

In July 1939 I finished my studies at Wilsons Grammar School in south London and looked forward to the summer holidays. By September our Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had declared war on Germany as the Nazis had invaded Poland. Schools were shut and any further studies became impossible. I secured a temporary job in our local Ministry of Food office in Sidcup in Kent as food rationing in the UK was being introduced. 1940 saw the beginning of the bombing of our cities and by July of that year the Battle of Britain had commenced with daily dogfights occurring with the German bombers. By September our brave fighter pilots had done immense damage to the German airforce and so any invasion of UK was abandoned by the Nazis. I was 17 years of age and daily watched those German bombers appear. I eventually decided I had to do something to protect our land and our way of life. Watching those fighter boys daily I thought it would be a good idea to join them. The idea that I may be able to learn to fly really prompted me into action. So I applied to join the RAF and eventually had an Aircrew Selection Board at the Air Ministry in London. I was thrilled at being accepted and was promptly put on Deferred Service as the various flying training establishments were full with trainees. It was a very frustrating time for me as it was not until September 1942 that I was finally called for service and proceeded to the Aircrew Receiving Centre at St Johns Wood, London where one met other volunteers and was kitted out with a uniform, had a medical etc., and was allocated our accommodation. Our pay was to be 2 shilling a day. About a week later we found ourselves in a training camp under canvas in Ludlow, Shropshire, where we carried out cross country running and swimming in a very cold river. Seven days to get us fit for service and it was cruel as the weather was cold and miserable but we all had to agree that we felt much fitter at the end of our stay in this camp.

So with some 50 other airmen I proceeded to No. 7 Initial Training Wing installed in Penolver hotel in Newquay, Cornwall. The hotel had been taken over by the Ministry of Defence for the duration of the war. During our stay here we had daily lectures on the theory of flight, learnt the Morse code, had aircraft recognition and much to our dismay had drill in a local car park and many runs round Newquay to keep fit.

With our time in Newquay at an end in March 1943 we were posted to No. 6 Flying Grading School at Sywell in Northhamptonshire. This was the moment we had all been waiting for, our very first flight. After 8 hours of flying with an instructor carrying out many take offs and landings, turns, spinning, aerobatics, etc., I went solo in a Tiger Moth. The weather was poor and bitterly cold in the open cockpit of the aircraft but the thrill of being on my own actually piloting a Tiger Moth was immense. A small number of my course were rejected as being unsuitable as pilots and the rest of us were sent to the Aircrew Disposal Centre at Heaton Park, Manchester. We were destined for training in Canada or America which excited us immensely as none of us had been out of the UK before. So in June 1943 we all travelled to Gourock on the west coast of Scotland to board the Queen Mary cruise liner bound for New York. The ship, which was about 1000 feet long, had been converted into a troop carrier for the duration of the war. Besides us on board there were some German prisoners being guarded by Polish army personnel and some Canadian troops. The crossing of the Atlantic was a bit hairraising as the ships stabilisers had been removed in order to gain extra speed so as to avoid the patrolling German submarines. We were struck by a storm midway across the ocean and we got thrown around a lot with the ship creaking and groaning from end to end in the high seas. The storm was so strong it caused us to think maybe it would damage such a big vessel. The ship had one Bofors gun for defence mounted in the stern and one morning this gun opened up with a frightening noise and one could see the shells bursting on the horizon. We were assured that it was only practice. It took 3 days to reach New York which was a welcoming sight. Upon docking it was found that several of the German prisoners were missing. One can only assume that the Polish guards threw them overboard one night in retaliation for the terrible bombing of Warsaw.

Having disembarked from the Queen Mary we were transported to the Grand Central railway station in New York. To board a train for Canada. After several hours having elapsed we arrived in Moncton in New Brunswick. From here we were put on a train to take us to the state of Saskatchewan, situated on the Canadian prairies. We were looked after very well during this journey with the black car attendant preparing our meals and generally taking care of our needs. We enjoyed the t-bone steaks and other fabulous food which was of course was unobtainable in UK with food rationing in place since 1940. We made many stops during our journey to No. 33 Elementary Flying Training School in Caron, Saskatchewan. The strange thing is that at every stop we made the Canadian people were clapping and waving and passing sweets, chocolate and other goodies to us through the open carriage windows. An incredible sight of typical Canadian hospitality and which we found quite humbling. Our arrival at Caron was the same with lots of Canadians to greet us. How they all got the news that some RAF aircrew were on their way was a mystery. We disembarked at Caron railway station to board some coaches to take us to the airfield. Upon arrival we were greeted by the Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader Bradley and given a pep talk. We quickly settled into our accommodation and were eagerly waiting for our first flight in the Cornell aircraft all lined up on the tarmac in the blazing sunshine.

My instructor was Warrant Officer Auldous, a rather serious but friendly character who very early in my training taught me not to kill myself. As far as I can remember our course all passed satisfactorily. The flying was intense and continued day and night the weather being excellent for such training and which of course included more ground lectures too. Having had a final flying test with the Chief Flying Instructor S/L Bradley I was ready to move on to No. 41 Service Flying Training School situated at Weyburn, not far from Caron and still in the state of Saskatchewan.

We now had to master flying a bigger and heavier aeroplane, the Harvard. We had all entered a phase of advanced flying that was going to determine who was suitable for fighter aircraft or heavy bombers. My flying instructor was Flying Officer Ney, a happy and jovial Canadian who inspired confidence and taught me a lot. The Harvard was a heavy all-metal aeroplane with a retractable undercarriage. The usual flying manoeuvres were once again carried out including inverted flight and lots of aerobatics, formation flying and navigation exercises. Saskatchewan is a completely flat wheat growing area quite unlike the hills and changing scenery of the UK. The towns had strange names like Medicine Hat, Assiniboia, Swift Current and Moosomin. Our free time was spent in the local town of Moosejaw and occasionally in Regina.

Our flying training was slowly coming to an end and the weather was changing, eventually with heavy falls of snow. The last flights were made and we now waited for the results. The majority of our course passed and in December 1943 we assembled in a hangar for our "wings" parade as it was snowing at the time.

It was a proud moment having the RAF wings badge pinned to our uniforms by the Canadian Air Officer Commanding the group. A complete surprise for me when it was announced that I had been granted a Kings Commission and my rank was now Pilot Officer. The promotion later appeared in the Supplement to the London Gazette on 9th May 1944. I was really very happy at my achievement. I had left home as Aircraftman 2nd class and was now to return home as a RAFVR officer. I promptly visited the tailors in Weyburn in order to get measured up for a new uniform which was delivered a week later.

Winnipeg for Christmas with a chum of mine. During our travels we were stopped by an elderly couple who very kindly invited us for a dinner that evening. Typical Canadian hospitality and most enjoyable in every way. I sadly lost contact with this generous couple. We returned back to Weyburn the following day. I think the whole course were getting a bit homesick by now. We had to wait until February 1944 to board a train for Moncton once again and in March we again travelled by rail to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Soon after arrival we boarded the ship New Amsterdam, a smaller and slower vessel than the Queen Mary. In view of this we sailed a more northerly route across the Atlantic in order to keep clear of the German U boats. That made our crossing take 6 days but to be heading eastbound for UK once again was great and all of us just wanted to get home to our families and with so many stories to tell. Docking in Gourock harbour once again after a safe crossing of the Atlantic it was a moment for reflection in what we had left behind in Canada. Our friendly flying instructors and the comradeship, the great and varied food at Caron and Weyburn and in the local restaurants knowing that we now had to face food rationing once again. But it was great to be back home once again amongst our families and friends..

We quickly boarded a train bound for P.R.C Harrogate where my posting to Filey in Yorkshire was confirmed. I was to take part in an Officers Battle Course leaving behind all my friends originally made in Canada. After a week of instruction on various armaments at the firing range coupled with lectures on the defence of airfields, etc., I was posted to No. 18(P) Advanced Flying Unit at Sutterfield in Warwickshire in May 1944. This course was designed to improve instrument flying for bad weather operations. The twin engined Oxford aeroplane was used and I spent a lot of my time with the cockpit windscreen blanked out accompanied by a check pilot for safety. It was here that I received my promotion to Flying Officer with a very welcomed pay rise.

Having completed the course satisfactorily at Snitterfield I was moved to No. 11 Operational Training unit at Westcott in Buckingham in August. Serious stuff now as I was to be checked out on the Wellington aircraft, a twin engined bomber. It was here that I had my new crew members join me. Gathered in a lecture room the various crew members were told to choose their future skipper. I have no idea why they chose me but we quickly formed a close bond. So now I had another officer, my bomb aimer, together with a navigator, wireless operator, and two gunners, all sergeants. As far as I was concerned I was never going to pull rank on my crew as this would have damaged the developing bond between us. We were a crew each relying on the other to safely execute the coming operations. Having carried out many navigational exercises, dropped 30 lbs practice bombs, crew training and fighter affiliation manoeuvres our next posting was to No.1668 Heavy Conversion Unit at Bottesford in Nottingham. Now this was exciting for me as my dream was at last coming true in that I was going to fly a Lancaster 4 engined bomber at the ripe old age of 21. It was here that a new member joined our crew, a Sergeant Flight Engineer now making 7 of us. I guess we were a happy bunch of fellows and always seemed to be joking about something but aware that our next move was going to be the real thing. I proceeded to carry out many take offs and landings and generally familiarise myself with the Lancaster. It was pure music to hear those 4 Rolls Royce Merlin engines start up with a roar with smoke and flames coming from the exhausts. Having spent some 3 weeks at Bottesford we received instructions to join No. 514 Squadron at Waterbeach, just outside Cambridge. This was No. 3 Group Bomber Command territory, the airfield having come into operation in 1943. No time was wasted in getting us on our very first Operation, a daylight raid on a oil refinery and coking plant in Bruchstrasse. The usual bomb load was 16 x 500 lbs general purpose bombs and a 4000lbs cookie. There were some 800 bombers taking part and the trip was uneventful apart some heavy flak at the target. The war was slowly coming to an end and German fighters were almost absent. Our crew carried out several more raids mainly on German oil installations, and a spectacular raid by 1000 bombers on the Heligoland German U-boat pens. What a sight that was with Lancaster bombers everywhere one looked. We had to keep our eyes peeled to avoid the possibility of collision with other aircraft.

In April 1945 our Government managed somehow to get agreement with the German Commander in Holland to allow some food drops for the starving Dutch people. The situation was desperate as the citizens of Holland were reduced to eating tulip bulbs, leaves off trees, flowers and scraps in garbage. Death by starvation was a daily occurrence. The Germans agreed to the food drop providing we went unarmed so all guns in the Lancasters turrets were removed. The bomb bays were filled with panniers containing selected food and 514 Squadron got airborne and headed across the North Sea at low level for Rotterdam. Arriving over the city we felt very uneasy as the Germans were on the rooftops training their guns on us. They could have shot us out of the sky so easily but they must have realised we were unarmed. We crossed the city at about 500 feet looking for the main square to drop our food and eventually to 300 feet with my bomb aimer releasing the panniers. One could see the 1000's of Dutch people in the square waving and smiling. After several runs we turned to head back across the North Sea and home. It was a moving sight and one that I shall never forget. I just hope we were able to save some lives during those terrible times. Next day we repeated the Operation by going to The Hague. A similar greeting by the Dutch people was a sight to believe.

May 7th. 1945 saw the surrender of the Germans to Allied forces and so our Squadron was reduced to carrying out general flying to keep in practice. Now the big exodus occurred from the RAF with a great number of pilots opting to leave the Service. As jobs in flying in the civil world were minimal I decided to stay in the RAF for a further 18 months during which time I was promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and another pay rise. Our crew were then moved to No. 207 Squadron at Spilsby in Lincolnshire and later the Squadron moved to Methwold in Norfolk. It was during this period that we carried out several flights to Naples and Bari in Italy. The purpose of each flight was to pick up 20 army personnel and bring them back to UK. If sea transport had been used it would have taken so much longer and the army still on the continent were getting somewhat frustrated at not returning home. Eventually my crew were discharged from the RAF and they all returned to their civilian jobs.

A surprise phone call in May 1946 from Group Captain Simpson at RAF Marham invited me to join the Development Wing at the Central Bomber Establishment in Norfolk. My duties were to carry out flights with some boffins who were experimenting with secret radar equipment. They occupied the navigators desk in the aircraft which was blanked off by a black curtain. I only had a flight engineer to accompany me and the flights were mainly local in the Norfolk area. Upon landing this equipment was removed by the boffins and taken to a nissan hut on the airfield which was out of bounds to all. Secret stuff. My time spent at Marham was a very pleasant and interesting one in that I was able to fly not only the Lancasters but the bigger version the Lincoln, as well as the Anson and Auster.

My time in the RAF came to an end in April 1947 and my thoughts were turned to civilian life once again. Spells at the London County Council and Chislehurst & Sidcup Urban District Council left me totally bored. I had done some study whilst still in the Service and had obtained my Commercial Pilots licence. Jobs in the UK were still minimal and my family did not want me to move overseas where flying jobs were available. In order to keep my hand in at flying I joined No. 24 Reserve Flying School at Rochester in Kent as a reservist which enabled me to fly the old Tiger Moth once again at weekends. It also helped me maintain the validity of my Commercial licence. News in the daily papers that ex-RAF pilots were wanted for a special 3 month course to train on fighter aircraft interested me. The Korean War had started and RAF fighter pilots may be needed for operations to back up the Americans. Being a ex-heavy bomber pilot I thought I would have no chance but was quickly accepted and was recalled for service in June 1951 being posted to

No. 1 Flying Refresher School at Oakington in Cambridge. It was time to refresh my flying skills on Service aircraft again and so I found myself on Harvard aircraft for some 3 weeks. The posting of our course moved us to No. 102 RFS at North Luffenham in Rutland. Lined up on the tarmac were Spitfires Mk 22 and Vampires Mk 5. No dual instruction was available as both aircraft were single seaters. It was just a question of reading the pilots notes, familiarising oneself with the cockpit layout, start up and go. I had for a long time hoped one day I could fly a Spitfire, the best fighter in WW2 and at last it was happening. The Vampire allowed me to have my first experience of jet flying reaching speeds of 500mph at 30-40,000 feet. As it turned out we were not required for operations in Korea but this 3 month course had decided one thing. The flying game had bitten me once again so I resigned my civilian job and joined once again the RFS at Rochester but this time as a staff pilot employed by Short Bros. & Harland. I was involved in flying the weekend reservists on navigation flights in the Anson aircraft. Other aircraft available to me was our twin engined Rapide, a Chipmunk and the old Tiger Moth. Happy days once again but unfortunately it was shortlived because in March 1953 the Government closed all the Reserve Flying Schools. The RAF invited me back for a 2 year short service in April which I accepted and so found myself putting on my uniform once again and travelling to No.3 Advanced Navigation School at Bishops Court in County Down Northern Ireland. My duties there were to fly the Anson aircraft which was fitted out like a class room with desks for the navigators under training. It was in February 1954 that I was posted to Leconfield in Yorkshire, the home of the Central Gunnery School. I was once again flying the "heavies", the Lancaster and Lincoln and training gunners on the 20mm cannon guns on a firing range in the North Sea.

With my 2 year short service commission at an end in April 1955 and having bid my many colleagues farewell I departed from the RAF for good and secured my first job in the civil airlines. The next 25 years enabled me to see the world but that is another story.

Hope this gives you all some idea of my varied life in the Royal Air Force. Jim, February 2013.