**The RAF**

**Action and movement**

Holland and France were invaded while the squadron was at Martlesham Heath near Ipswich on 10 May 1940. From then on planes often came back having been in action, including on 30 May, when we lost two planes over Dunkirk with both pilots accounted for. There was a lot of movement of squadrons at this time. We went to Biggin Hill for a few days and then to North Weald where the ground staff stayed until 24 September. Pilots and planes moved about - ours went to Lincolnshire for a few days while we serviced 111 Squadron, which on 31 May claimed 13 German planes without loss.

On 27 June the King visited North Weald and inspected both 56 and 151 Squadrons. Planes were in action most days, except when it rained. Despite all this I was sent on leave from 19 to 26 July, and went up to Kidderminister where my mother had been evacuated to from Clacton.

**Attacked!**

In mid-August things hotted up. A typical day would start at 4.30am when aircraft would be warmed up, and sometimes planes would go off to a coast drome and come back later on. One morning I had just got back into my bed when 257 Squadron arrived for the day. This was rather a busy day, with air raid alarms and our aircraft returning at dusk and requiring servicing. There were a lot of oxygen bottles for me to change.

On 16 August at lunchtime, the Squadron scrambled and were all airborne in three minutes. In a few minutes over 50 German planes appeared out of the clouds at 15,000 feet, and we saw the fighters attack. Bombs dropped mainly to the south of the drome, but some damage was done to the buildings. We were able to watch all of this from the door of the shelter, as we were on the north side. The aircraft returned at about 5.40pm, having got some of the attacking aircraft.

**More attacks**

In September our pilots were sent to Boscombe Down, to a less busy sector, being replaced with pilots and planes from 249 Squadron. Their baptism came soon on 3 September. Scrambled at 11am, they formed up at the west end of the drome. All 12 aircraft were eventually airborne in just over nine minutes, as the bombers appeared overhead. Only a few buildings were not hit, and there were bomb craters all over the south side of the drome. This time we did retreat into the shelter! I was told to take the 48-hour pass that I had booked, and left the battered camp at 4.30pm. When I returned the camp was operational although still battered. Aircraft could take off and land, oxygen bottles were all available, but I did not ask how.

On 7 September waves of bombers came over in formation on their way out from the docks. When our planes returned we had lost five, with three pilots safe. The daylight raids eased off, but the tents gang spent most nights in the shelter as shrapnel from anti-aircraft guns were showering through the tents.

**Battle of Britain**

From 7 to 14 September most activity was at night. On the 15th (Battle of Britain Day) there was much activity and our aircraft (249 Squadron) were in action twice. They claimed ten bombers plus ten probable, with no aircraft lost from then until we rejoined our pilots at Boscombe Down. On the 24th my diary does not record any daylight activity, but the night raids on London continued. On the 17th I fitted an oil pressure gauge before going out to Epping to the cinema.

During all those summer months my diary shows that I got to Epping about twice a week, to dances and/or the cinema. We walked both ways. Trains did run from Epping to North Weald but both stations involved about as much walking as going direct. We used the train when coming back from London, but got lifts most of the way when going there.

On 29 August 1942 a ridge of high pressure over the country meant a clear sky with few clouds. Sunshine all the way? Not on your life. It meant that our Squadron No.88 were given a target to attack. We were equipped with Boston Mark 3 aircraft, in which each crew member had their own individual cockpit without access to each other. We were one of the squadrons that made up No.2 Group Bomber Command, a group consisting of light bomber squadrons. We were based at RAF Attlebridge in Norfolk.

I was a wireless operator/air gunner, holding the rank of sergeant at the time. My crew consisted of a pilot, Vincent Hughes, and an observer, Edward Armitage, known as Ted. They had recently been awarded a commission and were brand new Pilot Officers. Although I had been put up for a commission at the same time as them, for some reason it was not announced until the following month to take effect from 3 September 1942.

As I recall - in a sketchy sort of way after all these years - we were briefed as usual to fly at low level. Our target was to be a power station at Comines, not too deep into enemy territory. It should have been a straightforward low-level operation, and we expected to be back for our bacon and egg in a couple of hours. Six aircraft were detailed to attack in pairs at two-minute intervals. We were to fly as number two to Flt Ltn 'Farmer' Adams, who was to lead the box of six to the target.

### All hell let loose

All went well on the channel crossing. I do not recall any flak on crossing the enemy coast, but we gunners had to be alert to the possibility of fighters using the few clouds above us as cover for an attack.

Then, about two minutes from the target, all hell was let loose as we flew into a solid barrage of light and very accurate flak. I heard Ted on the intercom, shouting 'Farmers had it' and, as we flashed over a wood, I saw the flames and smoke from the crash of our leading aircraft. Just at that moment there was a tremendous bang and our aircraft swung violently to the starboard and upwards. We had been hit by a shell, somewhere in the front of the aircraft as there was no sign of any damage around my station.

Vin called Ted on the intercom - there was no reply. After several attempts to get him to reply, Vin said that we had been hit in the nose and that Ted might have had it. Our starboard engine was smoking but not on fire, and Vin was desperately trying to feather the propellor, which was causing a lot of drag, but he was having no luck. He then said we had to abandon the mission and asked whether we should make an emergency landing, or attempt to get back to base.

I'm afraid I chickened out of the decision and told Vin that as he was the pilot - it was his responsibilty. If Ted was seriously wounded - and we were forced to ditch on the return journey - he was unlikely to survive. On the other hand, Ted might have been dead already, and the certainty of languishing in a prisoner of war camp did not appeal. Vin was a married man with a child to think of. I did not envy him his decision and, perhaps for the first time, I was glad I was not a pilot.

### The return journey

Vin turned the aircraft for the return journey and found that the milling of the propellor on the starboard side meant that flying the aircraft on a straight and level course was very difficult. It was then that my first problem arose. Oil was seeping from the starboard engine and the slipstream was turning it into a fine spray, which was comimg into my open cockpit and getting into my eyes. I tried putting on my goggles to keep out the oil but this only resulted in the goggles being covered with the stuff, which prevented me from seeing. As it was imperative that I kept an eye out for enemy aircraft, which could very easily have picked us off, I had no option but to accept the discomfort and try to keep my eyes clear by constant rubbing.

Vin then asked me to help keep the aircraft straight and level by putting some weight on the rudder bar. (Bostons were equipped with basic controls in the air gunner's cockpit - a rudder bar, a control column and, for some reason which I still do not understand, a wobble pump.) Vin told me we were losing oil pressure and asked me to pump the wobble pump. The technical aspect of this has never been explained to me.

So, we crossed the enemy coast on the way back with, fortunately, no great opposition from the anti-aircraft gunners, then we started the channel crossing. This was the most uncomfortable journey I have ever experienced - oil in my eyes, an aching left leg through pressing on the rudder bar (which meant bending my left leg backwards as much as I could), periodic pumping to maintain oil pressure, and the ever-present worry of whether or not we would plunge into the sea. Vin asked me to switch on the IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) - this meant leaving my position and crawling back to the installation to do so. The crossing seemed never-ending, but eventually Vin said he could see the coast and that we were approaching Ipswich.

### The crash

There were several naval vessels in the harbour so I fired the colours of the day from the Verey pistol to identify us as friendly. This had no effect and the navy opened up on us from too great a distance to be effective, thank goodness. Vin then said that we would put down at Ipswich Airfield, used as a training airfield for Spitfire pilots. As he could not risk circling before landing, he decided we would go straight in, and he asked me to fire a RED as we crossed the perimeter to warn other aircraft of our presence and direction. This I did and I braced myself for what I thought would be a belly landing. However, as we touched down I realised that our wheels were down but one tyre was punctured, which resulted in a violent swerve to starboard. Just as we swerved, I saw a Spitfire landing on what would have been a parallel course had we not been swerving to the right.

The crash was inevitable, and furthermore it was going to involve the back of our aircraft where I was sitting. I could do nothing except put my feet up on to the scarf ring, cover my head as best I could with my arms in a sort of foetus position, and wait for it. I clearly remember the awful sound of crunching, tearing metal as the aircraft was violently pushed around. Then utter silence. Smoke and dust blocked out daylight. Suddenly I realised to my astonishment, that I was alright - I hadn't been hurt. My next thought was 'FIRE! Get out quick.'

I went to put my feet down but couldn't - the wing of the Spitfire had sliced into the starboard side of our Boston and I was sitting on it. Somehow I clambered out of the top of my cockpit and jumped to the ground. I thought again of the possibility of fire and I ran to see if I could help the Spitfire pilot. Behind the tail I bumped into someone so I said 'Help me get the pilot out.' He said 'I am the pilot! Help me get the gunner out.' At that point I thought of Ted, although I must confess that I had not given him a great deal of thought during the flight back - I suppose self-preservation had something to do with that. I said 'Come and help me with the Observer.' The pilot said 'He's alright. The front of the kite hasn't been touched,' or words to that effect. I ran round to the nose of the aircraft and looked up at Ted. He was sitting there in his seat, but without any perspex in the nose, which had been shot away, and... he had no face.

For the first time in my life I fainted. I came round lying on the grass with an officer kneeling beside me. Then, to my amazement, I heard a voice call 'Get me out of here!' It was Ted - he was alive but extremely badly wounded. Poor fellow had received multiple wounds to the face, arms and thighs. Only his parachute, which he had clipped to his harness, had saved him. The constant bleeding from the shrapnel wounds to his face had congealed into a mass of dried blood due to the fact that he had faced an open cockpit during the return journey. This had given me the impression that his face had been completely blown away.

I think at that point I had a slight breakdown in composure and I was led away by the officer to a hangar office where they had an officers' bar. They were kind enough to forecast my promotion to commissioned rank and gave me a brandy, which I desperately needed.