ONE MAN'S WAR
MY STORY 1939 – 1946
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The Early Years

In the early part of 1939 it was obvious that war was coming, it was only a matter of when. I was still in the sixth form at Buxton College taking the finals of my Higher School Certificate in French, German, Mathematics and Chemistry with the intention of going to University to read languages. Don't ask me why I took Maths and Chemistry as they didn't really fit in with the other two, but I liked them and normally had fairly high marks, also it did give me an alternate career path if necessary.

It was a strange time for a teenager to live in as the imminent outbreak of war tended to overshadow everything else and it was difficult to think about University when it was extremely likely that all my age group would soon be in the services.

In April 1939, Hitler had just annexed Czechoslovakia, and even the most blinkered pacifist could see that war was not far away, so several of my friends and I went along to the drill hall in Buxton with the intention of joining the Territorial Army, the local regiment being the Sherwood Foresters.. Unfortunately for me I was sixteen years and nine months at the time and the minimum age for enlistment was seventeen so I had the mortification of seeing all my friends accepted whilst I went home. It was then that I decided that the Army was not for me, they had had their chance and it would be the Royal Air Force or nothing. I suppose I could have waited until I was seventeen and then joined up, but my friends would have had three months army experience by that time and I didn't fancy going in at the bottom of the ladder. At that age position was all important.

I left school in June 1939 having passed the Higher School Certificate examinations. By this time, the whole country was almost on a war footing so I decided to take a temporary job until I was eighteen when I would apply to join the Royal Air Force. I was fortunate in obtaining the position of Junior Clerk in the Borough Treasurer's Department at Buxton Town Hall. I didn't tell them I had no intention of making it my career or they wouldn't have given me the job. At least it was not time wasted for, as a result of my twelve months there I decided that sort of work was not for me and that, when the war was over, I would look for a different kind of employment. I must admit now that these long term thoughts didn't figure very prominently in my plans as, not only would I have to survive the war, but we would also have to win it.

War duly broke out on 3rd September 1939 when Hitler invaded Poland and it became very apparent that we were not at all prepared for a major conflict. We had a first class Navy and an Army which was being trained but the Royal Air Force was quite small compared with the Nazis and, even though an aircraft building programme was under way, it would be some time before we could reach anything like parity with the Germans in men and materiel. I didn't enjoy the next nine months working in the confined and rather unreal atmosphere of the Borough Treasurer's office whilst my friends were out in the real world pursuing their careers in the Army and coming home on leave in uniform with all sorts of tales (probably most of them exaggerated but filling me with envy nevertheless). This was the time of the phony war and was rather an anticlimax. During the winter the RAF carried a few rather desultory bombing raids against coastal targets in Germany, the Navy were much more active and there were quite a number of naval engagements, including the sinking of the Graf Spee in Montevideo which was great news for a while. During this time, the French and German armies faced each other across the so-called impregnable Maginot line which stretched from the Swiss frontier in the east to the Belgian border in the west and very little happened on land. The British Expeditionary Force under Lord Gort were mainly at the western end of the line.

In April things started to warm up, Hitler invaded and conquered Denmark and Norway and then in May the long awaited Blitzkrieg started with Hitler bombing and invading Holland and Belgium. He didn't need to attack the Maginot Line as he could outflank it by going through Belgium, there being no fortifications on the Franco-Belgian border. The BEF were in a terrible position and were extricated

at great cost through Dunkirk, some 300,000 troops being brought back to the U.K. having lost most of their armor and weapons. This whole thing came as a terrible shock to Britain as we had been lulled into a sense of false security by the comparative inaction of the last nine months and the fact that the English Channel was between us and the Germans. This turned out to be our saving grace as I am sure that if Hitler had invaded us soon after Dunkirk the story would have been very different and we would probably now be a subservient colony of the Greater German Reich.

As far as I was concerned, Dunkirk was just finishing and, on my eighteenth birthday, 10th June 1940, I went on the train from Buxton to Padgate near Warrington (at my own expense!) to join the Royal Air Force. After filling in a lot of forms, including the question 'Which trade', to which I put 'Pilot', I was interviewed by two RAF recruitment officers who told me I could only enlist as 'Aircrew'. I said that if I couldn't train as a pilot I didn't want to join and would wait until I was twenty, the age at which conscription began. After a few more questions they could see I was serious, so I was enlisted for pilot training only. I then passed the flying medical, was given a rail pass to Buxton (my return half was wasted!) and told that I would be called up in about six weeks.

The whole country was in a state of near panic expecting an invasion at any time - Churchill had taken over as Prime Minister from Neville Chamberlain, who had been a complete waste of time, and Churchill made that immortal speech about 'We will fight them on the beaches etc' which I am sure has gone down as one of the finest pieces of oratory ever.

To combat a possible invasion, the Local Defense Volunteers were formed (they were the fore-runners of the Home Guard) and, having nothing better to do, I joined. I was given a battle dress uniform and an old Ross .300 rifle left over from the first World War. It was thick with grease and took hours to clean - I was even given six bullets although I had no idea how to fire the rifle. However, we were taken up onto a rifle range in the hills near Buxton and I actually fired my six bullets - I was now fully trained. For the next six weeks I stood guard most nights at a railway junction where the line from Manchester to Sheffield and the Midland line to London diverged. Nothing happened and I spent most of my time in the signal box - after six weeks I was quite a competent signalman. The signalman on duty sat and let me do all the work, signaling the trains on the rather archaic system similar to Morse which was operating at that time and setting the signals by pulling huge levers about five feet long - it was interesting and certainly helped to pass the time during the long nights. We didn't see any German parachutists.

By the end of August the Luftwaffe were well into their attempt to break the power of the R.A.F. by mounting huge raids mainly against RAF aerodromes in the south of England during the day. The weather was glorious the whole time and aerial battles were taking place continuously. We didn't realize it then, particularly in North Derbyshire where nothing was happening, but this was the prelude to a possible invasion and the period up to 15th September has since become known as 'The Battle of Britain'. The RAF were not defeated, although it was a very close run thing, and Hitler abandoned his invasion plans.

<u>No. 1 Receiving Wing, RAF Babbacombe</u>

At the end of August I received my calling up papers with a travel warrant from Buxton to Torquay (one way!) and orders to report to No. 1 Receiving Wing at Babbacombe in Devon on 6th September. I duly arrived with my small suitcase (no civilian clothes were allowed apart from those in which we traveled) and was taken to a large hotel on the top of the hill at Babbacombe together with about a hundred other hopefuls. I have forgotten the name of the hotel but it had been commandeered by the RAF and I was given a bed in the ballroom of the hotel along with about forty others, it was just a great big dormitory.

Meals were served in the hotel dining room and weren't too bad at that time of the war, rationing hadn't really started then. My time at No. 1 Receiving Wing was spent on one parade or another, and the N.C.O.s tried to instill some sort of discipline into us although most of us had two left feet at the beginning. We were issued with R.A.F. uniforms, boots, kitbags, greatcoats and all the other items supposed to make us self sufficient. Also we had a number of sick parades in which we were injected and inoculated against all kinds of strange diseases. It was surprising how many people passed out during the injection process and it wasn't always the apparent weaklings, great big strapping rugby forward types were equally prone.

When we weren't marching up and down the Babbacombe promenade trying to make head or tail of the various drill commands we spent our time polishing our brass uniform buttons in the hope of making them look as though we hadn't just joined up and rubbing our boots to put some sort of a shine on them. We had an inspection every morning and the bed space had to be immaculate with everything folded according to the wishes of the sergeant, our boots had to be mirror-like and the uniform buttons dazzling. Fortunately, this was the only time in my entire RAF service when this happened and on future postings, provided things were clean and tidy, nobody bothered very much.

We had one scare whilst we were at Babbacombe. We were all woken up in the middle of the night and told to parade on the front immediately. We did so and were kept on parade for a couple of hours before being told that we could go back to bed. No explanation was forthcoming and the comments were pretty pungent. We found out much later that there had been an invasion scare on the South Devon coast that night, probably caused by German E Boats, and I suppose that if it had been genuine we would have been moved inland - they certainly wouldn't have sent us to meet an invasion force, we hadn't a rifle between us.

On the evening of 20th September, after two weeks at Babbacombe, we were marched down to the station with our kitbags over our shoulders and boarded a troop train bound for the great unknown. After traveling all night and most of the next day, this turned out to be Aberystwyth in central Wales.

<u>No. 6 Initial Training Wing, Aberystwyth</u>

We decamped from the train in the middle of the afternoon of 21st September and were marched through the town to our billet which turned out to be a large hotel in the middle of the town. I am not quite certain of the name, it was either the Bellevue or the Blue Bell but I rather think it was the former. Once again I found myself in the ballroom which turned out to be my home for the next three months.

Life in 'D' Flight, No. 6 I.T.W. was very interesting and quite new. We spent most of the day in lectures covering navigation, theory of flight, airforce law, aircraft recognition, meteorology, mathematics and sundry allied subjects. The rest of the time was taken up with physical training and drill and on games afternoons we played rugby. Whilst we realized the necessity of all this classroom work, we wanted to get it over as soon as possible as the war in the air was increasing in intensity and we all wanted to be in it as soon as we could. I made some good friends at Aberystwyth and six of us decided to have a professional photograph taken when we were issued with our full flying kit - we went to the studio and dressed up in all the gear looking like a lot of aces! A few years later I realized that this was the only time I ever wore the full suit, all my flying being carried out in warmer weather where a suit like that was the last thing required. It was at Aberystwyth where I received the first injury of my R.A.F career, I broke my thumb playing rugby! It was no great hardship but I had to keep my arm in a sling for a couple of weeks which excused me drill parades which wasn't a bad thing. Whilst I was incapacitated we were given our first home leave since joining up and when I went back to Buxton I received a huge amount of sympathy, the spin-off from the Battle of Britain meant that the R.A.F. could do no wrong, and people who didn't know me thought I had been shot down! It was quite an anticlimax when I said I had been playing rugby. I made a particular friend in another cadet called

Norman Lingard who came from the Manchester area and we kept in touch after leaving Aberystwyth. Every Sunday morning we all had to attend Church Parade, assembling on the promenade and then marching off to church. Norman and I didn't think this was a very good idea as, after the first Sunday parade the order was given 'Fall out Non-conformists, Roman Catholics and Jews',the latter fell out and went their own way.

The next Sunday we joined them as Non-conformists and went along to the local NAAFI for tea and buns instead of going to church - nobody checked on us so, for once, we put one over the powers-that-be.

There were about forty five cadets in 'D' Flight whilst I was in Aberystwyth and, bearing in mind that we were among the first R.A.F Volunteer Reserve pilots to be accepted and that the war went on for another five years, with hindsight our chances of survival were not very high although we didn't think about it at the time. In the event, I doubt if more than five survived to the end of the war.

M.V. Rangitiki

The course at Aberystwyth finished on 14th December and we all received our postings. Unfortunately, all my friends were to join flying schools in the U.K. whilst a few of us were to report to No.2 P.D.C. at Wilmslow in Cheshire for posting overseas. No. 2 P.D.C turned out to be a series of large huts and we were issued with tropical gear including a large topee. By this time, with all our flying gear and this additional tropical equipment, we were real beasts of burden. We stayed two nights at Wilmslow and on the morning of 16th December boarded the inevitable train, once again for destinations unknown. We weren't allowed to contact anyone by letter or telephone, goodness knows why as we didn't know where we were going anyway and it wasn't really a matter of great importance. However. that was the way the official mind worked and the first thing my mother know of my whereabouts was when she received a letter from me about three months later - as far as she was concerned I had just disappeared off the face of the earth. The only thing was that, during the war, no news was good news and if anything had happened to me she would be informed immediately.

After changing at Bristol we finally arrived at the port of Avonmouth about 8 p.m. It was a dark night and we went on board our troopship, the M.V. Rangitiki immediately.

I kept a diary of the voyage and have included it here exactly as it was written in 1940 (in my best schoolboy English!). Much of the diary of the voyage is repetitive, so don't spend too much time on it, but this was how an eighteen year old saw the first big adventure of his life!

The voyage of the M.V. Rangitiki

Monday 16th December 1940
Left Wilmslow (No. 2 P.D.C) at 9 a.m. for unknown destination which, after changing at Bristol, turned out to be Avonmouth. Went on board M.V. Rangitiki immediately - our sleeping quarters were very bad - twenty to a mess, with eighty of us in a confined space about 60ft x 30ft x 8ft high. By now it was 8 p.m. and a fine night. There was an air-raid warning somewhere in the distance, probably

Bristol, didn't hear any bombs or planes. After looking round for a time finally slept in the sun lounge on 'A' deck. Slept quite well.

Tuesday 17th
Fine morning, sailed from Avonmouth 6.40 a.m. with tugs fussing about until we were well down the Bristol Channel, sea very calm indeed. Our last view of the South of England was a hillside wreathed in mist with a church steeple on one side, the whole being backed by the rising sun. Met a destroyer (G91) and after going round in a few circles anchored with it off Barry. Left about 7 p.m. in company with it. Was made a spotter during the day - this entailed spending two hours per day in the front funnel top with orders to advise the gun crews of the approach of hostile aircraft. Slept in the sun lounge again.

Wednesday 18th
Wind a little stronger, still in company of G91, very nice boat, I'd rather have been in her than this old tub (maximum speed 16 knots). Sighted land to starboard about noon, believe it was Holyhead and the North Wales coast. A Blenheim assisted in convoying us, possibly as some unknown four engined plane passed over us in the morning. Did two hours in the funnel in the afternoon, weather got hazy, picked up with large convoy about 4 p.m. Didn't feel too well at night, slept below.

Thursday, 19th
Didn't feel too good on waking, so went on deck before breakfast, land on both sides, Scotland to starboard, Ireland to port. Now we were in a big convoy, twenty merchant ships, eleven destroyers and one cruiser. Nothing much happened during the day, heading north west and north all day - last sight of land was Scottish hill in the far distance about 3 p.m., I wonder when we'll see land again? Did usual two hours in the funnel, still felt pretty ill. Slept below.

Friday, 20th
Still feeling pretty awful, nearly dead in fact. Sea getting rougher, still going north complete with convoy, very cold indeed, sun didn't rise till 10 a.m., we must be nearly in the Arctic Circle, it's cold enough anyway. Staggered up to the funnel as usual, but felt a little better up there; great goings-on about 3 p.m., a submarine was reported in the vicinity, everybody was tearing about, C.O. came up to the funnel but nothing happened, thank God! A Sunderland flew over about an hour later, it was very nice to see it - circled round for about half an hour then cleared off. Went to bed early, still feeling pretty bad.

Saturday, 21st
Feeling worse than ever but haven't been sick yet, perhaps it would be better if I had. Still very cold but we have at last turned west, thank goodness, I thought we were bound for Greenland. The sea is getting rougher, the old tub is pitching and tossing terrifically, groaning in every joint, it's a wonder it doesn't fall apart. Felt considerably better at night. Very uneventful day.

Sunday 22nd
Had quite a shock on first going up on deck - nothing in sight but sea and sky, no convoy, no destroyers, nothing! The old ship clanking along like a steam engine, knocking back the water to the tune of about 14 knots. Caught up with the convoy about 10 a.m. to our great relief - turned out that the engines had broken down during the night - a habit this boat has! Eight of the destroyers and three ships had left us, we now had seventeen ships, three destroyers and the cruiser, good old Navy! Went south all day, the clock has been put back two hours, so things were more normal. Weather warmer now, sun shone nearly all day. Feeling a lot better, ate decent meals for the first time since Wednesday. Spent usual two hours in the funnel, terrific wind has sprung up, ship is now bouncing all over the place - worse than ever before. Played cards at night, slept below. (A note on the Rangitiki - first time it has been used as a 'trooper', and it would be our luck to get on it. On it's last trip it was bombed on the way out, a torpedo was launched at it and hit the next ship in the convoy, and it was in

the 'Jervis Bay' business - the first two shells straddled it then it cleared off as fast as it could go - went nearly to the Arctic before going back to Scotland, given up for lost until it was resurrected by arriving off Scotland quite a time after the battle).

Monday 23rd
On waking found the clock had been put back a further forty minutes - we must be in the middle of the Atlantic by now. The weather is much less boisterous, the sea now has no

white-topped caps, just long rollers which are quite pleasant, it is also much warmer. After breakfast sighted a number of ships on the horizon to port; these eventually joined us and turned out to be two aircraft carriers, four supply ships and one cruiser. Soon after these had attached themselves on to us, a fifth supply vessel came panting up from directly astern. One of these carriers is an exceedingly antiquated old tub looking rather like an orange box stuck upside down on an old tramp; the other is pretty much the opposite - seems to be a very modern ship. The cruiser is absolutely identical to our own, with three gun turrets one above the other before the mast. Someone said it belonged to the 'Dido' class, perhaps they are right, probably not though. Throughout the day Skuas continually flew about, coming from the modern carrier, it looked very funny to see planes in the sky, rather like civilization once more, it was nice to see them. The sun seemed a lot higher in the sky and it was quite definitely warm, a very pleasant improvement indeed. Played cards at night and slept below.

Tuesday 24th
The clock had been put back a further nineteen minutes so we had another long night. On going on deck the wind was still strong - we seemed to have collected a bit more of the Navy in the night, a 10000 ton cruiser of the 'Kent' class, probably the 'Suffolk'. If we continue like this we shall have the Grand Fleet with us. Our naval escort now consisted of two aircraft carriers, now identified as the 'Furious', and the 'Argus', three cruisers, the 'Suffolk' of 10000 tons and two of our latest cruisers of the 6000 ton 'Dido' class, four sub-chaser escort vessels and five supply vessels - very useful indeed. We had an inspection in the morning, an absolute farce as nobody had cleaned any buttons. Did two hours in the funnel as usual, nothing startling happened except that the wind increased to at least gale force and nearly blew us straight off the ship. The night got rather dirty early on and we played pontoon until about nine - it is Christmas Eve, fancy spending Christmas Eve on a trooper, by far the worst I have ever had, what a difference to previous times. (Our position was approximated in the morning to be in the middle of the Atlantic about the same latitude as Cape Finisterre, Spain, - quite feasible, taking into account the sun and warmth of climate).

Wednesday, 25th December 1940 Christmas Day
We were rudely awakened at 6.45 a.m. by the banging and slamming of watertight doors - Hitler, as his Christmas present to us, had arranged for one of his raiders, probably the 'Admiral Scheer', to give us a firework display. A shell dropped about 200 yards to port of us, another hit one of the vessels in the convoy but didn't damage it too badly. The three cruisers and the two aircraft carriers immediately engaged it, one or two planes passed over from the carriers, the raider being far away to the west and out of sight except for flashes from its guns. For about twenty minutes the western horizon was lit by gun flashes which disappeared to the north-west, after which all that could be heard or seen of the battle was a rumbling which got fainter and fainter. A misty rain had obscured everything by now and the convoy had split up - nothing at all could be seen except for sea and mist. During the latter part of the engagement we had been at boat stations but about 7.40 a.m. we went below and had breakfast which was excellent, consisting of bacon and eggs, porridge and marmalade. On going on deck about 10.30 we discovered we were heading east and had found some of the convoy again, escorted by two of the small escort vessels. A storm and high sea had been in full force throughout the morning which, if anything, increased during the day until, by evening, it had reached pretty hefty proportions. We had an excellent dinner, pork and Christmas pudding, also decent soup, which was very acceptable considering some of the stuff we've had. Did two hours in the funnel in the afternoon and then had tea, quite good again! (At dinner, the officers made us a present of 50 cigarettes and some beer, very decent of them). Played pontoon in the evening and went to bed at 10 p.m. - storm still very strong.

Thursday, 26th December

On waking, discovered the escort had completely disappeared - twelve ships left now. Sea still pretty rough with considerable wind, this quite warm. We moved south all day but didn't see the sun at all except for about half an hour in the afternoon. Very uneventful day, it drizzled nearly all the time, apart from that nothing of interest occurred. Wind abated somewhat towards the evening. Slept on deck at night.

Friday. 27th December
All alone when we woke - no ships in sight. Picked up with three more ships about 9 a.m. Wind still high but sea calmer. Sky broken up. Was mess orderly during the day, moved east all day. Rained slightly in the afternoon, wrote a letter in the evening. Slept on deck at night.

Saturday, 28th December
Woke up about 6 a.m. and was treated to the most magnificent sunrise I have ever seen - the sky was covered with all kinds of high cloud stretching away to the far distance. These were flecked with red, yellow, gold, blue, green, pink and every other colour of the rainbow. The day was very warm and the weather was very much like a late April or early May day in England. About 9 a.m. we were joined by a cruiser which eventually disappeared. Other members of the convoy arrived later in the morning and we steamed round in circles waiting for them to come up. When this was accomplished we sailed south with a slight western tendency. After dinner we were joined by a cruiser, probably of the Dorsetshire class and a modern aircraft carrier, probably the 'Ark Royal'. During the afternoon we saw a large number of aircraft, both Albacores and Fulmars, taking off and landing on the carrier. They also dropped a number of smoke bombs on the water, it was quite an interesting spectacle. This was the first time I had seen the redoubtable Fulmar flying - it looks a very nice machine indeed. Slept on deck at night.

Sunday, 29th December
Rose early - had a very good night. The weather was warm throughout the day and the sun was definitely warmer and higher in the sky than ever before on the journey. All the convoy was still with us and we zigzagged nearly all day, maintaining a southwesterley direction, why, the Lord only knows. I'm afraid this journey will take a lot longer than the three weeks originally forecast, it will probably be nearer five weeks. Did two hours in the funnel as usual - it was very pleasant up there. An Admiralty communiqué issued in the evening read as follows:

Atlantic Raider Escapes Navy Christmas Day Attack On Convoy

Early on Christmas Day a heavy German surface raider attacked a British convoy in the North Atlantic. Several shells were fired at the convoy and one ship sustained slight damage. The raider was immediately attacked by the Naval escort and made off under cover of a low mist. Before the action was broken off at least one shell was seen to hit the raider amidships. One of our cruisers sustained slight damage and five casualties.

Shortly after the engagement an enemy ship of 8000 tons, believed to be supplying the raider, was intercepted. It was immediately set on fire by the crew and was sunk by our warships.

We also discovered from the Chief Wireless Operator that the 'Rangitiki' was straddled by shells, one each side. Slept on deck at night.

Monday, 30th December
The clock had been put on one hour during the night - we were now only two hours behind British time. The air was very mild in the morning and the sea very calm, as it had been during the past two days. All the ships were still with the convoy including the carrier and the cruiser. The sun was very hot during the day with very little cloud - the sun was very high in the sky at noon, showing our approach to the Equator. Spent the morning sunbathing on the top deck and the afternoon in the funnel. During our sojourn in the funnel a New Zealand first lieutenant gave us a bit of a lecture on the Bren gun and let us take it to pieces. Throughout the day aircraft from the carrier buzzed all over the sky, carrying both bombs and depth charges - they are very good pilots and do a lot of low flying. We zigzagged all day, the general direction being south. The night was warm and the stars were very bright - all the constellations are in the wrong places and the Plough has almost gone. Slept on deck at night.

Thursday, 31st December (New Years Eve)
A very fine day, very warm indeed. Spent the morning sunbathing on the deck, very little else to do. Another cruiser, identical to the one which has been with us for the past few days, joined us during the morning - they are of the County or London classes. The old 'Costa Rica', which had been missing since Boxing Day, arrived in the afternoon. There has been a lot of speculation during the past few days as to where we are - I think we have passed Freetown but can't be at all sure, the sun is very high in the sky which seems to bear out that belief. During the two hours in the funnel I spent my time trying to identify other ships in the convoy. The results so far are as follows:

'Costa Rica' two funnels, passenger

'City of Derby' grey, single funnel, cargo

'Settler' Liverpool one funnel, cargo

'Delane' French one funnel, blue superstructure

'Elizabethville' Belgian one funnel.

There was now a total of seventeen ships in the convoy with three naval craft. After the two hours in the funnel we changed into tropical kit - a welcome change. Slept on deck at night.

Wednesday, 1st January 1941 (New Years Day)
Rather a dull day, a little colder than usual. The sea still very calm, and the wind not very strong. Very little of importance occurred during the day, we played deck games in the morning and again in the evening. From orders which appeared in the afternoon it would

seem that we have not yet reached the latitude of Sierra Leone - I hope this is incorrect as it will mean another three weeks on this rat-trap. In the evening we went up to the sergeants bar and slept on deck later on.

Thursday, 2nd January (Mother's birthday)
Woke up at 6.30 a.m. - the weather showed promise of a fine day to come, a promise which was fulfilled. It was hot in the morning and boiling in the afternoon - the sun is getting high in the sky and

seemed hotter than an English summer day. I did my two hours in the funnel from 8 to 10 a.m.in place of Alec who was mess orderly. Played deck quoits in the morning and spent the afternoon sunbathing. About 4 p.m. we were joined by a destroyer which came from the northwest at a terrific speed. In the afternoon Walrus flying boats from the cruisers were catapulted into the air and buzzed around for quite a time,. One of them came very close to the 'Rangitiki'- all these pilots seem to make a point of coming as close to this ship as possible - they must know we are on board! At tea-time we had to take a dose of quinine as a precaution against malaria - it is awful stuff to take, the taste sticks for a long time. The sea has been calm again all day - just small waves rippling the surface. This is our fourteenth day out of sight of land - I shall be glad to see a bit of earth again. During the day we had our first sight of flying fish - they are funny things, rather like aeroplanes and go terrific distances without going into the water. The night was very fine, the air mild and there was a new moon - I stayed up on deck talking to Angus till about 8 p.m. before going to bed on the top deck.

Friday, 3rd January

Was rudely awoken in the morning by showers of water from the boat deck - the crew had started hosing it and some of our chaps got wet. I was lucky, it all missed me. Another destroyer has joined us during the night, making a total of two. The weather was very hot during the day, hotter than I have ever known it before and I am getting quite sunburnt. Awnings were erected over the open decks in the morning and there was plenty of shade. The sea is, if anything, a little calmer and a beautiful blue colour - I've never seen it like this before. Spent the morning lounging about on deck and the afternoon in the funnel. It was very hot up there. Whilst in the funnel, another aircraft carrier, I think it is the 'Furious' and a rakish looking light cruiser joined us - our escort now consists of two carriers 'Furious' and 'Illustrious' (not the 'Ark Royal'), three cruisers, one light and two heavy, and two destroyers. Tea brought the usual dose of quinine and afterwards we went on deck - about seven o'clock some rumbles and booms came from the west. I've no idea what it was but it sounded pretty big and we thought for a moment we had run into another raider, but it is really all a mystery. Slept on deck at night - very warm. Direction generally south east during the day.

Saturday 4th January

The sea was terrifically calm this morning, just like a mirror, we must be in the famous 'doldrums'. Our course has been generally south east for the past few days, zig-zagging all the time, and it was expected that we would be in Freetown today or tomorrow, but no land had been seen by 9 o'clock in the morning. During the morning the sun became hotter and hotter until at midday it was a good deal hotter than the day before. Topees were worn by everyone and, by jove!, we needed them. I did nothing all morning, just sat and read in the shade. In the afternoon I went into the funnel and was properly roasted for two hours. The evening was once again very fine and I didn't go down at all except for my bedding. Slept on the boat deck again (During the day we saw a number of big white fish which jumped out of the water, and also a school of porpoises in the afternoon. A gunboat joined us in the afternoon, probably to escort us in).

Sunday, 5th January

At last we have sighted land - about 9.0 a.m. this morning we had our first view of Africa - the hills of Sierra Leone rising out of the sea. We had been out of sight of land for sixteen days and eighteen hours. We were escorted in by a gunboat and followed a buoyed channel which led through a boom of chains and very large canisters. Inside the boom there were about four dozen ships of all sizes, shapes and nationalities with quite a few naval craft - one or two destroyers, a few cruisers and the two carriers. Land was on the starboard side as we went in and consisted of beaches fringed with palm trees behind which the land rose steeply to a series of hills, one behind the other and all richly covered with vegetation. On this side, almost at the mouth of the estuary was a settlement consisting of a hundred or two houses rising up the hillside with a lighthouse on the point. On the port side the country was some distance away and was very flat with long yellow beaches backed by very green vegetation and palm trees. Further inside the estuary the only sign of land was a faint line in the distance - it may not have been very far away as the heat haze reduced visibility. On our way in, just outside the boom, we saw the masts and superstructure of a sunken ship protruding grotesquely out of the water. When we had anchored, a tanker called the 'Bassethound' laid alongside and commenced to pump water into our tanks and also numerous natives in canoes came up to try to

exchange fruit and odds and ends for clothing. They also dived over for money and anything else that was thrown to them. Their canoes were very frail affairs, long and thin, and they had to bail out frequently with scoops of wood. Their paddles were single bladed and shaped like a large spear head. They were very clever with the boats and could maneuver marvelously. Other natives were in sailing boats with sails of a triangular shape and they seemed to get along very well. The heat was terrific all day and, as I was mess orderly, it was pretty awful down below, rather like a Turkish Bath. About four o'clock the tanker left, appreciably higher in the water. After tea we had our usual dose of quinine and had to stay below for the rest of the night owing to the danger of malaria from mosquito bites - it was a bit like the Black Hole of Calcutta!

Monday, 6th January

Woke about 6.0 a.m. and had a bath to remove the effects of the night which had been very restless as far as I was concerned - I perspired terrifically. Did nothing all morning except read and watch the natives as they came in their canoes to dive for pennies and also to attempt to barter goods in the form of fruit and baskets for old clothing. The divers were exceptionally good and sometimes disappeared for quite long periods. One funny thing I noticed about them was that the soles of their feet were quite light coloured. In the morning an oil tanker, the 'Inverrosa', came alongside to fuel the ship - she was quite a large-sized vessel, registered in London. In the afternoon I did my usual trick in the funnel - it was terrifically hot. The tanker left about 4.30 p.m. and, after having tea, plus quinine, we went on deck until 5.30 p.m., when we had to go below for the night. It was steaming hot down below and some of the New Zealanders staged a minor revolt and went on deck for the night - they got away with it.

Tuesday, 7th January

Slept a little better than the previous night and had a bath on waking. Spent the morning reading and watching the natives. Some of the sergeants (army) tried to soak the negroes with a hose but the New Zealanders didn't like this, so they fixed up another hose on the deck above and wet the sergeants, it served them right. During the day a lot of dhows, with triangular sails, came from the far side up river - it must have been market day. At lunchtime, a cargo boat, the 'Grypevale' of Glasgow came alongside and tied up, for what reason I don't know. She was flying the flag of Sierra Leone, which is a blue flag with a Union Jack in the top left hand corner and a horizontal white anchor in the blue ground. Spent the usual two hours in the funnel - it wasn't quite so hot as the day before. After tea (with quinine) we went on deck and watched a crowd of more prosperous negroes in large rowing boats bringing sack after sack of oranges and bananas to the ship - they had obviously done a bit of good business. All the natives were very good tempered and always smiling. I felt rather sorry for them though, especially when the hose was turned on them, still this only happened twice as public feeling was made evident very quickly. They are probably a lot of unmitigated rascals but they are really little better than children. However they are happy which is more than a lot of Europeans can say. At night we were allowed to open the portholes, provided they were Muslim covered, which improved things a lot.

Wednesday, 8th January

Spent a pretty rotten night and had a bath in the morning. The 'Grypevale', which had been tied up to us all night, moved away about 6.30 a.m. There had been rumours to the effect that we would leave about 5.30 a.m. but we showed no signs of moving. Spent the morning reading and, to our immense relief, the convoy began to move out one by one about 11 o'clock - we actually started to move about noon and by 1 o'clock were outside the boom and formed up as a convoy. Our escort consisted originally of two small gunboats and two light patrol vessels, but this was soon augmented by a carrier, the modern one, a County Class cruiser (one of our previous escort), and a rakish light cruiser. After a lot of messing about we finally settled down to a south-westerly course. We had no quinine after tea which was a relief. Spent the evening on deck and slept there afterwards (one thing which was rather peculiar was the fact that within one hour of leaving the boom we were out of sight of land, even from the funnel top).

Thursday 9th January

Had a much better night's sleep. We were now going south-east, complete with the usual zigzags which had continued all the way from Freetown. The sun was hotter today and we had a hose down on the well deck, spent the rest of the morning reading. The 'Costa Rica', which was still in Sierra Leone when we left, caught us up about 11 o'clock. About lunchtime, another County class cruiser joined us, and we now had a convoy of twenty one ships (including one naval supply ship) and a naval escort of ten vessels, the carrier, three cruisers, three destroyers and three gunboats. The sun was hot in the afternoon but it was quite pleasant up there. After tea we went on deck - the sky clouded over and looked very threatening but it didn't rain. Slept on deck at night.

Friday 10th January

On waking up, discovered we had a third County class cruiser with us, but this turned out to be a change of escort. The new cruiser stayed with us but the carrier, two cruisers and one destroyer left us. The weather was not too hot in the morning and there was a lot of cloud about - a cool breeze was very refreshing and a pleasant change. Our escort was now two cruisers (one light, one heavy) and four escort vessels. Spent the morning reading and the afternoon in the funnel - it was a little hotter then. Went on deck after tea and stayed there for the night. Just after tea we met a cargo boat going the other way - it looked very strange to see it. The clock was advanced fifteen minutes in the evening. (We should have crossed the line today sometime and during the night at the latest).

Saturday 11th January

We still had the same escort with us on waking. The weather was still cloudy and the sea a little more choppy than the previous day. After a bedding inspection in the morning I spent the rest of the morning reading with the exception of twenty minutes P.T. After lunch went on deck and did some more reading as aircraft spotting in the funnel has been discontinued, presumably as we are out of range of enemy aircraft of all types. We officially crossed the line at 2.0 p.m. so I was a bit out in my calculations - lot of the officers and sergeants were hosed on the top deck. After tea I spent two hours guarding the hose in the sergeants mess from 6 to 8 p.m. Slept on deck - it was a beautiful night with a very bright moon. The engines broke down again in the afternoon but soon recovered.

Sunday 12th January

Should have been on guard at the hydrant but didn't get there until 6.20 a.m. owing to oversleeping. The fact that the clock had been advanced three-quarters of an hour was probably the cause. We were still going south east and zig-zagging, the procedure we have adopted since leaving Freetown. After breakfast we stopped zig-zagging and went on a straight course in a south east direction. The destroyer escort had left during the night leaving only the two cruisers which took up position one behind and the other well ahead. In the afternoon we watched some boxing on 'A' deck - it was quite good and one bout, in which four people took part, was very amusing. Stayed on deck after tea - the evening was marvelous, a glorious red sunset filled the western sky. At night the moon was almost full, there was a very warm breeze from the east and the sea looked marvelous. Slept on deck at night.

Monday 13th January

The weather was again hot, but not really as warm as I expected for this part of the world. Spent the morning reading on deck, there is very little else to do these days. The sun was nearly vertical at mid-day and exceptionally hot when not obscured by cloud. Some of us dodged P.T. in the morning and had to do extra P.T. in the afternoon. Spent the afternoon reading and sunbathing on deck - I am getting quite brown, particularly arms, legs and face. After tea went on deck for a while then went below and played nap before going on deck to sleep. The night was again very beautiful and warm.

Tuesday 14th January

Very little of importance occurred during the day except during the afternoon when the sun shone and warmed things up a lot. The air round here is a lot cooler than in Sierra Leone and much more bearable. The sea is a glorious blue - better than anything visible in British waters; there are no flying fish about nowadays - I wonder where they have all gone to? Was mess orderly during the day so

spent the morning down below. During the afternoon sunbathed on 'A' deck- a large number of sparks flew out of the funnel in the evening and for a moment we thought it was on fire but it went out. The night was again very beautiful. Slept on deck.

Wednesday,15th January

The sky was rather overcast in the early morning and from the position of the sun we were going south-south-east. The day was again completely uneventful. After breakfast we paraded and had P.T., spending the rest of the morning reading on deck. The weather was quite cool all day with a lot of cloud, quite the opposite to what I expected as we approached the sun. After parade in the afternoon I read until teatime and then did some boxing afterwards. Played nap down below before going on deck to sleep.

Thursday, 16th January

The night was cold and a high wind made the morning seem quite arctic. The sky was again very cloudy throughout the day but the sun shone occasionally and it's rays were very hot. I was on deck fatigue during the day and missed all parades except the first. After this parade I went on 'A' deck and did nothing all morning except read a book on top of the winch-house. After dinner I swept a bit of 'A' deck twice in an hour and spent the rest of the time talking to 'Tiny', a 6'6" New Zealander. He is a very nice chap. Played cards after tea until bedtime, pretty disastrous! The sky was still cloudy at night but the moon's rays shone through, making a marvelous sight on the sea.

Friday 17th January

The night was not too warm and at 6 o'clock the sun was quite high in the sky (it is time the clock was put on as we are moving further east). Our course is somewhere between SSE and SE and our speed is supposed to be eleven knots. After breakfast we had P.T. and then a lecture on airmanship - the weather is still not too warm, definitely not up to tropical standards. After lunch we had another lecture on airmanship and spent the rest of the afternoon reading. In the evening I played cards below - did a little better. On going on deck discovered it was raining - not hard, more drizzle than anything.. Moon rose at 10 o'clock.

Saturday 18th January

The clock was put on seventy minutes during the night. It was cold and rather wet on deck before breakfast. After breakfast we had P.T. and spent the remainder of the morning watching the boxing competition and playing quoits. We were still traveling SE and the sun was directly overhead and very hot. After dinner we watched further boxing and a Torquay chap called Tweedie enhanced our reputation by knocking out an Army chap (heavyweight) in about a minute. Played cards after tea, the night was very starry and not too cold. Slept well. Just before going to sleep noticed a number of regular flashes on the eastern horizon - I wonder if they belong to a lighthouse on the coast?

Sunday 19th January

The morning was misty early on - noticed a black sea bird skimming the waves just after breakfast. This bears out our supposition that we are near land. The weather was not very warm during the day and the sea became a little rougher, the ship was pitching quite considerably by the evening. I was on deck fatigue and after doing a little sweeping on 'A' deck went below to write letter until dinnertime. After dinner spent the first hour or two reading before doing a little more sweeping (very little!). A popular rumour stated that we were now off Capetown and due in Durban on Thursday (I am very skeptical), we are still traveling SSE. Went on deck after tea and saw my first albatross. It is a very large bird with a white body and long narrow brown wings; it is only seen in the Southern Hemisphere. When flying it rarely appears to flap its wings but glides on the wind - this is the bird mentioned in 'The Ancient Mariner'. We also saw a terrific school of dolphins swimming parallel to us between the 'Rangitiki' and the 'Delane' - they all come out of the water together and caused a terrific scurry of foam. Played cards on deck in the evening. The night was very starry but I still can't find the Southern Cross. I expect it is in view somewhere. Slept on deck as usual.

Monday 20th January

The sea was still very choppy and the wind quite cold. After breakfast we went on deck and heard some booms in the distance, we ran to the rail and saw the light cruiser firing shells. We could see the flash from the gun muzzle, the puff of smoke and then the boom came about ten seconds later. The shells could be seen causing great waterspouts near the large cruiser which was putting up a cloud of smoke - I think it was only a practice, it really couldn't have been anything else. The middle of the day was terribly hot when out of the wind - the sun beat down and scorched everything. We had tug-of-war heats in the morning. The German wireless announced that a convoy of three cargo boats and a troopship, the New Zealand 'Rangitiki' had been sunk. It shows they know all about us but it also shows what liars they are. The afternoon was still very hot and I spent it sunbathing on 'A' deck. After tea we had a V.D. Lecture from the M.O. and then played cards until about 9 o'clock. Slept on deck again, starry night.

Tuesday 21st January

The sea was calmer during the day but still high enough to make the ship pitch a little. A third cruiser of the three funneled 'County' class joined us after breakfast. Just about this time I saw a large fish with a grey white belly and curved mouth swimming about ten feet from the starboard side. It was about fifteen feet long and I am pretty certain it was a shark. The P.T. Competition took place in the morning and the RAF won it. The day was again very hot and I did some sunbathing. About 4 o'clock an Anson flew round us - the first connection with South Africa and a very pleasant sight indeed. After tea we has a bit of a rag and played a sort of Rugby football on deck - about half a dozen life jackets, a box and a trolley went overboard. We had been moving SE all day but changed course twice in the evening until we were moving almost NE - we must be in the Indian Ocean now. Stayed down below until 9 o'clock and then went on deck to sleep. The clock was advanced one hour during the night.

Wednesday 22nd January

There was a very heavy following sea during the day and the ship yawed, rolled and pitched violently - the bow and the stern made circles in opposite directions all the time. We were now moving NE, the sun was very hot until about 4 o'clock and the awnings, which were taken down a week ago, were again erected. Spent the morning sunbathing and reading and after dinner we had a Morse examination, it was very easy and I got 100%. Had another game of football on 'B' deck in the evening - another lifebelt went overboard. Stayed on deck and listened to the music before going to sleep. We now seemed to be moving East.

Thursday 23rd January

We were still moving East when we awoke and the sun rose very early, about 5 a.m. We were now well into the Indian Ocean and the sea had become a lot calmer since passing the Cape, although there was still a fairly large swell. We were held up yesterday by adverse currents and it isn't expected that we shall arrive before Saturday. After parade we spent the morning getting our webbing out of the forward hold, drawing out our deep sea kitbags and repacking the bags. The sun was hotter today, nearly as hot as Freetown but nothing so humid. In the afternoon I sunbathed on the boom until teatime, the sun still being very hot. About 4 p.m. we turned NE, it looked as though we were running parallel to the coast. After tea we watched a concert on 'A' deck, it was very good indeed. A Maori Haka team (or war dance) gave a genuine display of war dances and also sang some Maori songs, the last being a farewell song in our honour - it was beautiful, I should like to know the words. (NOTE: this haunting melody was taken up later in the war in the UK and became a huge hit under the title of 'Now is the hour for us to say goodbye'- I have never forgotten sitting under the stars that night listening to those beautiful Polynesian voices singing that song, it was the ultimate in nostalgia). The light cruiser disappeared sometime during the day, it probably went to Simonstown, the naval base near Capetown. There was a marvelous sunset and I did some washing before going on deck to sleep. (I forgot - we had an Airmanship examination in the early afternoon - very easy!)

Friday 24th January

We were traveling NNE in the early morning and held the course during the day. After breakfast we paraded and I spent the morning sunbathing and watching the sports prize-giving on 'A' deck, it was again very hot indeed. After dinner we paraded in full shore kit - shorts, stockings, shoes etc, they looked very smart. At 3 p.m.we drew some pay, I had £3.3.0. We have now been out of sight of land for sixteen days, almost as long as the first part of the voyage. Went below after drawing pay and did a little packing as we should be landing tomorrow. An Anson flew round for quite a time just before tea. The boat slowed down considerably in the late afternoon and we just idled along. After tea we had a sing-song before turning in. About nine o'clock there were a series of lightning flashes in the west and it started to spot with rain.

Saturday 25th January

Woke up about 3 a.m. and saw the lights of Durban stretching along the coast - a marvelous sight, rather like Mecca to the pilgrim. We had been out of sight of land for 16 days and 12 hours approximately, almost as long as the first half of the journey. It started to rain again so I went below about 5.30. The boat moved into the slight bay just before breakfast and we could see the skyline of Durban - it seemed to be very American, all skyscrapers. We moored about 9 a.m., it was still raining slightly but wasn't really unpleasant. We spent the morning getting straightened up down below ready to go ashore. Paraded at 2 p.m and went ashore after Tony has said goodbye to us - he went off on the 5 p.m. train, where to, I've no idea. It was marvelous to feel dry ground beneath my feet again, it was the first time for 39days 18 hours. All the buses were free and we had a great time, we wandered about and admired the city - it is undoubtedly the finest city I have ever seen and the roads are wonderfully set out, most of them take from four to six lanes of traffic. The people made a great fuss of us. A man and his wife bought Alex and I some cider in the Esplanade Hotel and shortly afterwards five of us (Ken Rolls, Michael Rutherford, Harold Alexander, Mike Bowley and I) were picked up by a man, his wife and two daughters in a large Hudson.(Shortly before this we all had tea in the Playhouse, a marvelous large airy cafe full of big beams and dark paneling - all the waiters were Hindus). The Wakefields (the people in the car) took us all over the place and showed us the surroundings of the city. Most of the better residential people live on the higher ground at the back of the town and we went all round there as they live up there. (The skyscrapers on the sea front are actually tall blocks of ultra-modern flats and they looked very attractive). After the ride we went back to their house for dinner, it was very good, the best meal I have had since leaving home. Later on we went out in the car to the Amusement Park, then to the Playhouse again and then they drove us back to the ship just in time for us to get in before twelve. Durban was absolutely full of troops, there were South African troops of all kinds, S.A.A.F., Australians (chaps who had jumped ship from the previous convoy and now took our places on the 'Rangitiki'), New Zealanders, Free French army (some with pill box hats, others with flowing red capes), French navy, British Navy, R.A.F., and some W.A.T.S,- quite a collection. The rickshaw boys were very queerly dressed and quite a number of blokes went in them but I didn't. It was raining again during the evening but didn't affect us much. Slept on deck again, covered by deck chairs.

Sunday 26th January

Got up early and had breakfast at seven; handed in our mess gear and hammocks before 8 o'clock and then spent the rest of the morning until eleven unloading kit and waiting to disembark. It was still raining when we finally said 'Goodbye' to the 'Rangitiki' and we were taken in lorries to Durban Dock station - the people gave us a great time, loaded us up with fruit of all kinds, books, tea, coffee, foodstuffs, cigarettes, matches, milk, lemonade and every sort of food possible and to crown it all, we were given a parcel containing a towel, face cloth, soap, first aid kit and other useful things. This was all voluntary and was typical of the generousness of these people - some of the people at home should see this, it would make them buck their ideas up! We got on the train with 300 Air Force chaps off the 'Orbita' - the carriages were good and there was nothing to complain about. We left about 1 p.m. and were hauled by an electric engine. The people of Durban waved and cheered to us as we passed through the town and in some places nearly every window in the large blocks of flats had someone waving through it. The country for about twenty miles outside Durban was very hilly and very pretty - the train bent round and round like a snake. All this part was quite wooded and there were quite a few beautiful waterfalls. The land straightened itself out a little later on and the rest of the day was uneventful. We arrived at Ladysmith about 8 p.m. Slept very well in the bunk.

Monday 27th January
We were just passing through a place called Heidelburg when I woke up about 6 a.m. The country was pretty flat now and we traveled on at a pretty good speed, arriving in Johannesburg about 9 a.m. - there are a terrific lot of slag heaps looking like yellow sandstone scattered about the place and they rather ruin the landscape. We left about 10 a.m. and continued through the plains which gradually became sparser until by the time we arrived in Mafeking (5 p.m.) they were nothing more than scrub. The people of Mafeking gave us a terrific welcome and I think the whole white population turned out to greet us but we couldn't stay as the train was more than an hour late. The people of Zeerust, a very small town a little further back, also made a great fuss of us - grapes, peaches, bananas, food, lemonade etc - it is terribly good of them. We continued through this scrub, which doesn't seem to be any good to anyone, all the evening - it consists of sandy soil, very little grass and small stunted trees. Slept well again.

Tuesday 28th January
Still going through the scrub - it is terribly lonely, no houses for miles on end. We continued via Figtree and Plumtree and the land got a little greener but still scrub as we approached Bulawayo. We arrived there about 4 p.m. and then went on to Induna arriving about 5 p.m. - our journey is at last over. Our billets were excellent, two to a room, clean sheets, cupboards, tables and good food.

NOTE : This is the end of the diary I kept since leaving the U.K. and I have made no attempt to edit it as I thought it better to leave it untouched as it represents the thoughts of an eighteen year old abroad for the first time.

When we settled in at Induna, we were the first course of pupil pilots at the station, the ground crew having traveled out in the same convoy on the 'Orbita'. It was decided that there were too many pupils for the course and after a week six of us were posted down to Kumalo near Bulawayo for onward posting to No 25 E.F.T.S. at Belvedere on the outskirts of Salisbury, the capital of Southern Rhodesia.

No 25 E.F.T.S. Belvedere
We arrived at Belvedere on 13th February 1941. It was an old, formerly private, airfield right in the suburbs of Salisbury and the accommodation was excellent. We lived in round thatched huts called rondavels and the pilots mess was a very attractive building constructed very much in Cape Dutch style. see photographs)

We started flying the following day so my first flight ever was on February 14th, St. Valentines Day in a Tiger Moth, a small single-engined biplane.. As the weather was very hot during the day, resulting in bumpy flying conditions not suitable for learner pilots, all flying took place between first light, 6 o'clock and 10 a.m., the rest of the day being taken up by lectures. We were allocated a specific instructor - we had been warned by the previous course that Flt. Lieutenant Hensman was the one to be avoided as he was a very hard man and failed more than he passed. To my horror I discovered that I had drawn the short straw and he was to be my instructor. However, I didn't find him too bad and, whilst he was rather taciturn, he was a good instructor.

One thing insisted upon was that, before flying, we had to drink a mug of hot sweet tea and eat two slices of toast. At half past five in the morning this took a bit of stomaching but I suppose it made sense. We flew every day with no weekend breaks and I really enjoyed the flying - it was all that I had expected it to be. On 27th February I did forty minutes dual with Hensman and when we landed he handed me over to a Sgt. Schofield. I wondered whether this was a check to confirm that I had failed as Hensman had given me no hints as to my progress or lack of it. Schofield asked me to do a take-off, circuit and landing and we taxied back to the dispersal. He then climbed out of the front seat, taking the joystick with him and told me to do a circuit on my own. It is difficult to describe my feelings

as I took off on my own for the first time, but I can remember singing 'O sweet mystery of life at last I've found you' at the top of my voice all the way round - it was a good job nobody could hear me as my singing voice left a lot to be desired! I had done nine and a half hours dual instruction and was actually the first on the course to go solo which surprised me as, talking to the other pupils earlier in the week, I had the feeling that I was lagging behind them.

We continued flying and taking lectures almost without a break until March 28th with very little time off, although we managed to go into Salisbury a couple of times. It was a very interesting town, much smaller than I had expected, and very colonial with wide streets built on a grid system. The only place I can remember is Meikles Hotel which I think is still there.

We left Salisbury for Kumalo on 1st April and I had a total of 26 hours dual and 25 hours solo in my logbook.

No 21 S. F.T.S. Kumalo, Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia

Kumalo was a peacetime airfield on the outskirts of Bulawayo and, like Belvedere, grass with no tarmac runways. Accommodation was good in wooden huts and the food and facilities excellent. The aircraft we were to train on were Airspeed Oxfords, a twin engined low wing monoplane with retractable undercarriage. I started dual on April 7th and, on April 12th, after seven hours instruction, went solo - in this case I was one of the last to go, for some reason I found the Oxford more difficult, perhaps it was the complexity of the controls compared to the Tiger Moth. However, I made it eventually.

For the next three months we practised all the arts of war in the air, gunnery, bombing, formation flying, navigation both by day and night as well as single engined flying (a must!) and forced landings. It was a very good course and at the end of it we were reasonably proficient although how we would have coped in the UK with the blackout and poor weather is another matter. The weather in Rhodesia was the same every day, blue skies with little fluffy clouds and gentle breezes, perfect flying weather, and at night, with great visibility and brightly lit towns there was no danger of getting lost. As the Oxford really needed a crew of two, we flew in pairs and my co-pilot was a boy from the Bolton area, Harry Nuttall. We spent the whole course together but I don't know what happened to him afterwards and we lost touch completely, which was a pity - I often wonder if he survived the war.

Whilst at Kumalo we were given three long weekend leaves and went on the train overnight to Victoria Falls, arriving about six in the morning. It was a wonderful experience and we saw the Zambesi in flood, normal and in the dry - the difference between the river in flood and in the dry was unbelievable. On the first two occasions we stayed at the Victoria Falls Hotel which was quite an experience as it was a throwback to the days of colonial empire with wonderful food, servants everywhere and was surprisingly reasonable in price. On the last visit, we went a little further and crossed into Northern Rhodesia and stayed in the North Western Hotel in Livingstone. The hotel was a single storey building, built in a square with a veranda all round and a garden in the middle - very much an African type of construction.

We finished the course at Kumalo on 1st July and I was made sergeant and received my wings - probably the proudest day of my life to date. I had now flown 62 hours as first pilot on Oxfords which, added to the 25 hours on Tigers, gave me a total of 87 hours.

We left Bulawayo by train on the morning of July 10th - the train was reminiscent of those shown in the films of the Wild West, two-bedded compartments with an open platform at the end of each coach. I shared a compartment with Ben Boyd, an Irish sergeant pilot who had been training as a medical student at Trinity College, Dublin before deciding to join the RAF. He didn't need to, Ireland was not even in the war. All day long we meandered through the featureless bush of Bechuanaland and

arrived in Johannesburg early on the morning of 11th July. We had the day at our leisure in Jo'burg as the train did not leave for Cape Province until 9 p.m. so we decided to hit the town and spent most of the time in various bars. By the time 9 o'clock arrived we had drunk rather more South African wine than we should have done and fell into the train ready to sleep it off. When I woke up in the morning, there was no sign of Ben so I checked with all the other pilots and nobody had seen him. As he was definitely in the compartment when we left Jo'burg we were very worried and, at the next stop, reported him missing. We thought he must have fallen off the train as his tunic was still in the compartment and he couldn't go far without it. The mystery was solved when we arrived at our next posting, George in Cape Province, the next morning. Apparently the last coach in the train was a slip coach which was detached from the main train as it was going along. When the main train passed the junction, the points were switched and the coach gradually slowed down and stopped on the branch line where it was picked up by an engine and continued on its way to a place called Bethleham, the end of its journey. Apparently Ben had got up in the night to go to the toilet, couldn't find the compartment again and decided to sleep in an empty one he found, unfortunately in the slip coach! There was only one train a week from Johannesburg to George so he had to go back to Jo'burg and arrived a week late, not exactly at the top of the popularity stakes as far as the powers-that-be were concerned.

However, no further action was taken and he joined the course having missed the first week.

No. 1 School of General Reconnaissance George, South Africa

We arrived in George on 12th July for a three month course in General Reconnaissance. George is about half way along the coast of Southern Africa between Capetown and Port Elizabeth and was, at that time, the headquarters of a very right wing party called the Ossewa Brandwag. Not all South Africans were sympathetic to the Allied cause, not having forgiven Britain for the Boer War, and the O.B. were very pro-German which could have caused problems with us but, apart from not being allowed out at night unless in sizeable parties, we had no trouble. Perhaps the fact that the RAF played the town team at rugby fairly frequently helped to defuse the situation. There wasn't much to do in George itself except visit the local cinema, known for some obscure reason as the 'bioscope' - it was here that I experienced my first smoking ban, there was no smoking in the cinema, about fifty years ahead of its time!

The course was very interesting, concentrating mainly on navigation and at the end of it we were given our Second Class Navigators Certificate. The funny thing was that I didn't receive mine until the end of 1943 when it suddenly appeared in Italy from the Air Ministry. All the flying was done by staff pilots in Avro Ansons and we spent hours over the sea plotting courses and practising searches and other maritime exercises. Not very far from George was an area of exceptional beauty on the coast called the Wilderness which boasted two very good hotels, the Wilderness Hotel and the Fairy Knowe Hotel and we spent quite a number of weekends down there, it was a great change from service life as we had managed to acquire some civilian clothes and could lead a normal life for a change. Four of us also bought an old American car, an Auburn, from the course who left ahead of us, it cost all of £25, and we passed it on to a later course when we left for the same amount. We had a lot of fun in our time off and actually went up to Oudtshoorn in the Little Karroo on one occasion to see the ostrich farms for which the area was very famous. The road back was rather hairy, and, coming down the Drakensburg mountains, we had a front tyre blow out half way down the pass. Fortunately we weren't going very fast and had a spare so all was well.

I also got to know a family who lived in some style at a place called Mossel Bay just along the coast in the direction of Capetown and spent several weekends at their home - their hospitality was superb. It was here that I played my first round of golf, at Mossel Bay Golf Club - the first of many in my life!

However, all good things come to an end and on 4th October we had to pack up and travel to Capetown for a boat back to the UK. My stay in George had been most enjoyable, quite stress-free but there was a war on and it was time we joined in again.

Transit Camp, Capetown

We arrived in Capetown on 5th October and were billeted in the Transit Camp at Pollsmoor, on the racecourse at Newlands, in the shadow of Table Mountain. Capetown was a most attractive city and, as it was springtime, all the flowers were in bloom and the climate was marvelous. We had made friends with some nurses from Newlands Hospital and for the time of our stay were given a conducted tour of the whole area. One place that stays in my memory was the Del Monico restaurant which had a very high vaulted ceiling with imitation stars flashing against a black background - it is strange that I should remember that and not all the other popular features of Capetown. We were expecting to return to the UK on a Union Castle boat which did the trip in seventeen days unaccompanied, but when we arrived at the docks, the Union Castle boat was there, but we went past it to see a small cargo boat, the Henderson Line 'Sagaing' moored further down the quay - this was to be our home for the next seven weeks although we didn't know it at the time. However, I am getting ahead of myself as I kept a diary of the voyage and, as in the case of the 'Rangitiki', have copied it as it was written at the time.

The Voyage of the 'Sagaing'

Saturday, 11th October 1941
Still at Pollsmoor - up at 8.0 a.m. for usual parade Were told we had the day off so Bill and I went out in Louvain's car which she had lent us. Went to the hospital and picked up Louvain and Betty - they said we were to ring up camp immediately. We did so and were told to return at once. Louvain ran us down to the station (Mowbray) and we took the train to Retreat and arrived in camp at 11.30 a.m. Were cleared straight away and arrived in Capetown at 1.0 p.m. to be told to report at the Embarkation Office at 2.15 p.m. Ben, Ron, Bill and I went to the Del Monico and had a huge meal - the last in Capetown. Reported back at 2.15 p.m, changed to English money, the first I had seen for nine months and went on board the 'Sagaing' at 3.0 p.m. Very nice little boat, about 8000 tons, I should think. We are traveling second class in cabins, three to a cabin with stewards, cupboards, bedlights, fans, water laid on and mirrors - what a difference to the 'Rangitiki'. Severed connection with African soil at 5.0 p.m. and set sail for Trinidad. Apparently we are going to England via Trinidad and Halifax - what a trip! Had dinner at 6.0 p.m. with waiters, menus, five courses - marvelous, the food seems to be very good. South Africa, in the shape of Table Mountain, finally disappeared into the dusk at about 7.10 p.m.. I was very sorry to see it go, I have had a very happy time in South Africa. Went to bed about 8.0 p.m., the sea is quite rough but I haven't felt any ill effects so far. 8 p.m.- and I had a date with Louvain at 8.0 p.m., some chance of keeping it!

Sunday, 12th October
Woken up at 7.0 a.m. by steward with some hot tea and sandwiches - what a contrast to being woken at 6.0 a.m. by a shower of water as we were on the 'Rangitiki'. Had a bath and went to breakfast at 7.30. Sea still quite rough, the sun is shining and it is quite warm. We are going something like NW at about 8 - 10 knots. Changed into flannels - it does not matter what we wear on the boat. Weather became very hot during the day so I spent the whole day sunbathing on the top deck. We are apparently doing 14 knots, not 10 knots as I thought, and the official tonnage is 7958 tons. The sea is not very rough but the old boat is rolling all over the place - what she will do in the North Atlantic I hate to think. We are due in Trinidad about 1st November - quite a long time yet. Food is very good. Spent the evening talking to Wally and went to bed about 9.30 p.m.

Monday 13th October

Slept well, clock was retarded one hour during the night. Was up at 7.0 a.m., very nice day once more and we are still going NW. Weather became very hot during the day and so I alternated between sunbathing and putting photographs in my album all day. Went on watch on bridge from 8.0 p.m. to 10 p.m. - quite a pleasant two hours. We are still going approximately NW and our speed is 13 knots. Sea became much calmer towards the evening. We are not going to Trinidad but to St. Lucia and from there to some port in Virginia and then on the Halifax - quite a pleasure cruise.

Tuesday 14th October

Up at 7.0 a.m. - had a good breakfast. Spent the morning reading, sea quite calm and weather cloudy. Direction and speed of ship still about the same. Spent the afternoon sunbathing on deck and did some PT at 5.0 p.m. Went on watch from 6.0 p.m. to 8.0 p.m. In bed about 10 p.m. - slept well.

Wednesday 15th October

Up about 7.0 a.m. Weather hotter now, we must be getting near the tropics. The clock was retarded again during the night, we are now on G.M.T. Played deck tennis and sunbathed during the morning. Went on guard from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. - very hot spell. The sea is very calm these days and the ship is hardly rolling at all. Spent the evening reading and went to bed about 9.30 p.m. Slept very well.

Thursday 16th October

Up at usual time and had usual bath. Weather rather cloudy but very hot when the sun shines. The sea is very calm and we haven't seen a ship since leaving Capetown - it gives one some idea of the vastness of the South Atlantic, we shall probably be sailing for another fortnight before we sight land. Our course and speed are still the same but we are going to St.Lucia, not Trinidad. Spent the morning reading and went on guard from noon until 2 p.m. Spent the afternoon down below reading and played chess with Massey in the evening. Clocks back a further hour tonight.

Friday 17th October

Weather hot again but still cloudy. Sea very calm. Spent the morning playing deck games and went on guard from 10 a.m. till noon. Ship was sighted to south about 1 p.m. and we altered course away from it immediately - apparently no ships should have been sighted anywhere near here. Spent the afternoon on deck, I have become rather burnt, a little too much sun. Went into the smoke room with Wally after dinner and then slept on deck - slept very well.

Saturday 18th October

Very cloudy day, the sun hasn't shone much at all. Went on watch from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. - I'm afraid I read a book most of the time. Spent the rest of the morning reading in my cabin. Read all afternoon, there is nothing better to do. The ship's steering gear went wrong in the middle of the afternoon and we went right round in a circle - it's a good thing we were not in a convoy. Went down into the engine room and stokehold before dinner, it was ever so interesting, but was it hot! Slept on deck again - went to bed about 9.30.

Sunday 19th October

Up at 5.45 a.m. as I was on watch from 6 a.m. till 8 a.m. Weather quite cool and very cloudy with occasional rain even though we must be well in the tropics - quite unexpected on the whole. Read in my cabin most of the morning except for two lots of lifeboat drill. The ship did another accidental circle this morning, I only hope it isn't going to become a habit, it might be awkward later on. The sea has been very calm all day. Sighted another ship just after lunch and altered course to avoid it. Read all afternoon and evening. Went to bed about 8.30 p.m. Clocks retarded another hour.

Monday 20th October

Called at 2.45 and went on watch on the bridge from 3.0 a.m. to 5 a.m. Very cloudy all the time and some rain. Weather cleared after sunrise and became very hot. Stayed below all morning reading.

Wrote a letter in the afternoon and played a few games of chess. We did a series of very small zigzags at about 6 p.m. for no apparent reason. Talked to Ben for a while and then went on deck to sleep.

Tuesday 21st October

Up at 6 a.m. and did P.T. before breakfast - quite a good idea. Spent most of the morning reading except for going on to the bridge to see the navigation. We are going right across the Atlantic to about 45 miles from Bahia and then creeping right round the South American coast. At 8 a.m. today we were about 400 miles off the coast. Spent the afternoon down below and went on watch from 4 p.m. until 6 p.m. Went on the bridge after dinner with Wally and did some star identification. Went to bed on deck about 9.30 p.m. (Saw a whale spouting at the end of my watch - thought it was a sub!)

Wednesday 22nd October

Up at 6 a.m., sea still calm but with a little more wind than yesterday. Spent the morning sunbathing on the bridge from noon to 2 p.m. - sighted two ships about 1.45 p.m. and altered course to avoid them. We are now right amongst the coastal shipping. Spent the afternoon below. We passed within a mile or so of a large American liner going south - a very pleasant sight! It has a broad yellow funnel with two thin black bands and a blue diamond between them, it's name was 'Argentina'. When the sun set we were steering about NNE. Slept on deck.

Thursday 23rd October

Fine day, sea calm with little wind. Up at 6 a.m. and went on guard from 8 - 10 a.m. - very uneventful, didn't see a single ship. Apparently four were sighted in the early morning. Sunbathed till lunchtime, the sun is directly overhead now and very hot. Slept most of the afternoon. We have started to zigzag and our mean line of advance is forty miles off the Brazilian coast. Went on deck for a while after dinner - very pretty as there is a new moon. Slept on deck at night.

Friday 24th October

On watch from dawn to 6 a.m., so was up about 4.30 - very pleasant in the early morning. Only saw one ship, an oil tanker to the east. Spent the morning sunbathing and writing letters. We are now zigzagging in a north westerly direction so we must have rounded the corner of South America during the night. The sea is still very calm and the sun is very hot. Slept most of the afternoon and then went on deck after dinner to look at the stars. Went to bed about 10 p.m. and slept on deck.

Saturday 25th October

Got up at the usual time and spent the morning doing a jigsaw puzzle with Dai - one way of passing the time! Still traveling more or less NW, probable arrival at St. Lucia is next Friday. Weather not quite so hot today as we are traveling away from the sun. Read a book all afternoon. Some excitement caused when a ship was sighted ahead which immediately started going round in circles and doing very queer evolutions - it was flying a 'not under control' signal - we did nothing about it. Was on watch from 6 p.m. to 8.p.m., a very pleasant watch indeed. We 'crossed the line' at about 7.30 p.m.., I didn't see it! Played cards till about 11 p.m. and then slept on deck.

Sunday 26th October

Very hot day but a few clouds began to appear after lunch. Spent the morning sunbathing and writing letters. We gradually overtook a boat on the same track (NW) as ourselves and she turned out to be a Swede 'Anna Svenge'. Was on watch from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. Sky clouded over and we had some rain. Slept below at night owing to the wetness of the decks and didn't sleep too well, it was so hot.

Monday 27th October

Rather cloudy day again with quite a high wind - quite a lot of water came over the forward well deck. On watch from 10 a.m. to 12 noon, nothing happened. Saw a lot of flying fish, bigger than I have seen

before, they are about a foot long. Slept most of the afternoon and then played bucket quoits - reached the third round of the knockout competition. Played a game called 'Finance' in the evening and then slept on deck.

Tuesday 28th October
Rather cloudy again, but not much wind. Still going NW; we expect to arrive in St Lucia on Thursday. On watch from 6 - 8 a.m. - uneventful. Whilst I was on deck last night a ship passed about a quarter of a mile away showing no lights. Spent the morning reading in the cabin. Slept most of the afternoon and then read till dinnertime. Went on deck about 9.30 p.m. to sleep - a very bright moonlight night.

Wednesday 29th October
Overcast weather in the morning. We are expected to arrive in St. Lucia tonight. Spent the morning and afternoon reading. Saw the lights of Barbados to starboard about 7 p.m. Was on watch from 10 p.m. to midnight and spotted St. Lucia light at 11.09 p.m. Slept on deck.

Thursday 30th October
When I woke at 5.30 a.m. we were just arriving off Port Castries, the chief town of St.Lucia. Laid off until about 7.30 a.m. whilst two ships came out and then went into the harbour, piloted by a native pilot. The island is very hilly with no plains and the hills just run straight down into the sea. The vegetation is very tropical and luxuriant everywhere. Castries harbour is very small, shaped rather like a bottle with the town at the end, and what a town! Ramshackle old buildings and nothing but natives. We went alongside about 8.30 a.m. and immediately hundreds of natives materialized from nowhere with baskets. The ship started to coal up by means of these natives carrying baskets of coal on their heads up a narrow gangway (which they erected after much toil and trouble) and tipping the coal into the ship's bunkers. Nearly all the natives who did the coaling were women! They stood for ages queuing to get up the gangway with a huge basket of coal weighing at least a hundredweight on their heads and they kept it up until nearly midnight - were those women tough! Went ashore about 9 a.m. and had a look round the town accompanied by swarms of native boys - apparently we are the first RAF to visit the island. Saw very few whites, all the shop people being natives. Posted some letters and postcards at the Post Office - natives there too. An American Army plane kept flying over the town during the day, apparently from an Army base on the other side of the island. A seaplane base is being built near Port Castries for the US Navy and we saw a lot of the much-vaunted US Marines about. Had lunch on the boat and then took a boat across to the Vigi Club on the other side of the harbour. It was quite a nice place, it is the country club of the island and the visitors' book was very interesting - US Navy, US Army, Royal Navy, and people from all over the place, we were the first RAF to sign. Returned about 6 p.m. to the boat and then went to the Hotel St. Antoine for the evening - the view was wonderful, it is right on a hill overlooking the harbour and we could see miles, right across to Martinique. I also saw my first fireflies. Returned about 11 p.m. and went to bed.

Friday 31st October
Sailed from St. Lucia about 6 a.m. and went in a westerly direction Passed a Brazilian boat going in about 7 a.m. We could still see St. Lucia and Martinique until about 11 a.m. when they disappeared over the horizon. The weather was quite hot and the sea exceptionally calm all day. Read a book all afternoon and went on watch from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. We were going NW now, having altered course before lunch. Did a crossword for a while after dinner and went to bed on deck at 9 p.m.

Saturday 1st November
Still going NW - we are expected to pass through the straits between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico this evening. The weather is still warm and the sea exceptionally calm - in fact, the Caribbean is the calmest sea I have ever seen. Spent the morning writing and went on watch from noon to 2 p.m. We had sighted Puerto Rico to starboard at about 10.30 and we gradually approached from the south east until at 4 p.m. we were about 15 miles away and could see houses and trees - it is quite a large island. Saw some sharks in the sea about 4 p.m. - they followed the ship for a while. We

turned due north about 6 p.m. and went between the Dominican Republic on the port and Puerto Rico on the starboard. Weather became bad later on and we had some rain. Slept on deck, sea choppy.

Sunday 2nd November
Fine day with not much cloud. Was on watch from 8 - 10 a.m.- very uneventful. The sea had calmed down in the night and there was just a heavy swell all day. There has been a lot of seaweed in the sea - I wonder if it comes from the Sargossa Sea? Read a book most of the afternoon - no ships to be seen at all. Went to bed on deck about 8.30 p.m.

Monday 3rd November
Should have been on watch from dawn to 6 a.m. but dawn did not break till 5.45 a.m. so I didn't bother to get up . The sea was oily and glassy all day, hardly a ripple. Spent the morning reading and playing patience - it gets the time on! We started zigzagging again as an enemy submarine had been reported in the vicinity. Read most of the afternoon and sunbathed for a while. We seem to be moving north now. It was Dai's birthday so we had a drink in the bar in the evening. Went to bed about 11 p.m.

Tuesday 4th November
The sea was very calm all day, just like a mirror and we kept encountering large patches of seaweed throughout - a reminder that we are on the edge of the Sargossa Sea. Went more or less north all day without zigzags and saw quite a number of ships. Stayed on deck most of the day as the sun was shining and it was quite hot even though it was appreciably lower at midday. Went to bed about 9 p.m. and slept below.

Wednesday 5th November
Was on watch from 4 a.m. to 6 a.m.- it was quite warm and the sea was calm but, after I came off watch, the sky clouded over, the wind sprang up and it began to rain. Played deck games most of the morning on the shade deck - it continued to rain and became colder. Saw five oil tankers during the morning and we had to alter course for one about 11 a.m. The rain ceased about 4 p.m. and we arrived off Chesapeake lightship. We then altered course westwards and sighted the Virginian coast about 5.30 p.m. Carried on until 6.30 p.m. when we picked up the pilot and came into the bay, dropping anchor off the shore at 8 p.m. The clocks were retarded one hour on arriving to agree with American time. Very sorry we couldn't go ashore this evening - it is really annoying to be anchored within four hundred yards of the shore and be unable to land. Wrote a letter and then went to bed about 8.30 - down below.

Thursday 6th November
Up-anchored at 8.30 a.m. and continued up the roads to Newport News, arriving about 10 a.m. - there was a large bridge across the river further up. We tied up against a big coal wharf and commenced to coal up. As the ship had not been through the Customs we were not allowed to leave the dockside, but wandered about quite a bit. Stayed on deck till about 4 p.m. when it started to rain so we went below. Rained till about 8 p.m. - a lot of American girls came on board about 8.30 and we had a party - it was a pretty good effort. I got friendly with a civil servant called Olive Freeman from Clarksburg, West Virginia and spent most of the evening with her. All the girls were southerners and spoke with a glorious accent - the real Southern drawl that I thought only existed in the pictures. They left about midnight and we went to bed about 2 a.m.

Friday 7th November
Cast off at 9 a.m., the day was quite cold but very clear. As we went down the river aircraft of all kinds, destroyers, troopships, the cruiser 'Omaha' and lots of ack-ack could be seen - the Yanks seem to be getting ready for war. Arrived off Chesapeake light about noon and continued ESE till 10 p.m. when we turned NE. Saw quite a lot of ships during the day and the weather was cold with the

ship rolling all over the place, the good old Atlantic swell! Went on watch at 8 p.m. and 3 a.m. for an hour each time.

Saturday 8th November
Up at 7.30 and went on watch at 11 a.m. - saw one or two ships. The ship rolled very badly and plates wouldn't stay still on the tables. Read all afternoon and went on watch at 7 p.m. and 2 a.m. - very boring. Saw one or two whales during the day.

Sunday 9th November
Had breakfast and then went back to bed until 10 a.m. when I went on watch. Very cold all day with some rain and a rolling sea. Slept nearly all afternoon and went on watch at 7 p.m. and 1 a.m. or rather, I should have been on watch at 1 a.m., but the watch was cancelled as we were lying off Halifax.

Monday 10th November
Up about 7 a.m. - we came into Halifax harbour during the morning and anchored in the middle of the harbour just after lunch. Halifax seems to be a typical port - rather like

Liverpool or London and it is a wonderful natural harbour of terrific size. We weren't allowed to go ashore during the day.

Tuesday 11th November
Received some pay and changed it into Canadian money then went ashore in a boat, landing just as it was striking 11 a.m. There was quite a big parade going on in remembrance of Armistice Day. Had a large lunch in the Green Lantern for 75 cents and then went to the Capitol to see Bob Hope in 'Nothing But The Truth'. Came out about 4 p.m., had some coffee and cakes with Pete Blanchard and then went to see 'Target For Tonight' at the Orpheus. Went back to the boat which had moved into dock at No. 2 Pier about 10 p.m.

Wednesday 12th November
Went ashore to do some shopping in the morning - it started to rain about 11 a.m. and became pretty cold. Went to see two small films at the Garrick in the afternoon and then had a meal at the Green Lantern with Bill and Sis. Called for Jean Crockett (a nurse Sis had met at a dance last night) and her friend Vi and took them to see Bob Hope.

Thursday 13th November
Fine day with quite a nip in the air. Got up late and had lunch at the Green Lantern. Called for Jean and Vi and went for a walk to a park nearby - it was full of pine trees, just like Canada should be. Saw the U.S. Battleship 'New Mexico' and two cruisers in the harbour as we came back. Went to Jean's place till 7 p.m. when Bill took Vi back to the hospital and then went to the Casino to see 'Lydia (Merle Oberon) - it was a very good film. Took Jean home and then returned to the ship.

Friday 14th November
Only allowed off until 10 a.m., so I dashed into town and had breakfast at the Green Lantern - quite a feed for 40 cents! Did a little shopping and then returned to the ship. Hung about till after lunch and then we were allowed to go ashore till midnight, providing we turned up for pay at 5 p.m. Called for Jean and Vi and went to the Green Lantern till 5p.m. Went back to the ship for half an hour to draw £5 and then went to Jean's home. Vi went back to the hospital at 7 p.m. and we went to the cinema with two of Jean's friends, Catherine Kennedy and Annabelle Something-or-other. They were both nurses and good sports. We went to the Green Lantern after seeing 'Meet Mr Jordan' and then took the girls home.

Note: Reading this diary in 2001 for the first time in nearly sixty years, I think I must have been a real cinema buff!

Saturday 15th November
Didn't get up till late. There is a crowd of New Zealand pilots on board, they seem decent guys, also a Canadian and some new RAF P/Os. Took mail bags on board all morning and set sail about midday. The weather was fine but cold. Joined the convoy about 4 p.m. - it consists of about sixty merchant vessels of low tonnage, escorted by a destroyer and a corvette! We are on the port flank about the middle - I only hope we shan't be attacked - we shall be the first to get it! There is a F/Lt on board and he seems to be laying down the law somewhat - I don't suppose the rest of the trip will be a picnic. Did two watches - one at 8 p.m. and another at 4 a.m. - damn cold!

Sunday 16th November
Slight swell during the day with a cold northerly wind. We traveled slightly south of east all day and about 10 a.m. went right round in a circle and came up behind the convoy, taking up a position at the end of the third column from the port side - still not a good position but much better that the other. Went on watch at 4 p.m. - it rained like blazes all the time. Visibility was about 200 yards at 6 p.m. and we dropped behind the convoy. Slept well.

Monday 17th November
Much rougher now with a strong wind, we have lost the convoy and are tearing along with another ship looking for it. Visibility improved about 11 a.m. and we found it again - the escort now consists of four destroyers, two of them the four funneled American type. The weather was clear all day but the swell increased - the safety shields were put up on the cabin windows. Stayed around all day reading and playing cards - went on watch at midnight, the weather was clear but it was very cold, well below freezing point. Slept well.

Tuesday 18th November
Went on deck at 7.30 a.m. and saw a lot of snow-covered land on the port side, it turned out to be Cape Race, the most easterly point of Newfoundland. The weather was very cold and rough throughout the day - the well decks and rigging were coated with about six inches of ice. Very uneventful day except the sea became really rough and the ship bounced all over the place. Went on watch at 4 p.m. (old time), this being actually 5 p.m. as the clocks had been advanced one hour at 2 p.m. Went north all day making very heavy weather. I read and played games all day, there was nothing better to do. The ship's siren blew once or twice during the evening due to ice, it shook us a bit at first as we didn't know what had happened. Went to bed about 11 p.m.

Wednesday 19th November
Very cold day once more, we have gone north all day at a speed of about 5 knots. The escort consists of two four funneled destroyers. Went on watch at 10 a.m. then spent the rest of the day playing 'Bulls and Bears' down below - one way of passing the time. A series of loud crashes were heard in the evening - possibly depth charges. Had a bath and went to bed early.

Thursday 20th November
On watch at 2 a.m. and the weather seemed nothing like so cold. Slept most of the morning to recover from the effects of the watch. The wind, which was terrific yesterday, died down a lot and the sea became much calmer. We altered course to starboard twice in the morning and ended up by going slightly north of east. We moved up one in our column, the American tanker taking last position. Slept all afternoon and then went to a sing-song in the smoke room with the New Zealanders - they certainly can sing.

Friday 21st November
Much warmer today with very little wind; the sea is quite oily but there is a big swell. Still going NE and our speed is something like ten knots. Went on watch at 10 a.m. - very uneventful. The convoy has closed up considerably now and there are very few stragglers. Spent the afternoon reading and went to bed about 8 p.m. - the wind started to get up again soon afterwards.

Saturday 22nd November
On watch at 1 a.m., couldn't see a thing and only succeeded in getting wet. Stayed in bed until 9 a.m. then went on P.T. We had a following sea all day with very large rollers - I expect our groundspeed was quite high. The weather was warm with lots of small showers. The sea freshened towards evening and the ship began to roll and pitch a lot. Was on watch at 4 p.m. just as it went dark - nothing happened. Spent the evening in the smoke room and went to bed about 11.30.

Sunday 23rd November
Up at 6 a.m., on double watch with Ron Ridler - entirely without incident. We still had this following wind and sea and it was gradually getting rougher all day. Spent the day reading, I should have been on watch at 2 p.m. but the clocks were advanced at that time. The sea became very rough after dinner and waves were breaking right over the ship - our cabin window stopped a green one and flooded the place out so we retired to the lounge. The rolling became very bad later on until it was almost impossible to stand up at times - the ship was tilted over about forty five degrees - it is a good job they repaired that leaky plate in Halifax or I am sure the ship would never have stood up to the pounding. One of the Navy chaps said that this was one of the roughest seas he had ever seen and he had served over thirty years in the Navy! We had a ship's concert in the evening and then I played cards until 2 a.m. when I went on watch.

Monday 24th November
Spent a very rough watch as the rolling seems more pronounced on deck. Slept in the music room afterwards as the cabin is still swilling with water. The sea was not quite so rough during the day but, even so, it was still pretty hectic. One of the aft lifeboats was washed away in the night and one of the davits went too, torn straight out of the deck! The aft port rescue float was also lost and all the fittings and runners on the hawsers to which it was attached were smashed to smithereens. Spent the morning reading, went on watch at noon with P/O McColl and then slept all afternoon. Whilst we were watching, someone accidentally fired a rocket from the bridge - there was a lot of panic for a moment or two. Played cards till 11 p.m. then went on watch, we were then heading due east and the Northern Lights could be seen very clearly to the north. The clocks were advanced one hour at midnight, making us one hour behind G.M.T. (Our noon position was supposed to be 57N 30W).

Tuesday 25th November
Very big swell all day but not such a strong wind - both on the starboard quarter. We continued east all day. Our escort is still the same as before and the number of ships is unchanged. Went on watch at 10 a.m. with Ron - the only thing of interest was five minutes rain. Slept all afternoon and went on watch at 8 p.m. - very bright moon made things ideal for submarine attack, but nothing happened, thank goodness! Stayed up till about 2 a.m. talking to Bill and then went to bed. The ship was now rolling horribly, far worse than ever before and it was very difficult to sleep - the coal was shifting in the bunkers and things were sliding all over the place.

Wednesday 26th November
Still pretty rough with the ship rolling very badly. Went on watch at 9 a.m. - we were still going east and continued in this direction all day. Five ships and the four destroyers from Halifax left us about 9 a.m., presumably to Iceland, the American tanker and small American ship going with them. The weather was quite warm and the wind has abated somewhat, although we kept on rolling badly all day due to the following sea on the starboard quarter. Slept all afternoon and then went on watch at 5

p.m. - it was dark and the moon was shining brightly, the ships making a perfect target for U-boats. A ship on the starboard side of the convoy fired a rocket at 5.45 p.m. and we don't know whether or not it has been torpedoed. Spent the evening packing my kit and went to bed about 11 p.m.

Thursday 27th November

Didn't sleep very well, so got up early - the sea was much calmer and the weather quite warm. We still went east at about nine knots - went on watch at 8 a.m. with McBean, nothing happened. Our escort now consists of one destroyer and about five or six corvettes, three on the port flank. Spent the day reading and playing games below, and went on watch at 4 p.m., just as it was going dark. The sea was quite calm and there was very little wind - even the awful rolling of the ship had almost stopped. Spent the evening walking round the deck with Brian Blachford. There was a bright moon again - another perfect night for submarines. About 10 p.m. we saw two orange flares fired in quick succession on the starboard side of the convoy - I wonder if another ship has caught a packet? Clocks were advanced another hour at midnight, making us G.M.T. once more.

Friday 28th November

On watch at 7 a.m., the sea was calm and it was a fine day. We were still going east and at 7.25 we sighted the Butt of Lewis, the most northern island in the Hebrides. Shortly afterwards a Hudson circled the convoy for a while. We rounded the Butt of Lewis and went south through the Minches, keeping close to Lewis. The ships were now in two lines and we were near the end. The mainland was sighted about 10.30 a.m. and throughout the day we could see it to port. The water was flat calm in the Minch and we also had Hudsons from the RAF station at Stornoway on Lewis flying around. Went on watch at 3 p.m. - we were just near the south end of Lewis. Went to bed early in the evening.

Saturday 29th November

Up on watch at 5 a.m., with land on both sides and the ship going south. Land to starboard quickly disappeared and that to port could only be faintly seen during the morning. I stayed in bed until 11 a.m. and when I went on deck we were going south east at speed. The ship had left the two lines and was tearing along the port side. Continued south east until about 4 p.m. when we turned north east and rounded the Mull of Kintyre, five ships in all. The rest of the convoy continued on the Liverpool. There was quite a mist in the evening and we carried on up the Firth of Clyde, passing Arran on our left. Went below in the evening and went to bed about 10 p.m.

Sunday 30th November

We arrived at Gourock on the Clyde at the end of a journey lasting exactly fifty days - rather different to that of seventeen days taken by the Union Castle boats!

NOTE: In the memoirs of Winston Churchill written after the war he writes that the storm in the North Atlantic in the latter part of November 1941 was the worst storm throughout the entire war - just our luck, but it probably kept the U-boats down!

Back in the United Kingdom.

We disembarked from the 'Sagaing' on November 30th 1941 after saying goodbye to the Captain and crew who had been so hospitable to us during the voyage and went by train to Bournemouth, arriving at No. 3 P.D.C. the following day. There were no posting instructions for us so we were given a very welcome fourteen days home leave. I went by train to Buxton on 2nd December and saw my mother for the first time for over a year, during most of which she had had very little idea where I was because letters were taking anything up to three months to arrive. Unfortunately none of my close friends were on leave at the same time as by now they were scattered all over the world but I had a very restful leave.

I returned to Bournemouth on the 16th to find that I had been posted to a blind approach course at Dyce, near Aberdeen starting on 21st December, so it was back in the train and off to Aberdeen - whilst I was in the UK I seemed to spend most of my time in trains going up and down the country! Gourock to Bournemouth, Bournemouth to Buxton, Buxton to Bournemouth, and Bournemouth to Aberdeen - it would have helped a lot if the P.D.C. had been somewhere in the middle of the country.

No. 1509 B.A.T. Flight, RAF Dyce

Dai Bowen and I arrived at Dyce on 21st December after a long and very cold train journey from Bournemouth to find Dyce covered in snow, quite a change from South Africa. We flew together with a staff pilot in Oxfords learning the intricacies of landing aircraft completely blind using a beacon and beam system - it seemed to work well, but, fortunately, I never had to use it in earnest during my RAF career. The course finished on New Years Eve 1941 and we were posted to No. 1 (C) O.T.U at Silloth on the Solway Firth, so back on the train once more. We finished flying in the early afternoon and left Dyce the same evening to catch a train for Carlisle at midnight - I think Dai and I were the only sober people in Aberdeen that night as the Scots really like to celebrate Hogmanay.

No 1 (C) Operational Training Unit, RAF Silloth

When we arrived at Silloth, we found that Ben Boyd, Bill Bogg, Ron Ridler and Massey from Kumalo, George and Sagaing days had also arrived, the rest of the course being made up by Australians who had been two courses behind us at George but who had been lucky enough to come by Castle boat and had so caught us up. Amongst the Aussies were Don Beaton, Jim McHale, Frank Livingstone, Keith O'Brien and Bill Weatherly who were with us on 459 Squadron RAAF in the Western Desert later in the year.

Why the RAF, in their wisdom, decided to put an Operational Training Unit at Silloth on the Solway Firth (otherwise known as Hudson Bay because of the number of aircraft that went into it) I will never know. It is one of the wettest places in the UK, has the mountains of the Lakes to catch the unwary to the south and one or two nasty little hills on the opposite side of the Firth to ensure aircraft straying too far to the north would come to a sticky end. Perhaps the theory was that, if you survived Silloth, nothing the Germans could throw at you could be any worse! I think our course (No.20) proved the point as, out of seventeen crews, only fourteen survived.

On January 9th 1942 I took to the air for the first time in a Hudson and wasn't terribly impressed as all the training aircraft were ex-operational and should have been consigned to the scrap heap but I suppose the powers-that-be thought we might as well smash up old clapped-out aircraft and keep the new ones for the operational squadrons.

We flew in pairs, as the Hudson needed an extra pair of hands to fly it, mainly to operate the flaps and undercarriage, and I was joined by an Australian sergeant, Frank Livingstone. It was strange flying again, as I hadn't flown solo since 1st July but it soon came back and after five hours on Hudsons I went solo, much to my surprise as I didn't really have much of a clue, but it was a question of 'get on or get out' so I didn't have any option. Chuck Collins joined me as navigator of February 9th and I was wondering what to do about the rest of my crew when Lee Barrett and Jimmy Craig approached me in the Mess and asked if they could fly with me.

I said I would be delighted and we first took to the air as a crew on 18th February by which time I has amassed the grand total of fourteen hours on Hudsons. Over the next few months I didn't think about it again, but, one night, when we were in the desert with 459, sitting staring at the stars as the Mess had run out of beer, I asked Jimmy why they had asked to be crewed up with me and his reply surprised me - apparently they had spent all their spare time at the end of the runway watching the trainee pilots landing and decided that I looked one of the safest - I was flattered!

The rest of the time at Silloth was spent dodging the weather and the mountains - looking through my log book I see a lot of the exercises were curtailed due to bad weather although we did manage to complete a night cross country flight which entailed flying down the Irish Sea to the Kish lightvessel off Dublin, up to the Mull of Kintyre and back to Silloth. We felt very pleased with ourselves as our total night flying up to that time was three hours. The same night, Bill Bogg, who had been with me all the way from Babbacombe onwards, collided with another aircraft over the Solway Firth and both crews were killed. The visibility was very poor at the time and I don't think Bill had a chance. He was the first close friend to be killed and we were all very upset but, unfortunately, he was just the first of very many.

The next day we spent fifty minutes on a live bombing exercise and that was it - the course was over and we were officially a fully operational crew and off we went to join No. 500 (County of Kent) Squadron at Stornoway. When I think of it now it was unbelievable - I had a grand total of 51 hours on Hudsons and we had flown together as a crew for 37 hours. I suppose in mitigation for the RAF, they were very short of crews at that time and were pushing us through as quickly as possible in the hope that some would survive once we started operational flying. We thought we knew it all, or perhaps, hope springs eternal, but we must have been as green as grass and had no conception of what lay ahead which was probably just as well.

Since leaving Aberystwyth I had kept up a long range and very spasmodic correspondence with Norman Lingard, with whom I was very friendly at Aberystwyth and who had completed his pilot training in the U.K. To give an idea of the conditions obtaining at the time, here are details of a letter he wrote at the end of December which eventually reached me at Silloth.

Sergeants Mess,

R.A.F. Station Bottesford

December 18th/41.

Dear Bryan,

Thanks a lot, old pal, for the fags and your letter which arrived yesterday - it's damn good of you to think of me and to send me the fags - jolly welcome too, as we were rationed to 30 per week here - they don't go very far, I can tell you - they are not Players either - at least not always- perhaps 10 Players and 20 Star. This week it was 20 Kensitas (lousy) and 10 Players Weights (lousier still), so you see your S.A. Cigarettes will taste like Passing Clouds or Players No.3. Actually, I rather like C.toC. I was bunked with a South African at Waddington and he used to receive bags of them, I helped him smoke them and thought they were pretty good, a change from the usual Virginia taste. Anyhow, its damn nice of you to send me them and I do hope I shall come across you some day and thank you personally and have a good chin-wag together. If you ever get this way, do drop in - it's a new 'drome with runways, near Grantham, so lob down if you get the chance and if you let me know where you are I'll do the same. Gosh, it was grand to hear that you were home - bet you were glad to see Old England again too. You were lucky, you know, with there being so much activity in the Middle East - but you always were a lucky sod - you were lucky to get to Rhodesia and see a bit of the world, and here I've been seeing England, a thing I could do on my own dough after the war is over - still, it does have it's compensations, its nice to get home now and again.

We are doing a lot of formation flying and bombing at present (draw your own conclusions) and for this I'm with my old captain as 2nd pilot again, I'm not experienced enough for formation flying in these kites but they want all experienced crews for this job, so I'm back with my old crew - what a crew it is too - the grandest fellows you could wish to meet - what good pals we are - we always hit the high spots together - we're a crew outside the plane as well as inside. It's going to be really exciting, don't you wish you were coming?

Well, I'll have to finish now, or else I won't get any supper and I'm still as hungry as ever, so 'Cheerio' for now and here's hoping that I shall see you soon - let me know where you get to and what you get on - you might even get somewhere near here and then we could make a date - I've got my motorbike here.

Here's wishing you the best of luck and everything for Christmas and the New Year,
All the best,
Norman.

P.S. I'm due for leave on Jan 13th for 7 days, so if you are at home then, give me a tinkle and we'll meet somewhere.

I wrote back to him early in January telling him I was at Silloth but received no reply and it became obvious that the big operation he was on had cost him his life. I saw his name in the casualty lists as 'Missing believed killed in action' which were published later in the year. It was a great shame as he was a super chap, but that was the way things were during the war, particularly in the RAF.

<u>No 500 (County of Kent) Squadron, Stornoway</u>

We left Silloth on 31st March and arrived at Stornoway on 1st April. Those facts conceal a typical wartime train journey - we were given our travel warrants on the morning of March 31st and caught a train, packed to the doors as usual, from Carlisle bound for Scotland late in the afternoon. We wandered slowly north and arrived at Inverness the following morning feeling rather jaded. Eventually we caught another train which meandered through the glens until we finally ended up at the Kyle of Lochalsh, from where a steamer went via Portree on the isle of Skye to Stornoway, arriving late on April 1st. April Fools Day was a suitable date to arrive in Stornoway, as, to my very inexperienced eye, it looked like the end of the earth and I thought the RAF were playing a joke on us. Nobody really knew what to do with us as we were just a spare crew and spent most of our time trying not to get in the way. I did eventually go on one operational flight as second pilot on an anti-submarine patrol way out into the Atlantic. The weather was awful with a howling gale blowing (it reminded me of the Sagaing), there was a very low cloud base, it was raining hard, the seas were mountainous and the chances of seeing a submarine in those conditions were absolutely nil - I don't know why we bothered but it made me realise that there was an awful lot of the Atlantic and I had already seen as much of it as I wanted.

The weather was pretty bad the whole time we were there with very strong winds and we soon realized why our billets, Nissen huts, were anchored down with huge steel hawsers - they would have taken off otherwise.

After three and a half weeks of sheer boredom, the RAF suddenly woke up to where we were and posted us just about as far away from Stornoway as they could, to No. 279 Squadron at Bircham Newton in Norfolk, so we went through the procedure of getting our clearances prior to leaving the station. This chore was completed just after lunch on April 25th and the truck deposited us, complete with all our gear, at Stornoway docks early in the afternoon. The only snag was that the steamer didn't sail until midnight so, having nothing better to do, we went into the nearest pub. I think it was called 'The County Hotel', although I can't be sure of that. What I am sure of is that I have never seen so

much whisky in one bar in my life, there were cases and cases piled up behind the bar and shelves were full as well. At that time of the war, whisky was in very short supply and usually kept under the counter. After the war there was a film called 'Whisky Galore' about a ship carrying a large amount of whisky bound for the United States which ran aground on an island in the Hebrides and the locals helped themselves to the cargo. I believe this film was loosely based on fact and I have often wondered whether the glut of whisky in Stornoway was a part of this cargo.

Mainly due to it's unavailability, I hadn't drunk much whisky before and Jimmy initiated me into the old Scots custom of 'half and half', - a wee dram of whisky followed by a half pint of beer. We thought this was a great idea and one thing led to another until by 6 o'clock we weren't terribly worried whether the boat sailed or not. I remember walking (possibly a poor description!) out of the pub and into a cinema just down the road. I have no idea what was showing, but we sat on the front row looking straight up at the screen before falling asleep.

Fortunately the programme ended about 10 p.m. and we were thrown out into the night which was just as well as otherwise we would probably have missed the boat, with disastrous consequences for our burgeoning careers! I don't remember a lot about the boat journey as I slept on deck surrounded by my kit (I'd had plenty of practice sleeping on deck on the Rangitiki and the Sagaing), but I do remember a lot of very noisy sheep in a pen about two yards away.

Bircham Newton and Docking

Arriving at the Kyle of Lochalsh on the morning of 26th April we once again suffered another interminable train journey via Inverness, Glasgow, Carlisle, Preston and all points south to London Euston. In London we changed stations and finally arrived in Norwich, the nearest station to Bircham Newton on April 28th, three days after leaving Stornoway. Once again, nobody wanted to know us and we were billeted at a satellite aerodrome, called Docking, a few miles away. The only good thing was that the Australian crews we had trained with at Silloth were already there awaiting aircraft so that they could fly out to the Middle East to form a new Australian squadron and we were told that we would be taking an aircraft to the Far East.

We stayed at Docking for nearly six weeks without doing a thing from a flying point of view and we began to wonder just what was the point of it all. We also began to realise that life in the services was mostly utter boredom punctuated by periods of frenzied activity, some of which might be dangerous!

Docking was really out in the sticks, a few miles from Hunstanton, but we had no transport, so couldn't go anywhere. What made it even more galling from our point of view was that the Hudsons flying out of Bircham Newton were very much at the sharp end as, apart from 279, there was a Canadian squadron, I think it was 407 R.C.A.F., who were carrying out low level shipping attacks off the Dutch coast and getting quite a hammering in the process.

From what we heard, they were going in about fifty feet and, after attacking, escaping along the deck or in the low cloud which was fairly prevalent at that time. Their casualties were pretty high and the more we heard, the less we liked it - the North Atlantic out of Stornoway began to look more attractive than had first appeared, at least, the Atlantic didn't get up and bite you! Little did we know that within six weeks we would be doing exactly the same thing along the North African coast with the added hazards of unlimited visibility and no cloud cover. Never was the old adage 'When ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise' more appropriate.

However, back to Docking. It was great from my point of view to meet up with the Aussies again, particularly Bill Weatherly, Col. Stinson, Keith O'Brien, Freddie Madsen, Frank Livingstone and their crews who we had known from Silloth days. We had a visit from an Australian Wing Commander, Keith Hennock, who was forming the Hudson squadron in the Middle East, No. 459 R.A.A.F and he

said the Australian crews would be posted to that squadron. I asked whether we were included but was told that it was only for Australian crews. A pity!

Towards the end of our stay at Docking someone took pity on us and we were given a 48 hour pass, so about a dozen of us went off to London to see the bright lights (anything was better than Docking). One of the Aussie Wop/AGs, Harry Kelly, who flew with Jim McHale, had become somewhat disenchanted with the low level of catering in the Mess (the Australians were missing their steak and eggs for breakfast) and English wartime fare wasn't going down too well, so he decided to do something about it and the night before our visit to London he paid a nocturnal visit to a local farmer and returned with four chickens. The farmer probably put down their disappearance to a fox! He plucked the chickens in the billet which wasn't really a good idea as the whole place was full of feathers when he had finished and it was difficult to get rid of the evidence. However, be that as it may, off we went to London complete with the freshly plucked chickens.

We all stayed at the Strand Palace Hotel, which was a real den of iniquity at that time, and proceeded to paint the town red. Before dinner on the first night, Harry took the chickens to the chef and asked whether he would cook them for us. The chef entered into the spirit of the occasion and when we were all seated at one long table in the very large dining room, surrounded by servicemen of every nationality and not a few top brass, all tucking into the set menu of spam and reconstituted mashed potatoes, the doors of the kitchen opened and out came the chef in his tall white hat followed by three of his minions, each carrying a large salver containing a roast chicken. They paraded right round the dining room to the obvious amazement of the rest of the diners (it certainly stopped all conversation) before delivering the chickens to our table with a flourish. It was a memorable meal.

One very funny thing happened during our stay - a Canadian rear gunner, who was staying at the Strand Palace, attached himself to our party and was having a ball with a local lady whose morals left something to be desired. On the Sunday evening (we were due to return the next day) he found he had spent all his money and couldn't pay his bill. He mentioned the predicament to his girl friend who told him not to worry as she would soon sort out the problem. She went down to the foyer, found one or two willing clients (I don't know exactly how many) and came back some time later with enough for the bill and something over for the rest of the night. We never saw him again and I often wondered what happened to him - if he was from 407 I doubt if his life expectancy was very long.

<u>No. 1444 Ferry Training Flight, Horsham St. Faith</u>

Everything, good and bad, eventually comes to an end, and we were posted down the road to No.1444 Ferry Training Flight at Horsham St.Faith, just outside Norwich on the 13th June, three days after my 20th birthday. We were to collect a brand new aircraft and fly it out to the Far East. On June 16th, almost three months after we had last flown, we took delivery of Hudson Mk.3 FH 266 I for Ink. It was almost like learning to fly again after three months idleness, bearing in mind our low total of hours on Hudsons but, against that, new aircraft in which everything worked was a huge bonus. We had a thirty minute familiarization trip and then we were on our own.

Our first solo flight was on 17th June when we were sent to do circuits and bumps at Attlebridge, a satellite of Horsham St. Faith. Unfortunately for the flying practice, when we got there we found that they had a very good NAAFI and we only managed two circuits in one and a half hours, the rest of the time was spent drinking tea and eating buns. Perhaps not what the C.F.I. had in mind. The following day we really got down to business and were sent on a long cross-country flight, planned to last eight hours. When you consider that our longest previous flight was just two hours, it was quite a jump but off we went all round the north of Scotland. On the way back, somewhere in North Yorkshire, we were told that the whole of East Anglia was fogbound, so we diverted to Driffield after seven hours. The fog didn't clear so we stayed the night and returned to Horsham the next morning. This little experience taught me a lesson and from then on I always carried my washing kit in my flight bag on any long flight. During the next couple of days we did a further two and a half hours flying and then, on June 25th, fully qualified(?), we went off to the war.

United Kingdom to the Middle East

The first stop was at Lyneham where the aircraft was given a final checkout by the engineering staff and loaded up with spares for the Far East. We stayed there two nights and then, on the 27th, flew to our final stop in the U.K., Portreath in Cornwall.

The weather was pretty awful, typical English summer weather in fact, with low cloud, rain and strong winds. We spent the night at Portreath and then, at 8 a.m. on the morning of June 28th, set off for Gibraltar full of faith, hope, youthful optimism and an awful lot of ignorance! The strong wind was a great help as it was from the west and straight along the runway. The aircraft had a full load of fuel, quite a bit of cargo in the form of spares, and all our kit and was considerably heavier than anything I had ever flown before. We had barely reached flying speed at the end of the runway, but the strong wind helped, and, as the runway was at the edge of a cliff, we more or less fell off the end before staggering into the air. We went straight up into the clouds, the cloud base being about 200 feet, and slowly climbed up until Chuck gave me a turning point and a course for Cape Finisterre, assuming we were over the Scilly Islands. Just as I turned the cloud broke up for a few minutes and right below us were the Scillies. We thought this was a good omen even though it was to be our last sight of England for about three years.

The flight down to Gibraltar was quite uneventful although we had to keep a very careful watch crossing the Bay of Biscay as the Luftwaffe were well aware of aircraft such as ours en route to Gibraltar and were maintaining constant patrols in the hope of shooting us down.

Arriving at Gibraltar I was a bit put off by the length of runway available. The runway had been built on the narrow neck of land joining Gib. to the mainland and was obviously too short for very large aircraft, so it was in the process of being lengthened by building it out into the harbour on the western side. Unfortunately, all the heavy building equipment was parked at the beginning of the extension, reducing the effective length even further and I landed with my heart in my mouth, a hundred yards left and very hot brakes. As we turned off the runway a Wellington followed us in and wasn't quite so lucky, going right off the end into the sea with, as far as we knew, no survivors. We spent the night in transit quarters in Gib and even experienced an air raid although nothing happened and it was probably a false alarm. It was interesting to learn from the locals that the Germans had observers in Algeciras just across the bay in Spain who logged all aircraft and shipping movements through Gibraltar.

The next morning, June 29th, we were briefed to fly from Gib. to Mersa Matruh in Egypt, this being the absolute range of the aircraft. We started up and taxied to the very end of the runway as we were very heavily loaded again and didn't have the benefit of a cliff to fall off at the other end. Just as I was opening up the engines a series of red Verey lights came from the control tower and a jeep came over to us with a 'follow me' sign. We went back to dispersal to be told that Rommel had just captured Mersa Matruh and that there wasn't much point in taking off just to be taken prisoner when we landed.

There was some discussion as to whether we should fly to Malta the following day, refuel and go on immediately to the Canal Zone or be routed round West Africa which would have taken quite a time. In the event, it was decided that we should go via Malta and we took off the following morning, our load having been increased still further by a number of cases of bully beef for Malta, the island being under siege and rapidly running out of food. I think we were the last 459 Hudson to go through Malta as all the eventual replacements went the West African route and took anything up to a month to arrive in the Middle East.

The flight was fairly uneventful until we were about thirty miles from Pantelleria, an island being used by the Italians as an air force base. We suddenly realised we were on a converging course with a

Savoia Marchetti three engined aircraft of the Regia Aeronautica. Full of derring do we altered course towards it with all guns set on 'fire' but it turned away and dived towards Pantelleria. We didn't think it was a good idea to follow, particularly as I was getting a lot of Scottish invective over the intercom which I finally translated as meaning that the turret had jammed and Jimmy wasn't in the least bit interested in getting into a dog fight.

It was dusk and we continued towards Malta - there was no difficulty in finding it as the air raids were almost continuous at that time and Malta was one long firework display, dispensing with the need for navigation. The Luftwaffe were doing the bombing based in Sicily, about thirty minutes flying away, and could make a round trip every couple of hours which meant that Malta was getting a terrible pasting. When I called up the tower at Luqa I was told they couldn't put on the runway lights as the airfield was being bombed continuously and would I circle a rock about ten miles to the south of the island until it was safe to land. I did this for about half an hour, having a birds eye view of the bombing but, interesting though this was, the fuel situation was beginning to get critical and I called up again to say that, unless I could land in the next fifteen minutes, I would have to go into the sea. We were given a course to steer to take us over Luqa and when the controller saw us he put the runway lights on for 30 seconds so that I could line up the gyro. We then did a short low circuit and when we were about 100 feet on final the runway lights came on and we landed more by good luck than good judgement. The lights went off the moment we touched down and we taxied to the end of the runway but nobody wanted to know us as the bombs were still coming down on the airfield so we just had to sit there, scared to death, hoping the aircraft wouldn't be hit.

Eventually, after about ten minutes of sheer panic, a hero in a jeep came out and guided us into a blast pen where we stayed until there was a lull in the bombing. It was ten o'clock at night and the original idea was for us to be refueled and continue straight on to Egypt, a further eight hours or so, which would have made our flight from Gibraltar to Egypt a very long day, some sixteen hours flying. Somehow, I don't think that would be allowed nowadays as we would have been well out of hours, but things were different then. However, the question didn't arise as the turret was unserviceable and we weren't allowed to continue until it was repaired so we spent the night in a convent close to Luqa. The bombs kept coming down and I doubt if there were more than fours hours during our 24 hour stay when the skies were clear. Fortunately the convent was built of huge blocks of pale coloured stone with walls about two feet thick, so we had a reasonable nights sleep. Our main worry was that if the aircraft was damaged beyond repair we would have been taken on the strength of the Malta squadrons which, at that time, didn't offer a lot of future. The following morning we went back to Luqa and very quickly learned the local air-raid drill. Everyone carried on as usual until the bombs actually began to fall then dived into the nearest slit-trench, of which there was a goodly supply. Once the bombs had stopped everyone dashed for the nearest cover, either a building or an aircraft wing, to avoid the bits of shrapnel which were coming down from about twenty thousand feet and could do quite a lot of damage if they hit you.

The bully beef had been unloaded from our aircraft and received with delight by the locals and the turret was well on the way to being repaired so we were briefed to leave late in the afternoon, our departure to coincide, hopefully, with a lull in the bombing. This duly happened and we left for Egypt in the evening with collective sighs of relief as we hadn't really enjoyed our brief sojourn in Malta. We also left with a feeling of tremendous admiration for the courage and tenacity of the Malta garrison and the local population who were experiencing conditions far worse than those during the height of the blitz in the UK and who were half starved in the bargain.

The flight to Egypt was completely uneventful and we landed at Kasfareet in the Canal Zone in the early hours of the morning after a flight of eight and a half hours. Nobody bothered about us and we spent the rest of the day and night in the transit mess. I had been given a movement order at Lyneham to deliver the aircraft and crew to H.Q. Far East in Delhi and we had talked about it during the trip. At that time, the fortunes of the Allies were at their lowest ebb during the war, the Germans were at the gates of Moscow and Stalingrad, Rommel and the Afrika Corps were forty miles away from Cairo at El Alamein and the Japs were running riot all over the Far East. The Allies didn't have

the manpower or material to do much about it at the time and things looked very bleak. We didn't know when, if ever, we should be able to return home and the thought of going even further away to India didn't appeal very much.

The next day I went along to the Movement Office to ask for a further briefing but before I had the chance to say anything, a very young Pilot Officer asked me if we were going to 459. All the Australians had come through during the previous week and he thought we were the next instalment. We had heard that HQ Middle East was in a complete panic with Rommel being so near and were supposed to be moving down to Kenya (this may have been a rumour) but we thought quickly and I said 'Yes, we are going to 459. Where are they?'

We felt pretty safe as apparently something like 25% of reinforcement aircraft fell by the wayside, either crashed, shot down or delayed for other causes and they probably wouldn't miss one more so off we went to LG Z, which was situated about thirty minutes flying time away in the desert East of Cairo and north of the very mis-named Sweetwater Canal. We had a look at the canal later on - there were dead animals floating about in it, the locals used it for washing, drinking water and toilets all at the same time. The Sweetwater Canal!

No. 459 Squadron RAAF, Middle East

LG Z was just a flat piece of desert marked out by oil drums and a few tents. When we landed, Wing Commander Hennock, who we had met at Horsham when he was forming the squadron came up, and in typical Aussie fashion, asked us what the hell we were doing there. When I told him we were supposed to be going to India but would rather stay with our Aussie friends he wasn't very impressed until I told him the aircraft was full of spares. He took the Movement Order, tore it up and said 'You're in'. And that was how we came to find ourselves the only RAF crew on 459 Squadron RAAF.

There weren't enough tents for all the personnel but that didn't deter the Australians. About five miles away was a large army camp with lots of empty tents (I think it was being used as a transit camp) so the first night we were there a party took a gharry and came back with about twenty tents which was a very satisfactory solution to the problem.

Once we were housed, or rather 'tented', the next problem was water as there was very little available for washing. This was solved by taking gharries with as many people as possible to the same army camp where they had permanent showers.

As the journey took about twenty minutes it was felt that we might get de-hydrated on the way so we each took two or three pint bottles of good Aussie beer as a precaution. The only snag was that, as we were driving across the desert, the dust was appalling - we were all standing up on the flat of the truck completely covered in dust and, after we had had our shower and arrived back at LG Z we were just as dirty as before, but not quite so thirsty!

One night we were invited to the same army camp to meet the Gurkas who were there before moving up to El Alamein. Apparently they had put the fear of death (literally) into the Italians who would run a mile to avoid these little bland men who were absolutely ferocious in action. They showed us their kukris which were razor sharp and would cut a silk handkerchief, and, before being returned to it's scabbard, blood had to drawn so they pricked their thumbs. I have never forgotten that evening and have admired the Gurkas ever since.

For the first week we did very little flying and just settled in to our new surroundings as the squadron was just starting operations. The Sergeants Mess consisted of a few trestle tables in a large marquee and this didn't sit too well with the macho image of the Australian male and his drinking surroundings

so, goodness knows how, a large supply of bricks and mortar arrived and a magnificent bar was constructed inside the tent. It had everything a bar should have, including an unlimited supply of beer, about which more later. When the squadron finally left LG Z late in November, the bar was left out in the desert in solitary splendor and I imagine it is still there as I can't see anyone taking the trouble to knock it down. It may be that the sands of the desert have swallowed it up, in which case some archaeologist in the dim and distant future may excavate it and spend a lot of time and effort in deciding just what he has found - I would bet that whatever conclusion he reaches will be well wide of the mark.

Coming to the very important question of beer supplies. At that time there wasn't much beer available in the desert, but 459 had some very astute people in the stores and they soon discovered that there were large quantities of Australian beer being held in three depots in and around the Canal Zone. The beer had been sent from Australia for consumption by the Australian 6th Division who, if rumour had any truth at all, were a very hard drinking lot of battle hardened characters who would have torn the place apart if their beer supplies had been disrupted. I don't really know how true this was, but I do know that we registered the squadron for beer supplies at all three depots independently and, as a result, drew three times our normal ration. This meant there was never a beer shortage whilst we were on the squadron.

When we finally got down to flying again after about a week, we did a few hours local flying with bombing and gunnery practice to familiarize ourselves with desert conditions. At that time, early July, the squadron was just starting operations and, for this purpose, operational crews were detached to LG 226, a strip on the western side of the Delta, about 40 miles from the front line at El Alamein, LG226 being much nearer to our patrol areas than LG Z.

We were told that the main purpose of our operations would be to stop and sink 'F' boats which were coming down the African coast bringing fuel for Rommel's tanks and armoured vehicles. His supply lines overland were so stretched and the nearest port which was reasonably secure was Benghazi, so to bring fuel overland in the quantities required was almost impossible and he had to resort to being supplied by sea.

To this end, the Afrika Corps used 'F' boats, which were very large barges - I have no idea how much fuel each one carried, but I imagine it was quite a lot. They sailed singly in the hope that they would escape detection and were armed with a large number of Bofors and Oerlikon anti-aircraft guns which threw up a formidable barrage at anyone unfortunate enough to get in range.

The official briefing laid down by Group Captain Rivington, a first world war pilot attached to 201 Group was as follows: 'The war situation now is extremely desperate with the Eighth Army having their backs to the Nile Delta confronting an advancing victorious Afrika Corps. The outcome of the looming battle at El Alemain threatened another disaster for British Forces - the Suez Canal captured and the war lost to the Allies. In view of the long and arduous land supply lines for the Germans, Rommel was left with no alternative but to bring vital fuel for his tanks by sea, in the form of 'F' boats - long barges heavily armed with anti-aircraft weapons'. Revington continued 'We just do not possess the air power necessary to knock out their shipping by high level bombing only low level mast high attacks dropping your bombs into the sides of ships will succeed. I am ordering you to carry out low level attacks at night or dawn - that will give you the best protection. I regret being unable to give you fighter protection, there is none available. You will have bombs fitted with eleven second delay fuses which will allow you to clear the target before your bombs explode'.

That was the theory, but the eleven second delay was somewhat problematical and we went in fear and trepidation of being blown up by our own bombs. However, that was how we had to operate and we couldn't do much about it.

459 Squadron was attached to No. 201 Group which had been charged with the duty of making sure that no 'F' boats reached Mersa Matruh, the nearest port to the west of El Alamein. As far as I can remember, the Group consisted of a Wellington Squadron (No. 70), a Beaufort/Beaufighter torpedo squadron, a Maryland reconnaissance squadron (No. 203) and ourselves.

The programme was that the Marylands carried our long range sweeps covering the area between the coast of Cyrenaica as far as their range permitted towards Greece and Italy. If boats were located, these would be tracked until they were within the range of the Beauforts, the Wellingtons and ourselves. The Beauforts would attack at last light, which would give them some chance of survival, the Wellingtons would bomb during the night and, if there was anything left, we would bomb from fifty feet at first light. This sounded all very well in theory but I don't think it worked very well in practice, certainly not so far as we ourselves were concerned, as the boats we were involved with seemed to have slipped through the net and the first thing anyone knew about them was when we reported them.

From a Group point of view, one thing in our favour was that we had just been equipped with one of the first airborne radars, called A.S.V., and this, in theory, would enable us to pick up 'F' boats at some distance and thus cover a much greater search area. Once again, theory and practice didn't always match up as the sets were notoriously temperamental and, once in the air, nobody had the slightest idea how to repair them if things went wrong, the only advice given was 'give it a good clout, it might knock something back into place'. The other factor was that we were flying very low down to avoid being spotted and the sea return tended to obscure everything else. Still, I suppose it was better than nothing although I don't think anyone had a great deal of faith in it, certainly not at the beginning, as radar was still something of a mystery.

Our turn to go on operations came on July 18th and we flew up to LG 226 wondering what was going to happen next. The short answer was - nothing that day and we hung about all the next day waiting with a certain amount of apprehension until about six o'clock in the evening when a runner came along and told us to attend briefing immediately.

The resultant entry in my log book reads:

July 19th Hudson 111 V8992 Self Crew Offensive patrol - Derna

1.10 hrs day 7.00 hrs night Comments: Nil sighting, flak over Mersa Matruh.

This rather bold statement covers a multitude of sins and omissions, and when I think back we were so green it is a wonder we came back at all.

We took off at ten o'clock at night to fly off the coast and do a sweep in a north-westerly direction from Tobruk to Derna, our objective being to find any shipping which might be in the area. All went well, we duly reached our patrol area and carried out the search. The weather was clear with no clouds and the visibility very good even thought it was the middle of the night. When we finished the patrol we were somewhere off the coast of Cyrenaica at it's most northerly point and everything was going to plan. I remember thinking then that this operational business wasn't perhaps as bad as we thought - little did I know!

Although I didn't realise it at the time, the seeds of disaster were already being sown. I asked Chuck for a course to steer to bring us to a point twenty miles out at sea roughly due north of LG 226 so that

we could then turn south and return to base keeping well clear of the front line at El Alamein. He gave me a course and an E.T.A. to the turning point and off we went. The resulting shambles taught me a lesson I have never forgotten and for all future flights, however insignificant, I always made a note of the approximate courses and leg times so that I could make a rough check on the navigator's instructions.

Chuck somehow misapplied the variation and the direction of the wind so the course he gave me, instead of running roughly south-east parallel to the coast, was almost due east and we headed off into the middle of the Med. He also made a mistake in the E.T.A. which he gave as one hour sooner than it should have been. When the time of E.T.A. duly arrived we flew on for about ten minutes but could see no sign of land on our right so, thinking that we might be a little further out to sea than expected, we turned due south expecting to hit the coast somewhere near Alexandria in a few minutes.

We flew south for about an hour with still no sign of land by which time we hadn't the faintest idea where we were but the only solution was to keep on a southerly course until we eventually made landfall somewhere on the African coast. After a further twenty minutes we saw the coast (it was about thirty minutes before first light by now) and the coast appeared to be running NW to SE so we did a bit of quick thinking and, bearing in mind we had flown for an hour and a half beyond our calculated turning point, came to the conclusion that we had overflown the Nile Delta and were running down the coast towards Port Said at the entrance to the Suez Canal. In the hope of identifying where we were, we came down to 200 feet and flew south east. After a few minutes we began to fly over large quantities of tanks, guns, tents and all the paraphernalia of a large army, so we thought, 'This must be the build-up of Eighth Army reserves waiting to go up to El Alamein'. When they started shooting at us our immediate reaction was 'Bloody pongos, they don't know their own aircraft when they see them' so we carried on eastwards at 200 feet in the hope that they would see the error of their ways. After a mile or so the shooting stopped and there was a stretch of empty desert and then a further concentration of tanks and guns. These did not fire at us so we assumed they had seen the light.

Dawn had broken by now although it was quite hazy and we suddenly realised the coast had turned north east. This threw us completely and we assumed we were flying up the coast towards Palestine! What had happened to Port Said and the Suez Canal in the meantime we couldn't understand.

Suddenly, out of the murk appeared a small airfield so I did a quick circuit and landed with the intention of finding out where we were. The place appeared deserted except for a few strange looking biplanes, there was not a soul in sight and nobody took the slightest interest in us. There was a small control tower and we thought we might even be behind the German lines as we didn't recognise the aircraft, so in best Wild West fashion I drew my revolver and went into the building. There was a man asleep on a camp bed in a strange uniform, so I stuck the gun in his ribs and shouted 'Wake up!' The resulting burst of British profanity made me realise we weren't in enemy territory, so I quickly pocketed the gun before he saw it. It turned out we had landed at Maryut, a very small Fleet Air Arm station on the outskirts of Alexandria and the aircraft were Swordfish. We quickly climbed back into the aircraft and headed for LG 226, about thirty miles away.

When we were debriefed we conveniently forgot to mention that we had flown right over the German reserve and front lines at 200 feet and nobody ever found out that we had landed at Maryut so, from an official point of view our first operation with 459 was quite uneventful whilst, in actual fact, it was a complete shambles - the landing at Maryut never appeared in my log-book! In did teach us a number of lessons which stood us in good stead on later operations - it was a very good learning experience, particularly as we lived to tell the tale.

I felt very sorry for Chuck and he certainly didn't get his lines crossed to that extent again.

After the trauma of our first 459 operation things calmed down a little and we didn't fly the next night, but the following day, 21st July, we received the dreaded call to briefing about noon, which meant a daylight operation. Apparently a number of 'F' boats had been sighted off Mersa Matruh and it was decided to mount a daylight formation shipping strike, taking off as soon as possible. I can't remember who led the formation, but it soon became pretty obvious that formation flying wasn't one of the squadron's strong points and we straggled all over the sky, all five of us, shepherded by four Beaufighters who must have been wondering what was going on. Fortunately the 'F'boats were probably the figment of someone's imagination and after flying up and down the coast we returned to base. I see in my log-book the following day that there is an entry 'Formation flying practice' so obviously someone on high also thought that our formation left a lot to be desired.

The following day we flew back to LG Z having completed our first operational detachment - we hadn't covered ourselves with glory but we had done all that was asked of us and we had certainly learned a lot! I have since checked with the 459 Squadron Roll of Honour and I see that, from June 30th until August 25th, some seven weeks, the squadron lost fifty three aircrew, a very high casualty rate which was not sustainable in the long term as we weren't getting any replacements, the crews who were following us having to take the long trip via West Africa and the Sudan and back up to Egypt. By the time they arrived, the shipping strikes were over and we reverted to anti-submarine patrols. Amongst the crews we lost were some very old friends from training days, Lockie Staines with Willie Woodcock (RNZAF), Len Gamble and Bluey Killham; Frank Livingstone and his crew including Herbie Lake and 'Doover' Cruikshank. I was very sorry we lost Frank, he was a very good friend and we shared our initial pilot training at Silloth before we split up to join our own crews. Frank was particularly unfortunate as he took off behind another aircraft from Edku near Alexandria on a strike when the first aircraft crashed on take-off and exploded, Frank being caught in the blast and also crashing. Keith O'Brien, another friend from Silloth was also lost, crashing in

very bad weather on return from patrol.

Two other crews, Tony Gurry and Syd Wickham, went missing during this period and were presumed lost, but we learnt a long time afterwards that both were shot down in the sea, rescued, and spent the rest of the war in P.O.W. Camps.

When I was out in Sydney in 1998 I spent some time with Bill Weatherly, one of my oldest friends from Silloth days and we met up with Tony and Syd, both of whom had very interesting tales to tell. Syd was shot down and picked up by the Germans almost immediately and treated very well even though he had just been doing his best to sink them. He is now living in Sydney, a few miles from my son Andrew, and is in a pretty poor state of health. Tony is living outside Melbourne and, when I saw him, looked very frail. (He since died in late 2001). He spent two days drifting about in a dinghy before being picked up, which I don't suppose did him very much good in the long term. Syd has since written about his experiences and I would like to include his article in my memoirs as it indicates very graphically what could happen.

<u>THE STRIKE by F/Lt Syd Wyckham</u>
On the 28th July, 1942, I was alerted for an immediate strike against 'F' boats which were carrying supplies to the Afrika Corps at El Alamein (poised for a decisive strike at the Nile Delta). Our Hudson aircraft, 'R', was already armed with depth charges. We took off at 1110 hours with three other 459 aircraft in V formation. We were to fly behind enemy lines and close to the coast. Although we were promised fighter escort they did not appear until we were attacking.

Near Sidi Barrani in the Bay of Sollum and about one mile from shore I saw two 'F'boats and circled to attack with the flight falling in almost line astern. With bomb doors open I made a diving approach

slightly one their port bow which would give us a run to seaward after attacking and allow 'stick bombing' on both craft.

I saw cannon shells hitting the water off my port sied as I levelled out at about thirty feet. The "all hell broke loose". I circled a forward gun platform in my gun sight and held the firing button down. The tracer, clearly visible, sprayed across the gun platform and bounced off the deck. Ron Godfrey, my navigator, who was sitting beside me. hit my arm to go no lower or level out because at this stage of an attack I was always firing the front guns. We received more hits and Ron was blown through the seat. He must have died instantly. I released the depth charges. I could smell petrol and flames were sweeping up through the open front. Oil, soot, flames and blood covered everything and I couldn't see through the windscreen. The engines were dying and more throttle had no effect. I had released the depth charges as the ships disappeared under our nose and I didn't know whether they had cleared the bomb bay. Then, knowing it had to be a wet tail I selected bomb doors closed and released my escape hatch. The aircraft was losing height but there was no way of knowing where the water was. I tried to slip one side of my shoulder harness with the thought of looking above the windscreen but I don't know if any of this happened for I was experiencing a violent spinning sensation and then everything was black. The thought went through my mind "so this is what it is like to die".

I opened my eyes and vomited salt water, then slowly my brain started to function and I could see water, only water. I realised the flotation material in my Mae West was keeping my mouth just above water level and with each wavelet I was sucking some in. I turned around to see the aircraft about fifty feet away with Fred Stutt (W/AG) and Jack Evans (W/AG) at the open rear door.

The immersion switch to inflate the dinghy in the door has failed to operate so Fred, who had his boots ripped off when his feet were jammed getting out of the mid upper turret, climbed back inside and released the dinghy manually. It was perished and sank. Jack then went back inside, collected two 'one man' dinghies and swam them over to me. All this time, not knowing that the depth charges had released, I was yelling "Get away from the aircraft" in case the charges exploded. The aircraft slowly stood on her nose, as if in final salute, then settled back and sank tail first beneath the sea. I waited for the dreadful percussion which I knew would crush us. Nothing happened and slowly my head cleared and sanity returned. It was quiet, very quiet, except for the lapping sound of the water against my Mae West and the faint sound of the rest of the strike force in the distance. Suddenly I felt abandoned.

Fred and Jack handed me a 'one man' dinghy which I couldn't inflate so I let it sink. Three of us in a 'one man' dinghy! I clearly remember being in the water and thought that is where I stayed during this incident but I have been assured by Fred and Jack that they put me in the dinghy - I have no recollection. Yet I do recall people in the dinghy, little realising all these years later that I was the only one. Fred stayed with Jack in the water. We floated for about 1 ½ hours, then I could feel the vibrations of a vessel becoming more pronounced and there above us was 'the one that got away'. We had split the plates of one vessel which had been beached. The other had survived the four aircraft attack, taking the crew from the beached vessel and then coming to collect us. A 20mm cannon was aimed at us and I wanted to say "Good luck, this could be it" but I doubt the words were ever uttered. However, our captors behaved in a very humane manner, assisting us up the ladder with boat hooks.

We were prisoners of war.

Syd was badly injured and required considerable medical attention not only by the Axis medical staff during his three years of imprisonment but in RAAF medical establishments on his return to Australia.

When the Eighth Army advanced up the desert from El Alamein, a Hudson engine was discovered in the bow of a beached 'F' boat and the number of the engine corresponded to that of Lockie Staines' aircraft and it would appear that he could have crashed into the 'F' boat during his attack.

After spending five days back at LG Z during which time we did very little apart from one or two air tests, we went back to LG 226 (Gianaclis) on 28th July for another period of operational standby. By this time the squadron were having some success and had been credited with sinking several 'F' boats as well as attacks on other shipping.

We did a couple more patrols up the coast in the region of Tobruk but saw nothing and began to wonder whether we would ever see some real action - I'm not sure that, in our heart of hearts, we really wanted to, but that was what we had trained for and I suppose that, in spite of this trepidation, we hoped we could do something worthwhile. At least we didn't get lost anymore!

Our second operational detachment ended on August 3rd and we flew back to LG Z once again for a week of relative inactivity although we did have a couple of practice bombing sessions, bombing from very low level, which turned out to be rather prophetic in view of our next detachment to Gianaclis a week later.

I find it difficult to remember how we filled in the time at LG Z apart from flying. We were too far from civilisation , in this case Cairo, to do any sightseeing and we just sat around and put the world to rights during the day and made inroads into the goodly supply of Aussie beer in the evenings. Jimmy had an accordion which was in great demand and he played his 'squeezebox' for hours in the Mess in the evening, and songs like 'The Road to Mandalay', 'Waltzing Matilda' and 'The Road to Gundegai' were ever popular.

One thing was completely unchanging at that time of the year - the weather. We never saw a cloud and it was very hot during the day and quite cold in the desert at night. The wind always seemed to blow from the same direction by day and died away at night which helped sleeping as there wasn't so much dust. We hadn't much in the way of furniture in the tents and at the beginning slept on the sand with an odd purloined box to use as a table, desk or whatever. Three poles and an up-turned tin hat made a washbasin and water for washing was at a premium, so you could say that living was fairly basic for a while but, as time went on we acquired various luxuries such as camp beds and coathangers to make life a little more bearable.

We went back to Gianaclis on August 11th for our third operational detachment to find that things had been hotting up and, although we had lost a few crews, we had also had some successes in the form of 'F' boats sunk.

Our first shipping strike was the next day, August 12th and we took off at 3.00 a.m. to patrol the area Cape Azzaz to Taifa Rocks. The first part of the patrol was without incident, we saw nothing in the patrol area which was a strip about ten miles off the coast, so at the end of our patrol we turned with the intention of flying about fifty miles out to sea before turning southeast and returning to base. By this time it was full daylight and after about five minutes we realised there was something in the sea directly ahead. We were flying at 100 feet above the sea and recognised it as an 'F' boat. We couldn't understand what it was doing out there as most previous sightings had been very close inshore to obtain maximum protection from shore-based aircraft. Possibly someone had realised that we were patrolling just off the coast and that it would be safer to sail further out. Unfortunately for them we just happened to turn out to sea at that point and there it was, dead ahead. As soon as we saw the 'F' boat we dropped to fifty feet, opened the bomb doors, put on full power and headed straight for it.

The moment we reduced height they realised they had been seen and opened up with everything they had which, to my inexperienced eye, seemed to be an awful lot as tracer was coming from the whole length of the boat. I think the 'F' boats were equipped with both Bofors and Oerliken ack-ack guns with tracer every fifth or sixth shell. I opened up with front guns in the hope of putting them off, but I couldn't aim at anything in particular as they just fired where the aircraft was pointing but perhaps it discouraged them a little. Tracer seemed to be passing both under and over the wings and, as at that height, it was impossible to weave without hitting the sea, the only hope was to fly straight at them and hope for the best. Either they were rotten shots or we bore a charmed life, or both, but nothing hit us and we dropped the full stick of 10 x 100 lb bombs about 100 yards short of the target. It was impossible to miss as any bombs falling short would skim along the surface and still hit the side of the ship - this technique was later christened 'skip bombing' and turned out to be very effective. The bombs had an eleven second delay to avoid us being blown up by our own bombs and a few seconds after we had pulled up over the ship, there was a large explosion and the ship started to burn. Jimmy added to the general mayhem by giving them a long burst from the turret which I don't suppose helped them very much.

A couple of days later there was a piece in the local Egyptian paper under the heading 'Enemy Lighter Left On Fire' which said 'Early this morning a light bomber of the Royal Australian Air Force scored direct hits on a lighter engaged in the vital task of carrying supplies to the Axis. In a low level attack, the bomber dropped two bombs on the vessel which reared itself out of the water then splashed back with flames coming from it'. This was definitely our attack and was confirmed as sunk.

We slept most of the day and then the next night went out again on the same patrol , Cape Azzaz to Taifa Rocks, taking off at 3.00 a.m. The first part of the patrol was, once again, uneventful but, just as dawn was breaking in the east, we saw a fire on the water and realised it was a burning 'F' boat. On reducing height and coming closer we saw that a second 'F' boat was stopped between us and the burning boat, presumably picking up survivors. As we were approaching out of the dark we were not seen, came in at fifty feet and dropped our bombs with out a shot being fired. Once again, there was an explosion and fire and the second boat was credited to us as 'badly damaged, probably sunk'. The other boat was the result of an attack by Don Beaton who had been patrolling ahead of us and when I was in Sydney in 1992 for the 50th Anniversary of the formation of the squadron I met up with Ray Heathwood who was Don Beaton's rear gunner and he confirmed the whole episode.

Once again we hit the headlines in the local paper under 'Enemy Lighters Sunk Off Coast'. 'Light bombers of a Royal Australian Air Force squadron this morning carried out another successful attack on lighters off the Egyptian coast. At least one lighter was sunk by bombs dropped from a low level and a second lighter badly damaged and probably sunk. This brings the squadron's total to ten lighters sunk plus two probables in recent days'.

In two days we had gone from being complete novices to equalling the squadron's top score, although at the time we didn't realise it and, even if we had, it wouldn't have made any difference, we were just thankful to be in one piece!

We arrived back at Gianaclis in the early morning thinking we might get some well earned rest as this had been our second night on operations in succession but it was not to be and we took off early that afternoon as a number of 'F' boats had been reported off Marsa Matruh. We flew to within a mile of the harbour to be greeted by some very heavy flak and, as there was no sign of the supposed 'F' boats, we turned west along the coast in case they hadn't reached the area yet but, even though we flew for another hour nothing was seen and we returned to base. We worked it out that we had flown operationally three times for a total of fifteen hours in a period of thirty-nine hours without a lot of sleep. That was the end of our third operational detachment and we went back to LG Z the next day for a rest. However, we were given a 48 hour pass and off we went to investigate the bright lights of Cairo for the first time. Little did I think that I would still be going back there three years later!

My early recollections of Cairo are rather hazy, mainly due to time and not alcohol, but I remember Groppis, a wonderful patisserie with marvellous sticky cakes and Tommy's Bar, kept by an Australian left over from the First World War, where all the Australian servicemen used to foregather. The only problem was that he didn't have an unlimited supply of beer and, as most of the Aussies coming down from the desert had prodigious thirsts, the beer ran out fairly quickly, but still, the company was good.

When we came back from Cairo we spent a couple of days at LG Z doing a little local flying and then, on August 27th, went back to Gianaclis on operational detachment once more. We didn't fly until August 30th when we were sent off in the late afternoon to carry out a shipping strike off Tobruk. I have a feeling that the 'F' boat threat had receded by that time, apparently the squadron had accounted for about seventeen boats altogether and it could be that the Germans had given up the idea. However, the patrol off Tobruk was a much longer flight - we were in the air for six and a quarter hours, the last four at night and we started the sweep from Tobruk going westwards. We didn't see anything apart from a German hospital ship steaming west and lit up like a christmas tree. We flew round it without getting too close and I doubt if they saw us but, we couldn't be too careful as they would still be in radio contact and the last thing we needed was the Luftwaffe looking for us, the Hudson wasn't really a match for a German fighter. Incidentally, the aircraft we flew on this strike was FH 266, the old friend we brought out from the UK and, this, apart from a naval escort we carried out on a Malta convoy in November, was the only time we flew it on operations. I recently obtained a copy of the histories of all the Hudsons flown by 459 during the war, and was glad to see that FH 266, like it's original crew, survived the war unscathed.

That was the last squadron operational detachment at Gianaclis and the end of the shipping strike saga - I'm still not sure whether we ran out of targets or whether the hierarchy decided that casualties were getting too high. In any case, that was it from our point of view and, to be honest, we didn't lose too much sleep about it!

The squadron stood down and we were all given a weeks leave. We flew up to Lydda, just outside Tel Aviv, with Col Stinson and his crew (Joe Wright, Col Barber and Joe Hughes) and had a great week including nearly getting drowned at about two o'clock in the morning when, after a night on the tiles, we thought we ought to have a swim not realising that there were strong currents just off the beach where we were swimming.

When we returned to LG Z nothing much had happened whilst we had been away, but there were rumours that U boats were operating in the Indian Ocean and that the squadron might be called upon to do some patrolling from Aden. We didn't pay a lot of attention, there were always rumours on the go, but this one turned out to be fact and on September 18th, together with Col Stinson and his crew, we flew down to Sheikh Othman in Aden, night stopping at Port Sudan, half way down the Red Sea, on the way. On the 22nd we carried out a five and a half hour sweep off the Horn of Africa and landed on the beach on the island of Socotra.

Socotra was a strange place and the only RAF presence was a team of wireless operators manning a radio station. The petrol was kept in four gallon cans on the beach, having been landed by sea, and we had to refuel the aircraft ourselves, standing on the wing and pouring in the petrol through a funnel, a very time consuming process. The beach consisted of pebbles and, unfortunately, some were very sharp. As we were taxiing along the beach prior to taking off, there was a loud bang and the tail wheel burst and that was that. We didn't have a spare, so we were stuck on Socotra for a couple of days until another aircraft brought in a spare. When it arrived we had a problem as, even though a fitter came armed with all his tools, we had no jack so we had to pile stones under the tail of the aircraft and then dig a hole so that we could replace the wheel. The snag was that the tail oleo leg had quite a long extension and the hole had to be very deep before we could change the wheels. We then had the problem of moving the aircraft out of the hole, so we made a sloping ramp and then

started the engines, giving it a lot of power and the tail wheel came out of the hole, over the pile of stones and we were ready to go. We took off for Aden immediately with fingers crossed in case of further bursts but nothing happened.

Aden wasn't the best of places, there was very little to do in the town and nothing much in the way of hotels or bars or, if there were, we didn't find them. The climate was pretty awful, very hot with high humidity all the time and the most comfortable place to be was in the air.

After we had been there for a while we were joined by another couple of crews, including Keith O'Brien, also ex Silloth, whose navigator was one Alexander McKenzie Downs, otherwise known as Sandy. He became notorious in Aden by accepting a bet that he could drink a bottle of whisky in half an hour - he won the bet, but spent the next two days in hospital having stomach pump treatment. It was sad, really, as he was killed, together with Keith and the entire crew, crashing on landing in appalling weather at Edku returning from Benghazi later in the year.

After returning from Socotra we didn't fly again until October 5th when we went on an anti-submarine patrol out into the Indian Ocean. For our navigator we took Joe Wright, Col Stinson's navigator, Chuck Collins being out of action - Chuck was subsequently posted to the Far East, where we should have been in the first place if we hadn't bent the rules. Joe was a great type, a real died-in-the-wool Aussie from Victoria and we got on very well together - he died a few years ago and I never had the pleasure of meeting up with him on my visits to Australia which is a great pity as I would have loved to see him again. Incidentally, Col Stinson became Mayor of a town called Cowra, in western New South Wales and he also died before my first visit in 1992.

Coming back to our first trip with Joe as navigator, we did an anti-submarine patrol from Aden, ending up at a place called Skushiuban, some miles inland from the Somalian coast south of the Horn of Africa. It all sounded very simple and after we had completed the patrol we headed for Skushiuban. It was about half an hour before sunset and, as we were almost on the equator, it would be pitch black in fifteen minutes from the sun setting, so we didn't have very much time. When we arrived at the co-ordinates given to us for the landing strip we couldn't see anything resembling a strip, just flat desert with a few bushes here and there. We knew it couldn't be far away so we flew round in circles for a few minutes without success, before deciding we ought to get on the ground as quickly as possible as the sun had set by this time and worry about Skushiuban later. We selected what appeared to be a firm piece of desert and flew over at about fifty feet without seeing any obstacles, so we landed and waited for something to happen. A few minutes later a jeep came bouncing over the desert - it was the ground crew (manning the usual radio station) who had seen us flying around and tracked us down. We followed them through the darkness back to the strip, which wasn't any different to where we had landed and not marked in any way.

The following day we took off and escorted a northbound convoy for about six hours before returning to Skushiuban, landing at the right place this time. Next morning we once again escorted the convoy before returning to Aden. We had a day off and then took off about four in the morning and flew to Salalah, a landing strip on the coast of Oman. Conditions there were very basic and we were back to the old chore of refuelling from four gallon cans. There was a very strong wind blowing which simplified disposal of the empty tins, we just threw them off the wing and the wind blew them away. In the afternoon, we did a further escort on the same convoy and returned to Salalah late that night, having flown eleven hours that day - we slept well!.

A funny thing about Salalah - my daughter and her husband Richard were sent to Oman (he is a computer engineer) to service radar installations for the Royal Omani Air Force and lived in Salalah. When she was leaving I asked where she would be going and her reply was 'A place you have never heard of - Salalah'. She was quite taken aback when I said we had been there in 1942 and that it was

a small strip with tents and an Arab village nearby. Now it has an international airport and a modern city - amazing what a little oil can do!

The next day we once again escorted the convoy before flying back to Aden. This was the last we saw of that convoy and I don't think we were sorry as we had flown round it for about twenty five hours and that was enough for one crew.

When we arrived back at Aden we found we were to be moved to another airfield in the Aden Protectorate, Khormaksar. We couldn't see any reason for the move as it didn't seem any different to Sheikh Othman but ours was not to reason why. I did a couple of ferry flights between the two airfields and then we settled in for one night at Khormaksar before going off the following morning on another convoy escort (a different one this time) before once again ending up at Skushiuban - we were getting quite adept at finding it by now!.Joe was still flying with us and we did another seven hours escorting the next day, coming back to Skushiuban once more before a further seven hour escort and a return to Khormaksar. That was the end of our operational flying from the Aden detachment of 459 and we had clocked up quite a lot of hours without seeing anything of interest, such as a submarine.

We left Aden on October 17th, together with Col Stinson and his crew, bound for LG Z and home comforts. We stopped at Port Sudan, half way up the Red Sea for refuelling, hoping to do the trip in one day as Col and I were sharing the flying, but had to make a forced landing at Helwan on the Suez Canal where we night-stopped, going on to LG Z, which had been renamed LG 208 in our absence, in the morning. There were eight of us and all our gear in the plane, it was a bit of a squash!

Our next move was on October 28th, when we were detached to St. Jeans, not very far from Haifa in the Lebanon. This was much more to our liking as the camp consisted of tents set in a wood of eucalyptus trees, more commonly know in Australia as gum tress. This suited the Aussies as it reminded them of home, most of the trees in Australia being gum trees of one kind or another. We enjoyed St. Jeans and it was nice to get away from the inevitable sand for a change. The only snag was that we did a lot of flying, mostly at night on convoy escorts and I see that between October 30th and our return to LG 208 on November 8th we flew 28 hours, of which 24 were at night. We had also had a change of navigator, Chuck being bound for the Far East, and his replacement was a Lancashire lad, Sgt. Horace Nicholson from Colne. We got on well with Nick and he stayed with the crew until the end of our tour. We carried on doing convoy escorts from LG 208, amongst them being the naval force consisting of four cruisers and six destroyers which was taking the first westbound Malta convoy. The only incident of note was on November 10th when we had an engine failure and had to return to LG 208 on one engine. On 24th November we did a patrol from Edku, on the coast west of Alexandria, completing the patrol by landing at Mersa Matruh. It seemed strange to be there on the ground after our various recent experiences off the coast when it was in enemy hands. That particular flight was the last time we flew FH 266, our own UK aircraft.

On December 17th the squadron moved lock, stock and barrel to Gambut in Cyrenaica, a landing strip in the desert south of Tobruk. There was nothing there except a lot of crashed Luftwaffe aircraft and we had to bring up all our tents and other means of sustaining life - water was once again at a premium and bathing was a luxury we couldn't afford. We continued to fly convoy escorts and anti-submarine patrols from Gambut during December and the only interesting item was when we flew up to Benghazi on New Year's Eve to be based there for a week doing patrols west into the Mediterranean. Benghazi had only recently fallen and there were no facilities whatsoever so we took a small tent and our food which consisted a very basic rations, biscuits, bully beef, spam and a large tin of so-called butter. It was actually some sort of margarine and was as hard as a rock, needing a chisel to get it out of the tin. Everyone called it 'Oleo' and I think it was more suitable for hydraulic fluid than food. However, arriving at Benghazi late in the afternoon we pitched our tent on the side of the strip near the aircraft and settled down for the night. We were on a slight slope but during the night the heavens opened and before we knew it we had a flood coming in at one end of the tent and out at the other. We were so wet and uncomfortable that we gave up and spent the rest of the night in the

aircraft. It was just a year since I spent New Years Eve in Aberdeen waiting for a train to Silloth- a lot had happened in that year. My New Years Eves in the RAF hadn't been too successful so far!

January and February were very uneventful apart from a few convoy escorts - Rommel had disappeared in the direction of Tunis and we were a long way from the war, so we settled in to another period of relative inactivity.

We also managed a couple of 48 hour weekend leaves in Alexandria which were more than welcome as we had had very little leave since arriving in the Middle East. On the first one Jimmy, Lee and I went in with some of the Aussies, Johnny Springthorpe, Geoff Ashford, Harry Kelly and Dick Clancy amongst them and we were immediately initiated into the great Australian breakfast. We were all staying in a hotel in Alex and before going down to breakfast the Aussies rang Room Service and ordered steak and four eggs for everyone as the first course! It sounds pretty horrible but was actually very welcome as we had been living on fairly tight rations for quite a period and had a lot of ground to make up.

Alex was a wonderful change from the desert and very different from Cairo which was a very crowded, rather dirty typical Egyptian city with bazaars, flies, noise and everything else associated with the East. Alex, on the other hand, was much more European with quite a French influence and, as it was on the coast, much cooler and cleaner than Cairo. We found a number of excellent restaurants, and one in particular called Giovannides, kept by a Greek, took a lot of our custom during our visits to Alex. I remember they produced a most wonderful Russian Salad and, whilst I suppose distance lends enchantment to the view, I don't think I have ever had anything to touch it since.

We also spent quite a lot of time in the Junior Officers Club in Alex which was a meeting place for all the services, including the Merchant Navy, and on one visit I met the Captain of a tanker which was waiting to join a convoy to Malta. After a convivial afternoon he asked Jimmy and I to continue the party on board so we went down to the harbour and were taken by launch out to the tanker where we carried on until the early hours of the morning. The tanker officers certainly lived in style with luxurious quarters and excellent food, but when you consider they were sitting on thousands of gallons of high octane fuel and, as the tankers were always the prime target of any enemy attack, we didn't grudge them their luxuries one bit - life in a tent in the desert was much more stable and probably offered a greater future.

The tanker was called 'Ensis' and I was pleased to discover recently that it survived both a torpedoing off Cyprus and the rest of the war before finally being scrapped in Hong Kong in 1958.

At the beginning of January 1943 Col Stinson and I were sent to a Commissioning Board in Alexandria where we were asked a few questions by a Board of three Wing Commanders, we must have answered them correctly as we were granted commissions immediately and I came back as a very junior Pilot Officer. I was given £50 to buy the neccessary uniform but the delights of Alex were too good to miss and I didn't see the need for a best blue uniform in the desert, so I had an excellent 48 hours and returned with two shoulder tapes and an officers hat.

Whilst we were at Gambut we were visited on several occasions by three padres, an Anglican, a Roman Catholic and a Methodist. They were great fun and brought a breath of fresh air (and also some much needed supplies) to the squadron.. The Methodist was the Rev. Fred Mackay and after the war he achieved the distinction of taking over control of the Flying Doctor Service in Australia from the legendary Flynn of the Outback who founded the service. I was very fortunate to meet him again on several occasions from 1992 onwards and he took the memorial service at Richmond Air Force base in New South Wales when the memorials to 454 and 459 were dedicated and I was afforded the honour of laying the wreath on behalf of 459 Squadron. I met him again on the occasion of a service

of thanksgiving for his life on his ninetieth birthday at St. Philips Cathedral in Sydney in 1999 - he was quite a man and has left his mark on Australia. He died in 1991 after a wonderful life.

At the end of February a number of us who had been in at the beginning of the shipping strikes were told that our first tour was now over and that we had been posted as instructors to No. 75 Operational Training Unit at, of all places, Gianaclis, from where we had made most of our shipping strikes.

During my tour I had flown 45 operations and totalled 247 hours.

No. 75 Operational Training Unit, LG 226 Gianaclis

I flew down to Gianaclis with Doug Ferguson , Bill Weatherly and one or two more came down separately. We were given tents and about six o'clock decided to investigate the Mess. Bearing in mind that we had been up at Gambut for about eleven weeks, living an unavoidable nomadic existence, our uniforms left a lot to be desired and we were attired in a mixture of bush jackets, khaki battle dress tops, shorts and desert boots (calf length suede boots without laces, designed to keep out scorpions and other nasty creatures) and which were very necessary in the desert. Imagine our utter amazement when we walked into the large marquee which was the Officers Mess to find that everyone was dressed in best blue uniforms with polished black shoes - black shoes in the desert! Apparently all the ground staff and administration staff had come from the UK by boat and had just settled in at Gianaclis, bringing all the UK red tape with them. As the four of us walked up to the bar there was a deathly hush you could have cut with a knife, and the Station Commander, Group Captain Hodgson was heard to say 'Who the devil are these people?' The Adjutant's reply was 'Your new flying instructors, sir'. - the C.O said 'I'll see them in the morning'.

When we saw him the next day and told him of our uniform problems he was very understanding and dress rules were relaxed from then on in the Mess.

We did a lot of mixed flying at 75 O.T.U., taking wireless operators on radio instruction in Avro Ansons, converting new pilots to Baltimores and Hudsons, and flying the miscellaneous collection of aircraft the O.T.U. seemed to have acquired - Blenheim Mk. 1, Blenheim Mk. 4, Bisley, and even a Beaufighter. We didn't do any instruction on the last four but used them for fun flying - my lasting impression being that you had to wear leather gloves all the time as there were so many sharp edges in the cockpit on British aircraft that your hands were cut to ribbons unless well protected. Also the Anson had a wind-up undercarriage which took 128 turns of a cranked handle in the cockpit to retract and another 128 to put it down, so you never flew alone but press-ganged some willing? volunteer to come with you.

The time at Gianaclis passed quite uneventfully apart from two personal experiences which could have made a huge difference to my future. The first one concerned a Baltimore. The Baltimore was an American light bomber built to British design having a very narrow fuselage rather like a fighter with the navigator in the nose and two gunners in the rear. There was no means of moving about in the aircraft and information could only be passed through small hatches from the pilot to the crew members. The only way to instruct pupil pilots was for the pupil to stand behind the pilot and watch through a small hatch whilst listening to the pilot's commentary. Part of the instruction was to demonstrate stalling which entailed climbing to about 12000 feet, levelling off and reducing power to a minimum, slowly pulling back the stick until the aircraft stalled when the left wing would normally drop with very little warning. To recover, one had to turn into the direction of the dropped wing and come out in a dive. I had done this several times without any problem, but this particular aircraft must have been rigged wrongly as the wing that dropped was the right one and, as I was expecting the left one, I turned to the left, with the result that the aircraft turned on its back and went into a flat spin. All the accumulated debris and sand fell off the floor and the cockpit resembled a sandstorm - I couldn't see a thing and hadn't the faintest idea what to do, an inverted flat spin was something I had never encountered before. The G forces were throwing me all over the place and the noise was horrendous,

the controls weren't answering, so I did the only thing I could think of and pushed the throttles right up against the stops. This seemed to do the trick as I could feel some response in the controls although we were still upside down and, as I pulled the stick back we went into a vertical dive. I gradually eased out of the dive and ended up straight and level doing about 350 miles an hour at 200 feet above the desert - another couple of seconds and we would have gone straight into the ground.

When I returned to base I put the aircraft u/s and the riggers spent a couple of weeks checking it before it flew again. The sad ending is that another instructor took it up to do a stalling demonstration, spun and went straight into the ground.

The second near miss concerns a Hudson, V9101. The aircraft had been in maintenance for a double engine change and I was asked to air test it on completion. I took the ground crew with me for the ride as they had done all the work and, just as I was retracting the undercarriage on take off, the starboard engine stopped. We were only about twenty feet up and it was a very hot day which reduced lift somewhat so I pushed the port throttle right through the gate to give emergency power. The aircraft still would not climb so I did a gentle turn to port with the intention of making a low circuit and landing. When we were on the downwind leg the temperature of the good engine began to rise alarmingly and the oil pressure began to drop so I turned in, still at 200 feet, hoping to land across the airfield as there were no other aircraft flying at that time. When I was about 400 yards from the perimeter, the second engine packed up and the aircraft fell out of the sky, landing in the sand, bouncing once over some 40 gallon oil drums marking the airfield boundary before careering along between lines of parked aircraft and coming to a stop still in the dispersal area. I had very little control over the latter part of the landing and when we came to measure it, there was a clearance of only ten feet between the wing tips of the Hudson and the parked aircraft - it is better to be lucky than rich!

After these two experiences I began to think I was safer on operations.

Incidentally, in the RAF, if a pilot did something stupid he was given a Red Endorsement in his logbook which was a black mark for ever more, but after my escapade with the Hudson, Group Captain Hodgson gave me the opposite, a Green Endorsement which I hadn't realised existed until then.

The rest of my time at 75 O.T.U was uneventful although I didn't enjoy instructing very much and made several applications to be returned to operations, until, at the beginning of October 1943 I was posted to No. 267 Squadron. Jimmy Craig, Lee Barrett and Merv Griffiths also came with me, together with Doug Ferguson and quite a number of ex-459 personnel. During the seven months I had been at 75 O.T.U. I had only flown another 134 hours, but this covered seven different types of aircraft and with the average length of flight of no more than thirty minutes this had meant an awful lot of taking off and landing. I was also promoted to Flying Officer in August.

<u>No. 267 Squadron R.A.F. Middle East</u>

We were flown down to Heliopolis, an airfield in the suburbs of Cairo which at that time was the base for No. 267 Squadron, R.A.F. a Dakota transport squadron. Heliopolis was not an ideal base as the airstrip ended up with a tall block of flats. This was fine for small slow aircraft, for which it had been intended originally, but larger aircraft had to land towards the flats and take off in the opposite direction - from what I can remember there was also a slope towards the flats, so you landed downhill and took off uphill, which was not an ideal combination. However, soon after I joined the squadron moved to Cairo West, a large new field on the edge of the desert a few miles out of Cairo.

For the first couple of weeks I flew as second pilot to familiarise myself with the Dakota and the flying requirements of Transport Command. On October 17th we flew to Catania in Sicily to land on mainland Europe for the first time and I celebrated by catching yellow jaundice, in company with

thousands of other servicemen who had taken part in the invasion of Sicily. I flew back to Cairo West on October 19th and went straight into the RAF Hospital in Cairo feeling like death warmed up. I spent ten days in hospital and was then given two weeks sick leave which I spent in Jerusalem, staying at the King David Hotel. This was a wonderful experience and I saw all the biblical sites in Jerusalem and Bethlehem at my leisure.

At the end of my leave I thumbed a lift back to Cairo in a Lockheed Electra, took another flying medical (after jaundice this was mandatory in the RAF) and rejoined 267 at Cairo West. The squadron was in the process of moving up to Bari on the east coast of Italy, the front line having moved to the north of Foggia and across to Monte Cassino in the west. I did another couple of trips as second pilot and then on December 1st, with Merv Griffiths as navigator and Lee Barrett as wireless operator, started on my career as a transport captain. The flying was very interesting as we flew all kinds of loads, from up to thirty passengers, loads of freight, mail, even jeeps. From memory, the all-up take off weight was 33000 lbs and the load capacity in the region of 12000 lbs, which made the Dakota a very useful aircraft.

We flew anywhere between Cairo and Algiers and ended up in some very strange spots. One trip we did on an almost daily basis was from Bari to Foggia, Foggia to Trigno, Trigno to Naples and return. This meant six landings and the longest leg was thirty minutes, so at the end of the day, we realised we had worked pretty hard. Trigno was very unusual, it was just behind the front line and consisted of strips of pierced steel planking laid on the beach to make a runway. The runway was not very wide as the wing tips of the Dakota overhung it on each side and was about a mile in length. There was no problem when the wind was up and down the runway, but usually it was across, which made landing a rather hazardous undertaking. To make matters more interesting, it was used as an advanced base for a fighter squadron and their aircraft were parked at either side of the runway ready for immediate take-off which meant we had to be dead central when landing or else we would have incurred the wrath of the fighter C.O. if we had written off his precious aircraft!.

The weather in Italy during the winter of 1942/3 was appalling, so much so that the war on the ground became completely static and nobody moved for about three months. From a flying point of view the weather was a big problem as a lot of our flights went through Naples on the western side of the country and, unfortunately, between Bari and Naples there is a large mountain range, the Appenines, which go up to about 12000 feet. We discovered three wide passes through the mountains and normally flew through one of these to get to Naples. Unfortunately, on one occasion I was really caught out, as I went over the highest point in one of the passes to find that the cloud base had come right down to about 100 feet above the ground on the other side of the col.. I couldn't turn round as there was not enough width in the valley, I couldn't climb into the cloud as there were mountains all round, and had no alternative but to follow the river flowing in the bottom of the valley, the assumption being that water always flows downhill and that the river would eventually reach the sea. It was raining hard, which made forward visibility difficult, and we flew just above the water with houses and farms on the hillsides on either side above us, trying to follow the course of the river which was twisting and turning all the time. Finally, after fifteen minutes of complete panic we suddenly came to mouth of the river and flew out into the Bay of Salerno - I was wet through with perspiration and shaking like a leaf, so I put in the automatic pilot and flew out to sea until I got my breath back. I never found out what the passengers in the back thought, I hadn't the courage to ask them - perhaps they thought it was just a normal flight!

December, January and February were spent doing routine flying, with a lot of trips from Naples to Algiers and return - we did it so often the aircraft almost knew their own way and we hardly needed a map to fix our position as I think we knew every bit of the North African coastline by heart.. The weather didn't improve with the New Year and on one occasion I was flying from Naples to Algiers into a very strong head wind of about sixty miles an hour. Normally, we could reach Algiers with plenty of fuel to spare but on this occasion, the wind was so strong, I had to land half way along the North African coast to refuel before going on to Algiers. Early in January we were returning from Algiers to Naples with a full load of passengers including a well-known comedian called Tommy Trinder. His

trade mark was a trilby pulled down over one eye and, as I wasn't flying with a second pilot, I asked him to come up into the second pilot's seat for the flight. He kept me amused with a non-stop series of jokes which helped to pass the time until we were about 100 miles north of Palermo in Sicily when the starboard engine gave up the ghost. I had to move fairly quickly to close down and feather the engine - the feathering button was just above Tommy Trinder's head and in the process I nearly knocked his head off and his hat went flying. He quickly put it back on again and carried on with his monologue as though nothing had happened. We decided to go into Palermo which was the nearest emergency airfield but, unfortunately, the landing strip was not very long and was almost surrounded with barrage balloons. However, beggars couldn't be choosers and we had to go in on one engine which meant we only had one chance to land as we couldn't go round again if we made a mess of it. To complicate matters we had to make a right-hand circuit because of the balloons which meant turning into the dead engine all the time, something strictly taboo as in single engined flying, all turns are normally made into the active engine. However, we had no alternative and fortunately there was very little wind, so we landed safely and had to night-stop in the Transit Mess whilst the engineers fixed the engine. The problem turned out to be a fuel pump which was soon mended and we were on our way to Naples early the next day.

One thing which happened at Bari during the winter which had nothing to do with our flying but was quite memorable nevertheless, was a hit and run raid by a few German Junkers 88 aircraft on the shipping in Bari harbour in the early evening of 2nd December 1943. We were living in the Regia Aeronautica Mess on the aerodrome about three miles as the crow flies from the harbour when the raid started in the early evening. We had finished dinner and went up on the flat roof of the Mess to watch the raid which lasted about ten minutes after which some fires started in the harbour. Some time later, the fires having intensified, there was a terrific explosion with a column of flame going hundreds of feet in the air and then the sound and blast wave hit us as we watched from the flat roof - windows were blown in and the blast was enough to knock us off our feet. The fires continued all night and it was only later that the full story came out. Apparently an oil tanker had been hit and caught fire, the burning oil spreading on the surface until it surrounded an ammunition ship which exploded causing the explosion. This in turn caused a number of other ships to either burn or sink and the scene in the harbour was absolute chaos. For the next few days, casualties were being brought into the local hospitals suffering from burns and undiagnosed symptoms which the hospital authorities could not identify and many were dying. It was only much later that it was discovered that one of the ships was carrying mustard gas, which I thought had been banned under the Articles of War, this ship had sunk and the gas had mixed with the water which was being pumped to put out the fires, injuring all who came into contact with it. A book has since been written about this affair under the title 'Disaster at Bari' and apparently it was the largest explosion of the war prior to the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It must also have been one of the most effective bombing raids of the war.

Life at Bari was not very interesting as, apart from flying, there was very little to do and most of the action was in the bar in the evenings. Unfortunately we didn't have the same access to beer supplies as on 459 in the desert and had to make do with whatever turned up - we were rationed to six bottles of spirits every evening. These were available at 6 o'clock exactly and by half past six that was it - 267 aircrew were a thirsty lot. The only snag was that the spirits could be anything that came up from the NAAFI and on more than one occasion we had to put up with a mixture of vodka and cherry brandy which don't really go well together and produced some massive headaches. Whilst at Bari we got to know an Australian Air Ambulance unit who were based nearby and they appeared to have unlimited supplies of navy rum - they were never short of friends!

In March the role of the squadron changed and, in addition to transport flying, we began to carry out special missions in Northern Italy and the Balkans. My first trip was on March 11th when we did a supply drop to partisans between Fiume and Zagreb, using parachutes from 500 feet. A report received from the field said that all packages were received which was very satisfactory for a first attempt. Our next trip was another supply drop on the Yugoslav - Hungarian border on March 19th - this was much further into enemy territory but there was no interference and the drop was successful. We then went back on routine flying and, on April 17th I had an unusual passenger. I was told to be at Luqa by 10.00 a.m. before flying on to Tunis. As we had no special instructions, we were dressed in

the usual desert gear with no badges of rank, and, when I had landed at Luqa I got out of the aircraft to find to my horror a very official looking party consisting of the Governor General of Malta, Viscount Lord Gort V.C. and about ten of his staff waiting to be taken to Tunis on an official visit to the French General in charge at Tunis. There had obviously been a slip up in communications as the aircraft was full of mail bags with only a few flat tin seats along the side of the aircraft at the back. I apologised to Lord Gort for our appearance and the fact that the seating left a lot to be desired but he wasn't a bit worried and said he was quite happy to sit on the mail bags. I told him that this was quite impossible as, if there was an accident and he wasn't strapped in, my head would be on the block . I wasn't flying with a second pilot so I asked him if he would mind sitting up front in the second pilot's seat. He was delighted and we spent a very pleasant couple of hours flying to Tunis - he was a Field Marshal and I was a Flying Officer, the difference between our ranks being so great that we could have a normal conversation. He talked about his time in France before Dunkirk and, having told me he had once done a little flying, I asked him if he would like to fly the aircraft. He jumped at the chance, so I disengaged the automatic pilot and let him fly for a few minutes - he was like a boy with a new toy! It was an honour to meet him and I felt very privileged to have been given the opportunity. We night-stopped in Tunis and then returned him to Malta the following day.

About this time, once again the actual date escapes me, I was due to fly on the Bari - Naples -Algiers run, leaving Bari at 7.00 a.m. We took off, flew towards Naples and when we were about thirty miles away saw a huge column of smoke and fire in the distance. As we got nearer to it we realised that Vesuvius had erupted and we flew all the way round to have a good look - it was one of the most frightening sights I had ever seen with flame and molten rocks spewing out of the crater and rivers of molten lava flowing down the sides. When we landed at Naples we were told not to go anywhere near the volcano so we didn't tell them we had already been.

We started special operations in earnest in May with a leaflet raid toYugoslavia and Bulgaria, almost as far as the Black Sea. We didn't see a lot of point in these leaflet raids but someone thought it was necessary and as a result, we took about three tons of leaflets in packages and dropped them over the greater part of Bulgaria. It was interesting to see that the Bulgarian towns were still lit up, they probably had no blackout, but as we approached them, most of the lights went out. It was a very clear moonlit night and we were flying about 12000 feet which meant we could see for miles. On the way back near the town of Nis in Yugoslavia I noticed a series of flashes on the ground that looked like gunfire, so I disconnected George and dived the aircraft to the left, which was just as well as there was a series of explosions just above us - apparently we must have been flying towards a mobile flak battery which wasn't shown on our Intelligence summary. We took evasive action and after about five minutes were out of range and thought no more of it, but when we returned to Bari we found the aircraft had been hit in four places and one piece of shrapnel was lodged in the back of my seat, about six inches from my head. I kept it as a souvenir. Incidentally, this was the only time I received direct hits in action, and on a leaflet raid!

We did five more supply drops later in May, mainly in Northern Italy and on the Austro-Hungarian border with varying results - on two occasions the weather was too bad and we couldn't identify the dropping zone. On May 29th we carried out another leaflet raid, this time all over Greece, going to Salonika, Athens. Piraeus and Corinth and once again attracted some very heavy flak from two different sites with, fortunately, no hits. There must have been something fateful about leaflet raids.

In the first fortnight of June we carried out seven more supply drops in the same areas as before apart from one on 7th June when we dropped twelve Italian paratroopers in Central Italy, their task being to blow up some railway bridges. I never heard if they were successful The supply drops didn't present too many problems as the visibility was usually very good at night with the Italian summer weather although we did encounter one unexpected problem on a drop in the area to the north west of Spezia. The dropping zone was in the bottom of a steep-sided valley and mountains at one end meant we could only drop in one direction. We made our first run at 500 feet to check the pattern and came in for the first drop when we found ourselves flying through a collection of parachutes with large boxes underneath them. We managed to take avoiding action and waited until the area was clear before

completing the drop. When we returned to base rather annoyed, to say the least, we discovered that an American squadron had been doing their first operational drop, from about 2000 feet, which meant that their load would be spread all over the countryside instead of being concentrated on the target. From then on, we tried to ensure that we were the only squadron operating on any particular drop - it was much safer!

The squadron's flying had now developed into a pattern, one flight carrying out operations for a fortnight whilst the other flight did the routine flying and then the roles were reversed for the next fortnight. This was an excellent idea as it gave us all a break.

Our operations also took a new turn at the beginning of July when we began to do night landings in enemy occupied territory and on July 1st we did a landing in Yugoslavia with a load of 5000 lbs of supplies and brought out 26 starving Italians as passengers. The landing strips were a bit of a lottery as we landed on farmers fields, playing fields and any unobstructed piece of flat land the locals could find. They weren't always ideal, to say the least, as often there was a hill or a wood at one end but beggars couldn't be choosers! The sites were chosen by army liaison officers with the Partisans and I suppose they had been given a course in what constituted a suitable landing strip but their ideas and ours didn't always agree. Finding our way to the landing strips during the night was always something of a lottery as, whilst the weather in the summer was usually pretty good apart from the inevitable summer lightning, the maps we had were fairly rudimentary. The best way to navigate at night, apart from dead-reckoning which wasn't always possible in the mountains, was to map-read and, as water stands out well even on the darkest night, we tended to use lakes and rivers for navigational pin-points. The only snag was that, in the summer, a river shown on the map as a major waterway was often dry and couldn't be identified which caused problems from time to time. The other imponderable was not knowing exactly what would meet us when we landed, both in terms of the landing strip and the reception committee - there was always the possibility that the operation had been compromised and we would land in the arms of the Gestapo.

To minimise this, once we had identified the strip we flashed a pre-arranged morse signal with our Aldis lamp and, once we had received the correct reply from the ground, we carried on with the landing.

On the nights of July 3rd, 6th, 8th and 10th we carried out further landings in Yugoslavia, taking in supplies and bringing out various loads consisting of: July 3rd - 4500 lbs of supplies in and 27 wounded partisans out; July 6th - 5000 lbs of supplies in but no return load as the ground was very soft and we had difficulty in taking off at all. July 8th - 5000 lbs supplies in and 2 women and 39 children out. July 10th - 18 partisans (a Yugoslav General and his military mission who were being inserted into Yugoslavia) and ninety re-usable parachutes and eleven partisan casualties out. I doubt if the casualties have ever had a more comfortable flight as the chutes were nearly all silk and completely filled the cabin to the roof, the partisans then just laid on top of them and were literally surrounded by silk. When we arrived at the landing strips we were made very welcome by the locals and, on one occasion were given bouquets of flowers, on another, two bottles of vodka, and on a third, at two o'clock in the morning, were presented with more flowers and sat in the middle of a field eating strawberries and cream off a snow-white table cloth! Some of the landing surfaces were very poor and, in one case, on July 6th, we could not bring out a return load as the strip was only 900 yards long and boggy and we had difficulty with the take off.

During this period the squadron did two memorable operations, the first, flown by a Rhodesian pilot called Mike O'Donovan, was a landing on the outskirts of Warsaw to pick up the leaders of the Polish underground who were in danger of being wiped out by the Gestapo - the landing had to be made within a period of twenty minutes as the underground put a ring round the playing fields where the plane was to land and could only hold off the Germans for that time. This they did, at very considerable cost, and the aircraft returned safely with the Polish passengers.

The other operation was flown by a New Zealand pilot called Norman Culliford. At that time, the Germans were experimenting with flying bombs with a view to eventually bombing London. They had to do the tests for range and guidance over the land so that the results could be monitored, and were using Poland as it was very flat and fairly sparsely populated. One flying bomb (later named the V1) failed in flight a long way short of it's destination and fell into a river. The Germans couldn't find it but the Polish underground saw where it was and, once the hunt had died down, took the motor and guidance system off the rocket, put it in a haycart and slowly transported it to southern Poland where Norman Culliford was briefed to pick it up. They found the strip, landed and loaded up the V1, but when they tried to take off, found the aircraft had become bogged down in the soft ground and had to be dug out. Whilst this was in progress, a German army patrol drove along the road about a hundred yards away without seeing them. They eventually took off and arrived back in Bari safely, the V1 being flown to London the next day. The story of the finding and transport of the V1 is the subject of a book called 'They Saved London.'

On July 14th we did a supply drop in the Gorizia area of Northern Italy (Operation Ludlow) when we dropped 4600 lbs of ammunition into a partisan camp which was being besieged by the Germans and running low on ammunition. A couple of days later we received a very nice letter of commendation from the commander of No. 1 Special Force who were involved in Operation Ludlow.

There wasn't much respite - we arrived back from Operation Ludlow at four o'clock in the morning to find that our flight was now back on routine flying for a fortnight and that we were due off for Naples and Rome and return at 9.00 a.m.!

Since going on leave with Col Stinson to Palestine in August 1942 we hadn't taken any leave for almost two years - there really wasn't anywhere to go although we did manage to have two or three days in Cairo every month or so when we took the Bari - Cairo flight, which helped to break up the monotony. However, in July things took a turn for the better and the RAF commandeered a couple of hotels in a holiday resort, Taormina, on the Sicilian coast at the foot of Mount Etna, to be used as an aircrew leave centre. Merv, Lee and I were given a weeks leave on July 24th and spent a very relaxing week eating, drinking and behaving just like tourists - it was quite a change. Since the war and the advent of package holidays, Taormina has became a very fashionable destination.

On our return we did another supply drop in the mountains east of Fiume and were then put on standby for the first landing in Southern France. We waited around until the morning of August 8th and then flew up to an anonymous field not very far from Leghorn, code named 'Cecina'.

<u>Operation 'Nuptial'</u>
There were no facilities at Cecina apart from a small signals unit and we were briefed to take off at 9.00 p.m. on August 8th to land on a strip half way up Mont Ventoux, a 6000 foot mountain to the east of Orange in the Rhone Valley. The object of the trip was to take in a team of French maquisards to join the underground and to bring out an unknown number of American airmen who had been shot down over Europe and had made their way by various means to the area.

At 9.00 p.m. on August 8th we took off as planned, crossed the French coast, obtained a good pin-point on the River Durance and headed for the strip. When we were about ten minutes away from our destination we ran into a very intense electrical storm and after a few minutes realised it was hopeless to continue as, in view of the height of the mountains, unless we were absolutely accurate in our positioning we had a very good chance of hitting the ground, so we returned to Cecina feeling rather let down.

There were no facilities at Cecina, but we were fed by the signals unit and slept in the aircraft. The weather was still bad over the target area the next night, so we just did the usual RAF thing and waited. However, the weather cleared the following night, and at 9.00 p.m. on August 10th we set off again with 14 maquisards and a French general. All went well, we crossed the coast and the River Durance, identifying the area of the landing strip without any problem and flashed the recognition signal with our Aldis lamp. We did this on and off for about ten minutes without any response from the ground and began to wonder what had gone wrong as we were absolutely certain we were in the right place. We thought that perhaps the underground had been given the wrong time, so I reduced power as much as I dare to conserve fuel and circled slowly round and round. It was a very clear night and we could actually see a German airfield in the distance towards Orange with aircraft taking off and landing from time to time but they obviously had no idea we were there. After circling for nearly an hour we were just about to give up and go home when we saw headlights further up the mountain flashing the correct recognition signal and we assumed this to be the reception party on their way. They duly arrived and marked out the strip with hand-held torches in the form of a rather dog-legged 'L'. We landed along the leg of the 'L' towards the base of the 'L' and the aircraft stopped very quickly - I wondered about this until I climbed out of the aircraft to find that the strip was just 1000 yards long and consisted of 200 yards of ploughed field, 400 yards of stubble and 400 yards of lavender bushes. We were in the lavender bushes which, whilst the perfume was magnificent, didn't make the best surface for an airfield. To add to the problems, beyond the lavender bushes was a small wood over which we would have to fly on take-off.

We unloaded the aircraft and then found that there were 31 American airmen hoping for a quick flight to freedom. For obvious reasons they didn't have any luggage so we decided to try to take them all, although the surface of the strip and the height of the airfield, which meant slightly reduced power from the engines, made the take-off rather risky. I went right to the end of the strip, put on full take-off power against the brakes and a little bit of flap, released the brakes and set off along the strip. When we hit the lavender the aircraft slowed appreciably and it was obvious that we would have to be going much faster when we came to the bushes if we were going to get off. I aborted the take-off and returned to the end of the strip before going to the back of the aircraft to tell the passengers that there was no way we could take-off with our present load and that I suggested we try again with eight less. To their credit, the eight most senior officers got off the plane and I said that, provided we reached Italy safely, we would come back at the same time the following night to take them out. I had really no authority to say this as you couldn't really run your own war, but I was so impressed it was the least we could do.

We went through the whole take-off procedure again with just a little more flap and by the time we reached the lavender had almost attained flying speed, we slowed slightly and then picked up again and left the ground with about a hundred yards to spare, just clipping the tops of the trees on our way without doing any damage. After a few deep breaths we turned for home and arrived at Cecina just as dawn was breaking. Someone took a photograph of us with some of the American escapees who were dressed in the most weird and wonderful clothes, mostly looking like scarecrows.

The Americans were most effusive in their thanks and the thing that had impressed them most of all was that we had been able to find the strip in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night - I don't think navigation was a strong point in the American Air Force.

The next night, true to our promise and without any permission from on high we went back again but as we neared the strip we saw a dead straight flarepath laid out near the strip, all the lights equidistant and the same intensity. Obviously the Germans had heard us the night before and laid a trap, but with usual Teutonic thoroughness, had overdone the effect - no underground flarepath would have been as bright or straight as that, so we put down our nose and went home as quickly as we could. At that time, Hitler had issued an order that all commandos and saboteurs and anyone working with them were not covered by the Geneva Convention in his eyes and would be shot as spies, so it would have been a disaster if we had landed and walked straight into the arms of the Gestapo.

We arrived back at Cecina once again in the early morning and then flew on to Bari after four days and nights with very little sleep. The C.O. congratulated us on a job well done and then tore me off a strip for not letting him know what I was doing, particularly with regard to the last unauthorised trip, but he wasn't too serious.

As a result of operation 'Nuptial' we received a commendation from the Air Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Army and an article appeared in 'The Sunday Chronicle' dated 17th December giving rough details of the operation.

This was my last flight with 267 Squadron and my last operation of the war as I received details of a posting to take a Staff Navigators Course at Shawbury in the U.K.

starting early September.

During my two tours of operations I had flown a total of 77 operations, and, as I always thought seven was my lucky number, this was a good time to stop. The C.O. also gave me an 'Exceptional' rating as a transport pilot which was a nice farewell present. I was sorry to say goodbye to Jimmy Craig, Lee Barrett, Merv Griffiths and all my other friends with whom I had flown since Silloth days, but the thought of going back to England after two and a half years was something to look forward to with pleasure.

I managed to get a lift on a Liberator going back to the UK via Gibraltar and on the way, was very interested to see that the runway at Gibraltar was now completed and was twice as long as when we were there in 1942. We arrived at Lyneham on August 17th 1944, my Middle East tour having lasted two years and two months.

<u>No. 97 Staff Navigators Course, R.A.F. Shawbury</u>
I was given two weeks very welcome leave, during which time I saw my mother for the first time in over two years - for most of the period she had no idea where I was as letters were fairly slow in arriving from abroad and, by the time they did, the news was usually very much out of date. At the end of my leave I reported to the Empire Air Navigation School at Shawbury, near Shrewsbury in Shropshire to begin on No. 97 Staff Navigators Course. I was the only pilot on the course with twenty-two navigators. I don't know quite why I was sent on this course but it was very interesting and was just like being back at school again, most of the time being spent in lectures. The subjects were astro-navigation, meteorology, radar, general navigation and a variety of other subjects connected with advanced navigation. The astro-navigation was particularly interesting as it went into great detail and we finally ended up by being able to produce the actual navigation tables from scratch. Meteorology was also very good and at the end of the course, if we were willing to pay an annual membership fee, we qualified as members of the Royal Meteorological Society. As I had no intention of becoming a full-time meteorologist I didn't take it any further, having much better uses for

the money. We did about thirty hours flying on the course in Wellingtons piloted by staff pilots putting into practice the results of our course work. The only trip of note was a flight to Reykavik (Iceland) and return. I navigated up to Iceland and my co-navigator navigated back the next day. It was a seven hour trip and as it was the end of September, the nights were very long in Reykavik and we arrived in the dark. It was also very cold so we thought it a good idea to warm ourselves up with rum in the U.S.A.A.F mess in company with a load of American ferry pilots. One thing led to another and we had quite a night, getting to bed about 3.00 a.m.

We were up again at six for a 7.00 a.m. take-off, it was still dark so I have no idea what Iceland looks like in the daylight. I think my co-navigator was still feeling the effects of the night before and his navigation suffered somewhat - I took the opportunity of having a good sleep in the back of the aircraft as I was not involved in the return flight. However, we were supposed to make landfall at the Butt of Lewis, the northern tip of the Hebrides not far from Stornoway, of fond memory, but, two hours after our projected time of arrival at the Butt of Lewis there was no sign of land. The weather wasn't very good and it began to dawn on us that we hadn't a clue where we were, which didn't look too good for Staff Navigators! .

I was wide awake by this time and, after some discussion we decided to turn due east in the hope that we would hit land of some kind soon (there was no point in going west, that was next stop America). After about half an hour we saw the coast, a number of long inlets in a very hilly and rocky coastline but couldn't identify it from the maps we had. We thought for a moment that perhaps we had flown much too far east and that it could be the coast of Norway. The only solution was to continue inland on an easterly course and find out - the land wasn't mountainous, it obviously wasn't Norway or Scotland, so it had to be Southern Ireland. Unfortunately we didn't possess any maps of the west coast of Southern Ireland so we kept on going until we got on to the maps we had. We were flying at about 500 feet and the next thing we saw was a large city with the sea beyond - we realised this was Dublin and had no option but to overfly at 500 feet. The weather was very murky and we hoped that no eagle eyed Irishman had taken the number of the aircraft as Ireland was strictly neutral and didn't take kindly to the RAF flying over them. For the next half hour we 'cooked' the navigation log and made all the correct landfalls according to our official flight plan. When we landed this was handed in for checking and no-one was any the wiser, although we had a rather uncomfortable couple of weeks waiting for the axe to fall if the Irish had complained. I finished the course at the end of November with an R.A.F. First Class Navigators Certificate and wondered where my next posting would be.

I was given another leave, making up in some way for all the leave I had missed in the Middle East and, on my return, received the glad tidings that I was being posted to, of all places, the Middle East! I thought they would have had enough of me out there by now and the feeling was mutual, but, on December 22nd I left Lyneham in a Dakota via Elmas in Sardinia, and Malta, arriving in Cairo on December 23rd.

I spent Christmas and New Year in the transit camp in Cairo and on January 2nd was given a lift in a Wellington to my next posting, that of Senior Briefing Officer at No. 40 Staging Post, RAF Habbaniya about forty miles from Baghdad.

<u>No. 40 Staging Post, R.A.F. Habbaniya</u>
After all the time I had spent in the desert I thought they might have found me a decent posting but it was not to be - Habbaniya was almost the end of the earth, a permanent RAF station out in the desert not far from Lake Habbaniya. This had been used before the war as an Imperial Airways staging post and the flying boats used to land on the lake on their way to Australia. The station itself was very comfortable, with swimming pools, squash courts, brick built messes, offices and bedrooms, all with large fans, which were extremely necessary as the day time temperature often reached 120 F. Fortunately the humidity was very low which made conditions a little more bearable, but extreme care was needed with regard to the aircraft as, to touch the metal skin during the heat of the day caused severe burns and loss of skin.

The main reason for my posting was that the war in Europe was in its final stages and more resources were being sent to the Far East. Large numbers of aircraft and troops were flying out to India and 40 Staging Post was one of the main links between Egypt and India. We had to produce maps and route briefings from Iraq to Karachi in India and I had about six navigators to help me so we worked shift systems, from six in the morning until ten, and then from four in the afternoon until eight - between ten in the morning and four in the afternoon it was too hot to do anything but sleep.

In spite of being in the middle of nowhere, living was the most luxurious I experienced in my entire RAF career. I was given a bearer as my personal servant (obviously a throw back to the days of the British Raj), he was a very tall Kurd called Karim and followed me like a shadow. The day I arrived he took me to my room and insisted on unpacking my kit which he put away carefully. Having done that, he came to me with a very long face and said 'Sahib, it is no good - not enough clothes for Karim to look after you properly'. Apparently he would provide three changes of clothing each day and needed eight of everything to be on the safe side and I only had three! So I had to go to the Officers Shop immediately to remedy the deficiency. He woke me every morning at 5.30 with a cup of tea and a complete change of freshly washed clothing, after the morning shift he took the clothes away and washed them, bringing a fresh set for the afternoon stint and then repeating the whole thing in the evening. When we went into the Mess for dinner, we usually had a few pre-dinner drinks and the bearers would stand in a line along the wall at the back of the mess dressed in snow-white galabiehs. The moment I made a move to the dining table Karim would come forward, draw out my chair and hand me a serviette. He then asked me what I wanted to eat, would order the food and serve it, then stand behind my chair until I had finished. In one way it was very embarrassing as I don't think any person should be so subservient, but that was the way it had always been and if I had attempted to change it he would have been mortally insulted. He came from Kurdistan, a fiercely independent people in the mountains on the borders of Turkey, Persia (now Iran) and Iraq and once a year he used to go home to see his family, he had a wife and children; he hitched lifts and walked the rest of the way - it must have been a soul-destroying journey.

One of my navigators was a Flying Officer called Johnny Sharp who had completed a tour on Bomber Command. We played at least an hour of squash every day which helped to keep us sane. I became very friendly with Johnny who came from Hunstanton in Norfolk and about ten years after the war I was in the area on business and decided to call on his mother to see how he was. Fortunately, as I was looking for a phone box in the centre of the town I walked past the War Memorial and something made me look at it. There, at the bottom, were the words 'Berlin Air Lift' F/O J. Sharp - apparently he had stayed in the RAF after the war and was killed taking supplies in to Berlin during the Berlin Air Lift. In the circumstances I did not call his mother as I felt it might open up old wounds.

I did very little flying from Habbaniya although at the end of January I decided I ought to fly the route through to Karachi so that I could brief the transit crews from experience.

We had an odd collection of aircraft at the Staging Post as, if an aircraft went unserviceable and could not be repaired within a few days, the crew had to leave it, return home and collect a replacement. When these u/s aircraft were repaired we had the chance to fly them and I flew in both a Liberator and a Warwick. After flying the Warwick (it was a larger edition of the Wellington) I decided I might as well take it to Karachi for route experience and on January 30th flew from Habbaniya to Shaibah and then on to Bahrain in the Persian Gulf where we stopped the night. Whilst there, the movement authorities asked me could I take twelve Indian policemen who had been stuck in Bahrain for over a year as they had no movement priority - I don't know how they came to be there in the first place, but I said that, providing they didn't mind slumming it down the back of the aircraft (there were no seats) I would take them. The following morning we all piled into the Warwick and off we went. Half way across the Gulf we had a few moments panic as I wanted to switch from wing to fuselage fuel tanks as the wing tanks were nearly empty and suddenly realised I didn't know how to do it, but a quick look at the Pilots Notes, a copy which, fortunately, was in the cockpit, soon solved the problem. We landed at Sharjah (now in the United Arab Emirates), Jask in Persia, Jiwani in Afghanistan and then on to Karachi (Mauripur). I wasn't very impressed with Karachi, I thought it was dirty and didn't like the way the sacred cows were allowed to wander at will in the town. I stayed three nights in Karachi and then was fortunate enough to obtain a seat on the scheduled British Overseas Airways Corporation Ensign which took me as far as Basra in Southern Iraq in civilian comfort. From there the following day I scrounged a lift in a Dominie back to Habbaniya. This had been a very worthwhile trip and I had a much better idea of the route from a briefing point of view.

Things continued on their peaceful way until early April, when I was given a fortnights leave which I spent in Cairo, getting lifts there and back in Dakotas of No. 216 Squadron who were based in Cairo and did very frequent runs between Cairo and Habbaniya. I wasn't very happy with my position at 40 Staging Post as I would have preferred to have a regular flying job and, through the contacts I had made with 216 Squadron, did a bit of lobbying to get a transfer to them. I finally managed it, and on 24th July was posted to 216 Squadron at Almaza on the outskirts of Cairo, as Senior Navigating Officer.

No. 216 Squadron, R.A.F. Middle East

My new post was a great improvement as, although I was in charge of all the navigators on the squadron, I had some very capable assistants and could more or less pick my own flights on the pretext of trying out the routes from a navigators point of view, with the result that I spent more time in the cockpit than in the office.

On my second trip, from Cairo to Tunis and back, we were in the air between Benina and Cairo on the return journey when we received the news that Japan had capitulated after atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This meant that all fighting in the Second World War was over - we put on all speed and arrived in Cairo in the evening for the celebrations which went on for about three days.

I did a lot of flying in the early part of September and flew from Cairo to Naples and back twice in four days followed by a trip from Cairo to Nairobi on September 12th. This was a very long flight as we took off from Cairo at nine o'clock in the evening, flying through the night arriving in Khartoum at first light (to avoid the heat of the day which restricted take-off weight).

Whilst on the ground at Khartoum we saw a very strange looking aircraft without any propellors taking off accompanied by a lot of noise - we couldn't quite work this out and then realised it must be one of the new jet aircraft about which we had heard rumours. On making enquiries, it was doing hot weather tests prior to going back to the UK. The shape of things to come! After an hour we left Khartoum for Juba in Uganda. This was a landing strip in the bush and the drill was to make a low pass over the runway to scare off all the wild animals before landing. Near Juba we had seen herds of elephant, lion, buck and wildebeest in profusion. From Juba we flew on to Nairobi, arriving at five o'clock in the afternoon. The total flight time was almost fifteen hours which, bearing in mind we didn't start until late evening in Cairo having been up all that day, was quite a marathon.

Fortunately, the aircraft went unserviceable at Nairobi requiring a replacement gyro compass; no spare was available in Nairobi so we had to wait until the next aircraft came down from Cairo a week later which gave us an unexpected week off in very civilized surroundings.

Nairobi was a wonderful place in those days and the war hadn't touched it at all. We spent a lot of time in the New Stanley Hotel and the Norfolk, both of which have been immortalized in later books written about Kenya. I visited both again in 1989 on a safari visit to the area and they didn't look very different to my 1944 visit.

After a very good week in Nairobi we flew back, rather reluctantly, to Cairo on October 2nd I started another interesting trip from Cairo to Wadi Halfa on the Nile, to Khartoum and on to Asmara in Eritrea ending up at my old friend, Sheikh Othman in Aden, another thirteen hours in the air, plus stops making it a seventeen hour day! Nobody had heard of being out of hours in those days. Asmara was an interesting place, situated on the edge of an escarpment 6000 feet up. Taking off over the edge of the escarpment meant that one minute you were on the ground and the next 6000 feet in the air. We came back the next day, but stopped overnight in Khartoum which was much more sensible.

I didn't do very much more flying in late October and November apart from trips to Cyprus and Rhodes. The trip to Rhodes was unusual as I had to bring out a lot of German P.O.W's who had been injured clearing mines which the German army had laid down - a case of the biter bit! On December 1st received the news I had been waiting for - I was finally posted out of the Middle East after three and a half years back to the UK!

In September, the Air Ministry issued their first list of offers of four hundred permanent commissions since the beginning of the war and to my surprise, I was on the list with the offer of a P.C. in the rank of Flight Lieutenant (I had been made up to Flight Lieutenant in the summer of 1944). I was given a month to accept or reject the offer and was very undecided. I thoroughly enjoyed the free and easy life of flying in the RAF in the Middle East with very few restrictions, but, during my time at Shawbury on the navigation course I realised that life in England was very different and attitudes which were accepted as normal in the Middle East would not be allowed in England and that the peacetime RAF would be very different, so I turned it down, much to the amazement of the C.O. who did his best to make me change my mind.

I was waiting for some transport to take me back home when the pilot of a Dakota of 271 Squadron engaged in bringing back troops from the Far East went sick at Lydda in Palestine so I was flown up to Lydda and took the aircraft back to the UK via El Adem and Elmas in Sardinia. The hydraulics went u/s at El Adem and I had two more days in the Western Desert than I had bargained for whilst it was being repaired before going on and landing at Broadwell in the U.K. The C.O. of 271 was not too pleased I had flown the aircraft without his permission but when I produced a movement order from H.Q. Middle East authorizing the flight, he had to accept it, albeit with a rather bad grace. I wasn't terribly bothered because all I wanted was a leave pass and a railway warrant to Buxton.

<u>No. 24 Squadron R.A.F. Hendon and Bassingbourne</u>
When I returned from leave, having had both Christmas and New Year at home for the first time since 1939 I was posted to No. 24 Squadron at Hendon, in the suburbs of North London. 24 Squadron were one of the oldest squadrons in the RAF and were now the senior squadron of Transport Command, most of the aircraft having been stripped of camouflage and were bright silver. They did not fly normal routine flights but undertook special flights, mostly with V.I.P. Passengers. A number of the aircraft also had very plush seats and all the trimmings, a far cry from the tin side seats of 267.

Flying out of Hendon was not very satisfactory, it was a very small aerodrome surrounded by buildings and the London atmosphere (there was no clean air act in those days) was very thick most of the time and the squadron had developed a landing circuit with turning points at easily recognizable features on the ground, such as the Welsh Harp and Mill Hill School, to help in landing. There was very little accommodation at Hendon and we were all billeted out - I stayed with a family in Golders Green and came in every day on the underground.

During January and early February I made trips to Belfast, Berlin, Warsaw and some local flights in the U.K. There was a big difference in flying in the UK in the winter to flying in the Middle East - the weather. In the Middle East we didn't give it very much thought as it was usually fairly reasonable, but in northern Europe it was just the opposite and icing was a very real possibility which took some real concentration from time to time. The flight to Warsaw was an eye-opener, we flew from Berlin to Warsaw and back in one day, the land was snowbound and we didn't see anything that moved or any smoke. In their advance on Berlin the Red Army had stripped the country bare and there was nothing left as far as we could see.

Berlin itself was just one big ruin with the population living in apparent abject poverty.

At the end of February the squadron moved to Bassingbourne, just outside the town of Royston in Cambridgeshire. This was much better as we were all together on a purpose built pre-war station and we returned to a proper squadron life, most of it in the evenings in an hotel in Royston called 'The Banyers'.

Apart from one or two trips, most of the flying in March and April consisted of training in various forms, pilot categorization, blind approaches, instrument flying for hours on end and I began to realize I had done the right thing in not deciding to stay on in the air force if this was to be the pattern for the future. By the beginning of May I appeared to have finished with training for the time being and returned to normal flying and May was a very busy month including a trip to Rome and Athens and another to Gardemoen in Norway.

In May I was approached by a representative of British European Airways, the new European arm of B.O.A.C. , to find out whether I would like to join them on demobilisation as First Officer, with a captaincy within twelve months subject to satisfactory performance. I thought long and hard about this proposal but finally, the fact that I had been living out of a suitcase for six years with no settled home life decided me that it was time I settled down, even though I had no real idea what I intended to do on demobilization.

On June 3rd I took a parliamentary delegation of M.P.s to inspect the bomb damage in the Ruhr and Berlin areas of Germany. It was a very good trip, even though it turned out to be my last overseas flight, as I was given carte blanche where I went and, providing I didn't go much below 500 feet, could do as much low flying as I liked (minimum height was normally 1000 feet). For nearly five hours we had a birds eye view of the very considerable damage done to German industry and housing.

The following day, June 4th, I flew up to Prestwick in Scotland and returned the same day, landing at 4 o'clock in the afternoon for the last landing I made in the Royal Air Force, as my demobilization notice came through the next day and I was taken off flying.

I spent almost a month waiting for my final demobilisation to come through before I obtained all my clearances from Bassingbourne and reported to R.A.F. Uxbridge on 14th July 1946 to collect my demob. clothes - raincoat, tweed suit, shoes, hat, shirt and tie and, a little more than six years since I joined up at Padgate in 1940, I was a civilian once more.

FOREWORD

After some persuasion from my daughter, Patricia, I decided to write the story of my experiences during the Second World War to be read by my grandchildren Stuart, Kate, Matthew, Patrick, George and Michael when they are old enough to understand.

I do this, not to glorify war, just the opposite, but to attempt to give a factual account of how I saw it and to give them a description of life as it was during those troubled times.

I would like to think that the many friends I made during the war who did not return did not make their sacrifice in vain and that the life of freedom enjoyed by us all through their sacrifice will continue for at least the lifetimes of my grandchildren. It is my sincere hope that, in the future, they will never find themselves in a similar situation to that of my generation.

With fondest love to you all,

ONE MAN'S WAR
MY STORY 1939 – 1946
[BRYAN ROSTRON]

'Poppa'
Lytham
January 2001
Note: The diaries of the voyages of the M.V. Rangitiki and S.S. Sagaing have been reproduced exactly as written sixty years ago and are rather repetitive but I have included them as they represent the thoughts of an eighteen year old on his first journey overseas - you can skip through them at will!

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ONE MAN'S WAR
1939 - 1946
BRYAN ROSTRON

Statistics

Date of enlistment: 10th June 1940
Date of demobilisation: 14th July 1946
Hours flown: Day 1481.45
Night 373.25
Total 1855.10

Number of operational tours: 2
Number of operations: 77
Aircraft types flown: 14
Airfields visited: 126

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