

Ron Owen (1920-?)
Royal Air Force
Moylegrove Nr Cardigan

West Wales Veteran Archive

Interview Date: late 1980's

Source: Hugh Morgan OBE Collection of Welsh RAF interviews undertaken during the 1980 and 90's.

Ron Owen:

"I applied for pilot training. In 1940. At the time, the RAF were not accepting volunteers for this. I was asked and accepted to be trained as an aircraft mechanic.

I was with plenty of others sent to the place where the airship hangers were (Cardington) for kitting out. From there we were sent to Bridgnorth for our square bashing. When we were at last allowed out of camp, we could then walk properly. One of the recruits wanted a light for his cigarette. He stopped a chap who was coming towards him and asked if he had a light. The person obliged him, and then inquired of the recruit if he had ever seen one of these. This being the coat of arms on his sleeve. After some time pondering, a light dawned. And the recruit replied. 'Of course. On a Lyle's Golden Syrup tin'. He was quietly asked to return to the camp and report to the guard room. And await the arrival of the station Warrant Officer. This was perfectly true, so I hope you have not heard this one before.

To proceed we left Bridgnorth and were posted to Cannock Chase which was the technical or one of the technical training units. The first day of our arrival, we were paraded. The Sargeant went down the front of this squad and numbered them off as 'airframes' and 'engines', as each section was named.

We congregated together. The scheme was that we were first trained as airframe or engineer mechanics and at the end of this course we took exams written and practical. Those who had marks over 60%, I believe it may have been higher, were promoted to Aircraftsman 1st Class, and then offered immediate training as airframe or engine fitters. The remainder were posted to different squadrons. I was allowed to stay on with the former lot. I was finally posted to No 16 Maintenance Unit Stafford as an LAC Fitter. Eventually I was picked up for pilot training about the second week in April 1942. The timetable was approximately as follows.

Posted to St. John's Word Reception Centre. We were given medical, psychological and other tests which lasted about a week. At the end of this we were divided up into flights of about 30 airmen of all types, ie new recruits, serving Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve and, not the least the ex 'boy' apprentices. My particular flight was sent to Brighton for a mass refresher course for about 3 weeks where we were billeted at the Grand Hotel on the Front. Our lecture rooms were at the aquarium along the front.

It was here that we acquired our flight mascot. I had three special friends by this time. Two were corporals and ex boys. Delamere from Barrow in Furness. Sproggy Ewing, a New Zealander, as about as broad as he was tall. And also Danny from Nottingham.

We were having a drink at one of the pubs in Brighton when Danny came in and said that he had found the Mascot. The flight had been talking about this kind of thing for some days. However, this was a bit tricky, the reason being that it was attached to the bottom of the staircase of this particular pub. Was it possible perhaps to release it?. One by one, we all went into the corridor outside the bar to examine the said object. We discovered that we need to somehow undo the nut holding it to the staircase bottom. Sproggy was the one who did it I believe and managed to carry out this task and eventually we all managed to carry the thing back to the hotel undetected. How we accomplished this without being caught, I shall never know, especially when you realise that it was a) Two to three feet high b) Made of beautifully polished wood and c) A gargoyle. However, we did, and there was a photograph, which I cannot now find with 'Gudenheimer' as we called it, sitting in the middle of the front row of the flight. Danny was given the job of looking after it, and I believe he eventually carried it home to Nottingham.

Aberystwyth

From Brighton we were sent to Aberystwyth. Here we were to go through a navigation course at the University College of Wales. We were there for about 6 weeks. We were stationed at the Queens Hotel which was taken over by the RAF for the duration. The time here was spent in lectures and keep fit. Saturday nights were spent at the local dance hall and Sundays after church parade were spent on Clarach Beach.

We were fortunate to meet the young ladies of the Chelsea College of Physical Education who had been evacuated from London on our first Sunday. They were having a picnic on the beach and invited Delamere and myself to join in. Two of the young ladies then became our partners at the dances on Saturday night. They were called Joy and Zoe. We also met up with them in London in July after our course came to an end and they were down from college on vacation. We were on two weeks leave. Prior to proceeding to Sywell in Northampton for flying training. Later I understand. Joy and Delamere became engaged. I lost contact with all the people on the course after Manchester.

The flying training was, I believe, a bit haphazard. Our routine was that part of the course did practical flying training in the morning, then theoretical work in the afternoon. The following day the timing would be reversed. This worked very well. Generally speaking, the course was very good. So why do I say haphazard? Because of what happened in my case.

Each cadet had 15 hours flying training, divided into two or three of five days per week. Saturday and Sunday we were not on the airfield. I think we all knew that if you could go solo in this time or quicker, the better of your chances became to go on with the next part of the pilots course.

If, at the end of seven hours, you had not gone solo, your tutor or instructor changed. This happened to me. The first instructor was a New Zealander Sergeant pilot, and we got on well together. Take off and landings were no problem. Partway through, however, we were up one day, and I realised that we were in the air rather longer than usual. This puzzled me until the tutor asked me if I could see any other aircraft around. I said 'no'. 'If you do', he said, 'fly towards them'. After a little more time, I asked what the problem was. He replied that he did not know where we were. However. not to

worry, just keep flying around. In a while he said that he could see an airfield under construction, but we were strictly not allowed to land there, however, In this emergency, it was essential. He took over the controls, landed the aircraft and taxied up to the contractors hut. He asked me to keep the engine running white while he went into the hut. It transpired that he told the contractor that he was a King's Messenger and could he have a look at the map. We were at Rugby. He could now get our bearings and we eventually arrived back at side well safe and sound.

This adventure was quite a laugh, except for one thing. It cut short and the circuits and bumps. Any twit can fly an aircraft straight and level and carry out normal rated turns, stall spins at 3000 feet and recovery. But circuits and bumps are a very good thing to practise for beginners. The time taken over this escapade was some three hours, so my training was cut down some. Of course, I thought that my instructor was satisfied that I could go solo and therefore did not worry too much. I believed I that I would do this at the end of the allotted 7 hours. This, I discovered, was not the case.

Shortly after this I was given an English flight Sergeant instructor. Although I did this with a solid period of circuits and bumps. Taking into account, that there was the Chief Flying Instructors check to do with the 8 hours left. There was about 6 hours in which I could go solo, which seemed OK to me.

About the third day of flying with this person. I can remember it was a Friday morning. We were still doing circuits and bumps and I was completing the circuit and landing. I could see an aircraft which had just landed. This was at the far end of the runway, well within the safety limits. As far as I could judge. The instructor went berserk, shouting 'Can't you see the aircraft on the runway?' The runway was in fact a field. In addition to shouting, he slammed his foot on the rudder bar. To pull the aircraft out of the runway alignment and slammed open the throttle. I doubt if you can understand how I felt. The shock of his action both in word and deed caused me great turmoil. Firstly because he had no faith in my judgement and secondly that any instructor could behave in such an irrational way. If he had said to me over the intercom that he thought it wise at go around again, then perhaps ram other aircraft. Fair enough. Perhaps this chap was someone who had been taken off operations for a rest and that is why he acted this way.

Of course, all this specular speculation is after the event. So I acted in the only way I felt right. I kept quiet and said nothing. He handed back the flying of the aircraft to me. I proceeded to do a normal circuit and lined up the runway for landing. You will in all probability know that we were flying Gypsy Moth and the stall speed is 60 miles an hour. I know. Locked on the rubber rudder, bar, stick and throttle. I was determined that the instructor was not going to make a mess of this one. I pushed the stick forward and opened the throttle heading for the deck. It took a few seconds for the guy in front to realise that there was something wrong, that we should not be heading for the deck at such speed and angle. There was a furious shout over the intercom. 'What the hell are you doing'? In addition, there was a tremendous struggle as he tried but failed to move either of the controls. I thought we were going quite well, really. However, he gave up the struggle and Jess remarked 'if you don't throttle back a bit and pull back on the stick, you'll kill us both'.

I considered this and decided he was probably correct. I took the proper recovery action on the undercarriage and just kissed the ground. As we flattened out and took off again. I still had control. Made the circuit and landed very well. There was no response from the instructor until he climbed out of the aircraft and stood at the side of the rear cockpit. He asked what was the matter? My one word reply with tears running down my face was 'frustration'. He advised me to relax at the

weekend, go out on a bench or something, that on Monday we would do one circuit and bump and I could go solo.

Monday arrived and his excuse was that the wind had changed direction, so a solo was not advisable. I knew then there was going to be no solo for me and so it transpired. I completed the rest of the course without being allowed to go solo. Each time. We went up after that, there was some excuse or other until finally he agreed to ask the Flight Commander. Permission for me to go solo, but the flight commander said that there was not enough time, as I still had the Chief flying instructor check to do.

From Sywell, we were posted to Heaton Park, Manchester to await classification. There were probably, from what I call recall, about 200 airmen on the parade that morning in front of a large mansion. I cannot remember where Delamere was. But Sproggy, Ewing and I were together. As the names and classification were called out, the airman was to go to whatever the Assembly appoint was for their classification.

I heard Delamere's name, called out as pilot training and waited for my return. My turn. Both Sproggy Ewing and I were called for air Bomber training. We were to proceed to the Rose Garden. That shows you what imagination went into this. Fancy mixing air bombers and rose gardens! Right, said Sproggy 'Let's go'. I could not believe it. Somebody had made a mistake. I was furious at such an outcome. When I could control myself enough, I said to Sproggy that I signed up for pilot training and I would not be going to any Rose Garden. He tried to persuade me, but I was having none of it.

It is pointless to say anything else of what took place. I tried unsuccessfully to change the classification and at the end of the day. I found myself the only one of these approximately 200 volunteers alone in the tented camp. I even found that while I've been trying to be reclassified, somebody had taken the flying goggles from my flying kit.

What happened to my friends Delamere, Sproggy, Ewing and Danny? I have never found out. If I did, it is possible that it would bring sorrow. I only hope they survived through the war.

I was in a very short time posted back to my old duties as Airframe Fitter but at East Fortune, just outside Edinburgh, and was there until May 1943 when I volunteered for overseas duties and was sent to North Africa.

But that is another story”