

Chapter 4

Cranwell

The aim of the Royal Air Force College (like the much older RMA Sandhurst) was to turn the cadets, the majority of whom came direct from English public schools but with a few from other countries in the Commonwealth, into good officers and leaders with qualifications that would enable them to gain the highest ranks, and so form the nucleus of the future armed services. Cranwell, in addition, aimed to make them the best pilots in the world – for which medical fitness and sporting ability were even more important than academic qualifications. In consequence, the flying instructors were of the highest grade – but I was less impressed by some of the academic lecturers.

In September 1932, when I arrived, we cadets were accommodated in the old war-time hutted camp across the road facing the gates of the present building. We lived five to a hut. The only heating was a coal stove in the sitting room adjoining the dormitory – damn cold in the winter with the east wind from the North Sea blasting us, and stifling hot in summer without it.



September 1932 'C' Squadron

The Selection Board had eliminated most of those who were not of strong character, adventurous, good at sport and deemed likely to make good pilots. So I found myself joining a bunch of potential leaders, full of zest for life and adventure – but not (with a few exceptions) academically brilliant.

On arrival we had to fill in a form stating what sports we played – summer and winter. A typical cadet – the Earl of Bandon, who had been there a few years ahead of me – had, for example, filled his in:

Summer – *Fishing and Fu******. Winter – *No fishing*.

He was a fine officer, with whom I later served. I have no reason to think his statement was inaccurate or misleading – but typical of a breed which helped win the Battle of Britain.

All cadets were expected to participate in every type of sport and game – from boxing and rugby to water polo, from fox hunting (for which some cadets had their own horses) and beagling (for which the College had its own pack of hounds) to billiards and snooker. As a result of the skill I had acquired with my air rifle and later with a pistol, I became Captain of shooting: I was also Vice-Captain of cricket and a member of our squash team. However, we were warned that neither as cadets, nor as officers later, were we ever to become involved in discussions about either politics or religion, and few of us had any idea of what was really going on in the world.

The cadets were divided into the three Squadrons, each subdivided into two academic levels relating to the performance in the entrance exams. I found myself in the top section of 'C' Squadron, in which there were just four of us: Jeudwine (Prize Cadetship), Henry Molyneux (King's Cadetship), "Dreamy" Williams (Scholarship from Johannesburg, South Africa) and myself. We four, for the whole of the next two years, attended every lecture, marched down to the hangars, sat beside each other at meals – did everything together. But, at the end of the two years, I felt I knew Jeudwine no better than the day I first met him. We other three formed a wonderful friendship.

Jeudwine was a most extraordinary chap. He was tall, had a face and neck like a giraffe, had few friends and never mixed much.

But he had an amazing career (DSO, OBE, DFC) and an even more astonishing death – which forms the basis of a novel I have yet to finish writing. (Details in a later chapter.)

Molyneux was quite different – small and plumpish, vivacious, full of fun, brilliant at sport, clever and a very loyal friend to me. He used to go out with the lads most Saturday evenings. I always stayed in camp, studying or writing to Bunny.

Williams (rightly known as “Dreamy”) was tall, handsome, a wonderful character, slow, deep thinking and rather reserved, but with a good sense of humour and large, unmistakable handwriting. He did not join the other lads on Saturday, but tended to go out alone. Towards the end we suspected that he had a girlfriend somewhere nearby, but he never gave any hint of it himself. We learnt later, however, that Dreamy’s activities there later had a major effect on the life and family of my second daughter, Pat – of which I give details later in this chapter. After leaving Cranwell, Dreamy specialised in Engineering and I lost touch with him until after we had both retired, when his son, Andrew, used to come and stay with us.

In my first term the cadet in the next bed to mine was an Indian named Daljit Singh. That autumn, on 5th November, some time after we had gone to bed, we were woken up by a loud sizzling noise, followed by a thump of something falling on the floor. Realising the date, I, like the other three, just put our heads under the bedclothes waiting for the bang and then looked out to see what had happened. There was poor old Daljit standing dishevelled in his nightshirt, his turban blown off, his beard singed, and in his hand the remnants of a firework.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, “they do not do that in India. ... I tink I go home.” That became a catchphrase if something went wrong.



Molyneux, me & Dreamy Williams - Cranwell 1933

We learnt to fly, to begin with, in an Avro 504N – a later version of the biplane designed in 1912 which was in action throughout the First World War. The propeller was made of laminated wood and designed to pull the aircraft to a top speed of no more than about 70 mph with the engine flat out. At speeds above that (eg in a dive) the engine could go no faster and so the propeller acted as a brake, pushing against the air and preventing the aircraft reaching much higher speeds.

While still at school in 1926 I had paid five shillings for a brief flight from Shoreham airfield as a passenger in a similar aircraft with Alan Cobham. That had been interesting. But the feeling of exhilaration of myself controlling an aircraft was far more exciting. In all my flying experience, nothing ever gave me more of a thrill than my first solo in that slow old aircraft. Being up in the sky alone and able to move myself about like a bird was completely different from being a passenger. I took to flying like a duck to water, and just loved it – particularly aerobatics and instrument flying.

One of the first things we were taught at Cranwell was how to pack a parachute. We never knew when we might have to jump. We used the seat type and never flew without one. It acted as a cushion attached to our bottom and fitted into the bucket seat. We each had our own, with the harness carefully adjusted to our size, and we kept them in our flying clothing lockers in the hangar. In the same way that my ghillie later always encouraged me to tie on my own flies when fishing for salmon or trout, so – for the same reason – we were encouraged to pack our own parachutes, or at least supervise it, so that if it did not work properly, then we could not blame anyone else.

In that, we were always carefully supervised by an expert and, once a month to test it, we had to stand on a chair and pull the ripcord, while the instructor watched that the parachute fell out correctly onto the floor behind us. On one such occasion a particularly unpopular cadet nicknamed “Queenie” had pulled his ripcord and then heard the instructor give a shout of alarm. Queenie looked round and saw that only three tightly packed bed blankets had come

out. He went as white as a sheet and had to be helped down from the chair. But he got the message. The shock transformed him into a much more pleasant character. He never discovered that the blankets had only been substituted that morning.



A different trick played on another cadet as a punishment was in the old huts where our heating was the coal stove. Having been told that he was going to be branded on his bottom, he had to watch a poker being made red hot in the stove, then forced to lie over a chair with his trousers down. It was winter and he did not know that another poker had been frozen in the snow. The sensation derived from frozen iron on the skin is very similar to hot iron. As they applied the cold iron to his bottom, they simultaneously applied the hot iron to a piece of meat. He felt the iron on his bottom, heard the sizzling and smelt the burning meat that he assumed to be his own flesh. You can imagine his reaction. But it did him no physical harm at all.

Our flying training was dominated by two things: learning how to get out of a spin (which most aircraft went into automatically if the pilot mishandled the controls at slow speeds), and how to make a safe landing on whatever ground happened to be beneath in an emergency – such as when the engine failed, we smelt fire or something went seriously wrong with the aircraft – all not infrequent occurrences in those days! That was also important, but less of an emergency, for when we got lost or the weather got too bad to continue.

For the whole of my first year I flew only training aircraft – first the old Avro 504N and then the Avro Tutor, which replaced it in early 1933. In these I learnt to do every type of aerobatics then known. I remember the first time I did a bunt. We were flying level and my instructor told me to loosen my collar and tighten my straps. Then he

pushed the stick forward and held it there until, having completed half a loop downwards, with us on the outside and my eyes nearly being forced out of their sockets, we were flying level again but upside down, with the engine spluttering; from there we did a half roll back. He then taught me to do a tail slide too. That consisted of pulling the stick back until the aircraft was pointing vertically upwards and holding it there until we started falling backwards through the air – a most extraordinary sensation. To recover, we applied full rudder, which tipped the tail to one side – thus allowing the aircraft to just tumble out of the sky, which usually resulted in it going into a spin.

Part of our training was also to recover from an inverted spin that we practised by rolling the aircraft onto its back, pushing the stick forward until the aircraft nearly stalled, then applying full rudder. That caused one wing to stall and flip the aircraft into a fast spin with the pilots on the outside. Spinning was so rapid that my eyes could not focus properly on the rotating ground below, and the blood was forced into my head, giving a feeling that my eyes were nearly popping out. It was not a pleasant experience – but valuable training.

My blind flying training was particularly comprehensive – mainly because one of my instructors, Sgt Monk, was exceptionally good at it – and I enjoyed it. He taught me how to recover from a spin flying blind in cloud, even though the instruments we had were very primitive. When flying blind, with my head in the cockpit and looking only at the instruments, the most difficult thing of all was to disregard completely all the sensations I was getting and to rely completely on what the instruments were telling me. Years later, when more powerful engines generated greater acceleration, one of my friends, O'Brian Nicholls, as well as several other pilots, were killed flying Canberras solely because they let these sensations overrule what the instruments were indicating. I happened to be given the job of finding out why these crashes had occurred and – thanks largely to my Cranwell training – was able to do so, as I explain later.

To practise blind flying in good weather we used a canvas hood fitted over the pupil's cockpit (to prevent him seeing outside), with

the instructor looking out to ensure safety. My training to ignore my sensations began like that, with the instructor doing the take-off and warning me that I would get a sensation of climbing steeply as we accelerated. Then, flying level, he closed the throttle and warned me that I would get a sensation of diving. He demonstrated how other manoeuvres also created false impressions. He made me practise doing these manoeuvres on instruments until he was satisfied that I was proficient. It was the excellent flying training at Cranwell, and the splendid instructors I had there, to which I attribute my later survival.

My instructor also demonstrated to me that it is easy to let your eyes, focussed on the ground, override what your instruments are correctly indicating. A fellow cadet named Gard failed to remember that and so killed himself by stalling an Atlas aircraft while turning on the approach to land in clear weather. Four years later, from the deck of an aircraft carrier, I watched two similar crashes occurring (the second fatal) for exactly the same reason. Over 70 years later, in 2009, my godson (Colin Heslop) also crashed a light aircraft – apparently because pilots are still not being properly taught how to avoid that particular danger.

But my survival is also due to more than my fair share of luck – even at Cranwell! Although we used the hood over the cockpit on clear days, most of our instrument training was carried out flying in cloud. Sometimes several aircraft might be in the same clouds, although the instructors tried to avoid that. On one occasion I was blind flying like that with my instructor in dense cloud, and with both of us concentrating on the instruments, when we felt a sudden bump. After landing, we found the marks from the tyres of another aircraft on our upper wing. The occupants of another aircraft had felt the bump too. Had that other aircraft been a few inches lower, or us three inches higher, we would have all been killed. And Heaven only knows how often we had similar near-misses without us being aware of it!

Not everyone had my luck. Shortly before I left Cranwell, two of my fellow cadets, and their instructors, were killed in a collision – a New Zealander named Plugge, and a chap in my squadron named

Rutherford - although this had occurred in clear air while low flying. That tragedy, coupled with the earlier incident, had a lasting effect on me. It convinced me that the main danger in all flying is colliding with another aircraft – a view I still hold. In all my 25 years flying, that was my only real fear – and it was that which led me to invent an airborne anti-collision system, as I recount later.

As I mentioned earlier, there was much emphasis on spinning. That had always been the main cause of pilots crashing – right from the beginning of aviation. If either wing of an aircraft was not going fast enough through the air to hold it up, that wing would suddenly stall; the aircraft would flip over to that side and start spinning downwards, with the other wing going faster and so gradually making the spin more stable. That created a situation that was not easily remedied. The longer it was allowed to continue, the more difficult it was to get out of it. Some aircraft were much worse than others; but the training aircraft were specifically designed to make it easy to recover. We practised spinning on almost every training flight.

Because of the danger of getting into a spin, when flying in cloud we were taught always to keep the wings level – never to let the aircraft bank into a turn, because that was far too dangerous with the instruments then available. If we needed to change direction, we had to use only the rudder to make the aircraft skid round – side slipping – while concentrating on keeping the wings level. It was a most uncomfortable procedure.

On the 504 we only had four instruments to help us fly the aircraft. The first was an altimeter, which measured the atmospheric pressure at some place inside or outside the cockpit to give us a rough idea of our height (but only above where it had last been set – usually the last airfield from which we had taken off). The second was a gadget to measure the pressure of the air coming from a forward direction and so indicate our airspeed: that consisted of a coiled spring hinged at the top and attached to one of the wing struts with a flat piece of metal facing forwards, with a pointer at the bottom being forced over a scale graduated in mph. The third was a similar device placed at right angles to that on another strut, to measure

the strength of the sideways wind (ie sideslip, which we also felt on our face). Both of these had to be located well away from the cockpit and the engine slipstream and so, in very dense cloud, sometimes became invisible or affected by ice. The fourth was a spirit level on the dashboard with a bubble, acting like an inverted pendulum, to confirm the feel we got from the seat of our pants. The Avro Tutor, which replaced the 504 N in early 1933, was better equipped with flying instruments.

The only other things we had to help us operate were a gauge on top of the fuel tank indicating the amount of fuel remaining, a watch to indicate time, a modified ship's compass, which was very difficult to use, a thermometer to warn of icing conditions, and a map, which was extremely difficult to use before it was (often) blown out of the open cockpit.

At the beginning of my second year at Cranwell, we cadets moved into the newly-built College, where we each had our own



New Cranwell College 1933

rooms. There were also several staff changes. The previous Chief Flying Instructor (C. N. Rowe, who played rugby for England and was, like me, an Old Alleynian) was replaced by Squadron Leader Martingell. Also, the Chief Engineer Officer was replaced by Squadron Leader Heslop, who had been a pilot in the King's Flight.

These two appointments made little difference to us, except that Heslop had a Rolls-Royce in which, on our weekends off, he used to give Molyneux a lift to his home in Yorkshire, which was close to Heslop's own destination: and – more importantly – Martingell had a very attractive and glamorous wife (Phyllis), who accompanied him to church each Sunday. She was the centre of attention for most of us cadets and excited our imagination during the otherwise tedious sermons. By an extraordinary coincidence, these three personalities later had a dramatic effect on my future family – as I explain at the end of this chapter.

In my second year I went on to fly operational types of aircraft in a flight commanded by Flight Lieutenant Beisiegel, who had recently been promoted to that rank. First, he taught me to fly Hawker Harts (a light single-engined bomber) and then I was selected to be a fighter pilot and went on to Bristol Bulldogs. Two events stand out in my memory concerning that part of our training.

One very cloudy day that winter, another instructor deemed the conditions ideal to give me my first experience of icing. We climbed up through solid cloud to a height of 12,000 feet, at which level the temperature had fallen well below freezing; with the wind whistling through the open cockpit. I was in agony from the cold. Also, I was becoming apprehensive that we might fall out of the sky because of the amount of hoar frost and ice that had built up on the front edges of the wings and struts. Furthermore, I knew the normal height limit for flying without oxygen was 10,000 feet and had little idea what happened above that.

The instructor (who was flying it) warned me that the aircraft had about as much ice on the wings as it could safely take without



Dining Hall - Cranwell

stalling and told me to take over control to get the feel of it. I did so – but shortly afterwards (flying in thick cloud only on instruments and possibly being a little light-headed without oxygen) I must have got the nose too high and stalled it. The next thing I knew, both from the sensations and the instruments, was that the aircraft had flipped into a spin. My instructor shouted, “I’ve got her”, and took back control. I watched the altimeter unwinding as we spiralled down, with him struggling to correct the spin – a much more difficult task with all that ice.

10,000 feet ... 8,000 feet ... and we seemed to be spinning faster. And we were picking up even more ice on the leading edges of the wings and struts. At 6,000 feet we were still spinning and I began to wonder whether the spin had become too stable for us ever to get out of it, and at what height he would tell me to undo my straps and take to my parachute. Then I remembered we had been warned that getting out

of the cockpit while the aircraft was spinning was extremely difficult, because one had to climb out from the top side – it was too dangerous to exit into the centre of the spin, as the aircraft spiralling down might then hit you or the parachute. We had also been warned that parachuting through cold clouds could cause the canopy to accumulate ice and so not function correctly.

At 5,000 feet the air felt warmer, but we were still spinning. I was following the movement of the controls with my feet lightly on the rudder and my fingers on the stick. We had full opposite rudder and the stick was being rocked hard forward with simultaneous bursts of engine. At 3,000 feet this suddenly took effect and put us into a vertical dive. We levelled out at 2,000 feet, still in cloud, and my instructor, in a perfectly calm voice, told me to take over control again. He told me to fly around at 1,000 feet until we lost all the ice and then land. My admiration for him – and my gratitude – knew no bounds. Ten years later that experience helped save my life.

Whenever I recall the confident way my instructor had called “I’ve got her”, I am reminded of an amusing picture on one of the walls at the College. It was based (but exaggerated) on an incident that had occurred at Cranwell some years previously. The pupil, sitting in the rear cockpit, was depicted as just having made an appallingly heavy landing – so heavy that the aircraft fuselage had split into two just behind the instructor’s front cockpit, leaving the rear half with the pupil in his cockpit on the ground. The instructor in the front half, unaware of this, is depicted with a bristling moustache opening up the engine to go round again and shouting, “I’ve got her” – just as my instructor had. The pupil, crouching in his cockpit now stationary on the ground, gleefully replies: “And you can bloody well have her!”

The other event concerns a “height test” which we carried out in clear weather. Our aircraft were not fitted with oxygen and we all had to experience the effects of lack of it at increasing altitudes. It only became significant above about 10,000 feet and the lack of oxygen had no lasting effect. Even if a pilot went far above that limit and became unconscious, then as soon as the aircraft fell below

10,000 feet he would normally recover and that would give him plenty of time to regain control before crashing. We each had to do one height test and were instructed to start descending immediately we felt light-headed and never to exceed 15,000 feet. Needless to say, competition between the cadets developed to see who could go highest.

I did my height test in a Hawker Hart. I began to feel a bit light-headed around 15,000 feet, but managed to climb to nearly 20,000. I was so elated that I decided to do a slow roll to celebrate. The next thing I remember was regaining consciousness and finding the aircraft out of control at about 8,000 feet, upside down, and diving very fast. I still do not know how we arrived at that situation. However, my training enabled me quickly to remedy matters and land safely.

One of the most difficult things was finding our way about – “cross-country flying”, as it was called. We had no radio or other aids. The only navigation instrument we had was the ship’s compass, whose direction pointer swung all over the place unless the aircraft was flying absolutely straight and level – a rare situation in a single-seater like the Bristol Bulldog, which I was now flying. Apart from the indications of our speed through the air (which itself could be moving in any direction), we had nothing but that compass, and a watch, to help us. Reading a map was almost impossible and I found memorising all the main features on it before taking off was too difficult. It was quite an adventure to get out of sight of the airfield or other prominent known landmarks.

One of our first cross-country training exercises was, on a fine day, to fly to Newark, Peterborough and back. These were such short distances that we had barely been out of sight of Cranwell and all of us arrived back on schedule, except a cadet named Yaxley. The hours passed and we feared he must have crashed. But that evening he turned up looking very sheepish.

He had managed the first two legs, but noticed from his map there was a village with the same name as himself – Yaxley – near Peterborough. He decided to fly over it to see what it looked like. But

he had suddenly smelt something burning. We were taught, if we smelt fire, to switch off the engine immediately and make a forced landing. So that is what he did – concentrating on landing safely. Only then, on the ground, did he notice the large chimneys all around, with the smoke pouring up into the sky from them. The town of Yaxley was in the centre of the brickfields and it was the smoke from them he had scented. Yaxley himself, after a brilliant career which won him a DSO, MC, and DFC, had the bad luck to be a passenger in the aircraft carrying the Polish General which the Germans shot down over the Bay of Biscay later in the war.

At Cranwell we were taught to fly, to be leaders, to use our initiative, and manage our subordinates. But the academic side of our training was pretty awful.

The main thing I remember from our engineering training (apart from learning how to take an engine to bits and put it together again) was being given, on entry, a cube of metal precisely three inches square. We had the whole two years to file it down to a cube exactly two inches square. Now, I don't know whether you have ever tried filing a flat surface accurately – but my cube quickly became the shape of a tennis ball. I had, however, learnt to use a lathe and with help from Dreamy Williams I managed to get some flat sides on it. This exercise again illustrated to me the irrational importance that teachers assign to things they themselves have learnt – but which are utterly irrelevant to the future of their pupils.

Legal training, including how to preside over a court martial, was considered important. But the main thing I remember was the emphasis placed by the lecturer on the essential need to prove penetration if the charge was rape. We often wondered why he particularly laboured that point – we had varied opinions on his reasons.

To improve our social graces, we were encouraged to accept invitations to dinner that often came from residents in the surrounding county. Having come straight from school, some cadets were rather shy and socially inexperienced. I remember one

such dinner when I was sitting on the right of the hostess – a most dignified elderly lady – at a mansion in the country. Her husband, wearing a monocle, was at the other end of the table. There were about eight of us altogether, including two other cadets, one of whom was on her left, opposite me. Like most big country houses in those days, they had no mains water – all came from a well or pond and was pretty cloudy.

Halfway through dinner there was a lull in the conversation. The cadet opposite me deemed it his duty to find a subject for conversation. So, noticing the glass jug of water standing on the table between us, he turned to the hostess and said:

“I notice that your water is very yellow.”

I remember seeing the monocle drop from her husband’s eye and her own expression of astonishment. There was utter silence for a moment; then, thinking she must have heard incorrectly, the hostess said:

“I beg your pardon?”

By that time it had dawned on the unfortunate cadet that he had made an awful faux pas. In an effort to remedy matters, he made it even worse by adding:

“Oh! I meant your drinking water, of course.”

We were not invited to that house again.

One of our main tasks, during our two years at Cranwell, was to write a thesis on a subject of our own choice relating to the future of aviation – as Frank Whittle had done with his famous thesis on “Jet Propulsion” a few years earlier. To me, one of the main problems facing military aviation has always been navigation – how to find the target to bomb it, or to reach and land safely at the intended destination in any weather. My grandfather having been a Professor of Astronomy, plus the telescope and sextant I had inherited from him, had already resulted in me taking Navigation as an extra subject in the entrance exam to Cranwell. So I chose Navigation – astronomical navigation in particular.

However, while I was writing that thesis I felt pretty certain that the staff would never read through all the several hundred

pages thoroughly. So I started off with quite a reasonable opening; then, to save work, I put in a lengthy middle (which was largely irrelevant) that I copied out of various books; but I wrote the end part myself very carefully. My hunch had been right – it was clear that the instructor judging it had not read it all, because I got full marks for it.

The whole of our strategic and war training was based on the assumption that the only conceivable foe that England would ever have to fight was France. Every lecture related to how we should plan to defeat the French and defend the South Coast from a French attack. No mention of Germany ever entered into any of the lectures at that stage – not even by the summer of 1934.

The cadet who passed out top had first choice of the available postings – and so on to the second and third down the line. First choice went to Don Stokes, who seemed never to do a stroke of work, slept through most lectures, but won most prizes and passed out top. He elected to go to a Squadron in India. Molyneux and I passed out second and third and so had next choice. There were vacancies for two pilots in 32 Fighter Squadron at Biggin Hill. That was the nearest airfield to where Bunny lived. So, at my suggestion, and because we had both trained as fighter pilots on Bulldogs, with which 32 Squadron was equipped, my friend Molyneux agreed that we should elect to go there together.

Bunny came up by train to attend our Passing Out Parade. Dreamy Williams had an open four-seater car in which he drove me to Grantham station to meet her. Driving back to Cranwell, Bunny and I were in the back seat and too preoccupied with each other to notice him nodding off. True to his nickname, Dreamy fell asleep at the wheel. We ended up in a cornfield and had great difficulty getting out again. But the next day after the passing out parade, at which we were awarded our commissions as Pilot Officers (signed by King George V), Dreamy drove us without mishap to Calthorpe station, from which Bunny and I had planned to go on holiday, together with her parents, at Mundesley on the Norfolk coast.

Sequel

When I graduated from Cranwell, in July 1934, the Chief Flying Instructor – Squadron Leader Martingell – signed my flying logbook with his assessment of my flying ability: “Above the Average”. (Nothing very special about that, as many others had similar assessments. But the fact that I still have that logbook with his signature is of considerable interest to my second daughter – Pat.)

About a year and a half later, on 20 February 1936, I learned that Martingell, together with a pupil, Flight Cadet Tomlinson, had been killed in an aircraft crash 15 minutes after taking off in Tutor K3201 – the cause of which was never fully established. The aircraft appeared to have dived almost vertically into the garden of his married quarter in full view of his wife, Phyllis – the very attractive, vivacious lady whom I have already mentioned.

One theory was that the pupil’s parachute had become jammed against the control column, another that he had “frozen” on the controls. Neither of these explanations appeared at all likely to me.

So, on my next visit to Cranwell (which was to play cricket for the Old Cranwellians against the cadets that summer), I decided to question the batman who had looked after Molyneux, Williams and me throughout our two years there. The batmen always knew everything (including all gossip) about what was going on in the camp.

“Was it really an accident?” I asked him.

He shook his head. “That’s what the Court of Enquiry decided, but we have other theories.”

“Such as?” I enquired.

But he refused to elaborate. “It’s best left a mystery,” he insisted.

I tried to extract information from some of the other batmen, but all my questioning was similarly unproductive. So I forgot about it.

Meanwhile, in April 1936, when I was temporarily based at Aboukir in Egypt during the Abyssinian War, I was ordered to fly a Blackburn Shark out to the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious*, which was cruising about 20 miles north of Alexandria, to pick up two

passengers, fly them to Cairo for a meeting and later return them to the carrier. One of those passengers was Squadron Leader Heslop, who had been the engineering officer at Cranwell. Luckily, the weather was fine and, with the Pyramids visible from 50 miles away, I completed the task without difficulty.

The following year, although I was unaware of it until much later, Martingell's widow – the gorgeous Phyllis – married Heslop (better known as "Slops").

Five years later, during the war, when Slops was a Group Captain and I was a Wing Commander, I found myself serving as one of his deputies at the British Air Commission in Washington, DC. As a result, my wife Bunny and Slops's wife Phyllis became great friends, with their first son Peter and our daughter Pam often playing together. Later, Phyllis asked me to be godfather to her second son Colin, and we stayed with them, first at their house near Washington – then in 1945, just after VE Day, at their house in Sonning in England. The following year Phyllis also became godmother to our second daughter Pat.

Some 20 years later, Pat had come down to Switzerland to spend Christmas with us at Gstaad, where we were then living. Peter Heslop, following in his father's footsteps as an engineer, was working for Rolls-Royce on aero engines in France and Switzerland. Bunny had a phone call from Phyllis to say that Peter was temporarily working at an airfield near Berne (quite near us) in Switzerland and suggested that we might like to have him with us for Christmas dinner – which we did.

That led to a romance and, a few years later, Pat married Peter Heslop.

Slops retired as an Air Vice-Marshal and died in 1976, and Peter's mother Phyllis died a few years later. When Pat was sorting out Phyllis's things, she came across many photographs of Dreamy Williams. Some were of him and (as she had then been) Mrs Martingell together. Also, there was a letter, in Dreamy's unmistakable handwriting – dated just four days after Martingell's crash – which made it quite clear that they were lovers. It read:

*"Think of me as withdrawn
into the morning dimness –
Yours still – you mine –
Remember all the best
of our past moments –
forget the rest –
And so where I await
come gently on."*

As I mentioned earlier, when we were together at Cranwell we had suspected that Dreamy's girlfriend might be one of the officers' wives.

Whatever caused that crash which made Phyllis a widow, it led to her marrying Slops which also resulted in our daughter Pat marrying their son Peter.

"It's a small world!" remarked Pat when we discussed it.

"Proof of the Chaos Theory." I replied.

To confirm what I now think may have happened (and so complete the story) I intend, next time I visit Cranwell, to study the photos of Tomlinson's term there to see whether he also had been a strikingly handsome cadet.