

A dedication to Rohan Amerasekera

AVM Ekanayake Edward (Rohan) Amerasekera DFC & Bar. R.Cy.A.F.

By Charles M. Amerasekera. OMRS # 4842

Seven years ago when I first started collecting medals, my father, whose group of medals was the first in my collection, said "You should ask Aunty Aloma for Uncle Rohan's Medals. He won the DFC twice in the last war." Fancy that, if not for my hobby I would never have known that my father's relative was a war hero. After doing some research and with the help of Mrs. Aloma Amerasekera and the offices of the RAF, London and the SLAF, Colombo, and the No. 158 and 640 Squadron Associations, I have pieced together his story.

Ekanayake Edward Amerasekera, born on May 21, 1916, was one of the seven of Edward Snr and Joslina Amerasekera. Orphaned at the age of four, he was brought up by his eldest sister. He received his education at Kingswood College in Kandy, Wesley College in Colombo and later at the Pembroke Academy. Early in his life an astrologer had predicted that one day he will be a great commander, but young Edward could not figure out how that would come about.

At the outbreak of the war Edward joined the Army, but his sister objected and somehow got him out before he was shipped overseas. He, then, secretly left for England to join the RAF.

He enlisted at Euston on September 30, 1941 as an Aircraftman 2nd class RAFVR with the service number 1396932. He was reinstated as U/T Observer on November 3, 1941 and posted to 5 ITW on December 13, 1941. On February 20, 1942 he was promoted to Leading Aircraftman and was posted to 1 Empire Air Navigation School on May 2, 1942, followed by a posting to the 1 Advanced Flying Unit on September 26, 1942.

On November 30, 1942 he was remustered as an Air Navigator, promoted to Temporary Sergeant and posted to the 10 OTU in Abingdon, Berkshire, where he 'crewed up' with Sgt. Stan Emms' crew.

They were sent on April 27, 1943 to the 1652 HCU to convert from Wileys to the heavier Halifax bombers and on June 13, 1943 they got their first squadron posting to No. 158 Squadron based at Lissett, Yorkshire.

This squadron was equipped with Halifax II's and engaged in strategic bombing duties. Whilst with this squadron, on July 29, 1943 he was commissioned as a Pilot Officer, General Duties (Navigator) Branch RAFVR with the Service number 155926.

Personnel Records at RAF Innsworth show, incorrectly, that he was transferred on September 4, 1943 to No. 35 'Madras Presidency' Squadron at Gravelly, and he remained there until December 23, 1943. No. 158 Squadron microfilm shows "...13 June 1943 arrived with crew ex-1652 Conversion Unit. September 1943 Posted to No. 35 Squadron."

No. 35 Squadron's records show "Amerasekera posted in W.E.F. 29 July 1943 from No. 158 Squadron. Posted back to 158 Squadron 4 October 1943."

These transfers seem to be only on paper as P/O Amerasekera flew 20 missions continuously with Sgt. Emms' crew from 24/25 June 1943 to 26 November 1943 (Amerasekera and crew did train with No. 35 Squadron in September 1943). These missions were flown just before the end of the Battle of the Ruhr, through the Battle of Hamburg and at the beginning of the Battle of Berlin, and included targets such as Wuppertal, Gelsenkirchen, Köln, Aachen, Hamburg, Peenemünde, Berlin, Mannheim and Monchen-Gladbach. Fourteen of these missions were flown on the aircraft HR755 NP-X (Xpress Delivery).

The crew consisted of F/Sgt. Stanley W. Emms (Pilot), P/O E. E. Amerasekera (Navigator), F/O P. H. Ackling (Bomb Aimer), W/O Geoffrey S. Almond (Wireless Operator), Sgt. D. G. Cree (Mid-Upper Gunner), P/O John McGuire (Rear Gunner) and Sgt. W. S. H. Strong (Flight Engineer). Emms received the DFM, Almond was awarded the DFM and Bar (One of 60 issued for World War II) and McGuire rose to the rank of Wing Commander, receiving the OBE and the DFC. All three live in retirement today.

Amerasekera was promoted to Flying Officer on January 29, 1944 and was awarded the DFC (L/G February 15, 1944). The Citation is as follows - "This officer has displayed a high degree of courage and determination in navigating his aircraft to the target and back, often under great difficulties. In November 1943 whilst on a flight to a distant target, the oxygen supply failed early in the sortie. P/O. Amerasekera, though suffering from lack of oxygen and extreme cold continued his duties and the mission was successfully completed. This officer has proved himself to be a navigator of outstanding ability."

On August 16, 1944 he joined the No. 640 Squadron which had formed in January 1944 at Leconfield from the 'C' Flight of his old squadron (No. 158), now equipped with Halifax III's. Initially he flew eight missions with F/O Fred J. Papple (Pilot), F/Sgt S. I. McLean (Bomb Aimer), Sgt. R. G. Gunstone (Wireless Operator), Sgt. T. W. Dakin (Mid-Upper Gunner), Sgt. J. W. Burns (Rear Gunner) and Sgt. MacDonald (Flight Engineer), replacing their regular navigator who had been injured. The targets included Gelsenkirchen, Boulogne, Neuss and Calais.

When Papple's crew completed their tour, Amerasekera flew one mission with P/O F. W. Mills and crew (on November 29, 1944 to Essen) and then 'crewed up' with F/O A. J. "Bert" Jeeves (Pilot), F/O M. J. Cruthers (Bomb Aimer), F/Sgt J. Sydall (Wireless Operator), Sgt. R. E. Draper (Mid-Upper Gunner), Sgt. F. Smith (Rear Gunner) and P/O W. H. Harding (Flight Engineer), to fly another 22 missions from December 5/6, 1944 to March 19, 1945. This crew flew most of their operations in the aircraft PN182 N-Nuts, and their targets included Essen, Hannover, Saarbrücken, Gelsenkirchen, Düsseldorf and Dortmund.

RAF records show that F/O Amerasekera DFC ended his tour with No. 640 Squadron on October 12, 1944 but actually he continued to fly until March 1945 with the permission of the C.O., in order to fly fifty-two missions (two tours).

Amerasekera was back with the No. 158 Squadron from May 6, 1945 to August 14, 1945. Here on July 29, 1945 he was promoted to Flight Lieutenant and was awarded the Bar to the DFC (L/G November 30, 1945), with the following citation - "This officer has completed his second tour of operational duty. In December 1944, whilst on route to Essen, his aircraft was engaged by

searchlights and heavy anti-aircraft fire was encountered causing severe damage to the aircraft. Despite the fact that shell splinters penetrated his compartment, F/O Amerasekera took evasive action and completed his allotted task. His other targets have included the Ruhr Valley, Chemnitz and Hanover. On all occasions, F/O Amerasekera has set a fine example by his tenacity and devotion to duty."

In addition to the DFC and Bar, he received the 1939-45 Star, the Air Crew Europe Star with the France and Germany Bar, the Defence Medal and the War Medal. He was back in Ceylon in Early 1946 and served at RAF Kandy, Ceylon until August 1946. He was released from service on July 20, 1946 and his last day of service being November 3, 1946. He resigned his commission on November 4, 1946 with permission to retain the rank of Flight Lieutenant.

All his surviving crew mates and Bomber Command colleagues remember him with great affection. Ian Roberts of the No. 640 Squadron remembers him in his article "Leconfield's League of Nations" as "Handsome and dapper, with hair swept back and parted precisely down the middle, Amerasekera hailed from Ceylon. He completed 52 Operations, requesting permission from the C.O. to stay with Jeeves' crew in order to do so. He flew 22 operations with the New Zealander Jeeves and 8 with Fred Papple. I remember him most vividly with red nose and red cheeks as he was rolled in the snow during on of the inevitable snowball fights between the sergeants' and the officers' messes. After the war he completed a pilots' course and eventually rose to be Chief of Air Staff of the Sri Lankan Air Force. He was an unforgettable man."

In a later interview, speaking of his RAF days, Amerasekera recalled "It was a wonderful experience; we simply lived in them forgetting everything else."

Upon his return to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon), Amerasekera changed his middle name from Edward to Rohan. His service record in the Department of Civil Aviation and the Royal Ceylon Air Force reflects this change.

He joined the Department of Civil Aviation on August 20, 1946 as the Assistant Aerodrome Officer (Flying Control) at the Colombo Airport in Ratmalana, and on October 1, 1950, he was promoted to

Acting Airport Controller. He left this Department on May 15, 1951 to join the newly formed Royal Ceylon Air Force under the Commandership of G/Cpt. Graham Clerke Bladon OBE, an officer seconded from the RAF.

On May 15, 1951 he was commissioned as Pilot Officer (Service number 01002) and promoted to the rank of Squadron Leader with effect from the same date.

While in R.Cy.A.F. he attended the following Courses - No. 67 Officers Advanced Training School Course at RAF School of Administration, Bircham Newton (January 5 to February 27, 1953), No. 24 (A) Long Photographic Intelligence Course (Strategical Wing) at RAF Wyton (March 2 to April 2, 1953), No. 11 Staff College Course at RAF Staff College, Andover (April 1953 to March 1954) and the Senior Officers Course at the Imperial Defence College, London (January 4 to December 15, 1961).

On October 1, 1955 he was promoted to the rank of Wing Commander, followed by promotions to the ranks of Group Captain (July 1, 1959), Temporary Air Commodore (November 13, 1962), Air Commodore (January 1, 1964) and Air Vice-Marshal (October 1, 1967).

Rohan Amerasekera held the following appointments in the RCyAF - Senior Air Staff Officer, Air Force HQ, Colombo from May 14 1955 to May 21, 1955; Chief of Staff, Air Force HQ, Colombo from May 21, 1955 to December 17, 1960; Senior Air Staff Officer, HQ Unit, Colombo from April 22, 1962 to November 13, 1962.