

David Fellowes

SJB: So this is your crew, obviously. Can you just tell me who they all are?

The wireless operator, Jack Wilson, navigator Dennis Collette, a very good trombone player, my skipper Arthur Whitmarsh, mid-upper gunner Kenneth de la Mer, myself and our bomb aimer Jock Turnbull. That's who they all were; unfortunately, I'm the only one left, although I am in contact with the skipper's daughters. He, like me, went into civil and I'm also in contact with the flight engineer, not here [not in the photo, presumably?], who we picked up in the heavy conversion unit on Halifaxes. I'm in contact with his son, who lives in the States. We talk to each other on Skype. That was the only picture that was taken at the 30 OTU Hickson [? 01:31 or Hixon (Stafford)?] but there is a little story I could tell you. My skipper, Arthur Whitmarsh, we met first of all on a train. He'd finished his advanced flying unit up in the Scottish borders somewhere, where they'd been flying Oxfords with two others, Australian flight sergeants, and they were on their way down to Hickson. Now I met him at Crewe station; I got on the same train because I was going to Hickson and in piled these three flight sergeants. We got chatting and I asked where they came from; I knew it was a big place. He said Sydney and I told him I had an aunt there. She went out after the first World War. I told him the address, which was in a suburb called Marrickville, and he said "Well, that's where we live. What's her name?" So I said Evans and he said "Well, I don't know what to say because my mother and your aunt go to the same chapel in Marrickville". So he said "Well, we're going to have to get crewed up so will you fly with me?" So I said yes and then, you know what it's like at OTUs, you've got to get crewed up. I remembered that chappy from gunnery school. We then looked around for the navigator with the eyebrows, who was a studious-looking laddie, and then we found Dennis Collette and he was fantastic. That Australian wireless operator, he didn't know Arthur but that didn't matter, he fitted in and so did Jock Turnbull and so we formed a crew. That was the idea, we bonded together and stayed together right up to the end of the war. So that was 30 OTU, from July to September '44.

SJB: Do you mind if I take a photograph of that?

Yes, if you can do.

SJB: So after Hickson then?

Well now, what did we do at Hickson?

SJB: OK, what *did* you do at Hikson?

We created mayhem. Well, we started off doing circuits and landings and when our skipper was qualified to go solo, that was it and then of course various different pilots would come with us, screen pilots. We even did a bit of formation flying, high-level bombing, straight and level, we did a lot of gunnery there. The first part of it, of course, was on the ground and the next part was daylight flying. We did 28 hours 55 minutes: we did cross-country, air-to-sea and air-to-air firing, combat manoeuvres, everything really for gearing us up for operations, because that was what it was all about. The Wellington itself we rather liked but another little story about Wellingtons: I think they had about 30 at

Hickson, taking part in raids on enemy targets and they did have Miles Masters, for the fighter feel [? 07:19, Indistinct] , Martinets for pulling the drogue and Hurricanes were also used for that so there was a pretty good selection of aeroplanes there. One day we sat there, ready to take off, and we saw a B-17 come in. Our wireless operator said "That's funny, listen to the radio boys" and *In the mood* was on, Glenn Miller. He got a reprimand, actually, for improper use of the radio. Anyhow, that was the first half of the course and we then went on leave. When we got back, we started on the night flying side of things. We did circuits and landings and all the cross-countries. We then had a special bullseye to Calne [? 08:09 Cologne?]. You wouldn't count it as an operation but it was a hairy one.

SJB: Hairy in what way?

Well, there was flak about, and stuff like that. We did another couple of bullseyes; one was special, but I can't remember what it was about. It got us across to France for five hours or so.

That's all we did there really, but I can remember one little thing about it. It was divided up into flights, obviously, and the flight sergeant in charge of I don't know how many aeroplanes was one of the old-time ground staff. On the ladder going up into the aeroplane he had a mat and if you didn't wipe your feet before going up into the aeroplane he'd have your guts for garters, on the grounds that the Wellington of course, being of geodetic construction, had the canvas sewn on. He maintained that if you went up there in your dirty boots, flying boots obviously, there was only a little tiny gangway going up from the rear door to the front, you could take up grit, dirt and everything else. He said that that got in between the stringers and geodetic construction and it can cause wear and tear and rips. Anyway, if we ever flew in one of *his* aeroplanes, we always wiped our shoes before going up into the aeroplane. But really, when you come to think of it, it's quite true.

After the OTU I went to 1481 Gunnery Flight at Ingham [? 11:15] , which was up the road on the opposite side of the Great North Road from Scampton [? Scampton is next to the N/S road through Lincoln, not the A1] and there was a gunnery flight there, flying Wellingtons and all we used to do were exercises using a camera gun; total flying time three hours.

SJB: OK, September/October '44, OK.

27th September to 2nd October. Then, after that, I can't remember where the rest of my crew were.

SJB: Ah, so which of your crew were there then? Just you?

Just the two gunners. We were being prepared, in actual fact, for going to a squadron at Binbrook, where we did a lot of experimental work on gunnery stuff.[? indistinct: 12:24], AGLT and stuff like that and we were quite an advanced squadron with a lot of the new aids that came up. We used them and tested them because when we left our conversion unit, which was 1656 at Lindholme on Halifaxes, we.....my skipper, being an Australian, got permission to go to an Australian squadron and asked us if we would like to go with him. Well, we'd heard a little story about going to Commonwealth squadrons. One

of the good things was the Commonwealth squadrons' governments, Australia, New Zealand and Canada had told our government that Commonwealth crews should not be put into any old accommodation, like Ladford in the Mud, you know, that kind of thing, they were going to have to put them in proper peacetime stations with proper accommodation, so we were all in favour of that. We went to Binbrook, 460 Sqdn, and we were put into (and we didn't think it was unlucky at the time) No. 13 Airmen's Married Quarters. You had this house to yourself and went to the mess for your food and the recreational side of things but as far as sleeping was concerned, you stayed in No. 13 AMQs. It was good and we didn't mind it being No. 13; we weren't superstitious. When our skipper was commissioned, it did make a difference then because he went to sleep in the Officers' Mess. The other six of us had the house to ourselves. We used to get a coal and coke ration to keep the house warm. I used to share a room with my flight engineer, Arthur Sheppard.

That's about it but I must say about this business of going to Ingham, most of the pilots there were Polish and they were a bit of a mad lot. It was good and I can honestly say I've enjoyed my flying life, from start to finish.

SJB: So after HCU, which was Halifaxes, you went on to Lancs at finishing school?

Lanc finishing school....we got there on the 13th and left there on the 18th [SJB: (looking at log book?) Ah, Lindholme again]. Yes, Lindholme, circuits and bumps generally, for the pilot although I can remember, oh dear, one of these screen instructors said you know you can throw a Lanc around a bit so you're sitting in your turret at one moment, I was looking down at the Earth like this and the next minute I was looking up at the sky, like that. It gave you a lot of confidence in the aeroplane though and, to my mind, it saved my life. Then we went to 460 Sqdn at Binbrook and one of the best things I can tell about there was that we were doing a couple of cross-country and bombing flights alone, one at night time, and then on our first operation, whereas the pilot would normally go as a screen with an experienced crew, it wasn't like that for us. This gentleman here, Gp Capt Edwards VC DSO DFC, the station commander said "I'll take them all together". Word got around that night "You poor buggers – you don't know what you're letting yourselves in for". He was very good actually. We did get shot up, by American flak.

SJB: And this was to..... Freiburg, 7th November.

He was not amused. And neither was our screen navigator. It was, I think, his 50th trip and he was going back to Australia as a screen and Gp Capt Edwards had a habit of getting to the target and going down and having a look. They didn't tell us that before and the navigator said "Well, you're not doing it this time, sir[? 18:40 indistinct] if you do, I'd rather bloody bale out" so we didn't. We carried on and we came back. We then carried on and I got involved with Village Inn and Z-training [? 18:54]. which I think was very, very good. We carried on and on and on.

SJB: You did a full tour there?

Yes. Let me have a look here. flak holes at Ulm, I went to Gelsenkirchen and the bomb site ...GY [? 19:20] .. Village Inn and the RT was all u/s but we went. We saw jet planes over the target. Nuremberg.. when we came back the port outer was u/s on that one. Munich...we had a mid-air collision with another Lancaster; they didn't survive.

SJB: This was over the target or coming off the target?

No, this was on the way to Munich. Just coming up the river Rhine and flying at 14000 ft, in cloud, bumpy, horrible and we decided to get above it. As we were coming out of the top of the cloud, you could see other aircraft had got up there, it was quite bright and another aircraft came up underneath us and stuck his port wing into our fuselage, just aft of the main door. The props mangled up the trailing edge of our starboard wing and ruined the aileron. There was a hole in our aircraft from the trailing edge back to the door and some of the floor disappeared; it's a wonder the mid-upper turret didn't fall through but they did get him out of that afterwards and up the front. I was left down the back and the skipper said to me "Well David, if you fancy it you can bale out" and I said "Not likely. I could still be attacked by fighters. I'll stay". The other aircraft just went down, hit the ground and blew up. We dropped our bombs and went into a spin, then climbed up to 20000 ft again, above the icing level, and flew it back to Manston. A bit of a funny story there. Manston was covered in snow so they couldn't get an aircraft down to pick us up but they told us to get all the secret Village Inn and Z-equipment stuff out of the aeroplane and bring it back with you. The people at Manston gave us a railway warrant to go up to London and then to Binbrook. We hadn't had a shave for a couple of days, we felt scruffy and were still in our flying equipment, because you don't carry anything else, and went into this pub run by a couple of ladies whose husbands were in the services so we had that and then just disappeared on the way up to London Waterloo. [Steve: the foregoing doesn't seem to make much sense but I hope I have heard it correctly] There was an SP there and he tried to stop us and wanted to know what the Devil we were doing. He was going to have us for walking around like this. My skipper gave him a few polite Australian words and soon put him right. We then got back to Binbrook .

SJB: For the record, that was 7 Jan 45 for the collision.

On the 22nd, we did a night cross-country. On the 28th, we went to Stuttgart and had a hard night; combat with a Ju88 over the target and we were hit by heavy and light gunfire. I wrote in afterwards that we got it; the plane was destroyed.

SJB: You saw it coming, did you?

Well, yes and no. We were coming out of the target, we'd dropped our bombs, it was quite bright down below and there were two Lancasters on one side and a Halifax on the other. You had to look out for aircraft coming out of a target because the chances of collision were great. Our wireless operator had his head in the astrodome and had spotted an Fw190 going over at an angle to us so that gave us an idea there could well be something happening. The Ju88 went round the back of the two Lancasters and then lined up on us and we both opened fire at the same time. I can still see bullets whizzing past me.

Anyhow, he hit the fuel tanks, we lost fuel, the mid-upper was hit by metal shrapnel but we flew home and that was it. Another trip done.

SJB: Now can you recall, was he using the upward-firing Schrader...[?].cannon or the front guns?

Oh no, he was using the front guns. Oh no, we would be looking out for him because he would have had to have overtaken us and when you've dropped your bombs and have used half your fuel load your speed's a bit higher. That was on the 28th and on the 2nd we did another one to Wiesbaden. I did a mining trip [? 26:13] one night. Oh, it was horrible. We went to Denmark, mining 10000 ft, and on the way back we were diverted to East Fortune, Edinburgh. We got hit by flak. Where else did we have something happen to us? Hurn [? 26:39 Surely not?] ...searchlights, enemy flak, fighters. Nuremberg again and we had our windscreen shattered but flew home. Daylight raid on Bremen; we were supposed to have had good fighter cover from Mustangs but encountered fighter activity and lost two starboard engines so we made a two-engine landing back at base. And so it went on and on. U-boat pens. We got our old aircraft back from Manston. Berchtesgarden, Exodus [SJB: Oh, POWs] and I did three operational flights on Manna [? 28:14]. Non-operational hours on the squadron was 48, total operational hours 195 and then I went into BOAC. They didn't issue log books so I just went on, and on and on. I've got about six log books. Just look at this for one flight, in 1951.....

A section here describing his non-RAF service as a steward with BOAC, up to Christmas Day 1951.

[31:45] Then I got called up again by the Royal Air Force, because I was on a funny reserve. I left the RAF as a warrant officer and they told me I couldn't be that any more; down to a sergeant again unfortunately and I did a refresher gunnery course up at Leconfield. Then I went down to 206 Sqdn at St. Eval and I was the only regular gunner there. The Shackletons were nice – great big guns on them – 20 mm and I stayed there three and a half years. While I was there I did Radar, Radar/Nav, ASV and all the stuff you do on a Shackleton. Everybody did a bit; it didn't matter what trade you were, you learnt it. Then I went up to Shawbury as a safety pilot on Chipmunks. Up there, I had the chance to go on to either Vampires, Ansons or Chipmunks so I decided on the Chipmunk, a nice little aeroplane. We used to fly around for two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon. The idea was to teach the air traffic control people how to do GCAs and they started on a small aircraft like the Chipmunk. After ten days or so, they then progressed on to the Anson, a twin-engine job and finally to the Vampires. I liked that job very much but I did have one big moan: I logged 600-odd hours on those Chipmunks but the civil authorities would not count those hours towards getting a private pilot's licence because I hadn't been properly trained. That's the way they worked so I was out flying one day and I was called back by the flight commander, Bill Vasseur, and he said "David, you're posted, but I can get you off". I asked where the posting was and he said Bassingbourne [SJB: 231 OCU] Canberras. I asked what I was going to do down there and he told me I was going to start an aircraft recce school. I was a qualified aircraft recognition instructor and a school was needed because the majority of the people out there, at the start of the Suez campaign, hadn't got a clue what aeroplanes they were seeing. They couldn't tell one from the other so myself and another laddie started a school and it went very well. We had all ranks coming through, from air commodores down to lowly pilot officers and it was good fun. Whilst I was

there I got married then, all of a sudden, the station commander called me in and said "We're closing it down now because there's no need for it. You can go and do an admin course and come back as Station Warrant Officer". I said "No sir" and he blew his top. I said "I came into the RAF to fly. If you can't fly me, I'll go elsewhere".

I went down and got a job with Hunting Clan; they'd just got Britannias and a trooping contract, but they had nobody to run their cabin staff so I did.

[37:00] All subsequent material [to 49:19] relates to training cabin crews etc. for civilian airlines.

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