

WAT
~~O.6~~ GENERAL
N 591

RAF WATCHFIELD

Born, Lived and Died
during

the WAR YEARS

1939—1946

This is a history of RAF WATCHFIELD, not of the writer

Fred C GUILMANT of 187 West End Road, Southampton
Ex Flight Lieutenant, Royal Air Force.

The date today is September 3rd 2000—an anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. FCG is 86 and "clearing up" his life, including his "Office" (conversion of a lock-up garage in the back garden). He finds an Album of photographs and decides that (rather than consign them to the dustbin) he would rather hand them to the Library perhaps at Shrivenham to place in their archives.

Because there are no "Notes" under the photographs, and Readers in the future might well have no idea of what the pictures were all about, perhaps even unaware of what happened during the occupation of those large Watchfield fields by the Royal Air Force, he decided that he would write a few Notes in explanation.

When he first started, they were mere NOTES.

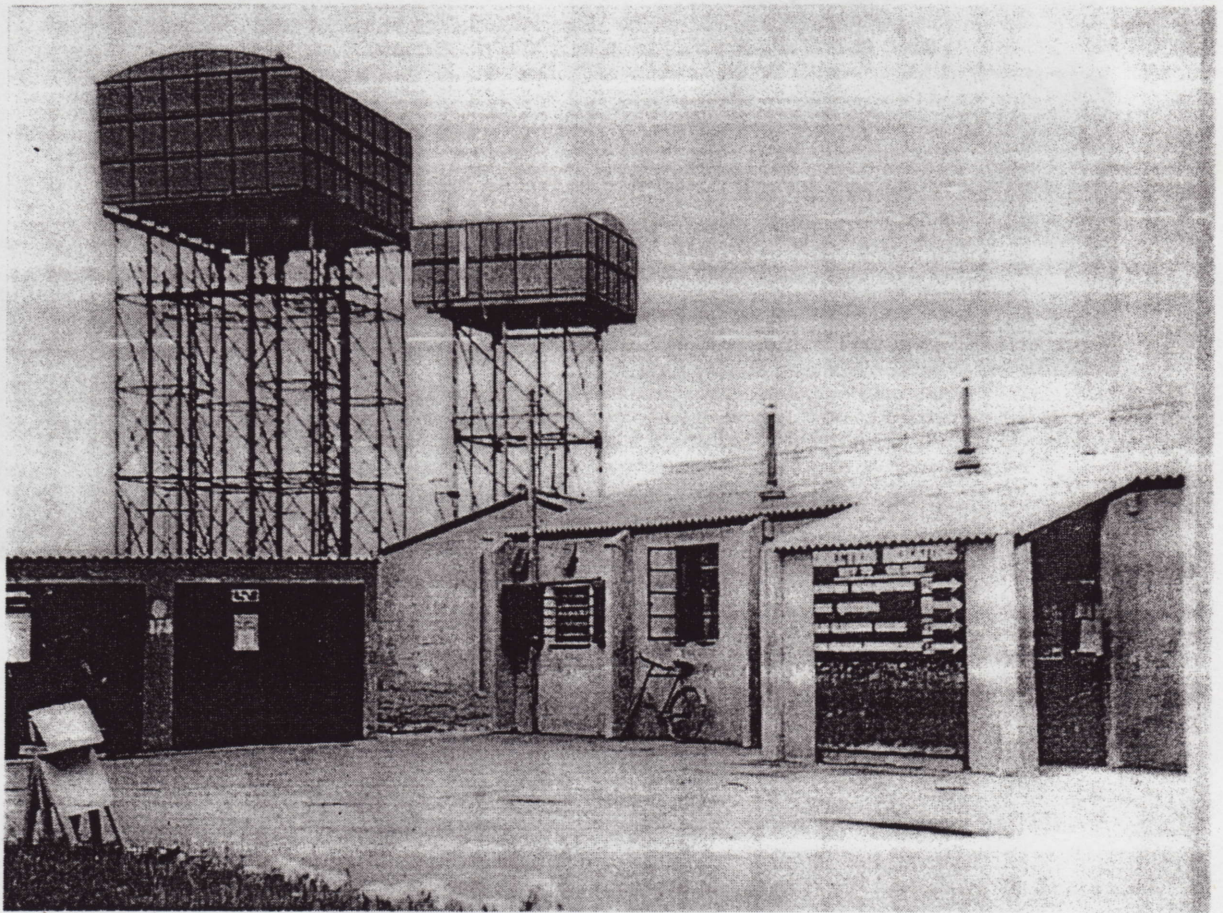
They developed into being a small BOOK! Sorry, but that's the way it happened.

Note:- This paragraph was inserted some long time after starting when it was realised the "Notes" were indeed becoming a "Book" and some "formality" was desirable. So it must be now be said that everything herein must be treated as COPYRIGHT and (should permission be granted for reproduction) the rights of the Author must be protected. He states that any fees received will be not be retained by him, but gifted to some local Charity or Good Cause of his choice.

Note 2 And this one was added even later, to explain that the whole thing had indeed gone berserk and finished up a kind of "MY LIFE AT RAF WATCHFIELD I am sorry about this, because there's nothing I want LESS than details of my life and thinking being made public. But my family are rather insistent it should somehow be placed on record if only because it contains so much history of the village itself. It COULD be that someone pictured or mentioned herein is still alive, living locally, and would be absolutely thrilled to "READ ALL ABOUT IT"

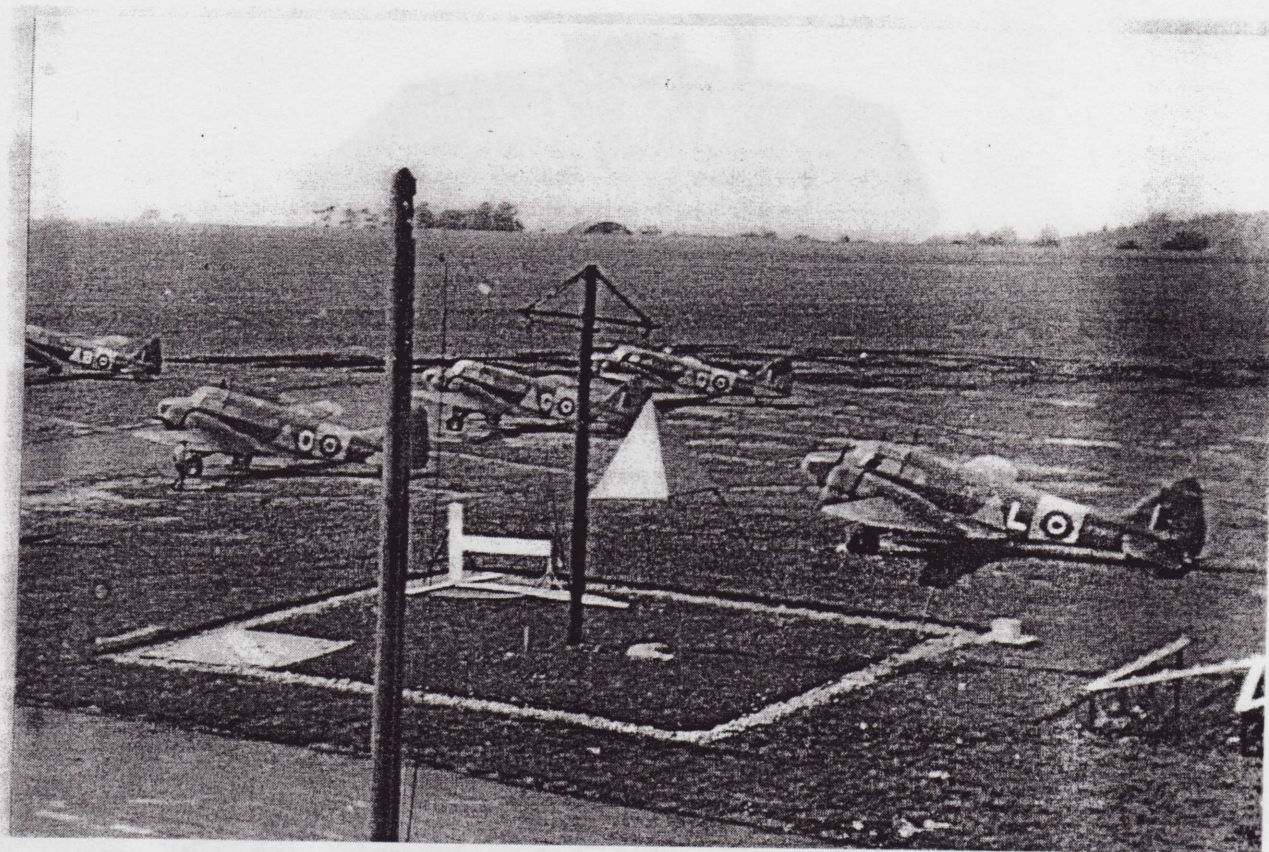
I commend this Journal therefore, NOT as some...thing to do with ME, but as a record of Wartime happenings in and around SHRIVENHAM and WATCHFIELD

This is the "Main Entrance" - an RAF Police Corporal always stood at the gate itself which was a yard or two outside this picture to the left. Here stood his "sentry - box" and here the duty guard stood, day and night with bayonet fixed throughout the entire War. They were a grand bunch of chaps and in spite of the hassle of hundreds of flying personnel going in and out at all hours, they took it all and responded cheerfully. Towards the end of the War, we quite often took them up as "passengers", and some (strictly against all Regulations) were allowed to sit in the Pupil's seat and operate the controls. It was something for them to write home about and it helped relieve the monotony.



Here are a few of them, they deserve a special mention!







The Flying Control Tower.

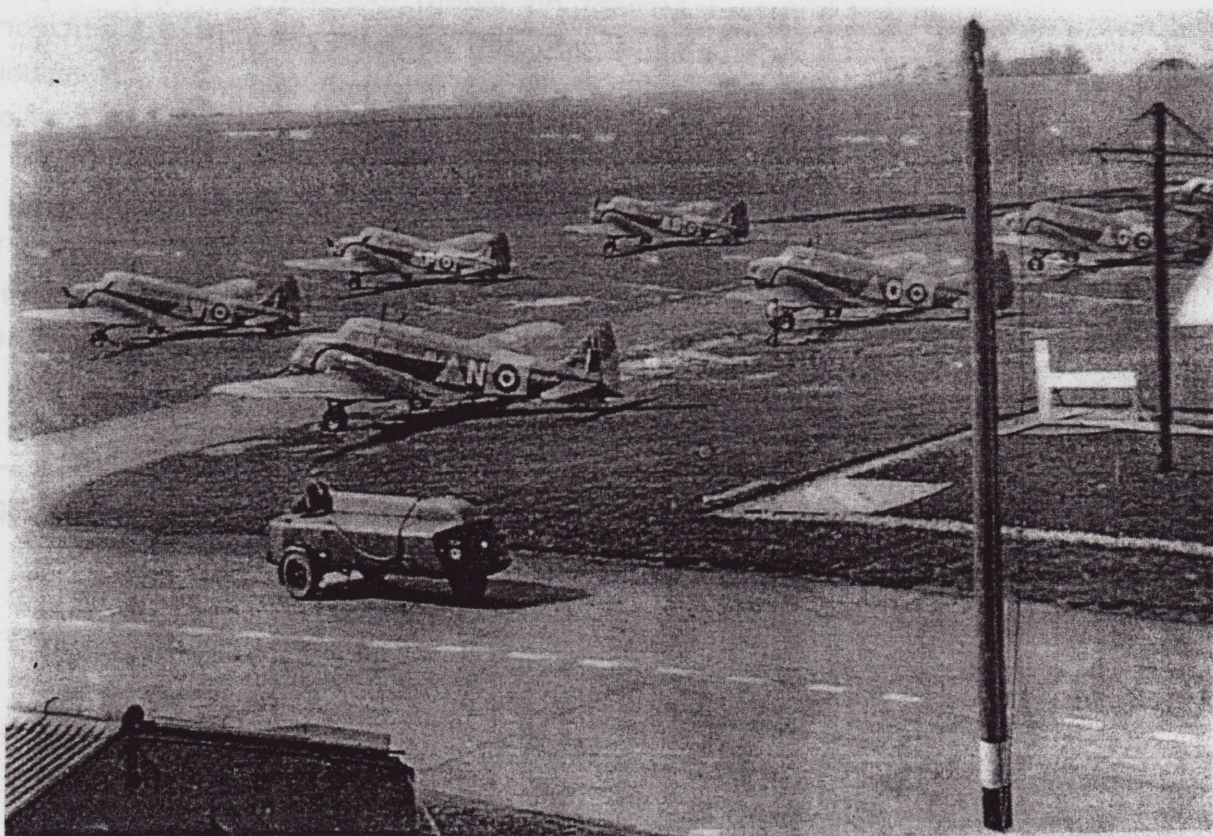
Observe the "Pill Box" on the top!

The next "Office down" was occupied by Flying Control Officers who looked out and issued instructions to Aircraft taking off and landing.

The Office below was used by Squadron Leader G Webb, (OC Flying). The adjacent attached building was for clerical staff. Below all was the Garage for the Emergency Breakdown Wagon, Ambulance, etc.

In the end there were some 40 or 50 Beam Approach Schools, Watchfield having the Category No 1 BAS. The skill of their often long-resident Instructors became noteworthy throughout the RAF and many were co-opted for special duties. The first "Pathfinder" Squadron for example, was started with BIGNALL in charge—taken from his duties as the senior Flight Commander here. And he took with him several of his Instructors, they were after all, probably the highest skilled Instrument-Flying Pilots in the RAF at the time! I remember perhaps six or seven names being so transferred over the years, especially a Flight Lieutenant James

The system was based around a "transmitter" in a small shed at the western extremity of the Airfield, which "sent out" TWO signals at the same time. One



North and the other South. One "DOTS" and the other "DASHES" The radius of each transmission was about 182 degrees, so if you draw a little plan of what was going on, there would be a very small area where they "overlapped" Since it had been cleverly worked out that the space between dashes was the same as the length of the dot, the sound heard by a receiver stationed INSIDE that overlapping area was constant. An aircraft flying along and within this space, would only have to know its "approximate" direction and then, by turning slightly to the left or right as the case may be, upon hearing dots or dashes, could adjust his flying direction so that he (in the end) would pass right overhead the transmitter. You HAD to find out of course whether you were flying AWAY or TOWARDS the source!

Having got into this "overlapping area" (which was called "The BEAM" (although it was factually, nothing of the sort) and going the right way all that had to be done was get down!

Two "marker" beacons were therefore installed — the INNER marker (which sounded a quick *peep-peep-peep* constantly) situated a few hundred yards ahead of the spot you intended to touch down on, and another, the OUTER MARKER (which transmitted a continuous but much slower *bonk bonk bonk*.) This transmitter was in a field a mile or so east of Longcot. You HAD to be right overhead of them to receive!

Hold on!

The Pilot, when using the "Beam", HAD to know his height above the landing area. His instruments enabled him to set/reset his height indicator, so, providing he knew the barometric pressure he could set to ZERO the height of that particular field. Sounds complicated, but providing there was or had been recently communication between Pilot and ground, the RAF had a simple routine which was part of ordinary training.

The final objectives were [a] locate the source of and "get on" the beam" [b] Fly along it until overhead, then do a "Figure of Eight manoeuvre at 1000 feet, aiming to arrive in due course at the Outer Marker [c] gradually descend until 600 feet and heading directly directly for home over the *bonk bonk bonk* sound.

Now comes the harrowing bit [d] Do your cockpit drill, lower wheels and flaps, reduce to landing speed. All the time getting steadily lower and lower and MORE lower.

DON'T PANIC! You ain't gonna crash! Not with ME here beside you, anyway!

[e] Follow what those dots and dashes are shouting in your ear! Absolutely, precisely and with the utmost care! Hear the Inner Marker? Look out, and THERE directly ahead is a lovely clear space to land! Oh what a relief!

THAT was the theory! In practice, it was so frightening, you had to be TRAINED to ignore what the seat of your pants was telling you - the instruments were ALWAYS right, just DO AS YOU ARE TOLD! Your life and the life of your crew depended upon you being calm and very collected in circumstances where you were fully entitled to be scared stiff!

There were times when (literally) the ONLY aircraft flying in the whole of the UK were those at Watchfield. Thick fog was never an obstacle, in fact the thicker the fog, the more our Instructor pilots wanted to take off!

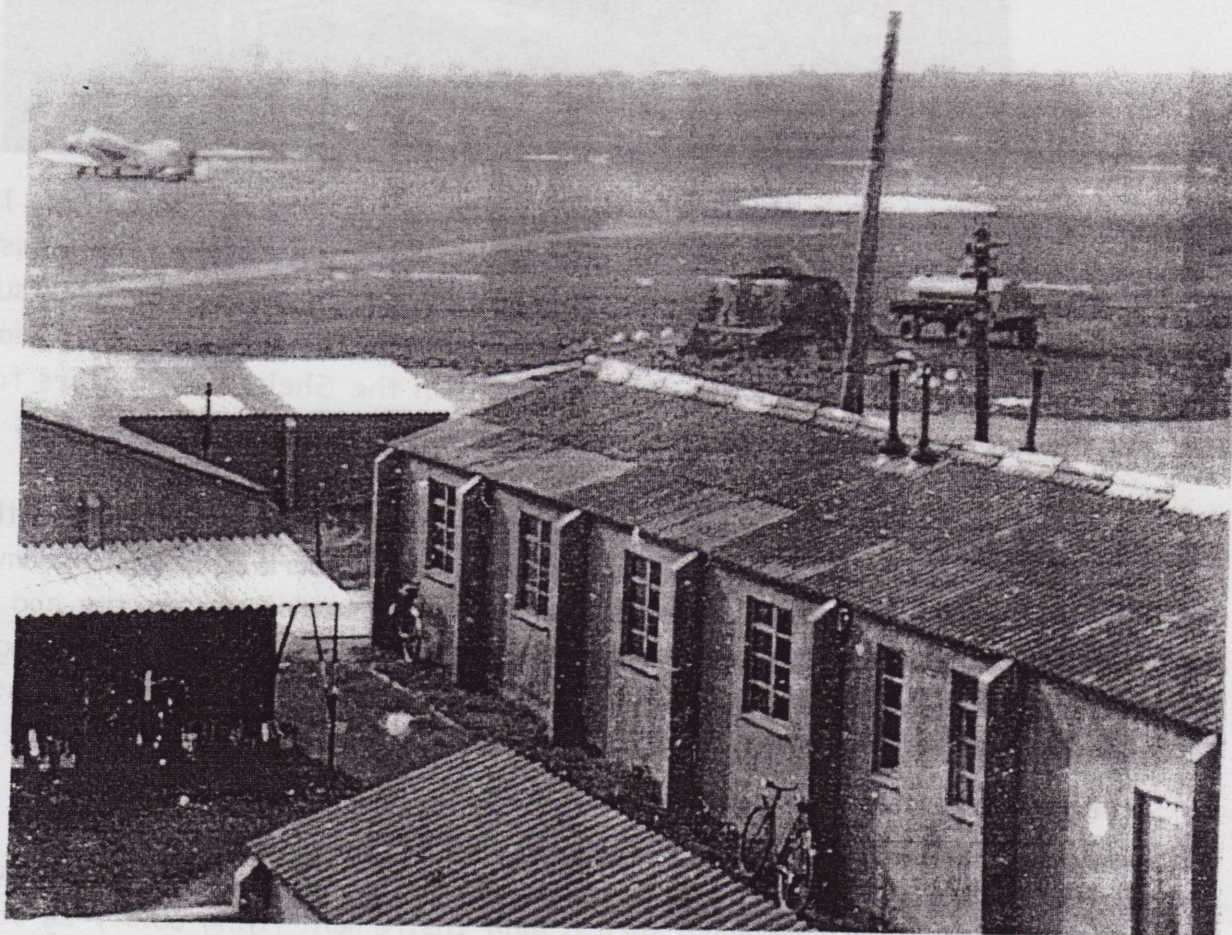
The writer personally recalls one night during very inclement weather, taking a small group of Pilots under instruction to an RAF Station on the Portsmouth / London Road called BLACKBUSH where had been installed a system called FIDO (Fog Intensive Dispersal Of) being two rows of paraffin-pressured flares alongside the runway which sent up flames about 20' high. This enabled Bombers returning to land when their own home Airfield was out of commission. FIDO provided a better chance of landing since the flames could be seen through the clouds from at least 1000 feet, and the heat made a "hole" in the low cloud. On that occasion, we flew around for at least an hour watching all the "emergency" landings, finally going home to land at Watchfield without any form of lighting at all, and in a fog so thick you couldn't see more than about ten feet. We all revelled in the excitement!

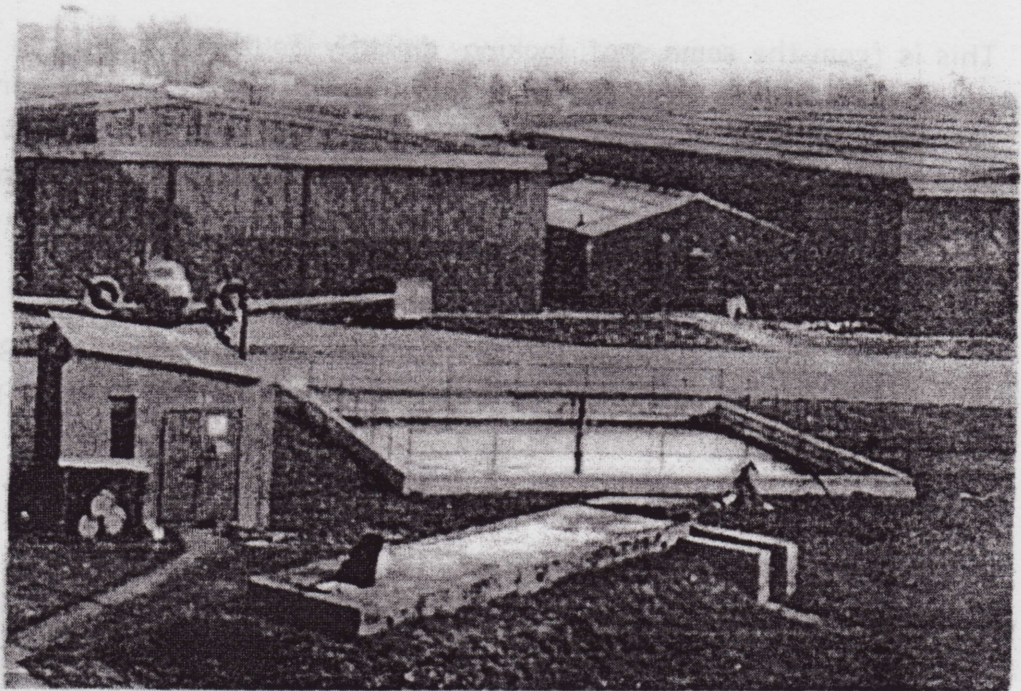


In passing, I mention that YELLOW underneath an Aircraft indicated it came from TRAINING COMMAND and therefore was not armed (as if this would have made any difference when in contact with an enemy!) Above and on the sides was camouflage green and brown dope. The RAF Roundel appeared on the wing tips and aircraft sides. Overall RAF identification was by a smallish number, and the Station or Squadron number was usually a large alphabet letter, also on the side. Aircraft doing "Beam Approach" training always carried the symbol of a large yellow triangle.

This is from the same spot, looking directly South. The lady on the bicycle was the ONLY Service-woman on the place. I am not sure WHAT service it was, but she was a NURSE, and I am not sure who her "patients" could have been, but she was a real personality, liked by all, sharing our fun when it happened, and tending our cuts and bruises alternately. I have a feeling she married one of the BAS Instructors later.

These were the Pupils Crew Rooms. You can see one of the "Pill Boxes" (adjacent to the Petrol "Bowser") which were scattered all over the place. Never used, and very much a nuisance.





There were several of these "basins" of water around the working areas. I don't recall one ever being used for its proper purpose. Occasionally, on the occasion of some individual celebration, a member of a flying crew got thrown in, but such incidents were never "logged" so (officially, nobody knew). There were regular ARP practices for Civilians, and great excitement in the Shelters. Shelters for the RAF had been erected along the perimeter tracks.

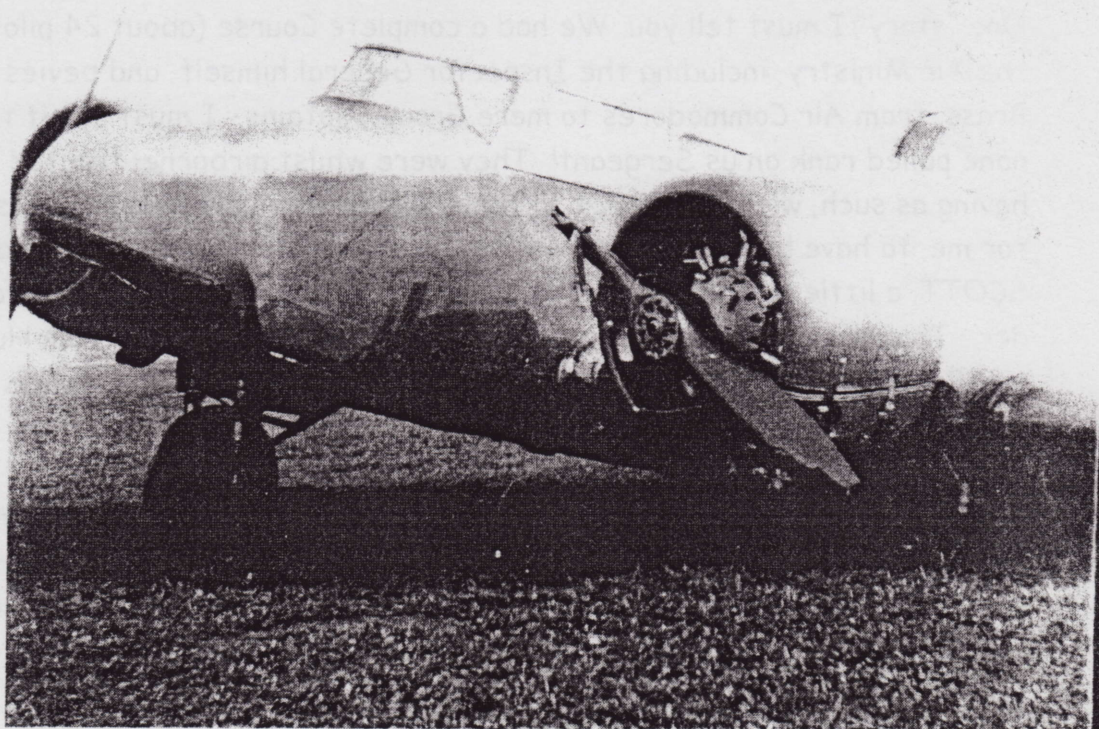
Incidentally, the "good" Instructors at Watchfield seem to have stayed there a long time, far longer than was permitted by the standard 6 months maximum allowed at other RAF Squadrons. They did this by cheating - at the end of six months, the Instructor was secretly "posted to Shellingford" (without being told.) The next day he was posted "back again" and no-one was ever the wiser! Both stations were in 50 Group Training Command, within a few miles of each other, operated by the same AST and (as we stated then "in cahoots")

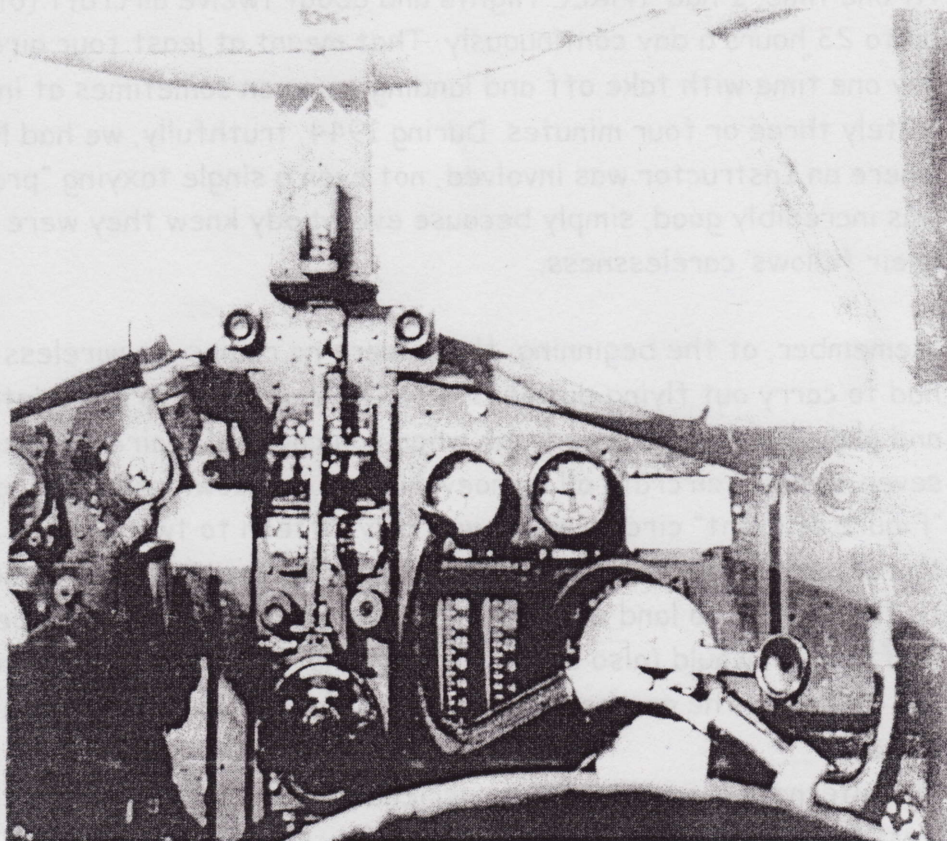
The excuse was that this was probably the most highly skilled job in the Pilot Training curriculum, requiring such a high Instrument-flying ability eg so as to maintain height within 10 feet of a specified figure, and steer at a fixed airspeed within one or two degrees consistently in a required direction. Plus all the time to maintain the confidence in your own ability to obey instrumentation in spite of everything else around. I tell you, it was very much a temptation when your instruments said you were 20 feet from the ground travelling downwards at near 100 mph to look outside! If you did, the chances were crashingly dangerous! You simply HAD to concentrate on the job in hand and absolutely trust your skill. The accident rate among Watchfield Instructors was infinitesimal, certainly by far, the lowest per hours flown in the whole of Training Command.

At one time, I had THREE flights and about twelve aircraft (officially) operating up to 23 hours a day continuously. That meant at least four aircraft airborne at any one time with take off and landing going on sometimes at intervals of approximately three or four minutes. During 1944, truthfully, we had NO Flying Accident where an Instructor was involved, not even a single taxiing "prang". The discipline was incredibly good, simply because everybody knew they were at the mercy of their fellows' carelessness.

Remember, at the beginning, there were no radios, no wireless communication—we had to carry out flying duties STRICTLY according to a predetermined timetable and plan. This was easy enough when you could SEE aircraft nearby, but imagine seven or eight aircraft all manoeuvring up and down and along a five mile wireless "Figure of Eight" circuit which was only fifteen to twenty feet wide in places. Moreover, there could be another 'plane 250 feet below and one above too! In fog, we had to land with a matter of perhaps five minutes between each aircraft, which would (also by time determination) mean descending from the allotted height to the one below, taking the place of one another until all were safely home.

The alternative was that (as experience was achieved, and providing there was at least fifty feet of clear space under the cloud,) we "descended" into a safe area over the River Thames not far away, and made our way back to Watchfield "hedge-hopping" sometimes to the utter consternation of our pupils. Nobody in authority "knew" this was going on of course, but they did it themselves anyway.





This is me in the cockpit of the "Oxford" I went solo in during 1940. There is another "interior" photograph later showing the same view of a later model.

One "story" I must tell you. We had a complete Course (about 24 pilots) all from the Air Ministry, including the Inspector General himself, and bebies of Top Brass, from Air Commodores to mere Group Captains. I must admit that absolute none pulled rank on us Sergeant! They were whilst airborne, treated as pupils behaving as such, with deference to their Instructors and it was a pleasure, at least for me, to have been involved. Anyway, we were using a satellite field at KELM-SCOTT, a little to the north of Watchfield because our local beam was out of order. This place had absolutely nothing on it apart from one Nissen Hut and a mobile Beam transmitter. Most peculiarly, YWCA Canteen truck always turned up there during our night flying!

Towards the end of this course, when a period of night-flying was part of the instruction, one black night, we all agreed our flying plan and took off into the darkness, NOT resetting our Barometric Height Indicators (which had been switched to ZERO feet.)

There were far too many buildings at Watchfield for this BAS School alone, so another operation was started to train ex Pilots to become Flying Controllers.

Here we (virtually) invented (or perhaps I should be more careful and say "perfected") the Figure of Eight Control System using Marker beacons. This was adopted after the War as the basic Control Scheme at Heathrow and (I discovered many years later) NEW YORK. The development of Radar Control of course, replaced our antiquated systems, and utterly destroyed the need for what we called the Radio Beam. The main difference was that the "beam" got transmitted from the AIRCRAFT, as distinct from the ground.

This School became larger as the overall extent of flying increased. Into being came the School for AIRFIELD CONTROLLERS, those intrepid and long suffering airmen who sat in a black and white chequered van on the Airfield Runway approach and flashed green and red lights to pilots to avoid collisions and crashes.

There were other minor operations going on at Watchfield. One very covert aircraft - an ANSON twin engined, very old monoplane of almost antique vintage, was hidden away in a corner of the big field, well away from prying eyes and this was the pride and joy of a Pilot we very seldom met.

A Flight Lieut Battersby ("BATS" to us) was the sole member of that operation, and he specialised in wandering off about four o'clock in the afternoon, returning goodness knows when, having flown all the way to the East Coast and then on into the North Sea backwards and forwards at Zero feet searching for (and finding) German beams which were being used to help their Bombers find British targets, especially in the Midlands. His information was used to organise defences, especially night fighters.

Long after the event, he told me he had actually reported a beam targetting Coventry - which for some reason Air Ministry had deliberately ignored. Years later I read that Churchill himself had vetoed disclosing that target to the defences because (at the same time) Bletchley Park had reported the same target from messages deciphered when the ENIGMA code had at last been broken. Churchill believed that by disclosing we KNEW the target in advance would indicate to the Germans we HAD indeed broken that code.

So much for Bats Battersley and his Anson bristling with aerials and antennae! By the way, he always went up ALONE and did all his considerable amount of knob-fiddling whilst flying at twenty feet up!

Here are pictures of a few of the "Staff" of AST who looked after us and our aircraft so well for so long:

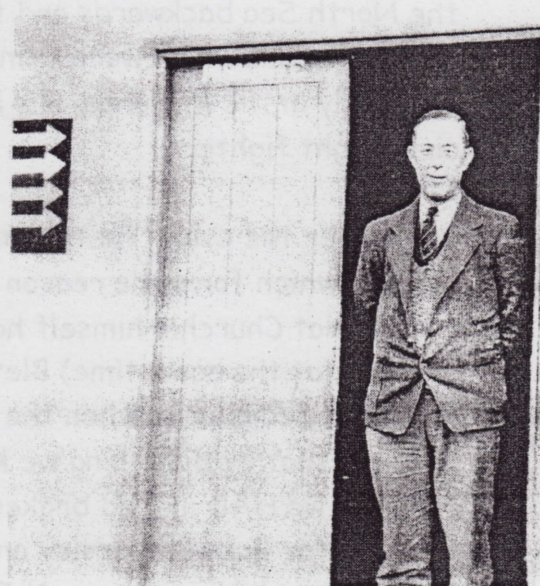
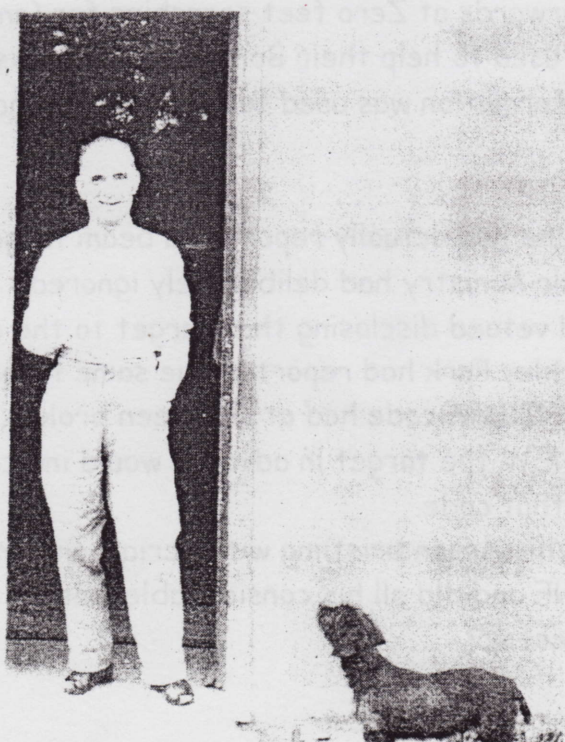


Mansell MORSE
Assistant Engineering Manager



Ron COOPER
In charge of one or more of the
Service Hangars

The two gentlemen who so carefully looked after our Parachutes.





Two ladies from the Office who looked after Flight records.

This is the famous (or infamous) TIM. I never did know his surname! There is a paragraph or two about him later on.



Up and down, round and about we went for an hour and a quarter, then *"Would you like a cup of tea, Sir?"* If the answer was YES, we carried out Plan A - which was first to pull out the Intercom plug so the pupil didn't know what was happening and couldn't hear the signals, then carry out a shortened Beam approach circuit, down and down, down and down with the appropriate needle pointing to lower and lower heights until ZERO got near. Inevitably there was a degree of consternation, and at least one pupil threatened to take over unless the Instructor stopped committing suicide! Zero passed and at minus 120 feet, the wheels went bump and gradually the aircraft came to a standstill in pitch blackness. Turn starboard 100 degrees, taxi for about a minute, switch on the headlight and THERE, neatly parked, were half a dozen Oxfords (no lights of course) outside a Nissen hut!

We got out and ushered our high-rank pupil into the smoke-laden glare of a paraffin lamp to meet, not only six Watchfield Instructors, but six very frightened Top Brass from Air Ministry! It so happened that the first time I did this during that Course, we were confronted by and introduced to the Inspector General himself - as cheerful as any ab-initio flier who had (without being sick) just experienced his first Loop-the-loop. He had got there by courtesy of George Webb himself who could have been court-martialled on the spot! No doubt he would have concocted a story about such landing being an emergency, but he would have had problems explaining why SIX aircraft had also had similar problems at the same time! For those particular pupils it was probably the opportunity to recount the horrible story in some Bar or other during following years -

"There we were, 120 feet below zero, not knowing WHERE we were going, couldn't see the ground old boy, no lights, and who was there to greet us? The Inspector General HIMSELF!"

The SCHOOL OF FLYING CONTROL became quite large in comparison with 1 BAS, with sometimes 100 to 150 pupils all learning the skills of how to keep flying tidy. They were almost all ex-pilots and their future job would be to man the "Control Stations" on RAF Airfields, being responsible for safety and efficiency in the handling of aircraft movements.

Part of their tuition was being ferried around in ageing Ansons using a satellite airfield at WANBOROUGH which had no facilities greater than a toilet and tea-making machine. Classroom instruction would be exercises in navigation, and anything which might assist in doing their future Control job, Meteorology, Morse Code, signalling of every description, and What to do and What NOT to do in an emergency. Most pupils knew it all anyway from the Pilot training days and considered the Course a doddle. Courses lasted about 6 weeks. Periods in between were used to provide staff leave and tidy up the empty Sergeants Mess! AST got a fixed fee per capita, whatever the results. There were some dozen permanent Staff, Lecturers and Instructors, with four or five aircraft and Pilots on the go mostly day and night.

Here are a few of the RAF personnel attached to this School:



He didn't like his picture being taken! Hard luck!

MR. ANDREWS - CHIEF ENGINEER

MANSALL MORSE } - 1/2 NO 3 HANGAR
"PADDY" ROUTLEDGE } (OXFORDS)

"DICKIE" DUNWORTH - 1/2 NO 5 HANGAR
(ANSONS)

STANLEY WARD

FOLLOWED BY

EDDIE PORTER - 1/2 INSTRUMENT
SECTION

MICK ROUSE } - INST. SECTION
DON SMITH } STAFF
BRIAN ALLWAY }

JACK DANCE - STOREMAN

MR HATCH - 1/2 MESSENGERS

HARRY MCCABE, KEITH ANGER, ? LUKER,

GEORGE CHILDS, ? ROBERTS, JOHN WARD.

JOHN FRANKAM - NO 3 HANGAR
FITTERS & RIGGERS

INFORMATION GRATEFULLY RECEIVED

FROM

BRIAN ALLWAY

AT PARK Rd

FARINGDON

IF ANY OF THE ABOVE (OR ANY OTHER PERSON WITH
MEMORIES OF RAF WATCHFIELD)

WOULD LIKE A COPY OF THE BOOKLET - PLEASE WRITE
OR HAVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TEXT

Thanks!

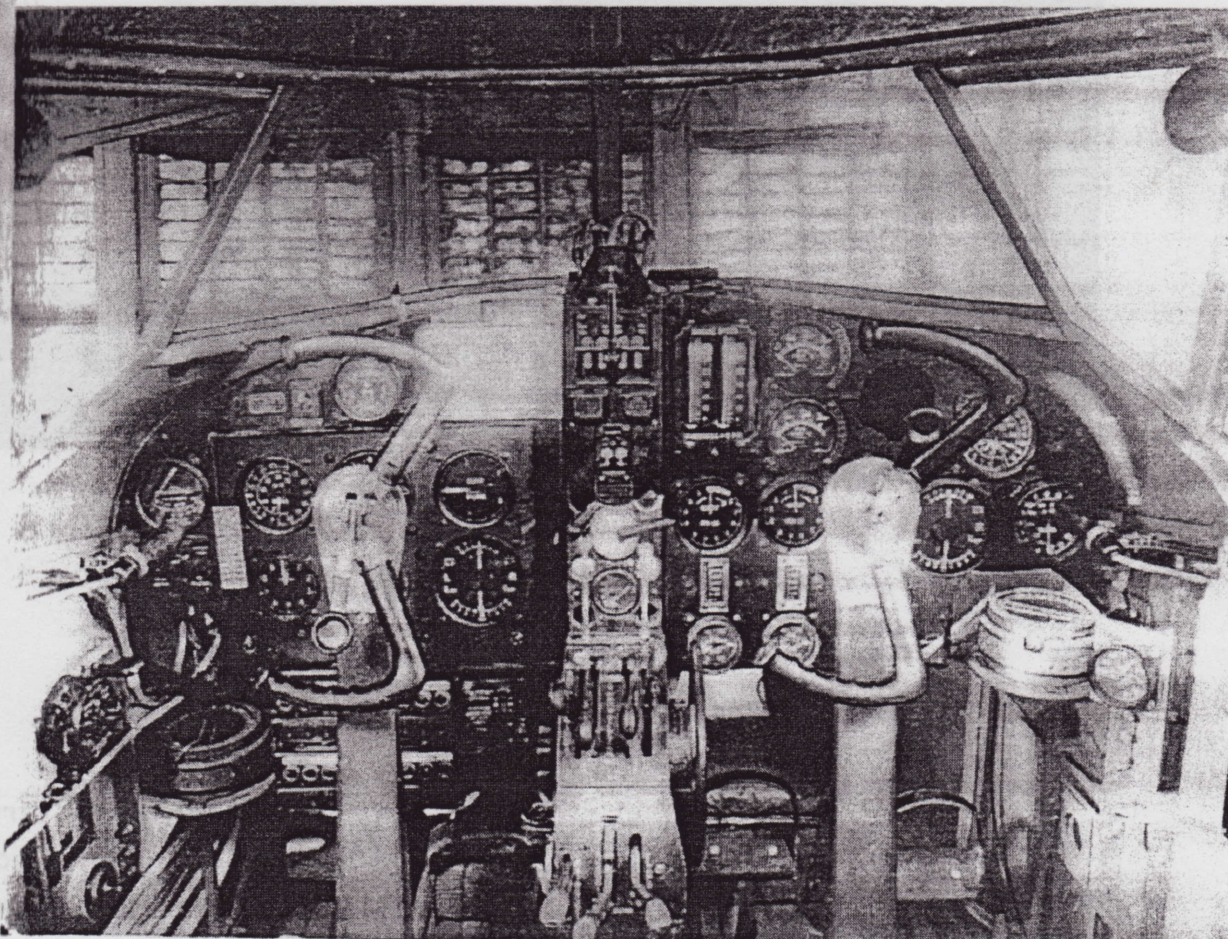


Mention is constantly made of the aircraft OXFORDS and ANSONS.
I digress and tell you more about these incredible machines.

The ANSON as an aircraft design was ages old. Wooden, the entire structure having slats covered with stretched linen fabric coated with "dope" which made it quite strong and durable; two engines, very efficient except when you switched fuel tanks when there was a tendency for one to pack up without reason. They were lumbering "crates" which were very nearly impossible to crash unless you were a cretin pilot. Top speed about 100 mph when everything vibrated like mad. Dual control mostly, with facility for a Wireless Operator (ie a TABLE to write on!) and seats for three, or four. Squeeze and SEVEN could claim flying hours in their Log Book!

First designed (I think) as a Light Bomber (!) they got the job of being standard Twin-engined Flying Training machines from somewhere in the twenties up to 1934/5. They had been a kind of work-horse for the RAF and EVERY pilot (other than "Single-engine" types) could get in and go. Landing speed was best about 40 mph, but it didn't matter much. Flaps of course, and relatively good visibility. They were STILL flying in 1946 and everybody LOVED them, mainly from nostalgia.

The OXFORD was designed and made originally by AIRSPEED at Oxford under Air Ministry specification, and it was a WINNER right from the start. Intended to be the standard "Service Trainer" for Pilots from about 1934, it kept going until long after 1946. Today, I don't think there is ONE left! Not even in a Museum!



At that time, "Initial Flying Training" stations used De Havilland "Tiger Moths" of ancient design, biplanes, seats in tandem and extremely sensitive. Easy to fly however - once you knew HOW! They were replaced by Miles-made MAGISTERS, a wooden monoplane with fixed undercarriage, also tandem. Both Moths and Magisters were the RAF introduction to more powerful models.

When Pilots in the "multi-engined" category advanced to "SERVICE level, they flew Oxfords exclusively. They were robust machines, made mostly of laminated wood glued and the whole covered with stretched and doped linen. They could take a lot of punishment especially at wheel level, but they did not like flying at slow speeds - stalling easily and very viciously. The instruction book stated emphatically, "If you *"spin"* during flight, *GET OUT!*" When above cloud and no-one was looking, we used to spin them deliberately, and they were not half as bad as made out. Mind you, we took remedial action fairly soon, not waiting long before "Nose DOWN and OPPOSITE RUDDER!"

Turn LEFT and skim the water BELOW cloud level, often fifty feet or less, keeping in the middle of the stream due South until suddenly it veered hard right. Stop turning, stay on your compass 180 degrees, climb to 130 feet into the cloud, count ten and then close the engines and drop down to the green green grass of Watchfield where everyone was screaming blue murder at Len Innesley to get the wretched beam going again! Mind you, it was something you PRACTICED on a nice day when the sun was out and nobody senior looking!

The village of Watchfield itself seemed to us to be, no more than a few cottages, a Church pub, and a largish house. SHRIVENHAM was the REAL address, with all the mod cons of shops, including a host of tailors, a few pubs, a Church Hall, and a Railway Station! Although we had occasional Church Parades at Watchfield, it was always the Vicar of Shrivenham who officiated. He was a tall, almost aged man, very "pontifical" as one of our pilots said of him. We nick-named him DRACULA, Most unfairly, but young people always do (and DID) poke fun at authority. A number of RAF people regularly attended services at Watchfield Church. At the time, I was rather surprised at this, to have men who were "fighting a war" attending a church, it seemed out of context in a place where the clergyman was urging parishioners to be kind to one another!

The pub was used considerably by NCO pupils, not so much by Officers. Staff as such "kept away", I suppose they had a reason? They went a mile or so "out" to the pubs in Highworth and villages beyond. Beer was of course "rationed" by availability, and to hear that barrels had arrived at the pub halfway up the road to Faringdon, meant an exodus that night of a mass of flying crew who quite regularly finished up in the river with all their clothes on! All high spirits and no malice - they were young men whose lives were hanging in a balance. Remember that these BAS pupils were from Squadrons actively involved in "operations" and many indeed had the familiar "twitch" recognised by everyone with experience.

On the Faringdon Road, actually on the Beam "line" into the field, was a sort of "double cottage" converted into a CAFÉ. It was popular with the RAF personnel but not others—aircraft passed noisily overhead at precisely 100 feet every few minutes. No wonder the Proprietors moved elsewhere to sleep and finally gave up in despair, probably with impaired hearing!

Wing Commander Jenkins and Mrs J had moved into Watchfield House at the outbreak of War. It was only a hundred yards or so from the main gate (on the little lane which went from the main Faringdon Road, almost opposite the OCTU at Shrivenham, to Highworth.

Incidentally you COULD "Barrel-roll" them, but they wouldn't "Loop". Do too-tight a turn at speed and one wing would stall violently. Very frightening. When you had learned how, you could fly them very accurately indeed, but it took time.

Usually a Pilot spent 140 hours flying time to become proficient and get his "Wings". He then was "channelled" into a particular line, Fighters, Bombers, etc. Then on to an OTU (Operational Training Unit) where he was introduced to machines of real war. And finally to a Squadron using one of the many types of aircraft available. He "*served his time*" and was transferred to a less-hazardous post at the end of six months or a determined number of missions. It is fact that on an average, the life of an RAF Combat Pilot was as little as 250 hours. This is not a helpful statistic because the period a fighter aircraft was airborne might have been a matter of minutes, and a Coastal Command Surveillance plane several hours.

Experienced combat Pilots who had "retired" as such, were used to support Training Command. Instructors at ALL training levels were categorised after a visit to a Training School. Their "University" was CRANWELL. (CFS - Central Flying School).

Watchfield became recognised as the "Beam Approach" Central Flying School.

At their own Flying schools, Instructors operated within a kind of "graded" system (A to C or D). "Top" Instructors were classified "Q" (QUALIFIED) and only THEY could send a Pupil Pilot solo at night. There always HAD to be a Q Instructor in charge when flying was undertaken. At Watchfield, virtually every BAS Flying Instructor was an A or Q Pilot.

Every RAF station had at least one Oxford, mostly used as taxi. They were put to almost every use imaginable, Pilot and Navigator training, Gunnery, Taxi-work, Weather tests, and running everyday errands. Pilots LOVED them!

It might be worth mentioning here that there was never a concrete runway at Watchfield. It was ALL grass, and during the winter, large parts of the field were unusable due to mud and pools of water. It was all taken in stride. If you couldn't see, you went through the lot and hang the consequences. Otherwise you steered your way skilfully or otherwise around the puddles. About 1942, a kind of wire mesh matting was installed along the most used middle strip, which reduced the risk of getting stuck and overturning, but by and large, it was all a matter of choosing a firm patch to land.

Remember that as far as the Beam Students were concerned, many aircraft did not physically "land" after circuits—they simply "touched down" and did the whole exercise again, because the most important part was that last 600 feet down to zero. The most dangerous bit of all was coming down the last 100 feet! A narrow "beam" existed between two marker beacons, one (the INNER marker) just East of the main Shrivenham/Faringdon Road and the other (the OUTER MARKER) a mile further along the beam at which point the aircraft should have been manoevered to 600 feet. Correct progress downwards was achieved by listening to dots and dashes either side of the "steady-note" beam and a very very concentrated attention to airspeed, engine speed and what-have-you. All very complicated, but it worked—providing the Pilot was skilled enough to make it so!

What the local people must have suffered, I can only imagine. To my knowledge, for FOUR years there was CONSTANT flying up and down this narrow aerial "way" for up to 23 hours a day. There were of course, intervals when Courses changed over, but bad weather gave no relief, in fact, the worse the weather, the MORE the Instructors themselves wanted to fly! Particularly if there happened to be fog! It was the dearest wish of EVERY staff pilot to have flown successfully and safely when LITERALLY, even birds were not airborne! This is quite true, almost unbelievable, but we DID take off, we DID land when you could not see the ground ahead. There is always SOME visibility, even in the thickest fog, maybe ten feet, but at 70 miles an hour, coming down at an angle, hoping to hit the grass and not a building, it didn't matter whether it was ten feet or fifty!

At night, very seldom were "lights" lit. The "Flare-path", used ONLY by the ANSON boys of the FLYING SCHOOL, was a series of some ten "Goose-neck" flares, each a kind of "Watering-can" filled with paraffin and a piece of rag sticking out of the spout. When alight it had a flame of about a foot high which spluttered and blinked in the wind.

Later, an added safety feature got used by the AIRFIELD CONTROL SCHOOL, a truck with a large floodlight which shone "up" the landing strip to assist landing and take off. When fog was about, all this lighting aid was superfluous, you couldn't see anything anyway!

Officially, our own Flying Controller in the "Tower" was supposed to be looking after us. Incidentally THEIR radio call-sign was "OSTRICH" and we were supposed to use in reply the word "DUCKLING", but as said, there were no radios for universal use in the early days, but we did get a few later in the War. "Control" of aircraft in and out was done almost always by simple observation and calculation. You HAD to be in a certain position at a certain height at a certain time. Knowing the circuit and procedures like the back of their hand, everybody "fitted in". If you didn't somebody was likely to die—and it COULD be you, so do it ABSOLUTELY RIGHT ALWAYS!

In 1999 I went (as a nostalgic "Goodbye") to the spot where I knew the Main Gate originally stood and THERE I found a small concrete patch almost overgrown and now part of a hedge.

It is ALL that is left of RAF Watchfield - the actual place where our Sentry Box stood, manned by a Corporal with Rifle and fixed bayonet, day and night for six years. I could find absolutely NOTHING else, not a trace of any of the buildings, no legacy for locals to treasure. Nothing, nothing, nothing. It was as if it had never existed!

The place was not there in 1938, it was born, grew up, did its duty, playing an important part in the War effort, and then died. Ashes to ashes? It would be nice if someone locally put up a little sign or stone marking the spot where lots of people "*did their bit!*" That remaining patch of crumbling concrete would be ideal!

Afterwards, we all went our various ways in 1946 and thereabouts, the RAF continued to use the facilities and in due course the Red Berets "*took it over*" as a kind of headquarters. Finally of course as everybody knows, the area was left empty and used for all sorts of purposes, including Rock Festivals! The Control Tower was about the last thing to disappear. I thought "*How sad!*" THAT could have been a marvellous centre for something like a Watchfield Museum.

However, it went possibly encouraged by a politically correct politician and in its place there is now a sprawling Industrial Estate. I bet few people working there today know what went on fifty odd years ago. Traffic rushes by on a massive highway at faster speeds even than the Oxfords and Ansons which once once chugged along trying to get airborne, I can imagine what the ghosts of our past must be thinking, but change is progress they say.

How and Why the "Red Berets" came to have an HQ at Watchfield is interesting.

One day, we were told "the Army" was arriving and would occupy not only ALL the vacant accommodation, but a mass of tentage around and in between. They would be here for only a week or so. It was all terribly SECRET and no-one was to say a word about ANYTHING to ANYBODY. We pilots (who had been watching the build up of gliders and transport aircraft at the "new" Airfields of FAIRFORD, DOWN AMPNEY, and all fields nearby big and flat enough) guessed at once we were being involved in the logistics of an airborne invasion somewhere. In every alternate field, there were the remains of a crashed glider, HORSIA, ~~HENSA~~ etc etc and in and out of Fairford big aircraft were practicing taking off with gliders in tow.

Several doors immediately opened and out jumped (it seemed) ever so many men in uniform. Most of them (literally) knelt down and kissed the sodden earth. They saw me walking towards them and suddenly I was pushed to the ground by screaming, excited USA Airmen grateful to be still alive! In due course, all sorts of Watchfield personnel arrived, including Squadron Leader Webb. He marshalled them all back to our Crew Room where the Watchfield "ladies" made tea.

Eleven very frightened men, some crying, simply could not stop thanking us for saving their lives. They had left North Africa several hours before, couldn't see the ground or make radio contact, and got absolutely lost. Their petrol was about to run out, so the pilot decided to drop straight down through the cloud and hope for the best. Just as they were expecting oblivion, an English voice came over the Radio, asking if they wanted help (there was a special SOS frequency which could so be used). HE then "talked" the pilot all the way round a wide circuit at a safe height, got a wireless fix on them and literally converted their panic to sanity by telling the pilot what directions to steer, how much height to lose and when, follow the landing cockpit drill and finally when to switch off and jam on the brakes.

He had personally saved ALL of their lives. There was not the slightest doubt about that! His name was GEORGE WEBB, Squadron Leader AFC and Bar. He had been a pre-war Fighter Pilot in the RAF, long experienced and as calm a man in an emergency as ever I have met. Fate had decreed that that crew would wander directly over Watchfield at that precise moment. Seconds before certain death they met George.

He had been in his Office in the Control Tower when he heard the noise of engines, and (like me) KNEW there was something wrong. He rushed upstairs, switched on the wide frequency button of the M'AIDEZ" system where the volume of the transmission is heard by everyone within a mile or so, and asked (I can almost hear him saying it today) "*Are you in trouble, can I help?*"

Now all that is you must admit, quite a story, but listen. Do you know what his job had been just before the War when he was serving as an Instructor at AST Hamble, near Southampton? **Teaching Airfield Controllers HOW to "talk down" aircraft in distress!** HE flew the aircraft supposedly in trouble and THEY had to find him with a wireless DIRECTION FINDING loop aerial, tell him what to do and get him safely onto the ground, or else they FAILED! He of course made their lives as difficult as possible by turning the wrong way and showing signs of panic—they had to correct his mistakes and reassure him that a safe landing was ahead.



Squadron Leader George Webb, AFC and Bar

He (being the methodical, careful and far-sighted man he was) had personally installed exactly the same emergency system at Watchfield with the help of a Mr Innersley, the resident radio boffin, and occasionally we pilots played with it just in case our Beam failed and WE had to trust a Flying Controller's ability.

I assure you the pressure on the Operator was incredible - one mistake and the aircraft was lost - no chance of a second try, they either got down safely or were dead. George did it alone, at a moment's notice, most efficiently, and twelve men lived

He was probably the most quiet and self effacing Pilot I ever have known, and to me a real hero. There was once in the Mess (where some hundred boisterous pupil pilots were celebrating the End of a Course and getting a bit inebriated) a loud voice shouted "*I'm the best pilot in the Squadron?*"

George was sitting at what might be called the "top table" and tolerant of what was going on because he understood the tension and pressures they were experiencing. He stood up, and suddenly there was dead silence. Everyone knew HE was the CO (FLYING) and they expected a rocket.

He waited; then said: " NO YOU ARE NOT! I AM THE BEST PILOT IN THE SQUADRON! BECAUSE I HAVE LIVED THE LONGEST!" and sat down. We all felt chastened. So right he was. The best pilot was indeed he who survived, and those words helped ME and many others to cope with our flying lives.

Just to finish this on a lighter note - the American crew stayed the night and next day emptied their aircraft of hundreds upon hundreds of oranges, bananas, all sorts of things which were so welcome to us near-starving Brits - chocolate, candy, cakes and sweets of every description. It got shared out, including several big parcels to DRACULA.

They left our airfield surface completely unserviceable for days, with a couple of massive ruts blocking the landing strip but there it was, an incident in the life of RAF Watchfield which had been, until now ~~been~~ utterly forgotten. Keep this book, and one day perhaps an American caller will ask at the Library and mention he or she had a grandfather who once safely landed somewhere round here in a dire emergency, thanks to the skill of a clever Englishman, and had it not been for HIM, well, you never know, do you!

On everybody's behalf, I pay tribute to George, not only for THIS episode, but for a life during which he was a real gentleman, unselfish, kind and without an unkind word for anyone, ever. He was the best pilot I ever knew whatever the age and every Instructor at RAF Watchfield knew it too.

George attended with Mrs Webb every Post War Reunion at "The Bell" in Faringdon for forty years and his Log Book when he finally gave up his goggles (he flew Helicopters for years and years after 1946) showed nearly 15000 hours flying.

Yes, he was awarded an AIR FORCE CROSS TWICE - the highest award the RAF as a Service can give for exceptional non-operational duties, but I think he should have been recognised in a wider sense. At least a knighthood! Thanks Sir George!

These Re-union affairs were always held at The Bell in Faringdon on the night of the first Saturday in September. Forty years on they stopped because we all felt we would like to remember friends not as they ARE but as they WERE. Surviving Pilot Instructors of 1 BAS RAF Watchfield were now old old men. It had to be put in context - those days had become HISTORY! So we said GOODBYE to one another and parted our several ways.

The Bell incidentally had been "bought" (I think "bought" is the right word) by Group Captain BARTON of AST Hamble either during the War or just afterwards. A few years later, a Mr W Stickland took his place. "Sticky" was the Transport Officer for AST at Watchfield, during the whole period of the War, previously in the Motor Trade at Southampton. Whilst at Watchfield he married a Mrs Cooper and she "took over" The Bell when he died. Immediately after the War, Sticky acquired and developed EAGLE coaches on the outskirts of Faringdon. They were both very fine people and much liked at RAF Watchfield.



This is George with the Station Commander, Wing Commander Jenkins, AFC
(in an unusually "frisky" mood)

Amongst the "Civilian" staff at RAF Watchfield, there were several outstanding characters. The Chief Engineer for example - I think his name was Andrews. We kept in touch for many years after he came to live with his lovely wife at Hedge End near Southampton. A kind man who had an affinity to birds. They would (literally) take crumbs from his mouth whilst perching on his lips!

His top Assistant was Mansell Morse. He also had a marvellous wife, and after the War they took over a pub on the main road out north of Faringdon, called I believe the "Baker's Inn" or similar. He was an incredibly good all-round sportsman, especially at football and played for the WATCHFIELD team.

This was organised by me and our Physical Training Instructor FRED HERBERT, who served at RAF from early 1940 to January 1946 and was promoted from Corporal to Flight Sergeant in all those years. An absolutely dedicated chap, enthusiastic about everything, willing and so loyal. Should have been commissioned, but RAF Watchfield had no such "establishment" and they thought he was too good to be posted elsewhere!



This is Flight Sergeant Fred Herbert, (left) an RAF Policeman's whose name I regretfully forget, and Flight Sergeant Hitchens who for several years managed the Adjutants Office.

May I talk in a more serious fashion for a short while? It was directly over Watchfield that I saw the most fantastic demonstration of the terrific power of nature and it will remain to my dying day.

To digress a bit - to me there had happened, early in my flying days, several events which were exceedingly dangerous. It is irrelevant what they were, but in each case there were short seconds during which certain death stared me in the face. I KNEW there was absolutely nothing I could do to avoid it, that it hadn't been MY fault, it was just plain bloody hard luck I happened to be there at that time in those circumstances. There was only one thing to do, say "Ah Well! And Goodbye to life!"

Obviously I subsequently landed safe and to a degree sound. For months after the first, I couldn't sleep, had dreadful hallucinations, nightmares, etc etc. After the second, it wasn't so bad, but I was constantly being reminded of the fragility of a flying life.

Then the third, probably the worst. Time stood still, and I had (it seemed) a long conversation with the Angel of Death. We talked about religion and the after-life, WHY it had got to be ME, and did death itself hurt much? Finally, she (Yes! It was a SHE!) smiled and whispered, "*DEATH, like all things in LIFE is a matter of CHANCE! It's not YOUR time yet to die, not for a long time yet!*" and vanished.

From that moment on, I lost all fear. Nothing at all seemed to so dangerous as to be avoided. There were a couple of subsequent and recognisable "near misses". Each treated very casually.

Back to this event over Watchfield.

It was a Summer afternoon, blue sky, warm and relaxing. We were flying three or five miles away, along the beam, with GROVE on our right, ie with Watchfield dead ahead.

I suddenly became aware of a dense black cloud on the horizon. Literally a kind of dark blanket, stretching from ground to the heavens. I had never seen anything like it before and could not imagine what it might be. It was approaching the Airfield exactly opposite to me.

I "took over" the controls, and kept going, intending to land and wait for the storm to pass over. It was now clearly an electrical storm, with lightning flashes like trees in a black forest. Over Longcot at about 100 feet up, I realised it

would be folly to try and land - why not turn round and go elsewhere? But before that, let's have a closer look at this phenomenon!

I turned left and flew across the village and round back again, about twice the height of Shrivenham Church. The advancing black "wall" was approaching at a terrific speed and turbulence was becoming severe. So I turned right, circled the OCTU and having decided that discretion was better far than valour headed away ~~west~~^{west} at about 100 mph. The black cloud was travelling as fast as I was! I could now see INTO the darkness behind and somehow FEEL the suction pulling me IN. It had all become a terrible emergency, somehow I HAD to escape the enveloping night. It WAS night behind me, sheer blackness, and the sun shone ahead with a blue sky and inviting calm.

I opened full throttle, broke the emergency wires to get increased power, and keeping clammy fingers crossed, managed to get away. Where to go? I decided Brize Norton, it being near and a very big place with long runways. Minutes later I arrived and crossed their Control area about 500 feet, seeing the windsock at right angles which meant a ground wind of at least 80 or 90 mph. A "split-ass turn" (forgive the language) and down as fast as humanly possible. As I passed the windsock, it was going ROUND and ROUND horizontally!

As we touched the ground, everything went black, yes BLACK! On a fine summer's day. The darkness actually passed us as we moved along and lightning flashed either side. It took over two thousand yards for our little Oxford to come to a halt, nose in a potato patch. We switched off and waited. There was nothing else we COULD do! The rain fell like sheets of water, lightning every second or so. Black as pitch and the wind buffeting so much we thought we'd turn over!

IT took nearly two hours for their Search party to find us. They had of course seen us touch down and then disappear.

All telephones were dead. In the end we managed to pass on news of our safe landing. THREE other Watchfield aircraft had also diverted and were scattered all over the Vale. Two days later, it was OK to fly back, and we saw utter devastation: cottages with roofs off, floods, burned out haystacks. At the Airfield, half a dozen aircraft at least were upside down and all flying had been abandoned

We flew over the village and I said to myself, if for no other reason I remember Watchfield, it will be because HERE I experienced my one and only contact with a real live LINESTORM, a weather condition unheard of in this country.

There WAS indeed a bump, but no more than an ordinary landing bump! I shouted "Abandon Aircraft" and doors flew off after pulling the emergency cords. Wimpy happened to be nearest and was the first to jump out, - dropping TWO feet instead of five. I can still hear his plaintive shriek as feet met the ground, "Christ! We're on a BEACH!" I had intended to "ditch" parallel to the waves about ten feet "out" (the recommended procedure in such circumstances) but the tide was OUT and the sand was more "level" than Watchfield itself!

There was another occasion when Wimpy got charged with alleged rape of a Waaf and I flew him to South Cerney for the Court martial. He was acquitted almost before the case started. On the way there, I looked around, and there he was, trying to get the door open whilst we were in flight over Swindon. I handed over the controls to my pupil, crawled back to where he was standing, and said "What's on mate?" He told me he wanted to jump out! A fag later, and a few kind words changed his mind, and the incident was never mentioned again, until now. Smoking in an aircarft? What WOULD Air Ministry say?

Wimpy did a grand job really and I am absolutely sure, did not deserve the treatment he got. He was demobbed to PLYMPTON, near Plymouth in 1946. Many times during the last fifty odd years have I had the urge to find him, shake his hand and talk of old times. But I never did get round to it in the end.

Probably the WORST pupil at Watchfield (when it came to Instrument Flying) was a certain Flight Lieutenant C P N BISHOP, some ten to fifteen years older than me. He was a Senior Elementary School Flying Instructor somewhere and had been allocated to me for special attention. What I did NOT know at the time was that he was an absolutely wizard single-engine stunt pilot. What he could do with a Tiger Moth for example was incredible. After the War, he set up a Club of "Clergymen" pilots who for several years amazed ordinary people with their flying tricks, formation flying and massive expertise. He called himself, of course, THE BISHOP. There were in addition, THE ARCHBISHOP, THE VICAR, THE CANON, and a few more too. Incidentally, his peace-time job was a Bank Clerk in London!

Anyway, I had no idea of his tremendous ability at the time. He had absolutely NO idea of how to fly without looking out! He simply would NOT do what he was told by his instruments, and literally "Panic"ed in bad weather. It wasn't too bad straight and level, but absolute agony to sit beside him on the way down. There is no shame in this, he flew "by the seat of his pants" and was incredibly successful at this, but it was lethal at times of limited visibility. He failed the Course and (strangely indeed) was granted permission to do it all again. To me it was a special challenge, so I spent a great deal of time indeed on "LINK" training (flight

simulation on a ground machine) and just sitting in the cockpit with him under a hood and me pretending we were in trouble.

One day, with a cloud base of about 75 feet, after a double dose of Course instruction, I thought he was ready to do it himself, without any help from me. Incidentally, pupils never flew "solo" on the beam, there was no point in taking such risk. At the end of the Course, the Instructor merely made up his mind whether or not that pilot could achieve a good result when the time came, and assessed a "mark of probability" that he would get down safely.

If the weather was suitable, this "final test" was landing in the bad weather ENTIRELY without help of any kind from the Instructor sitting alongside.

He did three "approaches" and at the last minute made a complete cock-up of each. I knew perfectly well it was all psycholological and decided to take a risk. All so bigheaded and stupid. As a last resort, on his fourth effort, as we passed the Outer Marker, I got up from my "dual" seat, crawled backwards on to the main spar, saying "Right Bish! It's all yours! Do it properly or you'll kill yourself and me too!"

He landed safely, cockahoop, and from then on was OK. It wasn't me being brave, only me being bigheaded. Mind you, I knew perfectly well that, just before we crashed, I could lean forward, grab the controls and with a little tweak, save our souls. That was what I thought!

Thank you Bish for teaching me a salutary lesson! I never did such a thing again.



Flight Lieut C P N BISHOP, Stunt Pilot extraordinaire.

An RAF "Member of Staff" who MUST go down in posterity as the most hated man at Watchfield was the Station Warrant Officer— "Wimpy" BLYTH. A smallish man, rather pompous and full of his own importance was responsible for Station discipline as regards NCO's and Airmen. The fact was that the total complement of those "permanently" attached was no more than a dozen or so, but of course, he was also responsible also for the behaviour of ALL RAF non-Officer personnel, which included the Pupils and Instructors of the several Schools.

These were 99 percent Pilots and long-serving at that, with all the bad habits of such categories. They dressed in their own particular variations of uniform, basically battledress blue, but with unpolished buttons, dirty flying boots, scarves of glorious hue, flying helmets, beaver-fur coats, sun spectacles and a definite aversion to being told what or what not to do by a prim and often strutting WO without an identifiable father.

Sadly, and quite undeservedly, they made his life purgatory! They really did on occasions behave abominably, But he in turn almost deliberately, invited retaliation. How many times he had condoms (filled with water) hung on his billet door handle, I don't know, but several times, we Flight Commanders were asked to invite these errant NCO's to stop being childish and help him enforce rules.

I personally had quite a lot to do with W.O BLYTH, one way and another, because of the many extraneous duties I was involved in. Being so regularly the "Duty Officer" at night, he and I often did "rounds" together and I found him a rather sad man who basically didn't like his job. I realised he was very "lonely" and therefore tried in my small way to alleviate the stress he day-long endured. When he joined the RAF he had wanted to be a Pilot and his application had been refused. Quite often I took him flying, and occasionally he flew as "second pilot". Without the "Station WO" tag he was a very nice individual, and good company.

He was "on board" my Anson one dark night when we had a battery failure and a starboard engine cut-out. The wretched overloaded old aircraft wouldn't maintain height on the port engine alone, and perforce, I had to land on the seashore at SELSEY. It was a bit hair-raising, 1 am, no moon, no radio, no beam, no nothing, only a manual compass and "bubble and squeak" indicator (two small curved tubes on the dashboard, filled with oil and a floating bubble from which you could learn whether you were nose-down, sideways-down or upside down!) Anyway, we landed safely, wheels up, with no more than a couple of busted propellor blades.

I had decided NOT to use parachutes because a quick look round told me there were THREE passengers WITHOUT them and I didn't want to act like God! "Wimpy" was one of them. They all sat in ignorance of my problems, believing we were on the way home and the next "bump" would be Watchfield and a hot cup of cocoa.

Years later, I reached the rank of Flight Lieutenant and for absolutely no reason I can think of, (certainly for no act of bravery or special effort), I was awarded the AIR FORCE CROSS in 1944.

No combat decorations could be awarded to Instructors, Training Command being non-operational. Some of us did secretly and very much against orders, take part in a few operations, particularly out of Abingdon using Wellingtons, and occasionally Halifax bombers in the capacity of second pilots. The official attitude (and of course absolutely right) was that it had cost the RAF many many thousands of pounds to bring us to the stage of skill required to do the job here, and it was utterly stupid to risk loss for the transient excitement of a sortie in Germany. So we accepted the routine and wished it were different.

Of the people who shared life as a Pilot Instructor with me at RAF Watchfield, I can truthfully say they were grand. There was great camaraderie and utter trust. The fact was, although it was never put into words, each owed his life to the others' skill and discipline. Most of the time it didn't matter because we could SEE what was going on and could avoid potentially disastrous situations. Sometimes we deliberately allowed near misses and encouraged dangerous situations to develop simply to find out how the other person reacted.

We practiced formation flying with inches, yes inches only between the wing tips, we didn't bother to take avoiding action where two aircraft met head on in a narrow part of the beam, providing we KNEW he had seen US and that HE knew WE had seen HIM. So close at times, you could have said Hallo and he would have heard you whilst passing at a combined speed of 250 mph. Daft? OF course it was daft, but when it came to the real emergency, there was no panic, it had all happened before, remember?

I recall "meeting" Warrant Officer McGeagh head on at 1000 feet in the middle of a cloud one summer's day, He didn't see ME, even though our wingtips overlapped by about a foot with only a few inches vertically between. He had mistaken his instructions and had been flying up and down the beam for an hour and a bit at this height. So had I! HE was supposed to have been at 2250 feet.

He was distraught and almost in tears when I told him. I am sure that never afterwards did he make a similar mistake. That was an incident I KNEW about. How many others happened with us both in ignorance I cannot imagine! Today, pilots have to make written reports of "near misses" of 5000 feet up down and sideways!

Another member of the football team was Ron Cooper Manager in charge of one of the Service Hangars, a tall, rather gangly young man with the courage of a lion, whom everybody admired for his determination and skill.



This was "WATCHFIELD" Football team, including both RAF and CIVILIAN personnel.

The two men in the Parachute Room were personalities too. They stripped checked and rebuilt parachutes day in and out. Whenever a parachute was due to be so dismantled, they would ask us to send along a Pupil to pull the ripcord—thus giving them confidence that should THEY ever need to do the same thing in an emergency, it would work!

The Wireless and radio buff was Len INNERSLEY, a very gifted quiet man absolutely dedicated to his work, often spending nights trying to solve some problem with an aircraft's wiring or beam reception. He was probably the leading UK expert in the field of SBA Transmitters.

He had an RAF Airman-assistant called Martin who had been a professional Photographer. We got "friendly" and (taking over a disused billet) created a dark-room, complete with Army Blackout- blankets. He taught me all about Black and White Processing of both films and Prints. After the War, I took up Victorian Photography as a hobby and became a bit of an expert on making prints from Magic Lantern slides. All thanks to HIS kindness and help.

It was due to him that I have so many pictures of RAF Watchfield, many of which are in this booklet.

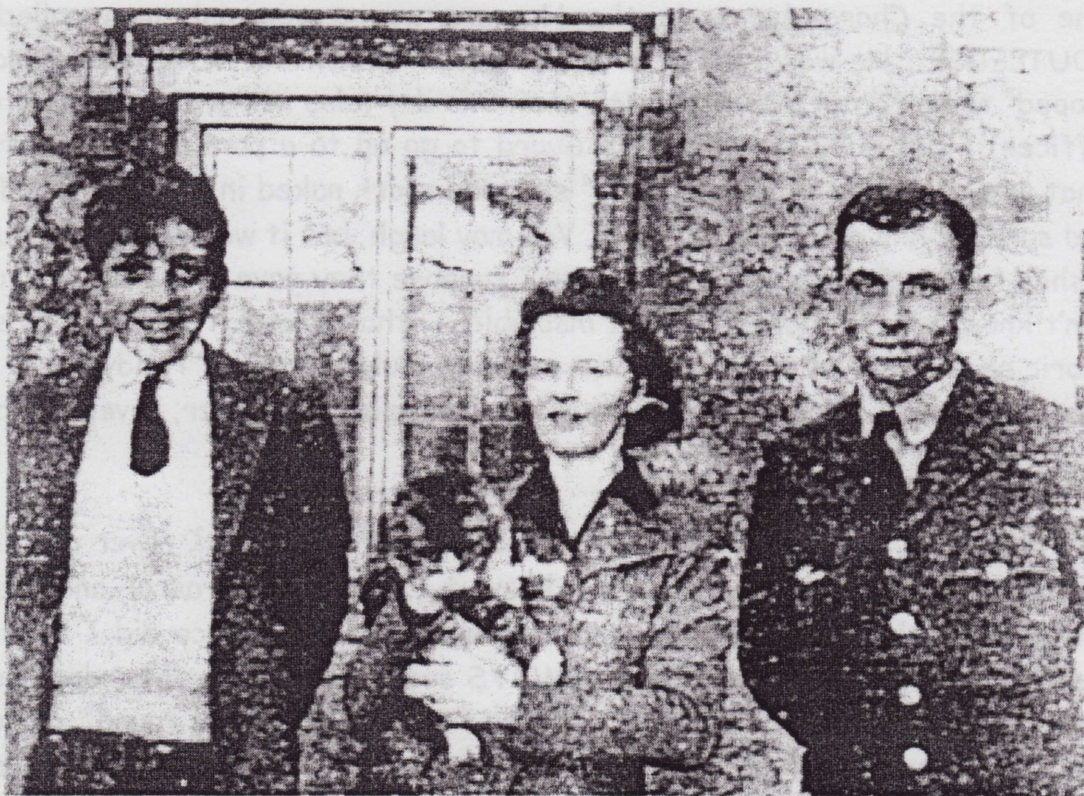
Len Innersley lived at Thornhill, Southampton and we shared an occasional night out together. Sadly he died about a Year after Peace.



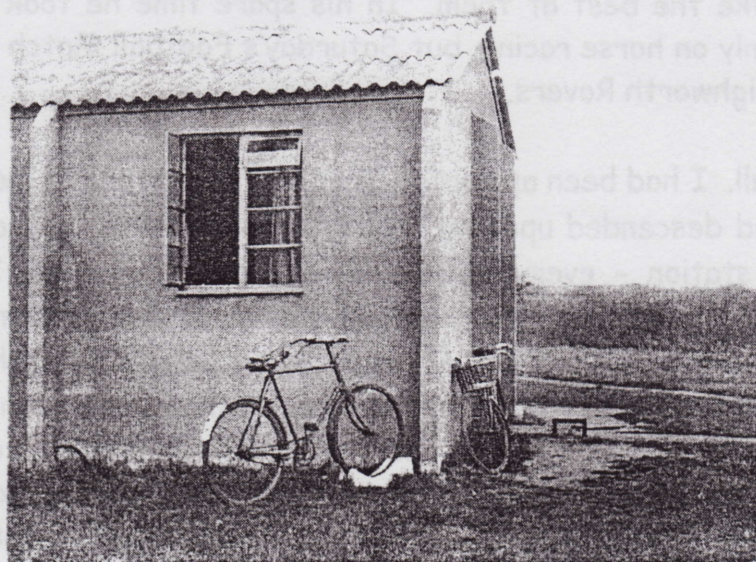
These folk were all concerned with Administration within the Flying section.



Leading Aircraftman SALT. Officially he was George Webb's batman, but he did ever so many things for ever so many of us and thoroughly deserved his nickname "Salt of the earth!"



Flight Sergeant HERBERT with Mrs Herbert and Wing Commander Jenkin's son.



My billet for four years. Squadron Leader Webb had a room at the other end. I think there were twenty four rooms per block Each room was about twelve feet square, plus a metal bed, three "biscuits", three blankets, one pillow, chair, cupboard and (I was fortunate) a kind of rug/mat. Electric light, no plugs, no heating. Hot and cold showers and toilets "up the end". It was enough

One of the Charge-hands in the Hangars was a youngish man called Paddy ROUTLEDGE. He was a bit of a lad with the Watchfield ladies who mended and "doped" the aircraft during service etc. One day (also whilst I was acting as Duty Officer) I got an SOS from the Guard to go up to a particular Hangar to see what was going on. I found "Paddy" stripped stark naked in a circle of ladies who had sprayed him all over with dope! You may laugh, but it was deadly serious - we rushed him to Swindon hospital where I suppose they gave him a bath. In what I don't know because dope is almost insoluble - that is why it was used to seal the fabric on aircraft. I suspect he was well and truly "scraped!" Paddy never got too familiar with the ladies after that! Very popular character, lovely disposition. Good allround sportsman, amorous.

On the tarmac, TIM was in charge. What his surname was I never did discover, but HE was the boss and everybody knew it. An absolute rascal, and everybody knew it. But he did his job fantastically well, and never once did I have a complaint from pilots about him. He ALWAYS seemed to be on duty, day and night, playing cards at 3am in a duty hut, waiting for a "Duty Change round", or sweeping frost off the wings of Oxfords waiting to take off in mid-winter (Frost was a killer on take-off!) He and his crew of about ten constantly rushed around the tarmac filling up tanks, starting up engines, doing the hundred and one jobs necessary to keep the props whirling.

In the absence of the ladies who recorded flying times and things, he would fiddle the figures like the best of them. In his spare time he took bets from all and sundry, not only on horse racing, but Saturday's Football Match where Watchfield was playing Highworth Rovers.

About Football. I had been appointed Sports Officer (one of many extra-Pilot duties which had descended upon me, being the senior RAF Officer actually RESIDENT on the station - everybody else living out - that is why I was so often the Duty Officer!) I was mad about football, playing at every opportunity, for anyone who needed a standin. I wasn't very good, but exceedingly enthusiastic. Within a period, I had organised teams of Airmen, Civilians, Sergeants, Officers with everybody playing everybody else and regularly rushing off to adjacent Airfields to play teams here and there. I was even granted a special Licence to drive the Civilian Transport coach! There was a dirty scheme afoot of course. I played for EVERYBODY when there was a missing centre-forward, outside left or goalkeeper! I could only do it when flying duties did not interfere - but then, I personally wrote out the flying schedules, so it was easy!

The Officers Mess consisted of a couple of large Nissen Huts joined together with a small one in between for Office and Stores. The Dining Room and the "Community" Room held between fifty and a hundred people each. All Officers were resident either in the main Camp buildings or "out" in the villages as rent-payers with their wives, or "billeted". Most of the "old hands" of course got "billeted" and very comfortable it was too. At evening times, the place was almost "deserted" except for the Naafi and Sergeants Mess. It was situate "up" the lane which passed the main gate, very nearly at its junction to the Main Faringdon Road.

My wife and I lived for a while at Longcot in a room, part of a large house. On another occasion we lived in an attic below the slates in a small cottage at Bourton. There was once a summer "drought" and everyone "living out" brought in bottles which they filled up with water and took home. The locals simply put up with having a tanker calling twice a week. Finally, someone wondered why RAF Watchfield had water on tap when they didn't, and discovered that the local Fire Brigade had had an exercise at ASHBURY involving the reservoir there, and had forgotten to turn the water back on again when they left! Ah well! Nothing much was said in high places. Don't you know there's a war on?

Of the RAF personnel passing through Watchfield, not a lot can be said. Most were transient, staying a matter of two or six weeks as Courses demanded. The main Administrators who might be called "permanent staff" I have mentioned. I did not have a great deal to do personally with the Flying Control School, except the Pilots. (For some months towards the end of the War, I was CO of their Flying Wing, but that wasn't a very important appointment and was merely an exercise whilst waiting for demobilisation)

No 1 BAS consisted of Flights, a Flight Lieutenant with a support team of about six, various ranks from Flight Lieutenants down to Sergeants. There could never be promotion because the Unit was restricted in its establishment, one Wing Commander, two Squadron Leaders, and as many Flight lieutenants as the Crew Rooms had space for.

Squadron Leader Webb had an Office immediately beneath the control Tower. Beneath him was stored the Fire Wagon and the "Blood Tub" - the ambulance. He had an Assistant, the senior "Flight Lieutenant" who was in effect Commander of a "Wing" of sometimes 20 aircraft but without the entitled rank. The Officer who operated three flights (9 aircraft ie a Squadron) similarly, could not be promoted to Squadron Leader—he had to be content remaining a Flight Lieutenant. A Flight Commander with maybe four or five aircraft and Instructors could be any rank from Sergeant up to Flight Lieutenant depending upon the CO Flying and his holding of a Q category. It was all very civilian, and hinged upon the Station Commanding Officer having the rank of Wing Commander.

Everyone else naturally, had to accept their proper place in the hierarchy. If you aspired promotion, you got yourself posted elsewhere! There was no promotion at Watchfield beyond Flight Lieutenant, and that arrived ultimately by time serving, not merit.

Which reminds me of what happened when I first arrived. I had been there on a fortnight's course, having volunteered for such instruction when at Brize Norton, whilst serving as an ordinary Instructor on circuits and bumps. At the end of the BAS course, Squadron Leader Webb called me in and asked if I would like to come back as an Instructor.

I said yes please because Brize was a ghastly place with thousands of people, full of what was known as bullshine with me an overworked Q Sergeant Instructor and no prospects of promotion or change.

I had incidentally, passed the Watchfield exams, both flying and otherwise at an E (EXCEPTIONAL) level which was almost unheard of. I wasn't a particularly good pilot, but I took to instrument flying like duck to water—it was dead easy. Probably due to a complete lack of imagination!

Anyway, when I got back to Brize there was the heck of a row. The Group Captain there called me into his sanctum and rollocked me well and proper, saying he had refused Watchfield's application and I had to stay!

For some reason, the powers that be at little Watchfield were stronger than the Guvnor at Brize Norton, even though he was a Group Captain, and a fortnight later I turned up at this little grass patch wearing my three stripes and wondering why I had given up so much for so little. George Webb actually met me as I stepped out of the Aircraft. "Hullo" he said, "Come and have a cup of tea!" Imagine THAT for a start!

In due course, after explaining the local nuances of the job, he asked "Have you any complaints?" With fear and trepidation, I replied "Yes. I want a commission!" He didn't bat an eyelid, merely saying, "OK But it will take at least a fortnight!" Think on that! No interview, no bullshine, no nothing. Some time later, he stopped me outside the Sergeants Mess and said (very formally), "Sergeant Guilmant! You are improperly dressed! Go and see Salt!" (Salt was his batman)

When I got to Salt, he quietly led me back to my billet several doors down, and there on the bed was a Pilot Officer's battledress complete with sewn-on wings and ranking ribbons!

That was the sort of man George was. You now perhaps appreciate why we all thought he was worth staying with, in spite of restricted promotion prospects.



Flight Lieutenant "Jimmy" James
(later Wing Commander DFC)

He was the most reckless, feckless, irresponsible, likeable, lazy, paper-incompetent, loveable, skilful, generous, (and a lot more things besides) character at Watchfield, ever.

Contempt for authority and disobeying rules was his way of life. Smoking 50 fags a day, he could drink ANYONE under the table and STILL be standing up when the lights went out. But HE was the man to call for when there was something REALLY tough to do!

I remember he flew to the Isle of Man a day or so before one Christmas (nobody knew where he'd gone!) with a pupil and came back with 36 turkeys! He had located a Beam on the top of Mount Snowden which he saw crossed that Island and simply went! He was away for TWO days, whilst the weather was absolutely awful, and on Christmas Eve casually dropped down without telling anyone in advance.

D'you know - NOTHING was said! Everybody from AC Plonk to CO got stuffed that Christmas, and so did quite a few Watchfield and Shrivenham children who got presents via DRACULA. He had taken the opportunity to buy lots of sweets and chocolate whilst there - they apparently had no rationing, at least so he said.





During the whole of my life, I have never met a man I liked better.

He earned his DFC on Pathfinders, doing 30 ops in 22 days, earning his DFC in the shortest time possible, and promoted to THREE RINGS within a month of leaving Watchfield.

He "dropped in" a few weeks later, walked into Jenks's Office and told him to "*Stand up when speaking to a Senior Officer!*" Then laughed, and after sitting down (very temporarily) on an almost red-hot coke "Tortoise" stove, dragged out a bottle of whisky and shouted for the Adj to come in for a drink!

Well, that was the rumour which went round the Mess!



Top left of this picture is Flight Lieutenant "Vic" King AFC who for three years acted as George's Deputy.

He was most efficient and a good leader, always to be relied upon. All the Instructors liked him because he had progressed from the ranks, and knew exactly what the job entailed.

After the War he carried on flying in a Commercial capacity with BOAC and BA, later becoming Secretary of the Professional Pilots Association (I THINK that was the name!)

A man of the highest calibre, and responsible to a large degree, for RAF Watchfield's high reputation.

A little story (there is ALWAYS a "little story!") He and I had "organised" an ordinary "Cross Country" exercise with a pupil to Grantham. Why Grantham? Vic lived there, and was going on leave! The weather was absolutely foul, and on arrival we found the place absolutely fog-bound. A trial run down showed a cloud level of below fifty feet, so we went "up" again, mooching around whilst we tried to radio contact their Control. There was no reply.



Suddenly, we noticed above the cloud (it was late afternoon and still light) AN-OTHER Oxford doing a wide circle around more or less the same spot we were, so we got up close, and by a series of complicated hand signals and intelligent head wagging, we realised HE wanted to land at GRANTHAM, but the cloud base was too low. So we somehow signalled across—You "formate" on US and we will lead you in!

Down we went with this stranger close by our side, not as close as he SHOULD have been. Wheels down, flaps down, slow down, we're nearing the deck!

At 100 feet or so, he completely disappeared. He had abandoned the joint operation!

So we carried on and safely landed on the Main runway, round the Perimeter track to the Control Tower which we could vaguely see, and parked right in front, leaving our engines running because we were not "staying". Vic got out backwards, kitbag, two parachute bags and some hand luggage, with me giving a hand.

Suddenly there was noise of a band and, turning round, we could see a Parade of some hundreds of Airmen, in full dress array and a posse of Top Brass advancing, clearly rank-orientated

It took more than a few minutes to explain. Apparently the Aircraft up above which had abandoned our offer of help, contained an Air Marshall on his way to inspect the Unit, and the assembled big wigs thought F/Lt Vic King was HIM.

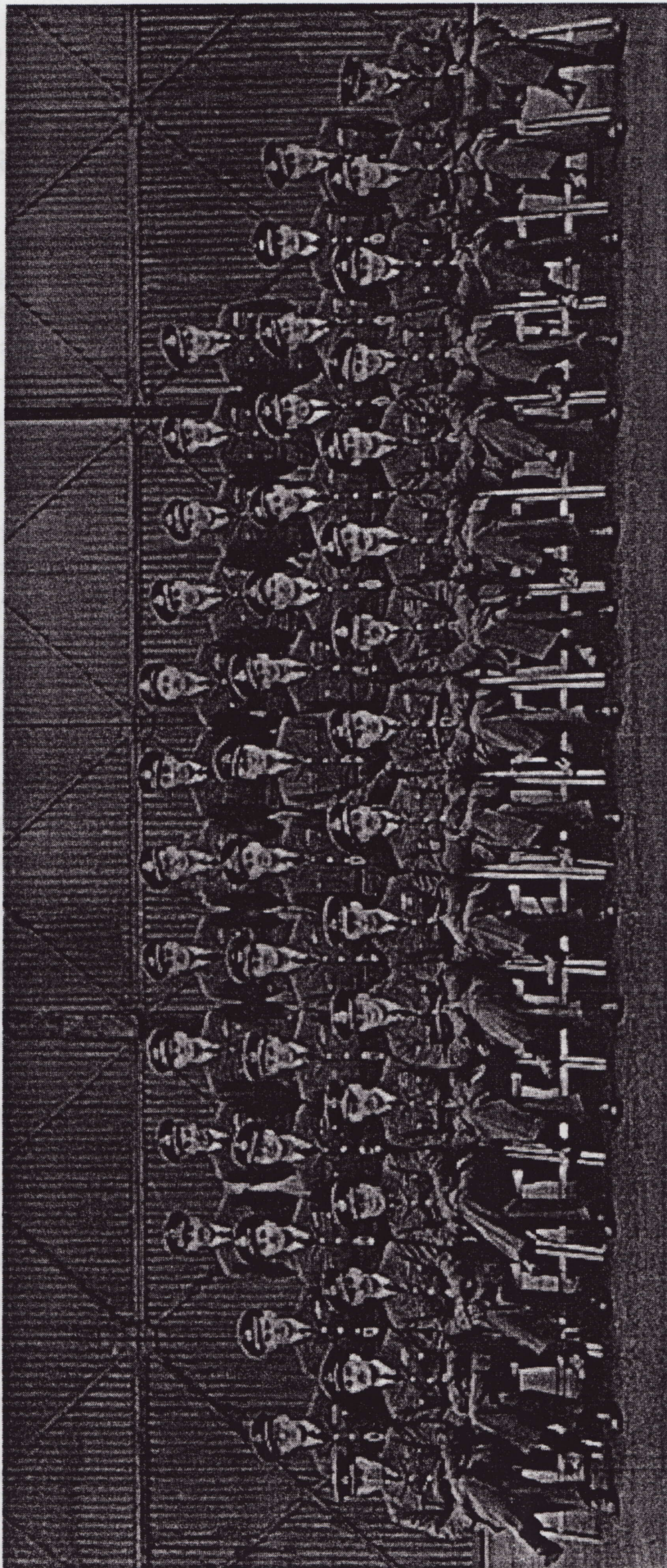
There they were, a few yards away, arguing, gesticulating, having a right old barney, when what do you think next happened? Vic opened up his raincoat (I suppose to get out his Identification card) and down dropped three dead rabbits which had been hanging inside.

I couldn't stop laughing, so in order to remove ONE of the embarrassments present, I revved up the engines, turned the aircraft away and took off into the murk.

Vic got away with it, but I have often since tried to imagine what the erks standing to attention thought was going on. I also wondered whether or not that particular Oxford we tried to help ever got down safely. It was indeed really bad visibility, but back home to Watchfield we went with the pupil driving, and the Mess got livened up that evening whilst the tale was told.







I have spent quite a time, looking at this "Station" Photograph, and asking myself is there anyone I SHOULD have particularly mentioned, and haven't. There are!

Flight Lieutenant WILLAN (Front row on George's RIGHT) was the Station Adjutant for ages and ages and ages, perhaps from Day One.. An ex-solicitor living in Northallerton and billeted at Greater Coxwell (?) he was a very kind man, and whilst doing his best to encourage efficient paper-administration, was very tolerant of us young and very inexperienced Officers. I remember the first time I was "Duty" Officer, when I reported, he gave me a ruddy great pistol, belt and holster, and one round, saying "*Sign here!*" I suppose I looked a bit scared at this ironmongery, because he asked, "*Have you ever fired one?*" Upon admitting my sheer ignorance, he said, "*Come on! Come with me!*" and (collecting an RAF Police Corporal on the way, plus fixed bayonet) we walked up the lane to an old gravel pit and there proceeded to pump lead into old tin cans.

Refreshed and more experienced in the ways of weaponry, I started my night's duty whilst HE went home to fried GOOSE egg. Later I discovered the people in the Tithe Barn nearby where he was staying, sold them so we made a point of collecting a few before going on leave.

Then there was Flight Lieutenant Mike CROSKELL (Middle row, third in on the right) He had been operational before arriving at Watchfield and was held in very high esteem because not only was he skilful himself, but always got good results. Leadership was natural and his whole demeanour was that of justified confidence. I could never understand why he never got an Award. He so thoroughly deserved recognition. I am sure that had he moved from Watchfield, he would very quickly indeed have reached high RAF rank. But he didn't and merely ran two or three Flights with the utmost ease. Capable of much greater acceptance of responsibility, there was nothing more for him to achieve here, and I think it grieved him considerably.

Strangely, his wife (a fully qualified Nursing Sister) was for a long time, Senior Receptionist at "Bath Road Surgery" here in Southampton where I and my family were registered. They moved to a town near Maidenhead on the River Thames, and we lost touch. After the war, I am sure he went Commercial flying with BA and retired with an enormous credit of safe flying hours. Ever so many ex Watchfield Instructors went to BOAC and BA. After all, they had EXACTLY the right sort of training and experience for the Civilian job.

He was a great Cricketer. He didn't know this, but I used to watch and envy him making those graceful strokes to ON and OFF and LEG with ease, saying to myself, "*I wish I could do that!*" But I couldn't. I simply slashed out at everything. And got clean-bowled out after an over!

Every time I look at this book, (and that has been quite often because it seems to get reprinted every few months!) I say to myself, you haven't mentioned "Dunc" or "that modest Welsh Piano Wizard who still lives in faraway Aberystwyth!" His name is Williams, and I always seem to get him mixed up with a chap called Griffiths! By the way, he founded the "RE-UNION" Club after the War, and, completely on his own, did all the paperwork and organisation to keep it going for forty years! He still maintains an annual circular with those of us on his mailing list, which must be a History on its own. One of these days, I will go to Aber and personally say THANKYOU to him for all his efforts over (now) 55 years. I cannot recall your actual Christian name Bill, but I remember the initials AJS - and a presentation Musical Manuscript which I most sincerely hope gave you lots of enjoyment! See your picture somewhere herein, smiling as usual!

"Lance" Duncan (Dunc to his friends) is a favoured one - HIS picture appears at least twice!

He was a sort of bear of a man, solid, dependable, reliable, etc etc. Always with a grin which imparted friendliness. A real MAN's man! You can say this sort of thing fifty years afterwards without fear of any lawsuits! Somehow, he was never commissioned, but he reached (by merit) the rarified rank of Warrant Officer. There was something not quite right and fair about the giving of commissions - so many deserving people were bypassed, so many thorough incompetents were given authority and failed. It had (and possibly still has!) something to do with a "formula". Family, School, Job, Accent and a host of completely irrelevant things intrude upon the decision. Sorry - it makes me very angry to see leadership ability wasted. There were ever so many NCO's at Watchfield who deserved elevation - and Dunc was one of them!

Another name which jumps the years is "Ginger" Stainthorpe. A most cheery and likeable Flight Sergeant who was always the life and soul of a party. I think after the War he became a Sales or Works Manager for a large organisation. He ~~was~~ was also a bloomin' good pilot! Thanks Ginger for sharing your life with ours!

And lots of others, too!

I decide to conclude all this talk, and suddenly I remember another face and another name, and I can't stop - I've GOT to mention them! It's Peter (?) Gibbs this time and for some unknown reason, I get him associated with PIGS! Ah well, it'll all come back in time! And before I have time to brood, along comes Ronnie (?) Milton. He was much younger than me, but far far more in-

My family urge me to include some pictures of myself, pointing out that I played a part in the history of RAF Watchfield and the Reader should know a bit more about me, the writer.

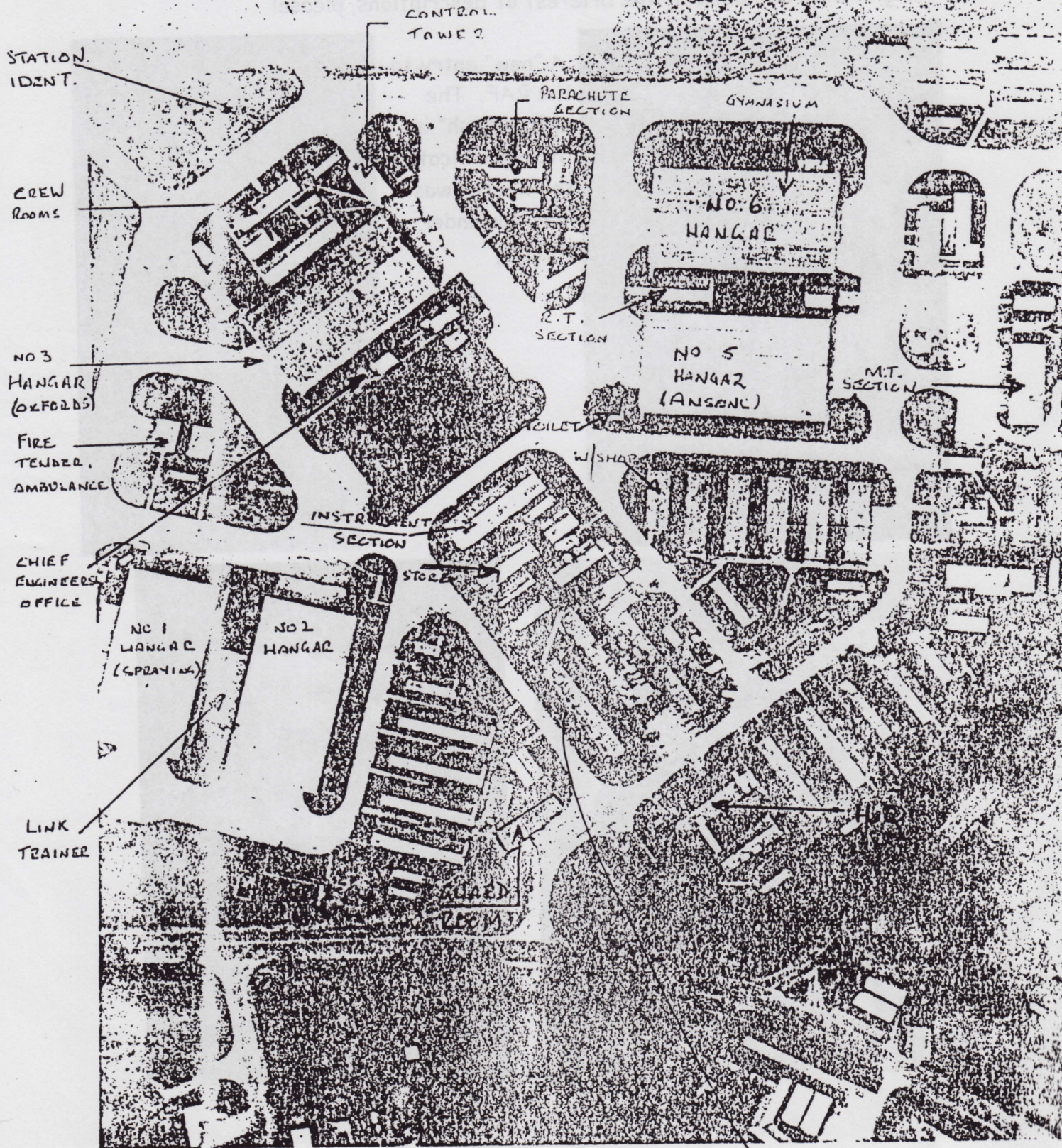
Alright! I agree—but only the briefest of descriptions, please!



A "new" entry to the RAF. The white "flash" in the cap indicated the wearer was "aircrew under training"



RAF WATCHFIELD



WATCHFIELD AERODROME

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SERGEANTS MESS

SEE OVER

telligent and I am certain he made a big name for himself in the Architectural profession. He somehow always bubbled with enthusiasm and was full of new ideas. I hope he has had a happy life - seeing him in my mind reminds me of ~~young~~ BROWNIE, a quiet, studious perhaps, young man who had much much more in him than appeared on the surface. Vaguely I remember he had a Civil Service background and made decisions easily. Very well informed on almost everything, music included. He was inveigled once by Mrs Jenkins (the CO's rather imperious wife) to run some "Musical Evenings" for the benefit of vandals like me. I envied his ease in the exercise of authority, his wide general knowledge, and the confidence which much learning had brought to him at such an early age. He was the sort of man you could be a friend of for a lifetime!

I really MUST stop!

Dear Watchfield Friends and Colleagues.

I have forgotten so many of your names and I feel most annoyed with myself. If you ever read this, Johnnie, Tish, Mike, Frank, Tom Bury (remember that carpet?), "Lanky" Holmes (who could drink two pints of bitter in twenty seconds flat, then go outside to bring it all up so he could start all over again!) Vic Adams and his melodious trumpet (and the lovely girl he married) "Mad" Dukayne (and the unsuccessful search for a mouse in the Officer's Mess radio-gram which finished up on the floor in pieces!) to mention but a few absent from these pages!

Oh! And six-foot-four Rogers, athlete, footballer, cricketing genius who got our teams out of trouble so often. Hyslop, Gray, Winship, Haines, etc etc etc. Please forgive me, I well remember your ugly faces, Irvine Jackets, those teddy bear coats, and night flying in December when the beam packed up, and how you - there, I've forgotten what, but I know you did it!

Thanks everyone for the Fellowship and Friendship engendered at

RAF WATCHFIELD

Born, Lived and Died
during the War years of 1939 to 1946

Those were the days we dream about

*Let us pause to remember friends and colleagues posted
elsewhere by death*

*And in this year of 2000, exactly SIXTY ONE years
after the OUTBREAK OF WAR, wish each other*

Goodbye!
