

## Chapter 22

### 79(F) Squadron - Biggin Hill, France, Acklington, Pembrey, Fairwood Common

*Biggin Hill was an excellent Station and well run. The Squadron was equipped with out of date Gauntlets, a biplane with a fixed undercarriage. For some reason we also had a Hawker Hart. For my sins I looked after the Hart as well as a Gauntlet. The silliness of the "Grippo" gang continued with my Fitter's mate, Tommy Schrier, being renamed "Pippo". As a side note, Tommy was rescued after Courageous was sunk in 1939. Unfortunately I then lost touch with him. By then I was a Corporal and the "Grippo" gang ceased to exist.*



**Gauntlet**



**Hawker Hart**

*Together with a chap called Toms, I went to Halton to play in the RAF Tennis Championships. I got knocked out in the first round, but got to the semi finals in the Plate Competition. I played a stupid game. I was winning 5-0 in the first set but was foot faulted and lost it 7-5. The same thing happened in the second set. If I had won, which I should have, I would have played the Sergeant who had beaten me in the first round.*

*Being so near to Bromley, it was a simple train journey to Chatham and my friendship with Betty deepened. That summer we went to Whitstable as usual and Betty came with us. As it turned out, this was crunch time. We were on the beach one day and Betty, in a swimsuit, was just walking into the sea. I was sitting next to Dad when he suddenly came out with the words "Why ever don't you make up your mind about Betty? Look at her, she has a lovely figure and would make you an ideal wife". From that moment my attitude changed; I felt free of my doubts and worries, proceeded to court her and found myself falling in love again. Later on that year we went on a holiday to Dymchurch, staying at a Bed and Breakfast recommended by Aunt Rose. One day we*



**Betty & Me at Whitstable**

went to Hythe via the miniature railway and went rowing on the Canal. Who should be on the towpath but Aunt Rose and Molly, who were spending the day there? In those days we wouldn't have even thought of sleeping together but we had a lovely holiday just the same. I still have the china rabbit that we bought at Dymchurch on that holiday. Sadly, I cannot remember when Betty and I got engaged but an educated guess would be Christmas 1937. I bought her a three diamond ring. For her birthday, in October, I had inferred that I was going to buy her a posh coat which she did not want. That evening when I met her outside Marks and Spencer where she worked, she went to her home, with me in tow, by a

very indirect route, eventually we got there and she nearly cried when she saw that I had actually bought her a wheeled sewing box which was exactly what she wanted. She told me that the reason for the detour was that she was afraid of being disappointed.

It might be interesting to paint in some background to Betty. She came from a family which had a well off half and a poor half. She came from the poor half. The paternal part of the family had roots which originated in Alsace Lorraine and the name was Schmitt which was changed by Deed Poll to Smith in 1917. They were Catholic and her father died in 1932 at the age of 45 leaving her Mother to bring Betty up on her own. This had the effect of blunting one of her ambitions which was to become a Court Dressmaker where you paid for the training. When she was eleven, she won a scholarship but was not accepted by the Grammar School because she was too shy to answer a simple oral question which was "What was the date of the Battle of Hastings?". She knew the answer but couldn't bring herself to say. She was, however, accepted by the Technical College. She was very good at sewing and dressmaking. Her other great interest was her love of dogs; she had the gift of being able to approach and handle strange dogs no matter how fierce or menacing they looked.

Back at camp, work went on in a routine way. Nothing much happened until in 1938 we were told that we would be getting Hurricanes in due course. I was playing for the Station Hockey team which did well but didn't win the RAF Cup. I also played football

for the Squadron team. The Station Hockey team played the Station Football team at football and drew 1-1. I scored our one! I also came second in a half mile race on Sports Day and won a set of fish knives and forks. In June 1938 I was sent on a Hurricane course at the factory. One week later, on 3rd July (my birthday), Betty and I got married



**Hawker Hurricane**

at St Michaels Catholic Church, Ordnance Place, Chatham. A day or two earlier, we had to see the priest. While Betty was talking to him, the organist's wife came out and asked me if I knew anything about birth control. I suppose she was a non Catholic with a mission but the question was kindly meant. I told her that we did. Funnily enough, earlier in the year, Betty had come to see me and we had walked around Bromley talking about the subject. Betty did have a problem really because birth control was against all the teaching which she had been given. However there was no real choice since my pay, including Ration Allowance, was £2-12-6d and Betty's pay was about the same. The rent that we paid for a flat in West Wickham was £1-5-0 per week and we gave her Mum £1 a week to augment her pitiful widow's pension of 10/- plus the little amount she could earn cleaning. Betty was lucky enough to work for Marks and Spencer who arranged a transfer to Catford which was a short train ride from West Wickham.

The wedding went off OK after a bad start when the taxis didn't turn up. Betty's Uncle Louis came to the rescue as he had a car. My Dad scrounged a lift from one of the neighbours. By the time we got to the church it was almost time for Mass to start so the



**Wedding Day - 3 Jul 1938**

church was full, however the priest was very good and managed to get us married in time. It will seem silly now but we had both saved £14. Betty's money was to save and mine was to pay for the wedding and bungalow at Whitstable which we had booked for our honeymoon. I didn't have much left but Betty still had the savings. By the time I got married I was working in the Station Workshops who gave me a pewter fruit stand as a wedding present; I still have it. We had a small reception at her Mum's house. It all sounds simple by today's standards but it was a pleasant and happy occasion. I

had arranged to travel First Class to Whitstable on the train thinking that we would be alone but no, someone jumped into the same carriage. After our holiday, we went to Halton for me to play in the RAF Tennis Championships. We stayed in a hotel in Wendover. I was knocked out and it took them so long to organise the Plate Competition that we had to leave as we couldn't afford too many nights in the hotel.



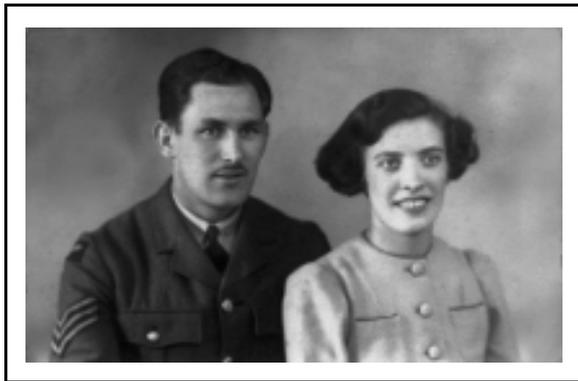
**Betty on honeymoon  
at Whitstable**

On the 1st November 1938 I was promoted to Corporal which helped a lot on the financial front. We bought a second hand tandem. Betty couldn't ride a bicycle but she was able to sit on the tandem with no trouble. We did one longish trip on the tandem; this was to Brighton where we stayed in the Cycle Association's Bed and Breakfast for 2/6d each. A good bed and a lovely breakfast. We saved a bit from my Corporal's pay and later on bought a saloon Austin 7. I think that we sold the tandem when we bought the car which cost £12. We had a lot of fun with it. On one journey from Chatham, the engine stopped on a main road lined with houses. I went to the nearest house to get some help and told the chap that I thought that the jet was blocked but that I didn't have a key. "That's funny", he said "I have two so you can have one". Lucky me. There was also a stopcock inside the car to cut off the petrol supply. Several times, Betty knocked this with her knee and of course the engine stopped. It was all good fun and we were happy. The flat we had consisted of a large sitting/dining room and a large bedroom. In between, a dressing room had been turned into a small kitchen. We could have a bath at any time. Then of course it was 3rd September and the war was on.

As soon as war was declared, all personnel living out were brought in which caused real confusion. At the start we were put into Married Quarters and then into newly built Blocks. They soon realised that this was a stupid move particularly as nothing was happening so we were once more allowed to live out. Betty and I had been getting a bit uncomfortable in the flat as the owner wanted to let it to other people as well. We moved, for a short while, into a furnished bungalow in Biggin Hill Village. Betty contemplated joining the WAAF but was told that she would not be allowed to serve on the same Station as me so that was a non starter. In moving she had left her job at Catford and I am not sure how we coped but somehow we did. I sold the little car, which had given us

so much pleasure, for £10. After a while we found an estate in Addington, Surrey where they were letting houses for 15/- per week. We bought some furniture on the never, never and settled in there. It was only about a four-mile ride in to camp which was ideal. Nothing much was happening in the war although I believe that our Squadron shot down one intruder; other than that it was sit and wait. Each day we went to work and each evening we went home. I dug the garden and planted lettuce seeds etc.; a penny packet of seeds from Woolworth produced 100 lettuces! Life went on until 10th May when Hitler invaded Belgium. We were told to get into a Bombay troop carrier which had seats down the sides. The trip to Merville in France didn't take long but for the first time in my life, I was airsick as the trip was very bumpy. Our Squadron's aircraft flew in and then, for them at least, all hell was let loose. We took over a Nissen hut from the Army. It had a concrete floor and nothing at all in it. We decided to make some beds using by using four-gallon petrol tins with some wooden planks, which we had found, stretched across. At least we weren't on the concrete floor. On the first day one of our Flight Lieutenants was shot down but later that same night he turned up safe and sound. After two days I was left with two mechanics to repair a Merlin engine. We were left with two rifles and a Colt 45 (mine). The Squadron was playing away somewhere and having a torrid time. Later on they came back and after ten days we were evacuated. The journey by lorry was horrible as we were passing streams of refugees just trailing along. At one point the lot in my lorry all jumped out because they had mistaken a Blenheim for a German. I waved my revolver about and got them back in but was upset with them for panicking in front of all those poor people. We eventually got to Boulogne where we stayed the night. In the morning we went down to the harbour where there was a cross channel steamer full of ammunition. Fortunately, the senior officer was an RAF man who ordered the Army to chuck all the ammunition over the side to let us get on. Of course we had lost all of our kit. What grieved me most was the loss of my Dad's button brush, almost worn down to the wood, which he had been issued with when he joined the Buffs as a very young man. The only man with anything was the Adjutant who had a huge box in which, he claimed, were Squadron documents. We reckoned that it also held his kit. We zigzagged across the channel and landed, I think, at Dover where a number of ladies welcomed us with tea and buns. We got on a train which took us to Tidworth in Hampshire where we were relieved of our weapons, given a meal and a bed for the night. The following day we waited hours for a train back to Kent. In London, the Adjutant dithered about so much that Sergeant Bert Parrish and I hopped it and found our own way back. I was disappointed however because, when I got home I found that

Betty had gone to Chatham thinking that I would be away for a long time which meant that I had to sleep alone. Anyway she came back the following day. Our peace from then on was shattered really but, with the Battle of Britain starting, the Squadron moved all over the place. This didn't affect me until they went to Acklington in Northumberland. We got Pickfords to pack up all of our things and Betty went to Chatham until I could find somewhere for us to live. I walked into a pub with Reg Hodder one night to have a drink and asked about houses for let. Oh yes we were told, "we have one", and so the



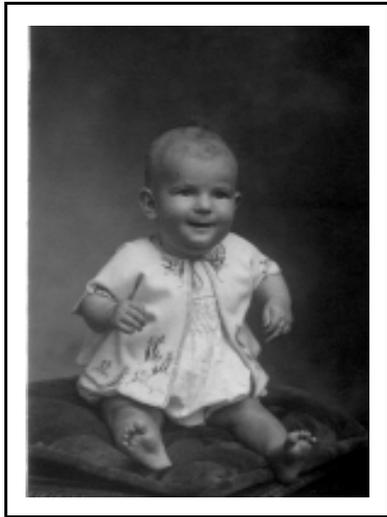
**Reg & "Jim" Hodder**

appropriate arrangements were made. Cooking was done on a huge open fire, potatoes being boiled in a large kettle. I have forgotten how long we were there but we left in September for Pembrey in South Wales. Reg found some decent accommodation but we had a bit of trouble. A short stay in Burry Port was followed by rooms in Pembrey.

Betty was pregnant at this time so the District Nurse looked around and came up with Danybank Farm in Pembrey. The Lloyds were lovely people who allowed Betty to keep her dog Blackie with her. Blackie was a Peke which I had bought for her when we were first married and at West Wickham. Unfortunately she got out one day and was killed on the railway line adjacent to the farm. She was terribly upset and I bought her a Spaniel to replace him. For some reason, she did not take to it so Bert Parrish took it. Reg Hodder and his wife "Jim" were great friends during the time we were at Pembrey and they saw John after he was born. They had lost their first child but after they left Pembrey their first daughter was born. On the 9th December 1940 I was promoted to Sergeant. March 1941 was when our first baby was due and he took his time in arriving. Arrangements had been made for Betty to have the delivery in Carmarthen Hospital. She was in labour for three days and while I was on tenterhooks she must have suffered acute discomfort. John finally arrived on 18th March but Betty had to



**Me with Blackie & Sonny**



*A young John*

*stay in the hospital until her blood pressure was normal. Earlier I had bought a Morris 12 saloon car but the tyres were somewhat worn so I borrowed a pair from one of our starter trollies and put them on the front wheels to ensure that I got the new baby home safely. Having done that we swapped the tyres back again. The chap who did that was JB Moss. He rode the Norton Works Development Model motor cycle in the Senior Manx TT races. Later he became a pilot and was killed in action and is buried in Charmes Military Cemetery, France.<sup>1</sup> He was a grand chap.*

*By this time, my parents had moved to Manchester. With our Squadron was a doctor who owned his own aircraft; he was actually an Australian Flying Doctor. One weekend, we arranged to drive up to Manchester to see my parents, but before we went, the doctor took out one of my back teeth. It didn't hurt at the time but it did later. We got to Manchester and got off to a bad start by knocking over their front garden wall. When it came time to go home, the "Big End" bearings broke and we went home by train. JB Moss' father had a garage in Manchester, so he rescued the car and repaired it for me to collect later on.*

*Later that year, the Squadron moved to a new aerodrome at Fairwood Common. Once more we were looking for somewhere to live. At first we stayed with a Sergeant Policeman and his wife, then on to a place at Sketty. We introduced the landlord to the game of Monopoly but the trouble was that he wanted to play every night! Then Betty struck lucky as she saw an advertisement for a flat in Knoll Avenue, Swansea. The lady was asking £3 per week but when she found out that Betty was a Catholic she halved the price. It had two bedrooms, bathroom, kitchen and dining/sitting room and was really smashing. The lady subsequently became John's Godmother. On 17 Oct 1941 I was promoted to Flight Sergeant and on 22 Feb 1942 I was asked to join 125 Squadron.*



**1941  
79(F) Sqn personnel at  
Fairwood Common**