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9/1/1994

Dear Sir,

Re 621 Squadron, R.A.F.

The enclosures re the early months of 621 Sqdn. R.A.F. may be of interest for your archives.

621 Sqdn. was formed in late Summer 1943 to carry out Coastal Command General Reconnaissance work over the East African area of the Indian Ocean to counter the expected increase in the enemy submarine activity consequent upon the reopening of the Mediterranean and Red Sea route for use by Allied Shipping destined for the oilfields of the Persian Gulf, India and the Far Eastern Theatre of War.

The various crews drafted to form the squadron flew their aircraft (Wellington Mk. XIII) out from U.K. to East Africa and operated originally from Mombasa (Port Reitz) and Mogadishu in Somalia, with major servicing facilities being supplied by the R.A.F. component at Eastleigh Airport, Nairobi. With the increased shipping through the Arabian Sea, the Squadron Main Base was moved after 4 months to Aden, and used as detachments (from which most of the flying was done) two small airfields in the Horn of Africa, Bender Kassim and Scusciuban, and an airstrip on the island of Socotra in the Indian Ocean.

I was a navigator on one of the crews forming the squadron (captain, P/O R.H. Mitchell). After O.T.U. and Ferry Training Unit in U.K. we flew our aircraft out to East Africa and a short account of this is enclosed. Eric Bailey was a wireless operator in P/O Grover's Crew, one of the first to arrive in Mombasa. He now lives in Alderley Edge and we are in close touch. Unfortunately he suffered a stroke some years ago, so when an air historian contacted us about affairs in which we had been involved, I wrote two of the enclosed items on his behalf.

I was flying as relief navigator with another crew on a search for survivors in March 1944, and also I was navigating with my own crew on 2/5/44 when we carried out a successful attack on a German submarine off the Horn of Africa (destroying its ability to submerge) for which the Captain and Front Gunner were decorated.

This and the resulting action by other aircraft of 621 and 8 Sqdns. has been included in the official history of the R.A.F. 1939-45, by Hilary St. George Saunders and I enclose a photocopy of the appropriate paragraphs from this publication.

Also enclosed is an excerpt from a short history of 621 Sqdn. which appeared in 'Aviation News' April 1986, and I enclose personal accounts of the items marked in red on the photocopy in which Eric Bailey was involved (P/O Grover's Crew); and the search for survivors in March and the initial attack on U 852 on 2/5/44 in which I was involved.

H.B. It is necessary to note that Operational Area of Aden H.Q. extended to 51° 30' East, and this was, for practical purposes, the western half of the Indian Ocean. Thus the term 'Aden' and 'Gulf of Aden' area must be understood to cover this area.

Best wishes for your project,

Yours truly,

*Oliver Gomersal*

*Details to amplify this page follow,*

Extracts from Log Book of Oliver Gomersal, NAV/B.A. 621 Sqdn.

6 (C) O.T.U. SILLOTH, CUMBERLAND.

DATE		Hours Flown	
		DAY	NIGHT
12/7/43	Splash Firing	2.00	
14/7/43	Air to Air Firing - Turrets	2.00	
15/7/43	Circuits & Landings - Night		1.00
16/7/43	Bombing from 3000 ft.	1.45	
"	" " 4000 ft.	1.00	
17/7/43	Low Level Bombing - Pilot	1.15	
"	" " " "	1.00	
18/7/43	C & L - Night		2.00
19/7/43	Base to Crosby, DARKY		1.30
20/7/43	Nav. Exercise D.R. 1A & BABS	4.20	
21/7/43	" " D.R. 2 & QGH	9.00	
23/7/43	Low Level Bombing - Bomb Aimer	1.20	
27/7/43	Nav. D.R.3 & Square Search	7.15	
28/7/43	D.R.5, Rockall-Recalled to Base	4.20	
29/7/43	D.R. 7 Irish Sea		4.15
30/7/43	Periscope Bombing - Pilot	.50	
31/7/43	Fighter Affiliation	.45	
"	Airtest & Photographs	1.00	
2/8/43	D.R. 8 St. Kilda, QGH		5.40
4/8/43	Photographs	.45	

303 F.T.U. TALBENNY, SOUTH WALES.

8/9/43	Wellington HZ 956 - Airtest	.30	
"	Local Flying	1.45	
"	Petrol Consumption Test	1.40	
9/9/43	Nav. 7 Atlantic	6.30	
10/9/43	Airtest	.30	
12/9/43	Nav. 8 Operational	4.40	3.00

FLIGHT OUT TO JOIN 621 SQDN., EAST AFRICA

15/9/43	Talbenny to Hurn	1.45	
17/9/43	Hurn - Rabat (Morocco)	3.30	5.00
23/9/43	Rabat - Castel Benito, (Tripoli)	7.15	
24/9/43	Castel Benito - Cairo West	7.50	
10/10/43	Cairo West - Khartoum	5.15	
12/10/43	Khartoum - Eastleigh, Nairobi	8.15	
19/10/43	Nairobi - Port Reitz, Mombasa	1.40	
20/10/43	Port Reitz - Mogadishu	3.55	

Notes to amplify the extracts from the flying log.

No. 6 COASTAL OPERATIONAL TRAINING UNIT, SILLOTH, CUMBERLAND.

O.T.U. was the unit where we came together as a crew and learnt to operate in (in our case) a Wellington, the crew being made up of:-

First Pilot (Captain of the aircraft)

Second Pilot

Navigator/Bomb Aimer

3 Wireless/Operator, Air Gunners/A.S.V. Operators.

The Pilot (Captain) had first of all to be familiarised with the Wellington and passed as safe to take up a crew.

The 2nd. Pilot took turn and turn about with the captain once we were in the air, but for some reason they were never taught to take off or land the aircraft. They did half an operational tour and then went on a course to become captains of their own aircraft.

All Coastal Command Navigators were qualified in Navigation, Bomb Aiming and Air Gunnery, and in my case the great difference from training was having to keep the navigational plot going on trips of anything up to 9 hours instead of the 2½ hrs. during training flights. (And of course no opportunity to map read over the sea!)

The W/Op. A.G./ A.S.V. Operators swapped jobs either by arrangement or as detailed by the captain. The A.S.V. (Air to Surface Vessels) was, by modern standards, an elementary form of Radar (highly secret at the time) which by sending out impulses could detect return blips on a cathode ray tube. One could use either front aerials with a spread of 30 degrees or so, or side aerials with a spread of 20°. Its range and accuracy varied according to the height of the aircraft and the weather. When working well (it could have off days) it could detect a ship at 15 to 20 miles, and land, if it was a rocky coast, at 30 to 40 miles. A low flat coast did not show up satisfactorily and a rough sea would mix up the return signal.

As we were not allowed for security reasons to enter fine details in our log books of the exercises and flights the following notes will supply some further explanation.

1943

- 12/7 Splash Firing. Firing into the sea from both turrets. Air Gunners and self took part in this.
- 14/7 Air to Air Firing. As before but presumably at a drogue towed by another aircraft. (Sounds dangerous for the other A/C)
- 16/7 Bombing - 3000'. An exercise both for me as bomb aimer and for the pilot to concentrate on flying straight and level. Likewise from 4000'.
- 17/7 Low Level Bombing, Pilot. An exercise for the pilot to bomb by eye from a height of 50 to 100 ft.
- 18/7 More night circuits and landings.
- 19/7 Crosby and DARKY. This was a night exercise of an emergency procedure whereby an aircraft which was uncertain of its position could ask for 'DARKY' help over the R/T. Any R.A.F. station within R/T range (only a few miles) would reply which would give the aircraft some idea of the area in which it was flying.

1943

20/7

Dead Reckoning Navigation Exercise 1A ending with Blind Approach Beam System. 'BABS' was basically to tune in to a radio beam which indicated on a dial by means of pointers whether the aircraft was flying left of, right of, or along the beam, and so be channelled into a runway in bad weather.

21/7

D.R. 2 and QGH. A Nav. exercise via N. Ireland out over the Atlantic then back to Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides. I remember it being a lovely sunny afternoon, and after flying 300 miles or so into the Atlantic our satisfaction at seeing the lighthouse on Monarch Island pure white in the sunlight. We flew down to Barra Head and then set course for the Mull of Galloway and Silloth. As far as I remember QGH is a controlled descent through cloud, being talked down by flying control.

23/7

Low Level Bombing. For my benefit - Probably from about 500' at something in the sea.

27/7

D.R. 3 and SQUARE Search. A square search is a square pattern based on twice the visibility distance (bearing in mind the size of the object) and increasing the distance every 2 legs. This keeps the navigator on his toes to work out the courses to fly, allowing for wind, to keep the legs square.

28/7

D.R.5 Rockall - Recalled to Base. This was in many ways the climax of the daylight navigational exercises as the object was to fly from the N. Irish coast to Rockall, a large rock sticking out of the sea about 300 miles N.W. of Ireland (which of course gives its name to the sea area). If there was no sign of it on E.T.A. one was expected to carry out a square search. When we set off the pilot said "We should be O.K. Ollie as we've got a good aircraft and plenty of petrol." Shortly after setting off we flew through some bad weather over Mull of Galloway and the Irish coast before setting course for Rockall from Inistrahul. After another 50 miles the weather cleared (we had flown through a cold front) and in the bright sunshine we were confident that we should achieve our objective. However when we were about 100 miles into the Atlantic we were recalled to base because they were concerned about our having to find Silloth in the heavy cloud and rain which, had we done the whole trip, was expected to cover the airfield at the time of our return. This was at the time rather galling as we were then in clear sunshine, but in retrospect I appreciate the fact that they were trying to safeguard a partly trained crew. That is why the leading question at Silloth was "Did you find Rockall?" and only last year (1992) Johnny Ryall, on a visit from Vancouver, showed me the photo of it that one of his crew took with a Kodak. Still one up!

29/7/43

D.R. 7 This was a night exercise all round the Irish Sea. I think the wireless packed up on this trip and we were under cloud so no astro shots could be taken. When the Navigation Instructor checked through my log next day I recall that he wrote on it "You appear to have stooged round the Irish Sea guessing winds", which I think was a reasonable assessment of the situation.

1943

30/7

Periscope bombing - Pilot. As depth charges had to be dropped from 50' or 60' above water this was an exercise for the pilot to practise low flying and gauging the point of release on a target towed by a boat. I can't recall whether anything was actually dropped or whether it was assessed photographically but it was this exercise which was the basis of the successful dropping of depth charges nine months later when it was for real.

31/7

Fighter Affiliation. With Staff Pilot. An exercise where we were 'attacked' by a fighter aircraft, and in turn the pilots or myself observed from the astrodome and told the pilot when to turn into the attack, i.e. in order to give the fighter the maximum deflection shot. No doubt our gunners were ranging onto the fighter with their turrets.

31/7

Airtest and Photographs. Using a standard R.A.F. hand held camera (as opposed to one fixed in the fuselage).

2/8

D.R. 8 and QGH. A night flight to St. Kilda and a practise descent through cloud upon return.

4/8

Photographs. This completed the course at Silloth.

### 303 F.T.U. (Ferry Training Unit) TALBENNY, HAVERFORD WEST, S. WALES

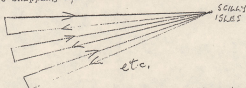
The purpose of this course was to familiarise ourselves with the aircraft we should fly out to East Africa. The pilot P/O Roy Mitchell and one of the wireless operators went to Kemble (near Cirencester) to pick up a brand new Wellington, HZ 956 which we always considered to be "our" aircraft although we never flew in it after Dec. 1943, a flight right across the horn of Africa from Mogadishu to Aden. Doubtless the other crews felt the same about the aircraft they flew out.

9/9

A flight into the Atlantic south of Ireland - Nav 7

12/9

Nav.8 (Operational) This was an operation where about six aircraft flew at the same time from the Scilly Isles a series of diverging courses to build up a fan pattern about 350 miles seaward covering the Western Approaches south of Ireland. The general idea being that we should fly out in darkness and fly the homeward leg in daylight to give an up to date report on the shipping and weather in the area covered.



As far as I remember the only item of interest we saw was a Hospital Ship which looked quite stately in the dark, highly floodlit to illuminate the large red crosses on its sides.

This was the end of our activities at Talbenny, and officially completed our training.

The next thing was to join 621 Sqdn., and for all those who flew to East Africa was an important and unforgettable end to our apprenticeship.