

Obituary

William Harvie ('Tommy') Thomson, DSC (1922–2012) was born in Airdrie, Lanarkshire, Scotland on 13 September 1922. Following distinguished service as a Fleet Air Arm pilot in World War II, he joined the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS) in 1946, serving in 1947–1948 at Base E (Stonington Island) as pilot of the Survey's newly-acquired Auster aircraft.

Tommy's recently-published autobiography, *The life of a Swordfish flier* tells of a hard upbringing in central Scotland, with an engineer father whose restless spirit and serious drink problem frequently reduced the family to poverty. Schooling at Airdrie Academy and reading in the local Carnegie Library provided steps to a better future. Early in World War II, after brief spells as a Glasgow steelworker and later as a university student, Tommy volunteered for the Royal Navy, training as a pilot and qualifying as a midshipman RNVR. Assigned to a Swordfish squadron, from 1943 he served in HMS *Fencer*, an escort carrier guarding convoys in the North Atlantic and Arctic. His Distinguished Service Cross was awarded for his action in sinking a U-boat. Later in life he received the Russian Commemorative Medal for Arctic convoy work. Though invited to take a permanent commission, he was demobilised as a Lieutenant RNVR in 1945.

Tommy's first civilian job was as a partner in a London disinfestation business, essentially a rat-catcher, in restaurants and factories. One evening by chance he met James Marr, formerly of Shackleton's *Quest* expedition, who had lately returned from leading Operation Tabarin, the fore-runner of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey. Marr was recruiting for FIDS. Tommy expressed interest, and some months later he was offered the post of pilot for the survey's work in Graham Land. Tommy accepted, quickly married Nan Metcalf (the sister of a wartime colleague), and managed a brief four-day honeymoon before shipping off to Antarctica late in 1946.

Assigned to Base E, Stonington Island, then the survey's main base, Tommy flew the ski-equipped Auster Autocrat on reconnaissance and depot-laying flights. This lasted only until mid-September. In a joint operation with the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition, the aircraft was forced down by bad weather to crash-land on the sea ice some 60 miles south of base. Tommy, his co-pilot Bernard Stonehouse and observer Reg. Freeman were fortunate to emerge with little damage, but suffered a hazardous week of walking back over shifting sea ice toward base. A fuller account is given in Kevin Walton's *Two years in the Antarctic*, which properly appreciates the outstanding efforts of both British and US colleagues to find the lost fliers during a week of foul weather. These efforts culminated in their rescue and safe return.

Following his response to a minor accident at the base, Tommy had been warned of a medical condition that might seriously prejudice his future. For the rest of the year he took part in the sledging and routine base programme but, perhaps more than most of his colleagues, looked forward to getting away and starting what, in his autobiography, he calls 'Beginning of real life'. He trained as a primary school teacher, followed a successful career of teaching in Britain and British schools abroad (notably in Malaya), and retired as an HMI, an inspector of schools. The threatened medical condition did not reappear. He and Nan raised two sons, and from 1981 enjoyed a long and adventurous retirement in Scotland and Spain. Tommy died at his home in Ardrossan on 4 January 2012. (Bernard Stonehouse, Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

References

- Thomson, W.T. 2011. *The life of a Swordfish flyer*. Isle of Arran: Banton Press.
- Walton, E.W.K. 1955. *Two years in the Antarctic*. London: Lutterworth Press.