

Letters from Peter Billyeald to David Gunby author of “Sweeping the Skies A History of No. 40 Squadron RFC and RAF” (published 1995)

17th February 1987

Dear Mr Gunby

My attention has been drawn to your letter to a Reading newspaper regarding your desire to write a history of No. 40 Squadron.

I served with the squadron as a pilot from July 1940 to March 1941 – a very brief period in relation to its total history. Nevertheless, I am willing to offer you any help I can. When I joined the squadron as a Pilot Officer, it was based at Wyton in Huntingdonshire, in No.2 Group of Bomber Command, and was equipped with Bristol Blenheim Mk 1V aircraft. The squadron had previously been in France as part of the Air Component of the BEF. After the retreat from France, it continued to operate from Wyton against the German advance through the Low Countries and France; then against German shipping in the English Channel. During these operations the squadron suffered severe casualties.

When I joined, the squadron, it started to fly “intruder” type operations against enemy airfields in France, and concentrations of invasion shipping which the Germans were building up in various Channel ports. These operations were sometimes carried out by single aircraft using cloud cover, or in small formations with fighter escorts.

By August 1940 a change of bombing policy resulted in a switch to night operations – still against targets in France and the Low Countries, but occasionally into Germany.

On November 1st 1940 we ceased to operate Blenheims – they were apparently not considered effective as night bombers – and we re-equipped with Vickers Wellington 1Cs.

We became operational in Wellingtons on January 1st 1941, and the squadron was transferred to No.3 Group, Bomber Command. We now joined the strategic bomber force and operated entirely against German targets. I, personally, left the squadron at the end of March 1941, having completed my first operational tour of 30 sorties (18 on Blenheims and 12 on Wellingtons).

I hope this brief summary of my own personal contact with the squadron may be of interest to you. No doubt you will have access to many sources of information about the rest of the squadron’s history, but if you think I could be of further help, please do not hesitate to contact me again.

Yours sincerely

Peter Billyeald

April 1987

Dear Mr Gunby

40 Squadron, RAF

Thank you for your letter of 12th March. I am also very grateful to you for passing my address to Alec Greer; I have already heard from him and I was delighted to have a very full account of his life and adventures since we last saw each other 46 years ago.

I find it very difficult to recall very much about my 40 Squadron days but I hope the following scraps of information may be of some use to you.

My service with the squadron was from July 1940 to March 1941. Our base was Wyton and we also used the satellite airfield at Alconbury. The Station Commander was G. Capt McNeese ("Pussy") Foster; the Squadron CO, W. Cdr Dennis Barnett, followed by W. Cdr Davey. My Flight Commander ('A' Flight) S/Ldr Springhall, followed by S. Ldr Hugh Lynch-Blosse. Amongst the Admin Staff and ground crews, I remember with affection – F.O. Dutt (dentist), F.O. Morrison (doctor), F. Sgt (later F.O.) Charles Crimmin, Sgt Maund – he was N.C.O. i/c the ground crew of my aircraft and he often borrowed my car whilst we were on ops at night; I invariably found next day that the car's tank had been replenished with a mixture of 100 octane and M.T. fuel! Amongst the W.A.A.F contingent, I particularly remember L.A.C.W Margaret Watts-Russell. She was one of the M.T. drivers who used to take us from briefing-room out to dispersal point for ops. Although these girls were forbidden to fly as passengers, we often "smuggled" them aboard on our pre-ops test flights. I remember taking Margaret W-R for such a flight and she asked me if I could fly over her home which was somewhere not far from Wyton. I followed her directions and was quite surprised to find that her home was a mansion of "stately home" proportions!

A famous visitor to Wyton was F.Lt Evans (Major Evans of the "Escapers Club"). He was touring RAF stations to lecture aircrews on escape and evasion. The day after his lecture at Wyton, I was detailed to fly him to Stradishall in a Miles Magister.

Everyday life in the squadron was a mixture of excitement, tension, boredom and boisterous fun, according to whether the squadron was on stand-by or stood down. Accommodation at Wyton – a pre-war standard design station – was excellent. At Alconbury, we used commandeered property and huts, which were reasonably comfortable if somewhat cramping compared with the comfort and facilities of a purpose-built base.

So far as I can remember, food was plentiful and good. In fact, throughout the whole of my service in the RAF I considered myself well-fed and infinitely better-off, in this respect, than most of the civilian population. We certainly experienced some of the shortages suffered by the civilians – e.g. fresh eggs, which were served only to aircrew for their after ops meal.

The only recreational activities I can remember were visiting local pubs and accepting generous hospitality offered by many local inhabitants. I cannot recall taking part in any sporting activities, although these were available and indulged in enthusiastically by the ground staff.

Aircraft: The Blenheim, once we had mastered its foibles, was a delight to fly non-operationally. However, as an operational aircraft it was unsuitable for the tasks it was required to do. By day – even in tight formations – it was easy prey for enemy fighters unless escorted by our own fighters. By night, without the later-developed navigational equipment crews had great difficulty in locating their targets. It had no heating system and the crews suffered intense discomfort from the cold,

especially in winter even at the aircraft's modest maximum height. Both by day and night, the puny bomb-load of 1,000lbs was hardly devastating.

The Wellington, in my opinion was the finest twin-engined bomber in the Service. It was easy to fly; could take a lot of punishment; provided reasonable comfort for the crew, although the heating system was not very reliable.

Operational Experiences: I suppose every pilot remembers vividly his first operational sortie. Mine was on 9th July 1940. Several aircraft (Blenheims) were detailed to attack various enemy occupied airfields in northern France. Each aircraft flew independently, using cloud-cover for its security. My target was the airfield at Caen (Carpiquet). My total inexperience led me to assess the cloud-cover as adequate and I proceeded to what I and my navigator confidently believed was the target and dropped our bombs. Such was my haste to regain cloud-cover that the results were unobserved. I was pleasantly surprised not to be engaged by Flak and this later led me to wonder whether, in fact, we had bombed the target or a "dummy" airfield.

On my return to base, I was met on the tarmac by a worried C.O. who informed me that all the others – more experienced – pilots had aborted their sorties because they had assessed the cloud-cover as inadequate. I was mildly rebuked because the briefing had stressed the importance of "adequate" cloud-cover.

Shortly after this, daylight operations were abandoned and we commenced a series of night attacks, mainly on targets in enemy-occupied France, Belgium and Holland. Because of strict orders not to bomb unless the specific target could be identified, these sorties often had to be abandoned and our bombs jettisoned in the sea. These orders did not apply over Germany and if the specific target could not be identified, alternative "military" objectives e.g. searchlight batteries, airfields, etc. were "fair game".

Enemy opposition at that time was not formidable; night fighters were no more numerous or effective than were our own in the days before the development of airborne radar sets. Flak was usually more spectacular than dangerous, but searchlights were a menace and we were often "coned" by a concentration and feared a fighter attack as a consequence.

After our re-equipment with Wellingtons, our results and confidence improved. I recall a particularly successful raid on Hanover on the night of 10/11 February 1941. The weather was good so navigation was easy. The target was "plastered" and the squadron was congratulated by Group H.Q. on its results as revealed by subsequent photo-reconnaissance. Cameras were not carried by attacking aircraft until late in my tour – I note that the first time my aircraft was so equipped was on March 3rd 1941.

My last operational trip was my only raid on Berlin – an 8-hour stint in a Wellington! We were hit by Flak over the target but the damage was confined to the hydraulic system. Although we could lower the undercarriage manually, the landing flaps were inoperable. I consequently misjudged my approach and landing, ran out of runway and finished up by crashing into the back of the gun testing range. Fortunately, only minor injuries were suffered by two of the crew, but the aircraft was a write-off. As was the custom, I was given the clock from the instrument panel and I still have it. I enclose a snapshot of the wrecked Wellington (No. R1166), though I fear its quality may not be good enough for reproduction.

Morale: When I joined the squadron it had recently had a gruelling time fighting in the Battle of France and the Low Countries, and had suffered severe casualties. My impression was that great

efforts by the Station Commander ("Pussy" Foster) and the squadron C.O. (W, Cdr Barnett) had been made to restore morale and confidence. By the time I joined, these efforts had been largely successful. An example of G. Capt "Pussy" Foster's indulgence of his aircrews, which affected me personally, occurred in October 1940. My sister was about to be married in Nottingham and, as the squadron was on "stand down" on the appropriate date, I asked for 48 hours leave, intending to travel to Nottingham by road. The G. Capt must have heard of my leave application (made to the squadron C.O.) and he immediately offered me the Miles Magister which was kept on the Station for his personal use!

The re-equipment with Wellingtons was another morale booster after the difficulties, discomforts and frustration of operating Blenheims at night in winter conditions. Also, the two-month respite, whilst we trained on Wellingtons and awaited the arrival of our full complement of aircraft and crews, was welcome.

Tension among the aircrew was, I think, always there but varied according to individuals' character and philosophy. Undoubtedly, the worst times were the hours between briefing and take-off. This became more noticeable as one approached the end of an operational tour (30 ops).

I cannot recall ever being bored during my two spells with operational squadrons. Certainly there were periods of inactivity – bad weather prevented flying, for example, - but boredom never seemed to be a factor. I only experienced boredom after I had finished with regular flying and was "chair-borne" as a Staff Officer.

Fear, undoubtedly, was felt by all but a tiny minority of aircrew. Possibly characters such as Leonard Cheshire, Basil Embry, "Batchy" Atcheson, genuinely did not experience fear – but I wonder! Fear, however, was very, very rarely seen because, in my opinion, the greatest fear was the fear of showing fear. Nevertheless, to the trained eyes of R.A.F. Medical officers, fear – and excessive tension – were usually detectable and carefully monitored so that aircrews were rarely allowed to reach a point where they might endanger, unnecessarily, the lives of their colleagues.

Looking back on my time with 40 Squadron, I inevitably remember best the good times rather than the bad. Indeed, I believe that the good times far exceeded the bad. I recall it as a happy time, there was fun, there was flying and, above all, there was comradeship and that almost indefinable feeling usually called esprit de corps.

Well, David – if I may so address you – I hope that some of the above may be useful to you. I wish you well in your task and I hope, one day, to read the end-result.

Yours sincerely

Peter Billyeald

PS It may not be relevant, but my rank during the whole of my service with 40 Sqdn, was Pilot Officer. PB

1st June 1987

Dear David

Many thanks for your letter of 5th May. I am sorry I have delayed so long in replying. Also, thanks for the return of the photo; I am pleased to hear that it copied well. In case it is of interest, the serial number of the crashed aircraft was R1166.

I am sorry to hear that Denis Barnett was unable to tell you much about 40 Squadron. However, as you say, his subsequent career in the R.A.F no doubt made those days seem insignificant to him. Nevertheless, I – and I am sure many others – regarded him with great affection and respect as a first-class squadron commander.

Yes, I remember George Hill, but not Jim Higgins. Bob Batt had been killed a day or so before I joined the squadron and he was replaced as “A” Flight Commander by Eric Springhall, who remained until November 1940 and was then, I think, posted to Honington. Roy Arnold followed Eric but only remained with us a few weeks before going to 9 Squadron, presumably as C.O. I have an entry in my log book of a flight to Honington “to see ‘Springers’ and W/Cdr Arnold” – this was on March 11th 1941.

I was most interested in your information about the Watts-Russell family and their connection with N.Z. I do not, however, connect Margaret with Ilam, Derbyshire. I think the “stately home” to which she directed me on that flight was somewhere in the Northamptonshire or Oxfordshire area.

I do remember the name Winstone-Smith but cannot recall anything about him. I don’t think he was in “A” Flight. Another name I have recalled is that of “Tubby” Wills; he was a great chum of Hugh Lynch-Blosse, so you may have heard about him from Hugh.

I was saddened to read the other day of the death of Air Vice Marshall S.W.B (Paddy) Menaul. He was a Flight Commander in 15 Squadron at Wyton during my time there.

I see from my log book that S/Ldr P.B Wood took over “A” Flight of 40 Squadron when Hugh Lynch-Blosse was shot down in March 1941. I cannot recall anything about him, but I am fairly sure that he was posted to the squadron as a flight commander and not posted from within it.

I am pleased to have been of some help to you. Please do not hesitate to approach me again if you want any more information about anything you may dig up which relates to my time in the squadron.

With kind regards

Yours Peter