

WW2 REMEMBERED

FLYING OFFICER RALPH NATHANIEL SMITH

Ralph was born in the first quarter of 1923 in South Woodford, East London, his parents being recorded on the electoral roll at 183 Maybank Road. He was the youngest of five sons of Arthur George Smith and Blanche Edith, nee Edwards. His parents married in Lambeth, London in 1908. His father was a police constable with Metropolitan Police and the family appears to have moved several times with the job.

According to the 1939 register his mother was living in Great Chesterford at 1 Council Houses, (on the Walden Road) and his father with another son Harry in Chigwell, though both were living in Great Chesterford by the end of the war. Ralph may still have been at school in 1939 working to obtain his School Certificate at 16 or a Higher School Certificate at 18, though as the school-leaving age was only 15, he may have been working.

The 1939 Register was designed to capture the details of every member of the civilian population on 29 September 1939. The information was used to produce identity cards, ration books and to administer conscription and the direction of labour. As the 1911 Census is the latest available for public viewing, the Register is an invaluable historian's tool to find out where people lived.

Ralph enlisted in the RAF Volunteer Reserve with service number 185078, possibly at the earliest age on his 18th birthday in 1941. We do not have the actual record of Ralph's wartime service, but working with the few known facts and comparing his with other known service records (my father also joined the RAFVR as a wireless operator/air gunner around the same time) we can outline Ralph's probable path.

By 1941 most aircrew training was undertaken abroad in Canada, the United States, Southern Africa or Australia, as aircrew training in Britain during the early war years had



incurred significant losses due to weather and enemy action.

Ralph was selected as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner and after basic training (square-bashing), W/O specialist training course (28 weeks), gunnery training, 2 long sea voyages (some like my father sailing on the Queen Elizabeth) and aircraft familiarisation it could take over 2 years before posting to an operational squadron. After Ralph completed his training he would have been promoted to Sergeant and was posted to 271 Squadron, probably in August 1943. According to the London Gazette he was promoted again to Flight Sergeant in August 1944.

271 Squadron had a strange history in the early years of the war flying many types of aircraft, many obsolete like the Handley Page Harrow (a phased-out 1930s bomber) on various transport, ambulance and mail carrying duties. They supported the British Expeditionary Force in France and evacuated the wounded before the evacuation at Dunkirk. They flew mail services to Iceland and moved RAF squadrons around the country during the Battle of Britain.



As the balance of the war began to shift at the end of 1942, the Allies began planning offensive operations and as a consequence 271 Squadron were selected to combine with airborne troops. During the following year they carried out numerous exercises with these troops both to give soldiers flying experience whilst at the same time improving the navigational skills of the aircrews. The Squadron became a part of Transport Command



when it formed on 25 March 1943, and later that year began to replace most of their Handley Page Harrows with the modern Douglas Dakotas, a greatly superior aircraft for the airborne role. The squadron flying from RAF Down Ampney, Gloucestershire provided twenty-two glider-tugs on D-Day (used to carry part of the 3rd Parachute Brigade). Ralph probably flew in this operation. The squadron was also part of the massive airlift to Arnhem in September 1944, and again during Montgomery's carefully planned crossing of the Rhine in March 1945.

Ralph probably was commissioned as a Temporary Pilot Officer during 1944 and his promotion was confirmed as Flying Officer (this is the RAF equivalent to Lieutenant) in the 13 April 1945 London Gazette. Later that year he married Ruth Olive Ellingford, a bakery shop assistant of Brentwood, Essex. According to Ralph's probate record, their home was in South Woodford at the time of his death.

At the end of the war the squadron moved to RAF Broadwell, Oxfordshire and was used to fly regular passenger flights to and from Germany, Italy, Greece and sometimes as far as Pakistan, continuing until the civil airlines were able to fill the gap. On the 15 January 1946 he was wireless operator in a 4-man crew on Dakota no. KN557 flying from Palermo to London with 22 English servicemen believed to have been ex-POWs from Japan. Tragically its position was fixed incorrectly by ground control in Malta and the pilot given a wrong course, leading the aircraft to crash in poor visibility in falling snow in a mountainous area 8 kilometres (5 miles) south of Marseilles. Only two people survived the impact: all of the crew were killed,

Ralph was buried in Mazargues War Cemetery, Marseilles, France along with the other crew and passengers. Ralph's headstone is inscribed "In loving memory of my beloved husband, some day we will meet again".



A cross and plaque were erected at the crash site in the Vallon Miougranier

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His father had died the month before on 16 December 1945 aged 62, and was buried at All Saints, Great Chesterford to be followed by his brother Eric, who had survived the war as a Japanese POW, but had died 2 months later in an accident. His mother Blanche (died 2 October 1947 aged 61) was later buried in the same family plot. His widow Ruth is believed to have died in Colchester in 2001.