

Obituary: Harold Yeoman

Harold Yeoman was born at 13 Westoe Avenue, South Shields on June 22, 1921. In 1927 he commenced his education at Mowbray Road Infants School and in 1932 was one of 12 boys awarded a free scholarship to South Shields Boys High School.

In 1936, Harold transferred to the new Boys High School at Harton. Whilst there he played rugby and cricket for the school, and it was reported that he was an accomplished spin bowler. In 1937, he was awarded the School Leaving Certificate in eight subjects, doing particularly well in languages, Latin being his favourite subject.

During the 1930s Harold joined the Westoe Rugby Club and later, whenever he was on leave from the RAF, he would play for the team. On November 8, 1937, he was appointed to the post of assistant trainee in South Shields County Borough Council's Weights and Measures Dept.

RAF career

Following the outbreak of war, Harold enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve in 1940. He was selected for pilot training at the age of 19. After initial training he was posted to RAF Sywell to commence his elementary training in Tiger Moths (biplanes) and was paid £5.4s a fortnight.

After training he was transported to Canada on a troop ship. Following a period of quarantine in Nova Scotia, he embarked on a rail journey to RCAF Station Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, to be trained as a fighter pilot in Harvard. It was in the Harvard that Harold learned the skill of night flying, which was to serve him well in Europe.

After gaining his wings Harold returned to the UK and decided, as he was not particularly good at aerobatics, to opt for bomber command. Eventually he was posted to 12 Squadron, RAF Binbrook, Lincolnshire, from where he carried out all his operational flying as pilot officer in Wellington Mark 2 Bombers.

On Harold's first mission shortly after take-off the starboard engine caught fire and he was forced to turn back. With the help of his co-pilot he crash-landed the aircraft near St Albans.

Harold was particularly proud of a successful low-level raid he made on the Renault factory in Paris, where armoured vehicles were being manufactured for the German army. On another memorable night he carried out two separate raids on Essen. Being in the Ruhr Valley, Essen was heavily defended and the squadron suffered many losses. The railway terminal in Cologne was another successful night raid.

Altogether Harold took part in 14 night raids on the continent before being grounded due to illness. A relief pilot was drafted in to replace him and that night his aircraft, W5570H-H, took off to carry out a further bombing raid on Essen. It failed to return to base and no trace of the aircraft or its six crew has ever been found. Harold never got over the loss of his crew and for the remainder of his life was wracked with personal guilt that he was not the pilot that fateful night, feeling that he had let them down. He spent a number of years in vain trying to discover their fate and after the war contacted their families, some of whom lived in Australia and Canada.

In 1943, Harold was posted as an intelligence officer to RAF Linton-on-Ouse and from there to RAF Brighton, near Selby. It is here that he met his future wife, Joan, who was a WAAF Sgt. Watchkeeper.

By this time Harold had been promoted to Flight Lieutenant, and after a further posting to RAF Tuddenham he was sent by SE Asia Command to RAF Butterworth, Penang, where he served as station adjutant. During the journey he embarked in Rangoon on a small paddle steamer, and it was here he first became acquainted with the music of Elgar, which he heard being played on a wind-up gramophone. Upon enquiring with the owner of the 78rpm shellac record, he discovered it was the 'Nimrod' movement from Elgar's Enigma Variations. As a result of hearing this Harold developed a love of classical music, which remained with him for the rest of his life.

During his time in Penang, the Japanese formally surrendered and Harold was drafted in to participate in the subsequent war trials. One particular case was of a Malayan collaborator named Carlos da Silva, who was successfully prosecuted for causing the deaths of many locals.

Post-war

Following his demobilisation in 1946, Harold returned to South Shields and resumed his professional training. He qualified as Inspector of Weights and Measures in 1947 and continued his work with the council until transferring to Tyne and Wear in 1976 as a District Trading Standards Officer, before eventually retiring in 1986.

Harold was held in high regard by his colleagues as a true professional, demonstrating both skill and integrity. Those who worked with him will be forever grateful for his help and guidance.

Harold married Joan on October 12, 1946, in Worthing. They were both passionate about listening to classical music. They also enjoyed walking, and when they visited Joan's family in Worthing they spent many hours walking the South Downs. Harold and Joan did not have children, and Joan passed away in May, 1985. Harold had one brother, Arthur.