



Denison Hilton Thompson

1918 - 1943

Denison and the Ghost Squadron

Mystery

Tim Martin
Midland, Ontario
July, 2022

Foreword

This sad story is about a young descendant of Captain John Denison who volunteered for service in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War Two. He died only twenty-five years old under mysterious circumstances.

The unfortunate legacy of the First World War and the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 was that Germany once again posed a threat to world order. Chancellor Hitler rose to power convincing the German people that the Jews and war reparations were responsible for difficult economic conditions in Germany and that the only solution was to annex more territory and embark on a policy of racial cleansing.

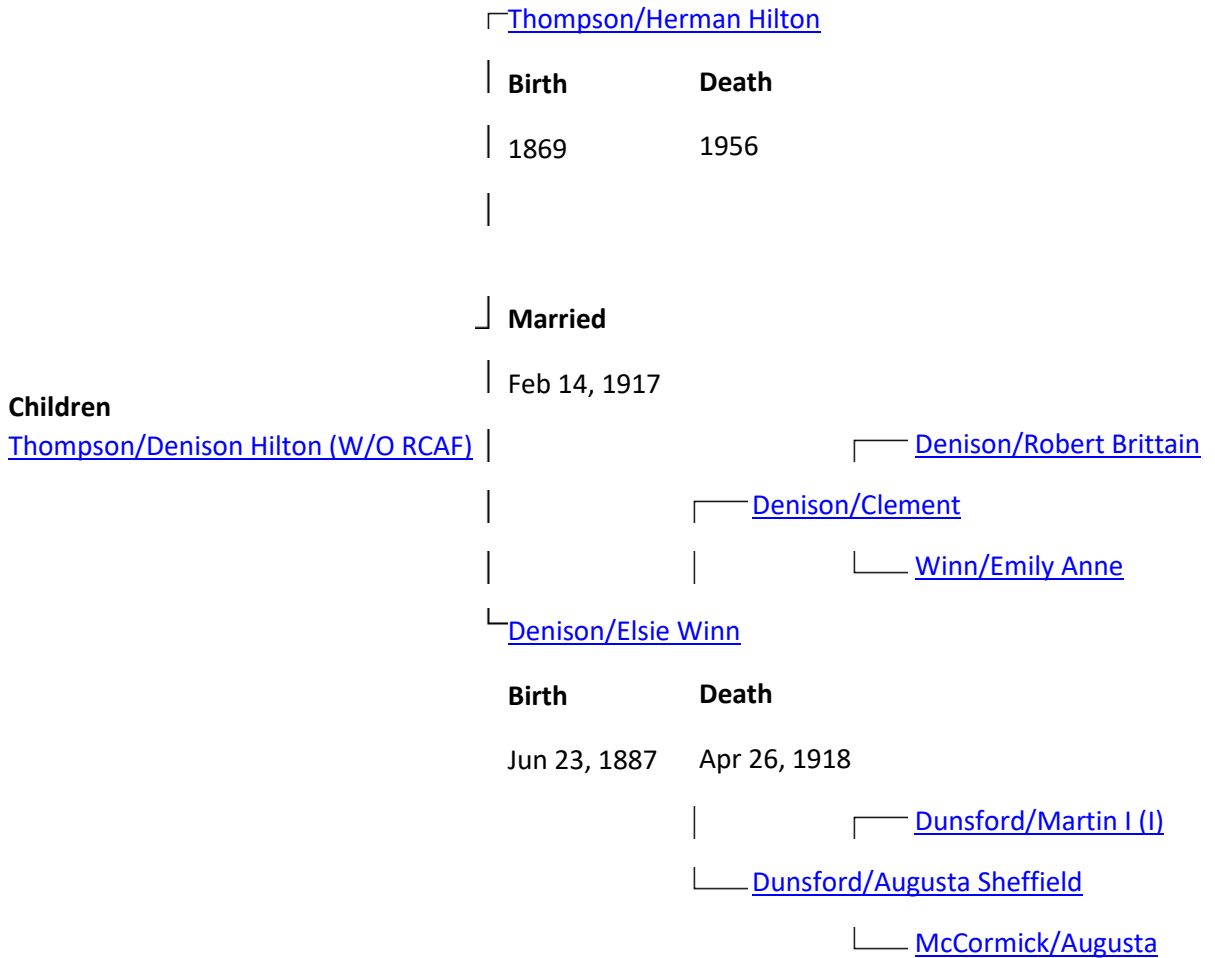
The invasion of Poland in 1939 forced Britain and the Commonwealth to declare war as Britain was treaty-bound to defend that country. In the early years of the war, the Battle of Britain was won in the skies by the Royal Air Force re-enforced with Canadian and other Commonwealth pilots - thus ensuring that Britain would not be invaded by sea.

Shortly thereafter, a massive bombing campaign was launched by allied air forces. Britain and her Commonwealth took on the dangerous task of night bombing while the United States Air Force launched sorties during daylight hours. The relentless twenty-four hour bombing campaign contributed to Germany's ultimate defeat.

Warrant Officer Denison Hilton Thompson flew a Wellington bomber with the RCAF during night missions over Germany. This is his story.

About Denison Hilton Thompson

Denison Thompson (we shall refer to him as “Dennis”) was born in the Bahamas on April 13th, 1918 and was the only child of Herman Hilton Thompson and Elsie Winn Denison. He never knew his mother as she passed away just shy of three weeks after Dennis was born. Given that she was thirty years old at the time, we may assume that the cause of death was possibly due to complications of childbirth. Elsie was buried in St. John’s Cemetery on the Humber.



The Early Years

Dennis grew up a lonely boy as he never knew his mother and he had no siblings. His father travelled extensively with his work as president of H. S. and T. Crystal Co. Ltd. of Toronto. The company produced satin white for coating paper at paper mills.



The picture shown is of Dennis at an early age at an unknown location with a young girl only identified as "Thelma".

There is no mention of Dennis and his father in the 1921 Census records – possibly a reflection of the constant business travelling.

In 1925, at the age of seven, Dennis travelled with his father to New York. The following year Dennis was enrolled in the preparatory school at Upper Canada College. He graduated and went on to the upper school and was assigned to Jackson's house - graduating in 1937 with honours matriculation. He excelled in rugby, hockey, boxing and advanced through the ranks of the school's rifle battalion.

Following graduation, Dennis travelled to Miami and then to Southampton as a third-class passenger in 1938, where he received some basic flying instruction. He departed England in 1939 just prior to the outbreak of war.

His father, Herman Hilton Thompson died May 10th, 1956 in Nassau and was buried at the Ebenezer Methodist Church Cemetery in Nassau, Bahamas.

The War Years

Dennis signed his attestation papers in September of 1939 but for clerical reasons they were rejected. He resubmitted his papers and they were accepted by the RCAF a year later on September 20, 1940. He also filled out his very first will on September 23, 1940 leaving everything to his father Herman. As the will's form was standard issue from the RCAF, his identification number R/72344 was also entered.

At the time he and his father were living at 214 Dunvegan Road in Toronto.

Dennis arrived in England in 1940 and was assigned to the RCAF 428 Bomber Squadron also known as the “Ghost Squadron” stationed in Dalton, Yorkshire.



The squadron's badge contains a white death's head in a black shroud and refers to the squadron's ghost designation which was earned through its night bombing operations, as 'Hitler's Hunters' and the death and destruction which it inflicted upon the enemy.

Dennis wrote home to his father saying “ *the raids were terrible to see and that it was like hell on earth with thunder and flames*”

Dennis flew five missions over Germany and managed to survive. But late in the evening of May 27, 1943 after returning from a leave in London he learned that he was to command an unscheduled sixth flight substituting in for the regular pilot who was sick at the time.

Over time, Dennis had befriended fellow pilot Allen Read and on the night of the final raid he entrusted Allen with his Rolex watch, some money and a few other small personal items. This was a reciprocal arrangement between the two men as both were acutely aware of the dangerous nature of their missions.

Dennis and his crew of four boarded Wellington bomber number HZ485 and lifted off from the Dalton aerodrome at 11:12 pm along with 517 Lancasters, Wellingtons and Mosquitos from #6 Bomber Group.



RAF Wellington bomber

The mission was to bomb the heavily defended German manufacturing town of Essen, home of the Krupp Armament factory located in the Ruhr valley. German fighters, heavy smog from previous attacks and a Krupp decoy site located out of town all hampered the operation.

It would be the last time Allen would see his twenty-five year old friend.

RCAF records indicate that the bomber crashed on the way to its destination at 1:30 am on May 28 at Haps-Rijkevoort, SE Noord-Brabant province, Holland.

There is no documentation as to what caused the crash or the exact fate of Dennis and his crew. Was the Wellington shot down by German night fighters or was there a mechanical failure? Were at least some of the crew able to parachute to safety? Were the bodies recovered and where are they buried?

Like so many other losses during the bombing campaigns, the fog of war and the passage of time suggest that this mystery may never be solved.

Modern day bloggers and amateur historians active on the RCAF forum believe that the crew may be buried at the Commonwealth War Cemetery in Eindhoven-Woensel in the Netherlands which contains 686 war victims.



543 are airmen who were killed in strategic bombings, however there is no specific monument for Dennis and his crew - rather there are a number of markers simply saying "an unknown airman".

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) **does** list Dennis on panel 179 at the Runnymede Airman's Memorial, which is situated at Englefield Green, near Egham, 32 kilometres west of London. (*Where in 1215 King John in the presence of his rebellious barons signed the Magna Carta*).

Dennis is only one of 20,450 Commonwealth airmen commemorated there by name who have no known burial site.

Dennis is also memorialized on the war cenotaph at the St. John's Cemetery on the Humber close by his mother's tombstone.

So ends the sad story of a young man who served his country not knowing his mother, having no siblings, wife or children, flying his final mission with a crew he did not know well and dying under uncertain circumstances with the location of his remains now unknown.

Epilogue

After Dennis was declared missing and presumed to be dead, his friend Allen wrote to Herman twice expressing sorrow and sympathy (see attachments below). He also pledged to return the watch to Herman as soon as he was released from his internment camp in Sweden. (Allen and his crew were also shot down three months after Dennis was killed). There is no record of Herman receiving the letters, responding to them or ever receiving his son's watch – another mystery!

After the war, the Dalton aerodrome was closed and Squadron 428 was relocated to the RCAF Station at Yarmouth, Nova Scotia where it was to be retro-fitted for deployment in January 1946 for service in the Pacific war with Japan. With the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, and Japan's formal surrender, the squadron was decommissioned on September 5th, 1945.

The Royal Air Force Bomber Command Memorial in London commemorates the crews of RAF Bomber Command who embarked on missions during the Second World War.



The memorial, on the south side of Piccadilly, facing Hyde Park Corner, was built to mark the sacrifice of 55,573 aircrew from Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Czechoslovakia, Poland and other allied countries, as well as civilians of all nations killed during raids. The average age of those killed was 23 years old.

Queen Elizabeth II unveiled the memorial on June 28, 2012 the year of her Diamond Jubilee.

As a sad example of indifferent and revisionist attitudes by some, the monument was vandalized with white gloss paint in early 2019. The monument has since been restored by professional conservators.

Acknowledgements

- www.Wikipedia.ca
- www.WarMuseum.ca
- www.veterans.gc.ca
- www.rafcommands.com
- Imperial War Museum, London
- Royal Canadian Airforce
- Ms. Jill Spellman – archivist, Upper Canada College
- Mr. Nick Macklem
- Mr. E.O. (Ned) Martin
- The Toronto Star

Attachments

Letters from Allen Read to Dennis' father Herman Thompson

(copy)

C/Sgt. H. A. Read
R77867
R.C.A.F.
Overseas
July 1 (1943)

Dear Mr. Thompson-

This is a hard letter to write, but I feel sure that Dennis would have written to my folks if anything had happened to me, so I felt that I would write to you.

Dennis and I have been inseparable friends ever since we met five months ago, and we have been everywhere together. I can't resign myself to the fact that he won't be back and I still keep looking for him in the mess and in the flight offices. I certainly hope that he is safe and there is a good chance that he is, especially with his knowledge of parts of that country. Be sure that I will be listening for any news of him & will let you know immediately.

I was in hospital with an abscessed ear at the time he was reported missing, and I had been expecting him in each day to visit me. Then my crew came in and told me that he wouldn't be in. He had given me the Rolex wrist watch you gave him- because he thought it too valuable to take on trips and it would keep time for me while I was in hospital. I have the watch now, and as it will probably be a valued keepsake for you I will send it to you as soon as I'm sure you receive this letter.

On the night it happened Dennis was not scheduled to go, but had to go at the last minute to replace a pilot who took ill. Everyone thought it a tough break and it was. When we were not on a trip together he used to leave me all his money, or if I was on I would leave him my money and my new bicycle. He always joked that my friendship was worth a lot but that he was awfully tired of walking and would like a bicycle.

He spoke to me often about you and what a fine father you had been to him, Mr. Thompson, and I know how you must feel about all this. So I wanted you to know how much I miss him too and how much I hope for his safety. This letter would have reached you long ago, but I was just out of hospital and I had to get your address from the records here.

I shall certainly inform you by wire the moment I hear any news and if there is anything I can do in the meantime please let me know.

Yours sincerely,

Allen Read

P/Sgt. H. A. Read, R77867
c/o J. B. Hogan, Esq.,
Head of A. I. I.,
Air Ministry,
King Charles St.,
London, England-

Dear Mr. Thompson:

I wrote you a letter before, but I cant remember whether I had the opportunity to post it before I left England, so I will write another. I have been interned here in Sweden for about two months now, and I have been trying with no success to get news of Dennis through Air magazines which we get here forwarded from England.

Dennis and I were the best of friends when we were together in England, and I certainly miss him very much. We had a very good leave together in London just before he went missing. Then I was sent to hospital with an absessed ear, and while I was there I received the bad news that he was missing. Dennis had two watches at the time, and as I had none he insisted that I take one to use in hospital. As I believe it was a gift from you he also said that it would be safe with me in hospital. You can imagine how I felt when I heard the news. He was one of the best friends I ever had, and we were inseparable on the squadron and when we went out.

I still have the wrist watch he lent me, and I intend to return it to you as soon as an opportunity presents itself. I am sure you would value it as a keepsake. Dennis always spoke of you as a very fine person, and I hope I can meet you when I get back to Canada.

After quite a rough passage we are having quite a good time in Sweden. THERE is lots for us to do here, and we are not treated as real prisoners, and we have a lovely home and fine food. So it is a fine place to be if one must be someplace other than Canada or England.

I would be glad to hear any news of Dennis which you may have received, and if you have heard no news I am sure there is cause for hope as sometimes nothing is learned for months.

Yours sincerely,

"H. A. Read"

"Missing" report from the RCAF

Reference:-
4288/3.4/26/Air.

No. 428 (R.C.A.F) Squadron,

Date: 6th June 1943.

C O N F I N E N T I A L .

Subject:- Wellington Aircraft HZ.485 - Missing 27/28th May 1943.

Sir,

I have the honour to submit the following report in amplification of my signal A.254 dated 28th May 1943, with reference to the crew of the abovementioned aircraft of this Unit and which has been reported missing from operations on the night of 27/28th May 1943.

2. At 23.12 hours on 27th May 1943, the above-mentioned aircraft piloted by R.72344 W.O.1. Thompson D.N., took off from Dalton aerodrome to carry out a bombing raid on Essen, Germany. The aircraft was due to return to Dalton at approximately 0.425 hours on 28th May 1943, but unfortunately nothing further has been heard from any member of this crew since the time of take-off.

3. All necessary action has been taken and next of kin residing in Great Britain have been advised.

4. The names of the members of the crew together with particulars of their trips and operational hours are as follows:-

R.77344 W.O.1. THOMPSON D.N. - Pilot -	28.3.43 Sgt. Nazaire	DCO 5.58 hours.
72344	10.4.43. Frankfurt.	DNCO 2.22 "
	16.4.43. Mannheim.	DNCO 3.48 "
	21.5.43. Gardening.	DCO 4.06 "
	25.5.43. Dusseldorf.	DCO 5.09 "
	28.5.43. Essen.	Failed to return.

Total hours. 21.23

P.O. A.F. BEATON. (J.13842) - Navigator -	4.4.43. Keil .	DCO 6.12 hours.
R.111333 SGT. HART, G.C. - Bomb Aimer -	10.4.43. Frankfurt.	DNCO 2.22 "
1076367 Sgt. CHILVER K.G. - WOP/AG. -	16.4.43. Mannheim.	DNCO 3.48 "
R.110283 SGT. O'HARA G.C.P. - Air Gunner -	21.5.43. Gardening.	DCO 4.06 "
	25.5.43. Dusseldorf.	DCO 5.09 "
	28.5.43. Essen.	Failed to return.

Total hours. 21.37

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your obedient Servant,