ENGLISH, Thomas Henry

Sergeant, 524025
9 Squadron, Royal Air Force
Place of Birth: Gateshead
Date of Death: Monday 18th December 1939
Lost over the North Sea
Memorial: Runnymede
Aged 22 years



Thomas Henry English was born in Gateshead on 7th December 1917, the second son of Thomas and Florence English nee Moore. His father, a 2nd Lt with the 12th West Yorkshire Regiment during WW1 had been gassed and although he had been unable to work well since, he was employed as Deputy Overman, a high-ranking official, in a local coalmine. In this role, he would have been responsible for everything underground, visiting the workings every morning to make observations on the air currents and other issues. Tom had an elder brother, Ralph, and two sisters Jessie and Jean.

The North of England suffered greatly during the Depression and in the street where Tom lived, few men had a job and there was little hope of one either. Probably the lack of jobs and poverty made Tom choose a career in the RAF, joining as a Wireless Operator.



In the spring of 1939, a few months before the outbreak of war, he was stationed with No 9 Squadron at RAF Stradishall as a wireless operator.

The RAF were taking delivery of new Wellington bomber aircraft so members of the squadron would have been heavily involved in training exercises. It is easy to imagine the excitement of flying these brand new aircraft.

It was usual for the airmen at Stradishall to be bussed into Haverhill on a Saturday evening and it was on the last Saturday in March 1939 that Tom went to a dance held at

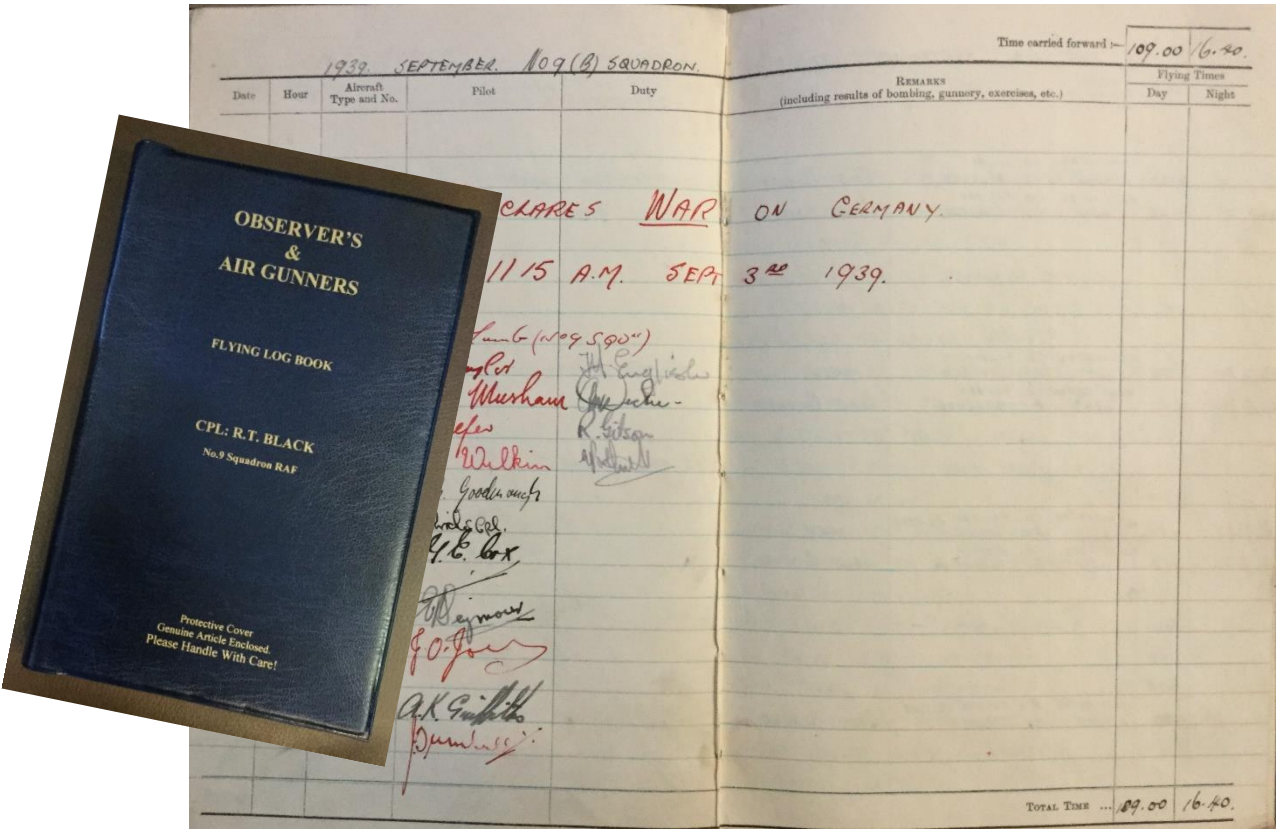
Haverhill Town Hall. It was there that he met a twenty four year old Haverhill schoolteacher, Doris Ellen Bigmore. (Doris is pictured above).

From May to July 1939 Tom was posted to an RAF station at Hamble Water near Southampton to complete a navigation training course. Doris's brother, John, lived in London so she visited him on alternate weekends and would meet Tom under the clock in Charing Cross Station.

Political unrest and fear of war continued in Europe and at the end of his course in late July, just a few hours after arriving for a short break with his family in Northumberland, Tom received a telegram which read "Leave cancelled, return to your squadron immediately." He had been expecting Doris to join him so he could introduce her to his family but this was not to be.

In August 1939, No 9 Squadron moved from Stradishall to RAF Honington.

Another man with Haverhill links served alongside Tom. He was Reginald Black who was married to Doris's next-door neighbour in The Pightle, who was also called Doris.
This page from Reginald's logbook records the day that war was declared.
Members of the section signed their names and Tom's signature can be seen at the top of the second column.



On 4th September 1939, the day after Britain declared war on Germany, Wellington aircraft and

crews from No 9 Squadron, now relocated to RAF Honington, were the first to hit the enemy. Six planes took part in the first raid of World War 2 against the German battleships at Brunsbuttel.

For the first four months of the war, No. 9 Squadron conducted anti-shipping sweeps over the North Sea, taking steadily increasing losses. In contrast to their squadron motto 'Per noctum volamus' – (Throughout the night we fly) the missions were often flown in daylight hours. Whilst Tom realised that the Wellingtons were vulnerable as they were easy targets in the light, duty came above everything else.



No 3 Section of 9 (B) Squadron, Honington October 1939. Tom is seated 3rd from left. Next to him is Reginald Black, the owner of the logbook and beside Reginald is JoshTurnbull, the man who would be Tom's best man.



No. 9. Squadron Wellingtons 1A

There was little respite from the action but on Saturday, 4th November 1939, Tom and Doris married at the Register Office, Bury St Edmunds with just two of Tom's friends, Josh & Betty Turnbull, as witnesses. Tom was on standby that evening so reluctantly he had to return to base straight after their marriage leaving his new wife to spend the night alone in the Everards Hotel. Knowing he would be entitled to some leave over Christmas they planned their honeymoon for then.

On 18th December 1939, just days before their planned honeymoon, Tom took part in an operation involving aircraft from three bomber squadrons. Wellington N2939, with Tom on board, took off at 9.00 hours along with eight other No 9 Squadron Wellingtons from RAF Honington. They were to carry out reconnaissance in the Schilling/Jade Road and to attack any battleships or cruisers in Wilhelmshaven. Unknown to the bomber force the Germans had been tracking them for many miles using the experimental early warning Freya Radar System and this information was passed to Luftwaffe fighters.

At 12.30 hours and just south of Wilhelmshaven they were attacked by approximately forty enemy aircraft and this attack continued until they reached Wilhelmshaven when additional heavy Anti-Aircraft fire was encountered from both shore based batteries and Naval vessels.

No 9 Squadron lost five Wellington aircraft in this action which was known as the Battle of Heligoland Bight. Tom was one of 24 men who lost their lives that day.

It is thought that his Wellington was shot down or hit by flak and lost in the North Sea off the coast of Germany. The bodies of the crew were never recovered. After this, daylight RAF raids were suspended and crews were trained for night flying.

Doris spent the worst Christmas of her life, her husband Tom was missing presumed killed. Their best man, Josh Turnbull, also lost his life in another of the Wellingtons that failed to make it back to RAF Honington. Reginald Black who was in Josh's crew was also lost.



Tom is remembered with honour on the Runnymede Memorial, pictured left, along with his friends.

Finally, in 2016, as the result of efforts by the Haverhill Branch of the Royal British Legion, Thomas Henry English's name was added to the WW2 Memorial Plaque near to the War Memorial Cross in Haverhill cemetery.



Reginald Black, like Tom, had met his wife at one of the dances held in Haverhill Town Hall. Reginald's wife who was also called Doris (nee Freeman), was a friend and next-door neighbour of Doris English nee Bigmore. One cannot imagine the grief felt in numbers 8 and 9 The Pightle that Christmas.

The Bigmore family were to suffer more tragedy when John Bigmore (brother of Doris), a 2nd Lt with the Cambridgeshire Regiment was killed by a sniper in Singapore on 15th February, 1942.

Doris never remarried. Her book 'A Shining Fragment' is a touching memory of her albeit brief time with Tom. Included are some poems written by Tom.

If Christ should walk this earth again,
Traverse once more the ways of peace-
Would His work be all in vain?
Or lust and greed of man decrease?

His presence near would shame a few
Instil with fear the hearts of most,
But Saxon, Aryan, Negroid, Jew,
Would strive to bring His former ghost.

They would not look for peace - these fools!
Peace spells doom to their wilful way,
Blindly keep to their set rules
Of hate, injustice, and dismay.

Tom English, 1939

Life's Elusiveness

Upon a peak extremely high,
His aims were such to do or die,
He set about a course to take,
Opposed by life, to make or break;
The journey grim he struggled through,
Exhaustion great but courage true,
To find the peak beneath his feet
One peak of many to defeat.

Tom English, 1939

With gratitude to Michael Black, nephew of Reginald Black, for his kind permission to use an image from a treasured possession, his uncle's logbook, and the photograph of No 3 Section of 9 (B) Squadron, Honington October 1939.