

FRANK WALSHAW

1

### MY PRIVATE WAR WITH HITLER'S GREMLINS

I was smitten by the flying bug in the late 1920s when I read of the exploits of Kingsford Smith & Ulm, Amy Johnson, Amelia Earhart and Lindberg. There were air races at that time organised by a national newspaper, the flights of the airship R101, the Graf Zeppelin, the Hindenberg, a huge twelve engine flying boat called the Dornier D.O.X. and the Schneider Trophy seaplane races frequently dominated the headlines. A Supermarine seaplane designed by R.J. Mitchell and destined to be the forerunner of the Spitfire, won the Schneider Trophy outright.

Later on when I was at grammar school a Westland Wapiti landed on the school sports field. It was the first aeroplane I had seen on the ground and I was lucky enough to get close to it and eventually to watch it take off. I used to devour any literature that I could find on the subject of flying and it was quite an event to see an aeroplane overfly our locality and it brought everyone outdoors to watch it. At that time the long distance flying landplanes were the Handley Page four engine series named Hannibal, Hector, Hercules and Hermes operating from Croydon. From Calshot on the Solent flew the "C" Class flying boats which later became the Sunderlands of Coastal Command.

At seventeen I was employed as a sorting clerk and telegraphist at the Head Post Office in Barnsley. R.A.F. Finningley was about sixteen miles away and a friend and I when we were off duty would cycle there and lay on the grass at the edge of the airfield to watch the Hampden bombers taking off and landing. I longed to fly in a Hampden and I envied an old school chum Maurice Gough, who had chosen the R.A.F. as a career and was already flying Hampdens from Hemswell. Sadly he was killed in the early stages of the war in a crash near Caistor, Lincs.

I got my driving licence as soon as I reached seventeen and a friend and I took our annual leave on a touring holiday of Southern England in a 'clapped out' Singer Nine of 1931 vintage and which had cost £11. It managed to keep going until we reached the Dorset area when, motoring towards Bournemouth, one of our rear wheels overtook us. We had broken a halfshaft. Luckily we were able to get it repaired but had to curtail our tour as our cash reserves had all but disappeared. We returned north via Hendon where we halted to watch the aircraft activities. Throwing caution to the wind we spent five shillings each on a short flight in a Percival Mew Gull - the first time either of us had been airborne. We eventually made it back home, broke, but very happy that we had been able to fly. When the Singer started to consume more oil than petrol our motoring was temporarily halted. Motoring into those days was utter joy and "England's green and pleasant land" was so peaceful and tranquil.

In July 1940, I persuaded one of my colleagues, Harold Hewitson, to join me in requesting permission from the Head Postmaster to join the R.A.F. Permission was granted and we went to the Sheffield recruiting office where after a quick medical we were enlisted as trainee aircrew. Being telegraphists we were to be Wireless Ops. "take it or leave it". My mother, who was widowed, was away on holiday and by the time she returned home I had taken the King's Shilling at Padgate. I wasn't to see her again until our first "48" some months later. The colleague who enlisted with me was killed early in his tour of ops. His mother never forgave me for encouraging him to join the R.A.F.

After Wireless and Air Gunnery schools I was posted to 14 O.T.U. Cottesmore. There I was involved in my first crash. At about 14.00hrs. on 23<sup>rd</sup>, December 1941, five Hampdens took off on a "X" country training flight. It started to snow almost as soon as we were airborne and blizzard conditions soon prevailed. We became lost and four and a half hours after take-off we crashed on the River Colne estuary at Wivenhoe in Essex. The snow by this time was quite thick on the ground and helped cushion our impact and the aircraft stayed in one piece. Luckily none of us were seriously injured and were taken to a military hospital in Colchester. I had superficial head injuries, badly bruised, and two broken fingers on my left hand. We were detained in hospital over Christmas and before returning to Cottesmore by train we went back to the site of the crash. Across the field where we had crashed were rows and rows of power lines all converging on a power station nearby. In the darkness and the blizzard conditions we had flown under them. Lucky us. When we got back to Cottesmore I learned that one of my friends, Frank Lambert, on the same course, had been killed in another Hampden crash on the same afternoon, They too having been forced down by the blizzard.

I was posted to "44" Waddington on 8<sup>th</sup>, May 1942 and crewed with a pilot called Tompkins who was about to start his second tour of ops. We were doing all the usual Con. Flight exercises and on the night of 5/6<sup>th</sup>, June we were detailed to take eight bomb-aimers on a bombing exercise at Bassingham Fen, only a few miles from Waddington. At about 3.30am on 6<sup>th</sup> June the bomb-aimers had finished their detail and we returned to Waddington. Having sent my landing signal I went to the rear of the plane as it was very overcrowded up front. I sat on the metal housing covering the tail wheel assembly. When Tompkins attempted to land he got it all wrong and decided to overshoot but he'd left it too late and we crashed into a concrete gun emplacement on the eastern boundary of the airfield adjoining the Sleaford road. The tail wheel oleo leg came through its mounting, hit me in the buttocks, and catapulted me up into the roof of the aircraft. The Elsan toilet situated in front of the tail wheel mounting burst open and when I returned to a state of near consciousness I found myself lying in the Elsan's contents. Now, I don't know if any of you have ever been hit up the rear by a swiftly accelerating oleo leg, but take it from me, "it don't arf make yer eyes water". The 'blood' tub arrived and they were so pleased that they had some live customers to attend to - that was until they got a whiff of what I was lying in. I smelled like a polecat! I was taken to sick quarters and there the medics were not at all pleased by the all-pervading 'pong'. I had lower back and neck pain and having difficulty in breathing and it was decided to send me to Raucy hospital. I'm sure it was the smell that persuaded them to get rid of me so quickly. Before I left sick quarters I discovered I'd lost my ring!

Here I shall halt my narrative to tell you of the conversation at our table while lunching at Branston Hall at our recent re-union. I was relating the foregoing event when a diner, who shall remain anonymous, said, "I can well imagine that you would lose your ring if you were hit in the lower orifice by a swiftly moving hydraulic ram and your difficult breathing was caused by your 'ring' being forced up around your throat and your baldness caused by your head being forced through your hair". Who needs enemies when one has such sympathetic friends?

Returning to the narrative; I had lost my ring – a signet ring that was a treasured possession. It had belonged to my father who died when I was fifteen. He had the same initials and my mother had given it to me to wear. The ring had slid off my finger as I had bathed in the Elsan goo. It was later found by the M.U. boys when they were clearing the wreckage. It was eventually returned to me and I wear it to this day.

In hospital, X-rays were taken and I was encased in plaster from hips to armpits and a surgical collar placed around my neck. There I stayed for the next few weeks until the cast and the collar were removed. When the plaster jacket was removed my back was covered in massive bruises from neck to buttocks.

On my return to the Squadron I was crewed with a lad from Wakefield called Ron Easom. He was just converting to four engined aircraft so once again I went through the whole conversion programme. On 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1942 we were near completion of a four hour daylight X country flight. In the bomb-aimer's position was a New Zealander called Dave Pullinger. The pilot was Ron Easom and the flight engineer was Jack Fletcher, who had joined the crew a few days earlier having just arrived from St.Athan. The navigator was another newcomer to the Squadron – he was from the Channel Islands but I can't recall his name. I was the wireless operator and in the mid-upper turret was a lad called Tom Black, a ground wireless operator who was with us just for the ride. Len Berrigan, a Canadian rear-gunner, occupied the rear turret.

We were preparing to land when, on the down wind leg we had an engine fire in the starboard inner. Easom told Fletcher to press the extinguisher button and feather the prop, but in a panic he feathered the starboard outer prop. By this time we were in the funnel and with undercart down and some flap applied we stalled and went into a yaw. I was looking out of the window and saw Branston church spire alongside us. I was sure that this was curtains for us all, and it seemed an age before the final impact. We crashed on a pig farm near to Branston cross roads. The aircraft broke in two just aft of the main spar and immediately caught fire. I had braced myself for the impact but the wireless transmitter broke from its mountings and hit me in the chest and upper abdomen and I sustained another neck injury. I remember being dragged from the plane by someone – at the time I didn't know who – and being carried away from the wreckage and laid on the grass by some nearby cottages. The pain in my chest was intense and I was coughing blood. The rescuers were able to save all except Pullinger in the nose of the plane and Fletcher who had been catapulted against the instrument panel and then down into the nose. I was consciously aware of the two men who pulled the others free but could only look on helplessly.

The tanks had ruptured and blazing petrol was all around the wreckage. Some pigs were trapped under the wings, they were being roasted alive and their squeals were horrifying to hear. Ammunition was exploding all around when, from one of the cottages emerged a little old lady bearing a trayful of cups of tea. Her words, on nearing me, were "You'll be ready for a cup of tea luv". Nothing that was happening in the inferno around us seemed to faze her and she continued to dispense tea to us who had been rescued. In those days a cup of sweet tea and a Woodbine were priority treatments in first aid.

The two men who had rescued us were Dick Taylor, a local farmer and a local butcher called Fred Kirk. With complete disregard for their own safety they had struggled to free us from a plane that was likely to have exploded at any time. The 'blood tub was soon on the scene and we were quickly transported to the sick bay. The pilot had been saved by his Sutton harness, the nav. Escaped with severe bruising, Tommy Black in the M/U turret hit his head on the rotating service joint but escaped with some damage to one of his ears and concussion. Len Berrigan in the rear turret had hit his face on the graticule sight and sustained two black eyes and a broken nose. Dave Pullinger was killed outright and Jack Fletcher died in Bracebridge Heath hospital that night.

Because I was still coughing blood I was admitted to Raucely hospital yet again. After examination and x-ray I was told that I had a hairline fracture of the breast bone and fractured ribs along with a whiplash neck injury. This time my chest was tightly bound with sticking plaster and I once again wore the inevitable cervical collar. I was under the care of the ward orderly who had cared for me only a few weeks previously. We became good friends and maintained contact until he died in the early 80s. After about two weeks in hospital I was sent back to Waddington and told to have the plaster removed when the Squadron M.O. thought it was appropriate and I was granted a week's sick leave.

By this time I had grown to appreciate that flying was not as glamorous as I'd fancifully believed. I had been involved in three crashes in nine months; I'd been on the Squadron since May 8<sup>th</sup> and hadn't flown a single sortie against the Third Reich. I had come to the conclusion that Adolf had sent over his "gremlins" to prevent me ever overflying Germany and to consign me to a Barton's wooden overcoat. Truth to tell, I was terrified of ever stepping into another aircraft. I wasn't afraid of going on ops. Because that was something that I hadn't experienced but I dreaded being in another aeroplane crash. I suppose in the current jargon I would have been diagnosed as suffering "Post traumatic stress syndrome". Had I admitted it at that time I would have been labelled "L.M.F." (Lack of moral fibre). That was a stigma I could not bear to carry.

On leave, I tearfully told my mother of my fears and of my struggle to overcome them. She took me in her arms and said, "You joined the R.A.F. whilst I was on holiday, you wanted to fly, you nearly broke my heart - if you pack it in now you are not the son I know you to be - go back, do your duty and God will see you through." I was thoroughly chastened by her words. She had been widowed twice - when only newly married she had lost her first husband in a coal mining accident and again when my father died at only 42 years of age. She was acquainted with grief and bore it stoically and with dignity. On that day I ceased to be a youth and became a man and my fears, though never leaving me, became easier to bear; all because of a mother's faith and love.

On returning from leave my first priority was to find the two men who had rescued us from the crash, so I cycle to Branston and called at the local pub called The Plough (now demolished). The landlord knew where they were to be found and I was able to find them and to convey to them our undying thanks. I kept in touch with them and spent several convivial evenings with them during the rest of my stay at Waddington. Fred Kirk, the butcher, died many years ago but

Dick Taylor, the farmer and I became firm friends and remained so until he died two years ago at the age of 85.

Once again I was back on Con. Flight awaiting with some trepidation, allocation to yet another new crew. I joined the crew of a young Australian pilot who was yet to convert to Lancs. And once again I had to do all the conversion exercises. I had done so many take offs and landings that I knew the Waddington circuit like the back of my hand. Until my fears gradually dissipated, at each take-off and landing, I used to close my eyes and cling to the stanchion that ran from roof to floor beside the wireless operator's position. My new skipper's name was Colin Watt, the F/E was Jack Money, the Nav. Johnnie Charnock, the B/A was Tich Hiscock, myself the W/Op. The M/U gunner was Eddie Harrold and a Canadian called Tex Campbell was the rear gunner.

Colin was mature for his years and he inspired in me a confidence that had been lacking in my previous skippers, and he helped me through the bad patches. He was like a father to the crew; he oozed confidence and captained us with common sense and a caring discipline. He never touched alcohol but would sit in a pub nursing a mineral water whilst the rest of us indulged ourselves and then he would that we were all safely back in our billets. You will have gathered by now that I like Colin Watt. That's an understatement! He is my dearest friend.

We flew twenty ops. Together and the crew celebrated his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on the way back from Kiel on the night of October 13/14<sup>th</sup>, 1942. On 21<sup>st</sup> January '43 he was posted to Wigsley as an instructor. The crew were dismayed at losing our skipper and Colin was furious at having been taken off ops. The crew were dispersed. Jack Money became W/Cdr. Nettleton's F/E. They went missing on the night of 12/13 July, '43. Charnock the Nav. Went to transport command and Harrold, the M/U gunner joined another crew and they failed to return from Cologne on 2. 2. 43. I don't know what happened to Hiscock. The B/A. Tex Campbell and I were lucky enough to join the crew of W/O "Sandy" Sanderson who had just come from the B.A.T. flight to start his second tour. I flew sixteen ops. with him and one op. with W/Cdr. Smales to complete my tour of 200 hrs. (Later on a tour was thirty ops.) When I left Waddington in March '43 I was the longest serving Wireless Op. on the Sqdn. Of 23 W/Ops. who were posted with me to Waddington in May '42 only I and a lad called Jack Long were fortunate enough to survive to March '43. During that short period I shared a room in the mess with four different aircrew who all failed to return from operations. A mother's faith and God's will had brought me through a dark period of my life, assisted, not a little, by the skills of two dear friends, Colin Watt and 'Sandy' Sanderson.

I lost touch with 'Sandy' until we renewed our friendship when we started attending the reunions. It was indeed a happy day for me when I was able to stand between him and Colin to have a photograph taken on the occasion of the first re-union. Because of 'Sandy' I have been fortunate in forging a new friendship with Aymon de Blonay, Sandy's step son. I am sure we all grieve with him at the sad loss of his mother and Sandy within days of each other. I trust we shall see Aymon at many of our future reunions. Colin Watt contacted me again in the early 60s since when we have maintained a close relationship and have met frequently. In 1978 Colin was visiting me and we telephoned the then Adjutant at Waddington to ask if we might be allowed to visit the station. He readily granted permission and on our arrival we were given a warm welcome and received the 'red carpet' treatment. After a wonderful visit we were asked to sign

the visitors' book and took our leave. Afterwards our dear friend Bert Dowty contacted me and visited me at home. He told me that he was hoping to form a 44 (Rhodesia) Sqdn. Association. The rest is history.

Bert and Edna's home has been used as a crew room, NAAFI and YMCA for the past 16 years or so and they have been instrumental in re-uniting so many old friends. Thank you Edna and Bert—we can never repay you for your warm and welcoming hospitality except by re—iterating our love and high regard for both of you. Thanks to Bert's diligent searching I was at last able to pay my respects at the grave of Dave Pullinger in Newport cemetery, Lincoln during the period of our recent re-union. As previously mentioned, Dave was one of the lads killed at Branston on 16. 8. 42. and until Bert found his grave I had not known where he was laid to rest.

Here, on behalf of all W.W.2 members, I wish to extend our thanks to the post war members for the part you play in ensuring that our re-unions are such a success. We may at times have given the impression that the Sqdn. Association was formed predominantly for the W.W.2 members. May I please dispel that impression? We older members represent those who paid the supreme sacrifice and are lucky enough to have survived to recount our experiences and when we were first re-united after so many years we tended to "open the hanger doors" amongst ourselves. We did not believe that fifty years after W.W.2 that anyone else would be interested in what happened then. So we tended to form little cliques to revive old memories, perhaps to the exclusion of others. We apologise for that and beg your forbearance. You for your part were instrumental in keeping the peace for so many years — a far more worthy cause than going to war. Wars are obscene and there are no winners.

It has been apparent at the last two or three re-unions that members have mingled and circulated more and thus made new friends. Long may that tendency continue. None of this would have been possible without the kind permission of succeeding Station Commanders to use the facilities at Waddington nor without the hard work and the organising skills of our Association Committee. To all of them we owe grateful thanks.

The W.W.2 members are dwindling at an alarming rate and the responsibility for maintaining a vibrant and visible Sqdn. Association will fall even more on the post war members. We are confident they will do their utmost to ensure its continuing and successful existence. I am sure we are all looking forward with eager anticipation to our 1997 re-union.

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#### TAILPIECE

Since my childhood in the 20s when, as previously mentioned, I read of Kingsford Smith and Ulm's flight across the Pacific, the wheel has turned full circle. Until recently Colin Watt has been piloting around Australia a replica of "The Southern Cross". The Fokker Tri-Motor monoplane in which they made their historic flight. A childhood dream re-enacted by my dear friend! A coincidence?

This missive is submitted by a bespectacled, bald headed, good looking old codger from Yorkshire who walks with a stick. Namely,

Frank Walshaw.