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Wing Commander Leonard Ratcliff

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obituary

Wartime pilot who flew with the RAF's elite squadrons that dropped agents into Nazi-occupied Europe



Leonard Ratcliff in a wartime photograph

While historical interest in the secret war against Nazi Germany shows no sign of abating, one aspect has remained relatively neglected. Throughout the conflict, the Royal Air Force provided essential clandestine transportation for agents of the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) and the Special Operations Executive

(SOE). Two specialist squadrons, Nos 138 and 161, based at Tempsford airfield in Bedfordshire parachuted personnel and supplies to resistance movements the length and breadth of the continent. In addition, light aircraft were used to deliver and pickup agents from France.

A Handley Page Halifax Alamy

Wing Commander Leonard Ratcliff was one of the very last of the elite aircrew who flew the RAF's secret "special duties" operations into the heart of Nazi-dominated Europe.

A diminutive man who built up his strength through extensive physical training, Ratcliffe was a vigorous presence who achieved much through the force of his indomitable personality. He won multiple decorations — including a Distinguished Flying Cross and Bar — during an impressive wartime career that saw him fly nearly 30 missions in bombers before handling an assortment of very different aircraft in pursuit of the secret war.

Afterwards, he never flew again. "It's a terrifying experience going up," he said, "and if you're not scared out of your wits, you jolly well ought to be."

Leonard Fitch Ratcliff was born at Maldon in Essex in 1919, the fifth of six children of Stanley Ratcliff and his wife, Constance (née Fitch). Both of his parents' families were pillars of the Essex farming community and undertook important roles in local life. After attending Felsted School, he joined the family agricultural firm while also finding time to engage in a variety of sporting pursuits that included representing Chelmsford and Essex at hockey.

Predicting the onset of war, Ratcliff joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve in February 1939 and was still undergoing basic training when hostilities commenced. Typically, he was engaged in a round of golf when the warning sirens sounded on September 3, 1939.

The RAF was not yet ready to receive his services and for some months he continued in his civilian occupation, taking the opportunity offered by this hiatus to marry his fiancée, Betty Stewart, a sea captain's daughter from the Stewarts of Appin, on September 26. Finally, in February 1940, his proper RAF training began. More than a year later, on July 16, 1941, he joined No 49 Squadron at Scampton as a pilot. Flying Hampden light bombers, he undertook 29 sorties against targets in Germany and Nazi-occupied Europe for which, in June 1942, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

{ His passengers included the most celebrated members of SOE

His next posting, to No 24 Operational Training Unit, proved pivotal to his subsequent special duties career as he was briefly deputy flight commander to Squadron Leader "Bob" Hodges — later Air Chief Marshal Sir Lewis Hodges — who soon departed to assume command of No 161 Squadron at Tempsford. Before the secret world beckoned, Ratcliff threw himself with gusto into his training work at RAF Honeybourne, where his efforts were recognised by the award of an Air Force Cross. Then, in his own words, Ratcliff "needed to get back on to the sharp end of active operational duties" and telephoned Hodges, who helped to engineer a posting to Tempsford.

He arrived at No 161 Squadron on June 24, 1943, to take over the

unit's flight of Halifax, Havoc and Hudson aircraft, which were involved in a very mixed bag of tasks. The Halifax bombers dropped agents and supplies by parachute; the Havocs were deployed for clandestine wireless communications; and the Hudsons were used for the landing and picking up of agents in France. Ratcliff did not receive specific training on these aircraft, but quickly taught himself their idiosyncrasies.

He wasted no time in participating in the unit's work, flying a Havoc sortie on July 12 and, the next day, undertaking a Halifax flight, dropping supplies in France. One early mission was only partially successful; two dropping grounds did not offer the correct recognition signals, but he managed to deliver two agents on the third. However, his aircraft lost an engine; with speed reduced and daylight imminent, he headed for North Africa, reaching his destination "with a cupful of fuel left" after a flight of eight hours. In December 1943, he was awarded a second DFC.

Although No 161 Squadron devoted its efforts principally to SIS, several of Ratcliff's passengers were among the most celebrated members of SOE. The most famous was Wing Commander "Tommy" Yeo-Thomas, GC — the "White Rabbit" — whose third mission to France was flown by Ratcliff on the night of February 24, 1944. Yeo-Thomas was captured in Paris and severely tortured by the Gestapo, but survived the war. Another agent for whom Ratcliff possessed particular affection was Yvonne Cormeau, a wireless operator, who he delivered to France on the night of August 22, 1943. He took part in a *This is Your Life* television programme for her in 1989 and they were reunited again at the unveiling at Elvington Air Museum of the rebuilt Halifax in which he had flown

her.

He still had not run the full gamut of operational activity. In April 1944, he assumed command of No 161's Lysanders a robust, single-engined aircraft, before being posted to staff duties at the air ministry's directorate of intelligence, where his operational experience helped to inform his briefings. This period at the heart of the war's direction proved especially memorable; it even included participation in an RAF Film Unit production, *Now It Can Be Told*, a drama-documentary on the work of the special duties squadrons.

While Ratcliff was engaged on staff tasks, No 161 Squadron suffered a leadership crisis after the loss of two squadron commanders killed on operations. He was the obvious choice to fill the breach. Perhaps the most significant feature of his brief period of command was a trip to Norway shortly after the end of hostilities. As the most senior British officer present, he took the surrender of German forces in Trondheim, fittingly with one of his Norwegian pilots, Per Hysing Dahl, by his side.

His wartime achievements did not entirely overshadow his later life. He went on to embrace post-war business challenges in the agriculture industry with the same commitment that he had expended on his RAF endeavours. He also maintained the family tradition of service to the community and became high sheriff of Essex

Betty Ratcliff died in 1987. The couple had four children: Rupert and Clive, who both became businessmen; Robin, who is a shipping agent; and Tess, who married a property developer.

Two years after Betty's death, he married Dorothy Radford, whom he had met at a dinner party while he was high sheriff. He is survived by his wife and children, and a sister, Cynthia, who is the widow of Richard Helms, the former director of the CIA.

With Dorothy by his side, Ratcliff retained a great joie de vivre. He was modest about his wartime career, but, in later years, he was very much the patriarch of the Tempsford Veterans and Relatives Association. However, he could also be iconoclastic, offering discreetly candid observations about some of his RAF colleagues and, surprisingly, evincing no great show of affection towards his aircraft and the challenge of flying. It was, simply, a job that had to be done — one that he did very well.

Wing Commander Leonard Ratcliff, DSO, DFC and bar, AFC, Légion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre, was born on July 27, 1919. He died on April 1, 2016, aged 96