

Thomas Raymond Oaten

Air Mechanic 2nd Class FAA/SFX 582, HMS Illustrious, Royal Navy

Died January 10th 1941, aged 25

Commemorated at Lee-On-Solent Memorial

Son of Thomas and Julia Oaten of Port Isaac, Cornwall



Raymond Oaten as a child

Raymond in 1923 with Arthur and Meta Pengelly, who looked after him

Raymond in 1921 sitting on 'Uncle' Tom Remick's knee. Raymond was a favourite with the Remicks. Both Tom and Raymond were to die in WW2

Thomas Raymond Oaten was born in Port Isaac in the summer of 1915 to Thomas and Julia (nee Olver) Oaten. He would never have known his father, as he was killed in the Dardanelles Campaign on September 14th 1915 and is also on our War Memorial. He was always known to family and friends as Raymond, his father being called Tommie. Having lost his father, Raymond was offered a place at Lord Wandsworth College at Long Sutton, Hampshire. The college was founded to assist children who had lost parents.

Raymond was serving on HMS Illustrious as an air mechanic 2nd Class in the Fleet Air Arm, with responsibility for servicing and maintaining the aircraft on the vessel. HMS Illustrious was laid down in April 1937 at Barrow-in-Furness, and launched on April 5th 1939. She was commissioned a year later on April 16th 1940, and cost £2,295,000. On completion, she could carry up to 36 aircraft, comprising modern Blackburn Skua and Fairey Fulmars, but also the outdated 'Stringbag' torpedo carrier Fairey Swordfish. Her complement was 1,299 officers and enlisted men. She was the first aircraft carrier to have an armoured aircraft hangar, but, due to the increased weight high up on the deck, this meant only a single storey hangar could be permitted without stability concerns.



HMS Illustrious: 22,000 Tons, 740'(225.6m) long, 95'9"(29.2m) beam, top speed 30 knots

Illustrious began working up off Plymouth, but owing to the fall of France she sailed for Bermuda out of range of land-based enemy aircraft. After returning to UK waters, she set off on August 22nd 1940 for Gibraltar to join the Mediterranean fleet where her Fulmars and guns shot down 5 Italian bombers in September. A fire in the hangar on October 18th destroyed three Swordfish and damaged two others, and meant that a proposed raid on the Italian fleet at Taranto had to be postponed. This was rescheduled for November 11th, when torpedo carrying Swordfish were sent off in two waves and managed to sink the battleship Conte di Cavour, and severely damage the battleships Caio Duilio and Littorio, for the loss of two aircraft. The Italian loss represented half the capital ships of their fleet and completely changed the balance of Mediterranean sea power in the Allies' favour.

Over the next month, Illustrious carried out successful raids in Leros, Malta, Rhodes, Kerkennah Islands and Tripoli, before arriving back at Alexandria on Christmas Eve. No doubt the crew enjoyed a Christmas break before Illustrious set sail on January 7th to provide air cover for convoys on their way to Piraeus, Greece and Malta. During the morning of January 10th her aircraft were launched several times and scored several hits. Her position was about 75 miles north west of Malta, near the island of Pantelleria, and just 20 miles from enemy aircraft on the Sicilian mainland. At 12.40, just as four aircraft were being launched, she was attacked by about 25 Junkers Ju 87 Stuka dive bombers. A further two aircraft were trying to take off when the first bombs struck just forward of the aft lift, destroying one Fulmar aircraft but the other managed to take off to engage the Stukas. The ship was hit five more times in the attack, one of which penetrated the unarmoured aft lift and detonated beneath, destroying it and the surrounding structure. Another bomb destroyed the starboard forward 'pom-pom' mount, whilst a further penetrated the outer edge of the forward flight deck and exploded 10 feet above the waterline to riddle the hull with holes. This caused flooding in some compartments and started a fire. A further attack by high level bombers at 13.30 and by dive bombers at 1610 managed to again penetrate that aft lift well, knocking out her steering and halved her speed to 15 knots. The attacks was intercepted by the ship's Fulmars, damaging two of the dive bombers before running out of ammunition. By using her engines to steer she managed to limp into Malta at 21.04, still on fire.



HMS Illustrious under attack



The wrecked aft lift still burning



Damage to the aft aircraft lift

An eye witness to the events that day was Richard Griffin R.N (1921-1999). As a member of the hangar maintenance crew, he may well have known Raymond. This is his story of the attack and its aftermath -

In January 1941 we embarked on the carrier for what was to be the last time I was on board. As always we read orders of the day. There was a message from the C-in-C commenting that units of the German air force had been sent to air fields in Sicily, and we might expect rather more activity than hitherto. We arrived off Pantaleria. Things started to hot up, and the ships tannoy system kept us informed of events as they unfolded. The cruiser Bonadventure engaged enemy units to the westward. The destroyer Gallant struck a mine and her bows were blown off.

I remember standing in the well deck, a grey sea surging past. There seemed to be an eerie still air over the ship. I have often thought about that since ... Fear? Premonition? I know I had a very strange feeling. Suddenly the fleet came under heavy air attack mainly directed at Illustrious by squadrons of Stuka dive bombers. All the guns of the fleet opened fire. Two seaplanes launched a torpedo attack, a diversionary feint. The tannoy told us that large numbers of aircraft were in the air over Sicily. The ship was all closed up at action stations and then all the ships guns opened up. The steel box of the hangar was like a huge sound box. My action station as with all maintenance crews, was in the hangar with the aircraft, which by the way were all heavily armed, and loaded with torpedoes ready for an attack on the Italian Fleet.



Damage incurred on January 10th 1941 to the ship's bell

Illustrious was armed with sixteen 4.5 dual purpose guns, and eight 6 barrelled 2lb quick firing AA weapons. The ship kept jumping and shaking. Several large bombs hit the ship aft, and the after hangar was on fire. The noise was indescribable. In my baptism of fire, all that sticks in my mind are impressions. I was standing more or less in the centre of the hangar. A chap came down from the flight deck; his rubber suit was full of holes with blood leaking from all of them. I helped carry him down to the casualty station in the washroom flats. The surgeons were busy. Blood washed from side to side with the sway of the ship. I returned to my action station in the hangar. The ship continued to rock and sway.

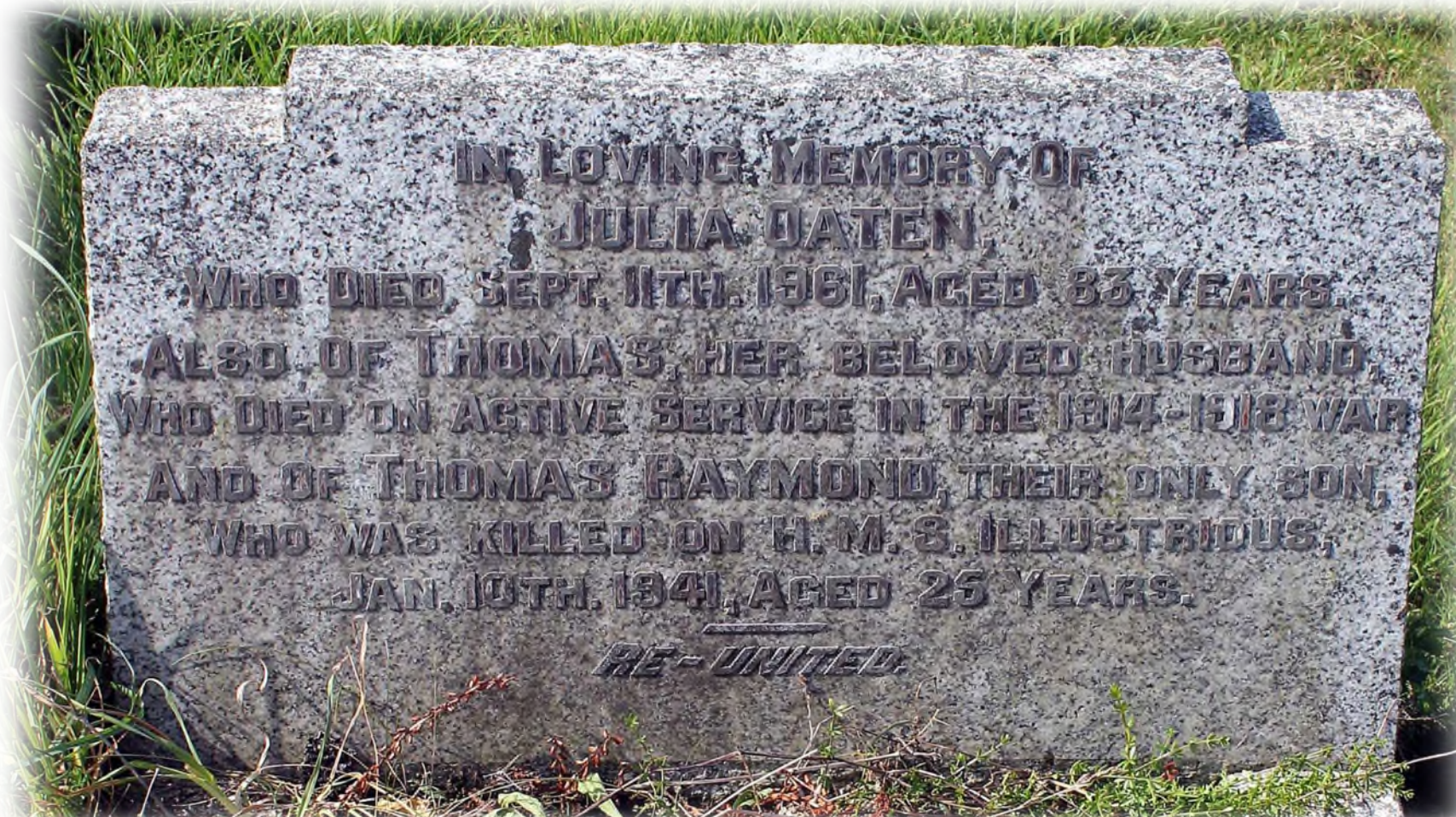
I looked up with fear and apprehension. Then there was an almighty flash as a 1,000 lb bomb pierced the 4 inch armoured deck and exploded. I was only aware of a great wind, and bits of aircraft, debris, all blowing out to the forward lift shaft of 300 tons, which was also blown out. There were dead and wounded all around. My overalls were blown off and I had small wounds to the back of my head and shoulder. I was probably 10-15 feet away from the bomb when it exploded. Luck I survived? I prefer the thought of someone looking out for me. The hangar by then was burning all over. The ships commander came and said, 'come on lads close the armoured doors.' The overhead sprays then flooded the hangar.

The ship started to sink by the stern, and everyone had to blow up lifebelts. Then came a spot of humour in all that chaos. Poor old Corporal Gater came through a side door white as a sheet saying 'I wish I hadn't bloody joined.' The battering carried on for six to seven hours. There were many wounded piled up. The aft surgeons station had been destroyed, and the forward station was unable to cope quickly with so many casualties. Captain Boyd finally steered with the engines into Malta. The ship was quiet at last.

It was in this attack that Air Mechanic Thomas Raymond Oaten was killed, along with another 125 officers and men of HMS Illustrious. With no known grave, he is commemorated on the Lee-on-Solent Memorial. His name is also on the Orford War Memorial in Suffolk. Perhaps he was living and working there when he was called up, and his friends wanted to ensure he was not overlooked. He is also remembered, along with his father, on his mother Julia's grave at St Endellion Churchyard.



Raymond Oaten on the Orford War Memorial



Julia Oaten's grave in St Endellion Churchyard, commemorating her husband Thomas and son Raymond.

Sources:

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