

In the wake of all the furor, and excitement which had prevailed during the past few weeks No. 14 OTU was now settling back into its acknowledged routine of normal crew training. Although this was so, senior course pupils were thrown in at the deep end when they were designated to take part in a Main Force attack on the night of 31st July when the target was DUSSELDORF. This sortie was not a four figure raid, but the bombing force was around the six hundred mark, and of these the bomber OTU's of No. 92 Training Group contributed around a hundred aircraft, and crews. A total of twenty nine bombers did not return from this attack. Our unit No 14 OTU lost two Hampdens, and the pilot of one of them, Sgt McGowan, a Canadian, I met later during 1943 inside the P.O.W. camp at Lamsdorf. During the remainder of my period at RAF Cottesmore two further operational sorties were carried out by senior course pupils.

As for myself I had no sooner settled down to resume my normal "screened" role the Flying Pool when, right out of the blue, I was detailed to perform a new job, thus ceasing my long connection with the Wop/Ag course pupils, and the Anson flight cross country training exercises. I would not say I was enamoured with the move which meant I would be attached to the Test Flight, I would certainly miss the contact with the various trainees, but one had to soldier on. The Air Test flight had only two aircrew members, all that was needed was a pilot, and a Wop/Ag. My pilot was Flying Officer Bill Deas, ex 61 Squadron, like me he had accomplished his tour on Hampdens so we soon hit it off together. Our job entailed the air testing of Hampdens following periods of being unserviceable, or alternatively had been on service checks, or engine changes in the maintenance hangars. The flying schedules of a bomber O.T.U. were pretty hectic, and naturally the kites were impaired by constant use so inevitably there was always a steady flow through the maintenance hangars. When the repair work etc had been completed it was then our job to thoroughly air test each aircraft to ascertain if it was airworthy in every way for further OTU use. Therefore F/O Bill Deas would put the kite through every conceivable flying test, and manoeuvre, and when he was satisfied with the outcome would then commence to fly around in a more sublime fashion in order that I could comfortably prepare to do my bit. Obviously all that remained was the fulfillment of a complete check, and test of all the W/T equipment, a job which usually occupied a time of thirty or so minutes, sometimes it was longer.

These trips proved anything but boring, fortunately I was not prone to air sickness for Bill Deas certainly threw each kite around the sky during his part of the air test, but apart from that it was a steady number, no night flying was involved, I had done my share of that in the Anson flight.

The summer of 42 was a marvellous one weatherwise being really sweltering, the glorious sunny conditions lasted for weeks on end. When flying allowed me the time after lunch I could be seen relaxing in the sunshine reposing outside the Sgts Mess sprawled languidly in one of the various assortment of chairs, at peace with the world. After all, misnomer or no, I was supposed to be on "rest", but in a more serious vein I must say that such occasions, unfortunately were not of a prolonged duration, work was always on hand.

Another pleasant diversion from course routine, which was a feature of the Sgts Mess at RAF, Cottesmore, was a once weekly jazz session performed in their own inimitable style by a quartet from the Station band. Sgt. Jack Nathan organised this musical entertainment on our behalf, of course he was the leader of the Station band, and became a popular post war dance band leader. On these enjoyable occasions our mess Ante room was always packed to capacity with enthusiastic listeners, such was the popularity of the jazz quartet.

Collectively, I do not think there was ever a dull moment at No. 14 OTU, Cottesmore it was a very active station, and besides the comings and goings of different faces, the various personalities amongst them, the many accidents, crashes, operational raids, there was also several visits from units of the Luftwaffe. In connection with the latter, the cheekiest by far was a daylight cloud cover attack one day during the summer which was undertaken by a group of Dornier 217 "flying pencil" bombers. This occasion turned out to be slightly embarrassing for us senior N.C.O.'s as these German crews had, appropriately or not, timed their attack to coincide with a Sergeants Mess meeting, well under way at that precise moment in a well attended Ante Room. With the protection of very low thick cloud the Dorniers flew in fast, and at very low level over the drome to strafe the hangars, and buildings.

I had never before seen such a multitude of chaps so quick off the mark for as soon as they realised the drome was under attack every N.C.O. assembled in the main Ante Room, including myself, moved with remarkable speed, and a gility to then disappear under the dubious protection of the small tables, and hug the floor. Bullets were flying everywhere inside and out, windows were shattered, while many fragments of plaster flew from the inner walls of the large room as a few bullets hit. Bombs were dropped simultaneously across the airfield, but the "Jerries" failed in their endeavours to hit the hangars, and the main buildings. Luckily their bomb aimers were off target so only slight damage was caused. Two or three wooden instructional huts were blown up, and apart from several craters plus a hell of a lot of bullet holes here and there nothing more was amiss except perhaps some loss of personal dignity. The raid was short and sweet, the Dorniers only risked one run, and then at speed swept away, and upwards into the cover of the clouds. The damage was soon cleared up, and the training programme was not unduly affected. I can recall that all station personnel were confined to camp for the remainder of that day.

I was now enjoying the steady routine of my Test flight job during which I only kept "office" hours, and the regular continuance of the marvellous summer weather, I was able to really relax. Many were the nights out in the small market town of Oakham, with the back room of the Crown Hotel a popular rendezvous for aircrew bods, to talk and drink, at least primarily. The very presence of a piano in the room meant that many a singing session was held during the last hour or so, when all the well known dittys RAF, and otherwise were given the treatment.

Oakham, our nearest town, then boasted a good selection of public houses, a cinema, and a very popular dance venue, the Victoria Hall, where dances were held on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights. The supply of female gender was more than adequate, and included WAAF's, ATS, Land Army girls plus the local talent. During the thrice weekly occasions when the light fantastic was being tripped the majority of the males were, of course, airmen from RAF Cottlemore. Our own RAF dance band usually monopolised the Wednesday spot, but otherwise the ensemble was a local outfit, namely The Four Aces, who could have performed with a piano, accordion, trumpet, and probably the saxophone. This quartet obviously was not quite in the same league as our own RAF band.

It was on such a balmy summer evening during the month of June when I had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of a young, sun tanned Land Army girl. Myself, and two Wop/Ag pals, Chick Morris, and Nobby Kewall, a lively trio, at the time were in the process of doing the rounds of the Oakham hostelrys, and the public house we were about to enter at that precise moment was the Wheatsheaf, not the most salubrious of inns, but in these days we took them all in our stride. Inside the passage of the Wheatsheaf Inn our three heads elongated around the doorway of the room opposite the bar, a hopeful gesture to ascertain if friends were inside.

However no flash of recognition lit up our eyes, for surprisingly the room was almost empty. The only occupants were three females sitting very quietly at one of the tables who had given a brief disdainful sideways glance at our three headed doorway spectacle. We withdrew our heads, it was three pints, landlord, and in a very short space of time we entered the room to sit down alongside the three damsels, who, let's face it did not show much enthusiasm about our presence, one had to watch these aircrew types. We did not despair, but took the initiative, and a conversation was soon under way, at which point I asked the girls if they would like a drink. Trust me to put a damper on the proceedings for, on turning from the bar I

must have tripped over some obstacle as the tray containing six drinks flew up into the air and all the liquid refreshments "went for a burton" all over the table spilling all over the lap of the youngest of the three females, who I had previously noticed to be an attractive, sun tanned girl with lovely eyes. As usual I could not help laughing, nobody else found it amusing, but inwardly I thought I must surely have blown my chances, instead the incident had the effect of breaking the ice, and a chance acquaintanceship ripened into what was to be a long lasting partnership which to date had lasted forty three years. Inevitably I arranged a date, and progressed from there, Monica was just sweet seventeen at the time, and was a member of the Womens Land Army based at the nearby village of Hambleton, a few miles from Oakham. The three girls, it seems, came to Oakham that night to attend the dance at the Victoria Hall, but found that it had been cancelled, the RAF dance band was apparently not available that night for some inexplicable reason. Feeling slightly disgruntled they had decided to pop into the nearest pub to quench a thirst, luckily it was the Wheatsheaf, and I can only say as far as I ^{was} concerned, it was Kismet.

From then on in, I think one can say I was definitely bitten by the love bug, and most nights I could be seen pedalling briskly along the country lanes from the drome at Cottesmore to the picturesque village of Upper Hambleton, only a matter of a few miles. The last few hundred yards into the village was really steep, with a few bends to negotiate near the top of the hill, and maximum exertion was needed, but ^{disheartily} I always dismounted and walked the last hundred yards or so.

During the following four months the majority of my nights off were spent in the village with Monica. The nightly journeys were achieved on various two wheeled steeds, most of them being borrowed from my fellow aviators. I never had any lighting on the machines, and on many of my return journeys back to camp in the late night summer darkness I was always a step ahead of a local constable, who used to lay in wait for me at a certain road junction. He made several abortive attempts to apprehend me for riding without lights, but I was always pedalling much too fast for him to catch me, it was an amusing challenge.

Unlike previous wartime entanglements my association with Monica was no casual affair, I was in love with everything about the girl, including her lovely disposition, and we met as often as possible. We were now a familiar twosome around the village, and the local inn The Finches Arms, where we invariably called in to enjoy the company, a couple of drinks, and a few quips and cracks from Doug, the landlord. The pub was a typical village hostelry of that era, beer straight from the barrel, and plain wooden benches. The locals were a cheerful lot, and all knew Monica well, who besides being a Land girl on a local farm also resided in the village being billeted with a lady in the house next to the church. The Finches Arms was very handily placed being just opposite the house, and Monica and I regularly took on the locals at both darts and dominoes, happy days. A very long time after the war we made a nostalgic visit to the scene of our courtship to see a few old friends, and enjoy a drink at the old pub. Mine host, Doug was still in harness behind the bar, an occupation he continued until recent years when he retired. Since that time Monica and I have returned at least once per year, but today, geographically, there is a great difference as Upper Hambleton is now surrounded on three sides by the largest man made lake in Europe, a gigantic reservoir now known as Rutland Water.

The local rural scene where Monica and I enjoyed each others company is, for the most part, under many feet of water. Part of the old road up the hill leading to the village still exists, but the village itself is now a dead end, one cannot go any further beyond, for to do so would result in a confrontation with a vast expanse of water. A new network of roads now exists along the sides of the gigantic reservoir emanating from the town of Oakham. Many tourist attractions, and car parks now exist in the area, consequently the number of visitors have increased by leaps and bounds in a like manner so have the trout fishermen. The Hambleton village pub, The Finches Arms, outwardly looking is the same as it was during wartime days, but inwardly has been extensively altered, and modernised. Obviously this was a necessary evil in order to cope with the evergrowing tourist traffic during the summer months with, of course, the surrounds of Rutland Water being the big attraction.

During the idyllic summer months of 42 my days were fully occupied, and while pursuing my romantic attachment I was still busily engrossed performing my duties in the Hampden Test flight, although a small allocation of night flying came my way at spasmodic intervals. During the month of August the Station Signals Officer caused a minor uproar when he informed all the tour expired Wop/Ag instructors that under a new system of wireless operator grading we would be obliged to undergo a written examination in order to achieve first class rating. Successful candidates would then would then be accredited as first class air W/Ops which would also entail a difference in pay. A chorus of low murmurs swept through the "screened" Wop/Ag audience. Mindful of our obvious qualifications, and long experience my first reaction to this instruction was expressed with a series of choice expletives. I was not alone as all my ex-operational Wop/Ag comrades were all of the same opinion, it seemed that "red tape" once again had overrode reason. We all strongly objected on a common sense valuation, it was surely nonsensical to suggest that after all our experience as first wireless operators during a long spell of squadron operational duty, and since then a long stint as instructors participating in both ground and flying duties, to infer that we were not first class operators. We all agreed unanimously that the official instruction was indeed a farcical suggestion, and if not deemed competent or first class at this late hour surely there must be something radically wrong with the appropriate RAF set up, shades of "Fred Karno", the issue was just as comical. Another well known wartime RAF adage, the three B's "Bullshit Baffles Brains" I think sums up the situation most aptly as far as we were concerned. Needless to say our protests fell on stony ground, officialdom had its way, and thus we Wop/Ag old hands were treated with scant regard for our previous service achievements inasmuch as the establishment were classing us on the same level as OTU trainees. Inevitably, of course, we had to get our heads down, and put pen to paper. I cannot recall whether I filled in a successful paper or not, there was very little enthusiasm after all what had I to prove?. It is sufficient to reveal that when I eventually left the station later on during the month of November to embark upon my second tour of Ops, my flying logbook was suitably endorsed to coincide with my aircrew trade proficiency rating which was entered as "Above Average", and as such was duly signed by F/Lt Grant, Signals Officer at RAF, Saltby, Cottesmore's satellite airfield.

In retrospect I would stress that on the whole I enjoyed my period of "rest", if that's the right choice of word, at No.14 Operational Training Unit, RAF Cottesmore. The possible exception was perhaps the final ten weeks or so spent as a disgruntled member of No. 52 course, which was therefore not a very happy period for me.

I had then spent eight months at No.14 OTU, and was aware that time was running out for me as anything in excess of a six months term of "rest" was indeed a bonus before a return to operational duty. Regretfully, I had come to terms with the stark fact that I would not be returning to squadron life with Bob, my former pilot at 106.

Unfortunately, he was still grounded, being medically unfit for flying duties. I knew that I was due to be posted back on Ops at any time so I had been on the look out for a probable team up with a "screened" pilot returning for his second tour, but such opportunities seemed to be few at that particular time. However, I did not anticipate the circumstances which then unfolded to provide a shock to the old nervous system. Myself, and several other "screened" Wop/Ag's together with eight other similiar types, who had been posted from No.16 OTU, Upper Heyford for this same purpose, were literally press ganged, and attached to a group of "sprog" trainees to form No.52 OTU course at this station RAF, Cottesmore. In short we were designated as the Wop/Ag's to crew up with trainee pilots, Navigators, Bomb aimers, and Air gunners. When we screened bods were officially informed of this plan I must admit I was dumbfounded at this turn of events, the establishment had worked a really fast one over us.

We had performed our OTU course eighteen months previously, in all my experience I had no recollection of this sort of thing happening before, or since for that matter. Certainly the administration department of No.92 Training Group were setting a precedent, and in doing so placed us in a position which was not equitable.

It was usual when going back for a second tour of Ops to team up with a pilot in similiar circumstances, or alternatively one was posted individually to a squadron, where, in the main, your record was considered in a fair manner so more often than not you were fitted in with an experienced crew. The mathematical odds of surviving a second tour were obviously very low indeed, I had been lucky to get through my first lot most did not, but to be pitchforked on to a trainee OTU course at this advanced stage

of my aircrew career was a frustrating experience, indeed it was diabolical. Surely we were entitled to a better deal than we received at RAF Cottesmore.

F/Sgt Dave Craven and I shared the same feeling of resentment, we decided to get it off our chests, and air our hard won opinions, but what was to be our next course of action? I was always an easy going and cheerful character and for the most part impartial, but this was a rough deal, therefore we took the bull by the horns, and sought an interview with the Chief Ground Instructor in order to expose our grievances. At the appointed time Dave and I marched smartly into his office to confront the Squadron Leader who, needless to say, failed to comprehend our point of view, and utterly disregarded our Operational, and Instructional records. He had no sympathy whatsoever with our case, after all we were only mere NCO Wop/Ag's it seemed we were expendable. All that we received from this somewhat biased interview could be likened to a swift kick up the rear, with an added hint of a possible court martial if we did not carry on as ordered.

Of course it was not possible to reply to such a one-sided onslaught, he didn't sound like an ex-operational type, obviously he did not know Dave and I, whatever inference he implied, we never at any time had any thought of disobeying orders either at that moment, or any time afterwards. Our RAF records spoke for themselves, exemplary in every way. So much for our hearing, two

very disillusioned pre-second tour Wop/Ag's then made their exit, silently reflecting on the rewardless outcome, and the old aircrew motto "Press on Regardless".

As we slowly headed back in the direction of our Mess an ironic smile flitted across my face as yet another service innuendo abruptly came to mind, it seemed to fit the bill. More popularly used in those wartime days by the numerous other ranks, when it used to be said "They could do anything with you except make you pregnant" which in reality meant that it was a near impossibility to beat the system.

After almost two years as an active aircrew Sergeant I had turned full circle, and thus was back as a member of a OTU training course, a brain baffling decision, from my viewpoint, an affront to my experience. No doubt we had been officially selected by some chairborne wizard at Training Command, who, perhaps, did not think very highly of our NCO category or otherwise had made a slight "cock-up" in the preparation of that particular course make-up, and so had to find a few Wop/Ag's in a hurry. Either way, as far as we were concerned, it was a low blow, a typical official manoeuvre.