

## CONVERSATIONS WITH JOE PETRIE-ANDREWS

MILTON KEYNES 8 JULY 2003

Key: JPA – Flight Lieutenant Joe Petrie-Andrews DFC DFM, enlisted Dec 1940. Tours on 102 Sqn Halifax, 158 Sqn Halifax, 35 Sqn Pathfinder Force Halifax and Lancaster at Graveley. Completed 70 ops.

SB – Steve Bond

JB – Jack Bromfield, Halifax Wireless Operator, 158 Sqn.

JPA – “Going back to 1940, as I was at school. I decided I would leave the Home Guard and join the air force, so I went along and stuck my age up and they wanted me to be a wireless operator/air gunner, while I’d set my mind on being a pilot, the Battle of Britain being all fired up, and one thing and another. But they said ‘No thanks’, and I came away.”

“But I went back a few months later and at another recruiting office everything went well. ‘That’s nice’, he asked, ‘but how old are you?’ and I said ‘I’m 18 sir.’ ‘But you don’t start pilot training until you’re 19, but you look older than you really are, perhaps you will go through straight away.’ I got into the air force and they sent me to America to do my training, which was all very well, but I was there for so long.”

“By the time I got back the Battle of Britain was over; they didn’t want me in Fighter Command. I was going to be a night fighter or a day bomber pilot, and ended up in a Whitley (*24 OTU Honeybourne*), which I thought was the pits!” (*Laughter*) “Let’s get this bomber thing over and get on to fighters.”

“And of course I volunteered for Pathfinders, because they said that because I did a couple of tours on Pathfinders, that I could do whatever I wanted, but it didn’t work out that way.” (*Joe flew operationally with 102 Squadron at Pocklington, 158 Squadron at Lissett and 35 Squadron at Graveley, for a total of 70 ops*)

“Eventually I left the air force and joined the Auxiliaries in ’48-’49 on 615 County of Surrey squadron, with Winston Churchill as our Honourary Air Commodore, and I flew Spitfires and Vampires and Meteors.; all that was magic. That was my career in the air force, and I have never looked back. I loved it.”

SB – “It’s often been said that one of the great advantages of the Lancaster was its ability to carry large bombs in the bomb bay, which the Halifax was not able to do. Did the Halifax have any distinct advantages over the Lancaster in any other way?”

JPA – “Yes it was first love. I was very fond of the Halifax because it was an extremely well built aeroplane as opposed to the Lanc, which was a good aeroplane. But after all it was a twin-engine Manchester, and when they put four engines on it did very well, but you always felt so very secure in a Halifax. We hadn’t got the great depth of bomb bay needed to carry 22,000 pounders, but our bomb load was quite substantial. The weight of the aircraft unloaded was 30,000 to 40,000 lbs heavier than the Lanc, which made a difference, but I did like the Halifax.”

JB – “When people look at the bomb bay in the Lanc, this cavernous hole underneath, and they look at the Halifax and say it’s shorter. But what they don’t realise is that in the wings, inside the two inner engines, you could have four or five 500 pounders.”

“I got inside a Lancaster once; God, I wouldn’t want to be in this thing, getting over the main spar was like getting through a cat flap, if you could imagine getting through with all your kit on. In a Hali it was so easy, well the forward end was double-decked, and the driver sits up top and the WOp sat underneath him. The escape hatch for the bomb aimer, WOp and nav was underneath the WOp’s feet. All you had to do was kick the over-centre spring back and out goes the hatch. The engineer could go out the rear door, which didn’t have a step over it, because it was part of the fuselage. Once lifted up you could get out so that you didn’t clobber your head.”

“The only problem that I ever thought my rear gunner sussed this quite early on. He said one night ‘Bromfield, if it goes pear-shaped I’ve got to get out of the turret, climb over the elevator bar, grab my ‘chute and get to the door; I’m not gonna make it.’ He did a lot of talking, and he got himself a fighter pilot ‘chute and sat on it, and when we were downed, he’d turned the turret round 90 degrees and he fell out backwards. But I found the Halifax was a well-built aircraft.”

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