

## Chapter 30

### 16 Operational Training Unit (OTU) - Upper Heyford

*Situated near Oxford, this Station was for training new crews in the procedures connected with heavy bombers. The aircraft used were Wellingtons, twin engine aircraft designed by Barnes Wallis. After passing out, most of the new crews would go to a heavy bomber conversion unit to enable them to fly Halifaxes, Stirlings and Lancasters, however some would go to Wellington Squadrons.*

*From the maintenance point of view, there was one hangar used for 240 hour overhauls and another for 40 hour inspections. In charge was a Wing Commander with a Squadron Leader, who only had one eye and an over inflated ego, reporting to him. In turn there was a Flight Lieutenant and two Pilot/Flying Officers. I was put in charge of the 40-hour inspection hangar and the other was the Technical Adjutant. A representative from Vickers was also available for advice. Talk about overkill. Of course there were the usual flight personnel for daily inspections, receiving and despatching aircraft etc. On the first day there was a fatal crash involving the whole crew being killed. The Squadron Leader grabbed hold of me and took me to the site where the fire crews were dragging out unrecognisable bodies, all Canadians. I don't know whether he thought that I would faint; if he did, then he was disappointed as I had seen it all before. The next day I took over my hangar. There were a Flight Sergeant, two Sergeants, several Corporals and a number of men and women. It looked chaotic and so it proved to be. I met everyone and studied the whole set up whilst trying to learn something about Wellingtons. One of the sergeants was most useful in this regard. I noticed that the WAAFs weren't doing anything except fetching tea, sweeping up etc. I asked what trade they were and was surprised to find out that they were all Riggers and Engine Mechanics. The obvious question was, why weren't they doing the job for which they had been trained? I was told that the Squadron Leader didn't think that they were suitable for that type of work. The new Pilot Officer thought otherwise. I got everyone together and told them that there were going to be changes. I asked to meet the best corporal and put him in charge of a WAAF team of mechanics and told them that, in future, they would do the same work as the men and that everyone would do the fetching and tea making. A few days later, the Squadron Leader walked in and saw a Wellington on which my gang of WAAFs were busy carrying out a 40-hour inspection. He went berserk, so I suggested that we saw the*

Wing Commander. This we did and the Wing Commander said that he thought that it was a good idea which deflated the Squadron Leader completely. One other silly thing the Squadron Leader insisted on doing was personally inspecting the main spars of the aircraft. The reason for this was that, before they were modified, Wellingtons had a habit of losing a wing in flight resulting in some rather nasty crashes. New spars for later models were made from a different metal. The older aircraft were not allowed to be banked beyond a certain number of degrees and the spars were inspected with a magnifying glass between each flight. This was an important inspection and the Squadron Leader with only one eye was hardly the best person to carry out the inspection. When he did the inspection, I always got someone else to do it again. Fortunately he never found out! Another thing for which I got into trouble with him was when there were no aircraft on inspection which happened occasionally. I would send half the staff on a half day holiday leaving half on standby. This was normal procedure in Fighter Command where I had worked as a Flight Sergeant. A similar problem occurred when I was detailed to take charge of three armoured cars as part of the airfield defence system, when I also had to liaise with the Army Major responsible. Each car was manned with a crew of three and, in slack times, I used to disappear out into the countryside on armoured car exercises. The Major thought it wonderful but I'm afraid the Squadron Leader didn't! Soon after, however, this particular Squadron Leader was posted and a replacement arrived. He was no better really, sarcastic and not very likeable (This man, in the thirties, was the replacement for Alan Cobham's Observer who was shot in the air by tribesmen (Iraq) whilst Cobham was on his round the world trip). One of the duties was Duty Engineering Officer at night. There was nothing to do unless there was a crash and I only had one of those when an undercarriage gave way on landing. We only had a five-ton Coles Crane but somehow we managed to get the aircraft off the runway. The lads who did the job were brilliant so I opened the rum and everyone had a good ration. It was duly recorded in the book and was quite official.

We had a satellite station with the Flight Lieutenant in charge however at night, the Duty Engineer had to look in and check that all was well. To get there, I was given a motor cycle just for the day.

Upper Heyford was a peculiar Station with the Officer's Mess split into two, Flight Lieutenants and above, and Flying Officers and below. It was a silly idea and didn't lend itself to good relations between senior and junior officers. It was the only place where I

*came across this system. One day, the Station Adjutant, a WAAF, decided that I should do Orderly Officer duties for experience. The Flight Lieutenant, with whom I was friendly, stopped that. The same woman organised a religious discussion night which everyone, Officers, SNCOs and airmen, were obliged to attend; not a great success.*

*On the personal side, I was looking for somewhere for Betty, John and me to live but it wasn't easy. In the end I went to a large house, near Steeple Aston, standing in two acres of land, all tilled as a garden. The lady who owned it was the widow of an ex Dean of Oxford University who was OK but a terrible snob. She let us have excellent rooms whilst a Sergeant, his wife and son were allotted to the servant's quarters. We were expected to have a bath every day, which was great, but the Sergeant and his family were only allowed one per week. I believe that she had a daughter in a home for the mentally disturbed. Another example of her attitude towards the high and low was when John and the Sergeant's son, both aged about three, got into the hay loft where they found lots of jam jars. These they took great pleasure in throwing out of the loft through the glass window. There was glass everywhere. In her eyes, John was to blame since he was the Officer's son! When I left Upper Heyford, she asked me to find a replacement. Luckily I knew a chap called Moreland, one of the Wool family, and he was only too glad to find a place. She was happy too. I had previously volunteered for the RAF Commando Unit but the Wing Commander, who understood my problems, talked to the Group Captain at GHQ who was only too happy to put my name forward to help start up a new Station at Husbands Bosworth. Volunteers were requested from the men who volunteered en masse. Of course not all of them could be taken but a great number were.*

### **Odd Memories of Upper Heyford**

- *Staying with Flight Lieutenant Caffyn and his wife and going to the pub in his pony and trap.*
- *Dancing during the same stay and doing the Polka with Mrs Caffyn and both ending up sprawled on the floor looking up into the eyes of the local Vicar.*
- *After the dance, going out to the Morris 12 and her peeing on one front wheel and me on the other.*