

Flying Officer Ronald TOOMER

Service number 152236
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve
35 (Madras Presidency) Squadron
Killed in action on 12 September 1944, aged 27

Ronald was born in Aberdeen during the Great War. His father was from Wells and so when his father went to fight in France, the family moved to Wells. Ronald went to the Blue School, was an active member of St Cuthbert's Church and was working for Sheldons' Engineering when the war started. He joined the RAF in 1942 and trained in Canada as a bomb aimer. He died when his Lancaster was shot down over Germany on his 40th mission.



Ronald, based on a photo in the *Wells Journal*, 20 April 1945
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Ronald was born in Aberdeen on 30 April 1917, to Joseph Charles John Toomer and Jeannie Hepburn née Sangster, who lived on Crown Street, Aberdeen.

Joseph was from Wells but was working in Aberdeen as a grocer's manager. On 27 June 1914, he married Jeannie Sangster at St Andrew's Cathedral in Aberdeen. At the time of Ronald's birth he was a corporal in the Cameron Highlanders and later in 1916 went to serve in France. On 17 September 1917, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers, and in February 1918, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. By then Ronald, his younger brother Ian, and their mother were living in Wells on High Street.

Joseph came back to Wells in January 1919, but continued to serve in the Lancashire Fusiliers, being made a Lieutenant on 1 March 1919. In February 1921, he was transferred to the Reserves, and two months later, he went to Ireland and joined the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary.¹

¹ The information about the Auxiliaries, and Joseph's service with them, is taken from www.theauxiliaries.com.

The Auxiliaries were an independent paramilitary unit made up of ex-officers from the British Army whose job was to conduct counter-insurgency operations against the IRA. They were separate from the 'Black and Tans'. On 1 October 1921, Joseph was hospitalised suffering from a severe chill and lumbago, and was discharged from the Auxiliaries on 17 February 1922, while still in hospital in Ireland.

He returned to Wells, and in January 1923, was employed as the City Council's rent collector and as the manager of the Wells Labour Exchange, a post he held until his retirement in 1956. He was a City Councillor from 1935 to 1941 and secretary of the Wells Branch of the British Legion for many years.

In 1928, Ronald attended the Blue School and St Cuthbert's Sunday School, and was a cub in the 4th Wells Scout Troop.

Ronald was a good singer. In 1933, he was in the Blue School Choral Society and sang in that year's School Concert. In February 1935, he sang in the chorus of the Wells Musical Comedy Society's production of 'The Arcadians', which played for eight shows at the Palace Theatre.

On the sporting side, in 1936, Ronald played football for Wookey Hole Football Club, and in 1937 he played cricket for Sheldons' and for Chewton Mendip.

He was an active member of St Cuthbert's Church. He was a committee member of the Bible Class, sang in the Church Choir, and from 1937 was a sidesman. Ronald was also a member of the Church of England Missionary Society.

In September 1939, Ronald was living with his family at 'Maryville', 16, Mary Road, along with a lodger, Edith Clark, who was a civil servant. Ronald was a draughtsman/engineer at Messrs. Sheldons' Engineering Works, and his brother Ian was serving in the Royal Artillery. During the war his father was an ARP Warden and the reception officer for evacuees arriving in Wells.

The *Wells Journal* of 20 April 1945 tells us of Ronald's early wartime service:

He was employed at Messrs. Sheldon's Engineering Works, and later as chief draughtsman for a Government firm near Salisbury. Although in a deferred occupation he gave up his job to join the R.A.F. in February, 1942 and went to Canada for part of his training [as a bomb aimer]. Whilst there he won the Skyways Silver Trophy, open to Dominion Trainees for a year's work ... He also volunteered for the Path Finder Force, when the Corps was formed and was the holder of the Path Finder Force Badge, an award much prized in the R.A.F.

On graduating as a bomb aimer in May 1943, Ronald was promoted from Leading Aircraftsman to Pilot Officer, and in November 1943 he was promoted to Flying Officer.

On returning from Canada, Ronald went to an Operation Training Unit where he met up with his crew and together they trained on twin-engine bombers, probably Wellingtons. After five or six weeks they moved on to 1665 Heavy Conversion Unit, at RAF Tilstock in Shropshire, to train on four-engine Halifax bombers.

On 8 March 1944, Ronald's crew joined 76 Squadron at RAF Holme-on-Spalding Moor in the East Riding of Yorkshire. 76 Squadron was a bomber squadron flying Halifax III bombers. From 9 April until 1 May they flew on nine raids including a 596 bomber raid on Dusseldorf and a 637 bomber raid on Karlsruhe.

On 3 May 1944, Ronald's crew were posted to 35 (Madras Presidency) Squadron, based at RAF Graveley, in Cambridgeshire, and joined 'B' Flight. 35 Squadron was part of the Pathfinder Force whose job was to accurately mark targets with Target Indicators (TIs) and incendiaries, so that the main bomber force could find the right target. As 35 Squadron flew Avro Lancaster B.III aircraft, the crew's first priority must have been to get used to flying a Lancaster, as so far they had only flown Halifaxes.

Their first raid was on 27 May 1944 when they bombed Rennes. In all, Ronald flew on 31 raids, mostly to targets in France in support of the D-Day landings. His last sortie was a day-light raid on the synthetic oil plant at Wanne-Eickel, about 10 miles west of Dortmund. It was part of a 412 aircraft attack on three oil plants at Dortmund, Scholven-Buer and Wanne-Eickel.

They took off at 12.13 on 12 September 1944 in Lancaster TL-O (serial number PB 308). Their designated role was that of a 'Supporter', which means that they had to fly with the main bomber force ready to remark or reinforce the original TIs as required by dropping incendiaries onto them.

The mission is described in the squadron's Operations Record Book:²

Seven aircraft set out shortly after noon to bomb WANNE EICKEL. Heavy 'flak' was encountered and a smoke screen hampered the attackers, and one aircraft went on to bomb BOCHUM, the alternative target. Two aircraft, captained by F/L P.C. GRANGER and F/O D. CAMPBELL, failed to return.

Ronald's aircraft, piloted by Donald Campbell, crashed at Gelsenkirchen-Bismarck, about four miles west of the target. Ronald and the rest of his crew were originally buried in the cemetery at Gelsenkirchen-Huellen, about 16 miles west of Dortmund.

On 9 May 1947, Ronald was reburied in the Reichwald Forest War cemetery in collective grave 19.E.15-17, along with Joseph Robinson and Francis Davidson, who were the two airgunners from his crew. In Wells he is remembered on the rolls of honour at the Blue School, Wells Town Hall and Wells Cemetery.

His brother Ian went on to serve abroad with REME (the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers).

² Held at the National Archives, Kew, reference AIR- 27-381-17.