My WW II in the RAF

William Cruickshank

Wartime RAF

After the blitz things had settled down and began to be normal again. I stayed in the same job, but in Hays Wharf. I was to be called up and it was a sort of limbo time until this happened, which it did sometime in 1941. The call-up orders were to go to some labour exchange where I found three queues - Army, Navy, Air Force. I had no idea except to avoid the Army, so on the basis that an uncle of mine was a tug skipper on the Thames and he owned a houseboat moored in Benfleet Creek, - and a couple of my cousins were already in it - I settled for the Navy.

I queued for about an hour until my turn came at the window, when the clerk behind the window said,

"I'm closed now. Get in another queue".

'To hell with him', I thought; 'If the Navy doesn't want me that's their loss', and I joined the Air Force queue. After some delay I had my orders to go to some centre - I forget where - for a medical etc., during which the doctor (or whatever he was) said,

"I'm sorry, but your sight is too poor, you will not be able to fly".

I nearly passed out with the shock to know that I might have had to ..... that was not why I joined the Air Force.

In the late summer of 1941 I got my marching orders to go to Cardington where we were kitted out - as far as I remember - with two lots of clothes, a kitbag and a greatcoat which we were told was nothing to do with the Air Force, but was some sort of gift from something in history. Then we were sent to Blackpool for basic training, which took six weeks. This meant marching up and down the back streets of Blackpool watched by umpteen holiday makers who had nothing better to do. Once or twice we were given cups of tea by local housewives - probably against regulations, but who cared? We were billeted in boarding houses together with holiday makers and it was rumoured that our rations were used to augment the meals of the paying guests; obviously untruths because it meant that Blackpool landladies were less than honest and surely that was not so?

We were taught to march in time, turn without falling over and to shoot, with many periods of PT in between. This was all outdoors unless it rained, when we went into the Winter Gardens and drilled there. All the time sweets were still not rationed and there were queues at the shops for bars of chocolate. Cigarettes were unrationed but in short supply and the smokers would go from one queue to another for their fags: I was glad that I didn't smoke.

After the training period we were posted to various RAF stations and I drew Lossiemouth which turned out to be so far up in Scotland I expected to see Eskimos. Instead I got a hutful of Scots, mostly from Glasgow, speaking a completely incomprehensible language. It took me some time to realise it was English. Eventually I got used to the 'Fit yer deing' and 'The wains aye greetin' and so on, and was able to communicate. I was the only Englishman in the hut but I had no bother from the Scots. Most of them never seemed to change from their underwear, in bed or out; most got drunk whenever possible and, as the latrines were some distance away, there were two large buckets at the end of the hut which were soon filled and overflowing every night. I also got used to the smell, the coughing, smoking, wheezing and cursing everyone and everything..

It was the coldest place I ever knew - and I mean COLD - for winter started shortly after I arrived. The routine was that some NCO yelled into the hut about 6 am to get up, which we did very reluctantly. We were then dragged out onto the parade square to line up while the canned version of the Air Force March was played and the role was called. At times the east wind was so cold that it was difficult to breathe, but eventually the parade finished and we could get to breakfast. The thing which stands out in my mind was a little Scots civil engineer who used to walk around in a kilt and a fancy jacket, oblivious to the cold. At that time the cookhouse was run by men and the cooks wore rubber boots as they stood in the swill running about their feet. Much of the food was cooked outside in big urns, and when it blew the wind drove sand everywhere, including into the urns, so most of our meals had some sand content. It snowed often, and one night we were dragged out at 2am to dig our way out to the town as the road was blocked. We were given shovels and dug snow. It made not the slightest difference, for every spadeful we moved was immediately refilled. After two hours of completely fruitless effort we abandoned the digging, were sent back and given a rum ration - the one and only time.

I was an erk, an aircraftman 2, the lowest form of life. I was given a job working in the armoury, helping the two armourers who were regulars. At that time there was

a vast difference between the regulars who thought themselves the élite and us, the wartime airforce, who did not want to be there anyway, so we had no time for each other. It was all pretty boring for there was nothing really to do. Our station was an OTU - Operational Training Unit - which meant that the aircrews, after initial training, were sent to Lossiemouth to train to go on operations. We had Wellington bombers, which were two-engined aircraft made of aluminium struts covered in canvas. They carried about two tons of bombs in all. The trained aircrews were sent out on mock missions before being posted to operational stations. While with us they were very green, getting used to handling the aircraft and working as a crew, but it was quite dangerous for the station was near to high hills and subject to bad weather and we had many fatal crashes - about one every two weeks - due to the inexperience of the crews. When the 1000 bomber raids were happening (I suppose it was a propaganda stunt to make us feel we were doing something against Germany) to get the number of bombers together they took all our aircraft that were serviceable, put in the green crews and more or less told them to follow the one in front. Several of these crews were shot down. Then there was the time when we carried out raids on Norway, on Stavanger against the German invaders. Suddenly bomber squadrons were landing on our field to be refuelled and 'bombed-up' (we were the nearest station to Norway). We only had the two armourers and they were overwhelmed, so we erks were brought in to help. The bombs were loaded onto trolleys and we were given cans of detonators and ten seconds training and left to arm the bombs. We also had to arm armour-piercing bombs which had a large detonator with a little propeller fitted to it.

"Just turn the propellor to make sure it is free."

So with gay abandon we spun the propeller and fitted in the detonator. Until one of the armourers saw us.

"What the hell are you doing?"

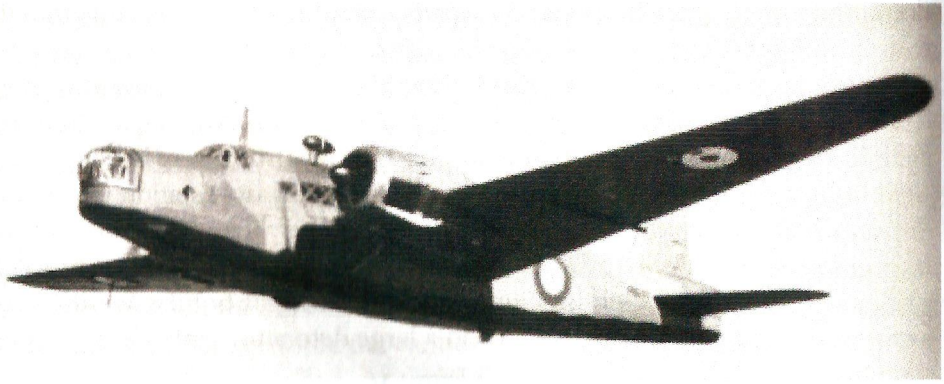
"Turning the propellor like you said"

"You bloody fools, just turn it, once or twice, if you turn it too much you'll set the bloody thing off!"

We were as equally incompetent at defusing the bombs which were not used. We had a tool much like a pair of tweezers with a spring to hold the legs open, and

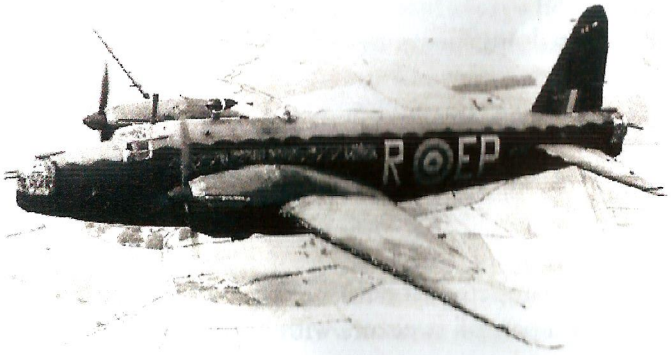
this was inserted in the fuse of the bomb, gripping inside a raised ring. Then the fuse was pulled out and put back in the can. One day I was doing this job when the tweezers did not catch properly, and as the det. was extracted the tweezers opened and flung it up in the air. I watched it slowly fall, petrified, for if it should hit a rock or one of the bombs it would explode and the string of bombs would go up, blowing us all to kingdom come. By sheer luck it landed on sand.

But there was a sad outcome to the bombing. Because of the rush and chaos the bombs were mixed up when fitting them to the aircraft, and low level attackers should have been fitted with delay bombs and high level attacks with instant, but they were not and the mix meant the low level planes got instant bombs which blew them out of the air. I do not know how many were lost because of this, but certainly some were.



Wellington Bomber

The training planes at Lossiemouth were very similar to this



This excitement was unusual; as a rule the most exciting thing was to see a rabbit running amongst the bombs, when the local dogs would chase it. The rabbit would hide under the bombs and the erks would move umpteen of them to help the dogs ..... or we would get a stupid job like checking thousands of hand grenades to see that no dets. were fitted by mistake; of course they were not, but it occupied us for days in a cold dark Nissen hut.

We learned a few things, like how to steal coal at night to keep our hut stove going. It was tricky as the coal was painted white to show up if it had been disturbed Other useful pursuits were how to make cigarette lighters from cannon shells or model aircraft from perspex.

We had the practical jokers who would creep along the hut roof of some other lot of erks and pour urine down the chimney (it gave off an awful smell) or drop live rounds down the stack, to explode in the stoveblow the lid off and shower the red hot coals everywhere ..... What Fun!!?

It was about this time that WAAFs began to appear at the station. The first noticeable difference was in the cookhouse where they were employed. Suddenly the place was cleaned up. No longer did the cooks stand around in swill with rubber boots. All was now clean and dry. I do not remember the food getting any better, but it was plentiful and edible and we were better off than the civilians as rationing got tighter.

I was now put on the bombing range which consisted of a large field with a target point in the centre and at two points at the edge were observation huts. We had a sort of telescope thing which we sighted on the bomb burst and between the two huts the nearness of the bomb to the target could be worked out. It soon became clear that the target was the safest place on the range. The bombs were small practice bombs of either smoke or flash, depending whether we were working days or nights. Our main job became one of putting out fires in the surrounding brush. This we had to do with long-handled beaters which we bashed down on the flames. Mostly it worked. There was one time when the cost of war was brought home to me suddenly when one of the aircraft, practising bombing was in trouble because the flash bomb somehow got caught up in the chute and blew up in the aircraft, tearing it apart. The aircraft crashed in the hills ,but the next day we were sent out to look for the bodies of two of the crew. They had fallen from the aircraft before it crashed. We found them on the scrub by the range, lying down on their backs, their bodies split open. We had to zip them into body bags,

which meant forcibly bending legs and arms from their rigor to get them into the bags; not a pleasant job.

Then when the WAAFs came we found them to be drivers as well as cooks, so now at night we had a WAAF driver bringing us out to the range.. We had a rough Scot's sergeant in charge of our shift of four men and the driver. The girls were his immediate target, and of the several we had there was only one with whom he did not have his wicked way, and she was known as the station bike. I had a very low opinion of the WAAFs in general after that.

The area was quite beautiful, with a glorious coastline, and the little town became overwhelmed with the flood of new recruits. The inhabitants were shocked with the WAAFs, who went to the local pubs and drank as much as the men, for there the tradition was that women did NOT go into pubs .... but not any more.

Then, to my astonishment and relief, an electrician's course I had applied for at Blackpool came through and I was posted to Henlow for 16 weeks: back to civilization where the language was understandable, and fairly near to home, to which I managed to escape on the occasional weekend. It was not allowed (in theory) and at the main stations there were always the 'redcaps' on the lookout, so I took my bike with me on one of the unofficial jaunts and was then able to escape detection without problems.

By now WAAFs had become a normal feature of the stations, for single women were being conscripted and they basically had the choice of going in the forces or joining the Land Army, helping on the farms. Married women were not called up, but many went into factories and workshops doing the job of the men who were now serving in the forces. At Henlow we had examples of the way they affected normal routine ..... the first thing we found was that many normal electrical terms had to be altered. For example there is a switch with two knobs known as a twin knob switch. Because this caused such gusts of laughter from the WAAFs it was altered to *twin toggle* switch. Another item which caused chaos in the classes for a few minutes - women were taught separately from the men - was the business of removing the blackout screens from the windows in winter. The sergeant would open the class door and yell "Blackouts down" and go. The girls called their knicker issue - dark blue - their blackouts, so you can see the reason for the ensuing laughter.

At the end of the course I was posted to West Malling, a much better and warmer place than Lossie. We arrived late in the dark, with the cookhouse shut. We were greeted by an officer, a flight lieutenant, who said,

"Sorry I haven't got my sword and epaulets, but welcome to West Malling".

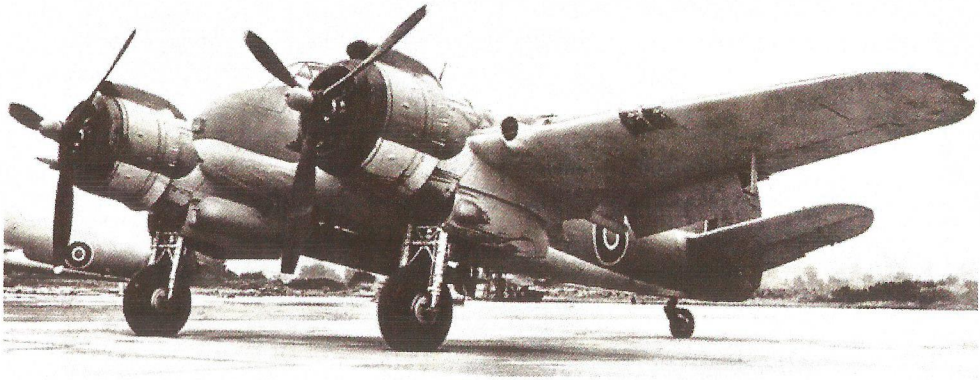
We concluded he was yet another of the nutters who ran the Air Force, like the sergeant - a short fat florid self important idiot who - when asked on morning parade by the officer,

"All present and correct, sergeant?"

would reply

"All present and correct sir, except the absentees".

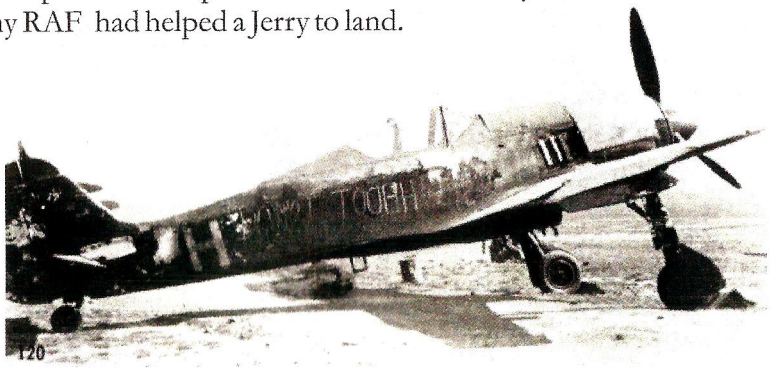
The squadron to which I was attached had Beaufighters which were night fighters, and maintaining these became my job. There were times in the winter, at night, in the cold when I was trying to make my fingers work to sort out some tiny undercarriage switch I wished to be elsewhere, but all in all it was a cushy job.



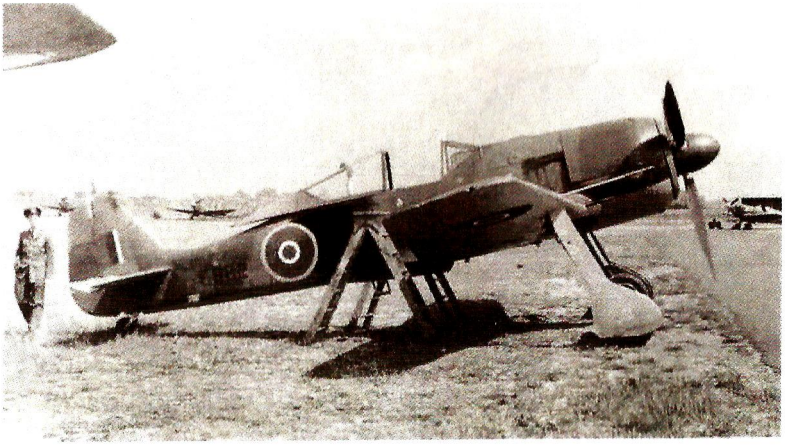
Bristol Beaufighter

Original plane for 232 Squadron, West Malling - later replaced with Mosquitos

One of the tasks I had in turn was to operate the portable floodlight at night. This was a big trailer containing a diesel generator and a powerful floodlight which sat at the end of the runway where the planes touched down, and my job was to look for the aircraft to flash its landing lights, then switch on the flood until it passed me then off again as quickly as possible. One night I was at this when an aircraft flashed and I switched on the light expecting one of the Beaufighters. Instead a strange plane rolled by with the swastika painted on it. It turned out that the pilot had got his bearings all wrong after making an attack in the Thames. The RAF guards got to him and he surrendered. Next day I had a look at the plane, as did the rest of the bods, and we were astounded at the beautiful finish of the aircraft. All the rivets were smoothed flush with the bodywork and polished, whereas with ours all the rivet heads were proud. That must have put his speed up several mph. I've a photo of the plane. It must have been my brief moment in history for not many RAF had helped a Jerry to land.



During the night of 16/17th April 1943 Fw. Otto Bechtold landed his Fw190A-4/U8, W.nr.7155, II/SKG10, in error at West Malling. It later became Pe882 with added British RAF roundels (below). This is the plane I 'landed'.

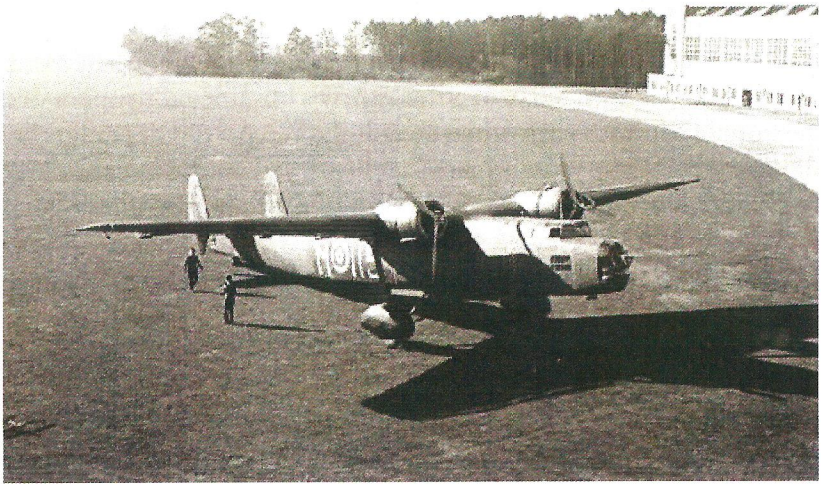


Another task which I am sure was quite against rules was to carry out daily inspections of the aircraft to be sure all the electrics worked. Which was all above board, but where we deviated, when the WAAFs became radio operators, was to work in cooperation with each other, so that the WAAF did her radio checks and carried out our daily inspections on some planes and we did her radio checks, on the others which meant things were done in half the time, giving us longer breaks.

I was able to skip home on the occasional weekend, mostly by hitching a lift along the A20 which was nearby. Despite severe petrol rationing there always seemed enough traffic, and most of the drivers were sympathetic to servicemen. Once or twice I had a lift with a fellow whose son was a Jap POW, so he was not too happy about that.

Other than the floodlight incident life was fairly ordered, I worked on the Beaufighters, then later on Mosquitos, For a short period we had a squadron of Boston bombers with us. These were experimental in a night fighter role. They were fitted with a powerful searchlight in the nose, the whole of the bomb bay was filled with batteries and the idea was that the Boston, accompanied by two Hurricanes searched, with its radar, for enemy aircraft and when an enemy was in range the pilot would switch on the light, illuminating the jerry and the two Hurricanes would shoot it down. This was the theory which some nut thought up. In practice what happened was that the pilot would switch on his light, and the enemy bomber's gunner or an accompanying fighter would blast the Boston out of the sky. We lost quite a few pilots that way until the powers that be gave it up.

The 'Boston' American bomber



Handley Page Harrow
My first taste of flying - from West Malling to Bradwell Bay

Towards the end of the year the squadron was moved to Bradwell Bay, Essex. It was a most dreary isolated place miles away from civilization, on the coast and surrounded by defences. The little town was in the coastal defence area and all the residents had special passes. To get there from West Malling we were flown in a Harrow, a transport plane. It was a monoplane which took about a dozen troops ... and was it basic! It so happened that it was the first time I had flown, and I was a bit taken aback when the pilot put his bike aboard leaning against the lines of control wires which ran the length of the plane. They were some sort of Bowden cables, no fancy stuff here. The plane's maximum speed was some 90 mph. We had a Hurricane escort, and it had to fly constant circles around us as no way could he have flown as slowly as we did. Then, not long after the move, I had another posting, again in response to a course application for class 1 *spark*, and found myself at Melksham, near Bath, for another 16 week course. The local town was beginning to fill up with Yanks, who seemed to spend their time lounging about in the streets, sitting on the walls or lying on the pavements. I was not impressed with them. They were useful for hitching lifts in their jeeps, which they drove with gay abandon, but that's about all the contact we had with them. After the course I was sent to Cosford, near Wolverhampton, to train as an instructor. As part of the training, and absolutely nothing to do with electricity they put us on an obstacle course, crawling under nets and belly wriggling across a river etc. Not my cup of tea at all. However for the local kids it was a delight, for when we finished they took over and whipped around the course for sheer joy.

At the end of the course I was kept on for a while as an instructor and given the glorious promotion to corporal, but it was not long before I was again shifted, this time to Gosport, a station we shared with the Navy, and I was given a squad of sailors to train. The squadron was used for drogue towing: that's to say they towed long tubes of material for the naval gunners to fire at for practice, that's where the tie up with the navy came into it. This was early 1944, and there were rumours of the coming invasion of France. It began to become more that a rumour when we found masses of tanks and yanks lining all the streets in Gosport and Portsmouth. It seemed ridiculous to me to be messing about pulling drogues when the real thing was about to happen. I applied for transfer to the Tactical Air Force, the invasion force, but nothing came of it. About the only thing I learned there at Gosport, was how to sling a hammock.

Then I got another posting, this time overseas. I was given seven days leave, during which time I became aquainted with the scares of the buzzbombs and V1s which landed in London day and night. These were both terrifying weapons, but the V1s were the worst for when you heard them, the loud pulsting throb of a crude jet engine, you knew that when the noise stopped the bomb was dropping at that point. The V2's were more destructive, but you did not hear them coming, just a great explosion if you were unlucky. I was glad to leave that, but worried for my parents, but shortly afterwards they moved to Swanley, Kent, and shared a house with my aunt.

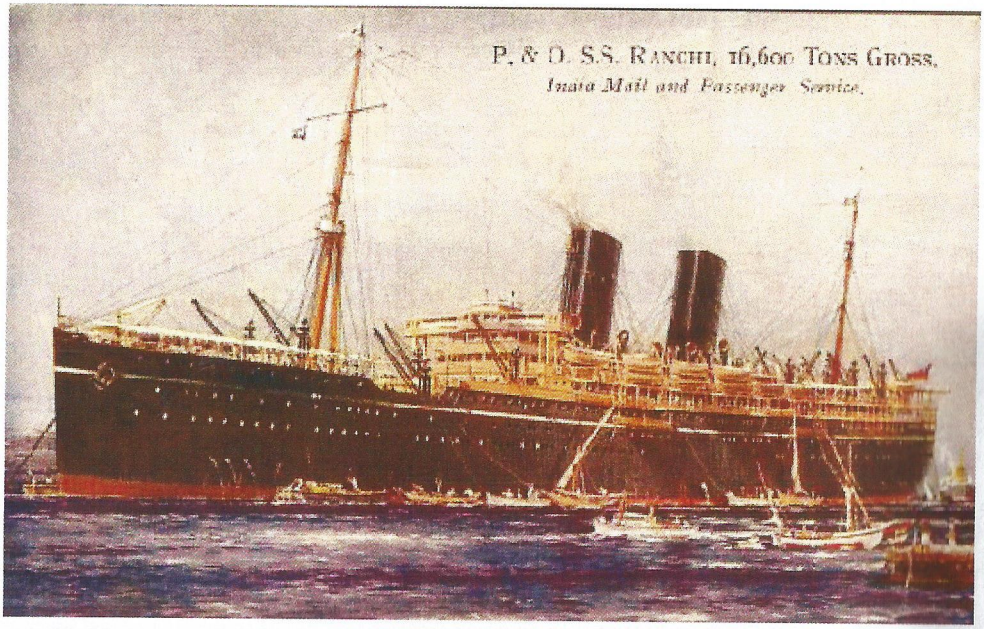
I then had to report to a depot in London . We were put on a night train to Greenock in Scotland, so I was not going to France. Instead I went aboard the Ranchi, a 16000 ton ship of the BI line. It had been a passenger ship on the India run before the war, there being a license plaque which stated 350 crew AND 300 passengers. This trip there were 2000 of us, a mixed bunch of Raf, Navy and army personnel. It was January, and we set sail in typical January weather. It was cold and rough as we headed out into the Atlantic. We were in a convoy guarded by a few frigates, and I was put down below in what had been a hold, with a hammock. The boat nearly stood on its beam ends with the rough sea, which washed over the bow as the ship dug its way through the water. All the so called sailors, who had just finished boasting to us about their prowess, were sick and the place was a mess of vomit. I collected my blanket and went up on deck and stayed there on top of a chest of lifebelts. There I stayed for a week, going down below to grab the occasional food. I was unaffected by the swell, and as no one ordered me to go below I stayed put. It was cold, but at least it was fresh air. The little frigates disappeared under the waves and reappeared streaming water, it must have been hell aboard them.

Emergency Landing, April 1943

On 16 April 1943 a single-engined aircraft was heard approaching the airfield. The plane circled twice, then landed. Station staff, assuming it was a Defiant low on fuel, sent a crash crew to meet the pilot, but on arriving, they discovered a German Focke-Wulf FW-190. The pilot, Feldwebel Otto Bechtold, immediately gave himself up to the ground crew. A second aircraft landed but realising his mistake, the pilot attempted to take off, under fire, and was injured as the plane crashed on the airfield. A third FW-190 undershot the runway, crashing into an orchard.

The serviceable aircraft was flown to Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough the next day for detailed examination, and was eventually repainted in RAF livery, designated as a prototype or experimental aircraft.

The German pilots revealed that they had become lost in thick fog, thought they were over France, and had been directed to the airstrip by a searchlight at Detling



SS Ranchi 1925-1953, scrapped in Newport. It was used in war as an armed merchant cruiser and troopship. It was equiped with 8 guns of 6 inch and 2 guns of 3 inch. It took also Dutch immigrants after the war.

We eventually arrived in Malta, to warm sun, calm seas and a harbour littered with sunken ships and bombed buildings, but for the first time we enjoyed eating proper meals, and the food was good. We had white bread, which we had not seen for years, and quite a few things which had disappeared at home. By now, although we had not been told, we had a pretty good idea we were headed for India and Jap country. All the bods had recovered from sea sickness now and littered the decks smoking and playing cards. We had some distractions. There were two guns mounted aft, and the naval gunners used to throw a barrel in the sea and use it as a target to practice with the guns. Their success rate in hitting the barrel gave us little confidence, the barrel was as safe as the target had been on the range at Lossie.

We went through the Suez, not long reopened, which was an experience, as was being caught in the middle of a swarm of locusts, like huge grasshoppers, which we shovelled up off the deck. Once out of the Suez we lost sight of land and at the end of a month's voyage entered a port and saw the sign "Welcome to India" We were in Bombay.

After a few days at a holding depot in Bombay I was sent to Delhi, Palam airfield. The journey by train was an experience. It took three days by very slow train. There was a cookhouse coach which supplied us meals when the train was stopped on sidings, and fields around which served our basic needs. The coaches had bunks fitted which were adequate, but sleep was not easy in the heat, although we travelled with the doors open. Eventually we arrived at the airfield, and were put into tents. I immediately contracted a bout of dysentry, which put me in the camp hospital for 5 days. It was cool with plenty of drinks, and, when I could eat, reasonable food. After that we were allocated to huts and found to our amazement that we had servants. That is to say someone made the beds, kept the place clean and also did the washing. A cha wallah supplied tea all day long from an urn heated with charcoal, and someone else sold us fruit, which all had to be washed in pinky pani, (water with permanganate of potash) to kill any germs.

The squadron was of Liberators, American 4-engined bombers, but we were in Transport command and the aircraft were devoid of armaments and used as troop or goods carriers between India and Australia. As usual our job was to maintain the aircraft, which became no joke in the summer period when working upside down in some awkward space, with the temperature in the cockpit showing 150 and sweat running into ones eyes, at the same time being plagued by tiny black storm flies.

Liberator

I had a shock when I found out that I was expected to fly in the aircraft after they were serviced to set up various controls, the generators and the auto pilot. There were four generators, one with each engine and they had to be balanced for output, which could only be done in the air, and the auto pilot the same. This and some other controls were electronic using valves, and they were not too reliable. The autopilot controlled the aircraft flight pattern, by controlling the sensitivity of the instrument, so that the aircraft could be allowed to answer slowly or quickly to any difference in level or change of weight etc. Once switched in , the autopilot took over and the pilot of the plane could only overide it with difficulty. The pilots hated us setting up the control, as we could make the plane wander all over the place, but that was too bad, we had to do our job.

The pilots were young and not very responsible. To be about 20 and be in charge of an aircraft costing the present day equivalent of a couple of million pounds was something and it went to the heads of a few. I had a friend there who was a brilliant portrait artist, his line of chat to the WAAFs was,

"Can I draw your portrait?"

and as he could his line worked more often than not. He was a spark, as I, and one day while he was doing his routine checks in the air the pilot decided to *shoot up* the airfield, diving the plane at some hut on the perimeter. As he went to pull out of his dive, two engines cut out, and he crashed, killing all. That was stupidity, as when we were given a new version of the aircraft, with one high rudder instead of the normal two. The pilot I was with went chasing clouds because he had heard that in turbulence the rudder became unstable, and had collapsed in some cases .... so he decided to find out with me aboard! Luckily the kite held together.

There was another nail biting occasion when I was crouched down in the lower deck checking the generators when I noticed flashes of red. It turned out to be the hydraulic oil (coloured red) leaking out of the system and a shaft of sunlight through a small fuselage hole showed it up. As the hydraulics controlled most of the aircraft functions it was a bit serious. I told the pilot. We were in a bit of a fix for the landing gear and flaps were all hydraulically controlled, so no oil, no brakes, flaps or landing gear. The wheels would not come down, so we had to wind them down by hand, an emergency procedure. Having done so one of the wheels would not register in the cockpit indicator as being down and locked, but it looked ok. Flaps came down partly, so we flew around for two hours to exhaust the fuel then had to chance it. Our survival depended on whether the fitters who

had serviced the plane had filled the emergency hydraulics for the brakes, and that we did not know until we tried them. So we came in at some high speed and hit the ground with a bit of a thump. The pilot cut the engines and braked, praying, for if they did not work our next stop was a pile of rubble at the end of the runway where work was going on. As I am here today the brakes did work and just stopped us in time.

There was another time when we were sent to some other part of India to pick up spare parts, an American-run airfield. We landed, to be greeted by a large yank who asked,

"Whats up, you got motor trouble?"

We told him we'd come for spares, and he said that there was no one there as it was the weekend, stores were shut ..... typical - so we prepared to return only to find we could not start one engine; the starter motor had packed in. The pilot would not chance taking off on three engines, so we had the choice of staying until rescued or using our initiative, which meant breaking into the stores, finding a starter motor and fitting it. Which was all very well, but only a fitter and myself had any idea what to do. We broke into the store , which was unlocked, and found a spare motor. We then had the task of undoing all the pipes and tubes around the engine, blocking the oils with lumps of rag to stop losing the fluids. We had the minimum of tools but managed to get the motor changed and all the bits back.
To our amazement the engine started with no bother and we were soon airborne. Then the pilot said,

"I've never landed one of these in the dark", as it now was.

But it was his big chance, now or never, and he did well enough. Wonder we weren't court-martialed or something, but we heard no more about it.

We were some few miles from Delhi, and went there when we could as there was a good centre for the troops in the Wavell centre. It had good food and a marvellous swimming pool. We usually went by any means possible, sometimes on the motor cycle of a despatch rider who was one of our cliique. He would sit on the tank, with one of us on the seat and the third on the pillion or carrier - a bit hair-raising but it worked.

We nearly created an international incident with the swimming pool, for one of our mates was a Jamaican from Liverpool. He had had an adventurous war in that he was a merchant navy greaser, someone who worked down in the engine room and prop shaft, oiling and greasing the moving bits. He had been torpedoed three times, and escaped, but the third time was a bit too much, so he joined the RAF as being safer. He had a bit of a shock, for he thought that as in the merchant navy, he could leave if he wanted. He found he could not, and ended up in India.. Back to this incident. We went with him to the pool and the Indian attendants told us he could not come in as it was whites only—it made no odds that he was one of us. We did our nuts, but it was to no avail. It seemed crazy .... Indians preventing a black man from going in the pool, but there it was - not the only strange thing about the Jewel of the East.

At first the culture shock took some getting used to. The poverty was at a level I had never imagined. The group of women and children who followed us whenever we went into the town, constantly wailing "baksheesh, sahib" was very off-putting. These people had nothing, as far as I could see, but the rags they dressed in and a hoard of bits of old bread tucked in these rags. All were barefooted. There were beggars galore apart from the followers, often badly deformed, dragging themselves about the pavements. I found out later that many of these unfortunates were maimed at birth by their parents, in order that they would become objects of pity and thus better beggars.

They belonged to the untouchable caste, and were allowed only to become beggars or sweepers. The caste system was difficult to believe, but if the shadow of an untouchable should fall across a table where the Brahmins (The highest caste) were eating, they would throw away the food. The system created many difficulties. For instance if a high caste man or woman decided to become a doctor, they automatically became outcaste because they would have to deal with all other castes. If someone was injured in the street, no one would touch him as he could be of a lower caste, so he would be left until the ambulance turned up. The "Song of India" never stopped. This was the sound of spitting, as much of the population chewed beetlenut and constantly spat out the red juice. There was the nonsense of the sacred cows. White cows are sacred which means they must not be harmed, but at the same time no one has to look after them. These scraggy creatures would find their way to the local market and try to eat anything from the food stalls. The stall keeper dared not push them away, so he spent most of the day placing himself between the cow and the stall. There was no health service for the poor and when they were ill they lay in corners in the street and

they lived or died, no one cared. The towns' poor areas were crowded, with such diseases as TB being rife. We have been blamed as oppressors by politicals, but as far as I could see we were very much better than the Indian employers. I had to go to an acid factory to get supplies, and I found walkways between the huge acid vats covered in slippery acid. Remember the workers were barefoot. I said to the owner who was with me "What happens if a worker slips into the acid?" Plenty more Indians" he replied .... and he was Indian. Life was worth nothing.

There was terrible poverty, lack of hygiene, disease all around us. Everywhere was crowded, any transport was overloaded. The health service was poor or non existent, cripples dragged themselves about in the streets. If they were lucky they had some sort of wood platform with wheels to help them get about. We only saw the town areas in which we were allowed to go - a lot was out of bounds. In Calcutta there were no-go areas, but we chanced it in a lorry to have a quick look at some of it and in one area they had women in cages, who were prostitutes.

Then there were the snakes and scorpions. We banged out our boots religiously each morning, because small varieties of snake were inclined to bed down in the warm boots. Scorpions we had no fear of because we could stamp on them, but if we were unlucky enough to encounter one while in the shower, it was *get out quick.*

Later there was the *Quit India* movement to get the British out. We came face to face with this on one occasion. My friend the despatch rider had been told to take a couple of warrant officers to the station in Delhi. He asked me to go with him, and we had a three ton truck to use, so the W/Os were put in the back with their kit, and myself in the front. The front of the lorry had wire grills around the windows as protection against stone throwing, so we went on our way. All was quiet until we reached the gate to the old part of the town. Through the gate we found the road covered in loose bricks, obviously to halt us, and down the side streets were crowds of people waiting for us to stop, yelling and screaming. We, by a stroke of luck, kept going. I said to the W/Os,

"Get your pistols ready"

"Oh, they are packed in our kit"

was the answer. We bumped and skidded along until we were in sight of the station, which was protected by a squad of Welsh Fusiliers who waited until we

had passed - by now we were being chased by the crowd - then they opened fire on the mob, who dispersed. Having got rid of the W/Os we came back a different way where all was quiet.

In general the food was all right, mostly some variation of McConochies, a tinned stew, but the Indians had different food, mostly curries. These were better than ours so often we went to the Indian table for our meals. It was the practice of the men to have the meal then afterwards to get a mug of tea and a slice of bread and jam to take back to the billet. But there were kitehawks who used to sit on the top of the cookhouse in ambush, and as we emerged from the shelter of the cookhouse they would swoop down from behind and try to grab the bread as they passed. They folded a wing and grabbed with their feet; they were very expert at it. We had to be quick not to be robbed by them. There were also the scavenging dogs, and for fun the lads would throw pieces of bread or whatever out into the open to see who was fastest - the dogs or birds. Sometimes they would tie two pieces of food, one each end of a piece of string. This caught a bird one end and a dog the other, or two birds, all struggling to keep hold of the food against the opposition.

Heat was an enemy, giving us the skin condition of prickly heat. Our only relief was during the rainy season to stand naked outside the hut and get drenched in the cool rain. But the relief did not last long. Winter was a great time, for it was cool night and morning and warm in the day, but it lasted for only a couple of months, then back to the 90s or more.

I was given a period of hill leave, and had to get to Talli Tal, up in the Himalaya foothills. It meant a train ride with two or three changes, the last of which was in complete darkness. I found a compartment door and crawled in. It was full as far as I could sense, but I went to sleep on the floor. When I woke in the daylight I was in a carriage full of officers. They said nothing, but I changed to another coach as soon as I could. From the end of the line a lorry took us some twenty miles up into the hills. It was a magical place after the heat of Delhi, a mountain resort on the side of a lake.

Here lived some of the Brits who had positions in India, and their lifestyle was not of our world. One day I came across a sedan chair being carried by four Indians, all dressed in medieval knee breeches and decorated tail coats, carrying an elderly woman, a Brit, down the mountainside from a villa way up the hill, to which house there was no road, just a track up which all supplies were carried by

these Indian bearers. There were many more like her. We played football against the British college, which was utterly posh, like Eton, and full of the offspring of these British residents. They had no time for the British servicemen. In fact the wife of the Indian Viceroy had said that the two lowest forms of life in India were the water buffalo and the British troops .... which endeared her no end to the same troops, who were dying to save her skin and those of her ilk.

During that hill leave the Atom bomb was dropped on the Japs, and that ended the war and consequently ended the need for us to be there.

There was a system of demobilisation, whereby we were divided into groups depending on our service etc. and each group was given a number. When your number was due a notice was put up to say report to Bombay for return to Blighty. Now that was all well and good, but the only trouble is no one knew when the numbers were likely to come up - could have been tomorrow or a year's time. It was not good enough and caused considerable unrest until one day we were told that there would be a strike and everyone was to stop working as from the next morning. We did, and it caused consternation. Firstly our sergeants told us to get to work, to no avail; then an officer, then the C.O himself - all in vain. After a couple of days the C in C, some Air Marshall or other, turned up. We were all ordered out to the parade ground and there this almighty man told us that we were mutineers and that if we did not go back to work we would all be disciplined.

We knew by now that this strike was all over India and it would need a big prison to hold us. When the Air Marshall first appeared we were ordered to stand to attention - not us, we were on strike - and the man nearly had a fit. Some brave soul stood up and said we were going to stay on strike until we had some satisfaction regarding when we would return home. Another few days passed and suddenly 3 MP s (members of Parliament) turned up and spoke to us at a meeting. They were sensible, explained the situation, that you could not dump millions of men suddenly back home, it had to be orderly, but in future they would let us know when we would go back. The CO then had a word. He promised no one would be victimised and that in future anyone with a grievance could walk straight in to see him, without formality. So we went back to work. We heard later that the spokesman and anyone else taking a leading roll did get arrested in secret, but no one knew what the outcome had been.

There was another incident. We had built a new cookhouse as the old one was a disgrace, but after being built it stood there for weeks waiting for someone or other of the heirarchy to come and officially open it. Someone decided to

circumnavigate that, and set fire to the old building. There was no alternative and the new cookhouse opened the next day. This was in August 1945 and we still had quite a time to go. To fill in the time some of the lads started a concert party. I joined in, but being completely talentless I was the effects, responsible for the noises etc.. There were a few who were very good at their roles in this, I have long forgotten their names, but I am sure some went on to be professionals. We did quite well, even broadcasting from Delhi on India Radio. We were asked if we would form a touring party to fly to various stations, but our pianist refused to fly, so that was the finish of our international effort.

I finally got the boat in the June of 46. Once again it was an old BI ship, serving as a hospital ship, whereas a mob of Italian POWs were put on the Andes, a fast modern liner of 26000 tons. We were a bit niggled about that, but we heard that the route taken by that boat went through a hell of a storm, whereas we had a quiet passage, so we were mollified a little.

I came back to the UK in August and it was cold. I queued up for my demob. suit somewhere and was once again a civilian and had to find myself a job. The firm I had worked for previously had offered me my job back, at the same price as when I left -some 25 shillings a week, about as low as it could get. I told them to stuff it, So much for the returning hero type thing!

And that was my finish as far as the RAF was concerned.

Appendix

London John

After my discharge from the RAF I needed a job, and as I had been trained as an electrician in the Service that was the type of work I was after. It so happened that a nearby neighbour to my parents worked for JM and through him I got the interview and the chance to start with that company. It was a well known civil engineering company in London, on the banks of the Thames, located in what had once been the Millbank prison. Some of the walls in the yard were from that period. I was started as an improver, which was the stage after being an apprentice and becoming a fully fledged tradesman. The foreman was suspicious of anyone who had been taught by the forces and my work at the beginning was to repair various bits of machinery in the yard. He could then see what I knew and did not have to worry about me making a complete cock-up of any outside work. I quite liked what I did, found it easy and at the same time learned a lot about the civilian side of electricity. Dan, the foreman, stood no nonsense, had no sense of humour, was always bad tempered, but quite fair. The first day I started, in the middle of August and I felt cold after coming from India, the lads said to me,

"Dan's coming; for Christ's sake don't say 'Good Morning' or 'Hi' or he'll sack you".

It was fair warning as Dan had no time for niceties. If you did your job that was all he wanted. It was not long before I found he had a weak spot, his brother. Pat. The man in question was entirely incompetent, and Dan was always covering for him, which meant, in effect, that we were covering for him and hid all his mistakes. How he ever got into the trade I never knew, but he had no idea of the normal rules by which electricity operates. He did the most ridiculous things, the sort that were music hall jokes. He had no idea of the sizes of cable to use, how to run cables anywhere properly, how to get out of trouble if anything went wrong, and in civil engineering things were always going wrong, because the average labourer had no more idea than Pat when it came housing or operating electrical machinery. He did the most stupid things. Several times he would be working from a ladder, feed cables through the rungs and find that after the cables had been fixed the ladder was framing them, so out came the saw and away went a perfectly good ladder. There was a time when he was wiring a hut, just a simple thing of putting a light and a power plug into a small wooden hut. The cable to feed the plug had been cut too short, by him. Instead of putting in a longer length her took the cable from the top of one side, where it entered the hut, across direct to the other side a t waist height to feed the socket. Everyone had to duck to enter the hut. But it was more than anyone dared to tell him it was wrong; all had to wait for Dan to come. His solution was to send Pat to another job, and tell someone else to 'Just square it up'. Another time was when Pat wired a compressor taking 30 or so amps from a light socket which at the very most may have withstood 3 amps. Switch on, big bang, all lights out. Another job to "Square up". I have

no idea how no one was killed by Pat's incompetence .... just luck. Luckily for him Health and safety did not then exist.

After a while I found that there was another foreman working for our department. I had not seen him before because he worked on the jobs out of London and rarely came into the workshop. JM was a branch of his own company. He certainly acted as though he owned the place, and no one seemed inclined to question his actions. Dan did not cross swords with him, and they both kept to their own work areas.

There were many stories about Frank. Our workshop was on the second floor of a lowish building, reached by an outside wooden staircase. This workshop had a section for battery charging, and some of the batteries were heavy and awkward things to carry, having no lifting handles. When Frank joined the company he came up against the problem of carrying the batteries up these stairs.

"Why can't we put the charging bay somewhere downstairs?"

he asked reasonably.

"Oh, no, it has always been upstairs",

said the powers that be. Frank decided that was not a good enough answer, so, one day when a director was visiting the workshop, Frank decided to carry one of the heavier, and most expensive batteries from the charging bay and down the stairs. It was not entirely coincidence that the dirctor was coming up at the same time. Somehow Frank tripped, he yelled out as the batttery slid from his grasp, hit the stairs, fell over the edge and crashed to the ground about a yard away from the director, who got splashed with acid as the battery burst. There was a great commotion . When the director got over his shock, he said what a stupid idea it was to have the charging bay upstairs. It was moved next day to the ground floor. Frank was unhurt (and triumphant)

A permanent member of the workshop was old Bill day sitting in a chair by his bench mostly repairing small tools. In winter he` had beside him a small electric radiator of ancient design.

This appendix is taken from a computer file which Bill last worked on in January 2009

Produced in memory of the author

William George Cruickshank

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