David Vandervord

[02:09] SJB: OK, let's start at the beginning then. So you joined up in '39 then, is that right?

Over here in Oxford [? Wroxford ? indistinct (sometimes Minnie Bannister seems to be twittering away in the background)] I joined the Civil Air Guard, which was an organisation the government set up to encourage young people to fly. They paid half your fees and you paid the rest of it and whilst I was over there I did my first solo.

SJB: What were you flying?

At that time it wasn't Tiger Moths; it was a civil aircraft but I'm not sure what it was. I did my first solo over there, even before I was in the RAF. Then the RAF opened up a unit there, an RAFVR unit and I thought oh I'll transfer to that and then they can pay all my training fees. The only trouble was – the war happened and everything stopped. [03:41 …Commentary now very difficult to follow. Microphone cannot compete with a kettle boiling and the Mothers' Union in the background]. Eventually we went to Bexhill; no flying, we just did drill.

SJB: This was ITW?

Yes, just drill, no flying and nothing to do with flying. That was down near the de la Warr Pavilion. Next thing I went to a place called Desford [04:34] and there I was flying Tiger Moths, so I started from scratch again, as it were. Then I went to Grantham, flying Ansons and they had Battles there. The people on Battles eventually became fighter pilots and those on Ansons went on to bombers.

SJB: So it was 15 OTU Harwell after that?

Oh yes, I was flying Wellingtons there and in one particular one I was shot at and wounded.

SJB: So you finished OTU in December '40 and then went to 218 Sqdn. at Marham. Fg Off Anstey was your first pilot and then Agar.

Agar, that's it. I was second pilot to him and I never flew the aircraft at all, operationally, I think. You didn't really need two pilots. I was just there in case the first pilot got killed or wounded and then I took over.

SJB: You've got one here – February 11th '41, would this be Bremen, low cloud over target, crashed-landed in field at Passingham.

No, no, that was another one. Shall I tell you about that? This is the second one actually. We came back with our bombs because we couldn't see anything over Germany or over here and we had to decide what to do. Should we climb, set the aircraft on George and parachute out over the sea. We could see little gaps in the cloud and the ground underneath so Fg Off Agar decided to dip down to get under the cloud and the next thing I recall is that there was a tree just in front of him. He lifted up over the tree and there was a ploughed field and he made a wheels-up belly

landing. Oh, I should have mentioned that we first had to drop our bombs ***live*** over this country.

SJB: So you just jettisoned them, somewhere on the way back?

Yes, I'm don't know quite where. I recall that we didn't know where we were. We walked along a nearby road and found a little house, knocked on their door and they were as scared as sin to see us. They must have thought the Germans had landed. They must have told the police and we soon had transport back to Marham.

SJB: Now I think this must be the other one you started to talk about. This is March 13th, '41. Can you talk me through that?

Yes, we went to Hamburg, up the coast of Holland and then round to the river Elbe and then to Hamburg. That was all right, we dropped our bombs there and it was decided to come back over land. I don't know why, anyhow we got as far as the Zuider Zee in Holland, got caught in searchlights and then two Me110s attacked us. I don't know how the aircraft survived. I think we shot down one of them and then Fg Off Agar dived right down to ground level. I was standing in the astrohatch. They had built in some bullet-proof doors, screwed to the fuselage on a hinge. They moved backwards and forwards and at the time we were attacked I think they must have been back. I was standing just behind them and it was amazing just how close the German aircraft came. I was the only one who got wounded but the aircraft was shot to pieces and still kept on flying. One engine was on fire and I think we were quite close to the coast at the time. We went out over the sea, heading for Marham, one engine on fire..

Anon female: Was there anything else you wanted, Mr Vandervord?

…..the petrol gauge was showing zero. I think the fuel supply to one of the engines had been severed and it was on fire every now and again; I think the speed of the engine blew it out and then it started again. So were out over the North Sea with one engine…… [15:40 indistinct] ….. back to Marham. I was wounded in the leg and went straight to hospital but I'm told the aircraft was in a Hell of a state and still flying. I feel that was something to do with the construction. I think most aircraft couldn't have survived the punishment that aircraft took. I was the only one who was wounded.

That was that one and then the other was the landing in a field. I got to 13 missions without flying the aircraft so I then asked to come off Bomber Command; I think I asked for fighters. I was offered the choice of either coming off flying or carrying on as I was. I had to make a quick decision so I decided to come off flying and that was the end of my flying career after 13 missions.

SJB: What did you do after that then?

Oh, I joined a unit which took wireless readings of ….. the two bombs they were sending over.

SJB: Ah, the V1 and V2.

We recorded where we were and the angles and somebody else was also getting the angles and where they crossed you could tell where it was (Steve: some sort of triangulation process, by the sound of it). I'm not sure it was much use but that was our job.

SJB: At the time you were flying your ops, was all your squadron going off at the same time or was it up to individual skippers when they went? How about navigation; were you on your own or as a force?

No, all at about the same time, more or less. I do recall that when we went to Berlin, most of the aircraft had Bristol engines, Hercules I think, but I do remember that one aircraft had Merlin engines and the squadron leader had that. I do recall that he was back in his bed when we got back, because he had the Merlin engines.

SJB: The Mk 2, Merlin-engined, wasn't that common, was it?

Probably not.

SJB: What did you think of the Wellington?

It was easy enough to fly. I could fly it quite easily. I did fly it quite a bit, but not operationally. I remember on one occasion my brother, who was in the Army, was on a suicide bridge [? 21:02 indistinct] on the Norfolk coast and I accidently shot him up and my wireless operator came to me and said "Do you realise our training area is out there?" I said "No, you never told me that".

SJB: All your ops were night ops then? You didn't do any day-time ops?

Oh no.

SJB: There are a couple of others here you might recall. On the 7th of May with Sgt McNeil you went to Brest to target the Scharnhorst and then you landed at Boscombe Down. Was that for any particular reason? Was it for weather or damage or what? Can you recall?

It wasn't damaged. I don't really know. It was quite a long flight and we might have landed there to refuel, on our way back to Marham.

SJB: Your last flight sounds interesting as well. May 10th, Hamburg, the target was the Blohm und Voss shipyards and you've written here large fires observed, very heavy flak and searchlights, many fighters. That sounds like an interesting time.

I don't recall that but on the other trip to Hamburg we got shot up.

[26:00 – 45:15 – looking at and photographing some of his pictures]

SJB: What rank were you when you were demobbed?

Sergeant

SJB: Did you routinely carry leaflets?

Oh no, only at the beginning.

SJB: Ah, I've got your mess bill here, from Grantham: £1 – 6s – 6d.

…..Large amounts of just chat from now on but one extra contribution from very near the end of the recording [45:15], referring to the special door at mid-fuselage:

We had this bullet-proof door with a hinge in the middle and flaps and we locked them but it didn't do that. They tended to flap backwards and forwards and when we were attacked, luckily for me, they must have been open. In spite of that I got shot; I was lucky my head was unexposed. However, after a time I believe they took those away. I think Bomber Harris decided that if you took those away you could have another bomb on board. He was more concerned about bombs than about the lives of the crew.

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