

Thomas Rogers

Probationary Observer

Sub-Lieutenant

Royal Naval Air Service



Tom Rogers was born on the 20th July 1893 in Hartlebury, Worcestershire, a son to Thomas and Alice Rogers. Thomas senior was a domestic gardener and had married a Hartlebury girl, Alice Jane Hunt, in 1890. They set up home in Hartlebury and shortly after, in 1892, their first child Allen was born. He was followed by Thomas junior in 1893 with a brother Frederick arriving in 1895. About 1900 Thomas moved his growing family to Ledbury where they lived in South Parade at the bottom end of Ledbury. Here their first daughter Alice May was born in early 1900. Sadly, baby Alice died shortly after birth, only surviving six months. The last of Thomas and Alice's children, William Stanley, was born some time later, in 1908. At the time of the 1911 census the family were recorded as still living in South Parade and Thomas senior was then working as a 'timber measurer and valuer'.

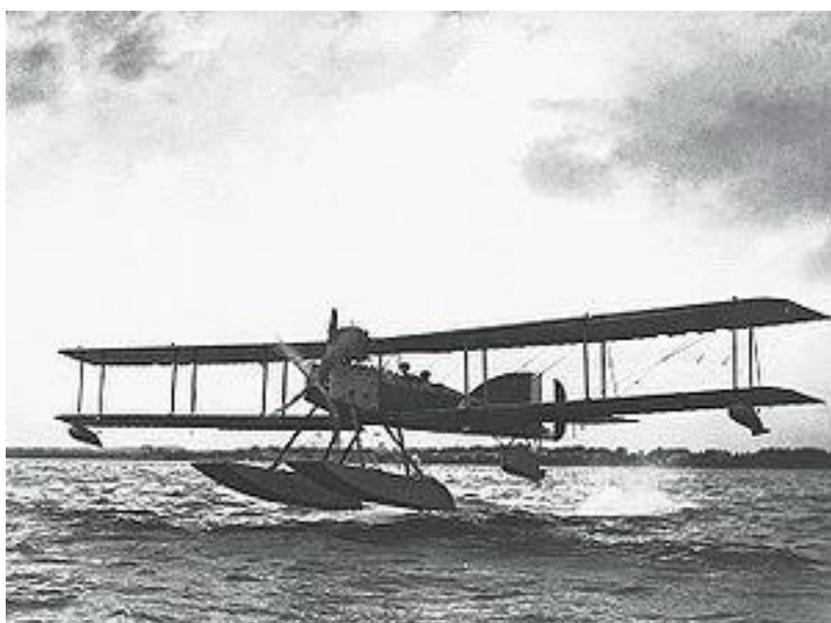
Initially Tom was educated at Ledbury Boy's School but was clearly quite bright and won a County Council Scholarship to attend Lady Hawkins' Grammar School in Kington. As far as can be identified this is Tom's only connection to Kington. Whether Tom travelled to Kington daily or was billeted in Kington while attending Lady Hawkins' school is unknown. Upon recording his death, the Ledbury Guardian informs us that while at Kington he was a member of the local Territorial Regiment, presumably the Herefordshire Regiment, 'D' Company. However, in the 1911 census Tom was living back in Ledbury and is recorded as being a Solicitors Law Clerk at Messrs. R&C Masefield, solicitors. A long established company still plying their trade in Ledbury today. Some years later he moved away from Ledbury establishing himself in Gloucester, working in the offices of Messrs Bruton Knowles & Co. Auctioneers, again a company still operating in Gloucester today.

The Ledbury Guardian informs us that it was from Messrs Bruton and Knowles that Tom enlisted on the 23rd November 1914 into the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS). He appears to have advanced quickly through the ranks and before long Petty

Officer Mechanic (E), F2155, Rogers was training to be a maintenance engineer on seaplanes. However, this period of Tom's service career ended abruptly. His record informs us that on the 31st August 1915 he was discharged from the RNAS with a medical condition, unknown at this time. He returned to Gloucester and took up his old position at auctioneers Brunton and Knowles.

As the war progressed the benefits and opportunities of seaplane use, as weapons and observation platforms, was becoming evident to the Admiralty. Seaplanes had been used at Gallipoli and one had been utilized as a spotter aircraft at the Battle of Jutland. However, these basic flying machines were a handful for the pilots and it soon became apparent that a second member of the flight crew would prove useful as a defensive gunner, observer, weapons and communications operator, leaving the pilot to concentrate on flying the plane. In 1915 there were no official flight observers, they were invariably failed pilots or RNAS Petty Officers. It was clear that the occupation of flight observer needed to be professionalised. At the end of 1915 there were just fifty-seven observers, most of these being in training positions and many more were required. It was into this fledgling trade that Tom was able to re-enlist as a Sub-Lieutenant Probationary Observer on the 20th September 1916.

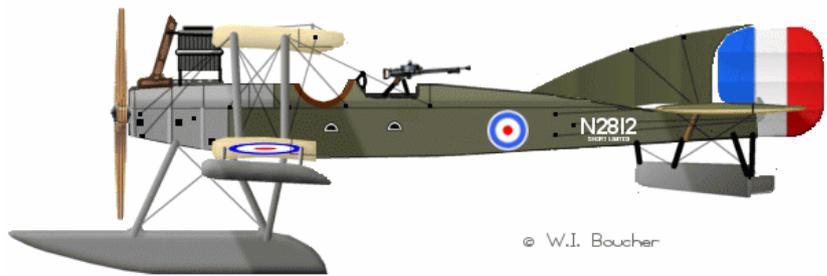
By the time Tom re-enlisted there had been considerable improvements made to observer training and their professional advancement opportunities. Tom joined the RNAS observer training programme immediately and the next few months were filled with intensive training and familiarisation in his new role. Following initial training, on the 24th September, he was sent to Signals School in Portsmouth (HMS Mercury) and on the 12th November moved down Portsdown Hill to the Gunnery School at Whale Island. In December 1916 he was moved to Roehampton Kite Balloon training centre in London and in the new year was despatched to the newly established Observer Training facility at Eastchurch on the Isle of Sheppey. His record reveals that Tom excelled as a naval observer and following successful completion of his observer training was posted to RNAS Dover on the 22nd May



1917. Sub-Lieutenant Thomas Rogers, a fully trained Probationary Observer, now embarked upon operational sorties flying out of Dover, over the English Channel, looking for enemy submarines and mines.

Detecting and destroying German submarines had become a priority for the Admiralty who urgently required a torpedo-carrying

seaplane. Designed by Horace Short of Short Brothers, Rochester, the Type 184 was the solution the Admiralty were looking for. This two seat, folding wing machine, could carry bombs and torpedoes and was also a capable reconnaissance platform. The Short 184 was



the type of aircraft Tom flew in and his role as observer would have seen him positioned in the rear seat of the aircraft with the pilot up front. Tom's responsibilities included the crew's personal defence using the craft's machine gun, observing enemy activity, detecting submarines and launching torpedoes to destroy them.

Sadly, Tom's wartime efforts as a naval observer were tragically short lived. From his service record we discover that on the **19th June 1917** he was part of a three-man crew aboard a Short 184 tractor type seaplane, serial number 9057. As mentioned these aircraft were designed for two crew so it is unusual to find three men aboard. It is quite possible that Tom was being familiarised with his role as observer and being prepared to go solo in the near future. He was accompanied by pilot, Flight Lieutenant G. P. Paine and Flight Sub-Lieutenant James Potvin. The record shows that they were on a 'special mine patrol' off the coast of northern Belgium. While flying eight miles NNE of Nieuport on the Belgian coast they were challenged by a German seaplane. An aerial combat ensued with the British coming off worse. They were shot down and crashed into the sea. Flight Lieutenant Paine survived the crash and was taken prisoner. Sub-Lieutenants Potvin and Rogers were not so lucky and both are recorded as having drowned. Tom had been on

active service less than one month and his death meant the RNAS had lost a valuable resource.



Notice of his loss was reported in the 30th June 1917 edition of the Kington Times. The Ledbury Guardian also reported his death in an expansive and moving epitaph from which we learn that his brothers, Allen and Fred, were also serving in the forces. Allen was a Sergeant in the Royal

Army Medical Corp serving in France and Fred a motor cyclist dispatch rider in the Royal Flying Corps. This suggesting that the pull of mechanically propelled flight was not only appealing to Tom. For his initial service in the RNAS Tom was awarded the British War medal. No records for any other medals exist but it is probable he was also awarded the Victory medal at the end of the war. Sadly, both posthumously.

Thomas Rogers death is commemorated upon the Chatham Naval Memorial, panel 25. After the war an appropriate way of commemorating those Royal Naval members who had lost their lives at sea, and hence had no known grave, was required. An Admiralty committee recommended that the three manning ports of Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth should each have an identical memorial of unmistakable naval form, an obelisk, which would not only commemorate the deaths of those with no grave but also act as a leading mark for shipping. Chatham Naval Memorial commemorates 8517 sailors who lost their lives in World War One. 10098 names were added after the Second World War. Since Tom was a Lady Hawkins' Old Boy his name is commemorated on Kington war memorial and quite appropriately his name is proudly displayed on the Lady Hawkins' Roll of Honour, located at the front entrance to the school. A Peace Service was held in Kington on Sunday 6th July 1919 at which Tom's name was read out along with another 64 names of Kington men who also gave the ultimate sacrifice. Tom may not have a grave but he is not forgotten.

