Copy Caroline.

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4

Seeding the Storm

Squadron Leader John Ernest Francis Mitchell, DFC, wireless operator/air gunner, then pilot

[Photo 4-0001] ***Squadron Leader Mitchell, c. 1956***

I had never known our headmaster at Eye Grammar to be taken aback. But when he asked at my leaving interview what I intended to do, and I replied without hesitation, 'I want to fly, sir,' it seemed to floor him. Possibly he had expected me to say something about Oxford or Cambridge, after all, I'd been no slouch under his tutelage. And that might not have been so bad. What I had no intention of doing, though, was getting involved with the land.

The desire to fly, on the other hand, was something that had become ever more compelling. What we tended to see in Norfolk were airships. But I knew all about the record breakers and their machines, and far more about the wartime aces of the RFC – the Royal Flying Corps –, about McCudden, Mannock, Bishop, and to me, the greatest of them all, Albert Ball. And war fliers rather then civilian, for even in 1934 it was clear to those with eyes to see that another conflict was brewing.

I even knew the qualities needed in an aspirant war flier: 'not exceptional, a good general education, a mechanical background advantageous, a fair working knowledge of maths and the application of simple formulae; more than keen to learn'. Apart from the 'not exceptional' – the very idea! – I more than fitted the bill.

The ensuing discussion went on for some time, but even then the Head was not happy.

'Think about it for a day or so, Mitchell,' he bade, 'then come back and see me again.'

I dutifully did so. When, having satisfied himself that I was determined to pursue a flying career, he sent a recommendation to the local education committee. As a consequence, just weeks later, a letter – railway warrant enclosed – invited me to present myself at Victory House, Kingsway, in London.

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The interviewers surprised me. I had expected them to be knowledgeable about aeroplanes. Instead, they seemed to inhabit some august intellectual level way above such things. Eventually, however, they descended from their Olympian heights to deliver their verdict.

At seventeen I was too young to become a pilot. Only here, as my face fell, they descended even further, to assure me that age was the only bar. Meanwhile, I could be taken on as either a wireless operator or an air gunner. Stifling my disappointment, I opted for the former. And a short time later reported to the Electrical and Wireless School at RAF Cranwell, near Sleaford, in Lincolnshire, where I was rigged out from cap to puttees, not forgetting boots that were initially reluctant to take the least shine, to begin my training.

It was clear that the government was among those with eyes to see, for some months before it had decided upon a vast expansion of the RAF. This meant the building of new airfields and the creation of new squadrons. It also meant a full-scale recruiting drive. And so it was that on 10 October 1934 I joined a Boy Entrant intake, doubled that year to nearly 600, for a nominal twelve months' course.

[4-0002] ***East Camp barrack block***

We were not the only trainees accommodated in the double-storied barrack blocks of Cranwell's East Camp. There were also signals officers on short courses, and air gunners who, after twelve weeks of instruction, were to take on an additional wireless-operating role. And there were Aircraft Apprentices, their entry too, swelled to some 600.

The latter were boys like ourselves, from fifteen plus to eighteen who, also like us, wore the distinctive spoked-wheel arm badge. Only they had gained entry by competitive examination rather than education-committee recommendation, their three-year course qualifying them to maintain the RAF's communication equipment – as opposed to operating it, as was our destiny.

And then, of course, just across the road, but infinitely remote from East Camp, was the gleaming new Royal Air Force College where future leaders of the King's Air Force studied in hallowed halls.

Our year-long course was packed full as we poured over wireless theory, disembowelled sets in workshops, achieved a mirror surface on those recalcitrant boots before strutting our stuff on the parade ground, and between times continued our studies in English, maths, general subjects, and History of the Service – one of Albert Ball's machine guns was enshrined in a barrack-block hallway! We tapped away at morse keys, strained into headsets, memorised the most frequently

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used of the Q and Z brevity codes – necessary with morse messages being so protracted – and even got the feel of airborne operating in the Wireless School's Wallaces, Wapitis, and Valentias.

[4-0003] ***Wallace, Wapiti, or Valentia*** (one of)

Off duty, sports were highly rated, and I was able to indulge myself to the full in those which interested me. With the compulsory boxing bout over I shunned anything further in that line, similarly soccer and rugby, but was to the fore in cricket and tennis. Where golf and croquet were concerned, however, I found myself pretty much a loner.

We finished the course on 12 July 1935, and having found no difficulty in learning to send and receive morse at 20 words a minute, and having been comfortable enough in my airborne sessions, I was able to replace the Boy-service wheel with the Signals' arm badge, a hand clasping three electrical flashes.

[4-0004] (Side-by side) ***Boy-service wheel, Signals' arm flash***

On passing out my posting was to No. 58 Squadron, at Worthy Down, near Winchester, a major bomber station which was to achieve singular distinction some years later when, its Naval tenants having re-christened it HMS *Kestrel*, the traitor William Joyce, Lord Haw Haw, announced that it been bombed and sunk!

[4-0005] ***Vickers Virginia***

When I joined, the squadron was operating Vickers Virginias, twin-engined biplane bombers which even to my eager eyes appeared distinctly venerable. Nor was the wireless equipment any more youthful. This was the transmitter-receiver combination known as the T1083/R1082. Unfortunately, it was not only unreliable but difficult to operate, even altering frequency requiring a coil change in both transmitter and receiver.

[4-0006] ***The T1083/R1082 combination ...***

One everyday problem was that to get any range at all we had to trail a wire aerial from beneath the aircraft, remembering to retract it before landing for fear of garrotting some groundling. Except that the pilot would get engrossed in his own concerns, and forget to advise when he was about to

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set down. Either that, or with the intercommunication system being so poor, his advisory wouldn't get through. Leaving me to bawl, 'You've lost my bloody trailing aerial again,' even though my bloke was an officer.

Just the same, I counted myself luckier than a gunner colleague who felt a pattering on his helmet. And on turning, got a face full of pee, his desperate pilot, far forward of him, having stood on his seat to relieve himself into the air rush.

To a large extent, then, we were all learning, pilots and crew members alike. Although I doubt this showed when we flew our Virginias in tight formation over the packed stands of the Hendon Air Display. In reality, however, it became even more the case a few months later when we began receiving the Handley Page Heyford, held to be very speedy, and the last word in design, with all-round protection that included a dustbin-like turret which could be lowered from the ventral – belly – position.

[4-0007] ***Heyford***

What the new aircraft brought with it, however, was a stepping-up of the flying task, with more and more long-range navigational exercises, and bombing and air-firing by both day and night, the communications side of all these being my pigeon.

It quickly became evident too, that although trained as a dedicated wireless operator I was still expected to fill in as a gunner: not the first evidence of the way the Service was being strained by the expansion.

For expansion necessarily meant a dilution of the experience embodied in both training school and squadron, with much of the training being left to the squadrons. And as these, in turn, lost their most capable men on posting – either to command or to bolster up new units –, so their own experience level dropped. For example, new boy though I was, even I could tell that to have so many prangs – minor though most were – was not the way things should be. So many, indeed, that we never bothered logging them.

I was not in a position to know, of course, but not long after this the new chief of Bomber Command, the C.-in-C., Air Chief Marshal Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt, would stir resentment in the very highest echelons by reporting upwards even more fundamental shortcomings.

Foremost among these was the lack of a definite policy regarding the crewing of aircraft, only pilots being considered full-time fliers. Observers and gunners, the other two categories of flier, were drawn from volunteer airmen, highly-qualified tradesmen who, after a flying duty, would pocket their one or two shillings a day flying pay and return to their workshops. True, there were

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already moves afoot to employ full-time gunners, but like those we had trained alongside, these were then to double as wireless operators. Indeed, it was to be 1942 before gunnery and signals were to become completely divorced.

Another major concern, the new chief found, and recommended changes to, was navigation, citing that in the last two years 478 bombers had made forced-landings because their pilots had lost their way. Certainly, in any sort of poor weather, determining our position continued to be a serious problem, my loop-aerial bearings notwithstanding! True again, observers began to depart for ten-week navigation courses. Even so – and also happily unknown to us –, just two months before the outbreak of war, the C. in C. would still have to warn the Air Council that Bomber Command was incapable of operating in anything but fair weather.

Blissfully ignorant then, of the true state of things, what we all knew was that, just like the war, newer and longer-range aircraft were only just over the horizon. And with that in mind we did not complain when pushed yet harder.

What did not improve, and totally disrupted continuity, was the number of times they had us upping sticks: another thing the Commander was to comment upon! Our first uprooting came on 13 May 1936, when we re-located to Upper Heyford, near Bicester, in Oxfordshire. At least, though, this heralded the arrival of the Armstrong Whitworth Whitley, the monoplane bomber which, through Marks One to Five, was to see us well into the war. Even so, it has to be admitted that Whitley crews suffered a fair amount of ribbing because of the aircraft's characteristic nose-down 'sit', which was especially pronounced at high speed. But by and large we were happy with it.

[4-0005] ***Whitley, flying level, but at high speed***

True to form, however, my current bloke, a flight lieutenant at that, cost me four teeth on our first landing as the undercarriage, only half-extended, folded beneath us. I suppose he was busy congratulating himself on having remembered that he now had retractable wheels – many pilots didn't remember. But as the blood streamed from my mouth all he could offer was, 'I didn't realise the selector had to go so far.'

From the wireless operator's standpoint the major benefit brought by the Whitley was its state-of-the-art Marconi radio installation, the transmitter/receiver combination known as the T1154/R1155, a vastly more flexible equipment than those we had struggled with before. It still incorporated a trailing aerial, but otherwise it was far more sophisticated than previous gears, although the gaily coloured knobs of its transmitter belied its complexity.

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Certainly my dedicated training came into its own, and 'Send for Mitch' became the cry of the day, so that although still a newish-joiner I found myself acting as what I would soon become, the squadron's signals leader.

Upper Heyford, however, afforded us only a breathing space, for by the end of August 1936 we had moved again, this time to Driffield, near Bridlington, in Yorkshire. And in February 1937 we were off down south once more, to Boscombe Down, in Wiltshire.

Here, we did settle to some extent, although there was a bombing detachment at Aldergrove, in Northern Ireland, where we were permitted to drop live bombs into Loch Neagh, followed by a stint at West Freugh, near Stranraer, for gunnery. On that detachment, having done a gunnery course at Catfoss, near Hornsea, I was able to exercise my new-found skills from all our gun positions, front, dorsal (top of fuselage), and the ventral dustbin of our Mark Threes, firing 300 rounds from each, largely at sea markers. Another gunnery detachment took us to Pocklington, to the east of York. But on 20 June 1939, we moved north again, this time to Linton-on-Ouse, in Yorkshire.

Such detachments gave us a flavour of what our war task might be. But the results were not always that comforting. My gunnery scores were consistently deemed satisfactory. But we did hear that whereas the previous year's averages for air firing had been an acceptable 20%, this year, with fewer experienced instructors in the schools and competent gunners spread more thinly on the squadrons, averages were running closer to 0%!

Equally concerning, we had noticed that even when we were permitted to drop live bombs – for there always seemed to be some rare wild bird or other which took precedence, or some influential landowner – a high proportion proved to be duds, or at best, ineffectual. In lieu of the real thing, however, we dropped practice bombs, or trained on the camera obscura.

This was an optical training aid which had us fly towards a building – identified by a flare at night – with a large hole cut in its roof. A lens would then project the approaching aircraft's image onto a table where instructors would assess the accuracy of the run-in. At his calculated release point the pilot would press the button, when either coloured smoke, or a parachute flare by night, would enable the wind effect to be calculated and the likely striking point ascertained.

[4-0010] Viewing a camera obscura ...

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Other noteworthy exercises we flew at this time involved dropping very powerful flares, the forerunner, as we were later to realise, of the Pathfinders' target markers. Arguably even more significant was the detailing of a squadron aircraft to patrol near the BBC's Daventry aerial, a perambulatory sortie that led directly to the development of radar.

We were great moaners, of course. But even where the unsettling moves were concerned we conceded that some were dictated by extra construction work, most of our roosts having come into being under the expansion programme. For essentially, while we noticed shortcomings, we saw it as our part to master the equipment we'd be given, and leave others to worry about the rest.

Even so, though one might push shortcomings from the mind, the international situation could no longer be ignored. More particularly when, on 1 September 1939, Hitler's forces attacked Poland which, to the surprise of many, turned out to be our ally. But nobody on the squadron was surprised when, next day, we were dispatched to Leconfield, near Yorkshire's east coast. And so, that much nearer Hitler's Reich.

At 1115 hours on 3 September 1939 we listened to Chamberlain's fateful broadcast, and as darkness fell ours was among ten Whitleys laden with propaganda leaflets which got airborne for Germany, my log book recording that the 'Anti-Nazis War' had begun.

On that first operational sortie I was flying with my regular pilot, Flying Officer 'Peggy' O'Neill, aboard a familiar Whitley, K8969. Even so it was the most surreal of experiences to be droning over a blacked-out Germany where millions of people were both ready, and willing, to kill us. Not only that, but to be doing so carrying nothing more lethal than propaganda leaflets. And leaflets intended to do what – destroy the resolve of a nation already cock-a-hoop over its Polish blitzkrieg?

We could not know that Churchill had only grudgingly conceded that leaflets just might raise Germany to a 'higher morality'. Or that our future leader, 'Bomber' Harris, would declare that the only thing such 'idiotic and childish pamphlets' accomplished was to satisfy a requirement for toilet paper. Again, though, our job was to drop leaflets. So on we droned.

The route was to be wide-ranging across the Ruhr, specifically targeting both Essen and Düsseldorf before overflying the Maginot Line and turning for home. I suppose, at a certain level, we were on edge the whole seven and a half hours we were airborne, but training sustained us. Then too, besides feeding our leaflets from the dustbin turret, we had been set other tasks.

These included assessing the effectiveness of the German black-out. Was it broken by any well-lit areas, which would, therefore, be dummy towns? Additionally, were the airfields active? What road, rail, or waterborne movements did we notice? Were searchlights evident? And was there any anti-aircraft fire? In fact, the latter question led to an animated on-board discussion. Until we

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concluded that what we had seen was some transient light flashing on low cloud. And just as well, for when we eventually got back to base, this was a point they really grilled us on.

Once more, of course, we were not to know that Higher Authority had accepted that the RAF was not yet up to bombing by either day or night, any lingering doubt being dispelled by the losses early raiders sustained. That as a consequence, our nocturnal paper delivery was now being pragmatically viewed as a means of building up an expertise in long-range navigation that might eventually allow Bomber Command to achieve most of its war aims through precision attacks by night.

Certainly, a little later, we all heard the broadcast Harris made, warning the Nazis of 'a cloud on their horizon … presently no bigger than a hand's width, which would break as a storm over Germany'. And hearing it we realised that we, of course, were that cloud, the seeders of that storm, the attendant fosterers of its fury.

Unfortunately, the Whitley soon proved unsuitable to the task. Early evidence of this being supplied on that first foray when, having crossed the Maginot Line, an engine faltered, committing us to a descent. Fortunately, although there was a pre-dawn mist, Peggy was able to put us down near Amiens. Nobody was hurt, but the aircraft was in a sad state. And so our first op finished in a French field, with a civil Dragon Rapide biplane being sent to pick us up and return us, initially to Harwell, near Oxford, from where we were recovered to Linton.

The Whitley's engine trouble proved to be symptomatic, and although the squadron was tasked with leaflet drops for a few more days, there were so many problems, not least the dustbin turrets freezing in the lowered position – they could provide belly defence when needed but caused enormous drag whenever extended –, that at the end of October 1939 we were reassigned to cover the English and Bristol Channels, and the Irish Sea, as convoy escorts.

This tasked diversion finished in early May 1940, when we moved back to Boscombe Down, by which time I had flown 12 patrols and a further 53 operational hours. More significantly, we had also received Mark Five Whitleys which, newly powered with the more dependable Rolls Royce Merlin Ten engines, finally enabled our crew to feature on the bombing battle order.

Ops then followed in quick succession. Initially, we raided objectives in Norway, bombing Oslo aerodrome on 17 May 1940 and landing after a 9 hour 15 minute flight. Results, however, were said to be disappointing, the target having to be revisited the next night. After that we attacked Stavanger, a seven hour forty minute flight. And what fraught trips these were, often wave-hopping, following a snaking fiord with cliffs disappearing into the darkness above! But again, training

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paid off, and we doggedly pressed through to our objectives, although from the outset we had little faith in the outcome of the expeditionary venture itself.

Then too, the phoney war was over, and events to the west were moving swiftly. So it was that we faced about, being tasked to bomb the Albert Canal bridges at Maastricht – a day after the debacle of the Fairey Battles, and the suicidal gaining of two VCs – before passing on to raid a bridge at Eindhoven and then Schiphol aerodrome.

Following that we switched to the Ruhr, to Gelsenkirchen and Düsseldorf, returning after a night or two, this time pairing Gelsenkirchen with Duisberg, each sortie taking between six and seven hours. Only now, in an unsettling taste of things to come, I was obliged to record, 'Heavy ack-ack'.

At which juncture I should, perhaps, mention that the contemporary entries in my flying log book do not specify the actual targets, but only 'Operations Norway', 'Operations France', and 'Operations Germany'. RAF crews, of course, are always restricted in this field, log books being official documents and scrutinised monthly by flight commanders. At that particular period, though, there was an extra dimension. For invasion was very much on the cards. 'You don't want some Gestapo thug reading that you bombed his Auntie Olga in Berlin,' we were told, 'so just make it "Operations Germany".' Which we did.

Even so, an incorrigible rebel, I kept a separate record of those early ops, entering the actual targets later in the war.

As the Germans advanced, so we were reassigned to the interdiction bombing of roads and railways. On 21 May 1940, for example, we attacked the rail junction at Jülich, dropping 4,000 pounds of bombs and coming away satisfied that we'd significantly disrupted communications, although achieving nothing like the destruction of a few years later.

[4-0067] ***Jülich, 1945 ...***

We also returned to the Ruhr, to Hamm, and again to Essen, dropping 10,000 and 14,000 pounds of bombs respectively.

After that, as the Battle of France intensified, we visited more and more French targets, bombing railways, roads, and convoys at La Capelle, Amiens, and finally Abbeville. The situation was often fluid, and on at least one occasion I received a timely recall signal which stopped us bombing our own troops.

And on 11 June 1940 we did a special flight – purpose unspecified – to Guernsey, spending the night there before returning to Linton. To learn two days later that the decision had been made to give up the Channel Islands without a fight!

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France itself fell on 26 June 1940, after which we switched to German targets once again. Notably a seven hour op to the Kiel Canal when I flew with a different crew, piloted by a Flight Lieutenant Thompson, on a sortie which moved me enough to declare in my log book, 'Hell'ova Night'.

An outing that did not receive a similar accolade – though why, I cannot recall – was the next one I flew with Peggy O'Neill. We successfully raided a factory in Turin, but on returning over the Alps flew into rougher weather than any of us could have imagined.

There was so much snow, ice, and turbulence that the engines started playing up, one temporarily cutting out altogether. Our co-pilot wanted to abandon, but Peggy gamely soldiered on, somehow retaining control of the machine, and eventually winning clear. But what a trip that was! Possibly too traumatic for me face entering anything but 'Operations Italy'.

By now ops had become a way of life. With fear as its natural concomitant. For cringe down though we must as flak and bullets tore through the airframe, fear had to be lived with. Indeed, we received a master class on the subject from one particularly persistent fighter. Pass after pass, he made, riddling us on each, with Peggy desperately sacrificing height for any speed we could muster. 'He's determined to get us,' he gritted, as the wavetops prevented further descent. Only abruptly, the attacks stopped. For a while, communally holding our breath, we watched the fighter, holding off. Then, finally, concluding that he had run out of ammunition, we scurried for home, well aware that it had been our narrowest squeak yet!

Such things were wearing. But they had to be borne. For back then there were no set tours of operations. The squadron bosses, though, knew the score. And on 1 July 1941 I was posted away, off ops, to No. 19 Operational Training Unit, at Kinloss, near Inverness.

Since January 1940 all gunners had become full-time aircrew, and in theory, at least, sergeants, with the 'AG' brevet being introduced in the December. So I had become a reluctant wireless operator/air gunner, first a sergeant and then a flight sergeant. The instant aircrew senior-NCO, understandably enough, was not that popular with the regulars, 'You got promoted pretty swiftly, didn't you?' became a common jibe in the sergeant's mess. But you couldn't win, for when I received an overnight commission it was to be greeted in the officers' mess with, 'And where did you spring from?'

As for the commissioning, naturally I'd always known that I was upper-crust material, even so I was disturbed at being summoned by my Commanding Officer – not on this occasion, the Head, but the feeling could be similar when you put up as many little blacks as I habitually did! This time the interview was not protracted, just friendly. But still resulted in my travelling to London, only this

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time to Mssrs Gieves and Hawkes of Savile Row, to be fitted for a new and shiny rig. 'And your bank account, sir?' 'Barclays, has been for years.' An NCO with a bank account! Upper crust, you see! Only there was still that pilot's course …

At Kinloss, the task was to train Whitley crews for No. 6 Group using both the main airfield and its satellite at Forres – Balnageith. I was to spend just four months here, and not uneventful months at that, for training had its share of excitement, not least on 3 September 1941 when I was in another crash, this one significant enough to be logged!

In mid November 1941, however, I was sent to Enniskillen, in Northern Ireland, to deputise for the established station commander. The area was a political hotbed – I had to tote a revolver! –, so although the RAF had flying facilities at both Aldergrove and Killadeas, and both a maintenance unit and a group headquarters at St Angelo, the predominant presence was army. As it was, my caretaker duties were not particularly onerous, the mess at Killadeas I frequented was sumptuous, and I got myself happily involved with some sailing craft I found on Loch Erne.

[4-0012] ***Killadeas, the erstwhile officers' mess*** (Mitch may rule this irrelevant)

This detachment gave me a break from the routine of training, but it was to set a pattern I was to find increasingly irksome as the years went by. I was assured, of course, that each stores check or unit inquiry befitted me just that little bit more for higher command. As it did. So why did I invariably feel 'joe'd'?

Certainly, I had periodically applied to return to ops, my hopes soaring whenever signals arrived requesting aircrew for 'special-duties'. In August 1942 these were for the proposed Pathfinder Force, and in early 1943 for what we were eventually to discover was to be No. 617 Squadron. However, all such applications were blocked by my immediate boss. 'They want the best,' he would say. 'But I do too, Mitch. So you stay.'

Eventually, however, an Air Ministry posting arrived for me, and on 20 May 1943 – with every front page screaming 'Dambusters!' –, I was posted to No. 207 Squadron.

I found the squadron at Langar, near Nottingham, still relieved to be rid of their Avro Manchesters – a disastrous machine – and happily settling with that queen of the skies, the Lancaster.

As signals leader I might have chosen my own captain, but having accepted the first to be programmed with me, Flight Lieutenant Brandon-Tye, I never had cause to regret it. And so, after just four hours of acclimatisation flights, I began my second tour of ops.

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Initially, we concentrated on the Ruhr, so that in short order I became re-acquainted with Düsseldorf and Bochum, although this time around, in the Lancaster, taking about an hour less over such sorties; just over five hours. Yet how adversely so much else had changed!

Certainly, the defences had really got the hang of things now, with droves of searchlights and seemingly impenetrable box barrages on every run up. Not to mention the radar-guided predicted flak! As for the night-fighters!

[4-0013] ***Flak ...***

Not that I was surprised – shocked, I'll allow, but not surprised! – for two years back we'd prowled the night sky alone, whereas now we offered the defences score upon score of targets.

Shortly afterwards, on 20 June 1943, we bombed an industrial objective at Friedrichshafen, on Lake Constance, after which we overflew brilliantly lit Switzerland – a wonderful, fairytale sight! – to set down after nearly ten hours at Blida, on the northern coast of Algeria. And to show no favour to any Axis power, next day we bombed La Spezia, the Italian naval base, the homeward trip taking just nine hours and ten minutes.

After that, though, it was Happy Valley again – the Ruhr –, and to Gelsenkirchen, a place I had last visited in May 1940, over two years before, and on successive nights. So perhaps they bore a grudge. For as we ran in we were well and truly caught by flak, and then shot up by a whole procession of night-fighters.

Not nice! But the rear gunner, a commissioned lad from another crew, proved to be a good man to have along. As each fighter came in I was able to use the Monica rearward-looking radar to warn him, so that he was not only able to beat them off but, I fancy, to destroy at least one. Just the same, we were so badly shot up that we had to put down at Coltishall.

Though used to dealing with fighter aircraft, Coltishall's groundcrew chaps pulled their fingers out – when didn't they! – and patched us up, enabling us to return to Langar later that day. Our Lancaster, ED 627, had certainly done us proud. As for the rear gunner, he received a Distinguished Flying Cross for this spirited defence, and would later, flying with his own crew, receive a bar to it for a similar exploit.

There were no such kudos for me, but I was well content with the way Monica had served us. Only I was already aware of whispers, and a few months later, when it was actually proven that the Germans were indeed using its pulses to both locate, and then home on us, it was hurriedly withdrawn from service.

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Back at Langar, however, with ED627 spick and span once more, we were off a-raiding over Mönchengladbach. And two nights later it was the Big B, my first trip to Berlin! 7 hours and 35 minutes simply packed with interest. And this would not be my last visit, some taking a whole hour longer than others, and so, packed with even more interest.

This initial Berlin outing, though, was our swan song from Langar, for in October 1943 we moved to newly-opened Spilsby, near Skegness, in Lincolnshire.

I was back over Berlin again, though, in the New Year, on 15 February 1944, and penetrating even further two nights later when we raided Leipzig, landing back at Spilsby eight hours later.

[4-0014] ***Berlin*** (or some other) ***aiming-point photo***

At this point, however, our tasking was changed, and from April 1944 – shades of May 1940! – we were set to pounding communications networks. On 10 April this meant a wide-ranging series of strikes on Tours and Bourges, in central France, and on Antwerp. Then, within the next few days, it was St-Valery-on-Caux, followed next night, by Paris.

It was clear to everyone that things were hotting up. Only at this point the boss handed me a signal. I knew what it was. But there was nothing to be said. For by now I had flown 830 hours by day and 439 by night, the majority of the latter being operational. I had also completed 66 ops – over two tours' worth – and counting OTU callouts, 15 operational maritime patrols. Further, on 18 January 1944 I had been gazetted with the Distinguished Flying Cross. But alongside all this I had also been part of a squadron which, by the war's end, would have lost 154 of its crews; at the very least 1,232 men.

Even so, I would love to have flown on D-Day, but it was not to be, and somewhat sadly shelving my flying log book for a while, I dutifully departed, on posting, to No. 1661 Heavy Conversion Unit at Winthorpe, near Newark, in Nottinghamshire.

Neither of my operational tours had been all work and unremitting dicing with death, of course. There had been periodic leaves. And in off-duty times there had been favourite pubs, the Flying Horse and the Black Boy in Nottingham coming to mind. Then too, there had been sport. Lashings of it. Except that whenever called upon to fill a soccer or rugger slot I'd unfailingly responded, 'Not likely, they're too bloody dangerous.'

Only suddenly, it was all over. And between June and August 1945 I was able to fly on three 'Cook's Tours', taking in, among other old haunts, Hamm, Duisberg, Wesel, Münster, and Düsseldorf. It was not a case of gloating. On the other hand, both outbound and inbound, we would

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overfly so many of our own towns blitzed unmercifully in those dark days when the Germans were riding high. When they had derided our leaflets, and refused to adopt Churchill's 'higher morality'!

[4-0015] ***Cook's tour***

Though the Service was shedding personnel wholesale, my continuance seemed to be taken as read, and on 16 Dec 1946, after a spell with No. 1563 Heavy Conversion Unit at North Luffenham, near Oakham, in Rutland, I moved on to No. 91 Group Headquarters as a staff signals officer.

The headquarters was situated at Morton Hall – nowadays a women's prison –, very close to RAF Swinderby, in Lincolnshire, my two-year stay giving me a deeper appreciation of the way the Service was run. But a headquarters was ideal too for getting things done, and as my tenure drew to a close, I resurrected the matter of my pilot's course. I was certainly not too young any more, not after 14 years and a world war. So on 9 August 1948 I gleefully reported as a pupil pilot to No. 6 Flying Training School, at Ternhill, near Market Drayton, Shropshire.

[4-0016] ***I'd met and married Joan ...***

I suppose maturity – in 1946 I'd met and married Joan –, and a wealth of experience to approach pilot training without fear of failure. And it clearly paid off. Starting on Tiger Moth biplane, I completed my course on the American Harvard, an excell trainer, being very demanding and only too ready to take control.

And so, having begun my aircrew career with a wireless-operator's arm flash, reluct supplementing this in late 1939 with an air gunners' 'AG' brevet; readily swapped in its turn, in January 1944, for a dedicated signallers' 'S' brevet; my chest finally bore the full wings so proudly worn in those old photographs by Bishop, Madden, McCudden, and Ball!

The operational phase of my pilot training saw me back on Lancasters, this time at RAF St Mawgan, Coastal Command's training station near Newquay, in Cornwall, where I was also checked out on the Avro Shackleton. This was a spectacular aeroplane – a great, grey-painted roaring machine outside but with an interior hushed by jet-black drapes – which was eventually able to patrol for up to 21 hours. In every respect a far cry from the Virginia and Whitley! But aeroplanes are aeroplanes are aeroplanes. And for all that I held an above-average rating it was not that long before I was clambering out of a Shackleton whose tailwheel had collapsed after landing!

[4-0017] ***A Shackleton on patrol***

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But aviation has a multitude of tricks. So that, on joining my first maritime unit, No. 202 Squadron, at Aldergrove, it was to find that, alongside the Shackleton, they were operating the Handley Page Hastings, essentially a transport, and notoriously ungainly. As a new joiner I was to start off on these as a second pilot, which, at that time, meant raising and lowering the flaps – and watching. Once I had built up enough hours on type, but only then, would I be checked out on landing the beast. And I say beast advisedly, for I had watched pilots on their first landings skidding sideways, shredding tyres, and even sliding off the runway.

[4-0018] ***Hastings, a handful to land***

As it was, my first Hastings sortie involved flying at 18,000 feet for some considerable time. Halfway through, however, my captain fell ill and passed out. And suddenly there were eyes on me from every corner. In the end, though, it worked out well, even to landing away to expedite medical aid, with my squadron commander recommending me for an Air Force Cross, although having to settle for a green endorsement.

[4-0019] ***The green endorsement*** (Handwritten, so with clear-to-read panel alongside).

Our bread-and-butter task at both St Mawgan and Aldergrove was to exhaustively patrol the Atlantic. But in July 1954, after a spell back at St Mawgan – by then the School of Maritime Reconnaissance –, and six months on No. 220 Squadron at nearby St Eval, I was posted overseas, to No. 224 Squadron in Gibraltar. And what a tour that was! No longer just the Atlantic, but flights ranging through Ceylon, India, Iraq, Libya, and both Madeira and the Azores. Except that in October 1957 it was back to freezing-cold Britain. With a decision to be made.

It was clear that the RAF had an interest in me, and indeed, even as I pursued my internal debate, they sent me to Worksop, to No. 4 Flying Training School, for a jet familiarisation course. Twenty hours on the single-engined, twin-boomed Vampire. What a mind-blowing experience, from the simplistic engine control to the swiftness – and unbelievable smoothness –, of jet flight! Flight, moreover, with never, ever, a mag drop!

A great interlude! But still my problem nagged. I was well aware that I had suffered a sea change. Possibly from seeing so much of it. For although further advancement in the RAF, and even a new career in Civil Aviation, offered, neither attracted.

In part, it was the ground jobs. The rationale for which remained the same; indeed, more so since I had become a squadron leader. For as I was a senior officer the RAF was primarily interested in my

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command and administrative abilities, not my flying skills. Yet being hived off to an admin job had always made me feel put upon.

Of far greater moment though, Joan and I had never had the opportunity of setting up a real home together. And that really weighed. But – to give up flying?

Then again, since 1934 I had flown 1,400 hours as crew, a good proportion of it on wartime operations, and 1,600 hours as a pilot, almost all on operational patrols. Only … Wasn't it true that for some time now the zest had gone?

And that, when it finally found expression, I recognised as the crux. Accordingly, on 4 November 1957, I submitted my resignation.

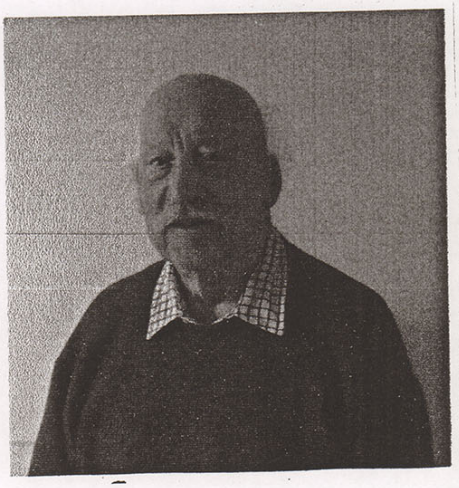
Getting used to civilian life took some time. Eventually, however, unable to find a niche at any level I found acceptable, I sought advice from a golfing acquaintance who persuaded me to try my hand at vehicle sales. Initially this meant my matching commercial and agricultural vehicles to the needs of prospective customers. And it all went very well, so that within a matter of months I had developed a lucrative, countrywide chain of client contacts. Only to remain fundamentally unsettled. Until I confessed to my boss that I didn't like my image as a flash-Harry car salesman. He was enormously amused. Yet puzzled also.

'But –' he reasoned, 'everything hinges on the company sales director.'

Company Sales Director! Ah! And suddenly all doubt vanished. Indeed, I rather think my golf improved too.

Above all, I finally had a real family home. Essentially, for the first time since meeting Joan, back in Nottingham, in 1946. Joan Ball, as she had been then. Whose father was Cyril Ball, a former RFC-cum-RAF pilot; and brother of my boyhood hero, Albert Ball, VC.

[4-00 20] *Mr Mitchell, 2010*



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