

Obituary of William Phillips from his son, David Phillips

One of the first airmen to serve at RAF Marham at the outbreak of the Second World War has died at his home in Tilney St Lawrence. He was 94.

William Phillips was born at Minstead, in Hampshire's New Forest, in 1917. He was the son of the head gardener on a local estate and, after leaving school at the age of 14, he initially followed in his father's footsteps as a gardener/chauffeur. But in the early 1930s, inspired by the success of the British team in the Schneider Trophy international seaplanes races held nearby at Southampton Water, he decided to join the Royal Air Force, enlisting in 1935.

He joined 214 Squadron and eventually arrived in Norfolk on 13 April 1937, at the newly-built RAF Feltwell. He was on leave in September 1939 when War was declared, but received a telegram instructing him to report to Feltwell immediately. On arrival, he was transferred to RAF Marham, which was then in the process of a major expansion into an important bomber base.

While at Marham he met his future wife, Dulcie Banyard, who worked at the former East Anglian Hotel. He was also promoted to the rank of Flight Sergeant.

His job was one of the most dangerous ever invented: as a rear gunner on the heavy bombers that flew over occupied Europe. The average life expectancy of air crew was just 12 missions. William was luckier than most and survived the war, winning the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM) for gallantry, in the process. He was presented with his medal by the late King George VI, at Buckingham Palace.

A newspaper report at the time said: "As an air gunner this airman has been engaged on operational flying since December 1939. In April 1940 his aircraft was one of a formation which was attacked over Stavanger by 40 enemy aircraft. In the ensuing engagement Flight-Sergeant Phillips acquitted himself with skill.

"On another occasion, in June 1940, during a return flight from Western Germany, his aircraft was caught in a concentration of searchlights and subjected to heavy fire. Displaying great coolness and accuracy of fire, Sergeant Phillips succeeded in extinguishing many of the searchlights and greatly assisted his pilot in evading the defences. This airman has displayed a high degree of courage and fortitude."

His missions included the notorious 1,000 bomber raids over Germany that helped defeat Hitler's Nazi war machine. He was also on the controversial raids on Dresden in February 1945 that saw the German city destroyed by a firestorm caused by blanket bombing. From his vantage point at the rear of a Lancaster bomber, he had an unrivalled view of the horror unfolding beneath him and later said: "The whole night sky was bright red. It was an inferno. Knowing that there were women and children dying down there made me feel physically ill. We were doing a necessary job, but it was a terrible job."

By the end of the war, William had been promoted to Flight Lieutenant and was training other air gunners. He served in India briefly after the war before leaving the RAF in 1947. By this time, he had married Dulcie and had a family of three young children: Ray, Angela and Wendy. Another son, David, was to follow in 1956.

William bought a smallholding in Tilney St Lawrence, but the days when a man could raise a young family on the proceeds from four or five acres of land were already gone. To make matters worse, the former Marshland Rural District Council refused to grant planning permission for him to build a family home on the land. "Tilney could be a very insular place in those days," he would later say. "It took a long time for outsiders like me to become accepted by the locals."

He decided to sell up and got himself a job at Cooper Roller Bearings at King's Lynn, where he stayed until he retired, in 1981. Ironically, he sold his smallholding to a local man, who had just been demobbed from the Army and who applied for – and got – planning permission to build a bungalow on the land.

However, William was very soon accepted by the locals, thanks to his keen interest in sport. He played football and cricket for local teams and was well known in the district as a fine wicket keeper. Later he turned to bowls and became secretary of the Tilney St Lawrence bowls club as well as a keen domino player for the village's Buck Inn team.

He seldom spoke about the war and never flew again. After his wartime experiences, he would say: "Only birds and fools fly!" But he retained an interest in the RAF and was an active member of the Royal Air Force Association as well as the Royal British Legion.

A lifelong smoker, William suffered a minor stroke in 1996, which doctors said was caused by his 40-a-day habit. They told him he would die unless he gave up, so he quit. Unfortunately, the stroke left him unsteady on his feet, so he also gave up his beloved bowls.

He enjoyed good health until early 2011, when he suffered lower abdominal pains, caused by bladder stones. He was admitted to the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Lynn for routine surgery, but while there developed a bladder infection. This was followed soon after wards by a serious chest infection. He was so ill, that doctors gave him less than 24 hours to live. William asked to be allowed home to die and his request was granted. Once there, nursed by Dulcie, his wife of almost 70 years, he confounded the medics for surviving a further 10 months.

"Dad was a fighter all his life," said his youngest son, David. "He was bed-ridden and needed supplementary oxygen, but he never gave up. Mum and my sisters, Angela and Wendy, looked after him, helped by a wonderful team of carers. We can't thank them enough."

But then one Sunday William became seriously ill with pneumonia and passed away early on the following Tuesday morning. He is survived by his wife, Dulcie, and leaves four children, 17 grandchildren, 37 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grand-daughter.

His funeral service was on 25 January 2012 at Mintlyn Crematorium.