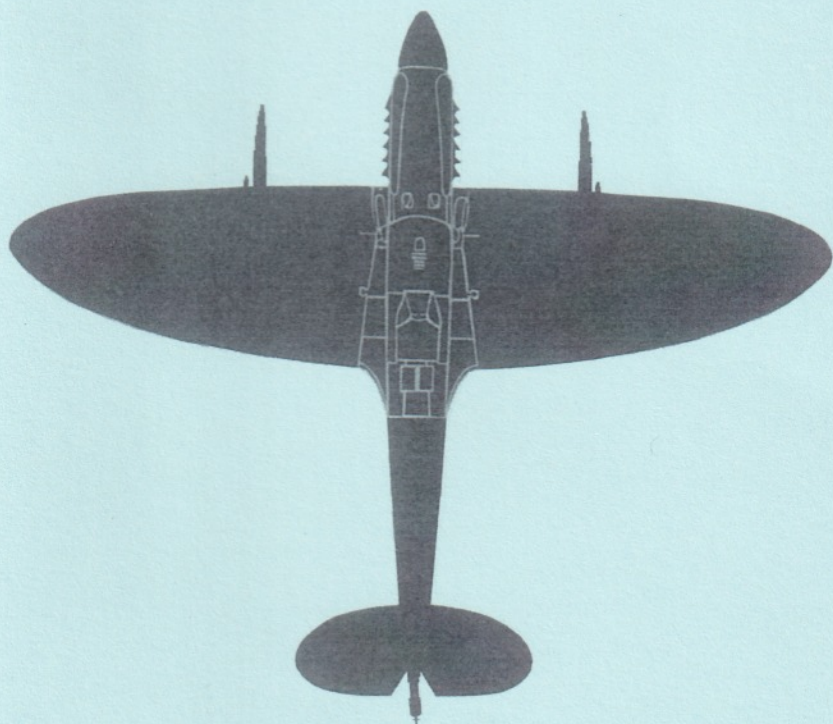


**THE
DISTINGUISHED WAR RECORD
OF
WING COMMANDER D F PERRENS
DSO OBE DFC MA**



Compiled by Dennis Sawden

Front Cover

The aircraft silhouette on the front cover
of this booklet is of a Spitfire Mark IX,
Donald's favourite of the
Spitfire types he flew during the
Second World War

The silhouette was provided
by The Spitfire Society

THE DISTINGUISHED WAR RECORD
OF
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DSO OBE DFC MA

Compiled by Dennis Sawden

Completed in March 2015
for the family members and friends of
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Donald Perrens taught me physics in my first year at Eastbourne College in 1946/47, but I had few dealings with him during the rest of my four years there. However, he was a well-known figure in the school, particularly on 'Corps Days', when the whole school of 400 boys paraded weekly as a contingent of the Junior Training Corps (JTC), later renamed and expanded into the Combined Cadet Force (CCF). Donald commanded the RAF Section then and his pilot's brevet and wartime decorations on his uniform were clear for all of us to see: however, I cannot recall ever seeing or hearing anything of substance about his wartime service and experiences: this shows his modesty.

Just before I left school in December 1950, to be called up for National Service early in 1951, I consulted Donald because although I had been a sergeant in the Army Section of the CCF, I had registered to serve in the RAF and he gave me some good advice. After my two years commissioned service in the RAF Regiment, I decided to stay in the Royal Air Force, transferring to flying duties as a pilot and served on to complete 33 years. Throughout those years and later in my life, I kept in touch with Donald and often met him at Old Boy reunions at the College, or we corresponded, or we met in other ways. (See also Appendices 1 and 2).

In 2013, Donald made a written record of the Spitfire sortie in Italy in January 1945 after which he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO): he was greatly assisted in writing this article by a friend who lived near him in West Sussex. Sadly, this friend then died, but Donald attempted to get the article published in two aeronautical magazines: however, he was unsuccessful.

I happened to write to Donald in January 2014 just after his 95th birthday and I was surprised, but also delighted, when he invited me to write a narrative for him about the DSO sortie, as he knew that I had written and published a number of books about the RAF wartime experiences of several individuals. Soon after I started work, I convinced Donald that my record should be about the whole of his long war service, so that the DSO sortie was put into proper context, as, for instance, he had previously been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) as well. We had numerous telephone conversations and then, generously, he kindly let me borrow his two flying log books, which proved invaluable. I had access to not only his unpublished magazine article, but also to the report of an exhibition at Eastbourne College in 2009, about his wartime service, to mark his 90th birthday, which was published in the Old Eastbournian magazine. Michael Partridge of Eastbourne College Archives, a contemporary of mine at

school, set up the exhibition for Donald's 90th birthday and assisted me considerably by providing valuable information about Donald's working life at Eastbourne College - and many photographs from the archives. As a result, I was able to compile this narrative, which Donald then checked and added to extensively, to authenticate and approve the story. He was greatly assisted in this task by Marian's daughter, Mary-Louise, who sat with him and read the text to him – and then made notes of his comments and additions, before typing and sending them to me, for which I am most grateful. Donald's daughter, Pip, also assisted with the proof reading.

Having written a number of books in the past purely for the family and friends of individuals, ie not for general publication, but as limited editions, I then persuaded Donald that his story could be recorded in the same way and this booklet is the result. It is worthy of mention here that I asked him in the summer of 2014 if he had ever written about his wartime experiences, or given any talks about those times? His answer was 'No': so I asked why that was? His answer was: 'Because nobody ever asked me to'.

It has been a great privilege, and pleasure, to be entrusted with the task of recording Donald's outstanding wartime experiences, so that the Perrens family members and friends have a tangible record in booklet form of all that he achieved and so that his loyal, long and distinguished service to his King and Country is preserved for posterity.

March 2015

Dennis Sawden

DEDICATION

This booklet is dedicated to the memory of Donald's friends and colleagues who were killed in not only The Suffolk Regiment of the British Army in France, but also to all those alongside whom he served in the Royal Air Force in North Africa and Italy, but who did not survive the Second World War – or who were wounded or maimed in the conflict.

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THE DISTINGUISHED WAR RECORD OF

WING COMMANDER D F PERRENS DSO OBE DFC MA

Prologue

Donald Perrens was born at Willenhall, Staffordshire, on 1 January 1919. Educated at Bablake School, Coventry and at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, he graduated with a Master of Arts degree in Physics in the summer of 1939 and applied for a teaching post at Eastbourne College.

During his interview with the headmaster, Mr John Nugee, Donald was told proudly by the headmaster that the College had a first class and thriving contingent of the Officers' Training Corps (OTC): however Donald, filled with new and fresh ideas gained at Cambridge, replied that 'he didn't believe in giving young people militaristic ideas' – words he would have reason to recall many years later. Nevertheless, Donald was offered a post in the Science department at Eastbourne: however, the outbreak of war intervened.

The Suffolk Regiment

Donald was conscripted as a member of the Militia in July 1939 and called to the colours of The Suffolk Regiment. (It is a matter of interest here that being called-up in peacetime to the Militia was the first such instance since the time of the Napoleonic Wars).

Donald underwent training as an infantry officer and soon afterwards, in early March 1940, he was posted to France to join the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), endeavouring to stem the German advances towards the English Channel coast, through the Low Countries. His unit was sent to a Reinforcement Camp at Rouen, but this was soon cut off by German advances, preventing those at Rouen from reaching the evacuation beaches at Dunkirk, well over 100 miles to the north, from where over 338, 000 British, French and Belgian troops got away between 27 May and 4 June 1940.

Donald still has an valuable newspaper article by Douglas Williams, War Correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, which was published soon after the events described and gives a clear picture of the

adverse situation in which Donald and his men found themselves, leading up to the fall of Rouen. The article is headed: 'Exploit of an Improvised BEF Division before Rouen' and most of that article is included here.

'It became urgently necessary to form a defence force, so reinforcement camps and base details in the area were hurriedly combed for a muster of all available troops. Finally the following 'mixed-bag' resulted:

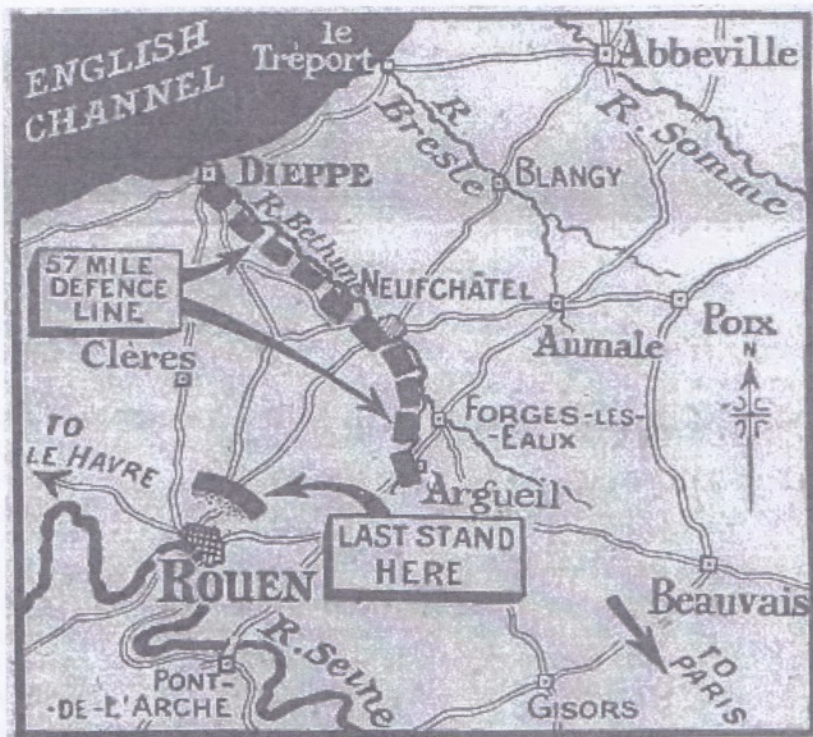
- 5 battalions from reinforcement camps*
- 3 battalions from reservists employed by the Pioneer Corps*
- 3 Territorial battalions engaged on guard duties*
- 3 batteries of anti-tank guns (2-pounders)*
- 4 Royal Engineer companies*

Defence of Rouen

This motley force numbering perhaps 8000 men was then placed at the disposal of Major-General A B Beauman and the force was moved 25 miles NE of Rouen and strung along a 57-miles front, roughly following the River Bethune, from Dieppe on the coast, down through Neufchatel, Forges-les-Eaux and thence southwards to the Forêt de Lyons. Though so thinly held as to seem almost helpless, this line served, thanks to gallant bluff and indomitable courage, to hold up vastly superior German forces for more than a week, until the Germans, finally realising the weakness of the body opposing them, smashed through with two armoured divisions.

A couple of days after this line had been formed, a division, which later was partially surrounded, moved through the Beauman force to take up a position along the River Somme, from which it was later forced to withdraw to the line of the Bresle.

After days of skirmishing and patrol encounters, during which officers mounted on motor-cycles did fine work as scouts, the storm broke on the morning of 6 June 1940. Strong German forces attacked all along the line, and finally pierced it, thanks to the stratagem of using captured French tanks, which approached our lines with tricolours flying and turret-tops open. Our men, thinking they were Allies, guided them through the tank mines, and only realised their mistake when the tanks opened fire at point-blank range.



DEFENCE OF ROUEN – JUNE 1940
(Daily Telegraph map)

By the afternoon the enemy was approaching Rouen, and General Beauman had safely withdrawn his entire force, except for the divisional reserve, consisting of a mixed battalion of men from some 20 different units – some from reinforcement depots, others newly returned from leave.

This gallant force, under the command of a lieutenant-colonel, was posted at a cross-roads, a previously prepared position, a few miles outside Rouen, on the main road to Neufchâtel. The rest of the Beauman division moved towards the bridges and ferries at Caudebec and Duclair, on the Seine, behind Rouen, on their way to the south of the river.

The battalion numbered perhaps 600 men, and owing to the fact that they had been so hurriedly assembled, had very little defensive

armament, and were poorly equipped to stand up to any massed attack by tanks. Their weapons consisted of:

*9 Anti-tank rifles, with just 8 magazines of 160 rounds each
1 Bren gun
1600 tank road mines – and
A few Vickers machine guns*

Many of the men had not been under fire. Nevertheless they defended their post with the greatest courage and obstinacy, and, in the words of an official report, 'their rearguard action constituted a model of its kind'.

Even for a Regular regiment their performance would have been regarded as magnificent, and when it is considered that this tiny force had been formed only a few days previously, from mixed-up units, with officers and men unknown to each other, their behaviour was extraordinary.

'You will give the maximum resistance without risking encirclement' was General Beauman's last order, and gallantly it was carried out.

The battalion, having marched from Rouen with blankets and full packs, arrived at the cross-roads at about 3.30 pm on 7 June. Road blocks were immediately built from available materials, strong-points were constructed and land mines laid at selected places through which tanks would have to pass.

Six severe bombing raids by German low-flying planes were made on the battalion's post, and the night was spent in a series of alarms. Information on the enemy's movements, however, was very obscure, and it was not until 4.00 pm the following day that an enemy tank suddenly appeared over a ridge 1000 yards in front of the British position, followed by a party of infantry.

This tank hit a road mine and blew up; the infantry, under hot fire from B Company, sought cover in a wood near by. Six more tanks then appeared. Two were put out of action by our guns and the other four scuttled for cover. Firing then became general and our positions were shelled heavily, while parties of Germans started to infiltrate around the flanks and to penetrate from the rear. With both flanks in the air, the position became untenable, and at 7.00 pm, the

order to withdraw was given. Losses inflicted on the enemy included:

12 tanks
1 field gun (knocked out by direct hit)
1 plane shot down, by anti-tank gun's first shot
6 parachutists shot as they landed
Several hundred infantry

Our men withdrew in perfect order down the main road, marching in sections at 50 yard intervals. They passed through Rouen, and although obstructed at the main bridge by hordes of refugees, managed to cross to safety.

Another fine show was put up by another detachment at the Pont de l'Arques, near Alizay, south of Rouen, where three enemy tanks trying to cross were knocked out and several hundred Germans were killed and wounded. All our men would have got safely away here also, but for the fact that the bridge behind them was blown up too soon and they were left stranded on the wrong side. Many of the men who could not swim were captured, although some were rescued, thanks to the bravery of officers who swam the river under heavy fire bringing rescue boats over.

Donald had good clarity of recall when he told me in telephone conversations during 2014 about those harrowing and extremely dangerous times in France. He told me:

After holding the line for 3 days, they were then involved in fighting a rearguard action. He said: "We crossed over the River Seine on foot at Rouen where there were many signs of enemy bombing by Stukas and low-level strafing of targets, even farm cattle had been killed: the smell was terrible and we hurried on, following the road signs to Caen, about 80 miles to the south-west, through Normandy. There were many refugees on our route, which slightly impeded our progress, but we felt sorry for them and did what we could to help. We passed Bayeux, but there wasn't time to stop to see the famous tapestry!

We had been on the move for 2 weeks and were very tired, through engagements with the enemy, lack of sleep and a lack of proper meals, but we did manage to get lifts in military vehicles at times.

Escape to the UK

After a further 80 miles of mostly foot-slogging from Caen, and approaching Cherbourg, we could see the harbour and masses of Allied road vehicles, all of which would be immobilised and burnt, so that they were not left for the Germans. At the top of that hill, we heard a German Me110 aircraft approaching from behind, firing its machine gun at us and the poor refugees. Fortunately we had no casualties.

Eventually, on 22 July 1940, with our spirits much higher, we marched down to the port of Cherbourg and were soon on board the only ship available to take us home. Donald admits that he was absolutely shattered with fatigue by this stage, after days and days without sleep, and proper food, but the sight of England and Southampton harbour, and the realisation that he had escaped capture, gave him an enormous boost.

He admits too that his experiences taught him a great deal about one's responsibilities as an officer in adversity. He learnt too what it is possible for an officer to do that gives encouragement to those under one's command.

Back at the regimental depot in Bury St Edmunds, Donald was by now a captain in rank and his battalion was re-formed, now as the 8th Battalion, and moved to Essex, close to the RAF airfield at North Weald.



REGIMENTAL BADGE OF THE SUFFOLK REGIMENT



CAPTAIN D F PERRENS
THE SUFFOLK REGIMENT
(1942)

One day, Donald made informal contact with the flying personnel there and 'scrounged' a passenger ride with a Sergeant Pilot in a Miles Magister; unkindly, the pilot threw the aircraft all over the sky and Donald was made very air sick. However, this experience failed to deter Donald from the idea of taking up flying himself and, on reading in an Army Council Instruction (ACI) that the RAF was seeking pilots, to be trained in reconnaissance, he applied and was successful.

RAF Pilot Training

Donald underwent RAF Basic Flying Training on Tiger Moth biplanes at No 4 EFTS at Brough, beside the River Humber near Hull from 29 November 1941 until 22 April 1942, at the end of which he was assessed as Above the Average. A week later, he started his Advanced Flying Training at RAF Cranwell, where the college had been closed for the duration of hostilities: many others on the course with him were also ex-Army officers destined to join Army Co-

operation squadrons. The flying here was on twin-engined Airspeed Oxfords, as, at that time, trainee pilots destined to join Army Co-op squadrons were expected to fly twin-engined aircraft types on operations. Donald finished this course on 15 August 1942 with a total of 200 hours to his name and was awarded his pilot wings: again he was assessed as Above the Average. A busy one-week course at RAF Newton followed, again on Oxfords, to acquire Beam Approach and Blind Landing skills.

A change in Allied/RAF policy, to use single-engined aircraft on Army Co-operation units, resulted in Donald being sent next to No 17 (Pilots) Advanced Flying Unit at RAF Watton in Norfolk, to convert onto single-engined types: here, on the Master II, he flew another 12 hours and was again assessed as Above the Average. Next he was moved to No 41 Operational Training Unit at RAF Old Sarum near Salisbury, where on 18 September he flew the first of 19 sorties on the Harvard single-engined trainer. Old Sarum was the centre of excellence for training in photo reconnaissance and here Donald also converted onto two new types: he did 32 hours on the North American Mustang and 8 hours on the Hawker Hurricane, aircraft he would be flying on operations in the future. By now he had a total of 281 flying hours to his name.

This course was followed by a final week of preparation at RAF Hawarden near Chester from 16 to 25 November 1942, where he was issued with tropical kit, had inoculations and was briefed on other aspects of his future duties abroad.

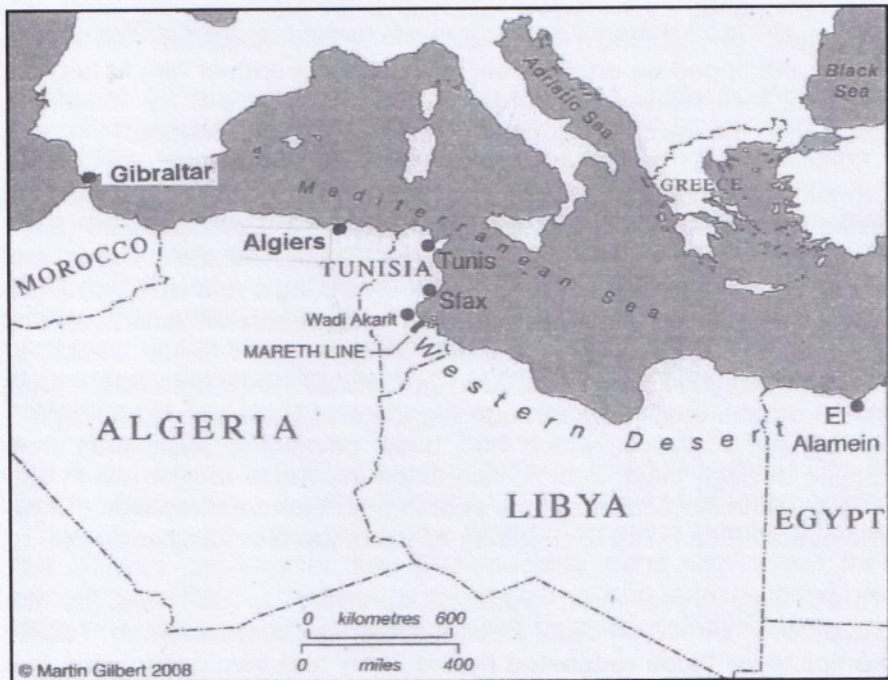
Posting to Algeria

There was no embarkation leave for Donald, as he was dispatched straight from RAF Hawarden by train to Glasgow and the mouth of the River Clyde, where he was soon onboard a crowded troopship, part of a convoy with other ships which sailed far out into the Atlantic to avoid enemy submarine attacks and, after ten days, he arrived in Gibraltar on 5 December 1942. He was here for two weeks, on what to-day is called 'R&R' (Rest & Relaxation), but he happened to meet a friend who was on a Catalina flying boat squadron based there, so he scrounged an interesting passenger ride with him one day. On 19 December, he was flown in a Dakota transport aircraft to Maison Blanche, a former French airfield near Algiers, where he was readied to join a squadron – and spent his first Christmas

abroad: Donald recalled that he was able to attend a service in the English Church in Algiers on Christmas Day.

No 225 Squadron

On 4 January 1943, he was flown in another Dakota to Constantine, also in Algeria, about 100 miles to the east. This is where he joined No 225 Squadron on 9 January. Living conditions here were vastly different to what he had been used to in England – with arid desert and sand everywhere, very stark indeed, with many flies about. Everyone was accommodated in tents: running water was a thing of the past – in fact, water was rationed and their food was mostly tinned goods, with only occasional fresh food available, but, as Donald said: 'There was a war on and we soon got used to it'.



MAP – MEDITERRANEAN SEA

It was at Constantine, from 10 January 1943 onwards, that Donald flew Hurricanes again, on local flying and formation practice. On 18 January, he was tasked to fly a Hurricane to the squadron's new base at Souk el Khemis, about 60 miles SW of Bizerta. Their new home was on one of a clutch of six Allied airfields built by Royal Engineers of the British Army, in a wide sandy valley, closer to the battle area in northern Tunisia: amusingly, these landing grounds were named after London railway stations – Kings Cross, Euston, Marylebone, Paddington, Victoria and Waterloo. One additional and significant factor for the pilots was that at all of these landing grounds the surface consisted of PSP (Pressed Steel Plate), a matting of interlocked metal strips, to provide a solid base on the otherwise sandy surface. Landing on them was a very noisy experience, but better than loose sand.

No 225 squadron was based at Waterloo, but as Donald landed his Hurricane there for the first time, he found that he had lost brake pressure, so, to avoid running off the end of the strip, he pulled onto the sand and, as he wrote afterwards in his flying log book, he 'Pranged on landing – brakes u/s' (unserviceable), when the Hurricane tipped up on its nose, which did not endear him to his new CO, so, for a while afterwards, he flew as his No 2 (or 'Weaver'), protecting the tail of his CO and quickly built up experience.

Donald had become a member of 'No 285 Reconnaissance (Recce) Wing, Desert Air Force', which consisted of Nos 208 and 225 (RAF) Squadrons, as well as No 40 Squadron, South African Air Force, and No 318 Squadron (Polish Air Force). The wing's role was 'Army Co-operation', which involved carrying out reconnaissance in and beyond the battle area and giving close support to the British 1st Army, which had landed at Oran in October 1942 and was forcing the Germans eastwards through Algeria and Tunisia towards Tunis – whilst the 8th Army, which had been advancing westwards from Egypt, through Libya into Tunisia since the Battle of Alamein in July 1942. Both Armies were thus pushing the Germans towards Tunis - the overall plan being to rid North Africa of the German presence.

There were three main types of operation to be flown by the squadron. Firstly, Tactical Reconnaissance (abbreviated to 'Tac/R') sorties were those requested by the Army and involved looking in a particular area for enemy transport movements: these formed the majority of the Army Co-op work. Army officers attached to the squadron (known as Air Liaison Officers - ALOs) would brief the

pilots on what was required and the sorties were flown in Mustangs or Spitfires: these trips lasted for about 40 to 60 minutes and were flown at medium level, ie 5000 to 8000 feet.

The second type of operation flown was pure Photographic Reconnaissance (PR), when searches were carried out in the same areas for signs of enemy military vehicle activity, ie vehicle tracks in/out of a particular location. These were flown in Mustangs at a lower altitude of 2000 to 5000 feet, but with the additional hazard of often running into enemy anti-aircraft gunfire, referred to as 'flak', which Donald admitted was 'distinctly unpleasant'.

The third type of sortie was Artillery Reconnaissance. This involved flying to a briefed area and observing the fall of shots where an Army artillery target was being engaged, with the pilots in radio contact with the gun controller on the ground. so that the accuracy of the gun fire could be reported back and gun sight adjustments made until complete accuracy was achieved. These were flown at what might be described as a 'safer' altitude of 8000 to 10,000 feet, but unfortunately it did not mean the pilots were immune from flak.

It should be appreciated that pilots engaged in these Army Co-operation operations in close support of the land forces had many demanding challenges to face in this role. Over and above flying a fast and heavily-armed aircraft with an outstanding performance, pilot navigation of a very high standard was required: skill at map reading, quickly assessing situations on the ground and alertness to the possibility of enemy air activity, ie FW190s or Me109s, as well as confronting enemy gun fire from the ground (flak), all made many demands on the pilots. Another feature of these operations was that they usually flew in pairs, the No 2 acting as Look Out, to protect the tail of the No 1 or leader.

But there proved to be yet another type of operation which Donald and his fellow pilots were called upon to fly, somewhat unexpectedly – namely ground attack of enemy targets, dropping bombs or using the 20 mm cannons or the .303 machine guns with which their aircraft were fitted. It wasn't long before they had to learn these new skills – on the squadron, a sophisticated form of 'on the job' training.

Battle of the Kasserine Pass

On 22 February, Donald flew in a battle formation of twelve Hurricanes, in sections of four, and unusually, with a fighter escort. The Hurricanes were tasked to attack German activity near the town of Tebessa, but this was aborted through bad weather: they landed after 1 hour 30 minutes and Donald recorded in his log book afterwards 'Fighter escort got Ju87'. This proved to be a significant date and event, as they were then briefed that, on the previous day, the German Afrika Korps under Field Marshal Rommel, although generally under retreat towards Tunis, had launched a counter-attack through the Kasserine Pass, a 2-mile gap in the Grand Dorsal chain of the Atlas Mountains, in west/central Tunisia. The enemy thrust had penetrated Allied lines by up to 50 miles, towards the town of Tebessa (see map). This serious development in the ground battle required that the whole the PR Wing of four squadrons in which Donald was serving was to be switched from their normal reconnaissance role to offensive ground attack, operating their Hurricanes' cannons and machine guns, and, as bombers, one of the first occasions on which the aircraft was used in this way, resulting in it being dubbed the 'Hurri-bomber', with two x 500 lb bombs under-slung beneath the wings. No 225 Squadron started to launch formations of up to ten or twelve Hurricanes at a time, – and Donald was swept into the middle of this intense activity.

The rate of flying increased rapidly and Donald flew a second sortie of 1 hour 20 mins duration on 22 February, entering in his log book 'Bombing S of Thala: no targets seen; returned with bombs'. The land battle then raged for several days until 26 February when the Allied armies re-occupied the Kasserine Pass, and by so doing, cut off the German line of retreat. Thus the German and Italian forces attempting to retreat were trapped in and around the Pass., presenting the Allied air forces with an abundance of ground targets. On 27 February, Donald flew two more bombing sorties of 45 mins and 55 mins duration, both described as 'Bombing at Sidi Nasir, with tanks and lorries on road'.

The next day, 28 February, Donald flew three more sorties, all labelled ' Bombing South of Sidi Nasir', and lasting from 45 to 55 mins, after which he reported 'All targets were tanks and lorries in battle area: enemy flak increased during the day and once our own ack-ack opened up on us near Bosa'. On 1 March, Donald flew another Hurricane bombing sortie lasting 55 mins, with 'Target 6



MAP: BATTLE OF THE KASSERINE PASS
 20 FEBRUARY 1943
 (The Daily Telegraph)

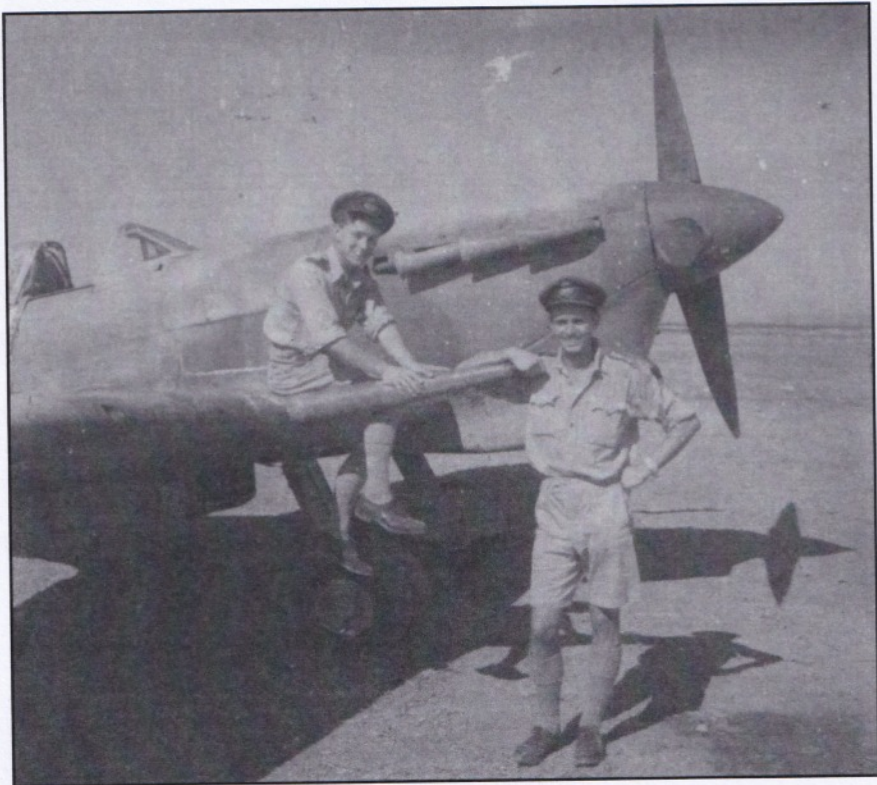
lorries on road – plenty of flak' entered in his log book. On 2 March, he flew two further bombing sorties in the same area, of 40 mins duration, recording 'Excellent conditions: no flak' or 'Concentration of lorries and again v little flak'.

On 4 March, Donald was airborne again for 40 mins, on further bombing in the same area, but reported 'Very few lorries to prang, but very heavy flak'. This operation proved to be significant on two counts: firstly, it was the last operation Donald flew during that battle – and it proved to be the last in a Hurricane for quite a while. On one of these bombing sorties, one of the two 500 lbs bomb failed to release from one of the squadron aircraft, resulting in the pilot having to return to base with it still on board – a tricky situation indeed; handling an aircraft in such an unbalanced state posed several problems, especially when coming in to land. (Seventy years later, recounting these events to Dennis in 2014, Donald's memory was working very well and he had amazing clarity of these intense operations during the Kasserine battle, showing how memorable they still are to him. Particularly, he recalled how frightening it was to fly for the first time into German flak when tracer shells were being used: in a dive towards the target, he would see the shells leave the gun positions and then arc upwards towards him, but usually going by, either side, but dangerously close – fortunately missing his aircraft. It amazed him that not one of the squadron's aircraft was lost as a result of German flak.

On 12 March, he added a new aircraft type to his log book, when he flew his 'First solo on type' in a Spitfire VB and thereafter the rate of operating settled down to its usual norm.. The squadron was equipped with three types of aircraft: firstly the Hurricane II, which proved good for dive-bombing – secondly with Rolls-Royce engined Mustangs, which were particularly useful for vertical photography of enemy positions. They also had Mark VB and VC Spitfires, which were good for armed interdiction of enemy positions, using their 20 mm cannons, .303 machine guns and bombs. These Spitfires had Takoradi dust filters fitted to their engines, to minimise damage from sand and dust.

From 21 March 1943 onwards, the squadron operated normally again, between 0800 and dusk at 1800, pilots usually flying one or two sorties a day, each of 45 to 70 minutes duration, and invariably they flew in pairs, the No 2 being the look-out. The unit operated seven days a week and the weather only occasionally interfered with

flying: there was little rain. Briefed by one of several Army Air Liaison Officers attached to No 225 Squadron, they were given any one of a variety of tasks, all intended to search for or photograph enemy positions, as the Germans were forced to retreat towards Tunis. After his first solo in a Spitfire, he did all his operational flying on this type - until May. On 18 April, during the first of two sorties that day, they encountered ten German Me109s, but, always working on the principle that once they had taken their photographs of enemy positions, their priority was dive down and gain speed, to head for base to get the photos developed, so they avoided tangling with the enemy aircraft. They also undertook an increasing number of artillery ranging sorties, directing Allied gun fire onto enemy ground targets.



DONALD WITH FG OFF MITCHELL AND SPITFIRE VB.
MITCHELL OFTEN FLEW AS DONALD'S NO 2



THIS SERIES OF AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS SHOWS THE
MANY OF WHICH HAD BEEN BLOWN UP BY THE GE
DONALD TOOK THE PHOTOGRAPHS AT 1400 HOURS
FITTED WITH A 20 DEGREE OBLIQUE F24 CAMERA, S
WHAT EQUIPMENT WOULD BE REQUIRED TO REPAIR
(SEE PAGE 25 FOR OTHER DETAILS).



THE BRIDGES OVER THE RIVER ARNO IN FLORENCE,
THE GERMANS IN RETREAT FROM THE ALLIED ARMIES.
ON 16 AUGUST 1944, FLYING A SPITFIRE MARK IX,
A, SO THAT THE ROYAL ENGINEERS COULD ASSESS
THE BRIDGES AS THE EIGHTH ARMY ADVANCED.

Once the Germans had been forced out of North Africa, No 225 Squadron started what became a welcomed three months rest period, after nearly six months of continuous ops. Donald flew Mustangs again and his flying from now on could be in any of the three types on the squadron. There was a lot of air-to-ground firing practice, or artillery ranging practices, during this quieter period, as well as formation flying and general handling practice. On rare occasions, a day or two free from flying was to be spent at a very pleasant rest hotel, situated overlooking the Mediterranean and well away from the battle area.



DESERT SPITFIRE AT REST ('MARYLEBONE')

On 23 May 1943, No 225 Squadron moved from 'Marylebone' at Souk El Khemis to Ariana near the south-eastern outskirts of Tunis and, two weeks later, on to Khorba North, an airfield pleasantly situated on the coast SE of Tunis. This was to position the unit more favourably for the 'Pantellaria Show' (Donald's words in his log book) when the Allied air forces would attack the German defences on the tiny islands of Pantellaria and Lampedusa, midway between Tunis and Sicily and Malta, to prevent any enemy interference during the forthcoming Allied invasion of Sicily.

On 9 June 1943, Donald remembers that No 225 Squadron's mission was to search for and photograph any white crosses of surrender on the two islands of Pantellaria and Lampedusa. The flights to and from these islands were a real test of the pilots' 'dead-reckoning' navigational skills, over nearly 150 miles of open sea, with no help except from their aircraft compasses. No maps were available to help them set course for the islands.

The Germans on Pantellaria surrendered on 11 June. On 12 June, Donald and Flying Officer Moore flew as a pair on a recce of Lampedusa, looking for signs of surrender there. The white crosses were found and photographed and on their return to the squadron, the photographs were delivered to 8th Army Headquarters, to confirm the surrender of the two islands. The next day, the squadron moved yet again, to Bou Ficha, on the coast south of Tunis. Most of the flying here was artillery ranging practice, air-to-ground firing, formation practice and generally improving operational skills.



DONALD AT PILOTS' BRIEFING FOR 'PANTELLARIA SHOW'

The squadron was not involved in any air operations over Sicily, as the Allied campaign to secure the island lasted only from 10 July to 17 August 1943 – and during this time, Mussolini resigned: this was

to have a major effect on operations in Italy later. No 225 Squadron moved to San Francesco (Lentini) airfield in Sicily on 22 August 1943: this airfield and others form a cluster of such facilities around the capital Catania, on the east coast of the island. Another squadron move, on 7 September, took the unit to Milazzo East, one of two airfields on the north-eastern tip of Sicily, just west of the Strait of Messina, so that they were well placed to support the early stages of the next phase of the Allied campaign,

Italy

Allied land forces crossed the Straits of Messina at dawn on 3 September 1943 and landed at Reggio to launch the invasion of Italy. They made rapid advances and, a week later, Italy surrendered to the Allies on 8 September: by 13 September, both Salerno and Taranto had been captured. During September, Donald flew 31 hours in Spitfires on 'Tactical Recce' (Tac/R) sorties, searching for enemy movements in the battle area in southern Italy. All the entries in his log book are concerned with searches – and the occasional attacks on enemy positions. Often his searches resulted in him recording in his log book 'NMS' (No movements seen), but they were keeping a close eye on where the enemy were – and were not.

The Allied armies advanced quickly in Italy and to enable the Army Co-op squadrons to provide close support, they often had to move to a new base. No 225 Squadron moved into Cretone, a rough, barely prepared strip, on 16 September and on to three more bases over the next fortnight: by now they had become expert in moving and setting themselves up on new airfields, where, usually, they lived under canvas. These new bases were chosen to give them easy transit and access to the battle area, usually about 10 to 15 miles from the land battle. Foggia was captured on 27 September: the Italians had had numerous airfields around Foggia, so the Allied air forces made good use of them, to move up closer to the land battles. Naples was captured on 1 October. It was also on 1 October that Donald made an unusual long-hand but sad entry in his log book, as follows: 'Fg Off Mitchell crashed on take-off and was killed'. (When compiling this book, Donald explained that Mitchell had flown very often as his No 2 and thus his loss was most significant, so he made a point of entering this sad event in his log book).

It is relevant here to explain that, following the capitulation of the Italians, many Allied prisoners-of-war (POWs) in camps in Italy found that their guards had disappeared – or that the gates of their camp had been left open for them to leave of their own will. Parties of these former POWs therefore started to make their own way southwards, down the leg of Italy, intent upon evading capture and reaching the Allied front line, which they knew was moving northwards, towards them. They walked many, many miles, or hid in the mountains, stole boats and headed south by sea at night, or they were looked after by Italian partisan troops.

For the next part of the story, we are able to quote directly from a typed report prepared by Donald himself, well after the war, but it gives a clear picture of some unusual sorties he flew next.

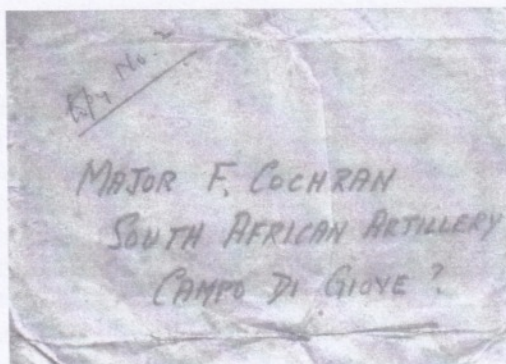
'On 17 October 1943, by which time No 225 Squadron was based at Foggia, a message was received from Wing HQ that the Squadron was to fly a special mission, as a matter of urgency and with great secrecy. The details of the mission were to be obtained, in person, from Tactical Air Force HQ at Bari, about 80 miles to the south-east, on the coast by the 'heel' of Italy. The squadron commander, Squadron Leader Alec McCandlish, said he would fly the mission and he asked me to be his No 2, so we flew to Bari that morning and were briefed. Apparently a number of Allied prisoners-of-war (POWs) had escaped from a POW camp near Sulmona (60 miles ENE of Rome) and they wanted not only supplies, but also an escape route to the east coast from where they might be picked up by a submarine. This information had come from an escaped POW, Malcolm Benitz, and he had a message for the leader of the escapees, a Major F Cochran of the South African Artillery at Campo di Giove. We were each given an envelope containing the message: Mac had one copy and I had the other.

The brief required us to fly up a particular valley, inland from Sulmona, as soon as possible, to try and locate the party of POWs, so that we could drop the message to them. We took off again and found the valley, but the weather in the mountains was bad, with a low cloud base. We found no sign of the POW party so returned to base at Foggia. At dawn the next day, Mac and I took off again to search the area. This time the weather was good, so we flew up and down the valleys NW of Sulmona, looking for any sign of the POWs. If we had found them, we were to drop the message (in proper weighted message bags). Although there was good visibility,

we saw no sign of the party: apparently there were about 500 escaped POWs in the area, we heard later. So we returned to Foggia rather disappointed, and later flew down to HQ TAF to report the result of the search.

We were asked to make one more search, so the next morning at first light we took off again and headed for the valley where the POWs might be. The weather was quite good and we flew as low as we dared in such a mountainous area, but had no success'.

Donald still has the envelope and the undelivered coded message, as shown below:



.....
Campo di Giove

Frank,

Hold everything. Expect mushrooms - weather permitting, any night after Monday night - light three fires in a triangle five yards apart between hut and graveyard around midnight each night from Monday until mushrooms grow. Collect them. Expect twenty-four mushrooms. The idea is to get you all away and forget the other scheme. Suggest get safe cache ready. Rookery Nook? Watch carefully for signs and do all you can to find mushrooms

*My trip a piece of p*** but hard on the feet! Fixing you up in that line. Also fodder and warmth. They are working flat out for you here. So sit tight (Locate Bunny if you can and have him with you when you come. Secrecy is vital. Good Luck.*

MALCOLM BENITZ
.....

By now, winter was approaching, so, mostly still living under canvas, life became less pleasant: however, when the opportunity existed to use commandeered buildings, they did so. Following the surrender of Italy to the Allies earlier, on 13 October Italy turned on its former allies and actually declared war on Germany: the general public in UK imagined that this would result in a rout for the Allies, but the Germans quickly moved reinforcements down into Italy and the Allies became engaged in fierce fighting in the Italian hills.



'A' FLIGHT ON 'LIBERATED' BMW

Donald continued flying Spitfires regularly through November and into December, mostly on 'Tac/R' sorties. But on 20 December he flew an Artillery Ranging operation lasting 1hr 50 mins and this proved to be the last mission on ops of his tour with No 225 Squadron: it was time for him to be rested from regular flying operations in close contact with the enemy.. He had flown 12 hours on Mustangs, 16 hours on Hurricanes and 142 hours on Spitfires since joining the unit in January, the majority of this flying being in close contact with the enemy. He had acquired a very high level of professional skill and his squadron commander assessed him as Above the Average at this stage.

'Rest Tour'

Donald recalls nothing special about how he spent his second Christmas abroad, again under canvas. His new appointment was within his own Wing headquarters, as the Operations Officer, so he knew everyone and he was already an expert in overseeing the range of work undertaken by the four squadrons in the wing.

He was promoted to the rank of squadron leader in this new post from January 1944. His log book reveals that he was often in the air in Spitfires, with just one trip in a Hurricane in February 1944, mostly getting about amongst the detachments from the wing's units, at different bases. Here it should be explained that the Wing HQ also moved frequently and often the airfield bases used by squadrons in the wing were not large enough to house everyone together, so the Wing HQ was established on different airfields on the eastern side of mountainous Italy, whilst the squadrons operated from various bases on the west side, so there was often a need for Donald to fly to and from these detached elements. All the time, Allied land forces were pushing the enemy armies back northwards, up the 'leg' of Italy. To give the reader an idea of how frequently these units had to move forward, during the first six months of Donald's rest tour, the wing headquarters moved from Trigno near Pescara, to Aquino (near Rimini), then on to Osa, just to the SE of Rome, and then on to Falerium, to the NE of Rome and on to Orvieto, SW of Perugia by June 1944. As all the units moved north, they became increasingly involved in flying in and around the Apennine Mountains, which rise to 9000 feet in places; at some stages, bitter fighting took place in the ground battles.

Award of the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC)

On 3 March 1944, the London Gazette announced the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) to Donald for his service in North Africa and during the invasion of Italy. The citation included the words: 'His cheerful courage and devotion to duty have been an example to all on No 225 Squadron'. (It was not until after the war, when back in the UK, that Donald actually received the decoration).

Further flying in Spitfires in March and April followed, carrying out air tests of aircraft, or testing radios, or cameras. But by 13 May, Donald had been cleared to fly a Taylorcraft Auster aircraft, a single-engined, high wing monoplane, with a good short take-off and

landing performance: originally designed as an air observation post aircraft, Donald used the Auster extensively over the next few months until September, to keep in touch with units of the Wing and delivering important photographs to various units. But he also flew Spitfires, to maintain his flying currency on this type.

Donald's expertise was called upon again on 16 August 1944, still during his rest tour, when he was tasked to photograph the bridges over the River Arno in enemy-held Florence, to see if the Germans had destroyed any of them. This was so that the Royal Engineers could assess what sort of equipment they would require to get all of the bridges functioning again, once the Allies had captured the city. With Lieutenant Grinver of the South African Air Force flying as his No 2, they took off and, at 1400 hours, Donald managed to take some impressively detailed photographs of the bridges, some of which had indeed been blown up by the Germans.

(Many years later, in his retirement, Donald was invited to attend as a guest a Battle of Britain Dinner in the Officers' Mess at RAF Cosford, the Defence College of Aeronautical Engineering, near Wolverhampton. During casual conversation, Donald revealed that he still had copies of these fine oblique photographs of the River Arno bridges. On showing the pictures to the staff there, they were so impressed with them that they borrowed the prints and made an eye-catching large-scale version of them, which was then displayed at the college, as a mural. A miniature version of these oblique photographs is shown in this booklet, as the centre-page spread).

It was during this 'rest tour' that Donald was also surprised, but naturally very pleased as well, to be sent home to the UK for a one week course at RAF Old Sarum, near Salisbury, where he had done his operational training originally. This was his first visit home since leaving for Gibraltar in 1942, but he still wonders why they sent him to Old Sarum, as, to be honest, straight from a front line unit in the busy battle area, he probably knew more of the recce world than the instructors! However, he did not complain. (He was flown as a passenger to UK and back, but didn't record the dates and other detail in his log book).

The 'rest tour' came to a close at the end of October 1944 when Donald was posted, within the Wing again, to join No 208 Squadron, as a squadron leader - and flight commander. The CO of the

squadron was Lieutenant Colonel Blaaw of the South African Air Force.

No 208 Squadron

By this time, the Allied armies had advanced well up the leg of Italy and the squadron was based at Peretola, on the northern outskirts of Florence, just to the south of the Apennine Mountains. After a couple of sorties to acquaint himself with the local area, Donald was straight back on operations in November 1944, flying regularly on Photo Recce or Artillery Ranging missions in Mark IX Spitfires: this version proved to be Donald's favourite of all the aircraft he flew during the war.

Donald was busy again in December flying regular Tac/R sorties or Artillery Ranging. By now their area of interest was around Bologna, Modena and Ferrara, in northern Italy, on the eastern side of the Apennine Mountains, which rise to 9000 feet, so, operating from near Florence on the eastern side, they had to contend with very high ground, to which had to be added the hazard of both snow on the ground and poor flying conditions. But Donald flew sorties on 20, 25, 26, 27 and 28 December 1944, so there was no let up: Christmas 1944 came and went.



DONALD ON RIGHT, WITH LT COL BLAAW SAAF (IN CAP) AND MAJOR BEVAN (ALO) BETWEEN THEM - PERETOLA - DECEMBER 1944

The New Year began with Donald flying further Tactical Recce or Artillery Ranging missions on 2, 3, 4 January, all in the Bologna area. He was by then one of the most experienced Army Co-op pilots in the wing and one day he was approached by Major Bevan RA, the senior Air Liaison Officer with the squadron, to organise a special artillery ranging mission. He was briefed that the British Army's No 54 Battery RA had been equipped with a new and formidable artillery weapon – an American 8-inch gun, with a range of up to 17 miles. This made it possible to site the gun well away from the immediate battle area and, also, because of its size, it could be moved more easily on major roads, in contrast to smaller artillery pieces, which had recently encountered difficulties on the narrow roads of NW Italy, particularly in the high ground – and with all the bad winter weather.

The projected task was of such importance that on 6 January 1945, Donald accompanied Major Bevan on a difficult 50-mile journey by road in a Jeep through the local mountains in snowy conditions to Loiano, a town in the Province of Bologna, 2400 feet up in the Tusco-Emilian Apennines, on Highway SS65 towards Bologna, 22 miles away: this was so that they could have a meeting with Major Mackenzie, CO of No 54 Battery.

The target was to be a German ammunition dump about 1 mile SW of Bologna. They studied aerial photographs of the target and decided on the radio frequency to be used: Donald was issued with the appropriate radio crystals and they set up all aspects for the mission.

Because the huge gun was sited in the mountains, it was essential that Donald should fly at a high enough altitude to maintain 'line-of-sight' VHF radio contact with the gun battery – and also to avoid fire from four German flak positions known to be sited around the ammunition dump. Donald was told that the gun director would tell him via the aircraft radio (RT) when the big gun was fired and that the shell's time of flight for the 15 miles would be 70 seconds. It was decided that Donald and his No 2 would fly at 8000 feet, to enable him to keep clear of the flak, but also so that he could observe the fall of shot, and then give corrections to the gun director. They knew that good visibility would be essential, so the sortie could not be flown until the weather improved.

Having returned to Peretola by road, Donald flew a routine one hour camera test on 9 January, but otherwise the poor weather persisted

for many days, rendering flying impossible. But, on 22 January, the day dawned fine and clear, providing perfect conditions for the vital task, so the decision was made to fly the mission and No 54 Battery was contacted to confirm final arrangements. Donald had Flying Officer 'Digger' Alexander, an Australian, as his No 2 and they took off at 1200 hours as a pair in Spitfire Mark IXs, PT950 and NH256. The Allies had by now achieved air superiority, so they knew that it was unlikely that they would be intercepted by German aircraft: nevertheless, a vigilant look-out was essential for survival – and there was always the likelihood of having to contend with enemy flak.

They made contact with the Sector Controller (callsign 'Cooler') and climbed quickly, crossing the mountains at 10,000 feet, and map read their way to the Bologna area, arriving 15 minutes after take-off. Donald quickly identified the German ammunition dump target from the aerial photos and noted that there was no movement at the site, although the tracks of vehicles could be seen in the snow. He identified as well the German 88 mm flak battery just to the north of the dump: there were four guns, arranged in a classic square.



MAP OF BOLOGNA AREA AND DONALD'S TARGET
ON 22 JANUARY 1945
(George Philip & Son Map – 1948)

Having made contact with the gun director, they were ready to start and the first shot was fired: Donald knew that spotting the first fall of shot was critical and the 70 seconds wait seemed interminable, but he saw the first shell strike. His experience prompted Donald to over or under-estimate the correction for the second shot. The gun director had the settings on the big gun altered and the second shot was fired.

By now the Germans had twigged what the two Spitfires above them were doing and the flak batteries opened fire at Donald and his No 2, who was about a mile away from Donald. The flak became so intense that Donald and Alexander were forced to climb higher and by the time Donald called the gun director to tell him 'Target Registered', they were holding at 12,000 feet. After 12 rounds had been fired, Donald reported two direct hits, a fire and destruction of the target.

Crash Landing and Hospital

Having completed the aim of the mission, Donald could have returned to base, but he called the gun director and asked if he was prepared to register onto the flak batteries? This was agreed and the second registration began, but, after observing the first two shots on the new target, the engine of Donald's Spitfire stopped suddenly. He was not aware that he had been hit by flak: there seemed to be no sign of fire in the Spitfire and the aircraft controls were responding normally, but, on checking the fuel gauges, he realised that he was out of fuel. Looking down, he saw that he was over the outskirts of Bologna: to bale out would mean prisoner-of-war camp for him, at least, so as he had altitude on his side, he decided to try and glide back over Allied lines, some 12 miles away. His No 2 was made aware of all this on the radio and he remained in visual contact with Donald, until he got down, doing what he could to help, before returning to base alone.

The problem for Donald was that the friendly lines were in the northern foothills of the Apennines, at a height of 700 to 1700 feet, with some parts a lot higher, so it would be touch-and-go whether he could glide that far. He knew too that he was committing himself to a forced landing in rocky terrain, unless he was exceptionally lucky. Gliding at 100 knots, he switched his radio to the Sector Controller and informed him of the emergency, adding that he was heading south for Allied lines: by now it was about 12.45 hours. He was told

to switch on his emergency IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) beacon and was given a heading to fly by the Fixer service (radio triangulation).

He tried to jettison his hood, but it would not release. After a further struggle, it came away, but by now he was down to 2000 feet and he could still not see any sign of the front line. On reaching 1000 feet, and almost giving up hope, he saw a road ahead of him and that it was clear of snow: this could only mean it was in Allied hands, as no roads on the German side would be as clear. As the Spitfire came down to a few hundred feet, Donald saw that he was heading for a farmhouse, so he pulled up slightly over the top of it and ahead appeared a large snow-covered field – but he doesn't remember anything of what happened next.

In fact, he had over-flown the Allied lines by about 3 miles and, by an amazing coincidence, he had crash-landed just outside Loiano, less than a mile from where the big gun was sited. It was their gunners who rescued him unconscious from the wrecked Spitfire. By now it was about 1300 hours. The aircraft had sustained flak damage in numerous places – in both the mainplane and the fuel tanks, so he had been leaking fuel that way.

Donald was handed over to a medical unit of the United States Army which was covering that area and moved on to a US Evacuation Hospital at Pietramala, 5 miles south of Loiana. He was unconscious for more than 24 hours and when he first regained consciousness, he remembers being inside a tent, in the mountains, and that although there was deep snow outside, he did not feel the cold. But, he could not sit up, because of appalling back pain.

He was told later that he had got the Spitfire down safely but, towards the end of the 'wheels up' landing run, hidden by the snow, was a large pile of stones which the aircraft had hit at some speed. He sustained compression fractures of the spine involving the sixth and seventh dorsal vertebrae (the so-called 'Hurricane' fracture), but fortunately the injury had not involved the spinal chord. He also had a fractured skull and multiple lacerations.

A few days later, Donald was moved by ambulance to the South African Air Force hospital in Florence (close to his base at Peretola), but he remembers little of the journey. There they put him in a plaster cast and kept him in bed for two weeks. He was then

transferred to the RAF hospital in Naples for a few weeks, followed by rest and recuperations in Sorrento. It was here that the cast was at last removed.

Remarkably, Donald was fit enough to return to No 208 Squadron in early April 1945 and he was airborne again on 5 April in a Spitfire, carrying out a Tac/R mission in the Bologna and Ferrara area lasting 1 hr 5 mins, so he soon had his hand in again.

Award of Distinguished Service Order

The first entry in the London Gazette published on Friday 6 April 1945 was headed: 'Air Ministry 6 April 1945' and read as follows:

The King has been graciously pleased to approve the following awards in recognition of gallantry and devotion to duty in the execution of air operations:-

Distinguished Service Order

Acting Squadron Leader Donald Frank Perrens DFC (47493)
RAF (Captain, The Suffolk Regiment), 208 Squadron.

This officer has completed many sorties on his second tour of operational duty. He has displayed exceptional tactical skill, great bravery and a determination to complete his mission with success which has won the highest praise. In January 1945, Squadron Leader Perrens was detailed for an artillery reconnaissance in the vicinity of Bologna. Whilst over the target area, he was engaged by heavy and light anti-aircraft fire. His aircraft was repeatedly hit but he remained over the target for nearly another hour to direct our artillery fire on to the enemy positions. He was forced to turn away however, when the engine of his aircraft failed. Nevertheless, he effected a successful crash landing in our forward defence lines. His coolness and courage in the face of concentrated enemy fire set a fine example.

Donald in his usual modest way has not revealed to me what jollifications and celebrations there were when the news of his DSO award reached his squadron at Peretola, but there was still a war on and the Allied spring offensive was in its final stages. Before long, Donald was moved to other duties, to serve as Officer Commanding

No 1 Mobile Operations Room Unit (MORU), part of No 285 Wing HQ, but there was still plenty of flying to be done. On 6 April in a Spitfire, he was testing the effectiveness of fluorescent ground strips at HQ 8th Army. On 8 April, Donald added a new aircraft type to his log book when he flew for one hour as second pilot to Wing Commander Berlandina in a Boston twin-engined light bomber: however, Donald wrote in his log book afterwards 'Pranged on landing' - but that is another story! On 9 and 13 April, Donald was airborne again in a Spitfire on Tac R/Recce sorties north of Bologna, but, for a change, he was flying as No 2, with Group Captain Millington as No 1: however, on both occasions, they recorded 'NTR' (Nothing to report) afterwards, the reason on the first sortie being 'Battle area very dusty'.

End of War in Europe

As May 1945 began, Donald flew another trip in an Auster on 3 May, this time for the move of the unit to Ferrara, but it was obvious to all concerned that the Germans were about to surrender in Europe - and this they did on Monday 7 May 1945. We do not know what celebrations there were on No 208 Squadron or within the Wing to mark this momentous event, but we leave that to the imagination of the reader.

During the months of June to August 1945, still with No 1 MORU, Donald continued flying Spitfires on various photographic sorties over northern Italy, or visiting other Wings: on one sortie, he got as far as Berchtesgarden, Hitler's infamous mountain retreat, in Bavaria, southern Germany, but the war for him was over.

Return to the United Kingdom

His log book shows that on 12 September 1945, he was a passenger in a Dakota transport aircraft on his way back home to the UK: he left Udine in Italy for Naples, which took 3 hrs 30 mins; the next stage was Naples to Marseilles taking 3 hrs 40 mins and then Marseilles to London which took 3 hrs 15 mins.. Apart from a one-week course in UK, he had been abroad since sailing in convoy to Gibraltar in November 1942 - nearly 3 years previously. After disembarkation leave, all that remained for Donald was to be debriefed and then released from the RAF. He had served his King and Country well and true - for over six long years of war - with distinction.

Epilogue

In January 1946, Donald married Mary Robertson, the daughter of the lady with whom he had been billeted during 1939, in his early Army training days at Bury St Edmunds.

In May 1946, Donald took up the appointment offered to him in 1939 at Eastbourne College, teaching physics and he also became a house tutor. He progressed to become head of the physics department – and then head of science. From 12 years, 1960-72, he was house master of Blackwater House.

In 1972/3, he took over as Acting Headmaster and from 1973-75, he was Second Master. He continued teaching at the college until he retired in 1981.

In 1948, Donald had joined the RAFVR (Training Branch) as a Flight Lieutenant in the RAF Section of the school's CCF Contingent, later being promoted to Squadron Leader and taking command of the Section in 1954.

Later still, he was promoted again - to Wing Commander - and had charge of the whole of a large and thriving contingent of the CCF, which was reckoned by many to be one of the best in the land. In recognition of his outstanding achievements commanding this excellent contingent, in 1961 he was appointed as an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday Honours List. He continued in command of the CCF Contingent as a Wing Commander until he retired in 1981. (By now, he had of course changed the views he had expressed to the headmaster at his initial interview in 1939 that he did not believe in giving young people militaristic ideas!).

In addition to all his work at Eastbourne College, Donald also volunteered his expertise and operational experience to serve for a number of years after the war with No 3618 (County of Sussex) Fighter Control Unit in the town of Eastbourne, eventually taking command of the unit as a Wing Commander, until the unit was disbanded in 1961.



'DFP' ON 24 MAY 2009

Now 96 years of age and living in Steyning, West Sussex, with his second wife Marian, in February 2014 Donald invited me to 'have a go' at re-writing his planned article for an aviation magazine, about the Spitfire sortie he flew which led to the award of his DSO. Later on, I was able to persuade him that I should compile a full record of all of his wartime experiences, as I have written many books on such subjects. Generously he let me borrow his flying log books so that this narrative could be compiled during 2014 and early in 2015.

It is to be hoped that this narrative is not only enlightening for all his family members and friends, but is also a source of great pride for them all, to realise what a fine war record he had, serving his King and Country for six long years, with such distinction.



WING COMMANDER D F PERRENS DSO OBE DFC MA WITH MARSHAL OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE SIR NEIL CAMERON GCB CBE DSO DFC WHEN HE WAS REVIEWING OFFICER AT THE ANNUAL INSPECTION OF EASTBOURNE COLLEGE COMBINED CADET FORCE CONTINGENT IN JUNE 1981. SIR NEIL HAD JUST RETIRED AFTER TWO YEARS AS CHIEF OF THE DEFENCE STAFF FOR THE YEARS 1977 TO 1979.

A VERY PROUD DAY FOR DONALD

THE COMPILER

Dennis Sawden was born in north Somerset on 26 August 1932. A family move in 1937 to Esher, Surrey, led to another move in 1939, to Haslemere, Surrey, where he spent the war years. In 1946, his family settled in East Sussex, where Dennis was a day boy at Eastbourne Collage 1946-50.

Called up for National Service in the RAF early in 1951, Dennis was commissioned in the RAF Regiment and served in occupied Germany at Lüneburg, Gatow (Berlin) and Wildenrath, after which he wanted to stay in the RAF and apply for aircrew. He completed his pilot training in UK on Chipmunks, Harvards and Meteors before converting to Canberras, which he then flew in the high level bombing role at Gütersloh in Germany, leading to an RAF role change onto night interdiction on the Canberra B(1)8 until 1957. Next he was based at Air Ministry, London, as a flight lieutenant liaison officer with boys' preparatory schools until 1960, when he completed the Central Flying School (CFS) course to qualify as a flying instructor on Cambridge University Air Squadron. Here he met Dumfries-born Charlotte, a nursing officer in the PMRAFNS. Promoted to squadron leader on 1 January 1963, Dennis married Charlotte in October that year; their daughter, Emma, was born the following year. Dennis was then a Cadet Squadron Commander at the RAF Technical College, Henlow 1963-65 and he then completed the 1966 RAF Staff College Course at Bracknell, before a flying tour on PR Canberras at Brüggen 1967-69. Tours followed on Officer & Aircrew Selection at Biggin Hill, Schools Liaison and Recruiting at Bedford, staff duties at MOD in London, instructing on the Officers' Command School course, Henlow, before his last tour in the RAF as OC Flying at RAF Halton.

He left the RAF in April 1984 to become the RO2 Wing Admin Officer for 19 squadrons in the West Riding of Yorkshire Wing of the Air Training Corps, in Bradford, until 1992, when he retired aged 60 years. He was a volunteer at the Yorkshire Air Museum, Elvington 1986-99, writing several books to raise funds for the museum.

In 1999, he and Charlotte moved to south-west Scotland, to be near their daughter, Emma, by then married to Martin McCornick, a farmer in Kirkcowan, and their two daughters born in 1993 and 1996. Dennis is a member of the Aircrew Association and of the Newton Stewart Probus Club. He still writes books – this one being his 21st.

THE OLD BOY NETWORK

Once Dennis had been serving in RAF aircrew for a while, the first of three opportunities arose when he could provide some assistance to Donald Perrens in his capacity as CO of the whole Combined Cadet Force Contingent at Eastbourne College.

There is a well established programme in the RAF under which RAF Sections of school CCF contingents are allocated Easter and Summer 'Camps' at RAF stations, giving the cadets a week of living on a station and seeing the RAF at work and play: this usually includes giving the cadets air experience, as passengers – and their staff are not excluded.

In April 1957, Donald accompanied a party of the RAF Section cadets to RAF Oldenburg in northern Germany for a week of Easter Camp. Dennis was then on No 104 Squadron flying Canberra B2 aircraft at RAF Gütersloh, about 100 miles to the south, and he was able to arrange to take a Canberra to Oldenburg on 5 April 1957 to give air experience to the Eastbourne party. With his Navigator, Norman Blanchard, he completed a 2 hour 35 mins sortie during which he landed at Oldenburg and took Donald for an hour to show him the performance of this fine aircraft: he then landed and took Cadet Sgt Hick for an air experience ride: this was quite a coincidence, as Hick's elder brother, Colin, had been a contemporary of Dennis's in Powell House. Sadly Colin had been killed in Korea circa 1951 when flying as a pilot with the Fleet Air Arm.

In April 1960, by which time Dennis was a flight lieutenant RAF liaison officer with boys' preparatory schools, based at Air Ministry in London. Contact with Donald in advance revealed that the RAF Section of the CCF at Eastbourne had been allocated an Easter camp at RAF Church Fenton, an RAF pilots' training school near Tadcaster in Yorkshire. As the camp fell during school holidays, Dennis was able to arrange that he was officially attached to RAF Church Fenton for the period of the camp, so that he could fly one of the Chipmunk aircraft allocated, to give air experience to the cadets. From 21-26 April 1960, Dennis flew 12 sorties and a total of 18 hours 30 mins. Living in the Mess for the week with Donald and his RAF Section staff member, Pilot Officer David Jewell RAFVR(T), also gave us plenty of time in the evenings to socialise and test the quality of the local ales in Yorkshire.

In 1965, Eastbourne's CCF/RAF Section was allocated a one-week Easter camp at RAF Henlow in Bedfordshire and Donald again accompanied the party in his capacity as the Wing Commander commanding the whole CCF contingent. At the time, Dennis was one of two Cadet Squadron Commanders at the RAF Technical College, Henlow, responsible for the officer training element of RAF Technical Cadets on three-year courses in various types of engineering. By coincidence, his deputy was another OE, Flight Lieutenant Michael Noble (School House 1948) and a third OE, Pilot Officer Michael Champion (School House 1957), was attending an engineering course at the Technical College. A group photograph of the visitors from Eastbourne provided an unusual opportunity for three RAF OEs to be snapped with the party, as shown below.



Mike Noble – Donald Perrrens – Dennis Sawden – Mike Champion

Happy Days!

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