AS IT HAPPENED

BY

JIM FORREST

MUSIC HATH CHARMS

The closest that this story gets to flying is that it happened to two impecunious airmen during World War 2. We were undergoing flying training at No 4 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) at Brough, near Hull in England's north-east. However, the story shows how Service camaraderie develops between young men from diverse backgrounds.

No. 4 EFTS was a lodger unit on an airfield owned by Blackburn Aircraft Company. Because the airfield was not very big, the EFTS used a Relief Landing Ground (RLG) at Ballasize, near Gilberdyke, further to the west.

Our course was split in two, each half spending four days at a time at the RLG, accomodated in a dormitory on the landing ground.

The pay in the lower ranks of the RAF was very small, and we were nearly always broke, but when we could afford it, we used to go to the pub at Gilberdyke.

One day, while we were at the RLG, my 'Oppo" Les Frampton, asked me if the pub had a piano. I wasn't sure, but I thought it had. Les then announced that from then on, we would have as much beer as we wanted. When I asked him how that desirable state could be achieved, Les told me that he could play the piano.

In appearance, anyone less likely than Les being a pianist could not be imagined. He had been a London docker, and was built like the proverbial brick outhouse.

To put his plan into operation, we scraped together enough money to buy two beers and set off for the pub which, sure enough, had a piano.

We had taken the precaution of arriving ahead of the normal influx of customers, and Les asked the landlord if he could play the piano. The landlord took one look at Les and said in a disbelieving voice 'Can you play? If not, out you go'.

Les moved to the instrument and started to play. He was good - very good!! The landlord was delighted and asked him to come again whenever he could - he would always be welcome. As the night wore on, more customers arrived, and in appreciation of the entertainment, beer for the pianist was sent in profusion, some of which he passed on to me.

After a very convivial evening, we tottered back to the billet, and Les said we should buy some sheet music. Puzzled, I said ‘But you play by ear, you can’t read music. Why on earth would you want sheet music’?

Les tapped the side of his nose.

‘Mateship’ he said. ‘You’ve got to take care of your mates. We put it on the piano music rack and you turn the pages over as if I’m playing from sheet music. Then the customers tell the barman “A beer for the pianist and one for his helper”.

He was right. We never wanted for a beer as long as we could get to the Gilberdyke pub.

Our association came to an end when Les was scrubbed from the pilots’ course, and I lost touch with him as the war dragged on.

WARRING TIGERS

In the early days of World War 2, military aeroplanes in the UK were in very short supply, so training aircraft were often used in multiple roles. A particular example relates to the basic bi-plane trainers, Tiger Moths.

Tigers were used on anti-submarine patrols across the mouth of the Humber River in England’s north-east.

Because they were unarmed, the decision-makers were asked what should be done in the event of a submarine being sighted.

The reply was immediate, firm and direct:

“ACT IN A HOSTILE MANNER”

TIGERS PROVIDE A GREAT RELIEF

This episode occurred during the early days of World War 2 near Hull, at the mouth of the Humber River in England’s north-east.

One day a telephone message from Hull Police was received at the Flight Office which, at that time was situated in a tent. The message was that a small aircraft wheel had landed near the Police Station and had been identified as being from a Tiger Moth.

Because Hull city had an anti-aircraft balloon barrage tethered to Mother Earth by steel cables, we were forbidden to fly east of the airfield.

No other airfield nearby flew Tiger Moths, so both the Police and our officers assumed that one of our aircraft had flown into the ‘no-fly’ area, had seen the balloons, turned quickly to avoid them, but had caught a cable which had cut off a wheel.

Tigers were not equipped with radio, so it was decided that two instructors would take off to look for the damaged aircraft, taking with them a wheel which they would show to the student pilot hoping that he would realise what had happened.

Unfortunately for them, and unknown to them, as they got airborne, one of their wheels fell off.

By a great stroke of luck, they found the student pilot and waved the wheel they were carrying. The student waved back, acknowledging that he had seen it.

At the ensuing inquiry, the student pilot was asked if he had realised what the message was. He said that he had seen that the other aircraft had a wheel missing, but couldn't understand how they had managed to catch their own wheel. He had no idea that they were trying to tell him that he had lost a wheel.

Further investigation revealed the real reason for the loss of Tiger Moth wheels.

No toilets were provided at the flight locations which were in full view of civilian houses. According to the natural modesty of the day, airmen used the screen provided by aircraft as they relieved themselves on the aircraft wheels, causing corrosion.

The following notice appeared in Daily Routine Orders:

"Promiscuous urination on the wheels of aircraft will cease forthwith"

AN OXFORD EDUCATION

During World War 2, individual Air Force Units were required to keep a diary of important day-to-day occurrences. Such recordings were notably brief, bald, and short on detail.

Following are two extracts from the daily diary of the Royal Canadian Air Force unit at Penhold, about 150 kilometres north of Calgary in Canada's mid-west:

PENHOLD DIARY

"27.7.42 At 1830 hours whilst engaged in formation flying, Oxford aircraft BC304 piloted by LAC Delamere changed from No. 3 position portside to No. 2 position starboard side, and in so doing collided in mid-air with Oxford aircraft AS934 piloted by LAC Forrest, who forced-landed uninjured. LAC Delamere's plane crashed about two miles south of Penhold and the pilot was killed.

28.7.42 C2767 Flight lieutenant Finland arrived by air 1535 hours from #4 T.C. to act as President of the Court of Inquiry into the death of LAC Delamere. He returned to #4 T.C. by road."

What follows is my account of the happenings on that fateful day. We were two embryo pilots training at RCAF Penhold flying twin-engined Airspeed Oxfords under the Empire Air Training Scheme (EATS) as we marched towards gaining our wings.

On 27th July 1942, I was flying as lead aircraft in a formation of two Oxfords as part of a training program at Penhold. We were not equipped with radio, so all communication between aircraft was by means of hand signals.

I signalled to Eric Delamere to cross from port to starboard.

The procedure we used was that the aircraft which was crossing reduced engine speed by throttling back, and reduced height from the formation position to pass under the lead aircraft.

Most of our training Oxfords were getting long in the tooth, and their engines were pretty well worn and consequently a bit sluggish. So we normally increased power directly

under the lead aircraft to allow the revs to build up for the climb back to the new formation position after crossing.

Eric's plane however, was brand new, just out from the UK, and we believe that that it responded instantly to Eric's forward throttle change, climbed immediately, colliding with my aircraft from underneath. I never saw Eric's aircraft at any time after he left the port formation position.

I don't remember, but I must have used one of those tension-relieving and very expressive four-letter expletives. What I do remember is deciding that now was the time to use my parachute. That didn't occur because my plane was in a spin, and I couldn't get out of my seat due to the 'G' force.

My propellors had gone, so the only way to go was down! I fiddled with the controls, got out of the spin and into a reasonable glide, aiming for a large green field.

About a mile out from the field, I saw power lines running through it, right across my flight path! I couldn't go over them because I had no power, so I went underneath and managed a reasonable forced-landing.

Leaving my aircraft in rapid fashion, I found that I had landed in a corn field. The corn was a lot taller than I was, and I couldn't find my way out. So what does an airman do in these circumstances? He sits on his butt and waits for help to arrive. Problem solved.

The most regrettable part of that accident was that Eric was killed.

REPORTING A (PRETEND) SUB ATTACK

During my time at Benbecula, an airfield in the Outer Hebrides, I was with No. 220 Squadron, flying B17 Flying Fortresses.

We received word that an American journalist was coming, to do an article for some American paper.

He came to us after a visit to the Flying Boat types who had convinced him that they were the only types of aircraft to fight against subs.

Flying Boats were the only ones? Rubbish!!

We had to take him for a demo, so I told the crew to be well strapped in as I might throw the plane about a bit.

We got airborne to do a practice dummy attack, and the only place to put this bod was between the two pilots' seats, just below the mid-upper turret. That had a large steel ring gear around its base to allow rotation of the turret.

In order to let him see what was going on, I arranged with him that he would pick out an island and shout 'SUB', and we would immediately carry out a dummy attack.

When he spotted an island he shouted 'SUB', and as I pushed the stick forward quickly, he rapidly floated up and his head hit the steel ring gear. He collapsed on the floor - out for the count!! I thought I had killed him!!

We belted back to base, he went to sick quarters and we never saw him again.

A CANINE NAVIGATOR

When I was at Thornaby, I bought a dog, a Sealyham Terrier which the crew christened 'Dinghy'.

The only times the dog flew with us were on transit trips to a new station. That caused my navigator, Maurice Milburn, to 'bind' to a great degree. He didn't like dogs.

Unfortunately, the only place in the aircraft that a dog could be carried was in the 'Nav's Office', and Maurice used to create a fuss everytime we moved.

Our first move was from Thornaby to Beccles. After we arrived, during the evening, Maurice (who didn't drink) asked me if the dog had been to Beccles before. I told him he hadn't.

'Odd' said Maurice. 'About ten miles from touchdown, the dog got up and went as near to the exit door as he could, as if he knew that we would be landing soon'. That was before any control movements were made, for we were still at cruising altitude
Next posting was to St. Eval and there, the same thing happened with the dog.

Maurice began to think that the dog was a better navigator than he was.

St. Eval to Tiree, same again!

Now Maurice was the dog's greatest fan, asking that he come on every trip we did.

I have not been able to find any explanation for our Canine Navigator's extraordinary behaviour.

THE SINGLE-ENGINED WELLINGTON

On 8th August 1943, I arrived at No. 3 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Cranwell (UK) to convert to twin-engined Wellington aircraft, also known as 'Wimpeys'.

My previous posting had been at No. 220 Squadron, flying four-engined Flying Fortresses, and I was less than impressed at dropping down to flying on two engines.

On completion of the course, I was posted to No. 303 Flying Training Unit (FTU) Talbenny, for further training to fly Wellingtons to Africa or the Far East.

After delivering a Wellington Mk 14 to No. 36 Squadron at Blida, hear Algiers (North Africa), I returned to No. 303 FTU as an instructor. My Wellington flying experience embraced a variety of Marks - 1©, 10, 13, and 14. The only type to provide any problem was the Mk 1© which would not fly on one engine.

One of the training exercises at the FTU was a 'Heavy Load Take-off' which usually included a 6 hour navigation exercise to 'burn-off' fuel which reduced total aircraft weight to below the maximum permissable for landing.

The captain of one crew was adamant that the aircraft would not get off the ground. After a deal of discussion, I finally said that I would go along for the trip, and do the take-off.

As luck would have it, we had to use the short runway for take-off. All went well, and about 100 yards from the end of the runway, I hauled the aircraft off the ground with no problem.

About 10 seconds after we were airborne, the port engine burst into flames!

The propellor of that engine was instantly 'feathered' and when its fire extingusher was activated, the fire went out, but our situation was parlous.

With our heavy load of fuel, we were way above our maximum landing weight, I had only 50 feet of height, and there was no possibility of putting the aircraft down straight ahead because of the rocky terrain!!

The starboard engine, now our sole means of propulsion and survival, was still being run at take-off revs and fuel boost to keep us airborne. Fortunately, we were not losing height, but we were not gaining much either.

I called Flying Control (now termed Air Traffic Control), advising our emergency situation and requesting that the main runway be kept clear of traffic, as I proposed using it for landing (mentally adding: IF WE COULD MAKE IT!!).

As we flew the circuit, we were positioning ourselves for our landing and we were flying level with the top of a hill which was on the line of the approach to the runway. On 'final', that hill obscured my view of the runway, so my next decision was a calculated risk.

I wanted to lower my undercarriage because, with our fuel load, a 'wheels landing' would be better and safer than a 'belly landing. However, putting the wheels down would increase 'drag'. To counteract that, and to lift ourselves over the hill, we had to perform a circus-like act.

Telling my pupil to pump like the clappers, I selected 'wheels down', slightly reducing the air speed. As soon as the wheels were locked down, I quickly selected 'flaps down' to give us a bit more lift We soon had a few degrees of flap down and that lifted us over the hill, presenting me with a view of the runway.

Our single engine had been running at take-off revs and boost for 20 minutes before we landed without further incident.

In flying the various Marks of Wimpey, I never experienced any real problems with single-engined flight except, as I mentioned, with the Wimpey Mk1(C)

As an aside, looking away from town lights to maintain night vision when night-flying the Wimpey was no problem, because, during wartime, total blackout fixed that.

Prelude:
The following story was written by a good friend and fellow 'Scrambler'. It shows that the 'Scramble' system, so graphically used by film-makers in depicting Battle of Britain fighter activity was not the sole prerogative of the fighter world. The story tells of happenings in and around 'Scramble Huts' scattered throughout the UK during the whole period of World War 2. The story is a classic which is reproduced without any change of text.

THE SCRAMBLE HUT

There was nothing great about the Scramble Hut and perhaps it doesn't deserve any write-up, but in just a few years, there will not be one person alive who will remember it.

Just a small, rather dirty unpainted wooden hut with an upright round stove and a few mixed uncomfortable chairs, a table, and the all-important telephone. Maybe in the distant past,someone had added several beds or a couple of club chairs - but certainly, the window wasn't washed.

The hut was always stuck away in some far corner of the airfield, like the Airforce was ashamed of it. No-one really cleaned it up, but every so often, someone from one of the crews would see fit to throw things out, or brush around the stove, clearing away the unburnt clinkers and grey dust, but mostly it was stoked up and just the overflow was tossed outside at the back of the hut between the weeds and the unkempt grass where, year after year, the garbage collected. There were no CO's inspections at this little outpost.

There would be one crew in the hut at all times - a pilot, a navigator, two or more Wireless Operator/Air Gunners (WOP/AGs) and a tail gunner, and they would be doing different things according to the nature of the crew, to pass the time away. Reading, sleeping, writing letters, playing cards or even a sort of game of baseball or cricket, but always - Always - there was one of them with his ear half an inch away from the telephone, ready to grab it and yell 'SCRAMBLE'! or 'HERE WE GO'! or at the end of duty 'We're released'.

'SCRAMBLE' would release a spurt of energy and wild activity as everyboby grabbed his stuff and started his run to the aircraft which would have been kept warmed-up by the ground crew throughout the whole stint.

There was a certain pride in just how fast a crew could get into the air. Four or five minutes (it varied between airfields) and those big wheels were being tucked up into the engine nacelles as you lifted off the runway.

Somewhere else, in another room, someone would chalk the pilot's name and the aircraft letter, and the time it was airborne (tucking its wheels away) and the 'old man' would see just how smart your crew were.

Within minutes, a new crew would be getting out of the crew wagon with their books, letters and whatever they would need to pass away the next twentyfour hours which would normally start at 1700 hours and finish at 1700 hours the next day. The new crew would be picking up the discarded playing cards from the table, giving them a super shuffle, stoking up the fire, or even cleaning up the mess. There was no 'rank' that I ever saw in the Scramble Hut. No Officer would give poor old Sergeant orders. It was as though they were already in the air.

This 'coming on duty' crew had worked their way up the 'Available' list for hours, or days. A list which some other bod was typing or chalking-up somewhere else. We used a lot of chalk in those days.

OK! So Pike's crew were off and Jim Forrest's crew are on their way to the Scramble Hut in the little Bedford truck. They had already been briefed about the weather and various other problems in the area. Their aircraft was warmed up and all ready to go. Forrest goes from 'First Available' to "Scramble'. "Second Available', who are close by on the airfield, are called in for briefing and they are moved up to 'First Available'. Maybe a runner is sent to their billets where they are sleeping. 'Third Available' are called into readiness - the pilot knows where they all are.

'Fourth Available' - well, one may well be living out with his wife in the village. The phone goes. "Things are happening up there" he tells his wife (or the postman's daughter). He has been on twenty minutes' readiness and the good old Airforce bike is outside in the

yard. On go the cycle clips and he pushes it down the path. His wife knows that it will be a long while before he's back. Everything goes like clockwork. Everyone knows just how many minutes he has so that he is ready when called.

'SCRAMBLE'! You may be in the hut for just a few minutes,or for the whole twentyfour hours. You may never have to fly and then you are 'released', and you go down to the bottom of the pack again and gradually work your way back up. There could be as many as eight or so crews ahead of you with time for a few beers, a movie, some shuteye, or even a day at the beach.

The airplane that has just become airborne could develop engine trouble, or any other sort of trouble like radio transmitter or receiver. It could return to base in minutes. The sighting may become a false alarm. Or its search could last for more than eight hours. The weather could close in and it would be 'returned to base'.

On the other hand three or four bombers, or their escort of fighters returning from a raid may have been badly mauled and have to 'ditch' in the Bay of Biscay, the English Channel or the North Sea. Once you were out there ANYTHING could happen. But one thing was sure, and that was that back at base, SOMEONE was sitting near to the telephone. Some crew, dressed for flying, was ready to scramble.

Each crew had its own little strategy to speed things up and it was not unknown for odd members of the crew to prefer to sit in or under, their aircraft and leave the running to others. But five (or whatever it was) minutes was the time to beat, and it could be the difference between life and death to an airman down in the sea.

I suspect that it wasn't always that they thought of him, so much as 'being the best crew' and/or 'the fastest off the airfield'. There were pilots who managed, or seemed to manage, to tuck their wheels up as their planes sped down the runway, and my buddies on 280 and 282 Squadrons will be nodding their heads and thinking of the same pilot. He could be inches off the ground and drop a wing onto his course before he reached the first hedgerow, and the C.O. would yell "Send HIM to me the moment he lands" and it never made a scrap of difference. The glamour boys of aircrew! How he managed to live through the war only God knows, but his crew loved him.

Some weird situations developed on Scramble. Picture a dull dreary wet day (weren't they all?) and your crew is twentythree and a half hours into their stint. Just thirty more minutes to go, and you are all off to the 'Black Boy Inn'. Twenty minutes. Ten. Already the new crew are getting into the crew wagon at the Mess. Five. Then the telephone jangles on the wall. Everyone growls the expletive words as they rush for the door.

Which word/s? There were dozens.

A long, long day. Three or more hours in 'readiness', twentyfour in the Scramble Hut, eight hours in the air (they felt like a week), then de-briefing followed by the aircrew breakfast of two or more hours and then someone says "How about the Black Boy"? Everyone looks at the clock and they decide there are about a couple of hours before closing, and everybody nods.

Such was youth!

The author of ‘Scramble Hut’ also wrote the following delightful anecdote. For the uninitiated, AC2 (Aircraftman Second Class) was the lowest rank in all Commonwealth Air Forces, and was the rank at which trainee aircrew started. – Jim

AC2 RABBIT

Once, on ‘Scramble’, I found a newly-dead rabbit in the grass outside. Now, what was more natural than to give it a full military funeral? So the whole crew (with one near the phone) spent hours, along with our mechanics, making a coffin, borrowing a flag, preparing the accumulator trolley to serve as a gun wagon to carry the coffin.

No other rabbit got a better send-off as we slow-marched around the hut and lowered the coffin. But then again, he was an Airforce rabbit. Just in case he happened to be a Fascist, one of our chaps gave him a snappy Nazi salute.

During this whole procedure, no one smiled or treated it as a joke.

A STROKE OF LIGHTNING

In the mid-sixties, I was living in Waltham, close to Binbrook (UK) Airfield where English Electric Lightnings and Canberras were stationed.

Since I had been a Reservist Officer for years,I was friendly with several of the pilots. It was suggested to me that I ask permission tofly a Lightning. Permission was granted with the proviso that I had a fitness test and undertook several hours in the simulator.

First question: Had I been decompressed?

Answer: Yes.

Second question: When?

Answer: During the war.

Statement: OK. We will probably get the decompression test records.

Three days later: Yes we have the records. All is well.

The rest of the medical went OK as I knew it would because I had a Commercial License and had to undergo this twice a year.

Next, the simulator. This was an exact copy of the real thing. After an hour being shown the ‘knobs and tits’, they said “That’s enough for one day. Here is the book of words on how to make it work. Take it home and study same. Do not lose it or you will spend the rest of your life in gaol”.

Over the next couple of weeks, I spent what seemed an eternity getting to know the ‘ins and outs’.

Next visit, I actually got to starting it. All appeared well, all the instruments were erect, warning lights all OK. Now to start same. All set. Press the starter. All the instruments toppled.

I looked at this in amazement, wondering what the Hell I had done. After a never-ending silence, a small voice said “Do you know what you have done”?

“No, I don’t know” said I.

“You have taxied off the G.P.U. and lost all power. Brakes avoid this happening”.

After several more hours in the simulator, I was ready for the real thing.

Having set ‘High Taxi’, we moved out on the brakes and steering.

To take-off. Lined up and cockpit drill carried out. I was told “It’s all yours”.

After take-off and an agonizing shout of “Get the wheels up and pull up the nose, or we will be supersonic with them down”, the instructor took over and we climbed to 39 000 feet in three and a half minutes over the sea. Then level flight, ‘reheat on’, and up to Mach 2. Absolute quiet. Then back to base.

The approach is started some ten miles out, the aircraft stabilized in the landing position and flown straight on.

A memorable day out!