

Battle of Britain

On active service, aged 19, driving huge lorries and mobile cranes recovering crashed planes, the first horrors of war, and breakdown problems in South Wales

Jan 1940 to Nov 1940

After settling in to my new accommodation, I went to the camp to have a briefing on the rules of the unit, and found that we covered the area from North London to Salisbury and down to Weymouth. Because all road signs were removed to prevent enemy parachutists from knowing where they had landed, all drivers had to get their directions from the M.T. Office before departing. Also we had to be advised of all low bridges, and routes with difficult bends or hump backed bridges, because the cranes were thirteen feet three inches tall, and many centre sections of some aircraft, could reach fifteen feet from the ground.

My driver was a Reservist who in civilian life was a London Bus driver and a true Cockney. He was able to show me many short cuts around London, but on one occasion he slipped up. I was driving a Leyland Lynx 5 ton lorry at the time and he thought he would call at his home for a 'cup of tea' but due to the bombing, we could not go the short cut and finished up in Oxford Street instead. At the time, no Military lorries were allowed to go into Central London, and when I was stopped by the Police, Alf, my driver gave them a story, which said that we had been told to go that way by the Military Police. He said it with such a straight face that even I believed him in the end.

When I arrived at Horsham, I applied for re-mustering to aero engine fitter and when I returned from this Oxford Street problem, my Commanding Officer called me in to say that my application to re-muster from a driver to a skilled aero engine fitter would not be permitted, but I could re-muster to a Mechanical Transport Fitter, which would be at the same pay level. M.T. Fitter was a new R.A.F. Trade and they were looking for trained Motor mechanics. Previously, any aircraft fitter who had 'blotted his copy-book' would be sent to Transport in disgrace, hence the poor

maintenance on the vehicles. I was eager to transfer to this branch of the service, because it would mean that I would be carrying on my civilian trade.

I took an Oral Test that day and I was told that a written test would be arranged followed by a practical test at Group Headquarters.

Crashed planes

Although the Battle of Britain had not yet started in earnest, many of our fighters were being damaged in battles over France and returning to land at the nearest aerodrome in the U.K. Any fighters engaged in gun battles were advised to come in with their landing gear folded. The planes were armour plated underneath and if they landed in this way, the only damage sustained would be the propeller, the glycol radiator and sometimes the reduction gear to the propeller. The plane could be dismantled, loaded and taken back to the factory, and could be flying again within seven days of forced landing. Should the pilot attempt to lower his wheels and a hydraulic pipe was fractured, the wheel would collapse, the plane cartwheel and be wrecked and the pilot killed.

On the day following my Oral Test, I now had my own crane with a 'rookie' driver and I was sent to Manston aerodrome (between Margate and Ramsgate) to load one plane. Before I arrived, two more planes had crashed and as soon as these were away, several more suffered the same fate. I was at Manston for twenty-four days.

Although I had driven articulated lorries, it seemed that I would be more useful on this thirteen and half ton 6 wheel close coupled Thorneycroft Crane. It had no power steering and no synchromesh gears and was very heavy to manoeuvre at low speed. By mid-April, the German bombers and fighters had been bombing and strafing all of the aerodromes in the southeast, and our unit was getting busier every day.

At the end of April I had to return to Manston again to pick up one plane and return, but once again the fighters were coming in and crash landing. We were working from dawn to dusk every day but when work eased off, my co-driver and I decided that one of us would have the night off and the other would operate and move the crane as required, Because of our frequent stays away from camp, we were given permanent passes, so that saved us having to apply for a pass to leave any station we visited.

Dunkirk arrivals

On my night off, I decided to go to Margate, and as I was walking down by the docks, I saw the first of the troops arriving from Dunkirk. They looked exhausted and the haunted look on their faces will stay with me forever. When they reached the top of the road from the berth, some builders demolishing a building dropped some galvanised sheets from the roof with a resounding crash, and as one man, they all fell to the floor, cowering away as if they were being machine-gunned again. Little did I think that I would be doing the same in a few month's time.

Because Manston was the nearest aerodrome to the continent, it was continually the target by day and night and most nights we spent in the very deep shelters near the cliffs. Our greatest danger came from the Junkers 87 (Stuka) dive bombers because once they started their dive, they were able to view the target all the way down, and as they pulled out of their dive, the bombs would be released automatically. The screaming sirens fitted to the wheel spats were designed to demoralise the bravest of people on the ground, and I am sure that they succeeded in many cases.

After Dunkirk, the enemy raids increased and it was common to see several hundred bombers (Heinkel 111 and Messerschmidt 110) escorted by scores of M.E 109 fighters and against all of these planes, you would probably see three squadrons of Spitfires and Hurricanes (thirty six) intercepting and managing to shoot down two or three times their own number. Unfortunately, the Luftwaffe had four times as many fighters and bombers as our own. Although we were billeted in civilian homes, we seldom spent more than three days a week at home, and by now, all hopes of a 9am to 5 pm working day had gone. We were often called out in the middle of the evening meal, to go out to lift an enemy plane with the dead pilot inside, in order to get to his maps, and then go back next day to load it up to go to Farnborough (The Aircraft Experimental Establishment) after the riggers had dismantled it.

We soon became accustomed to death and horrific injuries, and often when we had to remove a dead or injured pilot from a fighter plane, it was sometimes impossible for two men to lift him out of the cockpit, so a two inch wide strap was wrapped around the body under the arms, and we

then gently lifted him out of the plane with the aid of the crane. At the age of nineteen, I had to grow up fast.



On one occasion I had travelled to R.A.F. Henlow to collect a new crane and after joining the South Circular Road at Chiswick I was travelling along a fairly straight piece of road when suddenly the road erupted several hundred yards ahead and after stopping I discovered that an Air Raid was in progress, and that the houses on one side of the road had been hit and that there were several victims inside. The Rescue squads were on the scene immediately, but before I could turn around, another 'stick' of bombs had demolished some more houses behind us.

Military personnel are not supposed to assist civilian rescue squads under normal conditions, but I was stuck between two obstructions, so when I was asked to lift some heavy beams in order for the rescuers to enter, I had no option but to assist. We put some cables around the fallen beams and lifted them away. The mother was critically injured, one of the children was killed and the other boy had lost a leg. As they were rushed to hospital I cursed the war and all things German. I then cleared the road for traffic to pass, and repeated the same operation at the other end. I dared the Rescue Officer to thank the R.A.F. for the assistance they had been given, because I would have been in serious trouble if he had.

When I returned to camp, I was told that I would take my written test for my re-mustering the next day. The test involved much more than the basic questions and several made think hard before I answered. The test was in two parts and took the whole of the morning, but at least I was not out on the road.

Things were getting dangerous, and it was normal for some of our vehicles to come home with bullet holes or shrapnel tears in the bodywork so it was arranged that the drivers could have an 'operational rest' by taking trips that should have been undertaken by the Salvage unit from the Midlands or the West country. With four other drivers, we took 5 high loader Artics to the Isle of Sheppey to take the dismantled Fairey Battle aircraft belonging to a Polish squadron, to Blackpool.

The Poles had been badly bombed and were now located at Blackpool. It was an interesting journey, and we had seven days there until it was decided we should take some other old planes back to Farnborough. These trips were very nice, but we found ourselves getting very short of money, with no chance of getting any more until we returned to base.

Convoy in South Wales

My next non-operational trip was to Porthcawl, in South Wales where a Handley Page Harrow, (a very large obsolete high-wing Bomber) had been damaged on landing, and our riggers had dismantled it for return to the R.A.F. Museum. The convoy consisted of 3 sixty-foot long low loader artics, one high loader artic and the crane. The front half of the fuselage rested above the pivot of the trailer and the rear over-lapped the tailboard by six feet that meant an extension behind the trailer wheels of twenty-two feet. The rear section of the fuselage just fitted into the well of the trailer, and the centre section, which had a "well" where the fuselage fitted, was sixteen feet from the ground. The two wing sections fitted each side of the centre section. The engines, propellers and landing gear were fitted to the high-loader and the crane followed at the rear.

All went well until well until we reached Newport in Monmouthshire where the convoy had to travel under the railway bridge in the centre of the town. In order to allow normal high loads to pass under the bridge, the road had been lowered to give a 16 feet height restriction. When the artic with the centre section on board attempted to pass under the bridge, the steep slope down and the steep rise out of the bridge, caused the top of the

centre section to catch one of the main girders of the bridge, and for the "well" to become stuck each side of the girder. By now, a huge crowd had gathered to watch as we tried to get the load past the obstruction and even getting a large number of volunteers to stand on the trailer to make it sink to the lowest position, the trailer would still not pass without damage to the centre section.

Having a tyre compressor fitted on the crane, we decided to deflate the trailer tyres. In this way, we were just able to get the trailer and load free of the girder. As soon as we were clear of the bridge, we had to wait for the massive tailback of cars to disperse and then I drove the crane alongside and blew up the tyre on the right hand side of the trailer. Because the tyre hose was not long enough to reach the other side, we asked the driver to pull ahead and cross to the right hand side of the road. Unfortunately, the driver was too polite and travelling slowly, he allowed the next tailback of cars to pass before drawing to the right. Because the valve cores were not removed in deflating the tyres, the valves were drawn inside the tyres by the time he had stopped and we now had a flat tyre which we were unable to remove because of the amount of pressure still inside.

Due to all spare wheels being sent to France before Dunkirk, we did not have a spare to fit on the trailer. so we jacked up the trailer, removed the wheel and took it to the Corporation Bus depot to have the tyre punctured, tyre removed and repaired and then to refit the wheel to the trailer. The delay cost us at least five hours and we had to get to Gloucester that night. We had a similar experience near Oxford the next day, but this time we were prepared. We arrived back at Horsham three days after leaving Porthcawl.

Two more of our Airmen had been injured in Air Raids, They decided to have a look at the aerial battles overhead, when one of the bombers decided to drop his bombs. They were too late to run to the shelter or hide behind their lorry. They were blown off their feet into one of the lorries and spent the next month in hospital and two months sick leave. May-be they were not so daft after all!

I was advised that my appointment for my practical trade test had been arranged at R.A.F. Tangmere and on arrival, I was shown into the workshop and given my test paper. I was given two pieces of rusty metal,

about four inches square and told to file it down to a quarter inch thickness and then cut out a 'straight' dove tail three inches by two and half and all measurements to be to a tolerance of five one thousandths of an inch. It took me two days but in the end I was pleased with the result. The piece had to fit in several different ways and I was glad that I had used micrometers, and scribing blocks when I was an apprentice.

I was told by the Officer in charge of the test that I had passed, and when I returned to base I reported to my C.O. who then arranged for me to go into the workshops. Unfortunately, two days after my return, Tangmere was severely bombed, we lost three of our lorries and two of our drivers and my test pieces were blown away as well.

With the end of the Battle of Britain, the night bombing of London was keeping us very busy, but in early November I was going on seven days leave, when I was told that I would have to take another practical trade test because the original test had not been recorded. With my leave cancelled, I was preparing to go for the test when I was told that six of us were being posted to the Middle East, and that we would go to Tangmere for our overseas medical. I was given four days embarkation leave less the travelling time to and from Horsham and then sent to a transit camp near Liverpool.