

LOOKING FOR FLYING OFFICER RATTIGAN

Group Captain Clive Montellier RAF



As the Society's RAF Liaison Member, and as a serving officer within the personnel area of the RAF's Command Headquarters, I thought it would be an interesting exercise to research how Terence Rattigan appeared in RAF records. My aim was not to repeat the extensive research carried out by both Michael Darlow and Geoffrey Wansell for their biographies, as both had access to Rattigan's own flying log books and papers, but to see how Rattigan's wartime career was reflected in official documentation. Other than to check for misinterpretations on my part, I have thus deliberately avoided drawing on their work to amplify the raw facts below.

My first step, with the support of the Trustees of the Sir Terence Rattigan Trust, was to obtain a copy of his official service record from our personnel archives section, now at RAF Cranwell. In due course, two sheets of his Air Ministry Form arrived, complete with all the contemporaneous handwritten entries. We learn that his date of birth was given as 10 June 1911, that he declared previous military service as a Cadet in the Harrow School Officer Training Corps between 1926 and 1930, and that his civilian occupation was recorded as filmwriting for Warner Brothers Ltd of Teddington, and as an author.

Terence Rattigan was issued Service Number 84902; his first day of service is not recorded, but on 23 August 1940 he was commissioned as an Acting Pilot Officer on probation in the General Duties Branch of the RAF Volunteer Reserve for the duration of hostilities. He was substantiated as a Pilot Officer on 23 September 1940, promoted to Flying Officer a year later and was granted acting Flight Lieutenant rank in August 1942, a month ahead of his formal promotion, again on 23 September. Interestingly, although he was released from service in December 1945, he did not relinquish his commission formally until June 1956, retaining his rank thereafter, meaning that in later life he could have laid claim to the exalted title of Flight Lieutenant Sir Terence Rattigan RAF (Retired)!

As a commissioned Wireless Operator and Air Gunner, his training began with Wireless Telegraphy courses before embarking on Air Gunner training, culminating in his arrival at No 4 Operational Training Unit to prepare him for service on a front-line squadron, and a month's final training to equip him for the role of Gunnery Leader (the officer responsible for all Air Gunners on a flying squadron). In November 1941, he joined No 95 Squadron, based at RAF Calshot on the south coast and operating the Short Sunderland flying boat on maritime patrols.

Here we bring in the second primary source of information, the Squadron Operational Record books kindly obtained for me by the Air Historical Branch at RAF Northolt. These are detailed records of Squadron activities, compiled daily, and often giving details of crews. However, given that the Sunderland's crew numbered anything up to eleven, details of every crew member are rarely given for every flight, and so only individual flying log books would tell us exactly how many flights Rattigan was involved in. That said, his name appears regularly during his early months with the Squadron, crewing Sunderland T9073 on air tests from Calshot in November 1941, then joining it on a route from Calshot to RAF Mountbatten (near Plymouth) and thence via Gibraltar and Dakar to Freetown. The Gibraltar to Dakar leg was clearly a tense one, as the record relates: 'Starboard outer engine seized up after 5 hours flying. All mail, baggage, guns etc were jettisoned,

and the aircraft taken overland behind Dakar. 0750 waterborne Bathurst with less than 100 gallons left'.



A Sunderland of No 95 Sqn

Having arrived in Freetown on 5 December 1941, there are records of Rattigan being part of the crew of Sunderland N9050 on 3 occasions within 5 days in December, all involving anti-submarine patrols and convoy escort duties. For an Air Gunner, these long patrols – of over eleven hours in one case – would have meant constant vigilance, scanning the skies for enemy aircraft and the sea for allied convoys and the enemy ships or submarines that might threaten them. The Sunderland was particularly well-armed and its gunners had a fearsome reputation, indeed it was known to its Luftwaffe opponents

as 'the Porcupine'. As a Gunnery Leader, Rattigan would also have been acutely aware of the challenges faced by his colleagues in Bomber Command and it is thus easy to imagine how the material for Flarepath came to fruition in his mind.

Flying Officer Rattigan next appears on the strength of No 422 Squadron, Royal Canadian Air Force, re-formed in April 1942 at RAF Lough Erne in Northern Ireland to operate the American-built Catalina flying boats, again in the maritime patrol and anti-

submarine role. Rattigan arrived on the Squadron on 21 July from an aircrew depot (apparently between postings) early in the Squadron's formation when it was collecting Lerwick flying boats for training. Indeed, he was ahead of the 3 typewriters and a duplicator that the record shows arriving on 6 August! Declared operational on 1 September, there was clearly a change of plan as the Squadron was down-declared again on 1 October for re-equipping with Sunderlands. At the same time, the Lerwicks were to be ferried away 'for reduction to produce', a lovely phrase for some 1940s recycling. In October, the Squadron moved to Kesh aerodrome (again in Northern Ireland



Saro Lerwick Flying Boat

A Catalina of No 422 Sqn



and later the home of Long Kesh prison), but left again the following month for Oban in Scotland. More Catalinas and Sunderlands arrived, giving the Squadron 4 of each by the end of November; however, Rattigan was more involved with the despatch than with the receipt of these new aircraft as he is recorded as returning on 28 December 1942 from temporary duty with RAF Ferry Command in Montreal.

By this time, Rattigan's value to the moral and psychological component of the war effort had been recognised. Between 3 April and 17 June 1942, he had been temporarily released from service for casting and rehearsals for the production of Flarepath. Now, both Squadron and Service records

show him posted to No 1 Film Production Unit at Iver Heath on 30 December 1942 on special duty (which sounds exciting, but effectively reflects any job that doesn't fit a standard role). The Film Production Unit, or FPU, had been created in 1941 to generate professional quality films recording the RAF's contribution to the war. They had occupied their accommodation at Pinewood studios in February 1942, initially sharing space with Lloyds of London and the Royal Mint, both rusticated from the City, and having had to clear food being stored by the Ministry of Food from the sound stages. Shooting began in earnest in March 1942. Amongst the experienced film makers recruited was Pilot Officer John Boulting who, with his twin brother Roy, was to become a leading light in post-war British cinema.

References to Rattigan in the FPU records are few, but the first, on 7 February 1943 is a key one: 'Flight Lieutenant Rattigan, who is attached to FPU for 3 months to work on a proposed Anglo-American production, submitted his first treatment to Air Ministry'. This production was eventually to become 'The Way to the Stars', the film adaptation of Flarepath, but later in the year, Rattigan began work on a screenplay for the FPU itself. This film, commissioned for Flying Training Command, was to become Journey Together, but initially operated under the prosaic title of 'Production 26' and was approved on 14 February 1944; 2 days later, Aircraftman Attenborough (later Sir Richard) is recorded as being attached to the FPU to play one of the leading characters and shooting started on 6 March. In the early stages, Rattigan appears to have visit the set fairly frequently, on 16 March, again on 23 March to view the rushes (on the same day the diarist noted that Spencer Tracy, James Cagney and Walter Houston were to be approached to play the lead character eventually given to Edward G Robinson), and on 4, 5 and 6 April, at which time a revised ending was being discussed. Thereafter, Rattigan is recorded as visiting only once more, on 21 July 1944; however, it is clear that he was busy elsewhere as he is again noted as being released from service between 30 July and 25 August 1943, and then again for a period of 6 months – and then indefinitely – from 10 April 1944 for duty with Two Cities Films Ltd at Denham Studios. In the meantime, the FPU operational record book maintained a daily update of progress on Production 26, including a note of how much film had been taken, until its premier at the Odeon, Leicester Square, on 4 October 1945.

From this point, Rattigan's service record is sparse, as he was clearly being employed doing that at which he excelled. He was authorised to wear the ribbon of the 1939-43 Star in June 1944 and then in March 1945 is shown as being recalled to the active list. However, the indications are that this is purely an administrative measure, as he continued to be held on the books of the FPU but appeared nowhere in their daily records until he was allocated to No 1 Personnel Holding Unit on 23 October 1945 prior to being processed through No 100 Personnel Discharge Centre on 20 November 1945 for formal release from the RAF, marking his last day of paid service on 11 December 1945.

In truth, and unsurprisingly, this search through the RAF records for the passing of 84902, Rattigan T M, tells us little that his diligent biographers have not already unearthed. It is, however, poignant that so influential and celebrated a dramatist should, like millions of his countrymen, find his place in the hand and typewritten records that document the struggle for national survival between 1939 and 1945. A volunteer for one of the most hazardous of aircrew roles, that of Air Gunner, his decision to enlist cannot have been one taken lightly or as a token gesture. Although now lauded in his field, he rightly holds a place amongst the legions of unremarkable men and women who demonstrated boundless courage and determination when their country called.

I am most grateful for the assistance of Lauren Hardaker of the RAF Disclosures Dept and Graham Day of the Air Historical Branch for their help in obtaining the material for this article.

JOURNEY TOGETHER – THE CAST

Richard Attenborough RAF	David Wilton
Jack Watling RAF	John Aynesworth
David Tomlinson RAF	Smith
Sid Rider	A Fitter
Stuart Latham RAF	A Flight Sergeant Fitter
Hugh Wakefield RAF	An Adjutant
Bromley Challoner RAF	AC2 Jay
Z Perzanowski RAF	An Anson Pilot

Aircrew Interview Board:

Ronald Squire	A Group Captain
Derek Twist RAF	A Wing Commander

Aircrew Reception Centre:

Leslie Nixen RAF	The Group Captain
Len Reeve RAF	A Corporal
W Busby RAF	A Squadron Leader

Initial Training Wing:

Arthur MacRae RAF	Flight Commander
Reginald Tate RAF	The Commanding Officer
Elwyn Price RAF	An Instructor
Tommy Duggan RAF	Air Gunner Cadet

Flying Grading School:

John Justin RAF	A Flying Instructor
Anthony Hulme RAF	The Chief Flying Instructor
Michael Harroway RAF	The Commanding Officer

Aircrew Distribution Centre:

Edward Rutherford RAF	A Wing Commander
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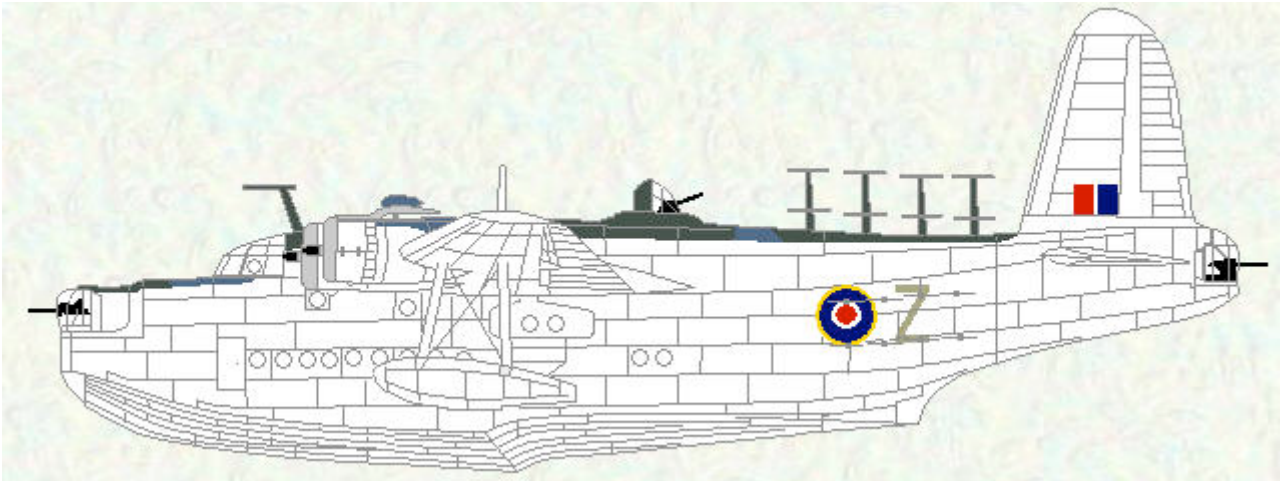
Falcon Field, Arizona:

Sebastian Shaw RAF	Squadron Leader Marshall
Ronald Adam RAF	The Commanding Officer
Edward G Robinson	Dean McWilliams
Bessie Love	Mary McWilliams
Norvell Crutcher US Army	A Driver

Canadian Navigation School:

Arthur Bolton RCAF	Airfield Controller
Fletcher Markle RCAF	A Staff Pilot
Jack Baker RCAF	A Flight Commander
Stuart Dick RNZAF	A Wireless Instructor
Peter Baylis RAF	Cadet Wireless Instructor

A Catalina of No 422 Sqn



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