

## CONVERSATIONS WITH NORMAN DIDWELL

LEIGHTON BUZZARD 3 MARCH 2007

(Includes information from a letter dated 21 April 1986)

Key: ND – Corporal Norman Didwell, Flight Rigger. 99 (Wellington) Squadron Mildenhall and Newmarket, various Middle East Staging Posts, Transport Command Waterbeach and Gatow (during the Berlin Airlift).  
SB – Steve Bond

The meeting started with a conversation about the death of Alex Henshaw, seven days previously, who Norman knew very well.

ND – “About my Air Force career; brilliant, brilliant.”

SB – “When did you join up then?”

ND – “’38, end of ’38. Went to 99 Squadron as a UT Flight Rigger Fitter’s mate. Joined them in May 1939, done all the odd jobs you get when you’re a sprog on a Squadron. On Saturday the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 1939, there was some modifications to be done on the Wellingtons, so we knew.”

SB – “Still at Mildenhall then?”

ND – “Yes. 99 was the first Squadron to get Wellingtons, and anyway Chiefy Darling in B Flight, Chiefy said ‘Right lads, drop everything you’re doing, gather round the Flight Commander’s office.’ We gathered round and stood there, and Squadron Leader Cat, known affectionately as ‘Pussy’, he said ‘Right lads, stand easy.’ He said ‘Right, go over to your billets, get all your kit, and get back here within half an hour.’ So we thought hello, it looks like the balloons going to go up, we shall be going to France. Anyway, we all assembled there, some came over in the aircraft, some came by coach. I was one of them on the coach, I never flew over with a kite. So where did they fly into? – Newmarket Heath, not above ten miles as the crow flies. I don’t think some of them even dragged their undercarriage up.”

“After the fifth aircraft landed, a bloke come running down, waving a stick, a deer-stalkers hat, hacking jacket; ‘You can’t put these aeroplanes here, go!go!’ The CO said ‘There’s a signal from the War Office, to take over this location, to operate my Squadron from here for the duration of the war. I want all the keys for that building down there.’ Now, he wouldn’t hand over all the keys, and some of us were sleeping under the canopy (*of the grandstand*) in the outside as it were, you know. I mean the rain blew in, we got soaked. Fortunately, it was a good summer.”

“It did rain one night, and anyway I don’t know, but somebody must have blew the whistle and immediately they were ordered to open up everything, because we’d got to be put under cover. Now, the kitchen, they wouldn’t allow anyone to be given the key to the kitchen, this old bugger, Major Marriott, the Clerk of the Course. And we

had what they call a field kitchen, the old cook and his assistant, a couple of blokes, had to do it out in the open; bloody good wan't it?"

"Some of the officers were married, they had to move out of married quarters in Mildenhall, and they got digs in the town with people. Such as Kirby-Green, who was one of the fifty officers shot." (*Squadron Leader T G Kirby-Green was shot down in a 40 Squadron Wellington on 16 October 1941, was 21<sup>st</sup> out of the tunnel in the Great Escape, and was murdered 29 March 1944*). "There were two of them, Brough and I forget who else, but they had digs in the town but the others had to sleep in the grandstand, until they found out the aircrew weren't getting enough sleep. Because we'd got eighteen aircraft, doing the daily run-ups and that you know. So they moved then into the Jockey Club headquarters; and the officers. We were single. So that's how we started off."

"We had the Mark I Wellingtons, and within a few days of war being declared, which was on the Sunday morning, we got new aircraft coming along, which was the Mark IAs with the dustbin turret; I think they were Frazer-Nash turrets. Anyway, we're stuck there now and you'll be amazed at this, most of the air gunners were ground crew in those days. They ere ground crew wireless operators, ground crew fitters, riggers, what have you, we even had, I think he was a cook, air gunner. He eventually went as a Sergeant Pilot. Anyway, I can't think of his name, I think his name was Stone, I can't quite remember, it's a long time ago you know."

"Anyway, they go on ops, leaflet raids. They come back and the next night they'd be on guard! You see there was no such thing as Sergeant Air Gunners until 1940; I think they came about April. Some say it was later, but I'm certain they came about April 1940, and they had to make this people up and give them a bit of extra money. Because you must remember this, AC2 Flight Rigger with the equivalent of three old shillings a day, and sixpence a day Air Gunners pay, if they were qualified; some of them were still under-training Air Gunners, they didn't get paid that. So you are talking about 15p present-day, 15p a day to risk their lives for their country."

SB – "Outrageous really isn't it."

ND – "More than outrageous. Anyway, I stopped with the Squadron, I then got posted on a quick course to - I think I went to Morecombe - about a six-week course to qualify as a full Rigger, but I learned more on 99 Squadron than I did on the course. Most of those ground crew on 99, especially being a new, modern aircraft as it was, the Wellington, mostly ex.Halton apprentices. 32<sup>nd</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup> entry from Halton apprentices was just finishing their three years in '38 early '39, and they were sent to these new Wellington squadrons. So I learned a lot off these blokes."

SB – "Where did you do your training then, when you first joined up?"

ND – "Uxbridge. Then I think we had a month at Henlow. Anyway, I then got posted. I was hoping to get posted back to the Squadron, but I didn't, I got posted to bloody Flying Training Command at Upavon (*Central Flying School*)."

SB – "When was that then?"

ND – “That would be in ’41, the beginning of ’41. I then got posted to Boscombe Down, from there I got posted then overseas. So I then went to the Middle East and then I did a in, a bit in Egypt, a bit in Iraq, a bit in Palestine and the Persian Gulf and back to Egypt again. But it’s so long ago that the your memories fade.”

SB – “Yes. So what were you doing at Upavon and Boscombe Down then?”

ND – “Ground crew, Rigger.”

SB – “For what sort of aeroplane?”

ND – “Well, we had the Miles Masters, we had the Avro Tutor, and we had another couple of comical aircraft didn’t we.” *(laughter)*

SB – “What about Boscombe Down then?”

ND – “I was only there a few months, and I was on Air Ministry Proving Flight. But we were experimenting with night flying with a Spitfire and a Hurricane, mostly. We were trying to cover the exhaust pots, you know. They tried all kinds of gadgets, but it was a bloody nuisance because you’d get called out by the Tannoy, ‘Handling Flight report to the dispersal as soon as possible.’ *(Presumed to refer to CFS Handling Flight which moved from Upavon to Boscombe Down at the same time as Norman)*. Night flying, Squadron Leader Bragg; there was three Squadron Leaders with these aircraft. Squadron Leader Bragg I do remember, George Stainforth was still there, he was in charge when I went, but George Stainforth suddenly got posted to form a Beaufighter Squadron.”

“Cause there was all sorts at Boscombe Down then you know, there was a Manchester, there was an early Lanc – and that had got a dustbin turret *(probably 2<sup>nd</sup> prototype DG595)*. Then we’d got Beaufighters, even the Mosquito was there. There was one Mosquito there with radial engines in.”

SB – “Really? I’ve never heard of that before.”

ND – “Yep. You wouldn’t believe that would you? *(There is no record of a Mosquito with radial engines. It is possible that what Norman saw was the Gloster F.9/37 prototype, which was certainly at Boscombe Down at that time)*. Martin-Baker fighter was there. Anyway, as I say, I upset the Station Warrant Officer one night I think. *(laughter)* Well one of the kites come back, and it was wet, and it got stuck in the mud, and we had to dig the bugger out. And as were walking back the Station Warrant Officer come round the corner of the block as we were passing; ‘Hey you! What the hell...’. Oh dear, he went off alarming. Anyway, Squadron Leader Bragg gave him a bollocking, but there was myself and a bloke named ‘Sparky’ Sparks, and who was the other bloke? George Grant I think it was, we all got posted overseas.”

“So there you are, that was my career in the Air Force, I went right through.”

SB – “What were you doing in the Middle East then?”

ND – “Staging Post. Handling anything and everything. I got a photograph here somewhere of 44 Staging Post (*Sharjah*). That was quite an experience, because we worked on virtually everything. We used to have one Wellesley; it was flown by a Polish Warrant Officer and was used for carrying the mail; I used to service it.”

SB – “You mentioned to me once before that when you first went to 99 they still had some Heyfords. One of your first jobs was on a Heyford wasn’t it?”

ND – “First job I was ever given on a Heyford was lacing-up the side panel, because it was all fabric as you know. It had a big panel on the fuselage on the starboard and port side, where they could check the airframe itself, and that was all laced-up, a right old job that was I’ll tell you. That’d be beeswax and lacing-cord.”

SB – “They must have all gone not long after you got on the Squadron though mustn’t they?”

ND – “Yes. There was only two there, and they went to Number 4 Bombing and Gunnery School at West Freugh.”

“There you are (*looking at photos of Wellingtons*), here’s one of the old Mark Is, flown by Flight Sergeant, no not Healey, I forget who it was. Flare went off and the flare chutes are down at the back you know, near the stern frame. Anyway, it went on fire and he dived it and blew the flames out. And it lobbed in and that had to be refabricated.”

“The first Wellington crash of a Mark I; Flight Sergeant Healey was taking off and struck an old barn on the edge of the aerodrome, engine cut. Of course the wing flopped down; they all got out. But funny enough that crew all was killed on December 14<sup>th</sup> 1939, no known grave. (*Wellington IA N2886 took off from Newmarket on a reconnaissance operation and was shot down into the sea. 99 Squadron lost six Wellingtons that day*).

SB – “Did you get any air raids when you were at Rowley Mile?”

ND – “Yes, I’ll tell you a funny story about that. We hadn’t been there a few days and Chiefy “Sticky” Glue asked ‘Any of you blokes got a driving licence?’ So three of us stepped forward, and said ‘Yes’ (we’re in for a good job here!) He said, ‘Right, Flight Lieutenant Stanley, he’s got a van, he’s going over to Mildenhall, and you blokes go with him. ‘Cause you’ve got to sign for three petrol bowsers, three tractors (the old Fordson tractors) and 450 gallons of 100 octane.’ That’s bloody bright isn’t it?! (*laughter*) So off we went; Dick Pike myself, and I can’t think who the other bloke was, he soon got posted. Anyway, there we were for the first week going backwards and forwards to Mildenhall, getting petrol.”

“But what then was happening, with the kites going on leaflet raids, if it was a long nine hour job, they used to have to go to Mildenhall and top up. Right, eventually they put in a 16,000-gallon tank. They used to come, the suppliers, from a depot near Bury St Edmunds I think it was, or Ipswich. Tankers used to come in all hours of the day and night, topping off. Well it was gravity, it was right up, where there was rise on the racecourse by about the five furlong post. And a pipe went in, then there was a

stanchion where you filled up the bowser. Now what you did, you connected the hose to the pipe that you could fill up from, that's how you used to do it for the normal 'plane, and you start the engine, and that pumped it out. But you'd got to watch it before it overflowed out of the top hadn't you? Because they hadn't got the cut-outs or anything like they'd got on the main stations. So we used to have to do that."

"Well, one afternoon, during the Battle of Britain, there was Fred Caldecotte, who was an LAC Flight Mechanic / Air Gunner. We were filling up the bowser, and all of a sudden, 'That's funny, that sounds like it ain't one of our kites in the circuit.' And there was low cloud, all of a sudden this bloody kite come out of the cloud, and it was an 'einkel. And it only started bloomin' red flashes from its front gunners! I dived in to where the turnstiles was in the lower ring, in the old grandstand you know. Where do you think Fred went? Under the petrol bowser!" *(laughter)*

"Once or twice on flare-path at night we copped it. They come over and we got a stick of bombs one afternoon. He came across from the July course and dropped a stick of bombs between the two race courses, but he dropped them a bit too early, or else he'd have dropped them on a line of kites at A Flight dispersal. The last bomb; now there was a kite in what was where the silver ring and that is now, it's all different you see, it's hard to describe it now. They were doing an engine change, because it was solid ground there then, it was tarmac ground. And so you were handy with your Coles crane for lifting the engines out and that, and also it was a bit more not too exposed. And the last one hit the corner of the grandstand, the last bomb, it bounced over this aircraft – blokes working on it – and it hit some stables, which used to be there. And that demolished a couple of stables and never went off."

"The other stick, I think there was a stick of six, the others made holes right between the two race courses. Pedlar Palmer and the Armament Officer, was it Bickton, something like that, they went over and defused this German bomb. In the early days there was no Bomb Disposal, they just had to figure out how to do it. They never got an award for it; Pedlar I believe finished up with his commission. He was a nice bloke, Corporal, and just got his third when that happened."

"Yeah, we had one or two on night flying. I was on flare path one night, 'cause that was a right old job that was you know. That was a bloody dangerous job, the flare path. I was standing there, and we'd got a new crew doing circuits and bumps, and I could see little shoots of red coming down towards the Chance Light, and all of a sudden the Chance Light went out. And, I think he was the senior (?), he come running down 'Douse the flares, douse the flares!' Anyway, he dropped his bombs, I think in an open field, anyway he missed. I forget where they went, I think it would probably out towards Barton Mills way. But, yes, those were the days."

"It's a long time ago. If you'd been allowed to have kept a diary, which you weren't, do you know what I mean, it was a Court Martial offence. You could have written a lot down. There were some great characters on flight line then, and it was a different atmosphere to what came after. You see once they made them Sergeants, air gunners and that, they were separated from ground crew, they were trapped."

"I remember Squadron Leader Bartram; I mean Flight Commanders came and went some of them were killed. Same as the COs, I mean I served under Wing Commander

‘Titch’ Walker at Mildenhall and first started off at Newmarket; Squadron Leader Griffiths was made acting Wing Commander, he was Squadron Leader Flight Commander A Flight; he took over the Squadron. After him came Wing Commander Ford, and then I think it was Wing Commander Heath, but I left about that period, ‘cause they was just moving to Waterbeach about February 1941.”

*Wing Commander H E Walker MC DFC commanded 99 Squadron from 21.6.37, Squadron Leader J F Griffiths DFC from 26.9.39, Wing Commander R J A Ford from 29.6.40, Wing Commander F W Dixon-Wright DFC from 16.1.41, Wing Commander P Heath from 12.12.41. The Squadron was effective at Waterbeach from 8 March 1941.*

SB – “You left before they moved did you?”

ND – “Yes, I left before they moved to Waterbeach. And so I served under three COs there. But Squadron Leader Bartram, he come over and he took over from, Catt if I remember rightly, pre-war regular, nice bloke. (*Squadron Leader R G E Catt*) And he tore a strip off one of these Sergeant air gunners that had just come in, you know, new boys straight in. Who was telling one of the ground crew off. He called him over ‘Sergeant’, he said, ‘stand to attention. This man is an LAC and he had to go through trade test boards to get where he is. And you are an AC2 acting Sergeant. You will have no connection as regards disciplining ground crew, and don’t let me ever here it again’, he said. ‘In fact, I don’t want you on my Flight.’”

“Now I met Bartram as a Wing Commander in Iraq. He came and took over 44 Staging Post. They said we’ve got a new CO coming, I think it was took over from McLean. Old Bartram saw me one day servicing I think it was a Lib, ‘cause we had Libs coming through then, and he said ‘I know you don’t I?’ And I said ‘Yes sir, I remember you, B Flight.’ ‘Of course yes, Didwell.’ And of course all the boys thought ‘Oh, you’re well in.’ (*laughter*) ‘Cause every time he saw me he used to come and say ‘How are you doing Didwell?’ Every time a Wimpy come in with a snag, he used to air test it. If the crew was sent on you see, he would air test it. I used to stand there sometimes when I was on duty crew, he used to come in and that was it. Service that aircraft and do the ground check on it before test flight. ‘Do you want to come up Didwell?’ ‘Yes please sir.’ ‘Go and get yourself a parachute and harness then.’ I don’t know what happened to him, but I think he went on a third tour and got killed I believe.”

“The AOC of 3 Group in those days was Air Vice Marshal Jack Baldwin, nice old boy. They used to call him Uncle Jack behind his back. (*laughter*) He took the Squadron to India. When they asked him to take over India Command, the bomber group command over there, he said ‘I’d like to take 99 Squadron with me.’” (*The move to India took place between February and June 1942*).

“I spoke to the Chief of the Air Staff when they reformed the Squadron again in 2001. There was eight of us, we’d been invited to the reformation lunch and do you know. And we had a big do at night and he was there. He came over, he could see because we were wearing miniature gongs, you know, and he said, ‘Nice to meet you.’ And old Wing Commander Ercolani who commanded the Squadron in India, five-tour man by the way, said ‘This gentleman,’ he said, pointing to me, ‘was with the Squadron at

the outbreak of war.’ ‘Were you?’ he said, ‘that’s interesting. You don’t look old enough.’ *(laughter)* Sir Peter Squires, yes, he had quite a little chat with me. ‘Oh’, he said, ‘you knew Pickard did you?’ *(Flight Lieutenant, later Group Captain P C Pickard DSO DFC completed his first tour of ops on 99 Squadron)* I said ‘Yes, I worked on one of Pickard’s aircraft.’ Which was N3200 *(actually R3200)*, and the call-sign was O for Orange. And then he got F for Freddie.”

SB – “Where was this then, where you worked on his aircraft?”

ND – “Newmarket. He came from 214 Squadron to Newmarket. You see we lost, on December the 14<sup>th</sup> 1939, on a Thursday, they were taken off and told to do an armed reconnaissance of a German fleet reported steaming in the Schillig Roads off Heligoland Bight. And they were to not bomb lower than two thousand feet. What happened was – a lovely morning actually, a frosty morning but beautiful sunshine – they took-off at about eleven o’clock I should think it must have been, and we watched them off. They took off towards Cambridge over Devil’s Dyke, and they took-off in threes, because Rowley Mile as you know Steve, is a hell of a big expanse. So they took off in flights of three and went down towards Cambridge, and they came back over the aerodrome, all twelve of them.”

“Anyway, what happened then, we heard no more until about half past three quarter to four I suppose it was, in the afternoon, it was starting to get dark. One of the wireless ops who was on duty come out of where the radios were set up in the jockey club; that was the ops room, the jockeys’ weighing room. And he said, ‘Oh, we’ve had some signals from returning aircraft; they haven’t half had a bloody pasting; forget who the wireless operator was. Anyway, the first one come, then another one, then another one, five; then another one afterwards. And I was filling up a petrol bowser and I watched this coming round, he’d got his navigation lights on, and all of a sudden he went over on the port side and down.”

“And Wing Commander ‘Square’ McKee, who’d served on the Squadron before the war, and he was at Group Headquarters or something, but he came and done one or two ops on the Squadron, and he was on this, in fact he flew the leading aircraft. He flew it, and Wing Commander Griffiths, who’d been made CO then, he took it and they had a Royal Naval officer on board as well to do a recon. And Square come along with this Ford van, little Ford van, he said ‘Airman, where did that aircraft go down?’ ‘Right jump in’ he said, ‘and point where it is, we’ll drive.’ ‘Cause it was dark. Anyway, we got there, I had to get over Devil’s Dyke, it had crashed the other side of Devil’s Dyke. By this time, the fire tender and the blood wagon had got there; they had to go round through July Course to get there. And he said ‘Go and find out’, and I went up over the top and oh, that was in a mess. There was a hell of a mess, and we could hear somebody groaning inside and that was Sergeant Parton, the observer. Flight Lieutenant Hetherington was the crew.” *The Wellington was N2957, and it had been badly damaged by an Me.110. The Squadron lost a total of six aircraft that day, and all crews were killed in the other five.*

“I can tell you the crew; it was Flight Lieutenant Hetherington, skipper, New Zealander by birth; Pilot Officer Payne, I think his name was Trevor Payne. *(Flying Officer A J Payne)*. He was wounded, Hetherington was wounded. Jock Sharp, Corporal Jock Sharp, was the front gunner; he was killed. Parton *(Sergeant L W*

*Parton WOp/AG*) was very badly injured. I saw his body lying there, and the Wireless Operator - it'll come to me - what was his name, began with an H. (*AC1 R Entwistle*). Anyway, they were dead, Payne was wounded and moaning; Parton was in a bad way, there was a bit of geodetic stuck into him, in the shoulder. And we got in the aircraft, one or two of us, and got him out. Lofty Craig, (*AC2 A D F Craig*), the stern frame had broke in half, and Lofty Craig was still in his turret, and he'd been wounded. We got him out, with a stepladder, and they carted them of in the blood wagon and the bodies you know. Anyway, Lofty came back to the Squadron after he'd recuperated from the wound and everything else, and he'd got the bullet, it was about that big (*indicates*)."

"He eventually got killed on his second tour. Wing Commander Payne, he finished up a Wing Commander, and I think he commanded the Staging Post in the Sudan after the war. Because John Cunningham was telling me that he remembers being in the 'plane with him when he was doing the Comet test flights out there. Anyway, we wrote to Payne when we formed the Association, and I said I remembered about the crash and everything you know, I said there was only myself and another chap alive that were there at the time, that helped to get Parton out. And Payne wrote back and said 'You were dead lucky, because we'd still got a live 500 lb bomb in the wreck.' (*laughter*) And that was true, I didn't know that."

SB – "So what actually caused them to pile in then?"

ND – "They'd had a flap shot away. In didn't go on fire because they'd lost no end of petrol. Now, they were very lucky it didn't go on fire, because it was before they put self-sealing tanks in, in the Mk.1A."

SB – "So where does Pickard fit in?"

ND – "Well after this, we lost thirty-three aircrew that day; in one day. In fact I believe Air Vice Marshal Baldwin in his report, said it was relevant to the Charge of the Light Brigade. Because it was daylight you see; they took-off at eleven o'clock in the morning, of course it was dark by the time they got back. There was only one aircraft out of the lot that had got no battle damage; of the five that actually got back."

"Houldsworth, that was him, AC2 Wireless Operator, UT Air Gunner, so he wasn't paid flying pay. Came from Manchester. His great nephew got in contact with me, he was eighteen." *AC2 H Houldsworth was actually lost on another aircraft, N2986 skippered by Sgt R H J Brace and lost over Wangerooge.*

"I mean as myself, what did I do? Nothing really."

SB – "Well, I don't know. You were on the Squadron for what, two years?"

ND – "Yes, about two years. I think there's only – Johnny Martin's just risen from the grave as it were. 'Cause he used to come to the reunions, and then he stopped. He's just been in contact with me again, lives at Redbourn. Now he came with Pickard, from 214 Squadron, and he flew with Pickard. Pickard' crew mainly are – Johnny flew with him once or twice – but his main crew was himself, and he always had some young new crew officer or Sergeant pilot what flew second dickey. But I



can remember his crew, there was Pick, Sergeant observer was Alan Broadley (*Flt Lt DSO DFC DFM*) his wireless operator was 'Titch' Mills, I think it was Hannigan was his front gunner and Harlingham was the rear gunner, that was his main crew."

SB – "So you came across him because he was operating out of Newmarket at some point."

ND – "Yeah, he came to Newmarket you see, in '40, as one of the replacement crews for what we'd lost. Anyway, I worked on that aircraft, O for Orange. He ditched it in one night in June 1940. (*On the night of 19-20 June, R3200 was hit by flak during an operation to the Ruhr, and with the port engine failing, was ditched off Great Yarmouth*). They all got out in the dinghy, but funnily enough, that same crew, the names what I've just given you, they all went on their second or third tour of ops, they never survived. As you know, Pickard led the Amiens 'Jerico' job. Well Alan Broadley flew with him mostly right the way through. Wherever Pick went, he got Broadley."

"When we formed the reunion association, had the first reunion, we wrote to Mrs Pickard, we knew she was in South Africa. She came over, she attended to the reunion, she came once or twice. But Pick was a big bloke you know, about six foot four. And he was all right old Pick, as long as you did your job; but he couldn't stand scroungers. He told one or two blokes off you know, but he hated the Germans. His sister was an actress, did you know that? His sister was Helena Pickard, there was four sisters and two boys."

"Pick's elder brother Walter, was a short-term commissioned officer in the Royal Air Force before the war, long before the war. And he came back and was made a Squadron Leader and he commanded Lyneham as a Group Captain. Now, Helena Pickard, she married Sir Cedric Hardwick, the actor. Well they came to Newmarket one weekend, and Pick brought 'em down the aerodrome, and he'd still got a Bentley. He was mixed up with a couple of propaganda films I believe."

SB – "You mentioned Ercolani a while ago, that was obviously the Ercol furniture family."

ND – "Now 'The Erc' got quite a good career. 'The Erc' was on 214 Squadron, completed his first tour on 214. That's where as a Flying Officer he was awarded a DSO, now that is very unusual for a junior officer. He got it on a trip to Berlin. He then came, when he'd finished his ops, he came to Newmarket as the Gunnery Flight leader. They had a small flight there of a couple of Wimpys, I think it eventually became three, Air Gunnery Flight. They used to go doing whatnot over Sutton Bridge you know, air firing training and that. Ginger Ware, (*Sgt James T Ware DFM*) as a matter of fact, when he finished his first tour, he was one of the instructors on there. Great bloke old Ginger, well he lost his leg on his third op. His third op was on 40 Squadron in the Western Desert. But he completed two tours with 99, its unusual. Now we know for a fact from his log book, that he did 70 ops with 99 Squadron, and he did about 28 with 40 Squadron before he lost his leg; he got the DFM. Pickard was very fond of old Ginger. Ginger never flew with Pick, but he liked old Ginger."

“There were some great officers there. There was Ian Cross came to the Squadron as a Flying Officer, finished up as a Squadron Leader; Jack Grisman was ex.Halton apprentice, came to the Squadron after we’d been at Newmarket a while, as a Sergeant observer. He got his commission, and there was Kirby-Green, and all these three were taken prisoners of war on their second tours, I think. As a matter of fact, Lord Haw-Haw, a couple of days after he (Kirby-Green) went missing on 311 Czech Squadron he was on. Now Pick went to 311 Squadron after he’d finished his first tour, to get them up towards scratch, and he went on ops with them, that’s why got a Czech Military Cross. Anyhow, Kirby-Green was with 311, I think Grisman was with 9 Squadron and I think Ian Cross was with 9 Squadron when they were shot down on their second tour.”

“Tom Kirby-Green was my Flight Commander. One day he came into the line tent and said ‘Anything going on Didwell?’ ‘No Sir’. ‘Might as well go and get some tea then.’ Well, we’d rather have gone into town, but when we came back we could hear an almighty din; he was a great banjo player. He was a very handsome man, so was his wife Maria.”

*Squadron Leader T G Kirby-Green was shot down on 16.10.41 during on operation on Duisburg, in Wellington Z8862 of 40 Squadron. Pilot Officer W J Grisman was shot down on 5.11.41 during a Sepcial Duties op in Wellington T2565 of 109 Squadron. Squadron Leader I K P Cross DFC was shot down on 12.2.42 during an attack on warships in Wellington Z8714 of 103 Squadron. All three later took part in the Great Escape, and were murdered by the Gestapo.*

“Now those three were among the fifty officers shot, because Jack Grisman got his commission. His wife was expecting a baby, and he never knew his son, and his son never knew his father. Kirby-Green had a son, yes, young Christopher I suppose was a baby at Mildenhall. Because he was eight years old when he was told by his headmaster at school that he’d got some sad news for him, that his father had been shot, you know, by the Gestapo.”

SB – “So what was the bit about Lord Haw-Haw?”

ND – “Well, Lord Haw-Haw broadcast that they had captured a famous British aviator, which was Squadron Leader Kirby-Green. When he was in the prison camp, he was in this Great Escape at Stalag Luft 3, he was very friendly with a Flight Lieutenant Ladoche, or something like that, I think it was a French name, but I think this bloke must have come from Jersey or the Channel Islands or somewhere. Anyway he brought some bits and pieces back of Kirby-Green when he was released, came back home and repatriated., and he eventually married Kirby-Green’s widow. And he was a very good step-father to young Christopher Kirby-Green. I believe Christopher became a doctor.”

SB – “Where did you eventually finish your time?”

ND – “I finished my time at Oakington. Post-war you see, ‘cause I was on the Berlin Airlift. We had an attachment from Oakington at Gatow, and I was on the attachment there.”

SB – “Were you on a Squadron then, or as part of the strength of the station?”

ND – “The strength of the station. We were maintenance hangar in those days, we maintained the stuff that came in for big major servicing and stuff, repair work. On 31 Squadron, no 30 Squadron I think it was (*Dakota, Oakington*), and 47 (*Hastings, Dishforth*) and 24 VIP Squadron (*York, Bassingbourn*) was there as well. So, we were at Gatow as I say, and anyway, then Joe Stalin blockaded Berlin and we were there then for 14 months.”

SB – “And what came after that? Was that it?”

ND – “I went back to Oakington and finished me time you see.”

SB – “When was that?”

ND – “’52.”

SB – “’52 you were demobbed?”

ND – “Yes.”

SB – “And what rank had you aspired to by then?”

ND – “Acting Corporal paid. Never mind, I’ve met blokes who I knew that finished up as Squadron Leaders. Bob Bernard, one of the ex.Halton apprentices, I’ll tell you a funny story about him; he was a very clever bloke. Ex.37 Entry, got his commission, and he was in accident investigation officer out in the Middle East, as a Flight Lieutenant. And he said ‘If I’d have known you were out there then, I’ve have got hold of you on my team.’ Anyway, Bob was made a Corporal just about the beginning of ’40.”

“We were on duty crew one Thursday morning during the Battle of Britain, no it wasn’t, it was a Wednesday morning I’m sorry, ‘cause I’ll always remember this. And they said report to the Pilot Flight Op tent there used to be and the blood wagon, ‘cause we had no watch office you know in those days at Newmarket. It was a caravan, with a duty pilot, junior Sergeant pilot, wireless operator and an electrician. Anyway, we nipped down to where this Hurricane came in and this fellow was wearing blokes’ overalls, with his helmet on and that you see, and he got out of the cockpit very awkwardly. So we looked at one another and thought ‘oh, he must have been wounded’, but couldn’t see no bullet holes in the aircraft, you know. What the hell’s wrong with him? Anyway, Bob said to him, he thought well he must be a Flight Sergeant, ‘Have you been wounded Chiefy?’ ‘I’m not a Chiefy’, he said, ‘I’m a bloody Squadron Leader!’ Blimey, nice bugger he is. (*Laughter*) Anyway he stomped of, he said ‘Where’s your operations room, have you got one here?’ Nasty. And we said ‘We’ll you’ve got to go through that little gate there, round that, and you come to the big building, and that is the operations room which is the old jockey’s weighing room.’ ‘Um, bloody long way to walk!’ So I think it was Bob Langford said, ‘He’s got something in his trousers.’” (*laughter*)

“Well, the next morning, the paper bloke couldn’t come down, who used to sit up the top there at Rowley Mile, you know where the road starts. So Bob went up to get the papers, Daily Mirror, Daily Sketch, and I think it was in the Daily Mail, and you know people who’d won the DFC, who had gone missing in action, and all the rest of it, there was this photograph. ‘Legless pilot awarded the DFC.’ Bader! He was commanding 242 Squadron at Coltishall.”

“There’s a sequence to this. I came across Bader after he’d been knighted. I was wearing a RAF tie, and he was parked funny enough, outside Leighton (*Buzzard*) library, as I came out. And somebody tooted in this Volkswagen, little VW, and it was ‘Ooh’ I said ‘Sir Douglas.’ ‘Do we know you, do I know you?’ (*laughter*) he said, ‘Have we met before?’ I said ‘Oh yes’, so I reminded him. Now he was a bit more subdued than what he used to be, ‘Oh yes, he said, ‘I remember, you had those cloth bombers.’ I said ‘You mean the wonderful old Wellington, that flew from the day war broke out right through to the end’, and I said ‘they were still flying in ’50.’ Anyway, I said ‘Do you remember the Corporal in charge of the ground-crew?’ I said ‘You gave him a bit of a telling off.’ ‘Did I?’ I’d reminded him. And I said ‘The next time you go to Heathrow, and I know you go there quite bit when you’re flying abroad, ask if you can go and see the power project engineering officer, Mr Robert Bernard. That was the Corporal; retired as a Flight Lieutenant engineering officer.’

“So that was the sequence of me and Bader. So we always say, Bob Langford, Bob Bernard, myself, I forget who the armourer and the electrician and the instrument basher were, we helped him get his DFC.’ (*laughter*)

“I think one of the outstanding things is that, when you think there was Ted Folks, Blondie Norton, George Grant, Sergeant Grant, myself, who was the other one, Corporal Jock, can’t think of his name. Well, one afternoon at Sharjah, we’d got a couple of Beaufighters come in, a couple of Wimpies, all of a sudden they said there’s an aircraft coming in from Comm Flight Delhi (*Air Headquarters India Communications Flight*); it’s an emergency. And we got a Wellington come in, and I was working on this Wellington, they’d lost a lot of fabric on the starboard wing between the engine and the fuselage. And a bloke named Joplyn and myself was doing this job on it, and all of a sudden, this Dakota came in; Comm Flight Delhi.”

“Well, the Station Commander at Sharjah, I forget who it was now, here was there with his jeep to meet this thing; so there was a big-wig on there. And who do you think it was? Field Marshal Wavell, with his entourage; and he came out, of course. To put these VIPs up they’d got the old Imperial Airways fort there in Sharjah; that was the only main building there, which is a couple of mile away from the village. The second pilot was Flight Lieutenant David Niven, and the pilot was Wing Commander Withers (*possibly Wing Commander Harold Robert Withers OBE*), and the Sergeant Wireless Op said to me he’s known as Goggy, ‘cause Googy Withers the actress.” (*laughter*)

“Anyway, the next thing was the old Field Marshal and his entourage, he’d got no women ATS people or nothing like that; not like when Mountbatten lobbed in at Habbaniya with all his women Wren officers. There was an Air Force Squadron Leader liaison officer, ‘cause they was flying up to I think, Cairo, to a conference or

something. Anyway, the aircraft, both engines were pouring out oil. Well we found out afterwards that somebody at Comm Flight Delhi had boobed.”

SB – “What had they done?”

ND – “They’d both done over their hours. I suppose all the whatnots were worn and so on. Anyway, it had got to be a double engine change, so what happened they sent a Comm Flight from I think it was one of 216 Squadron’s, either Cairo West, or they, might have been at Heliopolis at the time down to pick him up the next day. So he had to stay overnight at Sharjah.” (*216 Squadron was based at Cairo West from November 1942 until July 1945*).

“We started. We had to take the engines out with shear-legs, got no Coles crane there. And two new Pratt and Whitney engines had got to be flown up from India, from Karachi, the MU there (*317 MU*), or from Cairo, the MU in Cairo (*109 MU*). Anyway, after he’d had a meal and that, we were still working on the aircraft, ‘cause the only place we could work was near the fort, at night, with Leigh lights. The only they’d got was a generator with electricity. And we was working on this Wimpy, and old Wavell came out with his RAF liaison officer and a couple more, a Major.”

“I’d been there eight months, Ted Prouch had been there eight months, Grant had been there about twelve months, Sergeant Grant. Anyway, he said ‘Take these chaps, names and Service numbers.’ We wondered what’s going to happen. ‘Your working hard, I won’t detain you any longer,’ he said, ‘rather primitive isn’t it, rather primitive.’ And he marched off. So Wing Commander Withers and the Flight Lieutenant, they were there the next morning, they never went to Cairo, they had to stop there. We had to do the engine change and had quite along chat. Anyway, we got this Wimpy sorted out, re-fabricced the whole of the top inboard, and that went off. Then the Dak was ready for an air test. So Wing Commander Withers, he was DSO DFC, (*not identified*) he said ‘Would you lads like to come up on an air test?’ ‘You’d better get something to cover the seats’ he said. We only left three on the duty crew and we went up and down the Gulf for about an hour. So I actually flew in the aircraft of Field-Marshal Wavell. I think I’m the only one left of that crowd too, at Sharjah, I must be, they were all older than me. So I must be the only one left of that period at 44 Staging Post.”

“Ah, Chiefy Untwiss(?) he was the Flight Sergeant, ex.Halton apprentice. I did meet Chiefy after the war, at Broadwell, just after the end of the war, when I came back. And he was on a special job there, and he came in a vehicle, I forget what it was, and he said ‘What ho Diddy’ and I said ‘Ooh hello Chiefy, how are you?’ And I met old Sticky Glue there at Broadwell, who was Sergeant Glue when I was at Mildenhall, and Sticky was the Warrant Officer, Engineering Warrant Officer. He said ‘What ho Diddy, I’m reforming so-and-so Squadron, I want you with me.’ (*This would have been either 10 or 76 Squadron, both of which were re-formed here with Dakotas at that time*). He said ‘We’re going to the Far East.’ I said ‘I’m not Sir, I’ve just got back from the Middle East!’ (*laughter*) But of course Tiger Force was disbanded, because they dropped the atom bomb.”

“Those of us left that was at Newmarket; Gerry Blacklock, Sergeant Pilot, finished up a Group Captain, well-decorated, still alive today in his 90s. (*Group Captain G B*

*Blacklock OBE DFC DFM*). There's Tosh Hoskins in New Zealand, I think Jim Brough (he was Flight Lieutenant Brough in those days), I think he's still alive in Australia. (*James Brough was awarded the DFC*) Bob Bernard I think is still alive; there's myself, and Johnny Martin. You see a lot of these ground crew were Air gunners, and I think by February 1940, something like near enough 70 of them were gone, killed in action."

"Ginger Ware; he's only once allowed them to write his story. Ginger started off 'Being pissed and patriotic I joined the Air Force'. (*laughter*) He was born Cockney but was what I would say was a genuine English gentleman. And he was telling me those bloody Lithuanian guards in the prison camp used to kick his crutch away from him. He got to know Bader, because they always used to be up at Roehampton trying new artificial legs. And Ginger came to every reunion, and he died, ooh it must be ten years ago now. Three tours."

"What happened, he went with the Squadron on its way to India. When they got to Shallufa, I think it was, the Wing Commander Flying said to his pilot, who he did a second tour with, who was Flight Lieutenant Robin Goodfellow (*awarded an AFC in 1946*), 'You two are pushing your luck aren't you, going on a third tour? I'm grounding you.' Ginger went in the MT Section, because they found out he could drive; as a Flight Sergeant driver, and Robin Goodfellow was given an administration job at Shallufa. Anyway, eventually they wangled themselves on 40 Squadron, and on their 28<sup>th</sup> op with 40 Squadron, this was the early days when Jerry was in Tobruk, they were the first leading aircraft into Tobruk that night."

"On the way back they were about 70 miles from Tobruk and about 70 miles from their base, when an aircraft in the second wave which was off course, collided with them, and they crash landed in the desert. The navigator was killed, Jock White Sergeant Pilot second pilot was ok, so was Robin Goodfellow, but Ginger who was kicking the escape hatch out when it plonked, got his leg torn to pieces. I think it was Petty who was the Wireless Operator who was not too clever, and the front Air Gunner died, because the kite went on fire. But what was left of it, they popped Ging and Petty under the mainplane and give them morphine and what have you, and said 'We'll see if we can get to the British lines, or a British patrol.' And they actually walked through a bloody minefield, him and Jock White. But what happened was an Afrika Korps patrol found them, and they took them to the nearest Luftwaffe base and the Luftwaffe was a bit different to the SS and all that. They flew them to hospital in Greece, where they amputated, and took them to Germany. And that was Ginger, he was awarded the DFM."

"Him and old Pickard you know, they used to go poaching. And it wasn't until they got decorated, Air Vice Marshal Baldwin said ' You've done well, but keep off my shoot! You're poaching on a shoot that I'm renting."

"Old Ging during his rest period, they went him to Waterbeach. They gave him the job of collecting aircrews' kit who was shot down or went missing to put into storage, all sorts. Sometimes if they wanted something, flying boots or flying clothes, you know. Ginger saw a pair of flying boots on a dispersal one day, and he picked them up. He took them round to his little store in main stores, and he was responsible for cataloguing and everything, and who it belonged to, collecting the log books and that

sort of thing. Anyway, Ginger saw this pair of flying boots, and he thought ‘Cor, I’ll take them over stores’. ‘Cause sometimes bloke would lose things you know, and give you a couple of bob, ‘Got some spare?’”

“Two or three days later, Ginger’s cycling round the peri-track, and he saw the CO’s car coming towards him, Wing Commander Dixon-Wright (*DFC*) And he pulled up, and they always called him Ginger, because they admired him and liked him, ‘Ah’, he said, ‘Sergeant Ware, come here. Ginger, I’ve lost a pair of flying boots.’ ‘Oh have you Sir?’ He said ‘Have you got any spare ones in that little store of yours?’ ‘I might be able to find you some sir.’ (*laughter*) ‘Bring them to my office Ginger’, he said. Ginger promptly arrives with them, ‘There you are sir.’ ‘Oh yes’, he said, ‘that looks alright, how much do you want Ginger?’ He said ‘Before you pay me sir, you’d better look inside!’” (*laughter*)

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ND (from 1986 letter) – “The Berlin Airlift, as you know is part of history. A few airlines had fatal prangs; two runways were in operation, one for landing one for take-off, and the schedule was one aircraft landing and taking off per minute during peak periods of the lift. If they overshot, they had to return to base, with their load, and try again.”

“One of AVM Don Bennett’s Tudors had brake failure with a sorry result. The Tudors carried mostly diesel and petrol for Berlin, with a large tank installation in the fuselage. Bennett himself once took off from either Wunstorf or Fassberg with his elevator ground locks in. Being the terrific pilot he was, he managed to land OK, obviously using elevator trim tabs and power units. We had a Globemaster prang one day that took some removing. They sent some USAF bods from Templehof; we RAF bods had enough to cope with.”

“When I was attached to Amman landing strip, we had an old Arab foreman who remembered Lawrence of Arabia, and he had fought in the Arab Revolt with T.E.L. On the Middle East Staging Posts we serviced Wimpies, Spits, Hurricanes, Liberators, Dakotas, Hudsons, Halifaxes, Corsairs, Barracudas, Flying Forts, Mitchells, Mossies, Blenheims, Beaufighters, Beauforts, Lancasters, Albacore, Fulmar, DH.86, Oxford, Anson, Kittyhawk and many more. When I was at Habbaniya, we had as many as forty aircraft in the same evening, and the No.40 Staging Post at Habb only had about fifty officers and men, it was all go.”

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Further conversation 1 February 2013

SB - “You mentioned a Development Flight, what was it? Mutt Summers came to Mildenhall with Barnes Wallis, is the right?”

ND - “Just before the war. I just saw these two civilians walking around and wondered who they were. Wellington Development Flight, part of 99 Squadron with three aircraft, they were all 99 Squadron pilots. I can always remember, there was Flight Sergeant Bill Williams who was also a holder of the AFM, Gerry Blacklock who was a Sergeant pilot in those days, Flying Officer Kirby-Green, and there was a

Flight Lieutenant I think it was Hetherington, he was a New Zealander. I can remember they were on Wimpey Flight.”

SB - “What sort of things were they doing then?”

ND - “Well they were just doing duration tests, and fuel consumption tests and that. I mean they used to go up to nine hours duration. I think one of the aircraft was the original one delivered, L4215 a Mk.1 Wimpey, which had Parnall or Frazer-Nash turrets and a cupola.”

“You see some of those pilots collected the Wimpeys, those 99 blokes went down there and converted.”

SB - “Ah, so they did their conversion at Brooklands.”

ND - “Yes, I'm certain they did because I remember somebody saying to me, I think it was Squadron Leader Catt went down there and collected a Wimpey. Most of the original pilots in November 1938 were NCO pilots, most of them ex.Halton apprentices in the early days. I didn't join the squadron until May 1939.”

SB - “When you were there did they have IAs and ICs?”

ND - “The first ones that came with the proper turrets were Mk.IAs, then they had the ICs. Then they had the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, the Mk.II, then they brought out the Hercules Mk.III. The first ones had 1,400 and something horsepower, then they punched it up, and eventually those Hercules engines had 1,800 horsepower.”

“The only thing with the Mk.IAs, was the air intake for the carburettor was under the bottom cowling. If they over-doped in cold weather they'd get a fire in the housing, and what they used to have to do, they had to keep the engine turning and you had to stand with the prop behind you; what the blokes used to do, they used to put their cap over it or a board to cut the oxygen and then open it up again! Usually it was the engine fitters that stood there.”

SB - “If you were doing a Daily Inspection (DI), how many blokes would you have doing that?”

ND - “On a squadron, sometimes we had Fitter 2, or Flight Mech Engines, then you'd have a Flight Rigger, you got an Armourer who was usually responsible for two aircraft – armourer guns and armourer bombs – you'd have an electrician, and an instrument basher. But sometimes the ground crew had two aircraft to look after.”

“I remember we had Pickard's aircraft, the first one he flew, which he had to ditch, which was N3200. He ditched that in June and they were all rescued. Then the other one further up the line was the one that Flt Sgt Tim Healey had. Now before the war he was flying a Mk.I and the flare chute in the stern frame – I don't know what happened – it exploded and caught on fire and it burnt quite a lot of the fabric; he got it down. But Tim Healey was unlucky, during the battle over Heligoland on 14<sup>th</sup> December 1939, his aircraft had a shell burst underneath it from one of the cruisers and Brace's aircraft turned right over and landed on top of Healey's.”



SB - "Did you have a lot of reliability problems with the aircraft?"

ND - "Well, you got a lot of oil leaks in those days. You were forever washing the undercarriage down from an oil leak on the port side or the starboard side. You washed it down with paraffin, then you'd got to get going again with the grease gun on all the grease nipples. Eventually they brought out covers for the tyres, for the oil leaks, because the oil was ruining so many tyres, soaking into them. That was mainly the Pegasus engines."

"Otherwise they were reasonably serviceable in many ways, you didn't get many things, not like some aircraft. The only thing was you got a lot of fabric damage some times, which you had to repair. If they lost a bit of it, the chaffing strips on the geodetics, you had to replace all them; a bit of cord with the fabric wrapped round. One of them you had to crawl up between the wing top surface and the bottom surface; you could get in so far, you know. The other thing was putting the engine covers on and the cockpit and turret covers. You had to crawl over it and that was tricky, especially when you were trying to get the front turret cover on, the wind was blowing and you were on a rickety old set of steps."

"On the squadron we had 18 aircraft in two Flights, A & B (I was on B Flight). We had about 110 ground crew, but then at any one time there would be Duty Crew, four blokes, Fire Crew, Flarepath crew – that was seven including the Duty Sgt Pilot who manned the flying control caravan. Then there was the Chance light crew and guard duty, which came round twice a week, so there wasn't a lot of you left to look after 18 aircraft really."

"We had 20 commissioned ranks and 19 NCO pilots. Most of the Group 1 Fitters 1 and 2 were ex.Halton apprentices, and the Group 2 Flight Mechanics were engines and airframes. We also had Wireless Operator Mechanics (WOMs), wireless operators, cooks and butchers, admin clerks and a parachute packer. From pre-war the air gunners were mainly Wireless Operators and ground crew technicians until April 1940, when direct Air Gunner recruitment was introduced and on qualifying, they were given the rank of Sergeant. I seem to recall pay was eight shillings (40 pence) a day prior to April 1940. Ground crew technicians were AC2, AC1, LAC and Corporal, and on passing out as an Air Gunner, they were paid an extra six pence a day flying pay. They wore a brass winged bullet to denote Air Gunner on the right sleeve of their tunic."

"Wireless ops in 1938/39 included:"

LAC Tommy Brown UT AG, later W/O DFM  
AC1 N Collins-Campbell UT AG, killed 1941  
AC R Entwistle UT AG, killed 1939  
AC Fred G Hooper AG  
AC Harry Houldsworth UT AG  
AC1 Reg Hayward  
AC1 F A G 'George' Haynes  
AC2 W R Pountain UT AG  
AC2 Bill Williams UT AG

AC2 F J 'Johnny' Johnson UT AG  
AC1 L Worthington AG  
Cpl C B G 'Toddy' Knight AG RNZAF

END

### 24 June 2013

ND – “(Sqn Ldr) Geoff ‘Ginger’ Rothwell was a big bloke you know. He picked one of the ground crew up – I think it was Dick Slade – and sat him on the tailplane. Describing documents about Wellington HZ???. “I believe someone told me that it did a hundred ops and got destroyed.”

Photo of 99 Squadron personnel lined-up at Mildenhall in 1938. “CO right in the middle is Wg Cdr ‘Titch’ Walker MC DFC from the First World War; Sqn Ldr McGee Flt Cdr, next right as we look at it; next left is Sqn Ldr Griffiths, or that could be old ‘Pussy’ Catt.”

Painting of Wimpey being shot down by Me.110, which in turn was shot down by another Wimpy, 26 June 1940.

SB – “Who was the gunner who shot the ‘110 down?”

ND – “Jens ‘Morian’ Hansen, a Danish speedway rider. He had his own aircraft before the war, but he was too old for operational flying. He rose to the rank of Sqn Ldr and got the DFC and the George Medal. The Wimpy pilot shot down was at Stalag Luft III with Kirby-Green and Ian Cross, and Jack Grisham. When Jack got shot down he was a Flt Sgt, but he was promoted while he was a POW. The three of them were among the 50 shot.”

SB – “What was the name of those ground crew twins on 99 who you said came up with the name ‘Wimpy’ for the Wellington?”

ND – “Ernie and Les Evans; I joined the squadron in May 39 and they were calling them Wimpies then. They had been on the squadron since 1938.”

END