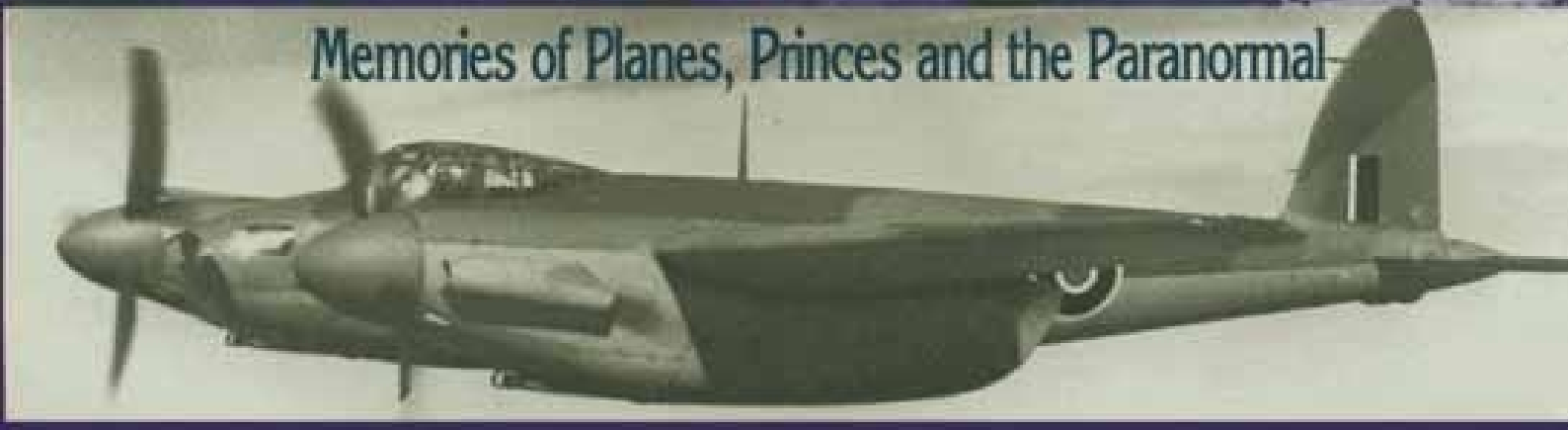
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY of PETER HORSLEY

SOUNDS FROM ANOTHER ROOM

Memories of Planes, Princes and the Paranormal



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by

PETER HORSLEY

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To
ANNIE
My Long-Suffering Wife

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Foreword

Long introductions are tedious to reader and writer alike so this Foreword is short. My story is not the traditional saga of some minor military figure; it recounts a number of separate events, each true and of such intensity at the time that they altered the pattern of my life thereafter, like coral polyps shaping a reef.

I like to compare it to a house whose main rooms are the events I shall describe and the corridors between but the passage of time. The rooms themselves are of such variety they might have been designed by different architects and with each furnished in the style of its immediate tenants.

There is a mystery about the house, for on occasions there would appear to be a house within a house, one living in the present, the other in a parallel time and dimension. The whispers and sounds of the other occupants sometimes break through from the recesses of a distant and unknown room, though message and messengers remain tantalizingly elusive.

Both style and time may at times seem confusing but there is a reason for this. Orphaned early, I was a lonely child, often thrown back on my own resources and imagination. With no one close enough to whom I could reveal my innermost secrets, I became a compulsive scribbler, and remain one. So the book is a mixture of what I actually wrote at the time and what I have written since, from diaries and notes. For example, my school diaries are written exactly as they were at the time and ‘The Storm’ was written shortly after the event.

Just ten years ago I was involved in a very serious accident which, at the time, seemed to have been caused by some quite inexplicable malfunction of my car. As I lay at the roadside, not far from death, the whole story of my life passed in front of me, like a film that was madly out of control.

A most remarkable explanation of the cause of that accident was later provided by Sir Ranulph Fiennes in his book *The Feather Men*. It appears that I was the innocent tool of a terrorist gang who had decided to use my car as a murder weapon. A former officer in the Special Air Service, Sir Ranulph is very familiar with the shadowy world of terrorism and I have no reason to challenge the facts as he gives them, even though several questions remain unanswered. As it was this extraordinary and devastating experience which triggered the idea behind this book of mine, he has very kindly allowed me to reproduce that story as my opening chapter.

1

The Clinic*

It happened a long time ago in a far off desert country. The four sons of Sheik Amar Bin Issa were killed in an ambush in the South Yemen by British forces. The Sheik swore an oath of revenge on his sons' killers.

'The Clinic' were a European gang of ruthless hired assassins who banded together to kill for money. The Sheik finally met the leader of the gang in Dubai and took out a contract on his sons' killers – a million dollars down payment, and a further million dollars for each of four films proving the assassinations; one stipulation of the contract was that the deaths were to appear accidental, arousing no suspicions of murder in the minds of relations or friends.

'The Feather Men' were a British group – feather because their touch was light. They took into their grasp crimes which were beyond the powers of the ordinary police. The Feather Men relentlessly pursued the IRA in Northern Ireland, moving silently against those members who had escaped the hands of the law through lack of evidence. They also took under their wing the families of the SAS [Special Air Service] and established a body of watchdogs to look after their interests. The Feather Men were controlled by a committee† of senior establishment figures under the chairmanship of Colonel Tommy Macintosh.

So far the Clinic had fulfilled half their contract by 'arranging' the deaths of Superintendent John Milling, a former Marine, and a police officer in the Omani Police Air Wing in a helicopter 'air accident' by tampering with the pilot's collective control lever. After an unequal aerodynamic battle, the helicopter plunged into the sea, killing John Milling. They had then settled the fate of Major Mike Kealy, Special Air Service, who died of 'exposure' in a climbing accident in the Brecon Beacons. He was leading a batch of SAS trainees on a forced march in atrocious weather conditions when he became separated from his charges. Kealy was then ambushed by the gang who drugged him and left him to die on the mountain in the cold and swirling fog. Later on they would deal with Corporal 'Mac', the last of the four, and even attacked Ranulph Fiennes himself close to his Exmoor Farm. He was only rescued by the intervention of the Feather Men who had been watching the gang as they circled his farm.

The Clinic now turned their attention to Major Michael Marman. They had broken into Marman's Clapham home while he was out shopping and had photographed his diary. During their escape, however, they were recognized by a member of the Feather Men who had been watching their unlawful activities for some time. Mike Marman was immediately warned that he was on the Clinic's hit list as a former member of the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces. The Feather Men meanwhile arranged for John Smythe, an active watchdog, and a team of local volunteers to mount a round-the-clock surveillance of Marman.

The Clinic had then to decide how to dispose of Major Marman. After considerable argument between members of the gang, it was decided to dispatch him in a road accident. Meier, the technical member, had already perfected the 'Boston brakes' method in

America. This involved fitting a sophisticated device to the brakes of a lead car, controlled by radio from a following car and steering it into the victim's vehicle travelling in the opposite direction. It had worked before in the States and Meier saw no reason why it should not work again.

While Meier's technical skill was undeniable, the gang recruited another member, Jake, a genius with cars and unethical devices. The gang leased an old disused airstrip in Kent and began to assemble the necessary tools and equipment to modify the brakes of the lead car. The plan began to take shape. First, Marman had to be caught alone on an open road. 'It is lucky,' said Meier, 'that Marman's car is a very small Citroen 2CV which will crack open like an egg when it is hit.' A day well ahead was chosen, after a study of Marman's diary and maps, Tuesday, 11 November, when Marman was due to visit an old friend, General Robin Brockbank, at Steeple Langford in Wiltshire. 'He should be driving back after lunch along the A303 at about 3.15 pm in time to reach his house in Clapham just before dark. If we allow him an average speed of fifty-five miles per hour, he will be,' said Meier pointing to the map, 'somewhere along this dual carriageway between Winterbourne Stoke and Popham. If this plan does not work the first time, we will continue to look for a suitable time and place until it does.'

'All we need now,' Meier continued, 'is to find a driver who is scheduled to head west on that same stretch at about 3.30 p.m. – that should not be too difficult, since the A303 is the main arterial road between London and Plymouth. What sort of person uses that route?' Meier asked and then answered the question himself, 'A representative of a company with offices in both places.' 'Do you remember,' Meier went on 'that Hovercraft we bought from M L Slingsby last year for that smuggling job? I have discovered that the Holding Company owns a subsidiary, M L Engineering, in Plymouth and after a lot of research, I have also found out that M L Holdings are having a main board meeting in Plymouth on the morning of 12 November. I have looked at a number of alternative companies and for one reason or another have discounted them. Here is a list of four nonexecutive directors who will attend the meeting. I have picked out the most likely candidate, Sir Peter Horsley, who lives at Houghton, near Stockbridge, and is likely to use the A303 on his journey to Plymouth, so Jake and I will pay him a little visit.'

Shortly after this meeting Jake and Meier quietly broke into Sir Peter's office above a garage close to the house in the dead of night. They found his diary open on his desk and it took only a few minutes to photograph the relevant pages before they left again, making sure that there were no traces of their visit. On the way out they passed an open garage. They went in and found a large saloon car and Jake made a quick inspection of it, a BMW 728i automatic, registration 3545 PH, Michelin XV tyres. This was undoubtedly the ideal car for their purposes.

The two returned to the disused airstrip and the next day they purchased a second-hand BMW 728i and two target practice cars; Jake fitted the control system to the BMW and rehearsals began in earnest. It was decided that Meier and Jake should follow the BMW and De Villiers, another member of the gang, would follow Marman's 2CV. All was now set. They perfected the equipment and procedures just two days before the target date.

On the night of Monday, 10 November, five members of the gang assembled outside Sir Peter's secluded Victorian house in the village of Houghton. Three remained on watch

while Jake and Meier began the work of fixing the apparatus to the BMW's braking system, making sure that it could be easily detached after the accident. It took a little time but eventually they were satisfied with their work. Meier knew from experience that once he had taken over the control of Horsley's car, he could steer it as he pleased. If Horsley survived the crash, all he could say was that his car had not obeyed his steering instruction and had gone out of control; he would have no reason to suspect that his brakes had been tampered with.

Meier and Jake positioned themselves in the lane outside Horsley's house on Tuesday morning ready to follow him when he left for Plymouth. Their victim came out of his house at exactly 2.30 p.m. and, unaware of the drama to be played ahead, got into his car and drove away. Meier and Jake slotted in behind him at a comfortable distance and followed him discreetly on to the A303.

Smythe, who had followed Marman to Steeple Langford and then, after lunch, down the A303, soon became aware of a white Ford Escort driven by De Villiers that siphoned in behind Marman's small Citroen. Before Meier and Jake reached the Amesbury roundabout, the voice of De Villiers broke in on the CB radio: '2CV making a steady seventy miles per hour. Has just passed the A360 turn-off.' Meier consulted the calculator and reckoned that Marman would be driving down the dual carriageway in about three minutes. The Volvo accelerated to a position just behind Horsley and Meier turned his special radio equipment to the 'on' position. De Villiers' voice came over again. 'One car behind me otherwise clear ahead. Activate the brake device any time now.' Meier took over Horsley's car and the gyrations began; he steered the BMW across the centre of the reservation into the path of Marman's approaching car and then accelerated past the disappearing BMW. Jake pulled up about five hundred yards further on and they both got out of the Volvo in time to see the death throes of the two cars. They then drove off to make the rendezvous in Andover with De Villiers.

De Villiers had in the meantime watched Horsley being taken off in the ambulance and waited for the two wrecked cars to be transported to a garage close to Amesbury before driving on to Andover to meet the rest of the gang. That night two members of The Clinic broke into the garage and quickly removed all the apparatus from Horsley's car.

The police arrived the following morning and their limited inspections revealed nothing technically wrong with either of the two cars. They did not have the slightest suspicion that they had been duped.

* This chapter is taken from *The Feather Men* by Ranulph Fiennes (Bloomsbury Publishing Limited)

† It was this committee that approached Ranulph Fiennes to write their story.

2

A Miserable Start

On entering the front door of my house I was faced by the hall, dark and threatening with odd pieces of furniture scattered around in an appalling muddle.

I was born in 1921 in one of the grander houses in West Hartlepool to a wealthy family of timber merchants and ship owners. West Hartlepool may not be very well known today but a hundred years ago it was a town of some importance. Durham was once described as a lump of coal with a million and a half people clinging to it; in the last century there were one hundred and fifty pits and fifty-eight iron ore works and blast furnaces in the county. All this industry required construction, communications and a large port to support it. My family exploited all three with timber to prop up the coal faces and ships to carry the coal through the port of West Hartlepool.

My forebears were seafarers who in the drive of the industrial revolution became early entrepreneurs. The school song of the Royal Grammar School at Newcastle-upon-Tyne records their rise:

> Horsley, a merchant-venturer bold
> Of good Northumbrian strain,
> Founded our rule, and built our School
> In bluff King Harry's reign;
> Long shall his name old time defy,
> Like the castle grim that stands
> Four-square to ev'ry wind that blows
> In our stormy Northern lands.
> '*Fortiter defendit triumphans*.'

My parents lived the life of the very rich with cars, servants and long bouts of travelling in the Middle East and Europe. In between times my mother managed to bear seven children beginning with my eldest brother, Terence, in 1904 and finishing off with myself, as an afterthought, in 1921. We were reared almost exclusively by Nanny Thomas, a lady of great loyalty, authority and affection, aided by a succession of governesses and nursery maids, and only paraded before my parents on special occasions.

My father was a junior partner in the family business; he was a fine athlete and sportsman, a competent painter and author of several travel books. My mother was a tall, handsome woman of considerable artistic and musical ability and an accomplished angler as well. They must have made a striking couple as they travelled around the world, talented and rich. I have written this in no spirit of boastfulness but rather to give some yardstick against which to measure the depths of the black hole that awaited me.

During the Great War the family fortunes grew, sustained by Government contracts for pit props and ships. Whether it was the excitement of the war or the ambitions of a younger son to prove that he was as good a businessman or better than his elders, my

father began to speculate in a number of risky ventures. Like so many speculators both before and since, he did not need the money, as the family business provided more than enough to sustain their substantial lifestyle.

* * *

I was christened Beresford Peter Torrington. My given names provided a source of embarrassment for the rest of my life; they certainly did not match my subsequent poverty-stricken youth. From the time I was able to impress my will upon others I insisted on the Christian name of Peter. Unfortunately, institutions require knowledge of such names so that at the Dragon School, my preparatory school in Oxford, I was at first called Beresford, shortened to Berry, until I fought my way back to Peter again. This lasted until, years later, the Air Ministry publicly announced the appointment as Equerry to HRH The Princess Elizabeth and Duke of Edinburgh of Flight Lieutenant Beresford Horsley; although my friends still called me Peter, the Beresford stuck with me like a leech until I left the Palace as a Wing Commander some years later. The final injury was inflicted when I was knighted and asked whether I wished to be dubbed Sir Beresford. This brought a lovely thought – 'Bad Sir Beresford' – but I grimly stuck to Peter.

* * *

The inevitable crash occurred in 1922 when the whole family edifice collapsed. My eldest brother, Terence, returning from Rugby School found my father in the stables at the back of our house, dead from a gunshot wound. He was still only forty-two. My earliest memories were of family discord and insecurity. Unpleasant events occurred to which I was not party, yet I was aware of the great unhappiness they caused to those closest to me. It seemed at the time that everything I cared for or trusted was removed. Following the crash, the elders of our tribe closed ranks and bought off any scandal by settling my father's huge debts. The gunshot wound was put down to an accident. The cars were sold and the servants, except for Nanny, were dismissed. Terence was made to leave Rugby but the rest of my brothers were allowed to stay on at their public schools. The family were paid off with an allowance of two thousand pounds per year, a generous sum in those days, provided that we all left West Hartlepool, never to return.

A small suburban house was purchased in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and we all crowded into it, my mother by this time a sick woman, whose unhappiness had pushed her into drinking too much, together with Nanny, four large and boisterous boys, two girls and finally a small boy, myself. 44 Sanderson Road was a tall, narrow terrace house next to a vicarage in the very respectable backwater suburb of Newcastle called Jesmond. The vicar and our immediate neighbours must have been astonished at the arrival of our circus in a fleet of taxis, delivering all the above plus three Pekinese and a great assortment of boxes and trunks (my mother could never get out of the habit of travelling in the grand style). The house was furnished with pieces salvaged from the past which were totally out of place in such surroundings.

By now my mother seldom left her bed except to be taken out two or three times a week in an over-sized bathchair wheeled by a hired man. I looked forward to these excursions and can still savour the exquisite scent of my mother's expensive furs. On such occasions I was placed in the foot of the bathchair on a fur rug, curled up with the three Pekinese

who from time to time would jump out and lap the chair, yapping and barking, before jumping back on again. Thus this extraordinary procession proceeded down Sanderson Road into Acorn Road with its few shops, watched by many curious eyes from behind their suburban curtains; it is little wonder that parents would not allow their children to play with me, and our house was off limits to them.

The wooden garage, at the rear of the house and backing on to a lane, contained a large square upright Austin. This was only wheeled out once a year, for our annual holiday at the seaside. I believe this annual outing was an important symbol to my mother of her will to keep us together as a family. A house was rented on the front at Cullercoats, a small fishing village between Tynemouth and Whitley Bay.

The Austin was packed with every conceivable item of luggage, and together with bodies and animals we set off with myself, Nanny and the Pekinese in the front seat and my mother driving. The short journey to the coast was extremely hazardous, accompanied by the shouts of irate motorists and gesticulating pedestrians, as my mother had only a very rudimentary idea of the gears and brakes and absolutely no idea whatever of the rules of the road. Fortunately, she was completely oblivious to traffic lights.

These holidays were my most treasured memories. Paddling with Nanny in the shallows, donkey rides at Tyne-mouth, chipping limpets off the side of the quay for bait, followed by delicious fishing expeditions in a brightly coloured boat hired for the afternoon, baiting hooks, and the excitement of pulling in the struggling mackerel and whiting.

Shortly after arriving in Jesmond I was introduced into the local convent school. Well-groomed and dressed in a sailor suit which my mother thought proper to the occasion, I was escorted daily to this establishment at the end of Osborne Road. In this garb I became a figure of great merriment to the other children, but soon earned their respect and admiration by concealing white mice under my ample nautical collar. This would finally cause my rapid expulsion when one day the mice, now swollen in numbers, jumped ship and soon had the nuns scuttling about clutching their skirts, shrieking and seeking refuge on chairs and desks. My sailor suit was thankfully consigned to the dustbin and I was sent instead to a small day school called Ackhursts where the discipline and supervision were a good deal stricter.

This period of order and contentment was not to continue for very long before my first prop was knocked away; Nanny, who had been with the family for over twenty years, suddenly departed. She was there one minute and gone the next. Whether her departure was due to a lack of money or a clash with my mother I never learned, although I suspect the latter since in West Hartlepool Nanny had been used to her own establishment, whereas in Sanderson Road there was only overcrowding.

At any rate, she went to work for another fine old family from our past, the Places of Northallerton. Occasionally I was permitted to go and visit her and was soon made aware of the difference in my status. I rarely saw the parents, only Nanny, the children and the servants; during these visits I was treated with kindness and put somewhere in the middle of the nursery hierarchy – below the children of the house but above the servants; this was my first introduction to the social pecking order and I learned the meaning of pride.

* * *

I was nearly six when the second and main prop in my life followed the first and the roof caved in. One early morning I was woken up by my eldest brother and told that instead of going to school that day I was to go and stay at Whitton Grange, a family friend's country house at Rothbury. No. 44 Sanderson Road was uncannily quiet and I had a dreadful feeling of foreboding, although at the same time gladly accepting the offer of truancy from school. When the Watsons' car and chauffeur arrived, I asked to say goodbye to my mother but was told she was too sick to see me. I had not seen very much of her recently since she had progressively spent more time in bed and less in her bathchair.

Some ten days later I was returned to Sanderson Road by the same chauffeur-driven car to be informed that my mother had gone away to stay with Nanny and it was left to the boy next door to tell me the brutal truth as he stuck his tongue out and shouted over the wall, 'Yah, your Mum's dead.' None of my family ever referred to her again, how she died or where she was buried, and I never asked. While I had Nanny and my mother alive the other occupants of the house were rather shadowy figures; with her death, they began to focus much more sharply.

Suddenly my eldest brother, Terence, became the dominant figure in the household. While my mother lived, the family somehow held together as a unit, but on her death all restrictions were removed and we reverted to becoming individuals – Terence, the three boys aged twenty-four, twenty-one and nineteeen respectively, my sisters aged thirteen and ten and, well down the pecking order, my six-year-old self. The boys were big, boisterous and strong, so the house became a battleground for the best bed, the first bath and the final piece of toast at breakfast. The house itself changed character. My mother had had her own bedroom and the drawing room next door as her sitting room, and Terence, now very much head of the family occupied a large study on the ground floor. All the rest of us, including Nanny, had seemed to fit in quite comfortably in the remaining space. Strangely enough, when my mother died the house seemed to get smaller and there was less rather than more room – possibly because, with the restrictions removed, my brothers and sisters began to fill the house with their friends.

My eldest sister attempted to manage the housekeeping with an impressive portfolio of envelopes all marked with the appropriate tradesman – greengrocer, butcher and so forth and money was switched from one to the other according to the particular crisis of the day and substituted with paper IOUs. I never failed to be impressed by this first introduction to high finance. She was aided in looking after the house by a succession of hard-faced housekeepers, paid only enough to be civil but not enough to stop them terrorizing a small boy if the occasion arose. According to the state of the envelopes we sometimes had a living-in maid as well.

* * *

Years afterwards I began to comprehend my eldest brother's difficulties. On my father's death he had been forced to leave Rugby and assume his position as male head of the family under extremely unpleasant circumstances, salvaging what he could from the mess and finally moving us from West Hartlepool to Newcastle while the rest of his brothers continued their education. With the death of our mother, he was really thrown in at the

deep end at an age when all his energies should have been directed into his own career and interests. He was pre-cast in the rôle of villain, a rôle which he filled very successfully.

Although we all lived in the same house, Terence managed to isolate himself from the day-to-day problems and the study became his private domain from which he ruled autocratically. My other brothers and sisters were, no doubt, unruly and without him there would have been no discipline at all; even with him, there was not very much. People came in and out of the house at will, and meals were irregular; to an outsider it must have appeared like a pride of cubs bereft of their elders, quarrelling over the scraps. I learned the art of survival by keeping out of the way; the study and its occupant were the centre of my fear. If I was caught doing something wrong I was summoned to the study and justice was administered on the spot – a beating either with an ivory riding switch with an ornate golden handle which hung on the study wall, no doubt a trophy my parents had brought back from their travels, or even more lethal, with an épée which resided in an elephant's foot in the hall alongside an assortment of walking sticks.

My brother knew exactly how hard he could beat me without inflicting any lasting damage, an art probably learned as a prefect at Rugby. I discovered the importance of not stifling tears; crying indicated to him that I had absorbed the lesson and had submitted to his will. My sisters occasionally stuck up for me and were often beaten as well for their trouble. However, provided I kept to the basic rules and stayed out of his way I was conveniently forgotten.

I had none of the usual children's toys such as soldiers, trains and so on to play with and the peculiar circumstances of our household had not encouraged the making of friends. More and more I took to the streets and my games were extremely sophisticated; I became an explorer and the back streets of Newcastle, derelict sites and old empty houses my territory. I climbed nearly every wall and roof in our street and the results of these forays were both dangerous and painful. Often I would return home with torn clothes and broken skin to be duly beaten.

What friends I made were picked up casually in the course of my wanderings and they were usually street urchins. Urchin is not such a common word now as it was then and I still recall peering through the railings of the local council school and watching the young children of about my own age romping in the playground. The difference was that I had shoes and stockings while many of them were barefooted. Occasionally I was picked up and joined a gang roaming the streets terrorizing the shopkeepers, but this was always a very temporary liaison.

Not long after my mother's death the curtain rose on a new act, heralded by secret conferences between my brothers from which I was firmly excluded, clearly indicating that I was the object of their conspiracy. The desirability of sending me away to boarding school had never been in doubt, only the means of paying for it. Somehow a benefactor was found, negotiations with the school concluded, and soon I was informed that the Dragon School, Oxford, had accepted me as a pupil. I suspect the fact that my four brothers had been already to the school helped the situation.

* * *

The Dragon School was essentially a civilized place, in contrast to Wellington College

where I went later. It was a mixed school where early in its history girls won the same rights as boys; it fostered a collective spirit bringing out the best in work, play and the arts. I was kitted out with the very minimum required by the school clothing list, which my elder sister packed into an ancient family trunk whose locks had long since fallen apart and which was now secured with an old rope washing line. My sister, who at the time was no more than fifteen or sixteen years old and about the same proportions as myself, could not resist borrowing the more desirable items of clothing for her own use; she was passing through a yachting phase and my white flannels and cricket shirts disappeared almost as soon as they were purchased. To make up weight and volume it was necessary to ballast the trunk, and I could easily arrive back at school with a motley collection of old bras, pants and vests, much to the embarrassment of both matron and myself.

With the advent of boarding school, I underwent a complete metamorphosis of behaviour and character. Until then I had lived and survived in a largely adult world. What companions I had made of my own age were acquaintances of the moment, picked up casually off the streets, whose games were rough, physical and generally anti-social. There was little in my home to attract boys of my own background, and even if I managed to smuggle them through the front door their subsequent discovery and reception was so hostile that our house was soon blacklisted. At boarding school this mould had to be turned inside out as I now had to adapt myself very rapidly to a children's society with a completely different set of rules and code of behaviour. A whole new territory of toys and games opened up and I quickly discovered an appetite for possessions such as model trains and lead soldiers, the like of which I had not come across before.

It was not long before I began to enjoy the settled and secure routine at boarding school, so much so that the normal schoolboys' attitude to it became reversed. I looked forward to returning to school after the holidays and viewed the approach of the holidays with dread. To avoid ragging it was important to conform to the pattern so I learned to be extremely secretive about my home life. To explain the lack of letters, food parcels and visitors I invented a guardian who lived in India and whom I saw only very infrequently. This appeared to satisfy my cronies but also earned me a considerable amount of sympathy, indeed, so much that I became very popular as a spare boy, always available to be taken out to lunch (there was nothing worse at school than failure to produce a friend at the appropriate time) by visiting parents or invited home for a week in the holidays.

During the holidays Terence left me more and more alone, although I was not entirely free from assaults upon my person and dignity. However, he was discovering the effectiveness of the latter and for one punishment I was despatched back to the Dragon School without any pocket money at all, and even now I cringe at the humiliation of having to confess to the master in charge that I had no cash to hand in and then being lent a shilling by him to last me the term. To be an orphan was bad enough, to be a poor one was awful.

Boarding school introduced me to its own peculiar activities, the fiercest of which were cold baths and organized games, both probably instituted for the same purpose of damping the ardour of young male spirits and bodies. There was an almost animal ferocity about the way we were rudely awakened from innocent sleep and driven like sheep into the ice-cold dip of a large lead-lined trough in the school house, as though to cleanse any dirty

thoughts lurking under the bedclothes.

Dirty thoughts were not entirely driven from my mind. My first initiation with raw sex was with one of the succession of maids, since wages of ten shillings a week did not buy their loyalty for very long. She was not a bad girl, about seventeen years old, from the country, with a red face and large hands chapped and ingrained from endless treks to frozen coal cellars. One evening when the rest of my family were out, she came into my room with a set expression on her face, sat on the bed and silently slid her hand under the bedclothes to hold and fondle my penis. In retrospect I suspect she had acquired a boyfriend and wanted to find out what a male organ was like. The whole exercise was conducted in total silence except for a quickening of her breathing but the poor creature could not have learned much since my member was still far too young to rise; nevertheless I remember it as a not unpleasant feeling.

This first brush with sex led to my second and this time with a member of my own sex. During my first year at the Dragon School I was boasting one day in the house playroom about this sexual adventure, embellished with a few fantasies of my own, to a spellbound circle of nine-year-olds and I was so engrossed that I failed to notice an older boy listening intently a few yards away. After prep that evening the same boy cornered me and forced me into a lavatory where, dropping his trousers, he demanded to be shown exactly what the maid had done to me. This taught me an important lesson about boarding school – never brag in front of older boys. The boys at school talked about girls and I began to get the general idea that they had something to do with the first ripples of desire stirring between my loins; discussions were conducted furtively in the dormitories after lights out or in the farthest corners of the playroom removed from the suspicious eyes of masters, so there was obviously something very naughty about girls.

There were plenty of girls at the Dragon School, mostly daughters of Oxford academics, and we were encouraged to treat them as members of the same race; one of them played on the same rugby football team as myself, much to the complete bewilderment of our opponents. Tucking her skirt into her knickers, she would set off with the ball tucked under her chubby arm, down the touchline, chased by a pack of small boys trying to decide whether to tackle her or not. She was a large, hearty young lady with no inhibitions at all; we became quite friendly and, indeed, she was kind enough one day after a match to lower her knickers behind the changing room and show me what was underneath, but that was all. I was definitely not allowed to touch.

Having failed the Common Entrance examination to Winchester twice I moved on from Dragon School to Wellington College in 1934, where my brother Rupert was a housemaster – known to us as a Tutor. After the Dragon School, Wellington was a cultural shock. While the Dragon School sought to bring out the best talents in the young, Wellington seemed to encourage their worst vices. At my prep school boys were treated as individuals; at my public school they were regimented into a system for producing the right type of candidate for Sandhurst or Woolwich. The stark Victorian red brick buildings rising out of an uninspiring heathland looked at first sight like a prison and it is not surprising that the inmates occasionally acted like prisoners. I was flogged three times in my first term by the head of my house who was also captain of boxing, on the last occasion for no other misdemeanour than being too tough which I felt really was the pot

calling the kettle black.

I arrived at Wellington at the end of a very bad era. The school was a breeding ground for beating, bullying and homosexuality. Boys were deemed all right but girls were definitely off limits. Cold baths, classes starting at seven o'clock in the morning, PT before breakfast followed by a vigorous routine of work, sport and innumerable Officers Training Corps (OTC) parades were designed to keep the sexual devils at bay but the complete suppression of natural sex together with the frequent beatings of young boys by older boys created just the atmosphere the authorities were trying to avoid. There was a cosy small circle of homosexual masters and their followers, boys easily recognized by their prettiness, carefully waved hair and effeminate manners. They minced around in a group and survived only under the protection of their mentors. Some years later I met an Old Wellingtonian Army Captain who explained to me the extent of this club, whose tentacles spread far beyond Wellington into the dark labyrinths of the Universities and Sandhurst, and the results of which surfaced many years later as the spies emerged from the woodwork.

While I was at Wellington the Army was seriously being considered as a suitable career for me by my guardians, but this dream came to an abrupt end a year or so later. A number of us had found a very good use for the Corps rifles, using a blank cartridge to launch a missile – pencil or acorn – quite a distance with some force. I tried this on a Field Day when Marlborough College were acting as the enemy and unfortunately shot one of their boys through the cheek, inflicting a deep wound. I was summarily reduced to the ranks. Hardly a great testimonial for a military career.

During those years my brother Terence got married and the Sanderson Road house was sold. As the tide of family life, such as it was, went out, my other brothers and sisters drifted off and I was left stranded on the beach during the holidays. For the next four years I led a nomadic life, shunting from one accommodation to another. This meant that I never amassed personal possessions which were not easily transportable, such as a bicycle. I was occasionally forced to stay with Terence when all other bolt-holes had been filled, but he hardly received me with open arms after years of mutual antipathy and dislike. By this time he was Editor of the *Newcastle Journal* and lived in a substantial residence in 'posh' Gosforth, a suburb of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Gosforth is still posh in the North and if you say that you live there it is like saying that you live in Belgrave Square if you live in London. Not that this rubbed off on me since I was relegated to the rôle of an unwanted brother and allocated a small attic at the top of the house. Except when locked in combat with Terence, I was seldom invited into the more comfortable parts of the house when he was present. I soon became too large and strong for him to apply the physical means to overpower me, so he relied on carefully articulated verbal abuse instead, something at which he was masterly and was still just as frightening. I believe it was Beverley Nichols who wrote that following his father's bullying as a boy, he plotted how he could dispose of him. Certainly I plotted for some years how I might bring about Terence's downfall and humiliation.

Wellington being an Army school, its rigorous routine no doubt prepared boys for the worst. There is a tale of a Naval Captain who on being finally released from a Japanese POW camp was asked by reporters on his return to England whether his experience was as

bad as had been made out. The Captain replied ‘Well it was no worse than my four years at Dartmouth’. I felt much the same about Wellington. I survived for two principal reasons; the first was the protective blanket thrown around me by my brother, and the second was that I had already learned the rough tricks of the trade around the back streets of Newcastle.

When I arrived at Wellington I hardly knew Rupert. He had remained a shadowy figure in my early years. Though a classical scholar at Winchester, he had taken modern languages at Oxford. Winchester would have suited him much better than Wellington where I always suspected he was a misfit. As a progressive, he spent his whole life fighting the Army tradition of education. At twenty-six years of age he was a very young and popular Tutor and I got to know him much better when I joined his form to learn German grammar from a text book he had written himself. I started off ragging him but was quickly put in my place, allocated a desk by myself in a corner of the classroom and firmly called ‘Horsley’.

Rupert’s classroom was a friendly place and hardly prepared me for the move next term into a form of terror ruled by ‘The Hun’, a squat fat man whose eyes glinted with lust behind steel-rimmed spectacles as he hypnotized his victims like a stoat facing a rabbit. He enjoyed beating boys in his study, lowering their trousers first and feeling their bare bottoms after each stroke. The Hun was recalled with fear by many generations of Wellingtonians and when he was finally caught ‘*in delicto flagrante*’ he hurriedly left Wellington under a cloud, only to give the same medicine to generations of Oakhamians.

So I climbed up the school hierarchy quite steadily, first as a fag, then after a spell in no-man’s-land finally joining the élite as a prefect with five fags on call, of which Christopher Lee was one, this no doubt preparing him well for his later rôles as Dracula.

At Wellington College all the privileges fell to the giants of the playing fields. On a Saturday, for example, if you achieved a college colour for Rugby football you were certainly a prince, if not a king, for the day, with the little velvet cap with its gold tassel perched perilously on the back of your head, all the buttons of your jacket undone and hands firmly dug into your trouser pockets – both against the rules. You could stride arrogantly through the quadrangles scattering the folks in your path and even school prefects could not put a halt to such splendid progress. I won college colours for rugby, hockey and swimming and joined the swells. But it was not enough, and as the clouds of war built up ominously on the horizon I became increasingly restless to be gone.

I began to plot my escape seriously at the beginning of the summer term of 1939 and wrote to Alfred Holt, the Chairman of the Blue Funnel Line, whose son and daughter I had known quite well at the Dragon School, requesting a job on one of his ships. This letter was written more out of bravado than with the expectation of a reply, so imagine my surprise a few days later when I received a letter from him telling me that if I presented myself at his office in a fortnight’s time he would consider taking me on one of his ships. I immediately announced my intention of leaving. I do not think either my Tutor or my brother believed me, but as I had already announced the news to my friends I was stuck with the decision. So exactly a week later, just as the school announced that I was to be captain of swimming for the summer term, I walked out of Wellington.

3

Escape to Sea

I thankfully left this dark and miserable chamber. In sharp contrast I now entered a room, light and airy, filled with spartan furniture, which seemed to grow more substantial as I walked through it.

This is the overture to the drama which follows. I went to sea as a callow schoolboy, cocky and arrogant, and returned six months later as a man ready to face the holocaust ahead.

In December, 1938, I had begun a schoolboy's diary of the events which caused such an upheaval and I now quote from it verbatim:

Thursday 25 May, 1939

On leaving College boys sell their room by auction, so after tea I announced I was selling mine that afternoon. It was quite a good sale on the whole and buying was reasonable – enough to pay my tips and train fare to Liverpool. Some boys came to buy, others just for amusement and others to amuse. Chopping, a young fag, and his gang were of the latter class, and they bought all my crockery merely for the pleasure of dropping it on my head (at these auctions everybody sits around the study on the wooden walls looking down on the wretched auctioneer). Any rate I got rid of a lot of unnecessary junk such as pens, geometry sets, old novels, and pictures handed down from one generation of boys to another. I offered my very old carpet for sale and it stuck at sixpence but when I happened to mention that it had belonged to Johnston, who had been Head of College, and captain of nearly everything, the price soared up to three shillings and it was knocked down to a junior fag who had never even heard of Johnston but had been caught up in the frantic bidding.

Friday 26 May, 1939

I woke early this morning to a glorious day, my last at school; the quadrangle outside my room was bathed in sunshine and not even a breeze stirred the foliage of the copper beech that stood in the middle of it, guarding the Chapel.

As the College clock struck seven two fellow prefects, Chris and Derek, appeared on the scene and dragged me along to the bathroom where they ceremoniously ducked me in my last compulsory cold bath – much to the amusement of the fags who inhabit the bathroom at that ungodly hour and who never suspected the prefects capable of such hilarity. Half an hour later Charteris, the Head of Dormitory brought everyone along and I was cheered in the customary manner and had to make a short speech. Many times had I cheered others but it was unreal and dreamlike to be actually cheered myself. I think my dormitory regarded me as a queer sort of fish who did unsuspected and eccentric things sometimes.

I didn’t go into breakfast as a few odd jobs still remained to be completed. At eight o’clock (my train was due to leave Crowthorne at twenty minutes past) College came out of breakfast and before I finally made my departure I shook hands with the whole of my dormitory. Chris and Derek promised to spread a rumour that I had been sacked for having an affair with Matron – as if I could get beyond her large moustache!

So, dressed in an old tweed coat, grey flannels, and carrying a small bag, I set off through the quads, followed by a battery of stares. A young lad called Harcourt, with nickname Flop, insisted on carrying my bag halfway and pumped me with hundreds of questions – I really think he imagined I’d got the boot. However, I left him on Big-side [the main Rugby football pitch], promising to send him a postcard of bathing belles in straw skirts from Hawaii! Walking across Big-side, I suddenly felt very lonely and when I turned round and saw those familiar red buildings bathed in the sun I longed to turn back, but it was a useless thought.

The train left Crowthorne two minutes late; I had been on the same run many times before and the engine was affectionately known as the Crowthorne Express. We always felt schizophrenic about Southern Railway; going back to College they always travelled too fast and were too dangerous; returning home they were too slow and too safe.

Wednesday 31 May, 1939

I can’t imagine why I have left the secure routine of school to face a totally new and uncertain future. If I can’t get a job with the Blue Funnel Line I shall be up to my neck in trouble.

Just after lunch I caught a bus into Liverpool and walked into India Buildings, a large block just across from the Mersey River. I felt very small in this vast gilded palace with its marble floors. People scurried around the lobby, clerks in their white stiff collars clutching bundles of files, typists in silk stockings giggling amongst themselves. I was whisked in a lift up to the seventh floor where I enquired of a bespectacled gentleman presiding behind a wooden counter, ‘Mr Holt?’ It was as if I had asked to see God. Taking a few seconds to recover his composure, he disappeared behind a green baize door. I imagined he would reappear and tell me to go away and come back another day. Not so. He returned fifteen minutes later, when he led me into a side room. A middle-aged man in an untidy blue suit was standing there and I thought he was another clerk. He held out his hand. ‘How do you do, Horsley,’ he said, ‘I am Alfred Holt. I believe you know my children?’ He sat down and motioned me to sit at his side. Meanwhile another person had come into the room and, without a word, sat at the table with a pile of dossiers in front of him.

I explained my predicament to Mr Holt and the imperative need for me to go to sea. Mr Holt immediately asked me the question, ‘Have you the permission of your guardian?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied, crossing my fingers under the table. He then turned to his clerk and said, ‘Give me a file on boats leaving Liverpool in the next week or so.’ While he was looking at the file I had a chance to study him. He was a fine looking man with tired but penetrating blue eyes. He hardly needed the file as he seemed to know all about the boats: when they arrived, when they left, the names of his captains and officers. ‘Ah yes,’ he finally said, ‘here’s a boat leaving for the East on Saturday; would that suit you?’ I immediately replied, ‘Yes.’ ‘Alright,’ he said, ‘you will be a deck boy at a salary of one

shilling per month. You will work and live with the crew but I will put you under the charge of the midshipmen and you have your meals with them and the officers.' (I didn't realize the significance of the shilling a month until a few days later.) 'Oh yes,' he said, 'I will give you a letter for the Captain to the effect that you may get on and off the boat and rejoin another one at any time.'

I suspect this was some kind of insurance for the company but it was nevertheless very decent of him. He got up, held out his hand and said, 'Goodbye, Horsley,' and continued, 'if I was twenty years younger I would come with you. Now you can go and see Mr Miller.'

Mr Miller turned out to be a white-haired old man in a tweed jacket who appeared to be the general factotum. He proceeded to tell me a bit about the Blue Funnel Line.

'We are,' he said, with pride, 'an old-fashioned family shipping line, mainly running cargo to the Far East but some of our ships do take a few passengers. The ships are all driven by coal and are easily recognizable by the tall blue funnel. You will be signed on the TSS (Twin Screw Ship) cargo boat, the *Cyclops*, carrying a mixed bag of heavy machinery, cotton goods and tin trays to China and Japan. She will be calling at Gibraltar, Port Said, Aden and Penang in Malaya to bunker before going on to Shanghai and Yokohama.'

He went on to explain that almost everywhere the ship docked was part of the great British Empire, except China and Japan. We had enormous possessions around the world, in America, India, Africa, Australia, and Colonies in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The Blue Funnel line served this Empire, taking finished goods from England and bringing back the raw materials. I was suitably impressed. Finally he said, 'Come back tomorrow and you can sign on the Articles of the ship and I will introduce you to the midshipmen.' I left India Buildings walking on air.

Thursday 1 June, 1939

Today I signed on the Articles of the *Cyclops* as a deck boy. I was introduced to the midshipmen who were supposed to keep an eye on me – Messrs Roxby, Frost, Eliot and Raymond. Roxby was a tall boy with hard blue eyes and a sharp tongue. Frost was a thick-set Australian with a mop of curly brown hair, and with kind eyes, in contrast to Roxby's; he seemed a pleasant sort of boy. Eliot on the other hand looked ratlike, a medium tall boy with straight smooth hair and shifty eyes. Raymond was a pleasant but obviously hard-headed Welshman, obstinate-looking too, and his companions called him Taffy. So after a last-minute shopping spree I returned to my pub for the last night in England.

Birkenhead that evening was full of the talk of the submarine *Thetis*. She had sunk just outside Liverpool Harbour on a test dive and was stuck on the bottom of the sea; she was crammed full of dockyard workers. Rumours ran like wildfire; one tram conductor told me that everyone had been saved, another that they were all lost. Twelve midnight saw me in a fish and chip shop about a quarter of a mile from my ship. There was about ten other people in the shop besides myself and two girls behind the counter. There was only one conversation – *Thetis* – the word hung from everyone's lips, it was written in their eyes, dull and sad. They were all working class people, men with scarves for collars and black pointed shoes covered in dirt and oil. They all seemed to know at least one of the men

trapped in the submarine. The girl behind the counter walked over to a cheap looking radio set and turned it on. A voice quietened us. ‘There is not much hope left for the men on the submarine,’ the voice said, ‘All is being done for those entombed in the *Thetis*, but I am afraid the air is running out rapidly.’

Saturday 3 June, 1939

This morning I went on board. Everyone was so busy that they took no notice of me so I leaned over the rail and watched everyone else working. The noise and bustle on the deck was incredible. We were due to leave at ten o’clock but in fact it was half past ten before the pilot came aboard.

The *Cyclops* left the wharf at exactly eleven o’clock. It was an exciting business; the First Mate stood on the poop, from time to time waving his arms and shouting. The pilot was on the bridge, megaphone in hand and beside him stood the Captain looking very serious and very much the Captain. A whistle seemed to be the signal for activity to begin, the gangway was drawn up, ropes were cast loose, smoke poured from the funnel. Two thick cables were thrown to two waiting tugs which caught them and proceeded to pull us out of the wharf.

There were a lot of ships all along the wharves, some quite deserted, others full of life and like ourselves about to embark on a journey. There was one blackened derelict – a symbol of a shattered past. There was a smart Japanese liner whose officers were sprucely dressed in white.

I feel horrible lonely; I wish I could turn back. I seem to be alone in the world about to go thousands of miles, it’s my own fault. I chose this course. I suppose this is home sickness, but leaving Liverpool with the wharf getting fainter and fainter, and surrounded by strange faces, I would give anything for my room at Wellington and a few friends.

> There’s a race of men that don’t fit in,
> A race that can’t stay still;
> So they break the hearts of kith and kin,
> And they roam the world at will.
> They range the field and they rove the flood,
> And they climb the mountain’s crest;
> Theirs is the curse of the gipsy blood.
> And they don’t know how to rest.
>
> John Masefield

It was about two hours after leaving the dock that we saw signs that something was amiss. A squat destroyer closely followed by a small trawler steamed by on our port bow. We arrived on the scene by tea time, which was forgotten in the excitement. About a mile or so away to starboard we saw the cluster of ships, some Naval and some commercial steamers like ourselves, all taking part or trying to help in the grim drama below the sea. From a distance it looked like a harmless cluster of toadstools outlined against the sky in a field of blue. It was anything but harmless – a sinister scene, but at the same time a macabre and fascinating one for in the middle of that cluster death had struck not once but a hundred times.

We could be of no use so we steamed away slowly and regretfully from that sad spot.

Birkenhead was soon left behind and at Holyhead the ship stopped and our pilot was put ashore. After we had left port the First Mate, Mr Large, had called me and Frost and told us to clean up. The ship was filthy, with coal dust lying everywhere, bits of rope, timber, rags all over the place. Before lunch together we tidied up the bows (lunch was at twelve o'clock) and afterwards swept it. It was a foul job leaving us sweaty and covered with coal dust. Dinner was at seven o'clock and afterwards I went to my bunk in the forecastle in total silence. I felt the crew didn't appear to like my presence at all.

At Sea

Monday 5 June, 1939

My first real day at sea! At five o'clock promptly I was introduced to a cup of dark brown liquid called tea and a slice of bread and butter. I dressed hurriedly, hardly bothering to wash or clean my teeth. Going outside there was a lot of activity on the deck for here the day begins early at half past five. I spent the next two hours swabbing down the decks under the sharp eye of the boatswain.

After breakfast Frost and I reported to the First Mate. The first job this morning was to store boxes away in the bows and the second to clean up again as we did yesterday. Frost is a very quiet but strong companion. The other two midshipmen are taking watches so they will not be working with us until after Port Said. From eleven to a quarter past there is a break; in the Navy I gather this break is called a 'stand easy' but here it's simply known as a 'smoke'. Everyone appears to be great smokers on board. I suppose it is because cigarettes are so cheap – a shilling for fifty Woodbines and one shilling and sixpence for fifty Players.

This afternoon I met one of the great characters of the ship – everyone seemed to call him 'Bose', short for Boatswain. I gather that next to the Captain he is the most important man on the ship – a sort of Sergeant Major. I was walking under the bridge with my hands tucked in my pockets whistling when the Bose came up to me and said, 'Young fellow, there are two rules of sea never to forget. One, don't walk around with your hands in your pockets and two, don't whistle, particularly when the Captain is having his afternoon nap and that is right now. If you wake him up there will be hell to pay for everyone and you will never hear the end of it.' He had come upon me silently and walked away silently.

Tuesday 6 June, 1939

Started off the day swabbing decks. After breakfast was given the job of washing down the Captain's deck. I was sent to find a bucket and pinched the first one that came into sight. Together Frost and I toiled and struggled with scrubbing brushes and soap, our only reward being red knees from kneeling on the hard deck. At about half past ten I was approached by a Chinaman who claimed that I had stolen his bucket. Naturally I hotly denied this accusation and a really grand quarrel developed. However, as usual I was in the wrong and it turned out that the bucket I had pinched was his. At eleven o'clock – smoke. At half past eleven the doctor vaccinated me against smallpox and tropical diseases! Then we stored pulleys from the derricks and after that began to sand and canvas the bridge rails. This is a job which is very good exercise for the wrists; it is a matter of putting a bit of sand on a small bit of rolled up canvas and rubbing like hell. You then wash off the result with soap and water. Half past twelve to half past one – lunch of soup,

hot-pot, sausages, pudding, cheese and coffee. After lunch cleaned the brass in the wheel house – the compass, speaking tubes, wheel, etc. This is hard finger work and the brasso remains on my clothes and I hate the smell of it. My legs are very tired. Frost is still a silent companion.

We break for tea at three which consists of one slice of bread, a small piece of cake and a cup of lukewarm tea, the colour of mud. Today I have learnt one thing: paint is called ‘splash’ and you obtain it from a man called ‘Lamps’. After tea I went on cleaning up the brass on the bridge and this time it was the portholes in the chart-room.

The morning was a cloudy one with a faint breeze blowing out from the land but in the afternoon the clouds shifted and the sun eventually came out. We had not seen land, or ships either, but our position must be somewhere off the Spanish coast.

Wednesday 7 June, 1939

This morning Frost and I cleaned out the bridge head and swabbed the floor. After smoke we began washing the portholes and I learnt that old newspapers are excellent for polishing brass. We both worked so hard that we were late for lunch and the Captain showed strong disapproval particularly as I think we interrupted one of his usual dirty jokes.

In the afternoon we cleaned the Captain’s windows, very, very quietly. It must be lousy going on watch – Eliot, Roxby and Raymond always look half asleep whenever I see them. I found out one or two other things today, among them that the ship’s carpenter is known as ‘Chips’ and the wireless operator ‘Sparks’.

Today we have passed or been passed by a good number of ships, for the most part cargo boats. Early in the morning we overtook a slow-moving Norwegian timber ship, lying low in the water and painted a dull grey colour. The troopship *Dorset* passed by us on its journey back to England from Palestine. We could just hear singing in the distance. Today I began taking morse code lessons from Sparks. The weather has been very kind. It was a lovely early morning with a cool, land breeze dying out as the day progressed and the sun became higher until the air was almost stifling. Our position is somewhere off the coast of Spain and after lunch we were able to distinguish the hard regular outline of Portugal with large, blue mountains in the background.

* * *

The Fight

After a few days I began to see how clever Mr Holt had been to pay me a shilling a month. I was neither fish nor fowl, living with the crew and working with them half the time and the other half spent with the midshipmen and having my meals with the officers. I very quickly appreciated the enormous barrier between the officers and the crew, a barrier seldom breached and one on which I sat uncomfortably astride. The crew resented my close contact with the officers and the officers suspected they had a spy in their midst from the other side of the camp. It was at about this time that I began to realize that I had a flaw in my personality which had advantages and disadvantages. We had at home, for many years, a Staffordshire bull terrier. He was never aggressive himself or attacked other dogs but perhaps there was an odour about him which attracted dogs of all shapes and sizes

from miles around to come and have a go at him. He cheerfully bore the scars of these encounters. I seemed to have acquired the same odour which encouraged others to have a go at me.

This manifested itself one evening in the forecastle. A very large seaman aptly called ‘Tug’ suddenly exploded. ‘I dinna like yer bleeding accent,’ he shouted at me across the floor. ‘Put yer mits up.’ He obviously had not been to a public school because before I had time to comply he hit me a heavy blow on the side of the head. I sprawled across the forecastle into the arms of a jeering semi-circle of crewmen. They unceremoniously pushed me back towards Tug. He smelt an easy victory and charged towards me but this time I was prepared and, side-stepping, hit him hard on his large purple-red bulbous nose which burst like a ripe strawberry. One all! I realized that I had to keep out of his huge arms which, once wrapped around my body, would squeeze the life out of me. I manoeuvred around him for a while but once more he closed and with a grunt of rage caught me another stinging blow. Again I fell back into the arms of the now shouting and excited crewmen. Once again I was pushed forward and hit Tug as hard as I could in his large pendulous belly. It was like hitting a sponge; my hand went in and came out again without even making him wince. I cruised around him, wounded but not yet mortally; the blood on his nose had stopped flowing and through the red screen I could see the mad gleam of murder in his eyes.

He hit me again and this time I went down on the deck. I got up slowly and he hit me once more. This time I didn’t get up quite so fast. I suppose I hit him twice to his half dozen blows; my own were getting weaker while his were just as powerful. After one huge blow I went down again and the deck and the ceiling of the forecastle appeared to be one. My eyes closed and I knew with certainty I could not get up. I vaguely remember hands lifting me up and placing me on my bunk. I woke the next morning feeling as though I had been run over by a bus. All the crew, including Tug, solemnly shook me by the hand. I was one of them.

Thursday 8 June, 1939

We arrived at Gibraltar at midnight.

Going out on deck I could see the neutral ground between Spain and Gibraltar. During the Civil War the Spaniards had dug up this ground until the British pointed their guns at Algeçiras, a brown-coloured town just across the bay, when they quickly stopped. Algeçiras itself was bombarded several times during the war. I could see the gun emplacements on the Rock and several guns and blockhouses were outlined against the blue sky.

At breakfast the Captain told me that this would be the last bit of green we would see for a long time and certainly the last sight of hedges for nine months. My work this morning was to continue cleaning the brass work but across the bay I could watch an English destroyer churning up the waters into a white foam. Soon we left Gibraltar, a lion of a rock set in the sea.

I was given a lesson on the wheel by Jannen, a seaman. Steering the ship was really quite easy although as Jannen says you have to know your ship and it is very easy to start swinging from side to side once you get the wheel on the move. After lunch Frost and I

made a canvas case for a ventilator on the officers' deck. All I did was to squat beside him and hand him the tools when required. We finished work at half past four. A canvas swimming pool had been rigged on the wireless operators' deck so we all went to try it out and it was not too bad. In the early evening I continued with my morse code studies.

Friday 9 June, 1939

I have today at last worked out the pecking order on the ship. There are three layers, each quite separate and with their own cultures, living quarters and messes. The Captain is the chairman so to speak of the company and the First Mate is the managing director. The Captain never gives an order but the First Mate transmits his wishes to the Boatswain. The officers are the Captain's board of directors. The Boatswain is the direct conduit through which the First Mate transmits his orders to the crew. The white crew look after the ship, painting, cleaning and scrubbing it; they do not mix with the officers. The final layer is the forty or so Chinamen who stoke the boilers under the chief engineer. They have their own mess and stick strictly to themselves. I am sandwiched somewhere between the first and second layers.

Saturday 10 June, 1939

Swabbed the decks at half past five which is one mad rush around the ship with brush and hose – knocked down, drenched but still struggling on. Swabbing is undoubtedly the hardest and most unpleasant work particularly on an empty stomach. The 'Bose' follows cool and silent, manoeuvring the long heavy hosepipe and if you don't work hard enough he turns it on you. After breakfast back to the windows both on the bridgehead and then on the Captain's deck. During the morning I committed two crimes. In the wheel house there is a piece of cord hanging from the roof which rings the ship's bell and while cleaning the windows my arm caught this and rang the bell which began to peal away. I wasn't very popular. Next I had finished cleaning the bridge windows and walked into the chart room thinking Frost was there and without bothering to look around I said, 'I am just going to clean the Old Man's windows, blast him.' I glanced up and there was the Old Man grinning evilly at me.

I swam and sunbathed after work and already my muscles are tightening up and my body is becoming tanned by the sun and sea. God, it is getting hot and there is not a cloud in the sky and only a gentle breeze makes it bearable. The eternal noise of the engines and the swift motion of the sea is making me nervy. 'Oh to be in England'!

After dinner the ship's doctor asked me into his cabin where he gave me a glass of sherry and I enjoyed his cigarettes. Doctor Hart is a very pleasant character. He is about five feet ten inches tall with a small moustache, covering a slight hair-lip. He is getting a bit thin on top despite his thirty-two years. It seems his hobbies are hunting and yachting and he told me many exciting stories of his experiences at both. He tells me he only drinks port and always smokes Rhodesian cigarettes of which he has about two thousand on board. He wants to be a country doctor and hunt two days a week but is now looking around the world and intends to visit a bastard branch of his family in Australia. To bed after a pleasant evening.

Sunday 11 June, 1939

Weary the cry of the wind is, weary the sea,

Weary the heart and the mind and the body of me.
Would I were out of it, done with it, would I could be
A white gull crying along the desolate sands.

And first I'll hear the sea winds, the mewing of the gulls,
The clucking, sucking of the sea about the rusty hulls,
The songs at the capstan in the hooker warping out,
And then the heart of me'll know I'm there or thereabout.

John Masefield

It is a glorious day. The sun is dazzling and the sea is a perfect picture blue. The Mediterranean is a wonderfully peaceful sea, calm and unruffled. It is difficult to believe that it ever could be rough although I believe it is at times. In the morning we passed the island of Pantelleria. It is a rocky peninsula rising steeply out of the sea and it has been fortified by Italy hoping in the event of a struggle between our two countries to cut off the West Mediterranean from the Eastern portion, thus making the Suez Canal unusable.

At lunch I asked if they ever had church services on board ship. 'Not on these types of cargo ships,' I was told. The Second Mate told us of a few of the experiences he had had on the passenger ships. He said he used to play the piano and one fine day after a service he played 'God Save The King' and the Captain had turned on him and in front of a very respectable lot of passengers had shouted, 'What the hell do you think you are doing? This is a church service not a bloody cinema.'

Tuesday 13 June, 1939

I was given one of the most unpleasant jobs that I have ever done but it was my own fault. After breakfast, in conversation with the Chief Engineer, he happened to say, 'What the devil do you want to come to sea for?' I replied that I was in search of experience. His eye took on a nasty glint and in a smooth voice he said, 'Experience you want? Well, I can give you an experience, lad; you report to me at twelve o'clock tonight in the engine room. I am one stoker short at the moment.'

That evening I retired to bed directly after dinner. At half past eleven a gruff voice woke me out of a dream and still half asleep I crawled out of my bunk and dressed in some old dungarees and a white boiler suit which one of the engineers had lent me. Attached to it was a hood which tied round the chin. At first I did not understand the reason for it, but afterwards I did. On the stroke of twelve I climbed down the perpendicular steel ladder which led into the bowels of the *Cyclops*.

My first impression of the engine room was machinery; one vast mass of revolving wheels and hissing steam, and the clicking of the dials on the instrument board. Dwarfing all else the giant pistons stood out in all their power and eternal noise. This was a noise I heard all the time in the ship: a steady thump, thump, thump keeping to a beautiful rhythm, never altering its time, with annoying intensity. The noise in the engine room was tremendous for besides the machinery there were the hurrying men bearing odd tools like grease-pans and oilers. For a minute no one noticed me but then a figure came up and shouted something in my ear which I did not hear, but, still dazed by the noise, I followed him down through a tunnel and finally out into comparative quiet. It was terrible here. I

would have preferred the noise ten times to the heat of that place. I was in the stoke hole … twelve blazing hellholes gaping wide with the thermometers on the wall registering 120 degrees. 'Your first job will be trimming. You have to hack this coal into smaller pieces in here,' and he led me through a door into a coal hole 'and then you put the coal in this truck and pull it down to the fires and then you do some stoking.' And so he left me among the twenty-five Chinese stokers, the only white man in the hole. They all looked at me and I looked back at them. One of them spat at my feet, and that seemed to be the signal for them to start working again. So I heaved the hammer at the coal and broke it up and then shovelled it into a truck and nearly broke my back shoving it and pushing it on the fires. The coal hole was quite cool after the awful heat of the fires. Once I slipped pushing the truck and fell into the coal cutting my hands and legs. A Chinaman helped me to get to my feet again, and grinning excitedly went back to tell his fellows. My hands became blistered and my back began to ache, my legs to tire and I began to curse. I think there were three things about the stoke hole that will always remain with me – the high treble shouts, songs and laughter of the Chinese stokers. They were stripped to the waist and sweat poured down their bodies. Then there was the coal dust which choked and got inside my mouth, nose and eyes and finally there was the heat, the blast as the doors of the fires were opened and we shoved the coal in with long shovels.

At about two o'clock, the Chief Engineer appeared and said, 'OK Horsley, you do look fine and how's the experience going?' At this stage I couldn't care less and swore back at him. 'Oh don't get so rattled, young man, come and have a drop of tea.' So back we went to the engine room in the middle of which a table had been laid out with toast and cups of tea. All the other engineers were already eating hard but I was introduced to them separately. The Second Engineer looked exactly like Mussolini and indeed was always called by that name, shortened to 'Musso'. The youngest engineer was a Welshman called Hughes and he told everyone that he loathed the sea. This was his first voyage and he said he wished he was working back in the garage at three pounds a week with none of the terrible noise and heat of the engine room.

We finished tea and one of the engineers volunteered to show me round. First he led me through some long narrow passages and up some more iron stairs to a place he called the 'Turkish Bath'. This was a small room absolutely covered with pipes, so full of steam you could hardly breathe without choking. After a few minutes in here my chest was about ready to burst and sweat poured out of every pore. Then back to the engine room and I was shown how the engine worked. The system seems to be exactly the same as that for an aeroplane or car except that coal is used to generate steam instead of petrol. The engineer then took me down a long tunnel which was where the main shaft was located. The shaft is slung on a long straight slide coated with lubricants and is round as a large tree and two shafts turn the two gigantic screws.

So at four in the morning I climbed back up the iron ladder and ten minutes later flung myself fully clothed and exhausted on to my bunk.

Wednesday 14 June, 1939 *PORT SAID*

> There is iniquity in many parts of the world, and vice in all, but the concentrated essence of all iniquities and all the vices in all the continents finds itself at Port Said. And through the heart of that sand-bordered hell, where the mirage flickers day long

above the Bitter lakes, move, if you wait, most of the men and women you have known in this life.

The excitement, the gaming-tables, the saloons, the dancing-hells, the straight vista of the canal, the blazing sands, the procession of ships and the white buildings – all are Port Said.

Rudyard Kipling

God I am tired this morning. I have just managed to struggle into breakfast feeling a complete wreck. After breakfast I was put to work again cleaning windows with the usual newspapers. After lunch I took out the pilot's ladder to the forward hatch and scrubbed it clean and at about half past three we began to see what looked like posts and iron girders sticking here and there out of the sea. There was not a cloud in the sky and the sun was blazing down on our bare heads. We passed one or two native fishing boats and suddenly the clang of the bridge bell and the cessation of the engines to a mere throb in the distance heralded the approach of a port. We rounded the buoys and slowly steamed up the narrow entrance to Port Said and the Suez Canal. Winches were being tested and the air was full of escaping steam and shouts of the crew.

The ship is surrounded by small boats called bum boats piled high with brilliantly coloured wares, money and goods are exchanged in baskets pulled and lowered over the ship's rails. All things are for sale in Port Said. I have never seen such a crowd in all my life, about two hundred all told on the deck, some big, some medium, some small, all dirty and all crooks. Roxby bought a camera and I bought a tube of toothpaste which when turned out of its wrapping proved to be only half full.

When the ship had finally been stripped of anything valuable and there was nobody left to swindle, the mob gradually disappeared; a few, like the gulley-gulley men stayed on. They played a betting game with three dice cups and a baby chicken. 'Gulley, gulley, gulley,' they cried, 'which cup hides the chicken?' Of course, you never could guess right against such nimble-fingered rogues and lost your bet.

I went up to the First Mate and asked him if I might go ashore and he said I could. It was easy enough to obtain a boat as competition is keen, and the Arab who rowed me across was a cheery fellow dressed in a highly-coloured vest and earrings and with a prodigiously large nose.

Port Said is a large town with a big business community. It is built on a site which not long ago was a marshy salt lake. All nations walk in its streets and ships from every country pass through the port. East mingles with the West in this strange town. It really is a fascinating place and I had a wonderful time idling through the streets and looking at the crowds and shops; I had been told about the most famous shop of all, Simon Artz, and I purchased there what every Englishman is supposed to – a topee, the cheapest in the shop! After a while wandering about I was rowed back to the ship and went back on board again.

* * *

There is now a gap in my diary until we reach Penang, probably because a monsoon struck us shortly after leaving the Suez Canal. The Captain said it was the worst weather he had encountered and all I remember is battling against huge seas while we lashed down the

deck cargo and returned half-drowned to the forecastle. We eventually docked in Penang and I decided to leave the ship and visit one of my sisters, who lived there with her husband, a Government engineer. I was collared by them as soon as I went ashore, taken to their home, put in a shower and given some decent clothes! I eventually emerged looking more or less civilized.

Penang

Wednesday 23 August, 1939

The latest, and what I imagine will in the future be known as the August crisis, is getting well under way and gathers speed daily. It gives the impression of being even graver than the crisis of September last year.

Germany wants to take over Poland and Danzig and include them in the Reich; naturally Poland objects. England is bound to Poland by treaty, so either Germany or ourselves have to give way and it must not be us. Therefore either Germany backs down or it will be war. Germany now holds the stage and the choice of the play; more correctly, perhaps, this is in the hands of her leader, Adolf Hitler.

Friday 1 September, 1939

At four o'clock this afternoon, for lack of anything better to do, I played with the dials on the wireless, idly tuning in first to Paris and then to dance music from London, and suddenly as I was tuning in to another station, an excited American voice, almost shouting, said, 'Radio City has made an important announcement tonight, ladies and gentlemen, and for the last two hours terrible events have been happening in Europe. Following a broadcast by Hitler, it is reported that German troops have crossed the Polish border and have invaded Poland; tune in to Radio City, New York, for all the latest developments.'

For a few minutes I sat dazed and silent. Had I merely dreamt the announcement or had the dreadful moment on which the fate of millions of people depended arrived? Had the guns began to bark and the lights go out all over Europe? I could almost hear the battle raging and the drone of bombers, on their way to destroy Warsaw, triumphant and gloating. I could imagine the mutilated bodies of men and women and the still poor forms of little children. Oh God, what is happening to this world? Thousands of innocent people are going to be thrown into endless strife and misery; damn Hitler and may his heart rot in hell. Why has one mad human being the power to murder not only his own people but the people of other harmless nations. Surely this is not only God's power, but perhaps it is Satan's too, and is Hitler the Anti-Christ who finally conquers the world? Perhaps we are to see wondrous things in our time, but the coming war is going to be terrible.

Saturday 2 September, 1939

I spent a restless day alternately listening to rather vague news bulletins and cursing the wireless. Eventually I tuned in to a German station broadcasting in English. The announcer accused the British of creating the present situation and went on to say that Chamberlain entirely dominated the British press; further, that England did not appear to realize the damage they had done. When I tuned in to a British wireless station they were still taken up with dance music!

Sunday 3 September, 1939

This afternoon we all went out to the Penang Flying Club where one of the instructors took me up for a flight. It was a very lovely evening with the sun setting over the hills and the lights of Penang beginning to twinkle. After landing we walked to the clubhouse and found everyone listening to the wireless. Suddenly the announcer said, 'We are taking you over to Downing Street where the Prime Minister will make a statement.'

> 'I am speaking to you from the Cabinet Room of No. 10 Downing Street. This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed to the German Government a final note stating that unless we heard from them by eleven o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war existed between our countries.'
>
> Mr Chamberlain went on:
>
> 'I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.'

One woman had a handkerchief pressed violently to her nose, with tears streaming down her face.

Monday 4 September, 1939

Today I went down to the town to see the immigration officer about returning to England. Heavens! He told me that I should have to stay in Malaya for the duration of the emergency – no one was being allowed to leave! I returned to the house wondering what I was going to do next.

Wednesday 6 September, 1939

During the night I had a brilliant idea and in the morning I went to see Mr Isherwood, the Blue Funnel agent, and without telling him what the immigration officer had told me, asked to be signed on to the next ship back to England. I produced Mr Holt's letter which duly impressed him and he signed me on without further ado as a deck boy with the Blue Funnel ship *Menelaus* arriving Penang on 20 September. Armed with his signature, I returned to the immigration officer and told him I was a member of the crew who had got stuck in Penang. This fooled him and he agreed that I could leave Malaya.

Wednesday 20 September, 1939

At exactly three o'clock the *Menelaus* was docked and I was taken on board by the agent. She is different from the *Cyclops* in that she can take sixteen passengers as well as cargo. I was given a tiny cabin as apparently there is no room for me in the forecastle with the crew. It even has a small fan! The ship is not a very inspiring sight as the crew have begun to camouflage her in a dirty grey paint. My sister and her husband came to see me off. It was a very emotional moment as I had no idea whether I would ever see them again. I walked to the side of the ship and watched them walk along the wharf with their steps breaking the quiet of the night and disappearing in the darkness. The engine of a car started up and it moved off.

I was unable to sleep. At four o'clock in the morning chains rattled, up came the anchor and the *Menelaus* began to move out of Penang harbour.

At Sea Again and Heading for Home

Thursday 21 September, 1939

No one seemed to notice me today and I skulked around pretending to be a passenger. It gave me an opportunity to study my fellow passengers. There were five of them and we were taking on a further six in Port Said. There was Eymes, a rubber planter from Malaya returning to England to volunteer; Blomfield a schoolmaster from Manila; a very suspicious lady called Mrs Benyon from Bangkok who claims she is Dutch but I suspect she is German; and two schoolboys returning from their holidays to England. (Later on Eymes and Blomfield became good friends during the day but once they had got down to the alcohol in the evenings fights broke out between them quite regularly. Fortunately they were usually so drunk by then that no damage was done.)

Friday 22 September, 1939

The idleness of yesterday didn't last long and I was caught today and interviewed by the First Mate. He immediately gave me the job of painting the rest of the ship grey! The rest of the passengers were most amused but I was not since I covered myself and most of my cabin with grey paint.

Saturday 23 September, 1939

We all listened to the news in the small passenger saloon. The Rumanian Prime Minister has been shot by the Nazis. There was a comment by Neville Chamberlain on Hitler's latest speech: 'If Herr Hitler says Germany can fight for seven years, I say Britain and France can fight for thirty-seven years.' Apparently there is another war rumour that every second bomb that fell on Warsaw failed to explode and contained a note from the Skoda works saying, 'We are with you, Poles.' This might have some truth in it as I understand the arms factories revolted a few days ago and were crushed with the usual Nazi methods – torturing in cellars, mass murder and whippings.

Monday 25 September, 1939

The sea has been rather rough since we left Penang and we are caught in the tail end of a south-west monsoon. This morning for the first time since leaving Penang, two boats were sighted; one looked like a destroyer in a hurry and the other, a merchant ship, turned about and fled when it saw us. At half past nine we entered Colombo harbour which at first sight looked very ordinary. After much manoeuvring we dropped anchor about thirty yards off a jetty and immediately the ship was beseiged by officials of all sorts and sizes.

Tuesday 26 September, 1939

We are getting an old gun here in Colombo to protect the ship and I have been told that I will be on the gun crew, but it has not arrived yet. At present we are loading a cargo of tea and rubber.

Thursday 28 September, 1939

The chosen gun crew, myself included, were assembled on deck to go ashore and receive training on our new acquisition – an ancient 1917 Japanese naval gun which had been in store in Colombo ever since the last war. We approached this event with considerable interest and speculation.

We were taken ashore and marched into a long shed on the quayside where our gun rested alongside a lot of other old firing pieces. We must have been fairly near the head of the queue because our gun looked quite new compared to some of the other junk. I hope it impresses the enemy. A smart Naval instructor formed us into a crew and chose me as gun trainer (apparently because I appeared to have two serviceable eyes). My job is to look through a telescopic sight and on instruction turn a wheel until a vertical line on the sight picks up the target and then fine tune it on to the centre, presumably a submarine conning tower. Big job. Key man. After some fairly rudimentary instruction we returned to the ship.

Saturday 30 September, 1939

Just after breakfast orders came through that we were to proceed outside the harbour to test our huge gun with live shells. Out at sea we assembled at our gun which by this time had been firmly bolted on to the poop deck. A large orange crate had been painted bright yellow and was dropped over the side as a target. A shell was loaded into the barrel and at a suitable distance I began to train the gun on to the general area of the target and awaited instructions – 'left, more left, left, more left, steady.' I picked up the target and focused the vertical line on to it. 'Fire!' There was an enormous explosion and at the end of my telescopic sight it was like watching the end of the world! Deafened, we peered through the smoke at the box bobbing about on the sea in the distance; in vain. No sight of the shell. We never did see it! In discussion afterwards it appeared that the gun layer had been following the instructions meant for me so by the time we fired the gun, the barrel must have been nearly vertical!

At any rate, after another shot we got the hang of it and the final one sent up a plume of spray at least in the general area of the fast disappearing orange-box. I only hope we don't have to fire while steaming along in the middle of a convoy. The Naval instructor passed us reluctantly as a gun crew and after dropping him off we set sail from Colombo for Port Said.

Sunday 1 October, 1939

We spent all morning filling and sewing up sandbags. The news over the wireless has put the wind up some of the passengers since our dear old friend Hitler has announced that Germany is going to treat all British merchant ships as warships and has given orders that they are to be sunk on sight.

Monday 2 October, 1939

I cleaned out the shell magazine this morning under the orders of the Second Mate. After that we all filled sandbags and placed them round the bridge. After lunch there was a gun alert and practice although we fired no more shells!

Tuesday 3 October, 1939

Continued filling sandbags.

Wednesday 4 October, 1939

Filled and sewed sandbags.

Thursday 5 October, 1939

I am beginning to appreciate what it feels like to be a convict.

Friday 6 October, 1939

We are supposed to have arrived at Aden today but no sight of land. Speculation among the passengers as to whether we are to go round the Cape or not.

Saturday 7 October, 1939

During the night we arrived in Aden. At six o'clock I looked out of the porthole into the red glow at the land about half a mile away. It looked rugged and sunbaked silhouetted against the morning sky – hard and desolate. We had dropped anchor and a faint breeze stirred the blue water. As the sun rose higher and higher the heat became more and more suffocating. The hills descended abruptly to the sea and coursed around the bay to a desert-like plateau on the other side. The town was situated on this slope and looked very uninteresting. To our right there was just barren rock hundreds of feet high without any sign of vegetation or life.

Shortly after breakfast a coal barge came alongside and we took on coal. Planks were pushed up from the barge to the deck and coolies carried baskets of coal on their heads running up the planks with bare feet to tip their loads into the bunkers. After taking on coal, the anchor came up and we headed towards the Red Sea and not the Cape route, thank heavens.

Monday 9 October, 1939

This morning we had more gun practice and the gun crew were also instructed in rifle shooting at a tin which had been attached to a string at the end of the poop. This is in case we have to shoot and set off mines which we might encounter around England.

Thursday 12 October, 1939

I woke up in Port Said. This afternoon I surprised everyone including the Captain by diving off his bridge into the harbour. A height of about forty feet. I didn't think this so funny afterwards as one of the passengers had said he had seen a shark cruising round the ship.

Sunday 15 October, 1939

I am feeling fed up and bored with Port Said. However, five or six more passengers are expected on board before we leave.

Wednesday 18 October, 1939

Thank God we are at sea again and people's nerves have calmed down. I now have to take watch. I was on watch this morning up the main mast from ten until twelve and then transferred to the poop for the afternoon and evening watch.

Thursday 19 October, 1939

I am tired this morning. I am on watch again in the morning, afternoon, and evening. These periods consist of two hours on watch but you are then on two hours' standby beforehand so it is a long day and night.

Saturday 21 October, 1939

The watches have now been changed to four hours with two hours on standby, so tonight I got three hours sleep in all. You have a hand rattle so if you see anything you can alert the bridge.

Tuesday 24 October, 1939

I was up at half past three this morning and on watch and, Christ, it is getting cold. I painted the raft all morning and hope we don't have to use it. I was on watch again in the afternoon and night and it's beginning to look like a twelve hour day!

Wednesday 25 October, 1939

Fed up and its nothing but work. There is a strong wind and the ship is rolling. At the moment my day is as follows,

3.30 am	Called by the seaman on standby
4–5 am	Watch on the top of the bridge
5–6 am	Watch on the main mast
6–7.30 am	Swab decks
7.30–8 am	Standby
8–10 am	Bath, breakfast and stand down
10–12 noon	Work on the deck
12–3.45 pm	Lunch and stand down
3.45 Pm	Tea
4–6 pm	Watch on the main mast
6–10 pm	Standby with the rattle on deck
10 pm	Bed

And shore people complain about a forty-eight hour week! Christ, they're lucky! It's getting colder and colder. The ship has run out of cigarettes because apparently we were due in London three weeks ago so I am smoking a pipe and a disgusting mixture of some stuff called Bulwark and the few Wills' Woodbines I have left over and it is all quite sickening. I must replenish cigarettes in Gibraltar if we get there. The crew are all making their own and even the passengers are beginning to run out.

Friday 27 October, 1939

The reality of the situation and war is gradually beginning to dawn on me.

In Port Said we were formed into a convoy of about forty ships of various nationalities (I wonder if this is the first big convoy of the war) and I don't think some of them understand the orders. The whole convoy is supposed to turn so many degrees at a certain time and a lot of ships either don't turn on time or turn at the wrong time. This is all right in the daytime when you can see them but it is very hazardous at night. This morning the First Mate assembled the whole watch crew and stressed upon us that the safety of the ship depended on the sharp eyes of the watch. The long hours and the strain of searching out at night is beginning to tell on me.

There is a hell of a wind and it is getting colder and colder. The sea is rough and the

ship just behind us is shipping water like nobody's business.

Saturday 28 October, 1939

We arrived in Gibraltar.

Sunday 29 October, 1939

We steamed out of Gibraltar at noon and there is a change of watch. I am on from twelve until two standby and then on watch twelve until four morning and night. I spent my standby as usual in the able seamen's mess drinking tea. It was a raw night and I had no desire to sit around outside. Unfortunately, the AB's quarters are swarming with beetles of all sorts and sizes – they are all very familiar and crawl about unmolested as though they own the place. The sailors call them Singapore Joes. I went on watch in blinding rain. Luckily, one of the able seamen had lent me his oilskins so I didn't get too wet. After some hot cocoa I retired to bed at half past four in the morning with the thought that I would be called again in a couple of hours for swabbing the decks.

Tuesday 31 October, 1939

At four o'clock this afternoon we passed Cape St Vincent. The wind rose steadily during the afternoon and since I am now on watch in the afternoon on top of the bridge I got the full fury of it.

Wednesday 1 November, 1939

The twelve until four nightwatch is a loathsome business and I find it very difficult getting used to rising in the middle of the night. The ABs are a very decent lot and Joe, my watch mate, always hands over his oilskins on the completion of his watch. We have arranged it so that he goes on watch first while I am on standby and vice versa. The weather is finer today with odd patches of blue sky and there has been plenty of moon for keeping a good eye out on the convoy. There have been several near misses with ships turning at the wrong time but so far no collisions – touch wood.

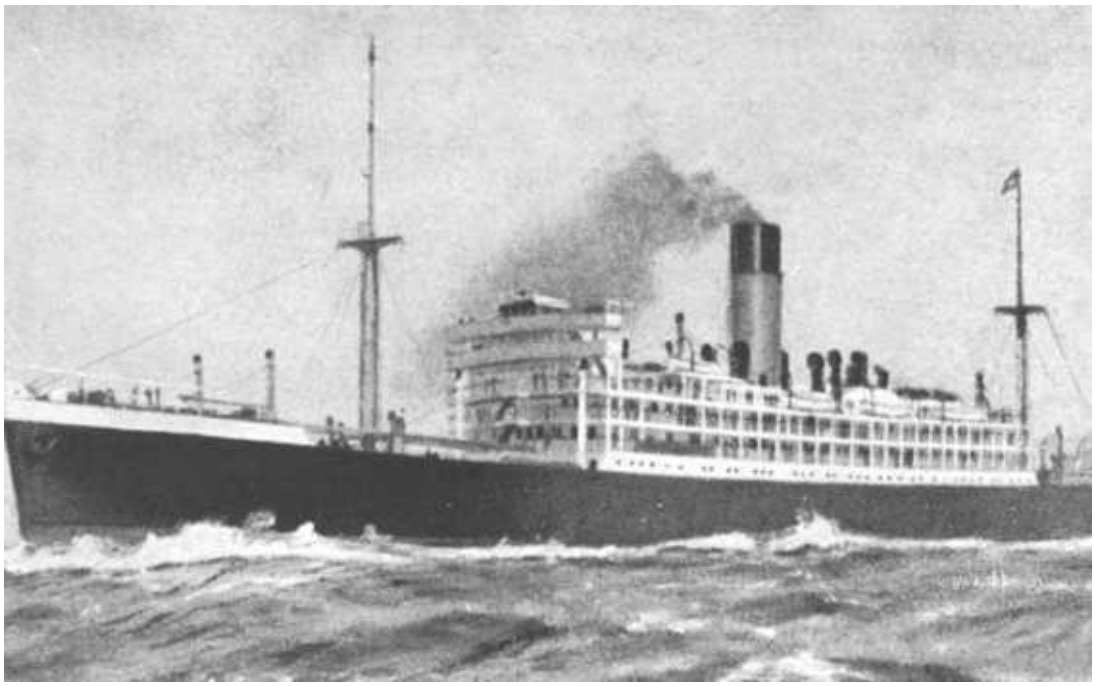
1. ‘Bradgate’, West Hartlepool, the house in which I was born.

2. My four brothers at Bamburgh Castle, which my parents took each summer for our holidays.

3. My mother with Terence, Dick, Rupert and John.

4. Wellington College Swimming Eight, 1937. PH seated on the left of Charlie Stocken, the master in charge of swimming.

5. ‘Chick’ pilots in their new feathers, 1940. (PH centre)



6. Blue Funnel TSS *Menelaus* on which I returned from Penang, September, 1939.

Saturday 4 November, 1939

What a night! Gales and blinding rain with huge seas breaking over the ship. It was quite impossible to climb the main mast so I went on watch on top of the bridge. I was deafened by the roar of wind and sea with the bows heaving up and down and spray sweeping over the bridge. It was all I could do to hang on, pray, and never mind the watch-keeping. The cold seeped through my oilskins to such an extent that it was impossible to sleep when I came off watch and everything in my cabin was scattered around the floor.

Sunday 5 November, 1939

As we approached England there is so much going on around the convoy that I have decided to stop my diary as the information in it might prove of use to the enemy if we were sunk and I was picked up. All I can say is that we have lost one ship in an accident and an escort has sunk a German submarine, so there has been a lot of excitement.

Thursday 9 November, 1939

We are now in the Thames Estuary so I can start my diary again. I am longing to get ashore to enjoy a square meal. We are three weeks late and for the last week we have been living on bully beef and ship's biscuits. The blackout has got on everyone's nerves. We docked at Tilbury and were at once invaded by immigration officers and security men. The security men immediately homed in on Mrs Benyon and took her off protesting. I gather her passport contained German and Russian stamps and they had found an unlicensed revolver in her cabin.

As for me, I am in even worse trouble. An officious immigration officer informed me that the Merchant Navy was now a restricted occupation and as I was signed on the ship as a crew member I was in the Merchant Navy for the duration of the war! This was terrible news and didn't fit my plans at all. So I went back to my small cabin, sat down and thought out my next move. Later on I went and saw the First Mate and asked if I could

have shore leave for the night. He said ‘yes’ and wrote out a slip of paper for me to give to the dockyard police saying that I was to return later this evening. So I left all my gear in the cabin and went down the gangplank. The dockyard policeman looked at my chit and waved me on and I turned back towards the *Menelaus* and said a silent ‘goodbye’.

I had learned a lot from my time at sea, most of all how to get on in all kinds of company. I had aged at least two years in six months and my body was fit and hard. I had come down to the level of the ordinary crewman and understood his simple virtues. I had learned to ‘talk with crowds’. To ‘walk with kings’ would come later.

I was now a deserter from the Merchant Navy.

4

The Royal Air Force

On leaving this austere room, I was faced by a corridor cluttered with military paraphernalia, from a large wooden propeller attached to the wall to old photographs of military courses I had attended and pictures of ancient aeroplanes.

My diary continues:

November 1939

I hurried to London where I lunched with my brother John, now a Territorial Captain in the Northumberland Fusiliers. I am supposed to be drowned! My family thought I was on the *Yorkshire* which was sunk in the Bay of Biscay. When I had written that I was coming home on the *Menelaus*, the censor had blacked it out and, as the *Yorkshire* was sailing from Malaya at the time, they had assumed that she was my ship. John told me that Terence had enlisted in the Fleet Air Arm as a pilot. I found my hatred of him had already receded in the process of growing up. After lunch I caught the train to Newcastle-upon-Tyne and holed up in John's now empty flat while I pondered what to do in the future.

Wellington has put me off the Army completely. I can hardly join the Royal Navy as a deserter from the Merchant Navy, and my only other option appears to be the Royal Air Force. I rather fancy myself as a latter day Biggies, so I wrote off to the RAF Recruiting Office offering my services as a volunteer aircrew. After a few days I received a reply to the effect that the RAF were not taking volunteers at the moment but suggesting that I keep in touch with them monthly.

As I hourly expect a policeman to knock on the door and arrest me as a deserter, it is imperative that I move out of John's flat and find a temporary job elsewhere.

January, 1940

I read in an advertisement that preparatory schools wanted temporary masters to replace those called up for the Forces. I registered with an agency called Gabittas and Thring and the jobs began to arrive. On 8 January I went down to Portsmouth for an interview with a Mr Foster, the headmaster of Stubbington House (the preparatory school for Dartmouth) which had been evacuated for the war to Lewes. He offered me a post at the princely sum of £100 per annum. I explained to Mr Foster that I was only waiting to join the RAF and would have to leave at short notice when called up. So, suitably attired as a schoolmaster in a Harris tweed jacket and dark grey flannels, I duly presented myself at Stubbington.

As so many of the able-bodied masters have already left for the war I find that not only

am I required to take the boys in all games and physical training but also teach twenty hours a week of History, Geography and Mathematics to the bottom form – about my mark. There are around 100 boys in the school and it really is great fun – an extension of Wellington except that I have a hundred fags instead of five!

I am becoming increasingly impatient to get into uniform, particularly as I dread the thought that the press gang will catch up with me and I could be returned in irons to the Merchant Navy. I have been pestering the nearest RAF recruiting office at Brighton at least once a week, but meanwhile I have joined the local unit of the Home Guard.

Here my diary ended.

* * *

The Storm Breaks

History has called the period from August, 1939, to May, 1940, the phoney war. The antagonists were dug in behind their concrete defences – the Maginot and Siegfried Lines: the French and English complacent in their static positions, the Germans building up their strength and waiting to unleash their mobile thrusts into the Low Countries. I had just returned for my second term at Stubbington House when the storm broke. First to go was Denmark, then Norway. In May the Germans launched their blitzkrieg on the Low Countries, with a right hook outflanking the Maginot Line and followed swiftly by a full frontal attack. The Allied fronts disintegrated and the Germany Army swept the British Expeditionary Force back to Dunkirk from where it was finally evacuated at the beginning of June.

During the battle for France, the RAF had lost over a thousand aircraft in the air and on the ground, and it was this disaster that at last opened the floodgates for recruits with the great and hurried expansion of the Royal Air Force, just prior to the commencement of the Battle of Britain in mid-August.

From now until the final defeat of Germany in 1945, a war would rage in the air upon which our whole future depended. It would stretch the capacities of both sides to their limits, playing a decisive part in the final outcome of the war as a whole.

The experiences of the next five years, during which I would play my own small part in that great conflict, would leave an indelible mark on my character and, indeed, upon my whole future. So this is perhaps the time at which to take a brief look at the broad pattern of that air war and the terrible price that the RAF would pay in men and aircraft.

The Battle of Germany

Casualties in the Battle of Britain were quite modest: four hundred and thirty-five pilots lost on operations, compared to the huge casualties suffered during the Battle of Germany. That great aerial conflict, the like of which the world had never seen before nor was likely to see again, was waged relentlessly for three long years day and night. The score would reach a crescendo in 1942 with an armada of 1,000 aircraft over Cologne. It only ended when Germany, reeling like a fatally wounded bull, finally sank to her knees and gave up. The Battle of Germany was a long and enormously costly battle in men and aircraft; night after night scores of aircraft fell into the cauldron of fire and steel over Germany with tales of exceptional courage and cowardice remaining untold. The remainder of the force crept

home in the cold light of dawn to regroup and lick their wounds, while the Liberators and Flying Fortresses of the American Air Force circled East Anglia in the early morning like flocks of wild geese in a thermal, wheeling and manoeuvring into huge formations before setting course to face the same perils.

In this aerial battle RAF losses alone in aircrew were over 47,000 and on the worst night of the campaign ninety-four aircraft were lost over Nuremberg (eleven point eight per cent of the force). Statistically the average life span of a crew in Bomber Command was about three months, somewhat better than that of a subaltern in the trenches of the First World War, but still not much to look forward to. It must also be remembered that most of these were officer aircrew of the highest calibre, men whom the country could ill afford to lose. Before the introduction of long-range escort fighters the American Eighth Air Force took a most terrible hammering in the daylight raids.

Without the tenacity, determination and single-mindedness of one man, 'Bomber' Harris,* the awful loss in life and material could well have called a halt to the campaign. Harris believed completely that the bomber offensive could by itself win the war, but he was wrong. However, the Battle of Germany merits a place among the greatest battles of our history, but has never received it. Even worse he suffered sinister denigration after the war by left-wing administrations and critics. It may not have won the war but this great campaign had to be fought and the war could not have been won without it. It so weakened the enemy's military machine and resolve that the invasion of Europe became a reality and finally a success. There can be no record of how many more submarines, bombers, tanks, V1s and V2s the Germans could have produced had they not been forced to divert resources into research and development, manpower and technical capacity into the production of defensive weapons against the bombers. Dismissing the armchair strategists mesmerized by statistics, what better authority than Speer himself, German minister of armaments and war production who had little doubt of the effects that strategic bombing had on the situation on the Russian front, the Allied invasion and reduction in the German offensives?

* * *

Aircrew Cadet

At long last I was instructed to report to the aircrew reception centre at Uxbridge on 26 July, 1940, and the period of waiting was over. After the hard struggle to get accepted, my entry into the Royal Air Force was bewilderingly easy.

The scene on arrival at RAF Uxbridge was like Paddington Station at the height of the rush hour, packed to overflowing with young men clutching documents, hurrying from one important point to another in the machinery of processing recruits. Uxbridge was so overcrowded that, after drawing a couple of blankets from stores, most of us slept, toe to toe, on hard boards, eight to a bell tent, rows of which had been hastily erected on the grass surrounds outside the permanent barrack blocks.

After filling in endless forms and undergoing a medical examination, I finally ended up on the third day in a line of recruits queuing up behind the desk of an elderly and harassed-looking officer. Here the interview was short and very much to the pont:

'Have you got an OTC Certificate "A"?'

‘Yes, Sir,’ I replied, producing the document, ‘from Wellington.’

‘Excellent, then I will put you down for officer aircrew. Report next door.’

The unfortunate recruit behind me, while no doubt a very worthy young man, did not have this certificate and I just had time to hear the officer say, ‘You are recommended for NCO aircrew.’ The process next door was similar except that the officer asked me:

‘What category of aircrew do you wish to volunteer for?’

‘Pilot, Sir.’

‘Sorry,’ he replied, ‘we’re not taking pilots this week, only air-gunners. We will inform you later when there are vacancies for pilots.’

As I didn’t have the price of a return railway ticket I stammered:

‘All right, Sir, I’ll volunteer as an air gunner.’

On such rash spontaneity can one’s fate be settled and I was accepted by the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve on 12 June 1940, for the duration of ‘the Present Emergency’. I hadn’t the faintest idea what an air gunner was supposed to do.

Leaving Uxbridge I was sent the following morning to Bridgnorth for formal induction into the RAF. At Bridgnorth I was sworn in, kitted out, immunized against every known disease, drilled and generally mucked around for a month. It was also my first experience but not the last of the jealousy and dislike of aircrew cadets by the regular NCOs, who tried every way of intimidating and bullying them without resorting to physical violence, although on occasion they came very close to it.

The sudden flood of recruits following the defeat in France had caused a blockage in the training pipeline so from Bridgnorth I was posted to an operational bomber station at RAF Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire for on-the-job training. This station was equipped with Whitleys, an ancient twin-engined bomber which flew through the air tail-down like some ungainly tropical insect; its crews grimly joked that it took off at ninety miles per hour, climbed at ninety miles per hour, cruised at ninety miles per hour and then landed again at ninety miles per hour.

My days were spent in the armoury dismantling, cleaning and re-assembling the aircraft’s defensive armament of Browning .303 machine guns under the watchful eye of a senior NCO. Occasionally I flew a sortie in the rear turrent when there was a shortage of trained air gunners. This experience quickly led me to the conclusion that I had joined the wrong trade: the rear turret was a long way downhill from the busy social and active life at the front end. Not only was it cold and lonely but, due to the elongated tube of the fuselage, the cramped turret rotated and vibrated like an unbalanced and crazy Ferris wheel. I quickly appreciated that the rear gunner was the lowest form of aircrew life; the other crew members seemed miles away and one longed for some sort of communication with them if only to say a brief ‘goodbye’. The pilot was a very superior sort of fellow, pampered by the rest of his crew, so I rapidly made up my mind that it was far better to be a pilot than an air gunner, a distinction then as distant as a shop assistant from the floor manager!

Our family solicitor, Dudley Appleby, had joined the Royal Air Force at the beginning of the war and at that time was staff officer to the Chief of Air Staff in the Air Ministry. Taking the bull by the horns, I rang him up and explained my predicament. He must have

been in a position of great influence because within a fortnight I was remustered to cadet-pilot, which meant that I wore a white flash in my fore-and-aft cap, and was posted in October, 1940, to the Initial Training Wing (ITW) at Aberystwyth for a month's basic training.

At Aberystwyth we were housed in the hotels and guest houses stretched out along the sea-front which had been requisitioned and stripped of furniture and fittings for the duration of the war. From that time until the end of our training I never seemed to move except in a body of men under the orders of an NCO, and personal privacy became just a memory.

The heroic exploits of the Few in the Battle of Britain had so fired the imagination of the young that the cream of the public schools had flocked to join the Royal Air Force, who welcomed them with open arms to top up their depleted fighter squadrons. Consequently the company I kept at ITW was not far removed from that in the sixth form at Wellington. My particular friends were all straight out of their public schools – Robbie Beresford-Peirse, Arthur Innis, Lloyd Davies (all Etonians), Ken Birley, Eric Masters, John Ayshford and Tom Latus (the only older member of our group who at twenty-seven and with a real moustache seemed positively ancient). We had a picture taken, posing proudly in brand new flying kit, by an admiring local photographer much more familiar with snapping holidaymakers on the front than aspiring knights in armour. (Of this group Lloyd Davies remained a close and dear friend until he died in the tangled wreckage of a car just after the war, following a head-on collision with another vehicle while driving down the main runway at RAF Sylt in Germany, taking a short cut to the Officers' Mess after a midnight bathe. A light in my heart went out. The rest of them disappeared into the pit of war.)

Our training was based on a pre-war syllabus sandwiched so much in time that I completed my *ab initio* flying on Tiger Moths in just one month between 5 October, 1940, and 5 November, 1940, at No. 22 Elementary Flying Training School, Cambridge. This unit was really Marshall's civilian flying school, where all the ground instructors and some of the flying instructors were civilians; there were one or two RAF officers but most of the other Service flying instructors were sergeant pilots who vented their dislike of officer cadets by indulging in a variety of aerial indignities designed to induce violent vomiting in their students.

From Cambridge some of us went on to No 3 Service Flying Training School at RAF South Cerney with the Airspeed Oxford, a twin-engined aircraft which, together with its civilian sister the Envoy, was built by Airspeed at Portsmouth. This was a great disappointment to us, as, in company with all the young men of the time, we saw ourselves as dashing fighter pilots. The twin-engined Oxfords meant that we were most likely destined for bombers.

My flying course began on 8 November, 1940, with my instructor Flying Officer 'Froggie', French who was a most delightful and civilized person. We immediately began instruction on the Oxford which was then used extensively for most categories of aircrew training. It was powered by two Cheetah X radial engines. These were fine, provided that they both worked at the same time, but on one engine the Oxford was a sod.

The first hour or so of dual instruction was taken up with trying to manage the awkwardness of single-engine flying. However, after three hours' dual I was despatched off solo and managed to steer my aircraft around the regulation square circuit, careful never to let the airfield out of sight, and finally perpetrate what can only be called an excuse for a landing.

As November gave way to December the weather began to get worse and worse, covering the Cotswolds with thick clammy low cloud and fog, giving a taste of the appalling weather to come in that second winter of the war. During the halcyon summer days over Cambridgeshire, with the Battle of Britain being fought above us to the south, I had enjoyed flying the Tiger Moth in the manner of a club pilot – safe but neither bold nor brilliant. But now coping with the Oxford in foul weather was quite a different matter and I began to realize that acute fear and flying were frequent companions.

Accidents happened when you least expected them; events leading to a disaster seem to come in threes – the weather deteriorates, the radar develops a fault and finally the engine fails. You are left in extreme fear on the back of a bucking bronco which is determined to unseat you. I had just read a book called *Some Practical Experience of Flying* by Hamel and Turner, published in 1914. Although written in the earliest days of flying, it became my faithful companion. There was one particular passage in the chapter on 'Aptitude for Flying' that I took to heart:

> The popular idea that the man without fear is the man to become a great flyer is entirely wrong. Most of the best flyers are men who are keenly apprehensive of possible danger, who never forget the presence of danger, and who have a very wholesome dread of the many causes of disaster. Nor are any of the best flyers men who no longer value life. The reckless, as well as the vainglorious, man may shine for a while in the aerial world, but his career will be very brief.

Unfortunately Gustav Hamel did not take his own advice, since shortly after his book was published, he collected a new racing monoplane in France and, despite warnings of a faulty engine, took off for Hendon. This great and gallant pilot was never seen or heard of again.

Shortly after reading that book I learned my lesson the hard way. Indeed it was a false sense of security that led me into a trap and a lesson that I shall never forget – that elements and machines have a habit of ganging up on unwary pilots and, unlike a car, it is not possible to get out and walk.

One of the exercises we were required to undertake was an instrument flight cross-country. On this exercise the first student pilot flew the aircraft from the left-hand seat and, having settled down on course, the second student pilot in the right-hand seat, acting as a safety look-out, pulled a black cloth over the pilot's head (rather like a perambulator hood) who was then required to fly around a triangular course on instruments. On the flight in question I was authorized as the safety pilot to a fellow student called Wisely-Wickam. The weather forecast was not good – overcast with broken rain clouds at 1,000 feet over base but deteriorating to the east along our route. However, as it was good enough to take off, our instructor authorized the flight with a warning to retrace our steps if the weather got too bad.

Accordingly we splashed across the muddy airfield, bounced into the air and climbed to 4,000 feet where we found a narrow tunnel with reasonable visibility between two layers

of cloud. Wisely set course and began flying on instruments while I kept a lookout for other aircraft. The weather did get worse as we flew east and after a while we began to fly over a solid dark layer of low cloud with the visibility deteriorating all the time. I warned Wisely of the worsening situation and pulled the hood back so that he could look for himself. After a short discussion we decided to continue on flight plan which would eventually bring us back to somewhere in the vicinity of base.

We had just turned onto the second leg of our cross-country when we both simultaneously saw wireless masts ahead sticking up like cocktail sticks through the fog. Their sudden appearance quite unnerved Wisely who turned to me with his usual oath and said, ‘Christ, we must get down.’ I did not dispute his decision as all pilots know that when faced with the unusual there is an overpowering temptation to get back into contact with Mother Earth as quickly as possible.

He pushed the stick forward and we were soon speeding down through a thick, black soupy fog – 1,000 feet, 700, 500, 400, 300, 200, 100 feet and suddenly the ground rushed up to meet us. Wisely just had time to pull out and with another loud, ‘Christ’ stabbed the undercarriage down and began to run his wheels at over one hundred and thirty miles per hour along what appeared in the fog to be a grass field. Another interesting fact about situations where death and destruction appear imminent is that events seem to slow down like the images flickering in the individual frames of a slow-motion film, so that a haystack seemed to only loom leisurely out of the mist. I desperately tried to pull the aircraft over it, but with a great lurch we struck it with the port wing. While the blow reduced our forward momentum we nevertheless sped on minus a wing and engine until we broke through a hedge this time shedding the starboard wing and engine. Crossing a road, the remains of the aircraft climbed up another tall hedge on the opposite side before we finally came to rest hanging twenty feet above the ground, still firmly strapped in our seats.

What was so surprising was the total silence as we sat there without speaking, each wrapped in our own private thoughts. I had been conscious of two very powerful emotions – first, a sickening fear of the unknown as we dived down through the fog, which was followed almost immediately by a fierce excitement when we hit the ground.

How long we sat there I do not know, perhaps just a minute or so. I was woken up from this reverie by another great shout from my friend who uttered with his usual brevity and clarity of speech, ‘Christ, thank God we’re down.’ I pushed back the perspex window of the cockpit and looked down onto a grass verge below. A little old lady came into view and stood beneath the window looking up. ‘Are you all right?’ she cried.

‘Yes,’ I replied.
‘Would you like me to go and fetch you a cup of tea?’
‘No,’ I said, ‘I don’t think so at the moment.’

Before I could say anything more she turned about and walked off. That was the last I saw of the old lady but the vision of her toddling gaily off into the fog swinging a large carrier bag remains firmly planted in my memory. Perhaps she often came upon aeroplanes perched perilously on the top of hedges.

Stiffly and painfully, since we were badly bruised from the jolting we had received, we

climbed out of our seats, picked our way through the wreckage and dropped to the ground. Still in our flying suits and helmets, we walked down the road in silence. After about half a mile the lane led into a main road with a public house on the corner. Approaching the building, the landlord emerged from the main door wearing a heavy old Army greatcoat. He looked at us, startled, and said, 'Are you English?' To which we answered in the affirmative. He looked much relieved and continued, 'I heard the engines of your plane coming down through the fog and the the crash – do you come from RAF Abingdon?' 'No,' we replied, 'but can we come in and use your telephone?' He led us into the bar lounge but no amount of trying could raise an operator on his telephone; this was not too surprising as I did recall seeing a lot of wires draped around the wrecked fuselage and we must have pulled all the telephone lines down in our progress across country.

Fortunately RAF Abingdon, just a mile or so down the main road, had also heard the noise of our engines and sent out a search party which found us happily downing our third free whisky. We were taken back to their sick quarters and then returned by ambulance to South Cerney.

Under normal circumstances we should have been suspended from flying for writing-off a valuable aircraft, but such was the demand for aircrew at that time that our punishment was very light – confined to camp for a month, a red endorsement in our log-books and whenever there was time between sorties we were dispatched to run a lap of the airfield perimeter in flying kit complete with parachute – an exhausting and very undignified exercise.

The winter of 1941 was an appalling one even by English standards. The airfield became a bog and every flight a struggle against low cloud, rain, snow and ice. Not only did the weather turn against us but the Germans did too. They began to mount intruder operations in Heinkel IIIs against RAF training bases, diving out of low cloud and strafing the airfields with bombs and guns by day and night, chasing any luckless student they found in the air.

We started night flying in January which necessitated flying our aircraft over Bibury, a subsidiary airfield, in the late afternoons. There we laid out a line of gooseneck flares and waited for the weather to clear enough to start the night flying programme. Night after night we sat around in cold Nissen huts huddled over the one wood stove and fortified by tin mugs of tea, only to return to South Cerney at dawn having achieved nothing. One night, after laying out the flare path with my old friend Wisely-Wickam, we were walking back to the crew hut when the inevitable Heinkel came down the flare path spraying us and the parked aircraft with machine guns. We both hurled ourselves under the nearest vehicle for cover and, when we finally emerged, found it was the petrol bowser. I felt destined to end my days in Wisely's company but at least he seemed on good terms with Christ! Eventually I managed an hour's dual on 10 February and a month later a further forty-five minutes' dual followed by three solo night landings. That was the extent of my night-flying training.

As the course drew to an end the excitement of our future fate mounted. I quite enjoyed flying the Oxford and had begun to look forward to heavy bombers, although both Lloyd Davies' and my own first choice would still have been fighters. When our postings came through I just could not believe my eyes. After all, my friends and I were still nineteeen

and desperate to get into the fighting war and we talked about little else. Now three of us were posted to No. 2 Central Flying School, Cranwell, on an instructors' course. We were average pilots and had no experience of operations; it was impossible to imagine how the decision to make us instructors had come about. The only attribute that I could see was that all three of us could talk 'proper' and perhaps they thought at least our future students might be able to understand us. Most of my fellow students were posted to bombers and almost all of them were killed in the Battle of Germany, so perhaps in the end we were the lucky ones.

Flying Instructor

On 10 April, 1941, we reported to the RAF College, Cranwell, conspicuous in our brand new uniform with one very thin stripe on our sleeves, but nevertheless very proud of our pilot's flying brevet. Although the cadets had long since departed, the atmosphere and many of the trappings remained. Efforts had been made at camouflaging, but the main college buildings and tower stuck out like a sore thumb on the flat Lincolnshire landscape. (Rumour had it that Goering, an admiring pre-war visitor, had given his Luftwaffe instructions not to bomb Cranwell.) The Officers' Mess continued to be run on strictly pre-war lines and the old civilian servants were still there to look after a new and quite different type of young gentleman. There was no bar and you rang a bell in the anteroom for a mess waiter to bring a drink. A quiet sherry before dinner just about set the scene and pilot officers were expected to be seen and not heard. However, there were a number of old lags on my course straight from Fighter Command and the Battle of Britain and the normal peace of the anteroom occasionally erupted into a riotous party, when the permanent residents would be driven out.

The flying was also fairly gentlemanly after the rigours of the previous winter, and we practised giving instruction (called 'patter') through a long rubber tube to each other on the single-engine Avro Tutor, which was the standard RAF trainer of the thirties, and then on my old friend and adversary, the Oxford. We were required to fly our aircraft to their limits, including aerobatics in the Oxford. I managed to execute a barrel roll quite satisfactorily with my instructor Flying Officer Strauss, a South African with a hair lip and a pronounced lisp. 'Now,' he said, 'I will demonstwaite a woop.' Whereupon he opened the throttles fully, dived the aircraft to gain the necessary speed and then with both hands hauled firmly back on the stick. Up we went, passing the horizon with the nose going higher and higher until we reached the vertical. At that point the Oxford gave up the unequal struggle, hung for a brief moment before falling back again down the same steep path throwing dust and an accumulation of loose articles all over the cockpit. My courageous instructor was not to be defeated and in an even firmer voice cried out, 'I will now demonstwaite to you how to woop the Oxford.' The exact manoeuvre was repeated several times with Flying Officer Strauss becoming more and more excited, until I thought the aircraft must fall to bits. He finally gave up with a disconsolate sigh, 'We will twy and woop another day, the engines on this aircraft are wotten.' We never managed a loop as very shortly afterwards the tail came off an aircraft on the same exercise, crashing and killing the occupants, and the Oxford was declared non-aerobatic.

The course finished on 23 May and I became qualified to instruct on multi-engine and elementary type aircraft. I did not have to travel far to my next posting. Indeed I kept the

same room in the Mess. Together with Lloyd Davies, I became a flying instructor at the RAF College Flying Training School which used the south airfield, whereas CFS had used the north airfield. On *6* June I collected my first clutch of eager students and began instructing them on the Oxford which I had hardly mastered myself, and certainly not at night since I had only gone solo once and getting up and down again on a black night was still an adventure for me. We did our night flying at a subsidiary grass airfield called Barkstone, very similar to the set-up at Burford except that the Germans gave us even more trouble by harrying the bomber and training bases in Lincolnshire. Quite a lot of the time of a junior instructor was spent at the end of the line of goosenecks controlling the take-offs and landings of aircraft, using an Aldis lamp giving green or red signal lights. While I was at Cranwell one new instructor gave a green for an aircraft on the approach to land which it duly did, and taxied around again to the take-off points. The instructor gave the aircraft another green for take-off and it was only when it turned into wind on the flare path that he saw with horror the huge swastika on the fuselage of a Heinkel! I suppose even Germans had a sporting sense of humour.

I soon learned to understand what it was like to be an instructor. In the early stages of the course I lived and breathed ‘circuits and bumps’, with my pupils hitting the ground in every conceivable attitude, from which I tried to extract the aircraft without crashing. However, I eventually got my fledgelings off solo. We then started the night flying phase and between myself and my students we managed to avoid enemy action and somehow get the aircraft around the circuit and down on the ground again in one piece, until in desperation I again sent them off solo. They seemed to cope rather better without my help. Yet Barkstone in the grey light of dawn was like a scrapyard, with Oxfords sticking out of every hedge; in 1941 Training Command was breaking more aircraft than the manufacturers could produce.

We had not been at Cranwell very long when I discovered that Dudley Appleby, who had already been so helpful to me, had forsaken the Air Ministry for the pleasures of the countryside and was now the Personal Staff Officer to the Air Officer Commanding (AOC) of the Training Group whose Headquarters were also at Cranwell. Lloyd and I called on Dudley one day and he insisted on introducing us to the AOC. I had never seen anything higher than a Group Captain before and trembled in the presence of such an important officer. He turned out to be a most charming person and immediately extended an invitation to dinner the following week. Driving to the AOC’s residence a few days later, some ten miles away, we exchanged thoughts which were remarkably similar: ‘Wouldn’t it be something if he had a beautiful daughter.’ And he had – a seventeen year old ravishing creature. Lloyd was an extremely good-looking tall Etonian with the most delightful and polished manners so it came as no surprise when they fell in love and I was relegated to the position of a useful decoy to allay her mother’s suspicion of any foul play.

> One morning Lloyd awoke me pale and distraught.
>
> ‘Peter, old friend,’ he said, ‘we’re in terrible trouble.’
>
> ‘What do you mean?’ I asked.
>
> ‘Last night there was an awful row at the AOC’s. June confessed to her mother she had missed her period and that I was the culprit. Madam is furious.’
>
> ‘Lloyd,’ I replied, ‘what do you mean, *we’re* in trouble; it looks as though you’re the one in trouble not me.’

‘Well, my old sport, it appears you and I are bracketed together in this deal and we are required to report to the AOC’s office at ten o’clock this morning.’

At exactly ten o’clock one aged Flight Lieutenant and two young Pilot Officers stood stiffly to attention before their AOC listening to a resumé of their characters which was quite unprintable. The interview concluded with the information that all three of us were suspended from duty pending posting.

The outcome was that poor old Dudley Appleby, whose only crime had been to effect the initial introduction, was posted back to the Air Ministry from which he had striven so hard to escape. Lloyd was posted to Rhodesia and I, who had enjoyed none of the pleasures of the encounter, was given a posting to No. 36 Service Flying Training School (SFTS), Penhold, Alberta. (And then of course it all turned out to be a false alarm, a mere hiccup in the menstrual cycle and the young lady’s period picked up again happily on time. But Lloyd and I were separated not to meet again until after the war when we were both married, and he was soon to be killed.)

I had come to realize quite quickly that I enjoyed a distinct advantage over the boys straight from school, toughened as I was by months at sea working amongst the roughest of sailors. It was not that public schoolboys were not tough; on the contrary, if Wellington was any example the opposite was true; it was just that the attitude taught by public schools, a strict code of honour and behaviour, may have been all very well on the playing fields of Eton but was not conducive to survival in the kind of war and against the kind of enemy we were being trained to face. While I did not purposely avoid danger, I was instinctively more keenly aware of the trouble spots and the right timing required to play rough when the going got tough. In retrospect I am sure that a lot of these young men were killed before they really knew what had hit them. Later on as the voracious appetite of Bomber Command hungrily began to consume aircrew, the type of recruit changed altogether. By the time I became a flying instructor the type of recruit had already begun to change from the young school leavers to middle-class professional people between the ages of twenty-five and forty with a consequent reduction in medical and physical standards. Unfortunately, we also began to get a type of recruit attracted by the glamour and uniform of the RAF, but who had no intention of going into action or getting hurt. This could be achieved by being just good enough to reach the end of the course but then ensuring a failure on the final flying test before being remustered to yet another branch of aircrew and so repeating the process for as long as possible. This small number became quite easily recognizable by their smart turn out, slick manners and well-trimmed moustaches but the RAF soon caught on to their tricks, classified them into a group under the heading of LMF (lack of moral fibre) and posted them to a special unit.

When I joined up the RAF was not the meritocracy it had become when I left thirty-five years later. The pre-war class system was easily identifiable. The Cranwell officers were the élite, with the short service commissioned officers well down the social scale. Even at Wellington (which had its snobbish priorities – Cranwell at the bottom and Woolwich at the top) a story had circulated about a young man straight from school seeking employment, returning home one day to confront his parents. Shamefacedly he faced his father,

‘I am afraid, Father, you are not going to like this.’

‘Tell me the worst my boy.’

‘I have taken a job playing a piano in a brothel.’

‘Thank heavens,’ replied his father, ‘for an awful moment I thought you were going to say you had accepted a short service commission in the RAF.’

Further down the scale was another category, NCO aircrew, in a very different social class of their own from Warrant Officer down to Corporal. It seemed completely wrong that after working together as a closely-knit crew its members should part and go their separate ways to their various Messes. Eventually all aircrew were commissioned, which was not only much fairer but it was far more convenient administratively for the whole crew to live together in one Mess and if they were shot down to remain together in an Officers’ POW camp.

The war introduced more categories into the caste system. The Auxiliaries, easily recognized by the letter A in their tunic lapels, and the University Air Squadrons. I remember standing stagestruck on the platform of a London railway station early in the war, gazing spellbound at the most delectable sight of an RAF Flight Lieutenant in an officer’s greatcoat, collar turned up, polka dot silk scarf, no hat, suede shoes and an umbrella with, of course, the A nestling in the badges of his greatcoat rank.

While the differences between Cranwell and short service officers were marked before the war, so the early Volunteer Reserve entries were about equally divided between public and non-public school entrants. At Marshalls we had been a small happy stream of ex-public school boys living and behaving in much the same manner as we had at school. At South Cerney all these small tributaries had come together into the mainstream of flying training and our group was much more varied in both age and background, so that the nearer we got to the front line the more the divisions became blurred – courage and flying skill were no respecters of class.

After joining in the war against the Third Reich, Canada, Australia and New Zealand were also determined to form their own flying squadrons to fight alongside the RAF; thus an agreement was signed at Ottawa in December 1939, to establish the Empire Air Training Scheme. The dividends of training overseas in good weather away from dense centres of population had been appreciated well before the war by the RAF, founded on their experience with a flying school situated at Abu Sueir in Egypt. England was to provide nearly all the aircraft and a nucleus of skilled men, while the others made up the rest. This great enterprise eventually expanded to twenty-five Elementary Flying Training Schools, twenty-five Service Flying Training Schools, fourteen Air Observer Schools, fourteen Bombing and Gunnery Schools and two Air Navigator Schools in Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In addition, three Service Flying Training Schools were formed in Rhodesia, principally for the RAF, and South Africa also opened her own training facilities for the RAF. The first flying course began in Canada at the end of April, 1940. The scheme had the capacity to produce eleven thousand pilots and seventeen thousand other aircrew a year – no training scheme of such magnitude and cost had ever been conceived before or since.

The Empire Air Training Scheme proved to be of overwhelming advantage in gaining air superiority over our enemies, training a very large number of British, Dominion and Allied aircrews, safe from interrogation, in the great open spaces and clear skies of the

Commonwealth.

So in July, 1941, with my posting to No 36 SFTS, Penhold, Alberta, Canada, I became a minuscule and very reluctant cog in this great machine. I had struggled back from Malaya, deserted from the Merchant Navy to get into the fighting and now I was unceremoniously shunted even further westwards in the opposite direction. On hearing the news, my sister-in-law wrote, ‘How nice to hear that at least one member of the family is going to be safe.’ This was as good as being given a white feather.

* * *

Almost the entire staff of the new school, headed by a Group Captain of First World War vintage, distinguished by his 1914–18 campaign ribbons, ‘Pip, Squeak and Wilfred’, assembled in Liverpool and boarded the *Stratheden* bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia.

To Canada

The *Stratheden*, like Cranwell, had not yet shed its peacetime elegance or ambience. We were treated like first class civilian passengers in spacious accommodation, every whim attended to by white-jacketed stewards. The style was of sherry before dinner and vintage port afterwards; only the pecking order was different, the tables being arranged in strict order of service seniority with my new station commander removed as far as possible from his junior officers, seating himself firmly next to the captain of the ship, watching the charges intently for any breach of etiquette or discipline.

We sailed on 7 July, 1941, and our progress across the Atlantic was peaceful and measured, sailing far south to avoid German U-boats, disembarking in Halifax some nine days later. Eight of us, under the command of Squadron Leader Maxwell, remained behind to ferry the school’s first eight Oxfords. These had been crated in England, shipped to Canada, and were now being reassembled at the Halifax air base. The remainder of our party set off by train on the five-day journey across Canada to Calgary and Penhold, where they arrived in the middle of a great prairie stretching from horizon to horizon without aeroplanes, airmen or students.

Meanwhile, in Halifax we waited and watched while our aircraft were assembled. As it turned out the main problem was a complete lack of trans-Canada route maps. (The Oxford was not fitted with any kind of radio or navigation aids.) This was finally overcome by a visit to a local garage which had enough road maps for our gallant leader, who then briefed us: all we had to do was to follow him across Canada from garage to garage!

Our route took us across Canada to North Bay and Kapuskasing, Wagaming, Winnipeg, Virden, Regina and finally RAF North Battleford, Saskatchewan, where the aircraft were to be based. It was a wonderful way to see Canada and throughout our journey it was impossible not to wonder at the great air stations being constructed across the breadth of the land, bulging with Canadian, Australian, New Zealand, British and Allied airmen. From North Battleford we took the train to Calgary and then on to the Calgary-Edmonton Line where the train was persuaded to make a halt at the single grain elevator called Penhold. Some time before the war a bare airfield had been laid out at Penhold as an emergency landing field for civil aircraft and it had excellent runways. By the time the RAF arrived a hutted camp had been erected to the most basic standards necessary for

flying training; it said a lot for Canadian heating systems that even in the depths of the arctic Alberta winters the huts and hangars were incredibly warm. After England, the most striking thing about Penhold was its feeling of isolation in the vast flat prairie around us stretching across Alberta and Saskatchewan. To the west of Penhold you could just see the foothills of the Rockies and on a clear day in the winter catch a glint of crystal white snow on the mountain peaks a hundred miles away.

I returned to Halifax to undertake some more ferrying but instead received orders to escort our first contingent of airmen across Canada. I imagined this would be an undemanding task, but that could not have been further from the truth. As the train was 'dry', and despite my entreaties to remain on board, my faithful troops disgorged out of the station in large numbers at each halt in their endeavour to race to and from a liquor store before the train left again. Inevitably, many were left behind and not a few decided it would be much more fun to abscond altogether, many ending up across the border in the United States which was not then at war. I did not find it at all easy explaining to my Group Captain how I had managed somehow to lose sixteen men in five days. Fortunately the first course arrived on 30 September and we settled down to start flying instruction.

The summers were hot and the winters harsh, although broken occasionally by the fine warm spells referred to as Indian summers; the spring and autumn were lovely with the prairie carpeted by golden crops. The people, like the seasons, were both open-hearted and hardy; they were great party givers and goers and the RAF were to prove very willing partners.

The winters sometimes made flying difficult with chill factors minus forty degrees Fahrenheit not uncommon. Most of the time the weather was bright and clear but sometimes snow was driven by mountain winds in great blizzards across the flat landscape, making it almost impossible to venture outside. On the coldest of these days it was necessary to start the aircraft in the hangars, slipping them out one by one before taxiing to the runway, otherwise even the oil froze. Except in blizzards, the weather seldom brought flying to a halt and very efficient Canadian snow ploughs kept runways clear, piling up the snow on either side until you took off and landed between two thick ice walls. Occasionally the Arctic winter was relieved for a while by a warm Pacific wind called a Chinook. Indeed, weather for flying throughout the year was so good that, unlike in England, we never fell behind our targets and were able to turn courses out like clockwork. The long winter provided many different kinds of activities, skating, curling and ice hockey; and it was only about four hours' drive through Calgary to Banff where there was excellent skiing at the weekends.

I quickly fell in with the convivial company of my fellow instructors and indeed one, Flight Lieutenant Christopher Foxley-Norris, who had already fought in the Battle of Britain, became a lifelong friend. As a very junior Pilot Officer I was privileged to join the club of the less serious-minded officers consisting of the more experienced and 'blooded' pilots, mostly distinguished and already bemedalled Flight Lieutenants. I soon discovered the real reason for my own initiation into this delightful circle. We seldom saw our revered Station Commander except on occasions in the Mess. It became the practice of my band of new friends to push me forward in testing just how far we could go with our aloof station master in such matters as immoderate behaviour, dress and drinking in the Mess.

It was not long before the Group Captain decided that this particular fly had bothered him long enough and I found myself duly marched into his office by a Wing Commander and swatted with an official reprimand known in RAF circles as an adverse report. The proceedings were not dissimilar to my first beating at Wellington. Nothing specific just ‘I don’t like your attitude, in fact your whole presence offends me.’ I replaced my headgear and was marched out and I don’t recall that he ever spoke to me again.

Month by month the war passed and I could only read about the great events in the occasional bundle of English papers which reached us – the German invasion of Russia, the first thousand-bomber raid on Germany, the battle of El Alamein. The war came a little closer as Penhold developed into a busy refuelling stop for the steady stream of Bostons, Mitchells and Aerocobras heading north over Alaska to the Arctic where, on the very top of the world, Russian pilots took them over. Also the pressure on turning out courses became greater and greater as the enormous casualties in Bomber Command demanded more and more replenishment aircrews. Standards fell and it hardly mattered how bad the material was; as long as students could get off the ground and back onto it again in one piece they were fed through the syllabus as if through a sausage machine.

Well satisfied with my work and rank now that I was a Flight Lieutenant, my social life settled into an orderly pattern. I spent most of my off-duty hours at the home of a local Canadian family, the Wests, in Innisfail, and courted the elder of their two charming daughters. Innisfail was about ten miles south down the main tarmac road to Calgary, not a bad highway except when severe frosts cratered it deeply in the winter. The roads leading off it into the small village communities, of which Innisfail was one, were no more than rutted tracks. These small communities grouped along the main highway served the outlying prairie farmers; they were sleepy hamlets during the week but erupted at the weekends with the influx of farmers and the RAF when stores, beer parlours and dance halls did a roaring trade, with Saturday night scenes not experienced since the gold rush.

Two or three thousand people lived in Innisfail which had one main street, dominated by the Wests’ country store, with a few other shops, a cinema and dance hall. The main meeting place for the young was the drug store (not a chemists) for ice cream and hamburgers, owned by a Chinese who was eventually run out of town for distributing nude pin-ups with their heads substituted by cleverly touched up photographs of the town’s leading ladies. There was also the church and an open-air ice rink for the winter. The track led out of town a mile or so to the Red Deer river, where it crossed an iron bridge and fanned out into a number of even more rudimentary tracks to the isolated farmsteads, and westwards into the wild foothills of the Rocky Mountains.

The longer I remained an instructor the more I learnt about flying. The Tiger Moth and Tutor on which I had learnt to fly demanded some knowledge of aerofoils and aerodynamics. A well-executed slow roll in a Tiger Moth needed a skilful movement of all the flying controls, elevators, rudder and ailerons – a co-ordinated effort of hands and feet largely unknown by today’s pilots flying by computer.

The Oxford, with its two Cheetah engines, was a much more difficult aircraft to manage and because of this and its ability to absorb punishment it was a good training aircraft. At this time very little was known about the theory of asymmetric flying. If you were unfortunate enough to suffer an engine failure, it became a question of using more and

more opposite engine and more and more boot and rudder to compensate; the general idea was to stay in the air as long as possible in order to find a space suitable for landing.

However, the Cheetah was a very reliable engine and I only experienced one failure. We were night flying from Innisfail on a particularly dark night. The pupil took off and at about seven hundred feet the port engine began vibrating and throwing off sparks. I took over the controls, throttled back the protesting engine and began the painful business of staggering around the circuit to make a single-engine landing. With no radio to warn the ground of any trouble, we carried instead a Very pistol pointed down through a hole in the floor between the two pilots. The green and red cartridges were clipped onto the pupil's side of the fuselage so I instructed him to select and fire a red. Unfortunately he panicked and failed to replace the pistol in its hole and fired it into the floor instead.

The effect was startling as the cockpit filled with acrid red smoke, and soon the floor began to burn. What had been a difficult situation rapidly became an emergency and I felt like saying, 'You have control now' and departing swiftly via the rear door. However, by opening the window and sticking my head out into the slipstream I could still make out the dim lights of the landing field, so throttling back both engines and, adopting a tolerable gliding speed, we headed our aircraft, lit up like a Christmas tree, towards the landing field. More by luck than good judgement we crossed the boundary and crash-landed, sliding on the aircraft's belly across the main runway. At the subsequent enquiry I strongly recommended that my student would be better employed in some trade other than flying.

Although we were flying at a very high intensity to get courses through on time, life in our off-duty hours was pleasant and safe, and it would have been easy to sit back and let others do the fighting. Yet I became more and more dissatisfied with the boredom of reading about a war that I could not take part in. Periodically Station Routine Orders invited volunteers for all kinds of jobs from ferrying US lend-lease aircraft purchases to flying Hurricanes catapulted off the decks of merchant ships on the Murmansk convoys; my name went forward for all of them to no avail.

Finally, in 1943, I was posted to RAF Greenwood, a newly formed Mosquito Operation Conversion Unit (OCU) on the eastern side of Canada in the province of New Brunswick. Greenwood, unlike Penhold, had been a permanent and well-founded Royal Canadian Air Force station. The Mosquito aircraft were brand new, built in Canadian factories and fitted with Merlin-Packard engines. The difference between the Oxford and the Mosquito was about the same as that between a cart-horse and a pedigree filly. Some aircraft did not feel comfortable flying and the Oxford was one; it had to be coaxed, protesting, into the air whilst the Mosquito, impatient on the ground, took to it joyfully. It was not a difficult machine to master but I had been taught at CFS and passed on to my students the art of pure flying – correct turns, nicely judged precision circuits and landings, good airmanship and discipline. My OCU instructor, a hard-bitten ex-operational pilot, finally lost his temper with me, 'For God's sake, Horsley, stop farting around like a pansy. Try flying by the seat of your pants for a change and throw the bloody thing around as crudely as you can, otherwise you will be shot out of the sky on your first sortie.' I didn't much care for him or his manners, but he was quite right and I took his advice to heart.

There were about a dozen experienced pilots on the course, together with the same number of rookie navigators straight out of Canadian training schools. The pilots were

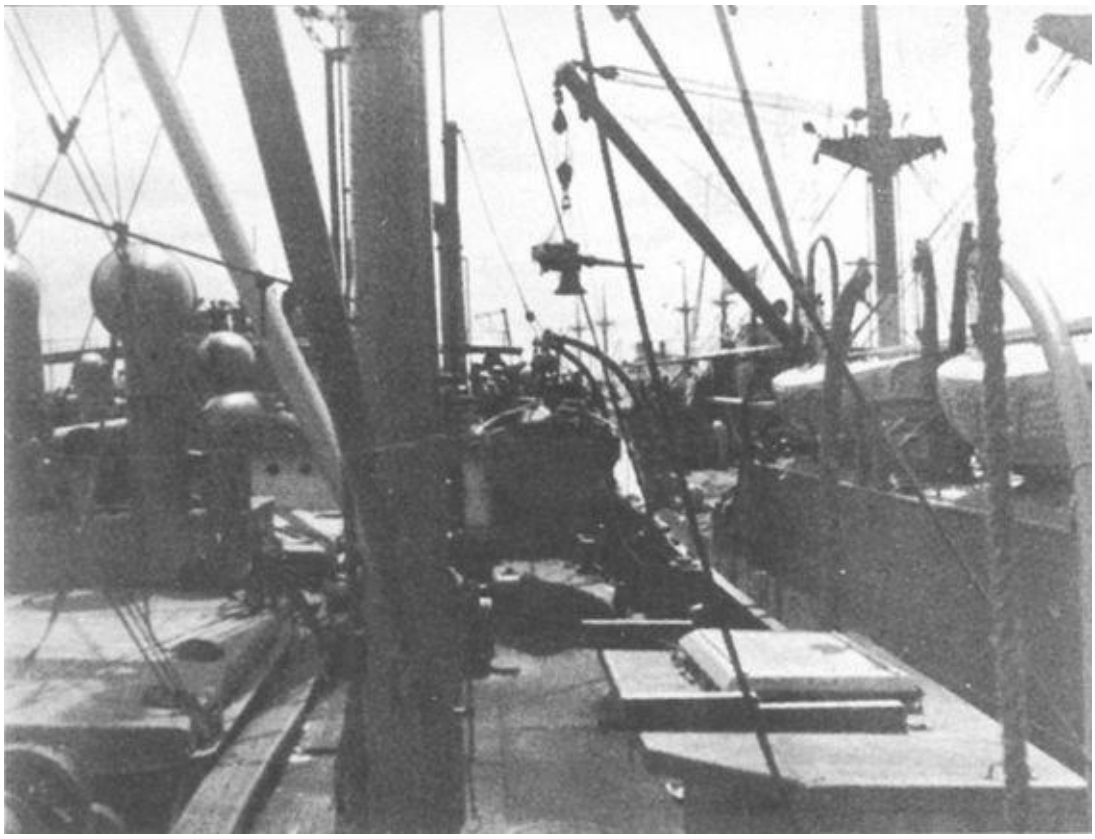
given just twenty-four hours to choose mates from these navigators, who hung around the Mess in little groups like virginal schoolgirls about to be raped. We had no idea of their professional ability and in our choice could only depend upon instinct and some feeling of compatibility. So after a very brief courtship I asked Frank Gunn to team up with me. Frank had been nicknamed ‘Bambi’ by his fellow navigators, so Bambi he remained, and it was not difficult to see why he had earned this nickname: he had the ears and eyes of a startled fawn, young, innocent and totally unsuited for either flying or war. I really believe he hated it all – the people, the noise and the roughness. It was not long before I discovered that Bambi was nearly always sick as soon as we became airborne, whether from fear or motion I never asked. He took a brown paper bag with him for this purpose and, once over, Bambi settled down quietly and competently to his job. He had probably never been away from home before and I don’t think I was much help to him; there is no doubt that with my assistance he could have remustered to ground duties but he stuck grimly to flying.

Marriage

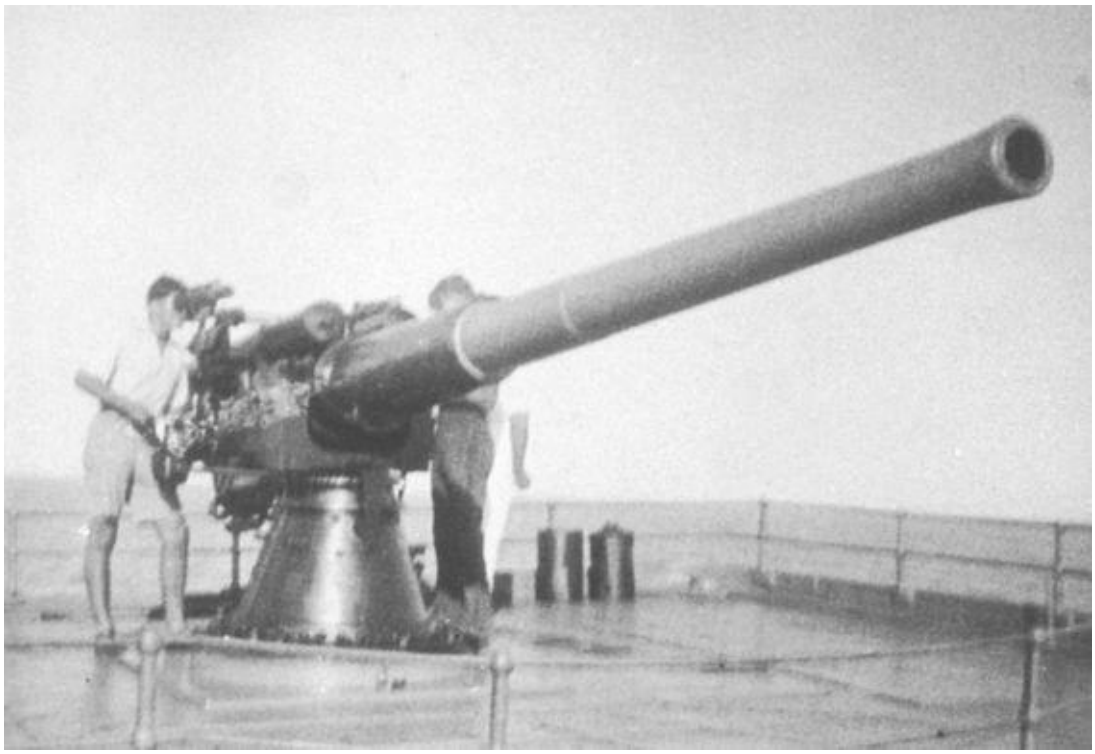
The course proceeded normally. It is much more difficult to explain the personal events which followed. It was more than just fickleness that made me proceed straight from the tender loving care of one young lady into the arms of another. I had been raised in an age of sexual innocence. The only instruction I had received was from my Tutor who made out that ‘It’ was not very good for games. The chips were stacked against a healthy male; nice girls were off limits, masturbation made you stammer, prostitutes passed on unspeakable diseases. In fact homosexuality at Wellington was looked on as far more normal than having it off with your friend’s sister.

The war had released a lot of inhibitions about sex, particularly with the influx of foreign troops; the Polish, French and then American servicemen established enviable reputations as able and generous lovers. Indeed quite a few members of the RAF sewed French or Polish tabs on their shoulders before going on weekend leave in London, thus increasing productivity immeasurably. War also eroded caution; take what you will while you can. Marriage was entered into lightly.

Greenwood nestled snugly in the Annapolis valley within a farming community whose main crop was apples. This proved of popular significance to the RAF, providing both a lethal brew called applejack and deerstalking at night by torchlight through the orchards. On a free afternoon, about a week after the beginning of the course, Bambi and I visited the local village to do some essential shopping. Waiting for the return bus to camp we called in at a Red cross dance in the village hall with nothing more in mind than a free meal. Two young aircrew officers caused quite a stir and it was easy to bask in the admiring glances of the local maidens.



7. Colombo, September, 1939. Our 1917 vintage Japanese gun is swung inboard.



8. PH gunlaying. Trying to hit an orange box outside Colombo Harbour.

9. On mainmast watch. First convoy out of Port Said, November, 1939.

10. My brother Terence.

11. Skiing for the RAF, 1952.

There was one particularly attractive girl. What made her even more tantalizing was the fact that she was not particularly impressed by a Flight Lieutenant. After a few dances we sat out. I learnt that she was studying psychology at Arcadia University fifty miles down the road and was visiting her grandparents on a farm in the vicinity. I also discovered that she had been engaged to a fellow student at Arcadia who had left early to join the Royal Canadian Air Force and had become one of the first leading Canadian fighter aces of the war, Wing Commander Sydney Ford, DFC and Bar, who had been shot down and killed over France six months previously. No wonder she was not impressed by a Flight Lieutenant without a medal to his name. However, rising to the challenge, I fished for and netted an invitation to a sorority dance at Arcadia University the following weekend. It turned out to be a pleasant evening, but no lights flashed or bells rang. We met three or four times during the next week or so. It was not a passionate courtship by any stretch of

the imagination, but at that point in time we seemed to need and enjoy each other's company.

A little over three weeks after our first meeting Phyllis eloped from university and we were married at seven o'clock one evening in the church at Wolfville, Nova Scotia. Just as simple as that. The whole operation had been touch and go because my Station Commander had required two references for the good character of my bride-to-be in accordance with King's Regulations. Naturally Phyllis, as a Canadian, felt somewhat humiliated by the King's attitude. Also her parents, scenting something was amiss, were hurrying north from Indiana to extract their daughter from whatever scrape she was falling into. John Rowley, a Flying Officer of the Royal Australian Air Force, positioned himself at the door of the church to repel boarders who in the event failed to turn up. We repaired to the Officers' mess for our reception and to the local hotel for our wedding night.

The course ended almost simultaneously and we were rewarded with a week's leave before reporting to a transit camp near Halifax. Phyllis and I set off by train to Montreal for a delayed honeymoon. We would both agree in restrospect that our honeymoon was not a great success. Her parents had by this time caught up and followed us to Montreal, still shouting 'foul', and installed themselves in the next bedroom at our hotel. To escape their attentions we moved to a deserted motel hidden away in the Laurentian mountains where getting to know each other better proved even more difficult, since by now she had learnt of my other entanglement on the opposite side of Canada which I had failed to explain before we were married. I had mistakenly thought that love would rub the slate clean, but this only demonstrated how little I understood women! This omission became a constant sore.

Back to England – and the War

We returned to the east, Phyllis to stay with her grandparents on their farm and I to the transit base to fill in papers for my wife to come to England in due course, and to wait for a return passage for myself. It was not long before the end of 1943 that, together with thousands of Canadian troops, I was squeezed like a sardine in a tin can into the *Queen Mary*.

Six of us, including a Polish officer, were allocated a small cabin designed for a couple, and now jammed with three two-tier bunks and with a minute bathroom. The last to arrive was a very elegant and to us elderly Flight Lieutenant, an ex-airline pilot called Bill Oliver, who had just finished a tour ferrying aircraft between Montreal and the West Indies. He was followed into the cabin by two airmen carrying a large, old-fashioned brown leather cabin-trunk which, despite our protests, was parked in the only remaining free space. This so enraged our Pole that he retreated to the bathroom, smothered himself with highly-scented after-shave and disappeared for the rest of the voyage, no doubt having found a lady willing to share her cabin with him somewhere else on the giant ship.

We settled down when Bill Oliver, with a merry 'Hope you guys know how to play poker', opened up his cabin trunk to display tray upon tray of 40 oz bottles of Bourbon. Meals were taken in two shifts, six in the morning and six at night. As the cabin was permanently blacked out and we drank and played poker continuously it became difficult to make out whether we were leaving the cabin for breakfast or dinner. Thus we sped

unescorted for five days across the Atlantic. We never saw the sky during the whole voyage. Even the decks were crowded with troops preferring fresh air and a security safer than the bowels of the ship where they had been billeted.

Some months later my wife, in company with a number of other Canadian girls married to Englishmen, was permitted to leave for England. She had a ghastly Atlantic crossing; their large convoy not long out of Halifax was repeatedly attacked by packs of U-boats, split up and picked off ship by ship the length and breadth of the ocean. She had the terrifying ordeal of seeing ships sunk around her, the long nights lit by the fires of burning wrecks, her own ship jammed with survivors. At this time my brother Terence was a Lieutenant Commander in the Admiralty and had been following the progress of her convoy in the Operations Room from the time it left Halifax. He called me one day and asked me to meet him in London, where he informed me that a large part of my wife's convoy had been severely attacked, with heavy losses. The convoy had been dispersed and he had no idea of the fate of any stragglers. But eventually they limped one by one into Liverpool.

On her arrival in England Phyllis joined a commune of other Canadian wives married to Englishmen who were like myself away on operations, for by this time Bambi and I had joined our operational squadron and were heavily involved in the war – at last. This commune developed into 'little Canada', an island of discontent, constantly criticizing the English and their quaint ideas of plumbing and heating. Their life was so insecure, never knowing of their husbands' whereabouts or safety, that it was only natural that they should cling together, living from one short visit to another between sporadic telephone calls. The house was forever changing its shape and nature as husbands went missing on operations and babies were born. To me, arriving back for a weekend away from the war, it was worse than a madhouse. Sometimes, in a fury, I would drive away all the hangers-on enjoying free meals and accommodation, leaving only the two or three original families who, once I had left, would immediately start building again. In time I became the *enfant terrible* and the villain of the commune.

* Air Chief Marshal (later Marshal of the Royal Air Force) Sir Arthur Harris, Commander-in-Chief Bomber Command.

5

Before the Storm

I passed down this corridor, idly basking in old memories. At the end of it, I went through a door into a sombre room whose far wall was in the shadows. I momentarily stopped and listened to the sound of muted whispers of unknown voices echoing in the darkness.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-slit clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle flew –
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

John Gillespie Magee Jr.

The two chapters which follow, 'Before the Storm' and 'The Storm', were written immediately after the events described and during a period of convalescence as I tried to put my thoughts and life in some sort of order. However, rather than clutter up pages with footnotes I have added some historical detail which emerged later from other sources about this period.

After a very brief refresher course at the Mosquito Operational Conversion Unit at RAF, High Ercall in Shropshire, Bambi and I were posted to No 21 Squadron RAF Hunsdon, Hertfordshire, a part of No 140 Wing. 21 Squadron was commanded by Wing Commander 'Daddy' Dale who had been the chief flying instructor at Penhold and whom I knew well. No 140 was a mixed Commonwealth Wing composed of an Australian Squadron (No 464), a New Zealand Squadron (No 487) and No 21 which had a smattering of Canadians

in it. We all got on very well together. The Wing was a highly specialized low-level day and night force of some eighty Mosquito VI fighter/bomber aircraft. These carried four 250lb bombs together with gun armament of four 20mm cannons and four .303 machine guns.

We had done no weapon training at Greenwood, and High Ercall had been supposed to remedy this. However, No 2 Group had been so short of crews that the course was cut short and the following was entered into my log book:

> This pilot is assessed as high average and commenced Intruder Training, but is now being passed out course not completed to a No 2 Group Squadron. He lacks formation, low level bombing and gunnery practice.

On joining 21 Squadron I managed three low-level training sorties and three dive-bombing sorties with 28lb practice bombs before going on my first operational trip, flying number two to Daddy Dale, the Squadron Commander. It was a daylight Wing attack against a flying-bomb site at Les Hayons and was the first time I had dropped a 250lb bomb or fired my cannons. The effect was startling. The noise and smoke in the cockpit from the cannons were just as frightening as the enemy flak! It took me a number of operational sorties to get used to this experience.

140 Wing was involved in a number of spectacular raids requiring pin-point low-level bombing accuracy, including that on the Amiens prison – Operation JERICHO. The objective was to breach the prison walls and release the several hundred prisoners held there, some of them members of the French Resistance awaiting execution. Eighteen Mosquitos, six from each squadron led by the Station Commander, Group Captain Pickard, already a famous pilot and star of the film *F for Freddie*, flew through the winter snow at tree-top level to attack the prison. His aircraft was the only one to be shot down by German fighters, crashing in the gloom just a few miles from the prison. He was succeeded by another distinguished pilot, Group Captain Peter Wykeham-Barnes, who would eventually retire, after a distinguished career, as an Air Marshal, having been decorated in the war with the DSO and bar, DFC and bar.

Most of the missions in which we flew were night intruder operations flown against German airfields and aircraft, diverting the attention of the Luftwaffe away from attacking our main bomber force. This type of intrusion involved groping our way across Europe at low level, using whatever navigational clues were available. Once we reckoned that we were in the vicinity of the airfield we had come to attack (we were lucky to ever find one lit up) we climbed to about 4,000 feet and dived swiftly into the black hole ahead with the navigator calling out heights; 3000, 2000, 1000 feet, bombs away! All this time, in order to avoid giving their position away, the Germans would keep quiet. Once bombs were gone we were almost always automatically coned in searchlights and sprayed with exploding shells and tracer. The aircraft, bucking with freedom from its load, would be thrown into an escape route, throttles fully open, jinking and weaving as close to the ground as one dared.

Each mission was an individual one, always flying at low level under the enemy defences, even on the darkest night, and requiring a high degree of concentration. The first aircraft would take off into the last shreds of daylight, followed at short intervals by one and then another until the whole Wing was airborne. From the north to the south and deep to the east, Europe became a battleground where neither village nor city, soldier or civilian

were spared.

On shorter missions we would often fly a second detail, using the long night to turn the aircraft around, refuel and attack again, only returning as the dawn began to break to crawl at last into dew-covered tents and a cold safari bed to try and sleep through the morning.

Once, on a clear night deep over France, I picked up the silhouette of a large aircraft, flying close to the ground. We crept up behind it, primed the guns and then moved in slowly with a healthy respect for a possible tail gunner who must have been asleep. I wanted to be quite sure of an identification before firing and super-caution made me go in even closer until the whole silhouette became quite clear. It was an RAF Stirling and I broke away in utter frustration, albeit relief. These aircraft were being used for dropping arms and supplies to the Maquis and were never cleared or announced beforehand. They relied on their stealth in the darkness to avoid friend and foe alike, and this one would never know just how lucky he had been. This became such a common occurrence that some brilliant staff officer in No 2 Group devised a scheme whereby, before pressing the trigger, pilots were required to transmit on their radios, ‘Bogey, Bogey, waggle your wings’. If the target failed to oblige, you shot. Fine in theory, but no fun on a dark night with practical jokers at work and two or three hundred aircraft in and out of cloud, some minding their own business, suddenly frantically waggling their wings in abject fear on hearing the ‘Bogey, Bogey, waggle your wings’ call. The scheme lasted but a night or two and no doubt the staff officer concerned was promoted. We continued to stalk friend and foe alike.

More and more frequently in late 1943 and early 1944 all three squadrons flew together as a Wing on daylight missions against the flying-bomb sites, which were code-named ‘No Ball’ targets, along the French Coast. By the time of my first mission against a ‘No Ball’ target, tactics had been fairly well established. The sites were normally constructed in woods or orchards, and consisted of a main launcher, which was easily recognizable, shaped like a ski or hockey stick and which the Germans made no effort to camouflage, together with two or three storage and assembly buildings. The site was defended by both light and heavy flak towers.

The success of any mission depended upon accurate navigation, routeing and detailed knowledge of gun defences. It was the kind of flying pilots loved, skimming across the Channel, churning up the waves with propeller tips, clipping the trees over France, twenty or thirty aircraft dancing across the countryside in open battle formation in a carefree ribbon of close comradeship.

There were always a number of narrow gaps, some only two or three hundred yards wide, in the chain of defences along the coast where you could slip in under the radar defences. Another tactic was to fly just above the crest of the waves to the coast and then the whole Wing would rocket up to 4000 feet above light flak and then dive down again to tree-top level. Although this cleared the gun defences, enemy radar was able to pick us up and alert the fighters to lie in wait ahead.

Flying as low as fifty feet above the ground to attack these targets, it was vital to make a straight-in approach at the correct angle to the aiming point and lob or skip the bombs into the buildings. It was like trying to flick a dart into the bull’s eye of a dartboard. Although

the bombs were time-fused, it was necessary to maintain tight formation discipline to avoid being blown up by the bombs of the aircraft in front.

One particular entry to a site area was marked by a wooden shed from which a stream of machine-gun fire always greeted us, aimed by an unknown gunner nicknamed ‘Hans Schmidt’. To maintain this excellent navigation point, Hans Schmidt was permitted to continue his private war against the Mosquitos until Daddy Dale lost his temper one day and sprayed the shed with cannon fire. As we turned towards the target a cow was seen to emerge from the shed and no more was heard from Hans Schmidt. Daddy Dale was not very popular thereafter with the rest of the Wing.

Because we were flying so close to the ground, damage from machine guns, light flak and even rifles was heavy. During the period of attacking these ‘No Ball’ targets, No 2 Group flew nearly 5000 sorties, lost forty-one aircraft destroyed and 419 damaged by gunfire. It was not a rate we could sustain for long; by the end of May, 1944, Allied Air Forces had destroyed over 103 sites leaving only a very few operable, and the Mosquitos of our Group had done the lions’ share of the destruction.

Required to move at short notice, the Wing led a spartan existence entirely under canvas. The purpose of inflicting such an uncomfortable existence on the aircrew was supposedly to toughen us up for the coming invasion of Europe where we would be expected to leapfrog across Europe from airstrip to airstrip. Following the miserably cold winter of 1943/44, and in preparation for this invasion, we packed up our tents and moved from RAF Hunsdon to a dreadful old grass airfield in Gravesend, near London, where metal planking had been laid in lieu of a runway. Gravesend was an undulating field, and after the smooth concrete runway at Hunsdon the Mosquito with a full load did not take kindly to it. At night, when the undulations in the strip were invisible, it was easy to hop the Mosquito along it like a kangaroo, becoming airborne only on the last bounce. We lost our American pilot Andy Wakeham this way one night, stalling his aircraft off the end of the strip into the Thames. On another occasion a crew overshot into a field, demolishing a haystack which hid a landgirl courting with one of our surprised and indignant ground-crew.

One early June morning I came out of my tent around dawn and heard a noise in the air coming from the east unlike anything I had ever heard before. I could only describe it as not dissimilar to a motorbike engine, a staccato phut, phut. This winged creature flew eerily fast and low just to the north of the airfield, down the Thames in the direction of London. I knew immediately that the Germans had got their flying bombs operational and that we had failed to destroy them all on the ground. It was a terrible shock to actually see these obscene weapons flying over England. This was the start of the second Blitz and from then on they came thick and fast, day and night, some directly over the airfield, so that it soon became impossible to operate properly. Once more we packed our tents into lorries and the Wing took off like a swarm of bees for a safer hive, this time RAF Thorney Island on the South Coast.

Each Squadron lived in its own tented camp, grouped around three widely separated Squadron Aircraft Dispersals. The Wing only came together for meals in a large marquee erected on the lawn outside the permanent Officers’ Mess which was out of bounds to Wing aircrew. Royal Air Force Thorney Island had been a well-established pre-war station

and the station officers worked in permanent brick buildings and lived, so we imagined, a life of Old Riley in the Officers' Mess; it was rumoured that they even enjoyed hot baths every day, whereas the Wing aircrew managed as best they could by drawing water from a bowser and heating it on primus stoves. At night, through the well lit windows, we could watch them eating and drinking in splendid comfort which widened even further the division between aircrew and ground officers, leading to a contempt and ridicule on our side and a certain guilty sulkiness on theirs.

The pattern of our life at Thorney Island was soon pretty well established. I shared a tent with Bambi. We normally rose at midday and assembled in the Squadron Dispersal to wait for the 20cwt trucks to carry us around the perimeter track to the mess tent for lunch; around the airfield the same was happening in the other Squadron Dispersals. Lunchtime was a social and happy part of the day when the whole Wing gathered together for drinks and lunch. The life of the Flying Wing was so compressed in time that any terrors of the previous night had passed and the fears of the night to come were pushed into the background. Our conversation avoided reference to missing crews and faces and generally centred around flying. As the drink flowed, the talk in groups became more animated and the stories taller; 'I tell you, old boy, I dropped one right down the funnel of a train and it finished up the arse of the stoker.' 'The flak was so accurate it would have brought a pigeon down,' and so on. The previous month a crew from, I think, No 464 Squadron, on a daylight sortie, had observed a troop train entering a mile-long tunnel; they proceeded to block the exit with two well placed 250lb bombs and then, with commendable initiative, closed the entrance with another salvo, bottling the train up inside. This story was the subject of much ribald humour for weeks as crews tried to cap it.

Daddy Dale was considerably older than most of the rest of the Wing. One of the few pre-war pilots, he had been involved in a serious aircraft accident which had left him with a gammy leg and a large dent in the top of his head. Indeed, he had a great deal of difficulty climbing in and out of the small entrance and cramped cockpit of the Mosquito. He was one of the nicest and kindest senior officers I had ever met and revelled in operational flying. In peacetime he had been extremely keen on hunting and looked on the whole business of war as an extension of hunting, with Germans as the prey. He was also very absent-minded and a natural butt for the practical jokes of the much younger officers, all of which he took with gentle good humour. These practical jokes generally centred around Daddy's tent; he always parked his staff car just outside it and at least once a week someone tied a guy rope to the bumper and Daddy Dale took off across the airfield trailing his tent behind him. It always worked and kept the Wing in hoots of laughter. I sometimes suspected that he knew what was happening but continued to express surprise and fury to keep us all amused. Ground officers seldom penetrated such tightly-knit groups whose gossip and repartee had produced its own special slang.

The working day began just after lunch, when the Station became alive as Group Orders were digested and dissected into Wing and Squadron details according to the availability of aircraft and crews. Around the dispersals the ground staff would still be working on maintenance, patching and repairing aircraft after the previous night's operations, the silence only broken by the noise of engine runs and air tests. Later on bombing-up and arming would be heralded by a long line of trolleys snaking around the perimeter track from the main bomb dump to individual dispersals.

For Bambi and I, this would be tent-tidying time, airing and making our safari beds, tucking away yesterday's laundry into a dirty-linen bag, checking guy ropes and pegs and, if time permitted, writing letters – in fact all the domestic chores familiar to campers. If there was an air test to do, crews would be called out but normally we only air tested our own aircraft. We would then make our own tea on a primus stove in the tent before stacking personal belongings in a neat pile on the shared folding table – photographs, letters, wallets. Each of us was responsible for ensuring that the other carried no information which would give away the location or tasks of the Wing if we were taken prisoner; it also made the collection of personal effects much easier if crews went missing.

The main briefing took place just after four o'clock in a large tent near the main control tower where over a hundred aircrew jammed in to hear the Wing specialists cover the meteorological report, the tactical situation and battle plan for the night, together with the update on enemy fighter and gun deployments. Then, after an early supper, crews dispersed to their own Squadron briefing tents where individual crews were allocated targets and the time to be over them. Now the largely physical activity of the day gave way to a different kind of concentration as pilots and navigators pored over charts, plotting enemy defences and courses. As we got further into 1944, the pattern of operations began to change perceptibly away from attacking Luftwaffe airfields to attacking logistic targets and communications with bombs and guns. The fingers which had previously stretched out nightly far into Europe began to close into a clenched fist, punching away at targets along and behind the French coast – railway sidings, bridges and military headquarters – whilst still keeping up the daylight attacks on the flying-bomb sites. With the shorter distances to fly, it was now often possible to get in two and even three sorties a night. As the pressures built up so the casualties mounted. On two occasions I returned to base on one engine and on another was diverted to Manston airfield on the Kentish coast minus a wing tip.

The Mosquito was a delightful aircraft to fly, fast and manoeuvrable. We generally cruised at about two hundred and twenty mph at 10,000 feet. It was thought unwise to mix it with a single engine fighter (although some pilots did) but, given height, it was possible to out-dive a fighter and escape at low level. Built entirely of wood, ack-ack shells could sometimes go right through the fuselage or wings of the aircraft without exploding, but light stuff close to the ground could be lethal. In comparison with other contemporary aircraft, the Mosquito had a high landing speed and could be tricky at the lower speeds when landing on one engine with full flaps down. In this period I had three squadron friends who were killed on operations – Michael Wedgwood Benn (brother of Anthony Wedgwood Benn, the Labour politician) who overshot the runway and drowned trapped in the cockpit in the shallow water just off the airfield; Bill Adams, whose Mosquito blew up near the airfield returning from a sortie, and John Farrally who ploughed through the airfield control wagon at the end of the runway when landing on one engine. My great friend from Canada days, Flight Lieutenant Trevor Woods, was also killed on another Mosquito Intruder Squadron. I mention this because later on he paid me a surprise visit.

One night a Squadron truck taking aircrew to the Mess along the perimeter track drove into the propeller of a taxiing Mosquito, scattering bits of bodies around the airfield. At this stage of the war there was no shortage of aeroplanes; indeed, as one was lost, another was flown in almost immediately by a ferry pilot from a Maintenance Unit to replace it.

The problem was replacing experienced crews. At one point the Wing was so desperately short that when two pilots were temporarily attached to the Wing for airfield control duties, pending posting to the Operational Conversion Units, one of the Squadrons, like the old press gang, grabbed them and trained them up with two spare navigators as Mosquito crews. Unfortunately, when they came to be posted to their OCUs they had already become battle casualties and there was hell to pay from the Air Ministry. And so the war went on.

Because it was so difficult on a moonless night to find the target visually, it was decided as a trial to fit three or four Wing aircraft with a blind navigation and bombing aid called Gee-H. Bambi and I were chosen to go on a week's course at RAF Swanton Morley in Norfolk to learn how to operate it, and this was a welcome break. We did five bombing sorties on Mosquitos and three on Mitchells during the week, before returning to the Squadron fully trained on the equipment.

This decision to fit Gee-H on our fighter-bomber Mosquitos was hotly disputed by those pilots with night-fighter experience, of which there were a number on the Wing. Since the procedure involved flying for some time at a constant height and airspeed along a curve, releasing bombs on a pre-computed signal, it was relatively easy for enemy radar to plot the course and vector night fighters on to the target. This was not so bad for bombers properly armed and crewed against fighter threat, but in our aircraft with the navigator's head buried in the black box and the pilot concentrating on his instruments for what had to be very accurate flying, the rear of the aircraft was totally devoid of look-out or defences. However, we returned to Thorney Island and continued flying the normal missions, waiting for our aircraft to be modified with the Gee-H equipment.

A fortnight before D-Day the Wing was confined to base and the ground crew began painting black and white stripes on wings and fuselage for easy identification when the battle for Europe started in earnest. As dusk fell on the night before D-Day we assembled in great excitement for the detailed briefing on the landings and our part in the invasion. The No. 2 Group Force of Bostons, Mitchells and Mosquitos were to be concentrated around the beachhead and behind it, attacking day and night all movement on the ground, sterilizing the front by preventing any reinforcement into the battle area by rail, road or waterway.

Our first sortie on D-night was to patrol an area far behind the beachhead to avoid giving our position away. On our flight at about 1000 feet across the Channel we were hotly engaged by the Navy; firing off the colour of the night only intensified their fire. Fortunately they were not very accurate and we were not hit. Later in the night, like a falcon among a flock of pigeons, we flew through a gaggle of Albemarle transport aircraft and gliders, which startled all of us. This proved to be a party of the 6th Airborne Division who were to seize the bridges over the Canal de Caen and River Orne; even later we skirted around the two Parachute Brigades, 3rd and 5th, on their way to drop east of Orne. Filling in my log book the next morning – D-Day, I wrote:

> 6 Jun. Mosquito T Self F/O Gunn. Patrol 1,000ft. Road and Railway LISIEUX-EVREUX. Strafed and shot up staff car on road. Bombed bridge over railway. No results observed. Scattered flak; several fires in area. Strafed and set train on fire.

And a second sortie:

> Mosquito T Self F/O Gunn. Area covered by mist and cloud. Bombed railway junction. Lisieux burning. Fires over the area. One car strafed. Light flak and rockets.

We now flew up to three patrols a night, bombing and cannoning anything which moved; the poor Jerry soldier only had to light a cigarette to be pounced on. Our orders were to stop all movement by night and this included the secondary roads leading to the front along which weary German troops crawled during the hours of darkness. This was not too difficult on a moonlit night when it was easy to pick up roads, rivers and railways, but the weather in June, 1944, was appalling and we were forced to fly lower and lower under the cloud in pitch darkness over the rolling countryside of Normandy looking for targets, breaking all the rules regarding safety heights.

On these dark and dirty nights it was impossible to see other patrolling aircraft although you knew they were there – a hundred or so aircraft in a very small and crowded air space. Every now and again a German night fighter got into the hive and stirred it up by attacking one of the patrolling aircraft and then everyone started firing, sometimes at each other, and the sky was criss-crossed by tracer, only to settle down again after a time as everyone continued about their business. But for the most part the Luftwaffe were conspicuous by their absence.

Our aircraft were modified with radio altimeters which helped considerably in judging heights during night attacks; we also began to carry our own flares for illuminating targets. Fatigue was still the worst enemy. On one particular sortie, in company with another Mosquito flown by a Polish crew, we were alternately attacking a train with cannons, diving from about 1500 feet and pulling out very low. As I was flying down the side of the train, setting myself up for a further attack, I watched the other aircraft dive on to it and then never pull out, flying straight into the target with an enormous explosion, illuminating the sky and the hoards of German soldiers hurriedly debarking from the train and spreading out over the countryside. I suspect a lot of our casualties were due to fatigue and the extremely bad weather. During this period typical entries in my log book read:

> Mosquito T Self F/O Gunn Night Patrol 1,000 feet Caen-Falaise Road. Weather poor, strafed Forêt Anglais twice; large explosion. Bombed lights in wood and fires observed. Strafed train and returned on one engine.

and:

> Mosquito T Self and F/O Gunn Patrol 1,000 feet roads south of Caen. Shot up convoy of four vehicles. Bombed and strafed Panzer element. Strafed one train. Light flak.

Because of the physical exhaustion caused by two or three sorties a night we were encouraged to take a benzedrene tablet on the last sortie to keep awake and active; unfortunately this also made it difficult to sleep afterwards, so at the end of briefing on the last mission we were given a Navy rum ration. As Bambi didn’t drink, I got his! It was not a very healthy way to live.

6

The Storm

I hurried through this gloomy room and now faced an apartment which looked as though a hurricane had swept through it. The muted voices I had heard before had now risen to a crescendo. Thunder echoed around the outside of the house and sheets of lightning lit up the scene of havoc.

BREAKFAST

His place was laid,
The messroom clock struck eight,
The sun shone through the window
On his chair,
No one commented on his fate,
Save for a headshake here and there,
Only old George, who'd seen him die,
Spinning against the Autumn sky,
Leaned forward and turned down his plate.

And, as he did, the sunlight fled,
As though the sky he loved so
Mourned her dead …

John Pudney

Saturday 23 June, 1944, started the same as any other day. I woke tired, to the familiar patter of rain on canvas. After days of rain I had dug a circular slit trench around the outside of the tent to drain the water away, but this had filled during the night and was now overflowing into small tributaries turning the floor of the tent into a carpet of mud. Everything inside the tent was damp, particularly bedclothes and clothes; Bambi had a hacking cough but refused to see the doctor. With the losses since D-Day, the Wing was short of crews.

On the way to lunch I fell in with my Flight Commander who said, 'You're in luck, Peter, the Gee-H aircraft are all operational and Group wants to put three aircraft on to the Cherbourg Peninsula tonight. You had better air test your aircraft this afternoon. You're a jammy sod, you will probably get away with only one sortie tonight.'

Bambi and I spent most of the afternoon on an airborne check of the Gee-H equipment in T for Tommy; we had lost a starboard engine from light flak a few days previously so we also gave the new one a very thorough run-up and check. As we were not on target until 2300 hrs, we spent a leisurely early evening reading the papers and lingering over supper in the Mess tent.

At 2100 hrs the three crews on the Gee-H detail were briefed separately on the military situation, weather, flak positions, entry and exit corridors, call-signs and so forth. The Americans, having broken out of their bridgehead, were pressing down the Cherbourg peninsula towards the port itself, without which the whole Allied advance would be in jeopardy, denied the necessary supplies and re-inforcements. The VII US Corps had already begun the attack on the port but had bypassed the dominating fortification of St Sauveur. They had, therefore, requested a bombing attack on St Sauveur prior to an assault at 2330 hrs. For once the weather over the target area was good, a break before an intense depression building up in the Atlantic moved into the area in the following twenty-four hours. The three Gee-H aircraft were to bomb at ten-minute intervals, but in the event of any delay no bombs were to be released after 2325 hrs. Wing Commander 'Black' Smith, the CO of one of the other Squadrons, was in the briefing tent at the time and had previously been on night-fighters. He came up to me and remarked, 'I know it's difficult but try to keep an eye open for night-fighters because if they get into the area you're a sitting duck.'

Following the main briefing we returned to the Squadron Dispersal as the evening closed in; around the airfield engines were already coughing into life as the night war in the air got under way. We changed into flying suits, collected parachutes and Mae Wests before going into the Flight Commander's office to sign the authorization book which gave the bare outlines of the sortie – 'Black Jack 34. Gee-H 20,000 feet. Four 500lb bombs. Time on target 2300 hrs.' Joe Bodien initialled the detail and gave the final word, 'Once you've bombed, go into a steep diving turn, down to the deck and back out as fast as you can – if you have any kind of trouble don't block the runway here – go to Manston. Peter, you should know the form by now. Any questions?'

We walked out to the aircraft and with only one sortie to complete there was plenty of time to settle down and go through our drills methodically. My ground crew were grouped around T for Tommy and I could just make out my crew chief, Corporal Benson. 'Everything OK Benson?' 'Fine, Sir, no snags at all.' Aircrew have strong feelings about flying their own aircraft, and would rather take it with quite a lot of unserviceability if the alternative was changing to a strange one; each aircraft seemed to have its own personality and quirks. Now and again you would come up against a rogue and avoid it like the plague. I had flown T for Tommy for some time and felt very familiar and at home with it. It had taken some stick but held together well.

While Bambi disappeared into the bomb bay with the armourer to check and arm the bombs I inspected the outside of the aircraft with my torch – tyres OK, all panels secured, windscreen clean. I had often jerked into a sharp turn at the sight of a fighter which had turned out to be only a speck of dirt on the windscreen. We finally climbed into the aircraft through the small hatch on the starboard side of the aircraft, myself first, then Bambi. We strapped in, feeling our way around the cockpit, using as little light as possible to preserve night vision. Finally Benson closed the hatch with a cheery 'Good luck, Sir, and please don't bring back any work tonight.'

After the pre-start checks I flashed my torch through the side panel and, on getting the all-clear signal, stabbed the engine buttons. The two Merlins caught easily and were soon throbbing rhythmically; these engines are inclined to overheat on the ground and have to

be nursed along until opening up for take off. I waved the chocks away with my torch and by the time I reached the end of the runway had already completed the take-off checks. I stopped only briefly, flicked navigation lights on and off for take-off – strict radio discipline was now in force to avoid giving the listening enemy any clues about our operations – received an immediate green Aldis light from the runway caravan in return and lined up on the runway. (So as not to attract any attention at all from enemy intruders every light on the airfield and the aircraft was kept to an absolute minimum.) It is always at this point, staring into the inky blackness ahead, that my stomach turns over, like a boxer first entering the ring before the fight starts. Once I get down to work then it is all right again. Slowly and carefully I eased the throttles forward, keeping straight down the narrow funnel of dim runway lights, using rudder and differential throttle. As full power was poured on, the Mosquito accelerated rapidly and by 80 miles an hour, as the flying controls began to bite, you could begin to feel you had an aircraft strapped on – 100 mph, 110, 120, 130 back on the stick, harder back and then, with a final jerk, T for Tommy became unstuck and with a full load lurched into the darkness. Thorney Island is almost surrounded by estuary and I was conscious of the water rushing past only a few feet below. I nursed the aircraft into a climb and once a position altimeter reading had been established raised the under-carriage. Now clear, the Mosquito began to build up speed rapidly and climb away and I could settle down to instrument flying. Bambi passed me a course to fly and an altitude to reach and for once was not sick; I saw him out of the corner of my eye stick a piece of gum into his mouth and chew contentedly as he began to pore over his Gee charts. It took about twenty minutes to climb to 20,000 feet, carefully checking radiator temperatures every few thousand feet, to get the maximum rate of climb without overheating the engines. The Merlins were purring beautifully with no sign of trouble from the starboard engine, and the exhaust stubs glowed comfortingly red in the dark. I turned the cockpit lights right down until only the luminous outline of the flickering needles showed and we became a shadow stalking down a dark starlit lane towards the Cherbourg Peninsula.

Finally Bambi broke the silence: ‘OK. Peter, I’ve picked up the lattice line and we can follow it into the target.’ This was the dangerous time. With small changes of course at a constant height, with pilot concentrated on instruments and the navigator with his eyes firmly glued into the visor of the Gee-H equipment, we were an easy prey for night fighters.

‘Left two degrees, left one degree, left another, steady,’ and so on with Bambi faithfully following the signals on his scope. ‘Two minutes to the outer marker,’ Bambi continued. I looked up from the instruments momentarily to catch the flash of guns marking the American advance down the peninsula, and then bowed my head again in concentration since one degree off course, one hundred feet out in height, could make a difference of hundreds of yards in bombing accuracy. ‘Outer marker, settled down on 129 degrees – steady – final bomb heading 125 degrees, check airspeed 240 mph, height 20,000 feet.’ Bambi’s smooth and efficient patter ran on: ‘One degree left – steady – one minute to go, bombs selected and fused, bomb doors open now.’ The bomb doors opened with a rumbling sound and flying with them open was like driving a car over cobblestones and I had to open the throttles to keep the speed steady at two hundred and forty mph. ‘Thirty seconds to go – 125 degrees – steady.’ I could detect the rising excitement in Bambi’s

voice. ‘Inner marker – keep steady 125 degrees – steady – five, four, three, two, one, RELEASE – BOMBS GONE.’

The aircraft bucked and tossed; I snapped the bomb doors closed and threw the aircraft into a spiralling dive towards home. ‘Course 300 degrees and down to 1,000 feet, Peter,’ said Bambi in a more normal voice. The airspeed indicator came alive – 260 mph, 280, 300. Suddenly the darkness outside was split by shafts of light like illuminated stair-rods. ‘Christ, what the bloody hell,’ and then Wham! Wham! Wham! The aircraft shuddered violently as though halted in its flight path by a shower of large rocks. The control column was wrenched out of my hand and simultaneously the instruments shattered as the cockpit filled with acrid smoke. Recovering from the initial shock, I grabbed at the control column. ‘Quick, Bambi, we’ve been hit. Give me a course to keep us over land. What’s your damage?’ No answer, and out of the corner of one eye I could see Bambi still leaning over his Gee box. The Mosquito was a side-by-side two-seater with the navigator slightly set back in an unarmoured position, while my own back and head were protected by a shield of hardened steel.

A sheet of flame spread over the starboard engine whose temperature gauge had now run off the clock; I had no alternative but to stab the feathering button. My only concern now was with the aeroplane and the extent of its wounds. I pulled back on the control column but there was little response as it flapped loosely in my hand; almost at the same time, if indeed there is any sequence to the death struggles of T for Tommy, a trail of sparks shot out of the port engine, followed by a loud explosion. Automatically I stabbed the port feathering button. The aircraft continued its spiralling path downwards. I could make out the rigid propellers in the glare from the burning engines and with the Merlins silenced all that I could hear was the rush of air outside and the thuds as the engine distinegrated from the intense heat. I knew beyond doubt that the end was near and there was nothing left to fly with. My whole mind and training switched to the urgent necessity of getting Bambi and myself out of what now was only a burning coffin.

‘Bale out, bale out, Bambi, get the door jettisoned,’ I yelled. There was no answer, no movement from my navigator. ‘For Christ’s sake, Bambi, get the bloody door open.’ The so-called door was a narrow hatch on the navigator’s side which was just large enough to squeeze through and I knew it would have to be opened and Bambi got out through it before I myself could exit. There was no other way. I grabbed Bambi’s arm and pushed him forward on to the floor where now my navigator showed some signs of life, fumbling with the emergency handle.

‘Mayday, may day, may day, Black Jack 34, baling out.’ No reply, but then, clear as a bell, ‘This is Gordon Cummings, Peter. Can I help? I am over the Cherbourg Peninsula.’ (Gordon Cummings was the pilot of the aircraft immediately behind mine on the Gee-H detail.) ‘No, Gordon, we are in real trouble, baling out and I am going on to steady transmit so try to get someone to get a fix on us.’ Suddenly the door blew off and the cockpit filled with a blast of cold air. Against the fire in the starboard engine I could now make out Bambi clearly crouched down on the floor and I had no time to find out whether the red shadows on the back of his flying suit were from the engine on fire or some dreadful wound.

‘Bale out, bale out,’ I shouted. There was still no answer; I unstrapped, got down on the

floor and, swearing, began pushing Bambi through the hatch, my whole urgent instinct was now to get clear myself. And then suddenly Bambi popped out. One moment he was there and the next gone. For one second I saw his white face and startled eyes, which showed no fear.

I now knelt in the doorway and pushed myself outwards against the solid wall of air. The whole engine and the underneath of the nacelle were illuminated by fire and I could feel the searing heat. With one Herculean effort I was out and tumbling away from the burning aeroplane. There was no sensation of falling and I became hypnotized by the peace and silence around me after the noise and shambles of the cockpit. I suddenly realized I had to deploy my parachute, searched and scratched desperately for the D-ring, found and tugged it violently. There was a great jerk, followed by the tearing noise of the shrouds as they protested at the speed at which I was travelling through the air, placing an almost unbearable strain on the cords and panels of the ‘chute. However, it held together, and I felt it gradually stabilizing my descent.

The night was black, although I could just make out the white roof of the parachute over my head. A bright explosion not far away showed where T for Tommy hit the water, and in the short life of the burning wreckage on the sea I could just estimate that I still had about 2000 feet to fall before the light was extinguished and the blackness closed in. I reached for my torch, normally tucked into my flying boots, only to find that both boots had been wrenched off by the force of the slipstream as I left the aircraft and the torch had gone with them. This was a bad blow, but worse was to follow. Just as I was preparing to inflate my Mae West life jacket I hit the sea and went under.

The shock of cold water and the first choking mouthful of sea water woke me to the stark reality of the situation and a new struggle began in earnest. I grasped for the handle of the air bottle on my Mae West, found and pulled it. I could hear the gas escaping and felt the bladders of the waistcoat expanding and gripping my body like a tight corset. It brought me to the surface, gasping and spluttering. At first I thought I had surfaced under a low, white cloud, but quickly realized that the parachute canopy had collapsed over me and that I was in the middle of an air pocket underneath it. I released the harness and tried to push my way clear, but the cords had tangled round my legs and as the shrouds became sodden with water so the parachute began to sink and pull me down with it.

I began to struggle and swallowed more sea water. Panic overcame me and I fought to free myself; the more I fought the more water I swallowed. Suddenly I realized that I was going to drown; reason returned and my mind began to function logically. ‘You are drowning because you are panicking; first stop panicking.’ I did, and felt more relaxed. Then I thought, ‘You have now got to get out of the shrouds.’ I began to locate and feel the cords binding me to the canopy like a giant weed. I remembered the clasp knife on my flying suit and, finding it, began to cut the cords away one by one, ducking my head below the sea, finding a cord and sawing through it, coming up for air and then going down again.

How long this went on for I cannot tell. It seemed a long time before the last strand was parted and exhausted, I floated free. For a while I lay riding the waves in my Mae West, but the will to survive returned and I began to think about the dinghy attached to my Mae West on a long lead. I found the lead and had soon gripped the pack. Methodically I undid

the press studs around the canvas cover, pulled out the rubber innards, then slowly felt around its periphery until I located the air bottle. The air went in with a hissing rush, filling the rubber walls which grew with every second. Silence at last, and the dinghy was inflated.

It required all my remaining strength to climb onto the dinghy where I lay across it, only half-conscious, my cheek pressed against the bulging side. My thoughts were only of the rapid and devastating transposition from the familiar surroundings of my aeroplane, returning to base, and the unreality of this ice-cold, wet, hostile world in which I now found myself. I had no idea what had happened to my navigator. In a Mosquito the pilot sat on his parachute and dinghy pack which were already firmly strapped to his body, whereas the navigator's parachute and dinghy were stowed away and required clipping to his harness before use. In the confusion of keeping the aircraft under some kind of control, I had no idea whether Bambi was wounded or had managed to attach both parachute and dinghy to his harness. From our drills in the swimming-pool I was aware that he was not a very good swimmer or very confident in the water. All these things passed through my mind. The sea was not very rough but was freezing cold; while it was dark there was little I could do except shiver and wait for the dawn, which was a long time coming.

With the first rays of daylight I was able to take stock of my position. The sky and sea were cold and grey, blending together. For the first time I could make out the colour and shape of the dinghy, only to realize that it was floating upside-down and I had been lying across the bottom of it all night. Obviously the first thing to do was to turn it over and get into it properly. I went into the water and it was very, very cold; with considerable effort I righted the dinghy and clambered over the side. The dinghy itself was oblong, no more really than a rubber ring with a bottom to it, but by drawing my legs up I could sit in it quite comfortably. The bottom held about an inch of water and even with the quite calm sea, water constantly splashed over the side. There was very little in the way of equipment; all I could find was a bag attached by a piece of string to the dinghy which would serve as a sea anchor or bailer, a pair of small bellows – thank goodness, as the dinghy was still only half inflated – and nothing else: no rations, no water or paddles. Either they had fallen out during the night while the dinghy was inverted or they had never been there in the first place. I went through my pockets but there was little of use in them except for the knife. At this stage the complete lack of survival aids didn't seem very important.

The whole business of righting the dinghy and settling into it must have taken about an hour and my watch had stopped at three o'clock the previous night, so I reckoned it must have been about six o'clock in the morning. It was now getting quite light. The sky was overcast with a cloud base of about 400 feet with very poor visibility. In the light I could see blood mixing with the water in the bottom of the dinghy and for the first time I realized I was wounded; not badly, but either shell splinters or splinters of the aeroplane caused by the shells hitting it had entered my leg. I did my best, tying a handkerchief around the wound, but it caused me no discomfort.

I estimated I must be within about twenty miles of the Cherbourg Peninsula and a hundred miles from England. I had been in contact with one of our aircraft before baling out and had surely transmitted enough for someone to get a fix on my position, so there

should be a reasonable hope of being picked up. So I sat shivering, thinking of a hot bath and a steaming cup of coffee! Then I heard the wonderful throb of aircraft engines in the distance, getting closer, and suddenly I saw them, two single engine aircraft heading towards me. What were they, Spitfires or Messerschmitts? I was so cold I didn't really care, although it crossed my mind that if they were German they might shoot me up. At any rate I waved like mad. The two aircraft turned slightly away and my heart sank, thinking they had missed me in the poor visibility, but no, they suddenly wheeled over and dived in my direction. Here it comes, I thought, and I closed my eyes. No machine guns, and I looked up as they swept overhead: Spitfires! They circled around and dived again, this time something fell from one of them and burst into smoke as it hit the sea. I paddled over with my hands to find it was only a smoke flare but again this did not worry me; everything was going fine and in no time a boat would be out to pick me up. The Spitfires circled low overhead once more and then skimmed low over the sea off into the mist. I listened to their engines dying away into the distance and relaxed as much as one can after a night in the water, waiting for the expected boat.

My spirits were high as I waited throughout the morning, confident of being picked up; the early arrival of the Spitfires gave me a pleasant feeling of security. The weather improved a little and for a short time the sun even shone dimly through the overcast and mist. But the hours wore on with no sign of rescue and I made dozens of excuses for the delay. I became worried but not desperate, every minute expecting to hear the noise of a boat approaching. I was very hungry but not thirsty. It was impossible to relieve myself over the side of the boat so I lowered my trousers and had my morning constitutional in the bottom of the dinghy.

As midday approached I became increasingly resentful towards both the Spitfires and the Air Sea Rescue boats for taking so long. My dinghy became caught up in a tidal race and I was swept along like a cork in a current; I knew that every minute was taking me further and further away from the position where the Spitfires had found me. The tidal race must have taken me near land as I could just make out the blur of a coastline on the horizon. The relief of seeing what could be sanctuary was too much and I slipped over the side of the dinghy and started to swim towards land. I was a good swimmer but with a Mae West on it only took about fifty yards to make me realize that I might make a mile at the most and trying to swim ashore was as good as committing suicide. I turned around and could only just make out the dinghy bobbing now about a good two hundred yards away. I was now in a panic to get back to the only security I knew. It was an awful struggle but I finally made it and just managed to climb back in and collapse, exhausted. I knew I had made a terrible mistake, one which had nearly cost me my life and weakened me so much that it might yet do so. My only chance of being saved was to stick to the dinghy, however close I might come to land again.

During the afternoon the wind sprang up and the sea became rougher. The awful exertions of the previous eighteen hours had taken their toll, so I sat quite comatose, with eyes half-closed, lulled by the waves smacking and rocking the dinghy but still believing it would only be a matter of time before I was rescued. The upper half of my body had partially dried out and, although I was still sitting in two or three inches of slops, half sea water, half urine, in the bottom of the dinghy, the discomfort was tolerable and I allowed myself to drift away from the reality of the situation.

In this complacent mood I was aware that the waves were slapping harder and harder against the side of the dinghy but it was not until the first clap of thunder in the distance that I snapped back to my full senses. I opened my eyes wide and the scene around had changed with unbelievable rapidity. The isolated pinnacles of white cumulus had turned as if by some Machiavellian wand into a solid towering black cliff of cloud bearing down on me and only broken by shafts of lightning. The sea was now a mass of individual waves as the storm built up the wind and water before it. I had time only to check my Mae West for inflation and secure a few items in the recess of my battledress before the violent behaviour of the dinghy began to require my full attention. It was not long before the waves were ten to fifteen feet high with crests whipped by the howling wind into a white frenzy of foam. The dinghy lurched in ungainly manner to the top of each wave where it spun crazily in the boiling caps before dropping sickeningly, half water-logged, into the deep trough behind.

I was now leaning on all my reserves, bailing the dinghy out and facing it into each new wave, using the scoop as a paddle in the knowledge that if the dinghy broached sideways the beaks of the waves would capsize it. I was drenched in water and the battle became a personal one with the storm itself. I was holding my own until from the top of one wave I saw a monster, towering and boiling above the rest, blotting out the horizon, bearing down with the noise and velocity of an express train. I was suddenly looking up at a wall of water with a cruel white beak curving over me – ‘Christ’, I thought, ‘this is it.’ The dinghy rose protesting until it was almost vertical when the beak snapped it over and over. I remember hanging grimly on to the side while the dinghy rotated around me in the whirlpool of green and white water; then it plunged downwards into the trough behind. I only just managed to climb back on to it before the next wave overtook me but this time the dinghy behaved in a much more stable way and I realized hat the water flooding it was now acting as ballast and keel.

Darkness and the full force of the storm coincided when sky and sea joined into one orchestra of wind, water and drums of thunder whose stage was illuminated by vivid shafts of lightning.

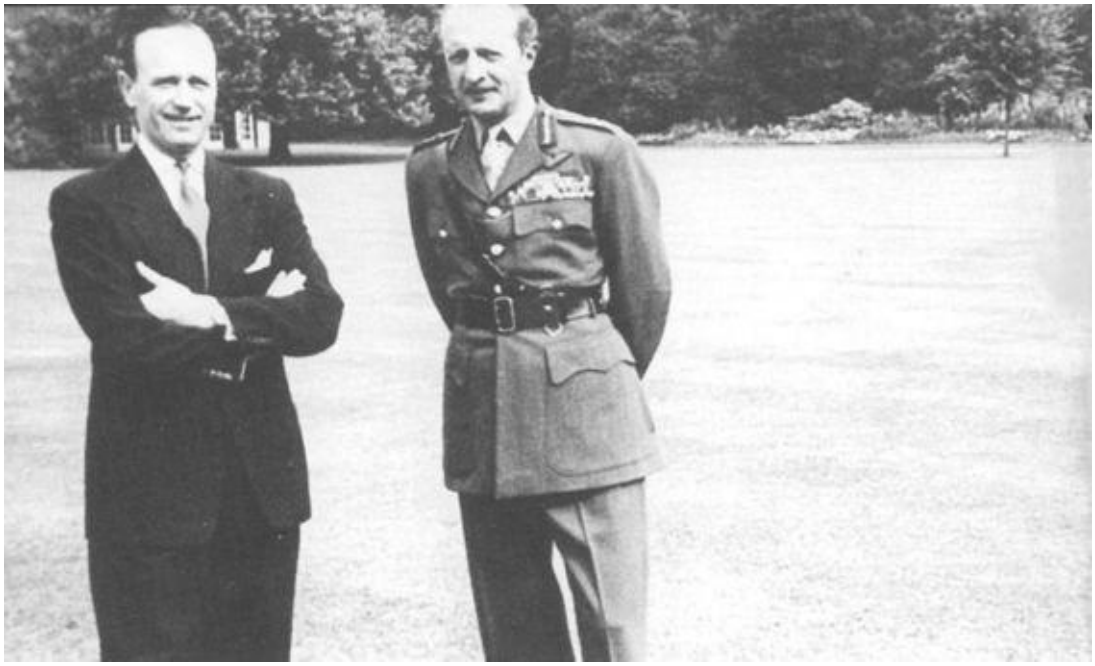
And so the night became the battle ground – each wave a charge to repel, each trough a breathing space to regroup and face the next one. I lost all count of the number of times the dinghy capsized that night, only realizing the urgent necessity of righting it and scrambling back inside with the knowledge that the storm had gained more ground as the effort sapped my strength.

The full holocaust of the storm lasted three or four hours, but even then it did not give up, returning again and again to snap and growl. The lifting of the curtain of dawn did not diminish the storm’s anger. I was terribly aware of my exhaustion and the awful state of my body encrusted with salt. The noise of wind and water continued and the sea came sweeping in, big Atlantic rollers, not just with white tops but strong surging surf. The thunder and lightning had died away with the coming of the dawn but the rain was now blinding so that I could hardly tell sky and sea apart.

There was not a sound of anything human, just the howl of the gale and the roar of the sea. I continued to capsize, always just managing to find the will to climb back into the dinghy again. And all day I continued to fight because I knew that to give in was to accept

death and I was not prepared for that yet. I experienced many emotions – anger, terrible loneliness and finally fear. It is not so difficult to face death in the heat of battle surrounded by one's comrades, but all alone and losing ground bit by bit until it becomes blindingly clear that you are going to drown fear becomes overpowering. Of course I prayed. I promised God anything if he got me out of the sea.

12. 'I wonder where we all go from here'.

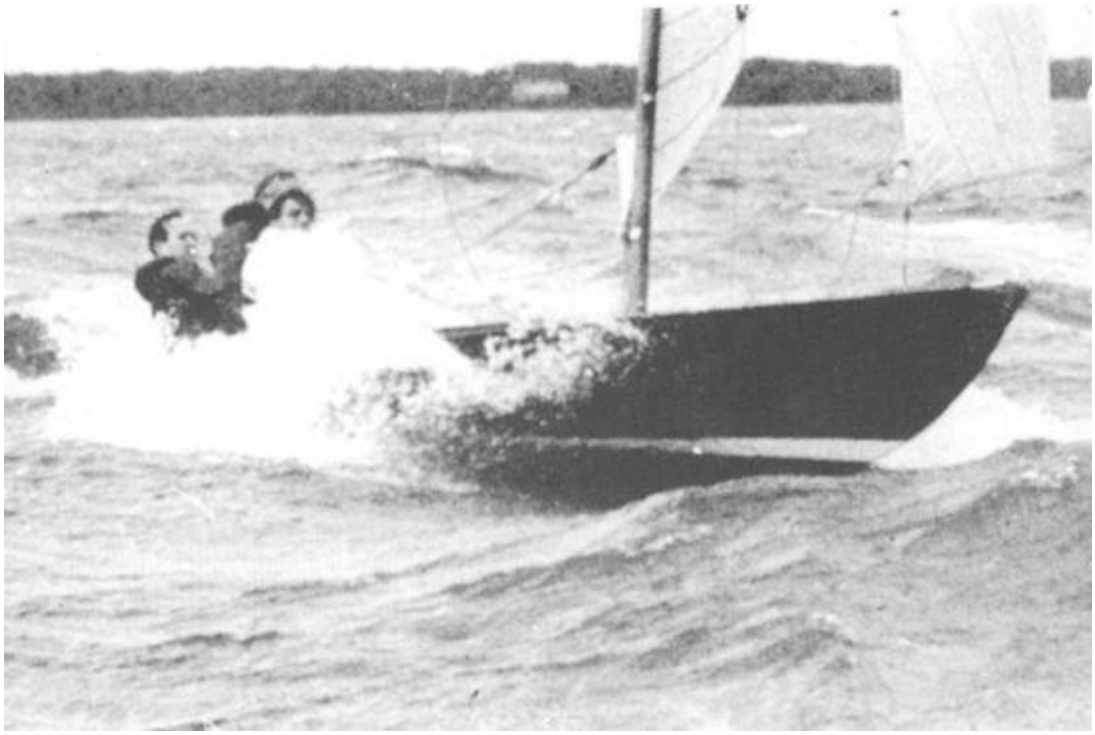


13. Mike Parker with 'Boy' Browning.

14. Coronation Supper. PH (left) with Prince Philip’s German relations: Prince Max of Baden, Princess Beatrix, Prince Carl, Princess Margarita of Baden and Prince Alfonso Hohenlohe – Langenburg.

15. The Coronation, 6 June, 1953. With Mike Parker (left) and ‘Boy’ Browning (centre) in attendance upon Prince Philip.

16. The first helicopter to land at Buckingham Palace.



17. Sailing in *Coweslip* with Uffa Fox and Mike Parker.

Slowly and inexorably I was worn down, so that when the next night came much of the fight had gone out of me and in the last round I was just holding on. The wind and sea dropped a bit during the night and I no longer capsized but just rocked and tossed until another dawn broke. With the slow abatement of the storm and in the early morning light I took stock of my physical condition. My lips were cracked and swollen, my eyes mere slits, my hands puffy and white and my legs felt like lead. Everything was caked and matted in salt and the will to live had gone. Indeed if I had capsized there was no energy left to return to the dinghy.

I gradually became conscious of a quite new situation: the pain and cold had

disappeared and only a rather pleasant numbness remained. The scene had slowly begun to change and the monotonous grey of the sky and sea had given way to bright diffused colours and I began to pick out a countryside of fields, hedges and trees; I could even make out a canal with some laughing people beside it. I no longer had a body and could move quite freely outside it so that I was able to look down at someone else lying in a drifting dinghy without realizing or bothering about it. My vision became quite clear and the countryside real and it was about this time that three people appeared. They came together: Euan Charteris in an Army uniform, Trevor Wood in his Air Force uniform, which I thought peculiar because he had been killed on operations six months earlier, and finally, Bambi, more fawnlike than ever. They stayed and talked to me; I cannot remember exactly what they said except that we were all together and there was no need to worry or struggle any further; the air seemed full of new noises like the countryside on a hot summer's day and I felt myself drawn more and more into it. Time meant nothing and a most incredible and wonderful peace came over me.

I was not conscious of anything until I felt hands grasping me roughly; I resented this and told them to go away. I heard voices, this time strange and harsh: 'Lift him up gently; is he dead?' 'What a mess.' I felt searing liquid poured into my mouth which I immediately spat out. I thought, 'This is a funny death.' Then oblivion again. But more hands grasping me, a blur of faces looking down from a quayside, I thought, 'Why can't I be left alone in peace?' Now strong hands exploring my body, a sharp prick and then more oblivion. I opened my eyes again; pain was all around, all over me. It was light and I could make out a room. I was in a bed. A man's voice said, 'What's your name, old man?' 'Flight Lieutenant Horsley.' My voice sounded funny, miles away. 'Where do you come from?' That was funny too. Where *did* I come from? I had to think quite hard. 'Thorney Island.' And I went to sleep again. After a while I vaguely remember a voice saying, 'Yes, that's Horsley all right. I'll ring his wife straight away.' I began to realize I was alive. I looked around and I was in a room, the sole occupant, with a number of other beds all neatly made up. It reminded me of something. Oh yes, a sick quarters. I moved around, a bit painful but everything worked. I wondered if I could stand up. I eased back the bed clothes and edged out of bed. I straightened up and fell flat on the floor. The door opened and a voice said, 'What on earth are you doing? Get back into bed immediately.' A young nurse helped me back into bed and said, 'I'll get the doctor.' A young man in Naval uniform came in. 'Well, you're looking chirpy. How do you feel? 'Bloody,' I said. 'Where am I?' 'You're in a Naval sick bay at Seaview in the Isle of Wight. An Air Sea Rescue boat brought you straight into the harbour here. We stuffed you full of sedatives and pumped half of the Channel out of you and you're lucky to be alive.'

Daddy Dale came over from Thorney Island with one or two of the boys, bringing some clothes and toilet stuff with them. Also when they had time, two captains of the Air Sea Rescue boats visited me, Flight Lieutenant Keith Beken and Flight Lieutenant Newman. From them all I pieced together what had happened. Early on the morning after I was shot down, Daddy Dale had assembled the squadron to go and look for me but the weather was so bad Group would not give permission for them to take off. However, two Air Sea Rescue Spitfires had been dispatched but were never heard of again; they had found me all right but had obviously remained so low under the cloud base that any radio transmission had failed to be picked up, so they had either flown into the sea themselves in the bad

visibility or been shot down. The area I was in was a hunting ground for German E-boats and dangerous for ASR boats; nevertheless two boats, HSL 198 with Flight Lieutenant Keith Beken and HSL 192 with Flight Lieutenant Newman, came out to look for me, but were ordered to return to base because of gale conditions which continued throughout the night and next day. They came out again on the third day as the gale abated and found me. Although I wrote 'The Storm' immediately afterwards, Keith Beken, in peacetime a Cowes sailing photographer extraordinary, wrote about the event many years later in his book *The Beken File*. The following extract describes it from a different but very caring angle.

> One day the Nab Tower flashed us a message: 'Proceed to position 55 miles, 185 degrees Nab.' Setting course on our grid compass, with the electric log at o, compensating for the westerly tide at one and a half knots, we adjusted our speed to 27 knots and set off in company with another RAF launch.
>
> Arriving at our estimated position, both boats then started the usual square search, going in opposite directions. The weather was very rough and getting worse. After four hours of searching as daylight vanished we suddenly had a radio message to return to base because of gale conditions. We were naturally furious, for, whilst it was no weather for us to be out in, it was considerably worse for the dinghy that we were searching for. The next day we were weather-bound in harbour and had to content ourselves with working out the estimated position that we thought the dinghy must have arrived at with the east and west tides and a westerly gale. Next day the gale was abating, so HSL 192 and my HSL 198 set off again to the new estimated position of the dinghy that we had plotted on our charts.
>
> After four hours we both spotted the dinghy. He was a Mosquito pilot and his navigator had been lost. Whilst he was being pulled up the scrambling-net we were keeping an eye on the enemy coast at Cherbourg which was about eight miles away, and also keeping a look out for enemy fighters. Three shells landed – one to port, one to starboard, and one astern: nice grouping! … We both made off fast on a zig-zag course, endeavouring to 'make smoke' to cover our exit. The pilot was taken back to Seaview and placed in the Naval sick-bay, where he gently recovered from the three days in gale-force conditions in a rubber dinghy. The RAF learnt many things from this pilot – how to survive at sea, good and bad points about rubber dinghies, and so on.
>
> There is an interesting sequel to this rescue. About fifteen years later, HRH Prince Philip was paying a visit to the Island Sailing Club at Cowes together with his Equerry, Wing Commander Peter Horsley. Meeting in the club, Wing Commander Horsley noticed that I by chance was wearing an Air-Sea Rescue tie, and he by chance was wearing a 'Goldfish Tie' – a tie only available to pilots who had 'ditched' in the sea in wartime and lived to tell the tale.
>
> After a few minutes we both realized that he was the pilot we had picked up with HSL 192 off Cherbourg. What a reunion then took place!

7

Voices

The first two or three days in Seaview were spent in a no-man's-land between the living and dead, heavily sedated, while the doctors cleaned out the bilges, but as the will to return to the living strengthened I slowly began to take more interest in my surroundings and condition. The place I was in had been an hotel until requisitioned and converted into a Naval Sick Quarters as an emergency overflow for the reception of D-Day casualties, which had fortunately not materialized in the numbers expected. It was manned by two Naval doctors and three or four nurses. My sick bay contained six beds and during the whole time I spent in it there was only one other overnight occupant, an American Thunderbolt pilot picked up after a short ducking in the Channel. Trade was therefore extremely slack and I enjoyed plenty of attention from doctors and nurses alike.

Prolonged immersion in sea water had left my muscles in a wasted condition and I was constantly racked by cramp and spasms; the exposed parts of my body, particularly my face and lips, were covered in salt sores and, despite being packed in hot water bottles, memories of the dreadful cold brought on long bouts of shivering, but all this could be easily remedied with proper therapy. The mental disorientation was something much more difficult to explain and cope with; a lot of fuses had been blown in the long struggle for survival, followed by the final surrender. Shell-shock had become an accepted condition, but how do you explain damage to the nervous system when there had been no shells around?

In the long hours of darkness I was still tormented by monstrous waves breaking over me, only relieved by the security of dawn's first light. Bambi was never very far away. Endlessly I went over the sequence of events to try and satisfy myself that, in omitting some action, I was not totally responsible for his death. One night in my dreams Bambi came back through the hatch, his face lit by the flames from the starboard engine and said quite clearly, 'I forgot my parachute, Peter.' This dream recurred so frequently in those first few weeks that his face is today as clear as it was then and I often wonder if that is what actually happened.

My legs and balance were unsteady, but after a few days, with the aid of sticks, I could make my way slowly from bed to bathroom, and so gradually began to cope with a normal routine of bathing, dressing and receiving the occasional visitor. The Seaview Hotel was situated at the end of a pier and I spent many hours sitting silently by the window watching the boats plying to and fro. Already I had begun to experience very strong withdrawal symptoms, with no particular desire to rejoin the world outside the narrow confines of my sick-room.

The Naval doctors and nurses were wonderfully kind and understanding but without specialist equipment in the sort of treatment I needed there was little more they could do for me, so after about ten days it was arranged that I should return to Thorney Island for a full medical examination by the Wing medical staff. An orderly was sent over to accompany me across in the ferry and thence in the station ambulance to the No 140 Wing tented sick quarters where I was, once more, firmly put to bed. There over the next two or

three days, many of the squadron pilots and navigators came to see me, but I must have appeared very unfriendly as I had no desire to talk about what had happened.

Following a detailed examination, the Wing doctor explained that I needed to spend some time in a rehabilitation hospital before there was any question of a return to flying, but it would take just a little time to arrange. I persuaded him, much against his judgement, to let me go on leave for a week first, although I was not really ready to face my wife and the disorder I knew I would find at White Lodge.

It proved a difficult journey on my own from Thorney Island to Newmarket by train, requiring considerable dexterity on my sticks with long periods of rest. Crossing London, I was overcome by a fainting fit and it was only with the help of a friendly taxi driver that I caught the Newmarket train, leaving me with a final, 'You should not be allowed out of hospital, mate.' He was right too.

Finally, looking I suppose like Hamlet's ghost, I came home. Our reunion was difficult. What could a young girl, living in a foreign country in war, eight months pregnant, make of a husband who was not only a stranger with ugly sores on his face but half crazy as well? Phyllis told me that the squadron had despatched an officer to inform her that I was missing and had probably not survived the storm so, having been subjected to one shock, she had the traumatic experience a few days later of being told I was not dead after all. In some way this sort of confusion was quite in keeping with the household and the people who came and went from it. However, Phyllis was bred from pioneer stock who had emigrated to the New World and I am sure it was this inherited strength and steadfastness under stress and hardship which sustained her through all these difficulties.

It was at White Lodge that two days later I experienced the first of a number of unnatural incidents. I had never been at all religious, quite the opposite. The endless compulsory prayers and services at Wellington had effectively quenched any kind of spiritual feeling. The war encouraged a selfish outlook on life, enjoying pleasures and appetites without thought of any consequences; added to this was the rather arrogant opinion aircrew had of themselves as an élitist body. Phyllis was a normal, healthy American girl who had studied psychology at University and rejected any possibility of the supernatural or ghosts.

Living at White Lodge at this time there was Phyllis, Nancy Winder* and Gwen Adams, who was Nancy's sister and the wife of Flight Lieutenant Tony Adams (serving on a Beaufighter Squadron in Norfolk, employed mainly on shipping strikes). He was a charming young officer who, like myself, had married in Canada during a tour on instructing duties. There was also a visitor, a young Canadian girl whose husband was a pilot in Bomber Command. With the arrival of this guest, the usual game of musical chairs occurred and Phyllis had been moved temporarily out of her room into the Adams' room on the ground floor.

On the morning of my second day back the telephone rang and, as I was the nearest, I answered it. A male voice at the other end said, 'Who am I speaking to?' and I replied, 'This is Flight Lieutenant Horsley.' 'Oh,' said the caller, 'thank heavens for that. I am Tony Adams' Squadron Commander. Is Mrs Adams staying with you?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'I have bad news and I am afraid you will have to break it to her. Tony did not return from a

strike today and it looks as though he went into the sea. I will call you in the morning again when I should have definite news of exactly what happened.'

This was awful. The household had only just recovered from my own drama and now this. Phyllis and I told Nancy Winder who broke the news and comforted her sister as best she could. There was a chance that, like myself, Tony would be picked up in the sea by our side or theirs. After such a tiring and unhappy day we went to bed early; it was a clear night and, with the blackout curtains drawn back, objects in the room stood out clearly. Tony's tweed jacket hung on a hook by the door and as I lay awake it seemed to acquire a peculiar significance as though it had suddenly begun to embody the personality of its owner. I found myself more and more concentrating on the jacket. I put out the thought in words, 'If there is a spirit world and you can hear me, Tony, then I promise we will do our best to look after Gwen and there is no need for you to worry. Surely there is some sign you can give me if you are dead.'

At exactly that moment an awful thing happened. The room became alive and an object like a blanket descended upon the bed suffocating us with a most terrible smell. (I had once had to remove the scorched bodies of two pupils from a crashed aircraft at Penhold and the smell that enveloped us was the same – pungent, burnt human flesh.) Both of us simultaneously threw off the 'thing' covering us, leapt out of bed in terror and, without thought of the blackout, turned the lights on.

In a flash the object and smell disappeared and the room was still again. We fixed the blackout and ran almost in a panic from room to room in the house. There was no smell. We sat up for hours in the kitchen drinking coffee and going over and over the experience. The smell seemed to be part of the solid covering us: it was upon us in an instant and gone in an instant. There was no trace of it afterwards either inside or outside the house. Both of us felt that what had happened was in some way associated with Tony's old tweed jacket hanging behind the door, so much a part of him that it acted as a transmitter for some kind of message. There was no rational explanation for what had happened; that we both agreed.

Tony's Squadron Commander rang back the following morning and said, 'I am sorry, there is no hope. Tony was seen to go down on fire and his aircraft exploded on hitting the sea. Mrs Adams will get an official telegram today and when the dust settles I will send someone over with his personal effects.' The message was clear now: 'I am dead and burnt.' Neither Phyllis nor I ever forgot that night, and for a time it drew us closer together.

I spent the rest of the week sitting in the garden reading and watching wave upon wave of Flying Fortresses and Liberators from their airfields in Suffolk circling round and round gaining height, like wild geese migrating, until in formation of Wings they set course eastwards. They would return hours later with great gaps in their ranks, followed by stragglers in ones and twos, some with smoke pouring out of their engines. It was a daily reminder of the ceaseless battles taking place over Europe. At the end of the week I returned to Thorney Island feeling fitter, but still isolated and alone.

The second incident occurred almost immediately after the first and was again witnessed. I still had a day or two to wait before going into the RAF rehabilitation hospital

at Loughborough; time hung heavily on my hands so I sought out the Wing padre. Each nationality had provided various support officers and the Australians had provided the padre. These padres were very much part of the Wing life, living with the aircrew in the tented camp. Indeed, there was a padre at Hertford Bridge who doubled up sometimes as an air-gunner and won a DFC on operations.

I told our padre about my experiences in the sea and the incident in Newmarket. He proved sympathetic and understanding; ‘There are many inexplicable things, Peter, in heaven and earth; our own religion and faith are full of mysteries and God tells us that only in death are the veils parted. Perhaps in the sea you caught just a glimpse of the other side and the cord is not quite cut yet. I tell you what, we will both go to the church this evening and pray for your peace of mind.’

The church at Thorney Island was a few hundred yards from the Mess, overlooking the estuary; it was over eight hundred years old and had been part of the village of West Thorney Island, long since demolished to make way for the aerodrome. Only the church and vicarage next to it remained. We arranged to meet in the Mess after supper that evening after the padre had made his rounds of the squadrons.

We walked down the road passing the crowd of Mess tents. As we approached the church in the cool of the evening the sound of the organ could be heard quite plainly. We went through the main door into the church and the padre showed obvious delight at the two airmen practising hymns on the organ, one playing and the other turning over the sheet music at the far end of the aisle next to choir stalls. We sat down towards the rear of the church and listening to the music my mind drifted away.

There was a sudden sharp interruption in the music, the organ died away discordantly and the two airmen dashed ashen-faced past us down the aisle. I suddenly saw what had frightened them so much. An old lady was standing by the choir stalls, having, I surmised, come through a door close to the altar at the far end of the church. The padre put his hand on my knee and whispered, ‘Keep quite still.’ Without glancing to either side, the old lady walked down the aisle past us and, turning around, I watched her disappear through a curtain at the back of the church. She had passed very close to us and I find it almost impossible to describe her appearance and passage. In some extraordinary way she was totally negative; her body translucent yet solid, her clothes coloured yet colourless, not quite walking yet not exactly gliding. There was a smell about her which was old; I would like to say of violets but it wasn’t. She was neither of this world nor of the next.

We sat in stunned silence for a minute and then the padre said, ‘Peter, get on your knees and we must both pray for the spirit of that old lady to be allowed to leave this place and find peace with God.’

We left the church and the padre said, ‘I have heard of the Thorney Island Church ghost but never thought I would see her. Perhaps it was your doing. Tomorrow I must summon the will and knowledge to find the release for her troubled spirit.’ The following morning I left for Loughborough and did not visit Thorney Island for forty years.

In June, 1983, almost forty years on, I returned there. The RAF had gone and the airfield was deserted. The runway was cracked and overgrown, the old dispersals marked only by piles of rubble. It was a beautiful summer’s day, so different from that in 1944, as

I drove leisurely across the airfield past the empty Officers' Mess where once we had pitched our tents on the neat lawns, and on down the road to the old church.

It took me by surprise. Both the church and hallowed ground surrounding it were beautifully maintained, bright and cheerful with the sun sparkling across the estuary. On one side were neat rows of white headstones marking the graves of Luftwaffe crews killed in attacks on Thorney Island, Portsmouth and Southampton. Behind them and separated by a gap of some yards were row after row of RAF aircrew, some of whom had been my friends, who had been killed on and around the airfield during its active life. On the other side of the church, nestling among the trees, was the ancient village churchyard with its age-stained gravestones. I entered through the side door by the altar, where the old lady had appeared, and walked down the aisle to sit in the same pew. The atmosphere was incredibly peaceful and secure. I felt the whole place had become a sanctuary, the old conflicts and enmities gone and the ghost of the old lady long since departed.

Passing the Mess again, I could almost imagine the sounds of boisterous aircrew, of trucks driving busily around the dispersals and the staccato bark of Merlin engines bursting into life. So I drove back out through the old guardroom into the real world, leaving the memories and dead behind.

Occasionally the nightmare of mountainous seas and boiling skies still returns, as though the deep waters robbed of their prey return to haunt me. And I have often pondered whether the three friends who came to talk to me in my dinghy could be explained in human and physical terms, or did their visit flow across some supernatural boundary, opening, for just a moment, a channel of communication between this world and another?

I have come to the conclusion that there is a bridge between life and death which we all have to cross. Perhaps the further I had traversed that bridge, so had the images on the other side become clearer, until my three companions had come out to escort me over the final bit. The mystery of why I was permitted to turn back and retrace my steps is still unanswered. But I know beyond doubt that the vision of the other side remains and the link, however tenuous, has never been broken. Nothing has ever been the same again.

My experience is not unique. When Douglas Bader lay in hospital, following the loss of both legs, he later recounted his experience of the incredible peace, clarity of mind and presence of others, only to be followed by the struggle and pain of fighting his way back again. This left him conscious of the vision of the other side and he recounted the story of how many years later when during a visit to that great golfer, Henry Longhurst, in hospital, Henry had said, 'I know I am dying, Douglas, and I only hope that the fairways are greener on the other side.' A year or so lapsed and when Douglas had just opened a fête for charity he was persuaded to visit the familiar lady fortune teller in her tent. 'Has a friend of yours died recently?' she asked. 'No, I don't think so,' replied Douglas. 'Could his first name be Henry?' asked the lady. Douglas immediately thought of Henry Longhurst 'Yes', he replied, 'I did have a friend of that name who died about a year ago.' 'Well,' the lady continued, 'he asks me to give you a message, "Tell Douglas the fairways are greener."' Spooky, yes, but something equally spooky happened to me in Australia when I was serving as an Equerry to the Queen.

During the Royal Tour of Australia in 1954 General 'Boy' Browning, Treasurer to the

Duke of Edinburgh, suggested I should visit Malaya and submit a report on the practicalities of a future visit there by HRH, since it was the time of the Emergency and there were obvious security implications. At the end of this visit I went on from Singapore and met up with the Royal Party in Sydney, Australia. After a few pleasant days in Sydney I booked a return flight to Singapore in a Quantas Constellation. Michael Parker, Prince Philip's Private Secretary, asked me to take a Royal Bag back containing films and mail. I also put some of my own papers, which had caught up with me in Sydney, in the same mail bag. We sealed the bag and I deposited it at the airline office close to the hotel. This would not only relieve me of my responsibility while saving me the trouble of carting it out to the airport the following morning, but also give security for the night. I went to bed early and had what I can only describe as a very troubled night, waking up very distressed with a terrible feeling of foreboding. On impulse I called the airline and asked if I could postpone my flight by a day. 'That is quite all right,' they replied, 'but what about the Royal Bag which has already gone out to the airport?' 'Would you mind putting it on the aircraft,' I asked, 'and I will collect it in Singapore.' They were very happy to do this for me.

The first thing I read in the headlines the following morning was that the flight I should have been on had crashed and burst into flames on the approach to Changi airfield and all on board had perished in the wreckage. Twenty-four hours later I had the eerie experience of approaching over the scarred ground and burnt-out wreckage which might so easily have been my own grave. The Royal Mail bag was salvaged and I still have pieces of its contents scorched by the fire and stained by the foam of fire extinguishers. It is easy to explain this away as a coincidence – too good a dinner, an upset stomach, a slight fever, a nightmare. But I've flown millions of miles in my life and this was the only time I have ever cancelled a flight on such an impulse.

* * *

I became no more religious in the conventional sense but I have felt on a number of occasions the presence of an external force and believe strongly in the power of prayer. This power was demonstrated when I was Air Officer Commanding No 1 Bomber Group at Bawtry, near Doncaster. Leonard Cheshire had been invited to preside at a reunion dinner at No 617 Dambuster squadron on a Friday night at RAF Scampton, its home base, and one of the stations under my command. Leonard rang me up and said, 'Peter, I have a problem. It is terribly important I get to Lyons on Saturday morning to attend the opening of one of our first Homes in France by a French Minister, and I cannot get there by civil aircraft in time. Do you think the RAF could fly me there?'

There are all sorts of difficulties to doing this kind of thing in peacetime when the Service is so closely controlled by the Civil Service financial branches. At any rate, I rang Strike Command Headquarters with the request, who said that in no way was this a starter, and I had to relay the bad news back to Leonard Cheshire. After a few days, I thought again. 'Damn it, there must be a way to get round the regulations,' and then I remembered Michael Carey who was a Permanent Under-Secretary in the Ministry of Defence in London and who had been at the Dragon preparatory school in Oxford with both Leonard Cheshire and myself. I rang him up and told him our problem. 'Peter,' he said, 'do you have any navigation training flights in the Group?' 'Yes,' I replied, 'we run some Argosy

missions to Gibraltar.' 'OK,' he came back, 'lay one on for the Saturday in question from Scampton and let it land at Lyons en route to Gibraltar, dropping off Cheshire, and I will fix it all at this end with the financiers.' I rang back Leonard Cheshire with the glad tidings; he didn't sound surprised and said, 'Well, Peter, I wasn't worried, particularly, as I have been praying you would find a way to get me there.' I attended a very successful and boisterous dinner at Scampton and Leonard went off the following morning to meet the French Minister and open another Home.

* Her husband, Flight Lieutenant Ken Winder, was the officer Daddy Dale had sent to tell my wife I was missing and who had returned to No 21 Squadron.

8

The Road Ahead

I stumbled through this dark and menacing room, still pursued by strange sounds and voices, emerging into a short corridor towards the rear of the house.

The road ahead proved a difficult one and I seemed to take two steps forward and then one back but at least I was moving forward. In what direction I was not quite sure.

Once I had arrived at the RAF Loughborough Rehabilitation Centre I felt secure, wrapped in a cocoon of doctors and nurses and surrounded by patients in various stages of recovery from their wounds, some worse than mine and some better. Slowly I fitted in to a small coterie of fairly heavy drinkers and once our daily labours were finished we used to haunt the pubs around Loughborough frightening their local inhabitants with our burnt and broken bodies. One of my friends at this time was Flight Lieutenant Fielding-Johnson whose son had been on 21 Squadron with me. They had been both awarded the DFC on the same day and shortly afterwards the son was killed in a low-level daylight Mosquito raid on Germany which had been ambushed by a large number of German single-engine fighters.

The best thing about the hospital was the little Belgian nurse who came into my room one morning and found me with a shivering attack, a relic of the sea, and immediately took off her clothes, got into bed and surrounded me with her pink, warm flesh.

My day consisted of a number of one-hour periods of exercises: full legs, full arms, volley ball, bicycling interspersed with bouts of swimming. The psychiatrist I had seen on my arrival was convinced I had become frightened of the water, which was the very reverse of the truth as I felt closely involved with the sea which I looked on as a friend. So I had to swim two or three times a day, overseen by a bemused swimming instructor who had been told to keep me in the water at all costs. In fact he had nothing to do but watch.

I was finally expelled from the hospital in disgrace. My little gang, who had been out on a particularly rowdy pub crawl, came back and gathered around a fountain which was situated on a lawn in front of the hospital. We had all undressed, some unwinding their bandages, and with one great whoop we all jumped in and splashed around until our yelling brought out the duty doctor who was not at all amused by our antics. The following morning I stood to attention in front of the Group Captain, Commanding Officer, who informed me that my presence was no longer required at the hospital and told me to report to a Medical Board in London where I would undoubtedly be boarded out of the RAF. I was no longer fit enough to be a pilot and at any rate we were at that stage of the war where there were plenty of aircrew just waiting to fill my shoes. Instead of reporting to the Medical Board I returned to No 140 Wing at Thorney Island who were just packing up their tents to leave for France. From there I rang my Air Officer Commanding, Air Vice-Marshal Basil Embry, and asked him if I could return to the Wing.

‘I am sorry, Peter,’ he said, ‘I cannot let you go back on operations. It would be just too bad if you were killed without a medical category. However, you can leave today and join the Second Tactical Air Force Communication Squadron which is presently based at Amiens and just hope the medical authorities don’t catch up with you!’

That was all I needed. I set off to fly Ansons following the advancing British Army through France, Belgium and finally Germany. I had first to overcome my fears, both conscious and unconscious: fear of flying and in particular fear of flying over water. In the next year or so I flew so many cross-Channel trips from the short route Dover to Calais and the longer route Dover to Ostend that I learned to grip hard on the flying controls and sweat it out. Gradually my fears receded, although for years I had the lurking shadows follow me when flying over long stretches of the sea.

In due course I was appointed personal pilot to the Chief of Staff of 21 Army Group and flew our own personal Anson. One of the earliest trips that I did was to fly General Montgomery’s watch to London for repair. It sat in solitary splendour beside me on the co-pilot’s seat! At about this time I was doing weekly trips with the Major-General Aministration, Miles Graham, to Rear Army Headquarters near Brussels, then on to SHAPE in Paris and finally to the War Office in London. There was one particular flight I remember with Miles Graham at the beginning of December, 1944, when the fog came down at the same time as the Germans broke through in the Ardennes with the intention of advancing and retaking Antwerp. Miles Graham was ordered by Montgomery to return immediately to Brussels and we began a verbal battle as to whether or not I would take off. Finally, against my better judgement, I took off from Northolt and headed out above the fog towards Brussels. When we arrived over Brussels it was still shrouded in fog. I made two or three stabs on ground controlled approach. Once I saw a ploughed field skim by just ten feet below. I pulled up and tried again. I made one last attempt, down, down I came with one eye on the altimeter and one eye peering out into the murky dark fog; suddenly and very quickly I saw lights ahead and the terrified looks of people flinging themselves down on the floor. I revved up the engines, pulling the Anson up and just missing the Evere control tower by a matter of feet. I had had enough and headed west into the countryside where, through a gap in the fog, I caught a glimpse of a runway. I immediately put down the under-carriage and landed straight ahead. It was a disused airfield and it took a little time to find a local inhabitant from whom we could enquire where we were. The General commandeered a car and set off for Brussels with the Germans just a few miles away still advancing, leaving me stranded with the aircraft.

A few days afterwards, on New Year’s Day, the Luftwaffe fuelled their aeroplanes with the last drop of fuel remaining in Germany and attacked Allied airfields with guns and bombs. Most of us had been partying the night before and arrived back at our airfield bleary-eyed. As the guns began to chatter across the aerodrome I dived under the nearest vehicle with the squadron adjutant, only to find it was a petrol bowser and I was with the last man with whom I would wish to die! Johnnie Johnson’s Spitfire Wing at Evere managed to get a flight off the ground, but the number two in the formation was attacked just as he raised the undercarriage and his engine blew up. He force landed straight ahead on top of an apartment building, lifted his canopy, stepped up on the roof and stepped down to a very surprised Belgian lady who was having her bath in the room below.

* * *

The War now began to reach its climax and the Allied Armies moved into Germany itself. I took a covey of generals which included the Chief of Staff, Freddie de Guingand, and Miles Graham to land beside the Rhine. There they all lined up, lowered their trousers and peed into it. Generals can still behave like small boys!

And so the Allies sped on into the heartland of Germany, finally ending up on the Elbe. There, by agreement with the Russians, they called a halt. Early one morning I was summoned by the Chief of Staff and asked if I would volunteer for a special mission – to fly my Anson into enemy-held territory and land at Fassburg to pick up General-Admiral von Friedeberg and his staff and fly them back to Montgomery's caravan at Lüneburg Heath. In the event of the General-Admiral not turning up I was to raise the undercarriage of my Anson and give myself up. A Major was detailed to fly with me. I set off on 4 May, crossing the front line at low level. I expected that I should have to take violent evasive action to escape flak but the guns were silent. It was as though a bugle had blown, ending the war, and all the German troops had deserted their posts to go home. It was an eerie experience flying across a deserted countryside.

Right on time Fassburg came up; I was given a green light from the ground and landed, taxied up to the control tower, was waved in by two German airmen and switched off my engines, leaving my navigator in charge of the Anson, ready to raise the undercarriage on my instructions. I got out to the smart salute of the German airmen and was escorted up a flight of stairs to the control tower. There an exact replica of an RAF scene took place; the German duty pilot booked me in – Flight Lieutenant Horsley, aircraft Anson, number, place of origin. It was all so meticulous that I was quite enjoying it and was given a welcome cup of coffee and a chair to sit on.

Meanwhile, outside on the airfield, it was as if someone had come along with a stick and stuck it into a beehive, stirring up the bees to intense activity. A wide variety of aircraft flew in, refuelled and took off again, including a jet ME262, in the last mad German scramble to find a safe haven somewhere in the south. A JU52 landed and was immediately boarded by a party of sinister-looking gentlemen in long black mackintoshes, taking off again in a last desperate attempt to escape retribution for their foul misdeeds.

Half an hour passed and finally a cavalcade of cars sped up to the control tower and General-Admiral von Friedeburg, the personal representative of Grand Admiral Doenitz, and his entourage gathered by the aeroplane. With a salute which was hardly returned, I ushered them into the Anson. Once again, after a green light from the tower, I took off and headed towards Lüneburg. There I was met by Major-General Graham. An even larger cavalcade of cars sped towards Lüneburg Heath with myself and the escorting Major in the last one. The Germans were ushered into Montgomery's large marquee where they signed the Instrumental Surrender, watched by me from one of Monty's caravans conveniently parked close by. So, from a distance, I had witnessed an historic occasion. In due course I was recommended by 21 Army Group for the award of an Air Force Cross, with which King George VI presented me. Little did I realize that the next time I should see him would be a few days before his death.

* * *

Germany had been reduced to rubble by bombing and the advancing armies. There were two worlds, the one occupied by refugees, gaunt and hollow-eyed, fleeing west from the Russians, and the other well fed, in their smart uniforms and staff cars. As there was a 'no fraternization' ban in force the two worlds just looked at each other, silent and curious.

My aeroplane was now based at RAF Bückeburg while I was billeted in a comfortable house at Bad Oeynhausen. In due course I was appointed RAF Liaison Officer to 21 Army Group, as well as personal pilot to the Chief of Staff. My wife and son, aged two, joined me. I had been given an Army batman.

Gunner Lyons was a most delightful old rogue, climbing the Army ladder several times to Sergeant, only to be busted down again to Private for some misdemeanour. I caught him on the last rung. Whenever we wanted a chicken or some German gin it would mysteriously appear with the compliments of Gunner Lyons. I once remarked to him that I could really do with some new pyjamas. A few days later Lyons appeared with the most exquisite material which was quickly made up by the German tailor into several pairs of pyjamas. My wife happened to be having tea with the Chief of Staff's wife who lived in a fine house just down the road from us and who showed her the drawing room windows bereft of curtains, adding, 'It was quite extraordinary, my dear. They disappeared just like that the other day!' I am glad she didn't have to go to bed with me!

Towards the end of my time in Germany I found that my Station Commander had put my name forward for a permanent commission. I duly passed my medical A1G1 which meant I was fully fit for aircrew so my medical records from Loughborough had still not caught up with me and I was duly gazetted as a permanent Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Air Force, all without trying very hard.

In 1947 I returned to England two years after the end of the war and felt a stranger in my native land. Gone was the wartime spirit of sacrifice, to be replaced by an atmosphere of selfishness, of spivs and the black market and an attitude of 'I'm all right Jack', with everyone trying to gain advantage over his neighbour in a country of shortages and rations.

I was posted to Headquarters No 23 Training Group as an Assistant to Wing Commander Arthur Donaldson DSO, DFC. One brother, Baldie, had died in the Norwegian sea after his Squadron was evacuated to the carrier HMS *Glorious* when she was sunk by the German battleships *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*. Only two squadron pilots survived on a raft in the Arctic Seas to tell the tale. The second brother, Teddy, won fame breaking the world speed record in a Meteor jet.

After a few months Arthur Donaldson wangled me back on to an instructors' course at Little Rissington. This course was quite different from the one I had completed in 1941. The students were not only required to qualify as instructors on Tiger Moths and Harvards but also as instructors on more advanced aircraft such as the Spitfire, Mosquito, Lancaster and, finally, the new jet Vampire. The Spitfire was only a single-engined Mosquito and I had no trouble flying it at all. The Lancaster, with its four engines, was a novelty, but I got the hang of it fairly quickly. The Vampire was a different kettle of fish, rather like flying a hoover. Being a seasoned pilot, I was handed a copy of the pilot's notes and told to get on with flying it. My first flight in the new jet was an unnerving experience. I started it up

and it sounded just like a vacuum cleaner. The early jet accelerated very slowly, at first gasping for air and flying speed down the short wartime runways. Gradually getting more confident, it seemed to gasp and gulp the air down. Thus, with the absence of the noise and vibration of a piston-engined aircraft, it often convinced newcomers that something was seriously wrong. It certainly did me, but as the end of the runway loomed up and I was obviously fully committed I was pleasantly surprised to find that on hauling back on the stick this new bird leapt into the air with the grace of a bird. The Vampire climbed cheerfully away, still sounding like a vacuum cleaner and flying it soon began to feel like fun. Suddenly you experienced a completely new freedom of cutting huge chunks of sky, carving it into figures with all the ease and grace of a skater dancing on clouds instead of ice.

Even at the Central Flying School little was yet known about supersonic flight. The Meteor had been rushed into service to be used against the flying bombs. Group Captain Teddy Donaldson had flown one in the high-speed flight at Tangmere at 611 mph (Mach. 81) – a true airspeed close to the speed of sound at a very low altitude. During a visit to his brother Arthur at Leighton Buzzard, Teddy had described to me the violent buffeting which began as he reached compressibility. Supersonic speed then seemed an impenetrable barrier, especially after the experimental DH108 had broken up, killing the pilot Geoffrey de Havilland when attempting to achieve the breakthrough. We were taught at CFS that you could not get into much trouble provided you experimented in thin air above 30,000 feet. My instructor demonstrated how you could climb a Meteor to 40,000 feet, open the throttle fully, turn the aircraft on its back and pull it through. The Meteor would then fall like a proverbial brick, quickly reaching its terminal velocity of .84 Mach, protesting and shaking violently. It took all of another 10,000 feet to straighten her out again, leaving a confused and sometimes bruised pilot. It was not a very popular exercise.

The first indication that things were not proceeding normally came about half-way through the course when a signal arrived addressed ‘Personal for Flight Lieutenant Horsley’ summoning me for an interview with the Wing Commander in the Directorate of Personnel in the Air Ministry. I wondered what heinous crime had possibly followed me from Germany. What I did not know at the time was that I was starting off down a new road which would eventually lead me to the Air Member for Personnel himself.

So one wet and miserable morning I duly presented myself in a well-pressed ‘best blue’ uniform before Wing Commander Spencer. Without beating about the bush, he asked whether I would like to be considered, among other candidates, for the post of Extra Equerry to their Royal Highnesses Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh.

I had no knowledge of the processes in the Air Ministry for sorting the sheep from the goats but at that moment I was a sheep and, without further thought, I answered, ‘Yes.’ The Wing Commander pointed out that my financial affairs had to be more than sound and my domestic situation impeccable. I told a white lie about both. My financial situation was just all right; I had worked through the money from the sale of my grandmother’s slum property and had about £700 left. My marriage, on the other hand, had just passed through a crisis and we were still gingerly feeling our way forward. That boat was leaking but at least was still afloat.

I returned to Little Rissington elated. The sea had drained me of much more than just

physical energy. For the first time since my escape I felt a quickening of the pulse and a renewed interest in life. My senses stirred sharply at the thought of this entirely new road opening up before me and I felt like a lioness getting the first scent of a prey borne on a freshening breeze.

The process of elimination continued for the next month or so. Some progressed from the Wing Commander's embraces to move on to the Group Captain and the survivors then on to an Air Commodore. Finally only three of us were left for interview by the 'next to God' himself, an Air Vice-Marshal. The interview with the Director General of Personnel could not have taken place under less auspicious conditions and I would have preferred a more suitable occasion at which to shine as a possible courtier.

It so happened that the Director General was the guest of honour at the final course Guest Night. Whilst the Commandant with his VIP and other distinguished guests retired to the bar, the rest of us settled down, if that is the right phrase, to the usual rough mess games in the anteroom. The Station Adjutant extracted me from the bottom of a rugger scrum and ordered me to report forthwith to the Commandant. I was in poor shape, minus collar and bow tie, my white stiff shirt spotted with blood and my mess jacket missing. However, by this time I had imbibed sufficient alcohol not to care very much anyway. So I duly reported to the Commandant, Air Commodore Macdonald and his very important guest, the Director General.

The Air Vice-Marshal was, of course, immaculate as all Air Vice-Marshals should be and he must have been surprised to see such a figure before him, even if he was decent enough not to show it. He did at least have a twinkle in his eyes which seemed to say that he was no stranger to the antics of young pilots on Guest Nights.

I imagined that was the end of that. It had been fun while it lasted. At the end of the course I was posted as Adjutant to my old friend of Canadian days, Wing Commander Christopher Foxley-Norris, at Oxford University Air Squadron.

I settled down at Oxford happily enough, renting a small Cotswold cottage in the village of Stonefield on the edge of the Blenheim Palace estate. The Oxford University Air Squadron was quite unlike any other RAF unit in which I had served. The Squadron was commanded by a Wing Commander, usually an ex-Oxford graduate himself, and consisted of a Squadron Leader Chief Flying Instructor, a Flight Lieutenant Adjutant, a civilian Chief Ground Instructor, Jack Akers, and a civilian secretary, Olive Round, both of whom had been with the Oxford University Air Squadron for a very long time and knew everything there was to know about the peculiarities of University Air Squadrons. Finally there were four or five flying instructors.

In 1948, the students were about equally divided between very experienced ex-RAF wartime pilots continuing or starting their university degrees on very slender grants or new graduates, one or two of whom it was hoped would join the RAF when they graduated (a former Chief of the Defence Staff, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Craig, was a young cadet whom I had taught to fly during my time as Adjutant). The town Headquarters was housed in old tin buildings just off Manor Road, next door to the very splendid and new brick building of our Army equivalent. However, our small squadron mess was immensely popular and one of the great attractions for impecunious students,

offering excellent food and drink at what must have been the lowest prices in Oxford. My work was congenial and undemanding, gentle paper work in the mornings (anything difficult I had only to refer to Jack Akers or Olive Round to find an answer), followed by lunch with the students and a drive over to RAF Abingdon with the other instructors and students in the afternoons for flying instruction. The OUAS did not have the usual discipline of the RAF unit, yet was not quite as free and easy as a flying club either, with an unwritten constitution somewhere just between.

While I went about my duties as Adjutant under the watchful eye of the CO, I was never quite sure what my colleagues were up to. The Chief Flying Instructor, Squadron Leader Guy Cory, a man of immense talent and charm, was at the same time reading for a university degree. Another instructor, Flight Lieutenant Trevor Gallagher, a tall craggy New Zealander, was also taking a degree at Merton College, training for his blue in the Oxford boat and studying for his RAF promotion examination, all with a very pregnant wife; how he managed to keep all these activities under some semblance of control was beyond imagination. The remaining instructors seemed to have other interests. ‘Tiger’ David was the caricature of ‘Pilot Officer Prune’, albeit a very elderly one, complete with white handlebar moustache which he constantly twirled and groomed with military precision. He had been at Wellington College in the mid-twenties, taken an RAF short-service commission and reached his ceiling as a Flight Lieutenant with 8,000 hours instructing on Tiger Moths in his log book! As far as I could see ‘Tiger’ spent his free time evading either the moneylenders or the police, for various minor motoring offences. It was perhaps fortunate for him that the breathalyzer was not invented in those days. He kept his companions and fellow instructors fascinated by his descriptions of his exploits with the ‘rozzers’ the previous evening. ‘Tiger’ left the Service and became landlord of a pub. This was a fatal course for him and for his wife, both developing into their own best customers. I last saw ‘Tiger’ David, some years later, as the driver in a long queue of commercial vans on their way to Southampton Docks for export.

There were only two incidents I remember well during my short period at Oxford. The first occurred when I was teaching a student how to make a forced landing in a field following engine failure. During his own attempt I allowed him to glide the aircraft far too close to a high bramble hedge on the far edge of the field. I took over only just in time to avoid a complete disaster, opening up the engine, but still flew through the top of the hedge, carrying a small plantation embedded in the wings back to base. On an RAF unit there would have undoubtedly been a formal enquiry but on such an unconventional unit the damage was repaired and no report made.

The second incident was far more serious and may well have shortened Guy Cory’s career in the RAF. One of my students was a young man called Nicholas who had had some previous flying experience but whose ability, in my opinion, had been suspect from the start. On this particular occasion, when I was on leave, the CFI took Nicholas on a two-aircraft dog-fighting exercise in the low flying area. During the ensuing series of manoeuvres Nicholas spun into the ground. He was removed from the wreckage, lucky to be alive but with one leg very badly injured. The only way of saving it was to operate while he was unconscious, without knowing what the effects might be. Permission to do so was accordingly sought and was given by his parents.

When Nicholas regained consciousness the leg was saved, but he was as mad as a March hare. After biting several nurses in the Radcliffe Hospital, he was removed to the Warncliffe Mental Asylum where I used to visit him at least once a week. He remained there plotting and making mayhem against staff and inmates alike for about six months, until one morning he woke up perfectly normal but with six months missing from his memory. As far as I am aware, he never resumed his flying career.

After much debate, in which I was only involved as Nicholas's instructor, the CFI was placed under open arrest and charged with flying in such a manner as to endanger another's life. It was an obscure charge and it proved very difficult to make it stick. Guy was aquitted but left the squadron under a cloud.

* * *

While I was at Oxford my eldest brother Terence was killed in a glider accident and the ghost of the past was finally laid to rest. His obituary by Atticus of *The Sunday Times* described a person I did not know.

> The brave, restless spirit of Terence Horsley was consumed by a passion for adventure and discovery. All his life he sought fresh worlds to explore, new hazards to combat and vanquish. He was absorbed by the conflict of man with nature, a theme which constantly recurs in his writings, and it was this aspect of soaring flight – the lone battle with an elemental freak like the Derbyshire thermal – which appealed most of all to him.
>
> For years he played court games with enthusiasm and his own originality of style at Manchester Tennis and Rackets Club. Just before his tragic death in a glider accident I mentioned that I had seen his name entered for the Amateur Tennis Championship at Queen's this week-end. 'I like the game,' he said. 'It's so darned difficult.'
>
> To an engaging independence of mind, Terence Horsley allied an appreciation of beauty which ennobled his writing. His work in *The Sunday Empire News*, of which he was editor, his essays in *The Sunday Times* and his books, with their background of river, mountain and sky, showed an acute sense of observation, and a love of wild nature which his fine prose vividly expressed. It is sad that this gifted writer lived to complete only one novel, *Jamie*, the story of a Highland crofter's son, which I learn, is to be published later this year.

* * *

I had almost forgotten last year's lucky dip when Olive Round, our secretary, burst into my office in a great state one spring morning, clutching a confidential signal which she proceeded to read out to me: 'Flight Lieutenant B. P. T. Horsley (63463) of Oxford University Air Squadron is under consideration for appointment to H.R.H. The Princess Elizabeth and The Duke of Edinburgh. He may be required for interview at Clarence House at very short notice. He is not, therefore, to leave his unit on attachment leave etc. without the prior approval of the Air Ministry.' How wonderful!

The shock had hardly abated before another signal arrived, telling me to report to Buckingham Palace at noon on **7** May for an interview with Lieutenant General Sir Frederick Browning, Comptroller and Treasurer to Their Royal Highnesses.

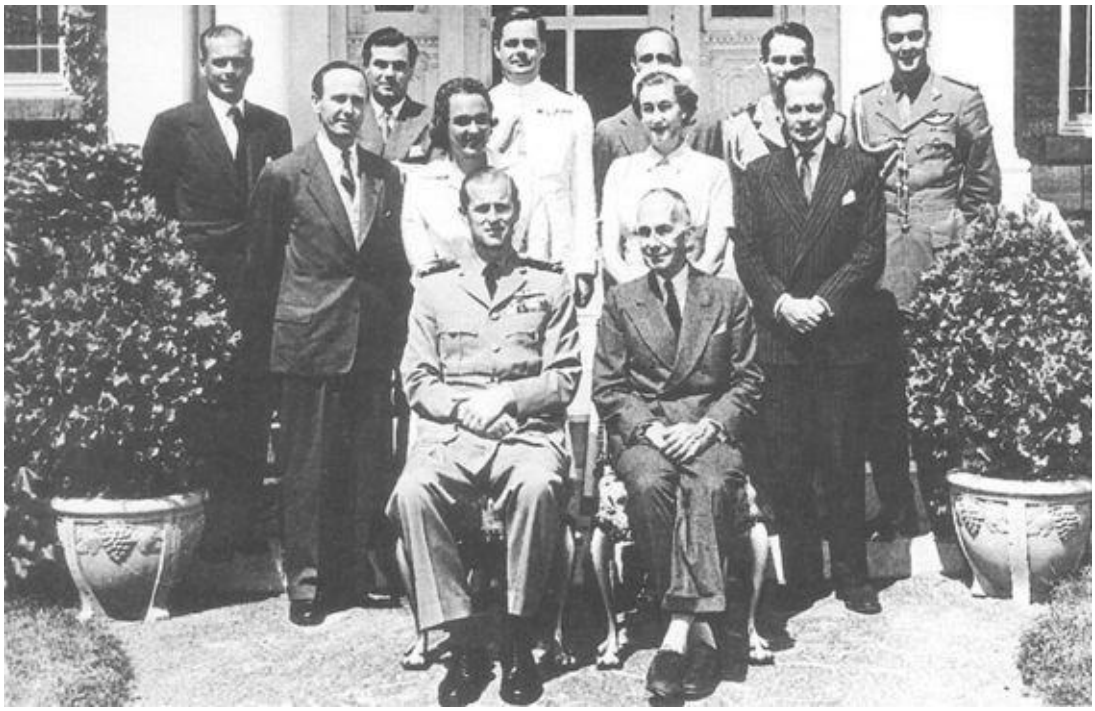
With only a few days to prepare myself for this interview, I managed to accomplish only two things. The first was to buy a bowler hat, since I thought it the proper headgear for the Palace (in fact I seldom wore it thereafter), the second was to find out something about General Browning which I did in our library's copy of *Who's Who*:

> **Browning, Lt-Gen Sir Frederick KBE, CB DSO**, Comptroller and Treasurer to Princess Elizabeth's Household since 1947, Military Secretary to Secretary of State for War 1946–47, retired from Army 1947. m. 1932 Daphne (see, Daphne du Maurier) d. of the late Sir Gerald du Maurier. One s., two d. Commanded 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards, 1st Airborne Division 1941–43, British Airborne Corps 1944; Deputy Cmdr First Allied Airborne Army

1944. Chief of Staff to Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten SEAC Clubs: Guards, Turf.

What better pedigree could one have than that, I thought.

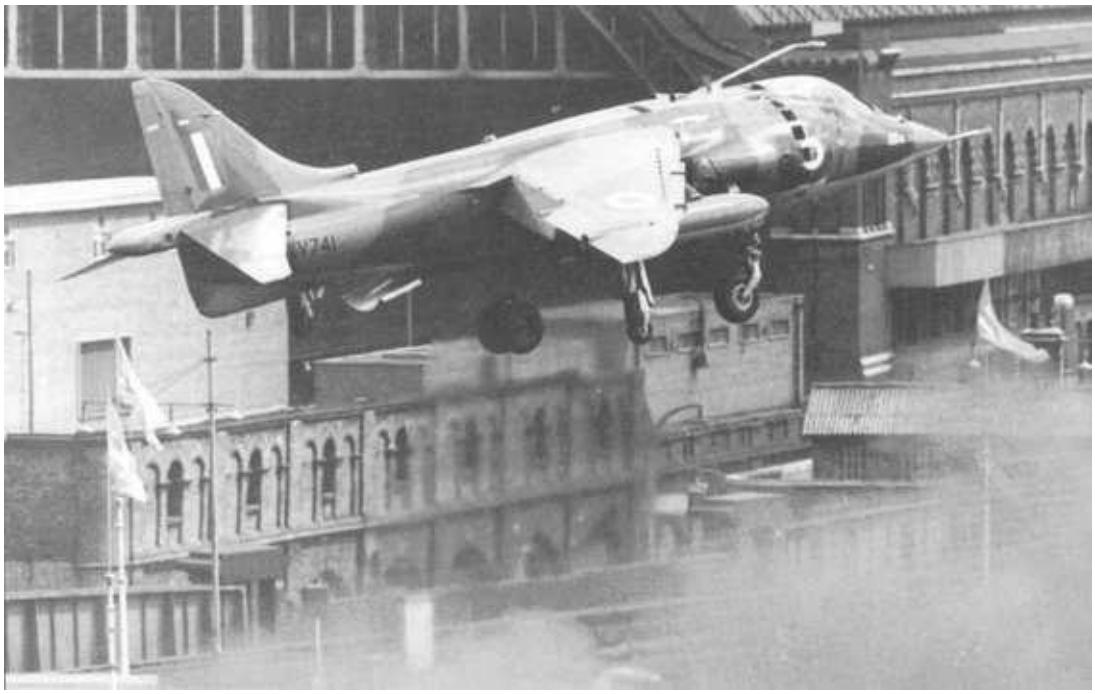
We did have something in common – flying; and in particular I had suffered one miserable and cold night in a slit trench on the edge of Nijmegen airfield, after flying Major General Miles Graham there for a conference with the Allied Airborne Commander during the bloody battle for the ‘one bridge too far’ – Arnhem. So I had done my little bit for airborne forces.



18. Prince Philip’s tour of Northern Canada, 1954, accompanied by Mike Parker and PH. With the Governor General, Lionel Massey, and his staff.

19. Prince Philip watches PH trying to load a camera aboard an RCAF Catalina.

20. Commanding Officer, RAF Akrotiri, Cyprus, 1963.



21. The 10.20 for New York leaves St Pancras.

22. Off to work – the Man from the Ministry.

I remember little about that visit to the Palace, never imagining that one day I should work there. There is something about the place that demands silence. On the other hand, Clarence House was a noisy place by comparison, whose occupants didn't seem to mind raising their voices, often in laughter. But in the Palace it was different. People seemed to walk on tiptoe and talk in whispers as though frightened of waking Royal ghosts. I found 'Boy' Browning to be a young-looking, charming and immaculately groomed man, the very epitome of a Guards officer. Indeed, we did talk about flying, almost to the exclusion of anything else. General Browning was particularly interested in my days in **2i** Army Group and knew most of the people I had piloted. Like any astute interviewer, he gave me full rein and no doubt came to his own conclusions regarding my suitability for a Royal post. I left without any hint of the outcome, although I felt we had found a lot of common ground. At worst I had at least seen the inside of Buckingham Palace.

So I returned to Oxford, got on with my job and waited.

On 1 July I was promoted to Squadron Leader. Returning late one afternoon from flying at Kidlington, I was greeted once again by Olive Round waving a piece of paper. 'Clarence House telephoned and I took down this message,' she said breathlessly. The message read, 'You are requested for interview with Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip at 1000 hrs on Friday 8 July and you have to report to Lieutenant Commander Parker RN at 0950 hrs.' I had entered the contest with a certain amount of cheek and bluff, never expecting to keep up with the front runners, so it was something of a shock to find myself in the lead, facing what now loomed up in front of me like Beecher's Brook.

At Clarence House a liveried footman conducted me to the office of Michael Parker, Prince Philip's Private Secretary. He, in turn, introduced me to Lieutenant Colonel Martin Charteris, Princess Elizabeth's Private Secretary; Lieutenant General 'Boy' Browning was there as well. I suppose the staff were now holding a collective view! Michael Parker was a great help. He obviously saw how nervous I was and did his very best to put me at ease. 'Don't worry,' he said, 'just relax and act naturally.' I relaxed. 'Incidentally,' he added, 'you will also be lunching with Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip. Princess Margaret will be lunching as well. Back to Beecher's Brook!

Michael Parker was right of course. I need not have worried. It could hardly have been called an interview as such. I was escorted into the reception hall at Clarence House and, after 'Boy' Browning had made the introductions, conversation flowed easily and naturally. I was made to feel like a guest being greeted by his host and hostess. It is so easy to write, as so many have, that the Queen radiates warmth, but that is what struck me from my very first meeting and I never had cause ever to change that first impression. She has a wonderful ability, as indeed has the Queen Mother, of making you feel better and bigger for the meeting. I enjoyed a light-hearted exchange with Prince Philip about the tribulations of instructing university students in the Tiger Moth but right from the beginning it was quite obvious that flying was beginning to interest him and the seed was sown. Princess Elizabeth concluded the interview with 'We look forward to seeing you again for lunch.'

Lunch, too, had an air of unreality. There were just the four of us and I was seated next to Princess Margaret. It should be quite easy; lunch is lunch after all and eating is a fairly common and straightforward sort of business. However, nerves can spill soup, knock over

wine glasses, cause you to say the wrong thing. On this occasion everything went well and I was beginning to congratulate myself, that is until the fruit was circulated. If you don't already know, fruit can be a terrible trap for the unwary and I fell right into it. Unless you are quite confident of what you are about, avoid it like the plague. You must be confident of knowing exactly how to extract the fruit and transfer to your mouth with style and dignity – particularly bananas! Grape pips and the core of an apple can also present problems. However, my downfall came with an orange. Never deal with an orange unless you are in a bath. How, after all, do you peel an orange with a blunt knife? And all fruit knives are blunt. I have often thought that fruit knives are designed to catch out people like me. Having made the original mistake of accepting fruit at all, I began to tackle the task, hoping to remain unobserved. First I began to peel it with my fingers and squirted the juice over my charming neighbour which immediately drew attention to my antics as she mopped up. Next I took a knife which was, as usual, blunt and only succeeded in reducing the orange to a soggy mess with everyone, footmen included, absolutely fascinated by this exercise, and Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret almost hysterical. I exaggerate, but not much. I could better have qualified for the post of Court Jester, but I did learn an important lesson for a courtier: think well before you move and don't propel yourself into the public eye.

9

A Stately Room

After traversing this short corridor, I came to a large ornate door which led into a grand room full of the most elegant furniture.

We are all just climbers taking different routes up the same mountain, whose towering peak ahead seems unassailable. For most of the time the ascent is a hard, unrewarding slog but just occasionally the surrounding mist lifts and it is possible to catch a brief glimpse of an unexplored route ahead. As the sun suddenly bursts through the clouds, illuminating the sharp outline and magnificence of the mountain, the spirits rise to its challenge and with renewed energy you set off up a new and exciting path. Such a path suddenly appeared in front of me, and its total strangeness took my breath away. So began an adventure which lasted seven years and took me to unexplored lands. This adventure widened my vision and introduced me to many different peoples in every walk of life; it created a path along which I was able to progress more rapidly for the experience.

At the beginning of July, 1949, I was posted to Headquarters No 65 Group at RAF Hendon. At the same time the Court Circular of *The Times* announced that ‘Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip have appointed Squadron Leader Beresford Horsley as Equerry for the period of one year’. I proudly affixed the Royal Cyphers on to the shoulder of my best blue uniform and awaited the call.

It was not long before I had the first indication of the difficulties I was going to experience. The Royal Air Force had never been a steady source of recruits for Royal Household posts as had the Army and Royal Navy. Appointments often ran through well established families from father to son. There were obvious reasons for this: we were a new Service formed from a hotch potch of Army and Naval recruits, united only by their dedication to an independent flying force and love of the freedom of the air. Flying required different disciplines and skills and so attracted a different breed of person, perhaps appearing casual and reckless on the ground but always fearless in the air. We had little or no family tradition to build on, we had no Dartmouth or Wellington to catch the sons of Naval and Army fathers at puberty. Before the Second World War, regular officers were trained at Cranwell and the balance was made up by short-service commissioned officers, little love being lost between the two breeds. The rapid expansion immediately before the War attracted the best type of adventurer from the old Commonwealth. We recruited comparatively few public schoolboys. Of course there were exceptions like Peter Townsend who, when I was appointed an Equerry, was considered more ‘Palace’ than RAF.

So, with a foot in both camps, I soon discovered that the RAF viewed my own position with suspicion and distrust; they were two-faced about it, applauding the benefits and publicity, but making life on occasions as difficult as possible. You would not have

thought it very difficult for the Air Ministry to arrange a couple of three-year postings in the London area; they had plenty of options to choose from. Instead they did the opposite by posting me six times in three years – an average of once every six months! First to RAF Hendon, then in command of RAF North Weald, to Headquarters No 11 Group at Uxbridge, to the Staff College at Bracknell, to Fighter Command Headquarters at Bentley Priory and finally to command No 29 Squadron at RAF Tangmere. These six moves involved me in considerable family upheaval and additional expense. Up until 1952 I had to live on my Squadron Leader's pay, at that time £1,300 a year, undertaking two jobs at once, travelling extensively, with two different sets of clothing and at the same time educating a son at the Dragon School. Fortunately I had a tolerant bank manager who was also an ardent Royalist and was determined to finance me.

Money was always a problem in the early years, but things improved later when I was promoted Wing Commander and received a legacy under the will of my uncle. After reading Sir Frederick Ponsonby's book *Recollections of Three Reigns* I discovered that things had not changed very much and I quote a couple of passages from the book which had a familiar ring:

> As my duties as Equerry to the Queen only occupied four months in the year, I had to serve as a soldier for the remaining eight. In those days this presented no real difficulty, but, despite the fact that most of my four months' duty as Equerry had to come out of my leave, I soon incurred the wrath of my commanding officer on account of my absences from the battalion. He suddenly became very democratic, and said that it was monstrous that I should count as an ordinary officer in the battalion when I was so often away. But as my position was laid down in regulations, he could do no more than make caustic remarks on the subject.

Ponsonby went on to write that the War Office:

> thought it preposterous that an Equerry should be drawing full pay from the Army and receive £500 p.a. for Equerry work. The Secretary of State wrote to King Edward VII to the effect that the Army proposed that Service Equerries should only hold the appointment for five years, that they should receive no Army pay, and that the five years should not count for pension. The King exploded with rage and the Army beat a hasty retreat.

However, it did seem that the financial plight of Equerries had become a good deal worse since 1901 as I received my service pay only (an extra five hundred pounds a year would have been a fortune even at 1953 rates).

My duties during the first year were negligible, so General Browning suggested that I do a second tour. I accompanied Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip on RAF occasions as well as carrying out my normal RAF duties. Apart from Aides de Camp to the King I was the only RAF officer, and a junior one at that, to wear Royal Cyphers and I found these picked me out from the crowd. I was naturally the subject of considerable jealousy and a few of my contemporaries could not resist the temptation to sink a knife in my back. At the same time I was also constantly courted as a minor dispenser of Royal favours – an introduction here, an invitation there. It was at times difficult to keep my sense of perspective.

In December, 1951, Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip set off on their first Australian Tour, travelling via Kenya. They appointed an Australian Wing Commander named Cowan as an Equerry for the tour, so, like Cinderella, I was left behind to look after the office at Clarence House, together with Leslie Treby, the Clerk Accountant. The Royal Party departed from London Airport and I was included in those who saw them off. It was a bitterly cold day and the King looked so ill and sad, almost as though he knew it would

be the last time that he saw his daughter. In January I took up my not so onerous duties at Clarence House which consisted of sorting the mail into two piles, one for forwarding and the other which I could answer myself. The rest of the Royal Family, including the children, were at Sandringham.

On 6 February, 1952, the King died at Sandringham and my idle world collapsed. I suddenly found myself at the centre of the universe as Equerry to the Queen! Endless questions were directed at me. What to do with the children? How would the Royal couple come back? Would they go direct to Buckingham Palace? What flags should they fly there? And so on. I did my best to answer them, always with the quiet and efficient Leslie Treby at my side.

I received a signal from General Browning on the *Gothic*, the ship serving as a Royal Yacht for the tour, in Mombasa:

> From Browning
> To Admiralty for Horsley at Clarence House
> Please arrange aircraft to fly the staff and baggage left on *Gothic*. Parker will arrange return of Royal Party from Tree Tops.

This looked like a clear instruction. Consequently, at midnight I rang the duty Wing Commander at RAF Transport Command who proved extremely co-operative. He at once placed two Hastings aircraft on immediate standby. I established communication with the *Gothic* through Admiralty Signals and that night traffic flowed backwards and forwards between London and Mombasa. At dawn one Hastings took off for Mombasa and one to Cyprus.

> From Admiralty (Horsley)
> To Flag Officer Royal Yachts for Cowan
> One Hastings despatched Waddi Siedna, Khartoum, Mombasa and one further Hastings positioned at Timbo, Cyprus at six hours readiness.

Later on that morning a very angry Commander-in-Chief Transport Command rang me at Clarence House to ask what I was doing ordering his aircraft to fly round the world.

The final twist to this story was when the Royal footmen cleared the Hastings of the baggage. In their hurry they also removed the aircraft radios, raising a signal from Transport Command, ‘We don’t mind you borrowing our aircraft but please return their radios!’

On the day the Queen was due back I was sent for by Queen Mary who handed me a letter saying, ‘You are to see the Queen receives this first before she steps out of the aircraft.’ So off I went to London Airport and explained my mission to the Airport Commandant and to Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, who was waiting to receive the Queen. I went on board the aircraft and greeted Her Majesty with the words, ‘Ma’am, Queen Mary has asked me to give you this with instructions to read it before you get out of the aircraft.’ I can only imagine what it said.

* * *

There was considerable upheaval in the removal of the Household from Clarence House to Buckingham Palace, and a good deal of jockeying for position and space between the old staff and the new. It was easy to detect resentment on the part of the late King’s staff as, no

doubt, they felt threatened by the new régime. The Queen Mother and Princess Margaret moved to Clarence House; Group Captain Townsend accompanied them. Over the next year or so there were many changes as the Queen formed the team she wanted around her, and a lot of the old staff quietly disappeared. On General Browning's recommendation, I commandeered a fine, large office on the ground floor overlooking the garden. My tenure, however, lasted only a few days before I was moved out by one of the Queen's Assistant Private Secretaries, and was relegated to an attic on the second floor which had obviously been a part of the old servants' quarters, where through a low window you could just make out the forecourt of the Palace. It was clear who ruled the roost!

In May, 1952, I received a letter from General Browning to say that the Queen had directed that I should continue my duties as Equerry to Her Majesty. For the time being, therefore, I ceased my duties with Prince Philip. This again was not quite a simple arrangement within the Household structure. An Equerry normally did a full-time spell on duty followed by an equal spell off, returning to whatever other duties he was performing. However, I was occupying a full-time post in the RAF, but still on call. I don't think the Palace hierarchy liked this very much. An Equerry was very much at the bottom of the pecking order and usually took the stick when things went wrong; even the senior Palace servants put you in your place if you overstepped the mark.

At the end of June I was posted to RAF Tangmere to command No 29 Night Fighter Squadron, flying Meteor NF XIs. By the time I arrived at Tangmere my Household duties were occupying about thirty per cent of my time and the RAF the other seventy per cent. As any RAF jet squadron commander knows, his first operational command required one hundred per cent of his time. At the height of my seconding duties, the RAF had decided to give me this most demanding Service job. Both my Wing and Station Commanders were quite convinced I would fall flat on my back, but they hadn't taken into account that No 29 Squadron flew mostly at night, and there were after all still the daylight hours in which to perform my duties as an Equerry.

While at Tangmere I was involved in an embarrassing incident with my Station Commander. With the Queen's Review of the Royal Air Force at Odiham due in July of the following year, it had been decided, for whatever reason, to swap the Station Commanders of Odiham and Tangmere, so that Group Captain Sam Elworthy (a very senior Group Captain and very much on the rise, eventually ending up as Chief of the Defence Staff) went to Odiham and Group Captain John Kent, a very distinguished wartime fighter pilot and a Canadian, was moved to Tangmere. Unfortunately, Johnnie Kent took it as a personal slight both to himself and his country 'that a Canadian was not good enough to receive the Queen'. As I was tarred with the Royal brush, he proceeded to take it out on me, making my life as difficult as possible. But he finally accepted defeat when he was forced to see the Duke of Edinburgh off from his own station on an aircraft of the Royal Canadian Air Force on a tour of Canada accompanied by his Private Secretary, Commander Michael Parker, and one of his former Squadron Commanders, Squadron Leader Peter Horsley!

* * *

In April, 1953, Michael Parker asked me if I would like to join Prince Philip's Palace Staff full time. It was a big decision to make. It would mean being away from the Royal Air

Force, which wouldn't help my career at all. I discussed it with my Air Officer Commanding, Air Vice-Marshal the Earl of Bandon, who eventually said, 'Go ahead and take it, you won't get a second chance like this.'

Prince Philip's tour of Canada in 1954 was an ambitious one and covered an immense amount of British Columbia and North Canada. We took off in a VIP North Star of the RCAF flying to Vancouver where Prince Philip attended the Empire Games. There we were fortunate enough to see Roger Bannister grind Landy, the Australian, into the ground in an unforgettable sub-four-minute mile. From Vancouver we boarded a Catalina and flew northwards to Sandspit, Whitehorse, Fort Simpson, Port Radium, Coppermine and finally Yellowknife. By the time we arrived at Churchill I was quite exhausted and put Prince Philip into tropical kit to inspect a guard of honour at Churchill which was dressed in fur caps amid a snow-covered Canadian scene! Returning to Quebec, we joined the Royal Yacht *Britannia* and, with Prince Philip on board, I acted as I did on later occasions as Master of the Household. After a few days fishing on the Eagle River we steamed back to England.

While we were in Quebec there was one awful lunch party that I shall never forget. It was given by Prince Philip for approximately thirty Canadian guests on Saturday 14 August before sailing for Goose Bay, Labrador. The guests' seating plan had been sorted out in detail with the Governor's Office. It had to be done with particular sensitivity as there were French and English Canadians on it who had not spoken to each other for years. I gave the final seating plan to the Naval steward in charge of the dining room and said I would check the name places just before lunch. He appeared deeply insulted by this suggestion and said, 'I have been Head Steward of Royal Yachts for twenty five years, Sir, and no one has ever had to check my work.' 'All right,' I replied, 'I leave it entirely to you.'

Lunch was at one o'clock and at five to one I did go into the dining room to check the seating plan after all and found that he had placed the names north on south, in other words, the guests were on the wrong side of the table. I quickly told him to change them over but in a panic he gathered up all the cards and then muddled them. I quickly went through the passageway to brief Prince Philip not to bring his guests into lunch just yet, when I met him half-way, leading his guests in. There was nothing I could do to stop him. In fact, Prince Philip thoroughly enjoyed himself at the muddle for which I was responsible and said to his guests, 'Just sit anywhere'. I would have gladly disappeared had a hole opened up in front of me but, in fact, I was told later by the Governor's Office that the party was a great success and that people had actually talked to each other.

Thereafter I sailed many times on the Royal Yacht and my relations with the crew, who were jammed tightly in the rear of the ship while I was accommodated in the Royal apartments, were mixed. I used to visit the officers in their Wardroom and infuriate them by referring in non-seamanlike jargon to the front end, the rear end, up the stairs and the chimney. However, they got their own back when I was laid low by the most dreadful seasickness by sending me down bowls of hot stew with their compliments.

I had my thirty-fourth birthday on one trip in the Mediterranean. It sometimes happened that when the fruit bowl was passed around at dinner and it arrived at me all the peaches had gone. I complained bitterly to the Royal stewards about this. So, on my birthday, they

saw that I got a peach with the following note attached:

> Three Dinner Parties we have had,
> No Peach for you – how very sad,
> Now today you're THIRTY FOUR,
> One PEACH for you and then NO more.'

Prince Philip had decided it would be a boost for the yachting fraternity if he took *Britannia* to Cowes and used it as a base during Cowes Week. This helped tremendously in turning Cowes into the sailing Mecca of the world. However, at the time it aroused considerable adverse comment from the press. I gradually became involved in Prince Philip's sailing activities. I was a poor learner, but, once he had been given *Coweslip* and *Bluebottle* as a wedding present, I was propelled more and more into the Cowes yachting scene. I do not know when Prince Philip met Uffa Fox but the friendship ripened rapidly. Uffa's wartime stories were a constant source of amusement. He used to wage a continual battle with the local police inspector over petrol, since Uffa took little notice of the regulations for rationing. He was finally caught and hauled up before the local magistrate.

He got his own back a week or so later when a German bomber was shot down over the Isle of Wight. The crew were seen to bail out but then disappeared into thin air with the local police hunting them all over the island. After a few days Uffa rang the local inspector and said, 'You can now come and get them'. The whole crew had been hiding in splendid luxury, eating the best food, in Uffa's spare bedroom at his Puck house.

I was passed out as a full crew member, having been taught by Uffa Fox to sail in *Coweslip*. We did in fact win a famous race from Cowes to Yarmouth in a near gale. It took six hours and I do not think anyone else but Uffa Fox could have made it. If the yacht had sunk, which it nearly did on several occasions, we had little hope of being saved. I shall never forget the sight of Uffa with the wind howling around him, swearing like a trooper, shouting 'Bail, Peter, bail for your life!' I was a Squadron Leader at the time and from then on Uffa referred to me as a 'Squadron Bailer'. Some time later, when I was promoted Wing Commander, I crewed with Prince Philip and Mike Parker on *Bluebottle* in an important race. We rounded a buoy with Prince Philip in the lead and were just in front of the Royal Yacht Squadron when the spinnaker jammed and Prince Philip shouted at me to pull it down, which I did. Unfortunately the sail fell about my head and I slipped overboard and lost him the race. That evening at the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club dinner Uffa Fox in a speech to the assembled company said, 'But for that bloody "Wing Comedian" Prince Philip would have won the race.' So from then on I was referred to by Uffa and his cronies not as Squadron Bailer, but as the Wing Comedian.

There are some sands called the Brambles between Cowes and Southampton which are uncovered every few years. On one occasion Uffa Fox organized a cricket match and persuaded the Governor of Parkhurst Prison to produce a motley crew of warders against a team composed of Mike Parker, the Isle of Wight MP, myself and a load of locals. It was a rough and blistering day and the teams were ferried out to the sands which were due to show around four o'clock. This they duly did, measuring fifty yards by twenty, and on that little strip we set up the stumps. The bat was an oar and the ball was a tennis ball. Unfortunately the field was full of water-filled sand holes and several players disappeared

up to their necks in water, including the governor, running for the ball. As the sea got rougher, the wind got wilder and the light got darker, the troopship *Empire Orwell* steamed past on a trooping run from the Far East. It must have really brought the soldiers back to England – the sight of twenty-four wild-looking men playing cricket in the middle of Southampton Water. The whistles started and well over four thousand troops cheered us on.

On one occasion, when *Britannia* arrived back with the Queen from Malta, Uffa Fox sent me a letter as follows:-

15th April 1954

My dear Peter,

At 7 pm the *Britannia* steamed by St Catherine's Point in a calm sea and she looked majestical and most inspiring.

I thought of those on board as she steamed on out away into the darkness, with her escort vessel, and I caused Niton radio to send a message to Sir Frederick Browning on board to say that she was an inspiring sight as she went by – for, as you know, I have a house at Puckaster Cove.

A lot of criticism has been levelled at this vessel on her looks but, to a seaman's eye, she looked sturdy and strong, sensible and seamanlike – in spite of all that she had an air of majesty about her.

Thought you would like to know all this.

Best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Uffa

It is a terrible tragedy that the Royal Yacht is now going to be ditched.

* * *

When I joined Prince Philip's staff full time, there were only three of us: General Browning, Treasurer and Comptroller; Michael Parker, Private Secretary; and myself, Equerry. It was an enormously busy staff and I was only too glad to act, in effect, as Michael Parker's assistant. He explained my job to me. I was to be responsible for all general correspondence; all programmes and travel arrangements covering land, air and sea; and all Prince Philip's flying arrangements. To help me in all this, I was given a full-time secretary.

We soon got into a pattern on the visits programmes. Michael Parker, in conjunction with Prince Philip, decided on the general policy, planning and pattern of visits, apportioning them out between Industry and the three Services. He would undertake the correspondence up to the point at which the visit was agreed and the date fixed. Thereafter it was turned over to me to arrange in detail, covering the method of travel and submitting the final programme for Prince Philip's approval. As far as Service visits were concerned, I initiated those to the RAF, Mike Parker to the Navy and General Browning to the Army.

As a small staff, we managed to get through an immense amount of work. However, we sometimes trod on a lot of toes in doing so and this was clearly demonstrated by the saga of the helicopter. Prior to the Coronation the streets of London were extremely crowded, particularly around the Palace, and it became almost impossible to move. Prince Philip had a number of engagements, particularly with Commonwealth Army units preparing for the Coronation and stationed on the outskirts of London. It was impossible to rely on cars so he asked, 'Why not by helicopter.' As usual I went at it like a bull in a china shop and found myself in the middle of an almighty row which I believe was the start of Prince Philip's rather adverse view of the Air Council, who, he believed, were blocking him by

over-insuring his safety. The Secretary of State for Air was responsible for all flying by the Royal Family and their safety in the air. In the past there had been no problems with such arrangements. All air travel was left entirely in the hands of the Captain of the Queen's Flight, Air Commodore Mouse Fielden, and no member of the Royal Family queried his decisions, and yet here was a young Squadron Leader ringing up the Air Ministry direct and ordering a helicopter to land on the lawn at Buckingham Palace! There was a stunned silence for a very short period until all hell broke loose. I was told very emphatically that it was not Government policy for any of the Royal Family to use helicopters as they were still not proven as a safe method of travel. Also it would be better if I kept my nose out of this sort of business as it was nothing to do with me.

Prince Philip had an engagement on a Monday and wanted to travel by helicopter. When I went to see him on the Sunday morning I had to tell him that I had still drawn a blank. He was extremely angry and his view was that 'If I want a helicopter I am going to get one and if the Royal Air Force won't provide me with one then tell the Royal Navy to'. So I rang up the Fifth Sea Lord at his home and passed on Prince Philip's message to him, saying that he wanted a Royal Navy helicopter to land on the Buckingham Palace lawn on Monday morning! The Fifth Sea Lord's attitude was very refreshing: 'Get on to the Royal Naval Air Base at Ford and make the arrangements direct.' The chosen pilot, Lieutenant Commander Spedding, came to see me on Sunday evening and we planned a suitable route out of the Palace. The flight was accomplished without bother, but we returned to a most awful storm. It appeared that everyone was going to get the sack – the Secretary of State for Air, the Fifth Sea Lord, and myself! Prince Philip's attitude was 'nonsense' and the flights continued unofficially in this way for some time. Meanwhile Prince Philip asked me to undertake a study of helicopter safety from the records of their accidents. I spent about a week at the Old Sarum helicopter unit studying the records on helicopters over a number of years and, indeed, did some flying on them myself. The conclusion of this study was that it was a safe and acceptable method of travel, but for Prince Philip alone at this time.

During all this period of aggravation Mouse Fielden sat on the fence. I think that he rather hoped that, given enough rope, I would hang myself. Eventually the Secretary of State for Air faced up to the fact that this method of travel was going to continue and that it would be better if the Royal Air Force took it over and operated it under his authority. It still took the RAF a long time to put it into effect and meanwhile the Royal Navy continued with the task splendidly. I don't believe Mouse Fielden ever really forgave me for winning that battle, as he saw that I was becoming a potential threat to his own little empire. Nevertheless, when he saw which way the wind was blowing he came down on the side of helicopter travel and we worked out an acceptable route out of the Palace via the Thames and the Parks so that, if an engine failed, a forced landing on an open space was always possible.

* * *

One of my first duties as Equerry to Prince Philip was the Coronation in June, 1953. I received an invitation from the Earl Marshal to be in attendance on the Duke of Edinburgh on Coronation Day. This involved taking part in a number of rehearsals beforehand, standing around in the Abbey while various intricate manoeuvres were worked out until

the whole pattern was finally woven into one colourful pageant. The rehearsal programme for the week before the Coronation was a heavy one. For the first and last time I got into full RAF Ceremonial Dress, which had been last used before the Second World War (and was never used again after the Coronation). I had to hire it from Moss Bros at considerable expense.

At the same time Prince Philip asked me to take care of the younger members of his family. His three sisters had all married German princelings, the Princes of Hanover, Hohenlohe-Langenburg and the Margrave of Baden, who between them had a number of children aged between seventeen and twenty years. They had all been invited to stay at the Palace for the Coronation. I was provided with an unlimited expense account and told to see that they all enjoyed themselves during their stay. These young people included Princess Margarita of Baden, Prince Max of Baden, Prince Kraft of Hohenlohe-Langenburg, Princess Christina of Hesse, Princess Dorothea of Hesse and Princess Beatrix of Hohenlohe.

It turned out like a tale from a Dornford Yates novel. When I agreed to look after them I had not realized exactly what I had let myself in for. They were all very young and exuberant and I think this was the first time they had been allowed out by themselves; they were therefore determined to make the most of it! After a hard day's work, my evenings began at about eight o'clock and lasted well into the dawn when, on tiptoe, I shepherded them back along the corridors of Buckingham Palace. It was quite enjoyable for two or three days, but towards the end my energy began to flag!

Coronation Day broke out wet and windy and I felt sorry for the thousands of people who had slept out on the streets lining the route. While the weather outside was appalling, the scene inside the Abbey glittered. The ceremony marked the start of a new reign whose future looked auspicious, Hillary had just climbed Everest and millions of Her Majesty's subjects around the world watched as the Royal couple put new wine into old bottles. The Queen was radiant that day, unbowed by the family troubles that lay a long way ahead.

* * *

I had already begun to promote the idea of Prince Philip learning to fly. After a discussion with him it was decided that I should go ahead and make the necessary arrangements with the RAF and I therefore approached the Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Training), Air Vice-Marshal the Earl of Bandon (Paddy Bandon). So Operation Thrush was born.

From the start the Air Ministry thought that Prince Philip wanted to learn to fly merely to obtain his RAF flying badge before being promoted to a higher rank. At that time he was an Air Commodore without wings. Had they known the extent of Prince Philip's ambition, they would, I believe have funked it, for we saw the final objective to be his flying his own personal aircraft. I believe he rather envied Prince Bernhard's ability to do that. I also believe that the RAF would have been prepared to fiddle his wings for him rather than risk his going solo. However, after a number of meetings, it was finally agreed that the training syllabus should be based on a normal pattern, although a lot of restrictions were included.

Prince Philip's flying would take place at RAF White Waltham from a temporary hut built for the purpose. A couple of Chipmunks were procured and 'Rainbow' was allocated

as Prince Philip's personal call sign. The Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Home Command had overall responsibility and both he and his Senior Air Staff Officer behaved rather like a pair of frightened rabbits, doing their best to make flying so difficult that it was sometimes impossible; they made their own flesh creep. Flight Lieutenant Caryl Gordon was appointed Prince Philip's instructor and turned out to be a very thrustful officer and a dedicated pilot. He and Prince Philip got on extremely well, but poor Caryl was often in trouble for breaking or bypassing the various regulations laid down for Prince Philip's safety. It had also been agreed that I should teach Commander Parker how to fly, as this would possibly provide a little competition for Prince Philip. So the flying started and Prince Philip took to it like a duck to water, graduating from the Chipmunk to the Harvard.

I attended many meetings on Operation Thrush both at Home Command and with Paddy Bandon at the Air Ministry. One day I was the object of a typical Paddy Bandon practical joke. I had occasion to visit him to discuss the progress of Operation Thrush and at the end of the meeting he signed my security pass, which was the normal procedure. I did not see what he had written on it, but on trying to leave the building I was astounded when I was detained by the security officer to whom I had handed my pass. Paddy had written on the pass, 'Arrest this man. He is a Russian spy.' Anything less like a Russian spy than I with my bowler and furled umbrella would have been difficult to imagine. Yet, despite my protestations, I was detained for an hour whilst the security officer attempted to contact Paddy, who deliberately refused to answer his telephone. Finally I was allowed to leave after convincing my captors that I was, in fact, a genuine Royal Air Force officer.

I recounted this incident to Michael Parker on my return to the Palace and we decided that on a suitable occasion we would give Paddy a dose of his own medicine. A chance came a few days later when Mike and I accompanied Prince Philip on a visit to the Central Medical Establishment in High Holborn. There we happened to listen to the recording of a Vampire jet at full throttle, it being part of a test to determine high tone deafness. After confiding the plot to Prince Philip, I borrowed the recording and took it back to the Palace. The next morning I put a top priority call from the palace exchange through to ACAS (Training) and in a pretended state of extreme agitation shouted down the telephone, 'For heaven's sake, Sir, there is one of your training aircraft beating up the Palace,' and then put the recording on. Paddy shouted back above the scream of the jet, 'Get his number, Peter, get his number quickly.' 'I missed it, Sir, but I'll get it when it comes round again. Oh heavens, the Queen is on the other line now asking what on earth is going on.' I continued to play this game for some ten minutes before quietly putting the telephone down. In the opinion of the players it was one game all.

Prince Philip was presented with his wings on 4 May, 1953, at Buckingham palace by the Chief of the Air Staff in the presence of the Queen, the Secretary of State for Air, the Commander-in-Chief Home Command, Mouse Fielden, Michael Parker, Caryl Gordon and myself.

I could never get Mike Parker to take his own flying very seriously, although in the end he did manage to go solo. After Prince Philip had done some flying, he graduated to a Devon. I do not know where the Devon came from but it was in a terrible condition when it arrived and a lot of work had to be done to get it up to scratch. In the end we finished up

with a useful stable of aircraft under Operation Thrush: two Chipmunks, a Harvard, a Provost, a Meteor and a Devon.

Eventually we had to decide on the future, particularly the question of a personal aircraft for Prince Philip. HRH asked me to study a number of aeroplanes for this purpose and I looked at a Devon, a Pembroke and a Heron and finally submitted a very short memorandum on the pros and cons of each type. The RAF wanted the Pembroke because it was already in service and would thus be easy to procure. The Devon was not really satisfactory for the job, and what Prince Philip really wanted was the ability to fly from London to Balmoral with up to six passengers. For this task there was not much to choose between a Pembroke and a Heron. There were some snags with the Pembroke's range and Prince Philip finally made the decision for the Heron. Then our trouble really started.

I had been dealing with Group Captain Wheeler in Operational Requirements and Peter de Havilland at Hatfield. I was also keeping Mouse Fielden in the picture but was never quite certain whose side he was on. We got quite a simple specification for the aircraft and it looked as though the cost would be in the region of fifty thousand pounds, with the aircraft delivered in three to four months. Unfortunately the Ministry of Aircraft Production got wind of what we were doing and announced that it was their job to order aircraft for the RAF and from that moment on everything went sour. We got into an area of large design conferences of thirty to forty people all trying to put their little bit in and this became quite infuriating. Some six months later we ended up with an aircraft which would hardly get off the ground as it was so heavily loaded with safety equipment and the cost had gone up to one hundred and fifty thousand pounds with little sign of it ever flying. All this included extraordinary precautions such as highly stressed seats, fire precautions for fire precautions and even the insistence on having ashtrays large enough to take cigars, despite the fact that the gentleman was told endlessly that Prince Philip did not smoke cigars and did not even want ashtrays. Things got so bad that I got Mouse Fielden, Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Operational Requirements), Geoffrey Tuttle and Peter de Havilland together and started again from scratch, throwing everything out. Prince Philip was in Australia but I kept him in touch with developments. Finally we got more or less what we wanted but at a very inflated price, and very late.

Visitors

In the comer of this elegant room there was a small, peculiar alcove curtained off from the rest of the apartment.

During my last two or three years at the Palace I had become increasingly interested in reports of unidentified flying objects (UFOs) and these were to lead me down a very strange path indeed. In the early 1950s there had been an increasing number of newspaper reports, magazine articles and books on the subject. Many of these stories, emanating from the United States, were being repeated and dramatized in British newspapers. The subject caught the imagination of the public, particularly during Coronation year, which seemed so rich in the promise of a new golden age of discovery and achievement. Mount Everest had been conquered and Man at last seemed about to break the bonds which in the past had held him so firmly to Earth.

My own interest was aroused because many reports came from airmen like myself and it was only natural that on long journeys the subject of space travel should be a topic for discussion. As always, Prince Philip's mind was open to the immense possibilities of new technology leading to space exploration, while at the same time not discounting that, just as we were on the fringe of breaking out into space, so other older civilizations in the universe might have already done so. Prince Philip agreed that I could investigate the more credible reports provided I kept it all in perspective and did not involve his office in any kind of publicity or sponsorship. Mike Parker thought it a reasonable proposition and came along with me for the ride, always with his great sense of fun enquiring, 'How are your little green men getting on?' After a time we all became enthusiastic saucer fans but as time went on Boy Browning began to take it too seriously and perhaps lost some objectivity.

Sightings

There were many difficulties separating fact from fiction. From experience I found that there were four general categories of reported sightings; those from:

– objective observers with no self-interest
– a growing body of people promoting sightings for mercenary reasons or self-advertisement
– observers suffering from flying saucer psychosis or mental illness, and finally
– practical jokers.

At first I had to be sure that my sources of information were secure and that neither I nor the office were being taken in for publicity purposes. This became a difficult judgement to make when I talked to authors of books and articles on the subject since they obviously wanted to promote their products. However, I am not aware that confidence was ever betrayed, which says a lot for the wide variety of people with whom I became involved.

My first move was to go straight to that unimpeachable source of records of unidentified flying objects within British airspace, the Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief Fighter Command at Stanmore, Air Marshal Sir Thomas Pike, who later became Chief of Air Staff. I had previously served on his staff when he was Air Officer Commanding No 11 Fighter Group. Tom Pike was a man of great sincerity and honesty and certainly did not treat me or the subject as a joke. He admitted that, as Commander-in-Chief and responsible for the integrity of our air space, he was concerned about reports of UFOs both from pilots and radar which might indicate that it was being violated.

He went on to say that incidents were logged on a standard reporting pro forma and were then examined by the scientific staffs in both Fighter Command and the Ministry of Defence. He explained that to date there was no firm evidence to support any conclusions that our air space was being penetrated by either the Russians or by alien forces. Most incidents had logical explanations, the commonest being meteorological balloons and meteorites. But he readily agreed that there was a hard core of about five per cent of the reports that could not be satisfactorily explained. He was prepared to keep an open mind on the origin of such objects, although he did not believe they came from the Soviet Union. Sir Thomas told me that the United States Defence Authorities were also concerned and had gone so far as to distribute standard reporting forms for pilots to complete on sighting UFOs, and that there had been many such reports. However, the Americans were extremely sensitive about their interest in the subject, either because they feared ridicule or, which he thought more likely, they believed that UFOs had a Soviet origin. He doubted whether I would get any information out of them, but as far as Fighter Command was concerned, I had *carte blanche* to read any reports and interview pilots.

After this very frank discussion, I wrote off to an old friend, Group Captain Bird-Wilson, who was serving on the British Defence Staff in Washington, requesting information on the official US attitude. In due course he wrote back confidentially to the effect that ‘yes’ the American authorities were collecting and evaluating reports but were not prepared to discuss them or give information about any conclusions which they might have reached.

At the beginning of November, 1953, I received a telephone call from Fighter Command about a possible sighting made by a night fighter crew stationed at RAF, West Mailing. I arranged, with the connivance of the Station Commander, to visit the station in the guise of a recent night fighter Squadron Commander keeping himself up-to-date on any-new tactical developments. In the course of this visit I was introduced quite informally to the pilot, Flying Officer T. S. Johnson and his navigator, Flying Officer G. Smythe. On the morning of 3 November, they had been detailed to carry out a day sector reconnaissance at 20,000 feet in their Vampire night fighter in the Metropolitan Sector. Johnson, as pilot, was scanning the sky around him while Smythe occupied himself with his radar and navigation. Johnson suddenly spotted what appeared to be a stationary bright object ahead and well above him. He drew Smythe’s attention to it. At first they thought it was a day star. Within a few seconds the object began to move and finally passed well over their heads at what they described as ‘a very high speed’. The visible detail was such that they could tell it was circular and brightly illuminated around the edges.

Although both officers realized that they could be ridiculed by their own colleagues and

the authorities, they reported the sighting on landing and their report was passed through to Fighter Command Headquarters.

Two experimental meteorological balloons had been released that day and were immediately connected to the crew's sighting. But Johnson and Smythe told me quite emphatically that the object which passed over them was travelling at over 1000 miles an hour and, whatever else it might have been, it was not a balloon. This belief was also supported by the Station Commander, their Squadron Commander and their fellow aircrew.

Aircrew, particularly fighter pilots, are trained and become extremely experienced in judging the speed of objects in the air in relation to themselves, since most of their missions involve intercepting other aircraft from a variety of angles, including head-on at closing speeds in excess of 1000 miles an hour. West Mailing was part of the London and Metropolitan Sector and crews became very familiar with a wide variety of civil and military traffic crossing the sector from a variety of directions and altitudes; in such circumstances judging speed and direction was second nature.

Johnson and Smythe described the object as darting past them at great speed. Balloons just do not behave in that fashion. The maximum speed balloons might reach in a jet stream could be as high as 100–150 miles an hour but no jet stream was reported that day. I did not believe they were exaggerating about what they saw and described to me. They both realized they could be medically suspect; in fact they were given a medical examination immediately following their report. This pronounced them physically and mentally fit for operational flying. The official explanation was that the object was most likely a balloon, although there were hints that the crew might have suffered from oxygen shortage. However, had Johnson and Smythe experienced oxygen starvation or contamination it was unlikely that their stories would have been the same. The newspapers speculated on the existence of a secret, high-speed, experimental aircraft but we had no such aircraft flying at that time and it was unlikely the Russians would send an experimental aircraft over London for all to see.

Another factor emerged which I did not investigate personally. An object was tracked by radar on the same day behaving in a similar manner, moving from stationary to high speed over a considerable height band. As I had not interviewed the operators, I discounted this report as corroborative evidence. My conclusions, based solely on my interview with Johnson and Smythe, were:

– They were sound physically and mentally at the time of the sighting
– They were objective reporters
– The UFO was travelling very fast and
– It was not a balloon or another aircraft.

Having investigated this sighting as fully as the available evidence would allow, I submitted a report to the Duke of Edinburgh, saying that I was satisfied that the Vampire crew were perfectly reliable. I added that an air defence radar seemed to have confirmed the observation – an object had been plotted at some 63,000 feet at about the same time and in the same vicinity. It had apparently been stationary for some time and then moved off at very great speed. If, when I obtained the actual radar report, these facts were

confirmed, it would seem that this was one of the very few UFO sightings that were difficult to refute. I added that the new radar at the Royal Radar Establishment at Malvern, which could scan up to 65,000 feet, had been picking up a number of objects flying at considerable heights and very high speeds, although no visual confirmation of any of these had been obtained.

Though not a trained interrogator, I was quite satisfied in my own mind that what Johnson and Smythe had seen was a genuine UFO. The story was published in the national press, and the description given of the object – circular with a bright luminous periphery – tallied with those in many other reports.

Over the next two months I read a large number of the reports coming into Fighter Command Headquarters – visual sightings both from the air and from the ground and tracks from radar stations. On analysis, the majority could be eliminated by natural occurrences – meteorites, aircraft glinting in the sun, balloons, high-flying jets, kites and so on. There were, of course, also reports from cranks and practical jokers, but always the small percentage which could not be explained. The trouble was that UFOs were elusive; they refused to be caught or to communicate. Very seldom did visual and radar reports match exactly, but very occasionally this did occur, as happened in a report from RAF, Little Rissington, the Central Flying School responsible for training flying instructors.

An instructor and his pupil-instructor were carrying out a high-level sortie in a tandem-seater Meteor Mk VII – the pupil in the front seat, the instructor in the rear. The front pilot observed a circular flying object some distance away, dead ahead, filling about three inches of his windscreen which was approximately two feet across. He had no previous knowledge of or interest in UFOs. The object was so strange that he immediately assumed that he had oxygen failure and informed his instructor who took over control and turned the aircraft through forty-five degrees. He then saw the object and the two pilots confirmed its description to each other. The instructor immediately reported the incident to Little Rissington Air Traffic Control, who were not aware of any traffic in the vicinity of the Meteor and instructed him to approach closer. The crew turned again towards the object, opening up to full power. At Mach. 8 they gained quite rapidly but when the circular object filled half their windscreen, it suddenly turned on its side ‘like a plate’ (their words) and climbed away out of sight at great speed. It was not possible to estimate its size because they did not know its distance. Their description was similar to other reports – circular and emitting an iridescent light around its edges.

Meanwhile in Fighter Command, Southern Sector radar reported to Sector Operations an unidentified aircraft travelling through the sector. This was not an unusual occurrence since flight plans detailing civil movements occasionally went astray. All unidentified blips were treated as hostile until positively identified and on this occasion a pair of stand-by fighters were scrambled from Tangmere. At the sector radar head the Little Rissington Meteor appeared on the tube closing in on the unidentified blip which then moved rapidly across the screen at an estimated speed of over 1000 miles an hour. Unfortunately, as the Meteor closed, it disappeared into a patch of ground clutter so it was never possible to measure the final distance between the two and so estimate the size of the UFO. The Tangmere aircraft never made contact with it. This incident was reported to me, but unfortunately, as I was just leaving the country on an overseas tour, I was unable to

interview the crew.

My next source of information was the civil airlines. One day I read in a national newspaper the story of a BOAC flight into Gander where the captain, crew and one or two passengers had seen a flight of UFOs. I telephoned a contact in the Corporation and obtained the captain's private telephone number, called him and arranged an appointment for him to come and see me at my office in Buckingham Palace. I asked him to bring a copy of his written official report, which he did and which I filed.

Captain Howard arrived promptly at the Palace in uniform and was shown into my office. He was slightly overawed, as I intended he should be, since, if he was solely seeking publicity, this experience might unnerve him. However, he was exactly what one might expect a BOAC captain to look like: middle-aged, well-built, smartly turned out, with a neat moustache. He was quietly confident and precise and I could easily imagine him at the controls of a large airliner – just the sort of man passengers would trust. Captain Howard told me that he was embarrassed by the attention he was receiving and disliked the publicity and medical inspections forced upon him. Nevertheless, he and his crew had seen the UFOs and had felt it their duty to report them. One or two of their passengers had seen them as well and informed the newspapers, and that was how it had all got out.

The UFOs were first seen by another crew member about 150 miles from Gander inbound. They were flying in formation to starboard and constantly changed position. All crew members confirmed these sightings. The objects were circular and emitted a bright light around their edges. Captain Howard had informed Gander and was told that the Americans had scrambled a pair of fighters after them. Eventually the UFOs turned away and disappeared at great speed. He flew on and landed at Gander to refuel. He had received no reports from the Americans, although he was aware of the interest being taken of sightings in the Newfoundland area. He told me that he had no idea what they were except that he felt they were far too advanced in speed and manoeuvrability to be some secret Soviet reconnaissance aircraft.

My next visitors to the Palace were very unusual. In early 1954 two boys saw what can only be described as an inverted plate or saucer hovering close to the ground on the slopes of Coniston Old Man in Lancashire and snapped it with a Brownie camera. I invited the two boys, Stephen Darbyshire and his cousin, Adrian Myer, together with Stephen Darbyshire's father, to see me. I was impressed by their story and truthfulness. Stephen Darbyshire's father was not relishing the publicity and notoriety the family were receiving from the newspapers. I got Wallace Heaton to examine the negatives and his report said, 'Yes, they could have been faked but they were so good it would have cost quite a sum of money on props, etc.' Who then would have put up the money, and was there a wider conspiracy?

At about this time Boy Browning was introduced to Desmond Leslie and through him to George Adamski, who wrote a book called *Flying Saucers Have Landed*. In due course I met both men. I was not impressed with either – quite different from some of the objective observers I had interviewed. I felt Desmond Leslie was probably sincere but gullible, sucked into the saucer cult by people who hoped to profit from it such as Adamski. I advised Boy against having anything to do with them, although he continued to have contact with Desmond Leslie for a few years.

* * *

Janus

After Terence was killed in 1948 his widow married Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Barratt who had retired from the RAF at the end of the war. I came to know him extremely well and we often met in London during the time that I was serving as an Equerry, particularly since he was Gentleman Usher to the Sword of State. He had expressed considerable interest in my UFO study and introduced me to an old friend, General Martin, who told me that he believed flying saucers were extra-terrestrial vehicles from a highly developed planet whose inhabitants were trying to warn us of the perils of nuclear war.

This was heady stuff but I knew that there are always a number of senior retired officers who are attracted to all sorts of fringe cults, most likely out of boredom; spiritualism was a popular one and Lord Dowding the keenest adherent from the RAF, but flying saucers were beginning to collect their recruits.

I felt that both Arthur Barratt and General Martin belonged to this category but I was not myself looking for a new fad. Nevertheless, I was quite prepared to discuss UFOs with them and any of their friends who were interested.

One day General Martin rang me at my office and arranged for me to meet a Mrs Markham one night at her Chelsea flat; I agreed and drove out of the Palace gates on a damp and misty winter's evening wondering what sort of occasion I was in for: the intense chatter, inevitable sherry and biscuits, the gushing goodbyes and promises of further meetings. It was only too easy to get sucked into this sort of society.

I was completely wrong, although Mrs Markham and the flat in Smith Street filled the part all right. There was only one other occupant in the second floor drawing room and I was introduced to Mr Janus. It was difficult to describe him with any accuracy; the room was poorly lit by two standard lamps and for most of the time he sat in a deep chair by the side of a not very generous fire. In fact I never really got any physical impression of him. After the introductions I was guided to a twin chair on the other side of the fire and Mrs Markham sank down on a sofa between us without offering either sherry or biscuits.

Without any preliminaries, Mr Janus dived straight into the deep end by asking me to tell him all I knew about UFOs. He listened patiently, only nodding his head from time to time. At the end I thought I might be as equally direct and asked Janus what his interest was. He answered me quite simply, 'I would like to meet the Duke of Edinburgh.'

It was such a direct request that it momentarily threw me off balance; although in the course of my duties I met many people who wanted to meet Prince Philip for a great variety of reasons, often for personal gain or publicity, they were never quite so direct as this. After some hesitation I replied that he must appreciate that this was not easy, since Prince Philip's programme of visits and visitors was always very full and had to be scrutinized closely. I was about to add particularly for security reasons but thought better of it in case this sounded insensitive. But it was here the strangeness of it all started – the man's extraordinary ability to read my thoughts. I asked him why he wanted to meet Prince Philip and he replied, 'Prince Philip is a man of great vision, a person of world renown and a leader in the realm of wildlife and the environment. He is a man who believes strongly in the proper relationship between man and nature which will prove of

great importance in future galactic harmony'. He continued, 'Naturally I understand it would be dangerous to let cranks loose on him, and perhaps you and I can discuss the subject first and you will be able to judge whether I am dangerous or not. Where would you like to start?'

'As an airman, one of the difficulties I have with the idea that UFOs fly here from another planet is the vast distances involved,' I said.

'That's a good start,' replied Janus. 'The distances involved are beyond conception to you, but cast your mind back to the astronomer peering at the moon through his rudimentary telescope three hundred years ago. Thinking in terms of the only transport he knew – feet, horses, carriages and ships – travel to the moon was inconceivable. It was only to men of great intellect and vision, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Jules Verne and your own H. G. Wells, who had the imagination to project their thoughts ahead to the distant future, that the impossible began to seem possible. So if we project our present knowledge ahead we too may get a glimpse of the future, although, just as they were considered cranks in their time, we may suffer the same fate too. Our brains have only developed to a fraction of their capacity but already we have seen the potential when Einstein reduced the fundamental process on which nature and the universe is bound together to the most frighteningly simple equation. Let us continue with this subject of distances,' Janus went on. 'History demonstrates that Man has constantly reached for goals beyond his immediate grasp. First of all travel was between groups and tribes, then between villages, regions, countries and finally between continents. Man has no intention of stopping here, so he is now striving to break his earthly bonds and travel to the moon and the planets beyond. But flight to the stars is Man's ultimate dream, although knowledge of the vast distances involved in interstellar flight make it appear only a dream. Yet perhaps after a hundred years or so, a mere ripple in the tide of time, exploration of his own solar system may be complete and it is just not in Man's nature to stop there any more than he was satisfied to remain in his own cave, for he will never accept confinement within any boundaries. Just as tribes found other tribes and Christopher Columbus discovered on his travels unknown centres of ancient civilizations, so Man in his journeys through the universe may find innumerable centres of culture far more ancient than his own.'

Janus paused for a moment, shifted in his chair and then went on, 'I realize that the distances outside the solar system seem impossible to comprehend in the present state of science and technology, and that travelling at speeds we now understand it would take far longer than the normal life span to reach the nearest planet outside the solar system, never mind return. However, apply the same projection we have done to distances – twenty-five miles per hour running, forty-five miles per hour on a horse, one hundred miles per hour in a car, two hundred miles per hour in an aeroplane and on to the speed of sound which many thought unbreakable yet was swept aside just as the so-called heat barrier in rockets will be too, and man-carrying vehicles of the future will accelerate to speeds of twenty thousand miles per hour and more. But even this is not fast enough for galactic travel.'

Janus continued without interruption as I sat quietly listening to what this strange man was saying. 'To our knowledge the speed of light is the finite speed; there is no physical barrier to achieving that speed given the technical means to accelerate to it. Einstein's theory sought to prove that an increase in mass with velocity stretched or dilated time

according to the same mathematical formula. This discrepancy is negligible at low speeds, but becomes finite at the speed of light, so to a beam of light in space time stands still. I am sure you are beginning to see what the Theory of Relativity means to a space traveller and that the impossible begins to look less impossible after all.

‘Travelling at normal weight and accelerating to the speed of light it would take a voyager thirty years to reach the centre of the Milky Way galaxy, one thousand light years away, and thirty years to return but in those sixty years, two million Earth years would have passed. The law of relativity would allow man to explore his galaxy by trading energy for time but it would be an unhappy journey if he knew that thousands or millions of years would have passed by the time he reached home. But if, as the theory of relativity postulates, time slows down, then it is possible that a return on a different tangent could speed it up so that our traveller would come back to a world only sixty years older where time had flowed and ebbed in between. Such a journey begins to be tolerable if you consider that, by travelling at close to the speed of light, a spacecraft could go to the nearest planet outside this solar system and return to Earth in three years.

‘It would take a voyager sixty years to travel to the centre of our galaxy and return, travelling at the speed of light, which is nearly a life span. However, equally important advances must come in anatomical science; the replacement of those parts in our body most susceptible to decay and failure, such as the heart, liver and kidneys. It is possible that with new discoveries in medicine, biochemistry and deep-freezing, it might be possible to prolong life indefinitely; in which case a journey of sixty years is of no significance.

‘You are thinking that I am now getting into the realms of science fiction.’ Again this strange man was reading my thoughts correctly and he went on, ‘But please use my rule of projections. You can no doubt remember what it was like to travel only twenty years ago; most people crossed the Atlantic in a ship and to do so in an aeroplane was an adventure. Compare the situation today and multiply all the advances in science, technology and knowledge since then by only a factor of five and I am sure you too would be accused of entering the realms of science fiction. It would be like plucking an aborigine out of a New Guinea forest and putting him down in New York or London. You would not have the language or common words to explain to him how a motor car or jet aircraft works, yet, in his own environment, he was, no doubt, convinced that up to that point his own tribal tools were the most advanced and his culture the most developed. So how can one describe the means of accelerating to the speed of light or interfering with the concept of time? Indeed, if we go forward a million years, the possibilities defy even our imagination: as yet undiscovered sources of power, different time tracks, speeds even faster than the speed of light. Could man have even gained mastery over death itself?

‘Our thoughts and projections have so far revolved around assumptions which have a reasonable scientific basis. I do not imagine you will disagree that provided Man overcomes his self-destructive excesses, he could have the means of travelling throughout the universe during the next few hundred years, at first in robot and computer-controlled spaceships, but then, just as he had to ascend Everest foot by painful foot, Man’s nature will drive him to feel for himself the awesome depth of space.

‘He will discover a wealth of experiences infinitely more startling and beautiful than

can be imagined: an infinite variety of agencies and forces as yet unknown: great fields of gravity and anti-gravity where objects are accelerated across space like giant sling shots, even other universes with different space and time formulae. The fictional story of a time machine has been written and sometimes the fiction of yesterday becomes today's reality. Would Jules Verne and H. G. Wells have been surprised by today's world of submarines, great flying machines, rockets and weapons of mass destruction? One feels they would have been quite at home.'

Pausing for only a few moments, Janus hurried on. 'So far we have only touched on the material and scientific aspects of journeying through space without considering the most important part – the Spirit of man and the designer who is Universal. Why does Man reach for the stars? His energies have never been solely directed towards material benefits alone. From the beginning of Man's history he has striven, sometimes hesitatingly, towards a spirituality and grace of which he was aware but could not totally comprehend. This drive to reach out beyond himself has been the motive power behind some of Man's finest achievements. The great builders of the Pyramids and cathedrals, the great artists and musicians, the great philosophical schools, the great travellers and explorers, were all inspired by this vision of spirituality and God. When Man has conquered for material gains alone, History leaves only a footprint, a barbaric Dark Age about which little is remembered or written.

'The belief in a God is age-old and even in primeval people removed from each other at opposite ends of the earth; this idea of a God supreme and omnipotent is incredibly ancient, so ancient that one must believe its seed was planted in the soul of the first Man: it is written in Genesis that God breathed into Man's nostrils the breath of life and Man became a living soul. So Man invading space for material gain or personal glorification alone will gain nothing, but Man searching to enrich his own spirituality and nature will come closer to understanding that God is Universal.

'The Earth is going through a Dark Age at the moment. Material possessions count more than a Man's soul. Like a child, man is preoccupied with his technological toys, which he believes will bring him riches and happiness. This shows up in the superficiality of his culture and a careless disregard for nature. In his greedy quest for more complex machines Man is prepared to sacrifice almost anything – his natural environment, animals and even his fellow humans. The dreadful spectre of blowing up his world hardly makes him falter in this headlong rush.

'Fortunately Dark Ages are usually followed by enlightened ones. If Man survives, he will come to his senses and realize that the material happiness he sought was illusory and the toys he had collected were intensely boring: hopefully he will turn back to the spirituality and development of a mind which has such unbelievable potential. The world could then enter a golden age of discovery when the greatest advances will be in the development of Man's mind. So little is known about the mind's ability and power to influence events and matter. Rudimentary experiments have already demonstrated that there is some response to mind over matter which defies scientific explanation. Christ, of course, had such powers to a miraculous degree and told us that if we too had faith we could move mountains.'

Janus paused and then said, 'Let us get back to the subject of flying saucers. You seem

to find it difficult to accept that intelligent life exists anywhere else in the universe or that it could have achieved the technology necessary for space travel. So let us discuss this logically. The generally accepted theory of the expanding universe states that it originated from the giant explosion of a vast area of high density gas which contained all the elements necessary for life and matter. These elements were blasted outwards, forming a backdrop behind the galaxies with their own solar and planetary systems. The universe is still expanding with far-flung galaxies disappearing out of sight of the present range of telescopes. If you accept this theory then all galaxies contain the elements necessary for life and matter; even at the very boundaries of the expansion, the original explosion is still distributing these elements. The expanding universe dispels any idea that space is a complete vacuum interspersed with islands and pockets of unidentified matter and that Earth is the only planet which contained the right ingredients and conditions for the creation of life. If you accept the theory of the expanding universe you accept that it is an ocean of galaxies with solar and planetary systems similar to our own. By the laws of probability there must be millions of planets in the universe supporting life, and within our own galaxy thousands supporting life more advanced than on Earth.

This is very difficult for Man to stomach with his vain belief of a God personal to him and him only; if he does even consider that intelligent life exists on other planets he invents such creatures with grotesque shapes and bodies, hostile to Man. But if there is a God, particularly the Christian one, it would surely be unlikely that he would actively discourage life where it could develop in the universe and dictate that enlightened life should only exist in one obscure planet on the edge of a galaxy. It is a safe scientific assumption, therefore, to say that life, far from being a rare phenomenon, is probably widely distributed throughout the universe.

‘If you accept this, go on to intelligent life. Earth is a young planet with its Sun a young mother. We may hazard a guess that other planets in our own solar system are unlikely to support life except in possibly rudimentary cellular form and are no more than uninhabited and hostile islands. But imagine a galactic solar system somewhere in space with conditions similar to Earth except that its Sun is in the autumn of its life. Provided its inhabitants have survived wars and alien invasion, it is impossible to imagine what super-technology and cultural advancement they have reached, any more than we can imagine the Earth and Man in a million and one hundred million years’ time when we see what he has managed in just a few thousand years. Perhaps in twenty years’ time manned rockets will be commonplace and the Earth will be girdled by satellites of all sorts and sizes. There will be great strides in the miniaturization of all our present technology, advances in navigational guidance and communication over vast distances. In a hundred years medical science will have advanced far enough for a manned spaceship to journey within our own galaxy carrying a complete set of spare organs. A thousand years may be just within our projections but a million years is quite beyond our imagination.

‘Most science fiction shows spacecraft crewed by intelligent animals intent on conquering the Earth. The Bible states that God created Man in his own image. Primeval Man thought so too, since his Gods were usually depicted in human form. Earth Man, in his supreme arrogance, believes that God only created him in his own image and left every other intelligent creature in the universe out of his reckoning. So Man can believe in a super-intelligent slug in a distant planet but not one on his own and of course he misses

here entirely the relationship between Man and God and Man and animals. God did not touch animals in the way he touched Man; animals he left as part of the natural biological process of evolution and environment. They kill each other to live, survive and procreate without conscience or responsibility. Why did God not breathe into the nostrils of an animal and give it a soul or indeed, the super-animals you imagine inhabit a distant planet? Why should your intelligent animals in that planet also not claim that they were created in God's image? I will tell you. Because God himself was descended from the first race of men.'

It was at this juncture that I felt the full force of this strange man's personality as he spoke with such authority and conviction.

'Go back to the very beginning when the giant wave of elements left the galaxies behind as it swept through space. Within these galaxies suns and planets mixed in the right conditions for biochemical action to give birth to all sorts of cellular life, and in just one to develop the first men and women in exactly the same way that they evolved on Earth – the first Man, only billions of years older in a distant planet, a replica of Earth. According to the laws of probability not an unlikely event. In the course of time they developed, as you have, into highly intelligent beings, experiencing their dark ages as well as their golden ones, periods of great scientific and technological achievements, exploring the universe and the abundance of life forming around them. But they were only too aware of the one essential thing missing; their universe was nothing but a natural phenomenon. Their world was like a ship without a rudder, coming from nowhere, going nowhere. There was no captain, no creative intelligence shaping the destiny of the universe.

'They witnessed only the bubbling in a vast cosmic test tube – birth, a span of life, death with no future, no hope. The irrationality of infinite space became intolerable and the determination to create something more beautiful, more lasting, became overpowering. So, over a vast span of time, they struggled to overcome decay of the physical body and finally to develop a spirit separate from the body. Medical science gave them the means of prolonging their own lives almost indefinitely, their society developed to the most remarkable degrees of will and intelligence. They had overcome the urge to kill and wage war, and had come to love intensely all life but particularly their own kind of life, Man. They developed great powers, the power of will over matter so that they were able to influence and control nature and events. In the end they found the ultimate key, to dispense with their physical bodies altogether and become intelligences free from the shackles of time and space, to integrate finally into one great universal intelligence. This Great Force was then able to influence and bring order into the whole universe and where life was most prolific and creative it steered the evolution of Man in their own original image.

'Man, wherever he developed, could not help being aware of this influence and called it by all sorts of names in different religious groups, but the wand and the wizard is the same. Man touched by the current strives too to overcome death and join the heavenly force, constantly charging and revitalizing this cosmic battery so that its power remains everlasting.

'The universe is full of planets sustaining higher forms of life, millions in the galaxies, thousands in our own where Man is growing in various stages of development, some like

yourselves in the early stages and some close to the very source of the creator.

‘Man was given the gift of tapping this source. Whenever Man cries out for help he appeals to the original promise – to Jehovah, God or whatever he has come to call him. His prayers and collective will-power are the essential link to the source and when it is ignored Man sinks to his lowest level. There is no personal God who rewards or punishes each individual. It is a far more exciting and grandiose concept than that. The gift gives man incredible potential for both good and evil since within the source itself there are memories of Man’s weaknesses and evil, and Man was given the choice to be Cain or Abel.

‘There is nothing in this concept of God to offend any religion and, indeed, it does not radically contradict any of the great religious books. There are many different paths leading to the top of the spiritual mountain. Only the words are different. You talk about God, miracles, life after death, Heaven. Why God gives his grace and gifts in profusion to some and withholds it from others remains a mystery, but faith and trust remain essential to divinity. God provides enough evidence through his emissaries and their power of the miraculous to encourage Man in this faith.

‘What happens to the spirit when the physical body decays? Do all live on after death, even the little dead babies and the mentally afflicted? This remains another of God’s mysteries, although there are clues; in Christianity, Christ said it was no easy matter to achieve everlasting life. It was no automatic right. Divinity has to be earned and depends upon Man’s own willpower and spiritual recognition of God’s existence, however weak; after all, Christ thought the thief on the cross was worth enough to justify redemption.

‘There are those, however, who have rejected God’s touch and to these mindless creatures life becomes an automatic process. These are the takers, never the givers, the destroyers never the creators. In their case almost as soon as the match was struck they blew it out. They have no part in the eternal plan but pass through it sightless. The plan is a great one requiring all sorts of spiritual talents to fulfil, and many seeds and crops are scattered over the fields of the universe. As long as the search and desire for truth lives on the seed ripens and matures, but when it does not then it withers and dies.

‘I have tried to give you a glimpse of the great concourse of space because it is against this background that you should consider its exploration and its explorers. There are differing views and theories about the objects you call flying saucers. There are those who would have them travelling along the trails of space to deliver prophetic messages of nuclear doom or those who see them as a substitute for a tribal God. There are the fiction writers who portray their crews in every horrible guise, invading and pillaging the world.

‘But in reality they are none of these things but like yourselves, inhabitants of a planet exploring the outer islands of their galaxy. You may well ask, why come to Earth at all? The answer is that this traffic is only a thin trickle in the vast highways of the universe; the Earth after all is a galactic backwater inhabited by only half-civilized men, dangerous even to their own neighbours. However, that does not stop explorers wishing to find out more about Earth just as your own people travel to some particularly uncomfortable and dangerous spots in your own planet.

‘Why, you may say, don’t they land and make contact? Most of these vehicles are robot-

controlled, space probes monitoring what is going on. Some are manned in order to oversee the whole programme and to ensure the probes do not land or crash by accident. They must also ensure that evidence of their existence is kept away from the vast majority of Earth's population. You must be well aware of the damage which your own explorers have done by appearing and living among simple tribes, often leading to a complete disintegration of their society and culture as happened to the Indian and Eskimo. Such impact is far too indigestible and only the most developed societies can cope with such contact.

'Imagine what would happen if the headlines in the world press announced the arrival of a spaceship with a mission of space people. Apart from the psychological shock that there actually were other races far superior to any developed society on Earth there would be complete panic about the motives of such an invasion. There is little doubt its crew, if you could catch them, would be subjected to the most humiliating interrogation and treatment.

'The knowledge you might acquire through contact and communication could have effects as disastrous as the so-called benefits of civilization had on the Indians and the Eskimos. This knowledge must come slowly to those most able to assimilate it in the fullness of time. The basic principle of responsible space exploration is that you do not interfere with the natural development and order of life in the universe any more than you should upset or destroy an ant heap or bee-hive. Man has a lot to learn before he embarks on deep space travel. If you were ready now, which you are not, you would only approach other inhabitants with the deepest of suspicion, inflicting your weapons and diseases upon them in the same irresponsible manner that you are busily destroying wild life on earth. You will have to grow a lot older and learn how to behave on your own planet, if indeed you do not blow yourselves up between times, before you are ready for galactic travel.

'Since time immemorial there have been tales of vessels coming out of the sky bringing strange visitors. Observers do come among you and make contact on a very selective basis where they judge that such contact could not harm either party. These observers have studied the Earth for a long time. With advanced medical science they have been fitted with the right sort of internal equipment to allow their bodies to operate normally until they leave. It is not very difficult to obtain the right sort of clothes and means to move around quite freely. Your own explorers will appear enormously cumbersome in comparison but then at first they will be operating in the very hostile environments within your solar system. The observers are not interested in interfering in your affairs, but once you are ready to escape from your own solar system it is of paramount importance that you have learnt your responsibilities for the preservation of life everywhere.

'It is equally important that other planetary travellers and inhabitants know something about this outer island, its society and intentions. While you are still far away from travelling in deep space, such contacts will be infrequent and must be conducted with great secrecy. Life in your own solar system is rudimentary and you can do little damage, but once you discover the existence of higher forms of life and intelligent men then the dangers will arise through your own fear and misunderstanding.

The observers have very highly developed mental powers, including extra-sensory, thought reading, hypnosis and the ability to use different dimensions, since all parts of the

mind and body have not necessarily evolved in exactly the same fashion. They do not use weapons of any kind and rely solely on their special powers to look after themselves. They make contact only with selected people where secrecy can be maintained. In the loosely-knit societies of the Western world, particularly in England and America, it is fairly easy with the help of friends to do this but not in police and dictator states.'

It was what Janus had left unsaid that was fantastic. He had subtly separated himself during the conversation to leave me with the impression that he was not one of us, gradually insinuating that he was an observer. His personality was so powerful and hypnotic that already I was wondering what to do about him.

Janus once more read my thoughts correctly. 'Because what I have told you is entirely foreign you are sensing danger. You are wondering who or what I am?' At this juncture he stopped and I felt that was all he had to say. I thanked him and said I would have to think about his request as I was not in a position to promise anything now. He showed no sign of disappointment at my apparent lack of enthusiasm and as I was clearly expected to leave I did so with brief goodbyes.

* * *

I spent the next few days puzzling over this very strange encounter. It would not have been so difficult had Janus been easily recognizable as a crank, but he was not, and there was much of what he said which made sense. What I found too difficult was the suggestion that space travellers had landed and were mixing with us. Authors like Adamski had already-written about meeting people from flying saucers and flying in their machines, but I was quite aware that the cult had attracted all sorts of charlatans. What was Janus? Was he part of an elaborate hoax or plot, was he a teacher, an imaginative prophet of the future or what he had insinuated – an observer? Whatever else he was, Janus left me with the impression of a force to be reckoned with. He appeared to know a great deal and spoke with authority about space technology. If he was part of any kind of plot, it was my duty to report the meeting to the security authorities, particularly if it had anything to do with the Royal Family

I wrote a report of my meeting and conversation with Janus and gave it to Boy Browning to read. By this time Boy had become interested in the more esoteric side of flying saucers and was very keen that we should both meet Mr Janus again. But I was not so sure.

At any rate, I rang Mrs Markham several times during the following few days but got no answer. So I eventually contacted General Martin who suddenly became distant and evasive. Mrs Markham had gone away; no, he did not know when she would be back. I did not like leaving the matter like this so I finally went round to Mrs Markham's flat but there was no sign of any life in it. I enquired of her neighbours on the floor below but all they knew was that she had appeared to leave in a hurry. The curtain had dropped. Had Janus sensed that I was in two minds about informing the security authorities of my meeting? I never saw General Martin, Mrs Markham or Janus again. I wrote this record of my meeting at Smith Street immediately after the event and quote it verbatim.

The episode did focus my mind on two great puzzles: the nature of God and the existence of UFOs and other phenomena. Since my escape from the sea I had become a

believer in God and the continuation of life after death; the experience had given me a much greater consciousness of the conflict between the great forces of spirituality and materialism. I felt strongly that God had tried to smooth my passage from this world to the next by dispatching three companions to accompany me on the journey; the mystery was why the journey was interrupted. Perhaps, within sight of the promised land, God had decided that I was not ready to face final judgement. Thereafter I have never been afraid of death, only of the indignity and pain of the act itself.

Until I met Janus my concept of God was biblical. I could only imagine him as a father figure, dispensing gifts and punishment according to the behaviour of his children. I avoided the question of who he was, where he came from and why he should concern himself about a little provincial corner on the edge of nowhere. But Janus's explanation of the beginning and God as universal made sense, with all life evolving from the same origin and same materials; even such a serious scientist as Crick, one of the discoverers of genetic structures, seriously put forward the theory that life did not originate on earth but came from outer space. Nothing in the universe is ever destroyed or disappears without trace. Nature permits no extinction, only transformation.

I became much more at intellectual peace with the concept of God as a universal spiritual force without shape or habitat, a cosmic battery, if you like, from which man could draw the power to charge himself, but a battery which also required constant charging by man's own spiritual fuel. This seemed to fit the historical pattern that when Man was at his lowest spiritual ebb the current was weak, but at his highest peak the light shone brightest. The idea of universal Man and universal God necessary to each other is appealing – God needing Man to maintain his own power and Man needing God's power to attain his highest spiritual values, creating his greatest works as acts of supplication and praise. I felt this strongly during the war, when the light of sacrifice to overcome evil shone brightly, but since then, as the force of materialism became stronger, the light has dimmed and the vision of the ultimate horror becomes sharper. Man can only pray for a change of heart before it is too late.

* * *

And More Sightings

Over the next few years the subject of UFOs continued to haunt me and the reports of sightings were legion, sometimes flaring up like an epidemic only to die down again. It is perhaps worth repeating some of the more dramatic ones.

> In the past weeks UFOs have been reported over Stonehenge and Shrewton. Two policemen spotted an object last Thursday. Leaving their patrol car, they saw the saucer-shaped object with a dome on top in the sky near Wilton.
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> A photograph of a flying saucer, claimed to be the most authentic so far, has been taken by two young women while motoring in West Waterford, Eire, on Boxing Day.
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> Three photographs of a flying saucer taken near Detroit last week by two youths are being studied by American Air Force investigators. One expert said that the pictures were apparently authentic and bore striking similarities to other reports he had investigated.
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> *
>
> Seven coastguards reported seeing a giant cone-shaped object hovering at about 15,000 feet. As an aircraft

approached it climbed to 20,000 feet and flew away. A senior RAF controller at Plymouth said, 'We reported all the details. I cannot tell you where the aircraft came from and you will have a job to get anyone to admit that any was sent up. I understand the UFO was also tracked by radar.'

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Mysterious flying objects, many described as 'starry crosses' were reported yesterday over wide areas of southern England. Crews of four police cars in different parts of Sussex made independent reports of 'a bright moving object.'

*

A retired Wing Commander said he saw four moving lights in formation over Hampshire. They were similar to the 'starry crosses' chased across Devon by the police.

*

Wing Commander Eric Cox, 56, of Pentons Paddock, Hyde, saw 'seven brilliant lights' while driving at night to Fording-bridge, Hants. 'They were three miles away flying at tree-top height, flying in a V-formation. After about three minutes they broke off and three went away. They just faded. Then the other four formed a perfect formation – just like a plus sign or cross. They were certainly under some sort of control because the formation was so tight.'

Eric Cox had been my Wing Commander in charge of the technical wing at RAF Wattisham and was totally reliable. The official explanation given was that the RAF was carrying out flight refuelling exercises that night. I spoke to Eric Cox about the objects and he said, 'Whatever flight refuelling and, from my air force experience, I have no idea what they were.

*

In 1967, *Time* magazine published an essay entitled 'A Fresh Look at Flying Saucers' which summed up objectively most of the theories and conclusions reached up to that time on the subject of UFOs. It concluded:

The most telling argument against the reality of UFOs is that no proven physical evidence or hardware has ever been found to support the saucers' existence. And although astronomers photograph the sky incessantly, no UFO has left an image on their photographic plates.

Despite the lack of such evidence, many scientists favour the continuation of UFO investigations in the hope that they will lead to new discoveries about Man's environment, while clearing up the uncertainty about saucers. But even after the most rigorous examination by contemporary science, it will be difficult to prove beyond doubt that there are no extraterrestrial saucers. Says astronomer Hynek: 'There is a tendency in the Twentieth Century to forget that there will be a Twenty-First Century science, and indeed a Thirtieth Century science, from which vantage points our knowledge of the universe may appear quite different. We suffer, perhaps, from temporal provincialism, a form of arrogance that has always irritated posterity.

Janus could have written quite large slices of that article!

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An official report, also published in 1967, stated that out of 6,000 reported sightings of UFOs, two per cent remain inexplicable. That may seem an insignificant figure, yet, in numerical terms, it means that 120 of those sightings could not be given any rational explanation. In the same year, the *Daily Express* published a report that the Soviet Union had established a scientific mission, headed by an Air Force general, to investigate all corroborated sightings of UFOs. More recently, in October, 1983, the *Sunday Mirror* reported that the well-known broadcaster David Jacobs and two prominent politicians, Shirley Williams and Jonathan Porrit, had described how a 'brilliant ball of light' had crossed the path of a car in which they were travelling to London, 'at a height of about 250–300 feet', and then disappeared. This story produced a flood of similar reports 'from

as far away as Devon'. Neither the Ministry of Defence nor any air controllers could offer an explanation. They were described as being 'baffled'. The paper concluded that this could only have been the flight path of a UFO.

* * *

In 1969 I was posted to the Ministry of Defence as Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Operations), responsible to the Vice Chief of Air Staff for the day-to-day management of our air operations worldwide. The Air Force Operations Room (AFOR) was responsible for collecting and presenting all information necessary for the conduct of operations and reported directly to me. There I discovered a rich vein of UFO reports in the form of an Annexe to a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) where every report of a UFO, from whatever source, was logged, examined and filed; those which might have either public or political repercussions came to my desk.

They seemed to arrive in batches. However, despite the very large number of incidents reported, the source and identity of the UFOs remained as mysterious and elusive as the other phenomena which have attracted public and scientific interest over the years. These include the Loch Ness Monster, the Yetis or Abominable Snowmen, the extraordinary report dated 1855 of the mysterious footmarks left in the snow over a wide area of Devon and, something very much of our own time, the completely inexplicable loss of ships and aircraft in what is now known as 'The Bermuda Triangle', the solution to which, despite massive air and sea searches and intensive scientific research, remains a complete mystery. No wreckage or human bodies have ever been recovered from the area. All these things have one common link – in the endless game of hide and seek they defy capture.

*

Suppose we are actually living in a multi-dimensional time track within the same space, including a young primeval world, our own and a much older world with advanced technology, all ageing and developing side by side, conscious and sometimes stirred by the presence of the others – strange ships in the sky, images of ancient creatures, the impudent antics of poltergeists and strange noises like the creaking of bedsprings from an empty room.

These time tracks spin around like separate grooves of a gramophone record, each playing a different score until given a sudden jolt when the needle jumps a track, imposing for a very short period an unintelligible tune upon its neighbour before being returned to its own groove again.

What causes the jolt is unimportant: possibly some electromagnetic charge so that, under special and localized circumstances, images of the other worlds break through, leaving prints for the briefest space of time – the monster in Loch Ness, hairy creatures in the frozen waste, strange flying ships and machines. And, conversely, ships and aeroplanes disappear from our own space without trace, perhaps all ending up in some cosmic dustbin.

The Corridors of Power

So I left this tall and stately room with sadness and saw ahead of me a long corridor running down the back of the house, fitted, at first, with quite ordinary bits of furniture, bookcases and the like, but towards its end filling up with more substantial pieces.

By the time I had completed seven years as an Equerry I had climbed to the dizzy rank of Wing Commander. In 1955 I had to make a decision about my future. Either I returned to the RAF before it was too late or I became a permanent fixture in the Palace. The final choice was mine alone and no one exerted any pressure on me to leave, but there were other personal factors which influenced me. My marriage was breaking up fast, as indeed was Michael Parker's. I decided therefore that it was time to leave. Michael Parker resigned about a year later and General Boy Browning retired shortly afterwards. So over a period of about two years Prince Philip had perforce to choose a completely new team.

Returning to the RAF was no easy matter. I suppose I had basked in my master's glory so long that I had become accustomed to the role of a minor deity. I had also become used to dealing with various agencies at the highest level. If I rang the Chief of Defence Staff, a Minister or Chairman of a major company I was put through to them immediately and, frankly, over the years I had come to neglect my contemporaries. When I left the Palace the 'Brass' dropped me like a hot brick, while some of my old friends took the opportunity to kick me hard in the crotch.

At first I felt very isolated, neither Palace nor RAF. Without realizing it, I had become part of a totally different culture. My job had taken me over and I had become completely absorbed in it.

The Palace had fashioned a cosy cocoon around me, sheltering me from the normal vicissitudes of everyday life. When you wanted something done, hey presto, it happened like magic; the name of the Queen or Prince Philip opened doors normally locked to more humble subjects.

I sometimes felt I had done it all before. The Palace and the people in it were so familiar that in some previous reincarnation I had served as a courtier. It had become increasingly difficult to move from the Palace back to a small house and all the horrid chores of domesticity; the differences were too great. Gradually the split between my working environment and my home life had widened.

I had enjoyed working for Prince Philip. He worked tremendously hard himself and expected his staff to do the same. He was always direct and to the point, and his nautical training shone through all his actions. He occasionally became irritated with officialdom and this had been particularly the case over his flying training and over dealings with the

pompous Air Marshals who had long since given up any idea of flying themselves. They did their best to restrict his flying. However, according to Basil Boothroyd's book entitled *Philip* I became a pompous Air Marshal myself, since he wrote:

> As a wry passing note, Peter Horsley, the squadron leader equerry who was so much on the side of the angels, is now an Air Marshal at the Ministry of Defence. 'I can't believe it,' he told Parker when they recently met – 'I'm an Airship!'
>
> But the wryest part, perhaps, is that Horsley is now one of the men earnestly wrapping protective cocoons round Prince Charles and his Queen's Flight Basset.

What a snide remark. I had nothing whatever to do with Prince Charles' flying training, as I was at the time Assistant Chief of Air Staff (Operations).

After I left I was invited back to the Palace frequently to be greeted like the prodigal son, recognized by a smart salute from the policeman on the gate, entitled to use the privileged Privy purse entrance, respectfully greeted by footmen and pages, confidently using the Household cloakroom to park my overcoat, boisterously welcomed by the other Equerries and Household Staff, and finally invited to whisky and coffee in the Equerries' room.

Gradually, with the passage of time, this privileged position disappeared as old friends themselves left, retired or just died. Memories dimmed and I became just one of the crowd on the outside. But my time at the Palace had a profound effect on my life afterwards and made me a much more complete and confident person.

Fortunately I still had one or two good friends in the Royal Air Force, who saw me safely back into the Service via the Flying College at Manby. I had had the determination to keep up with my jet flying while I was doing my Royal duties, and so excelled in my flying exercises on the Hunter and Canberra that at the end of the course I was given command of No 9 Canberra Squadron to gain experience before, hopefully, getting the command of a prestigious V-Bomber Squadron, then the height of any Air Force officer's ambition.

I entered Bomber Command at the height of its power with a formidable force of Vulcans, Victors and Valiants capable of carrying nuclear weapons, augmented by a force of about 250 Canberra light bombers with a conventional capability. I was posted to RAF Binbrook which had a total force of sixty Canberras.

Eventually the Canberra was given a nuclear capability with the Low Altitude Bombing System (LABS) or the 'madman's' loop. This involved flying at three hundred miles an hour at low level, pulling the aircraft up and at the top of the loop releasing the weapon and rolling out in the opposite direction. The Americans had been trying this out in B57S until the wings of an aircraft were torn off. The technique had been picked up by the Royal Air Force. I often wondered how the Canberra stood up to the manoeuvre but as far as I know no wings came off.

After six months or so on 9 Squadron, far from being posted to a V-Bomber Squadron, I was sent back to the Flying College at Manby as Senior Instructor. The students, all Wing Commanders of RAF and Commonwealth Air Forces, flew in a number of aircraft, Meteors, Hunters and Canberras, and completed the navigation syllabus on Lancaster. The Flying College had promoted the Aries series of aircraft which finished up with Aries 5

which was a specially modified Canberra, stuffed with fuel tanks in every available space. The normal Canberra weighed about thirty-five thousand pounds and Aries 5 carried a further fifty thousand pounds of fuel. The fuel tanks were divided into two parts and you drew on the second half of the fuel with a simple on/off switch. On a dark night over the North Pole you gingerly turned on the ‘on’ switch and prayed it would release the second series of tanks. I undertook one or two polar flights on Aries 5 and then flew direct to Aden. The tanks were filled up to overflowing at Mansion and we were towed out by a tractor to the end of the runway where we launched off, taking the whole five thousand yards of the runway to stagger into the air. It was too hot at Aden to try a direct return flight.

I was then posted to command RAF Wattisham. This was the premier Fighter Station with three squadrons: No 111 Squadron, who flew the aerobatic team the Black Arrows with Hunters, No 56 Squadron with Hunters, and No 43 Squadron with Javelins. Again I was being offered the chance to make my mark. I did a short Javelin conversion course at RAF Leeming; the Javelin had an evil reputation largely due to the test pilot Bill Waterton’s reluctance to undertake spinning trials, but I always found the aircraft delightful to fly. The only thing you did not do was to stall the aircraft or, even worse, spin it, since it really did not like recovering from a spin. My instructor explained this very carefully to me and then accidentally put the aircraft into an inverted spin, terrifying us both!

One of my jobs as Station Commander was to accompany 111 Squadron on their overseas tours to make sure that they behaved themselves prior to an Air Show and particularly that they got to bed by midnight before performing the following day. The Commanding Officer was Squadron Leader Peter Latham and his normal show was performed by nine aircraft. My own cross in that Squadron was a young pilot called Clayton-Jones. We clashed on numerous occasions and I always came off worst. The first time I met him was at a show in Spain when Peter Latham pulled his team rather close to the runway after a loop and then wheeled the formation round to pull up into a roll. Clayton-Jones, who was always the wing man, finished up very close to the ground and as Latham pulled up there was chattering on the radio. Latham always insisted on radio silence in the formation so that he could get his next orders out crisply and clearly. On the de-briefing afterwards Latham said, ‘Sorry chaps, I pulled out of that loop rather low but there was some chatter on the radio. It sounded like you, C-J. What was the trouble?’ ‘Nothing,’ replied C-J, ‘I just wanted to die talking!’

On another occasion, at Lyons in France, I had briefed everyone to be in bed by midnight for an eleven o’clock performance the following morning. I came down to breakfast to meet C-J just coming through the swing doors of the hotel wearing dark glasses. ‘Good morning C-J,’ I said, ‘glad to see you are up so early.’ ‘Good morning, Sir,’ replied C-J. ‘I have not just got up. I am just going to bed.’

Embarrassingly for a Station Commander, I broke my elbow at a particularly rough dining-in night. Of course the officer responsible for this painful event was none other than my friend Clayton-Jones.

* * *

Wattisham had been selected as the first operational Lightning station. The Lightning had been an English Electric experimental aircraft and was rushed into service after the Americans had found the sound barrier was no barrier after all. It was built just like a missile, two massive reheated Olympus engines slung under a fuselage. The aircraft was a delight to fly but pretty useless as an air defence fighter since the Mark 1 only had forty minutes' endurance and its radar was particularly useless. It also suffered from many teething troubles, electrically and mechanically. I had great difficulty in persuading one particularly nervous pilot to stay with this aircraft. He was in the habit of trying to eject!

When practising a quick climb to height, a vital part of any air defence fighter's role, the drill was to fly out to sea at Mach. 9, accelerate to Mach. 2 at 35,000 feet and pull up to 55,000 feet in a straight line, and then recover back to base! Once, when I was feeling particularly brave, I went on pulling back, topping out at about 70,000 feet and dropping like a brick back to Mother Earth.

Because Wattisham was the premier Fighter Station and because of my Royal background, I collected all Royal visitors to Fighter Command from King Hussein to Prince Philip. The record was three in one month. You put one set of props away and then pulled out the next one. I was even criticized by the headlines in a newspaper tabloid which read, 'Station Commander orders plastic daffodils to be planted for Royal Visitor'. This was quite untrue. Some wag had done it as a joke. But what I do remember was that when Princess Alexandra visited the station my wife was supposed to present her with a bouquet of flowers outside the Family Centre and a WRAF officer was detailed to produce a suitable bouquet. The great moment arrived and Princess Alexandra appeared in an official car. 'Bouquet,' someone cried. 'Bouquet,' was echoed, but no bouquet. The WRAF officer had forgotten! My wife, with considerable presence of mind, hurriedly picked a bunch of daffodils from the bed around the Family Centre and thrust it into the hands of the Princess who was quite charming. 'What a beautiful bunch of fresh flowers!' She didn't know just how fresh they were!

It was also on Princess Alexandra's visit that I made a howler much echoed around the Air Council on what not to say during a Royal visit. We had arranged a Hunter formation after lunch with the letters 'P.A.' On the way to lunch and followed by a line of Air Marshals, Princess Alexandra said, 'Peter, I hear you are flying an "A" formation after lunch.' Without thinking I said, 'Oh, Ma'am, we are doing a "P" over you as well.' She howled with laughter but the following Air Marshals were not amused.

I still kept hitting the headlines. No 111 Squadron was scheduled to make a fly-past on the birth of a Royal baby and the headlines in the *Express* ran, 'Group Captain Horsley, the Queen's old Equerry, said, "My boys are ready to christen the Royal child."' I wished the earth could have opened and swallowed me up. On another occasion I reluctantly agreed to give a television interview to a presenter who I believed was an old friend, on 111 Squadron's aerobatic prowess. They had just completed a record number of twenty-two Hunters in a loop over Farnborough. I agreed to this interview provided Colin Hodgkinson made no mention of my past Royal connections, which he promised to do. In the live broadcast he started with the words, 'Now Group Captain, you were of course Equerry to the Duke of Edinburgh, what do you think about …' So much for promises!

While at Wattisham I learned the essential qualities of leadership. I flew with all the

squadrons, including No 111 Squadron, on aerobatic sorties in the dual Hunter with Peter Latham at the controls. For my farewell dining-in night I had briefed the Wing that morning that I did not want to see any horseplay at dinner until after the Queen's health had been drunk. They were all so quiet and well-behaved at dinner that I thought I had ruined the evening. As soon as the Queen's health had been drunk there was bedlam; through every door and every window piles of burning pillow feathers were thrown into the room and within seconds visibility had dropped to less than a yard, and so it went on throughout the night!

* * *

My next post was as Group Captain (Operations) at Headquarters Near East Air Forces (NEAF) in Cyprus, this time with far more experience and confidence. I was the only staff officer to have a jeep and I lived a very pampered life, starting work at seven o'clock and packing up at lunchtime which left plenty of spare time for the beach or riding. The staff had been worried about the Station Commander of Akrotiri which was the major flying base in the Near and Middle East, as he never seemed to have a grip either of his Station or the Flying Wing. I found him a charming man, polite and intelligent, but very short on flying experience, about five hundred hours on special duty Lysanders during the war. He had been a planner and was completely miscast as an Operation Station Commander. My old Squadron, No 111, now re-equipped with Lightnings, were due to fly to Akrotiri in about two months' time. The Station Commander could not really face up to it. He kept putting off decisions on how to recover them.

I did not wield the axe. In fact I did my best to protect him, but, what was worse, his Wing Commander Flying was also not up to the job, never having gone solo on the Canberra which was the main aircraft of the station. The pair of them usually made a hash of things. The Senior Air Staff Officer, Air Vice-Marshal Worrall, got fed up with the situation and decided that the Station Commander had to go. I was dispatched to tell him. He took it very badly, but in his heart of hearts I think it was a great relief. We had to find an immediate replacement, but the Ministry in consultation decided it would take at least six months to find a Canberra-trained one.

I knew what was in the wind when my Commander-in-Chief, Sir Denis Barnett, sent for me and said, Peter, I want you to go down tomorrow and take over RAF Akrotiri.' I replied that I didn't really want to go for a number of reasons. First, I had just finished as a station commander in Fighter Command and my contemporaries would not look kindly on my becoming a station commander again, and, second, as a station commander's job was expensive, I did not want to bear the personal cost of another. My commander-in-Chief was quite succinct. 'Peter,' he said, 'I am not asking you, I am ordering you.' So the following day I presented myself at the guardroom. On being asked to identify myself I replied that I was the new Station Commander and that they had better learn to recognize me. I had sufficient experience to realize that the next six months were going to be very tough indeed.

I went to see the Station Commander in his office and asked him to leave the station within twenty-four hours. He went quietly and was posted to a back water staff post in CENTO at Ankara. I don't think he ever recovered and left the RAF some time later. It was a pity he had ever been given a front-line station. Had he been given a planning job in

the Ministry of Defence, or even a training station, he had the intellect to become a very senior officer.

The Wing Commander Flying had to go as well, so I gave him his marching orders. That day at lunch I was avoided by the whole station and ate in splendid isolation.

The first thing I now did was to parade the five Squadron Commanders in front of me. With a weak Wing Commander Flying they had been allowed to do exactly what they liked, but I told them that I had also taken on the job of Wing Commander Flying and that I expected to fly with all their Squadrons, so they had better follow orders in future. They didn't like it and had the nerve to say so. 'All right,' I said, 'think it over and let me know tomorrow if you would like to follow the Wing Commander Flying.'

From then on I never had a squeak out of any of them and they became the most loyal of subordinates. Eventually I formed a Canberra Wing with five Squadrons and a Wing Commander and my old friend Peter Latham arrived as the Canberra Wing Leader.

Just before No 111 Squadron were due with their Lightnings I sent a signal to their commanding Officer, Dickie Wirdnam, telling them to bring their dinner jackets with them as there was a black tie function in the Mess. They duly landed, an event for which we had arranged a press reception. They seemed to be spending a lot of time in their cockpits but on command of their Commanding Officer they came down the ladders all resplendent in dinner jackets! In the Mark 1 Lightnings they had had to plan for a nine-flight refuelling hook-up to get them to Akrotiri and there was a story at the time that one pilot stayed hooked up for the whole flight, like a baby at its mother's breast!

That Christmas all hell broke loose and I was rung up by the NEAF Operations Room at five o'clock in the morning to be told that a Turkish invasion fleet had been sighted off the Cyprus coast and that I was to start the evacuation of six thousand Limassol families through Akrotiri immediately. We had practised the evacuation beforehand and it all worked like clockwork. By this time I had the whole station on my side and they understood what leadership was about. I had thoroughly professional Wing Commanders under me and had the wonderful feeling of a ship's captain that I only had to turn the wheel and the ship would respond easily and quickly.

The Greeks started slaughtering Turks and the whole island blew up. Gradually fighting became a battle between the north and the south with small pockets of Turks being eliminated.

RAF Nicosia had to be evacuated and I received all their aeroplanes at Akrotiri, a squadron of Javelin fighters and a transport squadron of Hastings. Since Suez, Akrotiri had been expanding rapidly and I had a huge building programme on my hands, including a new Lightning fighter dispersal and hangar and a large transport dispersal. We had a fairly efficient plan to deal with all this but the evacuation of Nicosia filled Akrotiri to overflowing, so much so that I had to create a temporary Officers' Mess in a disused hangar. There were now nine Wing Commanders under me, besides a Group Captain Commanding the hospital – rather a wide span of command.

Even in the best run organizations, there will be moments of disaster. I was showing a parliamentary delegation around the Station and was with them in the Sergeant's Mess standing up against a window explaining the problems of running such a large Station. I

saw the MPs eyes widening as they stared out of the window behind me and eventually one said, ‘Excuse me, Group Captain, but there is a large fire burning behind your back.’ ‘It’s perfectly all right,’ I replied. ‘We have a very efficient fire brigade.’ However, when I eventually turned round I saw the Officers’ Mess blazing fiercely in the background. ‘Excuse me,’ I said and ran out. Lightning had struck the roof and within seconds the whole building was ablaze. I met the PMC rushing out with the monthly Mess bills in his arms. ‘For God’s sake put them back,’ I yelled. Rather bravely, so I thought, I went into the burning building to make sure that everyone was out of it and found a lone WRAF officer standing on a chair taking the curtains down under a red hot roof. ‘For God’s sake, get out,’ I yelled as the roof began to fall around her. Of course when the hose pipes were hooked up and a very efficient Commanding Officer of the Fire Brigade shouted, ‘Turn the water on,’ only a thin trickle looped out from the end of the pipe. The Mess burned down completely and the MPs stayed in the Sergeants’ Mess for an excellent lunch. A new Mess was built just up the road and the old one was repaired, so in the end I had plenty of room to house my 600 officers.

* * *

When I left Wattisham, I had thought that I had finally got rid of Clayton-Jones. I should have known better. I led a Canberra practice raid from Akrotiri, bombing the range at El Adem in the early morning and then landing at the local RAF station. As a visiting Group Captain, I was given a VIP bedroom in the Officers’ Transit Mess. I had just got into my pyjamas when I heard the sound of someone playing a very squeaky violin in the room next door. The noise was so excruciating that I donned my group Captain’s jacket over my pyjamas and roared next door to deliver a blistering attack on the offender. It was, of course, Clayton-Jones, who was on a Hunter armament practise camp. I knew I was on a hiding to nothing so I meekly said, ‘Good Morning C-J,’ and retired hurt back to my room to cry!

* * *

On my return to England, the Air Secretary interviewed me and said, ‘You need a rest, Peter, so I am sending you to the Imperial Defence College for a year.’ He was right, it was a rest consisting of a half past ten o’clock lecture followed by lunch and golf afterwards. At the end of the course the Secretary got up and asked us to return any books to the library. I have to admit I didn’t even know there was a library!

I was now posted as Deputy Commandant at the Joint Warfare Establishment (JWE) at RAF Old Sarum. I hadn’t a clue where or what the JWE was, but it sounded like the kiss of death to me. In fact it was only a stop-over. At the end of my tour I was promoted to Air Vice-Marshal as Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Operations). Meanwhile, I had created another school – the Joint Air Transport Establishment and was its first Commandant. It was at Old Sarum that I met my future wife, although we didn’t get married until ten years later when she had shed a husband and I had shed a wife.

* * *

My new appointment was the first time I had ever served in Whitehall and it proved a great cultural shock. There were three Assistant Chiefs of whom ACAS (Operations) was *primus pares*, taking over from the Vice Chief when he was away.

The first excitement was that Northern Ireland blew up one Saturday morning. Between us, an Army Colonel and I transported 5,000 reinforcements there over the weekend. On Monday the Chief of the Air Staff sent for me and said, ‘Peter, you might have asked me or at least told me what you were doing.’ So I learned my first Whitehall lesson, ‘Tell everyone, including the cleaners, what you are going to do. It is better to have the civil servants on your side than against you. I also learned, among much else, how to answer a telephone at any time of the day or night and answer in a perfectly clear voice, a habit which still lasts.

I had a series of other crises to deal with during my time as ACAS (Ops): the overthrow of the King in Libya and the seizure of the RAF airfield at El Adem: the revolt against the King in Jordan: the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Union: the closure of the border between Gibraltar and Spain by the Spanish and the invasion of Anguilla. For the latter I was in charge of the operational planning for all our transport operations. I resisted sending in bombers as there was only one light aircraft on the airfield! I attended innumerable meetings with the Army, civil servants and Foreign Office, all of which were conducted in the utmost secrecy. Instead of using the normal security procedure, endorsing documents top secret, secret, and so on, everything was conducted by word of mouth. As a result the operation escalated and it seemed as though the entire British Defence Force had turned on a tiny island and was about to subject it to a mighty invasion. In Whitehall all business is conducted by large meetings and I was required to chair one such on the Invasion Plan in one of four adjacent conference rooms. I went down the corridor and opened a door to face a long table of forty people, so I sat down in the Chairman’s place at the head of the table. After about twenty minutes, in which a number of people spoke about overflying African Territories, I brought the proceedings to a halt and said, ‘Gentlemen, what has overflying African Territories to do with the invasion of Anguilla?’ One of the members stood up and said, ‘Mr Chairman, this meeting is about overflying.’ I apologized and hurriedly left the room. Whereupon another gentleman hurrying down the corridor bumped into me and said, ‘Who are you?’ I replied, ‘Anguilla, but who are you?’ He said, ‘I am Overflying African Territories but for the last twenty minutes I have been chairing a meeting on the Invasion of Anguilla.’

Anguilla was really the biggest cock-up since Mons! When our troops stormed ashore they couldn’t find any enemy, all five of them had left the island the previous day!

I was responsible for the clearance of all aircraft; at one meeting I mentioned the clearance of our air transport aircraft full of troops through the RCAF Station, Goose Bay, on their way to Anguilla. Frank Cooper, the Royal Air Force Permanent Under-Secretary, gesticulated to me that it was all in hand. On the day, of course, the Canadians, to their horror, found a British invasion being mounted through one of their stations and they sent all the transport aircraft hurrying back to England. Mr Trudeau, the Canadian Prime Minister, rang Harold Wilson at midnight complaining bitterly of the invasion of his territory. I was left holding the baby and it looked as though I was for the high jump. Fortunately Frank Cooper admitted his mistake, but I still had to fly to Canada to make a personal apology, although no one in Ottawa believed my version of the story.

The Prime Minister had a paranoia about leaks to the Press. This resulted in everything being passed on by word of mouth rather than using the secure signals traffic. For

example, over the Anguilla operation, I had personally to go and visit the Commander-in-Chief Transport Command to instruct him to get his transport aircraft ready to fly west about 3000 miles to an island beginning with an ‘A’ and ending with an ‘A’ and that his crews would have to wear tropical kit! Of course with the telephone buzzing between Whitehall, Aldershot and Upavon it was not long before an operator had sorted it all out and briefed the Press accordingly. Hence, the day before the invasion was due to begin, the story came out in the headlines of the tabloids.

The Prime Minister also believed that it took his personal intervention to solve the pressing problems of the day. He had decided therefore to interfere personally in the Nigerian/ Biafran Civil War. In consequence, I found myself having to organize the provision of two VC10 aircraft – one with prestige fit for the VIPs and one as back-up – to fly to Lagos, where it was expected that talks would be held. In addition, to cater for the possibility of the need for any internal flying in and out of Biafra, an Andover and a supporting Hercules had to be positioned. The possibility of the party having also to call in at Addis Ababa had to be taken into account as well. All in all, it was a very expensive and rather complicated exercise.

The PM set off on his travels, surrounded by an enormous entourage. Despite the considerable expenditure of time and effort involved, let alone the cost, his mission came to naught.

* * *

Denis Healey was the Minister for Defence at this time and had the habit of tasking the staffs on a Friday afternoon to write a Paper over the weekend for his perusal on the Monday, which, apart from the work-load, I suppose was better than the normal habit of ministers making their decisions by flipping a coin. The only time I really met him was at a meeting in the company of the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir John Grandy. On my appointment as Assistant Chief I had also inherited the chairmanship of a Standing committee called Linesman/Mediator which was made up of about forty people from Air Traffic, Post Office and Uncle Tom Cobbleigh and all. It had been established to bring the large and complex Air Traffic/Defence Centre at West Drayton into operation. The Centre had been planned some ten years earlier as an integrated Civil/Military Air Traffic and Defence Centre on a forecast of future computer technology which proved far too optimistic. When I took over the steering committee there was not a hope of it ever reaching fruition, despite the fact that £120,000,000 had already been spent on large banks of already redundant Plessey computers! I was briefed by my predecessor that it would be much wiser never to let the subject out of the committee room and to hand it over to my successor after three years. Unfortunately we had to approach the Treasury for more money and it was necessary to leak it out of the door, where it exploded among the politicians. It ended up on Denis Healey’s desk and so I met with him and CAS to decide its fate. Sir John Grandy put it all into one sentence, ‘Minister, if you want to see Russian bombers flying at five hundred feet past Westminster and Parliament you can cancel it.’ At the word Parliament Denis Healy blanched and said, ‘All right, CAS carry on.’ However, in the end Linesman/ Mediator proved to be my downfall, as the Commander-in-Chief Bomber Command had set his mind against it and tried to get the Vice Chief to cancel it. Having got little change out of VCAS, he rang me up and said, ‘Peter, I want you to

cancel it.' I replied that I only took orders from VCAS and not from Commanders-in-Chief. This cooked my goose as far as my future career was concerned.

* * *

It was decided by the Air Force Board rather late in the day that the RAF would enter the *Daily Mail* Transatlantic Air Race which took place in 1969. The Royal Navy had already entered Phantoms which the RAF had agreed to support with Victor tankers, and I was given the rather thankless task of assembling and directing the RAF's entries. It seemed pointless to enter RAF Phantoms to compete with the Navy. Happily, a member of my staff came up with the brilliant idea of entering the Harrier. To do so required us to push forward its flight refuelling capability with RAF Boscombe Down and to find a suitable site in London close to the starting point, the Post Office Tower. We explored a lot of sites including the Parks which were ideal, giving plenty of room in case of an engine failure on take-off, but no one would give us permission to use them. The only site we could find close enough to the Post Office Tower was a coal yard next to St Pancras Station. It belonged to British Rail who enthusiastically gave us permission to use it. In marked contrast with the obstructionism that we had encountered in London, the Mayor of New York, on the other hand, gave us tremendous support, knowing the publicity value for his city. Indeed he wanted us to land on the Empire State Building, which was the finishing point. However, we settled on a school yard next door to the United Nations Building.

The questions still being raised within MOD were endless. However, once I had satisfied him about the safety aspects of landing and taking off a Harrier in the middle of London and the effect upon the local residents of the noise and coal dust from the coal yard, Lord Winterbottom, the Under Secretary of State RAF supported our efforts against most of his ministerial colleagues. Nevertheless, he actually visited the site himself and spoke to the people living nearby.

I had sworn blind that there would be no dust on the day for I had arranged for the coal dust to be damped down by an immense amount of water. In the event, I went down to the site to watch the first landing; the pilot approached over the railway station, lifting off its tin roof and disappearing in a cloud of the accumulated coal dust of centuries. My eyes didn't recover from the grit for days afterwards. Unfortunately the television cameras filmed the landing. Once he had seen it on the news, Lord Winterbottom rang me to say, 'No dust ACAS (Ops)?'

In addition to the entries involving the Service aircraft, there were categories for individuals or small groups using commercial airlines and all three Services had several entries in these – either flying from London or New York, their problems being mainly concerned with the speed at which they could get from the official start point to their aircraft and from the aircraft to the finish.

Having now satisfied Lord Winterbottom, I was able to report the full details of the Service involvement in the Air Race to Denis Healey for final approval and, on the assumption that there would now be no further hitches over the use of the coalyard, this was duly forthcoming.

One extraordinary entry to the Air Race was the chimpanzee of Typhoo Tea which was led from the top of the Post Office Tower, then put on a passenger seat on a British

Airways jumbo jet where a sleepy stewardess unsuccessfully tried to serve it drinks and canapés. The two prizes of £6,000 were won by the Naval Phantom and the Harrier, and I received the cheque and tankards from the organizers at the Royal Garden Hotel on the evening of 14 May, 1969, at a ceremony attended by Prince Philip.

British Rail, of course, received excellent publicity with its announcement, 'The Harrier standing at Platform 10 is the 9.30 to New York.'

The story of the Air Race provides a perfect example of the need to be ready for anything when serving at the top levels of the Ministry of Defence. It also gave me an interesting lesson in the art of defeating the bureaucracy and the political jungle which even the simplest and most innocuous exercise seems to generate.

* * *

The Cold War was at its height and each month I and the staff climbed up to the Air Force Operations Room and played a War Game with a nuclear scenario. The conclusion of the exercise was the launching of the V-Bomber Force against Russian targets as enemy missiles appeared on the screen in the Operations Room. We then all waited in silence for the three minutes it would take them to arrive on London and bring Armageddon.

Despite all, at the end of my tour I was posted as Air Officer Commanding No 2 Group so I was still in line for the top job, as the Group was a premier one in the RAF composed of six stations, the Vulcan force at Scampton and Waddington with the Victors at Marham, Buccaneers at Honington, a training station of Argosys at Cottesmore and an RAF Hospital at Nocton Hall.

I converted to all types: Vulcans, Victors, Buccaneers and Argosys. Towards the end of my tour the Air Secretary informed me that I had been due to go to NEAF as Commander-in-Chief. Unfortunately the new CAS had by then taken over and put his own boy in. I was posted instead as Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Strike Command, so my run to the top had come to an end.

While I was Deputy at Strike I did two round-the-world flights, the first in a Vulcan with the Head of Medical Services, Air Vice-Marshal Geoffrey Dhenin, a remarkable doctor who held the George Medal and the AFC and Bar. He had flown the Canberra through the first atomic cloud over Christmas Island shortly after it had exploded and was the first person to fly so close to an atomic burst. It was a very rough ride and the aircraft was so radiated that it had to be thrown away. I once asked him if it had affected him at all and he replied, 'No, Peter, the only thing is that my eyes glow in the dark!'

We set off around the world: the Azores, Bermuda, Florida, San Francisco, Hawaii, Hong Kong, Singapore, Ceylon, Masirah, Cyprus and finally back to base. While in the United States the Americans always mounted a guard of honour for us and I couldn't understand why they all used to collapse in laughter until one day I turned around and saw my ground crew operating the hydraulic lift of the nuclear bomb bay and down came our two sets of golf clubs!

You can do a very spectacular start of all four engines simultaneously on the Vulcan provided you have a Hochin starter on hand. There was a small RAF detachment on Honolulu commanded by a Squadron Leader with all the necessary equipment for

assisting V-Bombers on Pacific flights. The Station Commander, a Colonel Best, had recently been given a brand new Cadillac which he informed us the Pentagon had allocated to him for meeting VIPs like ourselves. We duly played golf in Hawaii and were driven out to the Vulcan by Colonel Best in his Cadillac which he parked immediately behind the aircraft. He then stood smartly to attention saluting us as we started up. I had decided to impress the onlookers by doing a rapid scramble and a Hochin starter, weighing about a ton, had been duly plugged in. I pressed all four starter buttons at once and the Olympus engines started with a great roar. Away we went, hurtling down the runway. What I didn't know was that the Hochin starter had not been anchored down correctly to the tarmac and was blown back by the force of four Olympus engines straight into Colonel Best's Cadillac, cutting it in half. I didn't learn of this until I got a letter from the Squadron Leader back in England telling me how Colonel Best had immediately limped back to his car, put his arms on the remains and cried like a baby. The following year I did another round-the-world trip, this time in a Comet to present the Fincastle Trophy to competing maritime teams in New Zealand. We again landed in Honolulu to be met this time by the Deputy Base Commander, a Lieutenant Colonel. I asked him where Colonel Best was and he replied that when he had heard that I was coming he had taken two weeks' leave!

When I was at Strike Command I was knighted by the Queen. While I knelt down for her to put the collar around my neck she murmured softly, 'You have grown into a rather stout Air Marshal, Peter!' I had too.

Caught in a Web

At the end of this long corridor I passed into a large room at the back of the house. I immediately had a terrible feeling of foreboding. The room seemed full of shapeless phantoms, shrieking and jostling around me. Outside the house a storm raged and rain clattered against the darkened windows out of which I could just catch glimpses of low, swirling clouds. As I struggled to get out of this sinister room, I was pulled first one way and then another by unseen hands.

I decided to resign from the Royal Air Force in 1975. The Service had done me proud and I departed from it with no bitterness.

My marriage had continued on its downward path and finally ended. I was now about to marry again – to Annie, whom I had first met whilst I was at Old Sarum ten years earlier. I had two children of my own, who had already flown the nest, and Annie had four small ones. So my family was about to expand again and I was feeling more than ready for a home life that the past, for one reason or another, had effectively eluded me.

It was not entirely the fact that I was posted as Air Member for Supply and Organization (I had never organized or supplied anyone in my life) but rather the offer of the chairmanship of Robson Lowe – the stamp auction house, now a part of Christies – that had made up my mind for me. I had had a lifelong interest in collecting postage stamps. Thanks in no small part to my seven years at the Palace, I had assembled a particularly interesting collection of Court Mail. This had been exhibited at the National Postal Museum and elsewhere, including the head post office in Glasgow. Now I had a golden opportunity to use my hobby to good effect.

I agreed to give Robson Lowe two to three days a week of my time but I had to fill in the remaining two to three days – the fear of not having enough to do was overpowering; so I joined M L (Holdings), a public company in the defence business, first as a Director and then, in 1990, as Chairman. I also started my own printing company which acted as a distributor for printing machinery for Dahlgren Incorporated of Dallas, Texas. It turned out that this company was the most successful of my ventures and for a few years did extremely well with lucrative contracts with the *Wolverhampton Evening News*, the *Birmingham Post and Mail* and the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* among them. I also took on a number of directorships. These included the Honeywell Advisory Council, Aeromaritime Incorporated of Washington DC and a number of other companies. For a

time I was also Managing Director of Stanley Gibbons, a boyhood dream. My business days were more than full and generally happy.

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I come now to the final episode. A new menace loomed up out of the shadows and like a giant octopus began to wrap its slimy tentacles around me.

I woke up on the morning of Tuesday 11 November, 1986, without the slightest idea that I was already the victim of a sinister plot, stretching back over the years to the far-off deserts of Southern Oman.

The day started ordinarily enough. Once a year M L (Holdings) hold a board meeting at one of their subsidiary companies, M L Engineering, near Plymouth. One had been arranged for the following morning, with a board dinner the night before at the Moorland Links Hotel. My wife had already left our house to visit her mother in North Wales. After working at my board papers with my secretary during the morning, we had a leisurely lunch together, after which I gathered my papers together and went out to my BMW. Joe Bentley, my partner in the consultancy company we had started together, had insisted that we purchase a substantially built saloon car on the grounds of road safety. I recall turning the radio to the afternoon play before settling back in the seat, looking forward to a pleasant drive down to Plymouth. Just beyond Boscombe Down airfield I negotiated the Ames-bury roundabout, overtook a car towing a horsebox and accelerated to about sixty miles an hour on a straight section of the dual carriageway, now devoid of any traffic ahead.

I happened to glance in the rear mirror and saw a grey Volvo coming up fast to station itself immediately behind me. I was just about to wave it on when, with alarming suddenness, my BMW spun sharply to the left, and then, with tyres now screeching, equally sharply to the right and then back again. I was thrown from side to side as I fought to control the ever-increasing gyrations. I was suddenly transported back forty years to that awful night when my Mosquito spun crazily towards the sea. As then, time slowed up, and I was a spectator watching a macabre drama unfold before me.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the grey Volvo accelerate past me at high speed. My car had now developed a mind of its own as it swung broadside and skidded down the road. With a lurch it hit the central reservation, mounted the grass verge separating the two lanes of the highway and crossed over into the opposite carriageway. I just had time to see a small car approaching from the opposite direction. I hit it sideways on with tremendous force. In a split second the driver’s horror-stricken face was visible and I clearly heard his hoarse scream above the tearing metal of the two cars momentarily locked together; then came silence as the small car disappeared, catapulted off the road by the sheer force of the impact, leaving pieces of scattered wreckage behind it.

My own BMW went on for a few yards, mounted the verge on the far side of the road and finally came to a halt with smoke pouring from the engine. Despite my seatbelt, the impact of the two cars hitting each other had propelled my body up over the steering wheel, smashing my head through the windscreen, splintering it into a thousand tiny glass pieces, peppering my head and face. My first thoughts were that I was still alive and conscious. I could hear the engine and, as there was now a strong smell of petrol

permeating the car, I quickly switched it off and then gingerly tested my legs and arms for broken bones. As they seemed all right I pushed open the bent and battered door and fell out onto the verge, spreadeagled on the grass beside my smoking vehicle.

I looked up at the sky and my whole life passed crazily in front of me. Eventually I was brought back to reality by the screeching of brakes and tearing metal as cars piled into each other in their efforts to avoid the wreckage strewn across the highway, gradually bringing all traffic to a complete stop. After what seemed an age the face of a man looked down at me, caught sight of my bloody head and face and vomited. He pulled himself together enough to shakily enquire whether I was all right. I replied that at least I did not appear to be dead, which was a plus sign as far as I was concerned. Gradually more faces appeared and I sat up.

My wits had by now half-returned and I saw with terrible clarity the sight of a small Citroen car lying on its side some forty yards down a steep bank just below me. ‘Oh dear God,’ I thought, ‘don’t let some innocent youngsters be trapped in it.’ I tried to struggle to my feet, determined to scramble down the bank to get the poor occupants out of the car, but my legs would not work. I heard the sirens of many police cars and the jangling of fire engine bells. For the next hour I was left to watch the firemen tearing at the small car with their cutting equipment in their efforts to get the occupants out of the tangled metal.

The police obviously have a drill for these occasions because at first they left me strictly alone, lying by the side of the road, until finally a very attractive policewoman bent over me and began gently to cross-examine me. What speed had I been doing? Had I had the radio on and was I changing a tape? Did I have a map and was I looking at it? I was partly concussed and very confused, so I had no recollection of what I replied, but it was all faithfully recorded and produced later as a statement! It was the first indication I had of the duplicity of the police.

After a further delay I was carried on a stretcher to an ambulance pulled up at the side of the road, which then sped off towards Salisbury, bells ringing loudly to clear a way through any traffic. I was lifted out of the ambulance at the door of the Salisbury hospital by two kindly ambulance attendants and placed in a small room by myself. Before any medical examination – again, I suspect, a part of the callous police procedure – a uniformed policeman came in and asked for a specimen, followed by a nurse who took a blood sample from me to check the alcohol content. First things first! I was only too ready to oblige with pints of blood and of urine if they so wished. It was only after this prolonged procedure that I was finally X-rayed and my face and head cleaned, although the scars from the innumerable bits of glass were to stay with me for a long time afterwards. The X-rays showed a ruptured kidney and the muscle of my right upper arm had been carved in two by the seatbelt as the car had jerked violently from side to side.

The doctor wanted to keep me in for observation overnight, but I was determined to get out of the hospital. As my wife was away in North Wales I rang my friend David Owen, the managing director of Leckford Estate, and chokingly told him where I was and could he come and fetch me. Once at his house I finally broke down and wept like a baby. That night the most terrible nightmares haunted me. I could not seem to get away from the hoarse cry of a man trapped in the awful collision.

The following morning my wife immediately returned from North Wales to comfort me as best she could. She telephoned both the police and the hospital to find out the names of the occupants of the other car, but met a wall of impenetrable silence. It took three days for my solicitor to find out, in a roundabout way, that the sole occupant of the other vehicle was a Major Michael Marman and that he was dead. It was as if a veil had been drawn down tightly around him by some invisible hand.

In the days following the accident, like that terrible night in 1944, I seemed to be living on a much higher plane, almost as though the accident had triggered off a frenzy of activity in the spirit world.

While my wounds gradually healed my mental anguish remained and, like a dog worrying over a bone, I went over and over the last moments before the crash. Why had my BMW suddenly gone out of control? Had it developed a mind of its own? Was it mechanical failure, a brake seizure, or a burst tyre? But I always returned to the essential fact that I had been travelling quite normally down a straight road when the car suddenly behaved in a violent and unexpected manner; there was no rational explanation for the unpredictability of the events thereafter. I began to doubt my own judgement and many of my close friends, including Joe Bentley, doubted the credibility of my explanation of the accident too.

It was not long before a police sergeant, accompanied by a woman police constable, visited my home. They began quite quietly by stating they were making enquiries into the accident and that the following interview would take the form of questions and answers. They sat down and the police constable led off. The questions began innocently enough, but gradually took on a much more sinister aspect.

WPC: ‘After examining your car there were cassettes on the seat next to you. What were they doing there? Were you reading a map?’

Answer: ‘I was listening to a play on the radio. I believe the tapes had been thrown on to the seat by the violent rocking of the car.’

WPC: ‘There was also a map on the same seat, perhaps you were reading it at the time of the accident?’

Answer: ‘No. I know the road well. The map too must have been thrown on to the seat. Everything was flying around the interior of the car at the time.’

WPC: ‘How do you account for your car striking the kerb?’

Answer: ‘I did not hit the kerb prior to the car developing its sudden swing.’

From these questions it was obvious that the policewoman was trying to trap me into saying that I had hit the kerb while changing a tape or looking at a map, which was a travesty of what actually happened. At the end of the interview the sergeant stood up and formally cautioned me that I could be charged with causing death by reckless driving. I realized at once that I was up against a very hostile police who were determined to charge me whatever the facts.

I knew the name of the man whose death I was responsible for, but that was all. Every enquiry I made about him or about those connected to him led nowhere. I became quite

certain that the SAS or some other military organization had drawn a tight net of security around him.

The threat of a serious prosecution which could lead to a jail sentence hung over me like a black cloud until the inquest was convened some six months later. I attended the inquest with my solicitor, Tim Milligan, now a judge. The Coroner, Mr John Elgar, established the main facts of the accident as follows: ‘Sir Peter Horsley was travelling west on the A303 and was involved in an accident between the Stonehenge fork and the Amesbury roundabout on 11 November, 1986. His two-year-old BMW, which had no apparent technical defects mounted the grass reservation and hit a Citroen 2CV travelling in the opposite direction. Its driver, Major Michael Marman, died instantly and his car ended up down a steep drop on the side of the road. A breath test proved negative and Sir Peter denied that he had been looking at a road map or that he had been loading a tape at the time of the accident.’

The Coroner then called Mr Aubrey Allen, a land agent from Sherborne in Dorset, who had been travelling along the A303 in a Bedford horsebox driven by his wife. He told the inquest: ‘The BMW was travelling normally down the centre of the road in front of me when a large puff of smoke came out of the left rear side of the car. The vehicle began to swerve from side to side. The driver was obviously fighting to control the car and it then shot across the central reservation at an acute angle.’

My solicitor wisely advised me not to say anything. The Coroner concluded, ‘Sir Peter’s vehicle was seen to snake along the A303 for some reason we may never know and then across the central reservation where it came into violent collision with the other vehicle.’

Mr Allen’s evidence was crucial to the outcome of the inquest and was very much in my favour. Why had I been left in such torment for six months? I met him afterwards and he told me that, following the accident, the police had warned him not to get in touch with me! It demonstrated once again that the police were determined to bring me to trial.

After the inquest I was charged by the Wiltshire police with careless driving to which I entered a plea of not guilty and decided to fight my corner. I immediately engaged an expert from a firm of accident investigation consultants to enquire fully into the accident. His report came out entirely in my favour. It concluded that:

> 1. The police scale plan showed a series of tyre marks which supported Sir Peter’s explanation of the movement of his vehicle once he had lost control. In particular four tyre marks visible on the kerb of the reservation suggested that this was the first time the BMW had struck the kerb after travelling sideways.
> 2. There was nothing in the evidence which indicated that Sir Peter was driving in any other than a normal manner. The movement of the vehicle as described by the witness Mr Allen is not indicative of a driver not paying attention to his driving. Importantly, this witness made no mention of the BMW striking the kerb prior to its crossing the central reservation.
> 3. On speed: the expert police officer gave evidence of the BMW’s speed at seventy miles per hour at the time it went out of control. For a trained accident investigator his evidence was remarkably brief and lacked good and detailed reconstruction. My own estimate of the BMW’s speed was that it was travelling at fifty-six miles an hour allowing for a ten per cent error of margin.

The accident investigator finally concluded that:

> The defendant has always been a safe and prudent motorist and there should be no

good reason for his sudden loss of control.

The accident investigator's report was then sent to the Director of Prosecutions. The police, who had nothing left to go on, then withdrew all charges against me and I was awarded costs against them. These included the not inconsiderable fees of the accident investigator.

It was shortly after this that Ranulph Fiennes contacted me and the story of The Feather Men at least gave me a possible explanation of why my car had behaved in such a manner. The Clinic had moved on, leaving behind the four dead soldiers involved in the ambush at Zahir many years ago. Their contract had been fulfilled.

The story is not yet quite over because then came the cruellest joke of all. One of my brothers died and the funeral service was held at Nether Wallop. After the service we followed the coffin out to a freshly dug grave where the vicar intoned a final prayer. I glanced over at the gravestone next to his and there were the words 'Major Michael Marman'.

The voices erupted in a pinnacle of indecent merriment.

The Beginning of the End

I went out through the back door and strolled on to the lawn. Half way across I looked back at the house, now bathed in bright sunlight. The voices were stilled. I wondered when I should put faces to them.

I emerged from this last dark tunnel into a space of peace and tranquillity. Once more I had met and defeated the grim stalker. The encounter had convinced me that I must be a good deal more careful in the future; if I caught even a glimpse of him on the prowl, I would turn tail and run for cover.

With my extended family now educated and launched on their precarious paths, with mortgages and loans almost repaid, the time had come to ease off a little and concentrate on a narrower front, focusing on personal choices rather than the need to generate money. So I gradually shelved those responsibilities which required hard work, sleepless nights, late dinners and jet-lagged meetings in distant uncomfortable hotels. Such interests as I retain are quite modest and involve me in a world with which I am familiar – aviation and printing.

I have shed a large, uneconomical house and moved into a much smaller one, with an expansive and beautiful view over the Test Valley on the banks of a famous chalk river where I lead a much more sedentary life of golf, fishing, the local pub and village activities. Time passes even more swiftly than before.

What stress there is I leave behind at the beginning of each January as we travel to a tiny island on the edge of nowhere and out of this time. My friends ask me how I get there and I reply, ‘On a big aeroplane, then change to a little one and finally paddle the last twenty miles.’ The island is a paradise with an idyllic climate, three miles long and about a quarter of a mile broad, shaped like an elbow. It is populated by a community of some two hundred and fifty people, descendants of loyalists who fled the Carolinas two hundred years ago to pursue a life of fishing and shipwrecking, plus an unknown number of Haitian refugees who undertake all the unpopular jobs around the settlement. There are also a number of visitors who, like ourselves, are escaping from the cold climes of the northern hemisphere, mostly Americans and Canadians who occupy the small, coloured, clapboard houses scattered around the island, and boat, fish, swim, eat the local crawfish and drink the local rum. Of high life there is none – *sans* newspapers, *sans* television and *sans* motor vehicles; I don’t suppose I change into long trousers more than half-a-dozen times in two months. A time warp seems to take you back to repeated visits to the same Cornish village fifty years ago where the same people go every year to swap books, recipes, socialize and gossip. We return to England as the daffodils are beginning to bloom and the fish are waiting to be caught.

Fortunately I believe in God and in a soul which does not die. What you become and where you go I don’t know. To all intents and purposes I died that day a long time ago

when the sea and the sky became one and gradually changed into a vibrant landscape. I crossed over the bridge between life and death and could just see the indistinct figures of people on the other side. All pain had disappeared and I enjoyed the most wonderful peace – the pain only began to return as I retraced my steps back to the side with life, propelled by some irresistible force. I know without any doubt that some time in the near future I shall cross that same bridge again.

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