

Pilot Officer Thomas George Cottier RCAF

PER ARDUA AD ASTRA
“Through Difficulties To The Stars”

During WW11 over 55,000 BOMBER COMMAND AIRMEN ascended way beyond the stars – As we grow older they remain forever young.

My Tribute however is written especially about Pilot Officer Thomas George Cottier RCAF and dedicated to the late Edna Mouncey.

Resting in Barton Cemetery, just a few steps along the path from the War Memorial, on the right hand side, is a young airman of Bomber Command, Pilot Officer Thomas George Cottier aged 27 years.

I knew nothing of this young man until a friend told me, when I moved to Barton 18 months ago, about Edna Mouncey (nee Such) who as a teenager represented the RED CROSS at the Officer's funeral and from that day onwards attended to his grave until she died a few years ago, having given 55 years devoted service to a part Canadian airman she didn't know – she hadn't even seen a photo of him. Edna's husband Gilbert still calls to pay respects when he visits her grave, carrying on Edna's long tradition.

Thomas George Cottier was born in Winnipeg on the 3rd September 1915. His Father, Thomas, had gone out to Canada from BRIDE in the Isle of Man in about 1912 and eventually married a Canadian girl, Sadie.

After the death of his Mother, whilst still a schoolboy, Tom returned to the Isle with his father. He attended the Ramsey Grammar School and his ambition was to become a schoolteacher. As far as I am able to ascertain Tom gain his degree at an English University and thence taught at several schools, Swinehurts, Laxey, Sulby and the Albert Road Elementary School, Ramsey.

After the outbreak of WW11 Tom went to Canada to join the RCAF and to train as a Bomber Pilot. He returned to England in May 1941 having been awarded his wings and a commission. Some little time later Pilot Officer Cottier, together with a

complement of 50 other Officers, was invited to dine with the King and Queen, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret Rose at Windsor Castle.

Tom took part in several operational sorties to Brest and flew from Mildenhall Suffolk with 419 Squadron. It was the third RCAF bomber squadron overseas. Their motto was "BEWARE OF THE MOOSE".

On the night of the 15th January 1942 Pilot Officer Cottier flying Wellington bomber Z1145 VR-A took off at 1810 hours. His crew of six consisted of Co-pilot Flt. Sgt. L.C. Powell, Sgt. A.E. Cox, Sgt. T.N. Pugh, Sgt. J.A.H. Lucas and Sgt. C.H. Lomas, who was substituting for a Sgt. Williamson.

From various other bases 96 aircraft in all flew on the Hamburg raid. Returning home Cottier's plane ran out of fuel, both engines shut off at almost the same time and the Wellington crashed at 0210 hours into the sea off Spurn Point. I believe that Tom's wristwatch had stopped at 3.15am.

The aircraft took about 2½ minutes to sink and there were only 2 survivors, Sgt. Cox and Sgt. Lucas. Cox managed, in a strong southeasterly gale, to get into the dinghy and to haul Lucas aboard. They were picked up about an hour or so later by HMS GOATFELL an anti aircraft ship. Both airmen suffered minor bruises and abrasions and were taken to the Naval hospital in Grimsby. As far as I was able to find out these 2 young men survived the War. It is thought the other 4 airmen died on impact. Pilot Officer Lomas and Sgt. Pugh still remain in the Deep and are both remembered on the Runnymede Memorial, Egham, Surrey. The two survivors said the plane had not been damaged in any way by enemy action, they had simply run out of fuel. The real tragedy was that they were so near to home. Fifty-two crews claimed to have bombed in poor visibility. Overall however the raid on the primary target, shrouded in cloud, was a disappointment to 419 Squadron and sadly they had lost so many crew members. Two Wellingtons and a Hampden failed to return and 8 planes crashed in England. Flt. Sgt. Powell was found in the River Humber on the 4th April 1942 and Pilot Officer Cottier's body was recovered in New Holland Dock on the 29th April. Flt. Sgt. Lloyd Charles Powell was buried in the RAF section of St. Mary's Churchyard at Brandesburton, East Yorkshire. It is in the care of the War Graves Commission and just recently new rose bushes were planted. I was assured by Rev. Ian Kitchen that Lloyd's grave is

in immaculate condition.

The funeral of Pilot Thomas George Cottier took place at St. Peter's Church, Barton. The Service, his first was conducted by Hugh Varah, brother of Chad the founder of the Samaritans. St Peter's is now under the care of the English Heritage.

It was sad that Tom and Lloyd could not have been buried together as they were both born in Manitoba within 2 years of each other – Tom in Winnipeg and Lloyd came from Virden.

Let us not forget these brave airmen and all those Servicemen and Women who died to keep the British Isles and the World free. We owe them a debt that can never ever be repaid.

As an addition to this Tribute, I would like to mention that next to Tom's grave is a young sailor's, AB E.H. Windle, HMS Bideford, 27th February 1943 aged 22 years. His Mother had said at the time "whatever we do for Edmund we will also do for Tom – he is somebody's son!" and so another tradition was begun in '43 that still exists to this very day. Each month Edmund's sister makes a round journey of over 20 miles to bring flowers and when I called just after Christmas to pay respects, two identical Holly Wreaths were laid almost side by side on the two graves. It leaves one lost for words.....

Mrs Windle must have been a beautiful and compassionate Mother, as in her own sorrow she could think of another young serviceman.

By Mrs. J. Holmes