

CONVERSATION WITH LUCIAN ERCOLANI

BOURNE END 30 JUNE 2009



Key: LE – Wg Cdr Lucian Brett Ercolani DSO and bar DFC. Pilot on 214 Squadron Stradishall, Wellington, completing 20 ops. 1483 Gunnery Flight Newmarket, Wellington. 99 Sqn Jessore, Wellington; converted to Liberator 9.44 and he took over as CO. OC 355 Sqn Salbani, Liberator. OC 159 Sqn Salbani, Liberator.
SB – Steve Bond
ND – Norman Didwell
JD – Joan Didwell

SB - “Where did you do your flying training?”

LE - “At Watchfield (3 *EFTS*) on Tiger Moths and Avro Cadets. I spent some time at Ternhill, then went to Canada, Boundary Bay for twin training on Ansons.”

SB – “Please tell us about your first tour on 214 Squadron.”

LE – “That was on Wellingtons; I started there in May ’41. We had a rough trip once; we got damaged over Berlin, we had a big chunk knocked out of us. We headed home and found ourselves over the sea somewhere off the Channel Islands. We were supposed to have coasted in at Southwold, so we had drifted way off track somehow.”

“Anyway, we eventually saw a coast ahead, but we had no option but to ditch. We got down all right and got into the life-raft, all six of us. The aircraft had broken in half; the tail was round by the cockpit! We came ashore at Ventnor and just waded ashore. Not long afterwards the rescue launch came out to us, but we didn’t need them.”

SB – “Was it flak that damaged you, or a fighter?”

LE – “Flak.”

SB – “Were you ever attacked by an enemy fighter?”

LE – “No, not really. All our ops were night raids, and this was 1941, so they didn’t have much equipment at that time.”

SB – “What did you think of the Wellington?”

LE – “Oh it was an excellent aeroplane, just like an old spaniel dog.” *(Laughter)*

SB - “So were there any other memorable ops at that time?”

LE - “Well they were all pretty memorable. My wife...we’d just been married...not long after I started operations, then my wife came down and she lived, rented a cottage outside the airport at Watchfield aerodrome, near Hungerford.”

ND - “You lived in Newmarket as well, didn’t you Lucian? You lived in Newmarket when you came to take over the Gunnery Flight.”

SB - “Anyway, you were saying about 214 still and...”

LE - “We’d done about 20 trips and they posted me to Newmarket and gave me the odd stripes to run a training Gunnery Flight there. In a similar location where we’d been before and my wife instead of staying where she was, we moved to a little cottage in Newmarket.”

SB - “So on the Gunnery Flight, was that still Wellingtons?”

LE - “It was Wellingtons, yes.”

ND - “Ginger Ware flew a lot with you; Sergeant Ware.”

SB - “What did you think of the Wellington?”

LE - “Oh well we...we thought...very strong affection for them. One would take a hell of a lot of punishment! Wonderful aeroplane, yes. I can’t really compare it to others because I hadn’t flown any others, certainly a lot of good memories of Wellingtons. Wonderfully, I mean, good old tough geodetic construction. Amazing piece of work.”

SB - “Were you ever attacked by fighters?”

LE - “Most of our trouble was ack-ack. We had the odd single, it was night fighters, it was fairly early on in the war and they hadn’t that equipment around to see what was going on.”

SB - “Who was in your crew? Were they all British? Or was it a mixed crew? What nationalities?”

LE - “There was one New Zealander, and a Scotsman. I don’t think we’d got any Canadians in our crew, there were a fair number of Canadians coming on the scene by then but they had formed a Canadian Squadron.”

SB - "When you left the Gunnery Flight, what did you do next?"

LE - "Well that's when I went to 1483, was at Newmarket, and we go back there now, we flew off the Heath."

SB - "And then I believe you had a long flight across Africa, didn't you on the way out to the Far East?.....Your ferry flight across Africa. What was that all about?"

LE - "Well I was posted out. Air Chief Marshal Jackie Baldwin, he was AOC 3 Group when we were there and then when he went out to India, I was at the dinner when he made his last parting farewell speech if you like and I had met him several times before and flown under his command basically, and he said 'Would I like to go out non the India run?' and I said 'Yes. Very much.' I was posted out as his PA with instructions to call at his office in the Imperial, back to the British Raj, fantastic sort of palaces that all operated from. He didn't know when I was coming...took us out by ship but it landed us in West Africa."

ND - "Takoradi?"

LE - "West Africa. Lagos actually."

ND - "Yeah, that area. It was that area but it was Takoradi wasn't it? The airfield."

LE - "I've forgotten where Takoradi was."

ND - "You flew across up to the Middle East and you flew across up to the Middle East to Cairo, and Cairo to Karachi."

LE - "Got fed up with hanging around then we went up to Kano, which is the crossroads of the desert. And just as a sideline, I rolled up there in the early afternoon, very few people around, but there was an old Wellington on the side of the field. Get ready, 'Oh you surprised us!' Up in this Wellington, none of the ground crew wanted to come up so I was the only one in it, floating round Kano, realising I was in the centre of the desert in an aeroplane that was probably not a good idea to go up in, but fortunately it worked out all right"

"It was on the delivery run to Cairo so I hitched a lift and got across to Cairo. Managed to get on the ship into Bombay and on to Delhi and the AOC, we went to the C-in-C of India and we rolled into his office and he pulls this drawer out and fishes out, you know the tape which you mark your rank with. I was a Flight Lieutenant, so he fished in his drawer and pulled out a thin strip and 'There you are. Go and get that sewn on.' So I walked out with the result I became a Squadron Leader! I arrived down with 99 when Jimmy Black was CO."

ND - "Squadron Leader Black."

LE - "Wing Commander then."

ND - "He was Wing Commander, that's right."

LE - "He was a good chap and he was a good personal friend."

SB - "So these are Liberators now?"

LE - "No."

SB - "Still Wellingtons?"

LE - "Still Wellingtons. We were flying over Burma obviously, and mostly still at night, over the Indian Ocean. Then we were going North – Mandalay and places like that. Seems an awful shame to think you go to bomb Mandalay – the old flying fishes play."

ND - "...song 'On the road to Mandalay.'"

SB - "Again, any particular memories of operations?"

ND - "Bombed a lot of bridges."

LE - "Yes. That was with the Liberators."

JD - "Did you drop the bombs on the River Kwai?"

LE - "Yes. And we'd bomb most of the bridges on the...and best of all was to try to catch a train. Except that one had to be jolly careful because they used railway trucks not carriages, and bunged our chaps into that. You'd fly alongside a train and hundreds of hands would come through the slats in those trucks waving like mad to us and it's very moving. So we'd try and clobber the engine when we got up to the engine. We certainly clobbered the bridges."

"Then they had the odd ships come into Siam Bay, Bangkok is up at the top end of it. These ships were just below Bangkok and we sank those."

SB - "Any trouble from the Japanese? Anti-aircraft fire or anything?"

LE - "We lost an engine as a result of one, we were very lucky."

SB - "What did you think of the Liberator after the Wellington?"

LE - "It would go a lot further, it certainly took a lot more bombs. Both were very good aircraft, but we were doing different jobs. We didn't like to show disloyalty, but the Liberator...I've forgotten what we did carry, but obviously it was a big aeroplane, and a four-engined aeroplane, you could take a lot more."

SB - "Did you go onto 159? Is that right?"

LE - "Yes I commanded 159. Yes, they were a good squadron, they were on special duties."

SB - "What sort of duties were those?"

LE - "We thought all we did was special duties basically! We'd probably be doing a one-off somewhere where they wanted...and they wanted someone from 159 to do that. Basically the routine was much the same; we had a very long flight over the Indian Continent and then you'd cross the Indian Ocean and pick up the Burmese coast or the Siamese coast for that matter."

SB - "When did you leave 159? When did you finish?"

LE - "October '45. Long haul too, December '42 to October '45."

SB - "And then you came back to the UK?"

LE - "Yes. The war was over by then and there were a hell of a lot of aircraft flying backwards and forwards ferrying troops and personnel back from the Middle East and I joined the team which was controlling that, when they flew and when they didn't fly. Obviously it was almost entirely dominated by the weather."

SB - "What about this one? Brest; bombing the *Prince Eugen*."

LE - "Oh yes. We'd go and bomb the docks; with the ship in there. We thought we hit it, but don't know what damage it did!"

SB - "I see here you flew a Lysander (*On 1483 Flt*). ("yes") What did you think of that?"

LE - "Oh, a bit of fun. I mean it's very different from the old Wimpey. You could land in a very small space, and you could almost hover...a general reconnaissance aircraft. We were using them here to tow targets, and a long drogue, so the guys would shoot and be shooting at aeroplanes when they should be shooting the drogue."

ND - "Can we see any of the crew; can you see a 'Ware', cos Ginger flew with him a lot."

SB - "Morgan, Jordan, Squire, Lee, Stevens, Innes, Barret, Biggs, Rickets...No, I don't see a Ware.....Oh yes! Flight Sergeant Ware."

ND - "That's him!"

SB - "Norman was just asking about him: Flight Sergeant Ware."

ND - "Ginger Ware.....Jim Ware. Sergeant Jim Ware. But he was Flight Sergeant when you knew him. He got a DFM."

LE - "Did he? Cos he was ground crew for a time wasn't he? ("oh yes") He was a good chap."

ND - "Used to come to a lot of the reunions if you remember. Up until when he died, he used to come to a lot of the reunions."

SB - "Well that's interesting; I think it's interesting! You were towing targets there for Whirlwinds."

ND - "That is interesting because there were only two squadrons."

SB - "263 and 137 I think."

LE - "That's it, you got it."

SB - "Not a type that you see too much of."

LE - "Whirlwinds. I've forgotten what they were."

ND - "They were the Westland Whirlwind. They were built by Westlands, the same people who built the Lysanders and they were single seater twin engine fighter. Something like the American Lightning."

LE - "We also had Whittle there at Newmarket. He was testing out his...all we knew it was a strange aeroplane with no propeller. It was a jet."

SB - "Oh so you saw it at Newmarket did you?"

LE - "Yes, it was on the same strip that we were using. Mind you, there's a lot of room there."

ND - "You could take three Wimpeys off in formation on the Heath."

LE - "This was at the time when Bomber Command was trying to get all the support they could get, and they wanted to prove to the powers that be that if they'd only help them, let them have enough aircraft, they couldn't half do a hell of a damage. And so he made sure every aircraft that he had any control over at all (quite a lot of which were on training), he concentrated them to...and we all took off with as many bombs as we could, and got as many aircraft into the air as we could and we were all rather excited about it."

SB - "This was the second thousand-bomber raid."

LE - "And he set up what he called 'Millennium Rage' to show what you could do if you had a thousand aircraft, and the damage. Bremen was one of the targets, another one was Dresden, particularly picked on, sadly, because most of the houses were built of wood and of course it burns. From a history point of view, it's pretty tragic you know."

SB - "I met a German lady two years ago who was in Dresden at that time."

LE - "Did you? ('yes') I bet she told pretty horrific stories."

SB - "Yes. When there are so many aircraft, were you aware that there were so many aircraft together?"

LE - "We were quite excited about it. We knew that something rather special was happening and knew you had more company! And you get more spread out actually, you don't see all that number. Unless you get one that comes a bit too close."

SB - "Yes I imagine! Is there anything else that's come to mind while we've been talking that you'd like to tell us about?.....No that's marvellous. Thank you very much. I'm sure other things will occur to us."

LE - "Have you spoken to other people about this?"

SB - "Oh yes, lots. Lots."

LE - "So what questions sort of come to your mind?"

SB - "I think I've probably asked them all actually! We've covered a lot.....Other things may well occur.....No that's marvellous. Thank you. Thank you very much."

ND - "It's interesting. You see, I can understand it, being serving during the war, and being connected with the units that you commanded. I mean it's very interesting, Lucian because I see it from the ground crew side, you see it from the flying side; it is interesting."

SB - "There is one more question actually. If there's one aircraft type that you never flew but you'd like to have flown, what would that be?"

LE - "Funnily enough, I've never asked myself that question. I'd have liked to have flown them all I suppose!"

ND - "You'd like to have flown a Spitfire."

LE - "Yes, anybody would have liked to flown a Spitfire. Hurricane would probably have been more fun to fly probably. I knew Frank Carey quite well and he...did you know he...."

ND - "I remember him. Crew Captain Carey, ex-Halton apprentice. Cockney Carey they called him; he was born in London."

LE - "Yes, we got to know each other quite well because when I was at Salbani he was about ten/fifteen miles south and we were training gunners, and we'd take them down there in the Liberator and play games with the fighter boys! But I was down there on one occasion and we were, I think having lunch together, someone came in and said some Indian guy wanted to see Frank Carey because he was Station Commander. (*Group Captain Frank Carey AFC DFC and 2 bars DFM*) He was from a village nearby and would by any chance get down help them because there was a leopard causing devastation, and some poor young baby was almost half eaten. There was another chap there, South African, and three of us went down and stood looking at the eaves of this house where this awful growling noise was coming out, and suddenly Whoop!...and this great creature came bounding out of the eaves of this house. I don't think it actually knocked us over but we dispersed out of the way pretty

quickly! And it went up the tree but the branch overhanging just above us lowered this beautiful creature draped along this...and very sadly really, we shot the poor thing. It had to be done because he had too much of an appetite for the local villagers.”

END

Sadly, Lucian died on 13 February 2010.