

CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER WELLS

ICKWELL GREEN 21 JANUARY 2009



Key: OW – Wing Commander Oliver Wells OBE. 7 sqn Oakington, Stirling, later Lancaster. Shot down on 7th operation, evaded for 4 months, then POW. Post-war CO 230 Squadron Sunderland, Pembroke Dock. Retired from RAF in 1956.

SB - Steve Bond

SW – Stuart Williams

SB – “I’ve read your story about you being shot down and so on . . . could you just in a nut shell go through it because Stuart hasn’t had a chance to read it, could you just talk us through that event, please.”

OW – “Yes, I’ll try. This was end of August 1943. When I was captain of a Lancaster aircraft, 7 Squadron, Pathfinder Squadron and had a really busy month and had been to Peenemünde a few days before. Knocked the hell out of there I’m glad to say. This was a very short operation to Munchengladbach, which should have been an easy one. But as these things happen we were just setting up to approach the target. When you approach the target you’ve got to stop corkscrewing and fly straight \and level so the poor old bomb aimer can see what he’s doing.”

“As we were just homing in on the target straight and level we suddenly heard a serious of frightful bangs, and a night fighter had got our port wing tanks on fire. They came up underneath; we were more or less blind, the gunners couldn’t see them; a technique like that; the weakest part of the Lancaster really. Anyway, I soon decided there was nothing much to be done and we were burning very fast indeed. So I told the crew to bail out, and I sat at the controls for as long as I could because it takes the rear gunner a bit of time to get out. And when I was fairly happy that everyone was out, I made a plunge for the front escape hatch, which you bail out head first. And as I bailed out, I got caught on something, and I couldn’t get back in and I couldn’t get out, I was halfway out, head down.”

“I remember trying to shake my parachute harness free, thinking that I might be able to just hang on to the harness and pull the rip cord, in a rather desperate attempt, it was either this or I was going to be killed. Next thing I knew, I was on the ground, face down on the ground, with the burning aircraft about 20 yards away I suppose – the wreckage hardly recognisable as an aircraft. And to my amazement, I found – I first thought I was supposed to be dead, what am I doing in this field – I found I could stand up, so I did stand up, and apart from my left arm was more or less out of action I think I had broken my collar bone. Apart from that I could walk, so I walked and heard a motorcycle coming at that stage, and thought it was time I wasn’t here, and walked away.”

“Luckily it was a fine night, and I knew which way to walk because of the Pole Star I could walk west. And both my flying boots came off, and my socks didn’t last very long. And when it started to get daylight, I decided I would hide somewhere and I hid in some trees or something and carried on each night. I holed up in either a haystack or somewhere in the daytime and then as soon as it got dark I carried on heading west. So this went on for about seven days. On the second night, I had to swim a river as I couldn’t find a bridge, so I took my clothes off, and tied them in a bundle, put them on my head and with only one arm working properly, it was slightly awkward and I kicked my way across this river. And I got to the other side and everything was there except my escape rations, which I had been saving up until I was really hungry. They had fallen out into the river; that was very bad news. Cursing and swearing, I got myself dressed and carried on.”

“Eventually after about seven days – I stuck to farm tracks as much as I could, keeping off the roads – I came to a place with a little red light ahead of me and I thought that might be the border with Holland or Belgium. So I hid in the daytime and I emerged the following night, went towards the border and this light and then I got through a very small wire fence and hid again in a spinney. In daylight when I woke up, I found bits of newspaper, which weren’t written in German, they were obviously Dutch. I didn’t know the Dutch language but I knew the sort of look of it. I had a silk map, which I’ve still got, it showed a place called Aix-La-Chapelle. I knew I was near a town, and I thought it should be called Aachen. I can’t remember which way round it was, anyway I didn’t know the other name for it; so I was a bit baffled by that. But by that was sort of a week, and I was extremely hungry. I’d had a few rather green apples and that was about all during that time, But I got water alright from streams so I had managed.”

“When it grew dark I went down to a level crossing, toward a small level crossing keeper's cottage, knocked on the door and said who I was, and they very sportingly took me in, let me wash a bit and gave me quite a lot of food, which I probably ate too fast. When I looked at myself in a mirror, I saw I had a cut right down the side of my face and one blood shot eye, so I looked fairly villainous; it didn’t seem to put them off. The following morning, they were obviously very frightened, they didn’t know what to do with me, so I thought I’d better go and carry on. They kindly gave me an old raincoat, which I put over my battle dress. And a pair of shoes that were a bit too small to do up, didn't do my feet much good either. Then the next evening I went to

another farmhouse where they also gave me food but couldn't really help, so I decided I had to go somewhere a bit more sort of up market that might have contacts with the Belgian underground. I knew I had to head into Belgium; I was not sure quite where the border was between Holland and Belgium, but anyway I must have crossed it."

"There was a village outside Liege called Tilfs I think it was, so I picked on a prosperous looking villa close to the village edge and waited until there was nobody about, and marched up to their front door. I said 'Look, I need help rather badly.' They were a bit alarmed at first, but sent for their daughter's fiancée, who spoke quite good English, he came and interrogated me a bit, and he decided I was who I said I was. So they took me in and gave me a bath and a brandy and a cigar. I thought this has to be better than plodding along. They had contact with an old lady called Mademoiselle Delwaide who looked like a very church-going old lady with lace and black clothes. She was a linchpin in the organisation and got me moved on to Liege. I holed up there; I got a bit ill there, I had jaundice. Just the result from I don't know what, not feeding I suppose. I did get bitten by a dog in that farmhouse too, which probably didn't help. Anyway, the chain got broken, the underground chain, you know, passed on to another. So I had to wait quite a bit."

"Eventually I was moved to Brussels. I was holed up in a flat for a couple of weeks over Christmas in '43/'44 and then I was taken down to the station and handed over to a guide, a chap called Raymond Itterbeek, who is now Chairman of the Comet Association, or was. Unfortunately we were taken to the station by a girl who was dressed up as a school girl, she looked very young and she was dressed up as a school girl, and she and another chap and I. This bloke appeared from somewhere else, he was a Sergeant pilot, and we were handed over to this young guide who took us onto the train. The object of the exercise was to take the train just before the French border to get off and then cross the border there, going round the side as it were, and get on the train again to Paris."

"Just before the border, we were rounded up by some thugs in plain clothes who had followed the school girl. Instead of arresting this girl, they let her carry on with her trade, and followed us onto the train which was a regular thing. And so really we were caught red handed, and there was nothing much we could do really. We were taken to a very nasty prison in Lille; had a horrible month there with the Gestapo being interrogated; not actually beaten up but interrogated. You were only supposed to give your name, rank and number, but as this was five months after I'd been shot down I thought I may as well tell them who my crew were, it can't do any harm. So I did that and they must have checked through the records because shortly after that I was passed onto the Luftwaffe, passing onto another interrogation centre and then Stalag Luft III. That was the end of a sad story."

SB – "So that was, when were you finally rounded up?"

OW – "January '44."

SB – "Right. Then it was Stalag Luft III until when?"

OW – “June ’45. the long march”

SB – “You were involved in the long march?”

OW - “Ours wasn’t as long as some of them were. But we marched for a week in the snow and ice and took as much as we could, we made some sledges out of the so called furniture we had in the camp which were mostly RAF and Red Cross packing cases. Piled whatever we could onto these, pulling it along through the snow, and then the snow evaporated and so we had to carry it after that. And after a week we were loaded onto a cattle truck on a train and taken up to a place called Lückenwalde about 30 miles south of Berlin.”

“Eventually the Russians arrived, and there was absolute chaos. They would behave very oddly because we were told, the Americans heard that we were there and they sent some trucks across from the Elbe to pick us up. The Russians all came out with guns and said 'You're not leaving.' So having survived that lot we said 'Very well' and we got out of the trucks again. The Russians solemnly took a roll call of everyone, we all gave false names anyway, and they provided trucks and took us to the Americans on the Elbe. I think at that time it was all the big stuff with the White Russians who had fought with the Germans, some sort of thing going on about the British would hand over the White Russians and they would hand over us, some political thing. I'd never really be able to prove that, but I think that's what happened. Finally flown back to England.”

SB – “Did you ever come across any of your crew when you were in POW camp?”

OW – “No. The only other officer was in a different part of Stalag Luft III.”

SB – “But they all survived?”

OW – “We all survived, and we all met after the war.”

SB – “What happened to you after you got back to the UK? Were you demobilised fairly shortly after that or did you serve on?”

OW - “I decided I was very keen on flying, I decided I wanted to stay on. Luckily, a friend of mine who was luckier than I was and became a master bomber and I knew very well he was stationed up in 5 Group. His boss was a very old friend of my elder brother who was killed in the war; he was CO of 600 Squadron. And so he sort of wangled a posting for me up there and I returned to flying very quickly, more quickly than I would have done if I had gone through the system.”

SB – “So this was in ’46?”

OW – “’46 yes.”

SB – “What were you flying then?”

OW – “Back on the Lancasters and Mosquitoes at that time.”

SB – “And where was that?”

OW – “Marham. “

SB – “When did your career finally finish?”

OW – “After a couple of years there, I decided I should make a change, so I went to Coastal Command and flew Sunderland flying boats. And got involved in the Berlin Airlift, flying from Hamburg to Berlin; landing on the Havelsee which was a different experience.”

SB – “Which squadron was that when you were on the Sunderlands?”

OW – “230 Squadron”

SB – “Was that Pembroke Dock?”

OW – “Yes. We took a Sunderland into the Pool of London for Battle of Britain Week. One thing you had to watch at Pembroke Dock was the battleships going down the Haven heading for the open sea at night. You couldn't see them and we had a wireless operator in the bow with an Aldis lamp looking out for them.”

SB - “That was 1950?”

OW - “'48. No, '49. After that I went out to Malta for a couple of years lecturing on anti-submarine warfare, working with the Navy. Then to the RAF Staff College for a year, and then posted to Whitehall to be one of the secretaries on the Chief of Staff's Committee for a couple years. I was then promoted to Wing Commander and then my father fell ill in the family business, so I had to apply to leave the Air Force.”

SB - “What year did you actually leave the Air Force?”

OW - “1956.”

SB - “Can we go back to 7 Squadron for a bit? That was I think you said, your 9th op when you were shot down. I read in your story that on one of your earlier ops you had an attack from a Ju.88, which I think your gunner successfully fought off. Can you say anything about that?”

OW - “Yes that's right. I think that was a training flight over France, we were dropping leaflets, you know, to the French resistance.”

SB - “A Nickel raid.”

OW - “Nickel, that's right, yes. He was a sprog pilot as well I think!”

SB - "When did you join the Air Force?"

OW - "I actually signed on at the end of '40 and joined up in probably January '41."

SB - "I presume you went through the ACRC route?"

OW - "ITW, then EFTS. Because my name began with a W, instead of training abroad I was trained in this country, which made a lot of difference in a lot of ways. It all happened more quickly. When I finished training, I was rated above average and was sent to be an instructor at Marshall's at Cambridge on Tiger Moths. Trying to choose people who would be able to fly or not, it was called grading."

"They decided they were very short of night fighter pilots, they would see if they could train people to fly at night from ab initio. So we took them out to Caxton Gibbet, which was a relief landing ground near Cambridge, and just instructed them only in the dark. They soloed after about 20 hours, and eventually became quite good pilots, but when they started flying in daylight they didn't know where they were, because they'd flown entirely on beacons." *(Laughter)*

"I had a black student, sitting in the back, and the only way I knew he was still there was when he smiled! *(Laughter)* We had a mirror attached to the strut. We decided it would have been much easier if we had tricycle undercarriages landing in the dark, but we didn't of course in those days."

SB - "Whereabouts did your instructing come? Did it come straight after you finished EFTS?"

OW - "Yes."

SB - "So where did you do EFTS?"

OW - "I went to SFTS at Cranwell, flew Oxfords."

SB - "Ah, so you did your twin conversion first."

OW - "Yes."

SB - "Right, so after your instructing at Marshall's, what came after that?"

OW - "Refresher courses on larger aeroplanes, and then over to 7 Squadron."

SB - "Where did you do HCU?"

OW - "Stradishall, on Stirlings. I started on Stirlings at 7 Squadron, very soon after we converted to Lancs."

SB - "So did you do any ops on Stirlings?"

OW – “Yes, I did one or two as a second pilot.”

SB – “This is probably a silly question but what did you think of the Stirling compared with the Lanc?”

OW – “They wouldn’t go high enough, that was the trouble. In some ways they were a more solid aeroplane. They had seven tanks in each wing, so there was less chance of getting a really bad fire. But just below...the heavy flak, which was not very nice.”

SB - “Those nine ops that you did, were there any daylights in there?”

OW - “No, they were all nights.”

SB - “Any particular long-duration ones, like Berlin or anywhere like that?”

OW - “Went to Milan once; over the Alps and back again; in a Lanc.”

SB - “Quite along flight I imagine?”

OW - “Eight and a half hours.”

SB – (*Looking at Oliver's log book*) “I see you didn't totally go over to Lancasters, you did two or three Lancaster trips, then a Stirling...”

OW - “Yes. July/August '43 was the changeover.”

SB - “I see when you went to Milan, when a Ju.88 attacked six times. And you said 'believed hit on the last attack.'”

OW - “Right, I'd forgotten that.”

SB - “I've read who shot you down. He didn't last much longer actually.”

OW - “Oh good.”

SB - “He was actually killed four weeks later in a mid-air collision.”

“Oh Booker, you did your EFTS at Booker.”

OW - “That's right. My elder brother Jimmy, who was killed in 600 Squadron, he was tried to get into the RAF before the war, but they turned him down on medical grounds. But he got together with two friends and they started up a training school at Booker before the war. Just as they were getting going the war started, and they were taken over by the Government.”

SB - “What did you think of the Lancaster then?”

OW - "A very fine aeroplane really."

SB - "The Lancaster and the Halifax both had their very strong devotees didn't they."

OW - "The aircraft I really liked was the Mosquito."

SB - "I see you've had a few trips in Lincolns as well; that was at CBE at Marham again."

OW - "Marham, yes. Went on a trip to Australia and new Zealand; tried to set up a record but lost time over the Timor Sea."

SB - "Was the Lincoln particularly different from the Lancaster in any way?"

OW - "Not really, no."

SB - "After you left the Air Force in '56, did you do any other flying?"

OW - "I was Aviation Trustee for the Shuttleworth Collection. My elder brother Jimmy was a great friend of Richard Shuttleworth and he borrowed the Hermes Moth and flew it over to our home in Bedfordshire, landed in a field across the river, and took myself and my twin sister up for our first flights at the age of 12. Some 60 years later I took my sister up to celebrate, in the same aircraft 60 years later."

SB - "Have you flown any of the other aeroplanes at Shuttleworth?"

OW - "A lot of them yes, from the Bristol Fighter upwards."

SB - "That's tremendous Oliver, thanks very much indeed."

END

Sadly, Oliver died on 4th June 2012 at the age of 90