

LAUGHTER - SILVERED WINGS



BY
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This excerpt is taken from John Pascoe-Watson's autobiography
"On Laughter Silvered Wings"

CHAPTER IV 208 (F.R.) SQUADRON



First of all we were sent to no. 5 PDC at Burtonwood, near Liverpool to get our K.D. (khaki drill) uniforms and our 'jabs'. Next we were sent on embarkation leave, and told to report back to Burtonwood in 14 days. This we did, having said our farewells to all our family and friends, since the overseas tour was 2½ years with no home leave. After a few days at Burtonwood they decided that there were no troopships for some days, so we were sent home again - to our families' delight. After this happened for the third time nobody cared, when we went back, expecting to see us yet again. This time it was for real and on 7th June we boarded the liner S.S. Empress of Australia, a well-known troopship, in Liverpool. On the day we sailed my great friend Bill Langford appeared at the dockside to see us off, and as 'the sun set in the west' away we went down the Mersey.

The three of us shared a cabin and the next morning we awoke in the middle of the Bay of Biscay. I felt fine and leapt out of my bunk full of the joys; and within about thirty seconds felt seasick and retired to my bunk where I remained till I awoke one morning in Gibraltar. It was presumably the next morning, but it might as well have been five years later for all I cared. I really want to die whenever I'm seasick or airsick.

After we left Gibraltar we noticed that several of the women on board (presumably wives going to join their husbands) had got quite friendly with some of the army officers on board, but didn't think anything much about it till we got to Malta. There we were amazed to witness tearful farewells to the army officers followed by joyous greetings with their husbands a few minutes later. Our big revelation in Malta was the 'bumboats' - the small gondola-type boats which crowded round the ship begging 'Baksheesh' or employing small boys to dive overboard for coins thrown down from the deck. They especially liked silver coins but some of the experienced soldiers wrapped silver paper from their 'fag' packets round pennies or even farthings, much to the rage of the boys.

After Malta our next stop was Haifa, which we still thought of as in Palestine, but which had recently been unilaterally declared to be the new nation of Israel. Here the tearful farewells were even more in evidence. The British were moving out and we picked up the 6th Airborne Division and took them with us to Port Said in Egypt, where we arrived on 18th June 1948. From the ship we transferred to an Egyptian train which had running boards but no windows, only window openings. Sitting in the

blazing heat at about lunchtime with several paratroopers in the compartment, we were all dozing off whilst an Egyptian stood on the running board trying to sell us 'felthy pictures', or "You like my seester, clean inside like Queen Victoria?". Suddenly he leapt in through the window opening, grabbed two kitbags from the rack, threw them out of the window and smartly followed them. I was stunned but not the paratroopers - one of them grabbed a Sten gun and fired off a burst at him, at which he dropped the bags and scarpered - my baptism of fire on the subject of 'kleftiwallahs' who, I soon discovered, would steal anything, valuable or not.

Some time later I was standing in the corridor to get some cool air. Standing just a few feet away was a native woman holding a baby. I turned away for a few seconds, during which she could not have moved without my noticing, and when I next looked at her she was no longer holding anything, and could only have dropped the baby out of the window - I could not bring myself to believe it but there was no other explanation.

We eventually arrived at RAF El Hamra, which was merely a transit Mess, and all three of us were allocated to a tent - the same tent. After an evening meal I idly glanced at the notice board, to find, to my amazement, that I was designated as Orderly Officer the next day (The Orderly Officer is the representative of the Station Adjutant after working hours, but also has some duties during the day; the Station Commander's representative out of hours is called the Duty Officer). I discovered that the Orderly Officer was to conduct a clothing parade, which I had done before in the UK - just a question of ensuring that RAF clothing was only issued to those swapping it for a used item of the same thing. Not in Egypt it isn't - for a start, airmen got a clothing allowance, from which they paid the Orderly Officer for what they got - and in local currency, which was Egyptian piastres, of which I had never heard. And the prices were in £.s.d and I didn't know the exchange rate, which I soon found out was 100 to the pound - 5 to an English shilling. However, by the end of the morning I had made over £5 in the deals.

A further duty of the Orderly Officer was to inspect the guard before closing down the Station for the night. In the UK this consisted of going to the main guardroom about 1800 hrs (6pm), instructing the Orderly Sergeant to "Call out the guard" and inspecting them - normally about six men armed with rifles. In this case I followed the normal procedure to witness the arrival of some fifty airmen. When I questioned the Orderly Sergeant he pointed out that there were guard posts on the roof of the WAAF block, Station HQ, etc. etc., all of which had to be relieved every four hours. I was also already aware that I had to take it in turns with the Duty Officer and the Orderly Sergeant to visit the roof of the Air Traffic Control tower all through the night, and, using the mounted searchlight, search the surrounding area, which was outside the barbed wire fence of the camp.

In addition we also provided sentries for the Malcolm Club, of which I had never heard. This turned out to be an Officers' Club on the shores of the Great Bitter Lake, some five miles away, as I was soon to discover. At about 10pm I got a phone call from the Corporal in charge of the Malcolm Club sentries that they "were about to be attacked" - apparently on the strength of some unidentified lights which were being

trained on them. Having decided to investigate before he shot somebody I called for a 15cwt. truck from the MT section and off we went. On arrival at the destination in the pitch dark I told the driver to stay where he was and keep the engine running - just in case! As I approached the gate, instead of the expected challenge from the sentry I heard the sound of a rifle safety catch and hastily announced my status. The corporal was obviously terrified, but when I asked where the alleged lights were he indicated several searchlights which were waving around. These were obviously the searchlights of the nearby Service establishments, but he took a lot of persuading. I thus had to carry out a complete search of the Club to satisfy him and his crew that nobody was about to jump out at them.

As I stood at the gate taking my leave of him I noticed in the distance a tiny red light spot which was bobbing up and down about ten feet above ground level, and appeared to be coming towards us, all in dead silence. I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck, when, out of the blackness appeared an Egyptian on a camel, smoking a cigarette. Phew!

The next day we had to report to MEAF HQ in Abu Sueir, near Ismailia, some miles up the Suez Canal by road. On the way we were introduced to yet another idiosyncrasy of service in Egypt - the 3 ton lorry/bus we were travelling in broke down miles from anywhere, on the edge of the Canal, and out of nowhere appeared an Egyptian selling bathing costumes!!

We eventually arrived at Abu Sueir and were told that there were two Spitfire squadrons, one of which had two vacancies and the other had only one. The day fighter squadron, no. 32, had the single vacancy and the fighter reconnaissance squadron, no. 208, had the double slot, and furthermore one of our particular mates, Fred Jelly, was already on it. Ray and I and Fred had played football in every station team that we had been on (except Cosford, which was the school for PT instructors, and the team was full of professionals). Although we knew nothing about reconnaissance - it was dealt with at Chivenor on an extension to the day fighter course - Ray and I persuaded Maurice to take the singleton slot, so he went to 32 Sqn (now the Queen's Flight at Northolt) and we plumped for 208 Sqn (now training fast-jet pilots at Valley). Both squadrons had recently moved from Palestine to Cyprus, so we would still be in the same Mess.

We next went to the HQ Mess dining room for lunch, and found to our consternation that the lowest rank in sight was Group Captain, and Air Marshals seemed like ten-a-penny. Whilst we were wondering where we dared to sit an Air Commodore (about 500 ranks above us) said "Come and sit here boys - we one-ringers must stick together" - what a gentleman (An Air Commodore's rank badge is a very broad single ring on his sleeve, whilst a Pilot Officer has a single VERY thin ring).

After a couple of days at El Hamra we discovered that a Dakota was going to Cyprus from a nearby airfield at Fayid so we bummed a lift on it to the combined civil and military airfield at Nicosia. We discovered that we knew most of the junior pilots on both squadrons, since they had been on courses ahead of us at Cranwell, so we were quite comfortable and settled in immediately.

We discovered that both squadrons had been stationed until very recently at Ramat David, in what was then Palestine, before the formation of the new state of Israel on May 14th 1948. On 22nd. May, when they were supposed to be leaving, they had been hit on a very early morning attack by an unknown air force, in which



32 Sqn had lost several aircraft, along with two of the Dakotas sent to carry all the equipment and ground crews. Since this disrupted the departure to Cyprus they had to spend another night at Ramat David.

In case the attack was repeated the following day, 208 had put up a standing patrol and had shot down four of the six repeat attackers, plus one shot down by an RAF Regiment sergeant with a Bren gun. They turned out to have been not the suspected Israelis, but Egyptian aircraft, who later claimed that they had mistaken the RAF aircraft for Israelis - everybody in the Middle East was flying Spitfires of one marque or another. Fortunately the RAF had the latest ones with the more powerful Griffon engines. One of the raiders had crashed on the airfield and 208 had recovered the

tail fin, complete with Egyptian markings and this was displayed prominently on the wall of the crew room. Even then it failed to register that our apprenticeship was now over, and we were (or should have been) ready for operational flying.

Apart from wearing khaki uniform, complete with shorts, (hence the superior phrases "Get your knees brown" and "Listen sonny, I was in shorts when you were in three-cornered trousers"), we discovered that we only flew in the mornings and had every afternoon off. We then usually went into Nicosia, about five miles away, and paraded along Ledra Street. One day Ray and I were passing a tailor's shop in Ledra Street when the owner asked us if we would like some coffee. Forgetting that there's no such thing as a free lunch (he was trying to persuade us to buy some clothing) we agreed, to be presented with two tiny cups of evil-looking black fluid and two glasses of water. The grounds of the coffee were floating on the surface, but we managed to swallow it all, and then drank the water to get rid of the grounds. We then realised that he was creasing himself with laughter, and he explained that the water was to get rid of the grounds - a drop of water on the surface and they sank to the bottom of the cup. All part of our education.

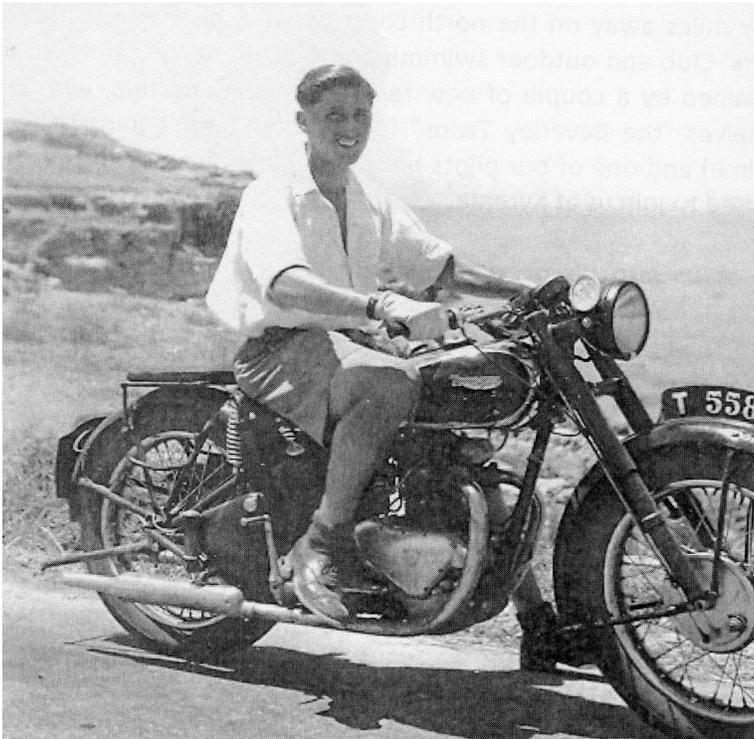
We sometimes got a group together and went off to Kyrenia, some twenty miles away on the north coast, where there was a first class Officers' Club and outdoor swimming pool. On one occasion we were entertained by a couple of new female British songsters, who called themselves "the Beverley Twins" (elder sister hadn't joined them at that time) and one of our pilots became engaged to one of them, and they used to join us at Kyrenia.

Some of us also discovered that one could hire motor cycles very cheaply in Metaxas Square, at the end of Ledra Street, and were thus able to travel the length and breadth of the island. At that time the main roads between Nicosia and the main towns were mostly of the twin-track variety, in that there were two parallel tarmac strips with dirt strips either side and between them. All traffic stayed on the tarmac till meeting another vehicle, when both moved to their left so that their offside wheels were on tarmac and their nearside wheels were on the dirt. If this sounds primitive, it was, but was standard practice throughout poor countries, and, in any case, one could go the eighty miles or so between Nicosia and Limassol and meet not more than a dozen other vehicles.

Most of these would be buses, which would be well overloaded, some even had cages full of animals on the roof, and they tended not to move over, on the basis that might is right. We used to get our own back on the occasions when we were going, as range safety officer, to our firing ranges at Morphou Bay, in the extreme west, as we had an armoured car with which nobody argued.



It was returning from Morphou on a motor cycle that I first encountered what I thought was a large wasp, but which turned out to be a hornet, of which that particular village must have been the world headquarters. Since I was doing about 70 mph. it must have thought I was attacking it when we collided, and it naturally stung me. I was wearing an open-necked shirt and it struck me on the neck and fell down inside the shirt. I was off the bike in a flash to get him out, but by the time I got back to base about 30 minutes later my neck was swollen very badly and I was not feeling well I then spent two days in sick bay, and learned (the hard way) that hornets are most definitely not wasps!



On my first long distance motor cycle trip, to Cape Andreas in the extreme north east, I had also learned that one doesn't drive in the open in shorts and rolled up sleeves - fine whilst on the move, but the instant one stops and the cooling breeze disappears the sunburn sets in. Another day in agony with peeling skin. In the winter one could also go to Troodos, on the top of Mount Olympus, to go skiing. This didn't last long, as in those days there were no such things as quick-release bindings, and no instruction, and very soon we had too many pilots off flying with twisted knees etc.

We lived in the Mess in single rooms, in stone huts with corrugated roofs on which the resident lizard population ran up and down sounding like the Charge of the Light Brigade. Some of these lizards were over a foot long, but another variety was not more than an inch or so and were transparent, so that one could see their hearts pumping.

After a few months we had our first rain, and I realised how boring wall-to-wall sunshine can be, and we all went out and paddled in the puddles. Another innovation was that in the posh hotels in town they had flush toilets - ours were just holes in the ground, disguised with a seat on top and in a building.

I had discovered that the Squadron had been a 'Mobile' unit in Palestine, with its own transport, cooks, drivers etc - and still had possession of a large Harley Davidson American motor cycle, which I was quickly able to experience. It didn't bear much resemblance to our British bikes, in that the throttle worked the opposite way from ours, as did the gear selection, and its acceleration was pedestrian. However, all the hired Cypriot bikes were British, including, to my delight, a 'Square 4' Ariel, a Triumph Speed Twin, and a powerful 600cc B.S.A. fitted with a side-car for transporting those who didn't know how to ride a bike.

For me, the only minus factor was that we had a new Squadron Commander, who regarded pilots who didn't drink with him in the Mess as wets and beneath contempt. I had experienced exactly the same attitude amongst my contemporaries at first, but they mostly accepted me eventually, especially as I was often the only sober one, after some outside parties, who was safe to drive them home.

To return to the flying, in point of fact, on the ground, the Griffon engined Spitfire Mk XVIII was very different from the Merlin-engined Mk 16's which we had previously flown, having a five-bladed propeller and a fast tick-over speed, together with a retractable tail wheel and, of course, a side-facing camera for the reconnaissance role. Nicosia had a standard 2000yd runway, facing into the prevailing westerly wind, plus a very short one facing north, approached over a cliff on the south side. A brand new civilian passenger terminal had recently been built, close to the rear of Air Traffic Control, just off the end of the short runway which nobody used. On my second trip the controller decided to change the duty runway, after I had got airborne, and I was instructed to land on the short runway, coming in over the cliff. This type of approach is notorious for producing a pronounced down draft at the cliff, and it behoves one to keep a little speed up one's sleeve, in order to counter such a possibility.

What I hadn't realised was that there was a large hump in the runway, so that, until a late stage in the landing run, one couldn't see the end of the runway - remember that one cannot see straight ahead in a 'tail dragger'. Having rather overdone the 'little extra speed' I was late touching down, and eventually realised that I wasn't going to stop in the distance remaining. Since it was too late to go round again, and I didn't know what the ground was like off the end of the runway, there existed a strong possibility that the aircraft might go up on its nose, or, even worse, go over on its back, which might place my head rather closer to the hard ground than I would like. I also decided that the RAF could probably get another Spitfire quicker than my mother could produce another Pascoe-Watson. As the reader may imagine, I had long ago made up my mind that, if damage was to occur either to an aeroplane or to Yours Truly, it would be the aeroplane every time, thus up with the undercarriage, a cloud of dust and a crunching noise but JPW still in one piece. This happened right under the noses of the passengers who were just boarding a civilian airliner, much to their horror. Naturally our new Squadron Commander was not amused, but probably not surprised, and it took me a long time to live it down.



Our normal flying was pretty standard stuff, but I recall one night flight when I clambered up to 40,000ft on a bright clear night and was rewarded with a view of the whole of the eastern Mediterranean, with lights showing all the towns and villages, and even a glow in the south which I assumed to be Alexandria.

On another occasion I was low-flying, legally, over the western plain when I flew over a herd of goats, which promptly took off in fright. I saw the goatherd shaking his fist at me, so, to be helpful, I turned round and drove them back towards him - whereupon he got run over by his own goats. Sorry, mate, I was only trying to help!

We also had to carry out the normal duties, and one evening when I was Orderly Officer I got a telephone call from the guardroom that a convoy of petrol tankers had arrived. I cycled off the mile or so to the main gate and found twelve civilian tankers waiting to go up to the airfield to discharge. I counted all twelve through and then followed them on the bike.

By the time I arrived the NCO in charge was trying to account for the fact that only eleven had appeared - even Cyprus wasn't immune to the Middle East thieving, and one had obviously diverted off the airfield via one of the several gaps in the hedges. Since nobody at the guardroom, including me, had thought to check the registration numbers, and all the civilian drivers claimed not to speak English, we had no way of finding the tanker.

One other incident sticks in my memory, and that involved ex-RAF Air Marshal Bennett, who had invented and commanded Bomber Command's very successful Pathfinder Force during the war. He had left the Service and obtained an Avro Tudor airliner, which he was using to ferry Muslims to Mecca, and which it was alleged he was overloading by taking out the seats and covering the floor with straw, thus taking more pilgrims.

He landed at Nicosia one morning, but bounced so badly on landing that he burst a tyre. He had a spare wheel on the aircraft, but needed a jack to raise the aircraft off the ground. The biggest we had in Cyprus was only meant for aircraft the size of a Dakota and the Tudor was about twice that size. However, needs must, and he was lent the jack. When the RAF engineer officer saw the jack sinking into the hot tarmac he hastily turned away and left him to it, but at least the jack lasted long enough to get the wheel changed.

After a few months a new unit started up at Nicosia - no. 26 Armament Practice Camp, and all the MEAF fighter squadrons had to attend annually to be assessed on their operational capability. The first unit to attend was 208 Squadron, and we took part in air-to-air firing (both cine film and live), air-to-ground firing, dive bombing and low-level bombing.

My results were about average till it came to the dive bombing, which I had quite enjoyed during training. After using 25lb. practice bombs, our final sortie involved having a 500 lb. bomb under each wing, which we regarded as quite a load for a Spitfire. It was also generally believed that, in the event of a 'hangu' (bomb not releasing) such a load might pull the wings off a Spitfire during the pull out from the dive, so we were a little apprehensive. Our target was a raft moored out in the middle of the Mediterranean and, in due course, off I went for my final trip. Unfortunately, during the dive I looked out to the side to check my dive angle and lost sight of the target, and was unable to relocate it. Being conscious of the strain on the wings with the bombs still on board I simply jettisoned them and pulled out, assuming that I would get another chance when they heard my story. However. it was not to be and I was credited (?) with a 600 yd. error. I've never got over the shame.

As I mentioned earlier, we used to travel all over the island by motorbike, and on one occasion, when I was going up to Troodos with my friend Fred Jelly on the pillion, the front wheel slid sideways when I struck a trickle of water on a hairpin bend. The whole bike slid across the road, Fred stepped off, and I collided with a stone wall, getting my right ankle and my right hand jammed between the bike and the wall. I couldn't walk and the handlebars were bent, and Fred couldn't drive it, so we were stuck. Eventually we were able to arrange a passing Service truck to phone for an ambulance from the Army unit at Troodos, which duly arrived some time later. When the MO had fitted me on my stretcher in the rear body he asked me if I would like a seasick pill. I assured him that I didn't suffer from motion sickness, but after a very short distance I changed my mind. The road was hair-pinned every half mile or so, and I could only see out through a narrow slit window high up on the side, which my brain found very confusing.

After treatment I was sent down to the Army hospital in Nicosia, where I remained for a couple of weeks. Due to the damage to my hand I had to do everything left-handed, and was surprised to find that the arm muscles on that side greatly increased in size. The nurses were charming and I used to get taken to Kyrenia with them, and I got personal attention from my physiotherapist. All good things come to an end however, and eventually I was allowed back to the squadron, where, after a couple of weeks, I was summoned to the Station Commander to receive an official reprimand for "self-inflicted injury".

All RAF junior officers are required to carry out "secondary duties", of various degrees of importance, as well as their normal work, and, towards the end of the year, I was appointed as Squadron Adjutant. Early in December, on the night of the Mess Christmas Ball I happened to be the Orderly Officer, and in the middle of the evening I received a secret code message which I had to decode. Having done so I realised it had to be reported immediately to "the Boss" - it required 208 to move lock stock and barrel to Fayid, in Egypt, the following week.

The whole squadron spent the next few days frantically planning and packing the equipment and getting the maximum number of aircraft serviceable for the move. As adjutant I was responsible for the ground equipment and administration, which had to be transported by ship from the port of Famagusta - I was dismayed to discover that I also had to escort it personally on a small Greek tramp steamer. On the day we departed we had hardly cleared the harbour when I began to feel sick, but, luckily, the ship was without its third engineer and I was able to be in his cabin for a couple of days, during which I was totally out of it'.

We eventually arrived at Port Said and started to unload the equipment and personal kit, which, of course, I had to supervise. I suddenly became aware that the winch driver was deliberately dropping some of the personal kit on the floor of the hold, whereupon some of the native stevedores were ransacking the bags. I hastily made my way down below just as an incident occurred, and the crew chief had just taken possession of a pair of airmen's socks. I ordered him to put them back, but he just laughed and refused. I was wearing a belt with a revolver in it but had no ammunition, so I took my courage in both hands and put the gun to his head. I knew

that If he called my bluff I was in trouble, but we looked each other in the eye and, to my intense relief, he backed down - there was no further stealing but the air was very threatening from then on.

Having loaded the equipment onto the waiting lorries we set off for the Canal Zone, through the Port Said traffic, me riding escort on the squadron motor cycle. At one point I was entertained by a slight hold-up on the Canal-side road where a 3-ton Army lorry had slid off the road and down a steep bank. Another 3-tonner was trying to winch it out, and had attached itself to a large palm tree as an anchor. As soon as he started the winch the 3-tonner, complete with attached palm tree, simply winched itself down the bank - at which point the road was clear so we continued on our way.

Our new base was close to the Great Bitter Lake and was at the north end of a long string of British military camps, mostly RAF airfields. We had to get used to low-flying over the featureless desert, and on one occasion I was flying along the railway line on the far side of the lake. To amuse myself I came down almost to the level of the telegraph poles alongside the railway, but, to my surprise, couldn't bring myself to get quite low enough, and couldn't work out why - till I came upon a local on a camel and realised that the poles were only about six feet high. Without anything except flat sand all around it was very difficult to gauge one's height, and although the railway looked the right size the poles didn't quite match for scale. Another lesson learnt, but luckily not the hard way.

Just before Christmas I was flying no. 2 to Ray Wyborn on a low-level straffing exercise over the desert, when I began to feel uneasy that we were too low for comfort. Just at that moment there was a sudden spurt of sand and Ray had hit the desert with his propellor. He pulled up as far as his speed allowed, but couldn't get much power due to his prop. being now about half its normal size (Our props were made of laminated wood rather than the more modern metal, and merely wore themselves away - very rapidly if they struck something).

We were not far from a Transport Command airfield at Kabrit, so Ray nursed his aircraft along whilst I called them and explained the situation using the emergency frequency, which was all we had in common with them. They cleared Ray to land immediately, but, just as he was turning, at about 100ft, on his final leg of the circuit, out of nowhere appeared a Dakota transport aircraft, right under his nose. I called Air Traffic to get it diverted away from the runway, but Ray had already decided to attempt to go round again for another circuit. At that height, and with very little power available, he didn't make it and the aircraft stalled and crashed alongside the runway, and broke in half, leaving Ray sitting still strapped in to the rear half. Very luckily for him he was uninjured, but we assumed he would be for the high jump for the low flying incident. To our amazement, the incident with the Dakota seemed to occupy the attention of the powers-that-be, and how he came to be in the emergency in the first place was never pursued - how lucky can you get?

At Kabrit there were four Dakota squadrons, and we were told, what I assume was an apocryphal story, about how they checked out new pilots. It was said that they arranged an alleged air test for an aircraft and invited several Waafs for the ride.

During the flight they plied these girls with fluid and waited till the first one went to the toilet. This was a screened off cubicle at the rear of the aeroplane, facing forward. The check pilot gave the girl 5 seconds and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. At that point he had to close the throttles, bring the propellor pitch into fully fine, lower the undercarriage and flaps, decelerating rapidly. Immediately the girl's silhouette appeared against the curtain he had to retract everything, open up the engines and accelerate rapidly. If she wasn't then sitting back on the seat he had failed the test.

A situation now arose where the new Israeli nation had invaded Egyptian territory along the north coast and the central area of the Sinai peninsula, and the United Nations had requested assistance from the UK to ascertain what exactly was going on. HQ MEAF was instructed to obtain evidence and thus 205 Group sent out a photo reconnaissance Mosquito from 13 Squadron, alongside us at Fayid, to get pictures. On January 1st 1949 I arrived at the crewroom having spent New Year's Eve over at a nearby RAF airfield, Deversoir, where several of our friends from training were flying Tempests.

I discovered that that morning several Egyptian air force officers had appeared in the crew room where, unfortunately, our trophy Egyptian Spitfire tail fin from Ramat David was still up on the wall, and an embarrassed 208 Squadron hastily removed same. It transpired that we were to take low level photos of the Israeli troops on the Abu Aweighla- Beer Sheba road whilst being 'escorted' by the Egyptians.

Unfortunately they were flying Spitfire Mk.9's, which were much slower than our Spitfire 18's, and those on this first sortie had great difficulty keeping down to their speed. Furthermore, far from being our escorts, they promptly started straffing the Israelis when they reached the target area. Hardly surprisingly the Israelis fired back at any Spitfires they saw - from then on we operated without 'escorts'.

We carried out low level recce daily, taking it in turns to participate. We had been instructed by 205 Group to operate as a low level recce pair with a higher level pair as top cover, but it seemed to us that the top cover achieved not much except expose the position of the recce pair to all concerned. Since everybody was flying Spitfires and red, white and blue roundels weren't that different from green, white and green from a distance, everyone on the ground felt entitled to let fly at anything airborne. On 2nd January one of our NCO pilots, Ron Sayers, had been listed to fly, but he had been Orderly Sergeant the previous night and was judged not fit for his sortie. I volunteered to take his place and duly acted as no.2 to F/O Roy Bowie on the top cover pair.

On 4th January I was also top cover for a recce. in the Aqaba - Nakhl area, again without incident. On 7th January my turn came up for the Abu Aweighla road again, but Ron Sayers claimed that he should take my place in return for me bagging his slot on 2nd. The CO backed him up, so off he went as no. 2 to F/O Timothy McElhaw on the top cover. The recce pair were F/O Geoffrey Cooper and his no.2 was another NCO, Frankie Close. As a pure coincidence Geoff and Tim had been two of the four which shot down the Egyptians at Ramat David nearly a year before, the other two

being Roy Bowie no.2 to Geoff and Les Hully no.2 to Tim. That occasion was the last on which an RAF unit shot down an aircraft in air-to-air combat.

After a couple of hours with no contact it began to dawn on us that this was a long sortie and Group began to check with other RAF and then Egyptian airfields to see if they had heard anything from our four. After three hours the truth began to sink in, the strange thing being that a 13 Squadron PR Mosquito had been in the area and had heard nothing on the R/T. In the afternoon we were instructed to send up another four on an area recce. to find any trace of our aircraft, with an armed escort from Deversoir of two squadrons of Tempests, led by their Station Commander, Gp Capt Anderson. These Tempests were bounced by Israeli Spitfires and the leader's no.2, P/O Tattersfield, whom I had just met on New Year's Eve, was shot down and killed. During this exercise one of the squadrons discovered that their guns weren't cocked (ready to fire) and this shambles caused the recce to be abandoned without finding any trace of our aircraft. It was when the three live pilots were returned to us by the Israelis that learned the awful truth. The next day I went to an MU (Maintenance Unit) at nearby Kasfareet to collect the first of our replacement aircraft, and it really sank in that this was for real. The incident on 7 January 1949 was the last occasion on which an RAF unit involved in air-to-air combat.

Some days later we were briefed to attack an Israeli road convoy allegedly heading south towards Aqaba, and were actually taxying all bombed up, when we were recalled and the attack never took place. We felt cheated at the time, but probably wiser heads prevailed somewhere up the line. Geoff and Tim were returned on the 23 January. Probably why we were recalled, and we heard from them the full story, which we were forbidden to communicate to anyone, to the extent that our mail home was censored - there some very powerful Jews in the British government at the time.

As a matter of interest, during the previous sorties we had begun suffer several radio failures, which was unusual, and the CO some comment to me on the subject. I asked if he had considered name of our radio mechanic, which was Isaacs, and his eyes widened but he said nothing. Next day Isaacs was posted away from squadron and our radio failures disappeared with him. In the vein, when a major parade is to have prayers from the padre the parade commander issues the order 'Fall out the Roman Catholics and Jews', and they march to the edge of the parade ground until the prayers are over. That June, during the parade for the Kings birthday, our Station Commander gave the order "Fall out the Roman Catholics and Israelis" - I could not believe my ears, and there sniggers all round. Remember, however, that, until a year before there had never been a Jewish nation, and it was obvious that there was confusion on the difference on all sides - with the exception of Israelis of course.

To revert to the 'actualities' of the sortie, I make no apology describing these in detail, because a number of false versions have been put about, mostly by people who weren't there, or had an interest in 'modifying' the facts. For starters, we were NOT armed on any of these sorties. Some of the aircraft might have had ammunition in the tanks, from previous practice sorties, but, as the Tempests found, an aeroplane isn't armed unless the guns are cocked. There was no reason to have done so, since

we were only doing recce for the UN and the thought of being attacked was never mentioned during our briefings. The following version is what was reported to us, at the time, by Geoff Cooper and Tim McElhaw.

It appears that at some point Ron Sayers reported the presence of two unidentified Spitfires, and was told to keep his eye on them. Very shortly afterwards Frankie Close was badly hit by small arms fire from the ground, which gave him the choice of baling out or doing a forced landing. In the few seconds available he decided to bale out, pulled up till he was inverted and took to his parachute. Unfortunately, at that low height, his `chute opened only a few feet above the ground, which he struck face first, smashing his jaw.

Geoff saw this and instructed the top cover to join him, looked over his shoulder and saw two Spitfires with red spinners coming towards him. (A spinner is the dome-shaped object on the forward side of the propellor, which initiates the streamlining of the fuselage, painted red for decoration in our case, and initially to distinguish our aircraft from 32 Sqdn when we were in Cyprus).

Meantime, possibly because Frankie was Ron's mate and they were watching him, the top cover pair were shot down by the two unidentified Spitfires, which turned out to be Israelis. No radio calls were made by either of them, Ron was killed and Tim baled out successfully - no wonder Geoff thought his top cover was coming to join him. As an unfortunate coincidence the Israeli Spitfires had spinners the same colour as ours, but when they started scoring hits on him he realised all was not well.

Until that time nobody (except the donors) knew where the Israelis were getting their aircraft from, and there were plenty of early models about from the war. We had therefore assumed that everybody except us was flying these earlier models and Geoff accordingly decided to out-climb this hostile pair - as I already mentioned, we were unarmed, being on UN duties, so he didn't have a lot of choice. Unknown to us, the Israelis had smuggled in several ex-Czech Air Force Spitfire 14s which were virtually identical to our 18's, and these were two of them. Naturally they stayed with him in the climb and when he ran out of airspeed they let him have it in the side, causing him also to bale out. The Israelis hospitalised Frankie and rebuilt his jaw with what looked like miniature scaffolding, but they interrogated the other two under the influence of Pentothal. Both allegedly admitted being over Israeli side of the Egyptian border, and we discovered that they had bulldozed Ron's wrecked aircraft onto their side also. There was no explanation of the motivation for this incident at the time, nor he ever seen one since, even from the pilots concerned. At one time of the pilots was alleged to have been Chaim Weizmann, who became the Israeli Prime Minister, but in fact this is not true, it being his cousin of the same name who had served in the RAF during the Battle Britain.

As one might expect, the RAF has maintained a low profile on this incident ever since. We were reminded of it for a long time, having our spinners and tails painted white - just in case! I still have in my possession the only indication we ever received illustrating the Israeli aircraft markings of the period.

For some reason I have no recollection of how long the Israeli incursion lasted - probably we all wanted to forget it, believing it to be between two other nations. At any rate my logbook records me as carrying standard sorties for the rest of January as if nothing had happened.

For the next four months my logbook shows the type of sorties more like a straight fighter squadron, with odd interesting exceptions. One of these was when I went back to Nicosia to represent the squadron at the funeral of one of 32 Squadron's pilots. For this I had to take with me a large wreath, for which there was no room in the aircraft except in the cockpit. This meant flying 200 miles over the sea in a single engined aircraft with a funeral wreath round my neck - I just hoped wasn't an omen!

One day in April I noticed a large formation of 24 Tempests, which too good an opportunity to miss. One crucial activity of all formations is to keep a good lookout for potential attackers, though the less experienced tend to spend more of their time trying to hold position in the formation. On spotting an attacker at a late stage, the first one to spot him calls the formation to "Break, break!", whereupon they are supposed to turn at maximum rate towards the attacker. With 24 aircraft a break can become a total shambles as they all try to avoid each other, and that is exactly what happened in this instance.

Every aircraft I could see was a Tempest, whilst they had to find some unknown attacker in amongst them. Like an idiot I stayed around and suddenly had an uncomfortable feeling that I was being looked at - screwed my head round and there, some 50 yards up my backside, was a VERY large Tempest radiator, flown, I later discovered by an ex-Battle of Britain pilot. Since the Tempest was no match for a Spit in a dogfight, it didn't take much to get rid of him, but on ops I would have been very dead. What a valuable lesson.

On another occasion I was flying in the region of our air/ground firing range when I spotted a lone Tempest. Since most of the Tempest wing were acquaintances, I made a pass at him, expecting some fairly violent reaction. When he appeared to ignore me I formed on him, whereupon he waved me away. Raising the usual two fingers I stayed where I was, whereupon he went into a dive. As I accompanied him down he suddenly fired off a couple of underwing rockets, which I should have noticed he was carrying. I realised he was on a genuine air/ground sortie and buzzed off smartly, thinking no more about it.

Some time after I landed I was summoned to the CO's office, where he was holding the phone and which he passed to me with a glare. As I announced myself to this unknown voice he introduced himself - "This is Group Captain Anderson - were you flying aircraft — — just now?". My heart sank - I knew what was coming - I guessed he must have been flying the lone Tempest. Although everybody did it, it was illegal to interfere with any unknown aircraft, and I was dead meat. "Er, yes sir". 'Don't EVER do that again sunshine, or I'll have you!' Slam with the receiver! My CO was NOT amused.

Another sortie, in April, involved a recce sortie over the Pyramids and the Sphinx, which should have been memorable in itself; for a start the Sphinx being the 208 Squadron badge. Having, some 55 years later, seen the Pyramids and Sphinx from the ground I have to say that they are much more impressive that way. I hadn't realised just how close they were to Cairo, though that city was virtually obliterated by thick smog.

Unfortunately, the sortie was memorable for another reason, in that, when I came in to land, I discovered that I had no pneumatic pressure, which, in turn, meant that I had to land without the aid of the flaps with which to lower the landing speed. Even worse, especially with the increased speed, I had no wheel brakes. A Griffon-engined Spitfire swings very badly to starboard after landing, and at that speed there isn't sufficient rudder power available to hold it straight down the runway, consequently, without brakes, it rushes off the runway into the distance. If the airfield surface is flat and smooth one can get away with it, unless one hits something out on the airfield minding its own business. Luckily, at Fayid there was only one building and it was some distance from the duty runway. I reckoned that the sand would slow the aircraft pretty quickly and sure enough that's what happened, and all I had to do, having switched off the engine on touching down, was wait for a tractor to tow me in.

Shortly after this incident I was landing back at night when Air Traffic asked me to clear the runway down an intersecting runway as a Mosquito from 39 squadron, the night interceptor squadron at Fayid, was very close behind me. I duly turned off and continued to taxi back to dispersal on an unlit part of the taxiway. Since it was a fairly bright night this didn't seem too hazardous- until I got one wheel just off the tarmac, which immediately fell into the only hole on the airfield. The wheel stopped dead, the aircraft swung left and went up onto its nose, just far enough to catch the propellor on the ground. As I mentioned earlier, taxiing accidents are ALWAYS pilot error, but in this case they blamed Air Traffic - which, I must admit, I thought a little hard on them.

In June the squadron was due to get a visit from a team of high grade flying Instructors from the Central Flying School at Little Rissington, aka 'the Trappers'. Their task was to visit all the fighter squadrons annually for random checks on individual pilots' general flying, but particularly their instrument flying ability. Since all day fighters are single seaters and, in our case, there were no two-seat trainer versions, we were allocated a Harvard trainer, which type most of us had last flown at Chivenor. The reader might have cause to imagine that this would be no problem to experienced pilots, but most of them were very wary of it, only flying it a few times a year, and our particular version was even more prone to vicious habits than usual.

Nevertheless, when 'the Trappers are coming' needs must and we all did some refresher trips in it to get our hands in, since this was the aircraft they checked us on. I notice that the Squadron Commander and my flight commander both used me as their safety pilot, so they must have trusted me in the Harvard.

My turn for a ride with a 'Trapper' duly arrived, and after the usual simple exercises he said "Show me the quickest way to turn through 360°. The only reason a

fighter pilot needs to turn that quickly is to get somebody off his tail, and I naturally assumed that was what he intended. I hauled off the power, went into the steepest bank the Harvard would handle and, when it started to judder into a stall, banged on the power again and kept pulling - all in the standard fashion. This may not be the quickest rate of turn, but it sure prevents the pursuer from getting a deflection lead angle, so that he can't shoot you down. The 'Trapper' said that that was what he had expected, but showed me that the quickest way to complete a 360° turn was to obtain maximum speed and then turn at full power. Since that would take several seconds, and wasn't a particularly tight turn anyway, and I couldn't see any reason why one needed to carry out that manoeuvre in normal flight, he obviously didn't know the first thing about operational flying. From that moment, and although I had always looked up to my own instructors, CFS flying instructors were not on my list of whizz kids.

The day following the Trapper's visit I did a drop tank test (to check the fuel feed - these tanks had no fuel gauge) on 'my' aeroplane followed by a long range sortie to Habbaniyah, not far from Baghdad. The purpose of the trip was to take specific photos of what were known as 'the pipeline airfields', several of which were involved in the Iraq war of recent times. I often wonder if my pictures were used to brief our pilots. At that time Iraq was policed by the British and specifically by the RAF, and these airfields were not occupied by the Iraqis. The airfields were numbered from Hi to H5 and were positioned alongside the oil pipeline from Baghdad to Haifa in Palestine/Israel, hence the 'H' designation.

I and my no.2, an NCO named Pete Mathews, were also to photograph the 'T' airfields on the pipeline to Tripoli, in the Lebanon (as it was referred to at that time) and the 'K' airfields along the pipeline to Kirkuk and Mosul, in northern Iraq. We had to fly from Fayid to Mafraq, in Transjordan (as it was then) via Aqaba, and refuel.

Mafraq at that time was just a flat piece of desert, but it turned out not very difficult to find, and down we went. When we taxied in it transpired that we were to be refuelled from 40-gallon barrels, with the fuel strained through chamois leather cloths - my first experience of this tried and tested method. However about halfway through this procedure I noticed a very large and dark sandstorm not far away, and coming in our direction. Not wishing the open fuel tanks to be filled with sand I checked how much fuel they had already put in and decided that it was sufficient for us to reach Habbaniyah. I ordered the fuel tanks to be closed up and told my no.2 to get ready for a quick takeoff.

Just as I got my engine started the sandstorm arrived and, from the cockpit, I couldn't see the ground beside me. I called Pete on the radio and said we would taxi downwind till I thought we had enough distance to get airborne and do a blind takeoff. This was one of the checks we had to demonstrate to the Trappers, so we had all done plenty of them. There was no doubt about which was the wind direction, and there wasn't much we could hit on the open desert of the airfield surface, and off I went

After I reckoned we had gone far enough (well I had - I couldn't see him of course) I turned into wind and opened the throttle, in the heat of the moment forgetting that Pete was still taxiing out behind me. Trying to keep it straight on the instruments I had just got the tail up for takeoff, doing about 100kts, when out of the corner of my eye I noticed Pete taxiing past in the opposite direction just yards away. Another occasion when a Hand was stretched out.....

After getting airborne I climbed up, still in the dark murk, and about 3000ft, when I thought I should be above the sandstorm, it was still dark. Then I looked out of the side of the canopy and realised I was indeed in the clear - some keen ground mechanic at Mafraq had cleaned my windscreen with an oily rag to which the fine sand had stuck!

I now had a problem, in that I needed to get it clean before I landed. I knew that the airflow very close to the airframe was not very fast so, having slowed right down, I pushed my left hand along the outside of the windscreen to wipe off the sand, only to have my wristwatch whipped smartly off my wrist - and unfortunately it was my own and not the issue one, which I wore on the other wrist (one watch set to local time and one to GMT, which our flight clearances used). I had paid my sister the princely sum of £3 for this watch which she bought during ATS service in India.

Having picked up my no.2, off we set for the first pipeline airfield, carried out the photography and carried on with the other four till we reached Habbaniyah. After landing there, I was taxiing in, with the canopy open as usual, when I was sure I could smell roses. Hoping I wasn't suffering from some sun-induced mental problem I taxied in, to discover that I had taxied past a large rose bed by the Officers' Mess, and the smell was real, as was the heat.

At Habbaniyah we discovered that there were three sections which were air-conditioned - namely Sick Quarters, the RAF Hospital, and Air Traffic, but it paid to be very careful how long one spent in either. One of the resident pilots had been in the habit of hanging around in the corridors of Air Traffic and had got pneumonia and subsequently died.

On our way to the Transit Mess I was amazed to see a local, with no legs, cutting the lawn outside - but he was sitting on a sack and using nail scissors - talk about painting the Forth Bridge as a full-time occupation. This preoccupation with proper lawns I also came across in Egypt, Khartoum and (probably) all RAF overseas stations. Indeed, at Fayid we sent some local soil to Suttons Seeds in the U.K., and asked them to send us some grass seeds which would grow best in this soil. They replied "Dear Sirs, We are amazed that ANYTHING will grow in this soil."

That evening Pete and I were relaxing in the cool outside the transit aircrew mess when live rifle fire started only yards away, to be immediately followed by return fire from another direction, and we were face down in the middle of it. This 'war' turned out to be some 'loose wallahs' (local thieves) trying to break in and being shot at by the local Iraq Levies (locally recruited police used in Cyprus, Khartoum, Aden and

Palestine). Remember that, at this time, all these places were British Protectorates, mostly regulated by the RAF

The next day, because the area was less uninhabited than the desert, I decided that we didn't need to act as a pair, so I photographed the Kirkuk airfields whilst Pete did the Mosul branch. There not being enough time to do these and return to Fayid, we went back to base the following day, again via Mafraq - which was a little less eventful than the previous occasion thank goodness.

At the beginning of July I was sent on an aircraft recognition course at Nicosia, which was pretty easy for me as I had been the instructor in the subject during my ATC days. To my enduring sadness, I heard that one of my very best friends, from my earliest days, Fred Jelly, had been killed back at Fayid, in an accident in which he had collided with another of our pilots whilst carrying out a quarter attack exercise. Both were killed. I was able to get a lift down to Egypt with the AOC for the funeral and then two of us had to pack up his kit and write to his mother. This was my first experience of this process, though it was, of course, standard practice during the war.

After my return from the course I found the squadron preparing for our second dose at the Armament Practice Camp, and spent most days doing air tests, trying to get the maximum number of aircraft serviceable for the detachment. In the evenings several of us were swotting for our promotion exams, in which we were sternly 'supervised' by one of the PMRAF Nursing Sisters from the hospital, who shared the Officers' Mess with us. Without her, I doubt if we would have passed, and we were ever grateful.

On 9th August the squadron left for Cyprus where we spent the next month on the, by now, familiar round of cine and live air-to-air and air- to-ground firing, but, to my great joy, no dive-bombing this time.

Those of us taking the promotion exams flew back to Fayid for five days, at the beginning of September, took the exams and flew back to Nicosia -just in time to fly the squadron aircraft back to Fayid! We spent the rest of September acting more as a straight fighter squadron, including several intercepts of incoming Lincoln bombers from the UK, heading for their detachment at Shallufah, at the far end of the Canal Zone camps. On one of these days about a dozen of our airmen had taken a whole morning erecting a large marquee beside the end of the main runway. This was to provide cover from the heat for our groundcrew the following day, as we sat on the end of the runway, ready to 'scramble' on receipt of a phone call from Air Traffic.

As it happened, I was Orderly Officer that night and one of my duties was to traverse the powerful searchlight on the roof of Air Traffic, checking that there were no attempts by the locals to break in through the barbed wire surrounding the domestic site. Sometime after midnight I swung the searchlight round and, sure enough, there was the large marquee on the airfield - some 15 minutes later it had gone! I could not believe it. To add insult to injury, when we came to scramble the next day we found they had stolen the telephone wire buried in the ground as well. I was again reminded that the locals would steal anything, whether useful or not. One

day, when I was Orderly Officer, one of the wheels came off the 'honey cart' (used to empty the toilet buckets - don't ask) as he drove the donkey through the main gate. This naturally capsized the wagon, spilling the contents on the road. Under all the contents he had hidden a 40 gallon drum of hydraulic fluid, which he had stolen. Hydraulic fluid doesn't burn, is no use in an engine and in fact doesn't do anything except 'hydraulic', so was quite useless to him, nevertheless he had the opportunity to steal it so he did.

On another occasion, when I was Orderly Officer, I heard a burst of Sten gunfire out on the airfield, followed by a frantic phone call from the radio operator manning the 'homer' facility. This was a small hut outside the perimeter wire, in the middle of the airfield, and was provided to assist any incoming aircraft to arrive overhead. We were a 'Master Airfield' which required the facility to be available 24 hours a day. I drove out to the homer to find the equipment shot to bits by the operator. It appeared that some locals had decided to steal what they could from the hut and had called to him from outside. When he ignored them a brown hand and arm came through the fanlight over the door, whereupon he let fly with the Sten, through the door. Spraying it around had resulted in shooting up a good bit of his equipment.

Three incidents in September are worthy of mention, all of which could have had fatal results for yours truly, and two of which caused severe damage to His Majesty's inventory. In the first I was minding my own business, flying round a very large cumulo nimbus cloud, when I spotted another Spit. Doing the same. Cue instant dogfight, in which, to my embarrassment, the other aircraft was getting round to my tail. To avoid this shameful experience I dived sideways into the cu-nim. in a steep climbing turn with, naturally, all my blind flying instruments toppled - remember I thought I was an ace on instruments.

As the airspeed instantly and rapidly fell off I rolled off what I guessed was about the right amount of bank, to get the wings level, and stuffed the stick hard forward to avoid the impending stall. Next second the engine stopped, and I was hanging in the straps - obviously upside down. Whilst I considered what was going on the engine roared again, and I wasn't hanging in the straps. By this time a big question mark was sticking out of my head, and at that point the exercise was repeated, just as I went through a minuscule gap in the cloud, at which point I seemed to be going end over end. Since this is not a possible manoeuvre for an aircraft, I had never been shown how to recover from it. I therefore decided that I might as well wait till I came out of the bottom of the cloud and see what was happening. I remembered that the met briefing forecast the cloudbase as three thousand feet, which I thought would allow me to recover from my unknown problem.

At 3000 ft it was still dark, and I decided that it was time to go, and began to unstrap myself. I then broke cloud, to find the aircraft in a spiral dive, from which I recovered in a hurry, and flew back to base, breathing rather more heavily than usual. I did a normal circuit, landed and taxied in without any trouble, and said nothing to anybody.

The following morning I was detailed to fly the same aeroplane on the first sortie, and in I got and fired the cartridge to start the engine. Nothing happened and I thought I must have forgotten to turn on the fuel, but, no, it was on. I tried again, with the same result. The Chiefy, who was acting as my crew, mouthed "Turn on the fuel" to which I mouthed "It is on". He waved me out of the cockpit and told me to take another aircraft, which I did.

When I returned over an hour later I noticed a large crowd round the aircraft, so I tiptoed past, and quickly climbed out, just as a hand descended on my shoulder - it was the Chiefy. "You flew that aircraft yesterday, didn't you sir?" "Er, yes, I believe I did". "Did you do anything to it?" "Not a thing, Chief, why?". It transpired that they had discovered that the carburettor diaphragm was split, which was why it wouldn't start. Nothing very unusual about that - these things happen, though I still wonder how I was able to fly it back and taxi in

However, when a very senior engineer walked up from the main servicing centre he noticed that the whole fuselage was twisted - which is VERY unusual; in fact just about impossible, hence the third degree. The result of this little incident was that the aircraft was 'written off' i.e. scrapped. I spent another twenty years pondering how an aircraft came to be going end over end, until I saw an aerobatic display at Prestwick in a Pitts Special - an aircraft with a short fuselage and a very large powerful engine. He got this thing into an end-over- end aerobatic, which he called a "Lomcevak", (my guess is that the name is Slav in origin) by commencing with what is known in the trade as a 'hammerhead stall', stuffing the stick hard forward and keeping lots of power on. In fact, just what I had inadvertently done, only his aircraft was made of stainless steel and mine was aluminium.

One other exercise now came within our sphere and that was Arty/R (artillery spotting to the uninitiated). One of the problems faced by firing guns over any distance is how to find out if you have hit the target, and, if not, how to correct your aim for the next salvo. In WW1 they used captive balloons, which are very vulnerable to being shot down by small arms fire. In WW2 they used small spotter planes, such as the Auster, equally vulnerable to being shot down by enemy fighters. Hence it was decided to train low-level recce pilots for the task. The general idea is that the recce pilot hangs about at very low level, between the guns (usually 25-pounders) and the target, till the guns are fired, then pops up to spot the fall of shot. He then decides how to correct the aim, gives the instruction to the gunners and bobs down again. We were trained for this by our Army Liaison Officer, Bob Begbie an ex-Auster AOP (Air Observation Post) army pilot, using a very simple but effective device, which is a broad-weave piece of canvas painted to look like a section of the earth's surface. Underneath this canvas a man smoking a cigarette emits puffs of smoke to represent the fall of shot and the pilot standing up above the canvas corrects the aim, which is then represented by the smoker - you couldn't make it up! The whole thing is called a Haskard Range.

However, just before I had my first shot at that, I was involved in the second nasty incident. This occurred when I was leading a very experienced ex-wartime Czech pilot, one Frank Masarik, and, as we arrived at the runway caravan for takeoff,

they changed the runway in use and told us to wait for the caravan to take up its new position. A Spitfire overheats very quickly on the ground, so when all was clear we were in a hurry to go. As I reached the new runway I turned across the taxiway to check my instruments before takeoff, as usual, only to see a very large spinner, closely followed by an even larger propellor, coming at me from the wingtip. The propellor began chewing up my wing towards me, but, luckily the engine stalled before the prop reached my cockpit.

After extricating myself we reported back to dispersal and waited while the CO reported the accident to the Station Commander. I couldn't help overhearing the conversation, especially the bit which went - "Who were the pilots concerned?" "Pascoe-Watson and Masarik, sir". "Pascoe-Watson? What's he done this time?" "Well, actually, sir, it wasn't his fault". "Nonsense, it must have been".

Other pilots also occasionally had technical failures, and the third nasty occurred when I was rejoining the circuit and heard Pete Mathews on the radio reporting an undercarriage lowering problem. Since I was close to him I was requested to see what the problem was, which turned out to be his port leg only partly lowered. I suggested he retract the undercarriage and try again, which he did, with the same result. In fact the port leg didn't even move, and he was left with the certainty of a wheels-up landing.

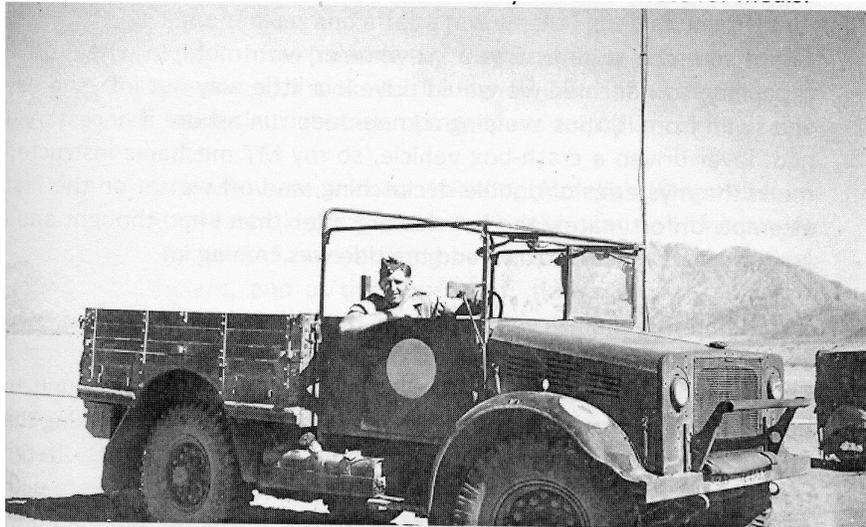
I then devised what was, in retrospect, a hair-brained proposal, namely that I should try to lever the leg down with my wingtip. Somewhat to my surprise he agreed so I suggested we climb up till we were clear of the turbulence always present at lower levels due to the rising heat from the desert. I then closed in and tried to get my wingtip along under his wing. I knew this was going to be a bit 'hairy', due to the interference of the airflow between the wings, and the fact that, being outward retracting, the undercart on a Spit was close to the fuselage, so that I had a long way to go under his wing. After several false attempts I suddenly noticed, out of the corner of my eye, that his propellor was well inside my wingtip, and, though I couldn't see my prop, I realised it must be extremely close to his. At that moment it eventually dawned on me what a stupid, potentially lethal, exercise this was, and I was tempted to immediately pull away from him. Luckily I managed to control my instincts and carefully eased myself away and abandoned the exercise. I only then suggested that he tried the standard operating procedure (SOP) i.e. turn his aircraft upside down, thus taking the weight off his undercarriage mechanism, and try lowering the wheels that way - which worked first time.

In October I flew up to Nicosia and back and a couple of days later acted as no. 2 to the squadron commander on a sortie to photograph the Aswan Dam - in the days well before the present High Dam produced Lake Nasser. We landed at Luxor to refuel, and I was fascinated to note that the runway was constructed of crushed brick, which I had heard of but didn't believe till I saw it with my own eyes. Having taken the photos we then landed back at Luxor, refuelled and returned to Fayid.

In the middle of October I was appointed as CO of the RAF detachment at Aqaba, which consisted of five airmen, a corporal, and seven vehicles (two fire engines, a 3-

tonner lorry, a 15 cwt. truck, two 900 gallon refuelling tankers and a Jeep). The airfield was a flat strip of sand, hand-rolled daily by a couple of locals, to the west of a collection of Army units and the village. The purpose of the troops was to keep the Israeli army at what is now Eilat, which was then just a collection of tents, separated from us by a barbed wire fence stretching into the sea, and the purpose of the airfield was to keep the troops supplied. The Israeli troops were the ones we had set out to bomb in January, but been recalled. As an aside, shortly after I arrived one of the resident infantry, one Fusilier O'Dwyer, discovered that the Israelis had female soldiers in their camp and one night he waded out round the wire to see if he could try his luck with one. The Israelis caught him, beat him up and sent him back, whereupon he got 7 days in clink as a punishment. The night after he came out of clink he tried it again - this time there was the sound of a single rifle shot and Fusilier O'Dwyer was never seen again.

We had a weekly visit from an Anson from 205 Group at Ismailia and another from a Dakota from Kabrit for supplies. The Deversoir Tempest Wing took it in turns with us to supply the unit CC, but my 208 predecessor had been Les Hully. We had two tents for living in, one for the six airmen and one for me, and one for the stores. At this point the Jeep was u/s with a



broken gearbox, which were just about unobtainable from RAF sources, so I used the 15 cwt. as my personal transport to travel back and forth to the army Officers' Mess for meals.

The base unit was the Royal Irish Fusiliers (referred to universally as 'the Riffs'), who, to my surprise, wore kilts - orange ones of course. They were supported by a 4th. Royal Tank Regiment unit, who, in turn, were supported by a Royal Mechanical & Electrical Engineers (REME) unit. We also had a troop of the Royal Corps of Signals for operational communications, using motor cycles, and I had an Army Liaison Officer (ALO), Capt. John Milligan, to assist my dealings with the 'Pongoes'.

In the afternoons we used to go swimming in the Gulf of Aqaba, but the beach was very shallow, rather like Weston-super-Mare, and one had to wade several hundred yards out to reach deep water. The water was occupied by both sharks and barracuda, and the latter only draw a few inches of water and have an extremely vicious bite. I was told that one of them is attracted by splashing and one by still bodies - but I never could remember (and still can't) which was which. On one occasion we had barracuda for our evening meal, and it was delicious. We were however warned that on no account were we to get one of the bright green,

translucent bones stuck in any part of our anatomy, as they were highly Poisonous, I also recall one morning having the most delicious kippers for breakfast - sourced from Israel to my amazement. One of our fire engines was a six-wheeler with multiple wheel drive capability, so I decided we would drive it a little way out into the bay and swim from it, thus avoiding a knee-deep run ashore if necessary. I had never driven a crash-box vehicle, so my MT mechanic instructed me in the mysteries of double declutching, and off we set on the first attempt. Unfortunately the beach was softer than I had thought and I got it bogged well and truly - and the tide was coming in.

The Mediterranean has very little tide, but the Red Sea does, and I was concerned as to how I would explain to His Majesty how I had lost a fire engine out to sea. I therefore walked along to the REME unit to borrow their recovery vehicle, but it was already involved in taking the engine out of a tank and was not available. However the Riffs offered me an Oxford Carrier (a large version of a Bren Carrier) complete with driver, and off we went to the rescue. To my horror the tide had now nearly reached my fire engine and the towing attachment was at the front, next to the water. Nothing daunted, the Carrier driver drove into the water, hooked us up and hauled us into the water and out again. then realised that a) some of my vehicles were never used and that b) ought to be able to drive all of them, so the next morning I drove down for breakfast in the other fire tender. This also turned out to be a mistake, as the army, seeing a fire engine arrive, assumed that their Mess was on fire and turned out their fire picket.

As a matter of interest, this second tender was loaded with CO2 gas bottles, which were prone to explode in high ambient temperatures We had previously experienced up to 125° F and one of the bottles had exploded, consequently we had to keep the tender Under a canvas cover.

On another occasion the supply of disinfectant, used to 'sanitise' the standard 'pit' toilets every morning, ran out and some bright spark decided to use petrol instead - with the inevitable result that the first chap to throw his morning fag end down the pit after his 'performance' blew himself up. He probably thought it was something he'd eaten....!

One of my duties was to send a weekly report to Group HO about petrol levels in the tanker, and after a few weeks I got a rocket because I had too much fuel (caused



by not suffering the permitted vapourisation allowance). I spoke to the Signals Officer and he agreed to organise a motor cycle trial to use up my spare petrol.

On one occasion we were warned that King Abdullah (King Hussein's father and the present king's grandfather), who was an Honorary Air Commodore in the RAF, was arriving by air to inspect the local

Arab Legion detachment, and at the appointed time we were all ready, complete with a large armed parade of the Arab Legion. The (RAF) Anson landed and taxied in beside the Guard of Honour, and the King was just stepping out as some unknown civilian aircraft tried to land. Without thinking I fired off the standard signal to forbid landing, a red Verrey light, which unfortunately landed not far from the Anson - whereupon I found myself staring down the barrels of several dozen rifles.

The King was accompanied by the founder of the Arab Legion, one John Bagot Glubb, better known as 'Glubb Pasha', virtually the successor to Lawrence of Arabia. During the parade inspection this famous man sidled up to me, and whispered. As I bent over to hear the words of wisdom I nearly fell about as he said "Where can you get a p..s around here?".

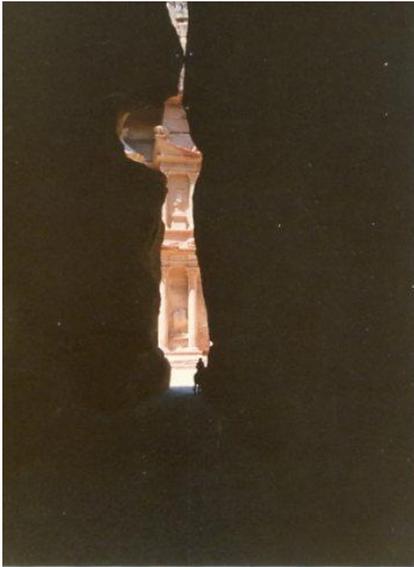
That lunchtime the king had invited all the local worthies (which included me) to lunch with him. When I arrived I was surprised to be instructed that we were all to sit on the floor, in order that the king be at a higher level, and that's where we had our food. We were also instructed that it was impolite to refuse any item of food, the first of which was a dish of boiled sheep's eyes. Not knowing any better I took one and tried to chew it - it was like chewing a rubber ball, and I could see that the servants were in convulsions. Eventually I got the message and swallowed it - ugh! Every other course seemed to be rice and I began to wonder if I should explode, and in fact I didn't eat another meal for about three days. The sitting on the floor didn't help one's digestion either. My ALO was very interested in a trip to the ancient ruins of Petra, and he took the opportunity to get advice from the Arab Legion. Consequently they offered us the chance of spending the night in their fort at Wadi Musa before a whole day at the ruins. We drove up the 'road' via a town called Ma'an, alongside what was then the Hedjaz railway (we even saw a train) which no longer exists, and spent the night with the Legion. On the way we met, in a very narrow part of the track, an Arab Legion lorry, and a game of 'chicken' ensued. At the last minute I chickened out and tried to squeeze a bit more space - which of course wasn't available. My nearside wheels rode up the steep edge of the road just enough to tip the 15 cwt over slightly - next second there was a bang and a shower of glass splinters as my wing mirror clipped the tailboard of the other vehicle - neither party even slowed down.



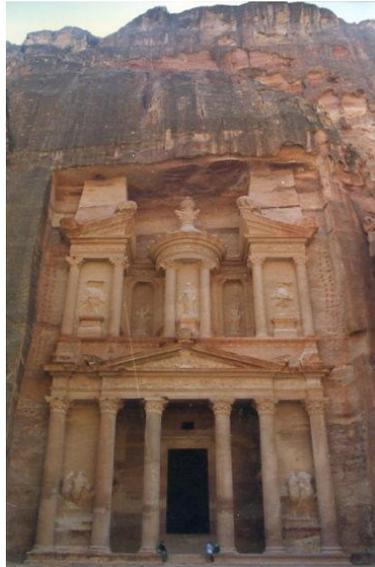
Next morning a local lad arrived with a selection of Arab horses, which we were to ride down to Petra, passing the spot where it is alleged Moses smote the rock face and water poured forth - and it still does today (or it did then). Never having ridden a horse before I was a bit apprehensive, especially as the reins only pulled the horse's head to the right, however off we set, down a very steep path for about a mile, with a sheer drop down the left side. I was glad that I could guide the horse away from the drop, and eventually we arrived at the Siq. Everyone now knows about Petra and the very narrow entrance ending at the Treasury,

but this was 1949 and I had never even heard of Petra, so I was spellbound for the rest of the day. I even picked up a Roman coin in the street, and was fascinated by the explanation of the footsteps cut in the side wall of the Treasury, which we were told were cut by robbers trying to get at the gold allegedly hidden in the crown of the facade.

(Naval 8 / 208 Squadron Webmaster's note: the following colour photographs were taken by the previous Webmaster during his visit to Petra in 1966)



The Treasury from the Path



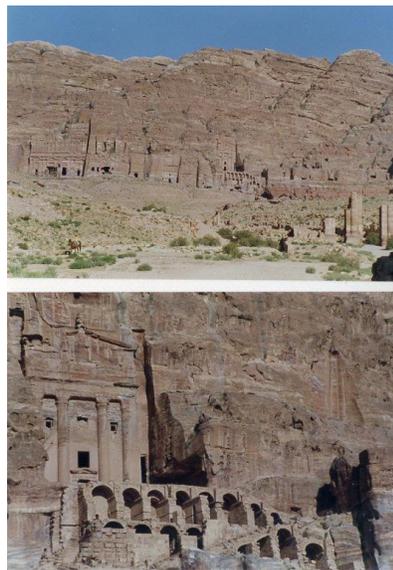
The Treasury



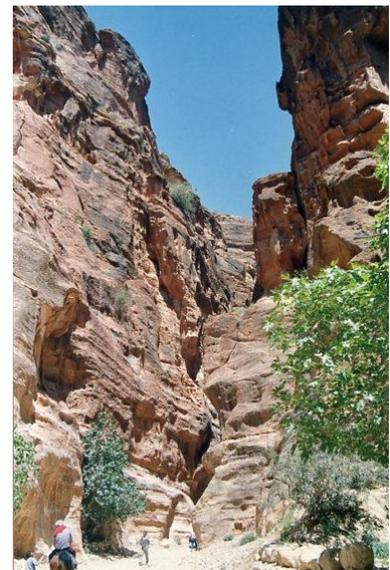
The Path from within the Treasury



One of the Temple Pillars



Two views of the Cave Temple



The Entrance to the Path to Petra

During the day I gradually became immersed in the time warp, until, in the afternoon I saw an aircraft vapour trail, which brought me sharply back to the present day. On the return trip up the steep path the horses sensed that they were homeward bound and began to be difficult to control. At one point my horse decided that he could fancy some vegetation about two feet down the cliff face, and I realised that I couldn't stop him with my 'right-turn only' reins, leaving me staring down his mane at several hundred feet of nothing - very scary for a beginner.

After we returned to Aqaba we had another quiet period before the ALO told me that one of our *raison d'être* was to evacuate to Wadi Rum in the event of an Israeli invasion of Aqaba. I decided that I at least ought to know how to get there, and arranged a sortie with him as guide. If we were also going to be an emergency landing ground I reckoned that we would have to supply fuel, so I decided we would go there in a 3-tonner and the tanker, with me driving the tanker and one of the airmen driving the 3-tonner.

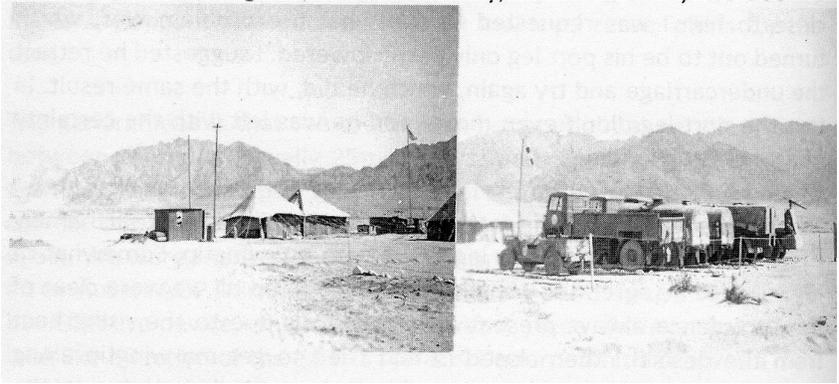
We somehow arrived at what looked like a dried-up lake bed surrounded by mountains, but the lake bed was several miles long and totally flat - quite amazing to me. On the return trip I decided to see just how fast a loaded tanker would go and chose a steep downhill section of track. We got an indicated 60mph with the tanker rolling markedly, at which point I thought enough was enough.



One other amusing incident I recall was when the pilot of the weekly Anson was one Master Pilot Ffolliot-Foster, who was a well-known trickster. As the freshly-returning passengers came on board his Anson they found him lolling in one of the passenger seats, reading a newspaper. I should point out that, in khaki uniform, aircrew didn't wear wings, and a Master Pilot's badge is exactly like a Warrant Officer's. After a suitable delay, when nothing seemed to be happening he leapt to his feet saying "Where's this pilot? I'm going to fly this thing myself" which he then proceeded to do - to everyone's horror.

At that time all arriving aircraft had to be sprayed inside with DDT before the passengers departed, and I had several aerosol canisters of it in my tent. Every night I was deafened by an invasion of moths, which swarmed round the single light bulb, continually colliding with it and creating a perpetual loud tinkling noise. One night I decided to 'fix' them with a heavy dose of DDT spray - and found I had a severe headache after a few minutes. No wonder DDT is strictly not allowed these days.

Whilst we were at Wadi Musa fort I had met some wild-looking characters, who turned out to be members of 'Topo. Squadron' of the Royal Engineers, correctly called the Topographical Squadron. Their job was to map the whole of the area, since the then current maps didn't bear too much resemblance to the actual terrain. They lived in their vehicles, in the desert, and had no food supplies with them - they ate what they could shoot, and consequently had absolute priority on spare parts for their vehicles.



In the course of conversation they promised to get me a spare gearbox for my Jeep, provided that I could give them my old one in exchange. Just before I was due to return to the squadron they were as good as their word and the gearbox duly arrived. All we had to do was take out the old one, which I discovered was more difficult than I had thought. We had no ramp with which to get under the Jeep, so we had to dig an 'inspection pit' in the sand and drive the Jeep over it. In case the sides fell in whilst the mechanic was under the vehicle we tied a rope round him with all the other airmen ready to pull him out. Luckily all went well and the Jeep became serviceable again.

All good things come to an end, and in late November I returned to the Squadron at Fayid. Here I discovered that 'my' aeroplane had been written off after Ray Wyborn had suffered an engine failure on a sortie way down the Nile. He had been carrying a drop tank, which he immediately jettisoned, but which fell very close to a native village. They promptly assumed they had been bombed, and, when the 'bomb' was closely followed by the aeroplane which had dropped it, making a forced landing, they arrived in a most aggressive mob. Not being able to speak much Arabic, Ray tried to keep them away by threatening them with the Verrey pistol. This worked, but left him all day in the blazing sun, till about 9 p.m., when a rescue convoy, triggered by his no.2, arrived. At one point he had tried to drink the water in the water-cushion on which we sat, and which was provided for just that purpose, and discovered that it had been filled with french chalk during manufacture. When filled with water by the safety equipment section they had overlooked the french chalk and all Ray got was a disgusting chalky paste.

On 12th. December we were to fly along the North African coast to Castel Benito, the airfield for the ex-Italian colony capital of Tripoli, in what was then Tripolitania. It would be a very long trip for a Spitfire, entailing a refuelling stop at El Adem, the airfield for Benghazi, in Libya, and we were to take off about 6 a.m. to avoid the worst of the heat, We were to carry 90 gallon external long-range belly tanks, which had no gauges, so we flew on them till the engine cut and then selected a normal internal tank. The sudden silence whilst over inhospitable desert is a bit nerve racking for the first few times, and our CO declined to do this and merely changed tanks after

an hour's flight. I was his no.2 and mine didn't run out for nearly an hour and a quarter, so he must have had at least 15 gallons left in the tank - doesn't sound much till one realises that represents some 120lbs weight.

At Castel Benito the ground crew had no trolleys available to put under the aircraft onto which to drop the tanks for normal flying, so a small corporal used to crawl under the tank and someone would release it from the cockpit onto his back. It weighed nearly a hundredweight empty, so he then crawled out with it on his back. When they came to the Boss's aircraft the tank weighed about two hundredweight and nearly flattened the corporal into the tarmac.

To revert to the actual journey, our takeoff time was put back for an hour, so we were told to go for another breakfast in the Transit Mess, followed by a further delay, with the same advice - and yet another. When the time actually arrived we were in a hurry, and I omitted to take my usual precaution of a 'panic pee' before takeoff. A few minutes after we were airborne I realised that all those cups of coffee were taking their toll, but, in a Spitfire, there is no provision for 'comfort stops'. Since I was the CO's no.2 there was no way I could return, and I knew I couldn't last the 2 hours+ to reach El Adem.

In a Spitfire the bottom of the cockpit is the outside skin of the aircraft, and I decided that there was nothing for it but to perform inside the cockpit. I then had to unstrap my safety straps, and my parachute harness and unzip my flying overalls - I'll skip the details, but you get the picture. After landing at El Adem I went for a coffee while we were refuelled, but when I returned to my aircraft the Chiefy said it was u/s with a hydraulic leak. I looked at the plane and saw, to my horror, a pool of fluid round the tailwheel. I had forgotten that the Spitfire 18 had a retractable tailwheel, which is closed in flight, when the aircraft is level, but is open when the aircraft is on the ground, in a tail down attitude. I realised what the puddle consisted of and said "What makes you think its hydraulic fluid, Chief?", whereupon he bent down, stuck his finger into the puddle and then into his mouth. "You can tell by the taste" he said. At that my courage failed and I hadn't the heart to tell him the truth, consequently I then had to wait behind while they carried out a hydraulic system test, and then fly on to Tripoli on my own. I often wonder if they pulled the trick of changing the dipped finger when putting it in the mouth, but I'll never know now.

One other thing which sticks in my memory was the sight, miles out in the bare desert, of small groups of tanks or lorries, presumably the results of some unknown incidents during WW2, which had occurred at east 6 years before. I was very moved by the sight of these silent witnesses to what may have happened to the occupants.

When we arrived, after a nearly three hour trip, we were given yet another breakfast - our fifth that day, partly because Tripoli was two hours behind Fayid in time. It took a day to get the aircraft back in normal kit, during which we wandered off into Tripoli and were very impressed by the beautiful Italianate buildings.

The next day we began the detachment, the purpose of which was to provide air support for the annual army exercises. My first sortie consisted of a session of Arty/R,

followed by the usual sector recce. of the local area, which is to familiarise one with the new terrain. The morning after that I was detailed as the CO's no.2 on a dawn recce, looking for tanks. After nearly an hour we hadn't seen hide nor hair of any tanks - nothing but desert and odd bushes. We were about to abandon the search when all the bushes started to sprout blue smoke- they were camouflaged tanks and the blue smoke was caused by them starting their engines.

As we were landing back at Castel Benito, an American military transport, landing at their air base at Wheelus Field on the far side of Tripoli, began a long complicated radio call on the same frequency as we were using. This so distracted the Boss that he forgot to lower his undercarriage, but I couldn't tell him till the Yank stopped talking. I could only watch helplessly, waiting for the crunch - which would also block the runway for me. At last, at the very last minute, the airwaves became clear, but I only had seconds to pass my warning and there wasn't time for the Boss to lower the gear before he hit the ground. All I could do was tell him to go round again, and I daren't risk him asking why, so I told him his wheels weren't down. He went round safely, but when he landed he gave me a rocket for "telling the world that he had made a bloomer". I felt that was a shade ungrateful, to say the least.

However he made amends by permitting me to take an aircraft to Malta for the weekend, to see my friend the physiotherapist from my days in hospital in Cyprus. Because she was stationed at the very top of the island I chose to land at the naval base at Hal Far, where I found some fascinating naval habits in being. Firstly, the Mess was referred to as the 'Wardroom' and secondly my room was my 'cabin'. However the real fascination was when I went to catch a local bus, which had a stop outside the main gate. It was referred to as the Liberty Boat, and furthermore I couldn't go outside the gate till the 'Liberty Boat was alongside. The next day, when I took off to return to Tripoli, the canopy (the cockpit cover) detached itself from its rails and I just managed to hold on to it, whereupon I had to complete a circuit and land whilst holding the canopy with one hand. Somebody had evidently interfered with the jettison mechanism overnight, probably to close the hood when they put it in the hangar. The following day, after a week at Tripoli, we returned to base via the same route - another two very long sorties.

The day after we returned I was on a low-level sortie out in the Sinai desert, flying along a track, which was in fact the main road, towards a village called NakhI in the middle of nowhere, when I spotted an Arab walking purposefully towards Suez, which must have been at least 50 miles away, and, although I passed within a few yards of him, at zero feet, he took no notice whatsoever. Well, you see Spitfires beside you every day out there, don't you?

Later that day I was sent to look for an RAF Anson which had forced landed in the desert towards the coast. Having found it I then dropped a message, which consisted of throwing out of the cockpit a weighted lump attached to a streamer. The following day, since I was the guy who found it, I was sent to take low-level photos of the crash, so that a recovery team could find it, and to assess what damage it had suffered. I didn't know it at the time, but one of the pilots, Toby Stobart, now lives four miles from me, was on 32 Squadron in Cyprus with us and later was instructing

with me at Stradishall. He now tells me that they had come down to Egypt to get an aircraft full of cheap booze for their Christmas party. And so 1949 ended unhappily for 32 Squadron.

In January I was detached to the newly formed Instrument Rating Flight based at Shallufah, and spent nearly three weeks flying the faithful Harvard on instruments. A new scheme had been initiated in the UK whereby all pilots were required to pass an annual, standard, flight test, referred to as an Instrument Rating, and this flight had been set up for the use of all the MEAF units, and I was one of the first three suckers. During my time there I managed to scrounge a night flight in one of the visiting Lincoln bombers, which we had intercepted on their arrival. It was very illuminating for me, especially when I was in the mid-upper turret and saw another Lincoln pass directly overhead not far above us. Nobody else saw it, and I then realised how hairy the 1000 bomber raids over Germany must have been. I also got a lift back to Fayid in one of the target-towing Beaufighters. These aircraft had fascinated me as an ATC cadet, when a Polish night-fighter squadron was stationed at Exeter. I have always wanted to fly one but the nearest I got was to stand behind the pilot and watch.

Towards the end of January I was offered a ride in one of 39 squadron's Mosquito Mk.36 night fighters. This was, to me, a big heavy twin, with a very heavy radar in the nose. The flight was an air test flown by one of their flight commanders, 'Bunny' Adams, with whom I was friendly. After he had carried out the formal test procedure he asked me if I would like a shot - does a dog like a bone? The only snag was that I had never flown a twin-engined aircraft, and furthermore I was sitting down in the bowels of the cockpit, in the navigator's seat. We agreed to leave our parachutes in situ, and clamber over/under each other till I was in the pilot's seat - I was instructed that, in the event of an engine failure, I just throttled back the live engine, trimmed it for a glide and swapped seats again. Sounded easy enough till we actually swapped seats, which was a bit of a struggle, but we managed it.

After flying around for a while it was time to return to Fayid, but, much to my surprise, Bunny decided that swapping seats was such a struggle that it would be safer if I landed it. Little did he know. He, of course, was standing beside me, so that he could see outside and he directed me onto the position for a final approach. Being used only to a Spitfire, it looked to me as if he wanted me to dive-bomb the runway, it was so close and we were so high above it, but he assured me that it would be O.K. I followed his instructions for setting the engine power and for the approach speed, and, sure enough, we came steeply down the approach path at the instructed 140 kts. At about the point where I would have closed the throttle on a Spitfire and glided the rest of the way I duly closed it on the Mosquito, whereupon the speed rapidly fell off, and Bunny hastily said "Don't let the speed get below 140". Since it was by then 130 and falling fast, and we were only about 15 ft. up there was nothing for it but to heave the stick back and keep my fingers crossed. At this point we fell onto the runway with a wallop which would have driven the undercarriage of a Spit. up through the wings. I kept it straight down the runway and apologised for the heavy landing check which I imagined would have to be carried out, but Bunny assured me that "that was about a normal landing for a Mossie". Wow! This flight constituted the ½ in my 26½ types.

The next day I was requested to fly to Shallufah where they asked me to return to the Instrument Rating Flight as a temporary instructor, to which I rather big-headedly agreed. The day before I was to join them I had been on an Arty/R sortie, so on my first 'local and famil.' flight in a Harvard I decided to take a close look at the group of tanks we had been using as a target to see if we had done any real damage to them with the gunfire. Unfortunately it had never occurred to me that the targets might be in use by somebody else, and, as I was roaming around them at low level, artillery shells began arriving all around. In a Harvard one doesn't go anywhere very fast and it seemed to take ages far me to get clear.

My first course of 'students', consisted of assessing their instrument flying ability and then instructing them in the new annual formal instrument flying test. They also had to demonstrate some 'actual' instrument flying, i.e. in cloud as opposed to simulated in the back with the hood over them. In Egypt cloud can be difficult to come by, and we had to be airborne in time to catch the early morning mist, which was never more than about 50 ft. thick. After this first course I was allowed to return to the squadron was just in time to take part in an annual army exercise, in which the soldiers of the imaginary country 'Galabea' had invaded the Canal 'one, (A galabea is the flowing gown in which all the local males dressed). On a night recce. we had dropped a load of home-made leaflets on them, one part of which asked them if they 'knew where their girl-friends were last night'. The following day we got an official complaint from the army that we were upsetting the troops by suggesting that their army wives were immoral. Our propaganda leaflets had obviously worked very well.

For some weeks we carried on our normal activities, but in mid April was on a low level sortie well down in the Gulf of Suez during which, as I turned for home over the sea, I found I was flying straight into the setting sun. Since I had been over the sea for some time I had collected considerable salt sea spray, which had dried on the windscreen, making it impossible to see properly. I decided to lower the seat to keep the sun out of my eyes, which is achieved by pressing a locking button on a lever and moving it in the required direction (rather like a handbrake in your car). Unfortunately, just as I operated the release button I hit a bump and the seat shot right down to its bottom position, where I couldn't see out at all. As I instinctively pushed forward on the stick to neutralise the bump I hadn't released the button. Consequently the seat then shot up to its top position again, at which point I pulled back on the stick After several of these switchbacks, all at fifty feet over the sea, I regained control of my senses and released the button and flew back to base, yet again a sadder but wiser man.

During April, for reasons I forget, we were down to only two officers on the squadron, consequently I was 'A' flight commander and Adjutant, and Dennis Usher, an ex-Battle of Britain Squadron Commander, was 'B' flight commander and CO.

On 18th April I went off on a low level photo recce to find St. Catherine's Monastery, at the foot of Mount Sinai, followed by a tiny hermit's hut in the middle of nowhere. I took the obvious photo of the Monastery (the one which now appears on every travel brochure), with the mountain in the background, and then got ambitious

and decided to take one in the opposite direction, i.e. with the aeroplane between the mountain and the Monastery. In the travel brochures there looks to be plenty of room, but in actual fact one has to be very close to the scree on the lower mountain slopes, at the same time as one is looking out the other way to see the target. I often wonder if my photo is the one which appears in the brochures. After the Monastery, the hermit's hut was like looking for a needle in a haystack, being about 10 ft. square and miles from any recognisable terrain feature, but I eventually got to it - how, and why, does anyone in his right mind decide to live like that?

On 25th. April I was flying no.2 on a formation flight, and when we came in to land I was fairly close to the formation leader, where the drill was that the leader landed on the left-hand side of the runway and the no.2 landed on the right. At about 100 ft., just after I had lowered the flaps, my aircraft began to roll very rapidly to the left. This was not that unusual, normally being caused by getting in the leader's slipstream, but in this case full opposite aileron wasn't having much effect and I was by then nearly vertically banked. A Spit 18 has flaps slightly bigger than its predecessors, consequently the operating jacks didn't quite fit as previously and they protruded up through the wing when in use and were covered by a small flap when retracted. Out of the corner of my left eye I just saw the jack disappearing into the port wing, indicating that that flap had retracted itself, which instantly explained the vicious roll. A quick glance at the starboard wing confirmed that its flap was still in place, and all the while the roll to port continued. Luckily I still had my hand on the flap control, with which I instantly retracted the remaining flap, and just managed to regain control before I hit the desert. Luckily I had caught the situation in time to save some pneumatic pressure, so only had to do a flapless landing but still had brakes. Had I crashed upside down it would have been assumed that I had misjudged the leader's slipstream and would have been a 'pilot error' statistic.

By the middle of May we had reverted to our normal situation, except that I was still the Adjutant, which was just as well because, on 16th we were ordered to move the squadron to Khartoum, in the Sudan. On 17th I flew down there in a Valetta, for the purpose of checking out the living accommodation, hangar facilities etc., and I recall the shock of walking out of the cool(ish) fuselage of the transport into what felt like an oven.

I reported, in the normal manner, to the Station Commander, who turned out to be a nutter! He stormed and raved that he hadn't been told anything about our move, that I must be some kind of a spy sent from HQ to check up on him, and placed me in close arrest. I discovered later that he had caused the grass cricket field, which had been painstakingly nurtured from the desert over many years, to be ploughed up, for no good reason that anyone could discover.

Close arrest, for an officer, means that he is confined to his room in the Mess, except for meals, and I was relieved to meet an RAF nursing sister, whom I had known when she was stationed at Fayid, when she first arrived in MEAF. She told me that her new boyfriend was the Squadron Leader administrator, so I asked her to get him to let the squadron know my predicament. This chap did better - he got me released, and I was able to complete my duties and return to Fayid as a free man.

While I was away the squadron had been packing up and preparing for the move (evidently we were still regarded as a mobile outfit), and three days after I returned we set off for Khartoum.

All the aircraft were serviceable, including the Harvard, and we had just enough pilots for one each. In my absence I had been 'selected' for the Harvard, which was going to be a major exercise. The Spitfires, together with the Valettas carrying the groundcrew and equipment, were to refuel at Wadi Haifa, right on the border of Egypt and the Sudan, but the Harvard wouldn't make it as far as that in one go. I had therefore to refuel at Luxor, Wadi Haifa and a strip in the desert called Dongola, for which I had to carry a special permit - written in Arabic. Due to the extra time I would be airborne I was to take off very early in the morning, so that I arrived about the same time at Wadi Haifa as the squadron. We had an airman who had been accepted for pilot training, so he was offered the chance to go with me, which he, somewhat unwisely, accepted.

Having been to Luxor before, I was not unduly concerned about that part of the journey, but after we had refuelled it got hotter and the visibility began to deteriorate, till it was no more than a mile. I could only protect myself from the blazing sun by holding my map over my head, and try to keep the airman awake. After Luxor we had a two- hour grind over nothing but featureless desert - 250 miles of nothing but sand, and nothing by which to navigate. I think this really brought home to me what bare countries Egypt, and indeed the Sudan, are, apart from an irrigated strip a mile or so along both sides of the Nile.

Some time before we approached Wadi Haifa I could hear the Spits and the Valettas arriving, but I couldn't raise the airfield on the radio. There is a standard procedure for navigating towards a line feature, which is intended to avoid arriving at the wrong point and not knowing which way to turn. This involves turning 30° left or right before one arrives, so that, if one isn't where one expects, at least one knows which way to turn.

Because of the poor visibility I decided to turn left several minutes before I was due to reach the river Nile, the airfield being only a mile on the far side of it. To my amazement, when we reached the river, there, bang on the nose on the far side, I could see the airfield, but, when the airman asked me how I knew when to turn, I produced the remark I was given in the ATC at Exeter - 'Oh, its easy enough when you know what you're about!''.

The Spits were leaving Wadi as we arrived, so we quickly refuelled and got going on the way to Dongola. Though it was miles from anywhere we were able to roughly follow the river, and eventually we came to small village which I assumed must be Dongola. I noticed a small pick-up truck, with several large drums in the back, leaving at high speed and noted its heading. Not far away in that direction I found a piece of desert with long white strips in a row on it. I guessed that must be the runway and came down low to have a look at the surface. The white strips seemed to be about a foot high and made of concrete, and the sand appeared reasonably flat so I landed. As I taxied back down the runway I realised that the white strips were in actual fact

only just above the surface, so I must have been much lower than I had realised when I inspected them.

Just then the pick-up arrived, complete with grinning locals, who proceeded to use the chamois leather system to refuel from the drums. Before they finished a rather grand saloon car arrived and out stepped a white European in immaculate clothing. He turned out to be the local British official and invited us back to his house for lunch, which we gratefully accepted, having had nothing since about five in the morning. We stayed in his rather grand house for about an hour after lunch, and then proceeded on our weary way to Khartoum. Again the navigation wasn't difficult since the visibility had improved, and anyway we were following the Nile for the first hour. After that it was a straight run across more desert to Khartoum, where we landed at about teatime - by which time they were beginning to wonder where we had got to. A long hard day's work.

The next day a nursing sister I had known at Fayid, arrived by Valetta on her way to the RAE hospital at Steamer Point, in Aden. That weekend I scrounged a ride in another Valetta, via Asmara, the capital of an ex-Italian colony named Eritrea, to the north of what was then Abyssinia, to Khormaksar, the RAF airfield. I had a pleasant weekend except that I discovered that the main subject of conversation in Aden was a discussion on the progress of one's current dose of prickly heat: Aden had temperatures of less than 100°F but relative humidity of nearly 100%.

Whilst strolling around Steamer Point shops we visited a perfumery where she wanted some Elizabeth Arden 'Blue Grass' perfume. I asked the shopkeeper if I could smell it, whereupon he sprayed me all down the front of my best no.1 khaki uniform. That was bad enough, but when I next wore it on parade, in the heat of Fayid, I was terrified that the parade commander would smell it and wonder about my 'sexual orientation' - except that we used a different expression in those days.

At Khartoum we discovered why we had been sent there, which was, in fact, to replace an army Auster AOP flight at Asmara. This airfield was at 8000 ft. amsl, and the object of the aircraft presence was to assist the local British Army unit to drive out the local banditry, called Shifta, and stop them stealing the villagers' cattle. The problem boiled down to the fact that Eritrea was basically an 8000 ft. plateau, split by sea-level valleys, which made radio communication from the valleys impossible. Since there was either no, or a very inefficient, telephone system, the aircraft were used to patrol, on a regular basis, all the village police posts and report any disturbance by radio. Each police post had a signal square, in which they signalled any Shifta activity, together with a time indicator, so that the army could take action, and we patrolled these posts several times a day on a 'milk-run'. Some of them were on the top of the plateau and some were at the bottom of the valleys, and the poor old Austers were not powerful enough to climb rapidly up to radio communication height, hence the use of Spitfires, especially as we were a low-level reconnaissance unit anyway.

We very rapidly discovered that the issued maps were useless, having been surveyed in 1904, and not bearing much relation to the actual terrain, so we had to learn the route by heart, and always follow the same one. One of the snags was that,

on occasion, one of the high posts was covered in cloud, meaning that one had to find a different route to the next one - using maps that were not very accurate - or abandon the remainder of the trip.

We lived in an army mess with the resident unit, The Royal Berkshire Regiment, or the 'royal berks' as they called themselves, and there was also a holiday camp for the use of British military from Aden. Asmara was a beautiful town, having been built by the Italians, but by then Eritrea was an independent country.

Though we established a flight at Asmara straight away, I didn't join it until the middle of June, before which I learned a few things about Khartoum. We lived in small bungalows, commenced flying at 5.00 a.m., had breakfast at 7.30, and finished at midday, due to the fierce heat. Every evening, as it got dusk, an amazing occurrence was the departure of literally thousands of bats, who covered the sky from horizon to horizon for some 40 minutes, returning in the morning. They came from the old abandoned city of Omdurman, across the Nile from Khartoum.

On one occasion we were offered a river cruise in the Sultan's launch, and from which I saw my first crocodile. He seemed to be asleep on the bank, but he suddenly took off across the mud with lightning acceleration and speed. And the amazing thing was that the locals were using the same stretch of water for bathing, laundry and going to the toilet.

We also had the unfortunate experience of a dust storm, called a 'Haboob', which occurred over night. We slept on the balcony of the bungalow, without bedclothes, due to the heat, and the storm left our naked bodies looking about the same colour as the locals. When I arrived at my desk at the office I discovered everything covered by the same dust, which was about the consistency of ladies' face powder.

One of our early trips was to intercept a prototype visiting Vickers Viscount passenger airliner, which was to carry out its tropicalisation trials at Khartoum. This was quite a common site for these trials in those days. The aircraft had four of the new (to us) turboprop engines, and, to our great embarrassment, we couldn't keep up with it in cruising flight.

When I eventually arrived at Asmara I discovered that they had a one- hour thunderstorm every day at 12 noon, followed by a very pleasant afternoon, during which we sometimes played football. Due to the height we found that 30 minutes each way was all we could play, and even climbing the long flight of steps up to Air Traffic left one breathless. This had the advantage that, when I spent a couple of weekends at Aden I was full of the joys, being at sea level again.

Having learned the 'milk run' route by following another aircraft I shared the daily tasks and on a sortie at the end of my first week I came upon a post showing bandit activity only five minutes away. I followed the direction sign and very shortly came upon a group of horsemen herding a number of cattle away from the village. I assumed that these were the bandits and decided to put my 'herding' skills, which I had learned with the goatherd in Cyprus, to good use. I managed to halt the cattle and

turned them round, but the bandits stayed in place, and very soon the cattle got used to the sound of the aeroplane and refused to go any further towards home. I then made a dive at the bandits, who appeared panic-stricken and rushed, complete with horses, under an enormous tree. When they then were faced with a head-on Spitfire at several hundred mph they decided that discretion was in order and galloped off, leaving me with a grazing herd of cattle. All I could do was return to the village, circle round, waggle the wings and hope they would get the message as I tried to indicate which way they should go.

It had become the general practice that, on returning to Asmara, one did a low-level run across the airfield to pull up just over the line of hangars. This was thought to look spectacular from Air Traffic, which was just along the front of them. Having been up there one day I realised that it didn't look that exciting, and I devised a ploy that meant flying between the hangars, thus seeming, from Air Traffic, to be about to fly into them. The reason for the gap was that the approach road to the airfield entered that way, and on the road was a lifting bar gate, to control road traffic. Just as I disappeared between the hangars the gate was suddenly raised, and I was faced by the now-vertical bar, which was rather higher than I, and only a violent bank missed it.

That same day a PR Mosquito from 13 Sqn. at Fayid arrived for refuelling, en route to Aden. On takeoff the pilot opened up to full throttle against the brakes, because 8000ft. was just the wrong height for the Mosquito's supercharger and he needed all the power he could get. Unfortunately he couldn't hold the ensuing violent swing, careered across the airfield and collapsed the undercarriage right beside our hangar. The next day they sent another Mosquito to collect him, and, in spite of a very experienced pilot, he also finished up beside the original and in an identical condition.

Our flight commander, Dennis Usher, was very relaxed about flying rules and merely stated that anyone who he decided had broken the normal safety rules was condemned to buy 'Naafi break for everybody else. On a day when the cloudbase was only about 200ft. our ALO mentioned that he had never seen an aircraft flying along upside down. Since I was about to go off on a weather check I offered, on my return, to fly along the runway inverted if he would pay the resultant 'Naafi break fine, to which he agreed.

When I got back the cloudbase was unchanged, but I reckoned that was enough clearance and rolled it over. At low level the horizon is in a different position vis a vis the pilot's eye level from the usual flying height, of which fact I was well aware. However, I hadn't realised that the low cloud would affect the situation even more, and, in my keenness not to fly into the ground inverted, I pushed the stick just too far forward and went up into the cloud. I was then faced with the decision to descend blind at 200ft., inverted, or to roll out whilst still in the dark. Having seen many people slide sideways out of a badly executed roll, I descended inverted and safely rolled out in the clear.

The Royal Berks were keen to persuade us to go on patrol with them, which I was quite happy to do, and on one occasion I spent two days away, including a night at a

village named Adi Ugri, where we spent the night in a very large fort several hundred years old. The first day we met a local on a bike who refused to cooperate when they tried to get him to tell them where the local bandits were camped. He had on the handlebars some of the biggest mushrooms I have ever seen, together with an Italian cavalry sword, which the soldiers threatened to confiscate. I imagine that he was scared of what the bandits might do to him and he continued to be uncooperative, so they carried out their threat, and later presented me with the sword - the mushrooms were delicious.

Early the next morning there was an earthquake, which I found very frightening because one wanted to run but had no idea which way to go. In the end I hid under the bed in case the walls fell in, which in fact happened to another part of the fort, where the ancient outside walls split wide open.

We also visited one of our regular villages on top of the plateau, which came in handy on a flight two days later. The village appeared, from down in the valley from which I approached it, to be just about in cloud, but by then I knew that there was another valley just the other side of the village, which I could use as an escape route, and this I duly used, having cleared the huts by a few feet.

I also went out on a mysterious trip with our Flight Sergeant 'Chiefy' Strachan, who had some unknown connection with the Intelligence people. One part of the trip, which I was uneasy about, took us through a village where we were told a baboon colony had recently kidnapped a local human female. The MT Section instructed the Chiefy not to leave the vehicle if we had to stop for any reason. When we arrived at our destination I stayed in the vehicle whilst Strachan visited one of the houses - he declined to discuss what all the secrecy was about, and I never discovered how he got permission for such an expedition, or how he knew where to go, or how to speak the language.

At the end of July I flew a Spit back to Khartoum for servicing, and on the return flight there was some cloud cover and, since Asmara had no let-down facilities, I decided to stay below cloud. About halfway back, near Kassala, the terrain began to rise up to the plateau, but I decided to press on though the cloud now covered the tops of the mountains. As I was following a large wide valley I consoled myself that, if the valley closed off, I could still turn back in the width available. Unfortunately I soon came to a bend and, immediately round it, the valley became very narrow and disappeared up into the cloud. All I could do was pour on the power and hope that the Spit was able to climb faster than the mountain side - which, luckily, it could. And, even luckier, there were gaps in the cloud by the time I got to Asmara.

At the beginning of August we all returned to the Squadron at Khartoum, where we found, to our amazement, that they had had biblical amounts of rain which had flooded the airfield, apart from the runways. This had disrupted the railways to the extent that they were short of aviation fuel. Somebody had also pranged the Harvard, which we had to leave behind as we returned to Fayid.

On 10th. we took off for Wadi Haifa, but shortly after getting airborne I found I had no pneumatic pressure - again. I had no idea what the airfield surface was like at Wadi, not having given it much attention on the way down, and didn't know what crash facilities they had, Consequently I decided that Khartoum might be the better be flooded runways notwithstanding. The trouble was that, in order to get to Wadi, we had filled the rear tanks and the ventral tanks, and I had to burn off most of that fuel before attempting a flapless/brakeless landing. Having already done one brakeless landing, I knew what was to follow, and it was a very lonely hour and a half contemplating the future. Because of the floods I decided against jettisoning the, by now, gas- filled empty ventral tank. Also, to shorten the waiting time, I was foolishly tempted not to empty the rear tank, which put the centre of gravity much further aft than normal. The ground crew had delayed their departure till I was down, and they decided to try to emulate the Fleet Air Arm and stretch a rope across the runway to try to catch the tailwheel strut before I swung off the runway. However, on landing I bounced slightly and this distraction caused me to forget to switch off the engine. This, coupled with the rearward centre of gravity, caused a vicious swing well before I got to the rope, and I was headed for the floods of unknown depth. I expected these would stop the wheels and probably put the aircraft on its nose, or, even worse, over on its back from where I could easily drown. Having been told by the ground crew, after my earlier adventure in Cyprus, that a wheels-up selection was more easily repairable than an overturned aircraft, again there was nothing for it but to raise the undercarriage and stay right way up. I came to a halt some fifty yards out in the water, and one of the airmen came splashing out to me, Since he was already soaking wet, I persuaded him to carry me ashore, which we achieved with me brandishing the cavalry sword which I had had in the cockpit with me, having had no room in my kitbag.



I spent the rest of the day ignominiously flying back in the Valetta with the ground crew, and contemplating how I might have better handled the problem. The sad sequel to this story occurred after I had left the Middle East, but I heard that one of our NCO pilots had gone down to Khartoum to airtest the Spitfire after it had been repaired. It transpired that the engine radiators had become full of sand in the crash, but had neither been checked nor replaced. During the airtest the engine had overheated and caught fire, but, when the pilot had bailed out, his parachute, borrowed from the Khartoum parachute section, had failed to open correctly and he was killed.

Three days after returning to Fayid I went for another air test in a Mosquito, but this time I wasn't offered the chance to fly it myself - wonder why? At this time we received a new intake of experienced pilots from UK, one of whom had been one of my flying instructors at Cambridge.

All the other fighter squadrons in the MEAF had, long ago, converted onto the single-jet-powered Vampire aircraft, 32 (our sister squadron in Cyprus) having received them before we left Cyprus, together with 73 Sqdn in Malta. Our friends in the Tempests at Deversoir had got them before we went to Khartoum, and we heard lurid tales of how they gobbled fuel and were slow to accelerate on an overshoot, but climbed very rapidly. In fact, we were able to beat a Vampire to 20,000 ft., they then overtook us to 30,000, but were useless at gunnery at 40,000ft., whereas we could do an ordinary quarter attack up there. 208 was a low-level recce. outfit and were thus due to get Meteor Mk.9 twin-engined single-seaters, but we first got a Mk.7 two-seater, which arrived in October, for our conversion, in order to be trained in flying twins. For this reason two of our new pilots were flying instructors, though neither of them knew anything about low-level recce. or, indeed, about Spitfires. One of them was so livid about reverting to piston-engined aircraft that he claimed to have had an engine failure and bailed out as a protest - we checked and discovered that he had had his parachute repacked the previous day.

Though we had our two-seater Meteor, and I was by then the longest serving pilot on the squadron, the ex-Cambridge instructor refused to convert me because I was nearly due to return to UK as "tour-ex" (tour expired), after the standard 2½-year tour. Unbeknown to me, that ruling affected the rest of my life.

In early September we heard that we were to make our next visit to 26 APS at Nicosia and, still being the adjutant, I flew up there on 7th to check the position. I spent most of the remainder of the month doing air tests and practising air-to-ground firing, and, on 28th, off we went. On my first sortie I reckoned I had got a good score till, on my last attack, the canvas target caught fire and burnt out, leaving me with no record.

Apart from three days during which I flew down to Fayid to air test some replacement aircraft, we spent the whole of October on the practice camp, culminating, for me, on the last day when I sank a ship-towed sea target and shot off a towed glider target in consecutive sorties. This made me extremely unpopular with the authorities, because

- a) they had no more ship-towed targets and
- b) they claimed that the glider nearly landed on the shore.

And, of course, the reason I had shot them both off was that I was allowing too much deflection, which hit the towing cable instead of the target. As a punishment I had to fly back to Fayid with the ground crew in a Valetta.

Immediately we were back at base we had to get ready to travel along the coast again to Tripoli for the annual army exercises. It was obvious that the squadron had already written me off, since I was detailed to act as the ground liaison officer and for

that reason I travelled to Tripoli on the ground crew Valetta. I was attached to an army unit, together with a naval pilot, and we had an armoured car, complete with driver, allocated to us.

The desert is very cold at night in November, and on our first night I discovered a generator vehicle with the engine running all the time to provide electrical power. At the rear were open shutters to the radiator, and warm air was wafting from this, so I laid out my sleeping bag and went to bed underneath it. Luckily for me I was spotted about five minutes later and a large soldier dragged me away, complete with sleeping bag. As I came to he explained that, not only was warm air coming from the radiator, but so was the exhaust gas, which would have done for me big time.

Both the naval pilot and I had an opportunity to drive the Beaver armoured car, which turned out to be a Humber Snipe saloon with an armoured body, and the brakes couldn't handle the added weight. At one point, descending a steep hill with a narrow bridge at the bottom, the army driver demolished part of the bridge without any apparent damage to us. After an interesting week we returned to Tripoli and I was allowed to fly a Spit back home to Fayid.

On 1st December I flew my last sortie on 208 Squadron and on 3rd I climbed aboard a Hastings transport on my journey back to UK. We spent the night at Luqa in Malta, en route to Hemswell in Lincolnshire, where we landed in deep snow. Strangely enough, it wasn't the first snow I had seen since we left UK, because it actually snowed in Egypt that winter, and we had log fires in the Mess, the only fuel available being used railway sleepers.

Unfortunately I had been promoted to Flight Lieutenant only a few weeks before leaving Egypt and hadn't bothered to change any rank badges on my blue uniforms, and had therefore packed my greatcoat in my steamer trunk. I spent two freezing days walking about in my khaki uniform as a consequence. However I was home and had several weeks leave due to me, not having taken any during my overseas tour, My final memory of my overseas tour was the arrival, after a couple of weeks, of my steamer trunk, which, I was amazed to find, released the distinctive smell of the Canal Zone - a cross between diesel oil and 'effluent'.