Ad Astra

"to the stars".

The RAF life of

George ‘Len’ Pearce 1942 -1947

Introduction

Len was born and brought up in Wimborne, went to the local Grammar School where he joined the Cadet Force.

In the summers, Wimborne received a visit from a ‘flying circus’. This ‘circus’, was an idea of Sir Alan Cobham, the pioneer aviator and was an effort to promote an interest in flying. The typical Programme was a Fly past, Individual aircraft displays, Aerobatics, Inverted flying ‘racing’ round pylons, Wing Walking etc.This is what probably sparked Lens interest in planes and flying.

Len volunteered to join the RAF and this book details his journey from raw recruit to becoming a Flight Engineer.

Len wrote this book after his retirement, as well as researching and writing the family history. It is written in his words and phrases, the only additions are the pictures.

It’s a bit wordy in places and technical, but also has some amusing stories and gives a good insight into RAF life during the war.

After the war, Len returned to working in insurance until he became a Town Planner. He also became an instructor with 1069 Air Training Corp in Wimborne, which he later went on to command. Len then moved to 149 Air Training Corp in Poole, where he remained for many years.

Chapter One:

VOLUNTEERING

For Joining R.A.F. extract from “Hurricane and Spitfire Pilots at War”.

‘The burning wish to soar above the world, to discover what lay above the clouds, to cut the earthbound tie.’

Principle motivation - the Desire to Fly.

Flying became the be-all and, to some, the end-all of their lives.

There is a very old service expression, “Never volunteer for anything”. However, during the second world war, volunteering was the only positive means of getting into whichever of the armed services one wished to join.

Somewhere I have read, “To many, the war offered a heaven-sent opportunity to turn an impossible dream into realty.”, and I suppose this must be my excuse for ignoring the advice of ‘Old Soldiers’.

The alternative was to register at the local Labour Exchange, with the appropriate age group, when the requirement to do so was published. If that route was chosen, the outcome usually meant being drafted into the service which was most in need of men/women. It was also at this point that the civilian occupation of the person registering was considered and, if he or she was already making a significant contribution to the war effort, then they were given exemption from service in the armed forces, on the grounds that they were in a “Reserved Occupation”.

As far as I remember, the normal time for Registration was at eighteen years of age but it was possible to volunteer once the age of seventeen and a half years was reached. John Loader and I decided to volunteer for service in the Royal Air Force and, through the Air Training Corps, began the enlistment process toward the end of September 1942.

Sometime during the October of that year, we were ‘invited’ to Salisbury and, having been sent railway warrants, we went in ATC uniform, as expected to do so, by train for an initial medical examination and interview. Once we had been documented, we joined a queue of other volunteers that wandered slowly round the building from cubicle to cubicle. These were occupied by white coated ‘Medical Bods’, not all of them from the Armed Forces. Perhaps some of them were consultants from the Salisbury Infirmary.

On the ‘tour’ we were literally examined from top to toe. I nearly wrote ‘from top to bottom’ and even that would have been true! Since, at some stage, I remember being told to bend over whilst someone gazed at my rear end.

Everything that these medics could think of, was peered at, poked, pressed and thumped. It was “Inhale!”, “Hold your breath!”, “Breathe out!”, “Cough!”, throughout the day.

Eyes, ears, heart and lungs, reflexes and even the flatness of one’s feet, were all checked, by people who, all day long, concentrated their minds on only one aspect of the body. The “bum” who was so keen on our backsides, might even have been an astronomer, since he seemed to be the expert on ‘moons’!! It was inevitable that, during the day, we all had to produce water specimens so that someone could, by playing in his “witches’ kitchen” and by heating them over a Bunsen burner (thereby producing all sorts of smells and colour changes), assess the efficiency of our internal plumbing.

After this going over, it must have been decided I was fit, and an interview with someone from the R.A.F., then followed. The final outcome of all this palaver was in another buff envelope, about a fortnight later, in which was a further invitation and railway warrant. This one requested my presence in Oxford, at the Aircrew Selection Centre, in the second week of December, for further tests and assessment.

The trip to Oxford was one more step along my chosen path toward flying with the Royal Air Force. So, I happily set out, very early in the morning and once again in uniform, in the knowledge that John Loader had already been selected for aircrew training only a week or so earlier.

The venue was the Clarendon Laboratories, not far from the city centre. The medical examination followed the same lines as the one I had undergone at Salisbury. After this, candidates spent several hours doing aptitude tests. After a night spent at the Y.M.C.A. (arranged by the R. A. F), I returned to the Centre to write an essay and appear before a Selection Board of Officers.

Clarendon Laboratories

I quickly made friends with an Air Cadet from a nearby A.T.C. Squadron. I saw him again about mid-morning when, barely hiding his disappointment, he told me he was finished and leaving. It transpired that quite early on, he had been asked to hold his nose and swallow and, no matter how hard he had tried, he could not do so. From that point, it was a question of a short interview, an offer of a ground trade, some paper work and he was in the Air force but quickly out of the building.

The medical was very much more searching than the earlier one and clearly orientated toward the needs of fitness for flying duties. Thus, eyesight and colour blindness were critical, although corrective goggles could be supplied for minor defects. Slightly flat feet were, for obvious reasons, deemed to be of little or no consequence.

The test of the lungs was the one to which I least looked forward, having heard about it from other Air Cadets who had returned to Wimborne after being accepted. Whilst seated at a table, I was given a rubber tube fitted with a mouthpiece, which was connected to one side of a glass 'U'-tube. The tube was getting on for a foot (30 CMS) high and it contained, in each arm, approximately ten inches (25 CMS) of mercury. By means of the mouthpiece, I had to move the mercury so that the level in one arm of the tube, moved upward an inch and then hold it for a minute. In other words, it needed a pressure of some 40 millibars to be sustained for that time.

Fortunately, I had been practising holding my breath for the necessary time but it was not possible to simulate the continuous back pressure on the lungs. It would appear that, following the introduction of this test, some 'smart alecs' had built up the pressure and then placed their tongues over the hole in the mouthpiece, to retain the mercury in the right position. The mouthpiece was then quickly modified by having spikes put on it, so that the tongue could not seal off the hole. As happened to most other candidates, after the first 40/45 seconds, my lungs were sobbing and this caused the mercury to rise and fall alarmingly but I did not give up and held on for the full minute. I must have kept within whatever were the prescribed limits, since I passed the test.

Once again, we had to have our water tested and this proved to be quite hilarious. We had been pottering around the place for some time, with very little clothes on, when a W.A.A.F. medical orderly came into the room where we were waiting and handed each of us a small glass jar, with the request that we 'make a little water into it'. She then left. The coffee we had drunk earlier, combined with the cold, meant that already bladder pressure was beginning to be felt. Thus, as we stood there each duly filling his little jar, it quickly became obvious that the receptacles were by no means large enough. Once the streams had started there was little hope of stopping them.

The solution seems to have come into our minds in the same instant, as there was a sudden mad rush for the door. According to the dictionary a cock is a 'tap for regulating the flow of water in a pipe', so, grasping our 'taps' we ran down the corridor shouting for directions to the nearest toilet. On the way we passed several W.A.A. Fs (not all of them medical orderlies), who, I am sure must have been highly amused, (perhaps even delighted!), by the procession.

A clearance from the medical people opened the way for me to go on to the next phase, which was the aptitude tests, and these I quite enjoyed. So long as they were all successfully completed, it did not matter in which sequence they were tackled.

I will try to explain the tests, although not necessarily in the order in which I did them.

The first which comes to mind was "S.M.A.3" although I have never been able to discover the meaning of this designation. (see Appendix 1) Its purpose was to test the co-ordination of the candidates.
The contraption was of wooden construction and loosely resembled the cockpit of an aircraft with a large box in front of the 'pilot'. In the centre of the side of the box facing the 'pilot' was a circular, convex, frosted glass panel. Behind the glass was a light which could be moved to the sides, by means of rudder bar and vertically by a

control column. On the face of the box were also a red light, a green one and a white one. To the left of the ‘pilot’ was a short lever which controlled the red and green lights. The white one responded to movement of a similar lever fastened to the right side of the cockpit. After a short familiarisation, the machine was switched into the test mode and that is where the trouble started.

In the early tests the light was made to wander all over the glass disc and the candidate was required to keep it on the centre spot by the use of the rudder bar and control column. There was some sort of counter which registered the amount of time when the light was not central.

After a few similar runs the red and green lights were introduced. Then it was a question of trying to keep the light central with coordinated hand and foot movements and, at the same time keeping an eye on the lights. If the red one came on, the lever by the left hand had to be moved forward to switch it off. When the green light came on, the same lever had to be pulled back to extinguish it. These tests were followed by the addition of the white light to the routine. This came on from time to time and was always put out by movement of the lever to the right of the candidate. If the lever was back, it had to be pushed forward to put out the light. When the light came on and the lever was forward, the latter had to be pulled back.

In the final series of tests, the light had to be controlled both vertically and horizontally, whilst the left hand moved the lever on that side forward and backward according to the lights and, in addition, as the occasion arose, it was necessary to change hands on the control column to deal with the white light. The machine provided, wholly by mechanical means, a simple but effective method of assessing both co-ordination and reaction to stress. These attributes were equally relevant to the selection of Air Gunners and Pilots. I have to admit that although S.M.A. 3 was a challenge, I enjoyed my time on it.

Hand / eye co-ordination was also tested by the candidate being required to direct a pointer controlled by a wheel, over a series of studs on a rotating drum. The wheel was not unlike a car steering wheel but, in the gearing connecting it to the pointer, there was a substantial amount of backlash and thus a delay in response to its movement. The pointer, when in contact with a stud, completed an electrical circuit which enabled the number of contacts to be read off on a counter. There were several rows of studs on the drum and their pattern led to variations in the degree to which the steering wheel had to be moved. A further complication was introduced by increasing the rotational speed of the drum. The degree of success in the series of tests was probably assessed by the use of a chart and plotting the number of contacts against the speed of rotation.

These days, (1999) such a challenge has become a video game and wholly electronic, but, in the 1940s the device was quite bulky and mainly mechanical.

One of my friends, who in the early 1970s was selected for air crew service, had to use a similar machine during his assessment process. He described it perfectly and said it must have been very old, since it was made of polished mahogany with brass studs and fittings. It would appear that the machine was a contemporary of the one I used in the early 1940s and thus it was at least thirty years old.

The Night Blindness Test required us to sit in a blacked-out room round a black octagonal table on which was a large octagonal black cone with glass panels in it.

Once our ‘night vision’ had developed, it was suggested that we viewed the tests more or less from the side of eyes rather than peer straight ahead. Shapes and patterns of lights were displayed in successive groups of two, at various levels of brilliance and we were told to press one button if two succeeding items were the same, and another button when the pair were different. Once again, this test was predominantly orientated toward assessing one’s potential as pilot or gunner but, of course it had relevance too for all aircrew categories, particularly those such as navigators and bomb aimers, whose duties required them to look out of the aircraft. from time to time, for position fixing etc.

Another simple test was one for manual dexterity. This consisted of two thicknesses of wood, each some 18 inches (0.5m) square and separated by about an inch (2 CMS). The top board was punched with about fifty or sixty square holes. Concentrated into one half of the board were twenty to thirty square pegs, with round tops divided into half circles of black and the other half white. At the start, all the pegs were at one end of the board with all the black semi-circular segments toward the candidate. He was then required to move as many of them as possible, to the other end of the board, in a specific time, by lifting them out, giving them a half turn and replacing them. At the end of the test all the black segments would be furthest away from him. As the tests progressed, the time limit got shorter and the manual dexterity of each candidate could be assessed by his overall score against the clock.

We had a relatively straight forward Aural Acuity Test during which sounds of differing patterns, frequency and volume were played to us, via earphones, into either or both ears. By means of buttons, we had to indicate whether pairs of signals, appeared to us to be the same or different. This test had hardly changed at all, when, in the latter half of the 1980s, I was examined prior to the diagnosis of an acoustic neuroma in my head

Another phase of the aircrew selection process consisted of, what came to be known some twenty or so years later as, “I.Q. Tests”. We were issued with a succession of booklets, one at a time and given time limits, within which to get as far as possible through their pages. It was emphasised that it would be extremely unlikely that any of us would finish any book.

The books contained mathematical problems, mechanical diagrams, intelligence and mental agility tests, general knowledge questions etc. Most of the books offered multiple choice answers which candidates marked on separate answer sheets.

The book of mechanical tests incorporated diagrams of weights, levers, fulcrum points, multi-pulley systems, long trains of gears and some belt driven wheels. With the sort of question that “If ‘x’ goes this way, which direction will ‘y’ move?

Other books had diagrams of dials which had to be read and the answer noted down, or related to illustrations of an aircraft. There were books in which one was required to draw mirror images of the complex line drawings which they presented.

Others had numerical and lettered codes in them e.g. “If ‘A’ = 1 & T = 20, what word is represented by 3,1,20.?, but our puzzles were more complex, i.e. “Using the same formula, what numbers would represent ‘submarine’? Once again, things were made more complicated by altering the relationship of the figures and letters, sometimes to a substantial degree or attaching either to signs, viz ”If T = *, B = @ and A = %, what word is @-%-* ? ” , except, once again the signs we were offered, and the words produced, were much longer and were codified in either direction.

The General Knowledge questions were wide ranging, and I have never discovered the relevance to aircrew service, of the one which asked how many keys there were on a piano.

One, which I recall with some amusement, went something like this: - “You are driving a car which stalls in the centre of an unmanned railway crossing. About half a mile away you see an express train approaching and you assume it to be travelling at 60 m.p.h. Would you -

a. Get out, run toward it and attempt to flag it down.
b. Engage first gear, operate the starter and try to jump the vehicle clear.
c. Engage reverse gear, get out and use the starting handle to wind it clear.
d. Get out and distance yourself from the impending crash.”

Since I knew little of the handling of cars, I took the view that, as I had about 30 or so seconds, discretion would overcome valour and I opted for the answer ‘d’! Of course, we never had any feedback on our test papers but this particular answer, whilst possibly throwing some light on my attitude, did not bar me from ultimately being selected for aircrew training.

Among the last of the tests was an essay and we were given an hour in which to write about “The Battle of the Atlantic”. I wrote what I knew of U-boats, convoys, shipping losses and RAF Coastal Command. It was some twenty years later when I discovered that these essays were never read. An airman looked them over and merely counted the number of times the words flying, the RAF, aircraft etc., were used and this gave an indication of the dedication of the candidate toward the service.

The question of why a candidate wished to fly was pursued by a board of half a dozen officers, who also had before them, the results of the aptitude tests. Shortly after leaving the room, I was invited into another, where an officer told me I had been chosen for aircrew training as a Pilot, Navigator or Bomb Aimer, [there-after known as PNB].

Toward the end of the day, those who had been successful were collected together and after being further documented, we were handed a Bible and a card from which to read. We swore allegiance to the King, his heirs and successors, obedience to those set in authority over us etc. We were then given a shilling (5p) and told that now we had accepted “The King’s Shilling” and sworn an “Oath of Allegiance”, we were airmen in the Royal Air Force. Along with the others I learned that we were to be sent home until there were vacancies in the training programmes.

Because it was fairly late, I decided to stay a further night in Oxford and leave early next morning. I still recall feeling very warm and smug as I travelled in bright winter sunshine, down from Basingstoke in a fast train, I'd done it!! Thus, a fresh-faced Air Cadet and country lad, returned to Wimborne on the 13th of December 1942, wearing a white flash in his cap, as "1850702 - Aircraftsman Second Class - service deferred pending Embodiment" and a silver looking RAFVR badge, to wear with civilian clothes, to prove that I was not avoiding war service.

Chapter Two

RAW RECRUIT

The official position was that, at the Clarendon Laboratories in Oxford, following extensive medical & psychological tests, I had been accepted for aircrew training and, on the 12th of December 1942, I had been sworn into the R.A.F. However, I had then been placed on "Deferred Service" until the King needed me to help him fight his battles. Both the need for my services and the battles, were further into the future than I had imagined at that time. In fact, I never reached the point of having to go into battle on behalf of the Monarch.

It was about nine months after taking the 'King's Shilling', that someone, somewhere must have decided that, if I was going to take part in a war, then I ought to be given some instruction in the art of doing so. Thus, it was that, in September 1943 buff envelopes dropped through the letter box of No. 21, East Boro, and by the 21st of September, I had received all the paper work giving me some three weeks' notice prior to reporting for full time service in the R.A.F.

It was quite a wet morning on Monday the 11th of October 1943, the day I joined the R.A.F. We all got up quite early. Mother was a bit 'sniffy' but tried to keep a stiff upper lip. Father, with a voice that was thick with emotion, and I, talked a little as we walked to the railway station through the rain, in the dark. I carried an almost empty case and father pushed his bicycle -he needed it to return home after the train left at 6-30. am. It was definitely a wet send off!!

At the station we met Victor Small who was a Major returning to Whitehall, after a weekend at home on Oakley Hill. He was well known to the family, partly by reason of his tailor's business (we could not afford to shop there!) which he had closed down to go into the army, and also on account of his good tenor voice, which we had often heard.

Thus, it was that I travelled to London, via West Moors and Brockenhurst, escorted by a Major, from whom I parted company at the Trafalgar Square underground station, when I continued to St. John's Wood.

It was probably about 10 o'clock by this time and I trudged, with others who appeared to be likely candidates for the Air Crew Reception Centre, to the famous Lords Cricket Ground. All potential air crew categories reported at the same place. We must have looked a motley collection as we entered the M.C.C. ground by the St. John's Wood gate. Inside we queued and queued, were documented, and generally hustled from one place to another. Before the end of the day, I had stood in the Long Room at Lords, absolutely starkers. I did it once or twice more, since it was used for Medical Inspections and, whilst it could be one of my minor claims to fame, it must be admitted that this feat was far from unique, since A.C.R.C - or 'Arcey

Darcy' as it was also called by the lads, processed about 1,000 air crew recruits per week.

For food, we were arbitrarily assembled into blocks of thirty and then into a gaggle that was "marched" along Prince Albert Road toward the Regent's Park Zoo and into the former basement garage of a block of flats known as Viceroy Court. This was to be our dining room for the next couple of weeks. Our sleeping accommodation was about 200 yards away, off The Avenue in another block of flats, some 50 yards or so from the west edge of Primrose Hill open space.

Unfortunately, this space was occupied by an anti-aircraft gun battery which, at times, made sleep very difficult as London was being raided almost nightly. The noisy and disturbed nights did not worry me and were of even less concern to two others from Southampton with whom I soon made friends. Some recruits from other parts of the U.K. were less phlegmatic.

However, an eye-opener for me, was the use of a bomb-damaged block of flats opposite. The constant stream of servicemen, mainly in khaki, soon alerted my room- mates, who were less naive than I was, to the fact that this was a brothel. I'm not sure how, but we established that it was operated by some Maltese and a year or two after the war there was a scandal when a group of Maltese men were found guilty of organising call girls for the benefit of business men visiting London. Had we seen the beginning of their enterprise?

Collectively we learned to march, although those of us with ATC experience had no problems at all. However, it was several days before we were fully kitted out. Some had to have their uniforms altered by tailors in order to achieve an acceptable fit. There seemed to be an unreasonable obsession with the distance of the hem of the great coat from the ground. From memory it seemed that in a parade situation, regardless of the heights of the airmen, the hem line of all the coats had to be uniform. I supposed it came from the same school of thought which decreed that there was a direct relationship between girth and height, at least that appeared to be the assumption in the manufacture and issue of all our kit. I also had my first service haircut (or was it a head shave?)

Never-the-less, on the second or third day, certainly before we all had uniforms, we were marched down Park Road almost to Baker Street, to Abbey Lodge which was the Medical Centre and small hospital, there we received inoculations and vaccinations in both arms. It was advised that arm exercise might help to ease things.

Abbey Lodge

To reinforce this point, after lunch we were on the march again, with towels, this time down Lisson Grove to the Seymour Street swimming baths. When we had

stripped, P.T Instructors divided us into groups of ten and we lined up at the shallow end of the pool which was in the basement. It was then a matter of swimming three lengths in any style. The full distance made one an ‘X’ swimmer and less than 1 length rated a ‘Z.’ From then on, I was graded as an ‘X’.

The Call-up papers had contained an instruction to bring a case in which to return civilian clothes to our home addresses. I borrowed one from the Hey family and I think I handed my case of ‘civvies’ in about a week after arriving in London, i.e. say the 18th October. Mother’s diary recorded that on 27th October “Len’s clothes came home”.

From the second day we were given periods of drill and P.T. We were also made aware of the standard that was expected in respect of our accommodation and room duties were agreed. One of the idiosyncrasies (which I later realised was “Bull”) was that all the taps had to be polished daily and that not even a drip of water was permitted to fall into the basins. Hence, until there had been an inspection, the taps were plugged with paper. Our attention was drawn to the photograph in each room, which showed us the way all our kit should be laid out once we had received it.

As soon as our clothing and equipment were issued, we had to display it daily, in accordance with the photograph of the kit layout. Best boots at the foot of the bed together with a water bottle (half full, cork polished and on the left shoulder of the bottle). Blankets folded and squared, superimposed with the best uniform, then the greatcoat - folded with just two buttons showing, on that the gas mask, then the steel helmet on which was a square of camouflage netting. It was quite a feat to get it all piled up - nearly shoulder high - ready for the order “Stand by your beds”.

Once we were all in uniform, we were allowed out for a while in the evenings, if not required for any purpose, such as spud bashing, guard or fire picquet. We had to clock out and in on a time clock, just like factory hands. I was lucky and missed the spuds but was reluctant to go too far from known territory.

An expansion of my experience occurred in the basement dining room one evening when I went in for supper. Two WAAF cooks were talking, one seated on the rear work surface with her feet on the hot plate in front of her. As I went toward her, it was obvious that she was wearing nothing under her white smock. I must have registered some surprise since she just said, “Have a good look sonny, you’ll see plenty more like that when you grow up!”. Of course, I later discovered that few WAAF cookhouse staff came from the upper stratum of society.

What with the place opposite and now this, I felt I was growing up very rapidly! Life in the RAF was far removed from life in sleepy Dorset!!

One night I was put in charge of the Fire Picquet at Lords and had a whale of a time wandering all over the sacred Pavilion. I found my way up to the BBC commentary box from where there was a good view of a night attack on the East End of London. In our flats, if a night raid occurred, we were usually allowed to sleep (if we could through the gunfire from the nearby site), but if things got a bit close, the guards blew whistles which meant we had to go to the basement where there were three-tiered bunks - just bunks - no bedding.

On another occasion, when I did a guard duty at the flats where we slept, I discovered that, at about five minutes to eleven, one unscrewed the bottom of the time clock from the wall and rocked it till the pendulum stopped. This enabled those who were late, to get their cards stamped before the “witching hour”. The clock then had to be rocked for a considerable period, until the lost time had been made up.

During the relatively short period which aircrew recruits spent in London we were given brief lectures on Air Force Law, mainly regarding the bits of paper which would be in the background of our lives for D.O.P.E (the Duration of the Present Emergency) - abbreviations abounded! Disciplinary procedures were outlined, together with elementary First Aid, Gas Training, all against the background of kitting out, medicals and the Drill and P.E mentioned earlier.

Some ten days after our first visit, we were once again paraded to Abbey Lodge for booster jabs. It was there that I was part of a charade. As can be imagined, there were long queues of airmen waiting and it was decided that we would cause a panic among those reporting for their initial jabs. Thus, it was that, with one or two others of small stature, I was lifted onto the shoulders of some bigger lads and carried horizontally from the building. The remainder of our group were at pains to tell the new arrivals of the horrors that awaited them.

In the evening, I went with a chap called Hyams, who was in my room, to a concert given in the Seamour Hall, by the RAF Dance Orchestra directed by Jimmy Miller (which was known as “The Squadronaires”). This was on the ground floor of the building which had the basement swimming pool. In the line-up were several musicians who became well known in later years. Among them was Ronnie Aldridge the pianist and George Chisholm the trombonist, Jock Cummings (Drums) and Andy Macquater-Tenor Sax).

The Squadronaires was, I believe, the first of the Service dance bands and it was formed late in 1940 or early 1941. At least eight of the musicians came from Bert Ambrose’s band, one of whom, Harry Lewis, became the husband of Vera Lynn - the “Forces Sweetheart”. It was one of the most exciting bands of the period and it rivalled the famous Glen Miller Orchestra of the American Air Force.

We had walked the mile and a half to the hall as there was no direct public transport. Toward the end of the concert, my friend became ill and I virtually carried him back to the flats. Next day it was discovered that, like a lot of the others, he had vaccine fever. I was O.K, jabs and things have never had an adverse effect on me.

For some reason which I have never been able to explain, I did not take advantage of the limited freedom we were given, to attend any other concerts, shows or even go to the Stage Door Canteen. I guess I was still wet behind the ears, a bit of a country bumpkin and not a little worried that I would put a foot wrong, thus upsetting the RAF authorities.

As my self-confidence grew, I made several trips by underground to Streatham, where I was made welcome by the Collier family who had moved from Wandsworth (Mrs. Collier was the sister of my Aunt Elsie) and I remember the crowds of Londoners bedding down in the underground stations, apparently oblivious of the trains passing through. I also went to one of the other nearby blocks of flats where Norman Christopher, a fellow Air Cadet from Wimborne, was getting ready to leave for Initial Training.

A week after Norman had gone, my turn for posting came. By then, I was beginning to feel something of an airman and on Wednesday the 27th of October the whole of the intake was re-flighted. I found myself in a group of 50 now designated “J Flight”, and we discovered that we were destined for Number 12, Initial Training Wing at St. Andrews in Scotland, to which we would be travelling on the 22.00 hrs train that evening.

We were handed over to a very small Sergeant who was our escort for the trip, and bundled into the backs of trucks with all our kit, to be taken to Kings Cross Station.

As can be imagined, like all wartime trains, it was crowded and people, mainly service personnel, many were standing in the corridors. Being an official posting, seats had been reserved for us, but the racks were inadequate to hold all our kit. I enquired of a porter whether it would be safe to leave my kit bag in the corridor, to which he replied,” Is it liable?”. When I asked, “Is it liable to what?” he got very cross with me and I gained the impression that he thought I was being smart. It took some time for it to sink in that I was hearing the cockney for “Labelled”.

There was a lot of smoking in the compartment and, as the journey progressed two WAAF girls were invited in by someone. This made things even more crowded and, being small, I was bundled up onto the rack from which some kit had been moved out into the corridor.

Shortly after, the bulbs were removed from the light fittings, “to enable everyone to get a bit of sleep in the dark”. Before that happened, I remember seeing the girls, one on either side, lying across the knees of the lads left below. Eventually I managed a little sleep and a day or so later I discovered that the giggling and rustling which had kept me awake, was the result of many hands fondling the WAAFs in the darkness.

The train made its way north from London and I was quite pleased that the possibility of being bombed was receding, since I realised that the glow when the fire box door was opened, could invite trouble. After some stops, we reached Edinburgh, where the WAAFs left us. It was not light, but from the station I was able to see the outline of the Castle against the sky. I remembered that the Forth Bridge was north of Edinburgh but I did not know how far or even how fast the train would be travelling so, just to make sure that I would not miss it, I hovered by or hung out of a window of the train. I now know that the bridge is about 10 miles from Waverley station but in the cold and grey of that morning it seemed to take ages for the train to cover the distance.

Like a lot of boys of my age, I had been a keen user of the metal strip constructional toy called" Meccano". The monthly magazine frequently printed photographs and details of the Forth Bridge which, by its nature, was an ideal subject for "Meccano" modelling. As a youngster, I had never in my wildest imaginings ever thought I would see it, yet here I was, less than three weeks after leaving home, attaining a boyhood ambition, courtesy of the RAF. Although, it must be admitted, I really had no idea of the size of the Victorian iron tube monster I was about to meet.

Somewhere up ahead, the engine whistle sounded and, as the noise from the track changed, I hung out in the misty dawn to see the girder work flash by and looked down at the sea an awfully long way below. The bridge, which connects Lothian to East Fife, is nearly 1.75 miles long and is built on the cantilever principle with four spans. The railway track, 150 feet above water level, passes through the centre of each of three diamond shaped, tubular lattice cantilevers, the tops of which reach approximately 360 feet in height. Since that morning, I have been over the bridge about half a dozen times (always remembering to toss out a coin "for good luck"), gone from the North side to the South by boat so that I could see the structure from the surface of the water, and even glimpsed it in the distance when flying.

Not long after leaving the bridge the train steamed through Kirkcaldy, which some 50 and more years ago, seemed to be one of the centres for the manufacture of linoleum floor covering. It was the first stop north of Edinburgh and when we leaned out of the carriage windows to read the station sign,00 there was an unmistakable smell about the place which even permeated into the carriages. With the decline in the use of the product and the introduction of anti-pollution legislation, I am told that now there is no problem.

We travelled on through Fife shire as the daylight strengthened until we reached a small station called Guard Bridge, 0where some of us left the train whilst others remained on board - we had established that this was a group going even further north to Aberdeen. As their train disappeared into the distance, in our turn, we were ushered onto a small train which took us, in the early light, the last few miles to St. Andrews.

Chapter Three

APPRENTICE AIRMAN

I suppose it was between 9 and 10 am by the time we reached the end of the long rail trip from London to St. Andrews. We were travel weary and hungry, although still required to march from the railway station to our billet. This, we discovered was to be The Grand Hotel and the first stop was the former basement dining room where, among other things we were served with porridge. It was not the stuff we had endured in London but we had unlimited sugar and genuine milk on it. Subsequently we found out that this was special gesture to new arrivals and, for most of our stay, we ate our porridge in the true Scot's way, with salt.

The Grand Hotel

Although, on an occasional Sunday, one might unexpectedly get sugar. Shortly after breakfast we were fallen in and told that, from then on, we would be known as “C flight of No. 4 Squadron at No. 12.I.T.W,” and we were advised that, although the bulk of our Squadron was billeted in another hotel, the whole Squadron used the catering facilities of No. 2 Squadron at “The Grand Hotel”.

At least we had not been made to carry our kit from the station. However, we had to man-handled it from the transport to the rooms to which we had been allocated. I was put, with four other aspiring flyers, in a back room on the top floor, 84 stairs from ground level and just about 100 to the basement. During the course of the next few weeks, whilst we were ‘guests’, these stairs were traversed some 18-20 times each day as we took our “mugs and irons” down to breakfast and returned to clean the room, then down again to parade on the road in front of the hotel. The trips up and down the stairs were repeated should we have to change for P.E., to go to meals, to go out in the evening, or even to collect a forgotten item.

My four room-mates on the top floor were more or less unknown to me at the outset, Since only one of them, Hymen had been with me in London. However, we very soon became good friends. One of them in particular, was a very good mate. He was older than the rest of us. I believe Alf Bramson was about 20 years of age, a short, portly Jew who became a sort of father figure to all of us18 year olds. He was at the top of the range for aircrew training and it was understood that, if he was lucky, he might eventually make it to become a navigator. He was very hard put to it to keep up with the rest of the flight either physically or mentally and our room tried hard to help him as best we could. As far as I can recall the other trainees were John Woodhead, Popplewell and Jordan, who was the youngest.

In the room opposite, which was the turret type and not really square were about four more trainees, among them was George Hill who, I believe hailed from the Oxford area and a chap called Nicholson from Brockenhurst who claimed his father to be a Wing Commander or Group Captain. George’s RAF number was only one or

two digits less than mine, thus we must have attested at the same time a year earlier but, although he was tall and distinctive, I have no recollection of seeing him during the two days I spent at Oxford.

Both Hill and Nicholson were not keen on service food and often ate at cafe up North Street, but then, they had money and could afford to be fussy. Personally, I found the food to be quite acceptable and so did the rest of the flight. After St Andrews, we were separated, and I often wondered how they managed once confined to an airfield miles from anywhere.

The Grand, which as I have said was really the home of No. 2 Squadron, was at the north end of Golf Place at its junction with a small cliff top road called The Scores. Opposite the corner of the building was the Royal & Ancient Golf Clubhouse - the club dates from 1754. I now see this hotel on T.V at least once a year. When the concluding moments of a golf tournament are shown, this red-brick multi- storied Victorian pile, forms the back drop for the approach shots to the 18th green. The Prince of Wales - for a short while King Edward viii - usually took the first-floor suite when he visited St. Andrews to play golf.

From the top floor windows which overlooked The Scores, the deepening of winter could be followed as we watched the snow line coming ever nearer. As time went on, we became acclimatised to the dropping temperature.

The Sergeant in charge of us was the same N.C.O who had escorted us from London, but he was now the guide, drill instructor and tormentor of our new designation of “C Flight” 4, Squadron. For most of our stay in St. Andrews we were not keen on him to say the least. Sgt. Ferguson was a lean chap but only about 5ft tall. It was alleged that, prior to service in the R.A.F., he had been a fish porter in the Glasgow docks. As with all Drill Instructors, he had a poetic turn of vituperation, which, to those not on the receiving end of it, was not without its humour.

Apart from chasing us day and night, he had to inspect our rooms every day. The daily bed layout was more complex than one we had built in London and almost defies description, but I’ll try. The 3 ‘Biscuits’ which comprised the mattress, were first piled up at the head end and on them were placed 3 blankets, folded in a special way and interleaved with two folded sheets, with the whole bedding wrapped in another blanket. (Yes, we were one of the privileged classes who were allowed sheets, even in wartime.) On the top of the blankets was the big back pack (artificially “squared” with cardboard inside it.) Next in the pile was the greatcoat, folded to expose only two buttons and on top of that was my best blue uniform, suitably folded to expose only the belt, with the buckle done up and central. The pile was topped out by a steel helmet, resting on the service gas mask and case, on which was placed a camouflage net, folded to a nine-inch square. By this time, the edifice reached approximately shoulder height.

However, it did not end there. Hung behind the bed was the gas cape, folded to be about a foot wide from top to bottom, but facing the wall. The reason was that the cape, made of some oil cloth type of material was designed to be worn over full kit, thus there was a” hump” on the back to go over the back pack and this “hump” had

to be made square like the pack lower down in the display. Try to think of doing something similar with a light-weight plastic macintosh.

On the bed, towards the foot, a towel was laid across the springs and on it the owner's mug and irons (knife, fork and spoon) were exhibited. On the floor, under the foot of the bed was a pair of polished boots (later exchanged for shoes) and P.T. shoes (whitened), and centrally between the footwear was a water bottle which had to be half full and the cork on the left shoulder of the bottle, with the base of it exposed (to show it was not corroded).

I believe the polite term for this service fanaticism for order and display is "Bull" but I have no idea of its contribution to the preparation of lads wishing to fly for their country!

The above daily layout had to be ready prior to the first parade of the day and had to remain intact throughout the working day, except for the mug & irons, which had to be removed for meals! Weekly kit inspection, usually on Thursday evenings, meant that the whole of our kit had to be laid out in a very different but equally special manner, so that the inspecting officer could establish if any item was missing; but that's another boring story which I do not propose to relate.

A minor event which occurred soon after my arrival in St. Andrews was the opening of my Post Office Savings account at Golf Place Sub-Post Office on the 12th of November 1943. From my pay of 3/6 (15p) per day, I drew 30/-(£1.5) each fortnight. Of this, I kept 10/- (50p) and banked £1 and then took out half of it the following week. The remainder of my pay i.e. approx. £1 was paid in the form of an allowance to my mother who bought savings certificates in my name, which was the beginning of a small post-war nest egg.

Close to the Post office in Golf Place were the rooms which did service as our N.A.A.F.I. This was nearly opposite our hotel and was usually visited at least twice a day. One day I was discovered in the N.A.A.F.I. with my cap on and promptly put on a charge. Next day it was the full works. The order of the Sergeant "Cap off - Prisoner and Escort, Quick March "etc, and I was in front of the Squadron Commander. There I was "Admonished"- the polite word for "Told Off"- and that was that. It was the only time I was on a charge during my time in the service.

St. Andrews - No. 12 Initial Training Wing (there were many more scattered over the U.K.) and the purpose of most of them was to turn 'a crowd of fellers' into a respectable "bunch of chaps", who could safely go off to learn to fly training aircraft. Not that the majority would ever become "Drivers of Airframes", since we were all in the P.N.B. (which was short for Pilot, Navigator, Bomb Aimer) scheme and, as such, we had a common initial training. Other aircrew trades had been sorted out at the A.C.R.C, in the re-flighting exercise carried out on the day prior to our departure for Scotland. The potential Flight Engineers, Wireless Operators, and Air Gunners went to Initial Training Wings which covered subjects specific to their needs.

At St. Andrews quite a lot of our tuition took place in the university buildings, principally at University College, St. Mary's and Madras. Being P.N.Bs, we were lectured for three months on navigation, meteorology, airmanship, theory of flight,

aircraft recognition, engines, armaments (bombs and guns - principally the .303 Browning machine gun which had to be stripped and reassembled blindfold as one shouted out the names of the parts right down to the “Sear Spring Retainer Keeper”, which I still remember half a century later.)

Perhaps the subject which worried us most was the Morse code. Instruction was given in a requisitioned house on The Scores, the road parallel to and north of North Street. In this we had to become proficient on both the oscillator and the hand held ‘Aldis’ lamp. That meant reaching a speed of 15-18 words (75-90 letters) per minute, in order to pass at 12-15. The lamp work (to a final standard of 10 words per minute), was often done outside, on the cliff top or the golf course. This was probably very acceptable in the summer, but the winter winds made one’s eyes run, as attempts were made to decipher the winking dots and dashes.

Of course, we also did General Service Training (G.S.T), since it was pointed out that we could be shot down and might have to fight alongside soldiers or even defend our airfields.

For this we often worked outside, at the range on the side of the Old Course. Another aspect of this type of training was Gas Drill. During the time I spent at St. Andrews I paid several visits to the gas chamber to establish confidence in the equipment and to supplement the lectures on the various types of gases which the enemy were expected to use as defeat became surer. Occasionally we were required to wear respirators for several hours during the day. At these times, life went on as usual i.e. We marched; we even ran and certainly sat in lectures.

Once appraised of my new address, Mother was not slow in hot-footing it down to tell Mrs. Fripp that Len was in Scotland. When she gave my new address so that it could be passed on to Charles, mother was surprised when Mrs. Fripp immediately gave her an address in St. Andrews at which she was sure I would be welcome. Within a week of arriving in Scotland, I had an address at which to call, and thus it was that I became a regular visitor to No. 30, South Street, over the Co-op, two or three times each week, during the next few months in the jargon of the RAF I had “Got Organised”! This arrangement also continued for the duration of my next posting.

It appeared that, in the 1930’s when Bill Fripp had been on flying boats, he had been stationed at Tayport. Somehow during this posting, he had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Weiss and two of her daughters, one of whom, Margaret, had had both her hips dislocated at an early age through being dragged out, rather than dug out from a snow drift, when she was young. The outcome had been a lifetime of difficulty in walking. As Mrs. Fripp had forecast, because of the Fripp family connection, I was made very welcome and so were any other aircrew cadets I sometimes took with me. This occurred most often on a Sunday and Alf Bramson was the one, who most frequently, accompanied me to South Street for tea. There was a further spin-off, in that Margaret, the only daughter remaining at home, was in the pay-box of The New Cinema in North Street, so that I could often gain free access to see films. There was another cinema further up the road and on the opposite side but that cost money.

The round of training went from 0830 until 1730hrs and, partly from panic and partly to demonstrate keenness, some of us even went so far as to attend extra Morse classes on one evening each week. Another evening, usually a Thursday, was taken up doing domestic chores and generally “Bulling up” things for the weekly C.O’s inspection which included a full kit layout. Also, part of every evening had to be devoted to polishing shoes and brasses for the daily inspection by the N.C.O in charge, and repeated if one was detailed for guard duty or fire picquet.

During the almost weekly visits to the range, we were given many opportunities to fire not only a rifle but also the revolver (not so easy as portrayed in cowboy films), the Browning machine gun, the Sten gun and we even did some clay pigeon shooting with 12 bore double-barrelled shot guns. The Sten gun was of very simple construction but it was also a temperamental weapon. Apart from the short barrel, it consisted mainly of welded tubes. It looked crude but it was quite rugged, although if dropped, it could suddenly start spraying bullets. These were 9mm calibre. Their use was based on the fact that this was the size of ammunition most likely to be used by the enemy and, if found, could then be used against them.

On the range, the firing point accommodated 8-10 of us and elementary safety indicated that a loaded weapon should always be pointed in the general direction of the butt. On one occasion, the Sten gun of a Welshman who was on the right of the line up, jammed. Whereupon, he turned to his left with the gun at his hip and yelled for the instructor who was conducting the practice from the other end of the line. He looked like someone from a gangster movie and it was surprising how rapidly we flattened ourselves onto the ground, since we could not trust “Taffy” and the gun he was holding could have suddenly started firing of its own accord. As far as I know, he was never allowed to fire a Sten again, in fact he was a mobile disaster as our next posting together will illustrate in due course.

The 12 bore training, near the Jubilee Course, was not without its hazards but this time not to those with the guns. One tended to stand, in succession, at different points roughly in a semi-circle, with one end of the arc close to the trap-house. Thus, the firer was presented with rising “birds”, passing shots and falling “birds” as the discs arced away from the release and quite happily banged off at these moving targets. For the firer it was good fun although there was an underlying motive in this training. It was hoped that one might develop the type of eye that instinctively aimed off at the other type of moving target we could eventually meet, namely enemy aircraft. However, the sports field was not far away and, from time to time, it was possible to be engaged in a game of football or hockey, when, literally out of the blue, one could feel a rain of spent buck-shot landing on head, neck and shoulders. In the main, it was an irritant, but I always took good care when looking up, if I noticed that the clay pigeon range was active. I did not want an eyeful of falling shot.

Other aspects of G.S. Training were unarmed combat, bayonet fighting and the throwing of hand grenades. Diana finds it quite amusing that the rather non-confrontational Len whom she knows, should ever have been involved in the rough stuff of learning how to break fingers, whilst escaping from hands placed round the neck from behind. Also, the gentle art of silent killing, such as a thin ligature round the neck, or a knitting needle upwards from under the ribs and into the heart. Unarmed combat also came into our P.T. training.

I could never take to bayonet fighting. To me, it was far too personal and by all accounts could be a bloody and a messy business, to put it mildly! The thought of trying to emulate the “Tommies” of World War 1 by becoming engaged in hand-to-hand fighting, was something which made me shudder. One was supposed to attack with blood curdling yells which, although undoubtedly frightening to an enemy, seemed a little theatrical to me.

In general, I did not mind handling grenades. After an initial worry about dropping the wretched thing in the dugout, and the handle flying off with disastrous consequences, I quite liked the satisfaction of the loud explosion, after I had thrown it way out in front of the sand bags. It is said that the base plug usually flies back in the direction of the thrower. Just in case, I was never slow to get my head down once I had seen the missile land and was glad, I was well out of the way of the small chunks of metal whizzing above me. It was quite obvious I was not cut out to be a soldier. The “Wait till you see the whites of their eyes” stuff was not my idea of a war.

One night, I came back from the cinema, climbed to the top of The Grand Hotel, only to discover that the room was in darkness, the blackout blinds pulled back and my room mates were all in bed. What puzzled me was the guy I could see by the faint light from the window, who was sitting up in my bed, still wearing his uniform!! In the darkened room, I tried to be as quiet as possible as I went over to turf him out, as I thought it was one of the lads from another room who had had too much to drink. My suspicions were confirmed when I touched him and he fell over onto his side. Somehow his big round eyes glinted at me and I saw that they were perfectly round and a lot of groping established that I was the victim of a prank. The ‘character’ on my bed was my best blue uniform stuffed with my kit bag and other bits and pieces and wearing my gas mask to give it a ‘face’ in the gloom. Once I had discovered the plot, the others in the room mysteriously ‘woke up’ to watch me trying to restore order to my bed space, since there would be no time to do so in the morning.

We were mutually supportive and usually helped each other out in a variety of ways, since no one wished any of his friends to be re-flighted back a week or two with strangers. Thus, it was that, when I fell ill with a very heavy cold, the others in the room did all they could to bring about a speedy recovery. I even managed a Saturday ‘breakfast in bed’ - strictly against the rules, but the thing I have never forgotten, was that one-night Alf went out and returned to make me a very hot lemon drink - from a fresh lemon! How he acquired a fresh lemon at night, in winter, in Scotland and in the middle of the war, I’ll never know. He certainly never told the other lads in the room either. I suppose that’s what friends are for!!
Being at St. Andrews and the Mecca of all golfers, it is not surprising that one of the activities on offer for Organised games on Wednesday afternoons was Golf. I tried it several times but with no outstanding success. It was possible to draw a bag and a handful of clubs, together with one golf ball, from the Sports Store. Once that one ball had gone, there was little to be done except to return the clubs and head for home. The excuse for being in bed on a Wednesday afternoon, if discovered by the Sergeant in charge of us, was simple, “Lost my ball Serg!! - nothin’ for it but to come back!”.

At St. Andrews, as in all training establishments, there was a constant through-put of trainees and thus a flight from one of the four Squadrons was posted each week. Some four or five weeks after our arrival we vacated our top floor rooms for some first-floor rooms of "The Imperial Hotel" in North Street, which was the HQ of No. 4 Squadron but only accommodated three flights. It was a very much smaller establishment, from which we were marched several times a day, back down a slight hill, to the basement dining room of The Grand, to which we had become accustomed. However, we were glad that we no longer had to rush up and down so many stairs, although there was little doubt of our fitness to do so.

Imperial Hotel St Andrews

This was ensured by the attention given to all trainees by the P.T. Instructors. Each day we were in their care for an hour and exercises on the cliff top adjoining the North Sea in the winter demanded some stamina. When the foam and even the first foot or two of sea water are frozen, a singlet, shorts and shoes provide very little comfort. It was a question of keeping moving fast or freeze! As a variation of the exercise programme, we were sometimes required to climb onto the flat tops of the concrete block defence works, and then jump from one to another for several hundred yards. Missing one's footing meant, at best, a drop of several feet and, if unlucky, a bad scrape down the side of the next block! The other alternative was a cross-country run round the golf course and once again the T.V, nearly fifty years on, provides the occasional glimpse of a landscape around which I pounded at least once a week in 1943/44.

On one of the days when we doing P.T. on the beach I was hit on the nose by the elbow of "Taffy" Rouse, a Welshman from Milford Haven who, to the rest of us, did not seem too bright. (We often wondered how he had passed the selection board!). As a result, I had to report sick, as the blood would not stop pouring from my nose and I spent the next two days excused marching, P.T. and the like as I wandered round with the ends of two plugs projecting from my hooter.

It must be admitted that, for a few years prior to joining the R.A.F. I had been a modest smoker, although never one to inhale. The rigours of life north of the border meant that, within a week or two, I had stopped smoking altogether and I know that many of the flight reduced their dependence on tobacco.

A day or so after moving into The Imperial I was slightly late for the Squadron parade on the car park almost next door. Thus, I was told by the Flight Sergeant, in no uncertain terms to, "Stand over there". This I did and was surprised to see another trainee, who was even later than I was, come round the corner and find himself directed to join me. We quickly exchanged greetings since we were both in the same boat and then realised that we had been together in the same form at Wimborne Grammar School about two years previously.

Like me, Jack Radford had been a day boy but had come from out of town somewhere. Since leaving school, he and his family had moved to Devon, from where he had enlisted in the R.A.F. and was now some weeks ahead of me. We saw each other quite often until he was posted later in 1943 and have never seen each other since

I next spoke to Jack when he phoned me on the morning of Saturday the 5th of July 1997, the occasion of the Grammar School (Old Winburnians) Quincentennial Commemoration Service which he had, that morning, heard about from his daughter in Chichester, when she had given him my telephone number. We met, in the Minster on the following afternoon and he stayed to tea before returning to Chard, where he now lives. After we had parted in 1944, we had gone to different flying schools and he had gone to Canada, but failed to qualify as a Navigator.

The group which had occupied the top floor room at The Grand managed to stay together, but this time our room was at the front on the first floor. Since it overlooked the road, it became a popular spot from which to view young ladies using North Street. The lasses in their red gowns going to and from the university buildings particularly attracted the attention of a chap called Burgess, who I believe came from Westbury where his father was a postman. At the time there was something of a revival of the song, “Friendship” a semi-humorous song, written by Cole Porter in the mid-1930’s. One of the lines in it was “If you’re ever in a jam - here I am”, and John was in the habit of singing it, at the top of his voice, to one particular female student, who had captured his heart, every time he spotted her going by. Eventually he got round to ‘chatting her up’ but I do not remember his infatuation being welcomed.

The first chance for members of the flight to level the score with Sgt.Ferguson, came at the end of November, on St. Andrew’s Day to be exact. On that occasion I was only able to see the conclusion of the incident as I had been to a dance at the Town Hall. When I returned it was to find “Ferggie” trapped in a dustbin, on the pavement outside the hotel.

It appears that he was far from sober when he had gone round the rooms at about 10 o’clock in the evening to make sure that all was well. He became abusive and some of the bigger lads, realising his condition rushed him outside. They then folded him in half, and wedged his buttocks well down into a dustbin, which is how I found him, asleep, just about mid-night. He was well and truly stuck. With the rim of the bin under his armpits and backs of his legs, he could not touch the ground to release himself, even if he had been able to work out how to achieve it. I believe some of the other lads who were on guard duty, eventually took pity on him and pulled him out. He was quite subdued for several days.

I had gone to the dance with a young lass called Margaret who also worked at the same cinema as Margaret Weiss. She ran the cigarette and sweet kiosk in the foyer and occasionally acted as an usherette. She also worked in a cake shop in the middle of the town near Market Street. Needless to say, with friends like the two Margarets, I was in a favoured situation and was thus able to stretch both my service pay and the weekly sweets ration. Margaret, who lived out in the Lamond Drive area of the town and I had a good understanding, since both of us was aware of the situation of the other. I had a girlfriend on the south coast and she was going steady

with a chap who was away in the Navy. We went to several dances whilst I was stationed in St. Andrews but there was no emotional involvement.

St. Andrews Cathedral

At the east end of the main roads in the town were the ruins of St. Andrews Cathedral, which dated from the 1120s and was originally 375 ft long. There were two major parts left more or less intact. One was the huge central arch which was supported by two slender towers and the other was a square tower, approximately 100 feet in height. Service personnel were admitted to the tower free of charge and, even in the winter, it was sometimes quite pleasant to climb the spiral stairs to the top. From there one could see out to the entrance of the Firth of Tay, about 10 miles to the North and, away to the East some 16 - 18 miles, the Inchcape or Bell Rock and its lighthouse was visible. I found the top of the tower to be a good spot in which to write letters.

Some weeks before Christmas, the Squadron Commander had the idea that a concert would be good for morale and, in a moment of bravado, I volunteered to play the violin. Thus, it was I wrote home and mother's diary for Sunday the 14th of November 1943 records, "Packed up Len's violin for sending away." The entry for the following day was, "Sent Len's violin away. Registered Post 1/4." (in 1993 = 7p). It duly arrived, completely undamaged, after travelling over 500 miles! (Someone worked out that, at St. Andrews, we were closer to Oslo in Norway than we were to London.)

In the event, the concert finally took place during evening of Christmas Day and my contribution was not worth mentioning. Stephan Grapelli, the jazz violinist, would have got a standing ovation and, even if I had played a one-stringed fiddle and told a few corny jokes, I would have been better received. My music floated like a lead balloon! The star of the evening was undoubtedly Alf Bramson who had a good tenor voice and had gone out of his way to find out the sort of music which would appeal to the C.O. He sang" On away awake beloved" from Hiawatha by Coleridge -Taylor. He later admitted to us that he was a member of the chorus which sang "Hiawatha" every year in the Royal Albert Hall. Clearly, I should have assessed the talents of the others before leaping forward to volunteer.

Earlier in the day, in traditional service fashion, we airmen had been waited on by the Officers and senior N.C.Os. at the Christmas Lunch. They had then been persuaded to sing us some of the more ribald songs sung by military men down the years. This was a very informal function but, of course, there was usually quite a gulf between the officers and the aircrew trainees.

During the time we were at No. 12 I.T.W, every cadet was interviewed progressively by his Flight Commander, in our case a chinless and wingless wonder and then the Squadron Commander. My interview with the latter went quite well. At the beginning he said, "I see your home town is Wimborne, nice place that. I remember it very well. There's a restaurant in the middle - Gush's, cream teas and all that!". Our little chat was far less starchy after that.

The C.O. must have been impressed because I was recommended for an interview with the Wing Commander. He was, to us, an old man - I've since discovered he was born in 1894 and was thus about 50 years of age! Never-the-less, I'm sure his posting to St. Andrews was organised by the "Old Boy" network, since he was The Earl of Haddington, - the 12th since 1619 - Knight of the Thistle, and a Military Cross from the First World War, with a family seat in East Lothian, 10 miles from of Edinburgh. I cannot recall any of our conversation and clearly, I did not impress him, since he did not recommend me as potential officer material, which I later discovered was the purpose of meeting him.

At my sorties with Margaret to the dances, which probably began with the one at the end of November for St, Andrews Day, I soon picked up the rudiments of the Reel, the Fling and such things as Strathspeys etc. The Hogmanay dance on New Years Eve in particular, seemed very wild and a far cry from the Youth Club and A.T.C. "hops", or even the Drill Hall dances I had attended back in Wimborne.

Next day, it was work as usual, although I'm sure the permanent staff must have had a long night bringing in the New Year. Some looked very hung-over!

That morning is one I will never forget. We marched up North Street, straight toward the rising sun and as we marched, it appeared in the arch of the ruined cathedral at the end of the road. The areas alto-cumulus cloud in the East were shades of red and orange, edged in gold. It was quite breathtaking and I was very moved. This was particularly so because I felt we were marching into the dawn of a New Year and none of us knew what the coming months would bring. For some it could have been the last New Years Day they would see. It could have been my last; but, although I have been spared to see a further fifty years, that sunrise and the emotions it engendered, have left an indelible impression on me. I have since heard the phrase, "A Glimpse of Glory", and that succinctly sums up my experience on the first day of January 1944.

Off to the north of North Street, right out on the edge of the cliffs, lies the ruins of St. Andrews Castle - built c. 1200 AD. Its dark stone-work gives it a gloomy air and within the walls is a "bottle" dungeon. The entrance to this prison is down through a small trap door about 3ft square and then, via a similar diameter well shaft, cut down through solid rock for several feet, to the dungeon proper which widens out considerably below it. Any-one incarcerated in this prison had to be lowered into it or, possibly more likely, literally thrown down the shaft into it, when injuries would have been unavoidable. Food and drink would have had to be delivered in the same fashion. There was no light and escape was virtually impossible.

During the war, the RAF had a number of "Gang Shows" on tour as morale boosters. These were under the overall supervision of Ralph Reader, then a Squadron Leader, who had made his mark in 1930s by writing material for, and producing 'Gang Shows' for the Boy Scout movement. In post war years, he organised the annual Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance at the Albert Hall. One of the RAF Gang Shows came to entertain us at St. Andrews and the Wing filled the Town Hall. A very tall gangling fellow with an exceptionally long scarf and a school cap took the stage, he was Douglas Cardew. Post war he became well known in his act as

“Cardew the Cad of the School”. He must have impressed me, since I do not recall any of the other members of the Company.

On a rota, each squadron had a Saturday off every fourth week but there was little to do in the town, thus it was normal to have a lie in. Since there was a Church Parade every Sunday, it was never possible to stretch this into 48 hours pass. The parades were routine affairs but the organist was a trainee whom I knew and, when he was practising, he told me that, for the exit voluntary he was going to play what he termed “Variations on the theme of Yes, We Have No Bananas”. Thus, on the Sunday, we all marched out to the music hall song but I doubt that there many who could exactly place where they had heard the tune before!

On one Saturday, some of us got the appropriate passes for the day and took the train back to Guard Bridge and thence to Dundee. This meant crossing the Firth of the Tay by the Tay Bridge which, had been the scene of a railway disaster on 28th of December 1879 only about two years after the bridge had been built. Then the centre spans had been washed away in a storm and a train had plunged to destruction. To follow the route and cross this famous bridge, which was rebuilt between 1882 & 1887, was yet another ‘impossible’ boyhood dream coming true, courtesy of the R.A.F.!

Once into the new year we were really under pressure as the time for exams approached. At every opportunity little group of airmen could be seen frantically ‘genning up’ on aspects of the course. The major emphasis of our time at No. 12 I.T.W had been on navigation and meteorology. Of these subjects we had two, three-hour examination papers on navigation, the first of which was a three leg, dead reckoning plot lasting three hours. I had gone to bed early prior to the examination which was programmed for most of a morning but I had been disturbed many times during the night by what I thought was kiter running down my throat.

My room mates were horrified when we all woke up to see my face, the pillow and bedding all covered in blood. It was decided I had experienced a very severe nose bleed. Never-the-less, by holding my head back, all the normal early morning chores were done and I marched, with the rest of the flight, to the examination. I could not bend over the Mercator plotting sheet for long at any one time, without dripping blood on to it and, for some of the time, I had to put my head back. However, when the results were published a week or so later, I was amazed to find I had the second highest marks!!

During the examinations we still did our fair share of drill, P.T. and cross country running but whilst we were awaiting the results, Sgt. Ferguson really polished up our foot drill ready for the passing out parade in front of the Wing Commander. The last 10 minutes of the parade comprised “Continuity Drill”, when, after the initial command, the whole flight carried out all sorts of drill manoeuvres - marching, counter marching, slow marching, saluting etc, in an order we had slowly built up over the preceding weeks. In post-war years, Continuity Drill has become something of a show piece, usually performed in places like the Albert Hall, by the Queen’s Colour Squadron of the R.A.F. The secret is that every airman is counting like fury all the time and the master time keeper is usually a little guy in the middle of

the middle rank. Yes, you've guessed it. It was my job in C Flight to keep them all together!!

At the end of the course, with the exception of one or two who were re-flighted to retake the final exams, we were sent on leave for a week. On the face of it, that sounds reasonable but, having regard to the distance and difficulties experienced by the railways in maintaining a service, going from Scotland to the south coast was quite a journey. I left with the rest of the lads at 9-30am and I got home to Wimborne at 8-30am the following day, after attempting to sleep for part of the night on a seat at Waterloo Station. Going back was worse; the trip took 26 hours. Thus, eight days away from No.12 I.T.W worked out at about five and a half at home. During that time, my mother was quite put out that I would not wear an overcoat or gloves but, the south coast was balmy by comparison with the temperature prevailing on the east coast of Scotland toward the end of January'44.

The journeys north of London were on the old L.N.E.R lines and I renewed my acquaintance with the Forth Bridge and, on the way down, south of Dunbar and again south of Berwick, I was surprised that the lines seemed to follow the cliff top and, hugging the coast, was a small convoy of ships - probably colliers, some of which were flying small barrage balloons, to discourage an attack by any marauding German dive bombers.

On our return from leave, we were told that most of us had passed the course and, as a result, we were awarded a pay increase to 5 shillings and 9 pence (29p) per day. We later discovered that this was higher than the pay of our drill sergeant. In addition, we were allowed to reduce the size of the white flash in our service caps. It had been the practice, at this point in training, to allow the wearing of the propeller badge of a Leading Aircraftsman but this had been discontinued some time earlier.

Shortly after my leave, I had a letter from my girlfriend in Wimborne, telling me that she had found a male friend from Tarrant Rushton and that our relationship was at end. My response was that I now considered myself free to seek other lady friends, which I did not feel would be a problem. In a way, one could hardly be surprised since the Halifax, four engined Glider Tug aircraft had started to reach Tarrant not long after my departure from Wimborne. Almost by return of post I was told that she had made a mistake and that we should continue as before. In fact, it was over three months before I saw her again. I am convinced that my mother had a lot to do with re-establishing the status quo, since she knew that my next posting would be to a flying school and, in correspondence, she indicated that she did not want me to have any worries in view of what I was about to do.

Back at St. Andrews, the question arose regarding what to do with us since there was a hold up right through Training Command. Not only had the winter curtailed the flying programmes but mercifully the aircrew casualties, though quite high were not as great as had been anticipated. Thus, the Empire Air Training Scheme bases in Canada, America and South Africa were swamped with aircrews ready to go operational. So, we had to stay put.

We became the victims of the usual service solution, ‘Keep ‘em busy’, and to that end C Flight, for the next few weeks did Drill, P.T., cross country runs together with a variety of guards and fatigue duties. If the weather was good, we were taken on all day route marches and, if it was bad we did advanced navigation and meteorology, besides keeping up with our Morse. A sadistic variation was sometimes introduced into the Drill and running by requiring us to wear anti-gas clothing and respirators for several hours at a time

On the fatigue trips to R.A.F. Leuchars to pick up lorry loads of rations, we actually saw aircraft.! They were the Mosquitoes which we often watched, as they flew off to bomb Norway. It was under 400 miles away (less than two hours flying time)

Sometimes we went to the goods yard to unload coal from wagons, for it to be delivered around the various buildings occupied by the Wing. On one of these trips, we discovered that a half-penny when placed on a rail and run over by an engine, was flattened enough to be passed off in the N.A.A.F.I. as a penny. This activity was a diversion rather than an economic exercise.

The cross-country runs were usually round the golf courses but sometimes we went elsewhere in the countryside. The route marches were something of a novelty at first but, as time went on, they got longer and longer. On one occasion we marched to Crail and came back a slightly different way - a total of 20 miles and another time, the march was to Pittenweem and Anstruther when we covered about 24 miles. These destinations were all on the coast and the Isle of May some six miles offshore could be seen quite clearly. The marching was periodically enlivened by singing songs, some of which were quite salacious. There are two villages between St. Andrews and Crail and I believe that some objections were raised concerning our choice of material. Certainly, we were told to reserve our more boisterous efforts to where there were no dwellings.

Mention has been made earlier of our doubts concerning Rouse. These came to a head after one of the cross country runs. Occasionally we were sent on unsupervised runs, when it was tacitly understood that, even if we quit very quickly after the start, there would be no come back. One afternoon, when there was snow on the ground and there looked like more to come, Sgt. Ferguson told us to,” Go for a run”. Nearly all of us got the message but Rouse kept pestering the Sergeant for a destination and he was eventually advised to,” Go to Crail”. All of us, bar one, just ran round the block and returned to our rooms, and our beds, until tea time. Rouse disappeared and did not show up for tea, by which time it had been dark for two hours and snow was falling heavily. At eight o’clock in the evening, his absence was reported to Ferggie, who was just starting to panic, when Rouse arrived back.

After he had been warmed up, he explained he had done as the sergeant had said, and had run to Crail. Not knowing what to do when he got there, he had reported his arrival to the guard room of the R.N. Air Station near the town. No one believed him, until Ferggie phoned up and secured confirmation. This “mad” Welshman had almost run a marathon - over half of it at night, and been out in his P.T. kit for about six hours, in below zero conditions. He was certainly fit, but were his actions rational?

We were told by the P.T. staff many times that, once we left St. Andrews, we would never be as fit again and I'm quite sure this has been true.

Sometime toward the end of February, we were made aware of our postings. The potential Navigators and Bomb Aimers (those whom earlier medicals had identified as having slight co-ordination problems), were to go direct to Heaton Park in Manchester to await ships to take them abroad for further training. Alf Bramson was in this group. The rest of us were posted to flying schools at either Carlisle or Perth. So it was, 'au revoir' to St. Andrews
and, for some of us, "Perth - here we come!" and thence to the airfield at Scone, just North of the city.

St Andrews Nov 1943 NO 12 TW dad 3d from right second row

Chapter Four

POTENTIAL PILOT?

No. 11 ELEMENTARY FLYING TRAINING SCHOOL PERTH

Our group of potential pilots were met at the Perth railway station by an N.C.O. and we piled into a couple of crew coaches. I began to feel a little more like a ‘proper airman’ now that I had left the Initial Training Wing and I had quite enjoyed the railway trip. Inevitably, the journey had been via the junction at Guard Bridge and thence over the Tay Bridge, to Dundee and then along the north side of the estuary, to what has been called, “The Smallest City in the World”. It’s a joke! The town is built mainly between ‘two inches’ - the North Inch and the South Inch - both are flat areas of public open space. Hence the play on words.

After travelling for about a quarter of an hour in a north-easterly direction and covering about 3.5 miles (nearly 5 km), *we arrived at Scone airfield, which was to be our new base for a lot longer than we then expected.

The reasons for the holdup in our departure from St. Andrews, affected the whole of the flying training system, thus those ahead of us at Perth were themselves held up, due to the knock-on effect of the congestion in the schools ahead of them. This was compounded by the winter weather of Scotland - at one time we had fog for a week. We were back to “Keep ‘em busy”, the service solution to this sort of situation. At least, from time to time we could see aircraft at close quarters, so we soldiered on.

RAF Scone

We were joined during the next few days by other aircrew trainees from other parts of the U.K. and eventually we were addressed by Flight Sergeant Fellowes, a dear old boy who wanted a quiet time and had no desire to chase aircrew cadets for misdemeanours. He gave us all the usual station joining chat routine concluding by telling us that there was no likelihood of any flying for us in the foreseeable future.

He told us that we would be employed until further notice, alternately as guards and fire picquets, because, when flying, trainees were excused all other duties. However, to soften the blow, we were paraded at the stores to draw our flying kit and told that the food would be far better than on our former stations.

This proved to be quite true, possibly because, to a very a large extent the place was run by civilians who had been there for a long time. Prewar, Scone had been a flying school and post-war it returned to training civilian pilots, under the auspices of the Airwork’s Organisation.

The entry was divided between two huts and the duties of each alternated. The periods of each duty were for 24 hours. Throughout that time, it was a matter of being 2 hours on guard and 4 hours off. We drew rifles and a clip of ammunition from the armoury, in order to safeguard the gate, patrol the airfield perimeter, guard the fuel dump, hangars, instructional area and domestic site. At the most distant part of the airfield, close to a wood, were a number of Horsa wooden gliders. They were being kept as far away from enemy reconnaissance aircraft as possible but on occasion a Whitley tug aircraft would arrive to tow one to the south of England.

Horsa wooden glider

The gliders were a great asset to those who guarded them each night, since they were a shelter from the cold and the bench seating provided a good place for a sleep. Of course, one was supposed to keep 'alert at all times' and all that rubbish, but many times I snatched the odd hour of sleep, in the wooden tube wherein the airborne soldiers ultimately went into action. I never heard of anyone being caught sleeping on duty. After all, it was unlikely that any Orderly Officer would cross the airfield just to check on the guards. I never discovered why so much stress was put on guarding the gliders Let's face it, they needed a pretty hefty aircraft to tow them into the air and I could never imagine an enemy raiding party, or even an enemy agent (if any existed in the U.K.!) being dispatched to the centre of Scotland to neutralise them.

The Fire Picquet, as in most service establishments, was a misnomer. It was a grandiose title, given to blokes who were, in the main, going to do the camp chores. The major job at Perth was to look after the accommodation. This meant polishing the linoleum on sundry floors until all had mirror-like qualities but only after the coke stoves had been cleaned out, re-laid, lit and sufficient fuel got in to keep them going for the next 24 hours.

Particular emphasis was paid to the huts of those currently on flying training which were right on the perimeter of the airfield. Their liability was merely to make up their beds each morning. The floors were so highly polished that no one was allowed to walk on them, other than when wearing large felt pads. This meant that walking was more of a skating action, with the result that, even in the evening when the flying details returned, the floors were still being polished! In the event of no pads being available the airmen were expected to jump from bed to bed. On reflection, it must all have been like the party game in which the floor is deemed to be crocodile infested custard, which anyone touching, has to quit the game.

On one occasion we were called upon to act as marshals for night flying. This was for the benefit of the instructors who had to keep their night flying and instrument ratings up to date. The flare path was literally just that. It comprised a line of twelve "goose-neck flares" (more or less like watering cans with wicks coming out of the spouts and the other end in paraffin), spaced out across the airfield. It was quite an eye-opener to see the engine exhaust systems glowing red hot in the darkness.

Another time, I was in St. Leonard's Church, by the 'South Inch' when I was persuaded to be the 'stand in' for the bridegroom at a wedding rehearsal, so that the rest of the party could get their timings correct.

During the period of alternate guards and chores we were twice given days off at fairly short notice. I think it was when there was no flying for the lads ahead of us and thus they, in turn, became victims of the 'keep 'em busy' syndrome and so we were spare. On one of these days a number of us went, by train to Dundee, which did not inspire me very much and on the other, a much larger group of us, went via The Forth Bridge, to Edinburgh which was a much better outing.

The spell of non-flying duties lasted about three and a half weeks. Then, with several others, I was moved off the airfield altogether, to a lovely old house "The Durn", in Isla Road, Perth, where I stayed for about five weeks whilst undergoing flying training. There we found wooden panelled rooms, block floors and quite extensive kitchen facilities. The house had grounds which went down to the River Tay and on the opposite bank was the North Inch - a park, on the far side of which were the barracks of The Black Watch Regiment.

The Durn

Life at The Durn was a most peculiar existence. We were left very much to ourselves but, as at the sleeping accommodation at the airfield, the wearing of outdoor footwear was banned, other than for the trip from bedrooms to the main door and return at the end of the day. For the rest of the time, we all wore P.T. shoes. Every morning, we had to wash & shave, make up our beds and get the transport. Anyone missing the coach had to make his own way to Scone. By the time he had begged a lift, bearing in mind the time of the day, he would have probably missed breakfast. I never missed!

Once we had eaten our evening meal at the airfield, we were driven back again to Perth to spend the evening at The Durn, or, if we wanted, we could go across the Perth Bridge to the town. The kitchens were a favourite place to meet in the evening. They were warm and the RAF supplied a plenitude of things to eat and drink. With the bread, margarine, jam, eggs, bacon and cheese together with tea, coffee, cocoa, milk and sugar we made all sorts of concoctions, even to our own version of chocolate spread, from cocoa and marge etc. It was here I learned the delights of toast and bacon with raspberry jam and similar unlikely combinations.

I shared a room with three others. Les. Palmer, Ian Peddie and a chap called Pearson. He hailed from the Birmingham area and was about my build. The student pilots were divided into two groups. One of which went to Ground School and the other to Flying Training. The programme reversed every other day, so that, if one flew in the morning, the next day it would be in the afternoon. Pearson and I were in different groups and both on the short side which was how we came to share a parachute. Ours was the only one with two cushions.!! (These were supplied when

dinghy packs were deemed to be unnecessary - the Firth of Tay was at least 10 miles away from where we flew.)

Les, who, I believe, came from Preston, never finished the course, at least not while I was at Perth. He was carted off to the “Gleneagles Hotel”, which was used by the RAF as a hospital and recuperation centre, in order to have his appendix removed.

I became quite friendly with Ian Peddie who came from the Devon town of Budleigh Salterton. However, we were separated after flying school and I did not meet him again.

Ground School was, to a large extent, a re-run of the course we had completed at St. Andrews but it was now angled toward the Tiger Moth with which we were about to become intimately acquainted. Also, we were taught how to start a Tiger by hand swinging the propeller. Fifty years on I can still recall the engine starting drill. First, from the cockpit - “Switches Off - Throttle Closed -Suck In”. Following which, whoever was acting as ‘Prop Boy’, rotated the propeller two or three times and left it with one blade at about the one o’clock position. After making sure that the wheel chocks were in position, he called “Contact” and gave a thumbs up sign. In the cockpit, the word and the sign were acknowledged in a similar fashion, and the magneto switches were flicked to “On”.

The propeller tip was the given a smart pull downwards by the ‘Prop Boy’, using one hand and the engine normally burst into life. It was as well to make sure that one’s balance was correct before giving the propeller the final flick, so that if one slipped or fell, the possibility of going headfirst into the prop disc, was reduced.

As soon as the students were able to prove to an instructor that they were ‘au fait’ with one part of the procedure, they swapped. positions.

In practice the “Prop Boys” were civilian fitters and riggers who maintained the aircraft and they sometimes gave impromptu demonstrations of their ‘fearlessness’, although I thought they were foolhardy. With one in the cockpit and the other by the propeller they would go through the starting drill. Having started the engine, the one outside would bring up a wheel chock, stand on it and lean toward the spinning propeller, until he was almost off balance, and rest one finger onto the point of the revolving cone of the propeller boss. Being the slightest bit off centre, could have resulted in a fall into the rotating blades. It seemed to me a classic example of familiarity breeding contempt.

The big day for me arrived on the 26th of March 1944. My instructor, Sgt Philpott, introduced himself and we climbed into a yellow painted Tiger Moth [a D.H. 82A], a wood and fabric biplane. I was about to learn to fly. I was again amazed that yet another schoolboy ambition was about to be realised.

My first half hour in the air could hardly be called a success. In the beginning it was a question of “Follow me through on the controls”, and then, “Don’t hang onto the stick for dear life!”. Communication was not at all easy since, being in separate cockpits, I could only talk to my instructor in front, and he to me, by means of Gosport Tubes.

Gosport Tubes

They were literally tubes and were first used, at Gosport, for training pilots during World War I. A mouthpiece in each cockpit was connected to the earpieces of the occupant of the other cockpit, via tubes which bifurcated at chest level and went into either side of the flying helmet. It reminded me very much of ear trumpets, used by deaf persons prior to the introduction of the battery-operated hearing aids, which themselves have now been superseded by unobtrusive microphones and transistors behind the ears. Since unknown numbers of trainees had been sick in these Tiger Moths, (undoubtedly when some of them were explaining their problems to their instructor), several of the mouth-pieces were somewhat nauseous!!

Not long after take-off, in an effort at conversation, I called the attention my instructor to the ‘smoke’ through which we flew from time to time and said that there must be quite a fire somewhere, but I had seen no evidence of one prior to getting airborne. His response is not repeatable but the essence of his reply was that we were flying through broken cloud.

Sgt. Philpott did not waste any opportunity. He explained the drill to be followed should the aircraft catch fire and in particular the way to successfully abandon it. By the time he had demonstrated how he would handle the Tiger Moth to let me get out first, I was already feeling far from well. His heartfelt injunction to, “Make it quick if we ever have to go. I can’t leave until you are clear”, I found to be very comforting - or otherwise!

As is usual, the first flight was for familiarisation with the aircraft and also with the local area. We went over Dunkeld, Blairgowrie and Alyth, as it was to these last two places that an aircraft would be most likely drift. I was also shown Coupar Angus and Balbeggie.

During this first flight, the opportunity was also taken to teach me how to fly straight and level and execute turns, together with climbing and gliding turns.

The airfield level was about 370 feet (130 m) and about two miles to the east of it was a hill, some 750 feet (250 m) above sea level. It was not a real problem on the landing approach but I was always aware of its proximity. There was an even higher hill, King’s Seat (1230 ft - 400 m) only about two miles further north of it. The airfield was a large grass area and really like the top of mound, since, from anywhere around the edge, the other side could not be seen. Fifty years on and, from the map,

it now appears to have three runways in the form of a triangle. To get down on one of them would have been out of the question for me. I had enough trouble putting a Tiger Moth down on the large patch of grass. Landing was not my strong suit!

After about twenty minutes Sgt. Philpott asked me if I knew in which direction the airfield lay. Despite being behind him, I stupidly replied, “In that direction”, and tried to point the way, totally overlooking that my arm was going out, over the edge of the cockpit, into a 90 mph (about 140 kph) slip stream. The air pressure forced my arm backward and, for a moment I thought I had suffered a dislocated shoulder. I was definitely not impressing my tutor who was observing me in a mirror attached to one of the vertical struts near his cockpit.

It was a couple of days before I flew again and it must have been quite bumpy as again, I felt sick. When we landed and the Chief Flying Instructor heard about it, he called me in and recommended that, half an hour prior to future sorties, I should drink a” Tiger Shandy”.

This was a sedative mixture which was supplied, in bulk, by the Medical Officer to overcome conditions such as mine and quite a few people availed themselves of it. The cloudy liquid tasted of aniseed and was kept in a small urn in a corner of the crew room.

By the 31st, I had done 5 training flights and had made a start on ‘circuits and bumps’ - take offs and landings. However, once again the weather put paid to any further flying for a week. Such an interruption in learning a new skill cannot be very easily accommodated, thus, by the 7th of April, my training was almost back to square one. Never-the-less my instructor was anxious to press on and, in addition to the inevitable circuits, I also had to put the Tiger into half a dozen spins and practice the recovery drill. ‘Full opposite rudder - stick fully forward and slowly pull out of the resultant dive’. The patter is still with me!

Quite a lot of the training was from a satellite airfield, some six or seven miles (8 km) north of the main drome at Scone and about 4 miles (6 km) south west of Coupar Angus. It was called ‘Whitefield’s”, after the nearby hamlet. The morning detail flew from Scone but ended their training by landing at Whitefield’s. The afternoon detail were taken there, by crew coaches after an early lunch, and the coaches returned with the morning detail, for a late lunch and then ground school. Life at the satellite was a lot more relaxed than at the main airfield.

Once established in the flying programme, we were given a day off each week. I believe mine was a Friday since I seem to recall often flying on a Sunday. For these days off I secured a pass to return to St. Andrews. By missing the evening meal and scrounging a lift into Perth, I could catch a bus from there to St. Andrews, with only one change. As the Y.M.C.A was right opposite the flat of Mrs. Weiss, I had the assurance of a bed for the night and a stoke up on her cooking. In a word, I was ‘organised’.

I was badly caught out on one occasion. I flew from Whitefield’s back to the main base late in the day and, because it was not too cold, I had not bothered to wear my inner, kapok lined suit, woolly gloves or the fleece lined boots and just left it all at the

satellite. My best blue seemed OK and I wanted to make a quick get-away as the next day was a day off. I had nipped off to St. Andrews and returned direct to Scone, on a cold and frosty morning, still wearing my best blue, which was much thinner than my battle dress. I pulled on the outer of my flying kit and we took off. At a few thousand feet, in an open cockpit, it was extremely cold and I was aware of draughts which I had never before experienced. In shoes, my feet felt frozen and without the benefit of the woollen gloves inside my gauntlets, my fingers too were feeling the cold. After an hour or so we landed at Whitefield's. I decided to be more cautious in future.

During one of the stand-down periods quite a few of the students decided we had not had a swim since leaving London in late October and we started badgering one of the P.T. staff. After a while he came back to tell us that he could only take a party of NON-swimmers to the baths in Perth to give them swimming lessons. We suddenly forgot how to swim and went into town. At the end of the session the P.T.I. told us that it was the best exhibition of swimming and diving by non-swimmers, that it had ever been his privilege to see.

I remember that on St. David's Day Rouse, who was still with us, kept a leek inside his battledress blouse and nibbled at the leaves from time to time. The aroma was not welcomed. On another occasion, when he was on the other side of the field, he claimed he could hypnotise people and so he was put to the test. A "stooge" played along with him and, when the time came, he refused to 'wake up'. Rouse was persuaded to run round the perimeter to fetch some water. when this was not effective, he was then sent back and returned with many suggestions for rallying his 'patient'. Having done this double run in full flying kit including fleece-lined boots he was getting very hot and bothered, so it was broken to him that he had been the victim of a joke.

Of course, flying from Whitefield's, one tended to go north to keep away from other aircraft around Scone, and also, it was more likely that the aircraft would drift toward the Cairngorm Mountains. I think I mentioned earlier that, from St. Andrews, we had watched the snow line creep south at the approach of winter. Now, although it had receded somewhat, we could see the snow-covered hills quite clearly. Some 6 miles (9.5 km) North from Blairgowrie was a hill of 1400 ft (420m), another 6 miles and the snow peak was 2,000 ft (over 600 m) and 8 miles (13 km) further on, there was a good high peak of 3,000 ft (over 900 m). In other words, at circuit height of 1,000 ft, the snow-covered tops were, in the main, higher than the aircraft and, in flying time, about a quarter of an hour away. Even so they had their use, either as aiming points to visually keep the Tiger straight, or as reference points for turning of course after looking at the gyro-compass!!

Over the next few weeks most of the flying time was spent on 'circuit bashing', learning the different technique required for steep turns, some spinning, also incipient spinning and recovery. All the latter exercises were practised at heights of 5,000ft (about 1500 m) in order that there was plenty of room for any mistakes to be corrected, with or without the assistance of Sgt. Philpott, who, like me, wished to avoid making any disorganised contact with mother earth.

It was necessary to learn about incipient spins since they usually occurred as the result of making a turn at low speed, often on the final turn to land. Then the airflow over the inner wing (the one already pointing toward the ground) could drop below the stalling speed, with a spin resulting. This situation, if not recognised and speedily rectified, because of the lack of height, was often fatal. Thankfully I became quite adept at getting out of such a difficulty well before a full spin developed.

I liked doing steep turns in the Tiger Moth. There were crossed bracing wires in the centre section of the wings and they provided an accurate guide to the correct angle of bank. Of course, when an aircraft is almost on its side, the rudder controls pitch and the elevators become the rudder. Thus, to raise the nose, it is necessary to apply top rudder and to tighten the turn, it's a question of getting the stick well back. If a steep, level turn was maintained into a full circle, there was satisfying thump as one crossed the slipstream left a short time before.

We usually managed a 'funny five minutes' in each sortie when my instructor would do aerobatics or a bit of low flying. Occasionally he would let me have a go. On one occasion he did a "Bunt" and this I did not like! It started with an outside loop and on the dive, a half roll to put our heads on the outside again as we did a vertical circle, below the one we had just completed. The blood flow is the reverse of that experienced in a "Black out" situation when the blood drains away from the head.

We returned to Scone on one occasion after a bumpy trip and looked down at two blue/grey wriggling lines, about 50 yds (45m) apart, stretching across the airfield. My instructor said he had only experienced this situation once before and we watched a Tiger Moth land between the two rows of airmen. Toward the end of the landing run, several people dashed out and held on to the wing tips. Our approach was made into a very strong wind with the throttle well advanced, but even so, the ground speed was relatively low and before long, our aircraft too was held down by several airman. Later we discovered that because of a freshening and gusting wind, there had been a general recall but, because none of the Moths were fitted with radios, air traffic had fired off three white rockets (the accepted visual signal for land immediately). Unfortunately, we and several others had not seen any sign of them.

On the hill to the east of the main airfield, Sgt. Philpott once bounced the wheels a few times as he chased sheep! At the conclusion of one sortie from Whitefield's, he dived at the time-keeper's wooden hut. The young civilian lady who logged all the flying times and kept the authorisation sheets etc., heard us coming and, having looked up, rushed out of her hut thinking that we were going to crash into it. There was a flagpole next to the hut and I remember seeing the top of it not far off the wing tips as we pulled out and the lady looking up holding a handkerchief to her mouth. We later learned that she was screaming her head off!!

Quite early in our time at Whitefield's we had a scare and it was Rouse again. Taking off on the sortie after his familiarisation trip, he 'froze' on the controls. We watched as the Tiger Moth went, at full throttle with its tail quite high, almost the length of the field. Just when it seemed that it would crash through the hedge and into a haystack on the other side, the aircraft went into a vertical climb to about 1,000 ft (300 m), by which time it was all but stalling. At that point the nose dropped into the position for level flight. Afterwards we discovered that the instructor, in the front cockpit, had only

just succeeded in overpowering him on the control column and averting a disaster. One or two other instructors flew with Rouse but he clearly had no aptitude and left the station early.

Periodically during the course at No. 11, E.F.T.S, as at all schools, the progress of pupils was assessed by independent instructors, but we were never told what they thought of our efforts. If one was considered to be good enough, it was possible that a solo flight would be authorised after the second or third assessment. Due to the situation of the airfields from which we flew and the time of year, it was seldom that conditions were deemed to be suitable to permit pupils to go solo. After my final assessment, on Friday the 28th of April, Sgt. Philpott asked me if I had done the landing. When I said I had, he refused to believe me, adding, “You’ve never done a good landing in your life and that was a good one!”. He even went to Flight Sergeant Gray who had checked me out, who confirmed that I had told him the truth.

On that trip I had an ‘air miss whilst flying just below a layer of continuous cloud. I spotted a Hawker Hurricane fighter coming head-on toward us when I had the controls. I instinctively did a diving turn to port and the F / Sgt., in the front cockpit, said I had responded well. We both thought the Hurricane pilot had not seen us at any time.

Those of us who were leaving managed to get a night out with our instructors at “The Salutation” in Perth. This was quite a well-known hotel in those days and, often on New Years Eve, it is now the venue for a T.V. broadcast.

Postings were usually on Thursdays and it was the practice for those who had finished flying to be returned to the guard/fire picquet routine for the part of the week which remained. In my case, having regard to the time consuming ‘clearing’ procedures, it was only three or four days and then, with a load of kit, a leave pass and a railway warrant, I joined others who were heading south on indefinite leave.

This time we did not go over the Forth Bridge but entered the city of Edinburgh from the west. The railway journey to London took an age and it was well into the evening when the train reached Euston station. Once the two or three of us who were going to the Southampton - Bournemouth area had got across to Waterloo, it became obvious that there was no hope of catching a train until the early hours of the morning. The wooden benches in the concourse area provided a hard and noisy resting place. I suppose we might have dozed but sleep was out of the question. Somehow, we discovered that a suitable train would be leaving sometime about midnight and we found our way on to it. What we did not know was that we had boarded the ‘paper train’, which stopped at almost every station to deliver the newspapers. A function which seemed to require an excessive amount of shouting at each stop, followed by inordinately jerky starts.

Still without much sleep I reached Bournemouth as dawn broke and changed onto a local train for Wimborne, where I walked into home for breakfast. The journey from Flying School to East Boro had taken approximately twenty-three hours!

Chapter Five

HEATON PARK

Just Waiting -

After a couple of weeks on leave, the recall telegram arrived and, from it, I learned that I would be expected at Heaton Park in Manchester during the last week in May. It was probably about Tuesday the 23rd of May, but the precise date is irrelevant.

Heaton Park was officially called a “Holding Unit” or “Transit Camp”. It was mainly for aircrew trainees, who were ultimately destined to be shipped off to the U.S.A., Canada, Rhodesia or South Africa, which countries were involved in the Empire Air Training Scheme. This arrangement existed to train aircrew in a variety of categories, under more amenable conditions than could be expected in the U.K. Abroad the weather was more reliable, the airspace was far less crowded, certainly devoid of hostile aircraft and virtually ‘peacetime’ conditions existed.

The rationale behind the choice of this locality was its relative proximity to Liverpool and also the rail connection between Manchester and Greenock, another departure points for outward bound convoys of ships.

Heaton Park was a large open space, situated about 4 miles north of the city centre of Manchester, to which it was connected by electric train into the Victoria station. In some respects, it was something like Poole Park, in that it had a tree lined central drive. However, there were several notable differences.

It was very much larger, being in the order of a mile square but the lake in it was small by comparison with the boating lake at Poole, since it was probably not as large as a school playing field I have no recollection of seeing any geese, ducks or sea birds such as those at Poole on the water and certainly no boats, but it may be that it is my memory which is faulty rather than the absence of bird life.

Not all that distance from the lake was a bandstand in a bowl-like depression and, in this general area, we dined in a fairly substantial, low rise, building. The sleeping accommodation was in widely dispersed Nissen huts and I was allocated to a space in one to the right of the main drive and only a couple of hundred yards (say 200 m), from the entrance opposite Heaton Park railway station.

Within the boundaries of the park was a house, ‘Heaton Hall’, although, for some reason, I was never curious enough to go and have a good look at it. I have since discovered that the Hall was built toward the end of the 18th century, for Sir Thomas Egerton who became the first Earl of Wilton. The architect for the building was James Wyatt and it is in the Neo-classical style after Robert Adam. The house was sold to Manchester Corporation in 1902 and it is now a museum, although I believe it still contains a two manual organ.

My first morning in the park was quite traumatic. I was awakened by the noise of intermittent machine gun fire, which came progressively closer. Having spent the previous three weeks on the south coast, I was very aware that ‘hit and run’ raids could occur thus I took the precaution of rolling off my bed and getting under it. The rattling went along the side of the hut where, until a few moments before, I had been sleeping. It was only when the rest of the lads in the hut awoke, with much cursing, that I discovered this was the standard way of waking the camp. Due to the dispersed nature of the place and the absence of a Tannoy system, each morning some of the guards were dispatched on bicycles to rouse everyone. This they did by cycling past the various sites and dragging a piece of wood along the corrugations of each Nissan hut. So much for my machine gun attack!!

There were few, if any, duties and I did none at all during my stay in the place. Nominally there were gate guards but, since they were kindred spirits drawn from those who were marking time, they were quite adept at turning blind eyes to any airmen with white flashes in their caps, who might pass through the gates in either direction. Should there be any difficulty, an alternative existed. Off to one side of the gate opposite the station, was some electricity or telephone switch gear, tight against the boundary wall. This provided a useful way of scaling the wall and the wear on the top of the wall caused by the scratching of countless brass buttons, was ample proof of the amount of traffic which used this route! The return trip was assisted by a street lamp standard at the back edge of the footpath.

Some of the trainees who appeared to be likely to remain at Heaton Park for longer than the average time, were given work to do in connection with the running of the place. They were usually men held over on medical grounds or awaiting their re-allocation to training courses in other Air Force trades, within the U.K. This is how I came to meet up again with Alf Bramson, with whom I had shared a room at St. Andrews. He had been considered to be suitable for training as a Navigator and had been posted direct to Manchester. I found him wandering around on a day off from his duties in the butchery section of the airmen's kitchens. It may be remembered that he was a Jew and thus it must have been a great trial to him as daily he carried about various carcasses, some of which his religion classed as “unclean”.

I am not sure how, but I later discovered that his former employers, a firm of undertakers in the Dollis Hill area of North London, had negotiated for him to be released from the Royal Air Force. This seems to have occurred shortly after we had met in Heaton Park. Perhaps he was being held in Manchester purely to await his discharge. Some years later, I noticed in the London phone book that the initials in front of his name had changed, and I suspect that he must have died. If so, he could not have reached a very great age.

After a few days at the unit, probably on Saturday the 27th, with some others, I went to try out the delights of Manchester. We wound up in a cinema where we saw Claude Raines in “The Phantom of the Opera” and later we found some food at the Y.M.C.A. in Peter Street. The latter was in a fine building where I was surprised to find a swimming pool at a floor above ground level. The next day we decided to go a little further afield and see what the famous so-called Pleasure Garden at Belle Vue had to offer. The only strong recollection I have is of a ride on the ‘Big Dipper’, a scenic railway of some complexity. After the slow ride to the highest point, the pullout

from the subsequent dive caused one or two of us to ‘grey out’. This we had experienced before whilst doing aerobatics at flying school but it was strange to do so when, to all intents and purposes, at ground level.

The pivotal point of life at Heaton Park seemed to be the bandstand which, as I mentioned earlier, was in a bowl-like depression. It was here that we mustered for almost all activities.

Heaton Park Bandstand

The two most important were for a daily ritual roll-call and to learn of the postings for the day. Both were conducted with very strict discipline, from the bandstand, by the senior Flight Sergeant known to all as “Bandstand Joe”. Apart from long winded instructions on all sorts of things related to life within the park, he read out apparently endless lists of postings. These consisted of venues, dates, times and, above all airmen’s names and numbers, not necessarily in that order. ‘Joe’ was disliked by almost all the airmen and, he was sometimes outmanoeuvred and overpowered by a mass of them and then thrown into the lake, shortly prior to their final departure, A fate which most thought he richly deserved.

Keeping so many airmen occupied for long periods of time must have been quite a headache. We did a little bit of drill and the occasional run in the park, but nothing too strenuous and, among so many others, avoiding either was not all that difficult. However, the favourite activity for both the staff and their reluctant charges was the cinema. There it was usually quite warm and sleep came easily.

Heaton Park cinema, was a civilian enterprise close to the railway station and almost opposite the main gates. It was taken over by the R.A.F. each day, until required for the entertainment of the public of the locality. Groups were paraded across the road to the cinema twice daily to see films supplied by the Forces Cinematograph Unit, which apparently had only limited stocks of 35 mm titles. For our edification we had a diet of films on gold mining and venereal disease. Why this peculiar mixture, I have no idea.

Heaton Park cinema

The easy access to the centre of Manchester and the availability of potentially unclean female company, might just have had a bearing on the choice of part of the programmes. Certainly, at the end of our stay at Heaton Park, we had become quite knowledgeable on both subjects but without practical experience of either - at least in my case. Perversely I found the V.D. films which were shown to us on most stations, to be to my advantage, since the graphic way the matter was treated, usually meant that some of those with weaker stomachs (or did they have cause for concern?), would go off their food and I could then have some extra grub.

On the next weekend, the 4th of June, I decided to be a little more venturesome and try to reach the Legge family at Diggle, which I vaguely thought to be to the east of Manchester. My notional map was not too accurate! From the city centre I caught a tram or trolley or something and got as far as the Hollinwood area on the way to Oldham. A public house in this locality had the odd name of “Pity the Poor Struggler”, which was singularly apt because the licensee was Albert Pierpoint, who was for many years in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, the country’s official executioner. Since I was unsure how far I still had to go to reach my destination, I turned back. I now know that my method of travel and, to some extent, my direction, was wrong, had I used the railway, I might have been successful, as a lot later, I discovered that my relatives lived close to Diggle station.

If one was going outside Manchester, it was a good idea to let a friend have a telephone number, to be contacted should the need of a recall arise. I know of one person who went from Heaton Park, home to Leicester for several days, on that basis and of others who stayed in other places, from which they could make a quick return to the park. All of them without any official passes.

There are occasions in one’s life which are for ever associated with world or personal events and, in consequence, become almost ‘frozen in time’. One such occurred for me whilst at Heaton Park, in the cinema on the morning of the 6th of June 1944. One of the usual films was stopped and the house and stage lights came on, to allow the Station Commander, a Group Captain we hardly knew existed, to come onto the stage. When we had all sat down, he said something like this,” Gentlemen, I have to tell you that, in the early hours of this morning, the invasion of Europe began. Up to the moment all is going well but I have no great detail which I can give you. Doubtless, from now on you will keep yourselves up-to-date with the progress of the invasion by listening to radio bulletins and reading newspapers”. With that, he nodded, we stood up again. He just seemed to melt away and we never saw him again. The films were abandoned and we were left discussing the likely implications of this event on our future aircrew aspirations.

With the passage of time, it was inevitable that my name would turn up among the lists of names read out by Bandstand Joe, and I discovered I was shortly to go off to London. This was not unexpected, since we had learned that, other than those with outstanding pilot potential, we were all to undergo fresh aptitude tests. These would be similar to those the majority of us had taken, about a year and half previously, at the time we had been accepted for aircrew training.

This was to be a further weeding out process, in an effort to ease the pressure on the training programme caused by the lower-than-expected casualty rate and the adverse weather. It was expected that those who were deemed to be less suitable for aircrew training would then be diverted into other R.A.F. trades, to one of the other services, or to the mining industry, which was short of labour.

So, in service parlance, on Wednesday the 14th of June 1944, we headed for ‘The Smoke’, as London was known.

Chapter Six

‘ARCY DARCY’ ENCORE.

The invasion had been in progress for just a few days and, from the newspaper and radio reports, it was going well. Never-the-less it did not seem to be a good idea to be heading for London. On the one hand, I was looking forward to re-taking the selection tests which I had enjoyed late in 1942 and, in addition, I would be an awful lot closer to home than I had been throughout my service career to date. However, Adolf Hitler had made constant references to “secret weapons” still to be unleashed against the Allies in general and the U.K in particular. Thus, we all entertained slight reservations about going to the capital, since that would seem to be a likely target for anything Adolf cared to throw across The Channel.

Several of us experienced deja vu, since, after reporting at Lords Cricket Ground with the rest of the party from Manchester, later on the Wednesday, we were marched up Prince Albert Road. We went to the basement of Viceroy Court, where I had previously dined and there had a meal. After it, we went on our way again, round the corner to the same block of flats I had left some six months earlier. This time I was in a room on the third floor with a large, south-facing picture window.

Within a day or so, I had phoned to my distant cousin by marriage - Sybil Collier who was a typist at Shell Mex House. This white building on the Thames, near to Somerset House had been taken over during the war for Naval Administration purposes. Having re-established contact, I was quickly able to, once again, organise myself some evening visits to The Collier family, in South London.

Of course, the weather in the metropolis was substantially different to what we had experienced the previous October and we were no longer ‘sprogs but airmen with a modest experience of service life. Because the tests were mainly held at Lords Cricket Ground we were marched back and forth from our billets. The temperature was high, the roads were hot and we did not enjoy pounding the tarmac surfaces. As time went by, this problem was compounded by a lack of clean clothing to replace the perspiration-soaked shirts, underclothes and socks. We did not dare send anything for laundering, since no one seemed prepared to indicate the duration of our stay. From memory, ‘shirt sleeve order’ was not acceptable for our appearances in public, so we literally had to ‘sweat it out’ in battle dress.

As forecast, the tests were a re-run of earlier ones. However, there was the possibility of now being sent to the Army to fly gliders or to go down the mines. Neither of these options appealed to me and fortunately I escaped either. Our tests were interspersed with a few martial activities, which, I believe, included marching around in gas masks. Not an enjoyable business in the heat! The opportunity was also taken to give all of us another once over by the Medics and this was followed up by a series of booster inoculations.

However, during the six months away, I had made a major gain in self-assurance and I had more confidence in getting around London. So, about every three days, I made my way, firstly by bus to the station and then by underground train, from Baker Street to Streatham, for a few hours with the Collier family.

During the night of Thursday, the 15 /16th of June, we were all awakened at approximately 1 am, by a substantial amount of gunfire. This was followed very quickly by whistle blasts, the signal to go to the basement of the building as danger was deemed to be imminent.

This I declined to do and stayed in my bottom bunk for a short while, but I heard someone coming. I realised it would probably be an N.C.O. checking that no one was left behind, so I rolled out of my bottom bunk and hid underneath it, conveniently screened by a blanket.

Once he had gone, I crept back into bed, only to be roused by an awful racket of gunfire and I looked out to see an aircraft, apparently on fire, coming almost straight for the window and then going over the building.

Very shortly after, there was a terrific bang and I decided that the machine had crashed a little further to the north.When I had looked out, I had seen that there seemed to be a lot of anti-aircraft fire and I heard one or two other aircraft but stayed in my bed until the others returned to the room.

V.1

Next morning there was some discussion about the aircraft that had been brought down during the night. Anthony Needham, a chap with whom I had become friendly, had been outside on guard during the night. He had witnessed the whole incident and it was his opinion that the crash had occurred at Swiss Cottage, about half a mile (0.8 km) away from us. This was later proved to be true and the evening papers carried reports that ‘pilotless planes’ had attacked London. The ones which fell on London that night, were not the first to land on the U.K. A few trial V.1s had fallen a day or so earlier to the East of London. I believe the first was in the Gravesend / Dartford area, at 0415 on the 13th. However, I feel that we witnessed the start of Hitler’s much vaunted, full scale, ‘terror weapon’ attack on the capital.

I have wondered since, whether Hitler realised that the date chosen for his intensive attack with V.1s on London, was the same date that Magna Carta was sealed by King John in 1215 - both auspicious days in British history!

For the rest of our stay in London, we grew used to these - flying bombs, buzz-bombs, doodle bugs - they had lots of names The noise they produced as the flew along, at a height of two or three thousand feet, was quite distinctive but, since the propulsion unit was a pulse jet, it is not surprising that it resembled the noise of a motor cycle. At a preset distance from the launch ramp the elevator was deflected to cause the machine to suddenly dive. The rapid change in trim made the motor cut out and, since the V.1 had virtually no gliding capability, it was a matter of 5 - 15 seconds before it hit the ground.

On Saturday the 17th June, or it may have been the following day, I was in Oxford Circus and, after hearing a doodle-bug, I then saw it to the south and decided I was in no danger, as the engine was still going. Many people who could see &/or hear it, were not so sure and I was surprised at their panic to get into the underground station. A few seconds later, the engine cut out, there was the usual loud bang, and they all came out again. This particular bomb landed in the Bayswater area.

About this time, although certainly not at a weekend, I was detailed for a fire picquet duty at Wingfield House in Regent's Park.The impressive title was again merely a 'cover' for a cleaning squad! Currently it was occupied by the Group Captain in charge of A.C.R.C. but, in more peaceful times, it had been the residence of the American Ambassador, i.e. The Kennedy family, from whom, ultimately, emerged a President of the United States - John Kennedy. I was most impressed by the opulence of the place. Even the bath taps were gold plated!

Wingfield House

After our tests, attempts were made to keep us occupied and slowly the results of our re-assessments became known. Eventually it emerged that I was regarded as a potential navigator. I was still mad keen and, knowing that the training was quite lengthy, I felt that the war would end before I qualified. I found that an appeal might be possible via the Welfare Officer and secured an interview with him at Lords. It was a surprise to find that the Squadron Leader with whom I was negotiating was Wally Hammond the cricketer. Thinking about it later, I knew it could hardly have been by accident that he was at the home of First-Class cricket. After he had heard my argument, he said he would try to help and would call me in again.

Since we were accommodated in the same block of flats as some of us had occupied the previous autumn, we were aware of the use to which the premises opposite was put. However, it seemed to us that the number of callers had declined and this led to several hypotheses. Some thought that perhaps a number of the girls were away on their 'summer holidays'. Others had the idea of the clients in the autumn needing to be indoors, whereas in the heat of the summer they were happy to indulge themselves, in the fresh air, with whatever company they could secure. I suspect that the real reason for the reduced attendance at the brothel, was due to the patrons being engaged on the other side of The Channel, trying to establish a bridgehead into Europe.

I imagine that there were a lot of postings to arrange and we were all sent off on Friday the 22nd of June for 10 days leave. Toward the end of it, it was decided that my girlfriend Peg would accompany me to London on Saturday the 1st of July and that we would have a weekend with the Collier family. There were still a lot of V.1s about and the nights were quite noisy. We parted after tea on the Sunday and I returned to my billet off The Avenue, to the rear of Viceroy Court. Next day I was back in front of Squadron Leader Hammond. On the same day, Monday the 3rd, Peg went back to Wimborne.

From the conversation, it appeared that since our last meeting, the Squadron Leader had discovered the tests had established I was suitable for re-training as a Flight Engineer, which was my apparent aptitude after navigator. Discussions with the

assessment board had confirmed their agreement but, he enquired, whether I was willing to accept a significant change from the Pilot, Navigator, Bomb Aimer (PNB) Scheme, under which I had enlisted. As this seemed a good way of qualifying for flying duties before the end of hostilities and I was still mad or keen, or a bit of both, I willingly gave consent for the wheels to be put in motion.

A day or so later we were all assembled in Regent's Park for an Inspection by the Group Captain. Rows of Air Force blue all looked very impressive but as the Inspecting Officer arrived, a buzz-bomb was heard in the distance. Like many on the parade, I was uncertain as to what to do. However, when the engine cut, I heard a shout of "Break", which I suspect came from the ranks and not from anyone in authority, and we all rushed for cover or laid down on the grass until we heard the explosion. The inspection never took place. By the time we had all been re-assembled it was lunch time, and the rest of the parade was abandoned.

Next day some of us wandered around getting the necessary signatures on our clearance certificates, prior to leaving London. As far as I recall, we were taken by lorries to Paddington railway station on Thursday the 6th of July. It is just possible, although unlikely, that we marched there and it was only our kit which was mechanised.

However it happened, a lot of us were shoved onto a train which headed west and, with a few others, I found myself destined for Tetbury in Gloucestershire and, in particular, to an airfield at 'Babdown Farm' to the west of the town.

Chapter Seven

BABDOWN FARM

Ad Astra "to the stars". Again -

It was a relief to leave London on the 6th or 7th of July, since it was still hot and, at times, quite noisy. Once the train got into the southern part of the Cotswolds, life was really looking good, particularly as we were once again heading for real aeroplanes. despite having spent some time flying Tiger Moths, it had been decreed that we should have further ‘air experience’. To that end, those identified in London as potential Flight Engineers were despatched to airfields in the heart of England, and thus they left the train in small parties all along its route.

The little market town of Tetbury, clustered around the spire of the church, was the nearest civilisation to our ultimate destination. As one wag put it, the most exciting entertainment for the natives was probably watching the bacon slicing machine at work. From the town, transport took us two or three miles to the west to the airfield called Babdown Farm.

There, a hut was found for us on the north side of the road, almost opposite the gate to the flying side of the station. The exact number escapes me but there were only 10 or 12 of us in the hut and we felt quite a select little group.

Babdown Farm was No. 12 Pilots Advanced Flying Unit (12 PAFU for short), and the purpose of this sort of unit was to provide recently qualified pilots with the opportunity to fly aircraft which were heavier and faster than those on which they had been trained, before progressing to multi-engined aircraft.

After the usual business of doing the ‘arrival’ rounds, there was no time for any further activity that day. The next morning, we were given a chat from this it emerged that we were to remain at the airfield for a week and expected to use initiative to fly as often as possible.

The aircraft were only over the road and the pilots had been told to take us with them, at their discretion. When we flew, we were supposed to log engine conditions and, in general, make ourselves useful.

The planes at our disposal were Airspeed Oxfords, they had a wing span of 50 odd feet and a length of 35 feet and were powered by two Bristol Cheetah radial engines. They could fly level at a speed approaching 200 m.p.h. although, on one occasion when I was flying, we got one up to about 240 m.p.h. by diving it. However, from memory, normal cruising was something less than 60% of that ‘hair-raising’ speed!

These aircraft, which had an all-up weight of approximately 8,000 lbs (3,600 kg) were of wooden construction which meant that they were not too difficult to repair and also, they could absorb quite a lot of the punishment dished out by relatively inexperienced pilots. Strange as it seems, the planes I was about to fly, were the direct descendent of the Airspeed Courier into which I had clambered some ten years earlier, when on holiday at Portsmouth.

Airspeed Oxford

My first flight was a cross- country trip of about an hour, on the 8th of July. Most of the flights were short exercises of this type, usually triangular in pattern and some 50 - 60 miles (say 90 km) for each leg. I flew several times on that first day, the last trip was a short air-test. I think those of us who had flown before were all beginning to enjoy ourselves. Certainly, I did not need any sedative like the “Tiger Shandy” mixture which I had used at flying school - perhaps I was calmed by the size of the larger aircraft! Some of those among us were direct entry engineers who had come, via London, straight from a special Initial Training Wing for Flight Engineers. This provided the sort of foundation for them that No. 12 I.T.W. at St. Andrews had done for us P.N.B.s. These lads had not yet got off the ground and I’m afraid we were quick to ‘Lord it’ over them, until they were sick of the phrase,” When I was at flying school.....”, which seemed to intrude on quite a few conversations.

One person with whom I became quite friendly, was a Leslie Robertshaw, who came from the Charminster area of Bournemouth. We flew together once or twice and, on the next two stations were in the same hut. We parted company when he finally qualified as a Flight Engineer on Lancasters. One of our efforts was to ‘cook’ our engine logs by making them up in the crew room. To achieve this, we periodically kicked the table to simulate bumpy conditions.

Every day of that week seems to blur into the next. I tried to find friendly pilots who were intending to fly on their own because, in that case I knew I would get the right-hand seat and probably be able to do some of the flying. In any case, although the trips were relatively short, the pilots were always glad of a hand with map reading and navigation. Rather than attempt to deal with any flight in detail, I will try to recapture the atmosphere of the week by recounting some of the more interesting bits, although not necessarily in chronological sequence.

The airfield was just that, a very large field with no concrete runways, although there were clearly defined take-off and landing strips. These roughly conformed with the normal service pattern; the main one being aligned in the direction from which the wind most frequently blew. I’m not sure of the exact figures but I think the Oxford took off and landed at about 60 mph (approx. 95 km) and the initial rate of climb was between 900 and 1000 feet (275 & 300m) per minute. Quite quickly after take-off, the ground dropped sharply away, so that, with only a slight climbing angle, the aircraft was at a respectable height as it crossed the aptly named town of Wooton-under-Edge. Further away by some 15/20 miles (24/32 km), at the other side of the River Severn, was the carpet of trees which formed the Forest of Dean. Towns in the

area with which we became familiar through flying over or near them were the cathedral cities of Hereford, and Gloucester, Ross-on-Wye, and Cheltenham. The two cathedrals were quite a sight from above and reminded me of the Three Choirs Festival which was held, annually in rotation, at these venues and at Worcester.

Mention of the River Severn reminds me of a ploy which was used for finding our base. Once the river had been spotted, it was only necessary to follow it until overhead the large loop near Westbury-on- Severn. From that point, by steering 120 degrees for about 10 minutes, the airfield was in sight.

I have already referred to going up on an air test. These short trips were usually undertaken to make sure that everything was in working order prior to night flying. The sorties always included some stalls, which were telegraphed well in advance by violent shaking of the aircraft. The vibration and noise were quite something but, when the nose of the 'Ox Box' finally dropped, it was a fairly gentle action. However, a spin in the Oxford was something to be avoided. I understood that the nose down attitude, combined with a vicious rotating motion made recovery difficult and, should it become necessary, abandoning the aircraft was virtually impossible.

The aircraft was not difficult to fly, and I enjoyed handling it on straight forward cross-country sorties although I never tried a take-off or landing. The Oxford had some vices but they were minimal as befitted a training aircraft. A dropping wing could easily be picked up on the spectacle type of control column (this was like half of the steering wheel on a motor vehicle). The days of flying with one finger on a short 'stick', as we had done in the Tiger Moths were behind us. On one trip we passed behind a Stirling bomber, which was at the same height and I was surprised at the sudden bumps and lurches from the turbulence it left behind.

One day, another aircraft from Babdown, probably doing the same navigation exercise, formatted on us. We were less than amused when it closed up to the point where our wing tips overlapped and we were eyeball to eyeball about 25 yards (just under 25m) apart. A few very explicit hand signals, succinctly conveyed our wish that its pilot should cease this unsafe practice and go away. Eventually he complied and we felt safer.

Before being allowed to go solo at night, the pilots were accompanied by an instructor for several flights and preceding those, the two had made a lot of so-called 'Day/Night' circuits and landings. For these, in broad daylight, a flare path of sodium lights was laid out along the landing run in use and the student wore a pair of special, almost opaque darkened goggles, whilst the instructor did not. The latter, for whom it was normal daylight, was the safety pilot, who made sure that his charge did not fly into other aircraft or get himself into any trouble. For the student it was 'night' since all he could see was the line of sodium lights and the instrument panel which was also lit with a sodium lamp.

Due to their relative inexperience, we were not allowed to fly when the pilots were doing night solos but I did several night cross country flights on what were known as 'Beacon Bashing' trips. Then an instructor or second pilot, also flew in the right-hand seat. In wartime, the whole country was blacked out and, apart from the occasional flarepath surrounded by a 'Drem Circle'. There were also other lights such as those

on airfields which, in morse code, flashed out two identification letters. Usually a triangular course was flown, with specific beacons as turning points, the others had to be ignored. It was like flying in a black void, with brief glimpses of the stars but only the beacons for guidance. Hence the name of the exercise.

To avoid being mistaken for enemy aircraft, there were recognised challenges and replies which changed every few hours. These could be in the form of lamp signals by morse or by pyrotechnics, usually of a changing colour. When the time came, the cartridge in the signal pistol was changed, to ensure a speedy and correct response if challenged.

In the main, the airfield circuit was controlled by lamps rather than radio. When ready for take-off, the aircraft code letter was flashed on the identification lamp. A steady green light, beamed by the 'Duty Pilot' from his caravan near the point where the take-off run commenced and aimed at the aircraft, was enough to send each on its way in turn. Much the same thing happened on return. One joined the circuit and, keeping a good lookout for other aircraft, repeatedly flashed the aircraft letter, in morse, on the downward identification lamp. Eventually this produced an answering green light from the Duty Pilot giving a clearance to land.

One night coming in to land I saw a red light go by and later realised it was the hazard light on the spire of Tetbury Church. Not only must we have been way off of the correct line but also low on the glide path, since the rule of thumb is 500 feet and a mile from touch-down.

Another night, after landing and taxying to the dispersal point, we discovered that it was not there! The truth then dawned. From above, the Drem Circles of Babdown and Kemble were very close together and we had chosen to land in the wrong place. A quick return was made to the take-off point and away we went back to our home field. Afterwards there was speculation about the thoughts of the Duty Pilot there, who would have logged an extra "G" both landing and taking off again, without ever knowing from where or to where!

After landing, usually in the early hours, we went off with the rest of the crews to the airmen's mess-it was only worth keeping one lot of kitchen staff awake. There, flyers and ground staff, helped themselves from the hot plate to suppers of fried eggs, bacon, fried bread, toast etc - the sort of fare now referred to by hotels as an English breakfast. Fifty years on, I still find that smell evocative of those night flying suppers.

One evening we were told that fog was expected to form in the early hours of the morning but, if landing proved difficult to fly round until the morning, as there was more than enough fuel to do so. We got in without seeing any fog. Next morning we noticed that one of the aircraft - "M" - was missing and enquiries disclosed the fact that it had flown into the escarpment during the night, with fatal consequences. It must be assumed that caught by the fog, the lure of bacon and eggs overcame the briefed advice to fly round until daylight. Since then, I have often used this incident since then, to illustrate the wisdom of doing what one is told.

The daylight flights were much more interesting but not without their 'stimulating' moments. For example - low over Leighton Buzzard and, remembering that

Whipsnade Zoo was not too far away, wondering if there were still lions in the park, should it become necessary to put down there. Approaching Droitwich relatively low and uncertain of the height of the masts at this major radio transmitting station. Running into cloud after being briefed for a low-level flight up across Wales. I advocated trying to climb over it rather than risk going under it. I had seen the posters which illustrated that clouds could have ‘hard centres’ and there was plenty of potential for those among the mountains of Wales. That cloud was getting on for 12,000 feet (approx. 3,500 m) thick and we flew through heavy rain, hail and goodness knows what. Eventually, when we came out into the glorious sunshine above all the murk, the aircraft was so covered by ice that we could barely see out. I always feel that breaking out from clouds into the sunshine is one of the magic moments of flying.

On another occasion, I felt ill in flight but was not sick. However, I admitted it during the landing run and the pilot stopped before turning off toward the dispersal, so that I could nip out and “throw Up”.

Another incident could have had a really sticky end. Coming back towards Babdown, we heard a loud bang in the fore part of the aircraft and an investigation established that an air pressure pipe had fractured. This meant that we had lost the use of the wheel brakes. A very long and low approach was decided upon and we crept in over the boundary and touched down immediately. The landing was no different from normal but the aircraft just kept going and fortunately ran out of speed before reaching the far end of the airfield. There we just waited to be towed in.

I was quite sad when it all came to an end. I had certainly crammed an awful lot into my time at Babdown, both in terms of flying and above all, experience.

We left Tetbury on about Monday or Tuesday, the 17th or 18th of July and went by train, first to Bristol and then on to Weston-Super-Mare. We were picked up by transport and taken just outside the town, to No.5 School of Technical Training at R.A.F. Locking, there to begin our training to become Flight Engineers.

Chapter Eight

L O C K I N G

A Change of Direction

With the rest of the little group of budding airmen from Tetbury, I made way by train through Bristol to Weston-Super-Mare, on the way being reunited with others whom I had previously met in London or even earlier. One such was a chap called Taylor who was a bit of wag.

He had been to another Advanced Flying Unit and had travelled by a different route to Bristol. He maintained that, since the train had travelled through Old Sodbury and then Chipping Sodbury he had expected the next station would have been 'Sodding Something or Other'. After a road trip, from Weston, of about 2 miles (say 3 km) we reached R.A.F. Locking, or to quote its official designation, "No. 5 School of Technical Training". From that point onward and for many months to come, our designation also changed. We were no longer u/t. P.N.B.s, and, with the rest, I became u/t. Flt. Eng. (u/t = Under Training & Flt. Eng. = Flight Engineer.)

The accommodation was different to that which I had experienced on R.A.F. Stations up to that time. This was mainly because Locking was designed as an R.A.F, training camp and all my previous units, even Flying School had taken over existing civilian accommodation.


Historic England Archive: EAW002969

We were put into huts which were linked, on the ends, by corridors. Similar huts some yards away, were linked in an identical fashion. Between the two long corridors were short passages and, more importantly, toilet and ablution blocks, drying rooms etc. The kitchens, dining rooms, N.A.A.F.I, stores etc., were not far away. In fact, after the marching around at London and St. Andrews, not to mention living in small rooms and the isolated huts at Perth and Heaton Park, it all seemed relatively compact. To one side was a parade ground, beyond which were the H.Q. buildings and the domestic accommodation of the permanent staff. On the opposite side of our huts and not all that distant from them, were the large hangar/workshops in which we were to spend most of our working time whilst at Locking. That period was expected to be something in the order of twelve weeks, with a few days break about half way through the course.

The first working parade each day took place on the parade ground, under the eagle eye of the Station Warrant Officer by the name of Silvester. To say that he was not liked, would be an under-statement, which, in some ways was quite surprising since his brother was well known to all of us. The latter was Victor Silvester, the band leader. It was to his strict tempo music that practically everyone learned to dance during the 1940s, and post war for about another couple of decades. W.O. Silvester was roughed up several times under cover of the blackout, by trainees during, when

they came across him in Weston for an evening out. Victor, as befitted a dance band leader and an expert on Ballroom Dancing, was, on the other hand, a suave chap

Since he is the only member of the staff about whom I can remember anything, it must be assumed that the remainder of the training staff of Junior and Senior N.C. O's, must have been an unremarkable bunch!

After the morning roll call, we were marched off, by flights, to work in the hangars. The whole parade being led by a Trumpet Band. This interested me greatly, since it was obvious that the band was comprised of trainees and I had been considered to be a very good drummer when in the band of the A.T.C., prior to joining up. I quickly discovered that the band practised on one night each week and when I went to the band room, a few minutes demonstration was enough to secure a position in the band.


Historic England Archive: EAW002965

The duties were far from onerous and there were some 'perks. Apart from playing the trainees to work each day, including Saturday, we also had to play for Church Parade on alternate weekends. On the other Sundays they were led by the station Brass Band. Both bands enjoyed the privilege of a 48 hours pass when not required on the station, which was not a lot of good to those of us in the trumpet band, since we had to work until lunch time on every Saturday. Never-the-less, one always got to work late and always with the same excuse, i.e. "...had to take my instrument back to the band room."

The more important 'perk' was being excused all guards, fire picquets and hut orderly duties, which meant no chores and no sleep lost on account of night guard duties. One bandsman was required each night to act as librarian to sit and guard the books, which meant giving up two hours or so for an evening about once every two or three weeks (There was between 12 and 20 in the band). In fact, from that time onwards, I have no recollection of ever doing another guard duty whilst in the service!!

The huts in which we were accommodated were fairly densely occupied. The hut I was in held was something in the order of 38 trainees and there might have been as many as 40 of us. This number was made possible by the use of four sets of bunk beds, one in each corner of the hut. Initially I was in the lower of one of these, but the chap above me was an over-bearing Lancastrian or Yorkshireman, who, I believe was called Binns. Not only did he smoke but he also liked his ale came in late and the worse for wear, which annoyed me greatly. I quickly arranged for one of his friends to take over my bunk and got some people to move around, so that I could have a bed space in the centre of the room.

The person in charge of the hut was Bill Potts, who, I seem to recall, hailed from Bristol. He was very tall and was a serving Corporal tradesman who was re-mustering for aircrew duties. The person occupying the next bed to mine in my new position, was Tiny Needham whose home was in the City of Leicester. We had first met after he had been on guard duty in London, the night the flying bombs first arrived. We became very good friends for the duration of our training and, as is the way of things, we parted company when we qualified and have not seen or heard from each other since.

Among those in the hut was Vaughan, who was quite a character. He had somehow volunteered his way out of the merchant navy into aircrew. Another was Ounsworth, a very swarthy airman who had a 'Mediterranean' appearance. 'Titch' Taylor, who I have already mentioned, kept us amused. Of the others, those I remember were Payton, Pryke, who I think came from the Bournemouth area, Scudamore, Habberfield, Hudson, Richardson a Londoner, Nightingale, Gough, Harris and Canneaux who had the other double bunk with Bill Potts.

Canneaux, was a Londoner, who had volunteered for aircrew duties as being a way of escaping, for a while, from the Metropolitan Police. It was only by volunteering for the armed services in a "Hairy" capacity, i.e. as Aircrew, Commando, Glider Pilot, etc, that policemen could gain release from their Reserved Occupation. I thought we always called him 'Bert', but I now believe that it was 'Ken'. He rejoined the police force in London on leaving the service and I met him again, as a copper, cycling into Boscombe Police station one Saturday late in 1947, after he had transferred to the then Bournemouth Police. He retired as an Inspector or Chief Inspector and we renewed acquaintance in 1991, at the funeral of a mutual friend, who had volunteered his way out of the Hampshire Police, to join the S.A.S. We even managed to recall the names of some of those with whom we had shared a hut nearly fifty years earlier and in particular we talked of Tiny Needham and Bill Potts.

In the hut there was a mix of people like me, re-mustered from P.N.B. training, direct entry u/t Engineers, also a sprinkling of other airmen who had re-mustered from various trades. Some of this mix of trainees from assorted backgrounds, quickly discovered the economic advantage which came from drinking the "scrumpy" or rough cider which could be obtained quite cheaply, from a pub in the nearest village of Banwell. Sometimes the revellers returned with signs they had collected on their return journeys and these were stored for a while under beds, until they were collected by the R.A.F. Police and returned to the Local Authority. Station Standing Orders indicated the displeasure of the C.O. at such practices, but I do not remember any disciplinary action being taken.

However, those returning late sometimes fell foul of the service police who, not only patrolled the perimeter of the site, but had also fixed up trip wires. These had tin cans attached to them at intervals, so that they jangled together to alert the S. Ps to the location where belated trainees were coming in through the fence.

As I have mentioned, the training course was about twelve weeks in duration and it consisted of the basics of both the engine and flight mechanics' courses held elsewhere. It was divided into fortnightly 'phases', which each week, to a large extent, alternated between two types of equipment that we would be likely to

experience. The entry was divided, for instruction by Corporals, into groups of 8 or 10 men. Each week, usually on a Saturday morning, we were checked out by being questioned by one of the other instructors and failure meant being re-flighted, with the consequent parting from friends.

Initially we were told about airframe construction, right through from simple ‘Warren Girder’ types to stressed skin fabrications. This was followed by instruction on undercarriages, various types of control mechanisms (the pros and cons of wires, tubes and hydraulics). The part that I did not like was having to try to remember the colour coding wrapped, at intervals, round every pipe in an aircraft, in order to identify its contents - i.e. like the colour coding of the small cartridge fuses, now in use in electrical plugs

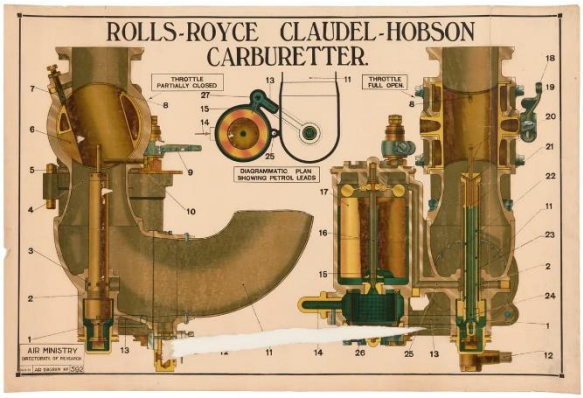
Bristol Beaufighter

Quite early in our time at Locking, we became aware that aircraft were being built in a factory down a lane opposite the camp. From time to time a partially completed Bristol Beaufighter would be towed down the main road toward Weston. The bits missing were the wings, outboard of the engine nacelles. At the airfield, which was just outside the town, the final assembly took place and a test pilot flew them to check them out before being handed over for war service. It became obvious that, during his flight, the test pilot always did an almost vertical dive over the factory. During our stay at Locking, we discovered that he held the view that, if anything went wrong when he was flying their aircraft, he would take with him some of those who had done shoddy production work.

It can be imagined that in such a crowded hut as ours, there was a diversity of tastes in music. Somehow, we had acquired a radio and it blared away unceasingly from ‘reveille’ until ‘lights out’ at any time there was anyone in the hut. Apart from the news broadcasts for which we relied on the B.B.C. the set was normally tuned, (I assume by majority consent) to the American Forces Network. As far as I am aware, this service did not begin transmitting in earnest, at least in the U.K., until the invasion in June. In consequence, we heard a lot of Glenn Miller’s, the Shaw Brothers’, Harry James’ and Stan Kenton’s standards, such as “On the sunny side of the street”, “Dearly beloved”, “I’ll walk alone”, etc. This latter piece of music was played at lunch time, at the same time, every day, for months. I’m not sure that this didn’t become a unique achievement.

After a fortnight, we moved to Phase B and learned of the four-stroke firing cycle, we were also told how to, and then were permitted to, strip and re-assemble an engine and all the bits and pieces which made it function. In addition, we had to be au fait with oil and coolant systems. At the end of the fortnight, they even let us hand start with the propeller, engines identical to the ones we had dealt with at flying school, although it was a new experience for the direct entry chaps. However, it must be said

that these practice engines were mounted on mobile frames and were not the ones on which we had been doing the stripping and re-assembling.!!



A month into the course and it was time to get to grips, first with the innards of magnetos and the following week with carburettors. First of all, we made the acquaintance of simple examples of both of these engine attachments. A few days later, we began stripping, adjusting and re-assembling, large and quite complicated magnetos. This was followed by learning about the drilled passages, jets and actuating capsule stacks within ‘S.U.’ and Claudel-Hobson carburettors.

I’ve already mentioned that Anthony (Tiny) Needham slept in the bed next to mine and we became very good friends. He was getting on for 6ft 4ins (1.9 m) tall and, since he had a tendency to slide down in bed when asleep, he turned his bed around so that his feet were against the wall. This was contrary to the rest of us, who all had our heads near the wall. It was possibly through being tall and easily noticed but Tiny quite frequently found himself in trouble and confined to camp. That in itself was not the punishment.

“Jankers” meant reporting at the Guard Room in full marching order. That is in best blue, full webbing, big pack with the steel helmet strapped to it etc. This had to be done the first thing in the morning, lunch time, after tea and again at ten o’clock at night. Being ‘on defaulters’ left very little time for personal use, especially as, in the evening such people were put to cleaning grease caked baking tins in the cookhouse and similar unsavoury jobs.

Tiny was a very sound sleeper and being late attracted several extra days of Jankers, so, to avoid that I used to wake him up, often dress him and usually take him to the door and point him in the general direction of the Guard Room.

It might help in visualising the picture, if it is remembered that I was known to a lot of people as “Titch” against his nickname of “Tiny”. This had something to do with the fact that I was in the order of 10 inches (25 cms) shorter than my friend. Thus, when he had got into his full kit, the steel helmet strapped to his big pack was about level with my face.

Phase D dealt with the construction, use and vagaries of all the various instruments with which pilots, flight engineers and navigators are confronted and, from which, they are expected to interpret the attitude, health and location of an aircraft. The electrical systems within a typical aircraft were also laid bare before us. We had to know everything from the alternators and generators on the engines to the control units, batteries, lights, bomb selecting gear and the supply to the radio etc.

Instruction on various hydraulic systems was the main purpose of the next phase. We were introduced to the pumps, reservoirs, selectors and the actuating jacks for retractable undercarriages, flaps, bomb doors etc and all the pipe work circuits which

joined them. Again, there were two basic types. The Dowty system with quite an extensive idling circuit and the Messier system. This latter relied on reservoirs of air being compressed by the movement of a surface in one direction, to move it the other way, when required. This is best visualised by thinking of a wheel being retracted under the action of a pump but lowered, once the retaining hydraulic lock is released, by being forced down, against the slipstream, by the air which was compressed at the time of retraction. At this time too, we learned about the pneumatic system which was principally used for braking.

All the foregoing, and indeed, all the practical training, was interspersed with theoretical training in classrooms. Here, over many weeks, we learned about Ohms Law, the Otto 4-stroke cycle, magnetos, carburation and the theory of superchargers, hydraulic and pneumatic 'gearing' etc. There were also lectures on air publications, cycles of servicing, fuel logging, theory of flight, even navigation (which was dead easy for some of us) and the inevitable practical exercises covering morse, gas, first aid, aircraft recognition, ground defence etc. There were also periods of drill, P.T, sport etc. Altogether, there was no doubt that we were kept pretty busy.

The summer was a very hot one and, for the first month or two of the courses, the weather was good. We were invited to help the local farmer with his haymaking and I found it quite a laugh. The 'townies' were no good with their pitchforks and were usually left with a few strands of hay clinging to the prongs. Of course, I knew the trick of heaping the hay and putting in a twist, before lifting quite a lot at one time. They were quite embarrassed when 'the swede-basher', as I was sometimes called, managed to show them up.

From the outset, some of the lads went into Weston Saturdays and endeavoured to 'pick up' girls who had come to the town for a week's holiday. If they were lucky the 'poor airmen' met them on Sunday and in the evenings during the week, when the young ladies paid for their company. The following Saturday the couples would bid each other fond farewells and, as soon as the train had departed, the crafty lads would wait to see what sort of luck the next arriving train would bring them.

At the weekend, I usually went into Weston-Super-Mare on at least one of the days. Several of us used to go off with our swimming kit and enjoy both the sun and the opportunity of a swim in the open-air square pool on the front, which, somewhat unusually, had a shallow side which sloped to zero. There we made the acquaintance of several young ladies, one of whom wore a white swim suit and was quite snooty. Whilst the others joined us in the water from time to time, she would not do so and we formed the opinion that she was afraid of the water. After several abortive attempts to get her into the pool, it was decided that she should be thrown into the deep end. I was in the water when this was carried out but she struggled toward the shallow side and, as she walked out, with the water level receding, first down her

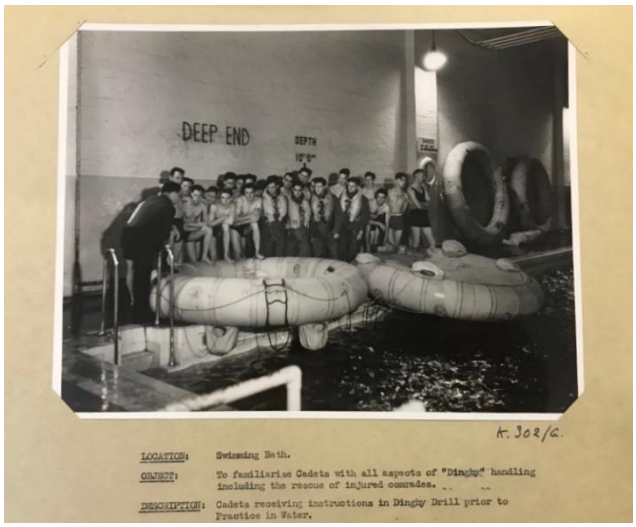
body, then her legs, the reason for her reluctance to immerse herself, was obvious. The white costume, possibly made of parachute nylon, had become virtually transparent. We were all highly delighted!

The rail journey from camp to home and back again was almost impossible. The route was Weston - Bristol (change) - Southampton -(change) - Bournemouth (change) - Wimborne. The reverse trip on a Sunday had to begin at Bournemouth. Some months later, when travelling from South Wales, I modified this procedure, which saved valuable time.

Since it was not very easy to get home from Locking when leaving at lunchtime on Saturday and be back by midnight on Sunday, I arranged to go to the home of Freda Rutter, at Chard, who was a schoolgirl chum of my girl back home. The distance, in the order of 45 miles (about 75 km), was achieved by bus to Weston and train or hitch-hiking to Taunton, followed by hitch-hiking the rest of the way. I was lucky on most occasions but once had a very difficult time on the road and in the dark from just outside Taunton. I think I probably misjudged the effect of altering the clocks. Freda's folks always made me welcome and I enjoyed home cooking and comforts for a few hours.

With the extremes of tide experienced in the Bristol Channel, bathing in the sea was out of the question. From time to time, in place of P.T. we were taken into Weston, to the indoor pool at the North end of the promenade, which, I believe, was called the Knightstone Baths. Here we often swam without clothes and did the bit of dinghy drill which justified the trip.

Knightstone Baths.



On the weekends when I stayed on camp, I often went into town on the Sunday to the Congregational Church and began talking to a very pleasant young lady. The services were conducted in the Boulevard Methodist Church which the two denominations were sharing.

The Pastor always invited me home and I always declined. When I knew I was going to be posted, I told the Pastor and he invited me to meet his daughter. That's right! She was the young lady who had been chatting to me over the weeks. Years later, the pastor turned up at the Wimborne Congregational Church for an anniversary service. He had become the Moderator of the Wessex Province but there was no opportunity of referring to our earlier meetings or to enquire concerning the fortunes of his daughter.

I made an attempt to hitch-hike home across country on Saturday the16th of September but I only got as far as the town of Frome before it got too dark to continue. Fortunately, I discovered that I could get a bed in the outhouses of the vicarage and that is where I spent the night. I have no recollection of how or where I found any food, just that next day, I made my way back again to R.A.F. Locking.

It was there that I learned first of all about the airborne attack on Arnhem and that in my absence, a glider, full of troops had crashed nearby with no survivors. It was understood that the bodies had been brought to the camp. It was only when I went home a week or two later that I discovered that one of the casualties was Eric Sheppard, one of two cousins, both of whom were in my form all through the Grammar School. Since his 'official' age at the time was 21, he must have put his age on in order to enlist. His is one of the names recorded on the Second World War Memorial Tablet, now in the hall of the Queen Elizabeth's School at Pamphill.

Horsa Glider preparing for take off

Eric was a Sapper in the R. Es in a Horsa glider, which was part of the Airborne Force which dropped at Arnhem in Holland. It had been towed off from RAF Keevil near Trowbridge and it crashed into the Mendip Hills. This particular Horsa was one which had been modified to enable it to carry a gun, its towing vehicle, its crew and other personnel Once on the ground, explosive bolts could be detonated so that the whole of the tail fell away to allow the artillery unit to go rapidly into action. It is thought that, for some reason, the bolts were activated in flight and the loss of the tail unit would have made it impossible for the glider to be controlled, leading to a crash. The pilots and all the passengers perished and they were interred at Weston - super - Mare.

By now we were into the second half of our course at Locking and coming to grips with the intricacies of propellers. As we had experienced earlier, there were two types with which we had to become familiar. The theoretical facts had been laid out in classrooms, where we had discovered that each blade could be revolved in its housing. To achieve this, one of two types of mechanical device, mounted in the hub, were used. Either device was operated by a Constant Speed Unit (known as a C.S.U.), which sought to cause the propeller and thus the engine to which it was attached, to rotate, within limits, at a constant speed, regardless of the load imposed upon them. One of the current popular songs pushed out by the hut radio was, "I'll be seeing you". The next line was, "In all the old familiar places" and some wag had already paraphrased the words to, "I'll be C.S.U. In all the constant speeding ranges". I am now not able to recall any of the other words.

Within two weeks I knew about Hydro-matic propellers, the blades of which were rotated by high pressure oil supplied, to the hub through the hollow drive shaft from the engine. Also, the Electric propeller, which contained an electric motor in the hub, power being supplied via slip rings. The direction of the power was controlled by the engine driven C.S.U, inside of which were two weights. These revolved in the fashion of the governor balls, designed by Sir James Clerk-Maxwell for steam engines. When the set speed was exceeded, the weights tended fly outward, pulling

up a spindle-valve and this allowed oil or electricity (as the case may be) to change the angle of the blade to the airflow to a coarser angle. which had the effect of slowing the engine rotation. If the engine should under speed, the weights feel inward and the move of the spindle-valve downward, caused the blades to be rotated in order to strike the air at a finer angle. We further discovered that if an engine failed or needed to be stopped for some reason, the C.S.U. could be used to rotate the propeller blades in their housings, into line with the direction flight, i.e. the propeller was “feathered” in order to cause less drag.

The last month was the time when, in Phases G &H, most of what we had been told, was brought together and we came face to face with big engines. During a fortnight each, on an in-line and then a radial engine, we learned to strip into quite small parts both the Merlin and Hercules engines. We also took apart the ancillary bits attached to them, viz Magnetos, Carburettors, C.S. Us, starter motors, various pumps and electrical generating equipment. As earlier, we did not run up the practice engines. However, this time we were allowed to do ground running on actual aircraft. Old Hurricane fighters were used for Merlin runs and a twin engined Beaufighter for the running of the large radial engine.

The Merlin had 12 cylinders in two rows of six in the form a letter ‘V’. It was not square in section but was in the order of 3ft x 3ft (1m x 1m) and was 6 or 7 ft long (say 2 m). Depending how old it was, the engine developed at least 1,200 horse power. The Hercules was a 14-cylinder radial engine of approximately 5ft (say 1.5m) diameter, with the cylinders staggered in two rows of 7. It produced a minimum of 1500 horse power. The Merlin was liquid cooled whereas the Hercules was air cooled. The individual cylinders were surrounded by cooling fins that resembled those seen on motor cycles but of course the ‘pots’ were very much larger.

The noise and vibration when starting these engines for the first time, was quite startling. This was followed, after a warm up period, by varying the propeller settings, carrying out all the ground tests checking the instruments and finally pushing the throttle lever well up the quadrant and snapping it back to slow running, before shutting down. It all gave one a real sense of power and a taste of things to come, when, in a heavy bomber, everything would be quadrupled.

After prolonged face to face questioning by a Sergeant and Flight Sergeant on any and all aspects of the course and also written examinations on the classroom material, I came well up on the list of those who had passed. Finally, I handed in my drum and was sent off home for a week’s leave and the rest of the entry also went their respective ways.

F. E’s DUTIES

1. Responsible for all technical matters relating to the aircraft, other than the radio operator’s position and the interior of the turrets.
2. Checklists and cross check pilot’s response - if one is necessary.
3. Weight and Balance information – fuel and bomb load.
4. Recognition of malfunction, log snags and awareness of a/c maintenance status.

5. Attention to F/E panel and pilot's panel using systematic scan pattern.
6. F/E pre-flight walk round and post flight walk round, following engine shut down.
7. Weight and Balance paper among last pieces of paper in civilian aircraft.
8. Take off = V2 + 10k & + 10k only till 3,000 feet (Noise abatement)

RAF Locking sept 1946 N5
Training school dad third row in

Chapter Nine

ST. ATHAN

Common Construction

During October, after spending about a week on leave in Wimborne, I set off for my first visit to Wales. Of course, from Weston-Super-Mare, on good days, the coast of the Principality in the Cardiff to Barry area, had been visible across the waters of the Bristol Channel but I was about to achieve another boyhood ambition. To get to Wales by rail, I had to go via The Severn Tunnel which had been bored during the years 1873 - 1886, by the Great Western Railway, to speed both passenger and coal traffic from the valleys to London and the South East of England. It also was a connecting link between Cardiff and Bristol, which are relatively close together - if the intervening water is disregarded. Prior to the construction of the tunnel, both road and rail traffic was routed through the City of Gloucester. The first road bridge across the estuary was not built until the early 1960s.

Thus, it was that within approximately a year, the R.A.F. had enabled me to see three ‘railway wonders’ which, as a country bumpkin, I might never have experienced.

To make the trip from home it was necessary to change trains at Brockenhurst, Southampton, Bristol, and Cardiff. On the journey I had met up with some of the lads from Locking and there were many more waiting at Cardiff. The last change was on to a local ‘flier’, which seemed to operate mainly between Cardiff and Bridgend. At that stage in the war, few places looked particularly attractive as a result of the attentions of the German Air Force. The town and docks of Barry, some 6 or 7 miles (about 10 km) from Cardiff, looked depressing in the extreme. A few stations later, the train stopped at Gileston and the trainee Flight Engineers piled out.

We looked for transport to take us to the R.A.F. station - there was none! Some brave soul decided to phone the Guard Room and, after getting ‘a flea in his ear’, he came back to tell us that we were expected to hoof it! The distance was getting on for 0.75 of a mile (about l km), which may not be considered to be too great, but it was up a long shallow gradient and we were in full marching order with full kit bags as well. A ‘crocodile’ of dispirited airmen set off, passed through the little hamlet of St. Athan, where I believe the pub was called “The Ring of Bells”, or something similar and we eventually got to the main gate.

To say that St. Athan was a sprawling station would be a major understatement. We had already heard that it was the largest R.A.F. camp in the world and, from the outset, we were prepared to believe it to be true, since the whole complex was served by three railway stations, the other two being Boverton and Llantwitt Major.

The choice of arrival station was dictated by the particular part of the base one wished to reach. Our posting was to the so-called West Camp, devoted, in the main, to No. 4 School of Technical Training but it also housed a Radio School and a school for P.T. Instructors. Elsewhere, there was a full-blown airfield, two Maintenance Units (M.U.) and a large hospital, not to mention an extensive “Married Patch”, containing properties of different quality, in which were accommodated the families of prewar serving Officers, N.C. O’s and Airmen.

To be accurate, we did not even enter the main gate but were shunted off to the opposite side of the road by which we had approached, to an area which contained the Officers’ and Sergeants’ Messes, an R.A.F. Hospital and “O Lines”, which is where we were to be accommodated. This proved to be huts in a similar form to those at Locking but the pattern extended over a wider area.

At that stage of the war, each weekly entry was comprised of approximately 120 trainees. who, with failures, drop-outs etc., could be expected to be reduced to about 100 Flight Engineers by the time they reached their Passing Out Parade. In our case, the latter event was thought likely to be some five to six months after our arrival and I was thinking, “Wow - A Sergeant by my Birthday! “

After a day of carrying out the ritual arrival processes, the next morning we marched away from our accommodation, across the road and through the main gate, for the working parade on the Drill Square. It was vast! - and indeed, it had to be large, to provide space for all the to attend the Colour Hoisting. For me, the major point of interest was the Band - very similar to Locking.

Within a few hours, I had located the Band Room, discovered the evening for practice and in a day or so, I was in it. In service parlance, I was ‘organised’ and from then on, it was a re-run of R.A.F. Locking. I was excused all duties but required to play, once a fortnight for a Sunday Church Parade, and that was the way it stayed for the whole of my time as an airman at St. Athan. As on my previous station, I was always late for training and, in addition, I had part of every Thursday afternoon off, since the Band always played for the weekly Passing Out Parade.

As I had some knowledge of drum music, I eventually became a sort of reserve drummer for the station brass band and I used to play for some practices.

Not all that far away from St. Athan was an industrial complex with two very tall chimneys, which appeared to continuously discharge white smoke. Each day our lockers were covered with a thin layer of white powder which we discovered was cement dust. This was a nuisance for the whole of our stay in the area, since the stuff provided absolute evidence concerning our domestic cleanliness. I have often wondered about the long-term effect on the health of the local population, of the dust associated with the cement works.

The training set-up was much the same as on my former station, except that now the weekly ‘phases’ covered all aspects of the work of a Flight Engineer and the aircraft they were expected to crew. The course was in two sections the first of which covered most types of heavy aircraft that we might be expected to meet and the second part was specifically termed “Type Training”.

Phase 1 brought us face to face with the Hercules XI radial engines which we had previously met over in Locking. However, now there was not so much emphasis on taking them to pieces but a great deal more on their operational limitations. Also, we learned a lot about superchargers and carburettors and in particular about ‘Economic Cruising Conditions’. i.e. How to get more air miles from each gallon of fuel.

We next went on to learn about the Halifax airframe and also took in Instrument layouts, the Fuel System (there were seven tanks in each of the main planes), The Flight Engineers Instrument Panel, Control runs and some Air Publications (the books that set out everything one needs to know and do about everything). The following week the Halifax hydraulic system (Designed by Messier) was dealt with in some detail and all the various procedures for coping with difficult situations, were explained and demonstrated on special, fully operational rigs.

We were housed outside the main gate of the camp for a few weeks, although nominally in No. 4 Wing, (I was in hut O 23), since, as we had experienced already, there were further delays in the flow of crews to operational squadrons. Eventually the qualified Flight Engineers from previous entries moved on and our entry was moved into “H” lines and I went into hut H 10. These huts were in the layout to which we had now grown accustomed, but on an even larger scale. The advantage was that we had a lot less distance to march to and from work, twice each way and every day!

I have mentioned that there were two Maintenance Units and these were on the other side of the airfield to the area in which we were principally involved. One M.U. was concerned with the refurbishment of Merlin engines which not only had to be tested but bench run for many hours before being declared fit to be returned for installation in an airframe. Thus, particularly at night time, there was an intrusive drone from one or more engines. Another test was to run the engines at progressively higher boost pressures for a half an hour, at each level, until the maximum continuous boost pressure level was reached. During any test, an engine

could fail. If this occurred at night time it was not unusual for the whole hut of sleeping men, to disturb in response to the sudden change in noise level.

By now my feet were getting itchy and I wanted to get back to Dorset for an hour of two but as there was no chance of getting a pass for that distance, there was nothing for it except to take a chance. After all, I could see Somerset across the water on a clear day, so home did not seem to be that far. We worked until lunch time on Saturdays and then there was a mad rush for Gileston station, although we were not supposed to go further than Newport.

I forget how much I paid for the return fare to Wimborne; the important figure was the 1 shilling and eight pence (just under 10p) I paid for the return ticket to Cardiff. After the first journey home I usually managed to do the round trip for only 10p!!

There was no way of avoiding buying a ticket at Gileston, but at Cardiff, if one stayed on the same platform, the through train to Brighton via Salisbury and Southampton could be boarded without any bother. At Salisbury I had two options. The first was to leave the station by one of several unsupervised exits without handing in a ticket (I hadn't got one anyway) and then hitch-hiking home - not easy at night. The alternative was to cross the lines and hop on to a train which went through Wimborne and eventually to Bournemouth but this meant getting a ticket or lengthy and sometimes unacceptable explanations at Wimborne.

The return journey to South Wales was even more tortuous and certainly not without its hazards. As there were no trains from Wimborne on a Sunday, I had to go to Bournemouth by bus, usually accompanied by my parents. I took my hat off and slipped my father's winter overcoat over my uniform to avoid being spotted by the Service Police who patrolled the station. Once on the train, which usually left at about 3-30 pm, I passed father's coat back to him through the window and hoped for the best. At Southampton it was again a matter of only changing platforms to join a Brighton/Bristol train. Once there, with an increasing number of people who were all going to the same place, I hung around on the same platform for a train to Cardiff, which could be expected to depart about 10 pm.

Thus, sometime round about midnight, the Cardiff platform was alive with airmen. It had been discovered that the carriages for Gileston were parked up the line away from the station, so we made our way along the tracks, climbed into the waiting carriages and went to sleep on the seats. We usually disturbed when an engine was coupled on at about 4.30 in the morning ready for its official departure at 5 am. Once Gileston was reached, great efforts were made to rouse the sleepy airmen and, in the cold, we made our way through the waking St. Athan village, to West Camp. There was time to wash and shave before breakfast and then it was a matter of getting through the colour hoisting parade and on to lectures or whatever the training programme for the day suggested we should do.

I believe most of the instructors realised that they need put very little effort into teaching us on Monday mornings, I know I've dozed many times whilst leaning against an engine, some other resting place or, better still, during a training film.

As I said earlier, I've no recollection of the full return fare from St. Athan to Wimborne but, to do the trip for 10p was quite a bargain, despite only being in town for about sixteen hours.

Even then, my folks could not understand why, when I came home, I spent so little time asleep. My reason was that I could sleep on trains instead.

When I did not come home, I went with some of the others the 6 or 7 miles (about 10 km) to Barry or further away, to Cardiff on Saturday afternoons. There was not a lot of sense in going on Sundays since, in those days, most towns in Wales virtually shut down and, although it did not worry me, even the pubs went 'dry'. In order to get a drink, some of the lads in the camp went to Newport, about 10 miles (16 km) north-east of Cardiff, where a peculiar situation existed. The pubs nearer to England kept Sunday licensing hours, whereas those toward the Cardiff side did not open all day.

We were warned to be very cautious as to the company we kept in Cardiff and, in particular to keep away from the Tiger Bay area of the city and not even to attempt to go down Bute Street. Apparently, the men were quite capable of beating one up in order to steal valuables and the ladies were considered likely to pass on a social disease, to any male who became too friendly with them. It was a very tough location indeed, which even the civil and military police patrolled in twos and threes. Purely by chance a little group of us accidentally strayed a short distance into this area and I remember being apprehensive at the looks we were getting from the occupants of this very run down and mean area. Now the situation is very different, Bute Street is quite respectable and the slums of Tiger Bay have been flattened. Diana and I drove round the area in about 1980 and discovered some quite pleasant properties were in there.

Our training course continued with details of the electrical systems one might find in multi-engined aircraft, where the power input might come from three generators and, to a separate circuit, from an alternator, each of the sources being driven by one of the four engines. Once again, problems and solutions were demonstrated and then we were left to sort them out on live rigs. Also, we were given detailed information on Instruments, including their construction and possible failure, for a variety of reasons, to be perfectly accurate.

The following week we got some further instruction on propellers and, at last, we got our hands on the throttle and propeller levers of large four-engined aircraft, but - not until we had spent some time on simulators On these, we were faced for the first time, with a multiplicity of instruments which quickly became rationalised when considered in groups of four, one for each engine, covering pressures temperatures, etc. Of course, the Engineer's panel contained a lot more instruments. The largest number being the contents gauges for the several fuel tanks in the wings.

These simulators were really electro/mechanical wonders and it is a pity but I know of none that have survived. In essence they were the fuselage of a real aircraft, forward of the main spar. The cockpit and the area rearward to the centre section was left intact, but, in front of the pilot's position, the covering of one side was taken off for access to the equipment.

Then everything that could be removed from the inside of the nose was taken out and replaced by a mass of small electric motors, worm drives, variable resistances and a great deal of electric wiring. There was much cross-wiring of inputs which affected others. The aircraft engine controls and all the instruments, were modified to work electrically in relation to this mechanical / analogue source.

There were a large number of these simulators and, during the course we spent time on all of them. Thus, I became familiar with the simulators and procedures relevant to the R.A.F. Stirling, Lancaster and Halifax, also the American Fortress and Liberator. There were even single examples of the R.A.F. Sunderland and the U.S. Catalina. At one time I desperately wanted to get on to the Sunderland and then one day I discovered that part of the Engineer's kit was a supply of leak stoppers. These were issued in case it was necessary for him to check that the hull was watertight prior to putting down on the sea back at base, if the aircraft had been shot up whilst on patrol. I lost some interest, although I suppose it would have been no more traumatic than a landing with a defective undercarriage.

Once we had been cleared, we were allowed to start and run radial engines, do all the checks and we were presented with several faults to identify. An old Stirling Bomber was kept for this purpose and I had one or two battles trying to sort out deliberately induced engine snags. On one occasion, I'd got everything running when I looked down to see a huge red glow below my feet. I though a fire had started, shut down rapidly and quit the aircraft in a great hurry. When the engines stopped, the 'fire' went out but I had not waited to find this out. On the ground it was pointed out to me that some idiot had fully turned on all the red lights in the navigator's and wireless operator's positions and these had given me the impression of a fire as soon as the generators had come 'on-line'. Red lights were the only illumination allowed internally at night and, even then the dimmers were turned down so that the lighting was extremely subdued. Reliance was placed very much on the luminosity of the aircraft instruments.

As time went by, we were introduced to Aircraft Handbooks, the Periodic Inspection Cycle, the Form 700, Aircraft Manuals, etc. As far as we were concerned, the important extract from the Aircraft Manual was the small booklet "Pilots and Flight Engineer's Notes", which, in respect of the Halifax was "A.P. (Air Publication) No. 1719 C", but more of this book later.

The manuals ran to several volumes and were in the main, workshop guides, very much as car manuals are today. However, they were extremely detailed and subject to so many amendments (usually as a result of experience) that they required the attention of special, technically trained airmen/airwomen to keep them up-to-date.

The Form 700 was virtually the" Medical Record" of an individual aircraft and was, in fact a book of many pages. It contained the servicing record, from Daily Inspections right through to Major Inspections, for the latter, the aircraft was taken over by Maintenance Units (M.U) where the engines and airframe were stripped right down to basics. The Form recorded fuel and oil inputs, Flying Hours, Armament replenishment, all the faults in any of the equipment and, more importantly, the details of rectifications. Entries had to be initialled and countersigned by a competent supervising N.C.O. and, finally by the Flight Sergeant who was in charge of

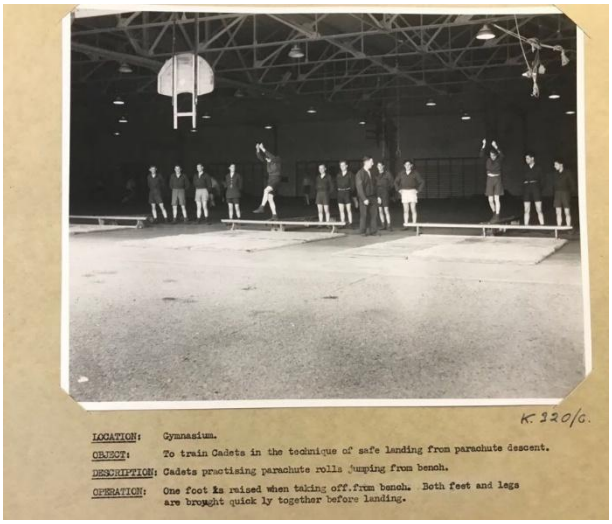
servicing, when he was satisfied that the machine was fit to fly. At that point, the Flight Engineer checked through the pages to confirm that everything was in order, did his own checks and passed his opinion to his pilot. Once the captain of the aircraft was happy, he signed the form and, from then on, the safety of the machine and its crew were his responsibility.

Against the background of technical training, we continued the so-called general service training of foot drill, shooting with all sorts of weapons, lobbing hand grenades, bayonet fighting, assault courses, anti-gas training, First Aid, P.T. and swimming (The station had its own swimming pool).

With regard to the latter, after free swimming, we went on to do dinghy drill, and were ultimately required to jump off the top diving board (18 ft - 5.5m), in full flying kit, including the fleece lined boots. Inevitably one hit the bottom of the pool and, so encumbered, had to swim to the surface. When we were adept at that, it was a question of swimming a length and then righting an upturned large rubber dinghy. We were taught to bear down on the C02 inflation bottle to lever the dinghy up to a vertical position, then rotate it and push it away from us, so that it was the right way up. We then had to get into it and it is not easy to climb from water level over the smooth surface of the 0.5 m diameter tube. The final test was to do the whole thing, still in full flying kit, in 1.5 minutes from leaving the board to being seated in the dinghy. The reason for the speed was based on the assumption that when “Ditched” in the sea, the American built Liberator bomber was not expected to float for much longer than that time. However, it was known that British aircraft, due to their different construction, could usually be relied upon to stay on the surface for somewhat longer, particularly if the recommended ditching procedure had been followed by the pilot, i.e. attempting to drag the tail of the aircraft through the sea before finally stalling it onto the water.

Clearly, another aspect of survival was the ability to make a successful descent from a disabled aircraft. To that end we undertook parachute drills of various sorts. At first it was jumping off low forms onto mats and executing rolls, i.e. forward right, forward left and the same going backwards. The ideal being to minimise the shock of landing by rolling so that the side of the foot, ankle, knee, thigh, hip, and shoulder progressively hit the ground. The arms were deemed to be above one’s head controlling the direction of travel, by using the web straps to do a sort of side-slip.

Once we had got the hang of that, the exercises were repeated but this time from tables onto mats. Later, we did further falls from trapezes, pressing the quick release box to land on the mats and finally we had to leap onto grass, from bomb trolleys which were towed behind vehicles.



There was one other parachute training game which the P.T. Instructors dreamed up but, as far as I know, no trainee was ever made to do. At St. Athan, in common with many R.A.F. Stations, there was a tall, brick-built water tower and, to this, a wire was attached about 30 or 40 ft (9 - 12m) above the ground. This was anchored some distance away on the far side of sand pit similar to a long jump landing area. A trolley was mounted on the cable, from which we were supposed to hang, as it rapidly ran down the wire. When over the landing area, we were supposed to let go and do the rolls we had been taught. Just to make sure we let go, a stop was bolted to the wire at about the right place. However, we argued that it was extremely dangerous (or words to that effect!) but agreed to do it if the instructors would test it out.

The first one came rapidly down, hit the stop, shot off in a very disorganised fashion and landed in a crumpled heap in the sandpit. When he was picked up, it was decided that he had probably broken a leg and this diagnosis was confirmed when the ambulance arrived to cart him away to the hospital. As a result, the experiment was abandoned and trainees were never required to plummet down this aerial ropeway. Modified versions of this sort of ropeway are sometimes seen in children's play areas but the gradient is very flat.

Another one of the 'joys' of training was the Decompression Chamber which, I hasten to add, I managed to avoid. About six or eight trainees at a time were sealed into this chamber with a supervisor and the air was extracted until the nominal altitude was in the order of 18,000 ft (about 5,500m). Others in the detail could look in through portholes.

Headsets and oxygen masks were worn, but one at a time, the oxygen to each trainee was disconnected and eventually he passed out. Whereupon, his supply was re-connected. Each trainee was given a task such as, "Count backwards from 100" or "Write out 'Mary had a little lamb' etc.". Without oxygen their efficiency declined rapidly and, when they were reconnected, they were surprised to learn of their lapses whilst under the effects of anoxia.

It was a useful exercise for Flight Engineers, who, were frequently required to move around the aircraft. If they had been flying for over an hour at 10,000 ft. (approx. 3,000m) and had to come off the aircraft oxygen supply, the use of a portable oxygen cylinder, which would last about 30 minutes, was mandatory.

Armaments was another area with which we were required to have more than a passing interest. Some of us had already developed a degree of expertise in the stripping and assembly of the Browning machine gun. At St. Athan, particularly for the direct entry Flight Engineers, this ability was hammered home. All of us were also given an insight into the different types of bombs with which me might come into

contact. The heights, trajectories and effects were all set out for us. One of the junior instructors was also the drummer in the station band and another instructor was a Sergeant who had been on the stage with Ivor Novello and he used to amuse us by putting on the air of Captain Blyth of The Mutiny on the Bounty.
A lot of the armament instruction took place in a large hangar -like building which was also used for physical training. In the evenings the smooth floor was available to all ranks and sometimes families, for roller skating. Adjoining and to one side of this building was the station church and to the other side, the station cinema. This was a well-appointed place with raked and upholstered seating and all the trimmings of a civilian cinema. The films were quite up-to-date and, occasionally the place was used for other forms of entertainment. I well remember a concert by the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra when the soloist was Joan Hammond, a soprano of some repute, who, after the war, returned to South Africa. The programme included Borodin's Polovtsian Dances, Elgar's Enigma Variations, and Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. Both Tiny Needham and I enjoyed the evening of classical music, which contrasted sharply with the dross usually pumped out by the hut radio.

Whilst all this was going on, we were also continuing to be force fed on technical information. The last part of the course seemed to concentrate on the other main heavy aircraft used by Bomber Command, the Lancaster (by this time in the war, the first four engined bomber, the Stirling, was considered to be getting past its intended role as a bomber).

In phase seven we were re-introduced to the Merlin 12 cylinder in line engine, but this time we had to get to grips with the Mark XX. Of course, a lot of it was similar to what we had learned at Locking but this time, very little emphasis was placed on stripping it. However, the operational limitations of the engine were dinned into us and, in particular the supercharger and carburettors had to be mastered. The oil and cooling systems of the engine had to be learned by heart. All this effort was necessary, since, at that stage no one knew who was destined for service in the Lancaster or other aircraft which might be powered by these engines.

The following week we had again to return our minds to the Dowty hydraulic system, in which the pipe lines were pressurised continuously, although there was an idling circuit for the fluid until it was needed to move one of the jacks. We also studied the extensive electrical circuits, which, as in the Halifax were powered by three generators and an alternator, one from each engine.

Then it was a case of acquiring as much information as possible on the Lancaster airframe, the layout of the wiring and pipework etc. Once again, the highlight was the engine running, which took place on real aircraft although we were again vetted on the simulators which I have already described. Thus, in our time at St. Athan, we were given hands on experience in the three main heavy aircraft used by the R.A.F, and we had become proficient, albeit in simulated form, in the handling of other aircraft, including the American heavies.

Once again, I did not get home for Christmas, or even for the New Year, mainly because of the poor weather, combined with the fact that our course was expected to end fairly early in January.

My main recollection of the Christmas dinner is of the usual queue at the hot plate and, in particular of one WAAF standing at the servery asking each airman as he came by, “Do you want stuffing?”. She was at the receiving end of countless ribald jokes and comments and undoubtedly lost count of the immoral propositions that were made to her.!!

As at R.A.F. Locking, our technical training had proceeded in parallel with so called ground school. There we were supposed, apart from some of the other things I have mentioned to do some navigation. This was ‘old hat’ to those of us who had started out as u/t P.N. Bs, since the navigation I had undertaken at St. Andrews and others at similar training establishments was, in fact, more complex than we were now required to do. We were also introduced to some of the paper-work which Flight Engineers were supposed to complete, such as Log Sheets, Defect Reports, etc., and we seemed to do endless calculations on fuel consumption under various conditions, usually ending up with so many Air Miles to the Gallon. This was a statistic for which no-one appeared able to think of a use. Perhaps it was an attempt to identify those who “wasted” fuel.

I mentioned that there was cinema on the camp and there was another in Llantwit Major. Tiny Needham was keen on classical music and I recall going with him to the cinema there to see “Song of Russia”, a wartime film which had a lot of Tchaikovsky’s music in the sound track. It was a tonic to hear some decent music, in place of the ‘pop’ stuff to which the majority of our hut-mates seemed addicted.

One night, somewhen after the beginning of the new year, I was lying in my bed and being rude to some of the other occupants of the hut. To teach me a lesson, they decided to pick up the bed, with me in it, and take me about 200 yards (say 200m) to the centre of a field on the edge of the camp. However, there had been quite a lot of snow during the previous few days which, of course, had only been cleared from the camp roads and footpaths.

When I was dumped, the snow was almost level with the blankets. It was a clear and frosty night and the stars were very bright but I was quite warm in bed, although faced with a problem. To get out, leave my bed and make the trip, through the snow, to the hut was, I felt, inviting pneumonia. On the other hand, staying as I was throughout a cold night, could have produced the same result. After about 10 minutes the same lads came and carried me back, but, for a while, I had been rather worried.

About the 10th of January, after we had learned the outcome of the Technical Training Board conducted by various Flight Sergeants and the written examinations set by the Education Section we were dispatched for a week’s leave. We returned to St. Athan expecting to go onto “Type Training” for the specific aircraft which we had been selected to fly. After a few days, it became obvious that something was amiss and, we were told that there were hold ups ahead of us. Some of us had heard a similar story a year earlier and wondered at the possible outcome. We were soon told that, as a temporary measure, the whole entry, and many others, would be sent to R.A.F. Cosford, west of Wolverhampton, where we would be given training as Flight Mechanics but that we would eventually return to complete our Type Training.

On hearing this news, my thought was, “The Flight Engineer’s brevet and those sergeant’s stripes are slipping away.”

It was the practice at many R.A.F. Stations and certainly at St. Athan, that so-called “Passion Wagons” (service buses or even lorries) went out to the local towns and villages to bring young women into the camp for dances in one or other of the N.A.A.F.I canteens. I seldom bothered to go to the dances, but some of the lads found these hops to be a useful avenue for fraternisation with the local Welsh damsels.

My friend Tiny, had an eye for the ladies and, being tall and good looking he could almost take his pick. He had made a close friend of a lady from Maesteg, which was a valley town some 15 miles (say 24 km) north-west of St. Athan. I suspect he might even have spent a few weekends at her home!

Our last night prior to being posted to Cosford, coincided with a N.A.A.F.I Dance and, as on former occasions, the local ladies were brought in. There had been intermittent snow showers during the day but, during the course of the evening, the weather deteriorated and the transport for the various valleys left early. Tiny decided to go to Maesteg with his girlfriend, although he realised that we were moving out early the following morning, on our way to R.A.F. Cosford in the Midlands. For some reason, he missed the return of the transport and we did not see him at all that night. About dawn, he returned, in a state of virtual collapse. It appears he had trudged the 15 miles through about 18 inches (say 0.5m) of snow, totally on his own, during a mid-January night. He just about had time to get his breakfast and join the rest of us, walking to Gileston Station, in single file through the snow, as the road was impassable for vehicles.

Chapter Ten

COSFORD

Short Break

As I indicated earlier, the walk to Gileston Station early in the morning, when it was barely daylight, was far from clever. It was cold and, overnight there had been further snow. Never-the-less the crocodile of airmen wound its way to the station - over-laden with kit, just as they had been when they had arrived. In due course the train from somewhere west arrived, and took us away to the east, to Cardiff but, even then, the train was cold. Things stayed that way for most of our journey. Travel rations had been issued, but nothing to drink.

At Cardiff we changed trains but not temperatures, there was no heating on the fresh one. We consoled ourselves that, as time went by, the heat would come on, but no! We travelled north, all the time through banks of snow, via Pontypool Road (where the train stopped for ages), Abergavenny, Hereford, Leominster, Ludlow and eventually to Shrewsbury where we changed trains yet again. All the time there had been no heat and no means of slaking our thirst or warming ourselves up. By this time, daylight had come and gone. Some genius, who seemed to have a working knowledge of the area, reckoned that from Shrewsbury to our destination was no more than 20 miles (32 km) and we were still chilled through by the time the train reached Shifnal and we started to prepared to leave it at the next stop.

There is little doubt that we were unlucky with the weather but delays due to it could have been be compounded by air raids of which we knew nothing or track faults as result of the cold.

Cosford was originally a small village, about 10 miles (16 km) west north-west of the town of Wolverhampton but part of the R.A.F. station, which was probably built about the time of the outbreak of W.W. 2 became No.3 School of Technical Training but it incorporated several other training facilities. The nearest small town was Albrighton, about 2 miles (just over 3 km) away, in the direction of Wolverhampton.

There was only a small station at Cosford, in fact it was more of a ‘Halt’, made out of old sleepers piled down into the steep side of a high railway embankment. Cold, hungry and thirsty we shouldered all our kit and made our way down steps, a short distance, into the gates of the camp.

The RAF station was divided by the railway embankment. The domestic side and a lot of the training area was on the north side and covered an area of approximately 0.6 of a square mile (say 1.2 sq. km.) It was an irregular quadrilateral and the maximum distance from one side to the other was in the order of 0.75 of a mile (somewhat over 1 km). To the south of the railway was the operational side of the station where there was an airfield, a maintenance unit and many buildings. Over there too, were sports pitches and a very large hangar-like building which was used in conjunction with the training of P.T. Is and, of course it was used by us and other training courses in the camp. From the 1950s, this complex became used quite

regularly for athletic events. Now, 1999, it has been substantially re-vamped and is known as ‘The National Sports Centre’.

Cosford was, in the main a hutted camp, not unlike those which I had already experienced at Locking and St. Athan. Probably they all began their existence at the time of the expansion of the Air Force which occurred in the latter half of the 1930s. There was a two or three storied brick building on the place, “Fulton Block” as we found it to be called, which was the accommodation for trainee officers. We felt very sorry for these gentlemen who were frequently scorned and mocked on the drill square by less than polite N.C.O.s, against whom they had no redress so long as the abuser concluded any remark with “Sir”.

When we went to the ablution section on our first morning, we were very surprised to hear female voices from the other side of a wooden partition which divided the place into two.

Half of the complex of huts in which we were to spend the next few months was occupied by Airwomen of the W.A.A.F (Now W.R.A.F.). Any connecting corridors were barred with substantial barbed wire entanglements through which the two genders could see and talk to each other. Thus, one got to know some of the young ladies. In the ablution block, for obvious reasons, the barrier was meant to prevent inter-visibility but previous occupants of these billets had already provided peep-holes which were used from either side. I am sure I would have remembered if I had done so, but I do not recall availing myself of this facility, possibly because I thought it ‘unsporting’. Perhaps it was the result of family standards, instilled when I was very young, in deepest Dorset. However, it seemed strange to be carrying on a conversation with an unseen female who was ‘freshening up’, whilst I was washing and shaving, not many feet away.

The course upon which we embarked had a far greater practical content than those we had undergone as u/t. Flight Engineers. There were some classroom lectures but, in the main, it was a ‘hands-on’ course. For example, the first two weeks were spent in workshops where we had to cut metal with hacksaws and then file out shapes to within a couple of thousandths of an inch. The test piece was to file two pieces of metal, one “T” shaped so that the vertical fitted into the centre of a squared off “C” and the whole formed a square.

By engineering standards such a tolerance is vast and the exercise well within the capabilities of a dedicated apprentice. We were neither dedicated nor did we regard the fortnight as being anything other than a total waste of time; merely a means of filling the days until we returned to St. Athan to complete our training.

Because we were supposed to be training as Flight Mechanic (Engines), once the first two weeks of the course was over, the remainder was almost another re-run of the engines side of the courses we had already completed. Thus, there were no airframes, hydraulics or electrics to concern us. As we had done earlier, we were taken out to the edge of the airfield in order to run up various types of engines, as we became familiar with them. It was all so dead easy, we were bored to tears.

Over the other side of the airfield was yet another Maintenance Unit but this one did not disturb our sleep by running engines night and day. There was another activity on the airfield side which we found quite interesting and that was the assembly of Horsa Gliders like those in which we had slept at Perth. These were made of wood and similar ones had been used to good effect at the time of the invasion of Europe and later at the debacle of Arnhem. All these wooden machines were flight tested prior to being towed away for storage &/or issue to the Airborne Forces. The pilots who did the testing were artists. Once they had completed their checks, the test pilot put the nose of the glider down and let the airspeed build up. It was then flown, at low level and high speed across the airfield, pulled up sharply to a stall turn and then put down with hardly a bump One tends to think of gliders as silent aircraft but, when flown as these Horsas were, they produced a surprisingly high level of aerodynamic noise.

Our course instructors were mainly elderly (to us) gentlemen who had spent a lot of time with trainees, who were straight from recruit establishments and who had probably not been in the service for longer than three months. Quite a lot of us had been in for over a year and, as I had, been on over half a dozen stations before arriving at Cosford. I think our tutors found us more than a little difficult to handle, particularly because we had previously done so much of the course work. This time there was no Station Band for me to join but I have no recollection of doing any duties other than the occasional morning hut orderly which meant going into work a bit late.

As we had already experienced at other establishments, training continued until noon on Saturdays. With that sort of constraint on our freedom, most of us went to Wolverhampton for our first afternoon and evening off. It must be admitted that I was far from adventurous and did not go the extra distance to Birmingham. In Wolverhampton it was possible for me to feel quite at home. There were trolley buses on the streets in the same yellow and brown livery as those with which I had become familiar in Bournemouth following the scrapping of the tram cars. So many of the local vehicles had been lost due to enemy action that Bournemouth had sent some of its fleet to the Midlands as replacements and they still carried the crest with which I was well acquainted. Since the motive power came from dual overhead lines, the trolley buses must have been towed all the way.

Usually in Wolverhampton I wound up by going to one of the town centre cinemas. On one occasion I got a shock when looking at a newsreel film of troops in the Far East. In a letter from home, I had been told that the son of Mrs. Cave, a local shopkeeper whose premises were opposite Knob Crook, had not been heard of for some time. Imagine my surprise when I saw the picture of Howard Cave on the screen, reading a newspaper which he had recovered from a bundle parachuted into the jungle. Before I left, I had a chat with the duty manager and he arranged for me to visit the projection room and closely examine the film when it was being rewound.

The projectionist got quite keen on the search for the right series of frames. He pointed out that each series was coded and numbered from the ‘clapper board’, through editing, to the final print for projection. We identified the best frame and its nearest code and, armed with that information I wrote to the film company, explaining

the story and requesting that, if possible, could they supply a print for Mrs. Cave. In due course one arrived and she was very thrilled when I gave it to her.

Having made friends with the projectionist, I made several visits to his ‘holy of holies’ and learned quite a lot about setting carbon arcs, linking the machines for changing reels, sound levels and lighting. He also showed me something I had never realised, namely the degree to which the ‘wash’ from the projector beam, illuminated the audience near the box. When seen from the little square windows, the antics of the paying public, who thought themselves shielded by the darkness, often provided entertainment for us looking down from the projection box.

The cost of a service return rail fare to Wolverhampton was anomalous in relation that charged to civilian passengers. Normally, servicemen expected to travel at a reduced rate, but the cost to us was higher than the price of a civilian ticket. We eventually discovered that we were still paying for damage done to rolling stock by trainees’ years before. It seemed iniquitous but we levelled the score before long.

Partly for economic reasons, I did not try to get home every week from the Midlands but the main reason was that the time taken for the journeys in each direction made the short time spent in Wimborne very expensive. Firstly, we had to get from Cosford to Wolverhampton or Birmingham and there change onto a London bound L.M.S train. (Pre-British Rail era!). On arrival at Euston several of us ran to share a taxi for the trip across London, to Waterloo in an attempt to catch a train for Bournemouth at 6-30. I was then able to board a train about 10-30, which got me into Wimborne by about 11pm.

I was usually met by my parents and girl friend and I normally went up the hill to her place for the night. After breakfast we walked down to my home and had Sunday lunch before catching a bus to Bournemouth, having had some sixteen hours in town. From then on, the drill was similar to that which I had been following for returning to St. Athan, except that I remained on the train until it reached Waterloo. As my train to the Midlands did not leave until 7-30, there was not such a rush across London to reach Euston, I travelled by tube.
The train to the north went to Birmingham where we had to change on to one that went through Wolverhampton and then west, possibly to Shrewsbury. As on the return trip to South Wales, it was a matter of getting what sleep one could on the trains and catching up with it next day if possible.

Whilst at Cosford we were allowed long weekends every four weeks. The homeward journey was complicated by the inevitable late arrival of the train in London. The only train available from Waterloo was the so-called paper train which seemed to stop at every station to Bournemouth and drop off bundles off newspapers. However, it did not leave until approximately 2-30 in the morning so we usually tried to doze on the benches in the station before getting what sleep we could on the rather noisy and jerky paper train. On those occasions, I usually got to Wimborne about 6-30 in the morning and walked up to East Boro in time for breakfast. After staying awake all day, my own bed was quite a luxury.

From what I have written so far, it will be obvious that to get home and back was very tiring and quite an achievement within the time available. In addition, there was

the cost of the trip to be considered. At the time, I was getting 5/9 (just under 30p) per day and, whilst I accept that it was shared between at least three of us, the fare for the essential taxi across London was 3/6 (17.5p). To make ends meet, we were all involved in an elaborate ticket fiddle which helped to rectify the high rail fare we were charged on the Cosford / Wolverhampton trips.

It was possible to get a through ticket from Cosford to Bournemouth which was postdated 24 hours to save a mad rush on the station staff on the day when we all wanted to get away. Euston Station in London was an open station but there were ticket inspectors on the train and they were not only eagerly attentive to their duty of punching tickets but they went out of their way to try to catch fare dodgers. If one was well on the way to London but riding on only a ticket for a short journey, the only way to avoid these 'jumpers' was to keep out of their way by moving around the train or by hiding in one of the toilets.
Neither ploy was very original and occasionally someone was caught. Once the first trip had been made and the likely hazards noted most of us opted for a ticket fraud which had been mooted.

The return tickets were not handed in when we got back in the early hours of the morning, so that we kept them. During the next few nights thick card of the ticket was carefully split for its whole length with a razor blade and some of the waste material used to patch the holes made by the punches of various ticket inspectors during the course of the previous weekend. A postdated return ticket was purchased as early as possible and it too was split with a razor blade. It was then a matter of sticking the old and patched front onto the new and updated back so that the thickness of the fake was similar to that of the original. Some of the lads were more adept at doing this than others thus a sort of 'cottage industry' developed and tickets were 'Doctored' for small considerations!

The inspectors always made a great show of checking and punching the tickets and the bogus ones were very good but I have wondered since whether or not they may have sometimes turned a blind eye when one was presented. With crowded trains and disgruntled service men and women, not to mention late hours and the night time blackout, their job cannot have been an easy one.

As I mentioned earlier, the railway station at Cosford was on a high embankment and there was always a rush down the steps and a crush to get past any railway worker who attempted to collect tickets from airmen returning from a time away from the camp. A way of getting out early was to open the carriage door as the train slowed prior to stopping and jump, whilst it was still moving, into the darkness as soon as one was sure there was a platform below. On a snowy dark night, we were all lined up to make the leap. The first chap went out but disappeared straight down - he was far too early and the platform had not yet been reached. He eventually turned up in camp and told us he had rolled down the embankment, with both his initial fall and the conclusion of his plunge down the steep embankment, being broken by the snow.

One night two or three of us miscounted the huts in the darkness. We wandered down the pitched black centre aisle of the hut we had entered but when we reached our respective beds, we found them to be occupied. Muttered harsh words and some

even harsher shoves at the recumbent figures, produced a series of high-pitched screams. Some lights were put on and when order was restored, it became obvious that, quite by accident, we had gone into one of the huts occupied by airwomen. The following weekend, they got their own back on the Sunday morning by raiding our hut, where they tipped a number of airmen out of bed.

For one weekend, instead of going south, I travelled north via Birmingham, to Leeds, where my girlfriend was staying with relations. They made me very welcome and I left again after a stay of about 24 hours to return to Cosford. It was over 50 years later that I again visited the city and then only to drop off a few people from a coach in which Diana and I were passengers.

Whilst at Cosford we became aware that repatriated Prisoners of War were being flown in from Germany as their camps were over-run by the Allied advance. It is not absolutely certain but Bill Fripp, whose folks lived just down East Boro from my home, and who had been shot down very early in September 1939, returned to the U.K. when I was at Cosford.

During the last few days we were at Cosford, the inevitable Trade Test Boards took place and, when the results were known, I was listed as an A.C.1. Flight Mechanic (Engines), so I must have passed out with fairly high marks. The course had probably occupied us for nine or ten weeks and I think we left about the end of March, first of all to go home on leave for a week, then to return to St. Athan for training on the type of aircraft in which we were designated to fly.

Chapter Eleven

ST. ATHAN

Type Training

As I made my way, by train back to St. Athan, I met up with quite a lot of the lads who had accompanied me to Cosford. The thought uppermost in all our minds was what type of aircraft had we been selected to fly and there was a great deal of discussion of the respective merits of the different types of which we already had a working knowledge The party got slowly larger as we changed trains at Bristol and again at Cardiff and, as far as I can recall, when we finally reached Gileston, we even got some service transport from the railway station to the RAF camp.

This time we went to No. 1 Wing, into accommodation on the north side of the large drill square and I found myself in Hut J7 but it was no different from the huts we had occupied some months earlier.

However, my hut was quite close to the Band Hut and I quickly re-established contact with Sgt. Parish and took my place with a drum in the band. Of course, being in the band, carried with it the privileges I had enjoyed earlier, thus I would still able to get home at fortnightly intervals, by the same devious means I had employed some months earlier and also avoid doing any duties. Due to being quite a senior member of the band, it was not long before I became the solo drummer and in a short while I was reserve side drummer in the Station Brass Band, a position normally filled by a Corporal armament instructor.

Halifax Mk.lll

After completing the usual routine of going round the various sections of the camp - basically to confirm that we had arrived - we were finally told on which aircraft we were to get type training. I was quite happy that I had been chosen for the Halifax Mk.lll.

Tiny Needham, and Les Robertshaw were among those selected for Lancasters. I cannot now recall any of the others being allocated to the remainder of the several large aircraft which needed Flight Engineers in their crews but I guess there may have been a few. It seems now that there were more Halifax people than Lancaster, possibly in the ratio of three to one.

At the outset we were told that we would be responsible for the technical side of the aircraft which, of course, included a detailed knowledge of all the systems. We were not responsible for anything inside the gun turrets nor for the radios etc. These latter items were looked after by the Air Gunners and Radio Operator respectively. Our job

was to ensure that their equipment had a power supply and this was best achieved by good fuel handling so that the engines kept turning! We learned about the Flight Engineer's instrument panel and that we also had to keep a watchful eye on the cockpit instruments, particularly those which recorded engine conditions. We were to 'advise' the captain on matters which affected the safety of the aircraft and its crew. It was quite a wide-ranging brief.
At this point it might be as well if I gave some information on the Halifax Mark lll aircraft. It was one of the three heavy bombers used by the RAF. The first was the Stirling, which, by 1944 was obsolete as a bomber but used extensively as a glider tug. The main weapon of Bomber Command was the Lancaster, which had been developed to a far greater extent in terms of bomb carrying capacity than the Halifax, although, the latter was a roomier aircraft for the crew.

The Halifax was some 70 feet (21 m) from nose to tail, had a wing span of almost 99 feet (30 m) and the top of the glazed cabin was 21 feet (6 m) above the ground. Its empty weight was in the order of 40,000 lbs (18,000 kg) and the maximum take-off loading was 63,000 lbs (27,000 kg) The landing weight was not to exceed 55,000 lbs (25,000 kg) The take-off speed was 105 - 110 mph (approx. 170 kph) and the touch-down speed was similar. The aircraft had a maximum level flight speed in the order of 260 mph (420 kph) and the maximum speed for a dive was 320 (510 kph). For maximum range (economic cruising conditions) 175 mph (280 kph) was the recommended airspeed. The bomb load was 13,000 lbs (almost 6,000 kg); however, this was reduced if additional fuel for long flights, was carried in tanks in the bomb bay. There were 4 Browning machine guns in the rear turret,2or 4 in the dorsal (Mid-upper) turret and one in the Perspex nose cone.

Almost from the beginning we were introduced to a Halifax which was in one of the hangars. It was on trestles, in a flying position so that the wheels did not touch the ground and, by using mains operated electric motors within the engine nacelles to drive them; generators, alternators, vacuum, hydraulic and pneumatic pumps, all worked as if driven by the respective engines and all the systems were fully operational. To add a touch of realism and to enable us to eventually get used to finding our way round in the dark, all the Perspex was painted over in black, although, in the early days we were allowed the use of some dim auxiliary lights inside. The staff actively encouraged us to use any of our spare time both in and around this aircraft, so that we became very familiar with it in the daylight and the dark.
As I mentioned, one the major tasks for a Flight Engineer is the handling of the fuel.

For a Halifax Mk. lll, the normal fuel load was 1808 gallons (8200 litres) the weight of which was 6 tons (say 6000 Kg) and it was carried in 12 self-sealing tanks of varying capacity - 6 in each wing. Since tanks 5 & 6, out toward the wing tips, were coupled together; effectively there were 5 tanks in each wing. To the rear of them, almost from tip to tip, there was a 'gallery pipe' that was divided into two halves by a main cross-feed cock, situated in the centre of the aft face of the rear spar of the aircraft. This was wired closed and could only be opened with the prior permission of the captain, since moving fuel from one wing to the other could quickly and seriously affect the trim of the aircraft. In the centre of the gallery in each wing, was a wing balance cock which was under the control of the engineer, as were the five tank cocks for each wing. The levers which operated these cocks were located at the

front of the rest benches which were on either side of centre section and between the main & rear wing spars.

For fuel consumption, a useful rule of thumb was, ‘a gallon per engine per minute’. Thus, normally the engines could be expected to be supplied for at least seven and a half hours but, by flying at economic cruising conditions, this figure could be exceeded. However, some reserve had to be kept in case it should be necessary for the aircraft to be diverted from its base to an alternative airfield.

The general strategy was to drain the tanks at the wing tips first and empty successive tanks toward the centre. However, there were times when each engine had to have its own supply (if both on one side were relying on a common source, failure in the fuel supply would result in the loss of two engines). The wing balance cocks were used to isolate the two engines and their supply of fuel. To avoid an engine cutting due to lack of fuel, there were Fuel Pressure Warning Lights at the centre section and duplicated on the Engineer’s panel. This arrangement allowed several seconds for the fuel cocks, of the draining tank, to be closed and the cock of the full tank to be opened - always in that order! Just for the record, it might be worth mentioning that it was 10-12 feet (3-4 m) from the F. E’s position through a door in an armour-plated bulkhead and over the main spar, to the site of the fuel cock levers!

We were also learned the intimate details of the Messier Hydraulic System which, in the Halifax, operated the undercarriage retraction system, the wing flaps and the bomb bay doors.

To reach the manual ‘up’ locks and the ‘accumulators’ or cylinders for the lowering of the undercarriage, located at the rest bench position, also required the negotiation of the same obstacle course.

The system devised by Messier, was for the operation of a piston in one direction, by oil pressurised by an engine driven pump but, which, was moved in the other direction by oil under the pressure of compressed air. The initial air pressure was enhanced by further compression as a result of the earlier movement of the piston. Thus, if subjected to enemy action, there was always power, (oil pressurised by air) available to lower the flaps and undercarriage. The bomb doors too could be opened, but, without an engine driven pump, they could not be closed. The cylinders or accumulators, were situated as follows. Undercarriage accumulators to the front spar - near the inner engines. Bomb door accumulator - port side and Flaps accumulator - starboard side. The flaps were held up by hydraulic lock and were lowered only by the pressure in the accumulator. In an emergency they could be operated by the Flight Engineer, as requested by the Pilot. They could be lowered progressively using a cock on the base of the flap’s accumulator. However, in the absence of a pump, they could not be raised again. The undercarriage was held in the retracted position, not only by a hydraulic lock. but also, by mechanical locks inserted (under the rest benches) by the Flight Engineer, after the retraction cycle had been completed. The tail wheel was held only on a hydraulic lock. This had its advantages. In the event of damage to the hydraulics, the loss of oil pressure was made evident by the illumination of a single central red light on the undercarriage

position indicator. As the tail wheel descended, the red was followed by a solitary green light.

As our technical training progressed, we were lectured on the pneumatic system which, via a lever on the control column and a differential braking unit operated by the rudder pedals, applied the brakes to the main undercarriage wheels whilst taxying.

Parachute training outdoors and dinghy drill in the swimming baths, was hammered into us. Now, of course, these things were specific to the Halifax in regard to escape hatches in the floor and roof exits to reach the dinghy which should be deployed automatically, by an immersion switch in the underside of the nose of the aircraft, when actuated by contact with water.
We again had detailed lectures on the fully feathering hydromantic propeller with which the Halifax was fitted. This time greater attention was paid to the correct use of the propeller pitch control levers and the interaction of airscrew pitch with the carburettor, the speed of the engines and airspeed. Some slight instruction was given on the Distant Reading Compass. This was a “black box’, sited well to the aft of the aircraft remote from electro-magnetic influences, which relayed to the pilot’s instrument panel, the reading of a compass which it contained.

The automatic pilot was another new addition to our increasing knowledge. In this, the displacement of gyroscopes as the result of the movement of the aircraft caused compressed air to be directed to piston and cylinder assemblies attached to the flying surfaces control runs. These were then moved until the aircraft returned to its preset equilibrium. The gyroscopes were rotated at quite a high speed, by jets of air directed into cups on them, as in a Pelton Wheel.

There was a sort of platform at the Engineer’s position on which he stood, facing aft, to read his instrument panel. The platform was also used by the Navigator so that he could get his head into the astrodome in order to obtain star shots with his bubble sextant. Under the platform were oxygen cylinders which supplied all the crew stations via ‘economiser units’ (bellows with a ‘demand’ valve). The use of oxygen was mandatory when flying above 10,000 feet (3000 m) for more than 1 hour. These units were also sited in other parts of the aircraft where a crew member was likely to be required to stay for a long period of time. At crew stations there were also some portable oxygen bottles which could supply a man for about half an hour as he moved around the aircraft. Elsewhere in the aircraft were bottles of nitrogen. These fed inert gas into the tanks, in order to expel the highly explosive petrol vapour which was left as the fuel was used.

Efforts were continued to make us aware of the insidious effect of the lack of oxygen, and, whilst some paid a second visit to the decompression chamber, I was never once put in it. I cannot give a first-hand account of the effects of anoxia but I attended many times as an observer, and learned a lot.

Both in the hangar, as I mentioned earlier, and out on the edge of the airfield, where there were several aircraft of each of the main types then flown by Bomber Command, we were taken through the engineer’s external preflight checks. However, on the airfield, once these were completed, one was expected to carry out

internal checks and then do a full preflight live engine run. This was when I first became aware that my “thumbs up” sign from high up on the port side of a bomber, was not readily visible. From that time onward, when necessary, I used my right hand and twisted round, to stick it out of the sliding window.

About the age of ten, I had realised that the joint at the base of my left thumb was very large and the family doctor confirmed that the ball of the joint was more or less out of the socket but he decided not to recommend any further action. The thumb was mobile then and, nearly sixty years later, still remains so. However, instead of being capable of projecting to a vertical position, I have never been able to raise it beyond about 45 degrees. Hence my difficulty in making a ‘thumbs up’ sign with my left hand.

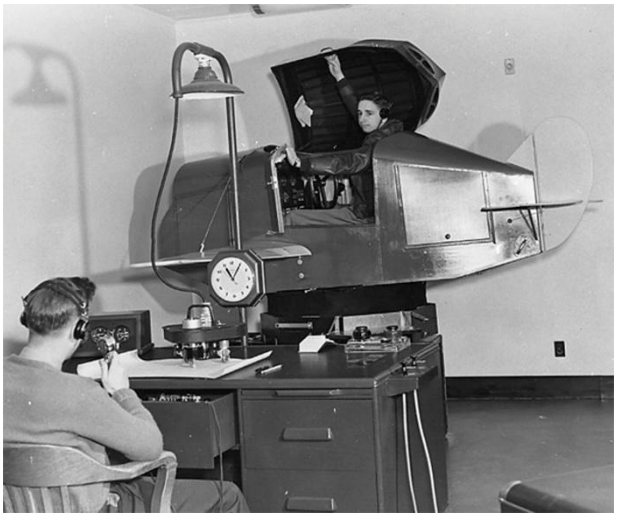
As I have mentioned earlier, the engines, as well as driving the propellers, also had auxiliary gearboxes attached to them. Through these were driven generators, alternators and pumps for various systems, thus we had to be aware of the effect on the functioning of the aircraft as a whole, if the use of an engine should be lost by our failure, mechanical breakdown or enemy action.

One of the systems which intrigued me was the switch gear in the nose which permitted the bomb load to be dropped in several different ways. e.g. singly, simultaneously or in a stick, the latter was achieved via a rotary switch. The last link in the chain was the hand held, thumb operated, plunger used by the Bomb Aimer from his prone position in the nose when the target was correctly positioned, i.e. in the cross wires of his bomb sight. For some reason which I did not comprehend, the switch panel was always referred to as the “Mickey Mouse”.

Instruction was given on the various pyrotechnics we would be likely to come across. The Very cartridge which was fired from a gun in the Perspex roof was quite important as, in the event of radio failure or enforced radio silence, various messages could be conveyed by coloured balls of fire. For example, if challenged by a Very Light from the ground or another aircraft, the correct response established that one was a friend and not a foe. Both colour codes were changed every few hours and the engineer was responsible for ensuring that the correct ‘colours of the day’ were loaded so that all that was necessary was a squeeze on the trigger.

Elsewhere in the aircraft were large parachute flares which were dropped through chutes or tubes situated toward the aft end and also smoke floats for establishing the degree of drift when the aircraft was over the sea. The chutes could also be used for the dropping of “window” - masses of strips of silver foil to confuse the enemy radar reception. High powered delayed action photo flares were carried in the bomb bay and dropped with the bombs, in an effort to photographically record strikes in relation to the target.

Fire in an aircraft can often spell disaster and we had to be ‘au fait’ with the extinguisher system, the siting of hand-held extinguishers and the position of the crash axes and crow bars which might be useful in dealing with hazardous situations. As I have already mentioned, the Flight Engineer had a responsibility for the safety of the aircraft and its crew.



Link Trainer

As part of our training, we were all given blind flying instruction in the Link Trainer, an early form of flight simulator. These trainers were extremely truncated aircraft mounted on bellows and they responded in all three planes, to movement of the controls in the totally hooded, fully instrumented, cockpit. Dots and dashes were relayed through earpieces to the 'pilot', just as if flying a radio beam approach. The dots and dashes gave an indication of the position of the aircraft in relation to the centre line of the 'runway', which was indicated by a steady note. A small, electrically operated "crab" which received information from the controls of the trainer, left an ink trace on the glazed top of the instructor's table, so that he could monitor the track being 'flown'. As some of the Link Trainer's instruments were repeated on a small panel attached to his table, the instructor could also keep an eye on our general 'flying' and, in particular our height and speed on the glide path. Thus, Flight Engineers were not only expected to fly their aircraft, it was felt that, in an emergency, they might undertake a beam approach landing. With verbal support from the control tower, it should be possible for them to bring off a landing from which, at least some of the crew, could expect to stagger away!
I enjoyed my sessions in the Link and was officially credited with the obligatory twelve hours or so 'under the hood'. In fact, I spent a lot longer than that.

As the course progressed, emergencies, malfunctions and engine fires, together with damage resulting from enemy action, all began to take a high profile. As could be expected, we had many sessions in the training simulators, when all sorts of snags were thrown at us. In these sessions we took it in turns to act as Pilot or Engineer, since the two worked together and there was a need to vary the settings of engine controls on the central console in the cockpit. Fuel leaks, loss of engines needing the propellers to be feathered and the consequent loss of the auxiliaries they were driving, had to be sorted out. Also, various fires, together with hydraulic and electrical failures, had to be dealt with. All this took place against the background of tank changes and at an accelerated time scale. In a phrase, we were put under pressure!!

By this time, the news made it abundantly clear that the war in Europe was rapidly drawing to a close and with it, the likelihood that we would not be flying aggressively in that theatre.

The 9th of May 1945 saw the official end of hostilities against the Germans and a few days later, celebratory street parties were organised all over the country. My recollection is of parading through Cardiff with the St. Athan Brass Band. The streets were decorated and, in the side roads, wild and informal parties were taking place. Always one for my grub, I recall having a slap-up meal in the canteen of the Central Police Station of Cardiff before returning to camp.

In the next few weeks, with our future slightly unsure, our technical instruction was continued and we were introduced to Air Publication 1548 - “The Responsibilities of a Prisoner of War”. This was supplemented with such morale boosting talks as ‘Behaviour under Interrogation’, ‘What the enemy will try to find out’, ‘The sources of enemy information’ and the ‘Do’s, Don’ts and Rights of a Prisoner of War’. Things suddenly started to look serious, since the only active enemy forces left were in the Far East; and not many of us, and certainly not I, had given much thought to the possibility of flying against the Japanese, over a hostile sea, & / or jungle.

Against this background, we had revision sessions and, eventually ground school examinations together with assessments of our knowledge of armament matters, swimming and dinghy drill, flight safety etc., which did not lend themselves to formal testing. There were also Ground School examinations. Never-the-less, the crunch point was the final board.

This was conducted viva voce by Senior N.C. O’s, who asked questions for over half an hour on any aspect of our type training course. Of course, we had also been assessed on each weekly phase over the many previous months, but the Final Board was the “Big One”.

At the conclusion of the examinations, assessments and The Board, there was a waiting period of a few days when we seemed to sit round, talk, drink NAAFI tea and practice for a Passing Out Parade, which we hoped we would qualify to attend.

The morning of Wednesday the 20th June was understandably particularly tense and we whiled away our time in the NAAFI. It was then I had a surprise as Tiny Needham went over, sat at the piano and played Sinding’s “Rustle of Spring”. Although I had been with him for about a year, I had no inkling that he could play at all and certainly that he could attempt such a demanding piece. It will be readily understood that I find this music evocative of the time I qualified as a Flight Engineer, since it was only a few moments later that we were told that the pass list had been published.

In almost a re-run of my conviction some ten or so years earlier, when I had felt confident of my success in the Grammar School Scholarship Exam. I had, throughout the training programme, nursed a quiet conviction that I would earn my flying badge, the wing attached to the letter ‘E’ contained within an oak wreath.

After a short period of exuberance, those of us who had been successful, were brought down to earth by being told to go to the stores and “Each draw two brevets and three pairs of sergeant’s chevrons and then get one badge and a set of stripes sewn on to your best blue uniforms only”! The afternoon was spent in sewing on the coveted brevet and three stripes for which we had, for so long, ‘sweated our guts

out', as the saying goes! To get these emblems in the correct position is extremely difficult and, for some, their amateur efforts at sewing left something to be desired.

For the rest of the day and the morning of the 21st of June, the entry lived in a strange sort of twilight world. We were still airmen with access to the NAAFI but in our lockers hung uniforms declaring that we were N.C.O Aircrew. Immediately after lunch, we all removed from our caps the white flash which identified us as aircrew trainees. Some of the lads even went so far as to take them outside and ceremonially burn them. I had worn one for about two and a half years (including my time in the Air Training Corps) and was just pleased that I was on the point of attaining a long-cherished ambition.

Our rise in status was, to say the least of it, prosaic in the extreme. The classic scenario of ramrod straight airmen, stepping forward individually, to be presented with their wings by a senior officer, just did not happen. Perhaps the numbers of aircrew of all trades, passing out of training establishments all over world, made such a ceremony unrealistic. We were not allowed to put on our best blue until after lunch and then it was a matter of mustering for the Passing Out Parade.

As an entry, we were familiar with the format of the parade since it was traditional that the three senior unqualified entries, lined the barrack square to watch the Station Commander take the salute of the newly qualified Flight Engineers. So, all the lads had seen it through three times. I had the edge over the rest of the chaps, as I had played in the band, for twenty to thirty similar parades, during the preceding months. As some others had done before me, I decided to join the band for my own parade and, having played my friends off the square, I left my drum kit for someone else to put away and dashed off to the station cinema. There the Group Captain addressed our passing out entry, using a string of cliche´s and platitudes and a reminder to," collect your Log Books from the table on the way out". It was all something of an anticlimax.

There was a celebratory dance in the evening but I only put my nose in the door for a short while. Prior to that, I had decided to go for a walk and, ongoing through the main gate the Service Police Corporal on duty said," Good evening, Sergeant", to me. I thought, "Cheeky B....", and was on the point of ignoring him, when it dawned on me that I was now senior to him!! The sudden change in rank was not easy to grasp. I had awakened as an airman, by the end of the working day, there I was, a senior non-commissioned officer and my pay had gone up to 10 shillings (50p) a day.

I had made it! I was Royal Air Force Aircrew!

When doing my sewing on the Wednesday afternoon I had also sewn sergeant's stripes onto my great coat and before I went to bed, I used various devices to remove some of their pristine looks. The remainder of the sewing I left to be done at home.

On Friday the 22nd, we were given leave passes and transport to Gileston. Thus, clutching a leave pass and a railway warrant, I was able to travel to Wimborne with my head held high. After all, I had three stripes on my arm and a clear conscience, instead of my usual predicament of no pass and no legitimate ticket!!

Chapter Twelve

AMBULANT AIRCREW

Intimate Details

After a week at home in Wimborne, during which time I have no doubt my new plumage
was flaunted for all to see, I returned to St. Athan on Sunday the 1st of July. Together with the rest of my entry, I quickly found out that we had been moved from No. 1 Wing, back across the parade ground to No. 4. Wing. There I joined friends in Hut N.21 and discovered that a former NAAFI had been re-designated as a Sergeants Mess for our use. The next day it was made clear to us that we could not be accepted on the unspecified stations to which we were to have been posted. Thus, we were to be held at St. Athens until they were able to accommodate us. If I had known the expression, “Deja Vu”, at that time, I’m sure it would have crossed my mind.

Yes, we had experienced this sort of hold up before, but the reasons had varied. A year ago, it was the weather, and then the fact that, despite the casualty rate among the crews of Bomber Command being high, it was never-the-less lower than expected and the need for trained replacements was less urgent. However, this time it was the simple fact that the shooting war in Europe had ended and the strategy for the defeat of the Japanese in the Far East was still being perfected. The location of our future operational area was now certain and I, for one, was less than keen to go to South East Asia but we were given no idea of the time scale.

After several days of sitting around and brilliantly doing nothing, we were told we were to be sent on a Jungle Survival course, which served to reinforce the ideas that had already been sewn in our heads. Somewhere about the 7th of July, in a convoy of RAF coaches and lorries we headed off, broadly in a westerly direction. After about 10 or 12 miles (16-20km), the journey ended in a little valley about 4 miles (say 6km) east of Porthcawl, at a tiny place called Ogmore. A redeeming feature was that the sizable town of Bridgend was only some 3 miles (5km) away, but I think I only went there once and can remember nothing about it.

The camp site was in a quite delightful little place and we set about erecting the bell tents and a couple of marquees which had been sent along with us. The weather was fine in fact I do not recall any rain whilst we were there. Nearby there was a woodland, with only a few relatively large trees and, in the bottom of the valley, there was a stream which drained into the Bristol Channel less than a mile away. It was a most “un-junglelike” place!

A handful of senior N.C.O/ P.T. Instructors from St. Athens were with us and, since we were all Sergeants and Flight Sergeants, no real hierarchy existed. However, in due course we organised ourselves into tents and from that developed a roster for cooking duty (the only worthwhile chore).

During the next 10 days, a tent of newly qualified flight engineers at a time, we took turns at cooking using ‘flash’ cookers. These fires were supposed to be the sort of thing which one could be expected to make from a crashed aircraft. Briefly they worked like this. A can was filled with used engine oil and another was filled with water. Oil from the first, was allowed to drip slowly into a downward sloping trough, onto a flat. preheated metal plate. After about half a dozen drips of oil, a drip of water was allowed to escape from the second can, run over the surface of the oil and ‘flash’ in the heated oil, very much as happens when water strikes hot oil in a frying pan.
The plate was seldom heated sufficiently to start the reaction and the oil ran over onto the hot embers of the kindling wood, which produced a pall of black smoke. Alternatively, too much water was released, the plate cooled and again the whole contraption failed. We quickly got fed up with attempting to eat partially cooked food which was impregnated with engine oil fumes and reverted to using wood fires.

Another cooking device to which we were introduced was the so called ‘field oven’. This was an oil drum covered over with a thick coating of clay but with a fire underneath. With this we were slightly more successful, although we avoided using the dreaded flash fire.

Each day, at least once and sometimes twice, we all ambled down to the shore of the Bristol Channel for a swim. Before doing so, we had been warned that there were dangerous tidal flows in this tapering neck of water and once we went in the sea it was very obvious, both in the rapid changes of water temperature and the eddies, (even tight inshore the flow was probably in the order of 2 knots at the ebb and the flow).

Naturally, we kept an eye on the shore to avoid being swept away and the P.T. staff with us also kept watch from the beach. In subsequent years there have been many fatalities in the sea at this point.

A further diversion was bridge building over the stream near the camp site. For this we used such timber as we found on the beach, supplemented by the odd log or two from the woodland. The whole was supposedly kept together with lengths of rope which the P.T.I.s had brought along. Our use for the rope was much more fun. Hung from the branches of the larger trees, the ropes became ‘creepers’ and we, in turn, swung along in the style of Tarzan of the Apes.

As I mentioned, the weather was kind to us, indeed it was very hot and some of the campers developed sweat rashes (partly because showers and baths were not possible and we had to rely on the swimming for general cleanliness). Eventually I developed a bad rash around the genital area and, within a couple of days, it became intolerable.

I decided to report sick and went back to St. Athena on the ration wagon with one or two others.

There I was examined by a W.A.A.F. Medical Officer who prescribed ‘Whitfields Ointment” as the treatment for the condition. I returned with the others, some of

whom had also been issued with the same ointment, and, back at the camp site, we were pleasantly surprised at the speed with which the balm we generously applied, cooled the afflicted area. The relief lasted about 30 seconds and then we were hit with the reverse effect. The delicate area seemed to catch fire and we were all running round in our shirt tails clutching genitals which, it appeared at that time, would speedily be cremated. I think we all felt that any future carnal desires would never be sublimated! Needless to say, these fears have, over the years, proved to be groundless!

Our stay at Ogmore, in what was almost a holiday camp atmosphere, lasted for about ten days and it was probably about the 17th or 18th of July that we returned to St. Athans. Possibly because there was a lot of doubt about our future, we were all packed off on leave again for at least a further week.
I'm pretty confident that I went back to St. Athans toward the end of the month and equally sure that, by the 3rd of August I was on my way back to Wimborne. This was useful as Monday the 5th of August was, at that time, August Bank Holiday. For the last month or so, the home leave had been most welcome, particularly when it was supported by my raised pay. However, since we were never sure whether or not we would be returning to St. Athens, every time we left the place, we had to lump all of our kit with us. This chore was very unwelcome!

However, on Tuesday the 6th of August at 7.45pm (Local Time) a B.29 -Super Fortress, of the United States Air Force dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. When this was first made known in the U.K. I'm sure that the implications of the event were comprehended.

Probably I was no different from the rest of the country and thought that the bomb was an upmarket 'secret weapon'. It was only the following day, when the barest outline of the equivalent capacity of the bomb, together with the devastation it had caused, started to filter through, that we began to feel that such a weapon could perhaps bring the war in the Far East to a conclusion, much more rapidly than had seemed possible.

A couple of days later, the world was told that, on the 9th another bomb had been dropped, this time on Nagasaki, at about the same time of day as the first one. Clearly the Allies were hammering the Japanese on their own ground and one really began to wonder what the next move would be. It was not long in coming and on the 10th of August the Japanese started negotiations which would lead to an unconditional surrender. Somewhere about the 13th of the month, I received a railway warrant and instructions to report, in a few days' time, to "Eccles Road". However, within a day, the 18th was declared as V.J. Day (Victory over the Japanese), all service personnel were granted a celebratory 48-hour pass and anyone on leave could report back 2 days later than stated on their passes. Mine was an indefinite leave, so I took advantage of this latter concession to stay at home and finally got on a train on the 19th as that seemed to be about the right date.

I knew that Eccles was in Lancashire (I've since discovered that there are at least two other places with the same name) so, having reached London, I crossed from Waterloo to Euston and on the way, I met a Londoner called Eames, who had been with me for months and who was also responding to similar instructions to mine. We

made our way to a train heading for Manchester and by the time we reached the departure platform, there were at least half a dozen of us, all wondering why we were going to a place somewhere west of Manchester.

Once we reached there, enquiries at the R.T.O. (Rail Transport Office - at the station but manned by service personnel), soon put us on the right train to Eccles but, when we completed the fairly short journey, a railway employee soon told us that we were in the wrong place and, furthermore, that many before us had made the same mistake. He added that he thought, from London, we should have gone east to Norfolk and not come north to Lancashire! So, we went back into Manchester and, having decided that it was too late to go anywhere else, we found beds in a servicemen's' hostel, in a building which had been partially demolished by a bomb.

Next morning - the 20th - our group of senior N.C.O's went back to the London Road railway station at Manchester and, having explained our situation to the R.T.O, secured warrants for a train journey to Eccles Road, which turned out to be near Thetford in Norfolk. So, off we went back to London.

We arrived at the capital in the middle of the afternoon and there was general agreement that it was too late to go on to Norfolk. I've no idea where we found accommodation but just remember that we wandered out for a look round the city in the evening. During the morning of the 21st, we made our way to Liverpool Street station and headed for East Anglia. Some 10 miles (say 15km) after leaving Thetford, the train stopped at a small halt which someone said was Eccles Road, so we all got off.

The place seemed to be in the middle of nowhere, but then, R.A.F. Stations are frequently remote from centres of civilisation. Following enquiries from a solitary railwayman, a phone call was made to the R.A.F and, after some delay, lorries arrived to take us to the camp.

Within a few years and following the cessation of its use as an airfield, the tarmac surfaces were in use for motor racing and the track at Snetterton became well known.

Via a series of narrow lanes, the small convoy reached a main road and, almost immediately turned off it again to the other side from which we had approached. In the distance there was some evidence of an airfield and in the direction, we were now heading, and much closer, were a lot of buildings. This was identified as the communal site and we were deposited outside the Sergeants Mess.

Since it was slightly early for lunch, the group made its way to the ante-room, some had a drink and then it was time for a meal. About halfway through this, there was a slight disturbance and some chatter outside and then a corporal appeared at the door of the dining room. He asked if any of the following N.C.O's were present and read out a list of names. The list included all those who had so recently arrived, plus some more who had obviously got there earlier. He concluded his announcements with the words, "Will all you people please book in with Adjutant as quickly as possible - we want to post you!"

After lunch, all those nominated, presented themselves at Station H.Q., signed in and were handed posting instructions together with a railway warrant. In company with a lot of the others I discovered I was being sent to RAF Melksham. Very shortly afterwards, with all our kit, we were once again in lorries going back to the little halt for a train to London.

It was then well before 3 p.m. and I think it was probably about 3 hours since we had arrived. Certainly, Eccles Road was the shortest posting I had in my service career.

Once back in London, the view was taken that it was now too late to go any further, so it was agreed that we would have another night in London and happily got back into the accommodation we had left earlier that day. Next morning no-one seemed very keen to go anywhere and Melksham was unknown as an airfield, so another day in London seemed like a good idea. Our accommodation was reasonable and on the 24th of August, we finally went to Paddington, got on a train, and after a few changes reached Melksham railway station, from where, via service transport, we booked into the R.A.F camp and discovered that its official designation was No. 12, School of Technical Training.

Because we had not seen any Routine Orders for weeks, it was not until this point that, metaphorically speaking, our noses were rubbed on Air Council Instructions and various other orders, that it became clear we were now redundant as aircrew.

Chapter Thirteen

MELKSHAM

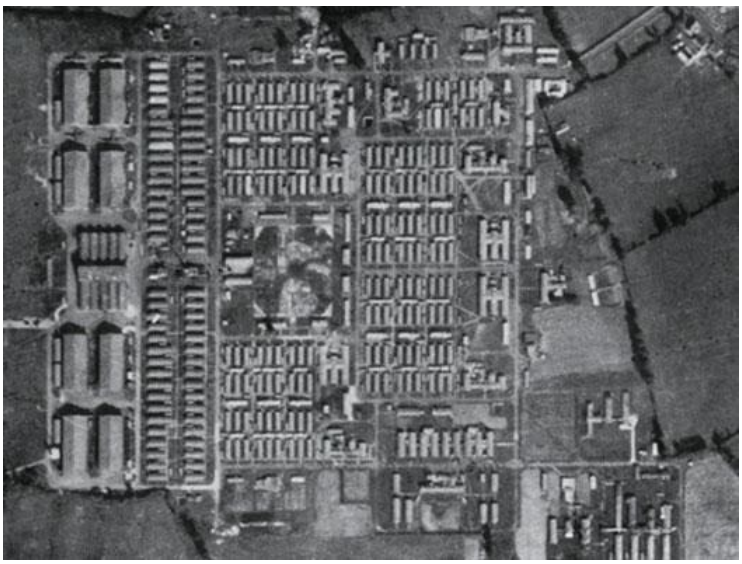
Clipped Wings

It was the A-bomb that caused it! “It” being the sudden loss of interest by the top brass of the RAF, in retaining the services of expensively trained aircrew and denying to them, the thing they had most wanted to do since they had reached their teens, namely fly. August 9th 1945, was the day the second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan and very quickly afterwards, the war in the Far East came to an end.

Within days of the acceptance by the Japanese that they had indeed been defeated; signals, undoubtedly planned and probably drafted, well in advance, were sent down the chain of command, to appear on the notice boards of R.A.F. Stations all over the world. Despite the phraseology, the simple message to most of those who wore flying badges was, “For you, the days of flying are over!”. A parody of the phrase which, particularly if shot down over Europe and captured by the Germans, some would have expected to hear.

However, this was different. it was coming from “our side”. By early September, thousands of aircraft were grounded for good and tens of thousands of aircrews, a large proportion of them non-commissioned, were painfully aware that they had now become ‘penguins.

I arrived at No. 12 School of Technical Training, otherwise known as R.A.F Melksham, at the very end of August and found a bed in Hut W.7.



Melksham was almost entirely a hutted camp, work on which had commenced just before the beginning of W.W. 2. and it was first occupied early in 1940. It was sited to the South East of the town and was approximately a square, each side of which was a half a mile. It was built on farm land, to a ‘grid iron’ road plan with a slight slope. The Admin. Section and various Messes were at the top. At the lowest level were some six or eight hangars, well set back from but parallel to the Trowbridge Road. In between these two areas were huts which accommodated permanent staff and trainees and other huts which were used for instructional purposes. A wide variety of Technical Training was carried out at the camp over a period of some 25 years, ending in the 1960s.

I believe that some 600 or so redundant aircrew Warrant Officers and Senior N.C.O's were posted to R.A.F. Melksham to be retrained as Flight Mechanics (similar schemes, for various trades, operated at other training establishments). The thinking behind this was probably that, in general, aircrew were younger than most of the men who looked after the aircraft which they wanted to continue to fly. The dedicated ground crews, by reason of time served and their age, would be released and retrained aircrew could take their place.

I was one of this 600, (sounds like "The Charge of the Light Brigade") and I came in by train with a lot of others from the East of England. We were a very mixed bunch, in rank, aircrew trade, age and experience. The range of rank was from experienced Warrant Officers through to relatively 'green' Sergeants and all aircrew trades were represented in our ranks.

Most of us were in our very early twenties, some a little older and a few were considered to be 'old men' as they were in their early thirties. Scattered among us were ex-Prisoners of War, who had survived being shot down, others in this large party had been wounded and quite a few of the group had been decorated for gallantry. All of us, whilst pleased that the shooting war in all theatres was over, never-the-less felt that we had been - dare I use the word? - 'cheated', by not being allowed to fly until our demobilisation was due.

Quite naturally, on arrival at R.A.F. Melksham, we headed for the Sergeants Mess and I think I ate there for a day or so. From then on, we were referred to almost contemptuously, by the permanent staff, as "Redundant Aircrew" Yes, it was a statement of fact, but it was surprising how much venom the training personnel could put into those words.

We were quickly shown the door and sent to eat in a hastily re-opened cookhouse, which had, at one time been used by trade trainee airmen. We had no Ante-room or Bar in which to pass the time, not even something as simple as a dartboard, let alone anything so grand as a billiard table.

In a phrase, we were treated as "Second Class N.C. O'S" by the occupants of the permanent staff Sergeants Mess. Attempts by some of the more militant members of "No.2 Sergeants Mess" as it was grandly designated by the Station H.Q., to get a drink in the original Sergeants Mess were quickly thwarted by the permanent staff and the C.M.C. (Chairman of the Mess Committee) the senior Warrant Officer, banned any of us from entering the place.

Our accommodation surrounded the so-called No. 2 Sergeants Mess but the huts were very much more congested than we had grown to expect. (There was an Air Force scale of floor space allocated per person, according to rank - viz airmen 37.5 square feet [3.5 m2], including room for a bed, say 6 ft x 2.5 ft = 15 sq. ft. (1.4 m 2).

Thus, as senior N.C. O's, we could have expected to sleep about eight per hut, whereas thirty airmen were usually allocated to one hut - dependent on its size!

The next hut to ours was occupied by Air Women of the W.A.A.F, although a modest fence divided the intervening ground, there was a degree of intervisibility between the buildings and this provided some light relief.

It will be realised that neither side in this, so called, re-training programme was happy. The permanent staff had grown used to dealing with trade trainees straight from Recruit Centres whom they could chivvy and chase to their hearts' delight, whilst the young airmen were too frightened and inexperienced to do anything other than comply with whatever orders they were given.

The same staff were now confronted with a lot of disgruntled senior N.C. O's, some of them with more service than they themselves had seen. In our turn, we were not going to be pushed about by 'wingless wonders' and treated in the same fashion as they had treated their previous trainees. A Warrant Officer radio operator, Ernest Steele had begun to emerge as the leader of the aircrew and the stage was all set for a confrontation.

After a week or two, I changed huts to Z33 and it must have been about this time that it was decided there were enough redundant aircrew at Melksham to make up a course, as one day, we were told to report in the morning to the hangars at the bottom of the site. After breakfast we drifted down to start work. We walked and chatted in small groups and did the same as we returned again at lunch time. In general, we conducted ourselves as we had done over the previous months or even years but we were always on time.

Almost immediately there was a problem. The classes were mainly taken by junior N.C. O's or civilian instructors. The former were out-ranked and the latter non plused! In an effort to find a solution, the Senior Training officer decreed that we must all cover our rank badges when under instruction and, we were issued for arm bands for that purpose. However, whilst our ranks were hidden, our aircrew trades were not, so that this move did little to off-set the unease of the instructional staff.

Later, after a relatively short time the pantomime was extended. Further orders were given that, until the end of working day, all redundant aircrew were to cover up their badges of rank. It was becoming obvious that a serious attempt was being made to humiliate us and reduce us to the pliable state of the trainees who had gone before us. W.O. Steele went off to the Training H.Q. to protest. For his 'sin', he was formally put in charge of all of us and told that, in future, he would be held responsible for us and, in an effort to 'divide and rule', he was offered membership of the permanent staff Sergeants Mess. He accepted his post as something of a challenge but said "No" to the invitation, as he was not going to be split up from his friends.

Ernie was quite a character. He had flown for a long while as a wireless operator and could give a hair-raising account of his time as a prisoner of war. If pressed, a somewhat different picture emerged. It appears that he was in the crew of a Halifax which was shot down, toward the end of the war in Europe, whilst on 'ops' against a Rumanian target. The crew abandoned the aircraft and shortly after he had landed in the River Danube he met up with his Flight Engineer, in the marshes adjoining the river. They evaded capture for quite a few days but, when they found themselves looking down the barrels of several rifles, they surrendered. He told us that the river was slow, muddy and dirty and we found that whistling 'The Blue Danube', was enough to make him see red! Altogether, it appeared he was only a P.o.W. for about nine days, which terminated at the end of the war.

Before that, during a raid, the Pathfinders, when putting down markers, accidentally placed some inside the prison camp and the lads had put them out as fast as they could. On return he had found out that they had extinguished the target indicators for the prime target, thus he had had another escape.

Among others on the course whom I came to know was a Sergeant Pilot, Joe Connaughton, whose home was in Aberdeen. Also from the same city was a Flight Engineer known as 'Jock' Fowlie, he had come from a Lancaster squadron and had been the 'screen' engineer in the training of another on the course, a chap called Hull from Ryde on the Isle of Wight. Another ex-Lancaster Flight Engineer with whom I became friends was Mike Cole. Other engineers were Ridge, Wood and Williams and among the gunners was a chap called Baker from London.

Our Flight Mechanic training was expected to follow the usual system of progression for about sixteen weeks. A week at a time being spent in a section dealing with a specific aspect of the Flight Mechanics' trade. The introductory week was when one was supposed to file away at a couple of chunks of metal, until they fitted into each other, with tolerances of a few thousandths of an inch. It can be imagined that this sort of pointless exercise was not well received by lads who had no wish to develop such a skill.

Then the Training Staff struck again by issuing denim overalls, "to protect our uniforms". Within a week we were commanded to wear them, not only during training periods, but throughout the whole working day also when going to and from work. We complied, since it was just as easy as carrying rolled up overalls and we continued to make our way, in small groups, to and from the instructional hangars.

Week by week we were told of the insides of carburettors, the workings of magnetos and "introduced" to the four-stroke cycle (I must have done it half a dozen times before) - it was all 'old hat'. We were allowed to strip and re-assemble simple engines and even run up some, after we had hand started them by swinging the training type of propellers with which they were fitted. It was all a fantastic waste of time as I, and many of the others on the course were already A.C.1 Flight Mechanics. We had been mechanics before we had qualified as Flight Engineers and, I suppose, about a fifth of the redundant aircrew were from that category. We had probably forgotten more about engines than some of our instructors, particularly those who dealt with us during the early weeks of our stay, would ever know.

As a schoolboy style, “jolly jape” to play on our instructors, one of the lads decided to puncture the insulation of the high tension lead on the spark plug test rig by putting a series of pin holes along its length. To various instructors we complained that there was a problem with the rig. One by one they were persuaded to demonstrate it, which they did by holding the lead onto the end of a plug and, at the same time, giving a rapid crank on the handle of the magneto used for testing. Where-upon, each gave themselves a high voltage electric shock. As they writhed and swore, those of us gathered around muttered that perhaps the insulation was breaking down, then slid away to have a laugh and find another victim.

One of the Flight Engineers was, I believe, called Bailey, who had a Distinguished Flying Medal. He had been decorated for bringing his damaged bomber back from the centre of France, after his skipper had been killed. With another member of the crew, he had managed to get the captain from his seat and, mainly by reference to the artificial horizon, he had flown the aircraft back to base. I seem to remember that he told me he had concentrated on the ‘little aircraft in the glass case’ (the artificial horizon) because, if he had thought about the size of the plane he was flying, he might have got worried. As he had done so well, he was advised by air traffic that he could attempt a landing and, with the aid of another member of the crew, he succeeded.

Another Engineer was Ted (Toby) Ellis. He was one of the older men among us (aged 32). We met by accident a few days after I had changed huts, so I moved into the same hut as Toby (Z27), since we both came from Wimborne, knew the same people back home and, despite the difference in our ages (I was 20), we got on very well together. He had been grounded with ear trouble, after doing twenty-two operations over Europe, with a Canadian crew.

Toby and I used to thumb lifts to Wimborne due to the non-existent direct public transport services. However, we did not do it together. He favoured going out of the main gate and thence, via Devizes to home through Salisbury. I favoured leaving by the back entrance to secure lifts via Westbury and Warminster. Sometimes I then went home via Salisbury and Ringwood and, if a suitable lift came along, I went straight from Warminster through Shaftesbury to Wimborne. I once went that way, from the back gate to Wimborne in just over the hour, in a car driven by a lady who was in a hurry to get to Bournemouth.

After we had been at Melksham for two or three weeks and possibly incited by Ernie Steele, we started an agitation for “V.J. Leave”. This was a 72-hour pass granted to the Forces to celebrate the ending of the fighting against the Japanese. Most of us had already had the leave, but the trick was to secure it again, before our documents came through to the Station H.Q. Thus, we all nipped off on a long weekend. (We worked the same trick on our next posting!).

Quite early on, I had sampled the station cinema for evening entertainment. As far as I can recall, the programmes were reasonable, but there were occasions when the noise of rain drumming on the roof detracted from the quality of the screen performances.

Once I went to see the Rev. Roe, the Minister of the local Congregational Church, who had, until the late 1930s been at Wimborne. My mother had ‘advised’ me to go to see him and, since it was tantamount to an order, coupled with the fact that someone from the Church might have written to tell him I was in the area, I felt it prudent to do so. I may have visited at an inappropriate time but I realised the evening was not going too well, left early and did not return.

Having got us into overalls for the working day, it was decided at Training H.Q. that we ought to march to and from work. Our response was to go along in groups of ten or twelve at fairly short intervals, with a consequent hold up of movement throughout a large part of the camp. Ernie was called in and told to stop us doing so but, at the same time, organise our movement in groups of 50 -60 men. In due time this was sorted out and when we were given the order to ‘March at Ease’, we felt able to sing as we marched along, as on a route march. We knew some very salacious songs and I learned some new ones. Thus, particularly in the early morning and at other times as we moved about, the camp rang to our lusty singing of ribald ditties. Such things were alien to the permanent staff and again Ernie was summoned to H.Q. to be told to cut out the rude songs.

After about a day of quiet we decided that we would sing on our return from work and we continued next day. There are many good hymns in 4/4 time and these were the ones we chose and I have a strong recollection of marching off to work in the mornings singing such stalwarts as “Onward Christian Soldiers”.

It did not last long. Ernie was soon back at H.Q. to be told to stop the hymns. However, to counter that instruction, he complained to the Padre that we were being denied the right to sing hymns, which undoubtedly put the poor chap in a bit of a quandary. Words must have been said in high places, since we did not stop completely but were not pursued. A stand-off situation existed, but, on each side, the point had been made.

It will be realised that we had very little respect for authority and it could not have been easy on the training staff with such a number of rebels on the camp. For obvious reasons, quite a lot of the aircrew smoked and some smoked very heavily. Consequently, since they could not light up in the hangars, there was a constant stream of people heading for the toilets.

To overcome this problem for the instructional staff, a system of “Smoking Sticks” was introduced. Each instructor was issued with a wooden batten about a foot (30 CMS) long and 2 inches (5 CMS) wide, painted in bright red and yellow stripes, which was given to anyone wanting to go outside for a smoke. Persons found without such a stick were to be put on a charge. The answer to this restriction quickly emerged. Within a day, one or two sticks had disappeared but there were quite a large number of aircrews outside smoking - and they were all displaying the necessary smoking sticks. The missing battens had been cut in half lengthwise and the two halves cut into three pieces. In fact, it was only a bit of a batten that was on display, from a top pocket, a trouser pocket or sticking out between overall buttons. Authority had again been outflanked!!

I do not recall any organised games on a Wednesday afternoon and often the majority of the course either went to bed or to the city of Bath, which was not too far away. One or two hitch-hiked homes. Sometimes a cross-country run was arranged, the route for which usually went along the North bank of the Kennet and Avon Canal. That was the place to stop, have a smoke and then return to camp. The Corporal P.T. Instructors knew what was happening and wisely chose to ignore it.

As we started on our 'run', our way out of the camp took us past a number of airframes which were collected at the south side of the hangars. Among them was a 'Botha' or 'Beaufort' and a 'Manchester'. The latter was the fore runner of the Lancaster Bomber, but with only two engines it was somewhat under-powered. With others, I sometimes crawled around these airframes and one of my friends removed a small compass and took it to London, where he sold it for use on a sailing boat.

Quite early on, I went into Trowbridge on a Wednesday afternoon and bumped into Gilbert Wort who, back in the early 1930s, had lived in Wimborne and had played in the dance band run by my Uncle Fred. He told me that his wife ran a sweet shop in Melksham to which he invited me. This was an offer which, in view of sweet rationing, I could not refuse.

I went along as soon as I could and met up with their daughter, Betty, whom I remembered from their days in Wimborne. We went out together many times to dances and the cinema. At the accommodation to the rear of the shop, I enjoyed home comforts and a supplement to the sweets ration. In the jargon of the time, I had "got myself organised".

To increase my mobility for trips out, I acquired an old bicycle. I locked it up on camp and checked it thoroughly prior to each weekend, when I rode it into Trowbridge, where I lodged it at the railway station for safe keeping before thumbing my way home. If Toby and I got back to Trowbridge at the same time, I invariably got back to camp before him since he had to rely of an indifferent bus service. The bicycle was also useful for my trips into town to the Wort family sweet shop and for evenings out with Betty to dances in Trowbridge at a Forces Canteen or the Town Hall.

Elsewhere in Melksham R.A.F. camp there were quite a few sailors on some electrical course. It transpired that one of them came from the Wimborne area and, from time to time, we went out together in the evenings. On those occasions he usually travelled on the cross bar of my cycle. There was quite a pantomime at the end of the evening since I always had to take him back to his hut and help him undress! It's not quite as bad as it sounds. Ordinary sailors wore jerseys and the best one was skin tight. In fact, they were so tight that not only was it difficult to put one on unaided, it was almost impossible to get out of one without help. Consequently, I had to go back to his hut, when the rest of the sailors were asleep and get him out of his jersey. Occasionally a sleepy matelot would make some ribald comment as, in the dim light, he saw a RAF sergeant stripping one of his "shipmates". (The naval types still adhered to their nautical terms)

At some time during the autumn of 1945, one of the early post-war international football matches was arranged. To that end a team which I believe was called the "Moscow Dynamo" came over but I have no idea who they came to play against. The

football fans among us wanted to listen to the commentary but since it was an afternoon fixture, there did not seem much chance of that being possible. Out of the blue, a radio set was obtained and fixed up in a quiet spot in the corner of a hangar. From there, a team of runners kept everyone up-to-date with the progress of the game.

One of our diversions when in the training hangars was to blow up condoms using a compressed air line. I was impressed by the size to which they could be inflated and the latent strength of the latex. They were then hit from bay to bay or allowed to be blown around the hangar (usually pursued by an instructor) As a variation and if access could be obtained to welding bottles, they were made lighter than air and allowed to float up to roof level where they remained for quite some time, to the annoyance of the training staff.

As mentioned earlier, No.2. Sergeants' Mess was opened up to keep us out of the permanent staff mess and after some delay a few easy chairs appeared. However, the catering level was substandard. For example, in one week, approximately two thirds of the meals contained sausages in some form or other. It began to be hinted that someone in the catering stores was working a fiddle with Harris's factory up the road at Calne. We decided that, since the food was so poor, we would boycott the dining area and then Ernie went off to complain that, as a result of their diet, his men were so 'weak' they could not go to work. He virtually declared a form of 'Hunger strike', but there was also another reason for our lack of interest in the Mess food.

The re-use of the kitchen area after a period of closure and the consequent increase in their food supply, had encouraged cockroaches to multiply so that the place was infested with them. They were all pervasive and food put in the servery was often invaded by them before we got to it. Again, Ernie went off to complain. This time to the M.O., on health grounds. It worked. We were given an extra-long weekend from Thursday until Monday, whilst the whole of the premises was disinfected, deloused or fumigated.

The staff should have realised that their attempts at treating us in the same fashion as earlier intakes of trainees, was not working. However, they still kept trying. Our two chief protagonists were a Squadron Leader whose name was, I believe, Rowe. He was, I think, O.C. Training Wing. If there was a Wing Co. in charge, I have no knowledge of him. The side kick of the Squadron Leader was a Warrant Officer Ptolemy who bore a resemblance to Sydney Greenstreet, a film actor renowned for his portrayal of sinister characters in films during the 1940s. We regarded both these individuals as menaces.

The Squadron Leader took to standing on the verges where the large groups of overall clad, redundant aircrew, would have to pass and salute him. We had wonderful sport over this childish ploy. As soon as he was spotted ahead, the party would be given the order to wheel down the first available intersection and he would be left standing. Sometimes, if there was no turning, the order to the party was, "About Turn" and we would retrace our steps before we reached him, leaving him standing and fuming several yards up the road.

On occasions we got the order for the drill practice of addressing an officer, except that he may have been fifty yards ahead. This meant that the party would halt, salute for a count of 5, pause for the same length of time, salute again and then about turn and retrace our steps! In order to try to get us to salute him, he would move from one place to another, but he was always spotted ahead and evaded. He was made to be a laughing stock.

I believe the Station Commander of RAF Melksham between 1944 and 46 was a Group Captain Lister, but I never saw him during my three months stay. He certainly did not intrude in our battles with the training staff and seems to have 'kept his head down'.

It could not go on and one day we were all paraded on the square and W.O. Ptolemy was instructed to read to us. It transpired that we were literally being "Read the Riot Act', probably extracted from The Air Force Act or some similar piece of legislation. We put it down to a desperate measure to hide their inability to cope with seasoned airmen but some good came from it. The Squadron Leader was posted and the Warrant Officer was less confrontational. In addition, someone must have realised that, on some of us, the training was being wasted and all the Flight Engineers were invited to accept postings straight away. A few accepted the offer and then, within days, found themselves posted to R.A.F. stations both in the U.K. and abroad.

Toby Ellis and I agreed that, since we were barely 50 miles (80 km) from home and had been hitch-hiking home every weekend, there seemed no point in leaving the place any earlier than we had to. Thus, we went to Training H.Q. and convinced them that we felt it would be better if we did the full refresher course. To our surprise, our argument was accepted, although we were Flight Engineers and we were allowed to stay on in a much more congenial atmosphere.

Toward the end of the course there was training on stripping and reassembling both in-line and radial engines. Eventually the opportunity came to run-up Hurricanes and Spitfires which had been relegated to an instructional role, perhaps due to some damage rendering them no longer airworthy.

I remember seeing one Hurricane with the engine roaring like mad and with hot coolant and steam pouring from it. A Flight Sergeant from the training staff was dancing around and shouting that the occupant of the cockpit would be put on a charge - presumably for damage to the aircraft. When the trainee eventually managed to shut down the engine and climb from the aircraft, he was told what was going to happen. He merely said that he was an Air Gunner and not an Engineer. He added that, in his opinion, being a trainee made such a charge impossible but if it was proceeded with, he would make the point that, as a trainee, he should have been better supervised. No further action was taken and another victory had been scored over the Training Wing. Had he been relatively new to the service, unaware of his rights and lacking in confidence to assert them, it is quite likely the outcome would have been very different.

As the end of the course drew near some attempt was made to find out our preferences for postings. This sort of thing does not necessarily work to one's advantage and there was a diversity of views as to the right course of action. Toby

and I felt it best to leave well alone, as a posting closer to home seemed unlikely. The Scots took the view that, if they opted to be sent to somewhere in the South of England, then perversely, they would be sent to Scotland which was really what they wanted. Ernie Steele, who really wanted to get back to flying, also made a bid for the South of England. We all left RAF Melksham on the 19th of December, to spend Christmas at home.

In general, I I found life at No.12 S of T.T. had been a laugh. I was a willing participant in the baiting of the training staff. Years later, when the exploits of those imprisoned in Colditz were made known, it was quite easy to see how the guards there, were goaded by men who had been trouble makers in other prison camps and, by whom, brinkmanship was taken to a fine art.

At the end of our leave, quite a little gang of us, including Toby, wound up, still together, about half a dozen miles down the road at R.A.F. Keevil, where I booked in on the 28th of December. However, Ernie soon committed himself to a term of service, sufficient to ensure that he would resume his aircrew duties and shortly after, another of my friends was posted to the Middle East.

Being the senior man in the hut I managed to wangle myself a small room at the end of the hut and, although this was rather small, we put two beds in it and I shared this with my friend. In an attempt to get the temperature up a little we purchased a small electric fire element, which we plugged into the light socket (very unofficial indeed). We left this on when we went to work and locked the door. One day when we returned and opened the door we were met with a little smoke and investigation showed that the draught caused by closing the door had blown the flex onto the element and the cotton and rubber covering had burnt away - no damage to Air ministry property but it could have been nasty.
We were not sorry to leave Melksham and awaited our postings with interest. “

W.O. Roy Palmer was sent to Sealand nr. Chester, where he worked on rusty Jeep engines before he was transferred into the stores. After several moves, he was released from the service in September 1946 and subsequently served for thirty years, as an officer, with the Air Training Corps. – GLP

(See Appendix Two for some other views on RAF Melksham)

Chapter Fourteen

KEEVIL

Sitting it Out
No. 61, Operational Training Unit.

With Toby Ellis, I reported as instructed to RAF Keevil - N0. 61, Operational Training Unit, on the 28th of December 1945. We obtained service transport out from Trowbridge and after about 4 miles (6.5 km), in the Sergeants mess, we met up with friends from RAF Melksham.

61, O.T.U. was tasked with converting recently qualified pilots into competent Spitfire pilots. It was quite a dispersed station, although parts of the accommodation were only about 0.25 of a mile (0.4 km) from the village of Steeple Ashton. The airfield was over a mile (Approx. 2 km) from the Communal Site (Comm. site) and it was in a valley, although some 250 feet (76 m) above sea level.

It was necessary to sign the arrivals book in the office of the Adjutant, in the Station Headquarters. This, we discovered, was beyond the main gate which was at least another 0.75 miles (1.25 km) further on. Contemplating walking this distance 4 times a day and an unknown distance round the perimeter track to our ultimate destinations - the squadrons, was a far from inviting prospect. In the event, on signing the book we were sent off to the cycle store and there we were each issued with a ‘sit up & beg’ service bicycle.

Before we left the Headquarters building, we were allocated sleeping accommodation. When it got to my turn, I was told that there were no more bed spaces for Senior N.C.Os. After some delay, I was asked whether I would consider sharing a hut with the Service Police - the dreaded people I had spent most of my service life avoiding! Since it was “Any port in a storm”, I agreed, but privately felt I had drawn the short straw.

When booked in, Ernie Steele again ‘tried it on’, by mentioning that we had not had our V.J. Leave and our request to go home and return again in the New Year, met with no resistance. No doubt the whole place was stood down and we quickly disappeared.

On returning in the New Year, we drifted down to the Technical Wing HQ where we were allocated to various units around the airfield. Toby went with others, to No 2 Squadron and some went to No. 3. However, Sgt. Baker was retained at Tech. Wing, where he became a clerk and since according to Ernie the seat of his pants would quickly become ‘shiny’, as a result of sitting down all day, he became known to us all as “Shiney Baker”.

I was sent, on my own, to the Communications Flight in the south -east corner of the airfield. It was suggested that this would be ideal for me as I had had experience of

radial engines. There I found four aircraft (all with radial engines) and a small number of airmen and women.

I soon found out that the advantages of being with the service police out-weighed the disadvantages.

Taking the latter first - their hut was on the main site for airmen and was not far from the main gate and Guard Room, which meant a cycle ride of at least 0.5 mile (0.8 km) to the Sergeants' Mess for meals etc.

However, there were several advantages. The majority of the police were Corporals and I found them to be very friendly. Because they worked shifts, there was always plenty of food on the go, both in the hut and in the Guard Room. Each morning, I was awakened with a mug of tea and, during the evening, the duty police would always supply me with cocoa, toast and various things to spread on it!

Nearby was the camp cinema, for which the police were never expected to pay - officially they were there to make sure the airmen were not misbehaving. Since I was 'well in', I used to spend time in the projection room and quickly became able to deal with carbon arcs, pick up the warning and action 'spots' as they flashed on the screen and cope with linked changes etc. The duty projectionist usually welcomed company and assistance.

The Sergeants' Mess was on the Communal Site and consisted of three large parallel Nissen huts. Each of the two outer ones was divided into half and the centre one contained the toilets, bar area and behind that again, the kitchens. The latter supplied the dining room which was in the rear half of the left-hand block. The front was only used occasionally, mainly for dances and other social activities. The bar served into the ante-room which was to the rear of the right-hand block and contained easy chairs, sofas, the radio-gram etc. In the front section was a darts board and a billiards/snooker table.

The centre of the domestic side of the station was the Comm. site which was approximately 0.25 of a mile (0.4 km) from Steeple Ashton. Here were located the airmen's mess. the Sgts. Mess, NAAFI, bath-house and various domestic stores. Some 200 yards (180 m) away and about half way to the village was the Officers' quarters and their Mess. In the opposite direction at a distance of 3/400 yards (say 300 m) was the accommodation for all ranks of the WAAF. As already indicated, the huts for the airmen were 0.5 of a mile (0.8 km) away from the Comm. site, in yet another direction and not far from the Guard Room and the main gate. The huts for the Senior N.C. O's were located on "Site 9" a triangular shaped piece of land about 0.25 miles (0.4 km), by road, from their mess but only about 150 yards (140 m) by way of a fenced footpath between a copse and a field.

The first buildings inside the main gate, other than the Guard Room, were the Station H.Q Buildings, outside of which was the flagpole for the Ensign. From there on, the road sloped downward for 2/300 yds (say 250 m) to the hangars, workshops and airfield. The latter was in the RAF Standard pattern of three intersecting runways and an encircling irregular perimeter track. Anti-clockwise round the perimeter from Air Traffic, one first came, on the left, to the south end of the North/South runway

(not often used). Almost immediately on the right was the entrance to the Communications Flight dispersal.

From there to the dispersal of No. 1 squadron, it was another 0.5 mile (0.8 km) down a slope and past the end of the East/West runway. Further on round the north end of the prevailing wind runway, and past the other end of the North/south runway a distance of say 0.75 miles (1.2 Km), was No. 3 Squadron. Approximately 0.5-mile (0.8 km)1 form No,3 and between the ends of the East/West Runway and the Southwest end of the prevailing wind runway was the dispersal of No. 2 Squadron. Which, in turn and completing the circuit of the airfield, was some 0.75-mile (1.2 km) back to the Air Traffic Control building. Apart from “Shiney Baker” who, as I have said was kept at the Tech Wing H.Q., my friends were sent to either Nos. 2 or 3 Squadrons.

I had the shortest cycle ride to work as I had only to reach the Comm. Flight in the south-east corner of the airfield. This flight consisted of just four aircraft and a handful of ground crew, including some WAAF. Mechs., to look after the routine servicing. The aircraft were two British made Miles Masters and two American aircraft, built as T-6 Texans but known to the RAF as Harvards. Both aircraft types were originally second level training aircraft but, at No. 61 O.T.U., they had a variety of duties.

Initially I was given two Masters and a Harvard to care for on the Comm. Flight. After a month or so I was moved round the airfield and given three Spitfires to play with. Our part of the station had a dozen of them and my rank enabled me to take any of them up to full throttle, if necessary for a ground test. Only the veteran ‘Chiefy’ would normally have done so but he delegated the job to me. I got on well with the WAAF and Airmen and the rank difference was disregarded. To be honest, I had a whale of a time. I was highly organised for ‘home comforts’ in Melksham during the evenings each week and a mere 45 miles from Wimborne, to where I hitch-hiked as necessary, at weekends. For quite a while, I even managed two 48 hrs passes a month, as I had made friends with the Tech. Adj., a Flg. Off. who hailed from Poole. He had a car and Wimborne was on his way home. When he was going, he would ring my unit and clear me and, of course I had another when the unit 48 occurred. Obviously, others who had been with me at Melksham did not have such good fortune.

The aircraft were used for ferrying pilots, fetching and carrying between stations and, to some extent, in the early training of pilots, freshly qualified at flying schools, including Cranwell. When so used, the pupils occupied the front seats and learned the technique for landing a Spitfire which had a long nose and, in consequence poor forward and downward visibility. They also made dual and solo landings without using flaps, in order to get them acquainted with the higher approach and landing speed of the Spitfire. It was expected that they would be among the first of the post war flyers and ultimately become fighter pilots.

Flt. Lt. Mackenzie in his book (“Hurricane Combat” Wing Commander K.W. Mackenzie. DFC., AFC. Wm. Kimber & Co.Ltd..1987) says “...*The Harvard Mk2’s which we used for dual instruction were noisy beasts, but fun to give dual in. Not as good as the Masters. but robust and easy to maintain”. Later he admits* “We retained

the Harvard's for dual instruction and I began to appreciate this aircraft because it demanded a high standard of discipline and awareness at all times, and contributed to our training role immeasurably without us being truly aware of it".

"Mac" as he was known to a lot of us, was aware that the North American Mustangs - P.51 fighters - built to British specification and fitted with a Packard-built Rolls Royce engine, were being phased out from one of the squadrons on the station and crated for return to America. Before they were all replaced by Spitfires, he decided, *"...to find out how long one of them could be flown with all the long-range tanks fitted." He continued, "Carrying some food and a thermos in the roomy cockpit, which had arm rests and other amenities not associated with British fighters, I flew the length and breadth of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales for some six hours or so. The engine never missed a beat, but I became quite exhausted sitting in one position for so long; - a memorable flight."*

The wing span of the Master was 35 ft (10.3 m) and a its length was 30ft (9m). In general, it was somewhat superior in performance, to the Harvard which had a span of 42ft (12.8 m) and length 29ft (8.8 m). They were approximately the same weight, both were fitted with radial engines of broadly similar horse-power, but, of the two, I think I preferred working on the Master with its Mercury engine, rather that the Pratt & Whitney powered Harvard. The latter had an Inertia Starter mechanism.

This consisted of a motor controlled by a three-position switch, which spun a heavy flywheel to a very high R.P.M. When this reached maximum, (by which time there was a high-pitched scream coming from under the cowlings), the switch was moved in the opposite direction so energising an electromagnet. This moved the starter into engagement with the engine, which was turned over by kinetic energy from the speeding fly wheel.

Masters

I think it could safely be said that my previous experience, which was the original reason for my attachment to the Comm. Flt., was of very limited value in my work on Masters and Harvards.

Harvards

Life on the Comm. Flt. was quite easy. The day began with a Daily Inspection (DI) of each aircraft by a fitter and rigger. The former had to check over the engine and propeller, top up the engine oil and, after turning the prop over by hand to make sure that no oil had leaked into the bottom cylinders, do an engine run. During this, the engine was allowed to turn over quite slowly until the oil pressure - initially very high due to the viscosity of the cold oil - had warmed sufficiently for the pressure to fall and then the revs. could be increased.

The engine was run at various throttle settings; the magnetos were tested and the propeller exercised by selecting coarse and fine pitch. All the while, one had to keep an eye on the instruments to make sure they were OK. Both types of aircraft required external trolley accumulators (Trolley Acc.) for starting but, as I mentioned earlier, the Harvard had an inertia starting mechanism which I had not met before.

The rigger (the terminology reflected the days when the old biplanes had rigging wires to ensure that the wings were correctly related to each other and to the airframe) checked over the wings, fuselage, tail plane and also the undercarriage.

Once the checks had been done, it was necessary to sign the Form 700 to certify that the machine was fuelled up and airworthy. Electricians, Radio and Instrument Mechanics came up from one of the other Squadrons since the unit was not large enough to require the permanent attendance of such people. Their checks were relatively straight forward and then they too signed the F.700. When all the trades had signed that they were satisfied, the senior N.C.O. cleared the aircraft to fly. From that point on, the signature of the pilot was required before he climbed into the aircraft and he then became responsible for it.

On the unit was a WAAF engine mechanic - ACW. Blackwell, and two WAAF riggers. We got along quite well and tended to ignore the differences between our ranks. Indeed, Blackwell was going out with an Officer who was an instructor in one of the squadrons on the other side of the airfield and they eventually got married.

Usually on a Monday morning the aircraft would be given a Weekly Inspection which was basically an extended D.I. We all had a good look round but the main task was to drop out the filters. Those in the lubrication system should have caught any evidence of metal from bearings etc., and those in the fuel system should have intercepted foreign bodies before they reached the carburettors and perhaps restrict one of the jets, leading to a loss of power. In that system also was a water trap which had to be emptied. (Occasionally a small quantity of water from condensation in the tanks was carried along in the fuel flow). These jobs were messy and one could get cold fiddling around. The WAAFs were not too keen to do them, but it did not worry me. Despite the weather being quite cold I enjoyed my time on this little unit.

The weekly routine of the station was - two and a half days of flying on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday morning, with the afternoon, notionally, given over to sports activities. Then, flying again on Thursday, Friday and Saturday morning, unless the unit was on a long weekend, in which case flying ceased early on Friday afternoon so that everyone could get away.

Just as when we were up the road at Melksham, Toby and I hitch-hiked home but again we went our separate ways. My ploy was to go on my cycle to Westbury, where I left it at the railway station. To save even more time, I found a route, via lanes and cart tracks, finally passing a large property at Heywood, about a mile (1.6 km) from Westbury. A short walk from the railway station then put me onto the main road through the town and, given good fortune, a series of lifts to Wimborne.

As before, the return trip was made on a long-distance bus from Wimborne which wandered about North Dorset - Sturminster Newton, Marnhull, Gillingham and a bit of Wiltshire-Mere, Zeals and the villages of the Deverill valley.

Very soon after I reached Keevil I discovered that the manageress of the N.A.A.F.I and one of her staff, both came from Wimborne. The former was Gladys Wadham whose family lived in the area near to the Eclipse Works. Her brother was married to Eileen, the aunt of John Loader and, between them, her brother and father ran a small holding. Purely by chance, among the girls on her staff was Joyce Oxford, the sister of Fred Oxford who I had known from childhood. He had contracted tuberculosis whilst serving in the army and had died about the same time as I reported to Lord's Cricket Ground in October 1943. It was strange that, on this one RAF station, were four people from the same small Dorset town.
Once again it appeared that I had struck lucky. Since, for the whole of my stay at Keevil I was 'organised' - Gladys could always be relied upon to supply me with grub whenever I needed it.!

The food in the Sergeants' mess was quite good but, after the high tea about 5-30, should one feel hungry during the evening, there were only a few leftovers from previous meals during the day, on a help yourself basis. Quite late in the day, it was sometimes possible to get the odd sandwich at the bar, but they were often in short supply.

However, although as a senior N.C.O, I was not officially allowed in the NAAFI, this did not prevent me from using the back door to reach Gladys' office, where, particularly on return from Wimborne late on a Sunday evening, she would usually provide me with bacon and eggs, together with all the trimmings. As I ate, I could then update both her and Joyce on events back home.

I usually told them when I was going home and, on most occasions, I would be given several pounds of slab cake - the one containing all the fruit, including cherries - with instructions to split it between our two families in Wimborne.

Also, on the N.A.A.F.I staff were two sisters from Trowbridge. They were both good dancers and I sometimes met them at dances in the town. The younger of them was stone deaf but it seemed that she could pick up the beat of the base drum, mainly through the floor and her feet. It was noticeable that she was more confident when dancing nearer the band. Toward the end of my time on the station, they both left and I occasionally saw the elder one working in Woolworths.

After I was demobbed, both Joyce and Gladys married. The former had met up with an engine fitter - Joe from Jamaica and, when he was released, they finally made a home in Bedfordshire, where he continued working on aircraft. Whilst I was there, Gladys was already friendly with the camp plumber and, when married, they lived at Yatton.

Somewhen in the mid-1950s, on a B.S.A Bantam 125 c.c. motor cycle, I went with Diana, back to Keevil which was, by then, closed. As I drove round to the former Sergeants' Mess, I was startled when one of the windows was opened and someone shouted, "Hello Len, what the blazes are you doing back here?". It was Glad's

husband - the camp plumber, still employed to keep the place serviceable for the Polish refugees who were housed there. He was able to tell me of the final days of the station.

The Sergeants' Mess was virtually our home during most evenings and, for me after the 10th of February 1946, it became even more so. On that day I moved from the hut I had shared with the service police, to No. 9 site, much closer to the mess, although still about 200 yards (say 200 m) from it. In particular, Hut 505 was exclusively for aircrew N.C.Os.

Although the site was a lot closer to the Comm. site and even connected to it by a shortcut along narrow path at the edge of a field, there was no hot water and thus washing and shaving took place in the Mess and baths/showers were taken on the Comm. site. All of us did little more than clean our teeth at No. 9 site in the morning and effected our main ablutions after tea.

In the evenings, quite a few of us got together in the billiards room of the mess and, whilst some played at the tables, the majority of us took part in a continuous darts tournament which went on for night after night. It was a sort of 'knockout' thing so that the better one played, the longer one remained at the board. At that time, I was at the least an average player - but not anymore! In those days I tended to play for No. 19 - at the bottom of the board. Being on the short side, it was easier than going for No. 20 at the top!

One evening each week we congregated round the radio in the anteroom to listen to Charlie Chester and others in a programme called "Stand Easy". There were usually quite a lot of laughs in it and, each week they had a topical chant such as: " Down in the jungle, living in a tent. Better than a prefab - no rent!"

I had given up smoking cigarettes late in 1943, but now decided to try smoking again. so, I bought a pipe. This made me thirsty and I took to having half pints of shandy. However, although it took a few years, I eventually gave up smoking altogether.

There were only eight of us in Hut 505 and it was something of a den and eventually degenerated to become virtually a 'grot'!

One of the engineers had a motor cycle which was his pride and joy. This was kept in the hut and, after almost every weekend away, he would strip bits off it and, during the evenings, generally tune it up, ready for getting away for the following weekend. His maintenance work sometimes involved the use of power tools which he scrounged from the hangars or station workshops. Unfortunately, the electric supply

to the huts was intended to cater for lighting only but we already ran several electric fires and, in consequence, the fuses sometimes blew. We tried various methods for solving this problem and, despite the risk of an overload and wiring failure, the most effective was to increase the capacity of the fuses. At one time during our experiments, we succeeded in crossing wires to the point where we could get half the lights on at full power or all of them at half power!!

The number of occupants in the hut meant that we all had a good space in which to spread our bits and pieces. In addition, we had aircrew lockers, the name given to double fronted wardrobes in which the top half was made of wire mesh. In these generous items of furniture, it was possible to store all sorts of items, both legal and otherwise. They also enabled us to contrive small, exclusive alcoves.

Apart from my civvy bicycle, my next most valuable possession was a small, mains operated, radio. This I locked away during the day and only plugged it in during the evenings when I clipped it to a permanent aerial which I had installed among the roof rafters. One of my minor luxuries was to lay in bed and listen to the American Forces Network (AFN) which broadcast, at quite a high power, from several stations in Germany. It was through listening to this radio that I first became acquainted with the melody, “Out of my Dreams” from the musical “Oklahoma”, since it was used as the signature tune of a late-night music programme. I still find this piece of music very evocative.

Another of my luxuries was a homemade bed warmer which consisted of a metal frame surrounding an electric light bulb. Placed in the centre of the bed and switched on an hour or so before retiring, it was quite efficient. One night there was a snag. Somehow, I was late going to bed and I had left my pyjamas against the surface of the lamp. Thus, when I went to go to bed, I found that they had become charred. If I had been much later, it is possible that my bed would have gone on fire and that would have been a difficult event to explain!

Our beds were seldom made up for inspection - only airmen did that. Indeed, if an inspection was likely to take place, we usually had a good warning. This was very valuable as it meant we could put the motor cycle outside and take some steps toward removing from the floor, the evidence that our sleeping quarters was doubling as a workshop.
The only time we stripped our beds was when we managed to get hold of clean bed linen. In fact, on one occasion I discovered that I must have been sharing my bed with a family of field mice, since there was a nest in one of the ‘biscuits’ - 2.5 x 2.5 feet (Approx. 1m) squares, packed with horse hair, three of which formed a mattress over the springs. On another occasion I found that some food I had put into my small haversack (ready for use on the way home the next day) had been partly eaten by mice, despite it being hung up. The intrusion of wild life into our living quarters was the natural outcome of being on a dispersed site.

Quite why we were given so much licence I have often wondered. It was particularly welcome after our stay at Melksham where so many attempts were made to return us to some degree of compliance with service standards.

With so many Senior N.C.O.s on the station, the duty of Orderly Sergeant (O.S.) did not come round very frequently. Part of the duty was to call at the Guard Room to check on the defaulting airmen who had to parade there, in full kit, each morning and evening. Also, on taking over the duty at 6 in the evening, one had to check that all was well with any airmen in the cells. I remember the horror I felt when presented with a book, in which to sign that there were “X” number prisoners - ALIVE!

The Orderly duties were, on most occasions, something of a shambles, particularly when conducted by aircrew. This was frequently the case as there were many newly commissioned trainee pilots in the Officers’ Mess to do the Orderly Officer (O.O.) chore and plenty of redundant S.N.C.O aircrew for Orderly Sergeatnts (O.S) One of the first jobs was the lowering of the Colour from the flag pole in front of the station headquarters. The casual approach to this ritual, sometimes went something like this: -,

O.O. to O.S. “Do you know what to do?”.
O.S. to O.O. “Sorry Sir, Drill is not my strong suit!”.
O.O. to O.S. “Nip over and have a chat with the Police Corporal by the pole, he’s probably done it dozens of times before”.

On return - The O.S. briefed the O.O. and the Colour was ceremonially lowered!
I did not mind being the Orderly Sergeant during the early part of the week but I had a strong aversion to any intrusion into my weekends away from Keevil. If Station Routine Orders indicated that such a thing was possible, a substitute was easily arranged. Among my friends there were quite a few Scotsmen who, in addition to being unable to get home for weekends were usually short of cash to spend at the mess bar. A day’s pay, 10 shillings (50p), was the standard rate for one of them to do my duty! With beer at 1 shilling (5p) a pint (Approx. 0.5 L) and cigarettes at the same price for a packet of 20, both sides of the bargain were satisfied. I was neither a beer drinker nor a cigarette smoker!

For several months it seemed, a sergeant armourer ran the mess bar and I thought of him as a fixture but toward the end of March, Toby Ellis told me that he was going to take over the job.

About once a month a mess dance was organised and sometimes, they fell into quite a state of disorder. Never-the-less we all had a good time. As I have said, I was not a beer drinker but, on such occasions, I felt it was OK to have some whisky, which, at the same price as a pint of beer, did not seem to be unreasonable. I well remember that the first time I directed a soda siphon at the amber liquid nestling in the bottom of a glass. I pressed the lever far too hard and the inrush of soda-water took the scotch with it, onto the bar top. I was much more cautious the next time!

At these evenings, there was an opportunity to dance with WAAFs and, in the ante-room the bar stayed open almost indefinitely. Also, the cooks made various goodies. Not all the lads attended these functions and, being me, I felt that my friends back in the hut might appreciate some grub, so I used to take them plates of sausage rolls, tarts, cakes etc. To do so, along a narrow path, in the dark and with a fair amount of alcohol on board, was quite a feat. However, my timing sometimes meant that they

had to be roused from slumber to take advantage of my efforts and, in consequence, they failed to show me the gratitude which I felt was warranted!

During one evening, the Flight Sergeant who was in charge of the Service Police got hold of the can used for watering the various plants in the mess and put into it, the contents of any beer glasses which were unattended. Those who accepted his offer of drink were surprised when he poured them one from the spout of the can which he had kept hidden.

Not to be outdone, I collected remnants from the 'shorts' glasses and put them into a bottle. The mixture tasted good to me and so I took it back to the hut but the lads, when wakened, were quite rude about it and very rude to me! At the time, I could not understand the reason for their abuse but, when I tried it again the next morning, I realised that their colourful descriptions of the contents of the bottle, were absolutely accurate!

Not surprisingly, there were never enough WAAFs who wanted to attend dances at the Sergeants' Mess and, to overcome this shortage, it was the practice to send "Passion Wagons" to the local towns and villages to collect female company.

As a result, I met up with a girl who was somewhat younger than I was and, from time to time, I went out on my bicycle to meet her in Trowbridge. As far as I can recall, this was in April and May, since I can remember hearing nightingales singing in the woods at West Ashton, as I cycled back to camp late at night. I have no recollection of her name, I never went to her home which was, I believe in the east of Trowbridge. In fact, the only thing I remember with any certainty is that she worked as a repair hand in one of the linen or carpet factories in the town, where she sewed in loose strands of material whilst still on the looms.

I suspect that we parted because I took over running the mess from Toby Ellis, who had done it for about six weeks and was needed on his Squadron.

Altogether, I only supervised the mess for approximately a month and, because Whitsun occurred about the same time as we would normally have held a 'thrash', I did not have to organise one. However, the rest of the job had to be dealt with, such as trips to Trowbridge to Usher's Brewery to get hooch for the Mess. There was also liaison with the Catering Stores and, in particular WAAF Corporal Farley. About a year later, it became obvious that she was pregnant, as her uniform began to show signs of being too tight for her and she had to let the belt out from time to time.

I slept behind the bar, in a small room which doubled as an office. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, t was more convenient than going back to the hut on No.9 site quite late each night. However, more importantly, it was a question of the security of the stock, for which I was responsible and which, even in those days, was worth quite a lot.

The senior Technical Warrant Officer - WO Earle - was also the Chairman of the Mess Committee (CMC) and he often chose to use my room at the back of the bar, both as his office and for consorting with one of the WAAF sergeants, on whom most of us were far from keen. At that time there was a concern about the number of

persons being killed in traffic accidents and there was a national poster campaign running. One of the displays showed a skull with the caption “Keep Death Off the Road”. Unfortunately, WAAF Sergeant Buckle had a rather gaunt look and she was very soon known to us as, “Keep Death Off the Road”.

The CMC also had a room elsewhere in the mess, out beyond the kitchen area, but, perhaps because of the proximity of the bar, the two would often come to my room, just before I closed the bar down. Then, despite his room out the back, they displayed a reluctance to leave. Eventually I developed a totally unsubtle strategy which ensured that they had to quit. I just got undressed! The WAAF sergeant sometimes waited to see if I would take off my trousers and, when it became obvious that this event was imminent, she would leave in a hurry. The CMC would then follow and I guess they resorted to the room at the back of the mess, which I am sure was not as warm as mine but that was their rotten luck!

At least once a month there was a General Meeting of all Mess members, when all aspects of the running of the place were discussed. At one of these, when the arrangements for the next Mess Dance were up for discussion, we were surprised when WAAF Sgt. Buckley proposed that some of the airwomen should be barred from attending. When asked for names, she mentioned several, including a LACW. Jackson, whom she alleged was,”. in the habit of draping herself over the furniture in a far from ladylike fashion”. One of the gunners, Bill Hill, who had a distaste for the proposer and was not noted for tact, told her that, in his opinion and probably that of most of the others in the mess, what Jackie displayed was far superior to anything she had to offer and the matter was laughed away!

Actually, I had worked with Jackie on the Comm. Flt. and, although she was somewhat saucy, she was reasonably good looking, enjoyed a laugh and was good at her job.

The second most senior man in the mess was W.O Alfie Ede who, sometime during his career had been awarded the Air Force Cross. He was the station test pilot and he had tested every aircraft after it left the hangars, following repairs or routine servicing.

There were other warrant officers in the Mess and among them was a chap called King who flew one of the Miles Master, air to air target tugs for the benefit of the more advanced students. His drogue operator was another W.O, who was an ex-W.Op, Jock Reid. I had become quite friendly with the youngest of the three WAAF Sergeants, Margaret Scott, who ran the Station Workshops and we had been having a good time at one of the Mess dances. Late in the evening, “Jock” reached the mess somewhat tipsy, having been out on the town all night, and he then made a play for Margaret. I was a little put out by this and, having established that he had been drinking only beer, bought him a double scotch, because I had heard that mixing drinks was a good way of getting someone very drunk.

He disappeared and Margaret and I, having finished the evening in the Mess, made our way down the road to the WAAF quarters. The next morning at breakfast, King said his drogue op. was missing and his bed had not been slept in. I said I had last seen him in the ante-room and, at first when we looked, the place was only in the

chaos left from the night before. However, one of the searchers found him, still asleep behind a settee. So much for mixing drinks.

Margaret Scott, as I have said, was the youngest of the WAAF sergeants in the Mess, but I am sure that not many knew her age. She had joined up as soon as she had reached the age of sixteen but had succeeded in convincing everyone that she was eighteen. She had served for some time on balloon units and had been rapidly promoted, so that, when we met, she was barely nineteen years of age - very young indeed to be a senior. N.C.O in the WAAF.

Whit Sunday 1946 was on June 9th, the station was 'stood down' for a very long weekend and I found myself as the 'Second in Command' of No. 61. O.T.U.! The C.O. for the period was, I believe a Flight Lieutenant who had fallen for the job of Station Duty Officer. The Sergeants' mess dance hall was used to house a Fire Picquet, a Duty Crew - in case an aircraft had to use the field in an emergency and we had a cook to look after us. We only saw the officer once a day but had a phone number for him if needed. Since there was nowhere on the station where he could get food, I can only assume that he lived out - or more probably- had got himself 'very highly organised', somewhere in the neighbourhood.

As for those of us left in the Mess, there was little to do but eat, sleep, read and drink. The kitchen was always available for food and I kept the bar open all the while. The airmen who bedded down in the dance hall enjoyed all the facilities of the place and, despite being left on the camp, we all had a good time. Among the treats we enjoyed was our own version of 'egg-nog', which we made up with sherry, beaten egg and sugar.

Running the Mess was not difficult but I was not keen on the late hours, and, in particular the tradition that the senior member present could, if requested, authorise the bar to remain open. Those taking advantage of this were expected to place tips for the barman into a glass every half hour, but it became known that I did not like late night customers and extensions seldom took place. I particularly disliked Sunday evenings. As most of the Mess members went off at the weekends, both Saturdays and Sundays were usually very quiet. However, this all changed about nine o'clock on Sunday evenings when the lads began to return. Most of them, apart from wanting a drink, also wanted something to eat. I usually got the cooks to organise sandwiches of cheese or sliced meat from lunch time but sometimes these things would run out and the kitchen was invaded to see what could be found.

I think I got home only once during the four or five weeks that I was running the Mess and, even then, it was mid-week. The Mess Treasurer, Fred Tarn, an ex-Air Gunner, agreed to stand in for me and guard the stock - after all, he too had an interest in its security!

The CMC was not too keen on me, mainly by reason of my ill-disguised distaste for his lady friend and in his capacity of Tech. WO, he also knew there was a need for an engines man on No. 1. Squadron. I was taken off my mess duties and I handed the job over to a Sergeant Hull whose home was in the Isle of Wight. I moved my kit back to No. 9 site but instead of returning to the Comm. Flight, I went to the Spitfire Squadron where I was to spend the rest of my time at Keevil.

About this time, in the mail rack, I found a letter from my former girlfriend back home, suggesting that we should attempt to resolve our differences. Thus, it was that, probably late in June, we ‘picked up the pieces’ and I reverted to dashing off to Wimborne, as fast as possible each weekend.

At No. 1 Squadron - Identification letters KR - I was given three Spitfires to look after. Initially, I thought, ”So much for the Tech. Wing appreciation of my radial engine experience”, but, within a day or so, I was revelling in the power of the Merlin in-line engines and having a great time.

The ground crew was under the control of Flight Sergeant Peary and he too was not keen on me. Without being precise, he made it clear that he had been in the RAF for a very long time and did not appreciate having an upstart like me around the place. We were almost the same rank but it had taken him years to reach senior N.C.O. status but I had done so in less than three years’ service. Within a few weeks he became even more put out when, since I had been in the rank a year, I was awarded a crown to put over my three stripes.

This made me a Flight Sergeant and thus we both now held the same rank although, clearly, he was by far the senior, in fact, he always swore that he only had three figures in his service number, which, incidentally, I never believed!

No. 1 Squadron was where the budding aviators from the Advanced Flying Schools made their first intimate acquaintance with the legendary Spitfire. As I have mentioned already, they were given some dual instruction on the Harvard or Master in order to get them orientated in respect of the local area and, by being denied the use of flaps, they became used to the higher landing speed associated with the clean lines of the fighter.

The broad outline of the servicing of the aircraft was much the same as on the Comm. Flight. There were more aircraft but then there were more airmen to look after them. By far the most significant change was the need for the Spitfires to be very rapidly turned round after each sortie, i.e. refuelled and, sometimes work to be done to rectify snags which were spotted on the “Between Flight” inspections or reported by pilots on landing. The engines seldom caused any problems and the snags were almost always on the airframes side - a tyre in need of replacement or perhaps one of the other tradesmen needed to sort out a radio or change an oxygen bottle.

The pupils were either relatively newly commissioned Pilot Officers or equally recently qualified Sergeant Pilots. Both groups were somewhat self-important as they had been singled out for fighter training and did not readily establish any rapport with the people who serviced their aircraft, strapped them in, waved them off and were there to help them out after each sortie.

Of the two, the officers were the snootier, since they were the first post war trainees to go through RAF Cranwell. I do not now recall any of their names, but I have often wondered how many of them, if any, reached Air Rank. It has always seemed to me likely that at least one of them could have been good enough or lucky enough to reach the rank of Air Marshall - plus or minus a ring or two!

In theory, a wheel change meant that the aircraft had to be jacked up and clearly, to do such a thing between flights was unrealistic. When a change was required on account of wear or “creep” (the tendency of a tyre to gradually rotate on the wheel, as it initially scuffed the runway on landing) the airframe mechanic usually trundled a fresh wheel out and then shouted to all and sundry “Two Six on ---[aircraft identity letter] !!”. When interpreted, this meant that he/she wanted help from a large number of people. Whilst they were gathering, the split pin and large nut retaining the wheel to be changed, would be loosened. When enough people were assembled, they would all sit on the wing on the opposite side to the wheel to be removed and the aircraft could be balanced on the sound wheel, long enough for the other one to be removed and replaced. It was then only a question of replacing the retaining nut and split pin.

This procedure was quite effective and speedy but the pupils did not take kindly to the peremptory shout of “Two-Six” from an airman or airwoman and their subsequent marshalling by ‘other ranks’!! It was not unknown for Instructors, if they were out on a dispersal, to lend their weight for a wheel change and, being ‘led by example’ as it were, this had a mollifying effect on the ruffled feathers of the pupils.

I do not now remember many of the names of the ground crew with whom I worked. Those which come to mind, apart from F/Sgt. Peary are “Taff” Meyrick a rigger who, being Welsh and having quite a good voice, could produce a passable impersonation of the “Ink Spots” a close harmony group which was popular in the 1940s. In ‘civvy street’ he was a telephone engineer in South Wales.

One of the engine chaps was called Weston. His nickname was “Whack” and he came from the Liverpool area. I remember having a go at him one morning when he was late coming down to the Squadron. He explained that he had been hut orderly but that, when he should have left, Perry Como (at that time an up-and-coming singer) was on the radio, and he “just had to stay and listen to him!! “.

Another, was Corporal Gilbert, who was in charge of the airframe mechanics. He was a quiet type and eventually was made up to a Sergeant and moved across the airfield to one of the other Squadrons. Later, he managed to scrounge a flight in one of the Comm. Flight aircraft but the trip ended with a crash in the low flying area, which put both the occupants into hospital for some while.

A WAAF - ‘Mickey’ Flynn - also comes to mind. She was an airframe mechanic and adept at getting fellows to do her work. This was particularly so when she realised that a wheel required changing. It usually resulted in an instant ‘migraine’, a collapse in the crew room or, if she could achieve it, a return to the WAAF site by motor transport, leaving the rest of us to deal with the wheel change.

There were several other men and women on the Squadron and, among them, was another engines man, an Irishman whose surname escapes me, but I will return to “Paddy” again later.

At the squadron location, apart from the huts, were three circular dispersal pans. Two of these were on the airfield side of the perimeter track and were separately connected to it.

The other one was on the outside of the track and joined to it via an access through the various Nissen huts - Squadron Office, Pilots' crew room and toilets on one side and ground crew room and stores on the other. Each pan was the base for four Spitfires and the major item of equipment on them was a 'trolley-acc'.

This was a substantial box on a pair of car wheels. The box contained a large pack of heavy-duty accumulators, from which led a thick electric cable. On the top of the box was a small petrol-engined generator which kept the accumulators charged. This weighty contraption was wheeled to each aircraft as necessary and, when the electric cable was plugged in, power was supplied to the starter motor. Adequate power could not be obtained from the relatively small internal batteries of each aircraft. The petrol for these engine/generators was only of M.T quality and not the high-octane variety used in the aircraft. These small items of equipment appeared to have an almost insatiable 'thirst' but in practice, they were a useful source of additional fuel for the vehicles privately owned by both the air and ground crews.

Once the aircraft had taxied away, all that was left was a 'trolley-acc.', about half a dozen wheel chocks, together with a heap of canvas cockpit and engine covers. The people who saw them off, then took the opportunity to sit in the crew room or, if the weather was fine and warm to lay out in the sun.

Such relaxation seldom lasted long. There was the fuel bowser to be got from the M.T. yard ready for re-fuelling, coolant and oil supplies to be obtained from the station workshops and sometimes items of spares from the servicing hangars in the same area. The average flying sortie was for little more than an hour and the crews were expected to be on hand to marshall their charges back into the dispersal pans, thus respites were relatively brief.

Life at all the flying unit locations was quite spartan. In the winter months, the huts were heated by coke-fired stoves (no coal was available) and, in consequence, they were not always easy to light. One crude but effective method was sometimes employed by the ground crew. The coke was laid on a small quantity of wood which had been scrounged from around the Comm. Site and onto it was poured some oil mixed with a little petrol.

From the stove a trail of petrol was laid across the floor, up the wall and out of the window. Everyone stood outside and a match was thrown at the end of the trail, where-upon the flame almost instantly followed the trail and an explosion occurred inside the stove. Heavy oily black smoke filled the room and despite the open windows, it took a while to clear. The curved ceiling which was painted a cream, gradually became sooty and the evidence remained long after the airfield ceased to be operational. It was still there in the mid-1950s when I went round to the old huts, with Diana. The danger of our actions never crossed our minds.

Once the fire was going well and the coke had become red hot all through, it was ideal for toasting the bread which most of us brought along from our respective messes. I still have (2000) the wire toasting fork which stood me in good stead at that time!

Prisoners-of-war, the camp tailor was a PoW. (A former Air Gunner in the German Air Force, he had been shot down during the big raid on Coventry (15-11-1940) He was a good tailor and he had a lot of latitude on camp who carried out various unskilled duties such as road sweeping, cleaning and gardening on the station), he also dealt with the toilets on the Squadron dispersals. These toilets were earth closets using buckets, which were emptied once a week. It was advisable not to go to the toilet when the sanitary squad were at hand. If, on opening the trap door at the back of a cubicle they noticed a posterior, they had no misgivings but merely shouted, “Hold it!” and the occupier of the seat was expected to do just that, until a loud clang below him indicated that the bucket had been emptied and replaced. The distances around the airfield, the relatively small number of persons to be catered for at any one site, not to mention the gradients; precluded drainage pipework being installed and, in any event, for much the same reasons, the units were not supplied with piped water.

The absence of a water supply, meant that there was nothing to drink out on the Squadrons. This deficiency was overcome by the provision of a twice daily mobile canteen service operated by two civilians. I have no idea if it was their own enterprise or whether they worked on behalf of some organisation. To my eye, at the age of twenty, the man and woman looked quite old but, with the benefit of hindsight, I expect they were in their fifties.

The canteen vehicle was quite large and, in the main, only hot chocolate was available. This was usually dispensed by the lady but it was made, in jugs by the man, who brought it to a froth with a wire whisk. He was also the driver of the van. Until this time, although I was familiar with cocoa, I had not come across the more refined ‘chocolate’. It seems to me now, that, even in the hot weather, it was still hot chocolate which was on offer. I believe that there were a few edible items on the van but, since sweets and most other things were rationed, I do not imagine that there was much to tempt us.

Squadron Leader J.H. (Jimmy) Broughton was the Commanding Officer of No.1 Squadron which dealt with the Ab Initio conversion of ‘sprog pilots’ into Spitfire pilots. His Flight Commander/Instructors were Flt. Lt. K.W. Mackenzie. DFC., (referred to irreverently as “Stuttery Mac”), Flt. Lt. Costain and Flt. Lt. ‘Tony’ Gaze an Australian. Since they were ‘permanent staff’ we got on quite well with them, although, I thought S/Ldr. Broughton felt it necessary to maintain his distance from us. Before retiring from the RAF, he commanded a squadron of Meteor jet fighters during the unrest in Malaya in the 1950s.

Mac was a prisoner-of war in Germany for several years and, as a device to secure early repatriation, he had simulated various nervous traits, including a very severe hesitancy in his speech. Unfortunately, this self-induced defect did not leave him when he had been repatriated to the U.K. Never-the-less, he had managed to persuade the medical and other relevant Air Force authorities, that he was still competent as a flier and they had allowed him to return

to flying duty as an instructor. The fact was that, once at the controls of an aircraft and totally alone, his stutter left him and his speech was absolutely clear.

This idiosyncrasy also persisted on the ground. Anyone talking to him on the telephone when he was in a room alone, always knew if someone had entered the room, as his stutter immediately returned.

Of the other two Flight Commanders, I particularly liked Flt.Lt. Costain.
As was usual on Air Force stations, Wednesday afternoon was set aside for sporting activities. At Keevil this applied, in the main, to the pupils rather than the permanent staff.

Thus, we tended to do odd jobs on the unit, go back to our huts and get our heads down or, in some cases, go out to Trowbridge or other nearby towns.

Mac was an enthusiast for rugby and I believe that at weekends he turned out for Bath. However, on Wednesday afternoons, car races around the perimeter track were sometimes organised, since there were several officers who owned rather powerful vehicles. Mac was behind these events; indeed, he later organised motor racing within the RAF.

An idea of the sort of line up of vehicles can be gauged from the following Mac. at that time owner a 1932 Continental 2 Litre Lagonda - all metal Low chassis. It was a powerful beast and gave out a delightfully throaty roar from its exhaust. S/L J.H. Broughton, drove an Alvis 2-seater- Silver Eagle. and Flt. Lt. Tony Gaze joined the others in a Streamlined Alta. The lads at the various squadron dispersals, lined the perimeter track, to cheer their respective officers.

As a Sergeant, I was unofficially given quite a lot of freedom. For example, the drivers of all RAF vehicles were supposed to be licensed and checked out by the M.T section and I was neither, although I had frequently driven around the fields of Barnsley Farm (near High Hall) , on a tractor which my farmer friend owned However, if some more coolant was required from the station workshops and there was no driver available for the tractor, I was the person usually persuaded to collect it. To do so, the empty drum was loaded onto a bomb trolley which was hooked on to the tractor. I then drove about a mile round the perimeter track. Off-loading the old drum was no problem but lifting 40 gallons of coolant (say 180 litres) - approximately 400 lbs (180 kg), was a heavy weight for me to raise, albeit only about 1 foot (0.3 m), in order to put it on the low trolley. When one is only just turned twenty years of age, thoughts of a hernia or some such thing is not uppermost in the mind and I was more interested in chatting to Sgt. Margaret Scot, who ran the Station Workshop.

From time to time, I also used to drive the tractor to tow the petrol bowser to the aircraft for refuelling between sorties. The bowser was essentially a 1000-gallon (4500 litres) tank, mounted on a chassis over 4 motor vehicle wheels, with an engine driven pump in a compartment at one end. Later we were supplied with a superior refuelling tanker. It had a much larger tank - possibly in the order of 2,500 gal., which was placed on the chassis of a 3-ton truck. The cab and tank were quite high off the ground and there was a normal gear box. It went an awful lot faster than the old

tractor and I really enjoyed myself driving it, particularly on the run from the hangars, down the slope to the dispersal.

On one occasion, at the top, I stopped to give a lift to some of the lads and they stood on the long narrow platforms either side of the tank. I put my foot down and was going so fast that I nearly missed the turning to the squadron buildings. I turned in very sharply but forgot about the high centre of gravity and felt one side of the vehicle lift. On looking in the mirrors, it surprised me to see all the lads jumping off and running away. They told me afterwards they were convinced I was going to turn the tanker over and had realised it would only require one spark to set off the high-octane petrol in an almighty explosion. I think I learned a little about driving from the experience!

Of course, sometimes various incidents affected the aircraft. I can give a few examples but I am not sure in which order the events happened.

Once I recall, that an aircraft from our unit was overdue and, when told of our worries, the Control Tower assured us that no emergency calls had been heard over the radio. The fuel tank capacity of a Spitfire was 90 gallons (410 litres) and, at an approximate consumption rate of a gallon a minute, the maximum duration was deemed to be to be in the order of 90 minutes and we were sure it was down. After nearly 1.75 hours, a Spitfire appeared overhead but we were unsure that it was ours. The aircraft joined the circuit, approached, landed and, in due course it stopped but failed to clear the runway. The letters on the side identified it as being our missing Spitfire. The pilot had got it down and had then run out of fuel. The tractor was sent out to tow it back to dispersal. It would appear that, almost by chance, the trainee pilot had flown at economical cruising conditions and had finally drained all the fuel from the tank.

On another day, about noon, I dispatched KR-D, which was one of my aircraft and then went off to the mess for lunch. When I got down to the perimeter track on my return, I noticed a Spitfire had stopped two thirds of the way along the runway in use. As I looked across, I became convinced that it was ‘D’ and when I got to the dispersal, the lads were lining up to tell me of the trouble which was about to hit me. It appeared that when the aircraft had joined the circuit, the pilot had heard a loud explosion in the engine which, after making a lot of noise, had then stopped completely. He had called the tower and, using a short circuit, had managed to land on the runway in use. When the air traffic control vehicle had recovered the pilot, it was noticed that oil was pouring from the engine cowlings.

It was assumed that somehow, I had omitted to put the locking wire on the oil filler cap, with the result that vibration could have caused it to work loose, leading to the loss of oil and a catastrophic lubrication failure.

When ‘D’ was finally towed into the dispersal bay, I went out to it and, with some misgivings, took off the cowlings on each side. I first looked at the oil filler cap but the locking wire was still intact and I was pleased to see that the cap was in place. However, there was oil all over the place and I then saw a hole in the side of the engine crankcase where a connecting rod was poking through. I had a look at the other side and saw a similar situation.

Ultimately, when the aircraft had been towed to the hangars and the engine removed and stripped down, it was discovered that one connecting rod had broken and part of it had penetrated the engine case. Within a few seconds, the resultant imbalance must have caused a fracture in the other rod. Thus, happily, I was totally exonerated. In the Merlin engine, the ‘big end’ of the connecting rod from one side is split to form a fork and a plain rod from the other side fills the gap. The two rods thus work together on the same ‘throw’ of the crankshaft. The fault in the ‘con rod’ must have originated during manufacture but had remained undetected and it could clearly have cost the life of the pilot and/or the loss of an aircraft.

On another occasion, whilst the early morning Daily Inspections were being carried out all over the station, we heard across the grass, the engine of one of No.2 Squadron Spitfires being run up and then shut down. However, this was followed by an engine roar which went far beyond the normal run up range. As we looked across, the aircraft was already in a horizontal position although its wheels were still against the chocks. As we watched the tail rose higher, bits flew off the propeller as it struck the ground and as the engine stopped, the Spitfire ended up with its tail high in the air, balanced on the spinner of the propeller.

We saw an overall clad shape clamber from the cockpit and slide, over the top of the engine, to the ground. Later we discovered that, on raising his left hand to switch the engine off, the person doing the D.I had caught his sleeve in the throttle lever and dragged it all the way up to maximum power. However, the thing which amused us more was the fact that it was the same chap who, at Melksham, had caused a furore when the Hurricane on which he was doing an engine run, had gushed out boiling hot coolant and steam.

If one of the pilots reported an engine irregularity when flying, I was sometimes allowed to ground run a Spitfire to full throttle in an effort to trace the fault. I felt rather privileged, as this was usually done at the servicing hangars by very experienced senior N.C.O. fitters.

First of all, the aircraft to be tested was carefully prepared. Once it had been turned into the wind, chocks were placed both in front and behind each wheel. Webbing straps were passed over each wing tip and over the fuselage in front of the tailplane. The wings were then fastened down to weights made from oil drums filled with concrete and the tail was secured to a substantial metal bar let into the concrete of the hard-standing. The object of all this was to prevent the aircraft moving forward or nosing over as the power built up.

Once all this had been done, it was a matter of climbing in, starting up, hood shut, stick back as far as possible, brakes on and, after the pressures and temperatures had reached the level at which it was safe to open the throttle, press on! It was essential to do the test quickly in order to check as much of the engine and propeller performance as possible before the oil and coolant temperatures rose to an unacceptable level.

I have already mentioned the feel of the aircraft when run at about two thirds of its maximum power as part of the daily inspection. At maximum normal power, the machine shook violently, there was some buffeting of the control surfaces and, of

course, a very high noise level. After-all, the engine had 12 cylinders discharging through six, unsilenced, exhaust stubs on each side and it was producing something like 1500 horse power only a yard or two (say 2m max), in front of one.
The tendency for the plane to nose over put a great deal of strain on the tail lashings which always stretched quite a lot during the course of a test run.

Once, during a full throttle ground run, I glanced up from the instruments and through the windscreen I saw huts and scared looking faces in the distance, whereas I should only have seen clouds. I felt the 'spade handle' at the top of the control column being moved rapidly from side to side and, when I looked out to see if I could find the cause, I saw an airman moving one of the ailerons up and down and by frantically waving, indicating that I should close the throttle. When I quickly did so, I felt a big bump as the tail of the aircraft dropped quite a distance. After shutting down and having chat with the airman at the wing tip, I realised that the machine had achieved a take-off attitude and there was not a lot of space between the tips of the propeller and the concrete! Examination showed that some of the ropes lashing the tail down, had almost reached breaking point. I was a lot more careful after that and always made sure I had someone watching the tail.

There were other incidents in the time I was at Keevil and March 1946 seemed to have been a particularly bad month.

On the 13th a Flight Lieutenant Instructor was flying some three miles North of the airfield at about 11-30 am, when the cockpit hood blew off. He was only on a short air test and he landed the aircraft successfully, some 20 minutes after taking off.

The next day, a pupil, Plt. Off. K.G. Chapman was killed at the end of the runway, due to an error of judgement on his part. He was landing wide of the runway and, as a result of his attempted correction, [He used a coarse rudder action], the port wing stalled. The aircraft rolled over, crashed from 30 feet and burst into flames. He had flown Spitfires for less than 20 hours. I seem to recall from somewhere, that his father was a Police Superintendent, somewhere in the Midlands.

I was not on the station when these two incidents occurred because I had taken leave in order to be at home for my 21st Birthday, and, in particular, for a party on the Saturday.
However, I was deeply involved in the flying accident which resulted in the death of Sergeant A.T. Paramanathan during the afternoon of Friday the 22nd of March 1946. The details of this incident are recorded at the end of this section.

On the 25th of the month, Plt. Off. K.S. Marsh had an accident, again at the end of the main runway, early in the afternoon, after he had spent an hour doing aerobatics. He had over 200 hours flying time but had only flown Spitfires for 12 hours. It seemed that he had a heavy landing as a result of excessive speed. One of the undercarriage legs twisted and the other collapsed. He was "severely rebuked".

Throughout the Spring and Summer, I continued to get home, mainly leaving camp at noon on Saturdays but sometimes leaving at teatime on Friday. On some Sundays my girlfriend came back with me as far as Shaftesbury. She became friendly with Rose Randall who lived in Julians Road. The boyfriend of the latter at that time,

turned out to be Alan Stoneman and we had been in the same form at the Grammar School. We all went out together a few times and once, in the summer, we all went back to Keevil, where we parted company at the Sergeants' Mess.

During the week several of us from the mess, took advantage of the long evenings to cycle to some of the local pubs. A favourite watering hole was an inn at Bratton about a ride of 2.5 miles (4 km) but, before going inside, we usually rode on a little, left our bikes and climbed the hill over the White Horse at Westbury. From the top the view was quite striking and it was particular appreciated by some of my friends whose homes were in large towns and cities.

On the way down, we once used a new route and the ground became more and more boggy. Being a country lad, I merely jumped between the clumps of grass and kept going. Mike Cole, a Londoner failed to understand what I was doing and just pressed straight on, only to find his feet sinking into the mire. He then threw himself flat into the mud and, when I inquired as to the reason, he said he had heard that it was the right thing to do when faced with slime, quick sands etc. Clearly, he had over-reacted to a straight forward situation and he was most upset to be laughed at by a 'country bumpkin'.

At some time during this period, I attempted to get back to camp by using the train and cycling from Westbury. This proved to be unsatisfactory but paradoxically it worked to my advantage.

The train was very late - not an uncommon event and when I finally reached camp in mid-morning, I was officially absent without leave and was told to report to the Technical Wing, where I expected to be placed on a charge. Before doing all the paper work, the Tech. Wing Adjutant, a Flying Officer, wanted to hear if I had any explanation and I told him my story. He was disinclined to believe I had tried to get back via Bournemouth, Southampton and Salisbury, insisting that it was impossible. I got cross and virtually said," Look mate, I've just done it and become late in the process." I concluded by cheekily inquiring how he could be so sure that he was right.

In reply he told me that he had tried the route without any success and when I asked him where he lived, he told me that it was Hamworthy. It was at this point that my luck changed since, although I knew his name was Galpin, it was then I discovered that he was distantly related to our former next-door neighbours in East Boro. He said he had been forced to get a car (Officers don't thumb lifts !!) and he would willingly take me to Wimborne if our weekends happened to coincide. Sure enough, he regularly phoned the Squadron Office and arranged to pick me up. Now and again, if he was going on a Friday and it was obvious that there could be no flying on the Saturday morning, he would persuade Flt/Sgt. Peary to let me off and to turn a blind eye when I was missing the next morning.

One day, the site and sound of a Halifax bomber in the circuit brought us all out to see what was going on. A long low run in, followed by a gentle touch down, produced some favourable comments and the aircraft, left the runway to stop briefly near the Air Traffic Control Tower. We then watched as it taxied round the track to our Squadron and, as it passed, everyone was surprised to find that the person in the

captain's seat was a blonde young lady in the uniform of the Air Transport Auxiliary, the organisation set up to ferry aircraft all over the U.K. The pilots were quite remarkable individuals and they could fly every type of aeroplane in service. A pre-take-off check when parked cross wind at the end of the runway in use, followed by an increase in power against the brakes and the Halifax went away as smoothly and as relatively quietly as it had arrived.

Later in the year, I discovered from Routine Orders that there was a recruiting drive for 'Emergency' Teachers. In our location the recruiting procedure was being conducted at Bath and I thought I would have a go. In due season I went to Bath, had an interview and two or three short written examinations. At the end of the day, I was told that I had failed. So what? It was late on a Thursday and I gave myself an unofficial 48 hours pass (no paperwork) and went home to Wimborne.

Another time, in Orders I saw a request for "suitably qualified Senior N.C.O's" to volunteer for service in Norway, to assist in the post-war training of the Norwegian Air Force. The idea appealed to me and, as I qualified in all respects off, I went to the Tech. Wing to put in my bid. A day or so later I was called in by Flg.Off. Galpin who told me that the Tech. Wing Commander had put his veto on my application on the grounds that I was "too valuable to lose !!".

With the end of my service likely to be within the next year, I engaged myself in what was euphemistically called the Educational and Vocational Training Scheme - EVT Scheme for short. This got me half a day a week off the squadron and into an Education Section hut, where I took English and Maths. After many months and, toward the end of January 1947 I met up with a lot of others at RAF Wittering near Peterborough and there, over a period of several days sat a series of examinations for what was known as" The Forces Prelim. Certificate". At this time, success was the guarantee of admission to a university - I failed.

My main memory was that the ground was under about a foot of snow for the whole of the time I was there and, when not sitting an exam, I loafed around in the warmth of the Mess. On the way back to Keevil (via Wimborne!) I took the opportunity to pay a quick visit to Peterborough Cathedral but sadly, I can only recall the massive scale of the porch.

I then took further advantage of the EVT Scheme and became a keen carpenter during dark evenings. The instructor was a Sgt. Winter from Eastleigh who, as a civilian had worked at the railway repair workshops and, on his release returned there. Between us we secured worthwhile supplies of decent wood and, in particular some oak, when part of the mess was being refurbished.

Within the family, there are several items which I produced in 1946/7. There is a fire screen with strips of oak radiating from the centre of the base, across some ply wood, which came from the main plane of wrecked Horsa Glider. Somewhere there is a very square looking table lamp, two angular photo frames and I also made a circular coffee table and an ironing board. The latter subsequently broke into bits. Sgt. Winter made a beautiful bow-fronted sideboard from a large oak dining table which he and I caused to" disappear" from the Mess. His creation and mine were very carefully padded and wrapped, then, in service transport, sent to Trowbridge

railway station and thence to our respective homes. He even went so far as to fill his item of furniture with such tools as could be useful to him after his demobilisation.

There was a great tendency for things to ‘disappear’ and be ‘recycled’ For example - Mike Cole had a very old Austin 7 which he managed to persuade to take him to London and back at weekends. This car ran on petrol filched from the trolley accs., and the seat covers strongly resembled service blankets.
As I have mentioned earlier, Wednesday afternoons usually meant sports for the pupils and often a few hours off for the rest of us. However, as the middle of October approached, I heard from Flt. Lt. Costain that he had a special project in mind and he mentioned the liner “Queen Elizabeth”.

This vessel, although launched in the late 1930s was far from completed when war began in 1939. From 1942 she had sailed as a troopship and, after the end of hostilities, she had been completely refurbished to the civilian standards expected by the luxury market for which she was originally built. The maiden voyage of the Queen Elizabeth as a luxury liner, was scheduled to take place from Southampton on Wednesday 16th October 1946.

Flying has now become well-regulated but, immediately post war a lot more freedom of action was available. True to his stated intention, Flt. lt. Costain got me to get a Spitfire ready and said he was going to give the liner a bit of a send-off. There is no doubt that he did so, as I have many times seen the evidence on a newsreel film of the departure of the liner, in which OUR aircraft can be seen.

There was a constant decline in the number of airmen of all ranks as their demobilisation times arrived and, still on 9 Site, I moved into Hut 495. Later, when his companion left, I moved into a small ‘bunk’ at the end of the hut and shared the little room with Fred Tarn.

When his time came to quit the Service, he married the daughter of a builder in Midsomer Norton and I had the room to myself.

Things were quite lax and access to the site was not controlled. Most evenings, when one came back to the hut, there would be a lady’s bicycle outside the door of the ‘bunk’ on the opposite side of the entrance passage. This was occupied by a Warrant Officer and, if one was about early in the morning, the cycle was still there. I was never introduced to the owner of the cycle - she could have been a civilian or a WAAF!

At some time before Christmas 1946 there was an impromptu function in the Sergeants’ Mess, it was part concert and part social occasion. The RAF had several touring “Gang Shows”, mainly to entertain at airfields. It appeared that there had been some communication breakdown since, one evening a group turned up and there was nowhere prepared for its performance. For some reason they could not be accommodated in the Officers’ Mess but we quickly offered the party a night with us. A special mess meeting rapidly voted some funds to buy drinks for our guests and they, in turn, delighted us with some spots from their standard show and alternative items, some rather racy, but very much appreciated by the Sergeants’ Mess. The

oddity which I remember was a drum solo of The Warsaw Concerto, from the film ‘Dangerous Moonlight’!

I have since discovered that the drummer was possibly Peter Sellers because, during the war he was in one of the RAF ‘Gang Shows” and he could play drums. After the war, Peter Sellers became a comedian/actor who made a name for himself in the 1950s on the radio, in the off-beat buffoonery of “The Goon Show”. He went on to play comedy roles in several films.

During the early months of 1947 the weather was extremely bad as will have been gathered from my reference to the depth of snow at Wittering in north Cambridgeshire. Keevil, despite being further south and just off the western edge of Salisbury Plain eventually fared no better. At the outset, as there was only an inch or so of snow, flying continued but only after masses of men of all ranks had swept most of the snow from the runways and taxiways.

When the first severe weather warning was received, the aircraft which were always turned to face the prevailing wind, had all the engine and cockpit covers, together with their control locks checked. When there were indications that things were going to get worse, again all ranks were recruited to push all the aircraft on the station up to the hangars. Whilst the distance to push might have been shorter, No. 1 Squadron aircraft had to be pushed through about 6 inches (15 CMS) of snow and up a relatively sharp incline before they finally reached shelter. It all took a lot of effort and the Technical Wing rose to the occasion by supplying everyone with drinks of steaming hot Bovril as a sort of ‘Thank you” gesture.

As there were no aircraft to work on, we stayed around in our huts and in the Mess but everywhere it was very cold. The water in the fire buckets was solid right through. The only heating in the camp buildings was from coke burning stoves and fuel supplies had mostly frozen into solid masses. We broke up chairs to burn in the hut stove and one day when someone managed to get hold of some coke, it was lit with a Coffman Starter Cartridge.

This was a stick of cordite about 2 inches (4 CMS) round and about 6 inches (15 CMS) long. In a confined space cordite explodes violently but we were assured by one of our number that lighting it was quite safe. We were less than convinced when a high-pitched whistle came from the stove and then it was recalled that there was a hole right through the centre of the solid stick and it was agreed that it was probably the source of the noise.

The bakery at Lugershall which supplied all the service units for miles around ceased to function, food supplies could not reach us and we melted snow and icicles over our fire to have a wash - shaving was out! Then the camp water supply and the toilets packed up. It was at that point that we were told “You can go home, if you can get home and stay there till you get a telegram of recall”. Roy Hull set off for the Isle of Wight on his motor cycle and later told us how many times he fell off before reaching Portsmouth and the I o W ferry.

I got hold of Flg. Off. Galpin and we agreed that it was worth a try in his car and we even decided to attempt the road between Warminster and Shaftesbury. Apart from some sliding we did quite well until we reached the steep hill north of East Knoyle. At the top we turned through half a circle and came down backwards. It was thought best to use the lower road to Blandford but, even so, we repeated this trick on the last of the several tight bends near Childe Okeford.

On arriving at Wimborne, I found no one home and, as I guessed one of my parents might well be down the road at the Congregational Chapel (now U.R.C) I went along there and discovered my mother was in a committee meeting. When I went in to tell her I was home, one of the women, horrified at my scruffy appearance, yelled that I looked as though I had not shaved for a week and was quite surprised when I agreed with her.

It was several weeks before the recall instructions arrived but, since I was in Wimborne, I was not worried. I cannot now remember how we were paid during our absence from the station. It is possible that we were not, since there would have been no Pay Accounts staff on the Station to process the paperwork.

Once back at Keevil, the weeks of spring-like weather whizzed by and the prospect of leaving the Air Force loomed before me. I had no real desire to return to the Pearl Assurance Company I had left in 1943. I was aware that I would be given 56 days Demobilisation Leave and I hoped that I would be able to delay matters, in order to fit in a lot of swimming before starting any civilian employment. Thus, I ignored the fact that my Demob number had been published in Orders. However, I was not able to defy authority for long as, on the 18th of April, when I was cycling round the perimeter track, I heard my name on the Tannoy (RAF public address system) and a demand that I should go forthwith to the Station Headquarters. There the process of releasing me from the RAF was begun.

The next day, the 19th, I started to tour round various huts, hangars, offices etc., to collect signatures confirming that, as far as was known, I had nothing on my charge from each particular section. I collected my tool kit from the Squadron and, balancing the box on the handlebars of my cycle, took it back to the Tool Store. When I went to book it in, I was told, in no uncertain terms, that it had already been handed in and crossed off my charge. I protested that I still had it and showed the airman but he was adamant that he would not take it. So, I did!

I got hold of thick packing felt and sacking, filled the box with personal items and kit which I knew I would be allowed to take with me on release, wrapped it carefully and, a few days later when I travelled to the Demob Centre, left it at the railway station, addressed to Wimborne. That is how I came by so many RAF tools. I have never considered that they were in any way stolen. I was literally told to take them away as they were not wanted! So much for the way the Service accounted for material things.

Getting the necessary clearances and documentation sorted out took several days. On such a scattered station, almost the last thing I handed in was my service bicycle - I had already taken my smaller and lighter civilian cycle to the railway station to be sent home.

Finally, I left Keevil early on the 23rd of April 1947. Years later, this time by car, I returned and found that the Mess had become a piggery, which somewhat amused Diana, but left me feeling rather sad. The airfield is still sometimes used as a dropping area, by aircraft from RAF Lyneham. It is also used, mainly at weekends, by a gliding club.

For the journey to the North, I was nominally in charge of an airman called Butcher, whom I knew slightly. He was also going to Lytham St. Annes to be released from the service. On arrival at our destination, on the coast to the west of Preston, we split up. The RAF insisted that the differential treatment of ranks had to be maintained to the end!

Early next morning I joined a throng heading for the actual Demob. Centre, a group of large buildings through which we were all to be “processed” like cattle. During one’s early days in the service a ’crowd of fellows was turned into a ‘bunch of chaps’. Here this was reversed and assorted airmen of all trades and ranks entered at one end, to exit at the other as plain Mister!

The first job was to get rid of the kit we were not being allowed to retain. Then, quite early on, there was full medical examination to discover any defects for which the RAF might have been responsible and, I suppose, pre-empt a disability claim in the future. More paperwork had to be dealt with before entering the clothing store. Here there were very limited ranges of shirts, suits, hats, shoes and overcoats / raincoats. I had a charcoal grey suit with a thin red stripe in it. The items were quite stylised and a partially sighted person could usually distinguish a” Demob Outfit” at a range of 50 yds (50 m) The choice of hats were, a ‘pork pie’ style, a trilby or a cloth cap. I was not, at that time, a “hat person” and my father never possessed one but when I got back to Wimborne, my Uncle George from Grove Road, was happy to be given my trilby.

On the 24th of April, shortly after a free lunch - in an ‘all ranks’ canteen - I left by train for the long-haul South. I had a couple of months release leave ahead of me and a job which had been held open. The trouble was that I was not keen to take the type of employment which was on offer. Before the end of the month, I had parted company with my girlfriend - this time for good.! Never-the-less, I enjoyed my leave and even secured a new girlfriend within two weeks. Despite my misgivings, I began work toward the end of June, as an agent for the Pearl Assurance Company, in the Boscombe area of Bournemouth.

Appendix One

Sensory motor apparatus (SMA-3), electro-mechanical test for eye, hand and foot co-ordination of Royal Air Force pilots, Cambridge, England, 1942

The Sensory Motor Apparatus (SMA-3) was an electro-mechanical test for measuring eye, hand and foot co-ordination. SMA-3 was one of many pilot aptitude tests given to aircrew candidates of the Fleet Air Arm, the Army Air Corps and the Royal Air Force. Designed by the University of Cambridge and the Central Medical Establishment during the Second World War, SMA-3 has seen service in many Air Forces. It was in continuous use in the UK between 1943 and 1985. The original machine was updated in the 1970s and finally replaced by a computerised version in 1985.

Appendix Two

RAF Whitefield

RAF Whitefield situated near Wolfhill, some 7 miles north-east of Perth, opened late in 1939, primarily as a Relief Landing Ground (RLG) to RAF Perth. It comprised a small (1,050-yard-long) grass runway with 8 blister hangars and temporary accommodation (possibly tents). To assist night landings, the airfield utilised a 'Gooseneck Flarepath', which comprised several short, oval watering-can-style paraffin lamps, with wicks protruding from their spouts, placed along the runway. They were later replaced by small electric Glim Lamps and Chance Floodlights powered by a generator mounted on a trailer.

RAF Whitefield closed on 9 July 1945, the land reverting to farmland. Today, only the flight office survives as evidence of the former airfield. Records detail a staffing complement of 36 in 1944. Units using RAF Whitefield during the Second World War include No. 11 EFTS and No. 5 Flying Instructor School (FIS). The airfield was employed to ease the load at RAF Perth and was very busy in this task. As would be expected from a busy flight training school, there were many recorded accidents, most due to poor landings especially those involving night flying. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured in any known incident. In one case, a de Havilland Mosquito FBV1 (HP856) out of RAF No. 8 OTU was forced to land at RAF Whitefield due to its cockpit filling with smoke because of a faulty radio. The aircraft underwent repair and continued in service until being scrapped in July 1947.

Scone Park

Scone Park was an SLG of RAF Perth. It is not listed as a separate RAF airfield; it was regarded as being part of RAF Perth at Scone. Scone Park is today occupied by Scone Racecourse.

Appendix Three

RAF Melksham – some other views

Some other views of RAF MELKSHAM from "RAF Melksham - Letters from the Past" J.B. Armstrong. (P.85), wrote, "...In the autumn of 1945, I was returned to Melksham as an Instructor NCO. At this time there were many redundant aircrews being trained in ground duty trades, most were of higher rank than their instructors and were a boisterous and exuberant bunch."

In the same publication Roy Palmer (91)- a Warrant Officer and an ex-Pilot, wrote: -

"RAF Melksham, how well I remember it. We called it BELSEN.
I was posted there on the 10th of September 1945 and left 15th Jan 1946. I was one of several hundred redundant aircrew on Flight Mechanics courses. We were issued with arm bands with which we had to cover our badges of rank.

We felt we were badly treated. We had in our midst several chaps who had done a tour of Ops with Bomber Command, in fact a friend of mine had a D.F.M.

When we were in class and nature called (or you were dying for a smoke), you had to ask the instructor for the 'smoking stick', which was a piece of wood painted with red and yellow stripes and if you were caught outside without it, you were for the high jump. My friend did not need a piece of painted wood for a 'pee' over Berlin.

The food was disgusting and the so-called Sgts mess, where we ate was simply a wooden hut and the floor was always wet and muddy, but we did have a somewhat more comfortable one where we could have a beer and a game of billiards or darts and from where we collected our mail.
My friend had a motor cycle and several days a week we did not bother with tea but went into Melksham to a little cafe for toasted tea cakes and jam. I recall that it had a large round table, I wonder if the cafe is still there.

It was a terribly cold winter and we suffered from a fuel (coke) shortage, we were not allowed to light the stove in the hut until work finished at 5 pm. We slept with some of our clothes on, we were not issued with pyjamas and any that we had started the war with had probably worn out and could not be replaced. How we kept warm I do not know, many search parties went out in the evenings looking for something combustible, preferable coke from elsewhere on the camp. We were rationed to one bucket of coke per hut per 24hrs.

The exodus from Melksham at lunchtime on Saturday was so great (not surprising) that the booking office at the local station could not cope, so they came to the camp on Friday evening and sold tickets in the library. Getting back to the camp on Sunday evening was not quite so funny, the train from London did not stop at Melksham but at a halt some distance short. This train was met by one or two local buses which made one trip only. If you got off the train quickly, you rode back to camp, otherwise you walked and managed a couple of hours sleep before breakfast, or missed breakfast and waited for the NAAFI wagon.

There was always plenty of bread and butter on the tables in the Mess and it became the practice to bring some of this, hidden inside battle dress blouses, back to the hut so we could have toast and butter in reasonable comfort during the evening. We were quite close to the Mess so a pint of tea in our mugs was no problem. Occasionally there were large soup plates of jam on the tables and one day the temptation was too great and one of these came out hidden under the greatcoat folded across my arm. I had just entered the hut when someone shouted that I had been seen, so out of the window it went. This proved to be a hoax so it was retrieved, not too badly damaged (probably too thick to run off the plate), we had our supper treat after all".

I subsequently corresponded with Roy Palmer and he forwarded to me the following additional recollections of his time at Melksham, extracted from material he had written for his family. Perhaps this will add to your data collection.

".....I found myself at No. 2 School of Technical Training at RAF Cosford in Staffordshire and after a few weeks, asked for a transfer to marine fitting but ...was posted to No.12 S of T.T, at Melksham.

Cosford was nice camp, but Melksham was a terrible place - we called it Belsen - hutted, low lying, very wet and damp. Fuel was rationed in spite of the fact that we had a severe winter, a bucket of coke per hut per day. Only by making the occasional midnight raid on the fuel dump were we able to get the temperature in the huts reasonable on one or two evenings a week. The food was indescribable and the so-called Sergeants' Mess where we ate was simply a wooden hut with trestle tables and forms, and a concrete floor which was always wet - we shared this hut with cockroaches.

I tried a new way back one we my friend with the motor cycle lived in Birmingham and he arranged to meet me there and we were to travel back through the night on the bike - what a ride. It poured with rain, it snowed, violent thunderstorms, we had only our greatcoats for protection and were soaked to the skin.
Instead of getting back for the first parade, we arrived mid-morning. We reported to the office, expecting the worse, because discipline was very tight, but we heard no more, perhaps the little W.A.A.F. took pity on us and it went no further.

We still had plenty of Bull, beds had to be made up every day and we were confined to camp on Friday evenings until the Station warrant officer was satisfied with the polished floors etc., - probably too late to go out anyway!

A couple of rather amusing incidents come to mind. It was not always possible to find suitable material with which to light a fire in the hut after we had finished work and before we had tea. One of the lads "found" some high-octane petrol (we had one or two aircraft which were used for ground running instruction) which was sprinkled on the coke in the stove before the match was applied. High octane petrol is a bit "dicey" and the resultant "explosion" caused a section of the cast iron chimney pipe to jump off the stove and smash when it hit the concrete floor. Needless to say, one of the nearby empty huts was without a chimney the following morning.

Being the senior man in the hut I managed to wangle myself a small room at the end of the hut and, although this was rather small, we put two beds in it and I shared this with my friend. In an attempt to get the temperature up a little we purchased a small electric fire element, which we plugged into the light socket (very unofficial indeed). We left this on when we went to work and locked the door. One day when we returned and opened the door we were met with a little smoke and investigation showed that the draught caused by closing the door had blown the flex onto the element and the cotton and rubber covering had burnt away - no damage to Air Ministry property but it could have been nasty ".

NOTE 1. Roy was sent to Sealand near Chester, where he worked on rusty Jeep engines before he was transferred into the stores. After several moves, he was released from the service in September 1946 and subsequently served for thirty years, as an officer, with the Air Training Corps. (Another parallel with yours truly - I served 25 years as C.O. of two ATC Squadrons. !!). GLP

NOTE.2. "RAF Melksham - Letters from the Past" was published in 1994 by Colin Venton of The White Horse Library, Melksham, Wilts., at the time of the unveiling of a Commemorative Stone on the site of the former No.12 School of Technical Training, on June 18th 1994, which my wife and I attended. (The site is now an Industrial Estate and Leisure complex.). The book of 140 pages, is comprised entirely of the recollections of former 'inmates' of the camp. At the beginning it contains the usual "Copyright etc" paragraph. The only entry concerning redundant aircrew being on the camp, was the one by Roy Palmer, which is copied above and, which reinforces the material I slimmed down and forwarded to the RAFA. My original took up ten pages!
NOTE .3. Around 1994, Roy Palmer lived in Cambridgeshire and, as I have mentioned elsewhere, we corresponded concerning our experiences. The fact that he was a W.O pilot, when I was only a Sergeant, suggests that he was at least 3 years older than me and I am now 81years of age

Appendix Four

Drem Lighting System

The Drem lighting system was developed in 1940 at RAF Drem by Wing Commander Richard Atcherley, the station's commanding officer, to address the challenges of safe night landings for fighter aircraft like the Supermarine Spitfire and Hawker Hurricane during World War II. These aircraft suffered from visibility issues due to glare from conventional floodlights and the Spitfire's long nose obstructing pilots' downward view, while blackout conditions prevented bright lighting that could alert enemy forces to airfield locations. Atcherley's innovation focused on low-intensity, shrouded lights that minimized detection risk while guiding pilots precisely during approach and landing.[4][16]Technically, the system comprised a pattern of dimmable lights mounted on 10-foot-high poles arranged in a circular formation around the airfield, typically at a radius of about 3,000 yards from the center, with additional lead-in funnels aligned to the runways. The outer circle used white shrouded lamps to delineate the airfield boundary, visible only to aircraft in the landing circuit, while approach funnels employed angled white lights to direct pilots toward the runway threshold. Runway guidance included green lights along the centerline and at the ends to indicate alignment and stopping points, with all fixtures designed for concealment in hedges or bushes and powered by redundant circuits to ensure reliability even if one failed. This setup allowed for telescoping bases to accommodate seasonal snow accumulation, prioritizing stealth and precision over high illumination.[17][16]First tested at RAF Drem in the summer of 1940, the system proved effective in poor visibility and was rapidly adopted across all RAF stations by late 1940, becoming the standard for night operations and influencing similar setups on Allied airfields. Its implementation significantly reduced night landing accidents by providing unambiguous visual cues without compromising operational security. Post-war, variations of the Drem concept contributed to the evolution of civil aviation lighting standards, emphasizing low-glare, directional systems for safer approaches.

Appendix Five

PARAMANATHAN CRASH

Every fourth Friday afternoon, when the personnel of No. 1 Squadron at No. 61 O.T.U. went on a long weekend, we usually changed into our best blue uniforms at lunch time and took our weekend kit with us, down to dispersal, ready for a quick getaway.

The afternoon of Friday the 22nd of March 1946 was no different from any other time when we were going on 48 hours pass. All of our aircraft were back and firmly tied down for the weekend. Men slowly drifted away as their work on the aircraft was signed up and I climbed out of my overalls, locked them in my tool box and, about 3.30 pm, cycled away toward the hangars, with “Paddy”, one of the engine mechanics.

It was dry, there was not a lot of wind and the runway in use by the other two Squadrons which were still flying, was the long one - NE/SW. As we cycled on the perimeter track, past the end of the shorter SE / NW runway, we noticed a Spitfire leave the circuit as if to land. To do so would have still meant a cross-wind component and been in conflict with the circuit pattern of the day.

Thus, we assumed the pilot was doing a short circuit, to go round again. We were horrified to see the aircraft wheels come down, hear the engine note die away and, as the flaps came down, see the aircraft sink toward us.

We cleared the end of the runway as fast as we could and, at the same time, kept the Spitfire in sight. It lost height rapidly and we realised that, if the pilot was attempting a landing, he was going to undershoot to a substantial degree. We both thought that the pilot would notice his error but the aircraft continued to sink until the wheels hit a barbed wire fence about 150 yards (say 140 m) outside the boundary fence of the airfield. This caused it to nose over and then perform a slow cartwheel. Panels, wheels and bits of the wings came off and, of course the propeller disintegrated. Before the wreck finally slid to a halt, the fuselage slewed round so that we had view of the port (left) side. It looked more or less intact but we found eventually that this was a false impression.

Even before the aircraft had stopped moving, Paddy and I had dropped our cycles and started to run across the intervening grass to get to the crash site. Despite barbed wire at the boundary, we got out of the airfield and ran toward the aircraft but, between us and the plane, was a ditch. It was far too wide to jump, so we leapt in and waded through water up to our waists. Once we had scrambled out the other side of the ditch, we ran on and I was surprised that I could still hear the engine running although the propeller had sheared off.

The engine continued to run as we ran the last few yards. As we got closer, we could see that the fuselage was, in fact, quite bent at the cockpit, the pilot was slumped forward and the engine was tending to point toward us. There was a trace of smoke coming from the wreck but we were unsure whether it was the beginning of a fire or just smoke from the exhausts. Neither of us liked the thought of the engine still

running, as we were aware that at any moment it could seize up, with an unpredictable outcome. Furthermore, we knew the explosive potential of the fuel tank which filled the space between the rear of the engine and the cockpit.

We ran round the tail of the aircraft and then saw that the fuselage had almost broken in two at the cockpit. Whilst the port side was almost intact, there was a 3/4 feet (say 1 m) gap on the starboard (right) side, between the two parts. It was like looking into the hinge of an open door. The pilot was sagging forward, due to being still strapped into his seat which, in turn, was attached to the rear bulkhead and the floor of the cockpit.

Both of us were hesitant to go in. The running engine, the fuel and the trace of fire, combined to spell out that such an action could have a fatal outcome. On the other hand, we were looking at a helpless pilot but we agreed the colour of the part of his face which was visible, was most peculiar. All this running around, considering and taking action took far less time on the site than it now takes to record. Thus, with no more delay, we went warily into the wreck.

When we got to the pilot, Paddy removed his helmet and mask and I operated the seat harness release. I was still confused by the strange colour of the pilot's face and did not recognise him. However, I noted waxy material oozing from both ears and, deep from my subconscious recollection of First Aid, knew that he had a fracture of the base of the skull.

We tried to shift the pilot, and failed to do so as he was still in his parachute harness, the canopy pack being firmly lodged in the bucket seat. All the time the engine was roaring away a few feet to our right, separated from us by what remained of the fuel supply, also we could see a few small flames below. Paddy tried to free the casualty by operating the parachute quick release box but was unsuccessful and I went for my pocket knife, which was fortunately a sharp one, and cut the webbing straps.

By this time, I was convinced that the pilot was dead and I'm afraid we were not too refined in the way we hastily carried him about 25 yards (22 m), mainly for our comparative safety and laid him on the grass. We had a good look at the pilot but made no further attempt to touch him. We could see that he had a dark complexion recognised him as a Sergeant pilot and although I knew him by sight, at that instant I could not name him.

We thought that he was Sergeant Paramanathan, a quiet type from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and I remembered he wore the embroidered shoulder flash which indicated that he had come a long way to join the RAF. He had a dusky complexion and the pallor of death had caused our confusion.

The engine still ran and we were sure it must seize up before long. In our inexperience we felt the pilot could not have survived and this was confirmed when the ambulance, normally stationed outside the Air Traffic Control building, got to the site of the crash, having come round the road. The fire engine was right behind it and, about the same time as the Merlin finally stopped, the fire crew were able to damp out the fire which was beginning to grow larger.

Eventually quite a crowd of people gathered and the two of us were told to report to the Tech. Wing H.Q, where, after chatting to the duty Warrant Officer, we were given the materials to write out our account of the incident from the time we had first noticed the aircraft. We were not even allowed to get any fresh clothes, although, by now a lot of the wet had dried off. By the time all this was done, any possibility of going on a 48 pass had to be forgotten and, in any event, I am not sure we felt much like it.
That night in the mess, the C.M.C, who, was also the senior Tech. Wing Warrant Officer, came up to me and said something like, “You’re a Flight Engineer and you know the Spitfire cockpit intimately. When you were in there getting the pilot out, why didn’t you switch the engine off?”. I’m not sure how I kept my temper and just said I was confident that Paddy, as well as I, felt that the priority was to get the pilot and ourselves out of the wreck, before it exploded. Had it done so, there would have been two more fatalities.

In passing, I should mention that the switches to which he referred, were in the top left corner of the instrument panel, close to the point where the bend in the fuselage had occurred. In other words, it would have been something like trying to find relatively small switches, tight in the hinge of a door. Under the conditions with which we were faced, there can be no doubt that groping for switches was not high on my list of priorities. To be honest I didn’t even think of them. It was a question of getting in and out as fast as possible.
Next day I went to have a look at the wreck, the parachute was still in the seat and had been partially burnt, but I cannot say whether that happened before or after we brought out the pilot.

On the following Monday a Court of Enquiry into the accident was held. I gave evidence along the lines of the account I had written shortly after the event. Paddy was not called. The Flight Commander who had briefed Sgt. Paramanathan prior to his sortie, addressed the Court concerning his instructions. Someone from the Squadron ground crew who had made the Between Flight Inspection and had seen the aircraft off, confirmed that he was not aware of anything untoward with regard to either the pilot or the aircraft. Air Traffic also had an input.

Inevitably a Coroner’s Inquest had to be held and I believe only the Flight Commander attended, since he could swear regarding the validity of the evidence taken at the Court of Enquiry.

As far as I know, the reason for Sgt. Paramanathan’s action and its fatal outcome was never discovered. It was put down, as was often the case, to “Pilot Error”.

THE WILTSHIRE TIMES March 30th 1946. Page Two.

Sargt A.T. Paramanathan aged 24 of Jaffra, Ceylon, was killed in a flying accident at Keevil R.A.F. aerodrome on Friday afternoon. At an inquest conducted by the Wiltshire Coroner (Mr. H. Dale), it was stated that the deceased had 150 hours solo flying to his credit. When landing, a wing of the plane touched the ground and the machine disintegrated, causing the pilot’s death through laceration of the brain and a fractured skull. The coroner returned a verdict in accordance with the medical evidence, the cause of the accident be unascertained.

Mr. Harold Dale (Wilts Coroner). held an inquest at Keevil Aerodrome on Monday on Sergt. Albert Thamnryrajah Paramanathan RAF, who was killed when flying solo at Keevil the previous Friday.
The Coroner was told the dead pilot's address was 3, Cross Street, Jaffra, Ceylon and that the deceased was 24 years of age and had 150 flying hours to his credit.
It was stated, that Paramanathan was a pupil under instruction at Keevil and that, when descending lost height rapidly, and when one wing of the machine touched a field on the outskirts of the aerodrome the machine disintegrated. He was dead when taken from the wreckage. Dr. Flt. Lieut. Craig. RAF, described the injuries to the pilot, and the Coroner recorded a verdict that the pilot died from a lacerated brain and a fractured skull, sustained in a flying crash, the cause of which was unknown.

NOTE This was the second crash in two weeks. Earlier, a pilot from the A.F.S on the other side of the airfield, experienced some trouble with the under-carriage of his aircraft as he came in to land and appears to have undershot. Flt. Lt. K. Mackenzie, who had only gone across to the unit on the 8th Feb, gave evidence at the Inquest.

George ‘Len’ Pearce

1925 - 2023