

Chapter 25

Sierra Leone

At Greenock a crowd of us embarked on the cruiser, HMS Arethusa, with none of us knowing where we were going or why. We were given Yellow Fever jabs so knew we were going somewhere fairly horrible. The Senior NCOs were housed in the CPOs and POs Mess which was fairly comfortable.

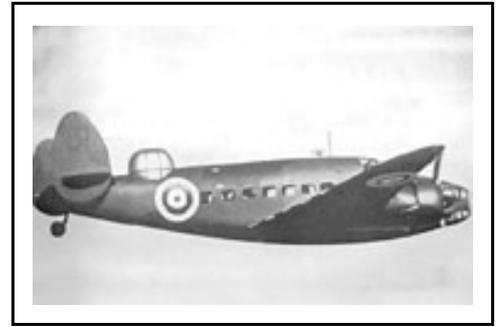


HMS Arethusa - 1942

Of about 150 men, 50 of them, including the silliest Flight Sergeant I have ever come across knew that they were staying on the ship until it reached Egypt. The rest of us were told that we would be disembarking in Freetown. There were no RAF officers on board so all news came from the Navy. The Arethusa was a Chatham ship crewed with Medway personnel who recognised my accent which made me quids in. It was through this and their leg pulling that I acquired the nickname, "Jungle", a reference to the juice brewed by the natives from Palm trees. I remained "Jungle" until I returned to England. The ship carried us to Freetown unescorted, no other ship in sight, and went at about 25 knots day and night, getting there in five days. It was the only time that I have ever been seasick! On the last day the Mess Members presented me with a Cross which they had commissioned the Shipwright to make. There was much laughter. We didn't go into harbour but anchored offshore and landed in boats on a piece of jungle. Eventually transport arrived and carted us off to a place called Hastings. It was a one runway airfield housing 128 Hurricane Squadron at one end and a Fleet Air Arm detachment at the other. No-one seemed to know why we were there or what for except for three Corporals who apparently came from a Coastal Command Unit in England and had been carrying out modifications on Hudsons. They said that we had come out to do the same thing in West Africa on Hudsons flying in from America. They also said that the Officer in charge would turn up shortly and sort things out. His name was



Flight Lieutenant Tex Jarboe and he didn't turn up for three months when our unit started operations; more of him later. In the meantime, General Headquarters (GHQ) in Freetown decided to distribute us all over West Africa. Hastings, at that time, was a tented camp with proper buildings being constructed and, as it happened, Bill Tyson and I were allocated to help out there.



Lockheed Hudson

I, of course, didn't know what Betty was doing but, as usual, she coped and found her way back to Chatham. Writing this down makes me realise how difficult it was for her and how capable and courageous she was. She found a bungalow to live in on the Maidstone Road; this was "Corona" in New Horsted, Chatham.

The CO of 128 Squadron found out that I knew about Hurricanes and asked me if I would sort them out as they had more aircraft U/S than serviceable. He was right about that and I accepted the job on the proviso that I would have absolute control.



This bearing in mind that there was an Engineering Officer and Flight Sergeant already there. My request was agreed and I duly took over. The first job was to inspect all the U/S aircraft which were in the hangar, allegedly awaiting spares from England. The normal practice on squadrons was to always have one aircraft completely U/S so that spare parts could be taken from it thus allowing the indent for the spares to be marked as AOG (Aircraft on Ground). This gave the request high

priority. I nominated the worst aircraft and proceeded to repair the rest using parts from it. I also put everyone's tool kits together so that they were available to all and stopped tool kit checks. Inside a week all the aircraft were back on the flights which they thought was wonderful. Then came another problem. The pilots reported that, at 30,000ft, the aeroplanes were all over the place. I checked one over and found out that they were Mk IIs which were fitted with pressurised fuel tanks. All the pilots had to do when climbing high was to pull a knob so that the pressurising device started to work. This they tried out and, of course, found that they were flying easily at a great height. I think that they

thought I was some sort of magician. Why, I wonder, were aircraft given to squadrons without instructions concerning new developments. There would have been an AMO somewhere but they didn't seem to have it.

Once in West Africa, I wrote to Betty every day but for weeks we didn't get any letters and when we did, they weren't always the earliest ones written

I played football at Hastings. The WO i/c was an ex professional I think and a good chap. The only other item of interest at the time was that the cookhouse burned down - what a mess. Anyway, by that time a lot of us were on the way to Takoradi on the Gold Coast.

This was a huge aerodrome with six huge hangars. Aircraft, in large crates, were shipped complete from England. The harbour was about a mile from the hangars and the road was lined with these crates. Each hangar assembled different types of aircraft but when I was there they were concentrating on Blenheims and Spitfires. Once built and tested, they were flown across Africa to Egypt. This was all part of the push to be at El Alamein. I thought that it was one of the best conceived ideas that I saw during the war. Although I was supposed to be helping, I was really surplus and then I came across a lot of Hurricanes in boxes with no-one building them. I asked the Squadron Leader in charge if I could have some men and tools to build



Supermarine Spitfire

the Hurricanes on the large hardstanding by the side of the hangars. He said that, if I could get three men from each hangar, I could go ahead. I saw each Flight Sergeant and told them that I had permission from the Squadron Leader to build Hurricanes in No 7 Hangar and that they were each to give me three men. This they did without question; no-one queried No 7 Hangar which was a figment of my imagination. I had Bill Tyson as the Sergeant Fitter and a couple of Corporal Riggers, all of whom had come out with



Bristol Blenheim

me on the Arethusa. Off we went and, as it was highly successful, it reflected well on the Squadron Leader. Takoradi was a very different place to Hastings. It had proper housing, messes etc. and the food was quite good. Fruit such as bananas were plentiful.

In West Africa it was necessary to cover up completely after 6.00 pm when it got dark; this was to prevent mosquitos biting and passing on malaria. This wasn't too bad in Takoradi but of course we were eventually to return to Sierra Leone. Work was done in the morning and late afternoon; the damp heat sapped one's strength. Whilst at Takoradi a large batch of mail arrived and the SNCOs played a good joke on me. One evening they all had a letter each, addressed to me, and when I sat down to dinner each chap in turn came to my table and handed over the letters; there were about thirty of them, all from Betty. I was glad to get them and, as for the joke, we all had a good laugh.

I flew back to Hastings in a 200 Squadron Hudson while all the rest went by sea. Men were coming from all directions including Lagos and other parts of Sierra Leone where they had been sent. The word was that Flight Lieutenant Jarboe had at last arrived and that we were to start the Hudson modifications. The unit was named the South Atlantic Ferry Unit or SAFU for short. When we got back to Hastings we found the billets had been built and a new hangar provided. There were no aircraft and where was Jarboe?

He did finally turn up; a raw boned Texan would be the best way to describe him. He said that the modification parts had arrived and the first aircraft would soon be on the way. In the meantime, he went out and got to know the Wing Commanders and Squadron Leaders at GHQ. He also scrounged a Dodge truck in which he used to take some of us to the coast where we went swimming. It turned out that the three corporals, who knew more than anyone else about what we were supposed to be doing, had worked for him before and knew all about the modifications. Of course, there was nothing to be done without the aircraft so I had a huge Ludo board painted on the floor of the hangar; the dice, which was a piece of wood about 6" cubed, was thrown from a bucket and hours of fun was had by all. The first aircraft duly turned up but, when it came to fitting the radar aerials, we found that we did not have the necessary jigs to place them on the wings. I worked it out using trigonometry and it seemed to work alright because we never had any complaints. The aircraft in the early days were flown by Pan American pilots who were a really grand lot. They also filled the aircraft with tinned food etc. to such an extent that we had to create a store for some of it. Jarboe then got the three corporals promoted to Sergeant and me to Warrant Officer. He certainly had a way with him. In the evenings he was found more in the Sergeant's Mess with us rather than the Officer's Mess. As time went by more aircraft turned up, latterly flown by RAF pilots. Jarboe's next move was to annex a Hudson and its pilot, who was supposed to be flying it out to

India, its ultimate destination. This enabled him to fly down to the American base in Liberia. It was also used by the Flight Lieutenant and Warrant Officer pilots who had come out to train the RAF pilots who would then take the aircraft on. At that point he organised a holiday for himself in the States. To get there he paid for a civil trip from Liberia. He took with him our addresses and a list of things for our wives. Thus, in due course, nighties, stockings and so on arrived at our home addresses. Meantime, the Flight Lieutenant Pilot had taken over as CO of SAFU. He was being awkward about sending my commissioning papers through but in the end he did, because a Wing Commander at GHQ told him to sign otherwise he, the Wing Commander, would. I lost a full year's seniority over this which showed up when I passed out from Cosford in January 1944. When the numbers were given out, the rest of the Entry had numbers starting 540; mine however started 529! I did try to get this sorted out but never succeeded. Back to Hastings. The Flight Lieutenant and I didn't like each another but before I left, I won a bet or two. 128 Squadron had a new Engineering Officer and the Fleet Air Arm detachment had a couple of Hurricanes in boxes. Asked if he could build them, he replied that he could in a month or two. When I was asked, I knew that the chaps who had built them at Takoradi were still with me so I said that it would take two days. The Flight Lieutenant thought that I was mad but I said that all it would cost them would be a bottle of whisky. Sure enough, in two days they got two Hurricanes and I got the whisky. I also built them a Gladiator. All good fun. All our chaps were going down with malaria one by one but luckily I never got it. The next move for me and a lot of others was near. I was interviewed by a Squadron leader for a job at Bathurst, in the Gambia, to build up and operate a base for Sunderland Flying Boats. It was agreed and off I went with Bill Tyson and a number of Fitters and Riggers.

Odd Memories of Sierra Leone - Hastings

- Part of my job was to help the Officers to censor the men's letters. One chap, whose wife was in the ATS had received a letter from her telling him that she had been promoted to Warrant Officer. His reply was one of congratulations but also said quote "I've always wanted to fuck a Sergeant Major and when I come home I will" unquote! The censors thought it hilarious.
- One day a Squadron Leader visited from Group and requested a trip in a Hudson. This was agreed. He had arrived at our airfield in a staff car similar to one we had

ourselves; this was in addition to the Dodge. The thing about it was that the tyres on his car were brand new, unlike ours. While he was flying, we swapped his tyres for ours and he eventually drove away quite happily!

- *In the first few weeks of preparing Hudsons, I painted various pictures on the noses along with the name of someone's wife. Of course Betty was on one.*
- *The only way that we were able to reward a native worker was to give him two names; thus, he could draw two lots of pay.*
- *I didn't see many snakes where we were but I remember a massive Black Mamba that someone had come across and killed. I was driving along a road one day when I saw one slithering across the road. The things that the natives didn't like were chameleons. I don't know why; perhaps something to do with their beliefs.*
- *On the airfield was a French plane which had been shot down by the British at the time when the French had given in to Hitler.*
- *One day an American pilot flew in much too quickly, burst a tyre and swung off the runway. I have forgotten what type of aircraft it was but it was an American single engine fighter. We went out to help him. He wasn't hurt but he was in a violent temper. I offered to place a guard on the aircraft as I pointed out that it was vulnerable. He refused help in the most offensive manner so I cleared off with our men. The following day I was sitting at my table when he burst in yelling and screaming. Apparently he had left a rifle and parachute in the aircraft and sure enough they had vanished in the night. He threatened me but I told him that I had only had to call and four men as big as him would take him by the scruff of the neck and throw him out. He was a Lieutenant and a bad tempered one at that. He cleared off swearing and shouting. He was rescued later by the Americans.*
- *One evening we had an alert which everybody, except our unit, ignored. Jarboe got some Browning machine guns and set them up on huge aircraft jacks. So for an hour or two I manned a Browning. We were then told to stand down.*
- *Meeting Ralph Reader who said that he preferred the Sergeant's Mess to the Officer's where he was billeted. He was on some sort of show tour.*