THE COMPELLING STORY OF A BATTLE OF BRITAIN AC

'An exhilarating and moving memoir'

DAILY MAIL

Life's Too Short *To Cry*

Tim Vigors DFC

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Cranwell

The RAF College at Cranwell is situated halfway between the towns of Grantham and Lincoln, about 130 miles north of London. The country for thirty miles around the aerodrome itself is as flat as a pancake, a condition which undoubtedly influenced the Chiefs of Air Staff when, in the early 1920s, they were selecting a suitable location for the training of the elite RAF pilots of the future.

My first journey to Cranwell, in January 1939, was by train from London. On that train were twenty-three other young men who had worked their guts out in the recent exams to achieve their life's ambition. At King's Cross station I had been surprised to run into Julian Bruxner Randall, a slight acquaintance of mine from Ireland, who had coincidentally passed the Cranwell entrance examination in first position, one ahead of me. Although we didn't know each other well we naturally greeted each other warmly, laughing at the fact that us two Irish lads were in the act of joining the 'enemy' forces. The Irish Air Corps in those days had only three aircraft so we would have had little chance of learning to fly with them.

At Eton it had been the fashion to wear one's hair long at the back and sides, enough to overlap

the collar. My father had seen to it that I had visited the barber in Clonmel before I left for Cranwell and, as a result, my neck that morning felt remarkably bare. I was therefore somewhat taken aback when Julian turned to me and said: 'Look, Tim old boy, I think you'd be smart to go and have your hair cut before you show up at Cranwell. With the length you've got it they'll certainly know you went to Eton and you may not be too popular.'

'Hell!' I replied, 'I just had it cut before I left home. It can't still be too long.'

'Be it on your own head,' responded Julian, 'the barber's just down those stairs and if I was you I'd get down there quick before the train leaves and tell him to get out his shears.' So down the stairs I went and sitting in an empty chair demanded a quick trim.

The next morning all the first-term cadets were paraded in civilian clothes in suits and bowler hats, which we had been told to bring with us. A large and fierce-looking warrant officer walked down the line in front of us, every now and then stopping to scrutinise his new prey. I just knew that he would make one of his stops in front of me. He halted and stared for what seemed like forever straight at me. He looked me up and down but didn't say a word and eventually moved off down the line. Then he marched slowly along behind us. Sure enough he stopped once more behind me. After a long silence he suddenly roared out, 'What is your "name" Sir?'

'Vigors,' I replied, knowing full well that for some reason this large, red-faced, parade ground bully hated me on first sight.

'Where d'yer "gow" to school, Sir?' he demanded.

'Eton,' I said, anticipating the wrath that this admission was likely to spark off in this narrow-minded savage.

'Well, Mr bloody "Etounian" Mr "Voigers", Sir,' he bellowed at the top of his voice, for the whole of Cranwell to hear, 'What do you think you are Sir, a bloody woman?! Go and 'ave yer 'air cut!' Thus my introduction to the world of Warrant Officer Digby resulted in my once more sitting in the barber's chair, for the third time in two days.

The night before, on arrival at Cranwell, I had been shown to a pleasant, although not over-large, room in the west wing of the long, low college building. I was to have this room to myself until I left Cranwell a year later. A batman, whose job it was to help initiate newcomers into the domestic routine of the college and to care for their general needs including clothing and shoes, was allocated to each ten candidates.

My batman, who was to become my trusted friend and ally in the difficult months ahead, was nicknamed 'The General'. At that time he was in his middle fifties. He had started his working life in domestic service in a large country house run on Victorian lines with a staff that included a butler and several footmen. During the First World War one of the sons of the house had joined the Royal Flying Corps and had persuaded The General to enlist and serve with him so that he could continue to look after his needs. In 1917 his master had been shot down in flames when the petrol tank of the Sopwith Camel he was flying was hit by a stream of bullets from a Fokker triplane, with which he was battling over the Somme battlefield. Despite The General being transferred to another officer, he

mourned his old master. After all, he had looked after the young man since he was a schoolboy and, when the war ended a year later, The General returned to civilian life as soon as he could. Times, however, were hard in the Britain of the post-war years for unskilled thirty-year olds. The big houses had mostly cut down on their staff, jobs for ex-batmen were few and far between. After seven years of struggling in part-time jobs, The General had a change of luck; he was doing a one night catering job at a big reception and was recognised by the commanding officer of his old wartime squadron. His former boss was by now an air vice-marshal who, on hearing of The General's difficult life over the last few years, quickly persuaded him to join, what was now, the Royal Air Force as a civilian batman. Within a year The General found himself at Cranwell, caring for the needs of cadets. Here he had stayed ever since.

The General and myself had an affinity with each other from the very start of our acquaintanceship. Maybe he saw in me something of the officer for whom he had originally worked during the First World War, or maybe it was the fact that I had been to Eton which brought out some of the latent snobbishness which is inherent in ex-butlers. Whichever it was, it was certainly my good fortune for during the next year The General looked after my every need and spoilt me rotten.

'Good morning, Sir,' he would say as he woke me up each morning at 6.30 a.m., 'and 'ere's yer tea Sir; it's an 'orrible mornin' Sir, rainin' cats and dogs, cold enough to freeze a brass monkey's balls off, blowin' a bloody gale, nasty mornin' for flyin' Sir but it's a great life if yer don't weaken Sir.'

No matter what went wrong during the next year The General would reassure me that life was great if you didn't weaken, wise words which I soon learnt to be extremely true and a philosophy which stayed with me to the end.

On our arrival at Cranwell we were issued with uniforms, similar to those of officers, but lacking any badge of rank, and then acquainted with the programme of work and daily routine which we were expected to follow. Due to Mr Tinniswood's efforts on my behalf I had attained the highest history mark, 298 out of 300, ever to be achieved in a Cranwell exam and I was greeted by the history master as a budding historian. He took me into his study and greeted me almost as an equal. As my knowledge of history was for the most part limited to the answers to those ten historical questions which I had learnt parrot fashion, I found the somewhat highbrow historical conversation which followed my introduction to him rather heavy going. Thus, I struggled along gamely for ten minutes and then excused myself on the grounds of being late for parade. During the months ahead I studiously avoided any close relationship with the history master. I'm afraid that he could never come to terms with what was to be my consistently mediocre performance in his subject, as compared to the incredibly high mark I had achieved in the exam.

On our second day at Cranwell, we were told to proceed to the aerodrome and report to our flight commanders. Now life was really starting. I had been allocated to A Flight which was commanded by Flight Lieutenant Bradford, a medium-sized, ruddy-faced gentleman into whose office I was

ushered in some trepidation. He told me to sit down and relax and started to question me about my life. When I happened to mention my interest in horses he immediately interrupted. 'Do you hunt?' he asked to my amazement. It had never occurred to me that anybody in the RAF would be interested in fox hunting.

'Why yes, Sir,' I replied. 'I have been brought up on fox hunting since before I can remember.' Bradford asked about those packs of hounds I had been out with. When I told him the Mendip, the Fernies, the Quorn, the Pytchley, the Tipperary, the Limerick and the Black and Tans, he almost flipped backwards off his chair.

'I've only hunted with Warwickshire and the Blankney,' he remarked with envy. 'You're a lucky young devil to have hunted with all of those famous packs, Vigors.'

We spent the next fifteen minutes in animated conversation about horses and hunting rather than aeroplanes. 'Jorrocks', the nickname which I was soon to learn had been given to my flight commander for most of his service career, was a real enthusiast. It was however soon evident that I could probably teach him as much about the art of pursuing the fox as he could teach me about the art of flying aeroplanes.

This thought obviously crossed his mind as well for, glancing at his watch, he said quickly, 'Hell! I must get on and see the rest of the new group. Anyway, Tim, I'll teach you to fly myself instead of passing you on to one of the other instructors. That way we'll have plenty of opportunity to carry on this conversation.' I rose to my feet and saluted. 'Thank you, Sir,' I said 'that sounds great.' I left his

office in high spirits. I had made a new friend. Later that day, we cadets reported to the equipment store to be issued with flying overalls, helmets, goggles and flying boots. There was a mirror in the changing room in the hangar where we kept our equipment. Looking at my reflection, fully togged out in flying clothing, it occurred to me that for the first time in my life I really did look like my hero Biggles. This wasn't so very surprising as the aircraft which he flew, the Sopwith Camel, and the aircraft which I was about to fly, the Avro Tutor, were similar in many respects. They were both open cockpit biplanes, they both had radial engines and their performance was almost exactly the same.

The next morning, at 9.00 a.m., I reported to the A Flight office for my first familiarisation flight with Jorrocks Bradford. As we walked out to the dual-control Avro Tutors lined up on the grass in front of the hangar the talk was of flying and not of hunting. Strapped into our cockpits, pupil in the front and instructor behind, Jorrocks ordered the mechanic to swing the propeller. The engine fired, the mechanic pulled away the wooden chocks from in front of the wheels, and we started to taxi across the grass to the takeoff position. All controls were duplicated in the cockpit in which I was sitting and I tentatively put my hands lightly on the stick and throttle.

'Keep your bloody hands off the controls until I tell you!', yelled Jorrocks through the intercom from the cockpit behind. 'I'll give you plenty of warning when I want you to fly the aircraft.' Quickly I removed my hands and sat back in excitement as the throttle opened and we roared across the grass and into the air. We climbed steadily away

from the field and soon the altimeter needle passed through 3,000 feet.

'First, I'm going to do some steep turns, then I'll show you a spin and then we might try some aerobatics,' yelled Jorrocks. No sooner had he spoken than the left wing dropped steeply away and the little aircraft turned on its side. I felt the pressure build on my seat as the stick was pulled back and the horizon swung crazily across the nose of the aircraft. This was different altogether from the gentle turns I had performed with my godmother and I felt my mouth go dry as I clung onto the sides of the cockpit. Next thing was that the left wing quickly rose, the right wing dropped away and the horizon pivoted round in the opposite direction. My stomach felt queasy and I was relieved when the right wing rose and we were once more in level flight.

In my headphones, Jorrocks said, 'Now I'm going to show you a spin. Ensure you keep your hands away from the controls.'

I saw the throttle, which was situated on the left wall of the cockpit, moving backwards. The noise of the engine died away. The nose of the aircraft rose above the horizon and there was almost complete silence. Then, suddenly, the nose came up and then took a sharp, vertical twisting dive to the left. Next thing the whole aircraft was corkscrewing towards the patchwork of green fields below which appeared to be gyrating in front of my eyes. I felt scared and also physically sick. Not a moment too soon for my comfort, the earth stopped spinning and the aircraft continued in a straight dive. Gradually the nose started to rise, the pressure on my seat increased and then to my relief

we were once more flying straight and level. 'OK, now you can try to fly her for a bit.'

Gingerly, I took hold of the stick with my right hand, felt for the throttle with my left and placed my feet on the rudder pedals. Keeping the nose of the aircraft level with the horizon, as my godmother had taught me, I concentrated on keeping the wings level and, to my satisfaction, found I was maintaining a reasonably straight path.

'Excellent,' said Jorrocks, 'now I want you to try and turn gently to your left.' I eased the stick to the left and, as I had learnt in Pamela's Hornet Moth, pulled back on the stick a little to maintain level flight. At the same time I applied a shade of top rudder.

'Hey!' came the surprised voice in my ears, 'you've done this before.'

'Just a little, Sir,' I called back delightedly. 'Can I try a turn to the right please?'

'Go ahead,' said Jorrocks, 'but this time try using a little bit more top rudder and concentrate on keeping the nose level with the horizon.'

I was pleased to find that as soon as I had taken over the controls the feeling of air sickness which had engulfed me when Jorrocks was performing his tight turns and spin disappeared almost completely. But I was apprehensive when, a few minutes later, he called out 'I've got her' and announced his intention of doing some aerobatics. My apprehension was well founded for, as we zoomed into a loop, the queasy feeling engulfed me again; then the whole weight of my body fell on my shoulder harness as we turned upside down in a slow roll. I'm bound to confess that fear of falling out of the cockpit momentarily eclipsed all other sensations.

The slow roll was followed quickly by a couple of stall turns, manoeuvres which involved pulling up into a vertical climb until all speed was lost and then kicking over one way or the other into a precipitous dive. Jorrocks capped the display with two more tight loops.

By the end of the sequence my stomach was also turning somersaults and I put my hand over my mouth trying to prevent myself from being physically sick. As we flew back towards the aerodrome I started to feel a little better but, as Jorrocks sideslipped into a perfect three-point landing, I still had that nauseous feeling which I had experienced so many times when the Holyhead to Dublin Irish Mail steamer had rolled itself into Dun Laoghaire harbour after a rough night in the Irish Channel.

As we climbed down from our cockpits and pulled off our helmets, Jorrocks took a curious look at me. 'Are you all right Tim?' he asked.

'Well, I'm afraid I felt a bit airsick, Sir,' I admitted, 'when you were doing the aerobatics.' But I quickly assured him that 'I'm sure I'll be OK when I get used to them.'

'We'll have to see what we can do about that.' Changing the subject, Jorrocks said, 'From the way you were handling the aircraft before we started the aerobatics, it looks to me as though you have flown before.'

I told him about the few days I had spent flying the Hornet Moth with Pamela, several years earlier. 'Well, we won't take long to teach you to fly' was all he said as we approached the hangar. 'Come into the office for a moment. I want to talk to you about this sickness you experienced.'

I explained to him that I had always felt seasick

in a boat unless I was steering it myself and I added that in the aircraft as soon as I had taken over the controls after he had completed the spin I had felt fine.

'OK,' he said, 'I'll try and help you through it.'

Over the next vital few months Flight Lieutenant Bradford was as good as his word. I am sure that had I not been lucky enough to have had such a sympathetic teacher I would not have been able to overcome the motion sickness. Jorrocks and I soon found out that so long as I was at the controls myself my affliction was not serious. Therefore he studiously avoided any violent or aerobatic manoeuvres when he was flying the aircraft. On a very bumpy day when he was teaching me tight turns and he sensed that I had started to feel bad he straight away landed in a large field next to where some horses were grazing. We got out of the aircraft and walked over to look at the horses, talking all the time about hunting. Then we got back into our cockpits, donned our helmets, took off and continued the exercise.

Weather permitting we flew nearly every day. The rest of the time was taken up with lectures on aeronautical subjects, airmanship, meteorology, engineering and so on, plus several periods a day on history, languages, science and mathematics. We also had, at least, one drill parade every day during which the antipathy of Warrant Officer Digby towards old Etonians became ever more apparent.

After ten days of flight training I had logged just over six hours dual instruction. I had proved my ability to make the aeroplane do just about all normal flying manoeuvres with reasonable accuracy and had also had no difficulty in

recovering from stalls and spins in both directions. After the first few attempts landing did not present me with any great problems, although I must confess to a couple of big bumps after which my instructor had to open the throttle and shout, 'We are going round again.'

On that tenth morning after my arrival at Cranwell I had completed a couple of good landings when I was surprised to be told by Jorrocks to taxi back towards the hangar. About halfway there he told me to stop and then proceeded to get out of the aircraft. Then, climbing on the wing beside me, he motioned for me to take off my helmet. Raising his voice above the noise of the engine he shouted, 'OK, Tim, you're on your own. Just taxi back to the take-off point, do one circuit and landing and come back to me here.' He gave me a pat on the shoulder, raised his right thumb and jumped back onto the grass.

There are moments in one's life which remain in one's memory so vividly that even over half a century later they are as immediate as ever they were. This was such a moment. The time was 11.20 a.m. A heavy shower had passed through Cranwell an hour before and the greeny brown grass on the aerodrome still glistened with the rain which had fallen. The sky was a washy bluey grey and a light wind from the west only half filled the windsock at the end of the field. I was full of emotion; anticipation battled with trepidation, deadly calm with excitement and, above all, an utter loneliness combined with a wonderful feeling of freedom.

Such a mixed bag of sensations was so overwhelming that the short flight itself was almost an anti-climax. I turned the aircraft into wind and

opened up the throttle with complete confidence. Pushing forward the stick to get the tail in the air all feelings of trepidation vanished as I eased it back again to lift the machine off the ground. I experienced no fear as to whether or not I would be competent enough to get the aircraft back down onto the aerodrome in one piece.

As my instructor had drilled into me for the past ten days, I climbed straight ahead until I had reached 500 feet and then commenced a gentle climbing turn to the left. Now I was flying due south and had reached 1,000 feet. Glancing over my shoulder to the left to make sure my path was clear, I then continued turning to bring the aircraft onto the down-wind leg of the circuit. I felt wonderful, keyed up, but completely at ease. I watched the routine activity on the aerodrome with interest. One Avro Tutor was on a final approach to landing and another had just completed its take-off run and was climbing away to the west. I could even make out the small figure of Jorrocks Bradford standing about 100 yards in front of the hangars, watching my progress.

'I'd better put this one down really smoothly,' I thought to myself, 'or I'll be letting him down.'

As I turned onto the cross-wind leg I throttled back and started to lose height. I was by now about half a mile to the east of the aerodrome and could see that the Tutor which I had seen earlier had now landed and was taxiing back towards the hangars. Once more, I looked over my left shoulder to make sure that my path was clear, then turned again to bring the aircraft onto my final approach leg which would bring me straight back to the middle of the aerodrome. Now, throttled right back, I could hear

the sweet sound of the wind whistling through the wires which connected the top wings of the Tutor to the lower ones. I kept a good eye on my airspeed indicator to see that I held my speed about 10 mph above the stalling speed. I maintained the nose of the aircraft just about on the spot where I intended to land. Then, as the boundary fence passed underneath me, I pulled back on the stick until I was flying level about five feet above the grass. Easing gently, gently back on the stick I raised the nose of the Tutor higher and higher until I could feel the wheels brushing the tops of the grass. A final pull back on the stick right between my legs and the aircraft stalled smoothly onto the ground. I am not going to boast that it was a perfect three-point landing as I can remember that the tail skid touched the ground slightly before the wheels. But still, for a first attempt, I am proud of it to this day.

Just before the Tutor came to a complete stop, I kicked the right rudder and turned back towards where Jorrocks was waiting. I stopped beside him and he climbed onto the wing. Pulling off my helmet I shouted, 'How was that, Sir?'

'OK,' he replied, 'with the help of the "Man Above" we might make a pilot of you yet! Now go and do five more just the same.' Full of confidence, again I taxiied out to the takeoff point, swung into wind and roared off. Following the same routine I flew round the circuit and straightened out for my landing. Crossing the hedge at about twenty feet I began to level off for my landing. Suddenly I felt the aircraft starting to drop out of my hands. A quick glance at the airspeed indicator gave me the reason. In my over confidence I had let the speed drop down below stalling speed and I was rushing down

towards the ground. I hauled back on the stick and pushed forward the throttle. The wheels hit the earth with a bump and next thing the Tutor was staggering through the air about thirty feet from the ground. I applied full throttle and pushed the stick forwards. Of course I over-corrected and the wheels hit the ground with another resounding bang. With my heart in my mouth I opened the throttle less violently and tried to hold the aircraft steady. The wheels nearly hit the ground again and then I was climbing away, once more in reasonable control of events.

As I climbed the Tutor out over the aerodrome boundary my heart stopped thumping and I took a quick look down to the right to see if my instructor was still watching. Happily he had disappeared and I thought that with luck he had not witnessed my clumsy blunder.

Once more I flew the circuit and approached for another landing. This time, however, I kept a wary eye on the airspeed indicator and made certain to keep my speed well above the stalling level. This resulted in my flattening out over the grass going about 20 mph too fast. I drew the stick back towards me, trying to make the aircraft settle down on the ground, but the only result was to make the gap between me and terra firma wider still.

'Be patient,' I told myself, 'there's still lots of aerodrome left, and there's no way I am going to suffer the humiliation of having to go round again without landing this time.' For another 100 yards I continued to float across the field niggling at the stick in vain to make the aircraft settle. At last, I could feel the Tutor dropping and finally, with a welcome bump, I was rumbling over the ground.

Still no sign of Jorrocks outside the hangar so maybe my ham-fisted efforts had passed unseen.

As I straightened out after my next circuit I made certain to keep my speed exactly as I had been taught. Coming in over the boundary I knew for sure that this time I had got it just right and, sure enough, the Tutor greased its way onto the grass with only the rumble of the wheels to tell me that I was back on earth. Feeling a great deal happier that I had completed the routine one more time with satisfactory results, I taxiied the Tutor back to the hangar. Parking at the end of the line of other aircraft I climbed down on to the ground, pulled off my helmet and, with my parachute over my shoulder, walked back towards the Flight Office. On the one hand I was experiencing a feeling of vast elation at having become a proper pilot but, on the other, I was dreading the fact that my instructor might have witnessed the mess I had made of my second two attempts at landing. Sure enough, as I drew close to the offices, a stern-faced Bradford appeared in the doorway. 'Come to my office,' was all he said. As I followed him down the corridor he turned on me furiously. 'You silly young bugger!' he roared. 'What the hell were you playing at out there? For a moment I thought you were not only going to break your bloody neck but, much more serious, write off one of my aircraft! How many times have I told you during the last ten days to watch your airspeed on final approach? How the hell do you think we're going to win a war with disobedient, ignorant, ham-fisted young fools like you in the air force?'

'Sorry, Sir,' was all I could shamefacedly mutter, 'I'm afraid that after my first landing I just got

a bit over confident.'

'Well, let me tell you one thing,' stormed the normally placid Jorrocks, 'if I ever see you get over confident again, and you're lucky enough not to kill yourself as a result, I'll see to it that you're out of this place and back to your horses in Tipperary. Now get out of here!'

Both chastened and ashamed I left the office and made off for the changing room. The bubble of pride, so recently filled with satisfaction not only at going solo but also at being the first of my term to do so, was burst wide open. But looking back on that painful few minutes in the Flight Office I know that a lesson had been learnt which was to stand me in good stead during the rest of my long flying career. During that career, both in and out of action, I have had my share of near misses. Ninety per cent, particularly of those occurring out of action, have been caused by temporary fits of over confidence. If I hadn't been at the receiving end of such a fierce lecture those many years ago I would certainly have experienced more of these 'incidents'. Amongst them there would undoubtedly have been the incident which would have been one too many.

Life at Cranwell proceeded apace. I lagged behind my mates in most of the educational subjects. Science is a subject which has always been way beyond my grasp. Likewise, mathematics has continually caused me frustration and trouble. Engineering lectures left me cold. The very thought of a small cog in a piece of machinery, on which I was dependent to keep me in the air, revolving at 20,000 revolutions a minute, was a piece of knowledge that my brain quickly rejected. History was a

subject at which I felt obliged to work hard, if only to make some effort to justify my reputation as a budding historian. All forms of team ball games were anathema to me and I would go to most lengths to avoid them. I much preferred, when time was available at the weekends, to go riding with Jorrocks on two horses borrowed from a neighbouring farmer. I like to think that in return for what he was teaching me about flying, I was able to give him some help with the finer arts of horsemanship.

Cranwell, whilst similar in many ways to the life that I had led at Eton, provided more freedom of movement. Cadets were allowed to have cars of their own and, as an eighteenth birthday present, my father gave me a secondhand Ford 8 which quickly became my pride and joy. Some evenings, along with a few of my friends who also had cars, we would arrange cross-country rally races between one public house and another – some 20 miles apart.

The only rules were that you could take whatever route you liked along the country lanes and the last man home paid for the drinks. There were a number of minor prangs during these races and a couple of major accidents which resulted in cars being written off and drivers hospitalised. I was proud to say that my car, 'EGO' – named after her registration letters I prefer to think rather than the character of her owner – never suffered so much as a scratch during these events. Moreover, I never once had to pay for the drinks and managed to reach the winning pub first on several occasions. Of course, the Cranwell authorities were tipped off by the local constabulary about what was afoot and

before long these races were forbidden on pain of having one's car confiscated.

I had been at Cranwell for about two months when, for the first time, the dangers involved in flying were brought home to me. After initial flying training, cadets were moved up from the simple Avro Tutors onto the more sophisticated and faster Hawker Harts or, if they were selected for twin-engined aircraft training, onto Airspeed Oxfords.

One sunny morning two of the senior cadets who were involved in a practice dogfight in their Harts, misjudged their distances, collided and crashed in flames. Entangled in the wreckage of their own aeroplanes neither managed to get free to make use of their parachutes. If they weren't already dead both were killed instantly as their aircraft, still locked together, hit the ground. By chance I had been talking to both of them half an hour earlier as we strolled down to the hangars. It therefore came as a real shock to me when I heard of the accident. Somehow, up until then, I had regarded flying as a marvellous game. Death in the air belonged only in Biggles books. The real dangers of what we were doing had never occurred to me.

Two days later we attended the funerals. The two coffins were lowered into their graves to the sound of the Last Post and we witnessed the grief of the bereaved parents standing around the graveside. Only then, for the first time, did it occur to me that it could easily be me in one of those coffins. Looking back now over all these years, I believe that it was at that moment that I left schooldays behind and became a man.

The clouds of war now darkened the summer skies. A sense of urgency entered our training at

Cranwell. Flying training especially was gradually stepped up at the expense of other subjects. The expression 'when we're at war' was substituted for 'if the war starts'.

'Thanks be to God yer don't 'ave to go to war with a rifle, Mr Voigers, Sir,' remarked Warrant Officer Digby one morning on parade, 'the bloody Germans would have a walk over!'

'Afraid yer going to 'ave to beat the bastards again!' said The General.

'No hunting for us next season,' said Jorrocks.

'Gentlemen,' said the Air Officer Commanding, Cranwell, 'the time has come when all our efforts have to be doubled.'

About this time I had to choose between flying Hawker Harts or the twin-engined Airspeed Oxfords. For some reason I plonked for Oxfords. 'I think you're better suited mentally to be a fighter pilot,' Jorrocks advised me.

'I know, Sir,' I replied, 'but somehow I just want to see if I can fly a twin.'

'OK, but don't come running back to me in a month's time saying you want to get back onto singles.'

At first I enjoyed the sensation of flying the twin. A low-winged monoplane with two radial engines, the Oxford was a much greater challenge to fly than the little biplanes I had by now grown used to. Instructor and pupil sat side-by-side in the Oxford and could converse relatively easily without the use of headphones. For a time I got a big kick out of rumbling around the surrounding countryside imagining I was an airline pilot and feeling greatly superior to those of my companions who had opted, or been recommended by their instructors,

for the single-engined Hawker Harts. But gradually I started to miss the excitement of aerobatics which were forbidden in Oxfords and to realise that my instructor had been right in his assessment regarding my temperament. However, the die had been cast, and it was too late to do anything about it.

Although the pressure of work was being stepped up we were still allowed a certain amount of time for play. My fellow cadets and I took full advantage of this. During one weekend off in London I managed to contact my former girlfriend Kitty, who was staying with an aunt in London. With several friends we spent the evening dancing wildly in a nightclub off Regent Street. Kitty and I left at about 3.00 a.m. and returned to my car. Daringly, I suggested to her that she should come back for a final drink at my hotel.

Nothing untoward happened between us but it all went wrong when we reached the hotel. Collecting the key at the desk we got into the lift and ascended to the tenth floor. Just as I was opening the door to my room there was a shout from the corridor behind me. A large night porter was emerging from the second lift. 'What you doin' takin' that young girl to your room?' he yelled. 'You only booked a single and anyway she's far too young for those kind of tricks.'

Kitty cried all the way back to her aunt's house. When I stopped the car she jumped out and left without so much as a 'Goodnight'. I drove back to the hotel feeling embarrassed, ashamed, angry and frustrated. Looking back on this rather sordid affair it is hard to imagine how it could have come about. At least it is a reflection on the moral standards of night porters of the pre-war era. The sad sequel was

the letter Kitty sent me four days later telling me that she never wanted to see me again. And she got her wish; we have never met since.

The short summer leave was soon over and by the end of August we cadets were back at Cranwell, where a sense of urgency entered into every part of our lives. More and more time was spent in the air instead of in the classroom. I was getting on well with the Oxford and enjoyed trying to hit targets laid out on the bombing range, using practice bombs which were carried in the racks below the aircraft's wings. But I watched with envy as my friends who had opted for single engines took off in their Hawker Harts for practice dogfights.

Within a couple of days we heard of Hitler's invasion of Poland and the realisation hit us that we were on the verge of war. On September 3rd, at 10.30 a.m. we were told to assemble in our ante room to listen to an important announcement to be made on the radio by Mr Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister. We all knew what it was he was going to say. An air of intense excitement pervaded the room. At 11.00 a.m. his stern voice came over the speakers. He announced that he had issued an ultimatum to the German leader but no reply had been received. Britain was therefore now at war with Germany.

There were about fifty cadets gathered in that ante room and, as one man, we jumped to our feet cheering with excitement. There was not one amongst us who would not have been bitterly disappointed had the declaration of war not been made. I wonder today whether our cheers would have been as enthusiastic had we known that within five years all but a handful of us would be dead.

The first difference war made to our lives was that we were immediately issued with gas masks. These we were told to carry with us at all times, except when we were in the air. The second difference was that at night a blackout was to be rigorously imposed, necessitating black blinds being installed on all windows and black masking tape placed on about seven-eighths of the surface of car headlights. The former made it harder to wake up in the morning if, like me, you automatically awoke at first light, and the latter finally eliminated any cross-country racing between pubs after dark.

Our term consisting of twenty-three cadets was now amalgamated with the term of twenty-four cadets who had been ahead of us. We were all told that we would be completing our training within the next three months. Working hours were to be increased and even more attention given to flying and its related subjects.

I pleaded with Jorrocks to get me transferred from Oxfords to Harts. 'It's no bloody good Tim,' he said, 'I told you not to go for the Oxford and that I wouldn't be able to do anything about it if you changed your mind.'

'Right enough, Sir,' I agreed, 'but then I didn't know war was going to be declared.'

'Too bloody bad! Now get cracking and go and fly your bomber.' It seemed that my fate was sealed.

The next months at Cranwell passed quickly. Up till now flying had been a lovely game. Now, every moment spent in the air was deadly serious. Each new exercise bore the stamp of cold reality; in the days ahead what we learnt now might mean the difference between life and death. No more trips to London were allowed as all leave was cancelled and

weekends were spent either in the air or swotting up for final exams which were due to be taken in early November.

The most important of the exam tests which had to be passed were, of course, the flying tests. These included written exams related to airmanship. The reward for passing was the right to have the coveted RAF wings sewn onto one's uniform jacket above the left-hand breast pocket. Only two of my term failed the flying tests and they, poor devils, had to work for another two months before sitting for the tests again. For myself a great surge of pride and excitement ran through me when I heard my name called out as a successful candidate.

The other exams in maths, history and science were of little importance compared with the flying tests but they too had to be passed if one's progress was not to be retarded. It was science which really worried me. Realising that there was no way that I was going to achieve the necessary pass mark in this subject, I decided that I must resort to more devious means. The gentleman who, for nearly one year, had shouldered the task of instilling into my unreceptive brain some scientific knowledge, was a kind, scholarly man who had never yet lost his temper at my hopeless efforts. One evening I approached him in the Mess and asked him if he would care to come and have a pint with me at a local pub. He looked at me with surprise but nevertheless agreed.

'Look, Sir,' I said, 'as you are only too well aware, I have no chance of passing the science exam the day after tomorrow.'

'So far, I agree one hundred per cent with what you say,' he remarked dryly.

'Well Sir,' I continued, 'Flight Lieutenant Bradford, my flight commander, tells me that my flying ability is above average. I believe I can pass all the other exams without any trouble. But if I fail to pass the science exam I will fail to pass out of Cranwell this term. That means joining a squadron three months later than I should.'

My teacher said nothing. I staggered on. 'Do you think, Sir, my lack of scientific knowledge is going to make any serious difference to my ability to shoot down Germans? I know I'm a pretty good pilot and believe I can make a fair contribution to the war when the fighting really starts. We all know that the RAF is short of pilots. Do you think that they should be made even shorter at this critical time by my inability to understand physics?'

He listened calmly to my impassioned appeal. 'Let's have a think about this,' he said. He remained ominously silent for a long time. Placing his now empty tankard on the table he eventually turned to me. 'You weren't born an Irishman for nothing. You've certainly got the blarney! Nevertheless, there is something in what you say. I have never been asked to do anything like this before and what we have said must remain secret. But, OK, I'll do it for you. You do your best and I'll give you the pass mark. But I repeat, never tell a soul or you'll cost me my job. And good luck to you.' He was true to his word and I scraped through the exam with the requisite pass mark.

Only a few days remained before our final passing out parade. I made one last appeal to Jorrocks to recommend me for fighters, cornering him in his office.

'How would you feel, Sir, if I asked you to go

hunting on a cart horse?'

'Uncomfortable and scared,' he replied.

'Well, that's just how I feel having to face up to the prospect of fighting the war in a bomber,' I said. 'Please do me one last favour and put me up for fighters.'

He relented. 'OK, I'll recommend you for twin-engined fighters. There are a couple of Bristol Beaufighter squadrons knocking around and I have heard that there are one or two Blenheim squadrons being converted to a twin-engined fighter role. Now that is as good a compromise as I can manage. Now get the hell out of here. I'm busy.'

I was jubilant. 'Thank you, Sir. One day I'll mount you on the best horse in Ireland.' Out on the tarmac the first person I ran into was my pal Bob Holland. He had come to Cranwell at the same time as me and had quickly shown himself to be a fantastic performer on the piano. Possessed of a natural talent he played jazz to a professional standard. My amateurish efforts on the piano accordion and the ukulele had drawn us together from the word go and we had shared some noisy evenings.

I told Bob my news. 'Good for you. Now, I'll tell you something really exciting. Fats Waller and the Mills Brothers are playing in Nottingham from tomorrow and I have four seats in the front row for their first show. You'll come of course.'

And so it was that the following night, which was actually the last night before the passing out parade, off we went to Nottingham. After a short overture the show began with a chorus of pretty girls. Our appetites wetted, the lights dimmed and the spotlight shone on the grand piano in the centre

of the stage with its small stool opposite the centre of the keyboard. An enormous black man came on stage, grinning, and placed one cheek of his large backside on the stool and looked round over his shoulder.

The magic started. After four or five songs the audience were clapping so much Fats rose to his feet and lumbered to the front of the stage, waving his big hands in acknowledgement. Looking down at us cadets sitting in the front row in our RAF uniforms he hollered above the din, 'Good to see you fellows! Come and see me after the show!'

Next were the four brothers, singing a succession of favourite songs and miming saxophones and clarinets as they sang. More applause and more dancing girls and more of Fats. As the show ended Fats Waller stood in the centre of the Mills Brothers and once more lent forward to us and once more shouted, 'Don't you guys forget to come and see me!'

As we made our way to the street, Bob said, 'I believe Fats meant it. Let's give it a try.' We entered the stage door and at that moment a big figure appeared on the landing above and we could hardly believe it when we saw it was Fats himself. He beckoned us to come on up.

We followed him into a large room which seemed to be filled with people, all with glasses in their hands and all talking nineteen to the dozen. The Mills Brothers were all there, and the dancing girls. Also there was the theatre manager with his pretty blonde daughter, who Bob was dating, and who had done us proud in providing the front row tickets.

Near the centre of the room stood an upright

piano. After some quick introductions we were given drinks and mingled with the crowd. Somebody shouted for Fats to give us a song but he said that he had been working all night and wasn't there somebody else who could play the piano. 'My friend Bob can hold his own,' I shouted, 'come on Bob, get to work!'

Bob was reluctant to leave his girlfriend or perform but after some encouragement from Fats he sat down and launched into his version of 'Basin Street Blues'. Everybody stopped talking and started to crowd around the piano. One of the Mills Brothers started singing. 'Hey, that fella can hit those keys!' roared Fats. 'Let's have more.'

And so began a most memorable two hours. Soon we had Fats at the piano with the Mills Brothers accompanying him. Then Bob was persuaded to draw up a chair beside Fats and they launched into a succession of remarkable duets. Fats soon had a large plate of sausages and mash and a pint tankard of beer on top of the piano in front of him. The whole room was dancing and singing. There had been magic in the theatre but this was something else.

I glanced at my watch. It was after 2.30 a.m. We were due on parade at 9.30 a.m. and we had a long dark drive ahead of us. Reluctantly I tapped Bob on the shoulder and pointed at my watch. He nodded assent and, accompanied by Fats and the Mills Brothers and the rest of us singing, he launched once more into 'Basin Street Blues'. Amidst wild applause he rose from the piano and we started to say our goodbyes. As Bob shook Fats by the hand the big man looked him straight in the eye and said: 'When you're all through with those aeroplanes,

boy, you just let old Fats know and we'll make some music together. We sure could turn an odd buck.'

The theatre manager had pressed some bottles of beer on us before we left in case we got thirsty on the way home. By the time we had driven ten miles Bob and I had only got through one bottle but our companions in the other car drove up beside us signalling that they had run out of beer and could do with another bottle. I let them go on ahead and then carefully pulled alongside them in formation. Bob opened the window and passed the bottle to the driver of the other car. Just as he took the bottle from Bob it slipped from his fingers. In doing so he turned the steering wheel of his car and hit the side of mine. I pulled away but he swerved to his left and disappeared over a steep embankment.

'Goddam clumsy fool!' shouted Bob. 'He's broken the beer!' I remarked to Bob that maybe we should find out if the other driver had broken his neck.

We found the car upside down in a ploughed field. The occupants appeared unhurt and, covered in mud, clambered back up onto the road. It was nearly 5.00 a.m. by the time we turned in through the gates of Cranwell.

The General woke me. 'It's 'arf past six sir and it's raining cats and bloody dogs. Warrant Officer Digby wants to see you personally at 'arf past seven after you've 'ad your breakfast, Sir.' Peering bleary eyed at the grey rain splashing against the window, I sat up and held my head. 'Now 'ere's yer tea,' said The General. 'Yer uniform is all pressed and 'ung out on the chair, Sir. And yer'd better get up quick and not be late this morning, Sir, 'cos you've got the

passing out parade at 'arf past nine.'

I don't know how I got through that morning. I snatched some coffee and a slice of toast in the dining room and made my way to the office of my tormentor. Ever since that first bowler-hatted parade, nearly a year ago now, a running battle had existed between Warrant Officer Digby and myself. It was not just the fact that I had been schooled at Eton. Many of my other fellow cadets had been to similar schools. It was probably more to do with an underlying trait in my character which automatically makes me react against authority of any kind.

I entered Mr Digby's office, expecting the usual tirade of insult and abuse. I was taken by surprise, however. He rose to his feet and asked me to sit down opposite him. I awaited developments. 'Now, Mr Voigers, Sir' he began. 'You and I 'ave been 'avin a rare old battle this past year. Yer going to leave 'ere as an officer tomorrow and I don't want you leaving with a bad taste in your mouth about me. I don't want yer to feel that I hold you any malice. I've had ter lick you into shape a bit because when you arrived here yer was just like a rag doll with two left feet. You're a bit of a rebel and I admires yer for your independence. I just want to shake your hand and wish yer luck wheresoever you goes.' He held out his big hand. I jumped to my feet and clasped his hand. We stood for a moment looking at each other straight in the eye.

'Thank you Mr Digby. You have been a great help to me and I can only apologise for the trouble I've caused you. I appreciate every word you have said.'

As I turned to leave the office he had one final

dig. 'One last thing Mr Voigers. On this 'ere passing out parade would yer make a big effort not to drop yer rifle!'

'I can assure you Mr Digby, that with the hangover I've got I'll be lucky to get through the parade without dropping myself! But I promise I'll do my very best.'

The parade assembled at the east end of the college, ready to line up in squadrons. Thank goodness it had stopped raining and even a little wintry sunlight was working through the clouds. The parade ground was now surrounded by parents and relations of cadets, teaching staff and various local dignitaries. We were marched onto the main space in front of the college and were put through our paces, then stood at attention for inspection by the Air Marshal of Training Command. We presented arms whilst the sword of honour was presented to the most virtuous of my contemporaries.

Under the command of Warrant Officer Digby we were marched off the main parade ground back to where we had assembled. He stood us at ease and then advanced to where I was standing in the front row. With a large grin on his face he yelled at the top of his raucous voice, 'Congratulations, Mr Voigors, Sir. Yer didn't drop yer bloody rifle!'

When the parade was dismissed I returned to my room, collected my suitcase and said a fond and grateful farewell to The General. I loaded my belongings into my car and bade goodbyes to my friends who were doing the same. Then, on some instinct, I got into my car and drove down to the hangar.

Jorrocks was at his desk. I saluted and stood to

attention in front of him. 'I've just come to say goodbye, Sir.'

'Relax Tim,' he said, 'I've some good news for you about your posting. You've been changed from Bomber Command and are now to go to the Fighter Operational Training Unit at Aston Down for training on twin-engined fighters. Report there after Christmas.'

I could not resist a yell of joy. I shook his hand. 'You've been a real friend, Sir. Just wait 'till I can get you on those good hunters in Tipperary!'

'Don't you worry, Tim,' he laughed. 'I'll be there.' I bade him goodbye with more thanks, saluted and left his office. Poor Jorrocks never did ride my good horses across Tipperary. A month after our last meeting he got himself transferred to Fighter Command and four months after that he met his end in the skies over Norway.

Thinking about it reminds me, too, that as I left the hangar for the last time I bumped into Bob Holland. We talked about his piano playing with Fats Waller and maybe having a drink later on in Grantham. Bob was to play his last tune three years later, in a tented camp near Calcutta. The next day he met his death at the hands of a Japanese Zero pilot in the skies over Burma.

And so ended my days at Cranwell. It was now December 22nd 1939.