

Dennis' Story

Dennis Tidswell: Audio recollections of service during WW2 in the Royal Air Force. January/February/March 2021

Transcription draft by Hugh Morgan, West Wales Veterans Archive. Age Cymru Dyfed/National Library of Wales.

"I have been asked to record my experiences in the Royal Air Force during World War Two. Who am I? My name is Dennis Tidswell, I live in Pembroke, I'm now ninety-eight and a half years old, and unfortunately, that wonderful human faculty of humour and memory does begin to fade, so before it goes completely, I will make every endeavour to talk about those experiences, something that I haven't done before. I think, to appreciate my feelings until recounting my experiences of wartime, it would help a little to go back to my childhood days to know what I did.

I was brought up in a small village called Gendros, which is about three and a half miles outside of Swansea. My father was a member of the Swansea Police Force. He served during the First World War, was in the Grenadier Guards, and rose through the ranks and at the end of that war was granted a commission. Now, he always told me that, in The Forces, if you wanted a commission, you needed a private income ... which was something I didn't have when I came to the point of becoming a member of The Forces.

During my young days, the society in Fforestfach and indeed the whole of Wales, was passing through a very deeply religious fervour. There were two factions of society; the deeply religious, and then there were the otherwise non-believers who led a very different kind of life. But my life was ...church three times on a Sunday. The whole area was literally covered in Welsh chapels with names like Calfaria and Bethany, Zion, Saron, Jerusalem, Hebron. Then there was one established church which I think was called the Church of England in those days – Church in Wales hadn't appeared on the scene. Then there were the other denominations – the Gospel Hall, the Baptists, Jehovah Witnesses, Salvation Army, and the Congregational – I think it was to the Congregational Church that I was sent three times every Sunday. So, here we had this young lad brought up very strictly in a very religious atmosphere.

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I've vivid recollections of being taken to the noisiest Welsh chapel called Calfaria in nearby Fforestfach. I stood I suppose about almost three feet tall at seven or eight years of age amongst a congregation of probably – best part of four hundred or more people... giving full voice to Bread of Heaven, which literally lifted the roof and, to me, was almost a terrifying experience, this tremendous noise...however, that's just an aside. The other faction of our society of course was the pub-goers and the billiard halls and the club-goers. Wales was "dry" in those days – there were no drinks on a Sunday in pubs, but you could get a drink in a club. There were two very distinct factions of society. So I can't say I've had a particularly good education as I wasn't able to take the Eleven-Plus.

I had as a young man a facial tick which set me back a bit and my parents took me everywhere to try and cure this. I have distinct memories of being taken to someone called a phrenologist who made an analysis of what may be wrong with you, by the bumps on your head. Anyway, by the time I came round to about fourteen years of age that tick had fortunately disappeared, and my interests mainly were swimming, cycling, tennis and amateur dramatics.

But when the war broke out in nineteen thirty-nine, I soon found myself somewhat on my own because a lot of my friends were slightly older and had joined the Forces one way or another. I was now an insurance clerk with a company called The London Assurance. I had made up for my poor education by evening studies and getting various certificates for mathematics and accountancy, and I was studying for insurance examinations.

My favourite hobbies were photography and radio. My father was a keen radio amateur enthusiast and, in the early thirties we were just coming out of the crystal set and moving into wireless sets made with thermionic valves. So he had taught me how to build a wireless set, and one day I took it into my head that I would like to join the Royal Air Force. Another one of my hobbies was aero-modelling and flying model aeroplanes.

So, one particular morning I go to the RAF Recruiting Office, at the bottom of Page Street in Swansea, and sat in front of this group of RAF officers...

"What age are you, my boy?"

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"I'm seventeen."

"Well, come back when you're eighteen."

I went past the sergeant at the door at the entrance way, he said...

"You're eighteen next week aren't you, boy?"

I said, "No, no, it's next July"

"You're eighteen next week – aren't you boy?"

I got the message...and I came back two or three weeks later and found myself sitting in front of this group of RAF officers at the Recruitment Centre. They look at your educational background, and then ask about your pastimes and hobbies. When I mentioned that I was interested in wireless, and could build a wireless set, they cottoned onto that one, and we talked very much about that. Well, I wanted to train very much as a pilot, that was the whole point of going in there, to learn to fly and to be a pilot. But they said join now as a radio operator, and then at some later date I could quite easily re-muster, and train as a pilot. But things didn't quite turn out that way.

A radio operator has nothing to do with flying at all I discovered – it was really very high-frequency inter-communication between ground and aircraft. This was all different to what I intended, but, I went along with that, and, in a matter of a couple of months really, I was called-up. Apparently they were very short of radio operators at that particular time. So here we had this somewhat naive young man leaving home for the very first time to go out into the big wide world. My mother cried and my father said

"Well, that'll make a man out of him,"

And off I went, starting at Uxbridge, which was a recruiting centre, and then onto Padgate. In so far as, in terms of language, I seldom if ever – heard the "F" word – that was certainly not part of the vocabulary.

In July 1940, I turned up at a recruiting centre at Uxbridge, amongst quite a few others, hundreds of people, where we were put into groups of about fifty, and we were sworn in. Here you agree to obey orders and keep to the King's Regulations...though no-one had ever read them... and of course swear an

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allegiance to the Sovereign. Once you had sworn this oath, you were no longer a civilian, you were now a member of HM Forces...and indeed this was a defining moment, which put you firmly in your place.

I was now an Aircraftsman Second Class, at the bottom of the pecking order and we were then directed to tents which were on grassland between some rather nice-looking brick buildings. But these were not to be our sleeping place. We were shown where we were to sleep, and that was a tent. On a straw palliasse, which was damp, and musty and smelly...with one blanket, and a sausage of a canvas bag. I suppose this was about a nine-inch diameter and that was your pillow and where you were to sleep. Henceforth, you were to wash and shave in cold water and this indeed was the second part of the culture shock.

However, that was only to last about four or five days, and we were then put into a billet, as it was called. It was like a Nissen-hut with a cast iron pipe stove. Fortunately it was in July, so a reasonable temperature. The billet contained a number of steel bed-frames with wire strings of course. "Biscuits" were a mattress you slept on... divided into three sections...and two blankets – rather coarse things...made you scratch and itch – and a sausage as a pillow; and that was your sleeping quarter.

There was a Corporal's room at the end, and the Corporal was invariably a regular airman and a charming sort of chap because, he would wake you up in the morning – very politely... "Come-on you sods - wakey, wakey; get your hands off your cocks and get moving, and stand by your beds, it's eight o' clock". Very friendly sort of cordial greeting but, anyway, then you stood by your beds you're being taught how to stand to attention for the Orderly Officer, who came round, looked you up and down, and from bed to bed. I found this business of being stood to attention not very much to my liking, you were usually commanded to stand to attention in the presence of an officer, and the command of "Stand to attention," is being like being placed in an invisible straight jacket with your arms bound to your side, your legs immobilised, and your brain literally numbed by the aura of class distinction. I found this was an ultimate humiliation, an outward degradation.

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Now, they put you in your place... and at their mercy...move or twitch an eyebrow at your peril. However, there was no going back. I had sworn allegiance to a Sovereign, one I had never met or ever likely to. Yet in that room I was prepared to sacrifice the one life I had. So, it behoved me I felt, to accept my surroundings. I volunteered for it, so just get on with it. I think that was the right move, because otherwise life could have been very miserable indeed.

But anyway, at Uxbridge, you then came to being kitted out. Kitted out: you're saying farewell to your civilian clothes, and you're now about to get a uniform. In this great big hall, loads of tables and piles of clothes. You walk up to a counter "Height?" "Five foot two", come flying at you. But before that you've been given a white kitbag – stood about three or four high, about a foot in diameter and all the time you simply put all this uniform into this kitbag. It came flying at you at a rate of knots.

OK, all this clothing, shirts, pants, came hurling at you, and then the one final thing – a pair of boots. I'd never worn boots in my life, but I was about to learn what it was like, because at Uxbridge you were taken out to the parade ground by the Drill Sergeant who was another very polite gentleman. I won't repeat a lot of the way he described us, but anyway... marching up and down... the boots are chafing my ankles, so I had red-raw legs around my ankles.

You were given a rifle. Now, what a rifle had to do with the RAF I don't know, but of course you had to learn the appropriate drill. So, we were given a Lee-Enfield rifle – no bullets but all the cleaning kit and the gear and trained how to use it in marching and on parade. When the turn came to do a guard duty at night, you'd present yourself at the guardroom, and they'd tell you to take your sentry post at the station entrance. Obviously you'd challenge any on-comer "Who goes there"? ... so I said "Well, where are the bullets?". The sergeant says "Give you bullets!?". All that stage passed and, eventually they knocked us into shape, and we were able, I think, to march reasonably well.

Before we leave Uxbridge, there's a couple of other recollections. I'm not really sure I should include them... 'because things have got to be so politically correct in this year of two thousand and twenty-one, but we're back in nineteen forty.

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I think I should really tell it like it was and in no way dress it up. We were all lined up for HET inoculation – anti-tetanus and typhoid ... so, there stood two men in white coats. I presumed one was a doctor, and there's a high table, three kidney-shaped, white-enamelled dishes, with a blue rim around the top... filled with methylated spirits. And there were two rather large needles. The actual needle of which was not like any refined one that there is nowadays'. It was nearly like a very fine nail really. Anyway, there was hundreds of blokes all lined up to see two people. You came along, got it jabbed into your arm, and then that particular needle was thrown into the dish of meth's where the other man rinsed it out, and refilled it in sequence. So those two needles really injected hundreds of men. That was the HET inoculation.

And then, one day we were all marched up to this large room and all seated down in front of a screen, cinema fashion, and we were shown a film about venereal disease. Now, looking at it, ages eighteen to twenty-five'ish, the likes of me, who'd never had any sexual education at all, either school, college or anywhere. This film showed the graphic detail, the horrors of gonorrhoea. And in the end it showed us a chappie having rather like a violent epileptic fit, who was in the advanced stages of syphilitic infection but at least it taught most of us something of which we had precious little knowledge.

And then the real classic was a FFI parade. I had no idea what an FFI parade was, but we soon found out. We stood in a long line and were ordered to drop your trousers and raise up your shirt and expose your genitals. Then we realised that it was a 'Free From Infection' inspection. We had a wonderful lady doctor (there wasn't many lady doctors those days) and the sight of all our hundreds of willies it might have given her a nervous breakdown. Anyway along comes this doctor I presume or medical officer and he's carrying like a musical conductor baton and every now and again sticks it under someone's willy and makes some sort of close examination and sees where it goes. And that's the part where I think I should end my description of Uxbridge and move onto the next posting which was Padgate.

I think I should explain at this point I am taking my dictation from recollections from my RAF record sheet which I obtained from the RAF records office in Gloucester way back in March 98 and things have gotten a little bit hazy here.

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I'll read you a letter.

"Thank you for your letter (letter dated February 98) 'I am sorry to have to tell you that at this late date only a very brief record of your service in the Royal Air Force is now held at the RAF headquarters personnel and training command. This record was compiled at the time of your service and contains very little detail of your postings and movements at that time, however I have included photographs of your service taken from the remaining records which I hope will be of interest to you."

Here in the record after Padgate there is a gap and it says No' 1 wing 6 RC, which I take to be a recruiting centre. The next posting in September 1940 is to the RAF station of Duxford and I have some recollections of that. But between leaving Padgate and arriving at Duxford we must have acquired the necessary skills to operate the VHF radio system because Duxford was the operational headquarters at the time I think, of number 12 group and I have a recollection of looking up and seeing the odd dog fight and of course dog fights played a very active part in the Battle of Britain. But be that as it may I only stayed at Duxford for something like a month thereabouts and then I got posted in October 40 to the RAF signal school at Cranwell in Lincolnshire.

Now Cranwell in Lincolnshire was the RAF training college and I learned another aspect of radio operating which did interest me very much and that was called VHF-DF (Very High Frequency Direction Finding), and it was a means of radio communication which enabled us to establish the position for all our own aircraft. Radio being very much in its infancy at that stage, so Fighter Command in particular relied on VHF-DF which consisted of 3 units and something like 40 or so miles apart from which you drew a line on a bearing taken on the equipment and four of them were known as a 'cocked hat' and in that 'cocked hat' was the position of our own aircraft.

Radio transmission of VHF at ground levels was optical but air to ground and ground to air was very clear reception and sitting listening out which we had to do for very long periods at a time, to a quiet musing noise. The equipment was set up in wooden towers, and the beauty of all this was that those towers were generally well away from any air force establishment. It was a little hill that was on its own and most time the RAF personnel operating it were in

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civilian billets. So to be away from RAF military discipline and operating one of these units appealed to me very much, so I set my stall out for that in Cranwell and over a period of let me say something like a month or six weeks, qualified as a VHF-DF operator.

I was then sent to station in Kirton in Lindsey in Lincolnshire that was in November 1940. All this time I was still radio operator on the ground when really, I had joined this outfit to learn to fly and become a member of aircrew. I have a recollection of going to Cardington and sitting in front of a panel of RAF officers. According to my records that took place in May 1941, and this was a selection board for aircrew. I see according to my record it reads 'accepted for training as Pilot, Observer, Wireless Op/AG' on 8th of the 5th 1941.

So, from that date onward I was waiting to go onto aircrew training. But then out of the blue in Kirton in Lindsley along comes this Sergeant and says report to so-and-so you're being posted abroad [39:09]

Well now, I couldn't go abroad as I was waiting for aircrew training.

"You're being posted abroad"

"I would like an interview with the Commanding Officer"

"You're being posted abroad"

So I thought "To hell with this"

So I took it into my head to go straight up to the Commanding Officer's office. Leading Aircraftman Tidswell goes into the Station Commander's office and said

'I want to see the Commander'.

Whereupon I was pounced upon by two Sergeants who took me one arm either side, knocked my cap off, and frogmarched me backwards out of the office. Then I found myself on a charge for insubordination. So the following day, I appeared in front of the Station Commander. I offered my apologies and said that I was listed for aircrew training so why was I being sent abroad? He said

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"We too have to do as we are told. You, I understand, are a radio VHF-DF operator and wherever you are going they seem to be urgently needed. So I am sorry, but you are going abroad and were it not for that fact you would be on a very serious charge and now you would be spending your time in the glasshouse (which was the RAF term for being in prison).

Anyway be that as it may, the next thing I was kitted out for foreign service, khaki shirt, ordinary vest, tin hat, respirator, and now a backpack – a blanket and groundsheet. So you rolled your groundsheet around a blanket, like a long sausage and then strapped it in the normal pack of three square and then wrapped in your backpack. It rather looked like a French Legionnaire. But we didn't have a neck protector like a Frenchman would have, but very similar in appearance. And of course all this had to be packed into this backpack. But here was one bright spot in this, for we no longer had to wear boots but had to wear shoes. The other ranks had leather shoes, the officers had 'hush puppies' which we named 'brothel creepers' and cotton socks, whereas the ranks had thick woollen socks. The trouble with the woollen sock abroad, I will come to later.

I found myself boarding a train for Greenock and on the train we were really like sardines in a tin. Packed, packed, packed. It was quite an unpleasant journey really. At Greenock we went aboard various ships. Around 1750 personnel, mainly army but with about a third Royal Air Force.

We boarded a ship called the 'Leinster'. The 'Leinster' was in normal times a ferry boat which crossed the Irish Sea on a daily basis, and she had been taken over by the Department of Transport. It turned out to be the smallest in the convoy in which we found ourselves. She just weighed 4,300tons, whereas a larger merchant ship would be almost 11,000tons.

For the historian, this was called Operation Substance, that is in July 1941. The Naval convoy was quite extensive – The Nelson, The Edinburgh, Manxman, Manchester, and seven destroyers. None of us were, at that time, aboard. But when we got aboard we were asked if we would form 'watches'. The watches were at intervals all around the ship and any sightings were passed back to the bridge. Accommodation, and I can't really remember about the food, but what does strike me.

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Back on the Leinster. 1700 troops on board, a mixture of Army and Air Force. Air Force, about 300 hundred of us. Sleeping accommodation, we slept in hammocks, which were all slung between various loads of pipes that there are on ships. And one would look and see this line of hammocks swinging away (laughs). Now a hammock is a bit tricky to get into on land but on a rolling ship it tends to be very tricky, and the Leinster did roll. She didn't have any stabilisers and we were at this time, manoeuvring into a convoy.

After the war when I looked up the records which say we were to relieve Malta. Malta at that time being under siege. The 'powers that be' said that this convoy must get through.

However, we were back on the Leinster. We set sail in a westerly direction for about half a day and then we turned south and then I suppose after 36 hours were told to change into our tropical gear, which we did of course. During this time one of our radio operators, a man called Dick Watson, who was from Jamaica who had come over to the UK at his own expense just to join the Royal Air Force. I had a great respect for him. He fell somehow and injured his ankle. In the ship's medical quarters they put on a light plaster. He could just hobble around but he needed to be assisted getting in and out of his hammock.

However, we are now in our tropical gear with an inordinate number of white knees and we're heading south. And then next thing we find we're entering the Straits of Gibraltar and we arrive at Gibraltar. We were given shore leave strangely enough and I have recollections of going to a pub in Bell Lane in Gibraltar and there was beer available in those days. We all got a bit merry and went back aboard and got into our bunks and fell asleep. The next thing we know probably after about 5 or 6 hours the engines started up and we were under way. Quite clearly we were moving on with the rest of our voyage.

All of a sudden there was an enormous bang, and the ship shook. It didn't completely turn on its side but was over at bit of an angle. It leaned onto the port side I think it was. Bearing in mind it was 80years ago, I'm a bit vague on detail but we were down below, a couple of decks down and we found ourselves in almost complete darkness. There wasn't a chink of light coming through and the gangways and stairways were at a bit of an angle. Obviously in the almost dark this was a rather frightening situation, given that you were

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trapped down below and certainly no easy route of access to get out onto deck. And we also learned that Dick Watson with his injured his ankle. Anyway we could hear a lot of noise, banging and bumping up on the main deck. When we eventually did get through into daylight, the whole place was pandemonium really. I got onto the portside because it didn't seem possible to launch lifeboats on the starboard side, but I never heard the order to abandon ship. But that was clearly what was being done because when you got down to the ship's rail there were seven lifeboats. Six of them absolutely chocka full and the seventh pretty well full. So they got Dick Watson aboard the lifeboat.

From the ship's rail I then jumped into the stern part of the last lifeboat. It was a distance of about 6 or 7 feet and you go down with a bit of a bump. Anyway, I was in the stern end of the tightly packed lifeboat. Now, clearly there was a mist just lifting and I could see on the mainland a pillar box type of thing with these soldiers.

No one wanted to be detained in Spain. Mr Franco was very friendly with Mr Hitler and to be his guest for the remainder of the war didn't appeal at all. Anyway the lifeboats were all put in a line and were connected by a line and the one lifeboat had an engine. About three quarters of a mile out in the bay was a naval craft. I think it was a destroyer but I'm not sure.

We were 'chug, chug, chug' out to the destroyer who then put us in tow. When he got underway of course, the bows of the lifeboats lifted up. Next thing we know, out of the mist comes the Rock of Gibraltar. I had my pocket camera in my pocket and to this day I have some photographs which I took from the lifeboat of the Rock of Gibraltar.

When we got to Gibraltar we were put aboard a ship in the harbour called the Louis Pasteur which was obviously of French origin and she was a very, very different kettle of fish. We were able to have a shower. A shower of which I had never seen in my life or even heard of. Instead of the water coming down through a shower head, it came from pipes on the side. I think they were called a 'needle shower' but the flow of water was from the horizontal side from your feet right up to your head and was indeed very refreshing. Alongside it was a strange idea of a gents toilet which was a long, two foot wide, plank of wood about twenty-twenty-five feet long and about every five feet a hole was

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cut and there is where you did your ablutions. Just sat there and had a chat. The flushing system was quite unique. There was something like an eight-inch pipe with constantly flowing strong flow of water. So there was constant flushing water twenty-four hours a day.

I can't remember much about the food, but I can remember going down way below into the engine room and meeting Scottish engineers who to my astonishment were drinking gin. I never tasted so much gin in my life until I met these chaps.

I think a resume of the war at this stage in the Mediterranean might well be appropriate. It might be a land-locked sea here in Gibraltar but to the north, Spain, France, Italy, Greece, the island of Corfu and Crete, all occupied by hostile forces. Also with North Africa under the control of Rommel. So the only British place was Malta and Gozo. So quite clearly if you are travelling East then Malta was our destination. We weren't officially told that but that was the general buzz amongst the troops.

From the Louis Pasteur we were transferred to a warship called the Hermione. The Hermione was a modern cruiser of the dido class. She had a very short lifetime for she was commissioned in March 1941 and sank in June 1942. She was torpedoed with the loss of about 700 lives. Hermione was actually a very fast ship. Its speed was 32 knots, its range was 1500 miles, and its armament was state of the art and was bristling with guns of all sorts. It also had torpedo tubes.

At this time Malta was under siege undergoing very heavy bombing. (Dennis then reads an extract from 'a historian'not quoted in transcription)

When we went aboard the Hermione the skipper piped up and welcomed us aboard and said 'it is a long passage. I can feed you and I have gallons of water but can only give you a pint per person per day. We slept against the side of the ship's hull. You slept where you could and kept your tin hat and respirator handy.

I didn't realise it but at the tip of the boat I suppose I was about to receive my baptism of fire and realised the real horrors of war. On board the Hermione as was the convoy, you could volunteer for duties. So having had the experience

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of being down below when the ship ran aground in Gibraltar, I didn't fancy the idea of bombing or torpedo raids when I down below. So I volunteered to work on deck and so I found myself passing boxes of ammunition to the crew gunner of the 'pom, pom' guns. I suppose we were about two days out and the ship was travelling quite fast with 7000tons going along at 32miles an hour, you know you are moving. Suddenly the klaxon goes '*Action Stations, Action Stations*'. I hadn't really had time to get up on deck before '*Standby to Ram, Standby to Ram*' and there was a terrific crash and the ship shuddered from bow to stern and then carried on sailing. It turned out it had rammed an Italian submarine which was charging its batteries at dawn on the surface and the following ships in our wake had made contact with the sub underneath their hulls and the Hermione had sustained a gash in its bow. But I suddenly realised what a terrible way to die being rammed by another ship. That's what I mean when I say 'the horrors of war' became apparent to me.

A further couple of days into the passage we were finding it rather hot. Having come out from the UK we hadn't had time to acclimatise, and it was in mid-July. Down below deck we had taken our clothes off for a couple of day and it had been rather uncomfortable.

We were approaching the real hot spots of the passage to the Sicilian straits, and of course in Sicily we had the German Luftwaffe and the Italian Aeronautica. The Italians did their dive-bombing from high-level, but they were very accurate, really. Germans had their Ju 88's and their Stukas, and we were coming to well within their range. I had volunteered of course in assisting with passing the ammunition boxes to the 'Pom, Pom' guns on the deck. The klaxons sounded '*Action Stations*' and that was my real baptism of fire because we came under air attack mainly bombs falling all around, fortunately missing the ship. I think most had been doing a sort of zig-zag course and the ship never stayed still. The angle seemed to alter all the time and the noise was absolutely terrific. The engine noise, the ship was doing its full 32knots, the exploding shells, bombs, anti-aircraft. It was absolute pandemonium.

However, to comment on my feelings at that time; first of all when it all started, it was one of fright, certainly one of fright. And then suddenly it becomes one of excitement; and then suddenly one of aggression because you then realise its either him or its me. You are either going to live or you are

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going to die. So you had to make every endeavour to survive. It was feeling I probably never had again, and it is quite an experience really. But anyway, we survived that unscathed and eventually, not very long afterwards sailed into Malta harbour and tied up and I think that will be sufficient for this episode.

Arrived in Malta, disembarked and then we board a number of very old, dilapidated buses with no windows. We all looked a little bit like coal miners coming off shift, in that we were dirty and dishevelled. And then we were transported to a place called Safi. Safi Strip was a nice long aircraft runway, large enough to allow Wellington bombers to land, and it was a base mainly for Wellington bombers and Hurricane fighters. We had a tremendous respect for the pilots, because if they didn't use a torpedo on a sortie and they came into land with a torpedo under the fuselage then one false move and that would have been curtains.

But anyway... we were moved to the Air Force station Luqa. It was originally called Safi, and the Safi strip became the Luqa main airport. We found ourselves surrounded by a large series of field kitchens and the CO welcomed us to Malta. He told us that he could feed us, but he couldn't accommodate us, for the Luftwaffe had damaged the billets and they were uninhabitable housing, but he hoped to have them repaired very soon. But for the time being, we had to sleep in the open. There were no washing facilities, we were just being fed. So we then had to take out our billy can's and take out our irons, and so we slept in the open for I think it was three nights, all together, before we get back to base at Luqa, and we are able to have normal washing and toiletry facilities.

The wireless mechanics built us radio operators a new for a VHS/DF high frequency direction finding station on the edge of the runway and it was disguised in an old farm building. And there we operated a watch system and to get back to base we had to walk across the runway. I can remember one particular time crossing the runway and an Italian Macchi fighter decided to strafe the runway and I was fortunately close to Nellie the steamroller and I dived under the front roller of the steamroller and that really did save my life. Nearby about 100yds or so was a Wellington Bomber which the strafe had set on fire and luckily for me I got away with that one. The story of Nellie is that

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Nellie was an old-fashioned steamroller with a big front roller and rear iron wheels and the Wellington bombers would be out bombing the North African coast and in the meantime the Luftwaffe would be bombing Safi. So before the Wellingtons could land from their return journey on the runway, all the bomb holes had to be filled up. It was a case of every hand on deck, filling up the potholes and Nellie the steamroller would iron them out as best as it could, to enable the returning aircraft to land.

If we take a look at the situation in the Mediterranean in 1941 you had the British in Gibraltar but coming eastwards you had the Spanish territory which was Axis friendly as they were friendly with the Germans. And you had Italy with Mussolini and the Aeronautica and the German Luftwaffe and to the south along the North African coast had a very large slice held by Rommel. And Rommel depended very largely upon his supplies from Italy, mainly by ship. In Malta, the British had a submarine base with a squadron of Wellingtons at Luqa and they were proving to be a sharp thorn in the flesh of the enemy forces and that is why Malta became the target of such prolonged siege and intense bombing.

During the stay at Luqa we duly continued with the VHD/DF work and for two of my three years in Malta I served at Ta'Qali which was a fighter base, Hal Far also a fighter base and Kalafrana which was ultimately a Sunderland flying boat base. It was much the same work in all of those stations VHS/Direction Finding.

And then for something like possibly six months I spent in Gozo, a nearby island to Malta. That gave us some relief from the constant bombing. We set a station, again in an old farm building in Gozo and for a short lived in a hotel called the Duke of Edinburgh, near Victoriaozo in Gozo. Unfortunately the Italians would do a strafe down the main street and the locals tended to blame our presence as the reason for that but I'm not too sure that was well received. Gozo was quite a respite really. In the evening for example when the temperature dropped and it was getting dark we used to follow a group of musicians walking around the island playing typical Maltese folk music on that lovely musical instrument, the Mandolin, and we used to enjoy that very much. So during our stay in Gozo they built a radar station, so we had a proper RAF

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unit then and we moved into that. Radar of course in those days was crude compared with what it is today. For instance, Sicily where the Luftwaffe and the Aeronautica were based was only 60 miles from Malta so by the time the aircraft were airborne, even at the speed of aircraft in those days, they were almost over the target anyway. 15 minutes flying time and they were there. So what radar there was, gave hope but it meant that the scramble of aircraft from airfields in Malta had to be very, very rapid indeed to enable our aircraft to gain sufficient height to be in a combative position. Our hotel stay was short-lived really and we were moved into other accommodation.

I left Gozo with a lot of happy memories and I've been back a few times on holiday since the war. I loved to play chess. From Gozo, I got posted to the Air Headquarters RAF in Valetta. Valetta of course being the capital of Malta alongside the harbour and the air headquarters was wholly underground, quite large areas and I found myself in the operations room. This wasn't really radio direction finding but really was radio telephone operating which I found a bit useless, actually. But we were billeted in a bombed Maltese house, I think it was in South Street and further up the road was the canteen. The air headquarters was also an interesting time. Some of the bombing was still continuing and I wasn't all that far away when the pride and joy of Malta, the Opera House in Valetta was hit and that turned it into rather a mess of things. But at air headquarters, I joined the RAF boxing team and I played water polo for the RAF air headquarters swimming team.

Malta was reputedly the most heavily bombed area for its size during the whole of WW2. But the Italians were very accurate in their bombing, and they bombed from high levels and a lot of Valetta got damaged. Their main target of course was the grand harbour and dockyard and that suffered most of the consequences of the bombing. A lot of German bombing was haphazard, and a lot of the German bombs dropped never exploded. There were a lot of unexploded bombs and gave a lot of work to the bomb disposal squads. They were brave men because these bombs were not in soil and farmland but in rocks and buildings and sandstone and they had some very difficult and hazardous tasks in extracting them. They were a very brave breed of men.

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During my stay in Valetta, the Maltese people were awarded the George Cross. But when it came out to medals for us there were no specific medal for service in Malta. But we were told that Malta service would be incorporated in the medal of the Africa Star, so we were entitled to the campaign medal of the Africa Star.

In May 1944, I had been in Malta for almost three years and the powers that be decided that they were going to send us back to the UK. We were going home to Blighty as it was called. Would we be flown home, would we be going on a troopship, how would we get home? The answer soon became evident though. We weren't going to fly home. After three years in Malta with all the problems that it involved I was to be sent home on a damaged tank landing craft, an LST F121 called 'The Boxer'. And The Boxer took part in the Allied invasion of Italy and had had its bottom stove in at Salerno. It had been repaired to make it seaworthy. It wasn't a particularly big ship, with a displacement of something like eight and half thousand tons.

The Boxer was limited to a speed of about 5 or 6 knots when its normal speed would have been something like 16knots. The journey from Malta to the UK was to take the best part of three weeks with us chugging along at about 6knots. Anyway we did eventually get home and reunited with our families which was very nice.

And then I was at various stations in the UK; Honiley, Hexham up north, Cleethorpes and then I eventually found myself in charge of a VHS/DF unit on the east coast at Hemsby. This was at a time when the German V1 was coming over. So from one bomb area, shipped over to the UK, to another!

I was unfortunately injured when a buzzbomb fell near to a vehicle in which I was switching off a diesel engine and the vehicle was severely rocked by the blast and my hand got caught in the cooling part of the engine. It made a bit of a mess of my thumb and the consequence of that was that probably spent something like three months in hospital and eventually the RAF hospital at Ely, did some wonderful work for me and repaired my hand and made it usable again. Those were experiences of which I could relate a few stories. I

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understand that time is pressing for me to finish these recordings. So in summary, I spent something like five years in the RAF during the war and then in August 1946 I returned to civilian life.