

Daily Telegraph Obituary:

Squadron Leader Tom Bennett, who has died aged 93, flew as a navigator in one of the specialist crews on No 617 (Dambusters) Squadron.

In April 1944 Bennett teamed up with his former pilot, Gerry Fawke, to convert to the Mosquito before joining No 617, where the CO, Leonard Cheshire, was perfecting low-level target marking techniques. The Lancaster-equipped squadron had four Mosquitos for this specialist role. Fawke and Bennett flew their first operation on April 18, with the Juvisy marshalling yards the target. They dived to 400ft to drop their markers before the Lancasters attacked, and the success of the operation proved to be the prelude to a concentrated period of similar operations in advance of the D-Day landings. Just before the landings No 617 received the huge 12,000lb "Tallboy", often referred to as the "earthquake bomb". Its first use, on the night of June 8, was a spectacular success. Trains bringing German reinforcements from the south of France had to pass through the Saumur tunnel near the Loire. The four Mosquitos marked the target for the Lancasters attacking from 10,000ft, and a Tallboy fell 60 yards from the tunnel mouth. The shock waves devastated the tunnel. Over the next few weeks, Fawke and Bennett marked the launch emplacements and storage sites for the V-weapons in the Pas de Calais, in addition to the E- and U-boat pens on the French Atlantic coast.

After 26 operations in the Mosquito, Fawke and Bennett reverted to flying the Lancaster. The battleship Tirpitz had been identified in the far north of Norway — out of range of aircraft based in Scotland. A force of Lancasters deployed to the Russian airfield at Yagodnik, near Murmansk and, on September 15th 1944, they attacked; but cloud and a smoke screen generated by the battleship thwarted them.

On October 7 another No 617 Squadron special operation was mounted, this time against the Kembs Dam on the Rhine near the Swiss border. Fawke and Bennett led a high-level force as the squadron's CO, Willie Tait, led a low-level attack. Despite heavy opposition, the daring raid was a success. A month later Fawke and Bennett again attacked Tirpitz this time from Scotland (as the ship had moved south, within range). Once again cloud interfered with the attack. It was Bennett's final sortie with No 617.

Thomas Bennett was born on January 27th 1919 in Poplar, London, and educated at Raine's Foundation School. He joined the RAF in early 1940, training as a wireless operator/air gunner before becoming a navigator. In June 1942 he teamed up with Fawke and they joined No 49 Squadron, which was reequipping with the Lancaster. They attacked targets in the Ruhr, and on one occasion their Lancaster was badly damaged and Bennett was wounded. On October 17th 1942 Bomber Command launched one of its rare daylight operations, when a force of Lancasters attacked the large Schneider factory at La Creusot.

Fawke and Bennett flew at the head of the formation as the large factory complex was bombed at dusk.

Bennett attacked Berlin and a radio and radar factory at Friedrickshaven on the shores of Lake Constance, when their aircraft was damaged by flak and they flew onto North Africa on three engines. Shortly afterwards he was awarded a DFM. After completing his tour with No 617, Bennett was appointed station navigation officer at Woodhall Spa, the squadron's home base. Bennett remained in the RAF, serving with the Service's RAF delegation in Greece in 1949 before going to the Middle East with No 38 Squadron, flying Lancasters in the maritime patrol role.

After a spell as wing adjutant at the RAF's Initial Training School, in 1955 he took early retirement. He then worked in administration for the Port of London Authority until 1980. Bennett was a staunch supporter of the No 617 Squadron Association and wrote articles for 'Flypast' magazine.

His book 617 Squadron: The Dambusters at War was published in 1986.

Tom Bennett married, in 1940, Lilian Wailer; she predeceased him.