

Ivor William 'Bill'
Thomas
by Daughter-in-Law
Judy Kozar English War
Groom
Bergensfjord
January 10, 1942



Editors Note: For more information about the war grooms please see Judith Kozar's book "Canada's War Grooms and the Girls who Stole their Hearts".

Ivor William (Bill) Thomas

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Bill was my step father-in-law. After he died on Feb. 25, 2005 the family found his brief memoirs among his papers. Because Bill's wartime marriage didn't survive the stresses of civilian life, he failed to give any details about this relationship in his memoirs. Not all hasty wartime marriages had fairytale endings.

In order for the reader to understand Bill's story, it is necessary to provide some background information. When the airmen from No.33 S.F.T.S in Carberry came to Winnipeg on leave, billets would be found for them. On one of his leaves, Bill stayed at the home of a Winnipeg couple who had a daughter. They began to see each other whenever Bill came to Winnipeg. The relationship became serious, and they were married just before Bill was sent overseas to serve with Bomber Command. After the War, Bill returned to Canada. The marriage, which produced two sons and two daughters, ended in divorce in 1966. I don't know the reasons for the failure of the marriage, but Bill's job with the CNR, which took him away from his family for much of the time, had to have been one of the factors. At the time of this writing, Bill's ex-wife is still living.

Judy Kozar

An Excerpt from Bill's Memoirs:

I was born on January 1, 1921 in the upstairs bedroom of 19 Powell Street, Old Trafford, Manchester, England. We were a medium poor, low middle class, Welsh family. After I finished school, I got a job as apprentice draftsman with Edward Wood Steel Fabricators. I attended

Engineering Night School at Salford Tech and took courses at Manchester University. My Dad, who was a semi-pro musician, taught me to play the string bass, and I got a permanent job playing in a dance band on Friday and Saturday nights.

We lived close to Old Trafford, the home of Manchester United Football Club. On Saturday afternoons, Dad and I would join 50,000 other fans to watch the game. There were no seats, and everybody stood on terraced steps, "belly to bum", as it was commonly termed. Vigilance was necessary, because sometimes men would relieve themselves in the pockets of those standing in the row ahead. True, believe me!

War was declared in 1939, and my dad became the air-raid warden for our street.

There was a big flap about spies, saboteurs, etc., and the Home Guard was formed. They were issued ancient rifles without bullets and had to stand guard at their workplaces for one full night per week, hoping to God that no one showed up. I spent time with the Home Guard until I joined up, and I didn't mind at all. I was taught many previously unknown facts of life as well as cribbage and blackjack poker. The rotten breakfasts dished up by the cook prepared me for the Service and for prisoner of war camp.

In early 1940, I took off for the RAF. I signed on as an AC2, a rank slightly lower than a snake's belly. I experienced one painful month of square-bashing and bullshit [drill / basic training], in the beautiful seaside resort of Paignton in Devon. Then, I was assigned to RAF Station, Booker, near High Wycombe where I learned to fly the Tiger Moth, an old single-engine biplane. I enjoyed this aircraft more than any other that I flew later. For the two months I spent there, I was in another world.

On graduation day in December 1941, I was promoted from AC2 to LAC, and was permitted to wear the white flash on my cap. We then proceeded to Glasgow, where we boarded a Norwegian cattle boat, the S.S. Bergensfiord and sailed for Canada. We were in a convoy comprised of three small ships escorted by three Royal Navy corvettes, and the going was rough. I was fortunate, or unfortunate, depending on how one looks it, to have a strong stomach. As a result of my strong constitution, I spent New Year's Day 1942, my 21st birthday, on deck emptying puke buckets over the side of the ship. It took twelve long days to cross the Atlantic.

We arrived in Halifax on January 10, 1942 and boarded the CPR train for points west. I was dropped off at Carberry, Manitoba, along with about fifteen others. There, we learned to fly the Avro Anson.. [Note: a few

years ago, when we were passing Carberry on the Trans Canada Highway in order to attend a family wedding in Calgary, Bill pointed out the exact field where he and his instructor made an emergency landing. Judy Kozar]

Upon graduation, four of us received commissions as pilot officers. We had a week's leave, and my buddy and I went to Niagara Falls and St. Catherine's, Ontario, where I visited my mom's distant cousin. We then went to Moncton, bound for the U.K., but because a bottleneck had formed and no ships were available for us, our entire course was shipped back to airfields across Canada. I ended up in Calgary. Later, I was sent to New York where I joined about 10,000 American troops on board the Queen Mary. Without escort, we arrived in Greenock, Scotland less than four days later.

There, I was posted to Grantham RAF Station, where we flew Oxfords at night to get us used to blackout conditions. Then, we were off to RAF Cottesmore, an Operational Training Unit, where we learned to fly Vickers Wellingtons. Next, we went to RAF Scampton, where I met up with my crew. At first, we flew Avro Manchesters, twin-engined heavy bombers. On our first trip as a crew, our port engine blew up. It flew like a cow on one engine, but to the relief of my crew, I managed to land it safely. We later converted to the Avro Lancaster, the best bomber of the War.

We operated out of a mudhole called RAF Bardney, Lincolnshire. All went reasonably well until the night of May 22, 1943 when we set off to bomb Dortmund in the Ruhr. After we dropped our bombs, we turned to go home, but we were coned [illuminated by searchlights], and almost immediately hit by a flak shell in the rear of the aircraft. The next thing I knew, we were in a steep dive. The gyro-compass had upset, and none of the instruments seemed to work. I had to ask Scottie [crew member, likely the flight engineer] to help me haul back on the control column, and we managed to pull out at about 3000 feet. By this time, we were over Essen, and it seemed that all the flak in the Third Reich opened up on us. Very shortly, both engines were on fire. As I tried to feather the engines and to start the fire extinguishers, there were more hits on the fuselage, and hydraulic fluid and oil was sprayed all over us. I gave the order, "Abandon aircraft!" As I tried to hold the aircraft more or less upright, my crew brushed past to dive out the hatch. I could not raise anyone else on the intercom, or see anybody left on the plane. I put on my chest chute and dived out.

I pulled the ring immediately, and I was soon hanging from a tree, 20 feet above ground, half strangled and dazed. Later, I remembered that I had forgotten to take off my helmet, and the intercom cable had been caught

up by the chute shrouds. It's a wonder that my head didn't come off. I then punched the chute release and dropped down on the ground to face a pistol in the hands of a very large Feldspolitzel [German policeman]. I did not give him any argument at all!

I spent the night in the slammer at Essen, and the next day, I was taken to the infamous Luftwaffe interrogation centre in Frankfurt, where I spent several unpleasant days. Afterwards, I was taken to the main P.O.W. camp for Air Force crews, Stalag Luft 3 at Sagan, where there were several hundred Allied airmen. [Note: This camp was the scene of 'The Great Escape', which has been described in a book by Paul Brickhill. Hitler ordered the execution of 50 Allied airmen who were re-captured after escaping from this camp].

The camp had been operating about two years and was well established and supplied by the Red Cross. There was a band operating in camp, and as they had a bass fiddle and no one to play it, I joined in. Because of my previous dance band experience, I was asked to take over the band. I taught my friend, Mike, how to play the bass fiddle, while I made horrible noises on the trombone as I proceeded to learn its intricacies. We used to give concerts for the camp, and even the German officers used to come.

About January 1945, we were told to get our gear together, and we were marched out of camp, headed west on a four or five-day march. The Russians were coming. We ended up at a place called Luckenwalde, about 30 miles south of Berlin. It was a rotten place, but we were better off than the Russian prisoners who had been there for a long time. About the end of April, we woke up to find that the German guards had left. We knew why when we witnessed the arrival of a Russian tank column. We were told by the Russians to stay put 'for documentation'. Mike and I didn't care for the sound of that. We disobeyed orders, sneaked out the back door, and hitched a ride with the Russian tank column.

As it turned out, we saved ourselves a long, tedious journey home, although I now realize that we took a somewhat dumb chance. But Welsh spirits, or someone else, looked after us. "On to Berlin!" the tankers said, plying us with vodka which tasted like gasoline. Because we had not eaten for a while, we were soon very drunk and very sick, which the Russians found hilarious. After two action-filled days, we were fortunate, very fortunate, to pass through a village where a small advance unit of the U.S. Army was just on the point of following orders to pull back to the west. We said good-bye to our Russian friends and proceeded to the U.S. base at Halle with the advance unit.

The U.S. Airforce flew us to Brussels, Belgium on May 7, 1945. I don't remember anything about V.E. Day, but I was told I had a good time. The next day, the RAF flew us back to England.

The RAF did not want to demobilize us too fast and offered us P.O.W. Rehabilitation. I got posted to a rehab centre in Scarborough. There, I got a job with a consulting engineer, working on municipal engineering. The company got my services for free, as I was still paid by the RAF, a very good deal all round. I enjoyed the work and benefited from the experience professionally. I became an expert designer for sewage disposal works. Some said I had found my proper place in the s--t.

About August 1946, I got word that I was assigned to a ship to Canada. In September, I got demobilized, resigned my job, packed up, and sailed from Liverpool on September 28 aboard the Scythia, along with several hundred war brides of Canadian servicemen. I arrived in Winnipeg, via the CPR about the ninth of October, a Friday, and I literally didn't have two nickels in my pocket. I went out on Saturday, and in the afternoon, landed a job at Vulcan Ironworks as a draftsman. Fortunately, at Stalag Luft 3, there was a good educational program set up, which was supported by educational establishments in the U.K. I enrolled and applied to take the final exam of the Institution of Structural Engineers while I was in prison camp, but because of the Russian advance, I didn't know how I made out.

I did pass and became a Chartered Structural Engineer. This was sufficient to qualify me to join the Association of Professional Engineers and to be licensed to practise in Manitoba .

By December 1946, I had a job offer from CN Rail. I worked there, designing bridges and inspecting them all over Western Canada: from Long Lac, Ontario to Vancouver Island, and from Churchill to Duluth, Minnesota. In 1968, I became the head Regional Engineer for Western Canada of Bridges and Structures.

My wartime marriage ended in divorce in 1966. Viviane, my second wife, and I, and I were married in 1971, but sadly, she died of cancer some years later. In 1992, I was very fortunate to gain the friendship of a very wonderful lady, who finally gave in to my demands to marry me. Dorothy Kozar was a widow with two sons.

May 2005

Note: one of those sons is my husband. The Kozar family will be forever grateful to Bill for his devotion to Dorothy, who now resides at a seniors' residence in Winnipeg. They had twelve wonderful years together. Bill

loved Canada, and because of his job, had seen far more of our wilderness areas than most Canadians can ever hope to. His legacy can be seen in the bridges and structures he designed and inspected for the CNR throughout Western Canada.

Judy Kozar