

Wing Commander
Forest Yeo-Thomas
GC, MC & Bar



HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Few trained accountants can have spent a life quite as eventful as Forest Yeo-Thomas. Never a man to be chained to his desk, he had more scrapes with death than can be counted, repeatedly thriving on danger and adversity as a secret agent.

Forest Frederick Edward Yeo-Thomas, widely known simply as 'Tommy', was born in London on June 17, 1902. His father, John, was a coal merchant, and his mother was Daisy, who went on to have two other sons. Early in Forest's life, the family relocated to Dieppe, France, where the three boys became bilingual in English and French.

Forest was too young to fight in the British and French armies at the start of World War One but, by lying about his age, he managed to join the US Army, aged 16, serving as a dispatch rider on the Western Front. After the war ended and enthusiastic for more frontline action, he served alongside the Poles in the Polish-Soviet War of 1919-20. Author Brigadier Sir John 'Jackie' Smyth VC wrote of Yeo-Thomas: "He campaigned against the Russians, was captured by the Bolsheviks and for the first of many times in his turbulent and adventurous life, just escaped being shot." In fact, what he had not mentioned, was that Yeo-Thomas escaped from prison by strangling a Soviet guard.

Between the world wars, he flirted with a more conventional career. He trained as an engineer with Rolls-Royce before retraining as an accountant for a firm of travel agents and later working in banking. However, he ended up in a senior role with a Parisian leading fashion house, Molyneux, while also having a part-share in a gym because of his love of boxing.

Yeo-Thomas married for the first time in September 1925 and the couple later had two daughters. However, his marriage to Lillian, a Parisian with an English-Danish background, came to an end in 1936, although she refused him a divorce.

In September 1939, Yeo-Thomas still lived in France. Aged 37, he attempted to join the British Army but was turned down. He then attempted to join the French Foreign Legion, but they were not accepting Britons. He was eventually given permission to join the RAF Volunteer Reserve, working as an interpreter and being evacuated from Dunkirk.

At this point too, he entered a long-term relationship with Barbara Dean, a young WAAF, but they could not marry because he had not been divorced.

Revelling in action

Yeo-Thomas was frustrated when he was refused any active wartime role due to his age. However, following the fall of France

"His first mission was a success: enabling a French officer, who was being followed by the Gestapo in Paris, to reach safety and to resume his secret activities elsewhere"



ABOVE THE WARTIME PARISIAN HQ OF THE GESTAPO AND THE SICHERHEITSDIENST, AT 84 AVENUE FOCH, WHERE YEO-THOMAS WAS TAKEN PHOTO 12/ALAMY

in 1940 he was transferred to the RAF Intelligence Branch and eventually came to the attention of the Special Operations Executive (SOE). In February 1942, he joined the highly secretive organisation.

Rapidly reaching the rank of wing commander, Yeo-Thomas was a fine organiser and co-ordinator, but he was always eager for an active role. On February 25, 1943, he and Andre Dewavrin were parachuted into France

to join Pierre Brossolette of the Free French Secret Service. The next two years were eventful, and Yeo-Thomas was time and time again to display the most amazing courage.

His first mission was a success: enabling a French officer, who was being followed by the Gestapo in Paris, to reach safety and to resume his secret activities elsewhere. He also took charge of a US airman who had been shot down. Because

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the officer spoke no French, he was in danger of capture, but he came back to Britain in the same aircraft that picked up Yeo-Thomas on April 15, 1943, after nearly two months behind enemy lines.

On September 17, 1943, Yeo-Thomas, by now known as 'the White Rabbit', returned to France for a second mission. Soon after his arrival, many French patriots were arrested, and the situation became tense and dangerous. However, he continued with his clandestine activities. He narrowly avoided arrest on no fewer than six occasions and on November 15, 1943, again after nearly two months in France, he returned to Britain with intelligence obtained from a house the Gestapo had been watching.

In February 1944, Yeo-Thomas was again parachuted into France. However, this time he was betrayed to the Gestapo and seized on March 21. While being taken by car to Gestapo HQ, he was brutally beaten. He then underwent four days of interrogation, interspersed with torture. He suffered regular "immersions": his head held down, with his arms and legs in chains, in ice-cold water. Further interrogations followed for two months and he was told that he would be freed in return for information about the head of a 'resistance secretariat'.



A PLASTIC AND WOOD NAIL BRUSH USED BY YEO-THOMAS AS AN ESCAPE AID. THE BRUSH HAS A SECRET COMPARTMENT WITHIN THE WOOD IWM EPH8486

Because one of his wrists had been cut by chains, he suffered blood poisoning and nearly lost his left arm. Even so, incredibly, he made two daring, but unsuccessful, attempts to escape. His punishment was four months in solitary confinement at Fresnes prison, including three weeks in a darkened cell with little food. The torture continued for all of four months, but he refused to divulge anything of use.

Brazen escapes

On July 17, 1944, Yeo-Thomas was sent with a party to Compiègne prison, from

where he tried to escape twice more. He and 36 others were then transferred to Buchenwald concentration camp, near Weimar, Germany. En route, they stopped for three days at Saarbrücken where they were beaten before arriving at Buchenwald on August 16, where 16 of them were executed and cremated.

On September 14, Yeo-Thomas was convinced that he too was to be executed, so he penned a letter to his commanding officer, Leonard 'Dizzy' Dismore. His lengthy note began: "My dear Dizzy, these are 'famous last words' I am afraid, but one has to face death one day or another so I will not moan and get down to brass tacks."

In fact, he was spared execution and, undaunted, Yeo-Thomas continued to organise resistance within the camp. At this stage, he accepted the opportunity to change his identity with that of a dead French prisoner – but only after a guarantee that others would be given the same opportunity. This switch of identity enabled him to save the lives of two more officers.

The Germans then transferred Yeo-Thomas to a work camp for Jews, from which he managed to escape but was picked up nearby. Claiming French nationality, he was transferred to a camp near Marienburg, Poland, for French POWs.

As the war appeared to be drawing to a close, Yeo-Thomas led an escape by 20 prisoners from the camp in broad daylight. Ten were killed by fire from guards and the rest split into small groups. After three days without food, Yeo-Thomas became separated. He kept going for another week but was recaptured just 800 yards from American lines.

Amazingly, he yet again escaped, then led a party of ten French POWs



'WHITE RABBIT': SOE EXTRAORDINAIRE WING COMMANDER FOREST YEO-THOMAS PICTORIAL PRESS/ALAMY



FOREST YEO-THOMAS'
GC MEDAL GROUP
IWM OMD2434

through German patrols and a minefield to reach Allied lines.

It was not until February 15, 1946 that Yeo-Thomas was awarded the George Cross (GC). His lengthy citation ended: "Wing Commander Yeo-Thomas thus turned his final mission into a success by his determined opposition to the enemy, his strenuous efforts to maintain the morale of his fellow prisoners and his brilliant escape activities. He endured brutal treatment and torture without flinching and showed the most amazing fortitude and devotion to duty throughout his service abroad, during which he was under the constant threat of death."

One among six

Yeo-Thomas was one of just six SOE agents to be awarded the GC after the war. Four of these decorations were awarded posthumously and the only other agent to survive and receive the GC was Odette Sansom. For his earlier bravery, Yeo-Thomas had been awarded the MC and Bar in March and May 1944, respectively. His other medals and decorations

included the Legion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre and the Polish Cross of Merit.

After the war, Yeo-Thomas returned to Paris with his long-term partner, Barbara Dean. Once again, he worked for Molyneux and he also took up a position with the Federation of British Industries. Yeo-Thomas became an important witness at the Nuremberg War Trials, identifying key German officials who had abused their wartime roles. He was also an important prosecution witness at the Buchenwald Trial held at the former Dachau concentration camp in 1947.

Published in 1952, Bruce Marshall's biography, *The White Rabbit: The Secret Agent the Gestapo could not crack*, turned Yeo-Thomas into a public figure. The author said Yeo-Thomas had experienced "an ordeal of incredible torture and suffering that only a man of indomitable spirit could have endured."

In 1967, the BBC adapted Marshall's book for television, with Kenneth More playing the lead in a four-part series. Yeo-Thomas' bravery also intrigued Ian Fleming, but suggestions that the former

SOE man was the main inspiration for the fictitious James Bond character appear wide of the mark. But Fleming was aware of Yeo-Thomas' famous 'farewell letter' and, like many others, greatly admired the agent's courage.

During his final years, Yeo-Thomas was troubled by ill health, brought on by his many wartime ordeals and his abuse at the hands of the Gestapo. He died in Paris on February 26, 1964, aged just 61. His ashes were interred in the Glades of Remembrance at Brookwood cemetery, Surrey. Over the years, there have been many memorials and commemorations in honour of this courageous man.

In 1972, a street in Paris' 13th arrondissement was renamed Rue Yeo-Thomas and in 2001 a bust was installed in the Parisian district in which the war hero lived after the war. In 2010, an English Heritage blue plaque was erected outside Yeo-Thomas' former London home in Bloomsbury, central London.

Yeo-Thomas' long-term partner, Barbara, helped the author Mark Seaman to publish a second biography of his life. Called *Bravest of the Brave*, it was published in 1997 and once again it led to his astonishing life being remembered by a wider audience.

Barbara Dean had earlier donated his gallantry and service medals to the Imperial War Museum, London.

His medal group is on display at the museum's Lord Ashcroft Gallery along with medal groups from my own VC and GC collection. ●

GEORGE CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His has written six books on gallantry, including *George Cross Heroes*, which was first published in 2010 and

is available in hardback and paperback. For further details, visit www.georgecrossheroes.com.

Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit www.iwm.org.uk/heroes – details about his VC collection may be found at www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit www.lordashcroft.com. Follow him on Twitter and/or Facebook @LordAshcroft

