Dad's War

There are all sorts of little stories I can remember Dad telling me about his war and there is corroborative information that comes from his logbooks and from my mother who as I write this in January 2001 is approaching her 83rd birthday. Dad himself died back in 1970 so my memories of his stories may by now be distorted.

During the war Mum kept a scrap book of newspaper cuttings and other information as and when she found it. That scrap book provides some linking information for what I will try to piece together. The scrap book itself has had a chequered career as it is a damaged survivor of a V1 attack which completely destroyed the flat that was our home in 1944. The scrap book was recovered from the rubble some three months after the attack. You can guess that we weren't there at the time.

Dad spent most of the second World War serving in the RAF, for the most part as a fighter pilot. In the broadest terms his career went like this. He volunteered for service some time early in 1940 not long after marrying my mother in January. At first he was rejected on fitness grounds, but was accepted a little later after some strenuous training. I know few details of his flight training other than that it was interrupted by my birth in October. I do know that he did the basic flying training in Tiger Moths followed by advanced training in Master Is with operational training in Hurricanes.

He joined an operational squadron at Ibsley in Hampshire in early 1941 and then towards the end of 1942 was posted to the Middle East after some involvement in ferrying Spitfires to Malta. In Iraq at the time the RAF was assembling and testing Spitfires that were to be handed to the Russians and Dad was posted to a Maintenance Unit as Flying Officer commanding and to act as one of the test pilots. Eventually he was posted again to an operational squadron and was involved in landings in Sicily and Italy. He was credited with three and a half aircraft destroyed during operational flying and was awarded the DFC for displaying "the utmost zeal and determination as a pilot and flight commander". In 1944 he returned to England and held a number of administrative positions around the country before being demobilised late in 1945.

In the following paragraphs I will write what I recall of his stories as far as possible in the correct chronological sequence. After Dad's return from Italy I can remember some peripheral events myself.

Training

Three things stick in my mind that I heard about Dad's training. First, he was given leave to visit my mother when I was born and, in doing so, undertook a typical interminable wartime journey including a fourteen mile walk in pouring rain, which resulted in him catching a quinsy. This sickness put him back to a later training course and probably resulted in his becoming a fighter pilot. All his earlier course mates were posted to bomber squadrons at the end of their course.

Second, during the advanced training part of the course when flying Masters night flying was required. Very limited aids were available or could be used, because of blackouts, and the first two pilots on the course to undertake night solos crashed and killed themselves. Dad was number three to solo. I imagine that at the commencement of that

flight he was fairly nervous.

Finally, when flying a Hurricane, probably from an OTU, he was caught in deteriorating weather over the Lake District and decided that a forced landing was a better bet than a crash in the mountains. Having managed to avoid a herd of cows, he was able to walk away from the landing and was astonished when the first habitation he came to was Blackburn's Farm. It seems that the coincidence caused him to be well looked after until he was retrieved.

Initial training from September to December 1940 was on Tiger Moths at Sywell given by Brooklands Aviation. Advanced training took place from January to May 1941 at 5 SFTS (location not specified) on Masters and Hurricanes. Dad then moved to 59 OTU at Crosby on Eden from May to July on Hurricanes.

Operational in England

Dad joined 118 Squadron in early July operational on Spitfires having never flown one before. This was after the Battle of Britain and the time of "sweeps" and "rhubarbs" . I think the distinction is that a sweep was a group of fighters roaming over occupied France and attacking targets of opportunity and a rhubarb was a small nuisance bombing raid escorted by fighters. My mother and I lived in a rented cottage in Ringwood and she says she used to watch the returning raids hoping that Dad was among them. When once I made a model of a Westland Whirlwind fighter/bomber, Dad recalled that he had escorted them on rhubarbs.

On August 6th 1941 his logbook says: "Saw my first 109. The pilot fired at me. He couldn't have known!". Otherwise the greatest successful activity seems to have been the occasional destruction of locomotives.

At this time the film *The First of the Few* was being made with the assistance of 501 Squadron, also based at Ibsley, and, on occasion, 118's pilots were asked to fly 501's aeroplanes for the benefit of the camera. So probably somewhere in the film can be seen a Spitfire piloted by Dad.

The Voyage South

Dad's log book says that he was posted to the Middle East in September 1942, but no flights are recorded after May. He did tell me that he was a reserve pilot for flying a Spitfire from a carrier to Malta, but it is not clear from his logbook when this happened. My mother recalls that he was suddenly sent to Gibraltar after 118 Squadron and that he returned to England before being posted overseas. He never went to Malta, but he did tell me that he got so far as sitting in the cockpit instead of a sick pilot, when the pilot concerned climbed on the wing and said "Get out, Blackie. I'm going". Dad thought that was one of the happenings that allowed him to survive the war.

Eventually on the 29th September he sailed on the *Queen of Bermuda* arriving at Freetown on October 16th. He sailed on from there on my second birthday aboard *s/s Thysville* arriving at Takaradi on the 27th leaving again on the 29th to arrive at Lagos on the 30th. From Lagos there was a long flight to Cairo on an Ensign and a Short C-class flying boat identified as *Coolgar*. On the same trip, one happening that nearly ended his war was sport shooting at seagulls from the stern of the ship. His killing a seagull made him highly unpopular with the ship's crew.

Iraq

From the Almaza transit camp at Cairo Dad was posted in January 1943 to 119 MU Shaibah in Iraq at the head of the Shat-al-arab river and known, it seems, to some as "the arsehole of the world" and Mum recalled that one of Dad's letters said that he was "400 miles up it and bloody browned off".

Spitfire for Russia – Dad on the left

As it turned out being posted to Iraq may have been yet another life-saving occurrence. Dad told me that the test flying Spitfires in near ideal conditions in non-threatening skies taught him more about flying than anything he had done up to that time. He was sure that the experience gained saved his life in combat over Italy on a number of occasions. Items I remember are that flying at high speed very low over the desert was very exciting and that keeping control of a Spitfire only one of whose flaps had worked was almost equally so. At the end of August 1943 Dad had a short period at a training unit before joining 242 Squadron in Sicily.

Italy

If war is ever rewarding, it may be that Italy was Dad's best time during the war. He was leading men and doing what he'd been trained to do and had gained enough experience to do well. He didn't tell me much about it other than a couple of minor experiences, one of which is very technically interesting. He did say that war was no fun when "Hun was trying to rivet your arsehole to your armour plating".

Dad in Italy

A typical logbook entry is: "Patrol battle area. Dawn take off. Chased a single 190 over the beachhead. The Army and Navy gave us all they had got. The Hun got away." Another: "Patrol battle area. Uneventful except for the odd spot of flak." More often than not sorties were uneventful, but when enemy aircraft appeared battle was joined whenever possible: "Bomb line patrol. Four of us intercepted sixteen 190s and 109s. I was fired at as was also Bill Hughes who was slightly hit. Pat got a 109, I got a 190 and Dick damaged a 190" or: "Ran into twenty enemy aircraft, but I only saw Spits in the melée. Minto got a probable." and, ultimately, when he was in 72 Squadron : "Fighter

sweep. Our big day. We bounced eighteen 109s and got nine of them. I got one". This last combat made the London *Daily Express*.

He told me a story once, why I don't remember now, of how he was on a high altitude patrol with his team. There were to be no patrols below, so on seeing a group of single engined aircraft below down they went. The resultant scattering of P47s with dropping of tanks was no doubt not received well. The logbook entry says: "Fighter sweep. Dived 15000ft to jump some Thunderbolts! Got some flak as reward."

The technically interesting story concerns his attempt to follow an escaping Me109 in a dive from high altitude. Dad said that speed built up so that he could not pull out of the dive using elevators alone, but had to put his feet on the instrument panel and use the elevator trim. My own subsequent reading suggests that his Spitfire was well into compressibility effects (in the popular phrase of the '50s "approaching the Sound Barrier") and that control returned as much through reducing Mach number with falling altitude as to heroic physical efforts.

Most of Dad's time in Italy was with 145 Squadron, which he joined after only a month with 242. Then in early April 1944 he joined 72 Squadron until his return to England in May.

A curious aside to his Italian career comes from my modelling interests. In the early '70s *Air International* published a letter from SqLdr D R S McKay reviewing a kit for a model Spitfire with the identification letters ZX-M that he had himself flown in 145 Squadron. SqLdr McKay complained that the pilot image didn't look much like him. Since Dad had flown several hours in ZX-M according to his log book, I wrote and suggested that perhaps the pilot image had actually looked like Dad. It transpired that there had been two ZX-Ms and that SqLdr McKay had taken over Dad's aircraft after he had left the squadron and subsequently flown the second after engine failure of the first. Photos were published of both the aircraft. The model carried the serial number of the later one which Dad never flew. Recently one of the many restored Spitfires has carried the marking ZX-M, but sadly, for me at any rate, with the later serial number.

Back in England

No stories were ever told about what were probably comparatively unexciting times, but my own memories can provide some inkling of them. Dad served in a number of locations around the country from Shropshire to Berkshire, Lincolnshire and even Durham, but his logbook only records a few flights in May and June 1945. I can remember a Tiger Moth flying over our rented accommodation in Shrewsbury and being told that Dad was flying it. I received as a birthday present an excellent pre-war pedal car resprayed in RAF motor pool blue complete with roundel and serial number. Someone had even found a Morris bonnet mascot to put on it. Somewhere or other during this period I was given my first direct experience of an aeroplane by being placed in the cockpit of a Proctor. But I wasn't flown. That experience waited until the'50s when Dad briefly relived his flying experiences with the Surrey Flying Club and I was treated to a first flight out of Croydon Airport in a Tiger Moth. I was also a passenger in the last flight recorded in his logbook in a Prentice.