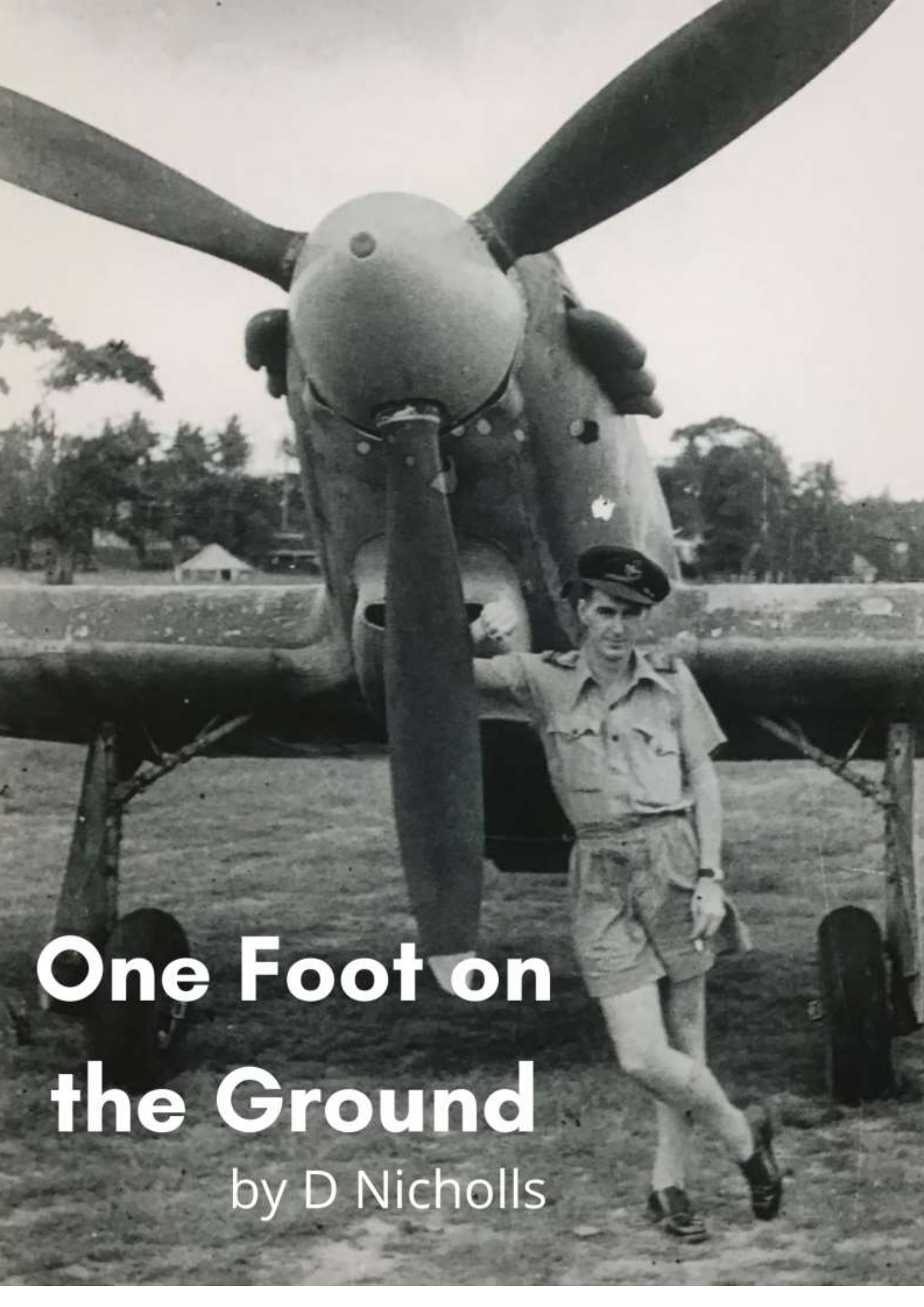

One Foot on the Ground

by D Nicholls

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Introduction

Douglas Benjamin Fletcher Nicholls was born in Ystradgynlais, Glamorgan on 5th February 1919 but spent his formative years in Grimsby, Lincolnshire. His father, Ben, had been a Lieutenant in the Machine gun corps in World War 1 and when sent back to England to recover from being shot in the hand he married Lilian, a nurse at the hospital. They settled in Grimsby, Ben became a sergeant and mounted police officer and after retiring ran the Royal George in Freeman Street which was destroyed by bombing before taking over the Wine Pipe in the Old Market Place. Dad attended St James School and having left, he had his fateful conversation with 'George' about signing up for the RAF Voluntary Reserves as war approached and his book takes over from there.

My brother Steve was born only five years after the war in Grimsby, I followed a couple of years later and growing up, the shadow of the war was still a major presence. Steve and I boast that we suffered the privations of rationing which was theoretically true as it didn't officially end until 4th July 1954 but by then even sweets were no longer rationed so we cannot really claim any great hardship! We knew Dad had been a fighter pilot and like every bloodthirsty young boy (and probably many bloodthirsty young girls too), we pestered him for graphic details of hell, heroics and hardship which he happily refused to supply. He would give a few details of his experiences but these tended to be more anecdotal than visceral; as we got older perhaps he talked a tiny bit more, but, as everyone says, those that took part in the war rarely wanted to speak about it, especially to those who were not there and could not know.

Steve and I, along with Betty our mother launched a gentle campaign of moral blackmail against him. One day, we said, it would be too late to recall his experiences so wouldn't it be a helpful and generous gesture to write down what had happened in the war so that we and future generations of the family would have a permanent record of his service? He humoured us, tolerated us and happily refused to take any action. Or so we thought. After Dad died on 6th December 2014 aged 95, I acquired a plastic box full of cuttings, a couple of photo albums, assorted memorabilia from WW2, a couple of ring files full of letters and other papers and a number of Amstrad computer discs. These I sent off and a genius converted them into Word documents and there was the basis of his autobiography which we knew nothing about.

Delighted that Dad had actually and eventually committed himself to paper, I sent copies to members of the family as a very rough and disjointed draft. And then, nothing. The box, with its papers, cuttings and articles all sat in a spare room and occasionally I threatened to do something with it – but what? There was so much material there I didn't know where to start to pull it all together into a coherent form or even how.

One of the problems was that Dad had typed out individual chapters of his story on some remarkably tatty pieces of paper, revised and revisited them, crossed out and re-typed and then put much of the material onto the Amstrad discs. The problem was that the discs had omissions and additions to the paper versions, the chronology was very difficult to follow and it felt like a monumental task to gather it all together in the form which he had intended.

But there was another problem, what to do with all the photos in the albums along with all the photos which were simply loose?

One album was carefully labelled with names and places which was helpful, the fact that most of the photos had been either taken out or fallen out was not.

Dad obviously never published his work and I think that there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, by the time he started to write, which I think was about 1992, the market was rather saturated with WW2 books and many of those involved the exploits of former fighter and bomber crews. Had he completed it earlier, I think it may well have been published. It is ironic that he helped in the success of several of these books; many authors wrote to him requesting photos dates and names which he would always respond to, hence the fact that many of his photos were removed from albums to loan to his correspondents but not all found their way back to their original place. I think that this also explains why the amount of detail decreases as the book goes on, he spends nearly as much time reminiscing on his young lady from Montrose and her unfortunate relationship with Pimms as he does with the pivotal and tragic events during the battle for Ceylon.

At some point perhaps he knew his work would have only a small circulation but none the less, he wanted to finish what he had started. Another consideration could also have been that once he started to write he enjoyed the process but wanted to spend more time on creative pieces such as short stories where he was successful in having some broadcast on both local and national radio.

Secondly, Dad was an extremely modest man, he would quite happily stand in the shadows whilst others took the limelight and I think that this is reflected in the style in which the book was written. He was not one to 'make a song and dance about things' and for me, the book is a factual rather than an emotive account; on the rare occasions where emotions are exposed he expresses anger – contempt even – for some of the decisions taken by some of those above him which had tragic consequences for individuals and for the conduct of the campaign as a whole. When you consider the number of pilots from 258 Squadron alone – who he clearly knew, worked, drank and flew with - who were killed such as Keedwell, Glynn, MacAlistair, Kleckner, Donahue, Dobbyn, Scott and Nash – he talks of only two - Glynn and Scott. Given his long friendship of Scotty and the tragic way in which he met his death, shot down by mistake by one of his own Squadron, he is clearly deeply saddened but says only " Scotty was a very good friend of mine"

So why make the effort bring his story to life and why now? The most obvious reason is that he was a very good man in very difficult times and his experiences need to be shared by anyone who has an interest in what his generation went through. As Remembrance Day reminds us each year, so many gave so much during those years, is it for me to forget? Why just pack up that part of his life into a little plastic box, place it in the loft as an interim resting place before finding the skip when I am gone? That would be selfish, immoral and to use a military term, a clear dereliction of duty.

His generation did their duty, paid a huge price and so we are now the custodians of their sacrifice. The second reason, as alluded to, is that our generation, despite their best efforts,

will not last for ever and with us an island of knowledge and experience will be further eroded and unless we are proactive, as time goes on, little will be left.

That brings me on to 'audience' – for whose benefit is this collection? The obvious answer is anyone who is interested but it is a little more than that. The book is full of photos that Dad took but there are plenty of others that I have included, and the aim is firstly to ensure his photos see the light of day and secondly, by including the additional material, to provide context.

Ask anyone of a certain age what a Spitfire is and they will know, ask them what a JU 88 looks like, some will know and the younger the person is, the less likely they are to have that knowledge – why should they? Ask most people what a Magister aircraft, a Tiger Moth or a Chance light is then it is likely that they will not have a clue, that is why I have researched often somewhat obscure references Dad makes so that they are placed in context and people can better understand and appreciate his experiences.

It may seem odd including a photo of the cockpit of a Mk 1 Spitfire, but not only does it show how cramped it was, it clearly illustrates the point Dad makes about having no forward visibility because of the length and height of the nose. This could concentrate the mind somewhat when landing and taking off. In the same way, including Air Ministry diagrams of the Spitfire controls may indicate just how much a pilot had to contend with, particularly whilst training and having to make your first Spitfire flight, engaging the air screw pitch mechanism, finding it doesn't work as you've been told, raising and lowering the undercarriage manually, completing a very hesitant circuit "like a ruptured duck" and then coming in for your first landing with an underperforming engine and no forward visibility. Hopefully there is some context there.

One thing I should make clear is that in the book Doug's words are in standard font, where I have made my additions (helpful or otherwise) they are all in italics along with any other quotes from outside sources.

Finally, Dad, Doug or Nick? In the additional comments I've made in the book I've stuck with Doug. He was Dad to only two people, but Doug to many, many more so I've tried to be consistent with that. Surprisingly, throughout his RAF days he was always called Nick (and this explains some of the references taken from the 258 Squadron history) but I think that would be a little confusing!

A last comment. Had Dad completed the book I'm certain that there would have been only one person he would have dedicated it to, his wife of nearly 70 years, so:

This book is dedicated to:

Betty Nicholls, 28/02/1927 – 6/06/2019

Chris Nicholls, November 2020

Chapter One – Up In The Air

One lovely evening in the spring of 1938, my friend, George and I were spending a few hours at his parents' holiday cottage in the sand hills of the Lincolnshire coast. When the tide was in, we could swim or sail or fish; but when it was out, as it was that night, it disappeared altogether, leaving miles of deserted hard sand behind it.

Sometimes, we brought girlfriends on the pillions of our motor bikes and, after the preliminaries of beach games, the sand hills would be enlivened by the sounds of chase, scuffle and squeal. But this time we were alone. George's two sisters were giving him a hard time and he needed a rest from female company. The previous evening, I had spent my spare cash taking a girl to a local cinema to see 'Frankenstein' - her choice, not mine. As soon as the monster on the laboratory table showed the first twitching's of life, she gave a scream which had the usherettes rushing towards us and spent the rest of the film crouching on all fours under her seat. There she stayed until the lights came on. It was, apparently, all my fault for taking her to such a horrid film and the atmosphere, which was frosty at the start of the journey home, steadily became icy.

So, broke, disenchanted and with nothing better to do, George and I set about 'tuning' our motor bikes which, with our limited skills, was of doubtful benefit to the engines or to us. Finally, we rested our kick-start weary legs on the warm sand and leaned against the bank of a sunny dune facing the ships cradled at anchor within the arm of Spurn Head. Briefly, we discussed the mysteries of engines, but George's replies were perfunctory. He was a long, thin streak of restless energy and he had something else on his mind. He pulled a newspaper cutting from his shirt pocket and passed it to me.

"Do you fancy some free flying lessons?"

"Are you kidding?"

I read the cutting; it was from our local paper and offered flying training at the local airfield to young men over 18 years of age who were willing to join the R.A.F. Reserve. It sounded too good to be true; successful candidates would become Sergeant Pilots under training and there was no mention of the unpleasant conditions we associated with service life. All we had to do was to attend lectures two evenings a week to qualify for flying at the weekends. When I read that allowances were paid for learning to fly, I was sure there must be a catch.

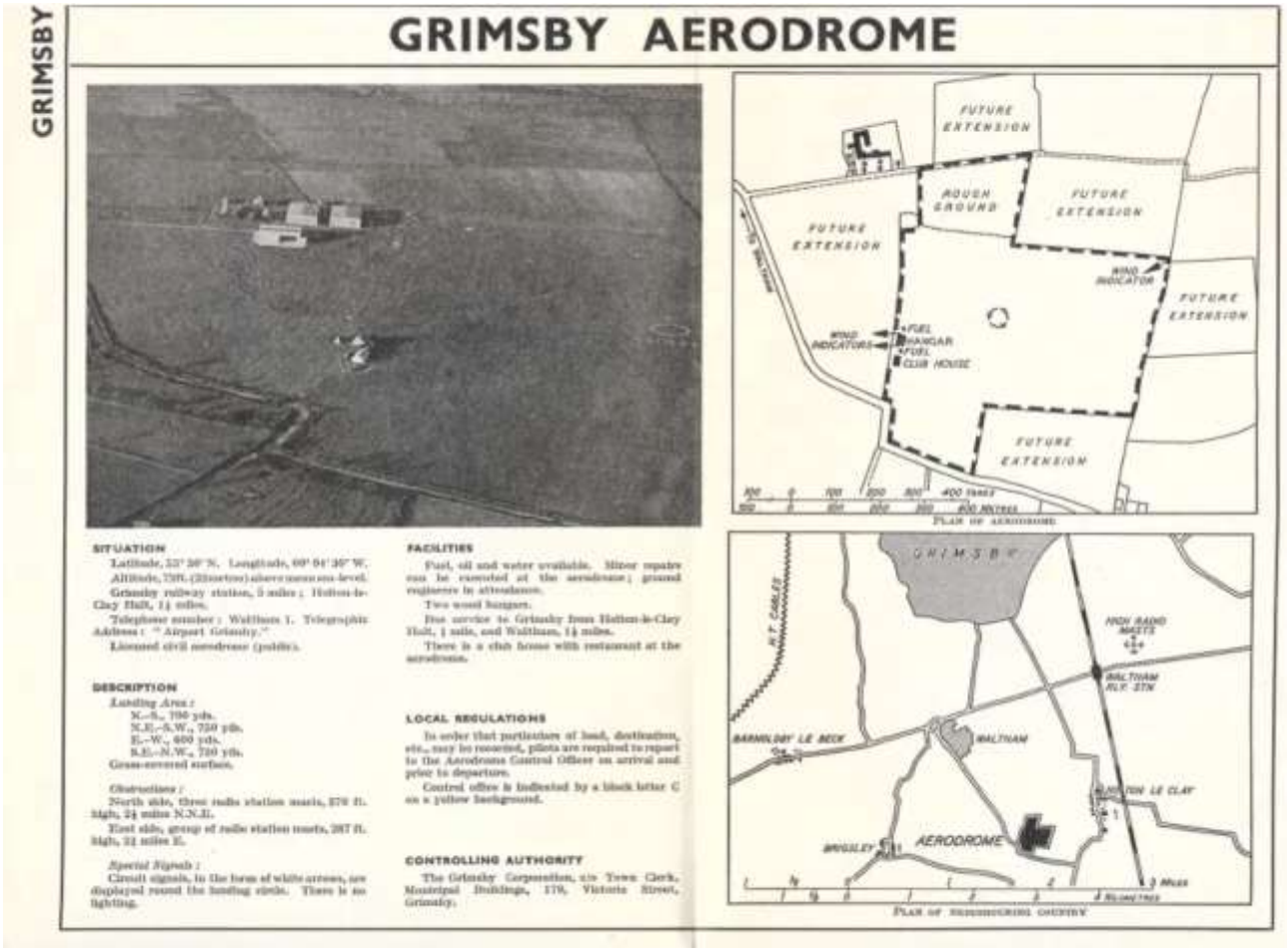
Normally, George and I would have jumped at the chance. We were nineteen and believed that there must be better things in life than the grind of office work and professional studies with only a few shillings each week as recompense. But we had heard too many tales of guileless young men who, in their search for adventure, had believed every promise made by plausible recruiting sergeants and had signed their lives away for several years. Then they had tasted the bitterness of harsh reality beneath the sugary coating of their illusions. Too late, they had learned that there was no hope of release until every day signed for had been served.

I was cautious. "I've heard of the University Air Squadrons, but I can't imagine the R.A.F. giving free flying lessons to blokes like us."

George was obviously very keen. "Well, let's ask around and see what we can find out. Come on!"

He jumped on his ten-bob Velocette and sped away towards home while I clattered behind on my ancient Panther.

As the weeks went by, more enticements appeared in the local paper. There was still no hint of spud-peeling or whitewashing of coal heaps. George, still enthusiastic, said, "Let's go out to the airfield. It's the best place to find out what is going on."


GRIMSBY

GRIMSBY AERODROME

SITUATION

Latitude, 53° 36' N. Longitude, 00° 04' 30" W.
Altitude, 73ft. (22metres) above mean sea-level.
Grimsby railway station, 3 miles; Holton-le-Clay Hall, 1¼ miles.
Telephone number: Waltham 1. Telegraphic Address: "Airport Grimsby."
Licensed civil aerodrome (public).

DESCRIPTION

Landing Area:
N.–S., 700 yds.
N.E.–S.W., 750 yds.
E.–W., 600 yds.
S.E.–N.W., 720 yds.
Grass-covered surface.

Obstructions:
North side, three radio station masts, 270 ft. high, 2¼ miles N.N.E.
East side, group of radio station masts, 267 ft. high, 2¼ miles E.

Special Signals:
Circuit signals, in the form of white arrows, are displayed round the landing circle. There is no lighting.

FACILITIES

Fuel, oil and water available. Minor repairs can be executed at the aerodrome; ground engineers in attendance.
Two wood hangars.
Bus service to Grimsby from Holton-le-Clay Hall, ¼ mile, and Waltham, 1¼ miles.
There is a club house with restaurant at the aerodrome.

LOCAL REGULATIONS

In order that particulars of load, destination, etc., may be recorded, pilots are required to report to the Aerodrome Control Officer on arrival and prior to departure.
Control office is indicated by a black letter C on a yellow background.

CONTROLLING AUTHORITY

The Grimsby Corporation, c/o Town Clerk, Municipal Buildings, 179, Victoria Street, Grimsby.

Waltham Airfield

Waltham airfield at that time was still a field, not the massive area of tracks and runways it became later

A few light aircraft were based there, and attempts had been made to develop feeder services but the results were not encouraging. The exploits of Amy Johnson, Lindberg, Alan Cobham and Kingsford-Smith had aroused admiration around the Humber, but very little desire for emulation.

As a public relations exercise, visitors to the airfield were encouraged as long as they kept out of the way. We were able to go up to one of the new hangars and stand at the open doors and gaze at the yellow monoplanes inside. We were accustomed to the sight and sound of biplanes buzzing sedately across the sky, but these Magister monoplanes had, to us, a sleek and compact look.

"Just look at those beauties," said George, in awe.

We turned to watch nearby aircraft being inspected by young men of about our age carrying helmets and goggles. They wore R.A.F. uniforms with sergeants' stripes. We knew some of them and waylaid an old schoolmate.

Miles Magister

"When did you sign on?"

"About a month ago"

"Any regrets?"

"No fear: it's marvellous. If you want plenty of flying, get in quick while there's only a few of us."

He took us into the hangar and showed us the cockpit of a Magister. We stuck our heads into a powerful aroma of hot oil and pear drops. There were instruments, knobs, switches and levers all round; it all looked strange and complicated. George and I looked at each other. We knew from our school days that our friend was not over-endowed with brains. We exchanged glances which said, quite clearly, "If he can manage it, we certainly can.!"

Decision time had come. We later returned to the seaside cottage and talked things over while we tinkered with oily engines. Both of us were keen to fly and George was willing to sign on there and then, but I still had doubts. I had almost decided to go along with him when he made the clinching remark,

"If there's going to be a war over Czechoslovakia, we don't want to be shoved in the army."

Our views of the Army had been moulded by the yarns our fathers and uncles had swapped about life in the trenches in 1914 - 1918. On the other hand, Hollywood and Biggles had convinced us that the risks of flying Bristol Fighters, Spads, Fokkers and the Red Baron were preferable to wallowing in mud and poison gas.

In spite of my lingering suspicions about a hidden catch, the decision was made, and George was eager to get the wheels turning. But, as we were under 21, we still had to persuade our parents to sign the forms. I was surprised how quickly my father agreed to sign after he had been assured that he wouldn't be required to pay anything.

"Here you are then. If you break your ruddy neck, don't blame me." From him, that was encouragement indeed.

George had a little more difficulty. His father was a schoolmaster who read all the fine print and studied the implications carefully. Much against his better judgement, he eventually signed, and the forms were dispatched. Surprisingly quickly, thirty of us were summoned to an interview board chaired by a very wide Wing Commander. He wore pilots' wings and I wondered how he ever managed to wedge himself into an aircraft cockpit. At the end of the interview, sixteen hopefuls, including George and me, were selected to appear before a medical board.

On the due date, we reported to the draughty administration huts at the airfield and were told to strip. We spent the rest of the day, protected only by a small towel amidships, wandering from specialist to consultant breathing into, staring at and balancing upon all manner of medical gadgets. Except for brief glimpses when we passed each other hastily proceeding to and from further embarrassments, I had no idea how George was getting on.

Late in the afternoon, I was told to dress and wait in the ante-room for a final interview. I had assumed that this would be merely to tell me that I would be hearing from the Board 'in due course'. When I was called into the office, there was the wide Wing Commander flanked by two junior officers. The Flight Lieutenant handed me a Bible and a card from which I read something aloud, then he said, "Sign here." I did; when the form was back on his side of the desk and safely out of my reach, he told me that I had just become an Aircraftman Second Class. He even had the nerve to congratulate me.

Now this was the lowest form of life in the R.A.F. and we had been assured that we should be given the rank of Sergeant Pilot (under training). So I had been right all along; we had been had for mugs! I opened my mouth to protest bitterly but the Wing Commander was obviously used to this reaction. He forestalled my splutter by explaining that the lowly rank was to satisfy administrative niceties.

"Don't worry, lad; tomorrow you'll be a sergeant."

Rapid though it was, Aircraftman to Sergeant in 24 hours was not the quickest promotion I ever had. I was told when to report for lectures and where to get my kit.

As I came out of the office, George was among a small group about to go in. I waited for him and, as I sat there, my mood fluctuated between anticipation and apprehension. I watched a succession of candidates emerge from the interview room elated or doubtful, indignant or depressed. Some fine physical specimens - athletes and rugby players - had failed, whereas I, with the physique of a string bean, had passed. But George was an even stringier bean, so I had no doubts about him.

Eventually, George appeared; there was deep pain and anger in his eyes. It took some time before he could speak to me.

"I've failed! Would you believe it? They don't know what they are talking about; I'm as fit as anybody."

I was too astounded to help him very much. It had never occurred to me that only one of us would fail. Anything other than both in or both out was inconceivable. I should have helped to ease his pain but nothing I could think of would have given him any consolation. His pride, his plans and hopes had been shattered. I stood there, hands on his shoulders, trying to find something useful to say.

Moist eyes were unmanly; he turned and walked away. I took a step to follow him but decided that I must not add the irritation of platitudes to his troubles.

Then it hit me that, like it or not, I WAS IN! I had taken the Oath and signed on the dotted line. I could not remember ever feeling so aggrieved before. The Wing Commander should not have let me sign without some sort of hint such as, "Your pal hasn't done very well in the eyesight test."

Surely, they must have made a mistake; George was as tough as old boots. George was the instigator of this venture; how could he possibly have failed? I began to understand how Oliver Hardy felt when Stan Laurel got him into 'yet another fine mess'.

Doug outside his father's pub; The Wine Pipe

It was no consolation to know that, of the original thirty or so candidates, only eight had been accepted; George was not among them. I debated whether to confront the Wing Commander and say I had changed my mind but knew, deep down, that I was delighted to have been selected.

It is sad to recall that from the day of the medical board, George and I drifted apart although we had been good friends since our school days.

Later, during the War, George [1] achieved his ambition and became a pilot flying the 'big stuff'. We met again in India where we mended old fences and laid new foundations. But, in September 1938, India was a very long way ahead.

Within a week of the selection board I had my first flight and, from then on, the theory and practice of flying filled nearly all my spare time. My 'Air Experience' was in one of the Magister monoplanes with a civilian instructor who had experience of speedway racing. Before the flight I was given plenty of unsought advice by the more 'experienced' students, some of it helpful, but most intended to terrify.

[1] 'George' was in fact called Glen Whincop and Doug managed to contact him in Bombay to find that he had gained his wings and was flying four engined Liberator bombers.

"He's a real bastard! He'll throw you all over the sky to see if you're scared or sick so that he can fail you."

"Instructors don't like it if you're nervous so sit up in the cockpit and look as if you're enjoying it."

"Once you're up, he'll show you round and then ask what you'd like to do. It sounds good if you ask for some aerobatics. But make sure your straps are tight because, already, he's lost three students flying upside down."

In spite of the advice, I enjoyed the first flight, aerobatics and all and managed to keep smiling most of the time. The grin must have appeared manic when I was dangling upside down in the open cockpit with several inches between me and the seat. But it taught me what was meant by making sure the straps were TIGHT. The instructor was not a vicious psychopath at all, but a skilled and wise pilot, a member of that patient and under-rewarded breed to whom this country owes a great debt of gratitude. Messrs. Howard, Gledhill and Frogley and most (but not all) of the instructors I encountered later, I salute you.

So, the course proper began. We soon learned not to strap on our helmets and parachutes at the flight office and waddle like arthritic apes the hundred yards or so to the aircraft. Nonchalance marked the old hand from the new boy; the mark of experience was the casual stroll with the helmet perched loosely on the back of the head and the parachute slung over the shoulder. It was, however, unwise to be too nonchalant and keep the instructors waiting as they became rather tetchy after a few hours association with suicidal idiots. So, at the side of the aircraft, buckles and straps were clipped deftly, then - and this was the mark of the expert - the cockpit was entered in three smooth steps - footrest-wing root-seat - and not with a beetle-like scrabble up the wing. But nonchalance could be overdone and after a few painful and premature landings, we learned that wet wings were treacherous underfoot.

Discipline was relaxed because all students were anxious to get their wings and fly more advanced aircraft. On a very few occasions there were warnings for missing lectures or for getting too close to chimney pots when showing off to girlfriends. But the heavy hand was rarely necessary. There were occasional sad farewells to downcast figures who had failed to make the grade. After the first initiation of misinformation and terror tactics, the equivalent of the apprentice's glass hammer, my fellow trainees were a pleasure to be with.

Eventually came the great day when the instructor, who had given me my first flight, stepped out of the front cockpit of the Magister, secured the straps and said, "Right, off you go. Do a circuit and come in."

Amid the welter of emotions associated with the first solo, most pilots have at least one vivid memory: it may be pride after a perfect flight or, probably, the shame of a rough landing. It could be the recollection of a near miss caused by flying 'eyes down in the office', or perhaps the terror of losing the airfield because of taking too long to settle down after take-off. But the first solo was not the most dangerous moment; the tenth was about the time when the head could start to get too big for its helmet.

The absence of that calm voice from the other cockpit was the beginning of airmanship. As the weeks passed, flying became automatic; movements of hands and feet needed no conscious control and switches could be located by touch alone. We were beginning to show promise when we learned to fly by feel and sound but mastery of the instruments was essential before a pilot could regard himself as barely average.

Elementary training aircraft were fitted with very basic blind flying instruments and it was easy to become over-confident through taking a quick look over the side now and then to see where the ground had gone. In cloud, there was an overpowering urge to believe the messages from the senses and to ignore that fact that the instruments were indicating something different. It was easy to believe that the instruments were faulty.

Apart from occasional moments of panic, the first year of training was, for most of us, a sheer delight with a new experience every flight. I verified that the sun shines even on a miserable, grey day and proved it often by climbing up through thick cloud to the bright sunshine above. It gave a great lift to the spirits to know that, even in Lincolnshire, brilliant sunshine was rarely far away for those who had learned to use and trust their instruments. There was the infinite joy of climbing up to play with and among the cumulus clouds, speeding along the cotton wool dimples, through the misty mounds and banking on wingtip around the hills and hummocks of dazzling white. Those were the clouds with angelic faces, the ones that stroked and caressed as they drew their gossamer veils across the windscreen. Any pilot who loses the childlike delight in playing with the clouds must have lived with tragedy.

We learned the hard way to identify the bad-tempered clouds, the ones with beetle brows which slap and cuff the impertinent. Many a terrified young upstart had been ejected upside down from these grumpy masses, leaving him much wiser for the experience. We had yet to learn that, in some seasons in other parts of the world, there are savage clouds, the black warlords of the sky, which can hammer and break and burn; they are merciless and allow no second chances.

Until young pilots fly solo, they think of the engine as something that keeps going until it runs out of petrol. But when the front seat was empty and the calm voice had gone, they learned to listen to the beat of engine. The Humber Estuary is not very wide but when an inexperienced pilot had to fly diagonally across the mouth in poor visibility, it seemed a long, long time before dry land and welcoming pastures were below once more. When over the sea or above cloud, doubts began nag about the reliability of the compass or the accuracy of the course. We all had our moments of stupidity, sometimes caused by following the wrong end of the compass needle. It has been known to cause great consternation when trawlers appeared below on what had intended to be a trip from Grimsby to Birmingham. If the course had continued, the next landmark would have been Holland.

When the Chief Flying Instructor thought fit, we were let loose in Hawker Harts and Hinds, a type which had once been first line aircraft.

Hawker Hind

They were biplanes, ancestors of the Hawker Hurricanes and very pleasant to handle when in the air except that the upper wings restricted vision.

The soft, tall undercarriage could make taxiing a queasy business especially in a gusty crosswind.

More than one young pilot, suffering from 'the morning after the night before', was 'airsick' during the long, swaying journey to the take-off point.

After the compact, squat Magister, the cockpit of the Hind seemed high above the ground and the upper wing, struts and bracing wires gave the impression of flying in a birdcage

Hawker Hind Cockpit

Waltham was still a small airfield and the landing run of the heavy Hind in light winds could be worrying long. So the parting advice of the instructor was usually,

"Come in low and slow. Don't forget you've no brakes!"

By the summer of 1939, my small group of trainees had passed all the required flying and ground tests and we were waiting for Air Ministry confirmation of the award of wings. In September, one year after I joined the Reserve, War was declared.

RAFVR in 1938. Doug seated first row, 2nd from left. There does appear to be a 'very wide' Wing Commander in the centre.

Many of the young lads who had learned to fly in the skies around Waltham were dead within the year, slaughtered in obsolescent aircraft over the Channel Ports. Some airfields around the country have memorials to the squadrons which operated from there. How well remembered are the Volunteer Reserve boys from all over the country who trained at their local airfields and were tossed much earlier into the cauldron?

Some of those young pilots paid a very high price for their 'free' flying lessons.

On the 1st September we were instructed to report to our local Reserve Centre every day. Two days later, these instructions were changed to 'Give up your jobs and be prepared to leave with full kit at very short notice'. We were on short notice for several weeks. This was no great hardship as we were being paid and we had the time to enjoy our good fortune. Eventually our paid holiday came to an end when the wide Wing Commander summoned us and announced,

"You leave for a Top Secret destination tomorrow. I shall not tell you WHERE. However, you may tell your parents WHEN, but NOBODY ELSE."

About sixty of us in uniform gathered at the railway station the following morning and started a long, meandering train journey south. We had plenty of time to speculate about our destination and the types of aircraft we would fly; most, but by no means all, of us wanted to go to fighter units. We arrived at Cambridge station and were met by R.A.F. regular N.C.O's

and assembled into what we called a 'loose formation' and our escort described as 'a disgusting rabble'. In this manner we trudged through the streets of Cambridge and into Downing College where we were paraded, crumpled and grubby from our long train journey, before a Warrant officer, a slight, dapper man who didn't like what he saw - and said so.

"You are here," he barked, "to learn what the R.A.F. is all about. It is NOT, repeat NOT a flying club for a bunch of Biggles. The sooner you understand that the better." He'd had his orders.

Doug plus 1 with white flashes

We were given white flashes to wear in our caps presumably to denote our status as untrained and unreliable and put in the charge of a R.A.F. Warrant Officer, a dapper disciplinarian who, nevertheless, seemed to understand our discontent.

We paraded and drilled and guarded the college gates. When on guard duty, we saluted and presented arms to all and sundry whether in uniform or not to register our opinion of spit and polish. The patience of the Warrant Officer began to wear thin and he became as anxious as we were to see us leave Cambridge.

Although our training had already included drill, rules and regulations and Air Council Instructions, the Air Ministry considered us quite unfit to fly in battle until we had more practice in marching, saluting and presenting arms. For several weeks that was all we did.

There was no mention of aircraft or tactics; just drill and more drill. All the time we were stamping around the college pathways, the R.A.F. had barely enough pilots to fight even the existing 'Phony War'.

Downing college group; on the reverse all have signed it, they appear to be C.P. Riley, C.A. Ream, E.G. Wilkins, Wm. Skipworth, A. Stephenson, R. Collier, G. Eddowes, J Jenkins? J. Reave, R.D. Rose and J. Wanlling?

In spite of our first impressions, the Warrant Officer was a patient man who understood our frustration and turned a blind eye to many of our failings and misdemeanours. One of our duties was to stand guard in pairs at the gates. All spies and saboteurs were to be refused admission, but we were ordered not to 'hinder' the few students and staff still in residence.

With all due respect to university students and staff in general, there were times when we had difficult decisions to make. So, to show our disaffection with such a ridiculous waste of time, we presented arms with much stamping and slapping of rifle-butts whenever the fancy took us. The old ladies gave yelps of alarm, the girls jumped and squealed with delight and those in authority who had been ignored, turned puce.

The Warrant Officer could have thrown the whole military book at us and made life very unpleasant indeed. But, in spite of our youth and rapid promotion, we were, never-the-less, full sergeants and not quite so easy to deal with as a bunch of raw recruits. So, in the interests of good order and discipline, he perfected a silent approach from the rear, a sharp prod in the ribs with his stick and a venomous hiss,

"Just watch it, Sergeant, me lad!" - to emphasize the difference in rank and age and the limits of his patience.

His forbearance earned our respect and co-operation in his efforts to cut our stay to a minimum. But attempts to get us to show any enthusiasm for the R.A.F's idea of Physical Training met with little success. Fortunately, as our numbers were augmented, we discovered, among the fresh arrivals, professional sportsmen and renowned athletes all eager and willing to pass on their skills and, thereby, rescue us from the military 'knees-bend-arms-stretch-ears-wiggle' routine.

There were about 150 sergeant-pilots at Downing College. We were accommodated in one of the old, stone student residences. All comforts had been removed and the rooms had little furniture other than four iron bedsteads with biscuit mattresses and heavy blankets that rasped at the skin without providing any warmth. There was no hot water and no form of heating other than open grates for which we were allowed one small bucket of coal every other day to be shared among four rooms. In these surroundings we had to try to dry wet clothing and soothe arms swollen and throbbing from inoculations. To us, at any rate, the winter that year was an exceptionally cold one. Thankfully, for the price of a small beer, we could enjoy the warmth of the local pubs for a whole evening as long as were careful not to attract the landlord's attention by going to the same pub too often.

Each member of a squad had to take a turn to be the drill instructor. Consequently, the squads spent most of their time out of sight of authority at the rear of the storage sheds with look-outs posted to warn of any approaching enemy while we puffed fags and propositioned the girls (students as well as serving wenches) who poked their heads out of the windows of adjacent buildings.

Fortunately, nothing lasts forever and our ordeal at Downing finally ended. In February 1940 it was decided we could march well enough to fly aeroplanes and we were sent off to R.A. F. Sywell near Northampton on a refresher course to fly, not our beloved Harts and Hinds, or even Magisters, but Tiger Moths, a biplane and trainer which holds fond memories for many.

Unlike the Magister, the Tiger Moth had no brakes and could be difficult to taxi in a crosswind. It could not compare for power with a Hawker Hart or Hind and progress against a headwind was often painfully slow.

Tiger Moth. This shows Doug back at Sywell for an 80th Birthday flight.

After a few weeks practice in the worst of the winter snows, with faces that seemed to be permanently numb and with instructors who would much rather have been doing something else, we were allocated to Advanced Training Schools.

There seemed to be no system about the selection; even twin brothers were subjected to the pain of separation which seemed strange as we were still at the training stage. One of the twins, Charles, was posted with me to R.A.F. Montrose, near Aberdeen, to fly the Miles Masters, monoplanes about which we had heard so many disturbing rumours.

Doug at RAF Sywell, 1940

Miles Master

The Master had a Kestrel engine and a wooden airframe. It was then the advanced single engine trainer; comparatively powerful and trickier than the operational aircraft we would eventually fly.

Montrose airfield, when we arrived, was buzzing with activity; there was obviously an urgent need for pilots. In the spring of l940, the accommodation and offices were in wooden buildings and the airfield had a surface of sparse grass and fine sand.

Almost my first view of a Master was through a cloud of dust in which pieces of yellow fabric floated lazily down and, as the air cleared, a splintered aircraft became visible. I was to get quite used to the sight of Masters landing abruptly in a cloud of dusty sand and yellow strips.

In inexperienced hands, the Master could play tricks. If it was put into a spin with the nose too high, it was likely to flip on to its back and make one or two turns upside down and then, hopefully, flick the right way up. Aerobatics could put additional strain on a suspect tail.

After one or two crashes, all our Masters were grounded and confined to the hangars for 'a technical modification' to the tail planes.

Miles Master dual cockpit

We were eager to see the results, but, when we did, we wished we hadn't.

We were shown two small angle brackets, which appeared to have come from a local Woolworths, screwed to each side of the tail spar. No doubt the experts thought they knew what they were doing, but we were not convinced that such small brackets would hold the tail on.

My first real experience of a full Scots pipe band was at Montrose and, when our ears became attuned to the pipes, it was an uplifting experience to march behind the band playing a lively tune. But for sheer gloom, a piped funeral lament takes some beating, especially when the pall-bearers are carrying the remains of a good friend.

If ever we were tempted to get over-confident about our ability as fliers, the weekly visit to the signals lecture room was enough to bring us back to reality; the windows of the signals hut were low enough to give us an oblique view of the front doors of an adjacent shed. It wasn't used very often, but we thought it was the station butchery because we could see rubber aprons and gumboots beyond the half-open doors. After a week or two, we identified the stocky, sleek-haired N.C.O. who seemed to be in charge of the shed, as one of the senior orderlies from Sick Quarters.

He had as little to do with the trainees as possible because, as we learned from some of his staff, he had sweated for years to attain his rank and he resented the 'instant' sergeants he had to associate with. His attitude was not uncommon among regular N.C.O's at the beginning of the War.

One hot, sleepy afternoon, we turned away from our Morse keys and saw him standing outside the partially open doors of the shed. He was smoking a cigarette and wearing a rubber apron and gauntlets streaked with a pink slime. He stood there until there was just a smouldering stub left between his lips. When it became uncomfortable, he blew through it and removed any shreds of tobacco or paper sticking to his lips by wiping them on his forearm. I was intrigued that he could be so unconcerned about those gruesome gloves barely inches from his mouth. Charles and I were sitting next to each other watching this performance; we had been discussing a fatal crash that happened the previous day. I turned to look at Charles; the awful thought struck us simultaneously. I saw his dark eyes widen, as he made the connection between the crash and the figure in the bloody apron

"Christ," he said, "that's the mortuary! He's putting that poor sod, Mellors, in a box."

As we watched, the mortician turned his head to stare at our hut and met our eyes through the window. He stood there, hands on hips, smirking at us. The nostrils on Charles' beaky nose flared.

"Look at the bastard. He wants us to know what he's doing." Charles shook his fist and growled,

"All right, all right. We've got the message."

We understood all right. We could almost hear the words, "I'll have the last laugh. You'll all finish up like this before long."

He became known as 'that bluidy bastard' and whenever we encountered him, we moved away from those cold, soft hands as quickly as possible.

In spite of its tricks and the ghosts of the mortuary shed, most of us came to like the Master but were careful never to take liberties with it. Although we had many experienced R.A.F. instructors, some of the younger ones were ham-fisted and 'twitchy', especially during night flying. We heard that there was such a shortage of instructors that some trainees, at the end of their courses, were given extra practice and used to fly as 'safety pilots' with the next batch. Certainly, some appeared to have less flying ability than some of their pupils. One of them tried to demonstrate formation flying at a considerable distance from the other aircraft and by operating the throttle like a pump-handle. Quite rightly, it earned me a rocket when I was unwise enough to follow his instructions with an experienced instructor.

As a wartime measure, Double Summer-Time had been introduced so that, in Scotland during the summer months, there were very few hours of darkness. Consequently, if training was behind schedule for any reason, night flying (because it was late at night) had to proceed alongside day training (because it was light enough). The night flights were restricted to a small area marked by quite unnecessary lights and the day fliers used the rest of the airfield.

Navigation training in Scotland was always interesting because the mountains could wrap themselves in cloud very quickly. We were all warned “Keep away from Balmoral”. However, knowing about Balmoral and recognizing it when lost in low cloud and trying to find a gap between the mountains are two very different things.

Occasionally, staff in remote stately homes would give what could be taken for encouraging waves to the low-flying aircraft. Probably the signals meant, "Clear off, you noisy idiot", but they were likely to be misunderstood and be subjected to a low-level 'beat-up' which would rattle the rooftops. The poor Adjutant at R.A.F. Montrose had to deal with many telephone calls from assorted lairds and dignitaries. Fortunately for us, without the number of the offending aircraft, little could be done to trace the culprit among sixty or so wide-eyed and completely innocent pilots.

Between the airfield and Montrose Town was The Basin, a large brackish lagoon in which was a target for us to drop practice smoke bombs. But the Master had makeshift bomb racks fitted to it which, with wear, were as unpredictable as the student pilots. The bombs were small and unlikely to cause much damage unless some poor unfortunate had a direct hit on the head, but the hissing, acrid smoke they emitted could be alarming. On one occasion the landlord of our favorite pub and the owner of the best cafe in the town square confronted a group of us heading for their establishments.

"It's the last time we'll be telling ye, d'ye hear? If any more of yon bombs land in this town ye'll be barred. Ye ken what we're saying? No more of it, now."

Unfortunately, there were and we were. But not for long; the takings fell too much.

On Sundays and we had to become bona fide travellers, which meant travelling three miles, to get a drink and then only if we ordered something to eat. So, with our beer, we asked for sandwiches, not for eating, because they had most likely been left over from Saturday and were intended to serve as a legal decoy for many thirsty groups of 'travellers' all weekend. Sometimes Charles, Jack, a Surrey lad and I went to Aberdeen in an old Hillman we shared. In the Scots pub we used near the docks we observed a new style of conversation. The customers were definitely there to drink, not to be sociable. They crouched over the bar and communication seemed to be limited to occasional grunts of 'Och' and 'Aye' and what sounded like 'heff 'n' heff', which we learned was the local dialect for a Scotch and beer chaser.

After several visits, we had a very pleasant surprise when one of the drinkers actually spoke to us.

He said “Weel now, and what will ye' hev?'

Several others said the same thing during in the evening. Too late, we learned that a Dornier had been chased over Aberdeen that day by a Spitfire section and shot down near the city. Because we wore wings it had been assumed that we were operational pilots. We had accepted the drinks as a friendly gesture, but now dare not reveal that we were in the final stages of training and still dropping bombs on innocent civilians nearby.

A few weeks later a German plane dropped a bomb on the new Sports Centre the citizens were so proud of. When we visited the pub again, the air of reproach made it very clear that we were held to be personally responsible for the damage. The customers didn't actually demand that we repay the value of the drinks they had bought us, but their pained expressions told us they were very upset that the protection they thought they had bought hadn't lasted very long. It seemed wise to stay away from Aberdeen for a while.

At that time, we regarded Aberdeen as a dour city, grim, granite and grey, close-knit and lacking in entertainment.

In spite of all the handicaps of not being of Scottish birth, (although I am alleged to be one of the millions of descendants of Rob Roy) I managed to persuade a rosy-cheeked lassie to join me at the Caledonian bar for a drink before going to the local dance hall. In the bar, she seemed undecided what to order, but pointed to the next table,

"Yon with fruit in it."

"Do you mean a Pimms?"

"Aye, that's it."

When I learned how much the first round cost, I suspected that, for all her apparent innocence, I had landed myself with a hard case. She finished her drink and asked for another one before I was halfway through mine.

Somebody, I thought, has been had for a mug!

Unless I could get her out of there soon, I would be broke. She seemed to be considering a third when, to my relief, she slurred,

"No more juice. Ah thenk we ocht ter goo."

As she weaved towards the door, she burbled,

“Ah’m all peely-wally."

Damned expensive juice!

Especially as it had made her feel ill. By the time I had collected our coats, she had reached the top of the flight of granite steps leading down to the pavement and the fresh air hit her fuddled senses. She missed her footing and hit every step on the way down. I scooped up the grazed, laddered and weeping wreckage, got a taxi and took her home.

I felt that explanations would not be well received by her parents or by any large relatives within earshot, so, when we reached the house, I told the taxi to wait with the engine running, saw her through her front door, and left hastily.

I never saw her again. It was probably just as well.

RAF Montrose, 19 Course May 1940. Doug front row, 2nd from right.

Eventually, our training at Montrose came to an end. Even though we had escaped the services of 'the bluidy bastard', we had slow-marched behind too many pipe bands to believe in immortality

But it was time to move on and Charles and I were split up. I didn't see him again until the end of the War when he had been invalided home crippled with polio, a frail shadow of the youth I had known.

By some system which was never explained, Jack and I were posted to the Spitfire Operational Training Unit at Hawarden near Chester. The flying staff seemed to be operational pilots 'on rest' from their squadrons and were friendly and easy-going. Within a few hours of arrival, I was checked out in a Master, then strapped in the cockpit of one of the ex-operational Spitfires and given the cockpit drill. Much of it was similar to the Master, but the instructor explained the mysteries of the airscrew pitch control ("In for take-off and landing, fully out for cruising.") and the use of the massive pump handle used to raise and lower flaps and undercarriage.

When, with some hesitancy, I assured the instructor that I had absorbed most of it, he tapped me on the shoulder and said,

"All right, then. Take it up and do a couple of circuits."

I was about to start the engine when a mechanic ran up waving his arms,

"Oi! You can't use that one. It's U/S."

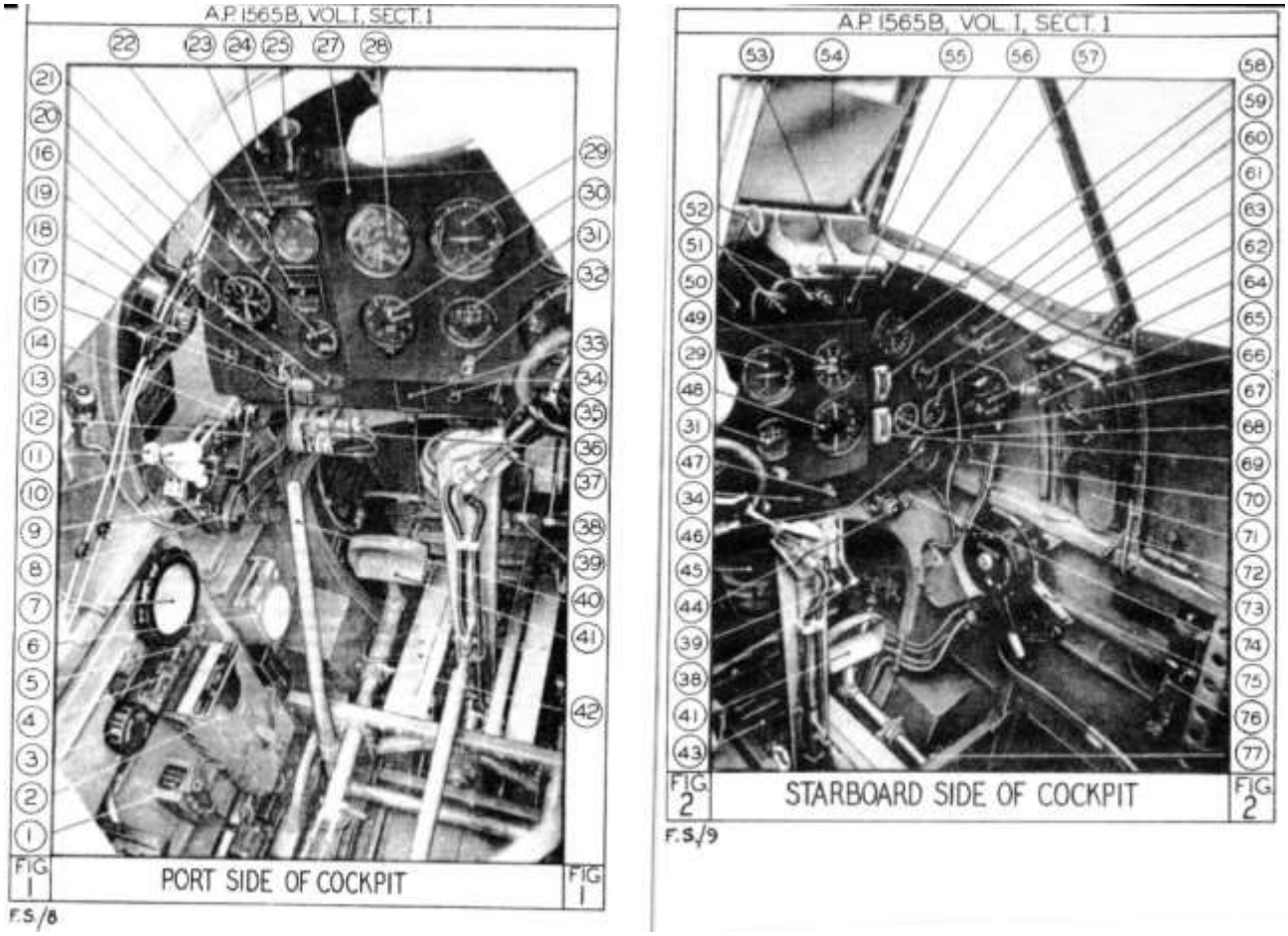
So, I was transferred to another Spitfire and, as normal, made a quick cockpit check. All seemed in order except that the airscrew pitch control had a slightly different knob on it. I started to taxi out.

There was no forward view over the engine, so taxying consisted of weaving from side to side to see anything at all. The engine of a Spitfire soon gets hot when taxying because an undercarriage leg blocks the airflow to the radiator so I could not afford to waste time. At the take-off point, I made a last check and then opened the throttle for a take-off. Until the tail came up, take-off was almost blind. But the power of the engine thrust, even in a clapped-out Spitfire, was like a shove in the back.

Spitfire Mk1 cockpit

Take-off went well and I climbed over the airfield boundary. I pumped madly until the wheels were retracted and then at about 500 feet, as instructed, pulled the airscrew pitch control from fully forward to fully back for cruising revs. Immediately the surge of engine power was reduced almost to nothing. The aircraft wallowed round the circuit with the engine thudding ominously unless I stayed in fine pitch. It was a relief to reach the point on the circuit where the landing approach could begin, and I pushed the airscrew lever forward again and landed.

The instructor had forgotten there were two kinds of Spitfires at Hawarden as some of the 'newer', but well-worn variations had recently arrived. Older two-pitch types could have the airscrew control either fully forward in fine pitch (for take-off, landing, combat, etc.) or right back in coarse (for cruising speeds). This was the type I had been briefed in. But I had been sent solo in an aircraft with an early type of the constant speed airscrew, which gives a far wider range of settings. So that when I pulled the lever right back as instructed, I had turned the airscrew blades at such an angle that nearly all the power had been lost as the blades beat the air. So much for my first solo in the famous Spitfire; no wonder it had flapped round the circuit like a ruptured duck.



Spitfire Mk 2 Cockpit Layout, from 'Pilot's Notes, Air Ministry'. Apparently the Airscew Control Lever is No.12.

The Spitfire was a joy to fly, with no vices except poor forward visibility which meant that the landing had to be a curving approach until just before touch-down. Hawarden had a few of the ' pump handle' models and the inexperienced pilots could be identified as they porpoised round the circuit trying to control the aircraft with the left hand while they pumped away vigorously with the right trying to get the wheels down.

At Hawarden we practiced aerobatics, air firing, and the type of combat tactics which rapidly became obsolete. The R.A.F. learned the hard way that aircraft operated far better in loose pairs scanning the sky than in tight formations of three, trying to avoid a collision with each other. It seems that Britain has, through recent history, been plagued by a mentality which sends its troops into battle in neat, but unwieldy, formations and therefore easy targets. It was the sort of reasoning which had seaside piers cut in half in case the enemy invasion forces wait until high tide to land their troops on them in preference to using miles of hard sandy beaches.

Until a few years ago, Hawarden airfield existed as a light industrial centre. There was enough of it left to bring back memories of the dispersal areas and flight offices. Some of the flight huts had survived and the wire fence we had to clear on the approach was still there; so was the grassy patch where so many young hopefuls opened up the throttle for the first nervous flight in a Spitfire.

Chapter Two - Operational

So, yet another course came to an end and we were posted to operational squadrons, and I finally parted from what was left of the North Lincolnshire contingent. There was some consolation; a fellow escapee from 'the bluidy sergeant' at Montrose and I were posted to the same squadron. He and Charles and I became a threesome in the early days of our struggles with the Miles Master. His name was Lionel, a name he tried to keep secret, but useful information for me to keep in reserve for blackmail purposes. He preferred to be called Jack instead. When we first met, he announced,

"Ektuelly, ay cem frem Wewking in Serreh."

From this, I gathered he came from Woking in Surrey. We moved from squadron to squadron together for over a year and never ceased to rib each other about his ‘barths’ and ‘carstles' and my 'ploom poodings'. We used each other to rub away the rough edges of our regional accents and, I suppose, finished up speaking slightly on opposite sides of standard English - but 'not quate B.B.C. y' know'. Jack was stocky, fancied himself as a ladies' man and nurtured a struggling moustache which, from time to time, disappointed him and was removed in a bad-tempered encounter with the shaving mirror.

Our posting was to 616 Spitfire Squadron at Kenley and we had to make our way there with full flying gear and kitbags on a long, slow railway journey interrupted by day and night raids. Jack took the opportunity to pay a quick visit home and I arrived at Kenley alone. As I trudged from the railway station up to the guardroom at Kenley, the All-Clear siren sounded. There was a pall of smoke and dust over the airfield. The N.C.O. in the guardroom tore himself away from the constant ringing of his telephones just long enough to tell me that my intended squadron had just flown out, with its few intact Spitfires, to a Northern airfield for rest and re-equipment. As he juggled with telephones, messengers and buzzers, he barked,

“Stay where you are until I find out what to do with you.”

I sat on the guardroom steps for over two hours waiting for a decision from on high. It was obvious that I was the least of the problems around Kenley that day.

Aftermath of Kenley airstrike, 18 August 1940. Damage to a 615 Squadron Hurricane.

Eventually a message and a travel warrant came from the bomb-shattered administration block. As I was a 'fresh' pilot, there was no point in my travelling north for a rest. So, I was to be sent to a squadron in a busy operational area. My new destination turned out to be 85 (Hurricane) Squadron at Debden in Suffolk commanded at the time by S/Ldr. Peter Townsend. Jack turned up later, still grumbling about having to leave his beloved Surrey.

Geoffrey 'Sammy' Allard

Neither of us welcomed the change from Spitfires to Hurricanes but, in time, learned to appreciate their durability and steadiness. My Flight Commander was F/Lt Geoffrey ('Sammy') Allard D.F.C., D.F.M and Bar who had quite a score of enemy aircraft to his credit. Sammy and I got on very well. He taught me a lot about air combat and modern tactics;

"Pretty aerobatics are all right for giving a pilot confidence in his aircraft, but for combat you need to kick and slide and skid and heave into tight turns until your eyeballs drop out."

He was very keen on practicing head-on attacks, insisting that when the attack was broken off, it should be downward and as late as possible to avoid exposing the belly of the aircraft. He never did explain what to do if the 'enemy' aircraft also broke off the attack downward at the last moment. It was a form of airborne Russian roulette not to be played by two pilots equally determined not to be the 'chicken'.

'Sammy' was killed in a flying accident during the war. It was a terrible waste. He was a good officer, a fine pilot and hard taskmaster. He had been a sergeant himself and judged his pilots by their ability and not by rank. He did not subscribe to the common view that sergeants must be led by an officer. If the sergeant was more capable, then he led the section. It was a happy squadron.

I must have met his standards because, after one particularly 'sweaty' patrol, he came up to me and said,

"I'm putting your name up for a commission. O.K.?"

"Whatever you say, Sammy."

That was the interview; decision made. The recommendation was approved, and I was told to expect confirmation soon. But, before it arrived, I had changed squadrons three times and was on my way to the Far East but the back pay was very welcome.

85 Squadron operated around the Thames Estuary and Suffolk coastal areas and, besides the usual scrambles and patrols, spent a lot of time, in sections of two Hurricanes, guarding the convoys which were sometimes several miles long. Sometimes, we circled the convoys but, as mariners were notoriously quick on the trigger and not very good at telling friend from foe, they often asked us to patrol on the landward side, the side the enemy was not likely to come from. This was a necessary but frustrating job; single Ju88's at sea level were used as decoys in the hope that they could lure the escorts away from the convoys while others raided the ships. Normally, we made a feint attack at the enemy aircraft to scare them off, but restrained from chasing them too far from our charges. The JU.88's headed for home very smartly, but often tried to tempt the unwary to follow them over flak-ships or underneath waiting enemy fighters. It was difficult to resist chasing the Ju88s just that little bit further to record an easy 'kill' but we had to remember their whole purpose was to get us to desert the convoys. So, personal scores had to be sacrificed to save the ships.

The time came for 85 Squadron to take its turn for a rest up North and we went to Church Fenton in Yorkshire. It was at Church Fenton that I was detailed to take a Hurricane on a battle climb and see how it would behave at its service ceiling of 34,000 feet. These days, airliners commonly cruise at that height, but with pressurized and air-conditioned cabins which were something the Hurricanes and Spitfires did not have. Approaching that height, the Hurricane was climbing painfully slowly, engine power was reduced, and the controls became sloppy. But it was a rare day of clear skies and exceptional visibility and, wallowing alone at about 32,000 feet, both the North Sea, and Irish Sea and what could have been the Isle of Man were within my range of vision at the same time. Although I have been higher since then, it was a day I shall always remember for its sparkling visibility.

Soon, Jack and I were on the move again. I was assured that our postings had been resisted, in vain, by the C.O. and were due solely to the critical shortage of 'fresh' pilots. We had felt very much at home in 85 Squadron, but, reluctantly, we gathered up our gear and travelled down to Coltishall, in Norfolk, to join Douglas Bader's 242 (Hurricane) Squadron.

The squadron had been in action almost continuously for months. Many of the pilots were tough Canadians and, though tired, had resisted attempts to send them 'on rest'. Coltishall was in 12 Fighter Group, but the squadron flew south every day to operate from Duxford.

On arrival, Jack and I spruced ourselves up ready to report to the famous Squadron Leader Bader. We marched into his office and saluted. He eyed us up and down; he was curt and to the point,

"Where have you come from?"

"What aircraft have you flown?"

"How many hours?"

"Humph! Go and get yourselves settled in and come to dispersal tomorrow."

Not a very warm welcome to the squadron.

We flew with the squadron a few times and it was a revelation to see Bader take off in a scramble. His aircraft was parked very close to his office. His ground crew knew exactly what help he needed so that he and his tin legs could be in the air just as quickly as any other pilot. Some busy days, the stumps of his legs must have given him hell because they were chafed and sore. I have seen him sitting in the flight hut with his artificial legs removed so that he could soothe the stumps with talcum powder and fresh dressings.

Also based at Coltishall was 257 (Hurricane) Squadron commanded by S/Ldr Stanford Tuck, one of the real glamour boys of the R.A.F. It seemed to me that Stanford Tuck, by design or accident, always performed his victory rolls over Bader's part of the airfield.

Bader's unconventional entry into his Spitfire.

After one successful sortie, he did a 'beat up' so low that his slipstream flattened a bell tent in which 242 Squadron's Signals Section was working. Both Bader and Tuck were 'ace' pilots but they disagreed over tactics. Tuck believed that squadrons operating singly were far quicker into the attack and more effective than the 'Big Wings' which Bader favoured.

Stanford Tuck, D.S.O, D.F.C. & 2 Bars

(Stanford Tuck was shot down on 28th Jan 1942 whilst attacking ground forces and captured by German troops. He feared a very hostile reception but this did not materialize when his captors noted that by a remarkable chance, one of his 20 mm canon shells had passed precisely down the barrel of an exactly sized ground weapon where it exploded peeling open the barrel 'like a banana'. Incredibly, the German troops found this hilarious and offered hearty congratulations for such a remarkable shot. He spent a couple of years in Stalag Luft III before escaping in February 1945.)

However, the argument didn't affect Jack and I very much as, once more, we were told that 'fresh' pilots were urgently needed elsewhere. By this time, we were beginning to believe that we were unloved and unwanted and felt aggrieved at yet another posting for no apparent reason. However, ours was not to reason why and Jack and I, who had been together since the Sywell and Montrose days, were posted to 151 (Hurricane) Squadron 'on rest' at Digby in Lincolnshire.

Naturally, I was delighted to be returning to my own county but Jack, southerner born and bred, dreaded the thought of being sent to a place which, he believed, was all flat and very wet. I don't think he had fully recovered from the shock of life in Scotland. He very much missed the 'gels of Serreh'.

The Acting C.O. of 151 Squadron was F/Lt Blair. 151 Squadron had been sent to Digby to cover the Lincolnshire and Humber sector. Some of the convoy patrols involved taking off when it was dusk and staying out over the North Sea until well after dark. Sergeant George Atkinson and I went out as a pair on one of the late patrols. As soon as the patrol started, I had a radio failure and we had to communicate by hand signals. It turned darker and darker and the lowering clouds thickened before a storm. Finally, when it was pitch dark and raining, we were recalled, and George called me into close formation to descend through cloud. The cloud was very thick, and I could just manage to see George's wingtip light if I stayed very close to him. Then we hit mild turbulence and his lights disappeared. So the wise thing to do was to turn away to avoid a collision and ease down through the cloud alone. When I eventually cleared cloud base, which was very low, I was still unable to receive control on my radio or to see much more than the faint glow of the instruments and scattered specks of light which were breaking the blackout regulations. Searching for any kind of landmark, in pitch dark and low cloud, short of fuel and without radio contact, I sorted through the options available to me.

Loud cries of 'MUM!' were unlikely to have an immediate effect, but I kept the option open.

How I wished I could look at the nearest signpost or stop and ask somebody the way. But I didn't have that choice. Instead I headed in what I thought was the general direction of the airfield until I was sure I had gone far enough. But there was no sign of a flare path and my radio was dead on all channels. We had always been told that, if lost at night, we should fly in a circle flashing the code letter of the day and eventually searchlights would indicate the direction of the nearest airfield. As with most ideas, it was all very well in theory, but I hadn't enough fuel to wait around for long.

When I was getting very close to Option No.3 (Bale Out!), a flare path came on in the distance and I flew to it, signaled the recognition code several times, got an acknowledgement and prepared to land. But there seemed to be something not quite right about the flare path; some of the lights were too bright and the alignment wrong.

Eventually, at about 150ft on the final approach, I decided not to land. Just as I opened up the engine all the lights went out and once again, I was in pitch darkness.

There was only one thing left to do; climb up into the cloud and use all the radio buttons once again in a last attempt to raise some airfield control and prepare to bale out into the blackness. Back in the cloud again, flying on instruments, I kept pressing the frequency buttons, watching the fuel needle sinking towards zero.

At last I heard a faint reply on the emergency channel which gave me a course to fly. After a while I was told to press another button to transfer to a Digby channel. With great relief, I heard the call-sign of my own controller.

"Hello Blue Two. Vector Zero Eight Zero."

"Vector Zero Eight Zero. Am I glad to hear you, Roger and out."

I had about thirty miles to go and I had just enough fuel left to make it.

In the flight hut I rang the Controller to thank him for saving my skin. Apparently, the flare path I had been circling was a 'Q' site, a decoy flare-path switched on to divert enemy bombers from more worthwhile targets. Obviously, the crew at the site had, belatedly, realised that the signal I had given was the correct one and switched off just in time. If I had decided to complete the landing, I should have ploughed through hedges, ditches and obstacles which would wreck any aircraft trying to land there.

We had quite a busy life at Digby with several scrambles by flight or section to chase mine-laying Dorniers over the Humber and to protect convoys off the Lincolnshire coast.

One morning, September 30th 1940, when the squadron was officially 'off-duty' and I was about to have breakfast, there was a call over the Tannoy for any pilots of 151 Squadron to report to dispersal and scramble immediately. I ran to dispersal, joined the Acting C.O *(Flt Lt Blair)* and took off across the airfield, completely ignoring wind direction. It was a little hair-raising; our engines could have cut out and, in the misty gloom of early morning, we could hardly see each other.

Helped by the silhouettes against the lighter sky, we were able to join up and headed out over the North Sea in low, patchy cloud. Eventually, a long way out to sea, we spotted a JU.88 using cloud cover to head for home.

JU 88

He saw us and went down to sea level flying so low that his slipstream left a wake on the waves. We had little height advantage and it was only after a long chase that the Section leader could make a low-level attack. He had to keep one eye on his gunsight and one on the sea, unable to get below the Ju.88 to avoid some of the return fire. I flew a little higher and to one side while he emptied his guns. I could see that he was hitting the Ju.88 but it seemed to be doing far more damage to him.

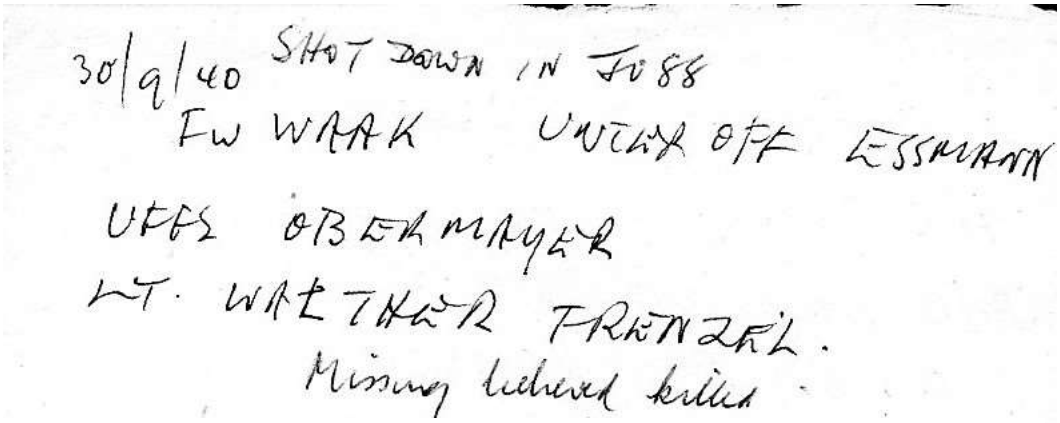
Eventually he peeled away and headed back to base to land in an aircraft that was declared a complete write-off. I made my attack, closing in until the Ju.88 hit the sea and disappeared under my nose. I circled and spotted the tail of the Junkers disappearing beneath the waves just a few feet below me.

JU 88 Crew

As far as I could see, some of the crew managed to climb into the dinghy and yet, I learned many years later, there were no survivors.[2] Among other things, the encounter emphasised the dangers of low flying over a featureless sea and how much more difficult it was when there was a grey sea, with a grey sky and a misty fusion of grey for the horizon.

On the way back I noticed that oil was running over my port wing root. Oil pressure slowly dropped until it was below the safety margin. It was still a long way to the coast and temperature started to rise and the engine had to be coaxed home. I knew there was a bullet hole in the oil tank but there must have been other damage I was blissfully unaware of because in 'The Battle of Britain - Then and Now' it states that Hurricane P5182 was a write-off.

[2] *When he spoke about this event, he felt that although the crew had survived the crash and evacuated the aircraft, insufficient interest or effort was made to rescue the three crew members and they should have survived. Amongst his photos and papers, I found that somehow, he had discovered who the crew members were and made a note of their names.*



JU 88 crew members, 30th Sept 1940

Figure 1Flight Lieutenant Blair receiving D.F.C.

About the end of October 1940, it was decided to convert the squadron and its Hurricanes to night-fighters to try to counter the German switch from daylight activity to night attacks on cities. All the existing pilots of 151 Squadron had returned from late-night convoy patrols in all weathers often enough to be classed as 'Night Operational'. But replacement pilots needed training, starting with moonlight flying and progressing to practices on some really black and dirty nights. By the time the squadron was transferred to Wittering, near Stamford, we could cope in most weather conditions at night except thick fog and mist.

Night practice continued at Collyweston, a satellite airfield nearby. Here we had both amusing and tragic events. The officer regularly in charge of night flying insisted in parking his car, a sporty Riley saloon, just behind the 'Chance' beam at the beginning of the flarepath.

A Flying Officer did suggest that, perhaps, that was not the safest place to park a car. The sergeant-pilots, always ready for a little diversion at somebody else's expense, kept quiet.

The suggestion was dismissed with,

"No-one in his right mind will taxi that close to the beam."

Chance Beam

But he was wrong. Someone taxiing out in the dark either didn't see or didn't understand the Aldis lamp signals and hit the car. The airscrew sliced into the roof and made a real mess of it. It didn't do the Hurricane much good either. The car went for repair and came back, eventually, not as a saloon but as an open sports car.

A few nights after the repair, the Officer i/c Night Flying again parked his car near the Chance light in a 'lightning never strikes in the same place twice' mood. But, in spite of Aldis signals, waving arms and berserk prancing by the car owner, it became apparent that lightning makes its own rules. The car went for repair again and when it came back, many weeks later it had been converted to an even lower sports car. In fact, the driver was very much exposed in all weathers; not a car suitable for any lady friend other than a Land Girl in muck-spreading gear. The car was never parked near the flare-path again. Pity really; one more encounter with an airscrew and it could have been the only model low enough to drive under a toilet door.

In the early stages, night training was done using Gooseneck lamps, a paraffin flare giving out a bright flame which could be seen in all directions. The heat from a full path of these lamps also helped to lift mist and fog just enough for a plane to land. Goosenecks did have some disadvantages: they took time to lay out and light for an emergency landing and it took too long to extinguish them in the event of enemy activity. There were other snags.

When trainees had finished their landing-runs they were required to turn at right angles to the flarepath and wait for permission to taxi back. I have, on more than one occasion, seen the Flight Commander clutching his hat and leaping in the air in frustrated rage because some clot of a trainee, hundreds of yards away, was sitting there singeing the tail of the aircraft over a goose-neck flare.

As soon as possible, the goosenecks were replaced by electric Glim lamps, which were directional, could be seen only in the close proximity of the airfield and could be switched off instantly in the event of an air raid warning.

There were some fatalities during the conversion flights and most of them happened on black nights just after take-off. On most nights there was a sufficient paleness, perhaps only the hazy light of one star in the sky, for a pilot who had taken the trouble to adjust his eyes, to judge his attitude to the ground. Most experienced night fighter pilots protected their night vision by declining to use the 'Chance' beam light for take-off. This speeded the adjustment of their vision during the dangerous transfer from the visual guidance of the flarepath to the faint glow in the sky.

Sometimes everything was pitch-black or misted out and the pilot had to rely entirely on instruments. His life depended on his ability to interpret immediately after take-off the dim messages on the panel in front of him. Three of our pilots were killed over a period of a few weeks because their vision and reactions failed to adjust quickly enough. From my position near the Aldis signaling lamps, I could see each pilot as he drew alongside to make the final (they really were final) cockpit checks.

The sequence of events after that was almost the same in each case. They accelerated down the flare path until only their navigation lights were visible and climbed to a height of about five

hundred feet. Then I could see their wing lights roll to the right and fall out of sight. Just beyond the end of the flarepath, there was an explosive 'CRUMP', a ball of flame and the crackle of ammunition exploding.

After this, all pilots including the ones who had been flying regularly on the blackest nights were given night vision tests. We had doctors shining lights in our eyes to check for defects and then we sat in a darkened room with our collars pinned to the back of the chair and asked to identify shadowy silhouettes on a screen. They were unusual views of common objects and aircraft. Most of the pilots could see the items on the screen well enough but some couldn't recognise all of them and made wild guesses. Therefore, some results were embarrassing, inconvenient and ignored.

To assist night vision, some pilots used tinted goggles on standby: many found them of little value. The Hurricanes were fitted with special exhaust manifolds with metal shields in line with the pilots' line of sight to reduce glare from flames and sparks. To reduce reflection, all night aircraft were sprayed matt black which gave them a most sinister appearance.

Few experienced pilots used the Chance light for landing. It could attract unwelcome visitors when the pilot was at his most vulnerable. It could momentarily blind him for the final few feet before touch-down and spoil his night vision for an emergency take-off.

If we took off just after dark, we could climb up and find the sunshine again. Of course, it worked the other way round and we could be flying home in the late sunshine and have to make a rapid transition to darkness on the landing approach. There are tricks in every trade and night flying was no exception; look slightly away from an indistinct object to bring into use other areas of the retina; protect night vision by keeping the cockpit lights as dim as possible and avoid chasing suspicious exhaust flames which, because of the effects of parallax, were really heavenly bodies in illusory motion across the sky.

Occasionally, the constant speed unit of the airscrew would leak, throwing a fine mist of thin oil over the windscreen and hinder visibility. This was just a nuisance during daylight, but at night, vision was reduced and flare path refractions on the windscreen made landing trickier than usual.

Three things make pilots of single-engine aircraft very sensitive to engine note and instrument readings: flying over enemy territory, flying over the sea and being a long way from home in poor visibility. Although they were made in vast numbers, the Merlin engines were generally most reliable. But they were liquid cooled and leaks of hot, acrid fumes of glycol into the cockpit were not unusual.

With his head stuck over the side of his cockpit and with his eyes streaming, the coughing, spluttering pilot usually managed to land safely if he was near an airfield during daylight. But Glycol leaks at night were bad news and the pilot had to get down in a hurry or bale out. By the end of the War I had more than my fair share of glycol leaks.

All Black 151 Hurricane 1, Wittering 1941

At Wittering we had to try to deal with the night blitzes of the autumn and winter of 1940/41 without the radar aids which were later fitted to twin-engined aircraft.

It was soon realised that, on dark nights, it was almost useless to send off single aircraft to chase the bombers. So whole squadrons were sent off on 'Fighter Nights' to circle in stepped altitudes at intervals of about 500ft in the expected path of the bomber streams.

In this manner I saw the blitzes on Coventry, Hull, Sheffield, London and Birmingham.

Aerial view of the blitz over London

London Blitz from the ground.

It was frustrating to watch the cities burning, to see the effect of further bombs falling and yet be unable to leave our briefed height and position. We circled and searched and stared until our necks ached.

One of our pilots was very successful when operating alone at night- 'Cats Eyes' Stevens. He had an exceptional talent for finding aircraft in the dark and liked to work alone with only occasional reference to the Ground Controller.

We sat together for many hours in the dim 'readiness' room, but I never really got to know him. He was a withdrawn and restless man, always anxious to get into action. He had a passionate hatred of the Germans, due, I believe, to the death, by enemy action, of a close member of his family.

He was eventually killed on night intruder operations over France after building up an impressive score.

Flt. Lt. R. P. Stevens, DSO, D.FC. & Bar. A recent book called 'Lone Wolf' by Andy Saunders has recently been published detailing his remarkable record.

But for most of us, on dark nights it was like looking for a black needle in a black haystack. Sometimes our aircraft would rock as we crossed the slipstream of a bomber and it seemed that our best chance of destroying an enemy aircraft was to collide with one.

Still, the authorities had to be seen to be trying, and all sorts of schemes were dreamed up. First there was the idea of using Boulton Paul Defiants which had a pilot and an air gunner ('two pairs of eyes are better than one, y'know'). The pilot had no forward guns, (which didn't please the fighter-pilots acting as 'bloody chauffeurs') and the gunner was in a turret.

Doug with Defiant and Jonny Ream (Turret not visible)

Defiants had already been withdrawn from day fighting because they were so underpowered. They were soon withdrawn from night operations. They were ladylike and comfortable to fly but they were too slow and they hadn't the fire-power of the Hurricanes. We had Defiants on trial for a few months and withdrew them from operations.

Suitable radar equipment was not yet available for fighter aircraft so the next idea was to test Hurricanes in co-operation with a twin-engine aircraft. A few Bostons were fitted with powerful lights and an early version of airborne radar. The idea was for two Hurricanes to formate above and on each side of a dim directional light on top of a Boston. The Boston was to use its radar to locate the enemy aircraft and, when close enough, switch on its light to illuminate the enemy while the Hurricanes attacked it.

Boston Turbinlite

We experimented with this new idea but there were several things wrong with it: the directional light couldn't be very bright or the enemy could see it so, on dark nights, the Boston and the Hurricanes had difficulty staying together: the Boston was slow and the raid could be over before the flying circus arrived: the airborne radar was undeveloped: if the light was accurate enough to illuminate the enemy, it gave him just enough time to dive away out of the beam before the Hurricanes could attack.

It didn't do the night vision of the Hurricane pilots much good, either. So, another attempt to beat the night bomber had to be abandoned.

But other things were improving; ground operated radar was getting more accurate and air-to-ground communications had been helped by the introduction of improved radios, a great advance on the old TR9 sets which needed frequent tuning in the air.

Apart from the frequent night operations and the occasional scramble or patrol during the day, the squadron always seemed to have plenty to do not always of direct benefit to the war effort.

Sometimes the Defiants would be used to collect urgent spares direct from the makers and get them instead of waiting for the slow, steady supply channels of officialdom. On one occasion I volunteered to go to the Boulton Paul aerodrome at Wolverhampton because I knew that my cousin, Jack Shelton, worked there. I had never been to the airfield before but knew it was somewhere in the sprawling conurbations of West Bromwich, Wolverhampton and Birmingham.

I anticipated some difficulty in finding the place amidst the tangle of criss-crossing railway lines and roads, but solved the problem quite easily, as I have done many times since, by looking for something camouflaged! I was a long time getting back to base, not so much because I had lunch with Jack, or because the spares were difficult to get, but because Boulton Pauls did not have a 48 volt starter trolley which Defiants needed - and they were the firm that made Defiants! It took ages to connect enough trolleys and batteries together to start the Defiant and I was not at all popular when I returned to base.

Sometimes ground-crew who lived a considerable distance from Wittering would be granted a precious 48 hour pass, not long enough to travel to and from the folks and girlfriends by normal means. So, for deserving 'passionate' cases, more 'navigation exercises' took place and the airmen were flown to the airfields nearest to home. There was little spare room in the turret of a Defiant and some airmen had exaggerated ideas about the amount of luggage they could cram in with them. However, if the airman was unwise enough to ignore the advice to travel

light, that was his affair. We had to abandon him at the chosen airfield, surrounded by his baggage and still, possibly, twenty miles away from home.

Some of these 'exercises' were used to give friends of the squadron their first flight in the claustrophobic confines of a Defiant turret; some enjoyed the experience; some did not and were never seen near the flight offices again.

On one occasion, I was asked by the Flight Commander to take one of our Welsh-born fitters to Filton, near Bristol. We landed, the fitter went on his way and while I was waiting for a starter trolley suitable for a Defiant, I wandered to the nearest hangar and looked through a gap in the doors just to see what was going on. There, on jacks having the undercarriage tested, was a strange type of aircraft with, to my eyes, a massive, radial engine. Curious, I wandered in and asked the civilian mechanics about it until one realised from my questions that I was a stranger.

"Who the hell are you?"

Whistles blew, hooters sounded, and my feet didn't touch the ground until I was outside the hangar and surrounded by burly security men. They believed my story in the end and it certainly speeded up the provision of a suitable starter trolley. I had wandered into the hangar where the Bristol Aircraft Company was testing the top-secret prototype of the Typhoon, Tempest and Tornado line of ground attack fighters. Fortunately, I had been instructed to land at Filton but my Flight Commander received a rocket for sending me to a restricted airfield barred to all except those with the highest security clearance.

On another 'navigation exercise' I was returning 'empty' from the North of England where I had taken an airman on a 48 hour pass, and as I was passing Nottingham, I noticed what appeared to be a Spitfire diving down to get on my tail. This sort of thing was common and made pilots keep their eyes open in the air. If the attacked pilot did not give the wing-waggle 'seen you' signal before the other plane was in shooting range it was regarded as quite a put-down. As this Spitfire came round behind me, I realised it was, in fact, an Me.109!

Captured Bf 109 G2 (1942 model)

Now, one does not stop to calculate that Nottingham is out of range of an enemy 109, one takes immediate and drastic evasive action especially as even an armed Defiant was no match for a Me.109. But, of course, a Defiant's guns were in the turret and controlled by the gunner, not by the pilot. After a little hectic activity, I realised that the 109 had roundels on it but it took a long time to relax.

Apparently the 109 was from the Research Dept. of Hucknall aerodrome and was an aircraft that had made a forced landing on soft ground during 1940 and had been refurbished. It was of course always escorted by a couple of Spitfires, but they apparently must have stayed out of the way just to watch the poor sap in the Defiant panic.

The Me.109 is, I believe, the one which is now on display in the Battle of Britain Museum at Hendon.

Fighter boys have always regarded their sector as personal property and guarded it jealously so that any interloper, friend or foe, was subject to the 'got an eye on you' treatment. Consequently on these long 'navigation' exercises we were subject to the attentions of Spitfires and Hurricanes trying to show the doddering Defiant what's what and get on its tail before the wing-waggle 'seen you' signal. It became quite a bore, but it kept us alert in our temporary role as bus driver.

Before the Defiant gunners left us, we tried to give them a few navigation exercises so that, in their new squadrons they would have a better chance of upgrading to Navigators, regarded as a step above an ordinary gunner.

Whether we succeeded or not, I never knew as I went abroad with a different squadron a few months later and lost touch completely with my gunner, a chap called Gazzard. However, we were not sorry to lose the Defiants, gentle and ladylike though they were, and get back to Hurricanes.

While 151 Squadron was at Wittering, the Station Commander was Wing Commander Basil Embry, an escapee from a German prison camp. He was a small, dapper man, whose story is told in the book 'Wingless Victory' by Anthony Richardson.

He took a great interest in the squadron and is believed to have arranged to take it with him when, eventually, he was posted to command another R.A.F. station and the squadron was re-equipped with Mosquitoes with which they carried out the famous raid on Amiens jail to free members of the French Resistance.

151 Squadron, 1941.

Back Row: Sgt. K.L.E Parkin, Sgt J.A Maguire, Sgt. S.Sudenberg, Sgt R.G Elvin, Sgt A.G Beale, Sgt S.J Fairweather DFM, Sgt F.W George, Sgt H.W Hart, Sgt J.A Wain, Sgt R.V Cartwright, Sgt E.A Fielding, Sgt D. Wrampling, Sgt B.Broit, Sgt J.G Stewart, Sgt D.E.C Jonas, Sgt J.J. Lammin, Sgt Gudgeon.

Front Row: Sgt L (Jack) Staples, Sgt D.B.F Nicholls. F/Sgt G Atkinson DFM, P/Ofr A.I McRitchie, P/Ofr R.P Stevens DFC, P/Ofr G.A.F Edmiston, F/Ofr C.L.W Stewart, F/Ofr A.S.Turnbull, F/Lieut. D.A.P McMullen DFC,

S/Ldr J.S Adams DFC, F/Lieut D.F. W Darling, F/Ofr G. Turner, P/Ofr I.S Smith DFC, P/Ofr J.L.W Ellacombe, P/Ofr H.E Bodien, P/Ofr A.D Wagner, P/Ofr J.S Davidson, P/Ofr A.H.C Lynes, F/Sgt P.Copeland.

At Wittering, the squadron was involved in developing an instrument landing system. Hurricanes could not carry radar and it was hoped that we could use a talk-in system to land in bad weather. Fortunately, the early trials were done in good weather in a Master aircraft with the testing pilot's cockpit hooded and with a safety pilot look-out in the front cockpit.

Trials went on for weeks and when the boffins were confident they had perfected the system, pilots were sent up in Hurricanes to follow the directions given over the radio and with instructions not to look out of the cockpit until they received the signal 'Landing now'.

The theory was that they would be about fifty feet over the landing area. Fortunately for their well-being, most of the pilots cheated and kept a beady eye on the accuracy of the guided landings. Admittedly, many of the comments broadcast by the pilots given the 'land now' instruction were congratulatory but some were caustic in the extreme such as,

"I haven't reached the b---- airfield yet!"

"I'm twenty feet over a lorry on the A1."

Then came the day when I was told the snags had been sorted out and I was to follow the landing guidance strictly. But no pilot willingly commits suicide; he has too much respect for, shall we say, his aircraft for that. I kept my head down on the approach, but an awareness reinforced by brief sideways glimpses on the turns, told me that I was not being brought in on the correct path. At about fifty feet, I cheated (well, who wouldn't?) and could see that I was about to make a perfect landing on a farmyard pond in the N.W. corner of the airfield. Politely, I told the boffins that my Hurricane had no floats fitted. They seemed to lose heart after that and took their equipment away for further development, with, I assume, more trusting and trustworthy pilots.

One very dark night at Wittering, I was sent off on patrol and spent well over an hour going round in circles at different heights without intercepting anything. Eventually I was told to 'pancake' that is return to base and land. I was in clear radio contact and over the airfield was given the all-clear to land and switched on all navigation and recognition lights. On the final approach at about 200ft, with wheels and flaps down, I noticed what seemed to be engine sparks passing each side of the cockpit, but in the wrong direction; tracer bullets!

With hands buzzing around the cockpit, I switched off the lights, got the wheels and flaps up, took evasive action, re-trimmed the aircraft and looked for the enemy.

In the middle of all this activity, the Controller called up and said, in a pained voice as if it was my fault, "Apparently you have been fired on." With that all the airfield lights went off. 'Sorry about you, but we're all right, Jack.'

I cruised around the area looking for the intruder, but he seemed to have decided to limit himself to one attack. My fuel was getting low and I told the Controller I was coming in to land. Naturally, he was reluctant to light the flare path with enemy aircraft about but I said I could see the ground well enough to land without lights. And I could - until my wheels were rolling along the ground; then there was nothing but blackness all around and I had only a rough idea where the hangars were. At last, a pinhole torch flickered in the distance and I was able to taxi towards it and park the aircraft. I used the dispersal telephone to ring the Controller and explain, in some detail, what I thought of being brought back to the airfield, like an illuminated sitting duck, when an enemy intruder was in the circuit. There was an embarrassed silence at the other end of the line; that was all.

I stayed with 151 Squadron at Wittering until the middle of 1941. It was a good squadron, and I was sorry to leave it and my good friend Jack. The squadron went on to do great things as Night Intruders in Mosquitoes.

After the war, the squadron was reformed and, until it was disbanded a few years ago, was flying Hawks (the Red Arrows machines) down in glorious Devon.

But, in the summer of 1941, it was my turn to experience a flight in the turret of a Defiant when Jack flew me down to Martlesham Heath in Suffolk to join 258 (Hurricane) Squadron. Here, Jack and I said farewell and didn't meet again until many years after the War. 258 was a R.A.F. Squadron but there were enough New Zealanders in it to justify the wearing the fern, the emblem of New Zealand.

When I joined, the pilots were a mixed bag of nationalities; Australians, Americans, Rhodesians, Canadians, a Newfoundlander and eleven British beside New Zealanders. Among the Americans was Art. Donahue, the author of "Last Flight from Singapore" and "Yankee in a Spitfire".

258 Squadron, Debden, September 1941

Back row L to R: Unknown, Lambert, Sheerin, Heeley, Gallacher, Scott, Unknown, Kelly, Keedwell, Miller, Nicholls, Glynn, Gregory

Front: Campbell, Unknown, Geffene, Nash, Macnamara, Dobbyn, Sharp, Thomson, De La Perelle, Macalister, White, Kleckner, McCulloch, Milnes, Circurelle

Most of our work was along the S.E. coast and the Thames Estuary along the busy shipping routes. Usually we went in pairs guarding convoys from the frequent hit and run raids from low-flying aircraft. Because the raiders came from the seaward side, our job was to patrol on the landward side to identify ourselves as friendly. Trouble was that the Navy gunners regarded anything airborne as unfriendly.

We were not supposed to cross the convoy but to fly round one end or the other. As some of the convoys were several miles long, we had a long way to go if we saw an enemy aircraft approaching. In a case like that, most of us just took a chance and flew across at high speed, weaving to throw the Navy gunners off their aim.

Eventually, the escort ship was fitted with a radio with our wavelength and we were then allowed to fly over the convoy provided enemy aircraft were approaching and we had been given radio permission first. Sometimes permission was a bit slow in coming because the Navy didn't seem to realise that we could see approaching aircraft much sooner than they could, so we had to dive across on the attack and get shot at anyway. But it didn't seem to matter if we waited for permission to cross, but we still get shot at by the Navy.

Some patrols we had a very busy time because enemy aircraft would approach at different ends of the convoy and often one aircraft would act as a decoy and while it was been chased, another would run in an attack the ships. For this reason, we could not chase too far and leave the ships unattended or allow ourselves to be lured within range of a flak ship, which one Ju.88 tried to do to me.

Bertie, a Yorkshire lad, and I were sent off on a convoy patrol and returned to the airfield at early dusk, but with plenty of light to land. The Controller ordered us to patrol base. I thought there must be an intruder about but all I could get from the Controller was, "Continue to orbit base." When it was quite dark, I reminded the Controller that we had little fuel left.

The reply was, 'Continue to orbit base.'

We went round and round for another 15 minutes, a flare path lit up and we were able to land. After getting to dispersal, I rang Control and asked what the delay had been about.

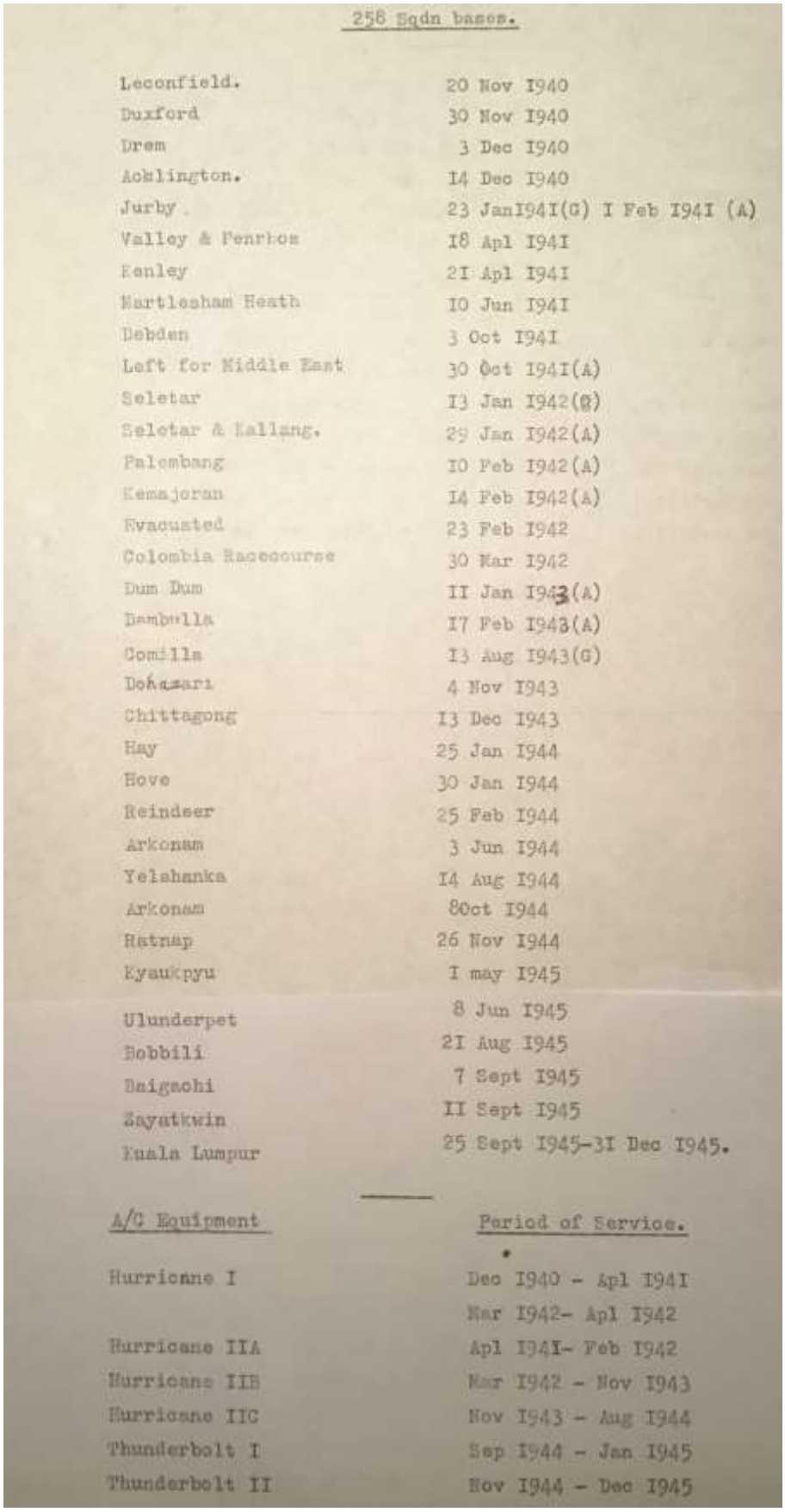
He said, 'I didn't know whether you were qualified night flyers or not, so I made you stay up until we had fixed a flarepath for you.'

I pointed out, with some force that, if we had been asked we could have told him it was light enough for us to land in the first place and, if we had NOT been Night Operational, it was ridiculous to keep us up until it was pitch dark. Problems like this, between pilots and Controllers, lessened as ex-pilots were transferred to Operations Rooms.

Hurricane Cockpit, BBMF plane with GPS etc

On the occasions when I, as a Sergeant Pilot, complained to a Controller, there was never any suggestion of repercussions for daring to criticise a senior officer, partially, I suspect, because the Controller didn't want to advertise what a clown he had been.

On the other hand, until I was commissioned, I didn't get an apology either.



258 Sqdn bases.

Leconfield.	20 Nov 1940
Duxford	30 Nov 1940
Drem	3 Dec 1940
Acklington.	14 Dec 1940
Jurby.	23 Jan1941(G) 1 Feb 1941 (A)
Valley & Penrhos	18 Apl 1941
Kenley	21 Apl 1941
Hartlesham Heath	10 Jun 1941
Debden	3 Oct 1941
Left for Middle East	30 Oct 1941(A)
Seletar	13 Jan 1942(G)
Seletar & Kallang.	29 Jan 1942(A)
Palembang	10 Feb 1942(A)
Kemajoran	14 Feb 1942(A)
Evacuated	23 Feb 1942
Colombia Racecourse	30 Mar 1942
Dum Dum	11 Jan 1943(A)
Dambulla	17 Feb 1943(A)
Comilla	13 Aug 1943(G)
Dohazari	4 Nov 1943
Chittagong	13 Dec 1943
Hay	25 Jan 1944
Hove	30 Jan 1944
Reindeer	25 Feb 1944
Arkonam	3 Jun 1944
Yelahanka	14 Aug 1944
Arkonam	8Oct 1944
Ratnap	26 Nov 1944
Kyaukpyu	1 may 1945
Ulunderpet	8 Jun 1945
Bobbili	21 Aug 1945
Daigachi	7 Sept 1945
Zayatkwin	11 Sept 1945
Kuala Lumpur	25 Sept 1945-31 Dec 1945.

A/C Equipment	Period of Service.
Hurricane I	Dec 1940 - Apl 1941
	Mar 1942- Apl 1942
Hurricane IIA	Apl 1941- Feb 1942
Hurricane IIB	Mar 1942 - Nov 1943
Hurricane IIC	Nov 1943 - Aug 1944
Thunderbolt I	Sep 1944 - Jan 1945
Thunderbolt II	Nov 1944 - Dec 1945

List of 258 Squadron bases 1940-45

Chapter Three - Travelling

Late in 1941, the squadron was notified of posting overseas as part of a ‘wing’ of three hurricane squadrons – 258, 242 and 605. We were not told where we were going but were given sun helmets and long, woolly underwear to cover all possibilities. In November we arrived at Gourock on the Clyde to board H.M.S. Athene, a seaplane tender about to make its maiden voyage with our Hurricanes down below in crates.

We had to go alongside by lighter and, naturally, we and our baggage, accidentally or otherwise, received a good sprinkling of black oil from the fuel barge also tied alongside.

HMS Athene

We set out on our mysterious journey in convoy with several supply ships, a destroyer, some frigates and the 'Hermes' a flat-topped aircraft carrier which had been converted from an old cruiser. All went well until we hit the storms of the Bay of Biscay.

Our ship had not been ballasted properly for the light cargo it was carrying and rolled like a plastic duck in the lightest of swells, so we had a rough time in the storms of the Bay. At times we could see the nose of the 'Hermes' dip into the sea and, as it rose from the waves, a wall of solid water, several feet high would run from the front to the rear of the flight deck. I say 'at times' because in our little vessel we were very busy hanging on. Even in the roughest weather, we spent most of our time on deck to get away from the greasy, queasy smell below decks.

Until we passed the storms of Biscay, we had had very little sleep at night. The oily fumes of below-decks combined with the uneasy motion of the ship were bad enough but, in addition, we had a constant struggle to master the mysteries of hammocks.

We were never at ease in them especially as our sleep was often disturbed by a dull thud as some restless sleeper fell out. We asked for permission to sleep on deck but, in rough seas and in War Zones this was not permitted.

Some, unnamed member of our group became over-confident about hammocks and made bets that it was possible to do a slow roll in one. Poor Bertie, much against his will, was made to try but, at the top of the roll, parted company with his hammock and hit his head on the steel deck with a horrible thump. He bears the scar to this day. There was no more horseplay with hammocks after that.

There were eight sergeant pilots on board, all in one small room like a metal box. There were Terry and Pip from the London area, Bertie from the Tees, 'Junior' and I from the Eastern Counties, Big Scotty and Roy from Canada and Artie from Australia.

(Altogether there were 22 pilots from 258 Squadron on board. By the end of the war 7 survived in service, 5 were Prisoners of War and 10 were dead or died of their wounds. All 22 appear in the 258 Squadron photo at Debden in September 1941 shown in Chapter 2, but since they all played a significant part in Doug's daily life, it is, I hope, worth looking at them in a little more detail. What happened to each is recorded in the following chapters.)

Squadron Leader Thomson. British

Flight Lieutenant D.J.T. Sharp. New Zealand

Flight Lieutenant V.B. de la Perelle (Victor) New Zealand

Flying Officer A.G. (Art) Donahue. USA

Flying Officer H.A. Dobbyn.
New Zealand

Pilot Officer A.H. Milnes. British (far left) with Churchill.

Pilot Officer B. McAlister (Left) New Zealand and P/O C. Campbell - White New Zealand

Pilot Officer D. Geffene. USA.

Pilot Officer G.C.S. MacNamara. Rhodesian

Pilot Officer A.D.M. Nash. (Micky), British

Pilot Officer N.L. McCulloch. British

Pilot Officer C. Kleckner. USA.

Pilot Officer J.A 'Red' Campbell. USA

Sgt. R.B. Keedwell (Roy) Canadian.

Sgt C.T.R Kelly (Terry) British

Sgt P.R.T. 'Pip' Healey

Sgt A. 'Bertie' Lambert (Left) British and Sgt. Doug Nicholls

Sgt A. 'Artie' Sheerin. .British.

Sgt K 'Junior' Glynn. Canadian

Sgt. N.M. Scott (Scotty) Canadian. With Sam Tew to the left.

We ate in one of the mess decks and the food was foul. The last straw came when we were served a charred mass which was supposed to be bread-and-butter pudding. Something had to be done. Much to the disapproval of the Navy, the relationship between sergeant and officer pilots in the squadron was relaxed and informal. Artie's burnt offering was the worst with currants like leadshot, so a deputation took his plate and waylaid Victor, one of our Flight Commanders about to go to the wardroom for a meal. Victor took one look at the plate, said "Good God! Leave this to me", and took it into the wardroom.

The Captain and some of the ship's officers were eating. Victor waited, unnoticed near the serving door, until the steward came in the with the Captain's pudding. He signaled the puzzled steward to wait a minute and reached over the Captain's shoulder and placed the charred mess before him. There was a moment's silence followed by a bellow which could be heard all over the ship and a series of horrifying nautical threats to the cook's well-being.

Before any harm could befall the horrified steward or a guiltless cook, Victor explained that it was an example of the muck being served to the sergeants on the lower mess deck. This, of course, was not the Navy way of raising a complaint but Victor was supported by our C.O. and other R.A.F. officers who were there at the time. In fact, some of our 'wild colonial boys', already irritated by the 'Senior Service' attitude to the R.A.F. and the 'other ranks' in particular, did not mince their words. Eventually the Captain calmed down and promised 'to see to that blasted fellah personally'. Things improved slightly after that. The incident certainly made the lower deck ratings far more friendly towards the R.A.F.

As N.C.O.s on a Navy ship, we were entitled to a daily rum ration which was supposed to be drunk immediately on issue; in fact, it was an offence to attempt to store it. As Navy rum was not to our liking, we saved it up in whisky bottles which we had illegally brought aboard full. We found the rum useful for getting odd jobs, such as laundry and ironing, done. At one time we had three or four bottles of the stuff hidden away in kitbags and flying boots. With us were two pilots who claimed to be hard drinkers: Artie, an Australian and Scottie, Canadian, both very agreeable chaps. They never saved their tots and took a supercilious view of our preference for beer (which we couldn't get, anyway).

This led to them being challenged to drink, between them, a spirit bottle full of Navy rum, neat, in one evening. The event took place one evening in the little metal box we called our quarters when everything had settled down for the night.

Artie made a brave attempt to polish off his half of the bottle but gave up when he found his limbs would not obey his brain and we dumped him into his hammock. Scottie finished off his share of the rum and sat there on the deck with his back against the bulkhead meditating. He loosened his tie and belt then he spoke, briefly,

"Going on deck. Fresh air."

As we were through the storms by then and he was steady on his feet, we could not object. He climbed the companionway easily. When he hadn't returned by 'battening down' time, we decided to send out a search party. Fortunately, the Navy had by then decided that the discipline of R.A.F. passengers was not their affair and had agreed to leave the closing of our hatch to us. We searched the deck, inside the lifeboats and floats but there was no sign of Scotty. Reluctantly, we headed back to our quarters trying to decide who would tell the Captain there was a man overboard. As I was about to step through our hatchway, I saw something glisten intermittently by the port rail, in the shadow of an upended Carley float.

Something made me check before finally giving up hope and I crept across to the side. What I had seen was a pair of bare buttocks glinting in the moonlight. They belonged to Scotty; he was balanced on his stomach over the bottom rail, his head over the side and his knees lifting

off the deck as the ship rolled. He was out for the count and his trousers were down to his ankles.

I grabbed his shirt to stop him going over the side and signalled for help. We hauled him and his trousers more or less upright and helped him to the top of the metal steps of our companionway. Terry and I supported him under each arm, Pip went ahead to cushion any fall and Roy stayed at the rear in case he collapsed backwards. With considerable difficulty, because he was a big fellow, we got him down two steps.

Then he said, "Jush a minnit", and stopped for a violent fit of retching which produced nothing except for one whole baked bean balancing on his lower lip. He stuck his lip out as far as it would go, went cross-eyed trying to identify it but failed to do so until it dropped off his lip and bounced down the steps in front of us.

Obviously relieved that he hadn't brought up anything vital, he beamed and informed us confidentially, "Thash a bean!" Then he slumped into our arms.

It was the last word he uttered for two days until, in fact, I dragged him out of his hammock on November 21st to view the approaches to Gibraltar harbour.

Gibraltar 1942

So, on November 21st 1941, we sailed into Gibraltar with Scottie propped up between us and the ship's rails. After docking at one of the outer moles, we learned that were to stay on board until the aircraft carrier 'Ark Royal' could take us and our assembled Hurricanes to a spot in the Mediterranean where we would take off and fly several hundred miles to Malta. There was some doubt about our eventual destination, probably for security reasons and possibly because great minds had still to be made up. Some reports said we were to stay in Malta; others that we were to be fitted with long range tanks and fly on to the Middle East. Whose idea this was,

I have no idea, but the second leg depended on its success for the winds to be favourable, the absolute minimum use of fuel and, no interference from hostile aircraft although the course ran quite close to the enemy coastline. For those who survived the journey, there was the possibility of re-fueling again and flying on to the Russian front. However, most of our Arctic gear had been left behind in the heavy baggage.

Fortunately, the plans were cancelled for two good reasons: (a) the Ark Royal set off with the first half of our wing (242 Sqdn. and half of 605 Sqdn) but was sunk coming back to pick us up and (b) the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour while we were waiting, and it was decided to send us to the Far East instead. Later, we learned that, on the first leg to Malta, there had been losses. What could have happened on the longer and more hazardous second leg did not bear thinking about.

Sinking of the Ark Royal

While we were waiting for routing, a few of our Hurricanes were taken off the Athene and assembled at Gibraltar airfield. The idea was that we needed to keep in flying practice, especially if there was another prospect of a carrier take-off. In addition, there had been some strange activity and pro-German noises on the Spanish side of the border. So, while patrolling the Straits of Gibraltar, we could, accidentally on purpose, fly near stretches of the Spanish and Tangier borders and 'show the flag'. During one of the patrols, Don Geffene, one of our American pilots, had to force-land on Spanish territory.

The handsome Don, the great charmer, had his head shaved and was confined to a Spanish jail in prison garb. There, because of the slow pace of diplomatic negotiations, he stayed for months in filthy conditions. Fortunately, he was an American citizen; it makes one wonder how long he would have rotted there had he been British.

For security and diplomatic reasons, we never did get the full story from him, but, from the snippets he let slip occasionally, we learned that, in fact, he was not released. He was 'allowed' to escape thanks to the effect of his charm on the daughter of the jailer and the 'arrangement' reached by the political fixers. He had a rough time getting away, but did not discuss the route and method he took. After we had been to the Far East and returned to Ceylon, he joined what was left of the squadron in Colombo. Sadly, he was killed in the Easter Raid l942. (*Photo in Chapter 5)*

During our stay in Gibraltar, we were 'billeted' on the 'Athene' which still had most of our crated Hurricanes on board and was also waiting for instructions. The ship was moored at a quay but, for some days, whether for general security or for ours we were not allowed to venture among the rough Navy in Gibraltar town. So, for want of something better to do, we rigged up simple fishing lines and enjoyed the winter sunshine sitting at the end of the sea wall hoping that nothing would disturb our peace by taking the bait. Pip felt a strong tug on his line and pulled in what appeared to be a large fish with a large head and a thin tail. Unfortunately for him, it turned out to be something which none of us had seen before. It was an octopus about three feet long and, when he handled it spread its tentacles all round his forearm, making him leap about the quayside screaming in terror, while his brave and loyal pals kept their distance waiting to see who would win the Tug-o-War.

It was interesting, if not amusing, to see that the octopus could wrap its tentacles round Pip's arm much, much faster than he could pull them off with a noise that sounded like sticking plaster being ripped off a hairy limb. It was a great tussle while it lasted but it was a great relief to all when the octopus tired first and dropped off the quayside into the sea. It may have tired first, but I am sure that the octopus recovered long before Pip did.

After a great deal of pestering, the captain at last agreed we could have passes to go into the town, but warned us that Gibraltar was chiefly a naval base and that we our innocence of the ways of the wily sailors would soon mark us as candidates for fleecing. We ambled down the main street and chose what we thought was the quietest bar, ordered drinks and sat at a table in a corner. But we were soon joined by several Naval Ratings who, by the look of them, had already called at every other bar in Gibraltar. Outnumbered and green as grass, we were fair game. One of the ratings came to our table, saw that our Canadians were drinking whisky and warned them against it.

"Do you want to go blind?"

He poured into a saucer a little whisky from one of their glasses and put a match to it. It burned with a blue flame.

"Look", he said, "it's nothing but bloody meths. Don't drink it."

We were duly impressed and allowed him to do us a big favour by drinking four glasses of it for us. Later, much later, we discovered that whisky burns blue anyway.

On another occasion, a rating came over and bet us a drink that we couldn't lift one of the heavy bar chairs by its polished backrest using only one thumb held straight and pointing down to the ground. To make sure we understood, he demonstrated how we must hold our thumbs. We all tried to lift the chair and failed. Then the rating used his other hand and we saw that on it he had four fingers and two thumbs, one vestigial, but strong enough to grip each side of the chair back and lift it. We paid up; we were learning fast; so we should, we were in a good school.

(The Squadron's intelligence officer was L.J Christie who kept a detailed record of activities up to his transfer in 1943 - further reference will be made to his engaging observations. Here, he notes another serious conflict involving the pilots of 258 Squadron.

"At this point shall be told the story of the squadron bollock. The Squadron stayed at the Grand Hotel, Gibraltar and about Dec 15th (1941) the officers gave a party for the Sgts. Not unnaturally, the party got somewhat boisterous and when the bar was closed the lads were told, in no uncertain terms, to clear off. On the way out, P/O Dobbyn and Sgt Sheerin saw a magnificent glass knob on top of a post and decided to remove it. So, the rest of the Squadron formed a circle and by dint of much heaving and wrenching detached the knob. The hotel manager later got to hear where it has gone and demanded it back – or else. A fine of £3 was mentioned and he threatened to hand the matter over to the police. The Squadron held a meeting and agreed to pay 30 shillings on condition that they kept the trophy.

P/O Bruce McAlister was made officer i/c Bollock but unfortunately it was left in Takoradi with a lot of kit that P.A.A. (Pan American Airlines?) refused to take as it was too heavy. H.M.S Athene had claimed a share in the Bollock in which they displayed great interest. In Batavia, the Squadron again met the officers and crew of H.M.S. Athene and the latter were greatly distressed to hear of the loss of the Bollock. They promised to see that it was replaced and somewhere in their travels in New Britain in the Solomon's they did a repeat of the Gibraltar episode. About 18th April 1942, H.M.S. Athene appeared in Colombo and the new Bollock was duly presented to the Squadron. "Fortunately, no images are available").

What we did notice about the bars in Gibraltar was that they were always very subdued whenever the 'shore patrol' was about. Quite often, the 'patrol', a squad of very beefy naval police armed with truncheons, came into a bar and just stood there studying the customers as if daring anyone to put one foot out of line. Anyone showing signs of being too much under the influence was removed immediately and, so we heard, had an unpleasant time both before and after disciplinary proceedings. For those ratings found drunk and incapable reduction in rank was quite common - and those who were charged with being disorderly as well, were very anxious not to be caught a second time even if they had no rank left to lose. Ratings would stand in front of any of their shipmates who had had a 'skinful' to hide them from the view of the 'patrol 'while other members of the group would physically restrain both the movement and, if necessary, the breathing of the drunk to keep him quiet.

We learned that the 'patrol' was tolerant with drunken seamen as long as they were not objectionable and could get themselves back to their ships. Those who were incapable as well as pickled were in deep trouble. Sometimes we would hire a horse-drawn carriage to take us back to our ship and during one of these journeys, we saw someone in naval uniform flat out in the gutter. Our knowledge of naval ranks was restricted to the three categories of gold stripes, peaked caps and round hats. As this one had no hat we had no idea what we had picked up but realising what would happen to him if he got caught, we dragged him into the carriage and put him on the floor. We kept our feet pressed on him as we passed through the sentries at the dock entrance and took him to the naval vessel - a submarine depot ship - berthed next to ours.

Leaving the drunk in the carriage, we made a few discreet enquiries of the ordinary ratings hanging about the gangplank and they seemed to recognise our description of the wreckage we had on the carriage floor. When there was no danger of a senior rank appearing, we dragged our drunk up to the deck and left him sitting up in a dark, secluded corner where he was not likely to be tripped over. Some of the ratings said they would 'see he was all right' so we left them to it and returned to our ship a little further along the quayside.

The following morning, during breakfast time, there was an announcement on our ship's tannoy system asking the R.A.F. personnel who had 'assisted' a member of the ship's company of the depot ship to report to Chief Petty Officer Blank at 10 a.m. To us, the Chief Petty Officer bit sounded ominous. Were we required to give evidence at the disciplinary hearing of the drunk we had dragged back to the ship? We had a debate about it, agreed that we would commit perjury if necessary and six of us reported to the depot ship and asked for the C.P.O.

Eventually, he appeared in full uniform looking very stern and officious. We expected some barked order but about official enquiries and to go and get our hair cut but his expression softened, he leaned forward and said,

"Come on down to the mess-deck lads".

We followed him into the bowels of the ship and when we out of the hearing of any other member of the ship's company, the C.P.O. said,

"I owe you lads a great favour. If you hadn't got me back to the ship last night, I should have had the book thrown at me for sure. I know you lads don't get much in the way of grub on the Athene, but I'm chief cook here and I can do something about it. This is a submarine depot ship and when those lads come back from a long trip, they get the best of everything. So, if ever you feel like a good meal, just come on board, ask for me and I'll give you the sort of grub you thought had disappeared forever."

We accepted with thanks, the C.P.O's offer for the following day. It really was a marvellous meal; but we only took advantage of his generosity once. We felt that frequent visits of R.A.F. personnel to the depot ship would cause enquiries to be made sooner or later and the whole story would come out. With our appetites, we would soon make quite a hole in the ship's rations and we had no wish to spoil the friendly relations we had built up with at least one small section of the Navy. However, the word went around the base that these R.A.F. twits weren't so bad after all, and the relationship in the bars improved no end.

Unfortunately for us, we picked up another drunken stray near the harbour a few days later. We knew he wasn't in the crew of the depot ship, so we took him to a nearby naval ship - the 'Ark Royal'. There was a panic going on; the Ark Royal had been ordered to sea with the first half of our wing heading for Malta, but there seemed to be an unusual urgency to sail. We dragged our waif up the gangplank, a crew member who had more important things to think about said,

"Dump him over there with the others", so we did and left.

We heard no more about him for several days and then only indirectly which was probably just as well. Apparently, he was not a part of the Ark Royal's crew; he had a perfectly comfortable job in the base radio section. Not only had we put him on the wrong ship, but it was sunk on the way back to Gibraltar. Whether our waif managed to get off the Ark Royal before it sailed, we never discovered and thought it unwise to enquire. Fortunately, he didn't know who had dumped him on the Ark Royal. We never met him again and we would have taken care not to recognise him if we had.

For some reason, the Athene was moved to another berth which meant that we had a very long walk around the sea wall and quays to get to town and back. We started using the 'liberty boat' for a short cut across the harbour especially on our way back at night. Another naval custom we learned the hard way was that the senior officer enters the liberty boat last and leaves it first while the junior ranks stand as near to attention as they can get. Trying to stand on the gunwale seats after a very enjoyable evening in town proved too much for the R.A.F. personnel. One dark night, as we returned to the ship, the senior officers started the boat rocking as, in quick succession, they stepped from the boat to the gangplank and all the R.A.F. blokes frantically tried to maintain their balance by grabbing at the person in front of them. I had no-one to grab at and, dressed in full blue serge and wearing heavy black boots, I finished up over the side, I went down a long way, and felt my way up the ship's plates until I surfaced between the liberty boat and the ship. Even then I had to go down again hastily as the liberty boat threatened to flatten me against the side of the ship. I was hauled in, a sodden mess, and clambered aboard dripping wet. When he was able to stop laughing, one of the engineers took pity on me and told me to hose down my clothes with fresh water and take them to him in the engine room.

After two days I collected my things from the midst of steaming, hissing pipes and was amazed to find how smooth and pleasant to handle and wear my blue serge had become; more wool and less wire. In other and better times, perhaps I could have patented this process and made a fortune. But it was no good for wrist watches.

The 'Ark Royal', having been sunk, we had to wait in Gibraltar for a few weeks for other means of getting to Malta and rejoining the other half of our Wing. But plans had to be changed; Japan bombed Pearl Harbour, War was declared, and we were re-routed to the Far East. So, on Christmas Eve we set sail on the 'Athene', escorted for only a short distance, and headed down the West Coast of Africa. On this trip, we were made to earn our keep by taking a share of watch and, after a very brief lesson, were given charge of a Bofors gun. However, our responsibilities didn't last long. The crew's nerves could not stand an emergency call to Action

Stations two days in succession from our reports of a submarine which was actually an oily swell in the distance and the identification of a butter tub as a mine.

Eventually, after a lecture by an embarrassed young officer about diseases caused by mosquitoes, unboiled water and loose women, we were, much to the relief of the ship's crew, off-loaded at the port of Takoradi on the West Coast of Africa. The 'Athene' eventually sailed to Java with our Hurricanes, most of which were entirely wasted by throwing them into the battle in penny numbers. In Takoradi, we had to leave most of our kit behind and with little more than a razor and toothbrush, we travelled to Lagos and then, in a D.C.3 ferry plane, across Africa, via Kano, Lake Chad, and El Fashir for the night. Here, I was about to get out of the aircraft when I saw a young lion trot across the airfield and sit at the bottom of the steps. Needless to say, I stepped back into the aircraft and waited until one of the ground crew assured me that the lion was the airfield pet, whose favourite pastime seemed to be to terrify new arrivals. Finally, four days after leaving our kit behind, scruffy, sweaty with no clean clothes, we landed at Khartoum.

I stepped out of the aircraft, just in time to see the Squadron Commander and my Flight Commander discussing a bundle of signals delivered by a station messenger. The C.O. called me over,

"Hey, Nick! We've got some news for you. Your commission has caught you up at last."

So instead of taking my sweaty self off to the (usually) relaxed atmosphere of the sergeants' mess, I was to clean myself up as best I could and report to the Station Commander in the Officers' Mess within the hour for a congratulatory drink before the evening meal. As I was no longer a sergeant but had not yet been admitted to the Officer's Mess the decision as to where the 'cleaning up' should take place and what with was left to me. The problem was partially solved by keeping my recent promotion a secret from the sergeants' mess for half an hour.

Khartoum at that time was still very traditional; pecking orders were rigid and even the use of recreation facilities was decreed by rank. For example, the swimming pool in the club was not only restricted to commissioned officers, but the most desirable and convenient times for a swim were confined to the most senior ranks.

So, it was in this sort of atmosphere that, with no clean clothes, nothing to show that I was now an officer, except a borrowed pair of Pilot Officer's epaulettes for my khaki shirt and somewhat 'creased' after sweaty days of travel, I presented myself to the president of the officers' mess for the critical scrutiny of the assembled brass. It was apparent they were not impressed with what they saw but, as I was not staying very long, they did their best to be kind. It was difficult trying to appear at ease sipping an unaccustomed sherry in an exquisite glass with immaculate and very senior officers. It was a great relief to be handed back to the care and guidance of my fellow pilots.

It was at Khartoum that I encountered what was probably the last of the solar topee and spine-pads brigade. It was in the grounds of the Sudan Club that some old army buffer told me off for wearing an R.A.F. hat with no protection for the back of my neck and spine other than a shirt and singlet.

"Heatstroke is what you'll get!" he barked, "You'll pay for it, dressed like that. Mark my words!"

What he was wearing underneath I don't know, but he looked like a lumpy boiled lobster done up in long-sleeved khaki jacket, trousers, shirt, tie, a sun-hat like a coal scuttle, leggings and boots - all very Indian Army circa 1902.

We stayed in Khartoum in comparative comfort for about two weeks while a fresh supply of Hurricanes was assembled as near to Port Sudan docks as possible. They were to be loaded on to 'H.M.S. Indomitable' a fairly new carrier which had just come from a refit in U.S.A. Our poor sergeant pilots (I just missed this chore) had the job of taxi-ing each finished aircraft from the assembly point, along desert tracks and roads - to the amazed confusion of the genuine road traffic - to the docks where they could be lifted on board the carrier and stowed below. In the tropical heat, this was a long, tiring job as the engines soon became extremely hot. Yet the job had to be done slowly as, only by swinging the aircraft's nose from side to side could the pilot see where he was going and avoid various poles on each side of the road barely a wingspan apart.

Soon, we were all on board the carrier and set sail down the Red Sea. I was delighted to be given an outer cabin quite high up. During the first day at sea, I realised that the cabin was not so desirable; it was indeed high - it was just underneath the metal flight deck and was like an oven most of the time. It was also near the rear of the flight deck and was just below the point where the aircraft thumped down on landing and caught the arrester wires which sent yards of heavy chain rattling and clattering up and down the cabin wall. I spent very little time in that cabin during the day. Most of us spent many happy hours each day on the flight deck watching operations.

258 Squadron on HMS Indomitable

Our favourite spot, when there was no flying, was sitting right on the front slope of the deck with our heels wedged behind a small ledge. From here we could look down on the bow wave, watch the flying fish skitter away and just revel in the sunshine, the clear blue sky and the glassy sea which mirrored the sky and decked itself with aquamarine and turquoise gems.

When flying had finished for the day, the flight deck was used for an amazing variety of sports, both team games and individual skills. The game which enthralled us was deck hockey, played with a puck. The rivalry between the different sections of the ship was good-humoured, but very real. Watching two burly players tussling ruthlessly for the possession of the puck on the very edge of the flight deck, with a long, wet drop below, was something I shall never forget.

There were two breaks in our journey, both at beautiful places. They were just as I had always imagined a South Seas island would look; white coral beaches sheltered by palm trees nodding over the rippling sea. The first was at the Maldives Islands where our massive vessel weaved its way into a lagoon to meet an oil tanker for refuelling. The next call was at Christmas Island for a refuelling rendezvous with a tanker. When the carrier was at anchor, the pinnace went to the nearest beach. Knowing that we were going to have to take off very soon and without any preliminary practice, we took great interest in flying operations and winced at the Fleet Air Arm technique of thudding on to the deck on landing. We admired the way they operated from these pitching, rolling specks in the ocean, but there was a ruthlessness about the treatment of the aircraft which it took us a long time to understand.

On one occasion, a Hurricane was attempting a landing when the pilot decided to go round again and opened up his engine. Unfortunately, he had just caught the arrester hook; the engine was not powerful enough to break the wire, so still attached to it, the Hurricane slid sideways until it could go no further and dropped over the side of the flight deck where it hung nose-down. We found this most interesting and wondered how the aircraft would be recovered. A rope ladder was dropped over the side and one of the deck crew went down and assisted the pilot to climb it. Then another rating came along with a large hacksaw, cut through the arrester hook and dropped the aircraft into the sea. No nonsense; no discussion of ways of recovering the aircraft; nothing was to be allowed to hinder deck operations.

View of HMS Indomitable from HMS Victorious

No matter how many times we saw Naval aircraft take off, our pacing of the length of the flight deck failed to convince us that it was an attractive proposition. We had seen many Navy aircraft sink over the nose of the deck and take a long, long time to climb into view again. One of them came into view at the side of the ship, floating in the water, hopefully for the pilot to be picked up by the retrieving vessel which trailed behind the carrier when flying was in progress. As the day drew near for our own take-off, we were not cheered by the sight of ratings putting timber barricades around parts of the ship the Navy thought we were most

likely to hit on our departure. In the wardroom, we discussed life in general and carriers in particular and drank more and more delicious cups of strong American coffee.

Some pilots hoped they would be chosen to fly in the rear sections of the squadron and thus have more deck space for take-off. But their hopes were dashed by 'Bats' the deck officer who stamped his foot on a spot on the deck a long way from the rear end and said,

"Whether you're first or last, you're all taking off from here".

Hurricanes prepare to leave.

That more or less settled it. There was no more help or advice the navy could give us without insulting our flying ability. There was nothing they could tell us about trouble developing ON take-off, except to hope that we managed to stop before reaching the end of the deck. They were very definite about problems AFTER take-off. Under no circumstances were we to attempt to land back on the deck until ALL aircraft had gone. It was emphasised that, as our Hurricanes were not fitted with deck landing equipment, it would be far safer to bale out into the sea just ahead of one of the escort vessels.

One young sergeant pilot had oil pressure problems after take-off, waited until the deck was clear, landed, without damage to his Hurricane and managed to stop before hitting the first crash barrier. The ship's captain congratulated him on the way he followed the instructions of the landing control officer.

"Who's he?"

"The man with the bats who guides you in."

"Didn't see him."

Exit one very embarrassed control officer.

However, the ship's company was sufficiently pleased with the R.A.F boy to have the carpenter carve a memorial plaque to be presented to him. He returned to the Middle East with the Indomitable and turned up later in the Ceylon/Burma area where we heard his tale.

Chapter Four – A Brief Stay in Sumatra

So on Jan 29th, the various aircraft formed up after take-off and followed the guiding Blenheim from near Christmas Island to Java and landed at Batavia (*now Djakarta*) where after a night's so called rest we returned to the airfield to fly any of our serviceable aircraft north. Each of the three groups of sixteen aircraft had had one or two casualties of one kind or another. One landed back on the carrier and others had brake problems on landing but the majority of the aircraft were able to fly on. So, once again, with Victor in the lead, we formed up and headed over the Sunda Straits, trying, just out of curiosity, to identify the island of Krakatoa as we approached the mainland of Sumatra.

At low level, we crossed over the southern shores of Sumatra and quickly passed over the coastal fringe of mangrove swamps to dense jungle, featureless except for so many rivers and their tributaries that it was difficult to tell which was which. At last, we came to a V shaped scar in the trees, circled it, moved into line-astern and went in to land. This was P2 airfield, newly bulldozed, and still with deep tracks of heavy machinery in the soggy ground. Sometime in the recent past, heavy aircraft had landed after rains and they too had left treacherous ruts in the landing and dispersal areas. We sustained more aircraft damage through the hazards of deep tracks, soft ground and protruding tree stumps on the landing run. P2 was 40 miles west of Palembang. There were no permanent buildings, it was rough, and it was a secret because, being in the midst of hundreds of square miles of jungle, it was difficult to find. The Japanese, in fact did not discover it until the very latest stages of the Indonesian campaign.

There was no-one to greet us or to indicate where our parking points were. It was sometime before a fat little Dutchman appeared, hastily buttoning up his tunic as he came towards us. Needless to say, we were not expected, and no rations had been arranged. There was fuel but not much. Our mess and sleeping quarters were an open-sided bamboo and palm hut with split bamboo beds with one blanket. We fed on raw, unripe pineapple and tins of cold Maconachie stew from the emergency ration store and we all finished up with sore mouths from the pineapple prickles.

This was a food ration for British soldiers in the Boer war and WW1. One soldier noted "warmed in the tin, Maconochie was edible; cold, it was a man-killer

We waited three days at P2 waiting for the rain to clear and the ground to harden enough to operate the Hurricanes.

There were no tools or spares and we had to rely on a few mechanics who did their best. in spite of never having worked on Hurricanes before.

Eventually, the ground hardened enough for us to take off to P1, the civil aerodrome a few miles from Palembang; this had the benefit of two runways in the form of a cross, they were narrow and bordered by patches of soft ground. Although the runways were a boon the limitations of the airfield soon became apparent. There was no radar, so the only warning of air raids was when we saw or heard aircraft approaching; there was no accommodation, water or cooking facilities and an unreliable telephone line. Radio communications both on the ground and in the air was virtually non-existent; pilots could neither communicate with base nor each other unless they were close enough to use hand signals.

*(Terence Kelly who served with Doug in 258 Sqdn wrote "Hurricane over the Jungle" and has a wealth of interesting and additional material about this period and I've used several quotes from his books. Here, he also puts into context how the lack of effective radio communication and advance warning o*f *enemy attacks placed the Hurricane pilots at a huge and often fatal disadvantage." (P91)*

> *"Of all the many problems, that relating to radio communication was the most serious. When one thinks of the Battle of Britain one visualises organized operational tables at which WAAFS trained for their job under the control of experienced officers, plot the approach of enemy aircraft, giving the defending fighters reasonable if not indeed ample time to put themselves into an advantageous attacking position. One thinks of commanding officer or flight commander receiving a stream of information listened into by the balance of the formation on the basis of which he can make decisions and issue instructions. One thinks of one aircraft being able to warn another of an enemy on its tail, of a myriad of alternative fields at which a damaged aircraft or one short of petrol can land, of the homing instructions given to a wounded pilot or one who has lost his way or finds himself in cloud over hilly country.*
>
> *There was nothing like this in Sumatra and it was only marginally better in Java. It was not merely that radio intercommunication was always bad, which it always was, but that sometimes it did not exist at all. One flew deaf and dumb over hundreds of miles of impenetrable and unbroken jungle where each mile looked identical to the rest and where the only way of getting back when lost was to fly until one found a river and hoping it was the Moesi, which it by no means always was, fly along it until one spotted Palembang.*
>
> *One could watch with horror a friend about to be attacked by a Navy 0 and be powerless to warn him. One could not inform that one has insufficient petrol to reach base or a faulty engine in the hope that one might be sufficiently pinpointed to make the chance of being found by a search party at least a flimsy one. As can be seen this grave want was to have the most extraordinary and disastrous of consequences*."

What little transport was available had to be shared with the few Dutch troops guarding the airfield. Palembang town was about eight miles away, over the ferry on the other side of the River Moesi so that getting to and from the airport was a slow business. Consequently, until there was a shortage of aircraft, pilots whether on readiness or not, spent all the daylight hours trying to get what comfort they could from the hard floor of the small airport terminal veranda just waiting for something to happen.

Eventually we were given billets in Palembang in a hotel which had been the local brothel. We thought the pictures on the walls rather interesting and soon decided that the beds had had a hard life.

Palembang was a small town on the River Moesi and had oil wells nearby. Most of Sumatra was thick jungle and, especially near the rivers, there was a great deal of mangrove swamp. Many of our aircraft were shot down into these swamps, and if unwounded, the pilots had to wade through the swamp and round the mangrove roots for quite a distance to get to dry land.

Wading through the swamps was not a healthy activity as the water was contaminated and contained many unfriendly creatures.

Sumatran Landscape

So, on 2nd February, we made the slow journey from our Palembang billet over the ferry and along the narrow road to the airfield. It did occur to some of us that, any emergency would be over long before off-duty pilots could get from the town to their aircraft. But the task to-day was to air test the aircraft and familiarise ourselves with the sector. The whole area, except for Palembang itself, was thick forest or mangrove swamps with so many tributaries off the main river it was difficult to select reliable landmarks.

Violent squalls were frequent, and the heavy rain reduced visibility so that it was easy to get lost. Except for P2, which was not easy to find in good weather, there were no other airfields within reasonable flying range. Some of our pilots and aircraft were lost after the hectic chase of a dogfight because of the lack of landmarks. Others were caught on the wrong side of an electrical storm and flew into violent air currents, heavy rain and visibility white out.

Some of our pilots had been ferried back to Java to collect more Hurricanes which had been delivered by H.M.S. Athene, the ship which we had left in West Africa. We expected them to return on the 3rd Feb and, when we heard engines above the clouds, prepared to see them join the circuit to land. But the formation came through a break in the clouds at high speed and were within the airfield boundary before we spotted the radial engines and the fried egg symbols. As their guns opened up, we ran, some to shelter and others to their aircraft. While the strafing was still going on, pilots were jockeying for position on the single runway to take off.

They were unable to do the usual 'scramble' because of the soft ground off the runway. It was a neck-prickling experience sitting in the cockpit knees up and head down crouching behind the armour plate with enemy fire spurting into the soft ground nearby. Some of us managed to take off and head away from the airfield over the treetops to gain height safely. Those unwise enough to climb up directly under the enemy fighters usually paid dearly for their rashness.

The raid was quite brief and little damage was done to aircraft or installations but there were some unfortunate casualties among the ground crews. *(One eyewitness of the attack said "I began to run and then I had to stop, if briefly, because a few yards away I saw something which to me seemed quite incredible. Red Campbell was standing calmly, revolver in hand, aiming at the next Navy O. It was useless of course but not a gesture. One does read of men who have no fear, but they are very rare. But Campbell was one of them")*

We stayed on readiness that day as long as we could and then made the slow journey to Palembang for a meal in our little cinema cafe and for what sleep we could get in our bug-ridden brothel.

We were at the airfield before light the following day giving what help we could to the ground staff to get the aircraft serviced. It turned out to be a hectic day and, for me, my last day of flying for some weeks. There were several enemy attacks, all without warning and all using cloud cover. For the pilots it was a mixture of last-minutes scrambles and standing patrols in a vain attempt to spot the raiders coming in. It was during the hectic activity of the morning that I managed to get a good burst into a Japanese fighter, but I was too busy to follow him down.

Zero

Whether it was a Naval Zero or an Army version, I don't know, but because of the lack of information we had at the time, all the Japanese single-engine fighters were called Zeros.

One of the later raids that day consisted of a low-level formation of medium bombers with fighter escort. Once again, we had no advance warning and, by the time I managed to get airborne, I met the bombers coming in over the airfield. With little flying speed and wheels only partially retracted, I aimed a quick burst at the nearest bomber and then kicked the rudder to the left to skid round parallel to the Japanese. I managed to get enough speed to pull up the nose and aim at the side of one of the rear bombers and saw that I had hit it. When I could no longer keep the Hurricane's nose on target, I stall-turned out though the muck being thrown up by the exploding bombs and pulled away from the airfield to gain height. There was no future in acting like a sitting target over the airfield.

Somewhere in the scramble I had lost my No.2. It was too much to expect him to stick with me during the crazy manoeuvres that had been going on and, at the same time, cover his own tail. I hoped he had managed to join up with another Hurricane; that was what I intended to do.

Just to the west of the airfield at about 5000 ft., I could see a lone Hurricane weaving amid small cumulus clouds, and I flew in his direction. Just before I reached him, I could see that he had a Zero coming up behind him and he seemed to be quite unaware of it. I tried to give the Hurricane pilot a radio warning but there was no response; I had a little height advantage and could afford to follow the pair of them round and through the cotton wool clouds waiting for the right moment to attack.

When that moment approached, I had a good look round and checked my rear mirror before diving into attack. But the Zero in front pulled away: either he had spotted me or, most likely, had a radio warning probably from the Zero which popped out of the clouds and raked my Hurricane. The engine immediately gave off clouds of white coolant smoke and I could hear bullets clattering into the armour plate behind me. There was no point in staying to argue and I put the Hurricane into a steep spiraling dive to get clear. But I couldn't maintain the dive for long; the escaping coolant was filling the cockpit with choking smoke which made my eyes stream. Flames were now coming from the engine; it was time to get out. Trying not to breathe or open my eyes, I unplugged the radio and oxygen connections to my face mask, unclipped the seat straps, and slid the hood back. This increased the blast of heat and acrid smoke into the cockpit. There was no time for niceties of Airmanship, How to Abandon Aircraft Part I; I rolled the Hurricane on its side, kicked the control column forward and shot out of the cockpit. Something gave me a bang on the head on the way out and the speed of the airflow took my breath away, but it soon cleared my lungs and eyes.

It would have been very unwise to open the parachute until I had fallen well clear of the Zero. I found the free fall strangely exhilarating; I suppose one does feel a great lift to the spirits, however briefly, when one finds oneself unexpectedly alive. When I eventually pulled the ripcord, the canopy opened with a reassuring yank and I tried to sort myself out as I drifted gently down. My eyes and nostrils were stinging and I felt a little singed round the edges but, for a brief spell, the feeling of calm after the storm was quite restful.

But, once again, the novelty soon passed. I was looking down into miles of thick jungle and there was no hint of a village or clearing I could head towards. There were many areas where silver glistened between the trees and I heaved and twisted at the shroud lines trying to aim for

dry land. I did not fancy trying to wade through the mud and roots and hazards of a mangrove swamp; it would exhaust the fittest man in a very short time. Relieved I may have been; fit, I was not.

By now the trees were rushing up towards me at an increasing rate. Our brief parachute training had assumed that we would land on flat, dry ground. There had been a mention about coming down in the sea, but the implication had been that it would be a very unwise and uncomfortable thing to do. There had been nothing about clattering through the branches of a tree with, possibly, a swamp underneath. So, knees up, head buried in arms, I hit the top branches of a tree and most of the others on the way down. I hit the ground feet first but off balance and felt a sharp pain in my left ankle. Close by there was a crashing through the undergrowth as some large creature dashed away from me. Whatever it was, I decided to pull out my Smith & Wesson .38 revolver in case it came back although there was little chance of stopping anything fiercer than a goat with it. But as I snatched it out of my holster the gun went off and I saw the bullet pierce a fallen leaf two inches in front of my toe. I put the gun down until I felt safe enough to handle it.

Then I made an inventory of my aches and pains. My left ankle was swelling and bleeding from a deep furrow along the shin. The lump on the back of my head was bleeding, my eyes and lungs hurt, I had a sweaty, singed aroma about me, and a variety of cuts and bruises were making their presence known. Short sleeved shirts and khaki shorts are not the ideal dress for crashing through trees, but Palembang was too hot and humid to sit about the airfield in flying suits.

It was beginning to grow dusk under the canopy of foliage and time to get moving. Whether I headed North, South, East or West first I have no idea but, after a long, crouching journey in three directions using a jungle knife to hack my way, I came to swamp water and mangrove roots. In the water there were fallen trees, some above the surface and some below and I tried to balance my way along them, but my ankle let me down. When I looked down and saw the things that slithered and wriggled in the surface scum, I decided to wade back to dry land not then knowing that the foul water had already infected my wounded leg.

Back on dry land I headed in yet another direction and, in near darkness, came to a derelict bamboo hut. The floor was about a foot off the ground and there was one wall and traces of a palm leaf roof. It was probably a deserted rubber-drying shed. I had to make the best of it and stay there for the night. Soon, I was not alone. Things that went creak and squeak and hiss in the night came to inspect me and myriads of mosquitos joined them. There could be no rest there; I limped and hopped along on hoping that I was getting away from the swamps. How long I travelled through the forest I have no idea. There was no response to my occasional shouts other than indignant squawks from the treetops and agitated rustlings in the undergrowth. Occasionally I fired the Smith & Wesson into the air but was reluctant to use the few precious bullets I had. After what seemed an age, there was what seemed to be an answering shot in the far distance. Totally exhausted, I sat on a fallen tree and answered the shots and shouts as they came nearer and waited to be found.

But I was not prepared for what came out of the trees towards me: a line abreast of small, brown-skinned soldiers with compact metal helmets and putteed leggings all pointing long bayonets and rifles at me. Days ago, we had been warned to expect Japanese paratroops at any time. These soldiers looked very Japanese to me; their helmets and baggy trousers and long bayonets seemed to fit the descriptions we had been given. They said nothing but moved into a semi-circle pointing their guns at me and looking most aggressive.

Indonesian Troops

There was nothing I could do; any movement could have been misunderstood. I sat there as still as possible for over a minute until another military figure pushed through the line.

His white skin was reassuring but he had a pistol pointed at me and he didn't appear very friendly either. He barked an order and his men encircled me.

He spoke to me in two languages and then in English, “Give me your weapons”.

I handed over my gun and jungle knife. Still very suspicious he asked me where I had come from and then more questions to check on my story. My description of our brothel billet in Palembang appealed to his sense of humour because he relaxed and explained that he was a Dutch Army officer stationed near Palembang. Eventually he asked, 'Are you hurt?'

I pointed to my swollen ankle and the furrow in my shin. He took out a first aid kit, bound up my ankle. Then he took a ball of cotton wool and a bottle of strong, dark iodine. Even in those days, I knew that iodine had gone out of fashion in favour of gooey, yellow Acriflavine but this was no time to be choosy. Six pairs of brown eyes were watching intently; they must have experienced the sting of iodine and any objections on my part could have been misunderstood.

The officer prepared to dab the iodine on my shin. I pulled my knees up to my chin and wrapped my arms tightly around them ready for the first sting of the iodine. He stopped, the cotton wool a few inches from my leg.

'This will hurt, you know'.

‘Yes, I know.'

He dabbed, once. He was right; it did hurt; the iodine was far too strong to be applied to a long, deep wound, but this was no time to argue. I drew a long, deep breath, rested my forehead on my knees and held on tight.

'All right?' he asked. 'Shall I stop?'

'No. Finish it'

He looked round at his men; they were now relaxed but expectant. The officer applied the iodine bottle liberally to the cotton wool and swiftly dabbed along the remaining six or seven inches of my wound. Much as I would have liked to curse the officer, his antecedents, the Japanese and stinking mangrove swamps at every dab, I gritted my teeth and held on. I obviously earned a little respect; the curiosity of the soldiers had been to see how much I would yell when the iodine soaked in. But the treatment was not yet finished. I felt the stinging dabs on the back of my head, both elbows and knees.

After a few moments rest, I limped, hopped, and was chair-lifted and piggy-backed for several miles until we reached an area of saplings with light, springy branches. Here the soldiers made a rough kind of sedan chair and I was carried in style to a small village with a military truck parked on the main track. The villagers had gathered but drew back until I had been lifted into the front seat of the lorry and then they crowded round for a better view. The Dutch officer explained, 'These are the people who saw you come down and sent a message to me'.

I wanted to show my thanks by giving them some money, but the officer was most definite.

'No, please. It is their duty!'

Reluctantly I gave in and waved my gratitude, but the villagers were too timid to respond; only a few children gave a timid finger wag at tummy button level. We drove along dirt tracks to the main road to Palembang and I was delivered to our billet. The officer said they had another urgent task, accepted my brief thanks, and went; I never met them again to express my gratitude in a more tangible form.

The billet was empty. I had a quick clean up and hopped across the road to our cinema cafe. Some of the pilots were there but several faces were missing. During my absence, four had been killed. One (Roy Keedwell), had been wounded in the leg and managed to land his Hurricane on the airfield but when it caught fire was unable to get out of the cockpit unaided. By the time help had reached him and pulled him out, he had been severely burnt and died in hospital soon after. Five other pilots had gone 'missing' but had gradually made their individual ways back by walking, canoeing, or wading. One of the waders, a dour Scot *(P/O Jock McCulloch),* had come across a Hurricane nose down in the swamp. He felt in the cockpit and discovered that the pilot was still there. From the number of the aircraft we knew that the pilot was, or had been, the baby of squadron. He was hardly out of his teens and, therefore, known fondly to us all as 'Junior '*(Glynn*)

Junior was a talented pianist able to play both classical and popular music. When he and we were in the mood he could really make our feet tap with tunes like 'In the Mood'. He had a light, casual style and, whenever I hear the tinkling notes of Artie Shaw tunes like 'Honeysuckle Rose' and 'Sunrise Serenade' my mind goes back to 'Junior' with the beer mugs on the piano surrounded by amateur Bing Crosby's. Poor Junior; such a waste of talent: so skilled at so many things and yet very gauche with girls. But there were plenty of girls in Palembang and he managed to affirm his manhood just the day before he died.

Kleckner, too, was gone. 'Kleck', the big, outgoing, happy-go-lucky American who had been on duty at the airfield on the day that General Wavell's plane landed for refueling. The General stepped out to stretch his legs and 'Kleck' immediately buttonholed him and told him exactly what he thought of the chaotic campaign so far and how it should be run.

Wavell was polite, made lots of 'Hum's and 'Ha's and 'How interesting's and scuttled back to his plane as soon as the refueling was finished.

Mick, Scotty, Cam White and McCulloch had all been shot down but had returned to Palembang in their own time and in their own inimitable ways. *(Some of the pilots used great ingenuity – and a lot of luck – to get back to Palembang,*

"McCulloch having been chased and getting lost ".. subsequently ran out of fuel and crash landed in a swamp near a river, his aircraft coming down not far from the wreck of another Hurricane, which had crashed upside down and was believed to have been Glynn's aircraft; the pilot was dead. Using his collapsible rubber dingy, the Scot made his way downstream and eventually spotted a canoe moored on the river-bank. Unable to find the owner, he pinned a ten guilder note to a nearby tree and made off in a canoe. After paddling for some time, he met some natives who took him to their chief at a nearby village, where, to his amazement, he was offered ice cold beer from a (paraffin) refrigerator in the chief's house.

For two days, until he was rescued, he dined on European foods and slept in the most luxurious bed he had ever seen" P67, 'Bloody Shambles' Vol 2, Shores, Cull and Izawa)

The 5th to 13th February was a period of great activity in which I played no great part because of injury. There were frequent raids and scrambles, usually, because of lack of warning, too late to have much effect. In the midst of one of the raids, Scotty arrived from Java with a flight of replacement Hurricanes and was jumped on his landing approach by a Japanese fighter. He was caught cold just like the proverbial sitting duck but was saved because the Japanese pilot overstressed his aircraft in the dive and its wings folded back. All that Scotty saw was the enemy fuselage shooting past him like some manned missile. On the 14th, enemy paratroops landed near the airfield and cut it off from the town.

All R.A.F. ranks and trades, whether on duty at the airfield or 'resting' in the town were involved in the fight to clear the road. Some of the squadron transport was ambushed by Japanese patrols operating along the sides of the road. Mick had a lucky escape. Unaware that paratroops had landed, he was in a lorry which was hit by grenades and forced into a deep ditch. He and others were thrown out and either injured or dazed. As he lay in the ditch bottom, he discovered that his throat was bleeding badly from a shrapnel wound near his Adam's apple. Then he heard screams and shots gradually getting nearer as the Japanese walked along both sides of the road finishing off any survivors. Micky lay quite still, with his bloody throat uppermost and tried not to breathe. He heard the mutter of the Japanese as they glanced at him, presumed he was dead and passed on to other victims.

(*Micky Nash had been at P1 as Duty Aerodrome Control Pilot when Japanese paratroopers appeared and the airfield had to be abandoned, Terrence Kelly and Bertie Lambert had landed on the strip and found it deserted, Micky Nash appeared from the jungle perimeter to warn them to leave as quickly as possible – they had landed because both had u/s radios and didn't hear the warning to go to P2 instead. Kelly gives greater detail regarding Nash and his extremely lucky escape from the Japanese.*

> *"Micky Nash was trying to get through to Palembang with one or two others in a car which was ambushed. The road ahead was blocked and as they slowed, realizing what was about to happen, a hand grenade exploded at point blank range and Nash was badly wounded (in the neck) Somehow he managed to get out of the car and crawl, his mouth filled with blood, into a ditch. After a long wait some Japanese came out of the jungle and, crouching down, Nash and the others while unable to see them, could clearly hear them jabbering a few feet away. It seemed likely only to be moments before they were discovered, they kept deathly still and silent for all the blood in Nash's mouth and chest.*
>
> *Then at the sound of another car approaching the Japanese withdrew into the jungle and one of the two men with Nash signalled frantically to it and the two men brought it to a screeching halt and jumping out hid themselves in the same ditch about eighty yards from the airfield. The Japanese reappeared, looked in the ditch found them and shot them – one after another, they came back to the first ambushed car, still jabbering. Several times they went away and they returned apparently finding this a convenient base. Discovery seemed so certain that Nash lay on his back, mouth open, covered in his own blood, feigning death. Still they were not discovered in spite of one of the Japanese jumping the ditch to explore the jungle beyond it. After a while, a third came down the road. The Japanese held it up and the driver jumped out, pleading for his life; he was murdered out of hand. Still more Japanese arrived in a captured armoured car and the ambushed vehicle being in their way they shoved it bodily to the side of the road where it hovered over the ditch with its wheels only inches from Nash's face but at least now hiding him.*
>
> *It was two hours before there was the sound of heavy rifle fire and when this had died down a column of soldiers and RAF personnel came in sight heading a convoy of all available lorries and cars making their way to Palembang whereupon the Japanese withdrew into the jungle allowing Nash and his companions to join the convoy which after continually fighting off rifle and machine gun fire and frequent ambushes with many casualties inflicted and received, finally fought through.*
>
> *Nash was taken to hospital where it was discovered that he had a piece of shrapnel lodged in his throat, after treatment he was taken south to Java." Kelly, Hurricane over the Jungle P136).*

The R.A.F. crews, under the guidance of the small R.A.F. Regiment contingent, did magnificent work clearing the paratroops at the airfield end of the road. The small assortment of pilots, administrators and ground crews which happened to be in Palembang town gathered into a kind of Dad's Army using whatever arms and ammunition they could get their hands on. Most of the ammunition came from the R.A.F. store and the Japanese were disconcerted by the

mixture of tracers, armour piercing and incendiary bullets that came at them, all fired from old .303 rifles 'borrowed' from the Dutch army stores.

Considering they were untrained for jungle or any other kind of hand-to-hand combat, the 'townies' did a magnificent job flitting from tree to tree as they worked their way along the road towards the airfield until they met our lads coming out. The full story of the Battle for Palembang is given in Terence Kelly's marvellous book of the same name.

Oil tanks being destroyed at Palembang

While the battle for the airfield road was going on, the pilots had not been idle. A Japanese fleet of warships and transports had off-loaded a number of barges near the mouth of the Moesi River. The barges loaded with troops were making their way up river towards Palembang and the oil refineries, using the hundreds of tributaries and mangrove trees as concealment. The Hurricane pilots had found and strafed them and inflicted terrible slaughter.

If only one or, perhaps, two more raids had been authorised, the Japanese casualties would have been so great that the invasion of Sumatra would have been postponed. Probably because of the paratroop threat to the airfield or, in the mysterious way in which the whole campaign was afflicted, somebody, some faceless, unknown senior officer decided to withdraw the aircraft to P2. Consequently, Sumatra was lost and provided the airfield base for operations over Java. Yet Java, at least, could have been saved as a base to build up reserves of air and ground forces which, had they not been thrown into the battle in penny numbers. As it was, Java resisted for only a short time; few of our forces escaped to fight another day and far too many went into the hell of Japanese imprisonment. I was told by some of our pilots who were taken prisoner that their Japanese guards spoke in awe of the carnage inflicted by the

Hurricanes on the invasion barges and spoke with relish of what they would do to any of our pilots they captured. It was fortunate that our pilots had been wise enough to remove all their flying badges when capture was imminent.

On the 15th February, the paratroops round Palembang were reinforced by a fresh drop and the airfield had to be evacuated. The aircraft flew to P2 and eventually to Java. The ground staff were dispersed by road, rail, air and river boat and in any direction clear of paratroops before heading south for the ferry at Oosthaven for the crossing to Java.

While all this was going on, 258 Squadron's original ground crew arrived in Java by sea and were immediately sent packing to Ceylon where surviving pilots met them later.

I had had to buy a walking stick to hobble about and had not managed to get more than cursory medical attention for my leg wound which was now red and puffy, an early sign of ulceration, due, no doubt, to immersion in the water of the mangrove swamps. I saw Victor (de la Perelle), one of the Flight Commanders, and asked him what was going on.

"Nick," he said, "all I know is that the airfield is being evacuated and Japanese troops are heading towards the town. Get out of here and head for Java any way you can."

When Victor told me to get the hell out of it and make for Java, I started off towards our billet to collect what I could, my mind set on, among other things, my Flying Log book – that piece of impedimenta so dear to the heart of a pilot. On the way to our little brothel, I met a group hurrying towards me; as they passed an RAF mechanic yelled “Get the hell out of it, Sir, the Japanese are nearly in the town.”

Figure 2 - Escape troops on train

This was later found to be inaccurate as most of the Japanese were round the airfield although a few groups had been dropped 'wide'. I headed back towards the town centre to get to the main road when I met Ambrose (Milnes) who was also heading for Java. He had 'discovered' a large American car which temporarily was without an owner and so five of us drove out on the road to the southwest. We had a few anxious moments when we met bodies of troops either on foot or in vehicles heading towards us. Luckily, they were always native Sumatran troops but from a distance, their uniforms, hats and complexion made them look awfully Japanese.

We had been travelling for several hours along dirt roads and had passed through several villages but had found nowhere where we could get petrol and had to press on. Finally, the engine stopped just as we were approaching yet another village down the narrow jungle road. Once again, we counted our money to see how much petrol we could buy, if we were fortunate enough to find any. The result wasn't very hopeful, and we were considering the 'Military-Requisition-Present-This-Document-to-Your-District-Officer ploy and wondering what to do if it didn't work. As we sat there debating, there was the sound of a whistle down the road and smoke appeared over the tree-tops. Then a railway engine pulling a few carriages crossed the road ahead of us and stopped with one of the carriages blocking the road. We ran to the village station and spoke to the guard but as we couldn't afford the fare, he wouldn't let us on.

However, he was very interested in giving us tickets in exchange for a fine American limousine and so we were able to continue on to the ferry port Oosthaven, at the southern end of Sumatra. For some reason, no-one bothered us for tickets on the ferry, perhaps they had been warned and we were able to get to Batavia and get rooms in one of the hotels on the 'Present-this-Document' basis. After a remarkably easy search, we unearthed an R.A.F. accounts officer who gave us some money and an authorisation for the hotel.

Waiting in Batavia Cam White, Nicholls, Teddy Tremlett, Ambrose Milnes

The wound on my leg had not been helped by the amounts of swamp water it had been immersed in and the several days of neglect. It had begun to itch and had become puffy and red round the edges, so I went to search for medical treatment which turned out to be of little help. Gradually more of the squadron arrived in an amazing variety of ways.

Some came in the few remaining Hurricanes; others found a river boat doing nothing and borrowed it. Some pilots had force-landed in jungle, on islands and hitched lifts in private cars, and naval craft. Most of the ground-crew and a few remaining pilots managed to get away during a spell when the Japanese parachutists had been driven back temporarily and they travelled to the south of Sumatra in open rail trucks and crossed by ferry to Java.

The C.O. (Squadron Leader 'Jock' Thomson) had been among the group of pilots who flew out and when most of the surviving pilots had arrived, he and the remnants of group headquarters were able to assess how many pilots and aircraft were available to carry on.

Jock Thomson on evacuation ship from Java

There were more pilots than aircraft and it was decided draw cards to see who should stay and who should go. My leg had become quite painful and I had gone out to buy a walking stick and to try, once again to get some proper treatment, so I hadn't heard about this plan.

When I came back to the hotel, I walked into a meeting just in time to get a rough idea of what it was all about and to draw a card. As I was near the door, I was nearly the first to choose. It was the Queen of Diamonds which in normal circumstances would have been a good card to hold. But, out came all the other queens, kings and aces so of all the pilots in the draw I held the highest card of those staying behind.

No one had asked how my leg was or why I was using a walking stick or how long my leg would last without proper

treatment. There was silence for a few seconds and then a voice, which I have blessed ever more, spoke up from the back of the room and said,

"I haven't seen any action at all yet and I don't want to come all this way for nothing."

So, the C.O. asked who had the highest card of the stayers and that was how Vibert[3], a New Zealander, took my place and became a prisoner of war of the Japanese instead of me. There are a great many things that could be said about this card-cutting incident but some of them are libellous especially concerning those who were excused from drawing a card.

(Kelly's recollection of the incident is informative as it sheds a little further light on this bizarre incident which decided the fate of so many of those involved. There are some differences from Doug's account, but the outcome was identical. He notes that there were more pilots than planes, so some would be evacuated and six needed to stay along with remnants of 605 squadron to try to defend Java.

"So we cut cards for the privilege. The 258 C.O, Squadron Leader Thomson, nominated Harry Dobbyn to remain as Flight Commander (and he did and was killed on his second operation) and Red Campbell, who ought to have known better, volunteered (and was all but killed on the same sortie and thereafter did no more flying). Most surprising of all, a New Zealander, John Vibert, who wasn't attached to anyone but happened to be around that morning, stating that he hadn't come all this way not to see any action, volunteered as well. He did this after the cards had been drawn with the lowest drawn by Healey, Lambert, myself and Nicholls and as Nicholls had drawn the highest out of the four of us he was let off the hook for which he has been everlastingly grateful!

I will not forget that card cutting ceremony. It was done on the steps of the Hotel der Netherlands in Batavia a hotel of, for those days, superb quality. Thomson had gathered us for a meeting and while waiting for us all to arrive some of us had been playing bridge. Without anyone realising it, the consequence was that the cards were divided into batches of high card and batches of low cards and those who drew late got into the high ones of which an astonishing proportion were drawn so that even Nicholls' Jack (?) wouldn't have been good enough to excuse him the option of death or three and a half years imprisonment had it not been for the rush of blood to John Vibert's head.") Hurricane and Spitfire Pilots at War, Kelly P130.

John Vibert in 2005

[3] *John Vibert was 20 when he was taken prisoner and finished the war in Changi Jail, Singapore. He spent much of his captivity working on docks, prison factories and building airstrips which left him with back, leg and arthritis problems and he returned home skin and bone weighing less than 45 kilograms. He died aged 93 in 2015.*

And so, the 'saved' gathered their few belongings together and caught a train down to the port of Tilitjap on the south coast of Java where we boarded the last ship of any size to escape the Japanese patrols.

The boys split up, Batavia Railway Station : Nicholls, Tremlett, Sheerin, Caldwell, de la Perelle, Red Campbell, Cam White, MacNamara

The ship was the Kota Gede, a cattle boat which sometimes carry four or five passengers.

Kota Gede

On this occasion, it had several hundred and we had to sit or sleep in any space we could find, on deck, under companion-ways. Space in the very few lifeboats was a very desirable residence but it was all mutually arranged in a very co-operative manner and the space you reserved on the first night was yours for the rest of the trip. My spot was in the tiny passenger lounge underneath the piano between the front legs.

We had an idea that we were going to Australia but, after the initial course changes to put any submarines and spotter planes off the scent, we headed north-westerly.

We had little to do on the long trip to across the Indian Ocean except talk about the reasons for our brief campaign in Singapore, and watch the flying fish sputtering away from the prow of the ship and try to identify dolphins, whales and sharks at a distance.

The sea was beautiful and calm reflecting the azure blueness of the sky, and the sun shone day after day.

Doug on the Kota Gede

Ceylon was, probably still is, one of those islands which has an attractive aroma spreading for a few miles out to sea all around it. Java and Singapore are the same, but India is not. At Colombo we landed a week or so later, grateful to have space once more to move and hoping for a change of diet from ship's biscuit and (once again) tins of Maconochie's stew.

We were not sorry to leave the Kota Gede, but we were very grateful to her. When we sailed on her she was an old ship whose smell betrayed her trade, but she served us well.

Life on Board

The Kota Gede was a Dutch Merchant Freighter built in 1928 and apparently boasted four toilets. Another escapee on the boat said:

"The Kota Gede was a tramp steamer of some 2,500 tons with room for perhaps six passengers.

What a bastion she was to the 2000 or more airmen crammed aboard her for the next nine days. The captain was Fredrick Goos, the crew a mixed one of Dutch and Indonesians. Two queues stretched right around the ship, one forward and one aft twice a day for meals of bully beef and stew.

The only 'plates' were slices of bread and 'cups' were tin cans. There were a number of deaths on board, the bodies being slipped into the sea after a few words from the padre.

To keep out of the lanes of Japanese bombers and submarines the Captain steered SSW until Sunday, 1st March when he changed to NNW. He had been ordered to sail convoy style to Australia but decided to head for Ceylon.

At the end of the war Captain Goos was expecting to be court-martialled but when the facts were known, he was decorated for having saved his ship and at least 2000 servicemen"

Queue for canteen

The Squadron had been in Sumatra and then Java for about five weeks. The remnants of 258 flew from an airstrip at Tjillitan from Feb 18th until around 3rd March along with some personnel from 605 and 242 Squadrons. During this time, five pilots had been killed. Pilot Officer Bruce McAlister RNZAF was shot down over Singapore on Feb 3rd aged 24, Pilot Officer C. Kleckner RCAF was killed on 4th Feb. as was Sgt. Ken 'Junior' Glynn; Sgt Roy Keedwell died from his burns sustained on 4th Feb. Fl. Lt. Dobbyn was shot down and killed in Java 25th Feb aged 22. Five others became prisoners of war, Flt. Lt Victor de la Perelle, Pilot Officer 'Red' Campbell, Sgt. T. Kelly, Sgt. A. 'Bertie; Lambert and Sgt. Pip Healey.

Java fell on March 8th.

Chapter Five - Ceylon

We were given some temporary quarters in Colombo until it was decided what to do with us all. I used the opportunity to get some treatment for my leg wound which, by now, had developed into a tropical ulcer. The treatment consisted of 10 days in the local military hospital with my leg raised and with liberal applications of the latest miracle drug - Acriflavine - a yellowish cream which spread everywhere. By the time I was discharged from hospital, the surviving aircrew from the Kota Gede had been grouped into a unit and re-named 258 Squadron.

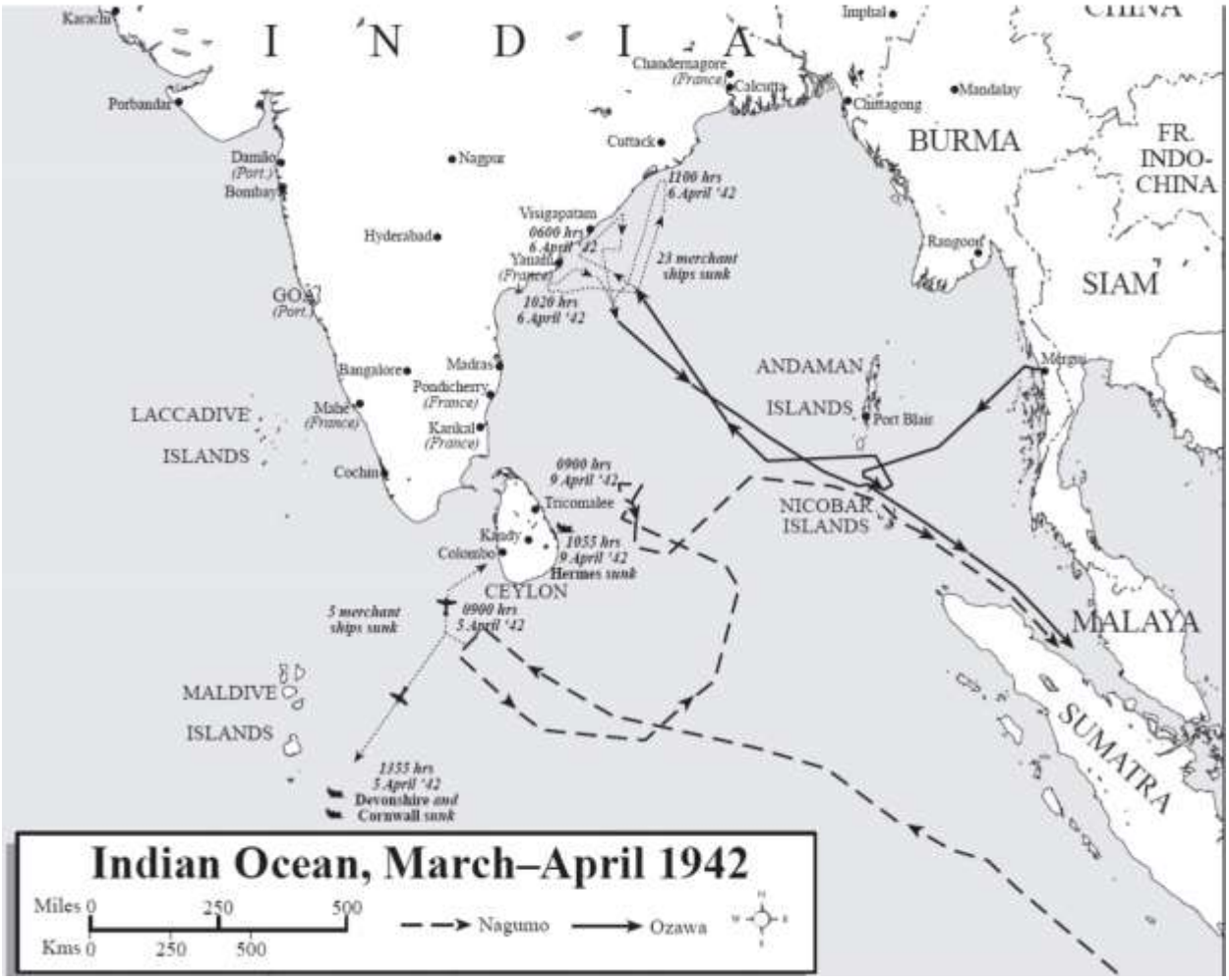
Remnants of 258 reform in Ceylon April 1942. L-R Tudor Jones, Nash, Brown, Donahue, McCulloch, Milnes, Nicholls, Scott

Slowly a few well-used Hurricanes were supplied, some such old models that they still had fabric-covered wings. Most were from the Middle East and additional pilots came with them.

We had an enviable airfield - it was a landing strip cut through what had been Colombo racecourse on the outskirts of the city. There was just one tarmac strip which had to make do for all wind directions and the airfield was surrounded by what had been superior residences some of which were requisitioned for use by the R.A.F.

On the east coast of Ceylon was China Bay, a naval station and near it an airfield. In the centre a strip had been cut out of the jungle and further down the coast from us was a seaplane base where a flight of Catalinas was based. So our days once more were busy trying to get the squadron operational again. A-A gunners were sent to guard the harbour and they needed co-operation from us by day and night for sighting and aiming practice.

Demonstration flights were needed to boost civilian morale and the newly arrived control room needed numerous flights from us at all heights and directions to set up their instruments and set up the communications system.



Map of Ceylon, 1942 (weaponsandwarfare.com)

Amidst all the activity, one of the Catalinas *(Piloted by Sqdn Ldr Birchall RCAF*) spotted a Japanese fleet with aircraft carriers approaching from the south east. The story of the Catalinas and their careful shadowing has been told but their warnings without doubt saved Ceylon.

(*The story is recorded in Michael Tomlinson's book "The Most Dangerous Moment" The book was named after a quote by Churchill when he said "The most dangerous moment of the war, and the one which caused me greatest alarm, was when the Japanese Fleet was heading for Ceylon and the Naval base there. The capture of Ceylon, the consequent control of the Indian Ocean, and the possibility at the same time of a German conquest of Egypt would have closed the ring and the future would have been black"*)

Eventually it became certain that Ceylon was the Japanese target and the night before the expected raid all pilots who had aircraft (there were not enough for everyone) were told to be on instant readiness at 3 a.m.

So, we had everything ready that night, had a good party and reported reasonably sober as required. About 6 a.m. we were in our cockpits ready for a quick start and scramble. Nothing very much happened until about 8 a.m. when a formation of aircraft flew high overhead.

Apparently, there was a telephone call from control to our dispersal hut with the question,

"Is there a formation of aircraft over you?"

"Yes," replied the orderly. "Well they're Japanese. Scramble"

By the time we had been 'Scrambled' the harbour was already under attack by the Japanese dive bombers and, to protect the shipping, our C.O. decided to climb straight into the attack.

Climbing up under enemy aircraft, especially those well escorted by fighters, puts the defending formation at a very great disadvantage, but our aim was to divert the Japanese and give other formations (if any) the chance to come to our aid at a greater height. As we climbed into the enemy formation, I was on the inside of the turn and travelling so slowly that I was very near the stall and unable to get in a shot. So, I kicked over the rudder and spun out and down to get speed to climb up for an effective attack.

Navy 99

I built up speed, climbed up north of the harbour and came back for an attack through the top. I passed through the loose gaggle of Japanese fighters and got on the tail of one of the Navy 99 dive-bombers and fired at it.

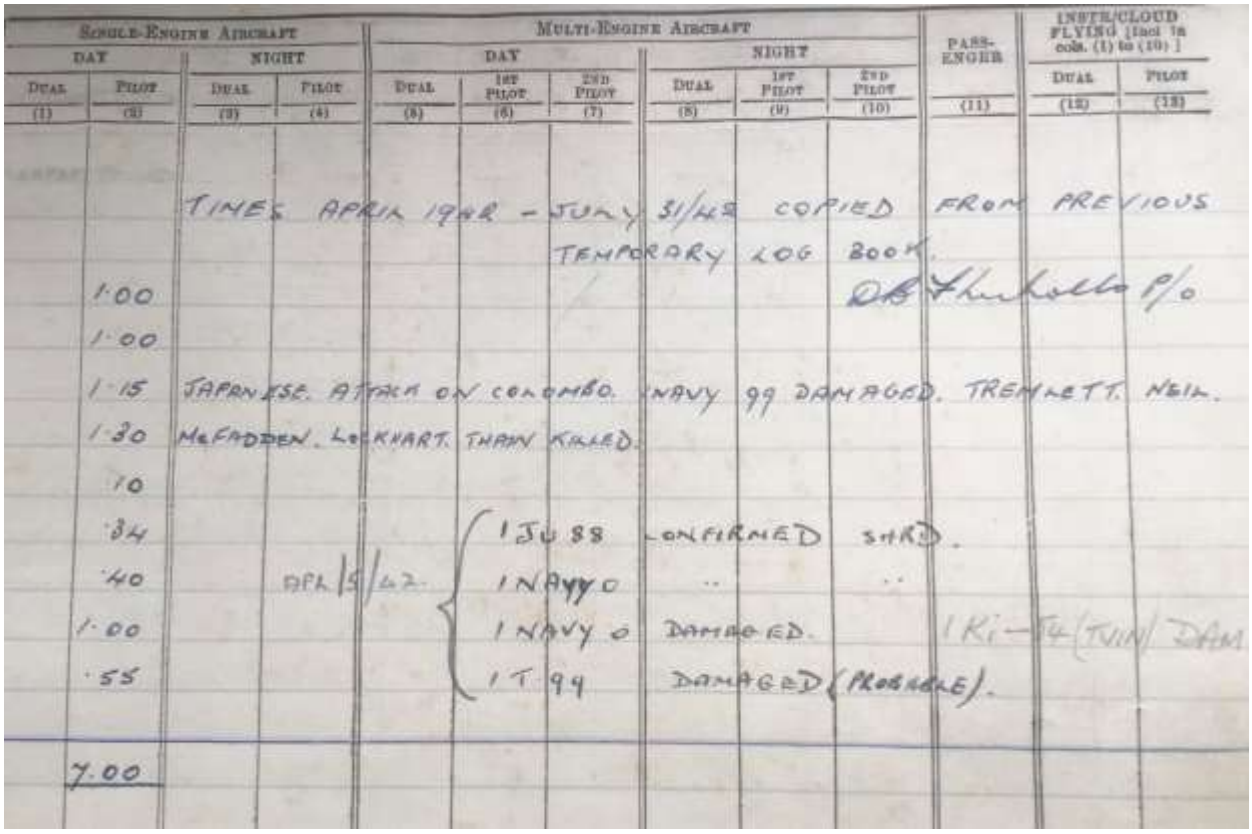
It was obviously hit and went off into cloud, but I couldn't follow it as I in turn was being fired at. Once again, I dived out and climbed back over the top but, this time, instead of the sky over the harbour being a milling mass of aircraft, it was absolutely empty. It was amazing how quickly the sky had cleared. Staying up long enough to ensure that the Japanese had all gone, I returned to base and landed, gave my report and waited with the others for the rest of the squadron to return.

Doug's report reads as follows:

Combat Report by P/O D. Nicholls Date: 5/4/42

Claim: One Navy 96 Bomber damaged, own machine undamaged.

"I went up on a scramble with 258 Sqdn and over Colombo harbour we intercepted several formations of Navy 99 bombers. One of these formations attacked shipping in line astern and I followed the Commanding Officer into the attack. Owing to cloud and my position in the formation I was unable to fire so I climbed above cloud where I got on the tail of two Navy 99s. I fired about a three second burst about 200 yards range from quarter astern. One of the two bombers shook violently and slipped off sideways into cloud. Because of AA fire I did not think it advisable to follow it down".



Doug's Log Book entry

There were a few *(more arrivals*) but there were far more telephone messages reporting crashes in the area. From our squadron alone we lost five pilots and several, including the C.O., were injured by gunfire from the air or ground or in crash landings.

Other squadrons also had their losses that day and again two days later when the Japanese attacked China Bay on the eastern side and sank naval vessels. It was the old, old story again - if only we had had radar warning, we could have been scrambled in time to get height and attack far more effectively.

One of the ships sunk in the harbour was H.M.S. Hector and one of the engineers was pulled through a porthole as the water level rose in the engine room. He is now a member of my golf club and often says 'Ah, but I was a slim lad in those days; you'd have trouble dragging me through a hatchway now."

(258 Intelligence Officer L.J. Christie's entry for the raid on 5th April noted:

"At 0740 four formations of Navy 99 dive bombers came over escorted by Navy Zeros at 6000 – 8000 ft. They dive-bombed and machine-gunned the harbour and the shipping outside.

They normally bombed in flights in line astern diving from 2000 – 8000ft and releasing at 200 – 100 ft. The fighters remained as top cover and made good use of cloud 8 – 9 tenths. At 0745, 40 a/c attacked Ratmalana airdrome and railway workshops. Again, there were Navy99 dive bombers escorted by Navy Zero fighters".

There were three forms of attack – machine gunning from 50ft, dive bombing from 500 – 800 ft and high-level bombing from 2000ft. At 0800, 48 a/c attacked the harbour with a high-level bombing attack from 10,000 – 12,000 ft.

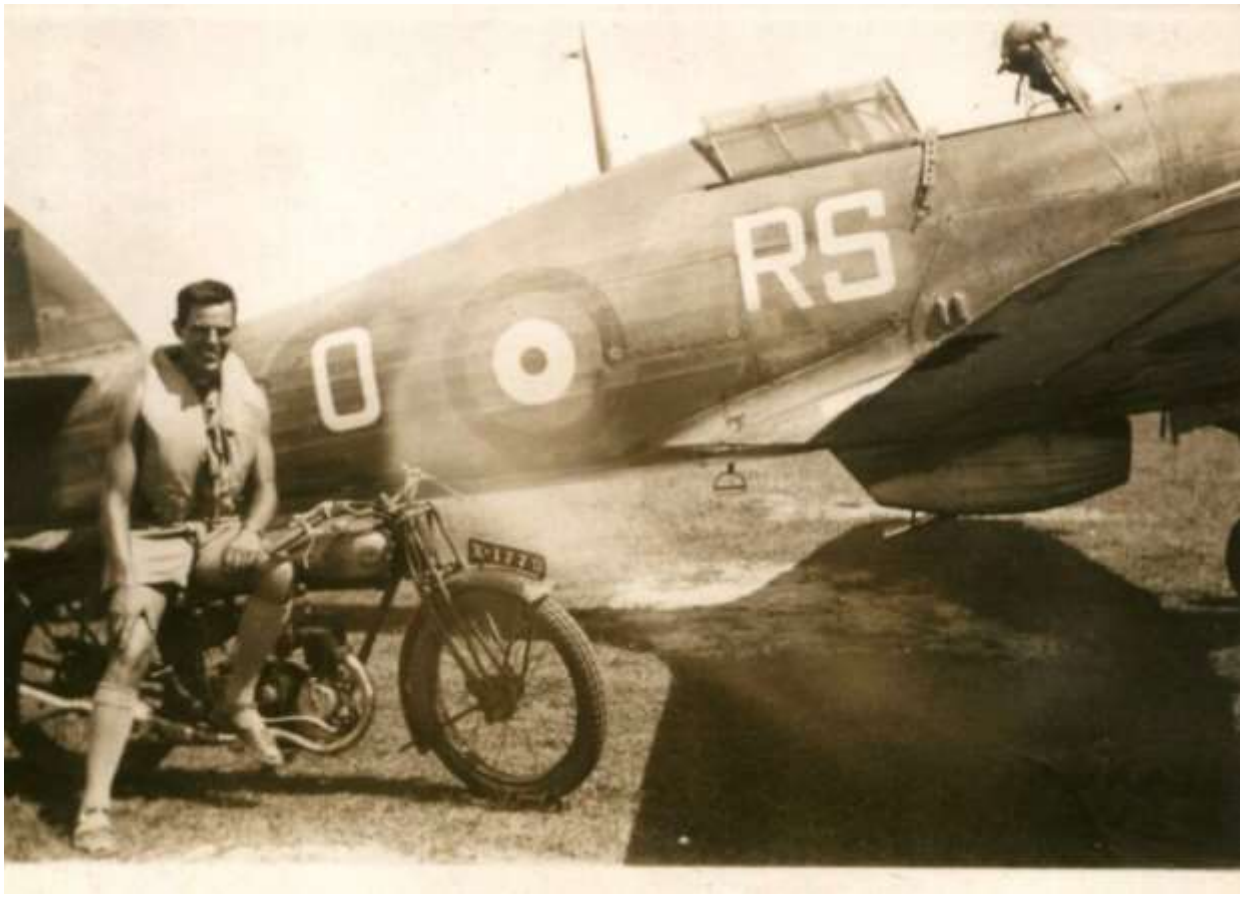
These planes were not engaged by fighters but AA (Anti-Aircraft guns) say they were twin engined planes resembling JU 88's. In the attacks on the harbour, the harbour workshops were seriously damaged and the railway workshops slightly damaged. H.M.S. Hector and H.M.S. Tendes were sunk and H.M.S Lucia damaged. 4 Naval Officers, 35 Naval ratings and 12 Goanese and Lascars were killed.

Our losses in a/c were:

258 Squadron: 7 aircraft destroyed, 5 pilots killed, 2 pilots wounded.

30 Squadron: 8 aircraft destroyed, 5 pilots killed 2 pilots wounded

Amongst the pilots killed was P/O Teddy Tremlett of 258 Squadron and Pilot Officer Don Geffene, now of 30 Squadron and one of the original 22 pilots who set off on the Athene.



Don Geffene, Columbo. March 1942

American Consulate
Colombo, Ceylon, September 15, 1942.
[Place and date]

Name in full: Donald GEFFENE Age: ? [As nearly as can be ascertained]

Native or naturalized: Not known to Consulate Occupation: R.A.F. Pilot Officer

Date of death: April [Month] 5 [Day] A.M. [Hour] - [Minute] 1942 [Year]

Place of death: Vicinity of Kottawa, 15 miles from Colombo, Ceylon
[Number and street] or [Hospital or hotel] [City] [Country]

Cause of death: Killed in action against the enemy, as reported by R.A.F. authorities
[Include authority for statement]

Disposition of the remains: Buried where plane crashed (see above). Grave in custody of Imperial War Graves Commission, Ceylon Agency.

Local law as to disinterring remains: Permission must be obtained from District Judge having jurisdiction, as provided for by Section 15 of Ordinance No. 9 of 1899

Disposition of the effects: R.A.F. authorities turned effects over to Consulate, which sent them to mother. Log Book, in Consulate's custody, to be sent at end of war.

Person or official responsible for custody of effects and accounting therefor: Royal Air Force

Accompanied by relatives or friends as follows:

NAME	ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP
--	--	--
--	--	--

Address of relatives (so far as known):

	NAME	ADDRESS	RELATIONSHIP
1.	Mrs. L. Geffene	1186 Queen Ann Place	Mother
2.	--	Los Angeles, California	--
		--	

Notification sent to:

Mrs. L. Geffene [Name] by air mail [Mail or telegraph] on June 19, 1942 [Date]

-- [Name] by -- [Mail or telegraph] on -- [Date]

This information and data concerning an inventory of the effects, accounts, etc., have been placed under File 330 in the correspondence of this office.

Remarks: Deceased served in Squadron 30, No. 222 Group, Royal Air Force, Ceylon, being there enrolled as of American nationality.

George H. Graves
Consul of the United States of America.

[SEAL]

No fee prescribed. Misc. Service No. 493

(To be sent *in duplicate* to the Department of State. To be forwarded *in triplicate* when decedent is an American citizen seaman, a pensioner, or a Veterans Administration or Social Security beneficiary. 18—13008 U. S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

American Consulate's record on Geffene's death

The air raid was led by Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the same officer who led the air attack on Pearl Harbor and just like that attack on Sunday 7th Dec 1941 Sri Lanka was equally unprepared.)

So, once again the squadron had suffered severe losses and pilots and aircraft replacements were drafted in slowly. Many of the pilots were inexperienced and new to the Far East. There was again a slow build-up to operational efficiency.

Figure 3 - 258 Squadron, Colombo, Ceylon, April 42. "Newspaper propaganda after Colombo raid"
L-R, Back row, Nash, Roberts, Scott, Caldwell, Land, Hickes, Nicholls, McCulloch,
Front. Sharp, Gavin, Milnes, Fletcher, Donahue, Newell, Brown, Gregory

More Ack-Ack guns and gunners arrived with searchlights so, they were in need of practice during dummy air attacks. The daylight exercises with the guns were a great excuse for low flying around the harbour but the searchlight men wanted to get their aim sorted out at night so, coming from a night squadron, I was landed with the job. I was supposed to be in radio contact with the searchlight units, but communication was not very reliable.

One pitch dark night, which was what they preferred because there was no chance of a visual sighting, I was circling round the harbour when my engine developed a tremendous coolant leak. The fumes were coming into the cockpit making me cough and splutter. My eyes were streaming from the acrid smoke and I had to get down quickly. I used the radio to call the code for "Switch the Lights Off" so that I could get my eyes attuned for landing, but they couldn't hear me and the full beam of two searchlight followed me all the way down until their beams were cut off by the tree tops as I landed. After that I determined that the radio was a waste of time in an emergency and I would dive down out of their range and then sneak back again to the airfield at a low level where they were unlikely to pick me up again.

Although we had the occasional scramble and reports of suspicious Japanese Naval activity, most of our time in Ceylon was spent bringing ourselves, the Radar operators, the controllers and the A-A defences up to scratch. There was no excuse for being caught napping again

(*Although there were more attacks, flying continued and with it, obvious risks.*

Pilot Officer Jamieson's funeral

Pilot Officer Jamieson was a Canadian from Toronto and died on July 1st after hitting a tree during a dummy attack. He was 24. The pallbearers are Newell, Ferguson and Nash).

McCulloch's war effort

On 2nd Oct McCulloch was promoted to Flying Officer, on the 4th he had this mishap. Doug's wry caption against the photo was "McCulloch's contribution to the war effort".

Ceylon was a completely different environment to Sumatra with an established colonial presence, hotels, cinemas, swimming pools and an active social life.

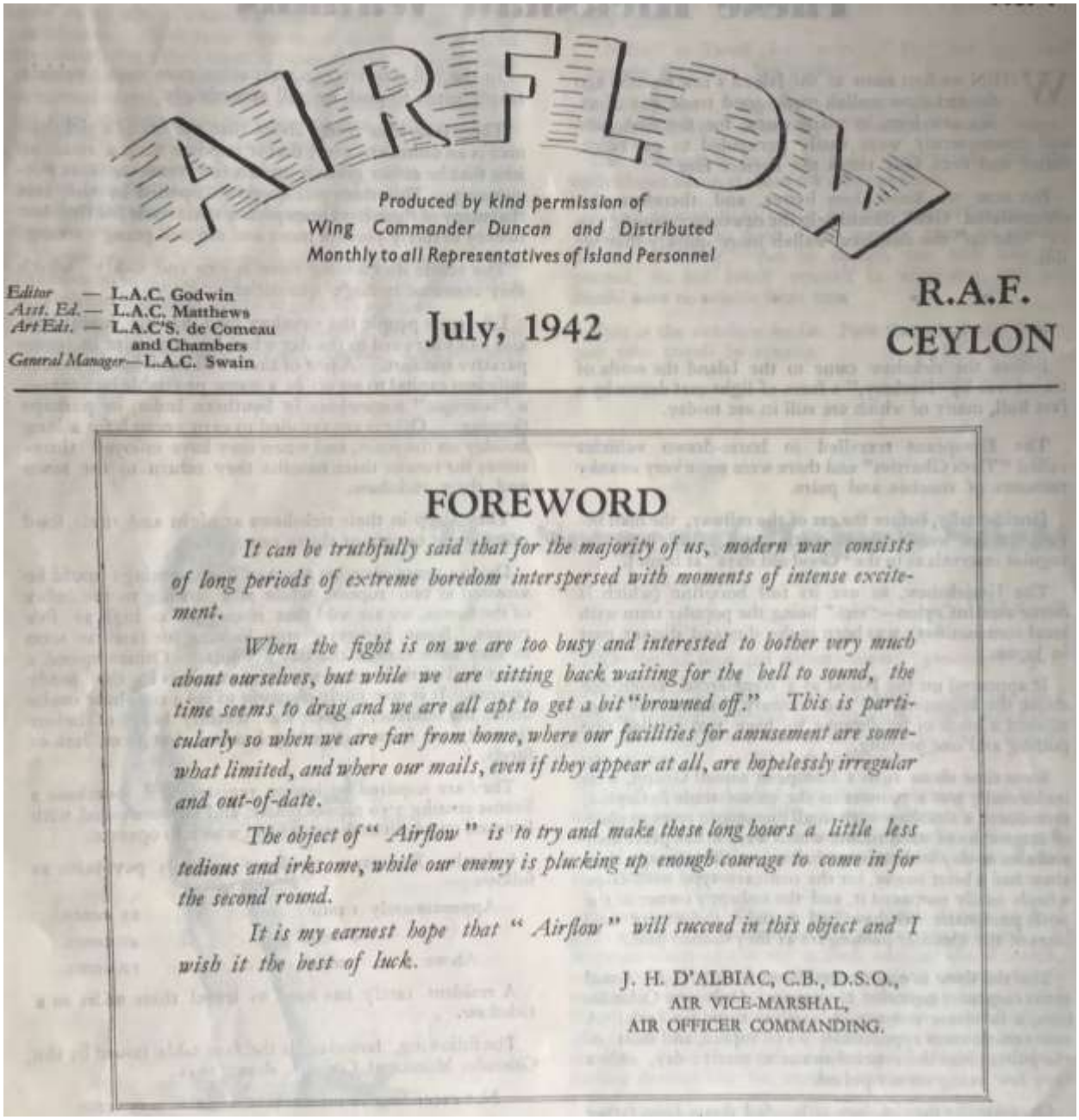
Micky Nash and friends

This must have been a huge contrast to the privations of Palembang where only a few weeks previously the squadron was fighting for survival, pilots had been shot down and killed and Micky Nash was lying in a ditch with a throat wound, his survival apparently highly unlikely.

It is not known what the pilots would have made of the film advertised at The Empire on July 31st – 'One of our Aircraft is missing.'

This was advertised in Doug's own copy of the new Airflow magazine for RAF Ceylon personnel and contained an interesting foreword regarding its purpose.)

Entertainment in Columbo, July 1942



AIRFLOW

Produced by kind permission of
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July, 1942

R.A.F. CEYLON

FOREWORD

It can be truthfully said that for the majority of us, modern war consists of long periods of extreme boredom interspersed with moments of intense excitement.

When the fight is on we are too busy and interested to bother very much about ourselves, but while we are sitting back waiting for the bell to sound, the time seems to drag and we are all apt to get a bit "browned off." This is particularly so when we are far from home, where our facilities for amusement are somewhat limited, and where our mails, even if they appear at all, are hopelessly irregular and out-of-date.

The object of "Airflow" is to try and make these long hours a little less tedious and irksome, while our enemy is plucking up enough courage to come in for the second round.

It is my earnest hope that "Airflow" will succeed in this object and I wish it the best of luck.

J. H. D'ALBIAC, C.B., D.S.O.,
AIR VICE-MARSHAL,
AIR OFFICER COMMANDING.

'Airflow' foreword

In January 1943, the squadron flew up to India and was based at Dum-Dum airport near Calcutta for a short time on a reinforcement exercise.

Dawn readiness was a bitterly cold business at Dum-Dum and we needed all the heavy clothing we had but, gradually, as the sun came up, we had to cast it off bit by bit until once again we were dressed in just khaki shorts and shirt. From Dum-Dum we flew to Chittagong and then to our base at Ramu near Cox's Bazaar on the coast. It was from Ramu that we operated over Burma just long enough to get our bearings and then, the reinforcement exercise being over, we all flew back to Ceylon again. Why we went back and not some other squadron in need of a rest, I have never been able to work out.

258 pilot, 'Jock' Gallacher

This time however, we did not return to the fleshpots of Colombo racecourse but to Dambulla *(Central Ceylon)* where an airstrip had been sliced out of the thick jungle and where the malaria incidence rate was very high and the malignant type was common.

The surface of the strip was a mixture of soft soil and hard lumps where tree roots ran just under the ground so it was covered by a kind of expanded metal mesh - not the smooth plates that were used later in the war but metal sheets which first had been cut and then stretched.

Tyres didn't last very long on it - and we had some narrow squeaks from tyres bursting on take-off or landing. The strip wasn't very long, and it was essential not to overshoot on landing. One of the Flight Commanders decided to give a demonstration on short landings and we dutifully watched as he turned on to his landing approach. It soon became obvious to us that he was too low, and even before he reached the landing area, he and his aircraft disappeared into the area of saplings and bushes where mature trees had been cut down to make the strip.

We waited for the bang but heard nothing except a loud rushing noise getting nearer, until the Flight Commander's Hurricane appeared through the shrubbery with twigs sticking out all over it. The topic of short landings became a very tricky business for some time after that.

The only buildings of substance, if you can class reeds, palm leaves and bamboo in that category, were the communal mess and cookhouse and the office.

We slept in bell tents dispersed around the strip and reached along narrow tracks between and under branches of the trees. On our journeys to and from our billets we had unintentional encounters with the creatures of the jungle. On one occasion I had a very large cobra slither

Accommodation in Dambulla

over my foot but as he was chasing a squeaking lizard for his lunch, he didn't notice me. But I noticed him!

We were warned to look out for whip snakes when passing under low branches.

They were not likely to attack but would strike if startled.

Although not so close to the hotels and swimming pools of Colombo, we enjoyed our stay at Dambulla. Nearby was the impressive Temple of the Rock, a kind of fortified palace cut out and through a towering mass of rock. Viewed from above, the reservoir which had been cut out of the hard rock was most impressive and could be used as a landmark in bad weather for those not sure in which direction in the miles of featureless jungle the airstrip lay.

Doug relaxes, with thick woollen socks

It was not too far from the hill capital Kandy, site of the Temple of the Tooth and where there is a large ornamental lake. There was an annual festival in Kandy, basically religious but with an air of fiesta about some of the proceedings.

One event which was not taken too seriously was the canoe race on the lake. Various local societies and clubs took part, and our squadron was invited to enter a team. We went to watch our self-selected team of Australians, Canadians and a Fijian practice.

Compared with the other crews' leisurely but very efficient paddle-work, we hadn't got a chance in the world. Our team may have been good oarsmen but, as paddlers, they were inept. It was apparent that steps other than practice and effort would be needed and a plot was hatched.

The Australians suggested to their unsuspecting Flight Commander that it would be a friendly gesture to have a section of Hurricanes circle the lake during the contest and give a brief aerobatic display afterwards. When the race was nearly over and it was apparent to the two Australian pilots that our team was getting nowhere fast, the aircraft dived down low over the

lake, screamed just over the heads of the leading canoes and pulled up into a victory roll, leaving chaos and shipwreck behind them and ensuring that our team, although not the winners, were able to avoid the disgrace of coming in last. Fortunately, the organisers recognised a victory roll when they saw one and made no comment at our suggestion that, probably, the pilots had thought the race had finished. All seemed to be taken in reasonably good part, with perhaps a little drop of acid in the smiles, but we weren't invited to enter the race again.

The Squadron rested (cartoon by Prudhoe)

During our stay at Dambulla, some of our hunting enthusiasts would go into the jungle with .303 rifles and very occasionally come back with some animal which the cooks declined to prepare and the rest of us refused to eat. However, all hunting expeditions were forbidden after the madman from Fiji believed he was being attacked by a wild elephant and shot it.

A deputation of head men and elders from the nearby village came to the C.O's office and demanded compensation for the elephant which was used in the local timber work and was having its day off when encountered by our Fiji man. Negotiations were pointed, lengthy and very expensive for the hunter.

We were visited occasionally by the Brass and for their benefit there was usually a practice scramble the aim being to demonstrate that the first aircraft could be airborne in 3-4 minutes. To make sure we impressed, one group of pilots would sit in the dispersal hut and when the mock alarm was given run like mad out of the door but turn left round the back of the hut.

Other pilots, already sitting in the aircraft would start up the engines and take off in a remarkably short time. Many an undeserved compliment was recorded this way.

Once, when I was in charge of a detached flight at a rough strip near Kalematya in the south of the island, and the Brass Hats had descended, there was a genuine scramble, for one section to investigate reports of a submarine on the surface to the South West of the island.

Why scramble fighters to catch a submarine, we never found out and what Hurricanes with machine guns could do to it other than annoy it we didn't know. However, the section was scrambled on a south-westerly course, took off and promptly climbed away to the North East towards the mountains. I was standing nearest to the Brass and it was difficult to give a precise answer to,

"Why are they going North East when they were told to fly south west?"

without actually saying,

"The b---clots have set course on the wrong end of their compass needles."

However, the explanation that they would turn out to sea when they had gained height seemed to be accepted without asking, "How much height do they need to fly over a submarine?"

Doug and friend Scotty at Kalematya

Chapter Six – Burma and India

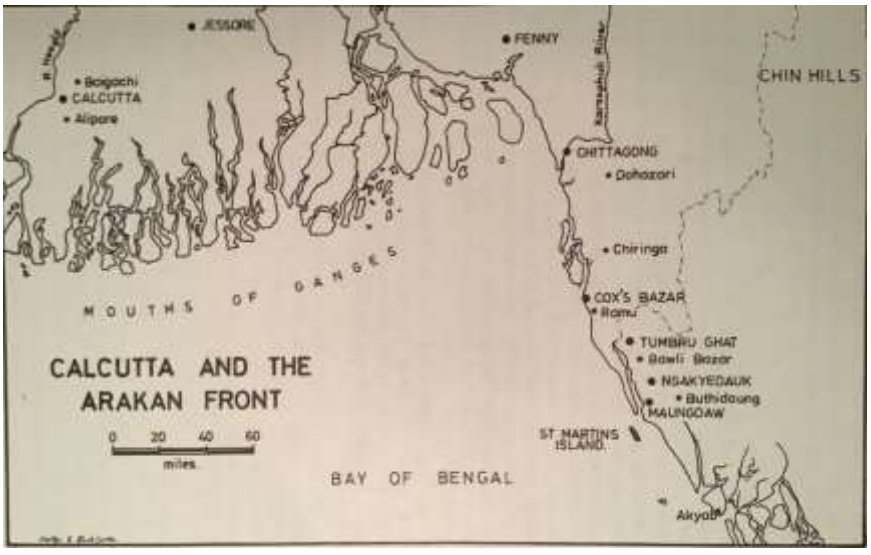
(The last image in Chapter 2 showed a list that Doug had typed up to show all the places 258 squadron were based from 1940 to 1945. It is a list he hand-typed numerous times; after the war many people – especially budding WW2 authors – wrote to him asking about people, places and dates and inevitably he would end up typing this list by hand yet again.

I've followed his footsteps, but in this instance just keyed in the bases once the squadron left Ceylon. This is because just in the period August 1943 to November 1944 they had 10 separate bases and in the material he left there may be a wealth of photos for one location but little if anything in the text that refers to it and vice-versa. Whereas in the previous chapters it was easier to place most events and images in clear chronological order, it is more challenging here and as Doug does give some dates, it might be helpful to refer to the list below to get some sort of idea where they took place.

To make matters a little more complicated, in some cases he uses the code name for the base rather than the geographical location, for example, Reindeer is actually Ramu in Burma (now Myanmar.) However, from my perspective, I am much more interested in the events he refers to and the experiences he went through rather being obsessed by recording the precise location where they occurred and, in his defence, he was probably a little busy at the time and may have been more preoccupied with survival than posterity.)

Comilla 13th Aug 1943	*Dohazari 4th Nov 1943*
Chittagong 13th Dec 1943	*Hay 25th Jan 1944*
Hove 30th Jan 1944	*Reindeer 25th Feb 1944*
Arkonam 8th June 1994	*Yelahanka 14th Aug 1944*
Arkonam 8th Oct 1944	*Ratnap 26th Nov 1944*

In May 1943 it was my turn to travel back to Burma on secondment to 79 Squadron (the squadron, I was posted the following year to command but declined) at a place code-named Lyons, another airstrip built on rice-paddy fields with the banks knocked down where necessary.



Area of Operations 1943-44

(Comilla is just north of Fenny or Feni on the map.) Very good in the dry season, but useless when the monsoons rains started.

79 Squadron had Hurricanes, but they seemed to be used quite frequently for long-range work often on escort.

Sometimes we would go for airfields like Meiktila which meant a hot reception or fly down the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers looking for traffic, a term which included the little sampans as well as steamers and barges. We were firing light cannon so we could have little effect on metal bridges, but the main ones were well defended, and we had to attempt to knock out the guns. It was said that, at some A-A posts, the Japanese had devices which shot cables into the path of low-flying aircraft. Flying into gunfire in a single-engine aircraft vulnerable to hits in the oil, fuel or coolant systems is not a restful occupation when you have a long, long way to go over enemy territory to get home.

With 79 Squadron I flew trips of 3½ hours or so, using external drop tanks. This probably doesn't sound very much until you remember that this was done in a small cockpit, with no toilet facilities and sitting on a dinghy pack containing a Carbon Dioxide gas bottle and hard rubberised cones to be used for emergency puncture repairs if shot down in the sea. The thin foam rubber cushion was woefully inadequate, and it was on those trips that I learned the true meaning of 'numb bum' and blessed the capacity and elasticity of a young bladder woefully strained as it often was by violent manoeuvres and sheer terror.

Inhospitable Terrain over the Mayu Range

Another job we had at 79 Squadron was the' rhubarb'- long boring trips at night, shooting at lights or anything that moved. The idea was to stop enemy movement and supply, but it was obvious that any supplies would be carried by mules under cover of the jungle.

In June 1943 I returned to 258 Squadron at Dambulla but in August I was on my way back to Burma again in charge of an advance party to prepare for the move of the Squadron to Comilla, one of the very few airfields with a tarmac runway. We were supervising the unloading of some of the equipment at a railway siding and one of the drivers parked his Bedford 3-ton truck with the rear end against the wagon we were unloading. The front of the truck appeared to be well clear of the adjacent set of lines and we didn't expect any other trains to come along anyway. We were wrong. In the near distance we spotted a passenger train approaching. It was moving at a fair speed and must have been a local express.

What did concern us was the amount of overlap of engine and carriages there was each side of the lines. Our driver, another pilot, had allowed what he believed was ample clearance. The approaching train driver did not seem to bother about the impending doom of our truck, and we had no time to move it. As the clattered towards us, we ran clear and hoped for the best.

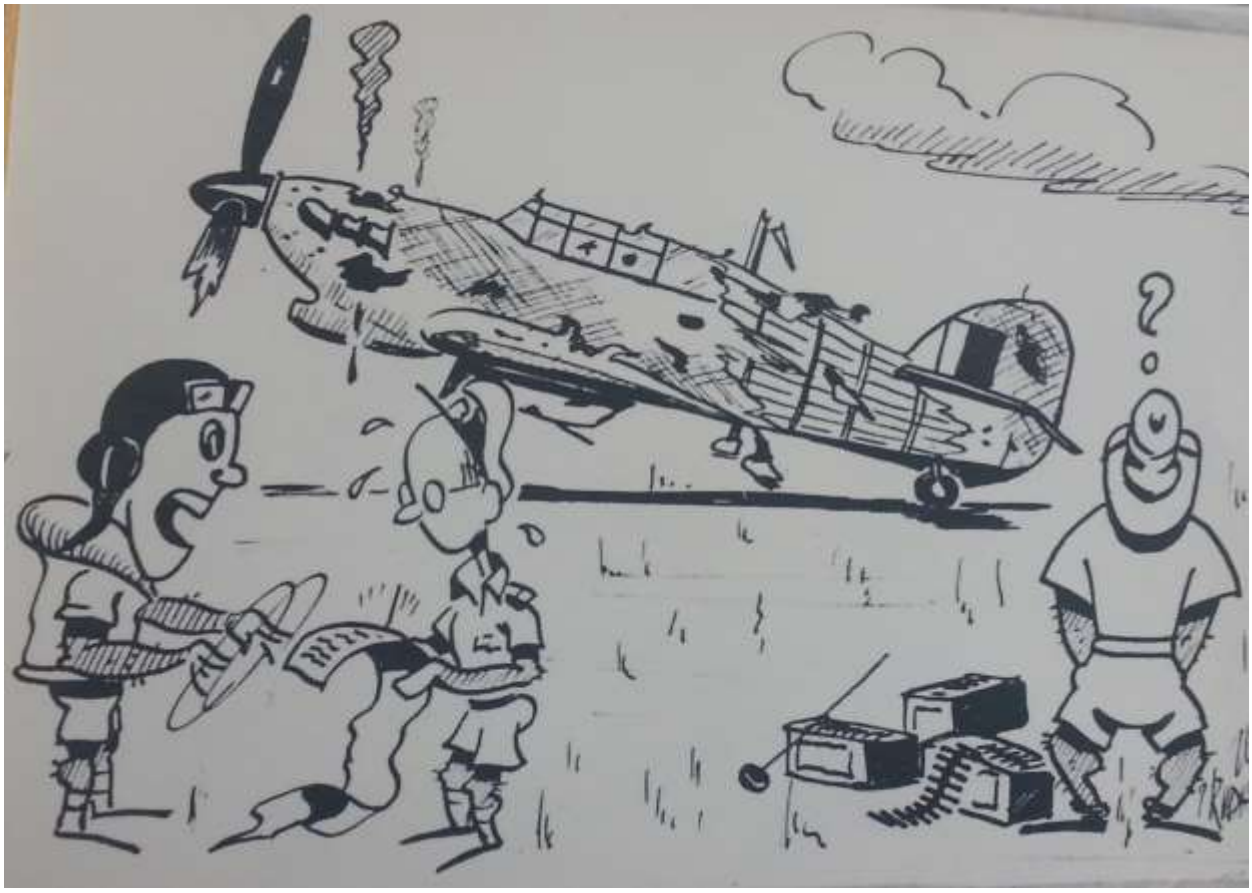
The front step of the engine hit the front bumper of the truck and sent the whole truck bouncing up and down. We could see that the carriages, because of the steps which allowed passengers to board from ground level, were even wider than the engine and we feared the worst. But nothing happened; the second and third steps of the carriages were just high enough to pass an inch or so above and below the bumper and we watched spellbound as about twenty carriages sped by without doing any damage.

Something on the guard's van, though, gave the truck an admonitory spank as it went by but, apart from an additional twist to an already knarled bumper and another bouncing, no harm was done except to our nerves.

We had a busy time at Comilla as we were based at one of the few airfields able to operate in the rains and many squadrons had been pulled back for rest and re-equipment.

258 gets acquainted with the monsoon

I seemed to get more than my fair share of glycol leaks and a new defect, a leak of oil from the constant speed unit of the airscrew unit, which covered the windscreen in a film of light oil and made landing rather tricky. On 13th Sept 1943 we went to attack some buildings at Thaungdara, and my aircraft was hit by some kind of shrapnel because on the way home, all the fabric from the cockpit to the tail gradually peeled off so that it looked as if I was flying a turkey carcass by the time I got back. The squadron artist, Prudhoe drew a (slightly exaggerated) cartoon of the aircraft which I had framed.



Return from Thaungdara (By Prudhoe)

Doug is on the left explaining what happened to the Intelligence Officer Christie. To the right, one of the ground crew considers the repair task ahead.

We had frequent scrambles which didn't lead very far as our radar was still unreliable. We went to Imphal Valley to help in the battle there - it was a little bit disconcerting to have to take off and land with Japanese gunners on the hillsides firing down at us.

Most of our operations were on the coastal section of Burma and inland from the Mayu Peninsular, a ridged promontory. The rivers leading into the estuary had numerous tiny side waters or 'chaungs' hidden by trees and these were used as concealment by troops and supply boats. The port of Akyab and its airports was occupied and reinforced by the Japanese. It was well defended because occasionally groups of enemy aircraft would arrive there, carry out lightning raids, and then fly back to a rear base. One of our jobs was to keep an eye on the

place by day and night not only for well-camouflaged attack aircraft but for the aircraft which Japanese. V.I.P.'s used when visiting the front line.

Akyab was one of our regular runs, either strafing the airfield and surrounding dumps or escorting Vultee Vengeance dive-bombers. Some Vengeances were lost on these raids and, although we never lost any aircraft there, some usually had some damage from A-A fire. Although A-A fire at Akyab was pretty fierce, and it was used frequently by Japanese aircraft, most of their aircraft were kept well behind the lines and used in mass in surprise attack either bombing from high level or in ground attacks.

During this spell, my logbook has entries such as 12th Oct.1943 - Investigate Akyab - night;23rd Nov. 1943, Scramble Angels 30 -25+ bandits; 27th Nov.1943, Escort Vengeances Akyab. We had also the usual night-time 'Rhubarbs' a great deal of close support work for the Army using Hurricanes fitted with cannon and, by 'close support' is meant that, at times we were firing at enemy positions with 50 yards of our own troops.

Visit by Lord Louis Mountbatten and Wing Commander Paul Richie to Comilla

On 5th December 1943 we had a 'Scramble 50+ West of Cox's Bazaar' which meant heading out to sea and climbing hard. The squadron was being led by Artie Brown, from Newfoundland, and I was leading 'B' flight. At about 15000 feet, the leader started to porpoise and the movements gradually increased so that the whole squadron was trying to follow him in a giant airborne switchback first climbing up almost to a stall and then diving down at high speed.

Artie Brown

There was obviously something wrong with the leader and I tried getting him on the radio, but the only reply sounded alcoholic and I guessed that his oxygen supply was faulty. As we were supposed to be climbing to 30,000feet, we were never going to make it at this rate, so I told the Squadron to formate on me and the leader's No.2. to stay with him. Very soon after this, Brown went into a steep down and his No.2. managed to follow him down to sea level; here he seemed to recover slightly just in time to run into some enemy aircraft.

Brown went into the sea and his No.2. claimed one Japanese A97 destroyed.

While all this was going on at low level, we were still trying to reach our required height. Eventually, through the haze, miles ahead of us and much higher, I managed to spot a gaggle of fighter aircraft, obviously top cover for other aircraft below them.

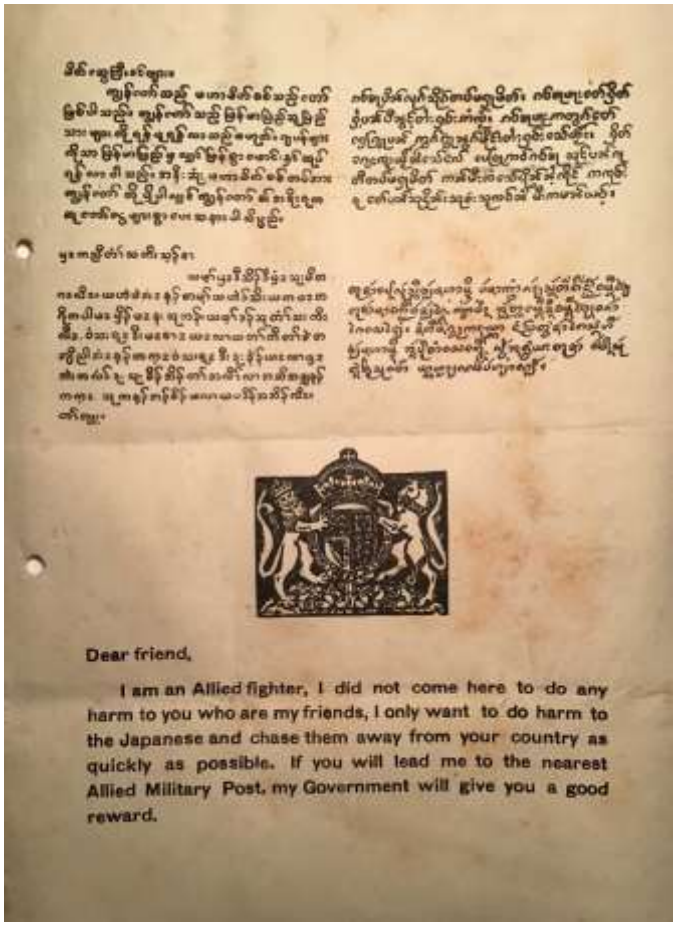
I gave Control the 'Tally Ho' call and carried on climbing but couldn't spot the formation again through the haze.

There was no way we could catch them and have enough fuel to get back to base, so we had to give up and come home.

The enemy formation went on to raid Calcutta where they were met by squadrons based there. It was one of the few occasions that we had received accurate radar information and yet, had been unable to profit from it.

Just off the coast, south of Akyab is Ramree Island and we were sent there, with long range tanks, to give the place a going over. We were all thankful that, on our way back, we were not intercepted by Japanese aircraft from Akyab or we would have been very short of petrol.

Pilots carried this with them so that if shot down they could try to negotiate a safe return.



Dear friend,

I am an Allied fighter, I did not come here to do any harm to you who are my friends, I only want to do harm to the Japanese and chase them away from your country as quickly as possible. If you will lead me to the nearest Allied Military Post, my Government will give you a good reward.

Reward Letter

Given how inhospitable much of the area they were over was with vast tracts of jungle, it would have been quite a challenge to even find someone to give this to.

Long-range tanks held about 90 galls of petrol each and were fitted one under each wing. In the event of trouble, they could be jettisoned but there could be anxious moments in case, (a) one or both didn't drop off, particularly if the thing was hanging half off just before landing and (b) switching back to main tanks caused an airlock in the fuel system. In either case, the usual remedy was to give the aircraft a good shaking about to try to clear the tank or shift the airlock.

Tactics both in the air and on the ground were beginning to change late in 1943. More Spitfires could be spared from Europe and the Middle East and some squadrons were now based at forward aerodromes as well as around Calcutta. The army was no longer withdrawing to 'strategic' positions when the monsoons came or when they were cut off by the enemy.

The plan was to form defensive 'boxes' and stay there, being supplied from the air by drops from Dakota DC3 aircraft. The Spitfires had much improved since the early days of the war; among other refinements, they had more powerful engines and were far more able to take on the Japanese fighter aircraft although even they could not stick around and mix it but had to make dive and climb attacks, so initial height was essential.

On 31st December 1943, the whole of our wing was scrambled to meet a large formation of Japanese aircraft and 136 Squadron (Spitfires) had a very successful encounter, being able to take full advantage of early warning and consequent height advantage. The story of the Spitfires in Burma is told in Norman Franks' book, 'Spitfires over the Arakan.'

Group Photo at Chittagong, Jan '44

Back, L-R: Dean, Campbell, Stead, Caldwell, Adamson, Fisher, Wilkinson, Betts, Gavin, Husband, Vart, Turner, Thomson. Front L- R: Berry, Scott, Nicholls, Land, Newell, Ferguson, Sole. This photo must have been taken only days before Scotty's incident on Jan 11th.

Quite often we had the job of escorting DC3's on supply drops flying top cover in a loose formation and circling overhead while the drop was on, some of us at a height and some, lower, searching the surrounding territory for any signs of enemy attempts to disrupt the drop.

Some of the supplies were delivered by 'free' drop; things like fodder for the mules would be wrapped in hessian and just pushed out of the door of the Dakota. Quite often, these loose bales would bounce or slither unpredictably along the ground after the first the first impact and the troops had to keep their wits about them in case any of the bundles fell outside the official drop zone. Other, more delicate, supplies were dropped by colour-coded parachutes so that the troops knew which load was which. These colour codes could be vital if a patrol under attack was in desperate need of ammunition and knew, for instance, that the red parachutes loads were the ones to unpack first.

Dakota (DC3) Supplies Drop

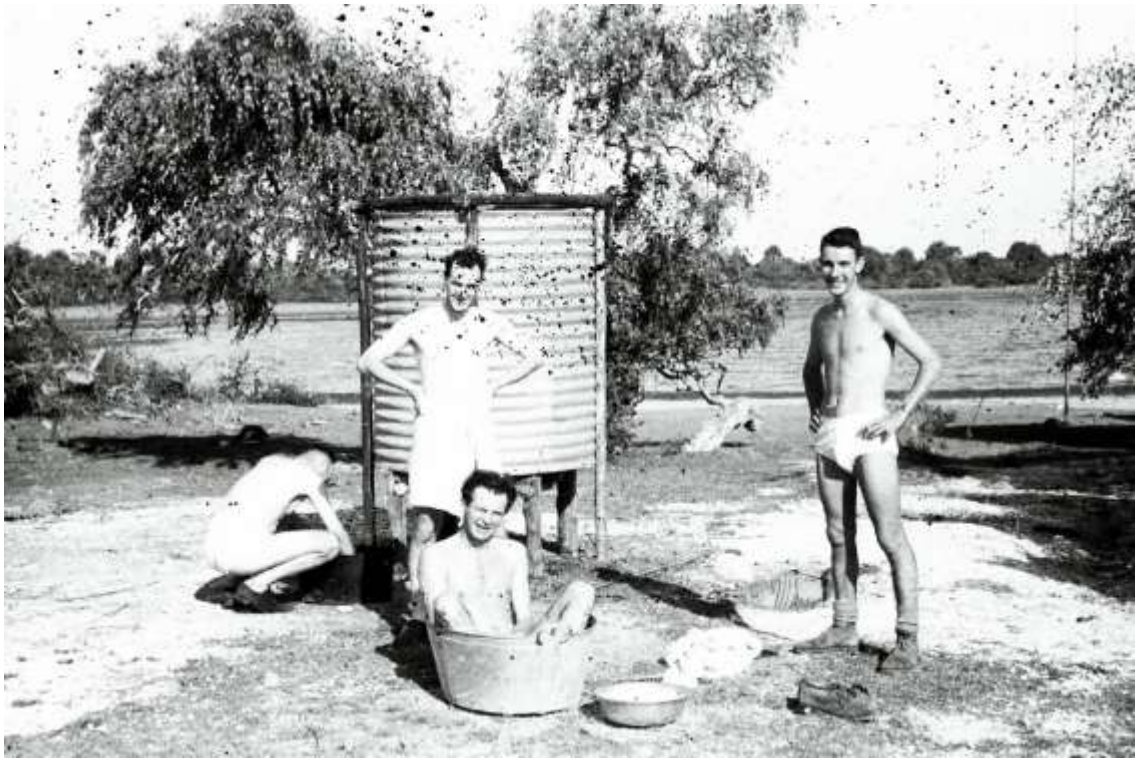
Occasionally, a Dakota would be hit by enemy fire and need to land before reaching its home base. At Ramu, near Cox's Bazaar, we had two parallel strips cut out of rice fields. We were based on one strip and the Dakotas sometimes used the other one in an emergency or for a quick re-load and turn-round. We became so used to escorting Dakotas back to our base and then approaching to land together, we towards the left-hand strip while they headed for their strip a short distance to our right, that, after a long day, it was easy to forget that not all the Dakota pilots were old hands.

We had one or two very near misses when new Dakota pilots tried to land on the wrong strip either on top of or just below a Hurricane. It happened to me once; a Dakota which had been heading for the correct strip, changed its mind at the last moment but fortunately changed his mind very rapidly back again when my wheels were just about to bounce off his cockpit roof.

On another occasion, I was leading a section of four Hurricanes escorting a single Dakota back from a long trip into Burma. The Dakota was going to land at the airstrip adjoining ours, so we pulled into tight formation just to put on a show over our airfield. One Hurricanes pulled in tight to the Dakota's wingtips, the third one went into the 'box' that is tight under the Dakota's tail while the fourth Hurricane stayed top cover, just in case. We had been escorting this Dakota for about two hours, sometimes above him and sometimes in close support, so he must have known there were four of us. Or, perhaps he couldn't count up to four because, as we flew over the airstrip, he suddenly thought he was flying a fighter plane because he pulled the Dakota up into a steep climbing turn and peeled off. The two of us on his wing tips had no bother, we could stay with him. But when the stick of an aircraft is pulled back, it isn't the nose that goes up, it is the tail that goes down first. Poor Pinky who was sitting tight under the tail suddenly saw the tailwheel a few inches above his cockpit and coming down rapidly. He needed to take some very rapid action to get out of the way and managed to save his skin by using a combination of a dive and a sideslip.

There was a scheme about this time for pilots to liaise with the ground forces at the front line and learn about their problems and the best way the air force could assist. On one of these trips, two of our pilots 'found' some of the brilliantly coloured fabric the parachutes were made of and they acquired sufficient of the scarlet material to have pyjamas made by the local village tailor. The finished garments were displayed, and we all admired them and suggested that the local girls would be suitably impressed. That night, the proud owners wore their pyjamas.

Nights on the India/Burma front are usually hot and sticky but at that time of the year, especially so. When our two glamour boys awoke hot and sweaty from their night's sleep, they discovered that the dye from the material had transferred to their skin and they were both a brilliant scarlet from neck to ankle, it took weeks to get their skin back to normal which was quite surprising considering the ease with which the colour had left the parachutes.



Facilities at Chittagong

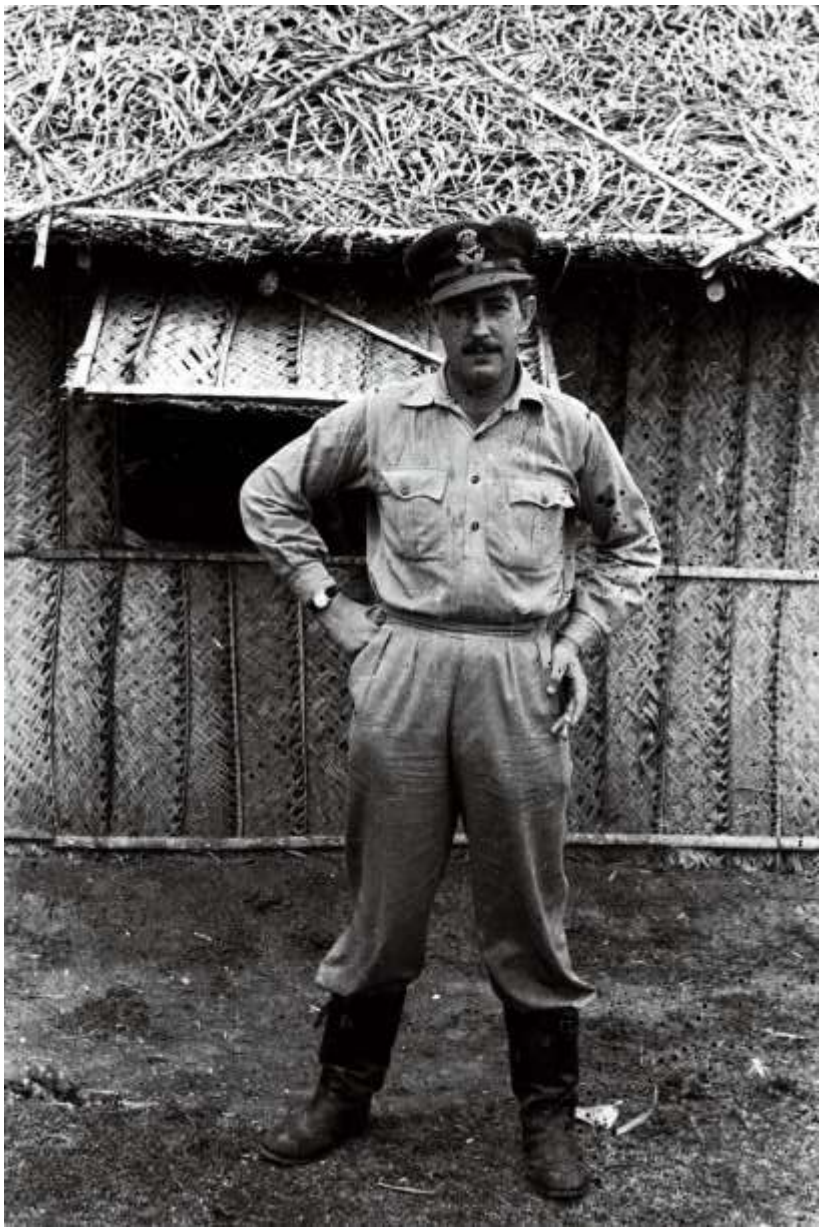
January 1944 was another busy month. On the 9th, the squadron was sent to raid the airstrips on Akyab, usually an occasion for a hot reception. I was hit in the oil tank; I could see the dark stain spreading back over the wing and the oil pressure was dropping rapidly. When the pressure had been almost nil for several minutes, I crossed into what could roughly be described as 'our territory' and force-landed at 'George', the first emergency landing strip I came to and hitched a lift home in a communications Anson leaving my Hurricane to be retrieved after repair.

Pilots Silk Scarf

Pilots in all theatres carried a silk scarf; on each side there was a detailed map of the areas they were flying over which would help them aim for home in the event of baling out over enemy territory. This image shows the area round one of his bases, Cox's Bazaar and the map on the reverse is just visible.

On the 11th, Scottie, the Canadian who had regurgitated the bean on the 'Athene' was leading a section escorting a V.I.P. to a forward airfield. The section patrolled overhead until the V.I.P.'s aircraft took off again and while they were waiting Scottie's No.2. carried out some practice attacks on him, using a camera gun when he thought he had a good shot. Unfortunately, the main gun button and the camera button were close together on the grip of the control column.

As they were on operations, the gun button was switched on and, Scottie's no.2. pressed it by mistake. Scottie's aircraft was smashed by a combination of machine gun and cannon shells and he went straight down. It was a terrible accident, and it was obvious that the pilot responsible could not stay in the squadron. He was posted away almost immediately returning only for a brief 'Court of Enquiry' at a confidential venue some-time later. Scottie was a very good friend of mine; he always did more than his share of flying and never dodged a sticky job.



Scottie, Chittagong, very early 1944

Aircraft Accident / Loss Entry

Date: 11 Jan 44 **Aircraft**: Hurricane IIC LB719 **Unit** 258 Sqdn **Airfield /Crash Location** Chittagong, India	
Details	Shot down in error by guns fired Hurri in practice attack Chota Maunghnama. 4 ac were to escort a VIP to RAmu. Fg offr T E B O Connor pressed firing button in error and shot scott down. Aircraft N
Source	ORB
Aircrew details	Fg Offr Nelson McGregor Scott*(J1622)
Date: 11 Jan 44 **Aircraft**: Hurricane IIc LB719 **Unit** 258 Sqdn **Airfield /Crash Location** , Burma	
Details	
Source	Henk Welting's Database
Aircrew details	Fg Offr Nelson Mcgregor SCOTT +(J/16222)

Recorded in CWGC

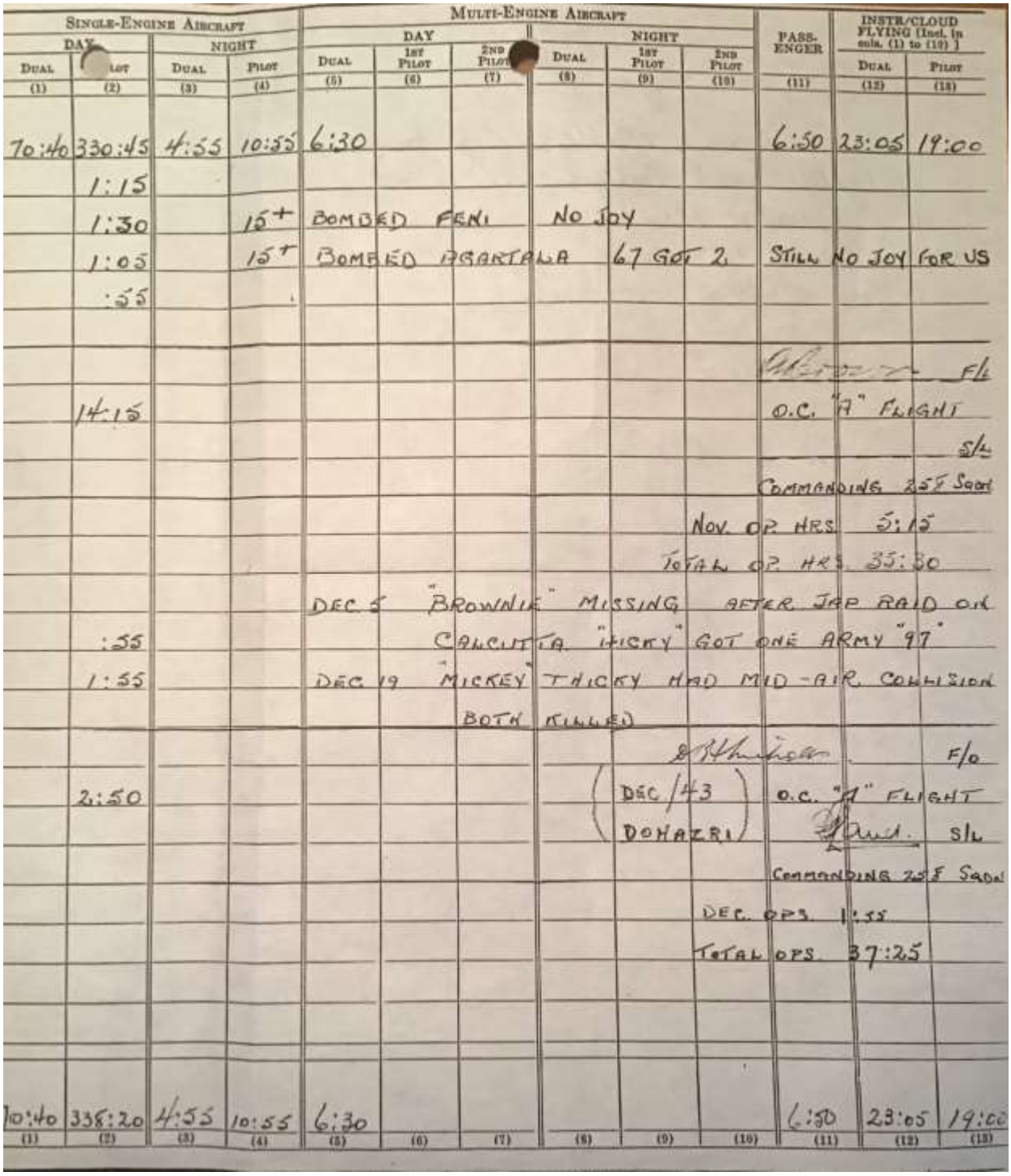
Rank	Name, Number, Trade & Details	Date	Unit	Country	Cemetery/Memorial & Loc Ref
Flying Officer	Nelson Mcgregor SCOTT (J/16222) Hurricane II LB719 TBD	1944-01-11	258 Sqdn AIR27	Singapore	Singapore Memorial

Scottie, accident investigation.

Within a few days of this accident, we lost two more pilots in another. Mickie Nash (who had shrapnel in his throat escaping from Palembang airport) and Ginger Hickes (who had escorted Brown down to sea level after the oxygen failure debacle) collided and both were killed.

(*This last incident was actually Dec 19th1943)*

'Ginger' Hickes



SINGLE-ENGINE AIRCRAFT				MULTI-ENGINE AIRCRAFT						PASS-ENGER	INSTR/CLOUD FLYING (Incl. in cols. (1) to (10))	
DAY		NIGHT		DAY			NIGHT					
DUAL (1)	PILOT (2)	DUAL (3)	PILOT (4)	DUAL (5)	1ST PILOT (6)	2ND PILOT (7)	DUAL (8)	1ST PILOT (9)	2ND PILOT (10)	(11)	DUAL (12)	PILOT (13)
70:40	330:45	4:55	10:55	6:30						6:50	23:05	19:00
	1:15											
	1:30		15+	BOMBED FENI			NO JOY					
	1:05		15+	BOMBED BARTALA				67 GOT 2		STILL NO JOY FOR US		
	:55											
												F/L
	14:15									O.C. "A" FLIGHT		
												S/L
										COMMANDING 25 & SQDN		
									NOV. OP. HRS. 5:15			
									TOTAL OP. HRS. 35:30			
				DEC 5 "BROWNIE" MISSING AFTER JAP RAID ON								
	:55			CALCUTTA "HICKY" GOT ONE ARMY "97"								
	1:55			DEC 19 "MICKEY" "HICKY" HAD MID-AIR COLLISION								
						BOTH KILLED						
												F/O
	2:50							(DEC 43 DOHAZRI)		O.C. "A" FLIGHT		S/L
										COMMANDING 25 & SQDN		
									DEC. OPS. 1:55			
									TOTAL OPS. 37:25			
70:40	338:20	4:55	10:55	6:30						6:50	23:05	19:00
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)

Extract from Dusty Miller's log book

This extract covers both Artie Brown's crash and the two pilot collision – note that as section leader, Brown had signed the log book the day previously. According to Doug, Hickes and Nash had escorted a DC3 parachute drop when they engaged in a mock dog fight with tragic consequences. *(* end of chapter)*

A new C.O. was posted to us in February 1944. He was Neil Cameron, a grand fellow, who had started the war as a Sergeant Pilot and who stayed in the R.A.F. finally becoming Chief of Air Staff and then Chief of Defence Staff. He wasn't given very long to settle down; within a few days of his arrival, he led the squadron on a raid to Akyab and his aircraft was hit by A-A also, I believe, in the oil tank. Like me, he managed to get his machine to a forward airstrip and scrape a landing out of his last bit of engine power.

Just before Cameron joined the squadron, I was promoted to Flight Commander of' B' Flight so I had a lot of contact with him.

The squadron was then based at what was an ideal airstrip - right on the coast south of Cox's Bazaar towards the Mayu Peninsular.

Looking sultry at Ramu airfield

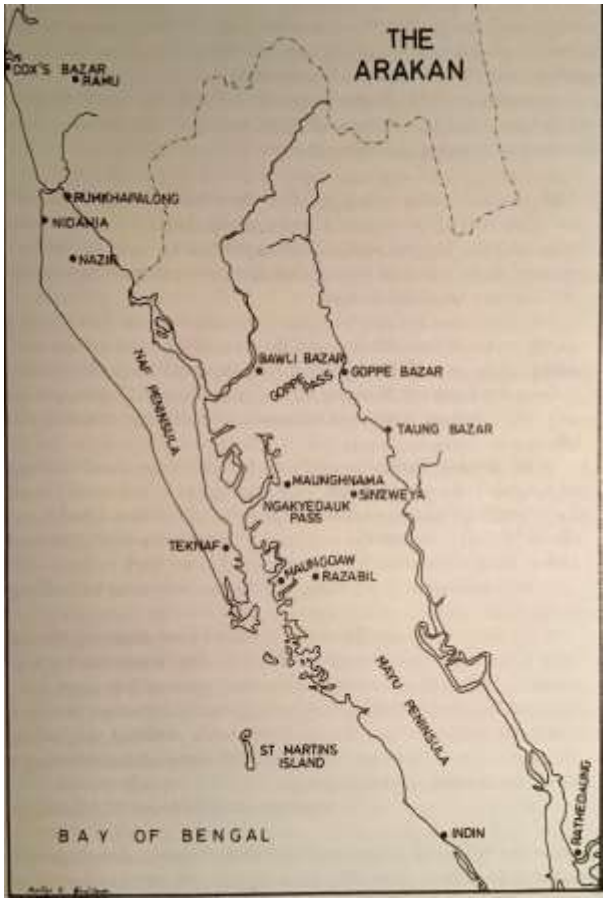
palm roofed and split bamboo floored huts just a little further inland.

There was another similar airstrip nearby; the code-name for ours was Hove and our neighbour was Brighton.

If it hadn't been for the interruptions of flying, it would have been an ideal site for a holiday; miles away from any town and with palm trees

So close to the blue and the glorious beach that we actually operated from the hard sand when the tide was out.

The water was so clear that, on a calm day, we had to be careful to remember the tide times if we could see no sign of breakers. From the beach there were strips of palm-woven matting along which the Hurricanes were taxied and dragged into the shelter of the palm trees and our quarters were



The Arakan Map

and with a turquoise and emerald sea which sent foaming breakers on to the coral beach.

We did as much swimming as we could, but it wasn't long before we discovered the hard way that it was necessary to wear sports shoes to protect our feet from coral cuts which soon went septic and from small sting rays, which lay covered in sand in shallow water and, if trodden upon, used their barbed tails to inflict a nasty sting.

It was while we were at Hove that I had to lead the squadron on a close support attack to assist an African regiment in trouble. The Japanese had a field gun position which was pinning the Africans down, and they had set up defensive positions in a long narrow village which ran along the side of a small river.

Strafing Japanese positions at Singohbyin

I flew round the Japanese positions and then led the squadron in to the attack in line astern with a section staying above as top cover. I dived on the gun position and fired cannon and then went along the whole length of the village firing at the buildings. I pulled up and turned to watch the rest of the squadron do the same and then went in again for another run. After two long runs we could see dozens of Japanese running away across the rice paddy fields to other cover, but we could do much about it as few of us had any ammunition left.

However, we left the scene in very loose formation but, just before reaching base, tightened up into really tight line astern fours and then, over our airfield did an 'emergency break left!' a method of getting a squadron round quickly to meet an enemy attack. The idea was that if the squadron was 'jumped' by enemy fighters, the section nearest the enemy would fly straight on while the other two sections in turn pulled over to face the attacking force, thus presenting a head-on and firing opposition for the time necessary for the final section to make its turn and protect itself. This was a manoeuvre which had to be practised frequently as it was no time for a pilot to forget which was left or right and whether to go over or under the section on his left. It was a tight and rapid decision: a sleepy pilot could cause havoc.

On this occasion I cheated a little by giving the squadron a little warning of what I was going to do. When directly over the airfield I called over the R.T. 'Break, Break, Left!', pulled up and turned left over the top of inside section. The outside section followed me, and quickly after them came the inner section so that, having no enemy to face, we went round in a complete defensive circle and from that into a line astern landing on the narrow strip of beach.

It must have looked very pretty and effective from the ground because it seemed to have some effect became clear a few months later. I walked from my aircraft to the dispersal hut where the C.O. and the I.O. were studying a long signal form. Apparently, our raid had been highly successful and the signal from the Army expressed great satisfaction at the way, the guns had been silenced and the enemy troops forced out of their positions.

Intelligence briefing by Doug

There doesn't appear to be a great deal of security in place here and it could not have been an easy task getting the maps up for display.

It wasn't very long before we had to leave our beloved Hove and move back to Comilla, the all-weather airfield. We were kept very busy on operations and, on the 13th I took the flight on a raid to the Baguna area. On the way back at five or six thousand feet, I happened to be looking ahead and saw a dot approaching which rapidly grew bigger until it smashed into my windscreen.

From the feathers and blood all over the place, it had obviously been a large bird, probably a vulture soaring away looking for prey. He should have been looking where he was going. The impact made the whole plane shudder, the armour-plated glass of the windscreen prevented the bird coming through, but the force of the blow, was too much for the frame to stand and the whole thing bent back until it was touching my head.

My hood was knocked out of its runners on one side and if I hadn't grabbed it, would have lifted up vertically and blown off taking part of the tail with it as it went. There were smears of blood and slime all over the windscreen, so I couldn't see ahead, the top of the windscreen was touching my head, and I had to fly the plane back holding the hood on with one hand. And that is how I had to land; as the controls for the wheels and flaps are on a different side of the cockpit from the throttle and the trim, it meant that my solitary flying hand was extremely busy. Probably, if I had let go of the hood, it would have blown clear with no harm done. Yet again, it may have hit the tail fin. When I landed, the ground crew had to help me to get out after I had unbuckled my parachute. With a parachute on (had the hood hit the tail) I would have been stuck.

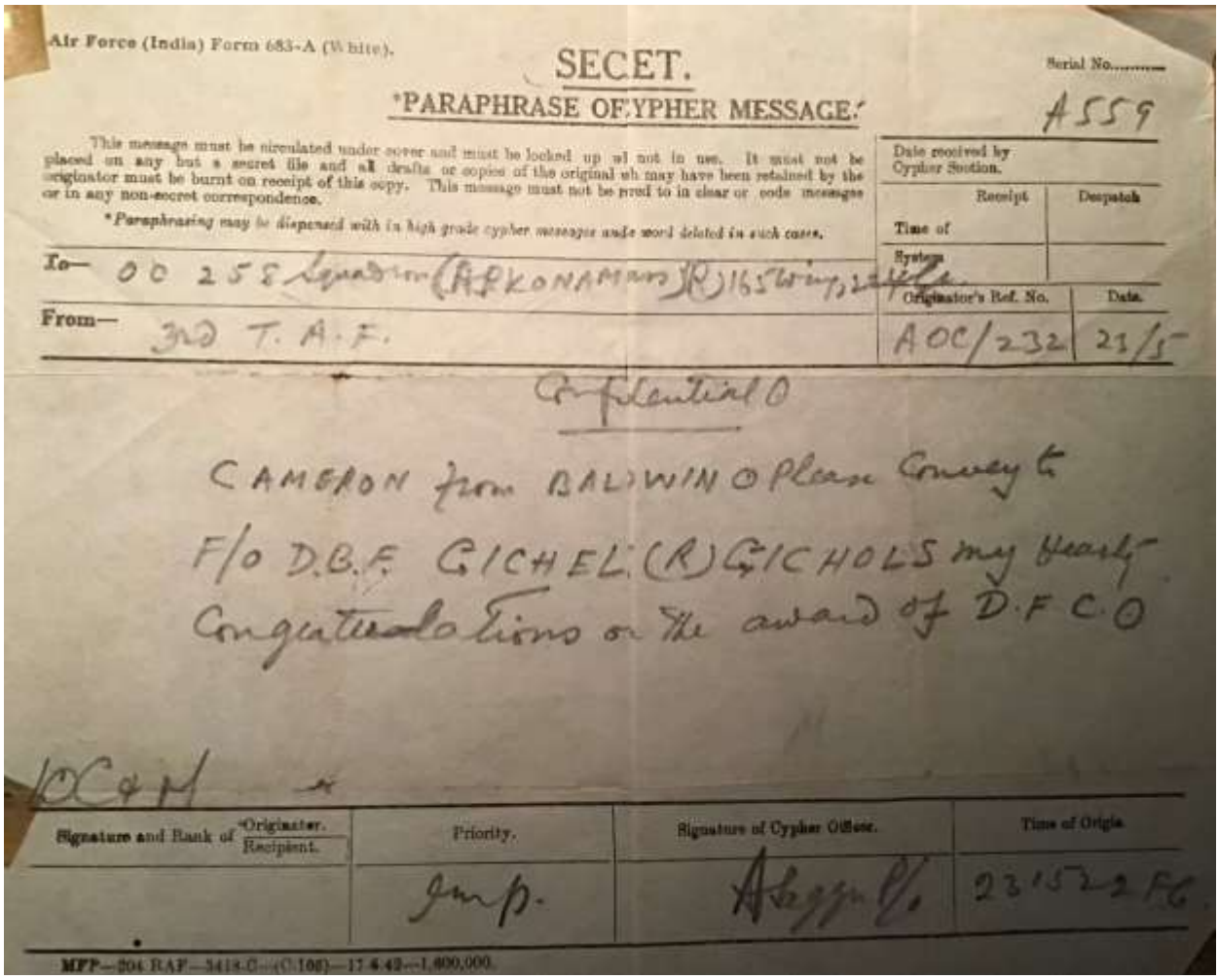
The Gremlin, Ramu, May '44

That happened in my beloved Hurricane LD 305 X, the one with the sweet running engine and smooth controls. It was repaired and stayed with me for a while but eventually had to go away for major repairs. I got it back in a few weeks though.

In 1943 Roald Dahl (himself a Hurricane pilot) wrote his first book in which 'Gremlins' sabotaged RAF aircraft in revenge for the destruction of their forest where an aircraft factory had been built. Eventually, the Gremlins are persuaded to fight a common enemy, Hitler and the Nazis. Flight. Lt Newell had this Gremlin painted on his aircraft and when he was posted elsewhere it appears that Doug acquired his plane.

We still had a few scrambles but now that there were more Spitfire squadrons in the area, we were used more and more for ground attack roles and escort duties for Vengeance dive-bombers and Dakota supply-dropping trips.

On May 20th 1944, the squadron was sent on rest to Arkonam, an aerodrome near Madras. When we arrived, waiting among the signals for the C.O. was one notifying the award of my D.F.C.



Air Force (India) Form 683-A (White).

SECET.

Serial No. A559

PARAPHRASE OF CYPHER MESSAGE.

This message must be circulated under cover and must be locked up when not in use. It must not be placed on any but a secret file and all drafts or copies of the original which may have been retained by the originator must be burnt on receipt of this copy. This message must not be used in clear or code messages or in any non-secret correspondence.

*Paraphrasing may be dispensed with in high grade cypher messages under words deleted in such cases.

Date received by Cypher Section.

Receipt | Despatch

Time of System

To— OC 258 Squadron (RAF KONAMARA) (R) 165 Wing, 224 Group

From— 3RD T.A.F.

Originator's Ref. No. AOC/232 | Date 21/5

Confidential

CAMERON from BALDWIN Please Convey to F/O D.B.F. GICHEL (R) GICHOLS my Hearty Congratulations on the award of D.F.C.

OC 4 M

Signature and Rank of Originator. / Recipient.	Priority.	Signature of Cypher Officer.	Time of Origin.
	Imp.		23/5/44

MFP—304 RAF—5418.C—(C.168)—17.4.42—1,000,000.

DFC Notification

"For the last 14 months he has been operating in the Arakan and has carried out many escort and strafing sorties against the Japanese. Flying Officer Nicholls has displayed great enthusiasm and determination at all times to engage the enemy."

The Connemara was one of the few places in India that was air-conditioned and was a little bit of Heaven. It was a clean and modern hotel with pleasant rooms, good service and food and views over the Indian Ocean.

The airfield, at which we were based, was about 40 miles inland from Madras and there was nothing very much in the area except temple area of Madura. Whenever possible we arranged for groups of squadron personnel, in turn, to have a few days break in Madras. We had been

allocated a large American made brake and it spent much of its time travelling to and from Madras on the semi-tarmac or dirt roads.

The semi-tarmac roads were two narrow strips of tarmac little more than wheel width and about as far apart as the average vehicle. This meant of course that some vehicles did not fit the pattern and spent the journey one side on potholed tarmac and the other on rutted mud.

I don't know what the speed record was for this type of road, but I'm sure that it was broken regularly by the squadron passion wagon.

The Passion Wagon

It had a powerful horn which had to be used frequently in the rural areas to warn a lethargic population of approaching death. Sometimes the high-speed run would be delayed by an ox cart trundling along, blocking the road and with the driver fast asleep on his cart. It was not unknown for the passion wagon to creep up quietly behind such carts, use the head ropes of the oxen to clear the way and then turn the cart and set it off in the opposite direction without waking the driver.

St. Thomas' Mount was the airfield at Madras, but it was used by civil aircraft and our use of it was restricted to duty trips only. There were requests from sea rescue organisations for help in searches, and affiliation trips with Beaufighters which were not very exciting in themselves, but they did give us an excuse to land at St. Thomas' Mount and have a few hours in Madras.

Around the airport perimeter there were A-A gun emplacements and there was a request for aircraft to perform mock attacks on them to give the inexperienced gunners more useful practice than the passing civil aircraft could give.

258 Squadron airborne - with Gremlin

We were particularly asked for high speed, low level attacks and it was arranged that other airfield traffic would cease for an hour. Windy Mears and I, the two Flight Commanders, took on the job and, after looking around to locate all the gun points, gave the place a really good going over, so much so that there were complaints afterwards that we had terrified some of the gunners and horrified the authorities.

On future occasions, we were used to give the gunners some gentle practice, but never in the form of low-level attacks. Never-the-less, we managed to get a few hours in Madras out of the exercise. Windy and I split up in Madras and when we met up again at the airfield to fly back, Windy had had a few more than I had.

We started our aircraft, got permission by radio to take off and I headed for the down-wind end of the runway and was given all-clear to take off. I thought Windy had been delayed by starting trouble because I couldn't see him behind me, but half-way down the runway, at about fifty feet I met him coming the other way.

'Windy' Mears

What Control thought of this we never found out, perhaps they didn't even notice or maybe they were so glad to get rid of us, they didn't want to give us an excuse to come back.

(Doug told of an unusual - and in the event – a potentially disastrous incident which occurred on one of these trips. He and an unidentified friend (presumably Windy Mears) had flown to Madras to give practice for the local army AA gunners and, with some time on their hands, eventually got themselves to a local market. There, in a rather smokey atmosphere were totally tame parrots sitting in cages, they could be picked up and handled without complaint.

Possibly unwisely, Doug decided that a tame parrot would make an excellent pet and he bought one. Returning to base, he placed the parrot on his control column where it was perfectly happy – for a while. From there things did not go to plan and Doug wrote down the sequence of events which followed. Although I could remember the story, I had no transcript until starting on this project. He made this incident into a short story called 'A Bird of Hazy Recollection' which I believe was broadcast on Radio 4, and a transcript is attached in The Epilogue for anyone to read.

I asked him how accurate it was and although names have changed to protect the guilty and the end is different, he said that it was at least 95% accurate. It would have been a remarkable obituary to hear of a pilot surviving three years of attacks by German and Japanese fighters only to be finally dispatched by a parrot. Having said that, a vulture nearly completed the task.)

(* From Page 112)

(After this collision, the ground crew tried to locate and retrieve serviceable items from the wrecked aircraft. Doug went with the Engineering Officer, Tudor Jones to the site and persuaded him to let him have the control column from Micky Nash's plane which he kept for many years and the family still retains).

Doug with recovered control column from Micky Nash's Hurricane

'Mickey's Ship'

Chapter Seven - Home

Just before the squadron left Burma, a signal was received promoting me as squadron commander of 79 Squadron also based on the Arakan front and equipped with Hurricanes. I was, at this time considering staying on in the R.A.F after the war and I believed that I would have a better chance of doing so if I had some kind of staff experience. So, I requested that the posting be changed but before Neil Cameron agreed to support me, he asked me to go with him to visit 79 Squadron for one of their parties.

When we landed at Dohazari, the senior Flight Commander said they were waiting for their new C.O. and I asked who it was. The reply was "Sqdn. Leader Nicholls." As I had in no way changed my mind, I hinted that the posting had still to be confirmed. We had a good party in spite of or perhaps because of that, and Cameron and I returned to 258 Squadron base the following day.

It was at Arkonam, near Madras, that the sequel to that visit occurred. A signal arrived requiring my presence for interview in Delhi. So, by various means and ways I travelled to Command H.Q. in Delhi to seek out the officer who was going to interview me for a job I knew not what. I eventually found the officer, a Wing Commander, in the courtyard of H.Q. with his head underneath the bonnet of a sports car. He gave me one brief glance and handshake, put his head back under the bonnet and the rest of the interview consisted of a muffled question and answer session.

At the end of this brief procedure, I was told I had got the job, I shook an oily hand.

Apparently, I was to become temporary C.O. of the aircrew section of the Reception Centre at Bombay. There had been some trouble about the delay in postings, and it was considered that someone with recent operational experience might be able to calm the troubled waters. That was my job for six months. It was not one I enjoyed but it was good experience, and it did give me the chance to live in the fleshpots of a city for a change.

The transit camp was situated on the outskirts of Bombay, an ideal site for a short period but some of the aircrew had been stuck in that transit camp for months and they were fed up particularly as, until I arrived, they had been regarded as just another group in transit and expected to fill their days with P.T. and square-bashing.

First thing I had to do was to call the mutinous lot together and explain that they would not be kept in transit a minute longer than necessary and promised to look into the square-bashing and P.T. complaints. I managed to get a Physical Training Officer ('Muscles') especially for our aircrew section and, with his full support, cancelled compulsory P.T. on condition that the sports facilities were used fully. The aircrew had to be seen doing some square-bashing or the other airmen in transit would have been resentful, but it was kept to a minimum and used chiefly on those 'flights' using the sports facilities least and sporting the most prominent beer bellies.

We tried to keep them up-to-date with events on the Burma and home fronts and gave them lectures on service conditions in the various parts of S.E.A.C. and, from 'Muscles', hints on self-defence, survival and escape.

Every month we had to make out a Top-Secret return of aircrew on the camp in the form of a Fruit Return, a complicated and ridiculous procedure which wasted time on what could have been a simple procedure. Each type of aircrew was given then name of a fruit; for instance, a navigator was a cherry. In theory all we had to do was to put in the cherry square the number of navigators in the camp. But, some navigators were also air gunners and they were allocated a different fruit. Some navigators were also trained in bomb aiming and they had a different fruit, and some were also flight engineers and some radio operators. We had some who were more engineers than navigators: all the gunner /bomb-aimers, the navigators/radio operators and the radio operators/navigators all had to be allocated to different fruits. Then we had to consider which kind of aircraft they were familiar with and adjust their fruity category accordingly. We soon ran out of fruit and patience and tried, whenever we could, to get rid of the aircrew who had been with us longest.

A few months before Christmas 1944 we had a pleasant return to make. It was from the NAAFI asking for the number of aircrew we had in our section as there was to be an extra allocation of beer for Xmas. That was the quickest return we ever sent and turned out to be a glorious Xmas present because we had an unprecedented rush on posting demands just before Xmas and coupled with great efforts on our part, we managed to reduce our section of the transit camp to about thirty men over the Festive Season. The promised beer allocation was very generous because we received three bottles of McEwan's beer for each man based on the large number on our original return. What a glorious holiday.

It was during my stay in Bombay that I came into contact with Glen again. We had been writing to each other occasionally for some months but the only address we were allowed to give to each other was xxx squadron, South East Asia Command. I went into the Bombay Postal Section and got hold of the TOP SECRET Unit Location file and found that Glen was based at an airfield about 10 miles from Bombay and flying Liberators. So, we very quickly arranged a meeting in Bombay, painted the town red and then finished up at my flat on Marina Drive, Bombay seafront just for one for the road at about midnight.

The problem of getting Glen back to his unit then entered the conversation - all public transport had ceased hours ago. If Glen had not returned to camp by dawn he would have been in the mire, so we went down to the seafront, hailed what must have been the last horse-drawn ghari still operating at that time of night, paid the driver a generous sum over the odds and, with Glen horizontal on the back seat, waved the ghari on its way.

I didn't see him again until after the war, but he was able to tell me that he had managed to get back all right so that I needn't have worried. Didn't know I had - not for that long anyhow.

Reunited with Glen 'George' Whincop

On 30th Nov, I managed to get to Group H.Q. at the Poona the famous home of pukka sahibs, chota pegs and polo and flew back to Santa Cruz, an airport near Bombay. Here I met, quite by accident, an ex-258 Squadron Engineer Officer who was in charge of the unit assembling Spitfires when they arrived by sea. He said that there was a terrible shortage of pilots with Spitfire experience for air test flights. "Any time," he said, "that you'd like a trip in a Spitfire just come over. You'd be doing us a favour."

I did manage to get over once or twice and flew Spitfire Mk VIII's but transport to and from Santa Cruz was difficult and I had very little time to spare from my own job. However, the few trips I did have were enough to compare the engine power of the new Spitfires with the old and certainly with the Hurricanes still battling away in Burma.

What I didn't know then was that the replacement of most Hurricanes by the American Thunderbolts was about to start. There was no doubt that I could have had a permanent job testing Spitfires which would have been fine for a time.

My stint at the Transit Camp was nearly over and I was relieved when I was posted as Squadron Leader, Tactics. to 224 Group, based at Cox's Bazaar on the Arakan front. The first job was to make myself known around the various sections of the H.Q. and then to get around the squadrons in the group. My first job every morning was to go to the Intelligence Section and collect all the operational reports of the previous 24 hours, weed out the trivia and discover on a map where all the places mentioned were not an easy job when you are looking for little Burmese villages and creeks with, as the song puts it 'strange sounding places with strange sounding names'. When I had made a few notes, I had to attend the morning 'briefing' and make my contribution by standing before 'The Abandoned Earl' (Air Commodore Paddy Bandon, the Earl of Bandon) and sundry red, blue and gold banded representatives of the three services and explain on a large map what the Group Squadrons had been up to the day before.

Whenever possible, I tried to visit squadrons in the group and find out what was going on. Many of the Hurricanes had been fitted with bomb racks and it was interesting to discuss the ways in which different types of bomb could be used to confuse the enemy. For example, if bombs with varied delays were dropped with instant bombs, the enemy was left in some doubt as to whether all the bombs had exploded. This was useful if a supply road had been attacked at the point where it entered a cutting - the Maungdaw-Buthidaung road was a regular customer - because the convoy would have to be delayed or detoured just in case. Although intelligence reports were submitted immediately after a sortie of any kind, it was not unusual for most useful snippets of information that had not been recorded in the report to come out of a conversation.

To reach these squadrons, we had to take pot-luck at the Communications Flight, and take whatever aircraft could be spared. There were L5's an American-made high-wing monoplane rather like an Auster, which was normally used for Army Co-operation for gun spotting and even, with stretchers fixed on each side, to evacuate wounded from the front line.

L5 (Unfortunately in USAF colours

It was a light. nippy little aircraft, needing only a short strip for landing and take-off, so that when an Army unit was surrounded, they need only clear a short area for the L5's to lift their casualties. With its large flaps extended at low speed, the L5 could be made to sink like a lift and with the flaps partially extended it would lift off in about a hundred yards. During January 1945, I flew one of the group's L5's visiting some of our squadrons and also dropping in at tiny forward strips for liaison with various Army units.

For security reasons, the strips were not easy to find and, as the troops were probably operating a mile or so away, there was no form of welcoming party when you got there. In a battle area with a very fluid front line, each side operating in small mobile groups trying to surround the other it was never possible to draw a mental line on the map and say, 'This is the front line and any airstrip on our side of it is friendly.'

It was a nail-biting to procedure to fly at low level round the strip looking for any signs of friend or foe. As many strips were sliced out of jungle, anything could be lying in wait around them and invisible from the air. Sometimes it was necessary to land on the strip, and wait, with the engine running ready for instant take-off until a recognisably friendly figure appeared. Sometimes the friendly figure would arrive waving his arms wildly in the 'Get the Hell Out of It' signal. Perhaps also, he would arrive too late to warn us about the mortar shells which had just landed on the strip.

After the great battles of Kohima and the Imphal Valley, the tide turned for the ground forces and the Army pushed forward down the Chindwin River to the Irrawaddy and along the coastal strip beyond Akyab and Ramree Island. It was a strange feeling to fly in a little unarmed L5 to visit Akyab shortly after its capture. After so many hot receptions from Akyab in the past, there was a great feeling of vulnerability as I circled the airfield, expecting the usual fireworks to open up at any moment. Another aircraft which could be 'borrowed' from Communications Flight was the Beechcraft an American, twin-engined aircraft rather similar to the Hudson which was used chiefly by Coastal Command except that this was far more comfortable.

As the Army advanced along the coast and down the Irrawaddy towards Prome and Rangoon and the Air Force moved further and further forward, I found the territory I had to cover was expanding all the time. In addition, I was given the job of liaising between the units on the Coastal stretch and those in central Burma along the Chindwin and Irrawaddy Rivers. This meant flying between 224 Group base at Cox's Bazaar and General Slim's H.Q. at Monywa on the Chindwin near Mandalay.

The country between these two areas was most uninviting, a series of steep mountain ridges running roughly north to south and covered in thick tropical jungle with hardly a village or settlement of any kind to be seen. The only aircraft that could be spared for me to do this job was a Harvard trainer - no radio, no armament or armour plating - and with a radial engine which made it look remarkably like a Japanese aircraft in an area where the Japanese were still likely to have the occasional aircraft operating.

Harvard Trainer

Any radial engined aircraft would be the object of great suspicion and an impulsive pilot might shoot first and think after.

I was' investigated' once or twice on these journeys by Spitfires and Hurricanes, but by frantic wing-waggling, I was able to persuade them to clear off.

The prospects of making a successful forced landing in the jungle were nil and the likelihood that a successful parachute jump would be followed by a rescue were very small indeed.

Crossing just one of the high forested ridges would exhaust the escaper, following a valley stream to the north would lead to higher and higher ground and a southerly direction meant enemy territory. However, it didn't happen, and I was strangely confident in the Harvard radial engine. It was air-cooled and there was no glycol to start leaking (I have had a glycol leak in that kind of territory but fortunately the engine stayed cool enough for me to stagger back to an airfield).

Journeys over unfriendly territory such as mountains, jungle, and sea and on pitch-dark nights make one very conscious of engine sounds and the slightest flicker of an instrument needle.

Doug, friends and Harvard

We had, too, a Fairchild Argus, (the kind of thing the bush pilots of Canada and U.S.A. used) a great lumbering high-wing, fixed undercarriage monoplane with a massive radial engine and cowl blocking the pilot's view. It was a tough, heavy machine designed for hard usage. I had to make several trips in an Argus during June 1945, and I shall always remember a trip across the mountain spine of southern India heading towards Madras.

To avoid a long detour, we had to climb higher and higher to clear the mountain ridges, and the old Argus was labouring to gain height. As we approached one knife-edge ridge, I eased the stick back to gain a few more feet in height. The nose went up, but our height didn't increase so I opened the throttle a little more and eased the stick back further. All that happened was that we travelled just a little faster but forward, not upward. Probably we were in a bit of a downdraught in the lee of the ridge, but the poor old Argus had given its all. With the throttle fully open and with the controls sloppy from lack of lift, we just managed to waffle, nose-up, over the top of the ridge barely clearing it with our undercarriage. After that, thank heavens, it was downhill all the way to Madras.

Flying Liaison Meeting

Someone decided that the Army was not going to slog its way through Burma all the way to Rangoon and beyond, so, in early 1945, 224 Group was withdrawn to Bangalore in southern India to prepare for a sea-borne attack on Rangoon. Some personnel travelled by air, some by road, rail and ferry and some by sea.

I was in the party which crossed from Akyab to Madras in a small steamer. Most of the passengers were members of an Indian regiment and they spent most of the journey being seasick. I was glad to get off that ship: the scuppers were running with vomited curry for days on end.

The planning of the invasion got underway and some great schemes were proposed but then the Japanese went and spoilt everything. What our intelligence people had been doing, I don't know but a reconnaissance plane had a good close look at Rangoon and, on the jail roof, saw in white the words "JAPS GONE" and “EXTRACT DIGIT”. Waving prisoners and civilians seemed to confirm the message and so, our planning had to cease with, for some, a great sense of disappointment.

Messages on Rangoon Jail Roof; Photo taken from RAF reconnaissance aircraft, May 1945

P.O.W's Rangoon Jail, May 1945. What might have been.

The air of hurry and bustle over, I managed to get a flight in a Spitfire VIII at Bangalore airport and, a few days later started to feel rotten. Eventually I reported sick, was told I had a temperature of 105 degrees and sent to hospital where, time after time, they tested, tested and re-tested finally coming to the conclusion that I was sick.

While I was in Bangalore Hospital, still undiagnosed and feeling little better, VE day was declared and, to entertain the patients, who would much rather have been left in peace and quiet, a native pipe-band marched up and down the ward for an hour, blowing full blast and setting everything, including teeth, rattling.

After a course of injections, I was told I was fit enough to go home and left for Bombay where I boarded S.S. Georgic for the journey home. The Georgic had, apparently, been bombed, burnt and grounded somewhere near the Suez Canal. We could see where the heat had buckled the ship's side and we were told that the keel was twisted. *(* end of chapter)* However, it got us home.

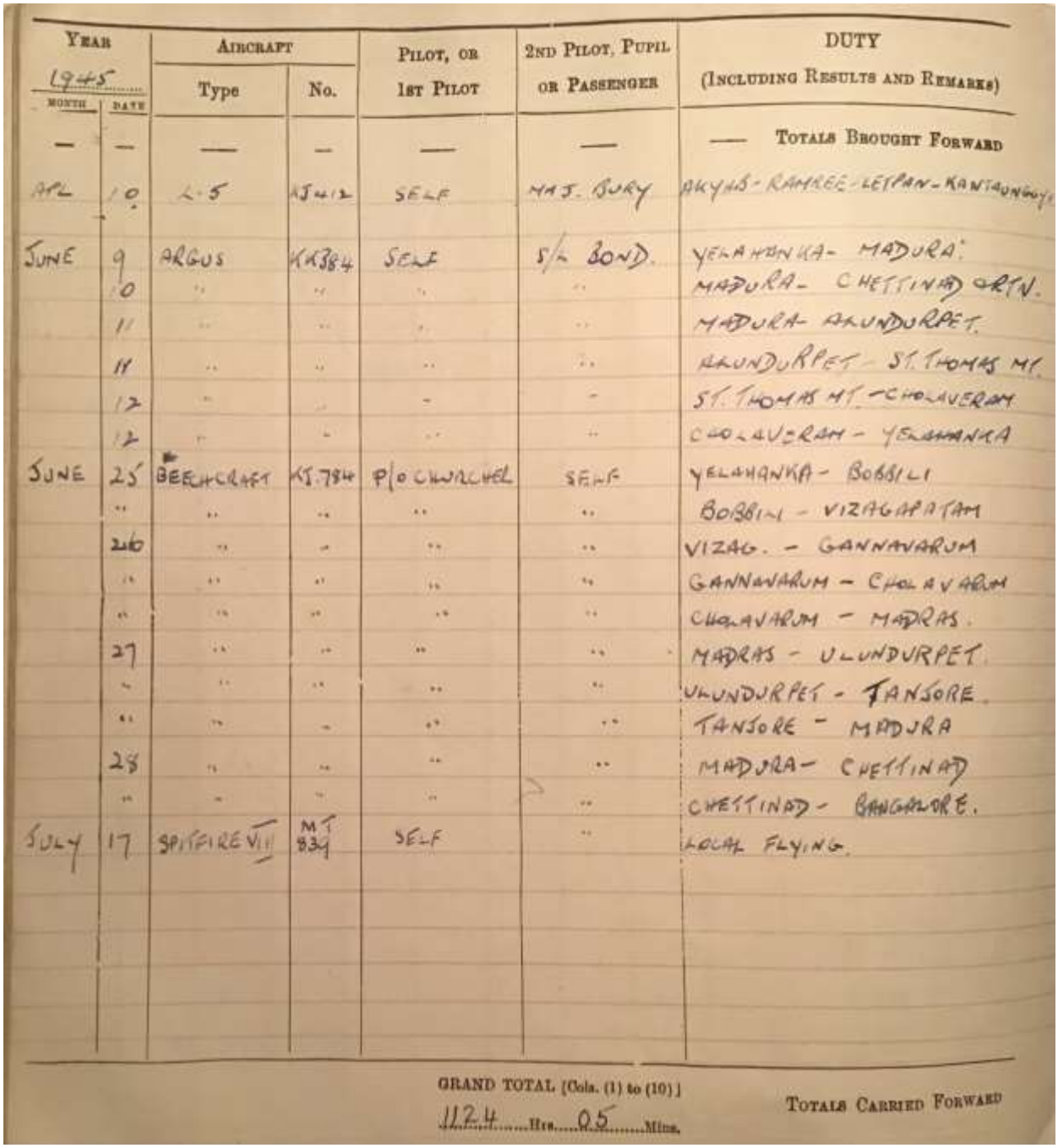
Just before I left Burma, I had been offered an 'Extended Service Commission', but, remembering my old boss Percy and hundreds of his colleagues who had, with little notice, had their commissions in the Indian Army terminated in 1926, I had decided to settle for a permanent commission or nothing, but, in the brief months of peace between VJ Day and demobilisation I could see that the 'If it moves salute it; if it doesn't, whitewash it' attitude was creeping back in and I decided to get out.

I have never regretted it. But, Neil Cameron, who started the war as a sergeant pilot like me, and ended it as a Squadron Leader, as I did, accepted an Extended Service Commission and eventually became Chief of Air Staff, then Chief of Defence Staff and finally Lord Cameron of Balhousie. Who knows?

(And there, Doug's story ends. Perhaps at this point it is worth reflecting back to November 1st 1941, when H.M.S. Athene set sail from Gourock with those 22 pilots from 258 Squadron on board. Of those, Doug was one of only seven pilots who survived the war. Five others were Prisoners of War, enduring life changing conditions for over three years, nine had been killed including close friends and one, the Rhodesian 'Ting' Macnamara, died of his wound after the war.

In his book 'Men Behind the Medals' P 91, Graham Pitchfork noted "Doug Nicholls had completed almost three continuous years on the squadron that had seen him flying convoy patrols off East Anglia, fighting desperate rear-guard operations in Sumatra and Java, flying fighter sorties over Ceylon and culminating in a long and intensive period of flying strafing and escort sorties over inhospitable Burmese jungles."

Looking at the last page in his log book, it is incredible to see that he had accumulated a total of 1124 flying hours where mechanical failure, navigation errors, flying accidents and tropical storms were as likely to be as fatal as the enemy - and that does not include hours recorded in his abandoned first log book. It's quite a story.)



Year 1945 Month	Date	Aircraft Type	Aircraft No.	Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	Duty (Including Results and Remarks)
—	—	—	—	—	—	— Totals Brought Forward
APL	10	L-5	AJ412	SELF	MAJ. BURY	AKYAB - RAMREE - LETPAN - KANTAUNGY
JUNE	9	ARGUS	KA384	SELF	S/L BOND.	YELAHANKA - MADURA.
	10	"	"	"	"	MADURA - CHETTINAD ORTN.
	11	"	"	"	"	MADURA - ULUNDURPET.
	11	"	"	"	"	ULUNDURPET - ST. THOMAS MT.
	12	"	"	"	"	ST. THOMAS MT. - CHOLAVERAM
	12	"	"	"	"	CHOLAVERAM - YELAHANKA
JUNE	25	BEECHCRAFT	KJ784	P/O CHURCHILL	SELF	YELAHANKA - BOBBILI
"	"	"	"	"	"	BOBBILI - VIZAGAPATAM
	26	"	"	"	"	VIZAG. - GANNAVARUM
	"	"	"	"	"	GANNAVARUM - CHOLAVARUM
	"	"	"	"	"	CHOLAVARUM - MADRAS.
	27	"	"	"	"	MADRAS - ULUNDURPET.
	"	"	"	"	"	ULUNDURPET - TANJORE.
	"	"	"	"	"	TANJORE - MADURA
	28	"	"	"	"	MADURA - CHETTINAD
	"	"	"	"	"	CHETTINAD - BANGALORE.
JULY	17	SPITFIRE VII	MT 834	SELF	"	LOCAL FLYING.

GRAND TOTAL [Cols. (1) to (10)] 1124 Hrs. 05 Mins. — Totals Carried Forward

Last page of log book

(From Page 129) *Although, this sounds unbelievable it is totally accurate "The Georgic was the last White Star liner ever built and was launched in 1931 and joined the Britannic on the London – New York route. She was used as a troopship but was bombed near Port Tewfik by the Luftwaffe in July 1941. The badly damaged ship, beached and burnt out was salvaged later in the year, returned to her builders Harland and Wolff and converted to a full-time troop ship. The repaired ship emerged with a new reduced and sported an altered external appearance; one funnel and one mast replaced her once finely balance duo."(taken from Chris' Cunard Page.)*

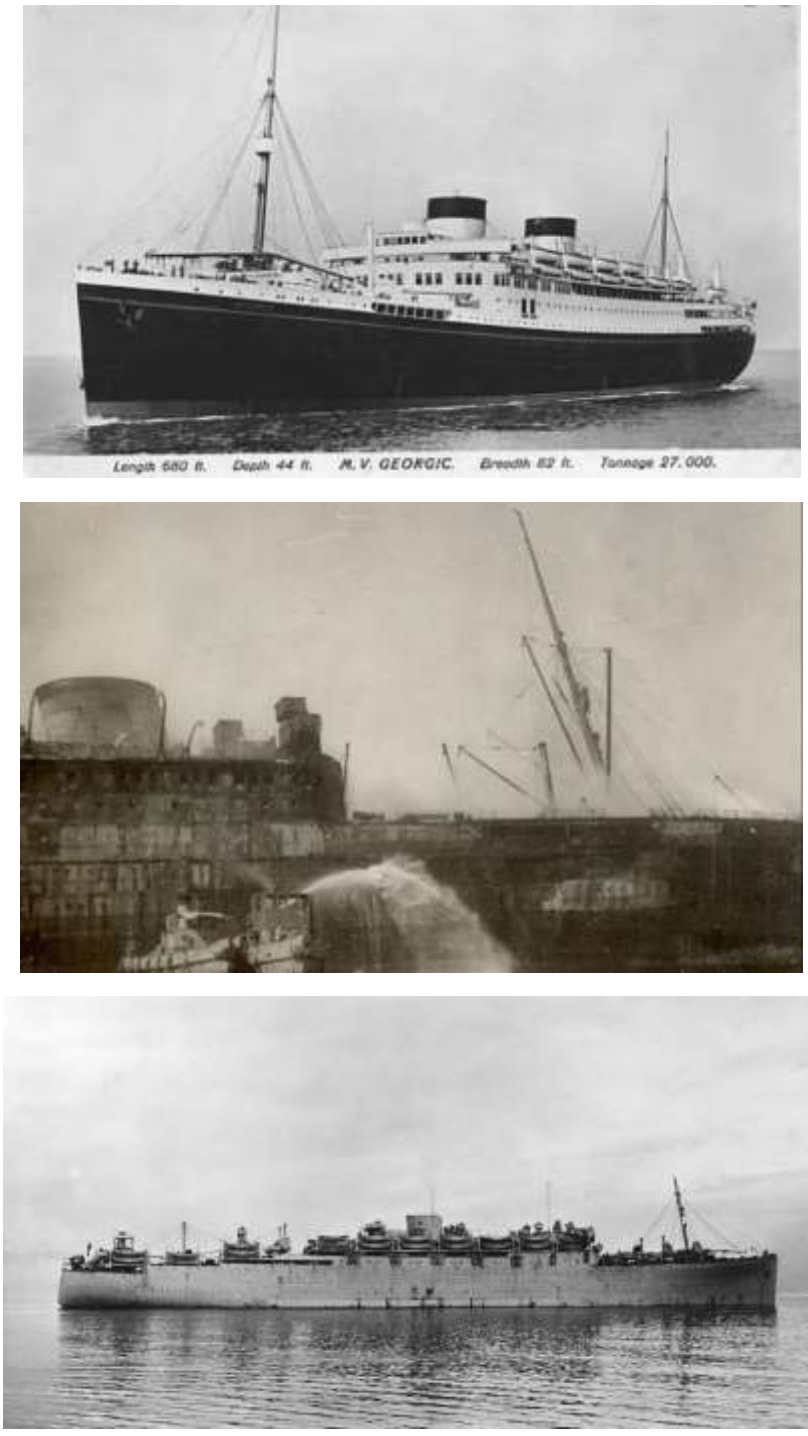


Figure 4 S.S. Georgic; before - burning - after.

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Art Donahue ‘Last Flight from Singapore’

Men of the Battle of Britain, K. Wynn, ISBN 1 902074 10 6

I would like to express enormous gratitude to Michael Brewis of Montrose Air Station Heritage Centre for volunteering his skills in formatting and editing Doug’s book. Without his generous contribution of time and patience, this book would still be bits of paper on a kitchen table with a completion date many years – or decades away. The end result would have been more akin to a child’s scrapbook than the polished version you see instead. My thanks to Michael, and I am sure than Doug would have been delighted with his efforts.

Epilogue

Squadron Leader Doug Nicholls

Pilot who flew in the Battle of Britain and survived three brushes with death during the fall of Singapore

Doug Nicholls was one of the heroes of Britain's last imperial hurrah in the Far East, three times cheating death at the nadir of her defeat in 1942 at Singapore by the Japanese. Two years later in his single-engined, single-seater Hurricane fighter he was instrumental in enabling General Bill Slim's "Forgotten" Fourteenth Army to claw Burma back from the invaders and stop them reaching India. For more than a year he flew as many as 28 sorties a month, day and night, unsupported by radar, over jungle-clad ridges up which the Japanese would haul supplies and artillery on their "March to Delhi".

Nicholls, a Flying Officer with 258 Squadron – one of the "Few" from the Battle of Britain, in which he had the destruction of a Ju-88 to his name – gave fighter escort for vital supplies and reinforcement troops being ferried to the front by Dakota aircraft, strafing the Japanese wherever he spotted them. Once he collided with a vulture, which damaged his cockpit hood.

The turning point came in Nicholls's busiest month, March 1944, after the enemy surrounded Slim's "Administrative Box" where supplies were concentrated, in Burma's Arakan peninsula, and cut off the West African Division in the Kaladan Valley to its east. Nicholls led the squadron in a strafing attack near the village of Inbauk that drew high praise from the army section commander and did much to set the British on their way to victory. Slim acknowledged his debt to Nicholls and his fellow fliers: "The biggest air fights yet seen in Burma took place in the Arakan sky and went decisively in our favour."

At the end of March Nicholls was promoted to Flight Lieutenant and made Flight Commander. On the squadron's withdrawal to India after nine months of intensive fighting he was awarded the DFC, and raised to the position of Squadron Leader Tactics based at RAF 224 Group's headquarters at Chittagong, from where he helped direct the British advance pushing the Japanese out of Burma.

Only three thin threads of spectacular luck during the disasters of February 1942 had preserved him. He had survived baling out over Sumatra, with a 40-mile journey across enemy-infested land and sea to rejoin his squadron; he had been evacuated to relative safety despite the "jack" he drew from a fateful pack of cards indicating that he must be left behind; and he had been fortunate in a ship carrying him to Ceylon that narrowly escaped the pursuing Japanese fleet after the fall of Singapore.

Nicholls had arrived in the Far East after a journey taking him and his aircraft to Gibraltar, West Africa and Khartoum, before the distant destination became clear. His Hurricane was one of 48 crated up and delivered to assist beleaguered Singapore by being flown off the aircraft carrier HMS *Indomitable* on reaching the Indian Ocean. A quarter were lost in the difficult manoeuvre, with a two-and-a-half-hour flight to Java. Nicholls had left Britain on 30 October 1941, and with 258 Squadron reached Batavia (now Djakarta), Java, on 28 January 1942. Three weeks later Singapore capitulated.

Flying from an airfield at Palembang near the south-eastern tip of Sumatra, Nicholls took part in desperate rearguard battles with the dwindling air force from Singapore island that was now withdrawn to Sumatra and Java (both of which would soon also fall to the Japanese). With inadequate early-warning systems, the pilots often found the enemy almost over their airfield before they could scramble. Nicholls nevertheless shared in the destruction of a Japanese Navy Zero.

When another Zero fighter raked his Hurricane, Nicholls had to abandon the burning aircraft. "I could hear bullets clattering into the armour plate behind me," he recalled. "I rolled the Hurricane on its side, kicked the control column forward and shot out of the cockpit... It would have been very unwise to open the parachute until I had fallen well clear of the Zero. I found the free fall strangely exhilarating."

Baling out over Sumatra, he had a 40-mile journey across enemy-infested land and sea to reach safety

Nicholls struggled out of the mangrove swamp where he had landed, commandeered a car then traded it for a railway ticket to the port of Oosthaven, where he caught a ferry to Java. His squadron had abandoned Sumatra after Japanese parachute landings there, and he was reunited with it at Batavia.

After Singapore's surrender, when British forces had to flee or be taken prisoner, Nicholls had his next piece of luck. "It was decided to draw cards to see who should stay and who should go... I was nearly first to choose. It was the Jack of Diamonds... I held the highest card of those staying behind... Then a voice, which I have blessed ever more, spoke up: 'I haven't seen any action at all yet', and that is how Vibert, a New Zealander, took my place." Vibert survived being a POW, and the two later met.

Only six pilots out of 258 Squadron's original 22 reached Ceylon, westwards across the Indian Ocean. Nicholls would have been taken towards Australia, and Japanese attack, but for the wisdom of the captain of his ship, the *Kota Gede*, who sailed west against official advice.

A re-formed 258 squadron, including Nicholls, took part in the defence of Colombo, when on 5 April 1942 Japanese Navy Zero fighters attacked, hoping to destroy the British fleet, which had, however, dispersed. Nicholls damaged one Zero. Altogether 21 Hurricanes were lost, and in a Japanese attack four days later on Trincomalee, the aircraft carrier HMS *Hermes* was sunk, but Ceylon was saved.

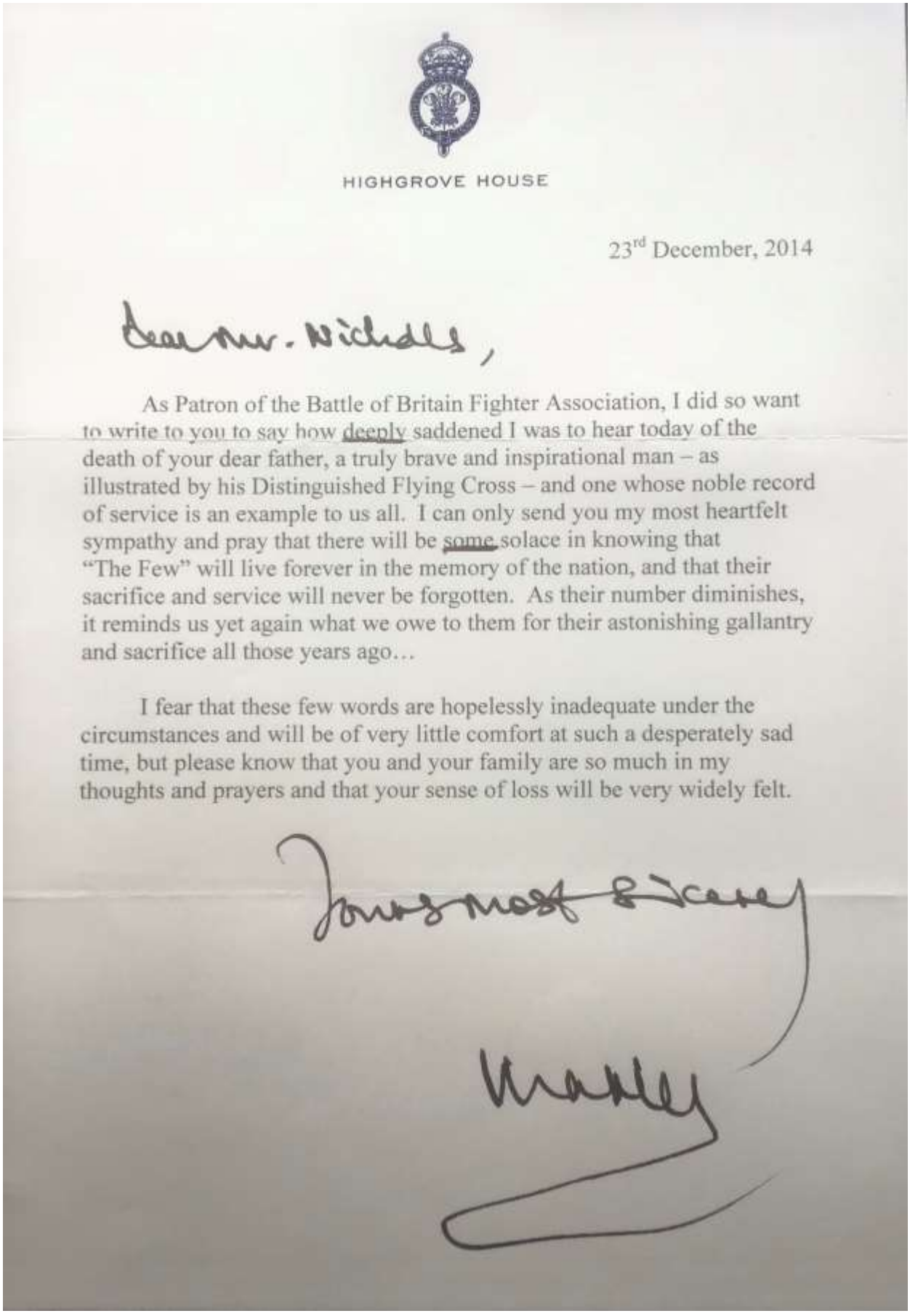
After the war Nicholls, who had been educated at St James' School in Grimsby, became a mathematics and science teacher, and also instructed at No 22 Air Training Corps Gliding School at Kirton Lindsey, Lincolnshire. His flying experience, begun when he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1938, included 14 types of aircraft, from Tiger Moths to Spitfires.

In 1960 Nicholls took his family to Uganda and later Botswana, where he trained other teachers. His work took him to the Kalahari desert, and he became principal of Bishop Stuart College, Mbarara and then of Buloba College near Kampala. He returned to Britain after Idi Amin expelled Uganda's Asians in 1972 and taught at schools in Grimsby. He made his last flight on his 80th birthday in a Tiger Moth, taking the controls and executing a turn, at Sywell in Northamptonshire. ● ANNE KELENY

Douglas Benjamen Fletcher Nicholls: fighter pilot and teacher: born Ystradgynlais, Glamorgan 5 February 1919: DSC 1944: married 1948 Betty Mildred Collins (two sons); died Leamington Spa 6 December 2014.

Nicholls and his Hurricane: poor early-warning systems meant that the enemy was often overhead before he could scramble

Independent Obituary



HIGHGROVE HOUSE

23rd December, 2014

Dear Mr. Nicholls,

As Patron of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association, I did so want to write to you to say how deeply saddened I was to hear today of the death of your dear father, a truly brave and inspirational man – as illustrated by his Distinguished Flying Cross – and one whose noble record of service is an example to us all. I can only send you my most heartfelt sympathy and pray that there will be some solace in knowing that "The Few" will live forever in the memory of the nation, and that their sacrifice and service will never be forgotten. As their number diminishes, it reminds us yet again what we owe to them for their astonishing gallantry and sacrifice all those years ago…

I fear that these few words are hopelessly inadequate under the circumstances and will be of very little comfort at such a desperately sad time, but please know that you and your family are so much in my thoughts and prayers and that your sense of loss will be very widely felt.

Yours most sincerely

Charles

Letter from Prince Charles

Wedding, July 10th, 1948

Gliding at Kirton Lindsey

FIRST PERSON

Douglas Nicholls

Memories in moments of silence

AS an RAF veteran, the anniversary of the Battle of Britain in the middle of September — as well as Remembrance Day — has a special significance.

Every year I attend a reunion for Battle of Britain pilots and a memorial service in Westminster Abbey. I expect I will observe Remembrance Sunday at home while watching the service on television. For me, it has a wider meaning.

I felt honoured this year when I was asked to be one of six escorts as the Roll of Honour was carried down the abbey's aisle at the Battle of Britain memorial service. The occasion conjured up a lot of memories of friends and it was a very proud moment.

For Remembrance Day though, I will be in the background.

My thoughts will be with those people who are still suffering. An awful lot of civilians and innocent people were killed or injured or maimed. And of course, there are their relatives to consider.

I don't think time softens memories. The memory is not softer for those people who can't really live life because of what happened in the war.

In the past, I have visited the cenotaph on Nuns Corner in Grimsby on Remembrance Sunday. This year I will be remembering at home with my wife. Those who find the day significant are not always the ones taking part in parades.

In some ways, people who knew what went on during the war don't need two minutes once a year. They have their own two-minute silences quite often as their memories come and go, and especially when reading obituaries.

As well as the two minutes during the Remembrance ceremony on Sunday, I would like two minutes to be observed today, November 11 — the anniversary of Armistice Day — but I don't know whether it would be practical or not.

We used to hold two minutes silence on November 11 and it was marvellous.

For Remembrance Sunday to endure, we need education — not the sort that would glorify the war, but the sort that would acknowledge the sacrifice and prevent it happening in the future.

■ *Douglas Nicholls (80), of Westward Ho, Grimsby, joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve at Waltham Airfield in 1938 before being called up a year later. He fought in the Battle of Britain.*

Remembrance Day (Grimsby Evening Telegraph)

Lest We Forget 11.11.11

I'm not proud. I did what I had to

Lest we forget

Former Hurricane pilot Squadron Leader Doug Nicholls, 92, is Grimsby's last surviving Battle Of Britain pilot. **Faye Preston** spoke to him

DYING BREED: Battle Of Britain pilot Doug Nicholls, 92, at home, left, and during his time in the forces, above.

DOUG Nicholls was just 21 when he was called up. An RAF Reserves pilot, he was ordered not to breathe a word of where he was going to anyone except his parents, who ran a pub in Freeman Street.

Armed with his kit bag, he joined the scores of other young men waiting on the platform at Grimsby Train Station. Doug, a former St James School pupil, would not return for four years. Many others would not return at all.

Doug completed three months of basic training, or "square bashing", in Cambridge before being transferred to Scotland for night flying, dropping bombs and machine gunning training.

He said: "It was amazing to practise night flying, but they knew what was coming. We all did."

After that, it was on to training in Chester and then Kenley, arriving amid a German bombing attack, and back to Lincolnshire, where he served with 151 Squadron RAF Digby. Here, Doug experienced his first air flight in the Battle Of Britain as the German Air Force, the Luftwaffe, waged war against the UK during the summer and autumn of 1940.

Doug and two other men were ordered to fly over Donna Nook, where a German minelayer had been spotted.

He recalled: "I was walking to breakfast one morning when the call came. I ran over and was told to get in the aircraft quickly and go.

"We were looking for a German minelayer. There was low cloud and rain, and the shadows of his aircraft could be seen on the sea.

"He was going from cloud to cloud but eventually he came down very low. We were faster and began taking a shot at him.

"I remember being amazed I could see the sea whipping up behind him. He wasn't actually hitting the water, but he was close. It was dangerous to get behind him, but we did anyway. I remember getting hit by the splash.

"Then he went down. I remember watching as they swam for their life rafts. Apparently, they were never found."

The trio flew back to base from 60 miles out over the North Sea, but it wouldn't be long before they were back in the air.

Doug said: "I admired the German pilots. We had a job getting them down. They knew their tricks."

With the Luftwaffe attacks becoming ever more frequent, they changed to night flying, a task so dangerous in its disorientation even training drills claimed lives.

During one exercise, Doug watched as two of his six comrades plummeted to their deaths.

At the height of the Luftwaffe's attacks, Doug protected the skies over Hull, Sheffield and Coventry, counter-attacking the horrific night raids until he was sent overseas with another squadron.

He said: "I could see the flashing and the bombs, but there was no way of seeing the aircrafts they were coming from because it was so dark.

"We did it as best as we could.

"One of the squadron's wife and kiddies were killed by a German bomber. All he wanted to do was fly and shoot them."

Later, he joined 258 Squadron, travelling to Gibraltar, West Africa, Sudan, Java, Singapore and Sumatra. Here, Doug was attacked by Japanese forces.

His aircraft hit, he crashed into a tree and landed in a swamp. Disorientated and alone, he made his way out of the jungle using only his compass, which led him to a chance meeting with Dutch soldiers.

Back in civilisation, they "commandeered" an American car and after running out of fuel, traded it in with a train driver for three train tickets to a ferry port.

Doug said: "We waited for the squadron, or what was left of it. They arrived by various means – boats, trains and some flew in.

"We all got together and the commanding officer decided there were not enough buses to get home, so we had to draw the highest cards. I drew a Jack of diamonds and thought I was safe. I couldn't believe it when they all picked higher than me."

Doug was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross in May 1944 and remained with 258 Squadron until August 1944, when he was made Squadron Leader Tactics for HQ 234 group in Burma.

In the four years he had been away, his parents' pub was air-raided three times. The town he left behind was covered in debris and the devastation caused by the German attacks was strongly felt by his friends and wider family.

"It was strange coming back home," Doug said. "It was quiet and people were niggled over little things. I didn't like that much.

"What I did has always been a topic of conversation, but I don't feel proud, I just did what I had to do at the time."

On Friday, Grimsby MP Austin Mitchell will present a memorial plaque at St James' School, Grimsby in honour of Doug and the late Pilot Officer Terence Genney MC.

We want to hear your wartime stories

DO YOU know somebody who is serving in the forces who you will be close to your heart this Remembrance Day?

Or perhaps you are a former serviceman or woman and will be recalling your days serving in conflicts across the world come November 11?

Whether you or somebody close to you has served in Iraq, Afghanistan, the Falklands, the Second World War or the First World War, we want to hear from you ahead of the weekend.

In the countdown to Remembrance Day, we will be featuring the stories of local heroes and heroines and those close to them in a bid to inspire you to honour the thousands of people who have fought for our country.

We want to hear from people serving in the Army, Navy, RAF, Royal Marines and their families.

Perhaps you are a mum whose children are serving overseas, or maybe you are a teenager whose parents are serving overseas.

Whatever your story, we want to hear how war and conflict has and continues to affect you.

To get your story across, e-mail newsdesk@grimsbytelegraph.co.uk, call 01472 372236 or write to Grimsby Telegraph, Editorial, 80 Cleethorpe Road, Grimsby, North East Lincolnshire, DN31 3EH.

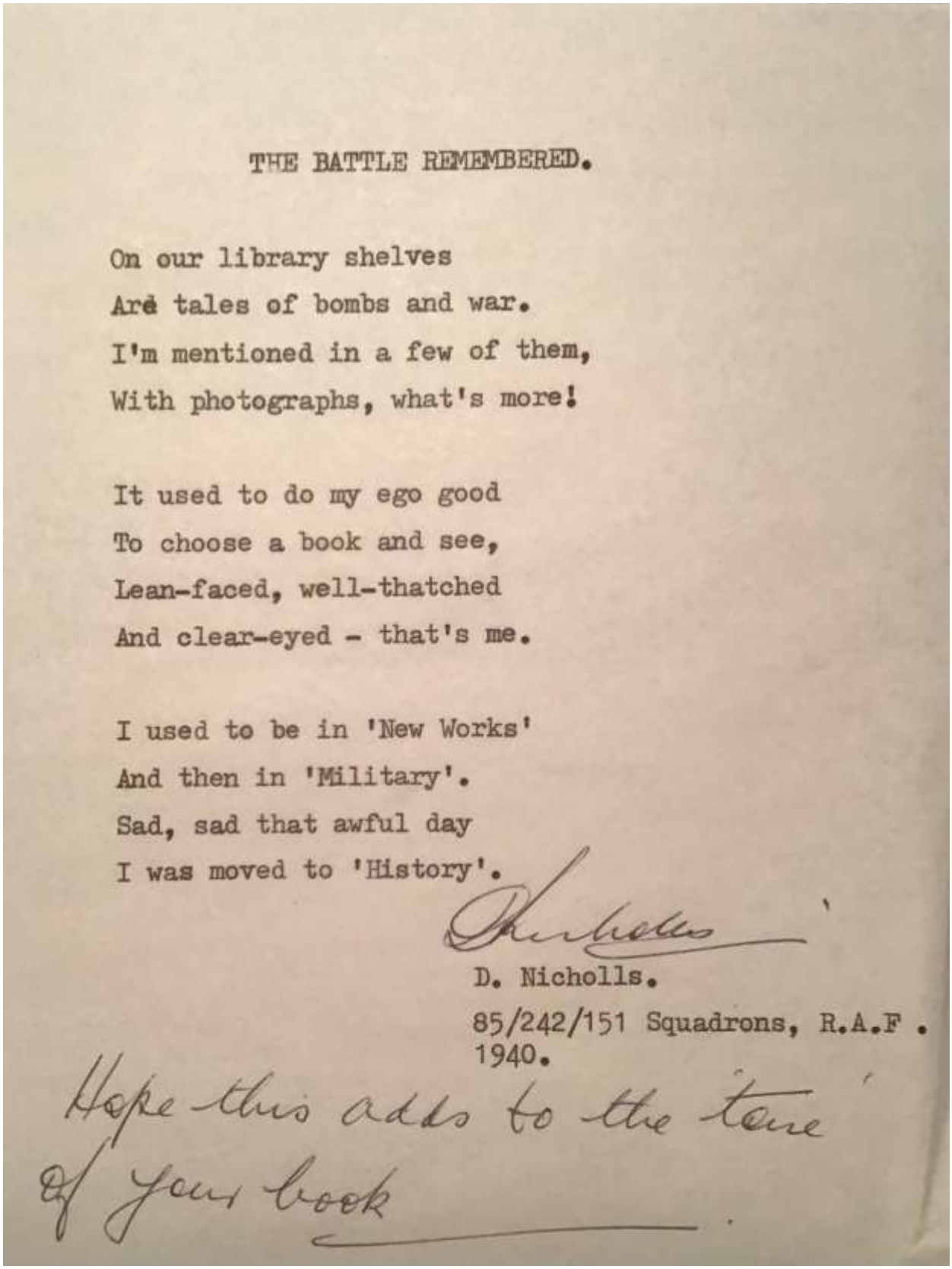
Remembrance Day 11/11/11 (Grimsby Evening Telegraph)

Battle of Britain Veterans

Buckingham Palace, July 2003

Battle of Britain Monument, London

Battle of Britain 70th Anniversary Flight, September 2010



THE BATTLE REMEMBERED.

On our library shelves
Are tales of bombs and war.
I'm mentioned in a few of them,
With photographs, what's more!

It used to do my ego good
To choose a book and see,
Lean-faced, well-thatched
And clear-eyed - that's me.

I used to be in 'New Works'
And then in 'Military'.
Sad, sad that awful day
I was moved to 'History'.

D. Nicholls.
85/242/151 Squadrons, R.A.F.
1940.

Hope this adds to the tone
of your book

Prescient, Doug's contribution

A Bird of Hazy Recollection

Early in 1943, a weary fighter squadron was posted on rest to a hot, arid airfield about 100 miles inland from Madras. There they were given six weeks to prepare for a return to the Burma front.

As usual, the 'period of recuperation' involved working harder than ever overhauling aircraft and equipment. Everyone helped, regardless of rank or trade. The unskilled held, lifted or fetched as instructed by their technical superiors. Prowling among the toiling groups were the medical orderlies kidnapping men due for inspection, inoculation or the treatment of microbes within and fungi infections without. The Signals Section relayed a constant stream of requests for co-operation with units training in the area, for air displays to boost civilian morale and urgent appeals for help from the Air/Sea rescue launches based at Madras.

When all the work was done, if ever, there would be a short break for everyone in turn but, until then, all thoughts of the delights of Madras would remain dreams except, of course for the lucky few who could combine business there with pleasure. High on the Commanding Officer's list of luxuries – but not at the top – was a visit to a professional barber. With a deep sigh, he brushed his shaggy locks aside, wearily swept away a mound of papers and peeled a signal form from underneath his sweating forearm, scanned it again and studied the young man standing in front of him.

Sergeant Pilot Finch was wearing the usual tropical uniform of Khaki shorts and shirt. He was a Yorkshire lad, short and boyish with his big, chubby face which never seemed to age. His cheerful youthfulness and impetuous good nature had led many to underestimate his abilities completely. In the air he was cool and competent but unwittingly he seemed to create complications to the simplest of duties.

The C.O. sighed inwardly and said – with some misgivings – "Right, Finch, you have the only available aircraft so there's a job for you. The new Ack-Ack battery near Madras airport has asked for low level practice at 4p.m. today. Fly there this morning, fix the details with Control and then go into Madras to collect the book for Flight Sergeant Evans"

The following day would be Evan's birthday and also his last working day with the squadron. He was to be promoted to duties more suited to his age and experience and the whole squadron would be sad to see him go. He had kept the aircraft flying through monsoon and drought, shot and shell. His ground crews knew that he could do anything they could do – and better. So, secretly, the whole squadron had arranged a combined farewell and birthday party during which Evans would be presented with tokens of regard and good wishes, doubtless accompanied by speeches that outwardly, would seem to convey quite opposite sentiments.

As a youth Evans had kept pigeons but life in the RAF had put an end to that pastime although the bird life which seemed attracted to the vicinity of tropical airfields had widened his interest into the field of ornithology. So, his ground crews had ordered from a Madras bookshop a beautifully illustrated copy of the reference book 'Birds of Asia.'

The C.O. continued, “When you have collected the book, your time is your own for a few hours so make the best of it. Keep out of trouble and don’t overdo the gun practice”. He glared at the delighted Finch. “This time, don’t try to winkle the gunners out of their sites by your wing tips”

Finch stopped grinning as he recalled the last time he had been sent on one of these exercises. The young gunnery Captain had emphasised “My chaps are very raw and have seen only civil aircraft traffic and I want them to know what it is like to have aircraft coming at you very fast and low.” Finch had done his best to oblige but, on his return to base, had been met by a bristling Adjutant and handed a signal from the captain complaining that the dangerous tactics of the pilot had been responsible for one heart failure and three desertions from the gun crew. Subsequent requests for co-operation were more cautiously worded.

Within an hour of his interview with his C.O. Finch parked his Hurricane at Madras control, reported to the Duty Officer and scrounged a lift in the ration lorry into the city. He collected the book in its gift wrappings and headed for the nearest air-conditioned hotel. He ordered his first cold beer after months of drinking chlorinated swamp water in which life was not always totally extinct. One cold beer followed another until his tongue felt cleansed and responsive again; much too soon it was time to stroll towards the square to meet the ration truck for the return journey.

On each side of the wide avenue were trees irregularly spaced and in the shade of each one, a street trader with a box or chair or a cart was displaying his goods and services. Finch, in a mellow mood, wandered amiably through the dappled sunlight weaving gently round the red splodges of betel-juice spittle. He ignored offers of sticky cakes, coloured drinks, the services of cobblers, barbers and dentists but stopped in fascination when he came to the pitch of the man who sold birds. On the floor, in the deep shade of the hedge were wooden cages crammed with birds of every hue. Near them, a small boy was tending a charcoal fire smoking lazily in an old car hubcap. From the shadow of the tree, hawking his wares, sprang the proprietor of the business, a wiry little man dressed in a tattered rode that years ago had been white. On his shoulders, arms and head about twenty birds were sitting quite unsecured in any way. They were parakeets, about eighteen inches from their curved beaks to the tips of their colourful tail feathers, with plumage a mixture of greens, pastel- pinks and powder-blue. They seemed quite calm and unconcerned even when Finch approached for a close look, taking care not to get too close to their forbidding beaks. Years in a tough business had taught the trader to recognise a likely customer, this youth had the happy look acquired in the hotel bar and should not prove too difficult to persuade.

“You buy, Sah?” he said “Look, it very tame” and deftly transferred one of the birds from his finger to Finch’s shoulder where it took a firm grip of his shirt and fixed its gaze on a nearby car.

“Look Sah. See, he like you. You take?”

Perhaps the cold beer had affected Finch’s judgement; certainly, he could not focus his eyes well enough to see how close that beak was to his ear, but he had one of those alcoholic inspirations which one lives to regret. He burbled happily to the trader “Good idea, lovely bird, another birthday present for Evans.”

Then a pause “have you got a cage for it?”

“Not wanted, Sah. Bird like you. Very tame. Sit there all way home”

Convinced, Finch handed over a few rupees and, oblivious to the smirks of the other traders, walked to meet the lorry and returned to the airfield. With the bird on his shoulder, he walked to his Hurricane, climbed in, stowed the book safely and checked his controls. In the tiny cockpit he needed to have the bird out of his way and yet where he could keep an eye on it. With some difficulty he transferred the parakeet to the grip of the control column; it took a firm hold and settled down between his bare knees gazing steadily upwards into his face. Finch crooned and whistled to his passenger but there was, to his intense disappointment, no response whatever. Never before in his life had he had such a negative reaction from any living creature.

Over the radio, Control gave clearance for the gunnery exercise to start. Concerned about the effect on the bird and remembering his C.O.’s warning, Finch took off and started with gentle dives and turns, but as the bird seemed quite unperturbed even when upside down, the manoeuvres became more violent. Eventually Control signalled the end of the exercises – rather hysterically thought Finch – and he headed for home.

But the steady movement of the aircraft seemed to bore the bird. Just as the home airfield came into view it became restless and its benign expression vanished. It fluffed and fluttered and moved sideways along its perch until its feet came into contact with a hand. The sight of flesh seemed to infuriate it. It leaned over and bit the thumb. Finch snatched his hand away and grabbed control with the other. The bird bit again, drawing blood. Finch tried to hold the control between his bare knees but they, in turn, were nipped. By making swift grabs with each hand alternately and by giving the column an occasional tap with his knees, Finch managed to keep his aircraft heading roughly for the airfield although it lurched through the air like a drunken dolphin. Having failed for some time to get a satisfactory bite, the bird, its aggression in no way diminished, fluttered and scrambled up the instrument panel and perched on the gunsight in easy reach of the pilot’s face. Hastily, Finch pulled down his goggles to protect his eyes, but he was too late to save the tip of his nose. This could not go on; this was getting dangerous. There was no room to move his head out of harm’s way or to see to land the aircraft in the gathering dusk. In desperation he flung out a hand and swept the bird down to the footplate where a flick of a foot sent it screeching into the fuselage behind the pilot’s seat.

The landing was uneventful and there was no sign of the bird when the aircraft reached the parking bay. As he unfastened his straps, Finch spoke to his mechanic. “Do me a favour, Ginger. Somewhere in the works there’s a bird loose. It’s a surprise for Chiefy Evans, so will you nab it for me? Watch yourself; it’s got a beak like pliers. Can’t stop, got a parcel for the C.O.” Ginger was glad to co-operate. “Sure, I’ll keep t in a box or something, come and get it first thing in the morning.”

Anxious to hand over responsibility for the bird to its new and expert owner, Finch went early the following morning to collect it. As he walked round the corner of the Flight Office, he saw that his aircraft was still where he had parked it the night before, but it was a sad and dissolute

sight. It looked like the carcass of a Christmas turkey on New Year's Day. The wings had been removed and all the gun panels were open. The engine cowlings were on the ground, all inspection hatches had been taken off and the ribs of the fuselage were showing where large areas of fabric had been stripped away. Pieces of equipment were scattered around as if they had been taken from the aircraft and dropped there hastily. Standing in the midst of this disaster was Flight Sergeant Evans holding a box in one hand and shaking a fist at Ginger and two of his pals.

With the awful conviction that he was walking into deep trouble Finch decided to face the music.

"Morning Chief, Morning lads" he said breezily. "What's up?"

Ginger gave him a glance of wistful apology, but Evans glared at him with that special expression he reserved for incompetent pilots and diseased maggots.

He asked, "Did you fly this aircraft yesterday?"

"Yes, Chief."

Evans was trying to keep his voice under control. "Can you see what your ground crew had to do to get this bird out? Look what it did to little Ginger here."

Finch noticed the sticking plasters on Ginger's fingers and ears but had thought it wise to make no comment; he feared he would find out soon enough.

Evans continued, his voice rising in pitch. "What the hell were you doing with a bird loose in your aircraft?"

Obviously, Ginger had said no more than was absolutely necessary. Finch explained about the persuasive street trader and how tame the birds had seemed. Evan's voice was trapped between a snort and a scream when he replied.

"Of course, it wasn't tame! It was full of hashish! Those traders trap birds and hang them over a smoky fire with a bit of hemp plant in it. When you bought this bird, it had just been drugged out of its tiny mind. All it could do was to get its feet round something and hang on until its brains cleared"

Finch tried to apologise but Evans ignored him. "When this bird woke up, it would have one hell of a headache. Tame be damned; it would be wilder than ever!" He pointed to the aircraft "And so am I. Every time Ginger tried to get hold of it, it bit like hell and hopped away out of reach. These lads have been up half the night trying to catch it. Look at your aircraft – as if we haven't got enough to do, today of all days."

He paused for breath and Finch managed to say "Sorry, Chief, I just thought you would like a bird for your birthday. Happy Birthday by the way and …."

Evan's expression softened a little, but only a little. He held up the box containing the bird and said "So, all of this.." he nodded to the dismantled Hurricane " … is for my benefit, is it?

Unfortunately for you, Finch, the C.O. has already requested a few words in your delicate ear. But as today is my birthday, I can get one little bird out of trouble"

He took the parakeet from its box, handling it easily so that it was controlled without hurt, smoothed its spiky feathers and launched it into the air. It flew erratically for a while and then set off towards its home in the hills. As it passed the airfield boundary, a very chastened Finch, not now very sure whether he was speaking to Evans or the parakeet, managed to finish his good wishes

"…….and many Happy Returns."

Immediately, the little dot wavered in flight as if suddenly unsure of its direction and came jinking back over the airfield flying right above the little group of watchers. It was then, as the bird passed directly over him, that Finch made another error of judgement.

He looked up.

Consequently, he was unable to see the bird set off, once more, this time flying straight and true for the hills.