

Air Mechanic First Class. Carpenter/ Aircraft Rigger. Thomas Oliver Wilkins.
No.7 Naval Squadron, No. 14 Naval Squadron, 214 Squadron RAF.



Naval Carpenter Ollie Wilkins. Probably taken on joining R.N.A.S. Liddle Collection

Ollie Wilkins was born on 24th July 1896. His family lived in Portsmouth and after school he probably trained as a carpenter. He joined the Royal Naval Air Service on 1st February 1916 and became 211239 WILKINS, Thomas, Oliver. Royal Naval Air Service. Wilkins did RNAS Basic Training at Crystal Palace, he then went to RNAS Chingford. After training he was posted to HMS Daedalus, Royal Naval Air Station at Cranwell. He was at Cranwell for about a year, then in June 1917 he was drafted for overseas service. Whilst at HMS Daedalus, he worked on the aircraft, *'Having had 12 months amongst the grease and oil at Cranwell'* He left for France on the 2nd August 1917.

Carpenter Wilkins would keep a detailed diary of his time on Active Service. He titled it, *'A small active service diary and experiences of Air Mechanic Thomas Oliver Wilkins.'* He kept the diary for about a year and recorded daily life on the squadron, the missions, air raids, his observations on life. A copy of Ollie Wilkins war time diary is in the Liddle Collection at the **University of Leeds. Liddle Collection/Air/351/Wilkins, Thomas Oliver.**

On Thursday 2nd August, Wilkins left Cranwell in a group of ten Carpenter ratings. By Dover, the group had increased to twenty two. Ten Carpenters from Cranwell, Ten Gunlayers from Eastchurch, One E (*Electrical?*) rating from Polegate and another E. rating from South Shields. On 3rd August they crossed from Dover to Calais and went to the RNAS Depot at St. Pol, outside of Dunkerque. On 4th August, Wilkins arrived at No. 7A Naval Squadron at Coudekerque. There were two RNAS Handley Page night bomber squadrons there; No. 7 Naval and No. 7A Naval, on opposite sides of the aerodrome. The two squadrons often flew joint missions together at this stage of the war.

On arrival, Carpenter Wilkins appears to have been attached to No. 7A Squadron and put to work constructing wooden huts on the aerodrome. In October he was put on temporary Duty with No 7 Squadron in their Carpenters' Shop repairing the fuselage of H.P. 3135. After 4 months of "Trade" work, Ollie Wilkins was put on "Flights", at No. 14 Naval Squadron, (*No. 7A Naval became No. 14 Naval*). This happened on 10th December 1917 and initially Wilkins was not happy having to work on the aircraft at a Royal Naval Air Service Squadron.



Ollie Wilkins with carpenter's badge. Liddle Collection University of Leeds.

He appears to have been in charge of the mess arrangements for his hut. In his diary, he writes a marvellous account of the Christmas Day and Boxing Day festivities at Coudekerque aerodrome. January and February 1918 brought exceptionally bad weather. Heavy rain, strong winds, snow and ice. The squadron flew on a raid on 23rd December and did not raid again until 16th February. Wilkins was kept busy on essential war winning tasks, *'Thursday 24th January 1918'.... 'Good job this morning repairing a tennis racket for an officer.'*

On 1st February 1918, Wilkins was part of a group of carpenters and other tradesman ratings sent to start building a new aerodrome, that 14 Naval would eventually move to, at Alquines, 50 miles from Dunkerque. The squadron aircraft arrived there on 10th March 1918. The stay would be very short, due to the German Offensive, that started on 21st March. By 26th March, 14 Squadron was back at Coudekerque aerodrome, outside Dunkerque.

On 7th April 1918, Ollie Wilkins finally had a flight in one of the squadron aircraft, only 8 months after arriving. On 1st April 1918, the squadron became 214 Squadron RAF, but officers and men clung tenaciously to their naval roots. Wilkins and the other men fought a long rear guard battle in the early summer of 1918, not against the Germans, but to be allowed to keep their Navy hammocks. *'On July 3rd I was one of a pair to hand in our hammock. This is about the worst thing that could happen to us.'*

Wilkins was at Coudekerque in early June, when a series of German air raids showered death and destruction on the base over 6 consecutive nights. The damage was so great that the squadron moved to St. Inglevert, outside Calais, on 29th June 1918. *'It has been estimated that*

250 bombs were dropped around us last week. The Wing C.O. considers it a complement to our usefulness that practically all Hun night flyers visited us to wipe us out.'

By this stage, Ollie Wilkins was an Air Mechanic First Class and most of his time appeared to be on "Flights" rigging the flying and landing wires on the heavy bombers before they went off on missions.



Thomas Oliver Wilkins in Naval Khaki.

Wilkin's diary appears to finish with a note referring to gas mark drills on 30th July 1918. It could be that he went on leave and when he returned to France did not continue writing the diary anymore. Or, that he got to the end of his first note book and that he continued to complete a second volume, but that this was either lost, retained by Ollie's family, or not donated to the Liddle Collection for some reason.

Ollie Wilkins continued serving in the Air Force until 13th August 1919, when he was officially transferred to the Air Force Reserve. A copy of his *Certificate of Transfer to Reserve on Demobilization Form* is in the Liddle Collection. This describes him as a 'Rigger-Aero'. Ollie Wilkin's medical category on leaving the Air Force was A1. By this time, 214 Squadron had been posted to Egypt. If there had been a future national emergency, that required his services again, Wilkins was required to do so at Blandford Camp in Dorset.

A small active service diary and experiences of Air Mechanic Thomas Oliver Wilkins.

On Friday 3rd August, a group of 22 RNAS men crossed from Dover to Calais. There were ten Carpenters from Cranwell, ten Gunlayers from Eastchurch and two Electrical ratings from Polegate and South Shields. On 4th August a group of these, arrived at Coudekerque for No. 7 Naval and No.7A. One of the men that was posted to 7A, was a twenty one year old carpenter from Portsmouth, Thomas Oliver Wilkins.

Some highlights.....

25th September 1917

In the evening of Sept. 25th the Bosches again bombed Dunkirk, and in the middle of it all the long-distance gun (17 inch) made a start and kept it up for over an hour and a half, one shelling every 7 minutes. On this evening our buses had intended to work in two raids, but several of them for second raid were told to locate big gun. We could see flash of charge from our drome, but on buses reaching there the gunners put up heavy smoke screen and carried on underneath it. Gibbs won D.S.O.'

28th October 1917

'One of the other... four in dropping on Antwerp caught a munitions factory of high explosives. The concussion turned the machine topsy turvy, all but causing pilot to lose control. He however lost a lot of altitude but was not mortared. Owing probably to all being engaged on fire extinguishing or rescue work.'

'The other bus coming back to this place on seeing fires, dropped a few more in to keep it going. No doubt these later bombs killed some Belgian civilians probably on rescue work, as we learn that Authorities complained to Admiralty. Our C.O. went away for a few days and rumour had it, he had gone to be told off.'

4th November 1917

'Just before lights out a fire signal was given which we found was on Stork's drome (French) 3 miles away. Two lorry loads of our boys armed with pyrenes went around, but couldn't stop the Officers quarters from being gutted right out.'

15th November 1917

'My afternoon off, however I did not go ashore, but honoured the occasion by swinging a clean "mick", having a good wash and change of underclothes and washing a pair of stockings. Not much washing that I ever do though just an occasional towel or pair of stockings. A French peasant woman right opposite the camp, attends to my underwear.'

17th November 1917

'Breakfast what a table it was. The last five to sit down, found that the bread had been portioned out and none was left for them. It transpired that men liking supper hadn't taken their own food, but had been helping themselves to stuff from the cupboard. Accusations followed. It was a shade short of a riot. Once the ball was rolling, things fell out thick and fast. One man thought that the milk was short in the tea this morning, so some were accused of having milk with their rum at night, and so of course the pinch had to be felt somewhere. Goodness only knows what was said. One thing is certain we would never be any better while two messes messed as one.'

24th November 1917

'Nothing at all doing, except that a terrific wind sprung up after noon, increased in violence so that in the night it was a hurricane and pouring with rain. Half of the garage disappeared as also did the Y.M.C.A. tent. Through this we had no tea and biscuits in forenoon of Sunday and there was no church service on same account. It blew and blew and blew all day, so that during the night more of the Garage and Y.M. tent went for a walk or at least at double.'

26th November 1917

'...leave had been stopped because several electric globes were missing after the R.F.C. concert on Tuesday.'

4th December 1917

'Well now the wind had dropped a good deal at tea-time, so we guessed there might be a chance of a bad night. Anyway, there was nowt doing at 10pm when lights went out. 12:30 we were awakened by gun fire. Some turned out, but as the hammock was warmer than a ditch, as a thick frost was on the ground, I stopped where I was, and was soon asleep again. 5:30am there was more gun fire and scuffling of "windy" ones. Still once again, like a maniac, I stayed in the mick (hammock). One Gotha was caught in searchlights about 10 to 6 am.'

11th December 1917

'Just for a start off our people raided, At least one raided the others landed again because visibility was so bad. This one (3121) in coming back crashed about 1 ½ from drome. Flt. Comm. Darley and Wing Comm. were pinned down and 'twas marvellous how they managed to get out alive..... everyone grabbed pyrenes though 'twas a poor hope of getting (there) in time to save life. The rear gunlayer (Captain R.F.C.) got clear and yelled. Alas, we were on the wrong side of the canal, so some swam, though it was a bitter cold night. I had to take charge of clothes. 'Tis good to be able to say that the "pinning" down didn't hurt, but petrol on a warm engine was making dangerous fumes. Things come off alright. Getting Franklin and Arter back to the hut, we found some more togs and was in bed by 2:15am. By the way, as the Flt. Com. was being carried back on prop blades, he said "Take care of these props for me, they can tell a good tale as souvenirs".'

20th December 1917

'On Thursday 20th Dec. a letter was placed on Notice Board from Flight Sub. Lieutenant Booth, lost on August 25th, telling of his experiences for the first few days after being downed by the enemy. Travelling by night and hiding by day and starved for 3 days having crossed several canals and dried clothes on them they came to river on the other side of which ought to have been Holland, but unfortunately had made a mistake. One gunlayer was a poor swimmer, had managed canals, but in middle of river, owing to exhaustion and exposure gave up the ghost. Others helped him for a bit, but in the end had to let him go. On opposite bank they ran clean into a German sentry and perhaps good job too, as the bank was wired all round with electrified wire which would have done them in had they touched it. By the way on the third day they only managed to find a few apples.'

Christmas Day 1917

'Anniversary of the birth of our Lord. But oh what circumstances. The majority of men forgot their circumstances and had as good a time as possible. This is what happened at Coudekerque R.N.A.S. station. First of all, there is or was the night before. The boys in carolling visited most messes and got something to drink from most and others joined in. By the time they reached the Ward Room (Officers' Mess) they were well oiled and went right in, asking if a few cards would be acceptable. "Yes". "Well first of all is we're "dry". That started it and drinks to cigars began to fly. The boys and the officers all got as bad as one another and treated each other as men. About 9:30 my bed mate was shot? into the door, blind, speechless, paralytic. Here was a good job, swing his mick and put him to bed. After this, we went to get more such cares, but found that the wine stores was drunk practically dry, over all the crowd had visited No. 7 'drome and when they did come back, practically all were drunken and the T.Ts (tee totallers) had to get out of bed and put them in.

Well now this morning. We started with bacon and tomatoes for breakfast. Afterwards a football match was played between 7 and 14 Squadron. Goals being 1:1. Supporters kicked up an awful noise, being already a few sheets to the wind. After this a church service was held and Communion afterwards by an Army Chaplain. 'Twas the first time I had joined in with C of E Comm. but I felt none the less sincere. Next step was dinner. We had a leg of pork, apple stuffing, green stuff, blancmange, jellies, preserved pears and raspberries, all bought in town with potatoes supplied. The joint supplied was served for supper. From this lot we managed to get a substantial dinner, but of course some weren't complete without their drinks. Next move was clearing up. Well, the mess men asked if anyone would like to volunteer as they would like a rest as we were leaving. Someone struck a novel idea, and 'twas carried out. The Petty Officers' mess was raided. P.O.s taken captive and brought to our mess and given the job. Other messes were put wise and they done likewise. P.O.s were made to clear up the fireplace, sweep

the hut and fetch coal. Then they went. Then we put out the nuts and apples also bought in town and also more cigars and cigarettes.

A letter to my girlie occupied me during the afternoon. Tea ! well for me 'twas a small one as I was raring up for late dinner with my chippy friends at No. 7. The spread was surprising to see, such a spread for active service, but of course everything was bought by the boys. Ham and fowl led the way. Preserved fruits, jelly and custard following. My mistake your wrong. Pudding followed fruit made by our Old Joe (Warwick) who was a great cook. Then came the aforementioned trifle. Chocolate dates, figs, cigars and cigarettes were there if you wanted them as also were drinks, not forgetting the Citron and Grenadine for T.T.s.(tee totallers) Several P.Os were present and a little table and votes if thanks, drinking to ???? etc. took place. Later one table served as a sideboard for show. Cigs and drinks and a little sing song , dancing etc. took place. We had a fairly decent time, but what about the people at home. We believed they weren't having such times, but still we would sooner have been there. Getting back to my own hut I found most of the boys well in the wind again.'

4th January 1918

'Chief Offender was an assistant Paymaster who would keep cuddling and hugging A.M. 2. Jack Thomas (the girl), had a girl's pretty trifles and actions off so nicely that we could hardly believe it could be a female until the end when he pulled off the wig'

25th January 1918

'Little to say until about 6pm when we ran out our buses for first raid since Dec. 23rd. Before our 1st bus could get ready Jimmy O'Goblin was dropping stuff into Dun. Our first bus got into middle of field and stuck. 4 from No.7 also got stuck so we dug out and stowed buses again.'

28th February 1918

'Nothing very war eventful today in fact we have seen nothing of that grim personage since we got here. But we were all surprised to see snow falling between 2 to 4:30pm. Yesterday an H.P. landed here from Cou. To take 2 men back to play in a football match against 12 Squadron. It also brought our mail. Today another bus brought the men back and our mail came on coal lorry later.'

20th March 1918

I went to assist in the recovering business of H.P. 3130. Well, I knew it too. While doping the underside, a nice kind splash landed in my eye and didn't I hop. I did a bit of Irish jig to Scotch sword dance. Eythel, Methol, Metol and Erulite isn't a good mixture for that part of the body.'

23rd April 1918

'A "bon" night. 4 done single raids, 3 double raids, though one had to wash out owing to throttle breakage ('30 Scott) and Mr Darley with 3 x 550s journeyed to Zeebrugge Mole and got two good hits. Gee they're some bombs too.' Carpenter Wilkins

23rd May 1918

'Parading at 11am on Thursday we found King Rain in charge. In the afternoon, the wind arose and by 3:30 was blowing a hurricane, so that two new hangars attempted to hand in resignation but failed. 5pm on Malo Sands was Mesopotamia. 'Twas an awful night, rain and wind, but I missed hangar watch.'

31st May 1918

'A Bosch came photographing about 12am, midday, and Nieuports from No.7 went up and reported bringing it down in the sea. Later 4 De Hs of one flight went on raid and met a Squad. Of Huns. One D.H. never returned neither did 3 Huns, but the 3 D.Hs got severe straffing, 2 pierced in petrol tank and other in radiator besides other wounds. RNAS gunlayer crawled out at 10,000 feet after downing hun and plugged petrol tank, thereby saving life of machine, pilot and himself.'

24th July 1918

'Sixth machine off, didn't "get-off" before reaching a field of flax This captured around the wheels, locked them and tipped the bus on nose, starboard side catching fire. A stampede followed to save the occupants, Lieut. Mc Cormac P, Bob Barber. Cpl.Obs. and Ensign Foster of U.S.N.A.S. All three clear. The C.O. (arrived in car) warned all to keep clear as bombs would soon be off. I turned and found Foster suffering from fractured or dislocated shoulder. Just then up went the bombs, 16 x 112lbs, spare parts flew all around us but we escaped it all. Several U.S. Corps cars and doctor came and Foster left me. Strange story, this was first raid for Mac and Barber, since returning from hospital and leave owing to a rough time over lines some 2 months since. Barber badly bruised returned and 2 days later looking like a man with shell shock, He has done 47 raids, mostly for £1.8d a day and get he has got no decoration. "Some gets all the sweets and some gets all the sours". By the way, some of us felt rather shaky while 9643 with big bomb, was getting height expecting it somehow to fall off. We watched, so as to get off at right angles.'