

# The Carpenters' Company World War Two Roll of Honour

## James Hamilton Martin

Lt James Hamilton Martin RNVR was born in 1899, the son of Hugo Hamilton Martin and his wife Mary. Educated at Harrow, he was commissioned into the Grenadier Guards at the end of the First World War and after demobilization began work in the City, becoming a Liveryman of the Carpenters' Company by redemption in 1925. He went to sea first as a seaman and then a deck officer, joining the British Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition under Sir Douglas Mawson in 1929-30 and 1930-1 on board the RRS *Discovery*, the ship previously used by Robert Falcon Scott. He became a member of the Royal Geographical Society in 1931 and in 1932 joined the crew of the Norwegian sealer *Quest* to learn about ice navigation, joining the Arctic expeditionary groups at Oxford and Cambridge on his return.

He joined the British Graham Land Expedition to Antarctica under the leadership of John Rymill between 1934 and 1937, on the *Penola*. Soon after the outbreak of war he joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR). He served on HMS *Willamette Valley* (X 39) a special service vessel (SSV) with the cover name *Edgehill*, a decoy boat with concealed guns. Lt Martin died on 29 June 1940 when his ship was hit and sunk by torpedoes fired from U-boat 51; there were 24 survivors of the 39 crew.

His obituary in the Royal Geographical Society's journal records that his 'contribution to exploration came from his knowledge of the sea, and his career is without parallel in recent times... He was naturally modest... and quite unconscious of his own remarkable qualities.'

## Geoffrey Ernest Robertson



Pilot Officer Geoffrey Ernest Robertson was born in 1917, the son of Arthur (Master of the Carpenters' Company in 1939) and Emily Robertson. He enlisted in the Royal Air Force on 5 July 1940 and was selected for flying training in March 1941 with the Royal Canadian Air Force Station Calgary, Canada, as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme. He qualified as a pilot at the beginning of August 1941 and was immediately promoted to the rank of Sergeant. On his return to England he trained to fly Wellington bombers and in November 1941 was posted to 149 Squadron at Mildenhall in Suffolk. He became a Freeman of the Carpenters' Company in December 1941.

149 Squadron was re-formed in 1937 at RAF Mildenhall as a night-bomber unit and played a prominent part in the early offensive against Germany, Italy and enemy-occupied territory. Initially equipped with Heyford biplane bombers then Vickers Wellingtons, the squadron converted to Short Stirlings in November 1941. Geoffrey retrained with the 149 Squadron Conversion Flight in Spring 1942. In April 1942 the Squadron moved to RAF Lakenheath in Suffolk. It was from here on 20th August 1942 that five Stirlings set off on a 'gardening' mission, a night flight dropping mines at low-level into the sea.

Operation Deodars was directed at the Gironde Estuary on the French Atlantic coast, Bordeaux being an important German and Italian submarine base. Although aged only 25, Pilot Officer Robertson and his crew (all under 26) had previously flown a number of missions including over the heavily defended industrial Ruhr in Germany.

Possibly some damage was sustained from anti-aircraft defences and the radio equipment may have been inoperative as the crew headed back home into thick fog. When they reached Dartmoor in the early hours of August 21<sup>st</sup> the Stirling crashed into the side of Gibb Hill in Luton, killing all seven airmen.

## Ivor Watkins Birts



Lt Col Ivor Watkins Birts was born in 1910 in Kensington, the son of William Thomas Watkins Birts, Senior Warden of the Carpenters' Company in 1941 and his wife Lilian (nee Stephens). He became a Freeman and Liveryman of the Carpenters' Company in 1931. He took a B.A. at Merton College, Oxford and qualified as a Barrister, but later practiced as a stockbroker. He married Josephine Bain in 1934 and had two children, Carol and Douglas.

On the outbreak of war he joined the Royal Artillery, serving at Larkhill, Salisbury Plain and South Eastern Command, Home Forces. He was promoted to Captain in 1941 and Major in 1942. He was posted to General Head Quarters in Cairo with MO4, the Middle East and Balkans branch of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and subsequently in Eritrea. In November 1943 he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel as GSO 1 (General Staff Officer Rank 1) and served with Force 133, a subsidiary SOE headquarters in Bari, Southern Italy under Cairo set up to control operations in the Balkans and Northern Italy and support the Greek and Yugoslav resistance movements.

He died on active service on 17 April 1944 with other military personnel attached to SOE and MI6 on board a plane which exploded over the English Channel near Newquay, Cornwall.