PO Thomas Earl Wiltse J/87719 RCAF



Thomas was born on 29 January 1922 in Assiniboia, Saskatchewan, the son of George Wiltse and Edith Wiltse nee Dennison. Educated at Davyrood School and Nutana Collegiate Institute, Saskatoon, Thomas was employed on the family farm when, in April 1942, he enlisted in the RCAF.

Thomas commenced pilot training; however, when his training was suspended in January 1943, he re-mustered as Air Bomber. In June 1943 Thomas completed his flying training in Canada with the award of his Air Bomber badge and immediately embarked for the UK.

Following advanced training at 4(O) Advanced Flying Unit RAF West Freugh, Wigtown, Scotland, 22 OTU RAF Wellesbourne Mountford, Warwickshire and 1664 HCU RAF Dishforth, Yorkshire, in January 1944 Thomas was posted to 425 Sqn at RAF Tholthorpe, Yorkshire and in May was awarded his commission. In July 1944 Thomas was posted to 415 Sqn at RAF East Moor, Yorkshire.

On the night of 10/11 August 1944 a 415 Sqn crew had flown Halifax MZ633 (QO-B) on an operational flight to bomb U-Boat pens at La Pallice, France. Just before reaching the target area, the aircraft's port outer engine caught fire. Fortunately, the fire went out after the propeller was feathered and the engine was shut down, and a precautionary landing was made at RAF Exeter, Devon. The damaged engine was replaced at Exeter, and the squadron planned the collection of the aircraft.

On the morning of 21 August 1944, 415 Sqn aircraft Halifax NA609 (QO-X) departed RAF East Moor with a crew of six, plus a second crew of six to fly MZ633 back to RAF East Moor. Arriving at RAF Exeter without incident, the repaired aircraft was signed over to them. At 17:04 Thomas and the crew, plus one ground crew mechanic, departed RAF Exeter in Halifax III MZ633 flying in formation with Halifax III NA609. At 18:20 the two aircraft collided and then broke up in the air, crashing between the villages of West Haddlesey and Birkin, 5 miles SW of Selby, Yorkshire, west of the York to Doncaster Road, killing all 14 onboard the two aircraft.

The subsequent examination of the crash sites found that the starboard aileron of Halifax MZ633 was found on the ground with the Browning machine gun from the nose of Halifax NA609 sticking through it, indicating that the nose of NA609 had struck the rear portion of the starboard wing of MZ633. One suggestion for the collision occurring was put down to a propeller of Halifax NA609 breaking off, leading to the damaged aircraft then swinging into Halifax MZ633. This suggests that MZ633 was flying as the lead aircraft and NA609 was formated on it, so when the propeller dropped off NA609 a swing would initially occur, and with the two aircraft being so close together there was no time to avoid a collision with the lead aircraft. Most of the crew lost were squadron Section Leaders and this, combined with the loss of the Sqn Commanding Officer temporarily affected 415 Sqn's operational efficiency just 3 weeks after beginning operations in Bomber Command.

Also Killed: Sqn Ldr Brian Edmund Wilmot RCAF DFC* (Pilot); FO Walter Reginald Eaglestone RCAF (WOp/AG); FO John Henry Hudson RCAF (Nav); Sgt Norman Martin Malpass (FE); Sgt James Walton Mitchell RCAF (AG); Cpl William Rodger Dickson MiD RCAF (Ground Crew-Fitter IIE)

Thomas is buried in Harrogate (Stonefall) Cemetery, Yorkshire

Thomas is commemorated on Wall Panel – 267

Photo Source: findagrave