

12 Squadron crew of Wellington II Z8397 Summer 1941.

In looking to piece together fragments of my Uncle Teddy's brief career in the RAF as well as his training as a Navigator in Wellington II Bomber planes, I was saddened to discover that little was known about his friends who formed the crew, not least because 12 Squadron, based at RAF Binbrook was decimated early in the war.

Such was their collective bravery that the whole squadron volunteered for a suicide mission which resulted in two officers getting the first Victoria Crosses of WW2.

These were men whose lives depended on how well his colleagues did their job so they'd need to be good mates and often, apart from flying together, they'd dine together, go out to the local pub in Binbrook, The Marquis of Granby, and in some case join their friends on dates with their girlfriends!

It seemed only right that they were remembered together too.

The twin- engined Wellington Bomber had two pilots. Teddy's pilots were P/O Frank Hugh Neville TOTHILL and P/O James Lennox Scott DUNLOP. This is what I was able to discover about their brief lives.

FRANK H N TOTHILL RAFVR 927584.



Initially I had trouble discovering any details of Frank's birth and I had no idea what he looked like, either, which led me to wonder if he may have been born abroad.

His gravestone at St John the Evangelist Churchyard in Moggerhanger, Bedfordshire told us he died on October 11th 1941 aged 25 and his parents were Francis James and Charity Wish Tothill.

His mother, a widow, died in June 1977 in Malvern and I discovered her on passenger lists between the UK and Ceylon. Similarly, I discovered that Frances, b. 1877 had been firstly a Lt in the Ceylon Planters Rifle Corps in 1912, rising to Capt of the Ceylon Defence Force by 1918 leaving every possibility that

Frank was born in Ceylon or Sri Lanka as it's now known, too.

It is fairly common for people in the armed services to send their children to boarding school while they are abroad and with a stroke of luck, I came across Frank's name listed in two old school cricket reports for 1933 and 1935 representing Blundells School in Devon.

The School Archivist was able to confirm that Frank's father worked for the Ceylon Government Office and his mother for the Colonial Treasury in Columbo and that Frank joined Blundell's School from Jan 1931 to summer 1935 in Petergate House, having previously been at Buckley Hall School in Kent.

In Frank's first year, he played cricket in the junior house cricket and scored 45 out of their 61 runs and earned one match at senior level too. The following year, he played in junior rugby competition progressing to senior level the same year. By 1933, he was Captain of junior rugby and awarded his Blundell's 2nd XI cap and played one match in 1st XI. It was noted also that Frank passed his written exam for the School's Officer Training Corps.

Autumn 1933 saw Frank playing for Blundell's 2nd XV at rugby swiftly being picked for the 1st team. By Summer 1935 he captained the Petergate Senior Rugby Team.

His leadership skills and prowess on the pitch weren't his only achievement as I gather he also was in the School production of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar playing the part of Lucilius, a General. All skills which helped him in his later career in the RAF.

I was shown some School cricket photos in which Frank was pictured but unidentified. By an amazing stroke of luck. I was able to cross reference these with a photo I had of my Uncle Teddy which I thought was in an Operational Training Unit but now know that it is a rather precious 12 Squadron photo taken at RAF Binbrook in the summer of 1941. By measuring eyes and looking at bone structure, I revealed Frank's face after 70 years!

After working briefly as a Customs and Excise Manager, Frank trained to be a pilot in the RAF . During his lifetime he clocked up 380 hours of solo flying as well as 125 hours of night time flying.

He took to the air at RAF Binbrook as 2nd pilot in Wellington II Z5367 on 17th June 1941 bombing at Boulogne followed swiftly by the heavily defended Cologne on the 21st.

He first piloted my uncle Teddy on 2nd August 1941 in Wellington II 5401 to Cherbourg. Together, they completed 10 missions. Frank had previously had to control a Wellington Bomber after a fault developed engine trouble on a flight to Stettin which caused him to turn back to base before he reached the Danish coast.

On his final mission, Frank almost made it. Piloting Wellington II Z8397 on a mission to bomb Cologne Railway Station, and contrary to what the history books tell us, an eyewitness on the same mission, P/O James Douglas McKnight of the RCAF wrote to me granddad to say that after successfully dropping the bomb load, Frank's Wellington was hit by heavy flak, killing my Uncle Teddy, the navigator, at his desk, outright with a head wound. But he reported that the port engine was damaged and that Frank had to pilot the plane on one engine, losing fuel as well as the use of landing gear back to England. Unluckily for the rest of the crew, now without their navigator and in a plane difficult to steer as well as almost complete cloud cover and a blackout, Frank was barely able to fly the Wellington above sea level before it crashed into the foot of the only cliff face on the Norfolk coast, at Caister on Sea killing them all. Again, in a departure from the written accounts, it was precisely because of the cliff being a natural defence point that there was no need for Land Mines on the beach as I heard from a gentleman Peter Tennant, who played on that same beach as a child during the war and whose father, Edgar the local ARP warden, together with the local policeman helped recover the airmen's bodies which I was reliably informed were intact, from the beach for identification, which would have been impossible at the time had they been blown up by a land mine.

Heartbreakingly for Frank's mother, Charity, she lost her husband, Francis on the 3rd August 1941 and her son, Frank barely two months later on 12th October 1941.

P/O JAMES SCOTT LENNOX DUNLOP RCAF R67572.



Originally born in Stevenston, Scotland on 19th March 1918, Jamie arrived at Niagara Falls on 3rd September 1934 aged 16, Fair haired, grey eyed with a fair complexion and 5ft 10" with his mum, Mary and sister, Isabella to join his father, Alexander who was already living there as a Methodist preacher. Alexander was aged 74 at the outbreak of ww2 and it was perhaps because of the fact he was an elderly parent that I got the impression that Jamie was quite a serious young man but most certainly a clever one.

I discovered he was educated at Bethany College and subsequently the University of Chicago where he was studying to become a brain surgeon. At his Niagara Falls High School, he had

been captain of the debating team for three years and President of the Forensic Society. It's no wonder then, that in his final letter to his parents, composed four months before his actual death, he shows incredible maturity for a 23 year old Christian who recognises that it is a duty to his Country, humanity and himself that he takes life endangering risks to stop the evil regime of the Nazi movement. He asks his parents to be proud of the fact he has the chance to sacrifice his life for the liberty of others having briefly lived in a free country itself and experiencing liberties others lack. He writes;

"All men must learn to live at peace with his fellow men and to grant all, regardless of station or birth, creed or colour, the same rights and privileges which he himself deserves or enjoys.."

He acknowledges the fact he'll never achieve his ambition to become a brain surgeon but that others will take his place. As a Christian, it is hard to fight in war without the realisation that evil must be overcome for good to prevail thereafter, conceding;

" I hate killing and suffering with all my soul and yet I have killed and caused suffering. If I am to be excused, it must be on the grounds that I killed the few to save the many. Nazism has, and would continue to destroy truth and independent thought....if there is no thought there is no freedom, no progress, no life."

Jamie's words resonate with us all today too and have formed the basis of several Remembrance Day tributes over more than 75 years after they were first penned.

Jamie was engaged at the time of his death to a young lady in the ATS called Delice de Wolf who was born in London on 30th April 1920. Described as a character, mischievous and full of life, it was Del who forwarded my Uncle's last letter to my grandad when it was returned with her correspondence to Jamie by their colleague, P/O James Douglas McKnight R68201.

Del went on to marry another airman, Thomas Wilby and enjoyed 61 years of marriage to him, living in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada but poignantly kept Jamie's medal in her jewellery box showing the importance of keeping memories alive.