Ice Crash Antarctica: Pilot "Tommy" Thomson, DSC

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On Christmas Eve morning 2007, as I listened intently to the steady and pleasing voice of 85-year-old William H. "Tommy" Thomson, I detected only a *faint* accent – not what one usually encounters with a Scottish native. Sensing a story, I asked Thomson about his accent, and the past began to roll smoothly off his lips.

In the early years of the Second World War, Thomson was at Glasgow University – and bored. Since the nearest recruiting station was a naval one, that's where he ended up. Given his education standard, it was suggested he try for the Fleet Air Arm, and Thomson duly became a Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR) officer. The obvious necessity for clear radio communications while flying meant only one thing: the suppression of Thomson's Scottish brogue.

Sub-Lieutenant Thomson was flying Swordfish with 842 Squadron beginning in August 1943, aboard the ex-USN escort carrier HMS *Fencer* on convoy duties in the Western Approaches. His subsequent combat report of the probable destruction of a U-boat on Feb. 10, 1944, puts us in the cockpit:

I started to dive from 500 feet and at the same time my Observer reported 'Tantivy Attacking'. As I approached, the swirl gradually increased until the first part of the conning tower of a U-boat appeared doing 7-8 knots on a course of about 210 degrees. I dived fairly low to about 20 feet and dropped my depth charges across a point just ahead of the conning tower, about two feet of which was showing. Attack was made from just abaft its port beam. My distributor setting was .3 seconds and speed of 120 knots. The depth charges went off straddling the target although for some reason the middle depth charge went off about three seconds later than the other two. The Observer and Air Gunner saw the bows of the U-boat lift out of the water with the first two depth charge explosions but the later one obscured everything although the height of the column was not so great as those of the first two. When the water subsided no part of the U-boat was visible but oil came to the surface and gradually spread out to about 350 feet. No wreckage was visible excepting a few pieces of wood. Although several aircraft were in the vicinity not one followed up my attack. I then dropped a Marine Marker to mark the spot. [ADM 199/466 refers]

Fencer's active anti-U-boat campaign continued, and between April and May she

escorted Convoy *RA59* from Kola Inlet. Treacherous ice and snow storms battered her aircrews, but they doggedly carried out 62 sorties, making 16 sightings and 12 attacks on enemy submarines. As a result, three more U-boats were destroyed, and on May 1, Thomson circled the area after one such attack.

HMS *Fencer* (Navy Photos/Mark Teadham)

Naval-History.Net provides an overview of 842 Squadron's operations on the first two days of May:

May 1st - SWORDFISH aircraft "C" of 842 Squadron sank U277 in position 73.24N 15.42E, SW of Bear Island in defence of RA59. There were no survivors from the submarine.

May 2nd - SWORDFISH aircraft "B" of 842 Squadron sank U674 in position 70.32N 04.37E, NE of Jan Mayen Island in defence of RA59. There were no survivors from the submarine.

SWORDFISH aircraft "K" of 842 Squadron sank U959 in position 69.20N 00.20W, NE of Iceland in defence of RA59. There were no survivors from the submarine.

By War's end, Lieutenant Thomson sported a Distinguished Service Cross (DSC) ribbon on his uniform for skill and determination in attacking the surfacing U-boat. But the fighting was over – now what? A chance meeting at an officer's club led Thomson to

join the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS – renamed the British Antarctic Survey in 1962).

Lieutenant Thomson c. 1945 (courtesy of William H. Thomson)

Roaming around the club were Dr. James M. Wordie (Geologist/*Endurance*/Polar Medal/Antarctic 1914-16) and James Marr (Boy Scout/Shackleton-Rowett Expedition, 1921-22; silver Polar Medal/Antarctic 1944 and bronze Polar Medal/Antarctic 1929-30 & Antarctic 1928-37). There were only 18 recipients of both silver and bronze medals.

Wordie and Marr were on a recruiting run for Antarctica and this piqued Thomson's interest, but when he told Marr that he was a pilot, the Antarctic veteran's reply was mixed: Marr said there were a lot of pilots around, but apply anyhow. Not having to be

asked twice, Thomson applied and was accepted. However, two “small” details remained. He didn't have a pilot’s license (no need for one in the Navy), so a temporary license to fly *in Britain* was acquired, and this served for “activities further afield”. Secondly, Willie Thomson married his girl Nan before going south.

On his arrival at the bottom of the world in November 1946, there were still strong echoes of Scott and Shackleton from childhood heroes, and tremendous enthusiasm in everything, with each person supporting one another.

Marguerite Bay (photo by Damien Carson, 2004)

Thomson was the pilot of the survey team at Base E, Marguerite Bay, on the Antarctic Peninsula. He flew the affectionately named Auster *Ice Cold Katy*, having with him Biologist Bernard Stonehouse as co-pilot (Polar Medal/Antarctic 1947-49) and Surveyor Reginald L. Freeman as navigator (Polar Medal/Antarctic 1946-47). Their missions were mostly short trips, in support of depot-laying work, to investigate other possible routes to the plateau – and weather was usually difficult or unpredictable.

Auster T7 (courtesy of RAF Museum, Cosford)

During the latter part of 1947, a twin-engine American aircraft from the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition (RARE, 1946-48), also based at Marguerite Bay, was set to carry out aerial photography with trimetrogon equipment (for rapid topographic mapping). This is a system of aerial photography in which one vertical and two oblique photographs are simultaneously taken for use in topographic mapping. The results were to be tied in with mapping by sledgers across the plateau. Thomson explained his part in the mission:

It had been decided that I would fly over the plateau with two companions [Stonehouse and Freeman] *in the Auster to a point about ninety miles south, land blind on the snow to check conditions for the landing of the heavier American aircraft, which would be carrying stores to the first depot. The problem was that there could be a thick layer of soft, fluffy snow into which the aircraft could sink and the Auster could more easily touch, taste and take off again.*

Thomson and his crew reached the designated spot and touched down without incident. However, their consort was delayed taking off due to trouble starting its engines, so it was some time before the sound of another plane rang in their ears. Thomson "set off the red smoke flare and it sent a thick, blood-red gash across the snow, marvellous and obvious. To our total astonishment, it was not seen and the American aircraft went

droning past. Again we waited and waited, but it did not return."

There was nothing to do now but head back to base:

We climbed up close to seven thousand feet before crossing the plateau and set off for base. The high cloud ceiling began to lower and I noticed that our ground speed was diminishing. I increased the throttle setting until even with full throttle we were making little progress into a tremendous wind. There was little point in maintaining this course so I turned across the plateau to head down to the sea ice on the same side of the peninsula as the base. The light was beginning to fade, but I could just see a glacier away on the left. . . . I followed the glacier down, losing height, the aircraft was bucking about in the turbulence, someone was being sick in the back, it was snowing now, the air intake was becoming choked and the starved engine was coughing and spluttering. The glacier curved round to the left and I had to keep in close visual touch with both the steep wall and the ice underneath; it was becoming quite dark.

By the time we reached the sea ice I could see very little, but I thought that I could do a slow carrier-type landing and all would be well. I could only see straight down. Suddenly, to my horror, I saw the ghostly shape of a large tabular berg slide beneath the Auster. . . . The skis touch and for a couple of seconds I thought we had made it safely. Then one ski caught on a small projecting piece of ice and the aircraft turned slowly onto its back. There was no fire, only a broken aircraft, no-one was hurt. I stuffed the little matelot monkey into my pocket and he has been with us ever since.

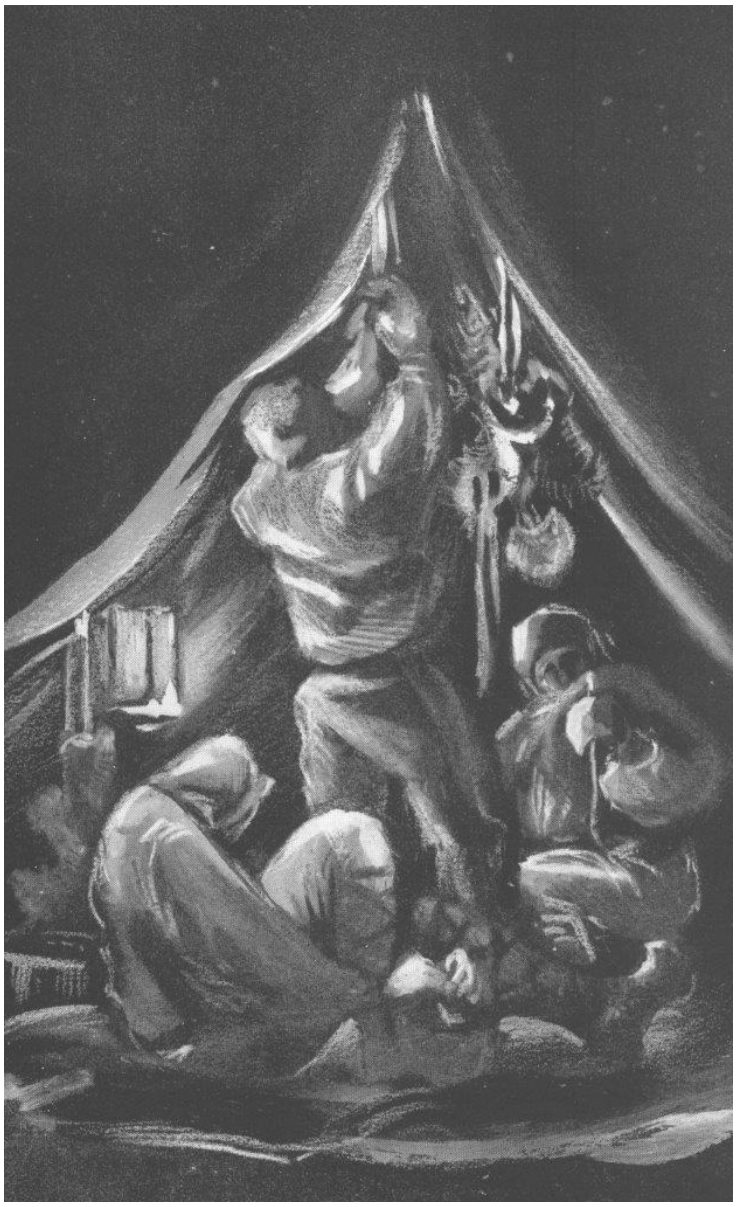
NO-ONE KNEW WHERE WE WERE.

As we were supposed to fly in tandem, the American aircraft had most of our emergency gear . . . We had a pup tent, designed for one, one sleeping bag and inner, one petrol primus [stove] *and seven pounds of pemmican.*

The trio settled down to their first night, while outside "the wind dropped and there was only the soft hush of snow on the tent and the penetrating cold. We dare not go to sleep so we talked about tomorrow." The next day was decision time: stay with the aircraft and wait for help, or start walking the estimated 60 miles back to base. The plane was already camouflaged with fallen snow, making any search from the air a difficult one, so "I suggested that we remove the petrol tank from the Auster and use it as a sledge to pull along our few pieces of equipment as well as having petrol for the stove."

And off they went. "When thirsty, we sucked pieces of ice, and walked for ten minutes, followed by five minutes of rest" and despite the soft snow making it tiresome travelling, they covered ten miles the first day.

The following day presented much the same picture as the first for the explorers, low clouds and just a whisper of wind – but then snow began to fall. Much less progress was made that day.



Three in a Tent, by Dr. Edward Adrian Wilson (c. 1903)

The third day gave us a clear blue sky, but our constant watching of the coastline towards the base brought no results and the fallen snow from the day before made walking very difficult. We floundered along, up to our knees, and made little real progress. . . . The tent had become much heavier with breath turned to ice and the makeshift sledge had become more difficult to drag through the soft snow. . . . I sang to keep us awake and this was reasonably effective because I only caught the right note by accident. My songs were those learned during squadron days, sentimental, of longing, of loneliness, of love lost and waiting for the emptiness of war-time to go away.

In the middle of the night a tremendous storm raged down from the plateau and we could

little but cower in our small tent, which was being gradually drifted over and the sides nudged in on us like unwelcome guests. . . . Thoughts were more sombre. I knew that our position was perilous. Storms usually lasted at least two days. The aircraft would be searching on the other side of the plateau.

The storm lasted for three days, but I had no way of measuring real time. The wind howled and filled our small world with noise that gradually diminished all thought. There was little light to indicate the passage of day and night. . . . a tiny piece of pemmican twice a day gave us little nourishment, our mouths were fissured with sucking ice. . . . There was a feeling of slowly shutting down.

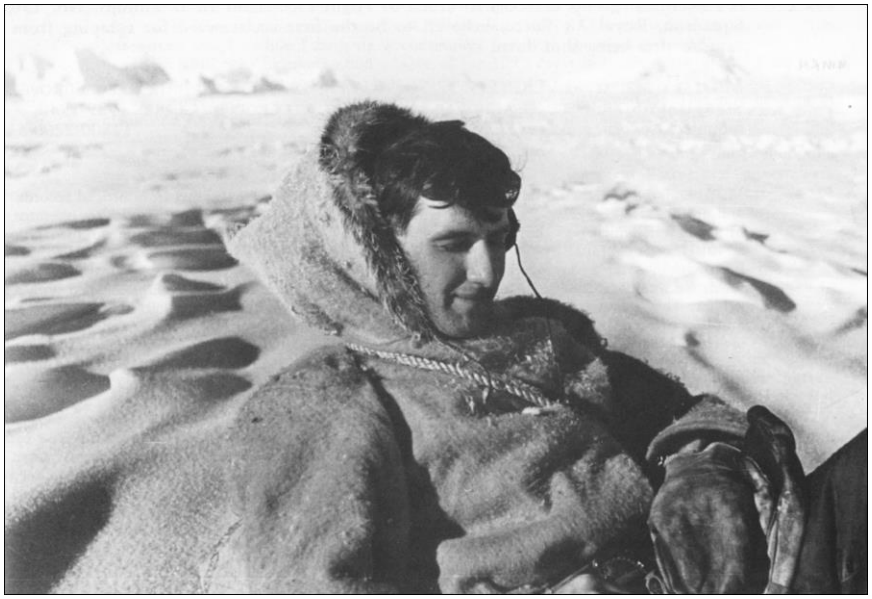
Gradually, it broke through into my fuddled brain that the wind had eased a little and that I must get out of this prison. We pushed away at the snow heaped upon us and I broke out into a night sky with light from a bright moon and rags of thin cloud racing across it. We staggered about trying to get some movement into our limbs, broke out the tent which was little more than a block of ice; it would have been so easy, so simple, to remain in that collapsed tent and drift into a deep, deeper sleep. We set off shakily in the direction of the base.

Good fortune smiled on the men when they spotted a seal snoozing in the sun, only a few feet from its blow hole. Thomson killed it with an ice axe and the trio enjoyed some much needed nourishment. The sunshine and that humble aquatic creature "had buoyed our spirits and we set off once again."

Not long afterwards we stopped. No-one spoke. There was a suggestion, a mere hint of a sound, it was not the wind, not the hush of our dragging feet, not the rumour of growlers far out to the open sea. It became louder, it was an aircraft, but where was it? Then we saw it. It was about twenty miles away and circling to gain height to cross over the plateau. My two companions wanted to set off our one remaining smoke flare at once, but I took it over and waited until the pilot, in his circling, might just be looking in our direction, before releasing it.

The red gash bled across the white snow. We did not breathe. Would it be seen? We waited, hoping, promising in my head to do all sorts of extravagant things if we were saved, to be always kind to others, never say anything nasty, turn the other cheek, help old women across the street, help anyone across the street. The aircraft made a long lazy turn and lost height towards us. It made a quick circuit to check the ice and landed with a brisk hiss of its skis beside us. It was the Nana. *The very American voice of Jim Lassiter hailed us and he had us back at base in a few minutes.*

[The *Nana* was a Noorduyn C-64 Norseman single-engine cargo plane named by Finn Ronne for the North American Newspaper Alliance, for which his wife was a reporter. It was piloted by Captain James "Jimmy" W. Lassiter and Lieutenant Charles "Chuck" J. Adams, USAF.]



Tommy Thomson after his Antarctic ordeal. (courtesy of DNW auctions, London)

We had lost some weight – Reg and Bernard twenty-eight pounds, while I lost eighteen. The cold had affected our feet and we had to wear slippers for a day or two, but apart from that we were fine.

Twenty-four hours later, there was another gale and the already weakened sea ice was swept out to sea. We had been so lucky. We could have gone with it.

There was another strange happening at that time. Nan was not informed that I was missing for about seven days and was completely distraught; the lurid headlines in the national press did not make it any easier. Then, just at the moment when we were rescued, she felt at peace and somehow knew that all was well. Although we had known each other for such a short time, it meant that there was something special between us. The official notification to Nan came a few hours later.

When Thomson departed the frozen continent in May 1948, he had no wish to return: "I need to have people around, the world was outside and I had a beautiful wife waiting for me."

"When I returned from the Antarctic I was offered a degree at Cambridge University, a two-year teaching course or a concentrated one-year course for emergency teaching. I chose the latter because there was an inner desperation to get on with real life," wrote Thomson.

After a few years of teaching, "Nan and I reckoned that our restless feet had to be appeased. We thought that it was a good idea to go to Malaya to teach the children of service personnel. I applied and was accepted." The Korean War was on, and the Royal

Navy wrote the former pilot, asking him to return to carrier flying as a senior pilot in the conflict: "The pay was great, but we decided that one war was enough for one man."

Being so far from home, and with the education of two young sons on their minds, the couple eventually returned to England. In time, headmasterships followed, and at the age of 42, Thomson successfully applied for the post of Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools in England and Wales.

Retiring 18 years later, Thomson reflected on his career of public service: "I think that I was a different kind of teacher, a different type of headmaster and a very different Her Majesty's Inspector."

The Second World War reared its head, and during one of our conversations, Thomson told me he sold his medals in the early 1960s, to assist a friend in financial distress.

Though he never went back to Antarctica, Tommy Thomson's name remains permanently fixed on the Southern Continent. When the west coast of Graham Land was resurveyed during 1948-49, a 780-foot headland on the east side of Bourgeois Fjord was dubbed Thomson Head.

Through the emails and conversations with Thomson, something shined with particular brilliance and refuses to leave me, and I hope it never will:

It appears that most men wish to hang onto their youth as the best time of their lives, and I keep looking around the next corner – and finding it.

William Harvie "Tommy" Thomson was born in Airdrie, Lanarkshire, Scotland on Sept. 13, 1922, and died at his home in Ardrossan on Jan. 4, 2012.

Medals of Lieutenant William H. Thomson, DSC, RNVR
(court mounted as worn)

DSC (GVI issue/officially engraved on reverse "1944") – *The London Gazette* (June 20, 1944) – "For skill and determination in attacks on U-boats while operating from H.M. Ships *Fencer* and *Vindex*." The Admiralty Letter of Notification for the DSC states: "For courage, skill and determination shown as a Pilot of a Swordfish aircraft which operated from H.M.S. *Fencer* in an attack on a German Submarine on 10 February 1944, which resulted in the probable destruction of the enemy."

1939-45 Star (privately engraved "Sub. Lieutenant, D.S.C., R.N.V.R.")*

Atlantic Star (privately engraved as before)*

Defence Medal (privately engraved as before)

War Medal (privately engraved as before)

Polar Medal/Antarctic 1947 (EIIR issue; impressed small capitals "William H. Thomson") – *The London Gazette* (July 17, 1953), Pilot, Marguerite Bay, Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey. One of just six Antarctic 1947 clasps issued.

* In a Sept. 24, 2008 telephone conversation, Thomson told me he has an Arctic Star: "The star, which will be made of white enamel with a red dot to represent Russia, is designed to be pinned to veterans' existing campaign medals, honouring their heroism for the first time. It is the first of its kind as it has been designed by the veterans themselves. It can be attached to either the Atlantic Star or the 1939-45 Star. All Arctic convoy veterans have at least one of these medals." (*Victory at last - a Star is born*, www.portsmouth.co.uk)

<u>Accompanied by a quantity of original documentation</u>:

a) Admiralty Letter of Notification for the DSC, which states, "For courage, skill and determination shown as a Pilot of a Swordfish aircraft which operated from H.M.S. *Fencer* in an attack on a German Submarine on 10 February 1944, which resulted in the probable destruction of the enemy".
b) Campaign medal forwarding slip
c) Ship Appointment Certificate as Temporary Acting Sub-Lieutenant (A), RNVR, HMS *Kestrel* (dated Oct. 21, 1942)
d) A wartime photograph of HMS *Fencer* (aircraft carrier)
e) Polar Medal Admiralty Letter and Buckingham Palace Investiture Letter, both for September 1953
f) Polar Midwinter's Day Dinner Menu for 1947, signed by team members
g) Several copy photographs

Acknowledgements

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Victory at last - a Star is born
(*The News*, www.portsmouth.co.uk; Dec. 23, 2005).