



Victoria Cross Recipient Thomas Gray

Thomas Gray was born in Urchfont, Wiltshire on the 17th May 1914 to Ernest Gray, the village policeman, and his wife Susannah.

Tom was educated at Warminster Secondary School. He enlisted in the 20th (Halton) Entry on 27 August 1929 and for the next three years trained to become an aero engine Fitter II(E). On leaving Halton in August 1932, Tom was posted to 40 Squadron servicing Fairey Gordon bombers. He volunteered for flying duties as an air gunner (this aircrew category was usually filled at that time by ground tradesmen on a voluntary basis additional to their normal duties). Tom soon earned the brass 'winged bullet' badge of a qualified air gunner. He was promoted to Leading Aircraftsman in 1933 and in June of that year was posted to 15 Squadron with Hawker Hind day bombers. Gray returned to Halton for conversion to Fitter I, completing training in May 1936. On 15 March 1937 he joined 58 Squadron at Driffield with the Vickers Virginia bomber and moved with them to Boscombe Down on 24th March. In February 1938 came a move to 12 Squadron at Andover and promotion to Corporal. Following a short course of instruction at No 1 Air Observers School, he was remustered as an air observer (equivalent of the later category of Navigator).

In the 1938 annual firing competition, Tom was awarded the 'Silver .303 Bullet' prize. He was promoted to Sergeant in January 1939. On 2nd September 1939 12 Squadron was moved to France as a unit of the AASF. Early in the morning of 10 May 1940 the German forces commenced their Blitzkrieg advance through the Low Countries. On the 12th May, 12 Squadron were tasked with destroying vital bridges over the Albert Canal, the whole Squadron volunteered so it was decided that the six crews already detailed on the readiness roster should undertake the mission. Tom's pilot Flying Officer Donald Garland was to lead 3 aircraft against the Veldwezelt Bridge in a low level attack. Tom was the Observer/Navigator on Fairey Battle 1 - P2204 PH-K, piloted by Flying Officer Donald Garland with LAC Lawrence Reynolds as rear gunner.

They flew below the cloud base at 1000 feet and on reaching the Veldwezelt area started a shallow bombing run. There were estimated to be some 300 guns entrenched in a defensive ring around the bridge, and the aircraft was blasted into the ground. The second Battle L5439 piloted by Pilot Officer I. A. McIntosh was hit in the main fuel tank, setting the aircraft ablaze, he jettisoned his bombs and made a forced landing - he survived as a Prisoner of War. The third Battle L5227 piloted by Sgt Fred Marland released its bombs but then lost control and dived into the ground. When the smoke cleared it was seen that the western end of the bridge was shattered, and evidence suggested the damage was caused by Garland and Gray's cool attack. It had been Gray's first operational bombing raid. After the raid, local civilians recovered the bodies of Garland, Gray and Reynolds, and quickly buried them in a secret location to prevent the Germans claiming them. Near the end of the war Allied authorities were notified and all three were re-interred in Lanaken cemetery. Subsequently the three were buried in the Imperial War Graves Commission cemetery at Heverlee.

The citation for Garland and Gray's VCs which appeared in the London Gazette dated 11 June 1940 read:

The KING has been graciously pleased to confer the Victoria Cross on the undermentioned officer and non-commissioned officer, in recognition of most conspicuous bravery:—

*Flying Officer Donald Edward GARLAND (40105).
563627 Sergeant Thomas GRAY.*

Flying Officer Garland was the pilot and Sergeant Gray the observer of the leading aircraft of a formation of five aircraft that attacked a bridge over the Albert Canal which had not been destroyed and was allowing the enemy to advance into Belgium.

All the air crews of the squadron concerned volunteered for the operation and, after five crews had been selected by drawing lots, the attack was delivered at low altitude against this vital target. Orders were issued that this bridge was to be destroyed at all costs. As had been anticipated, exceptionally intense machine gun and anti-aircraft fire was encountered, and the bridge area was heavily protected by enemy fighters. In spite of this the formation successfully delivered a dive bombing attack from the lowest practicable altitude and British fighters in the vicinity reported that the target was obscured by the bombs bursting on it and in its vicinity. Only one aircraft returned from this mission out of the five concerned.

The pilot of this aircraft reports that in addition to the extremely heavy antiaircraft fire, through which our aircraft dived to attack the objective, they were also attacked by a large number of enemy fighters after they had released their bombs on the target.

Much of the success of this vital operation must be attributed to the formation leader; Flying Officer Garland, and to the coolness and resource of Sergeant Gray, who navigated Flying Officer Garland's! aircraft under most difficult conditions in such a manner that the whole formation was able successfully to attack the target in spite of subsequent heavy losses. Flying Officer Garland and Sergeant Gray unfortunately failed to return from the mission.

The VC was presented to Gray's parents, who had by now moved to Odd Down, Bath, Somerset, at an investiture in Buckingham Palace on 24 June 1941. Thomas Gray is commemorated on the Royal Air Force Memorial in St. Clements Dane Church, London. A VC-10C MK1 was named for him, one of 15 Royal Air Force VC's so honoured.

