

## **William Roland Thomas (1923-2012) Royal Air Force Swansea/Broad Haven**

West Wales Veterans' Archive

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### **Description**

William's story has been passed down through the generations and has been collated here by his granddaughter Karen Smith, from a number of albums containing both photographs and memorabilia from his time serving in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War.

William was better known as Roly, the name which is used throughout this account, and had a keen interest in photography. This shows through in the many wonderful photos which he took during his service, all of which have been painstakingly catalogued, labelled and placed into photograph albums by his loving wife, Joan.

### **Early Years**

William Roland Thomas, better known as Roly, was born in Mumbles, Swansea on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1923. He was the eldest of four boys. He attended school in the area and, at the age of 16, had a job selling ice cream to visitors and locals alike from a bicycle.

### **Royal Air Force**

In 1942, aged 19, Roly enlisted into the Royal Air Force in the role of aircraft mechanic, and was posted to Blackpool for both basic training and trade training.

Blackpool was chosen as a suitable area for a training wing of the RAF due to the amount of accommodation that was available for billeting personnel in the form of bed and breakfasts, guest houses and hotels. Training was split between three main camps: RAF Squires Gate, RAF Weeton and RAF Kirkham. RAF Weeton was home to No. 8 School of Technical Training and ran courses for flight mechanics and riggers from May 1940 to September 1965. Squires Gate was home to No. 5 School of Technical Training for air mechanics and basic training for over 769,000 personnel during the Second World War period.

It is likely that Roly did both his basic training and trade training at RAF Squires Gate. After completing trade training, Roly was posted to Southeast England and billeted in the Grand Hotel in Eastbourne from January to February 1943. The hotel was used to accommodate personnel serving in the coastal command airfields nearby. Sussex was home to 14 airfields including Eastbourne, Rustington, Tangmere and Shoreham.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of February 1943, Roly was granted a 48 hour leave pass to travel to Swansea and marry his sweetheart, Joan Sutherland.

In April 1943, Roly was posted to an airbase somewhere in Norwich, to one of the many fighter or bomber commands in that area. By May 1944, he had been reassigned, this time to an airbase near Birmingham. As with many postings during World War Two, personnel were frequently moved to stations across the UK where the need was greatest.

Roly was deployed to Belgium around the time of the Battle of Arnhem, in late 1944. During his stay in Belgium, he was billeted with a Belgian family and when his daughter was born in December 1944, he named her Andree after the daughter of the family he was staying with.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 1945, Roly was posted to India. He sailed from Liverpool on the *San Marie*, arriving in Bombay (now Mumbai) on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October 1945, the journey taking him via Gibraltar and the Suez Canal.

From Bombay, Roly's journey took him across India by train to the RAF base at Dhubalia in West Bengal. In December 1945, he travelled by train to Peshawar, Pakistan and on to the Khyber barracks, a journey that took over a week.

Roly spent Christmas at the Khyber barracks and saved a menu from Christmas Day which shows that they enjoyed a three-course meal with cigarettes, matches and coffee to follow!

### **Post-War**

Roly was demobbed in 1947 and returned from India to Mumbles, where he worked as a projectionist at the Mumbles Cinema.

In 1948, the family moved to Tenby where he worked for his father-in-law, David Alexander Sutherland, as a butcher in the family shop, on the corner of George Street and Upper Frog Street.

When David retired from the butchers' shop in 1966, the four-generation family, including Karen who was 2 years old at the time, moved to Aviemore in Scotland, where they ran the Craigellachie Guest House as a family business, along with a caravan site and rental chalets.

In 1970, the family moved back to Pembrokeshire and bought Hasguard Cross Caravan Park which they ran until the late 1980s, when Joan and Roly retired to Broad Haven. They lived there until their deaths in March 2012, when they passed away within 5 days of each other, both aged 88.