George Andrew (Lefty) Whitman

Lefty was a member of the Aircrew Association of Vancouver Island for a number of years. What follows is his obituary and the text of his story in “Listen to Us” published in 1997.

On May 2, 2007 at the ***Grace General Hospital, Winnipeg, Manitoba****, George Andrew Whitman passed away at the age of 87 years.*
Lefty was born March 5, 1920; educated in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He joined the RCAF in New York City, September 1941. Recruited by the Clayton Knight Committee. He flew Hurricanes, Typhoons and Tempests with #3 (F) Squadron RAF in England. #3 Squadron began its illustrious history in 1912; its motto, `Tertius primus erit' meaning `third shall be first' has been passed on through many famous hands and to this day it continues on active service.

Lefty was shot down in September 1943 by flak and ditched in the sea. (First ever ditching of a Typhoon). While in his dinghy he was strafed and wounded by two Me109's. His dinghy was sunk but he was rescued by a Walrus aircraft. He later destroyed a Me109G, the first enemy fighter aircraft destroyed by a Tempest in the air. F/O Whitman also shot down 14 flying bombs. He also served as public relations officer at the Air Ministry, London.

He was honourably discharged in November, 1945, when he applied for and was granted Canadian citizenship. His work with the disadvantaged and underprivileged received national recognition, and in October, 1983, he was awarded the Order of Canada. In 1990, after retiring as Vice-President, Hudson's Bay Company Northern Stores, at the age of seventy, he remained active in the field of social development as a volunteer.

`When I joined the unit in April, 1943 I met one of the great loves of my life. With her humped back and straight legs she wasn't much to look at but she responded to the slightest touch and was always gentle. Slow to burn and tight in the turn the Hurricane and I were about to have an intimate affair. We were known then as the “Manston Night Flight,” attacking shipping at night during the moon period; usually four days before full moon to five days after. Our task was interdicting road and rail traffic, canal barges and enemy aerodromes, circling five or so miles back from the runway in use, waiting for enemy aircraft to land and then shooting them up while they were still on the runway.
These activities were very exciting and produced many casualties on both sides. Soon we re-equipped with Typhoons, flown in by tiny Joan Hughes and her crew of ATA pilots, much to our shock and amazement. I vividly recall our CO, Leo DeSumer, one of the great Belgian pilots, careering madly down the runway, nearly ground-looping the great beast on his first try at taming it. This flying artillery piece, powered by a great complex and unreliable 24-cylinder Napier Sabre engine of 2,200 horse-power, could carry in addition to its four 20 mm cannons, up to 2000 lbs of bombs, and later on, four 601b rockets, making it a formidable ground-attack aircraft. It did however, have a few shortcomings. When using long-range fuel tanks for example, changing from one tank to the other frequently caused the fuel to flow from the full tank to the empty one. More than a few pilots were lost due to this delightful possibility.
Perhaps its most deadly feature was its propensity for shedding its tail without warning. One of my dearest friends, Baron Jean de Selys Longchamps, nephew of the King of Belgium, was killed when he borrowed my aircraft and crashed in front of our dispersal while approaching the runway. Later on, as a test pilot, I flew a U.S. Navy Grumman Hellcat. This maker had the decency to affix a warning plate on the instrument panel, which read, "This aircraft is not to be rolled at speeds in excess of 400 m.p.h." All Hawkers did was to affix

5” fish plates to the stringers, more to allay pilots' fears than to really rectify the danger of the tails coming off.

In spite of these faults we flew the Typhoon on low-level attacks day and night. It also proved quite satisfactory as a dive-bomber. Our technique of approaching a target from 12,000 to 14,000 feet, half-rolling to a vertical dive, using our gunsight to aim with, gave us an average margin of error of about 25 yards; Adequate indeed to hit small heavily-defended targets. We had long since been designated "The Channel Stop"; ever since the "Scharnhorst," "Prince Eugen" and "Gneisenau" escapade and we paid heavily for the title. While other Tiffy squadrons were shooting down enemy aircraft we continued to suffer heavy losses to flak. We never flew above 14,000 feet however, since the Typhoon was no match for any Me 109G or Focke-Wulf 190 above that altitude.
At Central Fighter Establishment I flew both of these German types and although I destroyed the first 109 in a Tempest over Normandy, we did not do all that well against them when bounced in Typhoons. In May 1943 for example, after dive-bombing and strafing Poix aerodrome in Southern France, our two escort squadrons of "Tiffys" left us to attack trains and we were jumped by 60 plus 109s of Jg.27, losing five out of eight on the way home.

Deliverance came however, on March 2, 1944, when we went off to the factory to pick up our Tempests. What an aeroplane it was. Hawkers had built an airframe that handled like a Hurricane. Napiers, with the help of Bristol, had removed the bugs from the Sabre 11A and the long 20 mm cannons had been replaced by short-barrelled guns that doubled the rate of fire. Here was a fighter-pilot's fighter at long last. After two months of concentrated exercises, conducted as secretly as possible, we made our first sweep over enemy occupied territory on May 3. While it was uneventful from our point of view, I can imagine the looks of surprise and disbelief on the German radar-operator's faces as we flashed by over 100 mph faster than anything they had ever plotted before.
Shortly after we first flew our Tempests into Newchurch Advanced Landing Ground I received two unexpected visitors. Cussy, our Adjutant informed me that there were American MPs over in the thatched-roofed cottage that served as our ops headquarters. Cycling across the runway, I found two US Provost Marshals - NCOs all decked out in combat boots, white helmets, holstered .45s and more ribbons than all our squadron combined. They saluted smartly and presented me with a large brown sealed envelope and asked me to sign for it and read it in their presence.

On opening it I saw the heading, "Greetings," and I knew I was in trouble. "This is to advise you that you have been selected for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States of America. Failure to report to the nearest Army Recruiting Office within fifteen days of receipt of this notice will result in imprisonment, etc., etc..."
I read on and replied, "Thank you, Sergeant. What happens if I ignore this notice?"
"Well sir" he replied, "Someone will come and get you, I guess."
"Cussy," I called to the Adj. "Take these chaps over to the mess tent for lunch. It’s about time they had a taste of British Army field rations. It'll be a change from all those pork chops and ice cream."
As they left, I spoke to the CO of the RAF Regiment, our "servicing commandos" responsible for aerodrome security, telling him that I'd just been drafted into the American Army.

He doubled up with laughter, and said it was about time I did some war work, adding that he would go right over to the mess tent and warn those "bloody Yanks" that if they ever set foot on the base again there would likely be a Court of Inquiry leading to an international incident over their having been shot on an operational RAF base.

I was both amused and insulted by this incident. The draft in the USA had commenced long after I had joined the RAF. For some time I had been receiving post cards from my local Draft Board in Pennsylvania, informing me that my number was S 1511, that I had been classified under Section 3(C) - "engaged in war work" and that I should tear off a section of this card and return it to the Draft Board. What with my moving around there was often a six-month delay in their receiving it. On this occasion however, someone back there thought I should be upgraded to 1(A) and serve my country. By this time I had already turned down two offers to transfer to the US Army Air Corps, first on an equal rank basis and next to join the 4th Fighter

Wing in the USA But I didn't like the kites they were flying and I also didn't want to join up with inexperienced newcomers.

My squadron, #3(F), RAF was formed in 1912, and had fought with distinction ever since. There was no way I would ever voluntarily leave such an elite outfit. When I discussed the problem with the Wingco and the CO, they both agreed that I should get it resolved as quickly as possible.

The flight from Romney Marsh up to Croydon took only about ten minutes. Upon arrival I took a vehicle to London and soon pulled up at the U.S. Recruiting Office in Grosvenor Square. This had recently been set up with the principal purpose of collecting merchant seamen for induction. It was a tiny ground-floor store that had once housed a dress shop. In the front half, benches lined each wall, and sitting at a table underneath an "Uncle Sam Wants You!" poster was a sergeant, frowning at a pile of forms. Two civilians, obviously merchant seamen, were reading newspapers. One had on his lap a brown envelope, similar to mine, which I had tucked away in my battle dress jacket.

The sergeant never looked up as I went to his desk. I waited a moment, and said,

"Sergeant, I have some business of an urgent nature to discuss with your Commanding Officer."

He raised his eyes just far enough to see the colour of my faded blue pants and snarled, "Sit down, and wait to be called."

I had never before pulled rank on anyone; not that a Flying Officer had much rank to pull, but now I thought it might be called for. I placed my fingers under his table, and after raising it slowly about two or three inches, I let it drop with a bang. It immediately got his undivided attention, for he leapt to his feet and before he could reply I barked at him,

"Sergeant, do you recognise this uniform?" Before he could speak I fired a second barrel.

"Either you parade me in to see your Commanding Officer, now, or I'll drag you in behind me. Move."

He saluted and like a wind-up toy marched into the office of a Lieutenant who was obviously fresh out of Fort Dix, resplendent in Army "pinks." On his tunic was a good conduct medal (for not getting VD) as well as merit badges for a variety of other accomplishments. He had the kind of haircut that you would see in a delousing camp; a half-inch brush cut. He seemed startled that he had been disturbed at his work, sliding a copy of "Life" magazine under some papers with such force that it skidded out the other side and landed on the floor.

"This officer Sir, says he has some urgent business," the sergeant said, standing stiffly at attention.

"Very well sergeant. You may leave."

Without waiting any further I produced the document. At that moment a malevolent smile triumphantly spread across his face and he drawled,

"Swearing-in every day at fourteen hundred. Train the same night to Liverpool, and in two weeks you'll be stateside in boot camp. We get all of you draft dodgers sooner or later. "

Now it was my turn to burn and with great difficulty I restrained myself. Tearing the document in half, I dropped it on his desk and said,

"Come and get me. Don't send anyone else, just come yourself," and picking up his "Life" magazine from the floor I threw it at him, adding,

"But be sure you finish this first." Out on the street I cooled off a bit.

"Boy, you really blew that one," I said to myself as I headed across the Square to the Ambassador's office where I suppose I should have gone in the first place. He received me at once and when I told him my story about my intention to return to my squadron, he first apologised for the reception I'd had at the Recruiting Office.

"That Lieutenant will remember you for a long time, I'm sure. I'll send a cable to your local Draft Board and have your classification reinstated."

I thanked him and headed back to Newchurch. The entire operation had taken less than three hours. A few days later a signal came through saying,

"Congratulations on your successes in the RAF. Deferment granted for the duration." Signed, Wm. Ditter, Congressman. So an international incident was avoided, peace was preserved between the US forces and her allies, and the Lieutenant at the London Army Recruiting Office probably finished the war in his little back room reading magazines.

As for me, I had duly been reclassified by the Local Draft Board, which had apparently been convinced that employment as a fighter pilot in the Royal Air Force constituted being "engaged in war work."

On the 8th of May Bob Brockley and I flew the first night-intruder sorties by Tempests and what a supreme delight it was -- just like the old Hurricane with a 150 m.p.h. increase in cruising speed. I sank an E&R boat that night and although illuminated by searchlights from the shore, and drawing much light flak, I pulled the nose up and in no time was at 25,000 feet and 40 miles out to sea. Bob claimed the first V-1 ever to be destroyed on this sortie.

Squadron activity exploded overnight. We changed tactics. When flying long-distance "Rangers," rather than mount squadron strength, we flew in pairs, threes or fours. This gave us more maneuverability and allowed us to cover a much wider area. We now had three full squadrons, having been joined by Nos. 56, (RAF) and 486, (New Zealand) squadrons. Notwithstanding the fact that we had moved from established quarters with full messes and complete echelon support facilities into a tent camp at Newchurch Advanced Landing Ground, our ground-crews performed wonderfully.

We mixed our strikes and "Rangers" with standing patrols at low level over the Channel ports from the mouth of the Seine to Flushing, in the Dutch islands. There were two reasons for this. We wanted to create the illusion that an invasion was planned for the Pas de Calais area and we were looking for evidence of any build-up of vessels that might intercept or mount a counter-attack against the planned invasion. It was on one of these routine patrols that Teddy Zurakowsky and Jimmy Mannion were shot down. My Number 2 and I arrived over the spot south-west of Boulogne within four minutes but found nothing. We surmised that the German defences had been tracking us for days and made the proper adjustment to their flak predictors. We were to lose several more friends very soon due to our nemesis, flak; most of it friendly. A couple of days before, Remy van Leirde, another of Belgium's famous heroes, had said to Teddy and me,
"Let's go and kill some fucking Germans."
We spread our maps on the tailplane and quickly plotted a "Ranger" through Northern France, over Belgium, coming out by the most expeditious route. We filed our plan and hopped up to Manston where we topped up our 45-gallon drop-tanks and took off, just clearing the chimney-pots at Broadstairs, keeping four wingspans between us at prop-wash height. We crossed the Belgium coast between Coxyede and Zebrugge, checked the railroads at Roulers and Thiell, picked up the Vimy monument and set course for Louvain. There we found a long train, two locomotives at one end and one at the other, loaded with several Tiger tanks, a dozen light Mark X 11s and dozens of light vehicles stacked on end. We quickly destroyed the locomotives to immobilise the train and were at once fired on by three flak towers. Remy quickly put one out of action with a one-second burst and Teddy and I the others. We then quickly went back to work on the train, hammering away until the cars were ablaze from one end to the other and all we were shooting was compressed air. Turning for home we were back in Newchurch in an hour and fifty-five minutes. For the first time since takeoff we climbed to 300 feet to join the circuit. After the debriefing was finished Van said to us,
"Let's go back again tomorrow and catch them cleaning up.”
That night we celebrated with our ground crews at the "Bull" tavern just down the road (something that not everyone did, incidentally). When Van told them that we wanted to go back again the crews wanted to work on the aircraft all through the night. Bad weather intervened however, and on our return two days later we had no success. Van and I did several more "Rangers" before our mission was drastically changed.

The ghosts of Romney Marsh were now wide awake. It was as if they knew that terrible forces of unimaginable magnitude were soon to be unshackled. Tension levels were at the breaking point and after the 24-hour postponement of Operation Overlord we hardly spoke to one another. Ground crews swarmed like ants over the kites checking and rechecking everything, cursing and shouting when some little snag was discovered or some minor part was u/s. After the evening meal they turned in, bone weary from lack of sleep, even while the heavies set out on their diversionary raids over wide areas of Western Germany. Traffic over the Pas de Calais area was heavy and it was not until dark that we heard and saw streams of aircraft heading towards the south-west on a course towards the Channel Islands. These were the US airborne divisions coming from the Bristol area. Advanced airborne units of the British Sixth Airborne in a classic pincer movement were heading out east of us towards Caen. What little sleep we had was ended when we turned out at 3AM, ate a hot meal and stood by our aircraft while the sky and sea began to throb with reverberating sound that was impossible to describe. It was felt more than heard as masses of ships surged southward. We had been briefed on the assault areas. We were experienced, confident and aggressive and yet as we stood there by our kites, faces turned upwards at the ever increasing masses of aircraft, bombers, tugs and gliders by the hundreds with accompanying fighter escorts we asked ourselves, "What about us?"

We had a gut-wrenching feeling that someone had decided that we would not spearhead the attack after all. Then finally the red flare set us in motion and within four minutes the entire wing was airborne and as we climbed in tight formation we marvelled at the sights around us. The Channel was a mass of ships, escort vessels dashing about like water beetles on a pond and across the breaking day layers of aircraft seemed to be suspended as we rocketed up through their ranks and in minutes we were at 20,000' pulling well ahead of the endless stream that surged on behind us. As we neared the Cherbourg Peninsula we dived to about 5000'. High above us now was an umbrella of fighters; Spits, Mustangs and Thunderbolts were spread across the dome of the sky, while below us squadrons of Typhoons dive-bombed and rocketed ground targets. But where was the Luftwaffe? At Dieppe in 1942 the Focke-Wulf 190s swarmed around us like bees, but up here it was quiet. Our orders were to provide cover to the fighter-bombers and that was that. Off the mouth of the Seine estuary a heavy cruiser was shelling shore targets and at the same time directing its light armament against a poor lone Spitfire that was obviously spotting for them. (Moral: "Keep the hell away from ships"). As we turned for home, having finished our sweep we gave all vessels a wide berth. Still the armada came on. The sky from north to south was filled with this never-ending mass. We felt that we had been swept along by this flooding tide and now as we viewed it coming towards us we knew that this was a great crusade that ' was unstoppable and I thought of Shakespeare's words from Henry V:

"Gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not here. "

In an hour and a half we were back on the Marsh, stunned by the immensity of what we had witnessed and sharing the frustrations of our armourers who were quick to notice that our cannons had not been fired. Yet this was not the first such instance. In the Battle of France the squadron for two days never fired its guns and in the next eight it destroyed ninety-five enemy aircraft.

All day long it was impossible to look up without seeing dozens of aircraft coming and going. While we maintained cockpit readiness there was no action for us, so the Winco and the C.O. developed a plan of their own. If the Luftwaffe were going to lie low we'd try to decoy them up. We waited for a day before executing our trap. The Wingco and I would sweep the beachhead as a pair, with 3 Squadron, 10,000 feet above and down sun eight miles or so. Even further away would be 486 Squadron as a special back-up.

After we had covered the beachhead, Ops came on the horn advising us of six plus bandits south of Rouen. Bee and I spotted them about 2,000 feet below us, weaving and jinking, heading in an easterly direction. As we dived on them they began a flat turn putting their backs to the sun.

"Now where in hell are the other two," I mused.

Then I realised that they were sucking us in and as we attacked I looked behind and here was the other pair diving down on us out of the sun. I throttled back as Bee fired at one of the four and yanked my Tempest into a hard turn, firing at the leader who exploded like a clay pigeon. Snap-rolling back, I saw Bee's target breaking up and as I tried to get the second in my sights he dived vertically into the cloud and I followed.

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Assuming that he would be heading east, I went down almost to the deck but couldn't find any trace of him. I heard Bee telling 3 Squadron to keep quiet, as there was a lot of chatter, while they pursued the remaining 109s. He had disappeared, having caught a cannon shell in the right wing and we both came home separately. Bob Moore had shot down a third, and Morris Rose had forced-landed on the beachhead because of a prop malfunction. Our armourers were happy to see fired guns. The Tempest had its first kill in air combat. Soon there would be many more and the armourers would load over 120,000 rounds in the following month.

Our next two sweeps over the beachhead were uneventful, but we did however, find opportunities to engage right on our doorstep. At night E & R boats would cross the Channel, lie at anchor using smoke to augment fog when necessary, burst out to attack the convoys heading for France, then run for home to Calais or Boulogne only minutes away.

With Stan Domanski as my Number 2 just off Goodwin Sands, I noticed a fog bank that was a little too dense. We dived down to check it out, discovering two E & R boats. My first attack sent debris 100 feet into the air. Seconds later Stan had finished the other one and since we only fired short bursts we continued to patrol the convoys uneventfully for the next hour and a half when we were relieved by another section.

On the night of June 13th, Remy van Leard and I set out for Folkestone in his newly purchased little Renault to pick up his laundry and go to a movie. The show was interrupted by a message for all pilots to return to their aerodromes. We set off, Van racing at breakneck speed down the little narrow roads that led across the Marsh, saying to me,
"Look Lefty. 450 on the clock."
I was looking elsewhere because we had just run out of road and in a flash we were airborne, over an embankment an splashed into a canal. We sat for a moment, stunned, and as pile of freshly laundered shirts of his came floating between us from the back seat, I began to laugh. Van said,

"Lefty, don't laugh. Rather I be cut to death than to hurt my dear little car."
He grabbed his laundry and we ran, wet to the armpits, for a mile or so back to the air strip and what a sight we must have been. But within minutes after donning coveralls we were scrambled after the "divers." Allan Dredge and I were first off followed by Van and his number 2. No cowboy in the old horse operas ever mounted his steed any faster than we did. Our chutes were 1n the seats, harnesses laid back, helmets hanging on the control-column, with radio and oxygen hooked up. The moment you dropped into your seat there was a crewman on each shoulder, strapping you in while you pulled on your helmet. A third man was standing by in front of the engine and when he gave the thumbs-up you pressed your starter-buttons and the beast came alive. Were it not for their incredible efficiency we would never have been able to scramble so quickly. There was always great competition among them. Those who consistently buttoned up their pilots first were the envy of their peers and their pilots alike.

Later, Ernest Hemingway was to write an article about us for Colliers magazine wherein he referred to Van as being "as tough as a six-day bike rider. " He was all of that and like most other pilots on the squadron, he was idolised by his contemporaries on the ground and in the air. Tough-minded and aggressive, he had that rare combination of leadership, personality and character. It still fills me with pride that I had the privilege of fighting beside him.

Romney Marshes which had slept peacefully since Harold received William the Conqueror's arrow in his eye, had with the preparations for the invasion of Europe, become an armed camp overnight. A dozen airfields had been secretly built scarcely two miles apart. Summerfeld track, a link-mesh steel fence, was laid out on pastures, through orchards and across green fields. No buildings were constructed. The Tactical Air Force squadrons of fighters and fighter-bombers that moved in to support the D-day landings lived in tents and used cottages or barns as headquarters. One of those Wings, No. 122, comprising Nos 3, 56 and 486 (NZ) Squadrons soon had its role changed from spearheading the offence to assuming the first line of defence. Germany, desperately seeking to stave off defeat, was relying as a last resort on the production of "Victory" weapons. The V-l, a pilotless aircraft, powered by a simple ram jet engine, and capable of speeds in excess of 500 miles per hour, carried a warhead of two tons of high explosive. Sites for the launching of these "doodlebugs," as they were called by the press, were deployed from Cap Gris Nez to the Seine estuary. All pointed to Greater London.

On the 13th of June, 1944, as the C.O., Allan Dredge and I prepared to take off to patrol the beach head, a flying bomb streaked overhead. Half the size of an average fighter aircraft,
it trailed a tail of fire some twenty feet in length. Its characteristic sound, soon to strike terror in the hearts of all who were to hear it, was for all the world like a motor bike without a muffler.
"Let's go, Lefty," the C.O. shouted, and as other pilots tumbled out of their tents and ran for their kites, we were soon airborne and looking with horror at the spectacle that lay before us. Now that dawn had broken we could see the "divers," as we were to call them, coming in at several altitudes. The first wave had been sent over at low level, using the sea fog as cover. Now others were just above a cloud layer, visible to us but unseen from the ground. Within minutes we were engaged. We had split up after a widely spaced pair with a third some two miles and slightly above. As I closed in behind my target I had time to observe it at close range as it took no evasive action. Travelling at 400 miles per hour my Tempest was quite able to keep pace

and we flew in line abreast formation for a few seconds. The streamlined fuselage, about twenty feet in length was topped by a pipe about a foot or so in diameter, nearly as long as the body itself. The wingspan was about twenty feet and when I dropped behind to shoot it down I was impressed with the turbulence emanating from the jet. One two-second burst from my four 20 millimetre cannons produced a fireball at least 100 feet in diameter, from which at 75 yards distance, there was no escape. I made a mental note to triple the range next time and took off after the one trailing. To my surprise it made a slow 180 degree turn heading back towards Boulogne and as I pursued it, there was suddenly thrown up between us a protective wall of heavy flak. The barrage moved along and I broke off in search of others, downing one more before landing to refuel and rearm. For years my recounting of this incident was met with everything from mild disbelief to absolute scorn until I eventually heard that the famous German test-pilot, Hanna Reich had in fact made several observational flights in modified V- Is. Ed Schryer, former Governor-General of Canada, found this story difficult to swallow until Farley Mowatt, a long-time friend, vindicated my tale, relating that he had brought one of these V- Is, complete with pilot's controls, back to Ottawa after the war.

Our hitherto close support for the invading forces was suddenly discontinued as the battle of the flying bombs increased in intensity. We flew in shifts, 24 hours a day. Constant full throttle power played havoc with the engines and many of us had our rudders burned off flying through the fireballs, as four out of five of these things exploded in mid air. I discovered one day when out of ammunition that it was possible to tip the gyros which controlled the flight of the buzz-bombs by flying close to them and using a wing-tip to lift its wing and topple it into the ground. We only used this out over the Channel and damned if the media didn't pick this up somehow. A headline appeared in the "Daily Mirror" - "R.A.F. Pilots Save Ammo by Dumping Doodle-bugs." The very next day we lost two pilots while attempting this manoeuvre. The Germans had simply placed contact fuses under the wing-tips. Another good idea short-lived.

Within a fortnight our kills had mounted monumentally and we soon began to receive special attention. An entourage descended on Romney Marsh, led by the King and Queen, Prime Minister Winston Churchill and a covey of correspondents, including Ernest Hemmingway, John Steinbeck, Ernie Pyle and, as recorded in Shakespeare's "Henry V," "others, not of name." How Edward G. Robinson managed to muscle in on this august group was never made clear, but he provided great entertainment to the troops that day.

When the C.O. was advised of the visit (only the day before it was to take place) it was especially emphasised that the Prime Minister drank only "Johnny Walker Black." There was a note of desperation in his voice when he turned to me and said, "Where can we get that on such short notice?"

At the time we were subsisting on British army field rations and the only booze on the airfield was what we were able to bring back from our 48-hour passes in London or what we drank by the glass at "The Bull" down the road. As it happened, only two days previously I had met the C.O. of a U.S.A.F. Thunderbolt squadron based on the nearby Downs. While pursuing a flying bomb I had been shot at by his trigger-happy ground gunners. Having destroyed the thing in mid-air just past his airstrip, I landed and threatened to drop the next one right on his mess. After this we became instant friends. I knew the Yanks could get anything so I jeeped up and invited him to the luncheon the next day, provided he could produce a case of "Black" and a case of "Beefeater" gin. Within two hours a U. S. A.F. Dakota landed and quietly deposited the required refreshments without so much as a "by your leave. " Keeping our side of the bargain, the major sat as a guest at the table the next day.

Their Majesties only stayed about half an hour. After all, we were in a war zone and after greeting all of our Wing; cooks, drivers, armourers, fitters, riggers, radio mechs and administrative staff they bade us farewell. 1 can never forget the Queen Mother, her violet eyes bright with tears, as she talked to and touched every one. No dress parade this. As they made the rounds, work continued. The armourers, belting ammunition, scarcely stopped to shake hands. No medals were ever handed out for that effort however. We were a close-knit team and most pilots shared in all chores with the other ranks. No. 3 Squadron was the first squadron in the R. A. F. to fly aircraft in World War 1, numbers 1 and 2 Squadrons being balloon units. By tradition it was an international outfit, always containing more than a sprinkling of pilots from at least half a dozen different countries. This diversity more than offset the arrogance that often marked "the old school tie" crowd from Britain's upper class.

Lunch was served in a marquee tent. Benches and tables had been set in a T-shape. Where the table cloths had come from only the Adjutant knew and he wasn't talking. Bottles of "Beefeater" and "Black Label" stood about the tables along with small empty glasses. Large, thick, service tumblers filled with water were placed before each plate.

Churchill sat at the centre of the head table flanked by the C. 0. and the Wingco with our U. S. A. F, saviour across from the P.M. Seated among the pilots were John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway and Ernie Pyle, who was to stop a sniper's bullet in the South Pacific a few months later. When Churchill was asked to toast the King he disdainfully looked at the small shot glass, turned it over and picked up the large tumbler of water, ceremoniously pouring it on the grass. Within the next few seconds one would have thought that the monsoon had broken, as everyone followed suit. As he refilled the large glass with his beloved "Black Label," he smiled and toasted the King, draining at least half of the contents in the process. Noticing the look of surprise on my face, as we sat down he put his hand on my shoulder and said,
"Never mind, my boy. These are trying times you know," in the meantime refilling his glass.
When Hemingway guffawed at this remark the old man turned his head, scowled, and pointing his fork at him said,
"It has come to my attention that some of your ilk have inferred from time to time that I have drunk enough whisky to fill a battleship." Pausing to quaff another swallow, he continued, waving his fork at all the correspondents in turn, and scowling at them, "That is totally incorrect. I've drunk enough to float the entire Home Fleet."
His face glowed behind that cherubic smile of his, then everyone roared and I knew Germany had lost the war.

The meal was punctuated by many interruptions. Every 15 minutes a pair of pilots would leave to go on patrol and was soon replaced by the returning section. Other support staff left to make room for those who had been on duty and it began to seem more like a picnic than a formal event. It could never have happened in any other setting. The Prime Minister had been begun discussing the historical significance of Romney Marsh with Steinbeck when his A.D.C. hurried into the tent to whisper that a massive wave of flying bombs had been picked up on radar and would be overhead in a few minutes. Churchill beamed. The C.O. said,"Tally-ho boys! Off we go," and that was lunch.

Within four minutes eight of us were airborne and, supported by the four aircraft already on patrol in mid-Channel, we were soon engaged. In fifteen minutes it was all over. The coastal guns had accounted for two, we'd destroyed seven and three or four had got through to London. We swept in over the Marsh and those of us who had kills did victory rolls over our dispersal. I had to begin mine at the far end of the runway as I had two and I can remember looking down at the little group upside down as I began my second roll, Churchill giving his famous V-sign and Hemingway jumping up and down waving his arms just like a little boy had in a daisy field fifteen years earlier. In the debriefing that followed all the correspondents were silent, huddling over their note-books. Ernie Pyle, who wrote so beautifully in the "Stars and Stripes," seemed to be in a trance as he looked at us each in turn. He took no notes but his story, which I later read, had missed nothing of the operation and his account of the interaction between ground crew and pilots was beautifully descriptive. No wonder he was so popular with the G.I.s. Steinbeck seemed to be fighting with his angel that day and I wish I could have got to know him better and spent more time with him. We noticed that Edward G. Robinson was absent and we learned later that when the scramble was on and the guns had opened up, "Little Caesar" had rushed out of the tent in search of a slit-trench, tripped over a tent rope and dirtied his trousers; whether in front or behind we never knew. So much for little tough guys.

The shouting and the tumult having died, it was time for the captains and the kings to depart - the P.M., still siren-suited and beaming in his Bentley, and all the correspondents in their bus, save Hemingway, who had asked to stay with us. There was a spare cot in my tent as George Kosh had been killed two days earlier, shot down by our own guns while pursuing a buzzbomb. I felt very badly about his death for we were good friends and I had come to know his family very well, having spent several leaves with them. What really filled me with guilt was that ten minutes before he was killed he had wakened me to ask me for the loan of a sweater and I was very rude to him. I've never forgotten it. George's kit, minus his personal effects, which were sent home, was still there and Ernie moved in. As I remember he had a neat little portable typewriter with a folding table and I often fell asleep to the sound of his typing. Just the other day I happened to hear one of those idiotic quiz shows where someone was asked,
"What was Hemingway's nickname? "

Of course the answer was "Pappa." To us however, he was always known as Ernie. But that was before he was canonised and well before the "Hemingway and Me" cult had developed.

We became close very quickly, as is often the case in wartime. I've thought about this a great deal and have come to believe that one of the reasons we tolerate war is because of the opportunities that regularly occur to share the simplest things. This is a delusion of course, and when I hear veterans talk at reunions about "the good old days" I feel sorry for them, for they were not good in the slightest. Ernie however, was a war buff. We would lie on our cots or in our slit-trench or in the little steel-covered ammunition cache the other side of the hedgerow and he would talk about the Spanish Civil War and of the way that the peasants would fight. Their motto:- "It's better to die on your feet than live on your knees," had moved him deeply and he honestly believed that the best in a man came out in a war. I used to argue with him and point out that the worst came out too and when it looked like a stalemate I would say,
"Well, it's probably our adrenals that distort our perceptions. "
He would laugh and say, "You live with your problems. With me it's my gonads." We had an Army Liaison Officer attached to the squadron whose function it was to plot the bomb line. This supposedly marked the forward positions of the Germans and ourselves and although it was done at half-hour intervals it was sometimes inaccurate and at best approximate. Ernie would sit in the Ops Room, in the kitchen of a thatch-roofed cottage, and look with fascination at the ebb and flow of events. He would grind his teeth in that mannerism that was so often mistaken for a smile, and stomp up and down complaining that the goddamn invasion was three weeks old and he hadn't been there yet. I finally said to him one day,
"Look. You really want to see the action, don't you?" He pulled his beard and answered,
"I'd do anything to get over there." "Even not write about it?" I replied. "What in the hell are you getting at?" was his retort.
"If you swear that you'll not write about this while I'm in the service, I'll take you over for a look."
I knew that the Wingco had taken his wife up for a ride by sitting her in his lap, and he knew that I had seen them. But I'd never mentioned it to anybody, so I figured I could get away with it too. We went to my aircraft and talked to my rigger. Two years earlier, flying Hurricanes on a night intruder sortie, I'd landed and taxied up to my dispersal point, switched off my engine and heard Yorkie's strained voice from under the wing, "Two six, two six!"
"That is totally incorrect. I've drunk enough to float the entire Home Fleet."
His face glowed behind that cherubic smile of his, then everyone roared and I
knew Germany had lost the war.

Form 26 in the R.A.F. was a requisition for labour. Yorkie; was just calling for help. I slid off the wing and joined a group of ground crew in relieving him from a 250 lb. bomb, which had been hung up and dropped off when I cut the switches. I had put him up for the C.G.M. and when he was asked about the incident, he allowed as how there was only a 3-second delay fuse on the bomb and since he was a slow runner the only option he had was to catch it. I knew I could count on Yorkie to keep this plan under his hat and I told him to take my chute out of the bucket seat, lower it and lengthen the Sutton harness to its fullest extent. Ernie would sit down in the empty bucket and I would ' hop in, sit on his lap and that would be all there was to it. We were on 15- minutes readiness and since the 21st Panzer Division was pushing hard to drive the British and Canadian armoured units from Caen-Carpiquet aerodrome I knew that it would be a "guns only" defence against the buzz-bombs until this position was secure.

"Just remember, Ernie, I've got no parachute. If we get hit we have to ride it down together."

As I said this I turned away quickly because I didn't want to see his reaction. Less than 10 minutes later we got the I "scramble" order and we were off - two sections of four. One to do the strafing and the other to act as cover. Twenty minutes later we were diving on our target. My passenger thought he had died and gone to heaven. The aerodrome was strewn with j burned-out tanks. Hangars were aflame, and there were heavy exchanges of fire from tanks at point-blank range. Rocket-firing Typhoons concentrated on the Tiger tanks while we strafed gun posts and personnel carriers. When we got down to our tracers, which marked the remainder of 15 rounds per cannon, we pulled '; up and let our top cover have their turn. It was all over in ' fifteen minutes or so and we were back on the strip in just under an hour's total flying time. I jumped out of my kite and roared off to the debriefing session, leaving my passenger behind. Half ' an hour later, in the cook tent over a mug of tea, Yorkie ' whispered, "Cor! He's just there looking at the instrument panel. He thinks he's flying it hiself right now."

Nor did he appear that night in the mess-tent for dinner. Following "our" flight I had done another run at Caen and completed an uneventful buzz-bomb patrol off Dover. When I went back to the billet, there he was lying on the cot. Hands clasped behind his head staring at an earwig, which was industriously climbing the wall of the tent. He didn't know but the little bugger was getting ready to drop into his bed, which was their habit. I didn't say a word. We just exchanged smiles and I thought about the small boy lying in the daisy field long ago and wondered if they dreamed the same dreams. The typewriter was silent that night. He would write next day though, "You love a lot of things if you live around them. But there isn't any woman and there isn't any horse, not only before or after that is as lovely as a great airplane. And men who love them are faithful to them even though they leave them for others. Man has one virginity to lose in fighters, and if it is a lovely airplane he loses it to, there's where his heart will forever be. "A few days later and he was gone. Off at last to the action on the front. We only met once after that and we exchanged gifts. I gave him one of those gorgeous big white turtle-neck sweaters and he gave me a pair of German binoculars. I still have them and I think of him often. True to his word he never wrote anything about that particular experience though I am sure it was one of his greatest thrills in his life.

June and July 1944 were hectic months; in one week the wing had destroyed one hundred V-1s, but not without cost; in this period two of our most experienced pilots were killed; Stan Domanski and George Kosh were shot down by our own antiaircraft while pursuing them. I myself had been forced to break off attacks on three occasions despite new procedures in effect. These were "fighters only" and "guns only" days. On certain days procedures called for fighters to the coast, and guns to the balloon fence around London. While this looked good on paper, pilots were reluctant to break off pursuit, for we knew that every one that got through was going to destroy lives. The gunners in turn fired at anything they could see. Added to this complex arrangement were "itinerant" fighters, both British and American, that roamed the area at high altitude, diving on their targets as their aircraft were incapable of catching the "doodlebugs" in level flight. Further complicating matters were the night-fighters, whose ghostly appearance caused many a fright for us in the darkness. I had shot down several V- Is at night and the sight of them climbing out of France like fireflies in the long grass on a summer's evening was awesome.

We kept as many aircraft on patrol as we could, flying around the clock, with most of us doing two or three trips a day. Fortunately, the Tempest, the fastest propeller-driven aircraft in W.W.11, was a delight to fly at night. It had a gentle stall at 75 mph, and although our strip was equipped with a minimum of running lights, we had no accidents. All of us shared the frustration of having to land just as a flurry of "divers" was plotted on radar. There were other times however, when we were ready for them with full tanks. It was a combination of luck, plus some "claim jumping" that translated into high "scores" and high decorations for those who practiced the art. Claims were constantly being readjusted at the squadron level, and, as I was to discover later, at the Command level as well. The "guns" were occasionally given credit for "kills" for morale boosting, and, we suspected, for boosting of other sorts. It was not unusual to discover that you had been given half credit, or one quarter, or some other fraction of a "kill" that you thought you had made alone. The American daylight bombers were not the only ones gifted with the ability to destroy more enemy aircraft than were actually flying on any given day.

It was still scarcely dawn on the morning of July 29 when we left the mess tent, our boots wet with dew from the long grass. Bob and I were to patrol North Foreland to Beachy Head, one going one way, the other on the reciprocal. They were short legs, and at a cruising speed of 385-plus m.p.h. we could support each other in a couple of minutes if need be. Ten days earlier I had been given `JFT', factory fresh and very fast. As we roared off the sun rose out of the mist, a scalding red ball promising a fine summer's day. We passed each other several times before Ops reported "divers" coming out of the Boulogne and Treport areas.

Just as I turned over Goodwin Sands, tracers criss-crossed the estuary, tracking the course of my target. It was at about 1,000 ft, just visible above the fog banks. Starting off at full throttle I was quickly in a firing position, but not a moment too soon. There, directly in front was the balloon fence. A short burst blew number fourteen to smithereens; another few seconds and the Battersea Power Station would likely have been hit as it lay dead ahead. As I circled to report my "kill," people rushed out of the row houses, waving, and I knew that my victory roll would help keep their morale up. They had suffered four years of bombing, and these devilish weapons were absolutely terrifying.

We resumed patrol. Bob had destroyed two off Dungeness and after a quiet half-hour we landed at Newchurch. It was my one hundred nineteenth operational flight, and as I would discover in a few minutes, my last.

The end came as swiftly as the beginning. The signal was as usual, brief, terse and without equivocation: "Posted to Air Ministry, Whitehall for attachment to Ministry of Aircraft Production for factory liaison duties, effective immediately."

In a daze, I went back to `T' to pick up my 'chute, helmet and gloves, finding it already refuelled and Doug Palmer nearly finished with the reloading. Sitting in the cockpit for one last time, memories came flooding back along with tears, of faces and parts of bodies of friends killed during the past year and a half. From seven different countries they had come and many more would fall before the madness would come to an end. No.3 (F) Squadron, R.A.F., lost 90 pilots and over 300 aircraft in W.W.II. Questions repeated themselves in my mind; "Who will ever remember them? Who will ever know what they did? What was it really like, fighting to repel invaders from the hallowed ground of Romney Marsh, as Harold and his knights had done nearly a millennium before?" This generated a deep feeling of pride in what we were doing, together with a sense of responsibility to ensure that our story should live beyond us.

That night at the "Bull" just down the road, solemn promises were made and goodbyes were said, each knowing that it would probably be the last. Only five of us would survive the war.

A quick check of my clothing revealed a sorry mess; the result of six months under canvas. Much to my great relief the Ministry had sent a second message that a room had been reserved for me at the Strand Palace. I could now present myself in a condition befitting "an officer and a gentleman."

The next morning I stood on the little station platform at Newchurch and watched with tear-glazed eyes as the Tempests rose out of the Marsh in search of their prey, knowing that a part of me went with them.

Thus concluded a chapter of my life that would change me in ways beyond recognition. After three months "rest," touring aircraft factories where, in some instances (Napier's for example) the hammer and sickle flags outnumbered the Union Jacks, I received a summons to appear before Air Commodore Atcherley at Whitehall.

"I have some good news for you, Whitman," he said, "You're going back on flying."

"To my squadron, Sir," I replied, hopefully.

"No, we need you for some important work on the Tempest. You're going to Central Fighter Establishment's Air Fighting Development Squadron. You'll get all the flying you can handle. "

We shook hands, and I was off next day by train, to Tangmere where I would join an elite group of my peers, and once again experience the supreme joy of test flying a variety of British, Allied and German fighter aircraft. Most thrilling of all would be my reunion with those beloved Tempests.