

One Man, Two Rescues by Simon Wilson

It's strange how things sometimes synchronise. As I read David Gray's article on Air Sea Rescue, (*101 Airmen Saved from the Sea*). I had a group of miniature medals on my desk (*below*), waiting to be researched. They were once worn by Flight Lieutenant Thomas O'Gorman, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR), who was decorated twice for his services as a navigator in the Air Sea Rescue (ASR) Hudsons of 279 Squadron.



It is an interesting group, headed by a British Distinguished Flying Cross which he was awarded in 1944 and announced in the London Gazette 3 October 1944. The original recommendation says:

'Flight Lieutenant O'Gorman joined No. 279 Squadron on 10 December 1942, since when he has proved himself an excellent Navigator.

Together with his captain, Flight Lieutenant Clarke, he has taken part in numerous rescues and several of the sorties he has flown on have been hazardous in the extreme, but by his skilful navigation he has brought the aircraft safely back to base, after fulfilling the special instructions.

This officer was the Navigator of Flight Lieutenant Clark's aircraft which effected the rescue, in most difficult conditions, of an American crew on 22 February 1944. It was due to his excellent navigation that the dingy was "spotted" and he calculated the most efficient delays to be employed with the marine markers which were successfully used to guide the H.S.L. [High Speed Launch] to the dinghy.

This officer's work as Navigator has been invaluable to his Captain and I recommend him for the immediate award of a D.F.C. for outstanding devotion to duty.'

Additional remarks by his Station Commander give more information:

'Strongly recommended. Since this citation was written up, Flying Officer O'Gorman was responsible for navigating the aircraft which successfully dropped the lifeboat which saved a complete Fortress crew on 20 May 1944.'

Thomas O'Gorman enlisted in the RAFVR in August 1940 and was selected for aircrew training, being sent to Canada in 1941, which must have provided a nervous few days in the U-Boat infested Atlantic. In Canada he qualified as an Air Observer (Navigator) in December 1941, an Air Observer (Armament) in January 1942 and an Air Observer (Astro) in March 1942. He was commissioned as Pilot Officer and travelled back to the UK, being posted to Coastal Command's 279 Squadron in December 1942. This was an Air Sea Rescue (ASR) unit based at Bircham Newton in North Norfolk (now the National Construction College and RAF Bircham Newton Heritage Centre).

His was not the sort of war that attracted much notice – no fighter-to-fighter combats or thousand bomber raids, but it still had its moments, including the seagull incident on 13 November 1943. To quote Tom Docherty in *Dinghy Drop - 279 Squadron RAF 1941-46*:

'F/O. Clark, piloting the No. 2 Hudson in the formation, hit a seagull on take-off, which knocked a large hole in the nose of the Perspex and scattered entrails, feathers and worms all over the cabin. Clark elected to continue and his observer, F/O. O'Gorman, decided to navigate the Hudson from the aft

cabin area. The crew blocked up the hole in the nose as best they could with a cushion, but 'Nobby' Clark reported afterwards that it was '----- cold!'

It wasn't all bird strikes, of course. Sometimes weather conditions and enemy aircraft proved dangerous too, and O'Gorman's Log Book notes flights with Mustangs and Lightnings as escorts – both sides considered the ASR craft of the others to be legitimate targets.



Two of O'Gorman's missions ended in the rescue of downed Flying Fortress crews (*left, lifeboat being dropped to a B-17 crew*), and the Americans recognised this by awarding him the American DFC, one of only 209 such awards to the RAF in WW2.

His American DFC appeared in the *London Gazette* 15 May 1945, the original recommendation states:

'For extraordinary achievement in affecting many air-sea rescues under the most hazardous conditions. On 22 February 1944, Flight Lieutenant O'Gorman, through expert navigation and outstanding airmanship, located a dinghy bearing an American bomber crew and participated in their rescue. His courage and skill reflect highest credit upon himself and the Armed Forces of his country.'



He and Clarke joined the Squadron at the same time and probably converted to Hudsons together at RAF Thornaby, flying their first operation in mid-March 1943. Clark was also awarded the DFC (*left*), and would fly 60 missions before being posted away from the squadron in June 1944. He survived the war and served with the RCAF until 1957, when he retired as a Squadron Leader. He had originally enlisted in the

South Saskatchewan Regiment in 1927. By coincidence, his medals would be sold by Noonans in London a couple of months before O'Gorman's were sold by Spink.

O'Gorman, was also posted away from the squadron in June 1944, after 66 operations. He was posted to 111 Operational Training Unit in the Bahamas, which sounds quite pleasant after the time he spent over the North Sea, and ended his war with 8 Squadron, flying Liberators in India and Burma, where he dropped supplies to Resistance groups and Prisoners of War. He was released from the RAFVR. in February 1946 and became a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants.

The rescue on 22 February saved the crew of the Flying Fortress *Sugar Blues*, a B-17G of the 323rd Bomber Squadron, 91st Bombardment Group, 8th Air Force, which flew from Bassingbourn.

An internet search produced a report written by a member of the rescued crew, Arthur D Clay (later Lt Col A D Clay, and several photographs. Some more information can be found, in *Dingy Drop*, where an account from Pete Delo is quoted. He was the co-pilot., who was injured in the landing. The bomber



was hit on the approach to the target, and, with one engine out and two others damaged, was forced to bomb from 1,000 feet. They dropped to ground level to head for home, jettisoning all surplus weight and having to gain height several times to clear power cables. After two hours they reached the Dutch coast and the crew was told to prepare for ditching. A second engine stopped and one of the others started playing up.

(Left, Sugar Blues nose art).

After what Clay describes as “a superb landing” they were able to get into their rafts without difficulty. The co-pilot was injured - Clay's version said the co-pilot's seat had broken loose on landing and he had abdominal and head injuries, though Delo's version of events has him being struck on the back of the head by a belt of .50 calibre ammunition. Several of them had to get into the water to avoid the dinghies tearing themselves on jagged metal wreckage. A P-47 flew over them and they heard other aircraft in the overcast before an RAF Hudson found them. This was the machine of Clark and O'Gorman. It attempted a dingy drop, which failed, and a second aircraft arrived and made a successful drop, which the downed airmen were able to reach.



Darkness fell, it got colder, the waves got bigger, wet snow began to fall and the men became silent. Everyone knew that many airmen had died during a night adrift on the North Sea. After six or seven hours they saw a light and launched flares. This was risky, as they were far nearer to the Dutch coast than the English side, but the light turned out to be from a British launch. As they were picked up a light approached from the German side, but the British boat slipped away into the night.

On approaching Harwich, they were able to see a German bombing raid in progress and witness a German bomber going down in flames. They were given RAF uniforms when they docked hence the clothing shown in the photograph (left), and a little while later a letter was received at Bassingbourn containing their Goldfish Club badges (below).



Some months later, 19 May 1944, a Flying Fortress B-17-G – *Roger's Raiders* - flown by Lt Julian “Buck” Rogers was forced to ditch on its return from Berlin. It was from the 350th Bomber Squadron, 100 Bombardment Group, 8th Air Force, based at Thorpe Abbots, near Diss.

Three engines failed due to damage inflicted by enemy fighters. The crew survived the ditching, with a couple of minor injuries, though the emergency equipment was lost. Ditching at 4.25 on the

19th, the Americans found that the calm conditions which had helped their safe landing, soon changed to a five-foot swell. They were located by Hudsons of 279 Squadron and a lifeboat was dropped by Clarke and his crew at 13.12. The Americans, transferred to the lifeboat from their dinghies and started



to head for home, though they were shipping a lot of water as a result of the choppy seas. They were picked up by Danish fishing boats next morning, which turned for the Danish coast. One of 279's Hudsons, which was circling overhead to guide a High Speed Launch, fired across their bows to stop them and they hove to and waited until a the launch arrived four hours later to pick the crew up and land them at Great Yarmouth. (Left, the crew of 'Roger's Raiders'.)

If you read the different accounts, you will find that they can vary considerably in detail. In reconstructing the versions given here I have chosen to follow the contemporary accounts as they are likely to be more reliable than those written 60 years later. Similarly, I have relied on the details from the RAF in favour of those given by the downed crews, as a man in an aeroplane with a notebook is likely to be more accurate than one bobbing up and down in the North Sea.

This, at the moment, is still a work in progress, as there is still a lot more to be written about Air Sea Rescue and this, an account of just one man and two rescues, is merely scratching the surface. Behind O'Gorman's story, and his two decorations lies a complex organisation of crew, ground crew, training and invention.