THE RAF CAREER
OF
TOM WEBSTER

December 2011

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Certificate of Service and Release
Dated 12.12.46

1	**Service in the Ranks (1569455)**	**06.05.42-20.04.44**
	Mobilised	**07.12.42**
2	**Date and Nature of Commission (164936):**	
	Emergency Commission, General Duties Branch Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR)	**21.04.44**
3	**Ranks held and date of Promotion:**	
	Pilot officer on probation	**21.04.44**
	Confirmed in appointment and promoted Flying Officer (war substantive)	**21.10.44**
	Promoted Flight Lieutenant (war substantive)	**21.04.46**
4	**Date of Release**	**19.11.46**
5	**Last Day of Service**	**18.02.47**

This is an attempt, over 60 years after the event, to fill in details and comment as objectively as possible on my time in the RAF.

In July 1939, aged 15, I started work as a Junior Clerk in the Glasgow City Collector's Office and, along with several contemporaries, decided when it drew near to the time for call up that air crew was the most attractive option for war service. I volunteered as a navigator and had to attend at a medical centre in Edinburgh for the very strict air crew medical. We had all been for warned of this and a particular worry was the task of blowing a tube of mercury quite hard and holding ones breath for a minute. I had, for weeks, been practising holding my breath before the event and a minute seemed like an eternity! I got through this particular test by a tiny margin, as towards the end my chest was heaving in and out involuntarily and the doctor who was checking my heart rate was calling on me to "Hold on!" I'm sure he was quite lenient in the end. Other tests of hand and eye coordination and night vision were interesting but much less stressful.

Anyway, I was successful, was sent a fine RAFVR badge and warned not to lose it as it had to be returned when I was mobilised. I had to join the Air Cadets and turn up once a week at a school in Coplaw Street, for instruction in drill, navigation, etc. In

retrospect a considerable waste of time. The navigation instructor was one of the Maths teachers from my old Alma Mater, Queen's Park Secondary School. I can't recall his name.

My brother, Bernard was an RAF regular, a sergeant fitter rigger who had served for years before the war on HMS Glorious in the Med, based in Malta. He advised me that I should have signed on for a pilot's training and thereby kept my fate more in my own hands. I noted his advice and took it when the opportunity occurred.

Aircrew Reception Centre (ACRC) London

In December I was ordered to report to Aircrew Reception Centre (ACRC – known of course as Arsey Tarsey) at Lord's Cricket ground in London. I was sent a rail travel warrant and asked to bring a small case in which to return my civvies.

On the 7th, I arrived early at Euston on an overnight train from Glasgow and took the tube to near Lords. I was too early and had to walk around the area until it was time to report.

We were lined up by a sergeant and marched to a large garage to collect our kit. As I remember:

1 kitbag
3 pairs socks
3 sets underwear
3 shirts
6 collars
1 tie
2 pairs shoes
1 great coat
1 pair gloves
2 jackets and trousers
1 Housewife (needle, thread etc)
1 button stick
2 forage caps
1 white flash to go in cap ,indicating trainee air crew
1 service gas mask
1 pair sand shoes
2 sports singlets
1 pair sports shorts
1 set irons (knife, fork, spoon)

Eventually we were taken to our billet in a commandeered block of luxury flats facing Regent's Park. I shared a room with fellow trainee, Woods. Our rank was LAC (Leading Aircraftsman).

We immediately had to start cleaning buttons and polishing shoes. Meals were in the Regent's Park Zoo Restaurant. It was dark when we paraded to march to breakfast and a trainee at the rear carried a red hurricane lamp. The food was reasonable and on coming out we had to rinse our own irons in very hot water containing some disinfectant to prevent trench mouth (or so rumour had it).

At one of the first parades at Lords in uniform we were instructed in the use of service gas masks. The haversack had to be pulled up on the chest by shortening the strap and retained there by passing a cord round the back and through a D ring on the haversack. Slowness in achieving this led to the first example of the traditional crude comment from the NCO, "If it had hair on it, you'd find it soon enough!"

We were paraded after a few days and some of us volunteered for dishwashing duties at some WREN function – anything to ease the tedium. We were fed well and somehow a rumour got around that WREN “AN OTHER” had issued invitations to a Christmas party. Several of us got there, after some navigational problems, only to be smartly shown the door.

Soon after at a parade, swimmers were asked to take a pace forward, which I did, and about 8 of us were sent to a pig farm near Markyate. Those who hadn’t stepped forward had a course of swimming lessons. On the pig farm one of us served as cook, I and a mate collected wood and boiled swill to feed the pigs. It was a pretty wet period and the heavy soil made walking tricky. We were very pleased to be recalled for posting to No 1 ITW (Initial Training Wing) at Babbacombe in Devon. At an inspection parade before leaving ACRC it was decided my greatcoat was too short and I had to exchange it at the clothing store. So all my weeks of button polishing were wasted and I had to start again.

No 1 Initial Training Wing (ITW)

We left London by an overnight train, non sleeper, on January 15th 1943, not knowing our destination for security reasons. Early on the morning of the 16th we saw spectacular old red sandstone cliffs as the train ran along the edge of the coast. The colours were brilliant, especially in contrast to the bright green of the fields. It was near Dawlish in Devon and our train journey ended in Torquay where we were paraded and marched to No 1 Initial Training Wing (ITW) at Babbacombe. I was one of 50 forming D flight, No 2 Squadron (see photograph). We were billeted in a commandeered hotel, Foxlands, which still flourishes today. We were two or more to a room and the hotel also held the Wing NAAFI. We took meals and had some lectures in the HQ building, another hotel close by, Trecarn, also still flourishing. The CO was a F/LT Duckett but our main mentor was a Welsh ex professional footballer, Sgt Lewis, assisted by Cpl Stitchbury. Sgt Lewis was a real bundle of energy, responsible for knocking us into shape and for our general service “esprit de corps”. He took us for drill and PE and marched us about to our various lectures.

This was our first taste of real drill and we started with the basics. We fell in, tallest to the right in a single row, dressed and numbered, and with a few crafty commands we ended up in 3 ranks with tall trainees at either end, sloping down to the shorties in the middle. It took a day or two to get the arrangement to Sgt Lewis’s satisfaction but thereafter we paraded and marched in the same positions. We always marched to attention, swinging our arms well back, then forwards to shoulder level with the thumbs pointing straight forward. I was eventually chosen as flight leader, marching a pace ahead of the rest of the flight, although I was not quite the tallest.

We had reveille at about 7, rushed to get a good place in the queue for breakfast, then paraded and marched off to classes or whatever. We had lectures in a school about ¼ mile away – navigation, meteorology, engines, theory of flight, aircraft recognition and other lectures elsewhere in armaments, Morse code and signals.

We had arrived in Devon at the time of the Baedeker raids when FW 190s flew low over the Channel to avoid radar, then attacked holiday resorts with machine guns and the one 500lb bomb each would carry. The raids happened without warning and we

new comers were at first amazed at the alacrity with which more seasoned personnel dived for cover at the sound of aero engines. We soon got the message though, and whole classes would slide under tables and away from windows.

There were a few additional aspects of training- clay-pigeon shooting on the cliffs to the SE of the village (which was really a suburb of Torquay). This range was close to a Bofors gun set up, placed to attack the FW190s, and we occasionally saw and heard them at target practice, firing at drogues towed by, I think, an Anson.

We also attended the swimming pool in Torquay, and had to jump into the pool from the 12ft diving board wearing an inflated Mae West – swimmers and non swimmers alike.

As part of PE we had a cross country run, about 4 miles, the first many of us had ever done, and the subsequent cramps and smell of horse linament remain a clear memory.

We were worked hard, both physically and mentally, with little or no free time for the first ¾ of the course. We spent evenings revising or having a cuppa and a bun in the NAAFI. On Sundays there were church parades, but I had responded to a notice recruiting hockey players and this became my welcome alternative. Sport is the key to many doors in the Services and we had, I think, a Wing Commander who was besotted with hockey. I had dabbled at school, though never in a team. My trial was successful and I ended playing right half regularly for the Wing. The Wing Commander played centre forward, and was a very robust player who might well have been sent off occasionally but for his rank. I remember nothing about our opponents or the games, only that I escaped some chores and parades for the sake of the God of Sport.

I occasionally took part in small bore (.22") rifle shooting on an evening. We each chipped in a bob or two to a kitty and I won it on one occasion.

We had a fire watching rota, and I was on duty one night when there was a raid on Torquay by bombers, probably JU 88s. I could see the flares dropped by the bombers and some tracer from our guns. I heard the heavier ack-ack and the explosion of bombs. But it was all well away from Babbacombe and I was never again called on for such duty.

There was a little cinema at the SE end of Babbacombe and we attended occasionally for instructional films, a variety show and the odd film entertainment. I remember only one – HG Wells' "War of the Worlds."

D flight consisted mostly of young men like myself. A fair proportion, perhaps 25%, were university undergraduates. A few had been regulars in the RAF and had volunteered to train for air crew. This had the advantage that if they obtained their wings they automatically received a war substantive commission, which besides giving them better pay and conditions, improved their chances of getting a permanent commission, or alternatively, allowed them to get out of the RAF at the end of the war. They were older than the rest of the trainees, and found it difficult to keep up with the physical demands of the training.

Towards the end of our ITW training, we had a little more time off and at a dance I met Doris Meade. She was a student at a teachers training college evacuated from Bromley in Kent. We had left wing views in common and a liking for the countryside. It was a short platonic relationship. We did walk the coastal path to Teignmouth through the spectacular red cliffs, and on almost the last Sunday of the course, when we had our one and only full day off, Doris and I went to Hay Tor near Widdecombe. It was a sunny day with clear views for miles. We saw an FW190 raid on Babbacombe, about 16 miles away and one plane blew up in mid air, hit by Bofors gun fire before it had dropped its bomb. Other planes did their usual strafing and bombing and a Sunday school at Babbacombe was hit, with some casualties. An account of the raid can be found at:

http://www.devonheritage.org/Places/Torquay/CasualtiesofthebombingofSt.Marychurch.htm

It turned out to be common during training that there was always a delay before moving on to the next stage. We spent this 'spare' time doing designated walks in groups of six or so between villages on the fringes of Dartmoor, and keeping a navigator's log. Training wise not much use, but we got to like the cider in the small locals where we stopped for lunch. In retrospect, half of the training was a considerable waste of time. The subjects which contributed usefully were navigation, aircraft recognition and meteorology. Signals, armaments and engines were of interest but not necessary for functioning as a navigator or a pilot.

I had changed my original choice and towards the end of ITW opted for pilot training, as did a few others. My closest buddies, particularly Roy Sidebotham, continued training as navigators and our ways parted.

On 10th June 1943 I left Babbacombe for grading school at Sywell, just north of a line between Northhampton and Wellingborough.

Grading School, Sywell

I arrived at Sywell on 10th June 1943 and spent a month being assessed as a potential pilot. It was my first contact with aircraft and very exciting. The station had a public road running through it and at times we had to do guard duty at the check points. There were several large hangers with a wonderful smell of dope, petrol and oil. In one, Avro Manchesters were being assembled but we never did get aboard one.

Our flying field was grass, with hangers for the Tiger Moths and we were issued with flying suits, boots, gloves and helmets with goggles and a Gosport tube for inter-com. We were instructed in the instrument layout and in the starting procedures. For flying we were issued with a parachute which had to be returned after the flight. It became the cushion in the cockpit seat and was very comfortable. Trainees sat in the front seat with the instructor behind. Visibility forward was poor, so that safe taxiing involved zig zagging while holding the stick fully back to keep the tail on the ground.

Flights lasted about an hour, and we worked through the syllabus – level flight at cruising air speed, take off, landing, turns at constant height and steep turns. The Tiger Moth was prone to bounce on landing if a full three point position was not achieved. If the bounce was too great you had to open the throttle and go round again.

If the wind was strong, taxiing down wind was difficult as the plane tended to turn into the wind.

Fortunately it was a fine English summer and flying conditions were reasonably good, if a bit bumpy. One lesson hammered into us was that if an engine failed on the take off **never** try to turn back, but land straight ahead. The instructors tested us on this by cutting the switches at about 500 feet and noting our response. We watched a plane do this one day and the engine failed to re start so the instructor landed quite correctly straight ahead. It was a field of wheat and the plane flipped over and ended upside down with pupil and instructor hanging in their straps. The second part of the lesson was **never** to pull the pin of the harness in this situation or you might break your neck. They did scramble out safely with care.

After I had flown 10 hours I was passed over to a Wing Commander for my solo check. I started up, taxied and took off safely and did a left hand circuit as usual at 1000 feet. The approach was on reduced power, the throttle being closed just at touch down. I bounced, opened up and went round again. The same thing happened on my second attempt and the Wing Commander slammed the throttle shut so I just had to land. The engine stalled and he asked me if I knew how to swing the prop. "Of course!" I had to get out and do the necessary, then taxi back to the flight office. I was sure that I had blown it but he got out and told me to move to the back seat and get on with it.

It may be correct that you never forget the thrill of your first solo, but the actual details are very hazy. It was marvellous to be airborne knowing that all was dependent on your own technique and skill. I do know I made a good landing first time and have been grateful to that Wing Commander's trust (or gamble?) ever since.

I ended Grading School having flown 12 hours 5 minutes dual and 10 minutes solo!! It was to be over two months before I again climbed into a cockpit.

Air Crew Dispersal Centre (ACDC) Manchester

During the war, a total number of 133,516 airmen in training passed through ACDC Manchester.

After two weeks leave, I arrived at Air Crew Dispersal Centre, Heaton Park, Manchester. I was billeted out with a civilian family but had to report for parade each day before doing a few fatigues in the camp or skiving off down town via a convenient tunnel where a stream passed under the wall of the estate. I was there from 23rd July until 15th August.

We left on 15th after an assembly in a blister hanger where we were addressed by a senior officer and a padre. The journey was overnight by a war time train, fairly grubby and uncomfortable and we had no idea at first of our destination. Just after it got light, the train stopped and I looked out to see Pollokshaws Baths – I was only a mile from home! We carried on to Greenock and were transported by ferry to the *Aquitania*, lying at anchor at the tail of the bank. Close up her sides were surprisingly crude with thick overlapping plates and large rivet heads. I was allocated half of a double cabin on about the fifth deck and after an excellent meal we sailed down the

Clyde reaching the end of the Mull of Kintyre as it began to get dusk. We had been escorted by a Spitfire for the last part and as the ship opened up to full speed he did a low level roll across the bows and flew off (to Machrihanish?)

The voyage took about a week. The food was excellent as she was provisioned in the USA and it was a treat to see pure white bread again, to say nothing of fruit and steaks! The cabin was quite stuffy, as the port holes had to be kept closed after dark and after one night I transferred to an open air bunk on an outer deck and was fine from then on. We had one stormy day and quite a proportion of the passengers were ill so I did very well for extra rations! We zig-zagged at intervals as we had no escort and relied on the changes of course and the speed, approaching 30 knots, to avoid U boats. We reached New York on the afternoon of the 24th August and were docked by tugs. As we drew into the berth, the surface of the water was thick with condoms, which caused a lot of favourable comment from the crowds lining the rails, especially when they became a very solid looking mass as the ship squeezed close to the pier.

We transferred to a train and headed for Canada. At one point we ran alongside a commuter train in the dark and greetings were exchanged along with sweets and cigarettes. There was of course no black out and it was good to see all the lights again.

ACDC Monkton

We arrived at this large transit camp on the evening of 24th August. Most of the three weeks spent there seemed to be taken up with the issue of additional kit, medical inspections, inoculations and so on. I particularly remember wondering why my leg length, measured when sitting upright on the floor, was so important.

No 34 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS), Assiniboia, Saskatchewan

We left Monkton by train on 14th September. It was a corridor train and the seats in each compartment made up into 4 bunks at night. Washrooms and toilets were at the end of the carriage and we ate in a dining car. The whole set up was a bit old fashioned, though comfortable enough. The train seemed to dawdle along but it was an interesting journey until we reached the prairies. It took four days to reach Moose Jaw in Saskatchewan when we were transferred to a local train for a short journey south to Assiniboia, then a bus to the Elementary Flying School (EFTS). These stations were part of fairly big number of such units, part of the Commonwealth Air Training Scheme. This was planned to allow the training of air crew away from the dangers of training in Britain. As far as I know, the stations were built to a standard plan. There was a triangular set of runways with associated taxi strips and hangers, and a large two storey H block with double tier bunks in the arms of the H and showers and toilets in the cross bar. This would accommodate 8 flights.

The station was situated about 40 miles south of Moose Jaw and about the same distance north of the 49th parallel of latitude, the border with the USA. It was surrounded by almost level prairies stretching for miles, divided into sections of 1 mile square or sub-divisions, with boundaries running N-S and E-W. The small town of Assiniboia was 8 miles south of the station and it, along with every hamlet, had its prominent grain elevator(s).

Our course at the EFTS was very intensive. We started flying in Fairchild Cornell planes within two days of arrival and during our two month stay we flew almost every day. In addition we had lectures in the usual subjects, mainly navigation, theory of flight, aircraft recognition, signals, armaments and meteorology.

The Cornell was a low wing monoplane with a closed cockpit, not unlike the later British Chipmunk. During the first week a great emphasis was placed on how to recover from a spin as well as other safety procedures (action in the event of fire or engine failure etc).

Again it was a great thrill to go solo after 5 ¾ hours dual and from then on almost half of the hours flown were solo. We progressed through instrument flying to navigation exercises, aerobatics, low flying, night flying and, towards the end of the course, managed a solo night circuit (15 minutes).

The first solo navigation was a flight of just over 2 hours on 15th October from base – almost south to Fife Lake, then north-west to Flintoft and on to Meyronne, then east back to base. The navigation system was simple. On either side of the track lines on the map we drew drift lines at 5° and 10° of drift. The course flown had been calculated using the projected wind speed and direction and within five or ten minutes we were able to check our position with a fix from a feature on the ground, and therefore know our drift. By slightly over correcting, we came back on track and maintained this in the same way throughout. We had a nav. calculator strapped to one knee and could with a bit of trouble recalculate the wind, but it was easier just to correct the drift.

The weather was almost always excellent for flying with good visibility and no turbulence. Two areas near the station were designated for low flying and forced landings. The latter were practiced without actually touching down, but the recommendation was to be aware of wind direction and possible landing sites whenever we were airborne. An ideal not easily achieved.

My main instructor was a Welshman, Sgt Jones. About two thirds of the way through the course we had to give our preference for operational flying and like most of my contemporaries I opted for fighters. When Sgt Jones heard of my choice he remarked that the only air crew with long beards were in Coastal Command. He in retrospect had inside information.

Social activity was very limited at the station. We could bus into Assiniboia on a Saturday night and I remember nothing about the town except the bus journeys which were crowded and rowdy.

I ended the course having flown nearly 70 hours and being graded as an average proficiency pilot.

The Cornell was a kind plane to fly, with no bad characteristics. There were no accidents during my course except one poor trainee who managed to release his parachute when climbing up the wing to get into the cockpit. The slipstream did the rest.

We had no leave and travelled to our next station on 27/28th November 1943.

No. 35 Service Flying Training School (SFTS) North Battleford
28th November 1943- 24 February 1944

This station was the same pattern as the EFTS, a triangle of runways and 2 story H block accommodation. I chummed up with two other trainees from Glasgow – John Muir and Bill Wallace, both taller than I, and we thereafter socialised as a trio.

We were introduced almost immediately to the Airspeed Oxford – a wood and fabric 2 engined low wing monoplane with mostly very benign characteristics.

OXFORD II Armstrong Siddley Cheetah X engines
Inertial started – hand cranked

OXFORD V Pratt & Whitney Wasp Junior engines
Started with external generator

Take Off	65	mph
Climb	110	mph
Cruise	120+	mph
Approach	85	mph

By this time the whole area was snow covered and the procedure was to roll the runways after any new snowfall, so that landings were made on a good hard but slippery surface. A major snag was that the school was equipped with the 2 marks of Oxford, the engines of which rotated in opposite directions and it was necessary to apply the correct rudder on landing to counteract a tendency to swing when the throttles were closed on touch-down. Getting it wrong on the snow resulted in a spectacular ground loop, and it was a good incentive to remember which mark was being flown.

We started flying 4 days after arrival and flew almost every day thereafter, often twice in the same day, once we had gone solo. The instrument panel was a bit daunting after the Cornell but we very quickly got used to it. I went solo after 4 hours 5 minutes and from then on about half of my time was solo.

In between we attended Ground Instruction School (GIS) for lectures in Navigation, Aircraft recognition and some minor subjects. We also had regular visits to the gym, playing a rather vigorous game of indoor rugby. In addition, we three joined the basketball team, and played in a sort of league in the evenings. We won most of our matches and got $1 each for winning one of the finals. Through one of the charities providing for the troops, we three were introduced to the Blower family in North Battleford town, who treated us very hospitably during our time there. We also went on leave at the end of December to Winnipeg and for the final weekend of that leave John and I visited relatives of his at Prince Albert. We flew from North Battleford to Prince Albert in a civil Beechcraft airplane, the flight taking about an hour. Bill was one day late returning on his own from Winnipeg and got 14 days confined to camp. He had to report each morning to the Guardroom at 0600 hours in full kit. I logged an

early call which he was not allowed to do, to wake him up in time for his parade, so I suffered a little for his misdemeanour as well.

My main instructor was Sgt. Scarlett, prone to shouting down the Gosport tube when I did something wrong, but he did his job well. He was particularly keen that I should have my right hand on the throttles as we came into land in case I had to overshoot. He also got me to land on the main wheels in the early part of the course, without attempting three pointers, something which was questioned by an officer who took me for my first assessment test.

I particularly enjoyed the cross country navigation trips, low flying, and the freedom to practice take offs and landings solo at a satellite field on grass.

Rumours that the Station was to close proved correct and we three were down to transfer to Moose Jaw. This closure was because there were now too many aircrew in training for operational needs. My last flight with Sgt Scarlett was a low level cross country with low cloud and poor visibility, as it was snowing moderately. All went well and the grain silos appeared on time as we reached our turning points. Sgt Scarlett then let me have a go at one of his pursuits. This was low flying and trying to follow the bends on one of the local roads. It meant using flap and more throttle and doing tight turns. It was an enjoyable 20 minutes.

Next day I had three solo flights. On one I climbed to 15000 ft before the effects of altitude began to tell, laboured breathing and a slight headache.

I had a letter from Roy Sidebottom on 3rd February to say he was now a Sgt Navigator. I had not seen him since Babbacombe. It was to be eleven more weeks before I got my wings.

My last flight at North Battleford was on 16th February by which time I had flown 42.40 hours dual and 29.55 solo as well as several hours on the Link Trainer, an indoor flight simulator for instrument flying.

That night there was a Farewell Dance on the Station to which John and I took Kath and Jean Blower and we danced until 2am.

The next week was taken up with preparations for leaving and sitting final exams. My results were:

Navigation	184/200
Meteorology	88/100
Airmanship	154/200
Armaments	161/200
Aircraft Recognition	95/100
Signals (3 exams)	50/50, 50/50, 79/100

Average 86.1%

No 32 Service Flying Training School, Moose Jaw
24th February – 21st April 1944

We caught the 8am bus into town to catch the first train to Moose Jaw. Mr Blower saw us off and we had an hour at Saskatoon changing trains, arriving Moose Jaw at 8pm. F/O Bain, officer in charge, phoned the Station for transport and we reached the camp at 9.30pm to find no arrangements had been made for our arrival. The chaos was eventually sorted out and we got to bed at 11.30pm. A rather inauspicious start.

Next day we completed our arrival list and had a welcoming talk from Flight Commander Falconer. The Station was equipped only with Mark II Oxfords and over the next few weeks it was very cold so Falconer devised a system for getting planes airborne. Two at a time were started up by a hand cranked inertial starter while still in the hanger, which was warmed. Definitely not an officially permitted procedure. All hands then opened the doors and the planes were pushed out with a pilot aboard, who kept the engines running. Doors closed and the procedure repeated.

Flying started two days after our arrival and continued as a mixture of dual instruction, solo exercises and mutual trips (i.e. with another trainee). There was a preponderance of simulated bombing runs with ink lines drawn on the Perspex to indicate when to turn in on the heading for the ‘bomb run.’ I couldn’t see any use for this, but it did provide a lot of flying hours which improved familiarity with the plane.

Two members of the course which we joined, Alf Dyer and Ken Dixon, had been with me at ITW in Babbacombe and they warned us about the strict discipline practised by the Discip. Corporal Carling. Most days Revielle was at 6am, for a short period it was 5.30am to allow flying to catch up with the schedule, and woe betide any caught in bed later than this.

One cadet was wheeling around an Oxford main wheel, as punishment for landing with his wheels up. He was not barred from leaving the camp provided he took the wheel with him. He never did.

Nine of the dual trips during the course were to practice flying on instruments and doing a standard beam approach. The Station was equipped with a Radio Range Transmitter. This send out a sequence of Morse code ‘A’s (dot dash) in two roughly opposite quadrants and Ns (dash dot) in the other two. The quadrants overlapped slightly to give 4 narrow beams where the As and Ns combined into a continuous note. Flying accurately in the beam towards the runway, two vertical transmitters were crossed which gave a different loud note and lit up a lamp on the instrument panel. The aim was to cross these at height suitable for landing. We were confined to finding and flying the beam.

I had my first crack at night flying the Oxford and thoroughly enjoyed it. We were warned repeatedly to rely on our instruments and not to be deceived by lights outside the plane. It was surprisingly easy to misinterpret the plane’s attitude from stars or lights on the ground when the horizon was not visible. I went solo after two hours and eventually did several night cross countries.
On 17th March several of us were doing solo night circuits and bumps. I had finished my spell and was in the mess for late supper when all the Station lights went out. A

Welsh colleague on his final approach had closed the throttles momentarily to check that the warning horn (wheels not down) didn't sound and when he opened up again showers of sparks came from one engine. He closed it down and tried to make a single engine landing and got too low, cutting the power cables to the camp. He was lucky that the runway was lit with paraffin flares; he opened up the 'duff' engine and came down unscathed. The Sergeant's Mess were having a party that night and he was congratulated on his action. Romance bloomed!

Earlier that week when I and another cadet had just landed, a plane did an overshoot. His port engine cut and the plane rolled over and crashed upside down. It happened very quickly with no time to take corrective action. This was the only time there had been a fatality during training.

I occasionally did a mutual trip with John or Bill. We flew down to the US border and also climbed to 15000 feet as a relief from the 'bombing.'

Saturday evenings were spent down town, going to the cinema or a local dance and nearly always ending up in the Exchange restaurant where the delicious steaks overhung the plate. I met Betty Barr at a dance towards the end of our course and we corresponded for a while after. She worked in the office of the local laundry and some months later wrote to me that the dreadful Cpl Carling had been arrested and court martialled for theft. We had had to parcel our laundry up each week and collect it cleaned from a wooden hut with a small window. Carling used to call out the price, tear off the invoice and pass us the parcel. He had been adding on and pocketing a percentage and was discovered only when one cadet, short of a collar had gone to the laundry direct and had seen the copy invoice. It was discovered that Carling had a flat and a car and a girlfriend down town. He may still be in the glass house.

Late in March we began to get our Wings Check. I had mine on 29th with a Canadian of Scottish descent, Flt. Lt. Roland from the Central Flying School. The test covered all aspects of the flying we had been taught and we knew that at one point an engine would be switched off and we would have to do everything required for an emergency landing, except for the final touch down.

In the middle of a steep turn, I saw the examiner's hand go out to the switches, and the few seconds warning of 'engine failure' were very useful. I circled down to a field I had been keeping my eye on and approached up wind at an appropriate height. The engine was restarted at 500 feet and we headed home for a reasonably good landing.

Next day we were asked for our preferences for the next part of our training, as it turned out, a waste of nervous energy. I put in for Single Engine Fighters or (in my ignorance) Bomber Command. John opted for General Reconnaissance (Coastal Command) and Bill for Medium Bombers.

On 18 April a postings list was put up. Bill and I for General Reconnaissance, John for Flying Instructors Course! No one had failed the course. I had come out on top, with my proficiency as a pilot rated above average.

Next day we were issued with Sergeant's chevrons to sew on out best blue and a mess party was held that evening.

On 20th April Cpl Carling took us for a Wing's Parade rehearsal and he again shouted the orders for the real thing next day. It was a very smart turn out and we were each spoken to by the Commanding Officer and presented with our wings. It was a good feeling to receive them and to have been successful so far in our RAF career. We all looked forward to getting to a Squadron as soon as possible. The grapevine had it that the top five cadets would go to Operational Training Unit (OTU) in the Bahamas to train on Liberators for Coastal Command. John and I were both commissioned. Bill was happy enough, he said, as a Sergeant Pilot.

After three days leave, spent locally, we went our separate ways though Bill and I met up again at GR School on separate courses.

No 1 General Reconnaissance School, Summerside, Prince Edward Island
29th April – 8th July 1944

On 26th April, after 3 days leave, goodbyes were said to fellow cadets and Bill and I for some reason got separate trains to the east. Betty was there to see me off at 8.40am – a rather sad parting.

As an Officer, I now travelled first class and had been provided with a white armband to wear prior to getting my new uniform. It was the usual, rather slow journey with changes at Winnipeg, Montreal and St. John. I had chummed up with a fellow pilot, newly commissioned, Alf Foreman. He had been a Sergeant in charge of a Barrage Balloon section manned by WAAF. A great ladies man as it turned out, and I was surprised he had opted to train for aircrew.

We reached Summerside on 29th after crossing on the ferry from the mainland.

The Station was a couple of miles from the town and it turned out to have a very different approach to training than Moose Jaw. There was a very sensible concentration on the technical side and a complete absence of 'bull'. No checking in or out and no need for late passes. This applied to NCOs as well as to Officers. Accommodation and messes were excellent, as was the food.

There had been a large number of new arrivals, more than could be accepted immediately for a course which consisted of 25 trainees. Alf and I got 7 days leave and opted to stay on the Station. We were given part time jobs to do, mostly checking inventories, but we had plenty of time to enjoy swimming from the wonderful beaches to the north or sampling the entertainment in Summerside.

We had been given a fairly generous clothing allowance and I ordered my new uniform, plus accessories and a set of civvies at a good department store in the town.

Our course started on 8th May with a talk from the Chief Instructor followed by a screening of the film 'Coastal Command'. I immediately thought back to Sgt Jones' remarks at EFTS!

We studied eleven subjects in a combination of lectures, exercises and flying. The latter, involved 15 flights of about 3 hours each in Anson Vs, mostly over the Bay of Fundy, (12 by day and 3 by night). These were flown by staff pilots and carried 4

trainees, each doing the navigating. One flight was a practice reconnaissance over Halifax Harbour where we had to note the shipping and related activities.

It was a very intensive course and we were glad of the opportunities for other leisure activities on an island noted as a fine holiday destination. There were town and Station dances, swimming and boating as well as some good restaurants when we wanted to eat off Station.

Bill arrived after our course had started and we did not see a lot of each other, as we ate in different messes and were kept pretty busy. He did borrow my civvies a few times when he had a date down town and they were always returned in immaculate order.

The course finished on the 5th July. I came second and, with a few others including Alf, was bound for the Bahamas.

We left Summerside on 8th July after I had said goodbye to Bill and to a Pilot Officer Navigator, Bob Cochrane who had turned up unexpectedly on a later course. He had been a colleague with Glasgow Corporation for several years. We arrived at 31PD Moncton after a 6 ½ hour journey.

31 PD Moncton NB
8th July – 10th August 1944

After getting settled in at this transit camp, we were told on 10th July that we had to attend a week's Officer School. This was a very potted version of what we might have learned at Cranwell in peace time. It dealt with King's regulations – Service Law and Admin., writing of confidential reports, discipline and generally how to behave as an Officer. For example, not to carry parcels in public and avoid any close fraternisation with other ranks. Very much a class thing which got up my nose.

The Officer's mess here was as good as any I encountered. General menus were 4 star plus the contents of a long table across the middle of the room laden with every conceivable cold meat, salad and sweet. I thought I had become accustomed to high living but this was on a different scale.

After a week at Officer's School, there was a delay of several weeks before our next effective posting. We left Moncton on 10th August for another transit camp at Lachine near Montreal.

No 1 Y Depot Lachine
21 August – 17th September 1944

Alf and I had 10 days leave in New York and I spent some time visiting relatives of John Muir at Wallingford in Connecticut. During the month attached at Lachine we lived in a flat in Central Montreal and a few of us had a few days at a small hotel in the Laurentian Mountains to the north run by two French Canadian brothers.

We left Montreal on 17th September for the Bahamas after a break of five weeks in which the only training we had done was one week at Officer's School.

No. 111 Operational Training Unit NASSAU
20th September – 27th December 1944

The journey to Nassau took two days by train to Miami, and a further day by boat. Nassau is on New Providence Island, 150 miles from Miami and I can hardly think of a more pleasant site for an RAF base. We were soon settled into our billets at Oakes Field, one of the aerodromes on the island, close to Nassau, where we would spend two months flying North American B52 Mitchells. We were issued with very fine quality US military summer wear – khaki drill trousers, tunics and shirts and the most comfortable brown shoes I have ever worn. Extra pairs could be bought for £1 a pair.

There was a very fine Officer's Club in Nasssau with a bar and a swimming pool. Beer was the most expensive drink. A rum and coke cost 3 pence. We felt we were going to live the life of Riley.

The aim of the course was to assemble and train a total of, I think, twelve crews able to fly the Consolidated B24 Liberator on Coastal Command operations.

There were two groups of pilots, one composed of ex second pilots from Squadrons, and in our case two ex- Instructors who had put in for operations. These were expected to become Captains, and they set about choosing crew members. The second group, of which I was one, were pilots straight from SFTS, who were destined to become second pilots.

Most of the rest of potential crew members – navigators, wireless operators/air gunners and engineers were from earlier training courses, a few had Squadron experience.

It was evident from the start that this was a very intensive course. Lectures were a continuation of subjects we had studied at GR School, with the addition of bombing. There was a planetarium for taking astro shots with a bubble sextant. This had a clockwork mechanism which ran for one minute and averaged out the results – this to take into account of any movement of the sextant, something which was unavoidable when airborne. A bombing simulator had a screen showing a low level bombing run on a ship. The button had to be pressed at the optimum time for the release of a stick of bombs. The accuracy or otherwise was recorded.

I found all this, when combined with flying, a much more powerful and complex aircraft, quite a strain, and I used to tumble into bed at night and fall asleep instantly.

Fortunately we had a break at weekends and were able to take advantage of the wonderfully relaxing fare available – Officer's Club, fine restaurants and especially swimming on Hog and Paradise Islands. These were reached by Hog Island freighters with glass bottoms giving views of the sub tropical sea life.

The OTU was divided into 3 Squadrons and we spent about a month in each.

No. 1 Squadron

Flying began on 2nd October. In this Squadron all pilots received the same training, which was to learn to fly the Mitchell. This was a quantum leap for me - a tricycle undercarriage and 2 Wright Cyclone engines of 1850hp with very large propellers which nearly reached the ground as I found out when I taxied too close to a hurricane lamp and destroyed it. It was a delight to fly but very noisy and the effects of this lasted several hours after any flight. The training took a familiar pattern – familiarisation with all the instruments and controls, circuits and bumps, local flying, flying on one engine and two short navigation trips. Early on I was corrected for approaching with one hand on the throttles – something which had been drummed into me by Sgt Scarlett at North Battleford. The Mitchell could not be handled like an Oxford. Two hands on the controls were required. All bar two of the last three flights were done without crew, and for some reason flying times were logged as ‘dual’ if under instruction and as a ‘second pilot’ if flying with another trainee, even though no instructor was aboard. I flew 13 flights under instruction, two of which were at night and 9 with another trainee as second pilot, 3 of which were at night. I had gone ‘solo’ after 7 hours 15 minutes.

During this first month, one of the trainees who had been an Instructor pulled out of the course. It had been a long time since he had studied navigation, meteorology etc and he found the going too hard.

Until I began to write this account, I hadn’t realised that I never flew in the right hand, 2nd pilot seat throughout the whole course. With the work load at the time I hadn’t queried this but just followed Daily Routine Orders (DROs) which gave the day’s flying schedule. In retrospect it is odd that no senior officer discussed this with me or gave me any explanation.

Two of the last three flights were navigation exercises without an instructor, one by day and the other by night., and I had a crew of a navigator and 3 WOP/AGs (wireless operator/air gunners) as well as a fellow trainee doing second pilot.

Total hours flown in No 1 Squadron were:

Day	7hr 15 mins dual	21hr 40 mins ‘second pilot’
Night	2hr 15 mins dual	12 hr ‘second pilot’

No. 2 Squadron

The month in this Squadron was spent learning the arts of war – mostly bombing and gunnery with additional navigation and practice patrols.

All the flights were done with a crew, mostly the same with which I had flown towards the end of the time with No 1 Squadron.

Navigator:	P/O Harrow
2nd Pilot:	Sgt Ross
3 WOP/AGs:	from a group of four – Sgts Bradley, Beales, Young and McCreary

For bombing there was a target of poles set up in shallow water, roughly in the shape of a submarine. The attacks were made at low level, diving down to 50 feet and releasing a stick of 12 ½ lb practice bombs. The approach was made at an angle of about 30° to the line of the 'submarine' and I had to judge the moment to release the bombs to straddle it. A smaller number of attacks were practised dropping a single bomb. The results of both methods were recorded by a mirror camera.

Air firing was done from the mid- upper turret from two .5 inch Browning machine guns. We all had a go at this in turn as the plane banked around a target. It was thunderously noisy and as I was wearing shorts, I got somewhat burned by the cascade of hot cartridge cases on my knees. But it was very satisfying to see the damaging effect of the powerful guns.

Early in the month the remaining ex Instructor trainee flew into the sea on a practice bombing run, killing all aboard, including my friend Alf Foreman who was his 2nd pilot. A tragic error of judgement.

About the middle of the month there was a hurricane warning and a standard procedure was put into action to fly all the aircraft, including the Liberators, to Florida. I was assigned one of the Mitchells, and had been issued with some US dollars, when the hurricane changed course and we were disappointingly stood down.

I flew 3 flights under instruction and 10 on my own with Don Ross as 2nd Pilot, 3 of which were at night. The last flight on November 21st was a Crew Test under instruction and the final part of it was to go through the procedures prior to ditching. One of the responsibilities of the second Pilot was to release the upper escape hatch. He had been warned to point to the handle but not to touch it as it was hair trigger. He forgot, did touch it and it flew off, leaving a howling gale blowing round the cockpit. The instructor removed himself into the calm of the nose position and stayed there until we reached base. I wondered if the sea bed was littered with escape hatches.

Total hours flown in No2 Squadron were:
Day 9hr dual 25hr 20mins 'second pilot'
Night nil dual 9 hr 25 mins 'second pilot'

No. 3 Squadron

This squadron was based at Windsor Field, named after the Duke who was Governor of the Bahamas. It was situated about 10 miles west of Oakes Field and we were moved into accommodation there. It was now time for moving up another dimension, to learn to fly the Consolidated B24 Liberator. This was the 4 engined long range bomber which had been used by Coastal Command so effectively to close the gap in the North Atlantic in the war against the U-Boat. Most of the techniques taught on the course were based on this anti-submarine background.

The Liberator was powered by 4 Pratt and Whitney Twin Wasp engines of 1200 h.p. and had a range of 2200 miles.

It had a number of unusual features:-

1. The Davis wing, a high aspect ratio (span/width) wing spanning 110 feet. It was thicker than usual which provided plenty of space for petrol tanks, thus its long range.
2. The engines had turbo superchargers driven by the exhaust and the pressure produced (boost) was controlled electronically.
3. Bomb doors were similar in design to a roll top desk.
4. There was such a demand for electrical power to operate many of the mechanical functions of the plane that an Auxiliary Power Unit (APU) (a small petrol driven generator) was installed just forward of the bomb bay. This had to be run until the main engines were fired up.

It was a good plane to fly, naturally not as nimble as the Mitchell, and heavier on the controls, but it was very stable in flight and very reliable.

Flying began on 27th November and I had a crew of 9:

Navigator: P/O Harrow
Second Pilot: Sgt Ross (RCAF)
Six WOP/AG's: Usually Sgts. Bradley, Young, McCreary, Williams, Holder and Read,
Flight Engineer Sgt Devine

It was now obvious that I had taken over the place of one of the ex instructors and was headed for a role as Captain. Nothing had been said directly to me, and I just carried on as detailed in Daily Routine Orders.

The flying schedule was, as usual, intensive. Procedures were more complicated than with the Mitchell and 5 flights were fitted in to the first three days, a total of 5 hours 55 minutes before I went 'solo' and did my first circuit without an instructor. Thereafter we flew mostly twice a day, excepting weekends. It was a mixture of dual and solo with programmes to exercise all the crew, mostly in anti-shipping techniques- turret manipulation, air firing, photography, low flying, bombing, evasive action, radar homing and fighter affiliation.

Low level radar homing over the sea was done keeping a green light lit on a radio altimeter set at 50 feet. Dropping below this lit up a red light, rising above it, a yellow. It was advisable to trim the plane so that it required a slight forward pressure on the control columns. Any wandering of the mind, though unlikely, meant the plane would climb higher.

Navigational fixes were a rarity in Coastal Command and navigation was almost entirely by Dead Reckoning (DR). Every hour a small smoke float was dropped and sighted by the rear gunner who then read off the drift on a scale on the turret roof. The plane was then turned 60° and flown in that direction for 3 minutes while the drift was again determined with a second smoke float. It was then turned 120° in the opposite direction and the process repeated before turning back on the original course. This 3 drift wind was used by the Navigator to adjust the compass course the pilot had to fly to maintain the required track. The efficiency of the whole business required the plane to be flown at a steady speed, direction and altitude.

I had a number of crew changes during the course, ending up with 3 Canadian Pilot Officers and the following crew:
Navigator: P/O Steel (RCAF)
Second Pilot: Sgt Ross (RCAF)
Six WOP/AGs: P/Os Johnson (RCAF), MacDonald (RCAF), Sgts Bradley, Young, Morrison and Burrows
Flight Engineer: Sgt Devine

I had no part in this new crew selection, but they did form a very good working team and were all very efficient at their jobs. I think they felt the same about me, though I never did ask them how they felt about having a Captain with no Squadron experience.

The final test was on 20th December when we had to do a dummy anti-submarine patrol which lasted 8 hours. We had to fly a dog leg of over 300 miles, drop a large smoke float, circle and attack it with a live depth charge, then circle again to photograph the result. It was almost impossible to be sure we could spot the exact place of the explosion, but we had been warned not to return without a photograph so the beam gunners took a guess and the result was accepted. The explosion itself, of course, had been caught by the mirror camera. Another dog leg of 400 miles got us safely home, the last few hours in the dark.

We had our last flight to end the course. This was a Leigh Light radar homing at night on a small ship. A few planes had been modified to carry an army searchlight under the starboard wing so that submarines could be attached at night when they were usually surfaced. A clutch of batteries was added to the plane's load, necessary to power the arc. The approach was made in complete darkness at 50 feet guided by the radar operator. At a range of about a mile the arc was struck and a blinding light illuminated the ship. I had been warned never to be tempted to look up, but to keep flying on instruments and be guided on the run in by the Navigator. It was a nerve racking experience but we did manage to home in and pass over the ship without any aggressive action being taken.

Total hours flown in No.3 Squadron were:

Day	15hr 10mins dual	18hr 20mins 'second pilot'
Night	4hr 30mins dual	6hr 45mins 'second pilot'

We had a glorious celebration after the course ended with an excellent meal in Nassau and plenty of booze. We then had to get ready to leave this superb station and travel over Hogmanay to be in Montreal again by 1st January.

No. 45 Group, Dorval, Montreal
1st January – 10th February 1945

We had left sub-tropical Nassau on the 27th of December and arrived by train in frozen Montreal on New Years day. Tropical khaki had been exchanged for temperate blues, with scarves, gloves and greatcoats. Winter in Canada is very different from that in the UK. Temperatures were often well below freezing, but the air was dryer and it often felt, deceptively, not unpleasant. It was possible to get frost nipped ears or

nose without being aware of it. The flesh became waxy white, and I was warned of this once by a passer-by and had to go indoors and do a spot of vigorous rubbing.

We again had accommodation in a civilian flat near the centre of Montreal. This was arranged through a Services Club. Many kind citizens had made unused flats available for servicemen.

A generous transit allowance was added to our pay, and as we were there for nearly seven weeks, we were able to take advantage of all the facilities of a big city and to have another short trip to the same hotel in the Laurentian Mountains. I was the only one to have any additional training during this time. On the 6th of February, I did a short flight at Dorval – a dual check in preparation for the flight to the UK. On the 9th of February I had another check, this time in a Hudson, to practice radio range flying. Although the test was easy, it did not include the radio procedures for contacting the ground station as you passed over it, an omission which caused some concern when we used the ranges in earnest.

On the 11th of February, we all had to report to Dorval with our kit, to pick up a brand new Liberator ready to fly to the UK. We were briefed to fly the southern route across the Atlantic, and we had a staff wireless operator, familiar with the specialised procedures used, as a temporary crew member. It was a very cold morning with complete cloud cover with a base of about 2000ft. Our destination that day was Elizabeth City in North Carolina. We were to fly almost due south, to pick up the coast near New York, and onward to Elizabeth City using a number of radio ranges as we went.

Soon after take off we were in cloud, climbing towards our desired altitude of 8000ft. The plane was trimmed and the automatic pilot engaged. While a check has to be kept on all the instruments, the most vital are the three registering air speed, direction and altitude, and these are scanned frequently. Less than half an hour into the flight, I noticed the air speed dropping off rapidly. I immediately disconnected the elevators from the automatic pilot and stuck the nose down. It was quickly apparent that we were gaining a lot of speed but the registered air speed continued to fall. I levelled the plane out using the artificial horizon and realised we were suffering from icing. Air speed is measured by the pitot head, an open ended tube pointing forward. The pressure induced gives a measure of the speed when compared with the static air pressure, which is measured through slots in an outer tube. The plane had an internal static head and when I switched over to this we got our airspeed back. We were lucky that the icing had only after affected the slits in the static head. I also switched on a pivot head heater and in a few minutes all was back to normal.

We were soon out of the cloud and enjoyed a blue sky flight down the coast. Bill Steel kept his navigators log and gave any necessary alterations in course, but in addition I had to use several radio ranges. This was successful except we failed to contact the ground stations, but they seemed to put up with our ignorance.

The flight took just over 4 hours. As we were taxiing in to our stance the Control Tower got us confused with another aircraft which had landed just after us. His instructions to turn right or left at the next intersection caused a few minutes of

confusion but eventually we were berthed successfully. We spent the night there and the aircraft was serviced and refuelled.

Next day we flew to Bermuda in just over 3 hours and after a meal and refuelling took off for Lagos in the Azores. After an hour it was dark so we didn't see much of mid Atlantic. The flight took 10 ½ hours and we saw a magnificent dawn. We had been provided with a huge cardboard box full of US chocolate bars and cartons of fruit juice and we managed to consume about a third. We spent two nights there, and then took off on 15th February for the final leg to Prestwick. It was a blue sky day and we flew at 10000 ft looking forward to our first sight of Europe. We did not discover immediately that our large cardboard box of chocolate goodies had been nicked by the ground crew and replaced with bread, margarine and jam! It was wonderful to fly up the Clyde estuary and to find that the landing circuit took us over Arran and all the hills I had climbed in 1940.

No. 7 PRC Harrogate
15th February – 5th March 1945
No. 9 PDC London
6th March – 9 March 1945

We had had a very friendly reception after landing at Prestwick, and were assigned nominally to a Personnel Reception Centre (PRC) at Harrogate. We were all given leave and I didn't see the RAF crew members again for three weeks. The three Canadians came home with me to Glasgow for a couple of days then made their own arrangements to see something of war time Britain.

We were briefly transferred to a Personnel Dispersal Centre (PDC), I think, in London as arrangements were made for us to fly out to India. We flew from an aerodrome near Southampton on the night of 9th March. It was a Transport Command Dakota and we could see nothing as we flew to North Africa. At one point we were sure the pilot had climbed well above 10000ft as we became short of breath, not having an oxygen supply. We landed next morning near Tripoli, refuelled and flew on to Cairo, where we were billeted in a hotel.

We had two days of sightseeing, doing the tourist round, riding on a camel, climbing the tallest pyramid and viewing the treasures found in Tutankhamen's tomb.

On March 11th we took off in an Empire Flying Boat, a very luxurious form of transport landing at El Tessa, Habbaniyah and Basra where we spent the night. Next day we flew on to Babrien, Sharjib and Jiwani ending up at Karachi.

No.9 TC Karachi
13th March – 21st March 1945

During our week here we had to begin to adapt to a huge cultural shock, seeing life in India for the first time.

But we still had to get on with our service duties and this involved getting kitted out in tropical gear and preparations for the next stage of our journey.

This was by train which took 3 days to reach Bombay, the first stage making a huge detour across the Sind Desert. During the second night, while stopped at a station, we were run into by another train. We at first thought it was a bit of heavy handed shunting but it was very much worse. The engine of the train which hit us had buried itself in the rear carriage and by the time we reached there, a British Army Warrant Officer and some of his men were pulling out the dead and injured from the carriage. We did what we could to help for nearly an hour until recalled to our train. The shattered carriage was decoupled and we carried on. No emergency services had arrived by this time, and later we came up against the anti British Campaign when the accident was reported in the national press and praise was given to the Canadian soldiers who helped.

From Bombay we travelled by bus to Poona.

No. 3 RFU Poona
24th March – 4th April 1945

Yet another wait in a transit camp before a final train journey to Ceylon.

No. 160 Squadron, Mynneriya
10th April – 17 April 1945

We thought this was journey's end, but were put out when we discovered that we should have gone to the 203 Squadron. The week spent here was another tourist opportunity and we visited wonderful old reservoirs (tanks), temples and a huge statue of a reclining Buddha carve out of the solid rock.

We were at last flown by Liberator up to the northern tip of Ceylon, a flight of one hour.

No. 203 Squadron Kankesanturai (KKS) Ceylon
17th April 1945 – June 1946

We had at last reached our goal and it was a heartening experience to be, finally, members of an active Squadron. I had spent 2 years and 4 months training, 26% of which had been travelling and waiting time between courses.

KKS was situated at the northern tip of Ceylon, an area occupied by Tamils. There was a single 2500 yard runway running roughly east-west, with extensive taxiways and dispersed parking for about 24 Liberators. The first few days were taken up settling into our billets and messes and generally finding our way about the station. The Officer's mess and accommodation were Kadjan huts, built of low walls with the upper works of palm trunks covered with plaited palm leaves. They were very weather proof but home to a number of lodgers, mainly little chipmunks. A whole new section was under construction in brick and tile to replace the Kadjan buildings. I had a small but adequate single room and shared a Tamil batman, employed by the mess, with three others. We soon got used to the mess routine, when drinks etc were ordered 'on the slate' and a monthly mess bill presented. A fine tradition was the Sunday lunch – far and away the best curry I have ever eaten, to be followed by a recuperative snooze in the shade.

An ex member of the Squadron had left behind his tame mongoose and it could spot a newcomer instantly. He would turn up at mealtimes and be on and off your knee in a flash taking your meat with him!

I began flying on 22nd April with a dual check under a Squadron Leader Mosher. It had been 2 months since I had flown and it was necessary for the Squadron to ensure I was still competent. All went well and it was interesting to see the local terrain from the air. Flat country with scattered palm trees, some cultivated areas and a few villages. The only sizeable town was Jaffna, a few miles to the south.

The Squadron's operational area was Sumatra and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, nearly 1000 miles from Ceylon. The Squadron had moved from Madura in India to KKS in February 1945 to be closer to these target areas. A history of air operations at this time is published in Burma Liberators – RCAF in SEAC, Vol II, by John R. W. Gwynne-Timothy, 1991, ISBN I- 895578-02-7 Despite a few arrors, it is a detailed and useful account of operations in South East Asia Command (SEAC).

Targets were coastal shipping, cargo boats and naval escorts, harbours and occasionally airfields.

The fact that I had not served in a Squadron before caused some interest and I had to explain the situation at OT U when I was questioned by the CO, Wing Commander Waddy. Whatever the reason, it was month before I flew again. During this time we joined two other crews and spent five days at a jungle survival course south west of Columbo. We learned how to make bows and arrows from bamboo, how to identify some edible plants and fruit and how to obtain drinking water by cutting climbing vine stems. On the last day, each crew was dropped by lorry at a different spot on the edge of the jungle. We had to make our way by compass for a mile or two to rendezvous on another road to be picked up. It was hard going with a lot of undergrowth to be cut and we suffered considerably from the attention of leeches but we made it just in time to meet the lorry on its final trip.

During this period, the war in Europe ended. VE Day was 8th May and not long after we began to get additional air crew arriving on the Squadron for whom places had to be found.

When flying commenced again on May 21st it was a series of more training exercises-radar homings, low level practice bombings, air tests, navigation exercises and air to sea firing.

On 1st June another Captain F/O Cocks flew with us on a bombing exercise. On take off 'Clue' MacDonald excitedly reported an engine fire. It was too late to abort and I had to stop Don Ross, my co pilot, pushing the feathering button for no. 4 engine as the power was needed to get off the ground. Once safely airborne I shut down the engine and the prop. was feathered.

The exercise had to be abandoned and I went round the circuit and landed. Chief of our ground staff, Sgt Ship, said it had been too rich a mixture, and if we had just put the engine control on 'auto lean' all would have been well. But it was good practice,

and when the same thing happened on 10th June on No1 engine in a different plane, we corrected as advised, without having to shut down the engine.

On 8th June there had been an operation involving four aircraft, to patrol the Nicobar Islands. One plane captained by F/Lt Elmes had flown past his estimated time of arrival (ETA) ending up in sight of what were eventually identified as islands off the west coast of Malaya, an overshoot of about 300 miles. They turned for home and jettisoned bombs and all loose equipment including beam guns and the hand held cameras. Permission was obtained to land at China Bay, which was nearer than KKS, and they only just made it, with not enough fuel to have made another circuit. The photographic officer was annoyed that they hadn't unscrewed the camera lenses. In Burma Liberators this is reported as being due to strong tail wind, but in reality it was very bad judgement on the part of the Captain and Navigator. Three drift winds are calculated every hour so the wind speed should have been known. In addition, if a destination is not reached within a few minutes of ETA, they should have turned onto the planned route northwards and if necessary made a search for the Nicobars.

At least nearly two months after joining the Squadron, we got our first operation. Three aircraft were to attack a supply ship and submarine chaser which had been reported by British submarines off the north of Sumatra. The flight was led by F/O Law, a fellow Glaswegian, who had gained a Distinguished Flying Cross on an earlier operation. F/Lt Elmes captained the third plane. We took off on June11th and flew to China Bay where we refuelled, then took off in the dark. We had to wait some time in a queue of Dakotas which were ferrying supplies to Cox's bazar for the 14th Army on Burma.

We had agreed to fly at 500 feet height intervals and we intermittently saw the navigation lights of the other two planes as we turned right and left calculating 3 drift winds. At daylight we went down to our operational height of 50 feet and had our first sight of enemy territory – islands with dense forest right down to the sea. We were maintaining radio silence and as we approached our rendezvous position we were behind the other two aircraft when our intercom failed. I don't remember ever being told about this but I opened a fuse box behind my left knee, replaced a fuse and all was well. As we continued in loose formation I was on the port side and suddenly saw bursts of flax ahead and to the left and broke radio silence briefly in case the others hadn't seen it. We arrived to find a British destroyer being attacked by a small Japanese bomber. It was flying in a cloud layer at about 1000 feet and popping out to drop a bomb, at which every gun on the destroyer opened up. We circled this scene for about half an hour while, as I learned later, Jock Law was trying to contact the destroyer. He had no success and we were eventually re called to base as there was nothing we could do to help. The destroyer, which we later found out had sunk our targets, survived the attack as did the bomber.

The total flying time for this operation, from China Bay to Sumatra and back to KKS was 13 hours 50 minutes. A rather peculiar introduction to operations.

During the rest of June flying was confined to training exercises and transits within Ceylon with occasionally some civilian passengers. The flight to Ratmalana, near Columbo took about an hour – a very pleasant piece of low flying along the coast, skimming the palm trees.

At the end of June I had another pilot, F/O Larry Neal added to the crew. With the ending of the war in Europe. There was a surplus of air crew and most crews ended up with supernumeraries.

I had to put in a few hours on the Link Trainer, a device used to practice instrument flying. It was particularly enjoyable as the building housing it was the only one on the station which was air conditioned.

One day we had to swing the compasses on one of the aircraft. The runway had a new concrete circle at one end with the compass bearings marked on it, but this had proved useless at it was strengthened with steel rods! We had to use one of the empty parking bays and take hand held compass readings of the centre line of the fuselage at regular intervals round the circle. The two inner engines were running, both to turn the aircraft and provide a normal magnetic environment. Readings were taken of the headings at about 20° intervals and Bill Steel, our Navigator, prepared an error chart for use when airborne. These charts were unique for each aircraft. They had to be very accurate and were checked periodically.

I had to do some ground duties – one day as Orderly Officer – a general dogsbody whose duties included turning up at 'other ranks' messes with the Orderly Sergeant to ask for 'any complaints?' I also had to conduct a formal enquiry into the loss of a revolver by another Officer. Statements were recorded and in the end he received a formal reprimand.

During this period we moved into our new brick billets and mess. As usual the Catering Officer did an excellent job and meals were of very high quality.

Air crew mostly had very few duties apart from flying, and one of the favourite leisure activities was swimming. A truck or two visited a suitable site on the coast once or twice a week and were well patronised. We practised getting into and using a one-man dinghy as one was part of everyone's kit when airborne.

In early July, there had been some discussion among the more senior Captains concerning bombs which had not been seen to explode. As a result there was a move to get permission to have the explosive removed from a few and to drop them alongside the runway to check whether the pistols which would have detonated the explosive had actually worked. Permission was denied.

About this time we had a visit from an Air Vice Marshall whose name I can't remember. He gave us a talk about the progress of the war and hinted at some very secret technical development which might shorten its duration. It was of course the atom bomb as we were about to discover.

It was over a month since our first operation when on 17th July F/Lt Elmes and I were sent off to attack 5 Coasters with an escort at the north west end of Sumatra. We were to fly to China Bay to refuel to shorten the distance. Ten minutes into the flight we were recalled. On 18th we took off again and landed at China Bay but were again recalled.

When the plane was fully loaded with fuel and bombs, the wings flexed and I could see the port wing tip. As fuel was used up it disappeared behind the engine cowling. I discovered also that when loaded, the Liberator had two stable flight attitudes – one into which the plane would change soon after settling into level flight, the airspeed would drop off by a few knots with a very slight nose up attitude. It was hard to correct this just by opening the throttles, and the best solution was to climb a few hundred feet before diving back to fly level at the chosen altitude. Sometimes this had to be done more than once until the plane lightened a bit, then all was well.

On 20th July I was briefed to fly on detachment to the Cocos Islands. These formed an atoll about 1500 miles from Ceylon and nearly 600 miles south west of Java. They had been bought by John Clunies Ross in 1825 and were still owned by his descendants. Soil for gardens had been imported and Tamil and Malayan workers employed to produce copra and oil from coconut palms which covered most of the islands. South East Asia Command, under Lord Mountbatten, had decided that a bomber base should be constructed there to assist the 14th Army in the conquest of Malaya and Singapore, despite the fact that Singapore was over 1000 miles away.

Engineers from the 14th Army moved in unobtrusively in 1944 on West Island, removed most of the palm trees and built a 2000 yard long runway of pierced steel planks laid on bituminised hessian. This was later extended to 2500 yards.

As the islands were in reach of Japanese planes, the first aircraft to be stationed there were the Spitfires of 136 Squadron, brought in in crates and assembled on site. Personnel and pilots arrived on 7th April. Two Liberator bomber Squadrons 99 and 356 flew in later, followed by a detachment of a Dutch Squadron 321 which had Liberators and two amphibious Catalinas, the latter for air sea rescue duties. There were also 2 Mosquitos of 684 Squadron for photo reconnaissance. All these were in place when we arrived. The flight had taken just over 12 hours and although Cocos had a radio beacon, Bill Steel had got us there spot on without any need for external help. "Clue" MacDonald usually flew in the rear turret and was responsible for measuring drift using the gun sight. One of the requests for a three drift wind from Bill had been met with silence from the rear turret and I assumed, rightly, that our rear gunner was asleep. I switched off the elevators on the auto pilot and flipped the tail up and down. I think his head hit the roof, but he certainly came on the intercom pronto!

We had been briefed to photograph the islands for use by our own Squadron and we circled taking shots before making a very noisy landing on the steel mesh runway and taxiing back the full length to park beside three other203 Squadron planes which had flown out on 16th July.

The atoll was about 7 miles in diameter, with large areas of the lagoon exposed at low tide. It was a wonderful tropical site, with cool sea breezes and occasional showers, a reputedly stable condition for most of the year. We slept in tents among the remaining palms to the west of the runway and were each issued with a 2 gallon can of fresh water a day for all our toiletry purposes. I and the officers in my crew used the Mess provided for the Dutch 321 Squadron. They were a cheerful lot, some of whom had been Colonists in Java before the war and were very keen to see the island liberated. They had an unusual form of flying pay, receiving this only for hours flown. We discovered that an air sea rescue Catalina would take off before us as it was

considerably slower and would return later. If sea conditions were favourable, the Captain would 'land' and sit out his mission, listening out for any distress calls, all of which counted as flying time.

Off duty hours were spent swimming in the clear warm water of the lagoon, or borrowing a small boat for unsuccessful fishing trips. There was an open air cinema with seats on both sides of the screen – a very pleasant way to spend a cool evening, close to the palm trees. We had to watch out for the land crabs which came out of their burrows on the beach at night. The species *Birgus latro,* is the largest crustacean in the world, with a life span up to 60 years. They had one very large claw and although commonly called Coconut Crabs these were only part of their diet. The ones we saw were juveniles, but large enough to be avoided.

Our first operation was an armed reconnaissance on July 23rd from Padang in Sumatra to the Soenda Straits, to search for a 4000 ton vessel previously seen at Emmahaven, a harbour close to Padang.

There was no shipping of any great size at the harbour, and we turned to fly down the coast. We soon reached Boengoes Bay and there was the ship anchored close to the hills on the north-west side. I turned into the bay, asked Bill Steel the Navigator to select of stick of 6 bombs, and began to climb to get into position for an attack, but soon I realised I was not gaining height fast enough , and called for extra power. Larry Neal, the co pilot, increased power but it still wasn't enough and I called for more. I hadn't time to see what he was doing as I was judging height in relation to the hills and the target. It wasn't until after the attack I discovered he had not increased the engine revolutions to maximum, as he should have done and he increased the boost to 56 inches – the maximum was 48 for take off. Why the engines didn't blow up was a bit of a miracle, but the good old Pratt and Whitneys stood the strain. I turned into a shallow dive as we throttled back and had the bomb doors opened. This was our first attack in earnest and I had to call on the gunners to open fire. The front and upper turrets did so. This was the first time the upper guns had been fired dead ahead and fully depressed. The muzzles of the two 5 inch Brownings were very close to the heads of the pilots and the noise was horrendous. The blast cracked all the upper Perspex and unscrewed the mirror compass which was fitted above our heads. Larry had to hold it in place while I concentrated on the bombing run.

I had flown as we had been trained at about 30° to the mid line of the ship and 'Clue' shouted that we had scored hits. It dawned on me later that with a ship at anchor, a more effective attack would be straight down the mid line. We radioed in code details of the action and continued south-eastwards along the coast, found no more targets and were back at the Cocos just under eleven hours after take off. The ship was originally identified as Hyosi Maru from the mirror camera photos, but this now conflicts with an account on the internet of a sinking in the Pacific of a ship of this name. After this, Larry was known as Mr 56, but the ground crew were never told.

On 31st July we were briefed to fly an armed reconnaissance from Benkoelen Harbour to Soenda with another Liberator captained by F/Lt St John. En route we were radioed not to bomb any ships under 1000tons. Bombs apparently were scarce. We flew the whole route without finding a suitable target and returned – a trip of about 11 hours.

On 2nd August we flew back to KKS with 8 ground crew and I found that F/Lt Elmes had flown the operation that had been cancelled twice on 17th and 18th July, with another Captain F/O Rau (who had taken my place on 23rd and 24th July) and that Elmes and his crew were reported missing. No trace was ever found.

The first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6th August and the second on Nagasaki on the 9th. It seemed certain that he war would soon be at an end and I think this caused a change in spirit with thoughts turning to being repatriated. Nevertheless, on 9th August we again flew with two other planes to the Cocos, with 7 ground crew on board, taking off at night. It was one of the other Captain's birthday on 10th and we arranged for all the crew to sing Happy Birthday over the radio at midnight. We were somewhere near the equator and the greetings were picked up on the Cocos.

On 12th August I was briefed to fly an armed reconnaissance the length of the Soenda Straits, taking off just after dark. I wanted to be quite sure of clearing the palms at the end of the runway, and opened the throttles faster than usual. As we roared down the runway, a *very* agitated 'Clue' shouted that we had a fire in No 3. I slammed the throttles shut, braked hard and fortunately managed to stop, then called on Larry to operate the fire extinguisher on No3, which he did. When we had taxied back to dispersal, the ground crew thought it was again just a case of over rich mixture, and wanted me to have another go until I told them the fire extinguisher had been operated. It was discovered the next day that the electronic boost control had run away and we had blown up several cylinders. I was given a piece of one of the cooling fins as a souvenir! With a full load of petrol and bombs I reckon 'Clue's prompt warning saved our lives.

Another plane fuelled and bombed up, was on standby and we eventually got away safely several hours later. It was light by the time we reached Soenda and had dropped down to 50 ft and the weather was excellent. It was interesting to see Krakatau, which I believe is still building and may once again erupt. We saw one or two junks between the islands before we passed through the gap between Sumatra and Java and turned north up the coast of Sumatra. No shipping was sighted until we reached the end of our patrol at Banka Strait when we spotted about five merchantmen of about 5000 tons and an escort widely dispersed in an anchorage, and as we approached to photograph the area we came under fire from onshore gun positions. It was not a target for a single aircraft and I turned away to begin the patrol again southwards. When we reached about 5° south some vessels were seen ahead. Using binoculars these were identified as a medium sized tanker of about 4000 tons heading south with two escorting sub-chasers which were standing off a mile to the east. It was difficult to understand where they had come from as we hadn't seen them on the way north. The sub chasers opened fire as we prepared to attack and I used the recommended evasive procedure of climbing and diving irregularly on the approach. I ordered a stick of 6 bombs and called 'bomb doors open.' Nothing happened and the order was repeated several times ending with 'open the fucking bomb doors'! The gunners had opened up and bullets were ricocheting off the ship. I pressed the bomb release button but none dropped. I was sure they would have broken through the bomb doors easily but the safety arrangement prevented this. I was really steamed up and as we had lost the tactical advantage and continued being fired on by the approaching naval vessels I broke off the engagement.

When Bill Steel appeared on the flight deck to be greeted by some extreme language, his response was that he had been waiting for Andy Devine, the Flight Engineer to open the bomb doors. This incident is reported in Burma Liberators as an 'error in the crew drill' which I suppose it was, but the fact was that never once in all our many practices had anyone other than the Navigator opened the bomb doors. Some disciplinary action was warranted, but the war was ended a couple of days later, so there was little point. But, there was a tragic outcome.

Despite the virtual certainty of the war ending very soon, on the next day 13th August, four aircraft were to be sent out to attack the tanker. The mission was led by F/O Jock Law DFC accompanied by F/O Tetlock, F/O Rau and a plane from the Dutch 321 Squadron. Rau's aircraft was unserviceable and the 321 Captain went sick. Tetlock failed to make contact with Law at the rendezvous position, his wireless transmitter failed and he returned to base. According to Burma Liberator Jock Law attacked two motor vessel and two escorts; but I believe it must have been the tanker and two escorts. Whatever, he did radio he had attacked a motor vessel. Three minutes later he sent an SOS and a second one was received 16 minutes later. Three minutes after that he radioed that he was about to ditch in Welcomst Bay. The on-call Catalina searched this position without success and over the next two days searches were continued by Liberators of 203, 321 and 356 Squadrons. I took part on the 14th in the dark in the search area using radar but all was in vain.

An account of what happened was published over a month later in, I think, The Times of India as follows:

Transcript of a news article:

War's Last Raid

Four of the crew of an RAF Liberator of the Indian Ocean Air Force, reported missing from the last operation of the war carried out from the Cocos Islands, are now on their way back to the United Kingdom.

They are Warrant Officer A Rosenberg of 221 Navaino Mansions, London; Warrant Officer JB Walters, Duffryn Gardens, Ryd0y-Felin, Pontprydd, Wales; Warrant Officer R Keyes, of 10 Bennett Avenue, Blackpool; and Flight Sergeant G Miners, 94 Polmadie Road, Glasgow.

They were captured by the Japanese on Sebesi Island off Sumatra and after two days in prison camps were released under the capitulation terms.

F/Sergeant Miners, who was Flight Engineer of the Liberator, said they were attacking a convoy in the Southern Banka Straits on the night of September 13th. After sinking one ship the aircraft was hit in the front by 'ack-ack' fire and the second pilot was killed.

Swam Ashore

The Liberator turned away with an engine on fire. The Captain force-landed near Sebesi Island. F/Sgt Miners said, "Probably we hit a tree and then crashed into the

sea some 20 or 30 yards offshore. Anyway, the aircraft spun over on its back and the Captain, Navigator and Wireless Operator-Mechanic were killed. Four of us managed to swim ashore."

Next day Japanese troops arrived and took the survivors prisoner.
"They took us to the mainland and carried out preliminary investigations," said F/Sgt Miners. "There was a great deal of threatening and rough handling. Apparently they knew nothing about surrender then. Later we were taken back to Telek Betoeng, and then came the news of capitulation."

The ditching position for the crew in the rear of the Liberator was with backs against the rear bulkhead of the bomb bay. From there they would not have seen what was happening. I doubt if they flew over trees. More likely is that the impact on the sea catapulted the plane, and crew at the front would receive a huge impact and submersion.

I have often wondered why this operation was ordered and thought that the failure of the other three planes to take part was at least slightly questionable, but whatever it was a tragic thing to happen on the last day of the war.

News of the expected Japanese capitulation came on 14th August and the 15th was declared VJ Day. Spitfires were airborne over the Cocos in a VJ formation – not an easy one to maintain and I don't think it had been practised in advance!

We were not immediately recalled to base and there was an opportunity to get all the aircraft servicing up to date. On one of 203's Liberators a fault had developed in the hydraulic system such that nothing operated when the action was selected. The fault could not be found and the Engineering Officer flew out from KKS, but *he* couldn't find it. It was decided that the aircraft would have to be scrapped so on the evening of 20th I went aboard and nicked the clock as a souvenir. Next day one of the ground crew had an inspiration. There was in the system what looked like a simple nut but was actually a non-return valve. This was found to have stuck open and was easily cleaned and again functioned. On 22nd as the whole episode had been talk of the camp, a large number of folk, including the Engineering Officer (EO) turned up to see the plane air-tested. We heard the whine of the self starter on No.3 engine and it roared into life. Immediately, there was a bang and hydraulic oil poured out under the plane. A fitter had left a spanner on top of the engine cowling, it had dropped into the propeller and been driven through the fuselage under the co-pilot's seat, severing a number of hydraulic lines. A little higher and we might have lost the co-pilot. The EO went bright red and "Where's that fucking erk?" came through his teeth. The repair was quickly done and I was given the air test to do on the 23rd. we checked for spanners, but all went well. I did not return the clock!

On 28th August we flew back to KKS, an eleven hour flight taking off half an hour before dawn. Almost immediately the Canadians were repatriated. I did not find out until years later that they had spent some months in a transit camp in the south of England before finally getting home and that during that time Clue had met a WAAF whom he later married. Only one of the many good things that came out of the war for those of us who survived it.

After a spell of local flying, on 21st September we flew back to the Cocos with a bomb bay which had 12 canvas seats fitted facing inwards from each side of the catwalk. Next day we flew back, with twelve ground crew as passengers. I couldn't agree to them having to travel in the bomb bay so all their kit was stowed there and they went into the beam guns position with one of the crew on intercom- crowded but with a view.

I had had a locum Navigator since the Canadians left, but now got a permanent one, Bert Crump, who had done a tour on anti-submarine flights from Northern Ireland over the North Atlantic. Our first trip together was to Singapore on 29th September carrying cylindrical containers of supplies, two ground crew and a large box of K rations. I thought I would get a bit of practice in navigation and took a chart and a small hand computer with which to calculate the winds. It was a blue sky day and we flew comfortably at 10,000ft. When we reached the north-west end of Sumatra, Bert appeared on the flight deck and cast a very questioning eye on my chart. He was assured that I wasn't checking on his ability and I agreed that we could just 'map read' the rest of the way.

Soon after we entered Malacca Strait we could see ahead a Cumulo-nimbus cloud right in our path. It turned out to be one of the largest we had ever seen. Had it been over land at Singapore we would have been in some trouble finding an alternative landing site. As it was over sea, we dropped down and flew under it about 250 feet. It was almost like flying into a waterfall in the dark but there was almost no turbulence and we were soon in sunshine again. Kallang airport was circular with a single runway and as I approached I aimed to land as near as possible to the near end. A road ran across before the runway and a crowd was being held back. As I rounded off to touch down a man broke from the crowd and walked in front. I might have decapitated him, so I opened the throttle and went round again, and hoped he had had a good fright.

Another Liberator had joined the circuit but, as we had complained over the RT about the crowd control, we were given priority and he had to wait. The second landing was normal, but there were no taxi strips and we had to turn and go back up the runway, being told to park beside two other 203 Liberators already there. As we taxied up a figure came running towards us from our left and waved us over to a group standing beside two staff cars. I stopped beside them and shut down the engines. A fairly senior officer ran over and as we opened the bomb doors he stuck his head in and asked "Where's Gracie?" It turned out that Gracie Fields had been to the Cocos and was in the other Liberator! We were given a very hasty bum's rush and had to start two of the engines. The other Liberator arrived as we pulled away and we saw her get out and be presented with a large bouquet. We parked where we had been told originally and had to wait over an hour for a lorry to take us to our billets. We spent three nights in Singapore, but missed out on Gracie's performance which was arranged for a later date.

On October 2nd all three of the 203 Squadron aircraft were to return to Ceylon, calling first at Ratmalana, near Columbo, before going to KKS. We took off together but flew individually. I climbed to 10,000ft and part way up Malacca Strait there was a line squall stretching from Sumatra to Malaya. Not as dangerous as a Cumulo-nimbus but I was prepared to turn back, descend, and fly under it if necessary. We were lucky

enough to find a reasonably thin part of the cloud and despite considerable buffeting in the turbulence we were soon in sunshine again.

We landed at Ratmalana after a flight of just over 9 hours and we were told that nothing had been heard from F/O Stewart's plane. It never turned up and presumably had got into trouble in the line-squall and crashed into the sea.

For some reason, along with general local flying, bombing practices continued for a few weeks. But on October 19th I had to fly a consignment of mail to Mauripur airport at Karachi. I chose to go via Cape Comorin and fly all the way over the sea up the west coast of India, an interesting trip of just under eight hours. We had to stay overnight and I was asked if I would like to fly the mail on to the UK. An amazing offer, which I would have taken up had we not all been dressed in tropical gear. We flew back next day to Ratmalana with a load of mail after being told that it was not now permissible to fly over the sea and we would have to go inland and miss the gulf of Kachchh and Khambhat. As a Coastal Command Captain this was irritating. I had every faith in our Liberator and as the weather was fine I flew back the way we had come.

On the 26th October the Commanding Officer, Wing Commander Brady, had myself and a newly returned Captain join him for some formation flying. We were up for an hour and a half and took it in turns to lead. I hadn't done any since I was in Canada, but the Liberator was very easy to handle in calm flying conditions and we all enjoyed the exercise.

There was less flying in November, one practice bombing, a few local trips and a return flight to Cawnpore, then on the 21st of November I took 12 army re-pats to Santa Cruz at Bombay, again flying via Cape Comorin. Luggage was put on the bomb bay seats and the army in the rear with one of them on intercom. During the flight there was a garbled message and I sent one of the crew back to check. The latch holding up the radar dome had slipped and the whole mechanism had slowly dropped down into position. It was soon raised again and it stayed in position.

A few days later I did one of our "cornflake" runs to Madras. I had a list of extra goodies to buy for the Mess and a number of orders for individuals, mainly for Burma green cloth. It was *de rigueur* to have jackets, trousers and even bush hats in this colour rather than the regulation khaki.

Towards the end of the month, night flying "circuits and bumps" were on the programme to keep us well practiced. To save aircraft time this was done with two Captains on board taking turns alternately. I realised that this was a little hazardous because we were not used to the normal co-pilot's drill but we managed somehow. My partner, whose name I can't recall, was a bit rusty and on one circuit mis-judged his approach; the guide light at the end of the runway changed from green to red. I had to open up the throttles for him, but we were a bit close to the palm trees as we reached the runway.

Not long after, a plane of 160 squadron, with whom we shared the station, piloted by a recently upgraded Captain failed to clear the palm trees on a night approach. The plane scythed through the trees and all bar one were killed. The palm trunks were

about a foot in diameter and the fact that the wings were still attached was a measure of the good construction of the B-24.

I was to fly to Pegu in Burma on the 12th of December and we were short of information about the airfield, so I had a trip beforehand to Negombo near Colombo to see if they could help. They had no information so we just had to go on spec. It was a flight of seven and a half hours and we had a little difficulty finding it in the middle of the jungle. A few Dakotas were based there and they were spraying large areas with DDT for mosquito control. The planes stank of the chemical and although the flying would have been interesting, I was quite glad that I didn't have that job.

The RAF had established a "rest camp" in the mountains near Srinagar in Kashmir so that crews who had finished a tour of duty could spend some time there *in lieu* of going to the UK, Canada or Australia. In summer, the time was spent trekking, in winter it was skiing. Early in January we and another crew were sent to the camp. We were flown to Chaklala, near Rawalpindi, spent one night there and then taken in Army lorries to Srinagar, about 120 miles away. We had one night there, then moved to Gulmarg. The camp was where the ski club of India had an annual meet and it had just finished. We were issued with skis and boots and had to climb up through snow-covered forests to Killinmarg to the camp buildings. Indian bearers carried the skis up, each man loaded with three or four pairs of skis. The bearers wore sandals made of thick straw and had small pottery bowls carried under the blanket draped over their shoulders. We had several rests and the bowls were brought out and embers glowed amongst the ash when blown on – primitive but effective. The accommodation and food was reasonable and the views spectacular. On a clear day it was possible to see the summit of Nanga Parbat, 8126m, which was eighty miles away.

The skiing was also rather primitive – the skis were wooden, without edges and had curtain spring bindings. They had to have wax ironed in each morning. There were no lifts and we had to stamp out a piste for the lessons each day. None of us had skied before and there were lots of tumbles, but no injuries and we gradually became able to go down moderate slopes and stop at the bottom. The final day ended with a mass race and I managed to come second. A strenuous but enjoyable 10 days.

We travelled back to Rawalpindi, but instead of staying at the airport, which was several miles out of town, we booked into a rather downmarket rest house to await the arrival of our plane from KKS. It was considerately delayed and we had time to enjoy what Pindi had to offer – horse racing, cinema, swimming pool, bingo and a few dances.

We had to wait until the 2nd of February for our transport to arrive and the next day when we were loaded and airborne it was noticed that a trail of vapour was coming out of number three engine. We returned to Chaklala and a petrol leak was diagnosed which couldn't be repaired quickly so we had a few more nights in Pindi. On the 8th of February, two aircraft arrived to take all the personnel back to KKS. We took off next day and our aircraft landed at Jodhpur and we were offloaded to fly a brand new Liberator back to KKS. We spent the night billeted in part of the Maharaja's palace. The new plane was un-painted and had a collection of ancillary equipment – electric water heaters, torches, *Thermos* flasks, mugs and some tools. When we took off we could not immediately raise the undercarriage – a new safety device had been fitted

and a button had to be pressed to release the lever. I was very impressed with the way the plane handled, it now had balance tabs on all the control surfaces. These were fitted at the trailing edges which gave much greater leverage and much lighter handling.

When we arrived at KKS it was to discover that there was an outbreak of Smallbox on the station and the whole place had been immediately isolated from the outside world while everyone on the station was inoculated. A friend I had trained with had just flown in with a small two-engined plane used for communications by Transport Command. When the supply of serum ran out he was briefed on the 12th of February to fly to Negombo for additional supplies and I got permission to go with him. I had a shot at the controls and found it much lighter to handle than even the new B24. When we landed at Negombo we had to go to the furthest end of the airfield and park. A jeep drove out to us and I when I opened the rear door I was handed a parcel at arm's length before the driver retreated hastily.

When the quarantine was lifted I went as passenger on a flight to Cawnpore where I had been in touch with Sgt Bill Wallace, whom I hadn't seen since training in Canada. He had been re-mustered to general duties and was involved in decommissioning aircraft which had been supplied under Lease/Lend to the RAF by America. Part of this involved taking sledge hammers to the crank cases of brand new spare radial engines. I tried to obtain a control column from a B24 but no luck.

Before we could return to KKS I had to report sick and was diagnosed with Jaundice. The hospital at Cawnpore was very large and had been set up to cater for casualties from the 14th Army in Burma, for which it was not now required. I was in a ward with six beds and only three occupants. One was a US soldier who on a train headed for home via Calcutta had left his compartment on the train to go outside to the next compartment, had fallen under the wheels and had to have a leg amputated. Two days later, a Dakota landed at Cawnpore, a jeep with two nurses aboard, who asked "where's our boy?" and he was very smartly whisked off to Calcutta.

When my jaundice was cured I was given leave and Bill managed to get time off as well, so we took the train to Lahore and had a week at a good hotel seeing the sights. On our return I had a bout of dysentery which was diagnosed as amoebic. I had to contact the squadron and hoped that it would not be long before I could return. But it was not to be. Despite many and varied treatments, including retention enemas lasting an hour, a great strain on self-control, the amoebas would not go away. I got word that the squadron were preparing to fly back to the UK and a plane flew into Cawnpore to check whether I would be able to join them but the Senior Medical Officer was not in favour. I was in hospital for over two months and in May it was decided that I should be repatriated by sea. I was sent to Bombay and spent a week based in the hospital section of the ship but allowed ashore. I swam, shopped and saw the sights of Bombay and eventually we set sail for Southampton. I forget the name of the ship but it was a very comfortable journey and I opted for a curry each evening as I guessed correctly that it would be the last time I ate such high quality.

I had a spell of leave after I reached the UK, then had to report to the RAF hospital at Halton where one branch specialises in tropical diseases. After a thorough examination I was told that I did not have to be hospitalised and was given more

leave. I felt quite well, and after another check-up and more leave I was approved for discharge. It seemed that the amoebas had succumbed to the British climate.

The Government had set up a further education and training scheme (FET) for ex-service personnel and I took advantage of this and was accepted by Glasgow University for a degree course in Agriculture. This was to be in association with the west of Scotland Agricultural College. I did not have anything more to do with the RAF except to be de-mobbed and this took a very long time with several visits to London. Eventually in November, I was processed at Lytham Saint Anne's and got my de-mob suit etc.

I had already started my degree course by this time by beginning my one-year practical on a farm near Dunblane. Life had been hectic during this period with all the RAF administrative goings on and with getting myself set up with a FET grant. I had not been able to contact any of my crew as I had no addresses and I had no information from the squadron. I was now working very long but healthy hours on a rather old-fashioned farm where horses were still in use for everything accept ploughing.

Out of the blue I got a letter from British Rail to say that luggage at Leuchars Goods Depot addressed to me had been broken into. I made arrangements to go there and was met by a policeman at the depot. There were two trunks one of which had been opened, and anything of value taken – camera, roll of foreign bank notes, uniform etc., and sadly my B24 clock. I regret now that I didn't make more effort to contact my crew, as some of them might still have been serving at Leuchars where the squadron was now based.

When I look back at my time in the RAF a number of things stand out. The sites chosen for training courses were mostly up-market – Babbacome, Canada, especially Montreal and Prince Edward Island, and the Bahamas. A Cook's tour, which would be very desirable today.

Coastal Command set a very high standard. The curricula of the courses were extremely comprehensive, sometimes too much so, but they were designed to produce top flight personnel, particularly navigators. The fact that the rule 'air plots must not be started from a dead reckoning position' did not apply to Coastal Command was a matter of pride.

I was certainly very lucky to go through such a training and to be made a Captain at OTU. A lot sticks in the memory and I can still easily recall the mnemonic HTMPFFSGGBC for the vital actions before take off. If you are interested, it stands for; Hydraulics, Trim, Mixture, Pitch, Flaps, Fuel, Switches, Gyro, Gills, Brakes, Controls.

It was good to be part of such a service and to contribute even in a small way at the tail end of the war. It was also good to have survived. Those who served in SEAC received the following medals: Defence medal, War Medal 1939-45, Burma Star and Pacific Clasp (where appropriate).

Epilogue

As is common as one gets older, I had a resurgence of interest in trying to trace my crew members. In 2003 I joined Forces Reunited but none of my attempts on the internet were successful.

In 2005 I found out about a website run by Robert Quirk in Manitoba, Canada (Robert@rquirk.com). He has an amazing archive of B24 activities in the Far East and has very rarely been unable to answer any query of mine. In that year, I came across an old diary with the addresses of two of my Canadian crew members, 'Clue' MacDonald and Bill Steel. Without much hope I wrote to 'Clue' and was amazed when a few days later Robert told me that he had been contacted by one of 'Clue's sons, Mike, seeking information about his father who had died in 1984. I was able to get directly in touch with Mike and let him have photos and information. In 2009, I visited Nova Scotia to see an old friend and Mike was able to come over from New Brunswick for a get together.

In November 2005, Robert was emailed by a Michael Byrne, trying to find out what happened to his Brother-in-Law F/O Gordon Stewart. It turned out that he had been one of the crew on the aircraft which disappeared on the flight from Singapore to Ceylon on the 2nd of October 1945. I was able to let him know the probable cause of the accident.

In 2008, Robert heard from a Nick Abbott seeking information about his grandfather, Larry Neal, who had been one of my co-pilots. I got in touch with Nick directly and was very surprised to find out he had a farm on the Isle of Islay, close to where I live. He came to see me and told me that Larry had died in 2003 and his widow had given him a large bundle of his papers. She now lives in a granny flat at the farm. Larry had kept every bit of paper during his RAF career, course reports, transit orders, mess bills, tickets etc., but the thing of greatest importance I would dearly have liked to see was his flying logbook. I could have filled in the gaps of my own logbook which had been left because of my hospitalisation. Larry's had been lost during a removal. Nick, having seen my logbook had the wit to do a search on the internet and came up with another crew member, Bert Crump, who had been my last navigator. He had died in 2002 but I was able to contact his family and send them some photographs. Again, *his* logbook was missing!

Time has moved on, but who knows what other surprises Robert may come up with?

December 2011

A new Mk VI Liberator
– a joy to handle.