

# One Man's War

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## *Preface*

This is a Record of the Author's experiences during World War 2, and although some of the details are trivial, they describe the feelings of many men in the Services during those very difficult times.

I have deliberately left out the atrocities inflicted by the enemy on occasions in the Middle East and also the harsh sentences carried out by our own disciplinarians on our own Servicemen, because I wanted this to be my own personal record of events.

I dedicate this record to my late wife Eileen, without whose love, support and letters, my life would have been much more difficult during my four years of Overseas Service

J.H.Nethercott.

## *Prologue*

*Which explains why and how these memoirs came to be written: in hospital many years later he begins to relive his experiences in his sleep...*

### **September 1985 Recovery Ward, South Wales Orthopaedic Hospital**

“.....and this one thinks that he is fighting World War 2 on his own.....”

The Sister's voice faded away as she described the condition of the other patients to the male Staff Nurse who had just come on duty.

The air was heavy with the anaesthetic and I was trying to realise where I was. A large heated food trolley was being wheeled along the corridor to the Wards, and one of the wheels had worn a “flat” on the tyre, causing the trolley to lurch when the flat hit the floor; “Brump..... Brump.....Brump.... followed by “rat,tat,tat.....rat,tat,tat....rat.tat,tat...” of the stainless steel plates inside.....Then I remembered.

### **January 1944 Monte Cassino, Italy**

My name is Flight Sergeant Joe Nethercott, and I am in charge of the repairs and servicing of the vehicles on a large Mobile Stores Unit in the R.A.F. supporting the Squadrons in that theatre of the War. At that time it was not possible to advance due to the natural defences of Monte Cassino and also the terrible weather conditions.

With Sardinia and Corsica in enemy hands, it was not possible to invade North of Monte Cassino and because Italy was divided from East to West by a massive Range of Mountains, from Monte Cassino to the Adriatic,

and it was not possible to out-flank the enemy. In order to make a sea-borne landing, it was essential that an invasion of Sardinia and Corsica should take place, in order to obtain air superiority.

All units had prepared an advance task force, and because some of our airmen were new to active service, our Commanding Officer decided to send our invasion unit to a site four kilometres from the front line, situated on the top of a fir forest, where this unit could supply the squadrons and leave our main unit as a supply depot. In this way, we were sure that we were fully operational before landing on the beachhead. Any discrepancies could be rectified beforehand.

Our main unit was situated on the plain about twenty kilometres south of our proposed new site together with about ten fighter squadrons, several fighter-bombers and reconnaissance squadrons. and during the fourteen days before our move we had all been subjected to air raids during the nights and strafing during the day. Even when we were not the target, all units were close together and little sleep was available during this period... For twenty-four hours before we moved to our new site, we were subjected to torrential rain and everywhere was like a quagmire. We left for our new site two hours late and when we arrived at the entrance, we found that the road was under two feet of water due to the drainage ditch being blocked with rubbish from the previous tenants, the Wehrmacht.

The site was at the top of the mountain and the road was the thirty-metre wide firebreak and none of our normal lorries could pass through. We had two high chassis lorries, one a Thorneycroft four wheel drive, and an A.E.C six wheel drive Oxygen producer, so the six wheeler was used to tow the lorries through the water and then return to the entrance for the next lorry. The four-wheeler would then tow the disabled lorry to its proper location. This procedure was repeated until all the lorries were in position. After about six journeys, the driver did not need to steer his lorry, two deep trenches had formed and it was like a railway track, about two feet wide and one foot deep. With all of the lorries in position, we all changed into dry uniforms and three other Sergeants and myself, made our way to the Sergeants Mess tent, which meant crossing the muddy Firebreak. We had just started to cross when we heard the sound of several aircraft engines and looking out towards Monte Cassino we saw eight fighters in line abreast at low level.

The American Air Force were sending eight Mustangs in line abreast to the Observation posts at Cassino, dropping two one thousand pound bombs and returning as quickly as possible. We all said, "They are Mustangs" and carried on until the engine note changed, and looking up, I saw that they were making a complete turn and coming in line astern. It was then that I saw the black crosses on the underside of the wings. I shouted out, "Paddy, hit the deck" and we all dived into the trenches made by the A.E.C. As soon as I was in the trench, I said "They are not Mustangs, they are bloody 109's". I struggled to get my steel helmet off my respirator and stuck it on to the back of my head as the first of the Messerschmidt 109's came in, firing his 20mm cannon and his machine guns. "Brump...Brump...Brump..... and then rat,tat,tat, ... rat,tat,tat.....rat,tat,tat...."

As each plane swept down, they seemed to be getting nearer and nearer, and as the eighth plane passed, I saw that they were in position to come in again. One...two...three...four... "Jesus! That was bloody close", and the sound of the cannon shell exploding nearby was deafening and I felt a hefty blow to the back of my steel helmet, and then oblivion.

## **September 1985**

### **Recovery Ward,**

#### **South Wales Orthopaedic Hospital.**

My face was being slapped and a male voice was saying "Come on , wake up. You have had your operation and everything is alright." More slaps and I try to lift my right hand to stave off the slaps but somehow it wouldn't move. I opened my eyes but everything was blurred, so I put my left hand to my forehead and felt the bandage. I said, "What's happened to my eyes?". (I have always had a fear of being blind), The Nurse said "There is nothing wrong with your eyes, the bandage is on your hand".

I said, "Well, I can't see anything, anyway."

"It's probably because you are not wearing your glasses"

"I don't wear glasses, I've got twenty-twenty vision and I only wear sun glasses."

The nurse took the clip board from the end of the bed and I asked, “ Why am I unable to move my right hand. Is it in plaster?”.

“No” he replied “you were moving your hands about so much that you removed the tube from your drip twice and you were squirting blood all over the place, so we bandaged your arm to the bed to prevent it happening again.”

Looking at the clip board, the nurse said “What is your name?”

“902425, Flight Sergeant Nethercott.”

“And where do you live?”

“I live at the camp”

“ Yes, but where, and what is your Squadron?”

Alarm bells started to ring and I was beginning to think that perhaps the enemy had counter-attacked and that this hospital was not British. I replied “ That is Classified Material, and I am not allowed to give out this information”

“But how can we tell anyone what has happened to you and how you are progressing?” he asked.

“My Adjutant will contact you and give you all the information you require.”

The Nurse studied the clipboard again so I decided to bluff.

“Entschuldigen Sie bitte. Wo ist die Toiletten?”

(Excuse me please. Where is the toilet?)

“Um die Ecke, links und.....hey , why are you speaking German?”

“Because I thought you may be German” I replied, “ but why did you reply in German?”

He laughed.” Because I am going to University next year to read languages and German will be my second language. Look! The Surgeon has just come in and I must see him. Don't go away”.

I smiled to myself. My left leg felt as if it had been kicked by a mule, my left hand was bandaged like a leg of lamb, my right hand was bandaged to the bed and I could not see, and he said, "Don't go away!"

The nurse returned after a couple of minutes and told me that the Surgeon had said that because I had two operations and a lot of anaesthetic, I should be given some oxygen to clear my head and then I should be able to see alright. The mask was fitted and the gentle hiss of the oxygen began to clear my head, and I dropped off into a fitful sleep.

The next thing I remember was being lifted on to my bed in the ward. I felt the previously prepared blankets being unfolded and being draped over me and a female voice saying "Wake up, you have had your operations and everything is alright". This was followed by more slaps to the face and I finally opened my eyes. Everything was blurred so I said, "Would you please pass my glasses from the top of my locker, nurse?". As soon as my glasses were fitted, the room came into focus and I could see that the curtains were drawn, around my bed and a young blond Staff Nurse was by my right hand side and a redhead S.R.N. on my left. The Staff nurse said, "We are going to take all of your 'Obs' (Blood pressure, temperature, pulse and respiration) and we shall be doing it every two hours until tomorrow morning. First of all, we had better get you out of this operation gown and into your pyjamas.

I was raised into a sitting position and the gown was removed from my left arm and then it was threaded through the sleeve to the drip on the stand. My pyjama jacket was fitted in the reverse order. When the nurse saw the massive bandage on my left leg, she said, "we shall never get his pyjamas over this bandage, have you got any shorts?" I said that I only had 'Y' fronts so she said they would have to do. The bottom of the blankets were folded to decency level and they started to fit the 'Y' fronts. I told the Staff nurse that I was not shy and that they would have difficulties trying to pull them up under the blankets. She said, "You may not be shy, but we are". I am sure that the groping and manoeuvring that went on under the blanket was a little more than professional. The 'Obs' were taken, blood pressure, 170 over 110, pulse 65, temperature normal, and respiration normal.

"Do you suffer from high blood pressure?" asked the Staff nurse.

“Only when it’s taken by blond Staff nurses.”

“We have got a right one here nurse” the Staff nurse said “Thank God that he has both hands taken care of, otherwise we would have no peace at all”.

The blankets were tidied and the curtains taken away and I settled down once more to sleep.

Two hours later, I was awakened and the ‘Obs’ were taken again and as the nurses departed, two Doctors came in to see me.

“Good afternoon Mr Nethercott, how are you feeling now?”.

“Not too bad thanks Doctor, but my leg feels as if it has been kicked by a mule, my hand is throbbing, but I suppose that it is to be expected”

“Well, you have had a finger amputated, and you have had the cartilage removed from your knee, it is bound to be painful and I will give you something for the pain. I am Dr Lewis and I am the Resident in charge of this wing, and my colleague is Dr Read who is the Hospital Psychiatrist. The reason we are both here is that you caused us some concern in the recovery ward, before you came back to this ward. I was surprised because I had no recollection of being in the recovery ward after leaving the operating theatre. “I hope that I did not swear too much and that I was not rude to any of the staff. How did I cause you concern?”

Dr Davis looked at his case notes and said, “ Sister Davies thought you were fighting World War 2 on your own”

I interrupted and said, “ There were times when I thought that I was.”

“Yes. It appeared that you were in some sort of danger and that you were concerned about other people as well. You were throwing your arms about, so much so that the nurses had to bandage your arm to the bed in order to prevent your drip from being disconnected. Then you said they are not horses, three one and nines, that was bloody close, etc. etc. You settled down and when the Charge nurse came around and asked for your name, you gave him a Military number, rank and name, but you refused to give him your address because it was classified. You also thought that he was German and you also spoke to him in German. It



was then that you were given oxygen and returned to the ward. Any ideas?"

"It sounds very much like one of my favourite nightmares, and it was not horses, it was Mustangs"

"But mustangs are horses" said Dr Read.

"I know, but these Mustangs are American P51 Fighter aircraft, and at the time, the fastest fighter aircraft around, and it was not three one and nines, but they are 109's, Messerschmidt 109's."

Dr Read spoke again. "You said that it was one of your favourite nightmares. Do you often have these nightmares?"

I replied, "To understand this, you must realise that I was one of the idiots who volunteered for the R.A.F. during the first week of the war, and I was in uniform on September the 9<sup>th</sup> 1939. During 1940, I was stationed at Horsham in Sussex, working in an aircraft Salvage Unit covering the South East of England during the Battle of Britain. Our unit dismantled and removed every crashed plane and the repairable ones were taken back to the factory, and the others dismantled completely back at base. Many of the aerodromes were badly bombed during this period, and planes were never crashed near a shelter, which meant the only shelter we had was beside or under our lorries. I was sent on 'Operational Rest' on 2 occasions to have a respite from the continual bombing. Being a driver/operator on a large mobile crane, I had to stay until all the planes were loaded on to the 'Artic's'.

I was posted to the Middle East in November 1940 and I joined a mobile aircraft stores unit on the Western Desert on January 1941 and advanced with General Wavell right through to Benghazi and Agheila. We were based at Tobruk and 2 of my colleagues and I were the last to leave after the Afrika Korps pushed the British Forces back to their starting place. I later joined the largest unit in the Middle East where 9 fighters and 5 bombers were assembled every day of the week. They came from America in Crates and were rebuilt and tested. Unfortunately, we lost 5 fighters and 3 bombers every day through enemy action.

I joined a reconnaissance squadron just before the Alemein campaign. This squadron used Baltimore medium Bombers, fitted with a large fuel

tank in the bomb bay, and three cameras. They flew at 25,000 feet and were away for 4-5 hours. My job at that time was as Sergeant Mechanical Transport fitter and my vehicles had to be kept serviceable to move at 2 hours notice. We were sited about 5 to 20 miles from the front line all through the campaign.

It was my job to prepare the vehicles for the invasion of Sicily arriving on "D" day plus 2, later to invade Italy at Reggio on "D" Day plus 2 and advance to Foggia. Because my squadron was disbanded, I was posted to a Mobile stores unit at Bari and once again travelled back to Foggia and then to Naples. From Naples we moved to a site about just over 20 miles from Cassino and this where this particular nightmare originated. During the whole of this time, I was being strafed on the roads and at the camp, frequently we were bombed and in the end, some of us became a little 'Bomb happy'

"Bomb Happy, What is that?" asked Dr Read.

"It is very similar to 'Shell Shock' in the 1<sup>st</sup> World War You get so used to it that you get out of your slit trench and either you fire your rifle at them, or throw stones at them. The only thing is that when you hear any unusual sound or an aircraft approaching you are liable to think that it is the real thing and dive for cover. Sometimes my nightmares take the form of the raids in the Battle of Britain, sometimes the bombings at El Adem aerodrome. At the time they are very real and I caused some concern to the other men sharing my tent, so they reported it to the Medical Officer, who arranged for me to see the Psychiatrist in Corsica. After a long discussion, we agreed that they were not hallucinations and provided that they did not cause me any problems, no further action would be taken. Since then, I was on the invasion of Southern France, landing on "D" Day plus One..

During the peacetime years, these nightmares have frequently occurred, usually when I had been stressed or worried, and until a few years ago, my wife was a very sound sleeper and was unaware that anything occurred. However, after being taken seriously ill with heart trouble and several major operations, finally having a Mitral Valve replaced, she is now a very light sleeper. She became very concerned and at times tried to wake me up during these 'dreams'. Unfortunately it had the reverse effect and now I am allowed to go through them without interruption.

Knowing that I have already survived the trauma, it doesn't worry me any more."

Dr Read read through his notes once more and said, "It looks to me that when the recovery staff tried to wake you up, your sub-conscious was in a form of 'time warp', and you really thought you were back in that period of the war when you were speaking to him. I have 2 other patients with similar problems, but they are worrying themselves sick, thinking they are losing their sanity. I may be able to re-assure them now, because it is over 40 years since these events took place and yet you still have recall. Perhaps you would be good enough to write all of this down, from the time you entered the Services, and your own feelings at the time. You will probably find that this will release the 'demons' causing these nightmares. I will discuss this with my colleagues and who knows, it may help someone else".

I said that I would start it as soon as my drip was removed, but it may take a bit of time. Remember, Servicemen's reminiscences are like fishermen's tales, they exaggerate with the telling.

Dr Lewis who had been silent during this discourse said, " I think you can rest peacefully now, our concern no longer applies." With that, he pulled the curtains back and the two Doctors left, just in time for my tea.