

CONVERSATION WITH GUY SHARP

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Key: GS – 748560 Flight Lieutenant Guy R Sharp, born 1917. Pilot with IX and 70 Sqs and 29 OTU, Wellington. Flew with BOAC post-war for 18 years, retiring at age 60 on 707s. Later flew in Greece.
SB – Steve Bond

GS – “I didn't like the Army, I didn't like the Navy, so I tried to join the RAF. I failed the medical because I was completely unfit. How I eventually got in I shall never know, I was a weedy bank clerk. In the foul weather in '39/'40 we were at ITW at Hastings for eight and a half months, doing an eight week course. So I didn't go solo for about 11 months.”

GS - “I did ITW at St.Leonards-on-Sea; we were in the Marine Court.”

SB - “After ITW where did you go for your flying training?”

GS - “23 E&RFTS Rochester on the Magister, that was before ITW. After ITE I went to 15 EFTS at Carlisle, then on to Cranfield (*14 SFTS*); we did a hundred hours there on Oxfords. We then went up to Lossiemouth where we were a course on 20 OTU, I think we were No.9 course; this was August '40. I finished there in November '40, and then went to Honington. It was a grass airfield, and on my very first op I cocked things up. I selected flap, but I couldn't have put the thing back into the neutral position, so when we took off we had full flap on a wet grass airfield. We were going to Mannheim, which I knew very well because I'd been there before the war in '34/'35, I swapped with a German family to learn the lingo. This was 9 Squadron and we had Wimpey ICs, then we got IIs and in '41 we got the first 4,000 pound Cookies. I never flew a Mk.II, I never got round to it. My two Flight Commanders, Ken Baxter and Squadron Leader Ken Wasse (*DFC*). Both did about four tours and got through the war OK. I was co-pilot (*to Sgt Harry Mills*) nearly all the time.”

“On 22 December 1940 9 Squadron bombed the docks just outside Venice and one of our chaps flew across Switzerland and they had to steer across mountains and in cloud

they overshot Venice by about 200 miles and bombed somewhere near Fiume. Coming back they hit headwinds, they crossed the Swiss frontier in broad daylight. They only saw two fighters, nowhere near them, no-one expected to see a lone Wellington. They debated whether to bail out or crash in the sea, and they had enough height so that when the engines cut with no gas at all, they were over the Channel, and glided down until they saw a field at Pevensey. They put the wheels and flaps down, but they didn't know there was a ditch going across the field. They weren't hurt, and had been in the air for 11 hours and 20 minutes.”

Wellington IC L7799 WS-D Sgt R N Harrison and crew

“But we lost another crew when I was staying just outside Honiley, my girlfriend was seeing the wife of the gunner. You can imagine, Christmas and he didn't make it; they hit the cliffs at Beachy Head” They were all killed; we lost two crews that way”

SB - “This is an interesting one in your log book. 'March 3rd 1941, SCI in conjunction with the army, simulated dropping of mustard gas on troops on beach'.”

GS - “Yes, we were going to use it, if they wanted to walk into it. They'd used it in Eritrea and Abyssinia; luckily it didn't happen. That was the only time we did it, we had to wash everything down afterwards of course; simulated mustard gas.”

“When six of us left Honington, we went to Stradishall – they had concrete runways there – and took off for Malta on 8 April '41. The only one who didn't arrive was Carton de Wiart who was a passenger with the only officer captain. The bastards sabotaged his 'plane in Malta by putting water in the fuel, both engines cut out and they came down in the sea just short of the African coast, he swam ashore and was taken prisoner – they all were. But as he was the senior man in the prison camp, he was released to negotiate the Italian surrender. He was an incredible looking man; a Lieutenant-General, one arm, one eye; had the Victoria Cross.”

Wellington IC W5677, nominally on the strength of 3 Group Training Flight and piloted by Flt Lt J W Bridger, took off from Luqa for Abu Sueir in Egypt on 9 April 1941 and ditched off Apollonia on the North African coast.

“The other famous people we came across were Sqn Ldr Marwood-Elton who ditched the Wimpy in Loch Ness; I flew that Wimpy, so I was invited to see it at Weybridge. I only flew it once, and why he had to ditch it I don't know; he lost a crew member doing that. He bailed out and the others ditched and went ashore in a dinghy.”

SB - “When you were on 9 Squadron did you complete a full tour?”

GS - “No, with this trip to Malta happened, we were supposed to be going out to Greece but it was too late then, this was April '41, so we went to Abu Sueir just outside Cairo. Then we joined 70 Squadron; there were five of us, we all stayed as co-pilots. The following aeroplane was 'Dutch' Holland, a lovely character, I was with him quite a bit; he did two more tours on Pathfinders. But he was the only one I think, Johnny Grimshaw was there; I only did two of the thousand-raids, Essen, we came back for. We did 54 raids without a holiday; 20 with 9 Squadron and the rest

with 70. I was co-pilot, then there was Harry Riddles, and the navigator Ben was a teetotal Scotsman of all things, only drank tea or coffee.”

SB - “Were there any examples in those 54 ops of damage, or any other particular event.”

GS - “I think it was Derna on one of our raids, there was low cloud so we had to be underneath it. All these searchlights came up, just like daylight it was. We were down at 2,000 feet and we had machine-gun bullets going into the bomb-bay, which cut the leads to the Mickey Mouse (*a bombing panel consisting of a clockwork distributor, son named because it was like a cheap Mickey Mouse watch*) which was clockwork; so the bombs were released on top of ones that weren't released. We'd lost our hydraulics too, and we landed at Fuka, the satellite. We got away again and we had the wheels down but of course we couldn't open the bomb doors, and then one engine packed up, so we managed to do a flapless landing at Heliopolis which was very nice, for a three-day holiday. They didn't realise there was a war on there, and when they found we had bombs on board, we were made to taxi to the far end and they eventually managed to lower them.”

“There was a much nearer do when it was the only time we decided we wanted to give the gunners some practice; they were getting fed up with not doing anything. So went out below 2,000 and found machine gun convoys going along. Of course their machine guns were much better than our machine guns, and I was in the astrodome looking out to see if there were any fighters about. Then I don't know how many hundreds of incendiary bullets just missed us by inches; we never did that again.”

“We saw Bombays (*216 Squadron*) dropping off the first Long Range Desert Force and paratroopers; they were all training at Kabrit where we were. On some of our trips we dropped 50,000 pounds of ammo from the bomb-bay. When it came to leaflet raids, the silly-arses had put a hole in the fuselage that was too small for the bundles, we tried for about 20 minutes but couldn't get them out.”

SB - “You say you did the two thousand-raids, you came back for that.”

GS - “That was when we came back to England. We were told that we could choose to go back to England, or go to Addis Ababa with BOAC. Well we didn't know what BOAC was so most of us chose to go back to England. We flew Panam for four days in a Dakota, from Cairo down to the likes of Kano and Kisumu. We had first class accommodation on the Dakota, no seat belts, no food, no water, no seats, we were on the floor; but that was wartime flying. At Lagos we picked up a cross-Channel packet called *Princess Beatrice* a Dutch boat, and we were at sea for a fortnight and we went up to Greenoch. The navigator Ben got the best job of all when we got home, he was killed within a month; in the circuit, not sure if he was shot down.”

“But my flying was so rusty then I was put straight onto instructing and I got sent to long-nosed Blenheims target-towing (*1482 Flight West Raynham*). But The Earl of Bandon (*Air Chief Marshal Percy Bernard*), a lovely character, I told him I wasn't very happy doing this and I was sent off to North Luffenham (*29 OTU*) on Wellingtons again. As I'd done a bit of flying I was quite happy then, and I stayed there for three years from '42 until the end of '44 I think – it was after D-Day; all of

this still on Wimpeys. Bill Reed was at North Luffenham. He was screened, and was a good pilot; of course he was quite mad!”

SB - “I’ve got an op here when you were on 29 OTU, 25 June 1942 Wellington L7869 to Bremen. When you were on OTU and had to fly an op, was the crew all staff?”

GS - “All staff. That’s why they lost so many of them, because the aircraft were old and so that’s why they stopped it.”

SB - “Instructor’s course on 3 FIS at Castle Combe in 1942, on Oxfords.”

GS - “Yes. The Chief Instructor says in my log ‘Your steep turns are very weak’. They always have been!”

“Then I went to ‘Happy’ Honiley (*Signals Flying Unit*); we had a GCA course there. I was one of the guinea-pigs teaching the ground controllers. The only person of note there was Arthur C Clarke, and he was in the next hut to me; we called him the nut-case because he was looking for stars. He was an incredible man; I was always hoping to meet up with him in Sri Lanka, but we never did. At Honiley we had Stirlings and Venturas too. Then I went straight into BOAC and stayed there until I was 55.”

SB - “Just going back to the Wimpey, you mentioned the thousand-bomber raids, where were you then?”

GS - “North Luffenham still, instructing. We had four stations actually, there was North Luffenham, Bitteswell, Bruntingthorpe and Woolfox Lodge. At Woolfox Lodge I had my nearest escape I think. I landed, was only going about five miles an hour, it was thick fog, and at that moment we hit another Wellington. The front turret fell off, the undercarriage collapsed and I could hear the petrol just gushing out onto our hot engines. Why it didn’t catch fire I shall never know; most of them did when they collapsed.”

This occurred on 20 March 1943, Guy was flying Wellington III X3368 ‘N’

SB - “This was a night landing was it?”

GS - “Oh yes, we only had anti-collision lights. This was in ‘43, we never had Chance Lights or anything like that. I wouldn’t have missed him, even if I’d seen him.”

SB - “You mentioned the Wimpey IC and II.”

GS - “Before that we had the one with the dustbin underneath, the I or IA something like that; it didn’t have the front turret.”

SB - “What did you think of the different marks, how did they vary?”

GS - “Well to be honest, they got better; the dustbin of course was never used. The ICs which I flew all the time on 70; that was all we had. But afterwards I flew up to about Mk.IX or X. But you know the Wellington was the only one that could bomb at

38,000 feet? The Mk.V and Mk.VI, they never flew operationally, they were pressurised. I don't know how they got up there because they only had ordinary wings. I don't know why they were never used; Barnes Wallis went on to the Warwick, but they were pretty useless. I only saw them in the factory, never flew in one.”

“I think I did 1,500 hours roughly on Wellingtons, and did 1,850 with the Royal Air Force. I did 20,000 hours plus altogether.”

Continues from this point with details of his post-war flying career.

SB - “Many thanks Guy, that was wonderful.”

END

Did I tell you about 9 Sqn bombing the docks outside Venice on the 22-23 Dec 1940. We carried one 1000lb bomb and extra fuel . The 1c s could not clear the alps when loaded so had to have clear cloudless skies. We lost 2 planes that returned ok to England but with different luck. The first hit the cliffs crossing the english coast and were all killed. The 2nd piloted by Hemmings (I think I have remembered the name wrongly) overshot Venice and bombed somewhere near Fiume. Of cause with the wind behind him on the outbound track it was a very slow return and he left Switzerland just as it was getting light!. Crossing France they saw 2 distant fighters fighters but no attacks or Flak. After 11 hours flight their fuel tanks were empty and the engines cut just before the French coast. They all agreed it was better to ditch than bail out. But the glide was better than expected and nearing the English coast they selected a field and put their wheels and flaps down They had flown for 11hours 20 mins and made a good safe landing. But then their luck ran out They did not see the ditch across their path and wrote off the undercart but no one was hurt