

ON SQUADRON

Now a day came which I remember with great joy. The wing commander had me in and informed me I had been posted to 450 Squadron, but then the bugger said he'd told AHQ¹ he thought I would be better off to go to some Hurricane outfit because of my time on them. Damn! I would rather be flying Kittyhawks – they had a much better performance.

But AHQ would not relent thank goodness and three or four days later the posting was confirmed and I was told to report to the C & R Flight to do a dual check in a Harvard with Flying Officer Ken Sands from Perth, now on rest from his first tour with 112 Sqn RAF.

I was rather surprised when Mike O'Leary came over to the mess that evening for a few drinks, a sort of send off one could say. This was the first time I'd ever seen an officer in our mess here and no sergeant I knew of there had ever been invited to their mess. Suddenly I noticed O'Leary was wearing the extra 'thin' stripe of a squadron leader.

"Congratulations on your promotion Sir."

"Oh no, it's not a promotion, I've got the rank back again. They dipped me to Flight Lieutenant for clocking a wing commander at a party in England," replied O'Leary.

It must have been an exciting turn out, and doubtless the 'Brass' had sent him out to Egypt to well and truly rub in the lesson.

The night and the beers went on and on until it was time to close the mess.

“Come over to our mess,” said Mike. Nothing loath, I accepted and away we went and for some stupid reason started drinking pink gins. “Goodnight Sir,” and off to bed with a 4.30 get up in front of me.

Of course after all that beer and gin I had to wake up with a bloody lousy hangover. In fact I was still drunk, but admittance would only land me in trouble, so I rolled down to C & R Flight and got into the Harvard with Ken, feeling bloody terrible.

Start up, taxi out, and suddenly Ken shouts “I’ve got her!” and hits his brakes!

“What’s wrong Sir?”

“You nearly ran into a marker drum!”

Hell! I hadn’t swung her enough and wasn’t seeing things too well! All went well thereafter – round the circuit, wheels down, flaps down, pitch full fine, throttle closed – but I couldn’t see just where the ground was, and was attempting to three-point her at thirty feet.

“I’ve got her,” he yelled and we land safely and start again.

“Anything wrong with you?” he enquired.

“No Sir.”

“Right. Have another go.”

And a dead exact repetition of my first effort.

“Christ,” said Sands, “we’re going in, I’ve had this. There’s something wrong with you!”

I really didn’t get a chance to explain because the Winco’s airman clerk was waiting on dispersal edge with a message. The Winco wanted to see me immediately. Hell!

On the mat again, and I quote: “Sergeant Officer, you’ve just put up the worst flying performance I’ve ever seen! And I know what the trouble is. You were on the hooch last night.”

He had been to the theatre at Ismailia and had seen us in the mess when he came home.

I could say nothing.

“Well get back to your tent and sleep it off and come back at five tonight.”

He took no further action. He was a good officer but I had never got to know him very well because of our wide difference in ranks. I have always deeply appreciated being let off the hook for this performance.

5 pm – down to the flight again for one hour in the Harvard with Ken. Successful this time and we were carrying out ‘tail-down wheeler’ landings – the same type of landing as the RAF used for the P40s.²

The ‘Brass’ had long ago decided that three point landings increased the risk of a ground loop and consequently a broken undercarriage, so the proper technique was to land them with the tail wheel off the ground and keep the tail up with forward pressure on the stick during the landing run. It still did not prevent a number of ground loops as already recorded, and the craft must not be allowed to develop the slightest swing during the landing run.

Next morning (not much grog drunk last night) an hour and a quarter solo practising tail down wheeler landings, and another half hour at the same game.

Then once again the indescribable thrill of flying an aircraft you had not flown before – on which only single seater pilots had a mortgage. AK984 was the Kitty’s registration number.

Three flights next day involving aerobatics and air to ground gunnery. The Kittyhawk certainly packed more punch than the Hurricane. It could accelerate more quickly in a dive and after a pullout and climb it held its speed for a much longer time.

Low flying (authorised), a spin or two, but don’t let her spin round more than twice. Close the throttle right off and apply recovery action. Out she comes to straight and level again.

A steep turn – tight as you can – and off she flicks into a spin without any warning at all. But we’re okay. A sort of bonus flight in a Tomahawk – 45 minutes of aerobatics and spins which were not so vicious as the Kittyhawk spins and there was a slight shudder before she spun off a steep turn.

The report – confidential – on this eight hour fifty-five minute conversion was the best I had received to date. Sergeant Stone, the English orderly room sergeant, at my request allowed me to look at it, which pleased me greatly. It read: “had no trouble converting to this type of aircraft. Very