a native of Edinburgh. Helen had joined the WAAF and was working at Leuchars collecting meteorological data. Rhys graduated as an instructor in May of 1942 with a total of 173 hours on both the Tiger Moth and the Miles Magister.



Figure 2 Rhys and Helen during their courting days

He began as an instructor in June 1942 at No. 14 EFTS Elmdon (Birmingham) and at the end of the year he finished at EFTS with about 550 hours flying time and had contributed to the basic training of forty or so young pilots. A typical day of instruction may involve five, ten or more flights of about 30 to 60 minutes each together with the associated classroom work which would have made some days quite long. At some time before September 1942 Rhys advanced to the rank of Sergeant

At the end of December 1942 Rhys went to No.2 FIS and commenced training on the Airspeed Oxford for six weeks, after which he returned to No.14 EFTS Elmdon, the Tiger Moth and more pupils, moving to No.4 EFTS in early June 1943.



Figure 3 Three of his navy pilot pupils

The next move also in June 1943 found him back in Oxfords, at Cranwell undertaking a wide variety of exercises. He finished on Oxfords on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August and was then posted to No.30 OTU but took time off to marry Helen Lorimer on the 24<sup>th</sup>.



Figure 4 Wedding day

On October 1<sup>st</sup> 1943 he started on Wellingtons at No.30 OTU doing everything from "circuits and bumps" to extended cross country trips lasting five or more hours, and the final flight of this period on November 22 was a Nickel (leaflet drop) on Nantes in occupied France, but such raids were not counted as "ops". During this period on Wellingtons he flew with a regular crew of four (O'Donohue, Herkes, Bunker and Elsbury) and he clocked up his thousandth flying hour.

Rhys then had 10 weeks leave before returning to flying with 1656 HCU in a Halifax. The initial "conversion" to heavies consisted of three flights under instruction (about 3½ hours) followed by 2½ hours as pilot, all on the same day and with his old Wellington crew. Five weeks later he is again flying the Halifax, but by now he has "crewed up" with the regular six that he was to fly his

operations with. These six were Beardmore, Cronk, Curtiss, Farmer, Stack and Wilkins. They signed out of 1656 HCU on May 6<sup>th</sup> and started at LFS (Lancaster Finishing School) on May 20<sup>th</sup>. Eight flights and just over 10 hours later they were deemed ready for operations.

Jun 1	EE193	crew	local	0.25 daylight
Jun 2	LL837	crew	local	1.20 daylight
Jun 2	LL837	crew	local	0.50 night
Jun 4	DV279	crew+2	air to sea firing	1.30 daylight
Jun 4	LL796	crew	cross country	3.55 night
Jun 5	LL478?	crew+Maxwell	Op1 Crisbecq Gun site D day	4.00? night
Jun 6	LL747	crew	Op2 Acheres Rly junc	4.20? night
Jun 9	LL455?	crew	Op3 Flers Aerodrome	4.45 night
Jun 10	LL796	crew	Op4 Acheres Rly junc	5.10 night
Jun 12	LM455 T	crew	Practice bombing, formation flying	1.40 daylight
Jun 12	LL796	crew	Op5 Gelsenkirchen Oil	3.15? night
Jun 14	LL838	crew	Fighter affiliation	1.20 daylight
Jun 14	LM455 T	crew	Op6 Le Harvre E boat	3.40 night
Jun 16	LM455 T	crew	Op7 Sterkrade Oil	4.10 night
Jun 23	LM455 T	crew	Op8 Saintes Rly junc	7.25 night
Jun 24	LM455 T	crew	Op9 Flers Rly junc	3.20 night
Jun 27	LM455 T	crew	Op10 Chateau Bernhapre BB site	3.45 night
Jun 30	LM455 T	crew	Op11 Oisemont-Neuvelle BB site	3.50 daylight
Jul 2	LM455 T	crew	Op12 Domleger BB site	3.35 daylight
Jul 4	LM455 T	crew	Op13 Orleans Rly junc	6.45 night
Jul 6	LL800	crew+1	Op14 Foret du Cruc BB site	3.45 daylight
Jul 7	LM455 T	crew	Op15 Caen Close support	3.50 daylight
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Jul 20	ND972 X	crew	Op16 Wizernes BB depot	3.15 daylight
Jul 23	ND972 X	crew	Formation flying	0.55 daylight
Jul 23	ND972 X	crew	Op17 Kiel Morale buster	5.05 night
Jul 24	ND972 X	crew	Op18 Stutgart	8.50 night
Jul 26	PD221 R	crew	Formation bombing and air to sea	1.40 daylight
Jul 28	ND972 X	crew	Op19 Stutgart Morale buster	8.25 night
Jul 30	ND972 X	crew	Op20 Cahagnes Very close support	4.30 daylight
Jul 31	ND972 X	crew	Op21 Le Havre Submarine	3.40 daylight
Aug 1	ND972 X	crew	Op22 Le Havre Submarine	3.25 daylight
Aug 3	ND972 X	crew	Op23 Trossy St Maxim BB depot	4.25 daylight
Aug 5	ND972 X	crew	Op24 Paulliac Oil	8.20 daylight
Aug 7	ND972 X	crew	Op25 Caen Close support	0.45 day, 3.20 night
Aug 10	ND972 X	crew	Op26 Paris Le Bourget	5.25 daylight

June 1<sup>st</sup> 1944 saw them at 550 Sqn North Killingholme, and all the flights that Rhys took part in are listed below

Aug 11 ND972 Xcrew+w/c SisleyOp27 Cambrai Rly junc4.45 daylightIt was during the above operation that X-X Ray was carrying the w/c and some top brass from otherservices. Confusion in the overcrowded cockpit led to mis-identification of the target and Cambraiwas hit instead of Douai. For this Rhys, somewhat unfairly received a rap over the knuckles and thecrew was ordered onto another mission the following day, making it three in three days andprobably interfering with their planned leave.

Aug 12 ME776crewBordeaux Submarine pens7.05 daylightDuring this two week interval Rhys was on leave to be with his wife Helen for the birth of their firstson, Michael in Edinburgh on the 22nd.

Aug 27 DV200	crew	Height test	2.45 daylight
In the next mission the	w/c is checking	up on the crew of X-X Ray. No doubt ma	king sure they got the
correct target.			
Aug 28 ND972 X	crew+w/c Sisle	yOp29 Wemors Capell BB site	3.20 daylight
Aug 30 ME776	crew	Bombing air to sea	0.50 daylight
Sep 15 ND972 X	crew	Bombing and local	1.20 daylight
Sep16 ND972 X	crew	Op30 Stenwisk Airfield	3.35 night
Sep 17 ND972 X	crew	Op31 Zouteland	2.25 daylight

One could say that, compared with crews who flew earlier in WWII, this was an easy tour. Many of Rhys's missions were over France, in daylight and relatively short in duration, but we should not forget that during the course of the war both sides made continuous advances in equipment, tactics and training so I am not going to compare a couple of hours over Berlin in 1942 to an hour over France in 1944. Certainly losses were fewer in 1944 and for that I am grateful.

Some memories of the time this crew spent with 550Sqn have been documented in the books "Five Fifty" by Patrick Otter (Willsons Group Services, 2017) and in "Men Of Air" by Kevin Wilson (Phoenix, 2007).

Rhys left 550 Sqn immediately after his last "op" and spent a few days with 92 GIF (presumably this is Glider Instruction Flight), and from then until the final entry in his log book he was with No.14 OTU and No.17 OTU in Wellingtons, his penultimate flight being a "Bullseye" (simulated bombing exercise) on September 6<sup>th</sup> 1945. He never piloted an aircraft again after leaving the RAF.

Rhys logged 1344.30 hours flying over a period of almost 4 years. He completed one tour of operations. The Lancaster used on the first few operations was appropriately "T Tommy", but it failed to return from an operation while Rhys and his crew were away on leave, so most operations were carried out in "X X-Ray". This latter Lancaster carried the nose art "Daily Express" recalling the (almost) daily delivery of explosives into various parts of Europe. X-Ray was struck off charge after the war finished.

During his period of RAF service Rhys met his future wife, was married immediately before commencing operations training, and their first son was born during his tour of operations. He finished his career with the rank of Flight Lieutenant and was awarded the DFC. He died on 30 March 1972 in Harlow, Essex.

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Figure 5 Service book



Figure 6 X-Ray and crew



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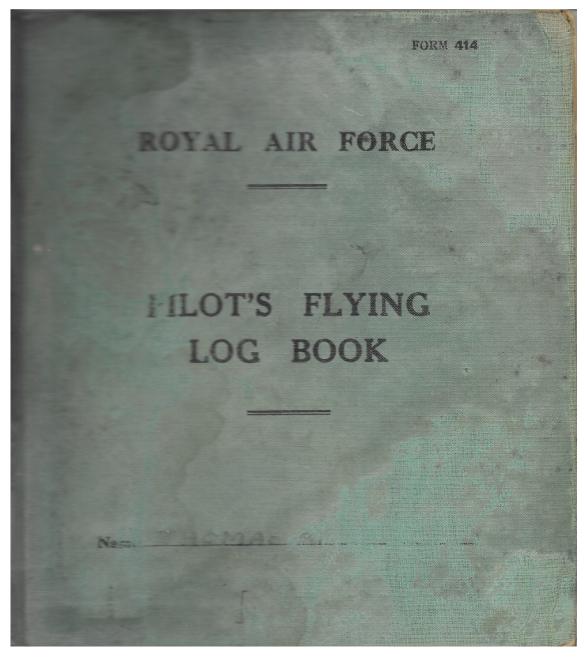


Figure 8 Rhys Thomas flying log while at 550 Sqn

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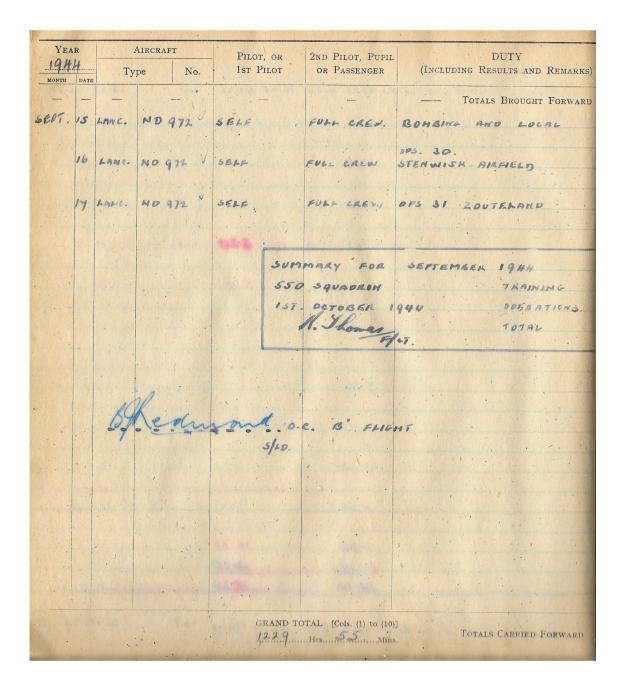
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(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	1st Pilot (9)	2ND PILOT (10)	(11)	DUAL (12)	Рпот (13)
25.40	651-45	10.30	49.20	65.50	139.35	11.20	112.05	118.05	-30		125.40	129-3
		Carlos Carlos		1.10.32		Marsh Marsh			1- 10	1.		
	A. A. All		airel	Server 19	3.50	And a state	1. A. M.		a strain			2
	•				10.00	<b>HARROW</b>		Contra The Ste			1 8 7 8 m B 4 m	Ball or
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		-	and the second second		
Year	AIRCRA	FT	Pilot, or	2ND PILOT, PUPIL	DUTY
1944 MONTH DATE	Туре	No	'1st Pilot	OR PASSENGER	(Including Results and Remarks)
	-	1004.	and the second		TOTALS BROUGHT FORWARD
AVG. 1	FANCASTER	ND 972	SELF	CREW 6	OPS. 22 LE HAVRE. (SUBMARINE)
3	LANCASTER	NP 972	SELF	CREW 6	OPS 23 TROSSY ST MAXIM. (8.8. DEPOT)
5	-ANCASTER	M0972	SELF	CREW 6	OPS 24 PAULLIAC. (OIL)
7	MACASTER	ND972	SPLA	слешь	OPS. 25 CONFRA CLOSE SUM
10	LANCASTER	N0972	SELF	CREW 6	OPS. 26 PARIS. (LE BOURCES)
	LANCASTER			CREW 6	OUS. 27 CAMBRAI (RLY SUNC)
	and a second	(man)	W/C SISLEY	and a second	
12 1	LANCASTER	ME 776	SELF	CREW 6	OPS: 28 BURDEAUX (SUB MARIN
27	LANCASTER	DV200	SELF	crev b	HEIGHT TEST
28	LANCASTER		SELF W/C SISLEY	CREW 6	DPS. 29 (WEMARS CAPELL) (D.B. SITE)
30	LANCASTER		and the super-s	CREU 6	BOMBING , AIR TO SEA
	any entities of	Sc	UMMARY	FOR AL	16UST 1944
this way former	and the strength	v	NIT 550	SQDH	TRAINING
1.4	P		ATE 1-9	A col.	OPERATIONS
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- 0.0 0	FLIGHT.		1	. 9	67.
			1	DFAL. [Cols. (1) to (10)	Tamira Commission Passas and

	INGLE-ENGI		GHT			MULTI-ENG	INE AIRCRA				INSTR/CLOUD FLYING (Incl. 1 cols. (1) to (10)	
DUAL	PILOT	DUAL			DAY	9.00		NIGHT	1 9.00	PASS- ENGER		to (10) ]
(1)	(2)	(8)	PILOT (4)	DUAL	PILOT	2ND PILOT	DUAL	1sr Pilor	2ND PILOT		DUAL	PILOT
75-40	651-45	10-30	149-20	(5) 65-50	(6) > 157-45	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
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					3-35		himmi and a	3.20				
					44.05			3.20				
5-40	51-45	10.30	49:20	65.50	201.50	11:20	12.05	143.45	.30		25.40	19.5
(1)	(2)	.(8)	(4)	(6)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(1))	(19)	(13)



DVAL (1) 75-49 6-	Риьот (2)	DUAL	GHT PTLOT (4)	DUAL (6) 65-50	DAY <sup>1</sup> sr <u>Phon</u> (6) <b>1.20</b> <b>2.55</b>	2xp Pior () () () () () () () () () () () () ()	Dval. (8) 17-05	NIGHT 1st Phot. (0) 1413-445 3-355	280 PHLOT (10) • 3 0	Tass- ENGER	cols. (1) DUAL (12)	CLOUD (Thet, in to (10)) Pror (13) 29-5
(1) 15.40 6.	(2)			(5)	(6) 1-20	Proof (7) ///-20	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
15.406.	(2) <b>59-45</b>		(3)		1.20	(i) 11-20		84 3-45	•30			(10)
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					2:55				n de José Animentes			
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					1:20 2.55 4.15			3-3,5 3-3,5				
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45.40 63	51.45	10.30		65.50	206.05	11.20	12.05	149.20	.30		25.40	29.50
(1)	(11)	(0)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(0)	(10)	(11)	(13)	(13)