

WING COMMANDER W A 'BILL' WILKINSON

Born – 16th November 1923 (Birkenhead). Died – 14th September 2015, age 91.

As soon as he was 17, in November 1940, Bill volunteered for the RAF, but was deferred until April 1941, when he was classified as fit for training as Pilot, Navigator or Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, only to be deferred for another year. In March 1942, Bill was finally called forward for aircrew training and joined No. 12 Initial Training Wing at St Andrews in Scotland, then No.11 Elementary Flying Training School at Scone, near Perth, going solo in a Tiger Moth in August 1942 after 7 hours of flying training. However, Bill's hopes for further pilot training ended when, quite arbitrarily, his flight was divided into two groups, one of which would continue pilot training, the other half would be trained as Bomb Aimers. At that time, the RAF had a surfeit of pilots under training, but a shortage of bomb aimers - a new category decreed necessary for the new four engined bombers that were coming into service. Bill joined No. 9 Observers Advanced Flying Unit at RAF Penrhos near Pwllheli in North Wales followed by a period of navigation and gunnery training on Anson and Blenheim Mk 4 aircraft at RAF Llandwrog, again in North Wales until, on

the 2nd March 1943 at age 19, Bill passed out as a Sergeant Bomb Aimer, with an Observers 'O' brevet, and was posted to No. 26 Operational Training Unit at RAF Wing near Leighton Buzzard in Buckinghamshire. There he 'crewed up' with Canadian Flight Sergeant Pilot – Bob Mackett, Navigator - Flying Officer Al Deadman; Wireless Operator - Gordon Lowe –, Mid-Upper Gunner - Bruce Tagget, also a Canadian from Nova Scotia, and Tail Gunner - Doug Houghton, an Australian from Manley, near Sydney. In July 1943, the crew converted on to the Stirling aircraft at RAF Waterbeach, near Cambridge, joined by Flight Engineer - Stan Newton. At the end of that month Bill and his crew joined 214 (Federated Malaya States) Squadron at RAF Chedburgh, near Bury St Edmunds.



Bill's crew at RAF Lakenheath in early 1944

Back Row L-R

Gordon Lowe (WOP/AG), Bert Waugh (RG)

Bruce Taggart (MUG);

Front Row L-R

Al Deadman (Nav); Bob Mackett (Pilot); Bill (BA)

By the Autumn of 1943, Bill and his crew had completed six operations when the Stirling bomber aircraft were withdrawn from front line service; the loss rate of these aircraft on the main bombing raids had become unsustainable. They were then one of six crews detached to augment No 161 Squadron at RAF Tempsford dropping supplies to resistance groups and underground agents in occupied Europe. A major advantage of the Stirling was that it was able to carry 24 containers, a greater number than those carried by other aircraft employed on this task.

These night moon light operations were conducted at times depending on the phases of the moon to dimly lit dropping areas, usually only illuminated by torchlight. The aircraft would be flown low over the Channel, to keep below the German radar screen, climbing up to 6000ft to be above the light coastal flak then, when safely clear, dropping back down to a transit height of around 400ft. When out of range of the Gee navigational system, Bill took over the navigation by map reading from the front turret until the dropping zone was sighted. On some operations, drops would be made at two or even three dropping zones, always dropping into wind and at precisely 400ft to avoid scatter of the stores.

By March 1944, Bill and his Bob Mackett crew had completed their required tour of 30 operations. Most of these had been supply dropping ops from Tempsford, but a number had also been on bombing/mining operations. Over this period, as the Stirling was progressively withdrawn from service and replaced, usually, with the B17 Flying Fortress, so the crew were variously parented with the remaining Stirling equipped squadrons - 218 at RAF Downham Market; then, in January 1944, 149 at RAF Lakenheath. As the crew split up to go on their various ways, Bill went RAF Wing as an instructor on 26 OTU Wellingtons, also being awarded a commission as a Pilot Officer.

After a few months on the OTU, Bill and his Wellington crew were posted to join the Path Finder Force flying the Lancaster on 7 Squadron based at RAF Oakington near Cambridge. However, shortly after arriving Oakington, it was realised that it had only been a couple of months since Bill had completed his first tour of ops; to his chagrin it was considered that the break had not been long enough, and he was ordered by Group to return to his screen duties at RAF Wing. It was on 1st January 1945 when Bill returned to operational flying, this time on the Halifax, joining No. 192 Squadron at RAF Foulsham. In addition to bombing operations, these aircraft carried electronic jamming equipment and German speaking special operators conducting radio spoofing. Bill's new crew were all second tourists and completed 14 ops by the time that Germany surrendered in May 1945. In all, Bill had flown 44 ops in his war service, from March 1942 to June 1945, achieving 629 flying hours.

Bill remained in the RAF in his Flying Officer rank, and undertook the duties of adjutant at a number of RAF bases before becoming the Station Adjutant in the rank of Flight Lieutenant at RAF Boscombe Down. But in September 1946 Bill decided to leave the RAF and returned to Birkenhead and qualified as a stevedore supervisor, only to rejoin the RAF in February 1950 when he was offered a Short Service commission in the Secretarial Branch.

After gaining an A1 pass at the RAF School of Administration, Bill became the Secretarial and Unit Careers Officer at the RAF Preston Joint ATC Centre, while in August 1952, Bill was



awarded a Permanent Commission permitting him to serve in the RAF until 55. In September 1955 he headed the RAF Recruiting Office in Leeds City Centre until the end of 1958, when he was posted overseas to be the Station Adjutant at RAF Khormaksar. Back in the UK, in February 1961, Bill was posted to the RAF Hornchurch Air Crew Selection Centre, moving with the Unit to RAF Biggin Hill. Then, in September 1963, following an accounts course, Bill went to RAF Abingdon as the Station Accountant Officer. In August 1964, being exceptionally selected for transfer to the General List of the RAF, Bill was promoted to Squadron Leader to be OC Personal Services Squadron at RAF Benson. A second overseas tour came in August 1967 when he went to the FEAF Command HQ at RAF Changi to be the Command Accountant. Back in the UK in March 1970, Bill's next job was in the MoD in London, while in January 1973 Bill became the CO of the RAF Unit at the Royal Aeronautical Establishment at Farnborough. Promoted to Wing Commander in February 1975, Bill's last job in the RAF was Wing Commander Administration at RAF Uxbridge. On his retirement from the RAF in March 1978, Bill joined the company Sperrys, until April 1986 when he fully retired, settling in the village of Maresfield in East Sussex, and latterly, College Town, Sandhurst.

Bill was a founder member of the 214 (FMS) Squadron Association, and served on the Committee for several years as the Treasurer and Auditor.