

Ron Brown

RB – A couple of my colleagues (one of them was Polish) was flying Wellingtons and he now only lives just round the corner from me. There was another chap who was a Squadron Leader Mosquito pilot I can't pronounce his name ?? he was with the photographic unit and he was flying and taking photographs after the raids. He had said that he had enough of this. He is quite a character and now is the biggest employer in Mansfield. He's one of five generations of printers. He has a massive state of the art printing works there. The contract that he has got, he does the whole of McDonalds throughout the country; he does all their examination papers for schools and colleges. Of course they have to have some strict security.

SB – I suppose we had best start with the most obvious – the Glenn Miller episode. Let's get that underway if you would like to talk through that.

RB – I have had lots of media and TV interest with it. On the 15th December (1944), it was a claggy day, horrible. We were briefed to attack Sagen in the Ruhr and we never thought that we would take off because it was absolutely pouring down with rain and the cloud was right down to about 500 feet, so we really didn't think we would go but we did. We had just got into German airspace, and it was the only time throughout our sixty missions that we didn't drop our bombs. We often thought afterwards that once we were in German airspace we should have dropped the bombs there, but we had the spot in the North Sea that we had to drop them. We came down to 3,000 feet to drop the bombs. It was very dicey because we couldn't even see our own wing tips. There were about 75 aircraft all dropping their bombs at the same time.

We didn't know until quite some time later that it coincided with the same flight track that Glenn Miller was taking. He had left Bedford and was flying in a Norseman. Apparently the pilot of the 'plane was not very experienced, and hadn't had a lot of time flying that plane. Of course he never arrived at the base. Strangely enough, after the war, one of the observers in one of the Lancasters claimed that he saw the bombs hit Glenn Miller's plane. Considering the conditions which were pretty grim, it's unlikely but he claims that he did see the incident. Would you believe he sold his log book for \$35,000. I did a lot of research with an American Air Force chap who had seen Glenn Miller before-hand in the Sergeant's Mess. He was with a friend of his and said "That is Glenn Miller there." They actually saw him go to his aircraft and take off.

SB – Let's go back to the beginning then Ron, when did you enlist?

RB – My education was a little bit limited. I passed my 11+ and went to grammar school. I had a girlfriend who was in the same class as me at school. My father was a miner and just at this time he was injured and in those days you didn't get compensation so there was not much money coming in. They couldn't afford to keep me at grammar school so I never went. Looking back it was probably a good thing. I went into the typewriter trade and I was an apprentice.

I did this until war was declared in 1939. I went to Sheffield recruiting offices there to join up. The fellow standing next to me and I joined there and then; he was a guy from Edinburgh and a lovely man. They asked us to give them a urine sample and he

couldn't manage it so I grabbed his jar and filled it for him. We were called up together and we went to Cardington and from there we went to Cosford and we did the flight mechanics course there. John was still with me when we got our first posting which was rather handy as it was at Newark and was 58 MU. We were picking up crashed aircraft along the East Coast both German and ours. We used to take out the engines or dismantle them and take them back to various depots.

SB – When was that Ron? When did you start at Newark?

RB – This would be '40. Some of the things we were picking up were from The Battle of Britain. After that we were put on the boat John and I, and most of us were all still together and we went to the Middle East from Glasgow, stopping at Cape Town. While we were there in Cape Town we had trouble with the engine on the boat so we had a very nice three-week stay in Cape Town. That was superb; the people in Cape Town were absolutely marvellous. The locals all drove us around to their homes where we would be staying; John and I stayed with a man who was an optician. He took us to his home and we were rather fortunate because the man had two young daughters about 16 and 18 years old. They used to take us out dancing. We didn't really want to leave there. After that we went on to Egypt, where we stayed for a couple of weeks living in tents.

Then we were shipped off to Khartoum in Sudan, 71 OTU, and it was called Gordon's Tree; we had Harvards, Hurricanes, Tomahawks. We had a mix of pilots, a lot of them were coming from South Africa; we had huge problems with sand in the engines. We attended a lot of funerals. Whilst I was there, there was an interesting episode when the CO sent for me with my kit bag and I told me that they were flying me to Cairo. I wondered what I had done wrong! He told me that he had no idea and had just received a signal that I was to go and straight away as it was urgent. So they flew me out in a Harvard. When we arrived in Cairo there were a couple of Army guys on guard and they took me to the military headquarters. I was marched in front of the Colonel and other top brass high ranking officers and they said to me that I was probably wondering why I had been sent there. They told me that after looking through all the records for the Army, Navy and Air Force, my name was the only one that came up for being in the typewriter trade. They wanted me to have a look at a typewriter that had dropped off a lorry in the Western Desert.

They took me into a room where the typewriter was. Of course I didn't recognise it; it was the Enigma. I just looked at it and pressed a letter 'S' twice and noticed that a different letter would appear. I told them that I hadn't a clue and I was told that it had had a bit of rough treatment and they would like it to get it in working order again. Even the keyboard which was a 'qwerty' keyboard, was damaged. So I spent two weeks there in Cairo working on it. They were really pleased with what I had done and they said to me that I would get a promotion to a Corporal. They also gave me a weekend's leave in a nice part of Cairo. It was the first time for over a year that I was able to sleep between sheets.

Whilst I had been away, the camp had a typhoon hit; it did an awful amount of damage and turned lots of aircraft over. Even the place where I was billeted had the roof taken off. So I missed all that excitement. After two years, a signal came that they wanted volunteers to train for flight engineers. So John and I who both had

girlfriends back in England, knew that the training was at St Athan and knew that would be a way of getting back to the UK, so we both applied and we were both accepted. Within a few weeks, four weeks at the most we found ourselves back on the boat. This was '43.

When we arrived back in the UK, we were asked where we would like to be posted and they tried to get us as close to home as possible. I said the nearest airbase to Crosswell. They sent me to ?? I had come from 120 degrees in Khartoum to a bitter December day in England. I remember there was snow on the ground and working on the aircraft there. We were there for about three weeks and then we were posted to Lord's cricket ground; John was still with me. I remember one of the questions that they asked me "Can you tell me the meaning of the word campanology?" Well, the school that I used to go to was alongside a church and I was a bell ringer; there were about five of us who had been appointed to be bell ringers. I never realised how many saints' days there were in the Christian calendar. Afterwards the intelligence officer told me that I was the only one who knew the meaning.

From there we were posted to St Athan to do our flight engineer training. We really enjoyed our six weeks there training, John and I; we also found a couple of girlfriends there that were sisters. Then we were posted to 1653 HCU. We were all crewed up then, so we had met the crew. A young Pilot Officer came over to me and asked me if I was Ron Brown. When I replied that I was, he told me that he would very much like me to join his crew as a Flight Engineer. He was pleased that I came from Nottinghamshire as he was from Nottingham. He was a really good guy. He turned out to be a fabulous pilot and as a crew we were really superb. We were just like seven brothers. We were dedicated and disciplined. We flew by the book and didn't cut any corners. It was just great being together.

Unfortunately I was trained on the Merlin and worked on the Merlin in the Middle East as well; and of course we changed to Stirlings so I hadn't a clue. We completed our training there, right up until our last training flight what we called the Bull's Eye. We flew from somewhere either in Norfolk or Suffolk to Newcastle, to Cardiff, to Dover. There we had to practise corkscrew. John was in the other aircraft and he went in first, we had to circle around just observing. We saw this flash of an explosion, a German night fighter had attacked it and shot it down. That was when we suddenly thought this was a dangerous business. The thing was, in six weeks time after that I would have been best man at his wedding in Edinburgh. I had to write to his fiancée and it was the most difficult letter that I have ever had to write.

Anyway the next day we were posted again and were near Stamford (*218 Squadron at Woolfox Lodge*). We did have a couple of problems there though as the runway ran parallel to the A1. I remember we did have one problem once on take-off; it couldn't get the height and crashed into a farmhouse. The whole thing exploded, as there were bombs on board; it killed all the crew and all the residents of the farmhouse. That is one that I really remember. It was fascinating really because I was going to be getting married there, fixed the wedding day which was going to be June 6th. Of course that was D-Day and there was a clamp-down on the station on security and everything, you weren't allowed to leave the camp, you weren't allowed to make a 'phone call (the 'phones were cut off anyway) and you weren't allowed to send out any correspondence. I wasn't able to let my mother know that the wedding was off. Even

the vicar turned up and nobody else was there. We were briefed with very short notice, the three Stirlings, and were told to go to Cottesmore and tow a glider over to Normandy. When we arrived there, both sides of the runway were full of gliders attached to Dakotas, it was very impressive. Anyway we got to our glider and we didn't tell anybody that we hadn't done this before; we forgot to mention that. It was an impressive sight to see all the shipping across the Channel, but what carnage too. There were gliders on fire and all sorts. We were very thankful that we had the opportunity to go back to the tranquillity of our own base.

SB – This was daylight then obviously?

RB – Yes. We slipped out very early in the morning. When we got back to base the CO said to us that we were not allowed to talk about it, and we must not tell anybody where we had been. We had been briefed before we went out on this but they were very certain that we must not repeat to anybody what we had seen. When we got back the aircraft was already refuelled and bombed up, another crew took it and they failed to return. We were so lucky, very fortunate. There is no doubt about it that luck has something to do with it.

SB – I see that most of your Stirling ops were mine-laying.

RB – Yes we did a lot of mine-laying.

SB – One of the bombing ops you did on May 1st at ?? in ?? your squadron lost three aircraft, do you have any memory of that at all?

RB – No.

SB – Do you remember any particular Stirling ops being a bit dodgy; anything particularly memorable?

RB – We did have a few problems with the Stirling. They were definitely getting past their sell-by date. In the night flying exercises, we had to come back to base three times and change aircraft.

SB – What sort of problems were you facing then, as you were saying you felt that they had passed their sel- by date? What had been the issues?

RB – Mainly engines. Cross-wind take-offs were quite hairy. It's amazing really because no matter what you flew, you would always have respect for it especially if it brought you back. It was certainly better when we moved on to the Lancaster, it had far more power.

SB – When you finished your first tour, the priority was to get married but what were your options then? What did the crew all want to do then?

RB – We were well aware that we would have to fly a second tour. So we told the station that we were quite willing to forgo our time off. Sometimes they would give you a month off after you finished a tour. We said that we were willing to forgo leave on the condition that we could all stick together as a crew. The CO said that he would

see what he could do for us, but they were pretty stretched for crews at that time. Anyway he thought about it and after two weeks leave we were all back together and posted again.

SB – It said on your ops list that you went to HCU for Lanc conversion first, where was that?

RB – I can't remember. I know when we got there, there was a film crew there. And the film they were making was 'Journey Together'. We did some of the flying scenes for them. I really can't remember the name of the base. It was a Heavy Conversion Unit. (*In fact it was 3 Lancaster Finishing School at Feltwell*).

SB – So your second tour was on 75 Squadron.

RB – Yes, Mepal near Cambridge.

SB – What did you think to the Lanc after the Stirling?

RB – It was a lovely treat, we were so pleased with it. They gave us a brand new aircraft as well. Everything about it just made it a lovely aircraft, it was good to handle and certainly everyone seemed happy with it. One op that we did was pretty grim. We had crossed the Dutch coast and ran into a tremendous flak barrage; I think that this was the problem with a lot of the aircraft that were lost. We were hit and there was some damage on the fuselage; that was one of the bad ones.

SB – Were there any other times when you sustained any damage? I guess there might have been.

RB – Yes, we got damaged several times, even on the mine-laying because we had run into the flak-ships that they had moored off the coast. They created some problems for us. We had flak damage on at least two occasions from them.

SB – Halfway through your second tour, you lost your pilot Harry didn't you? What happened there?

RB – Yes, we got hit, we were being attacked from below. Our gunners couldn't fire immediately below. But this Me.109 shot its cannon straight up at us and hit my skipper's elbow, it nearly took his elbow off and we had to get him out of his position. Fortunately our bomb aimer was ex.St. John's Ambulance brigade. He had quite a bit of medical knowledge and we always said that if the situation arose that he would be in charge, so he took over.

For a while we were blind flying. From time to time I had taken over the controls; I used to do a lot of link. I could do a bit of flying of course, I could do banking and weaving; I wouldn't attempt at doing a corkscrew though. When we lost him though, I thought 'oh dear'. I mean this is the nightmare that you dreaded about. It was a great relief when he tapped me on my shoulder and told me that he would return to his seat. It was marvellous, the bomb aimer had patched him up quite well on his elbow. We returned to base, which we were returning to anyway when we were hit. We had by then reached the Dutch coast. We made the landing and our rear gunner said that, that

was the best landing we had ever done even though it was with only one hand. When we taxied up to the hangar he collapsed over the control column. The ambulance promptly arrived and whisked him off to hospital and he was never seen of again. His girlfriend at the time arranged when he was in hospital to be transferred to a hospital nearer her in London. So he went there and we never saw him again after that.

Harry had been an out-going, public school boy, Jack the lad, always used to have a pair of ladies knickers tucked into one of his pockets. He used to have a different pair for each op, from his previous night antics. He went into Ely hospital and when we went to visit him, we expected him to be in serious agony and pain but he was sat up there beaming and he had a pair of ladies knickers tucked into his pyjama jacket and the matron said 'don't ask', he had got them from one of the nurses.

We were then taken over by a different kettle of fish altogether. We were taken over by the acting CO, Rogers was his name, he had done a tour already. He had been given the DFC. He was going to start his second tour with us and he took us on but it was totally different. There was hardly any communication from him at all; there was no banter like beforehand. He was a Kiwi, he was an introvert and didn't mix at all. He was totally different to what we had been used to. Having said that, he was a good pilot; he certainly knew what he was doing. We felt comfortable with him in that respect, but out of the aircraft there was nothing at all between us. When we had about seven or eight ops to go to finish our tour we told him we were going to finish when we had done our 64th. He was absolutely livid with us - very annoyed. He said that he wanted us to stay with him until he finished his tour. Two of us had just got engaged, and two had just got married and we all thought that we had done enough. He was absolutely livid with us though. Eventually we finished, but can you believe that he didn't even come to say goodbye, he didn't come to shake our hands or anything. He ignored us which was really upsetting. Our navigator, we decided he deserved a medal because he brought us back twice by the stars when we lost all our instruments, he was brilliant. The war interrupted his law degree that he was studying for at Oxford. He was brilliant, absolutely brilliant and should have been awarded the DFC.

SB – That is Sergeant Whittaker. What was his first name?

RB – Don.

SB – When you finished, you had done your 64th raid, what came after that?

RB – Well I had done a bit of work to catch up in the typewriter trade and they had said that they have just the job for me. Looking at the RAF records, they had over 3,000 typewriters there and they would like to set up a service department, I went to Leicester and got all the spare parts and tools, and they found me two members of staff and we set up this department. It was very good; they gave me a home, an RAF house, so my wife was quite pleased. She gave up her job and came to join me. We had a very pleasant year. Just before I came out they commissioned me to a Pilot Officer. So I had a wonderful career.

SB – Was it 1946 when you came out?

RB – '46 yes.

SB – Did you stay in the typewriter world?

RB – I started a company, built it up; had two branches one in Nottingham and one in Mansfield. Yes, it did very well. I have been very fortunate and have had good contracts. Perhaps I should have mentioned this, but when I was about 13 years of age, the local doctor in our village asked me if I would like to go caddying with him on a private golf course. Fascinating place it was, so I went there with him and eventually he was playing golf with the Duke and I ended up carrying two bags. I spent quite a while doing this, probably about two years. When I went into the Air Force, he kept in touch with me, the Duke did. It was lovely getting a letter from him. I flaunted it a little. He always took an interest and kept in touch and it transpired that he asked me if I would like to bring ten or so of my crew to shoot on his estate; with all the rationing, we jumped at the chance. We ended up with a lorry full of food, partridge, pheasant, rabbit etc. after not having much food with the rations, we had a ball. In the middle of the shoot this fella had arranged for a Lancaster to do an air test above us. Can you believe it though that the next night, this crew went out on an op and they failed to return.
