

Gone but not forgotten, Thomas Conway 1917-1940

One of fourteen children my Uncle Tom Conway must have been lured from his home in Willington Square, Wallsend with the dream of flying as he enlisted pre the second world war with the RAF.

He had been born in 1917 and from leaving school he became a surveyor's linesman at the Wallsend & Hebburn Coal Company. Maybe his visits to the Lyric local cinema in Howdon fuelled the young man's dreams and he joined up in the October of 1936 aged only 19 years of age. Thomas enlisted for 9 years in the RAF on 21/10/1936 aged 19 and served for 3 years and 326 days. His initial training In T Depot Squadron was possibly at RAF Halton in Buckinghamshire until 22/01/37.



This is Uncle Tom directly facing the camera, onboard the troop ship taking him to Africa.

On the 01/01/39 he achieved the rank on Aircraftman 1st Class (AC1). After 3 months on the 01/03/39, he was transferred to RAF Middle East Command. Thomas was given leave from 04/02/39, until the end of the month, when he began his journey to join 14 Squadron on 21/03/39. This first required more training and he gained qualifications on the maintenance of Avro Anson, Hawker Hart and Vickers Wellesley. He became a Leading Aircraftman on 01/08/39. A short time was also spent with 47 Squadron from 04/09/39 who also operated Wellesley aircraft. World War 2 started on 1 September 1939.

In May 1940 the squadron moved to Port Sudan. On the 10th June 1940 Italy entered the war and the next day the squadron attacked Massawa. Missions were flown almost every day from then on. Please see the second entry.

FROM THE OPERATIONS RECORD BOOK

No. 14 SQUADRON
11.15

PORT SUDAN 10 September 1940



Three aircraft left at 11.15 hours under F/Lt. C.G.S. ROBINSON to bomb KASSALA, a small wood situated to the east of the town, said to contain Motor Transport and tanks was the target. It was successfully bombed and one or two 500lb. bombs fell in the wood.

No fires were started but it is thought there was a possibility

some damage inflicted. Some interesting photographs, from an Army point of view were taken, showing defence work. Anti-war pamphlets in Amharic were distributed.

On the way home the flight was intercepted by eight CR.48 fighters probably stationed at SABDERAT. No.3 of the formation piloted by P/O. J.H. FERGUSON and manned by P/O. J. Lynch and Sgt. T. CONWAY was shot down in flames. P/O. FERGUSON made a successful parachute jump but the others were killed.

14 Squadron, Vickers Wellesley RK7763
Shot down over Kassala, Sudan. Report AIR81/3186. The Pilot Officer J A Ferguson parachuted out, captured, and became a prisoner of war.

Sadly Pilot Officer James Lynch was killed together with the rear gunner - Sergeant Terrence Conway aged only age 23. They are buried in a joint grave 4. D. 13. at Keren War Cemetery, Eritrea

When Gran received the telegraph saying he had died, it stated over Italian territory. She spent the rest of her days avoiding anything Italian, even ice cream. It was only many years later when we discovered where Tom died... on the African continent, in Eritrea My mother remembers the last time she saw him was walking down the street to the station with his kit bag over his shoulder.



Baby pic – Conway family & the first 5 of 14 children. Tom at front age 4

Keiran-Ann Keilty

Tyneside's Russian "Sypmaster"

Many people will be familiar with the Tom Hanks film "Bridge of Spies" for which Mark Rylance won an Oscar playing the Russian spymaster "Colonel Rudolph Abel". Abel was convicted of spying in the USA in 1957. The film focuses on the time in 1962 when Abel was one half of a "spy swap" when he was exchanged for the shot down American U2 pilot Garry Powers. What is less well known is that he was actually a Geordie, real name William Fisher.



William August Fisher was born in Benwell, Newcastle on 11 Jul 1903 to Heinrich and Lyubov Fisher. His parents were Russian emigres. His father was a revolutionary activist of German descent who worked with Lenin in St. Petersburg. He was arrested for sedition and after serving his sentence he and his wife fled to the UK. After first settling in Newcastle the family moved to Whitley Bay. In the 1911 census the family are

found living at 24 Eleanor Street, Cullercoats. "Henry" is recorded as a fitter working at an ordinance factory. The family later moved to Lish Avenue, Whitley Bay. Young Willie won a scholarship to Whitley Bay High School (later Grammar School) where he was moderately successful. After leaving school he became an apprentice draughtsman at Swan Hunter's and attended evening classes at Rutherford College. However, in 1921, after the Russian Revolution, the family returned to Moscow.

After arriving in Moscow Willie became involved with the Communist Party organisation and worked as a technical translator while also developing an interest in amateur radio. At the age of twenty two he was called up to the Red Army. Being fluent in English, Russian and German and with his interest in radio, he was trained as a radio operator before being recruited by the organisation that was the forerunner of the KGB. After training he was posted to Oslo and then London working as a clandestine radio operator. He was then recalled to Moscow in 1936 to become head of a training school for illegal radio operators. During one of the purges which occurred in the Party during Stalin's reign he lost position in the security service. However, during WWII his expertise was invaluable and he was recalled and became involved in training radio operators for clandestine work behind the German lines.

After the war and with the development of the "cold war" Willie's expertise and fluency in English made him an ideal candidate for a mission to the United States. He entered the USA illegally from Canada in 1948 using one of his several fake identities. He was responsible for a network that was concerned with smuggling atomic secrets to Russia. His contacts included the Rosenbergs, American citizens who were executed for spying for Russia and their courier Lona Cohen who later resurfaced in the UK as Helen Kroger part of the Portland Spy ring. Willie's identity was not revealed by the Rosenbergs and he then established himself in New York posing as an artist. In this he succeeded, becoming an accepted member of the artistic community.

