



DODDY schoolboy to flyer

DODDY, born 1924, lived at Enfield, retired to Lincolnshire

....heard declaration of war as a boy on his home-made crystal set and was surprised by his father's emotional reaction: "Oh no, not again!" The first air raid warning was memorable because a fire engine collided with a tree. A founder member of the ATC at school, leaving for a clerical job at Enfield Urban District Council, Doddy became one of two 16-year old wartime firewatchers protecting the civic offices. After his first ATC flight at Hatfield and discovery of a prototype Mosquito, he also discovered a strange balloon device in his back garden. Suspecting enemy guile, he was surprised to discover later that it was actually part of Britain's lesser known defences.



Following a bleak football game in 1941 – Arsenal v Man U “awful game, awful weather, no score” – Doddy and friends volunteered for flying duties with the RAF, adding a year to his age. Although accepted, his call was deferred till April 1942 when he enlisted at Lords Cricket Ground, initial training at 17 ITW Scarborough, Pilot Grading at Carlisle in Tiger Moths, guard duties looking for Prisoners of War with rifles but no ammunition. There was a delay to the Empire Air Training Scheme due to troopships being used for North African landings, so Doddy went to Whitley Bay for a “toughening up course”, with harsh conditions and a heavy enemy raid.

February 1943 saw Doddy among 6000 troops leave Liverpool on a 600-passenger liner, HMT Strathmore, one of at least ten in convoy heading for the Middle East via Cape of Good Hope. Conditions were squalid below decks while officers enjoyed first-class perks above. A propeller shaft ran through Doddy's 'H' Deck quarters shared by 28 men. Despite kippers and lime juice, a daily funeral rite was observed by all ships as provisions ran low towards the end of the six weeks' voyage, the tropical heat relieved by sleeping on deck in slightly less cramped conditions.

Arrival at Durban was greeted by the “Lady in White” singing through a megaphone as each ship berthed. South Africa seemed calm, untouched by war. Regraded as a Navigator for larger aircraft and impending bomber offensive, an initial ground course at East London was followed by Flying Training at Queenstown, courtesy of the South African Air Force. An idyllic detachment for night flying at Aliwal North, despite very primitive airfield facilities, led to graduation as Sergeant Navigator on 23 October 1943 and dinner at Queenstown Hotel at their expense. Then a ten-day wait for posting at Durban with orders to join a train heading for Johannesburg, “going up North”, i.e. Middle East.

PRANKS IN THE BLACKOUT

As a schoolboy of 15 when war was declared in September 1939, I was immediately concerned as to the effect the coming conflict would have on our schooling – hoping perhaps for some radical change that would release us from the mundane chores of preparing for the Matriculation/School Certificate examinations due in the summer of 1940. This was not to be,

however, and although being in the London area meant some risk of air raids, such considerations were not to be allowed to interfere with our education.

Thus, although the rest of the School was initially suspended, we, the elite of the Fifth Form, had to keep our noses to the grindstone and school attendance was not affected. The one big difference was that we should have all of our lessons in the relatively strong structure of the Chemistry Lab, and so it was that we changed our desks for the sink-lined and Bunsen-burner equipped benches of the 'Stinks Lab' as it was affectionately known. Surrounded by the bottles and boxes of strange chemical concoctions we applied ourselves to the less mysterious subjects of literature, maths, history and the like.

But science was not overlooked and we were encouraged to undertake 'experiments' with some of the substances so abundantly spread around our workplace. I remember being particularly intrigued by the fact that a minute piece of sodium – taken from large sticks of the stuff in oil filled bottles – could, when placed on a scrap of blotting paper and then placed in water, provide a most satisfactory spluttering and a brilliant orange glow.

Such was the impression made upon us by this chemical phenomenon it was perhaps inevitable that it came to the forefront of our minds as we stumbled, nightly, through the black-out. In those early days of the war the black out of most external lighting was rigidly enforced and apart from occasional vehicles creeping along with lights so heavily masked as to be virtually useless, outdoors movement at night was a case of groping ones way from whitewashed pillar to whitewashed post. Even the use of a torch, and, on occasion, the lighting of a cigarette, would bring forth a shouted reprimand from an Air Raid Warden to "Put that Light Out !!!"

It was thus perhaps only to be expected that, as we left school late on one damp autumn evening after a meeting of the Chess Club and found ourselves in the pitch darkness of the main street, one of our number would be found to be clutching a substantial piece of sodium wrapped in a large piece of blotting paper. All that was needed now was a puddle - and English weather having obliged, the sodium was placed gently on the blotting paper which was left floating on the water.

We departed quickly from the scene and awaited developments. They were not long in coming as the ancient Market Square was suddenly fully illuminated by a very fine orange light. This unexpected illumination was greeted in short order by considerable shouting, and blowing of whistles by Police and ARP Wardens. We considered our little act of protest against the black-out complete when emergency vehicles, clanging their bells, arrived on the scene just as the sodium completed its display.

To this day I wonder whether any well educated emergency worker connected the piece of wet blotting paper (which they took away) with one of the wonders of science that has since developed into one of the standard methods of street lighting.

Another aspect of the tedium of the black-out was trying to get on buses and trolleybuses at fully darkened bus stops. Queues formed in the finest British fashion, but it was difficult to locate which end was which, and the arrival of a vehicle resulted in an immediate disorderly melee. Science - and the contents of the Stinks Lab - came to our aid as we found that a test-tube of Sodium Bisulphide sprinkled along the side of a queue had an instantaneous effect on dispersing the line-up. That particular chemical gives off one of the most nauseous odours imaginable and, apart from the smell was otherwise undetectable – making it ideal for the purpose required.

SOMETIMES THINGS ARE NOT QUITE WHAT THEY SEEM

It was one evening in November 1940 when, returning to my home in North London in one of the air raids that had become an accepted part of every day (and every night) life, I came across something that made my young blood run cold.

As I pushed open the garden gate at the back of our house I suddenly discerned something white strewn across the trellis and disappearing over the fence into the neighbour's garden. I groped forward to discover it was a large sheet of rubbery white material with many lines of white cord spreading out all around - and of course came to the immediate, and frightening, conclusion it was some sort of parachute. Plucking up courage I went to the fence and pulled on the lines - only to find that there was something heavy, and perhaps immovable, on the other side. That was enough for me - I ran to the house shouting for my elder brother to bring his small-bore shot gun (he was 17 and entitled to have such things) and investigate what I was rapidly becoming convinced was a German airman in the neighbour's garden.

He needed no second bidding and in no time we were stealthily making our way through the next door garden gate to behold the white cords and material caught up around dustbins and a coal bunker - but with no obvious body, land mine or bomb!!! Encouraged by this we investigated further and disentangled a heavy wooden hexagonal shaped board - about the size of a coffee table top - which was obviously the main component of the mystery object. This was confirmed when we found electrical wiring, switches and hooks on the board, together with half a dozen exquisite white silken 'sandbags' - the size of salami sausages - suspended from the corners. Ah, it was now clear to us that this was a balloon device which must have carried some sort of wartime payload over London before the balloon burst, or was shot down, and came to earth.

We didn't have too long to consider all this before our father had rung the Police to tell them of the find, and had, in turn, been instructed to ensure that no one touched or interfered with the device before the Police or Army arrived to check it out. Too late!! My brother and I had been quickly to work with penknives and removed the 'sandbags' as souvenirs, and were working on some of the release mechanisms and hooks as further trophies.

Eventually the Police arrived and took the remnants away after lecturing us all on the need for secrecy - we were told to tell no-one of what we had seen and, although we were allowed to keep the 'sandbags', we should not show them to anyone.

As the War wore on I heard various stories of some of the strange devices used on both sides during the air war, and slowly became convinced that what we had found was a German balloon equipped with several small anti-personnel bombs which would drift across London with the electrical timing devices which would release a bomb every now and again - an ideal way of keeping 'heads down' and spreading alarm and despondency among the city's population.

And so it was until one evening in the mid 1980s when I was a member of a British Institute of Management party attending a reception to mark the opening of the new Kent International Airport at Manston. Among the many ex-RAF acquaintances I met there was a chap who had been in the Meteorological Branch during the war, and in the course of reminiscing some of the events of the Blitz he asked me if I had ever heard of something called 'Operation Barrage'. When I said 'No' he described in startling detail the balloon type object we had found nearly fifty years before!

I was then told the details of the operation. Just twelve of the devices had been taken to Liverpool to await a suitable wind that would blow them towards London – where the small weapons they carried would be released in the remote, but pious, hope of striking German aircraft bombing the capital.

I am not sure which of us was the more astonished – during my 39 years in the RAF I had never heard any reference to the devices from any source and, equally the Met Officer had never met - or heard from - anyone who had seen anything of the devices after their release. Now I wonder what are the odds against two men who, unknown to each other, and more than 150 miles apart, who had both been involved with one of just twelve balloons on a dark and noisy night in 1940, meeting up by chance nearly fifty years on? A strange coincidence indeed.

HOW TO PUT YOUR FOOT IN IT

Whatever else may be said about the Battle of Britain – fought over our heads in the Summer of 1940 – it cannot be denied to have provided a terrific spectacle of combat in the skies evoking nerve-tingling feelings of excitement and fear - all backed by powerful emotions of patriotism that did not allow for thought of anything but eventual victory.

So it was one August afternoon when I had been spellbound first by a flight of Ju88 bombers in immaculate formation en route to bomb aircraft works north-east of London - and then the sight of them returning but now harried by Hurricanes which, even as I watched, sent several plunging to their doom. Having picked up a spent bullet which had clanged against the 'trade' bicycle in our backyard (a souvenir to be long treasured in later life) I mounted my own bike to go off to the local fire station where I was well known and accepted because Eileen, my current girl friend, was the daughter of the Chief Officer.

On arrival I found a scene of much industry as the fire appliances received attention after a busy afternoon attending the shot down aircraft. Morale was high and I was greeted by my girl friend with breathless descriptions of the scenes of wreckage described to her by firemen as they returned to their station. Then, with great pride, she pointed across saying 'there's a German Flying Boot over there'. I looked over and saw, sure enough, a black flying boot lying amongst other debris. Keenly aware that this had belonged to a deadly enemy who had invaded our skies just a little while earlier I started across to take a closer look – but stopped in my tracks when Eileen added 'there's a foot still in it !!!'

I have pondered that incident many times since then – knowing that Eileen was anything but a bloodthirsty young hooligan – and decided that her robust remark was merely typical of the spirit of Britain at that time – we were winning and that boot and its content were merely part of the proof!

A GREAT TREK TO WAR

One of the great events in the colonial strife of the late nineteenth century between the Boers and the British Settlers in South Africa was the decision of the Boers to establish their own land in what is now the Transvaal. The epic movement of hundreds of men, women and

children through largely undeveloped territory is now remembered and revered by the Boers as the Great Trek.



I was involved in a different great trek through Africa in 1943, when having completed aircrew training as an RAF navigator in the Union of South Africa under the Empire Air Training Scheme, I was ready to put my new found skills into effect somewhere in one of the many areas of operations of WW2.

Newly qualified aircrews who had preceded me in the training fields of South Africa had largely been posted back to the UK or, to use the South African vernacular, Up North, to the Middle East. In both cases transport would have been by troopships as they plodded around the world moving men and materials between the various global theatres of war. In my case things were to be different.

Following our graduation at 47 Air School at Queenstown in Cape Province on the 23rd October 1943, and proudly wearing our flying badges with sergeant's stripes attesting to our newly qualified and promoted status, the 34 of us were first posted to the Imperial Forces Transit Camp at Durban. This was a camp built to accommodate literally thousands of troops as the troopships - with the Mediterranean denied to them - had to follow the tortuous route between Europe and the Middle and Far East around the Cape of Good Hope. But, unlike the huge numbers of men using the camp when we had arrived in South Africa eight months earlier, it was now all but deserted because, as we were soon to find out, the numbers of troopships passing through had been dramatically reduced following the initial North African Landings. So for a few days we had the place virtually to ourselves and relished the hospitality of numerous South Africans who so readily offered us home cooked meals and a stay in their homes.

Then came the morning of the 7th November when our party was summoned to be informed that 'you're moving tonight'. We were given no answers to our questions of 'where, why, or what' beyond a statement to the effect there was a shortage of navigators in the Middle East. Our camp intelligence confirmed there were no sailings due from Durban that night, and so we were still mystified when we boarded a bus for Durban Railway Station and then put on a train for Johannesburg. We were however told to stay on the train at Jo'burg – although by whom I have no recollection. In fact the whole movement was completely strange in that we really didn't know where we were heading and there was no-one in charge – just a load of rookie navigators with ages ranging from 19 to about 25 heading off into (Darkest ?) Africa!

So the pencilled fragment of a diary that I had started for the trip tells me that for the next 24 hours we rattled through the Union with the train running on a stop, skip and jump principle with the monotony only relieved by some RAF pilots from the Training School at Standerton well and truly 'shooting up' our train as we passed nearby. Stops were made at Heildelburg and Germiston before arriving in Jo'burg just four hours late – although I have no idea of what document would authenticate that statistic – we never were aware of any timetable published by South African Railways. That is not to say that the railway was not extremely well run and offered us excellent catering and comfort. Each compartment had built-in bunks which were brought into use at night and, with the addition of immaculately clean bedding, ensured an excellent night's sleep. The only mishap I recollect was on a tight bend in the narrow gauge line when a recumbent passenger slid, complete with bedding, out of the window immediately adjacent to the upper bunk.

One hour after arrival we left Jo'burg heading for a town with a name imperishable from its siege during the Boer War – Mafeking! My only comment concerned awakening there to find

the place full of flies. And so on towards British Bechuanaland, (now Botswana) covering countless miles with absolutely nothing of any significance in sight – except perhaps the astonishing rearward view from the observation car at the back where the dead straight railway lines eventually disappeared into a single point on the very far horizon. Looking at maps of the area a town named Artesia appears on our route marked with a circle not much smaller than the depiction of London on a large scale map. In fact Artesia, as its name implies, was a water filling point for the train's engine and really comprised just half a dozen huts and a well.

So the seemingly everlasting train journey went on with a brief stop at Mahalapye where the diary records that drinks were served, but does not say which of the six huts comprising the stop were used for the purpose. And so, as Pepys would have it, to bed until we were awoken at Bulawayo with the unexpected and unlikely demand that we complete customs and immigration forms. Having politely declined such formalities on the basis that as members of the Armed Forces we could not disclose our movements information we repaired to the station buffet for a substantial breakfast. Then in accord with the very relaxed atmosphere that was pervading the whole trip some of us walked into town and enjoyed a much needed bath and shave, with a haircut and shampoo as a bonus. As I read these and other facts from my diary, it occurs to me that at no time did we receive any pay on the journey until we reached the RAF Station at Kisumu some 18 days after leaving Durban – but then we never did see any tickets for our various forms of transport, nor did we pay for meals on trains and transit stops. Obviously we were well looked after en route and once again Bulawayo is in my memory as a very nice town with plenty of very hospitable folk around!

We left Bulawayo that evening now aware that our next stop would be at Livingstone and that we would need rise at 5.30 am to see the Victoria Falls as we crossed from Southern into Northern, Rhodesia. (now Zimbabwe and Zambia). However to prove that our rail journeys were truly monotonous I have noted that we stopped at Dett and had an 'interesting chat with a chap drilling for water' and that the train guard came from Willesden. Other than that there was nothing but 'clickety clack' through the long hours.

Hours that were made longer by the fact that our early rising was unnecessary as the train was two hours late at the Victoria Falls, which themselves were virtually out of water as the Zambesi River was always very low at that time of the year. At Livingstone we were, typically, greeted by members of the local Women's War Organisation who regaled us with coffee and cakes which my diary again notes were provided free!

About this time we seem to have expanded our party as the diary mentions 'single engined pilots' (SEPs). As newly qualified aircrew we were proud that our capabilities should be clearly designated to all and sundry, and so a navigator was clearly a master of his trade



whereas a nav/wireless operator was clearly more a 'jack of all trades'. So it was that SEPs did not have some unique power supply, but rather that they were probably destined to become pilots of single seater fighters in the future. Anyway the diary records their presence for a couple of days until the entry 'SE pilots left at night' bids them farewell as they departed to some other unknown destination on the African continent.

After another day or so of passing through a countryside endowed with masses of small trees but with no wild life or items of interest other than the occasional native kraal, we arrived at Broken Hill. The local military arranged for us to

be accommodated in a 'Transit Camp' comprising huts and thankfully not tents – the continuous light rain and drizzle was a long way removed from previous concepts of a blazing, sunny, continent. But other than that my diary observes that 'no one seems the least bit interested in the why or wherefore of us' – so we contented ourselves with a walk into town – all in one street - and generally spent a very lazy day. The next two days were spent in similar idleness until on the third day in Broken Hill we were suddenly informed that a train was on its way to take us onward. Before we left however two of us received wonderful hospitality at the home of a Mr and Mrs Stewart who feted us royally and who insisted that we give them our home addresses so that our families could be informed of our whereabouts – up till then we had strictly observed the 'no mail' rule. We left just before midnight having made the uncomfortable discovery that we had consumed the whole of the Stewart's beer ration for the current month - but such was the spirit of hospitality that our apologetic comments were quickly brushed aside

Departing Broken Hill at midnight our next stop was at 'Ndola where we breakfasted late (11 am) before pressing on to cross into the Belgian Congo at the small frontier town of Sakania where we received a welcome from the town band and an assembled body of the town's dignitaries. It was at Sakania our train was joined by a Belgian dining car which provided us with a most delicious and substantial dinner. But rail journeying through the Congo was not really different from that already experienced ad nauseam on our previous stages. Again the only diversion – a sad one – was when a bored local soldier, accommodated in a cattle truck at the rear of the train, leaned too far out with the result his head came into contact with a steel bridge – we never found out whether or not he survived that very nasty accident.

But now our rail journeys were to be interrupted and when we arrived at Kamina we found a small fleet of 15cwt type trucks awaiting us. After a typically Belgian continental breakfast we set off over roads that were little more than cart tracks, and which would not tolerate any speed much above 30 mph. After an hour and a half the first of the vehicles dropped out with engine trouble. The ensuing delay caused a demand for an increase in convoy speed and when we arrived at Kabonga for a lunch of two rolls and coffee we were liberally covered with red dust from the road's surface. In the afternoon we ran into torrential rainstorms and the dust on faces and clothing turned to red mud. Two more trucks dropped out and caused longer delay as passengers and freight were re-distributed amongst the remaining serviceable vehicles. These delays inspired our native drivers to ever greater efforts and speeds rose accordingly and we finally arrived at the Congo River only three hours late (so we were told – we never did see a timetable) having covered 285 miles of jungle roads in 9 hours!! The day was not yet over however as we had to cross, in the dark, the wide, fast flowing Congo River which we were reliably informed contained plenty of crocodiles which would take a keen interest in the large raft which was to be the only means of transferring us and our baggage to the far shore. Luckily all was well and after another excellent – and much needed – dinner we spent the night in the Station Hotel at Kabola – looking back on a unique journey embracing 3 Ks – Kamina – Kabonga – Kabola.

From Kabola we returned to the railways for a reasonably short trip to Albertville on Lake Tanganyika - which at first sight looked far more like the ocean than a mere lake. We soon found we were scheduled to cross the lake on a small tramp steamer which made no concessions to passenger comfort with the result we spent an uncomfortable night on the open deck trying to avoid the distractions of scurrying rats and the noises of the elderly engine propelling us forward.

Once ashore next day-in the somewhat god-forsaken town of Kigoma - we spent as quiet a day as possible recovering from the exertions of the two preceding days. However Kigoma was certainly not a good advertisement for the British Empire and offered facilities that fell very much short of what were available in the more southerly African countries through which we had recently passed. The poverty stricken appearance of just about everything served to

remind us that, prior to the Great War, Tanganyika had been a German colony and had been mandated to Britain as part of reparations at the end of that conflict. That we were no longer to bask in the relative luxury of modern railways became obvious that evening when we were assigned to one of several cattle trucks forming a troop train en route to Tabora – and before departure were issued with British Army rations which themselves could well have been saved from WW1. These we cooked over a small open fire in our cattle truck and nearly lost an important part of our dinner when the fire burnt through the floor and all but allowed our steaming pot to fall through to the track.

But now we were back in an environment where military discipline held sway, and indeed gave rise to a somewhat amusing incident when the British Officer in charge of the 200 strong detachment of Kings African Rifles (KAR) on the train instructed several of us that we were to make ourselves visible – and available – when the train stopped at a certain station. Our presence was required to ensure that there would be no trouble between the soldiers and the local population. Apparently it was not unusual for soldiers to leave a train, swap their uniforms with locals who would then take their places in the KAR. There was also something rather more unseemly concerning soldiers who had visited the town before and had aroused the hostility of local men over relationships with women of the town. The presence of British uniformed personnel was considered to be quite sufficient to prevent any trouble and so it proved with us, and we left the station amid cheers and applause from the locals. Later we heard that only three or four men had ‘deserted’ and been replaced by unknown ‘volunteers’. Tabora was to prove to be our last railway stop, and it was perhaps fitting that we had dinner there in the Government Rest House before departing on the final rail stage of our trek to Mwanza on the southern shore of Lake Victoria.

It was on that final stage that I discovered the secret of making the finest cup of tea I had ever tasted. In our cattle truck we had the remains of the British Army rations issued earlier. To make really good tea you take an Army issue tin mug and mix in it two teaspoons of sweet condensed milk with a large teaspoon of tea leaves. Stir thoroughly to prevent leaves blowing away and await an incline on the railway which will reduce the train’s speed to walking pace. Nip smartly up to the engine and shout to the Indian driver ‘Hot Water, Johnny’ and he will operate a strong jet of steam from somewhere under the footplate. Fill the mug as full as possible and return to the cattle truck. Use a spoon to flick floating tea leaves off the surface of the liquid allowing the tea to cool sufficiently to drink. Excellent – such flavour !!!

Mwanza was found to be a pleasant little town – very African but with all shops etc run by Indians. We had tented accommodation – no lights, but plenty of very adequate (and necessary) mosquito nets. Three days were spent in lazy relaxation and swimming in Lake Victoria – in an area with a wire netting anti-crocodile enclosure. Virtually on the Equator with the sun overhead the weather was terrifically hot with sunburn a very positive threat. With the tented camp four miles from the non-existent delights of Mwanza the lack of lights dictated extremely early bedtimes. We were therefore up early and ready for embarkation on the SS Nyanza looking forward to the 25 hour voyage across Lake Victoria on one of the three small steamers (built in Scotland and transported overland to the Lake) which plied their trade between the small towns bordering the huge area of water.

SS Nyanza sailed at 10 o’clock on Wednesday 24th November with our navigator contingent aboard. We were given a truly warm welcome by the Captain who anticipated extending our knowledge of navigation from the air to the sea – or rather to one of the world’s largest lakes. Thus we were soon on the bridge and in the chart room with the first essential of navigation being shown to us - a well polished brass plate set into the bridge floor. The Captain explained that the brass plate indicated the place where the navigation officer had to stand when taking bearings or observing navigation marks. In this way it was entirely complementary to the ship’s chart which, surprisingly, was under a heavy sheet of plate glass in the chart room. The chart showed a considerable amount of navigation information

recorded on its surface – with remarks like “two tall trees in alignment” displayed alongside a straight position line - in this case an observer on the brass plate would watch for the trees to come into line and then know he was somewhere along the pencilled-in position line. The reason for the plate glass was to prevent anything new being written on the chart as it was considered that all information necessary for safe navigation was already recorded on it! All refreshingly different from the more complex air procedures which we had been studying for the past year. Some of us felt reservations as to its efficacy – particularly in an emergency situation, and to some extent these concerns were borne out a few weeks later when a probably apocryphal story reached us suggesting that two of the three ships on the Lake had collided! So we sailed on, feasting on Army rations and sleeping fitfully on deck despite the noise of engines, crew members and again the scurrying of rats.

11 o'clock the next day saw us arrive at Kisumu, a small East African town 6 miles south of the Equator which boasted its own RAF Station, so it is not surprising that my diary records a route march as the main activity of the following morning followed by an inoculation parade in the afternoon. We were back in the Air Force again although I suspect the route march was specially laid on so that we could later boast that we had marched from the Southern Hemisphere across into the Northern Hemisphere and then back again! Other happy events were a pay parade where we each received £1, a cinema show and the fact that our chores were undertaken by local 'boys' fulfilling the long established military role of batmen! By Saturday morning we knew we would be flying off the following day and so packed our kit for an early departure, and spent the rest of the day playing cricket against a team of Service Policemen and watching a depressingly poor ENSA Show in the evening.

Sunday saw us well and truly back in our element – being loaded on to an RAF Sunderland flying boat for a flight to Khartoum – now we really were on our way to the Middle East. The take off was exciting and spectacular – the bare military interior of the Sunderland reminded us of a London Tube train in its noisy and jolting environment – but then tube trains do not rush across water for five miles in a take-off run before becoming airborne! The flight was routinely uneventful although the scenery was fascinating in revealing vast tracts of apparently undeveloped land with occasional glimpses of herds of wild animals visible from the comparatively low altitude at which we flew. After five and a half hours we landed at Malakal to refuel – using the River Nile as a splendid runway with only the odd native boat plodding between the township and river bank settlements. After less than an hour we were on our way again and were treated to nearly four hours of rather bumpy conditions following the Nile until at dusk, when, with a blazing red sunset, we settled back on the river and then taxied in to disembark at the flying boat pier immediately adjacent to the Union Jack Hotel – a truly spectacular illustration of the British Empire at its tropical best!

But the Hotel was not for us, as we were quickly spirited away to RAF Khartoum – one of the most legendary bases in the Middle East about which many songs and ballads had been composed over the years by airmen whose unaccompanied tours of duties in such places ran for a full five years. For us that Sunday evening it meant a full five course dinner in the Sergeants' Mess – and, indeed, for most of us one of the first meals that we had ever had in a Sergeants' Mess! The following day afforded us opportunity to visit Khartoum – and give validity to the phrase about mad dogs and Englishmen going out in the midday sun. As we passed under the great stone arch at the entrance to the RAF Station we noted that, even in its uniquely sheltered position, the thermometer read 104 degrees! Even in that heat my diary alleges that 'we walked into Khartoum'!

Shortly after our original arrival in Khartoum we had been let into the secret that we really were destined for the Middle East and that our immediate destination was Cairo. Moreover the means of transport for small parties of us would be aboard individual aircraft of the convoys of reinforcement aircraft for the Middle East Air Forces which followed a route from Takoradi on the Gold Coast (now Ghana) across 4000 miles of jungle and desert to Cairo

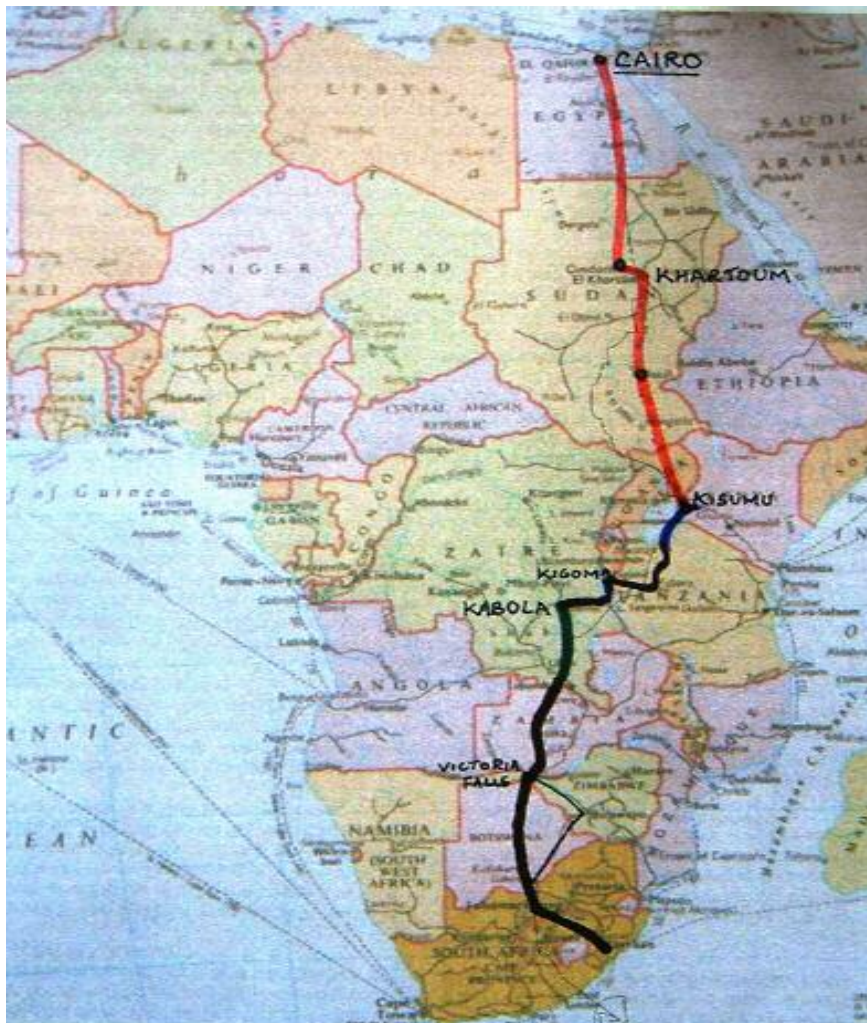
and the air bases around the Suez Canal. These convoys comprised mainly US aircraft which had been delivered to West Africa by sea – with the subsequent overland flight seen as less hazardous than shipment attempted through the Mediterranean. So now we knew, and the next event confirmed it.



Just six of us were told to be ready to leave Khartoum almost immediately, and we were ferried in an RAF 15cwt truck - in the hottest part of an already overwhelmingly hot day - to a twin RAF/USAAF base at Wadi Seidna some 18 miles out in the desert from Khartoum itself. On arrival at a unique airfield – RAF tented camp on one side of the desert road, with an American hutted camp on the other - we were greeted with the news that the expected aircraft convoys had been delayed for

several days. The RAF CO – a Flight Sergeant - was therefore negotiating with the Americans to get us aboard a Dakota leaving for Cairo the next day. We were told to disregard our navigator status as US priorities were awarded only to pilots, and then it was confirmed that our trek was to come to an end (with us described as pilots) at Payne Field, Cairo on the following day. We moved into the US camp and had a brief meeting with Judy Garland, who was there with a USO Show, before celebrating with a very satisfying dinner and cinema show provided by our friendly allies. Sleep came easily that night despite a

temperature of 96F in the shade.



Tuesday 30th November saw us lazing in the stupefying heat of the Sudanese desert waiting for the off to Cairo. Eventually we were emplaned in the promised Dakota and departed upon an uneventful flight to Cairo where we landed at 11.30 at night - to find that absolutely no one was expecting us, nor indeed did they know who we were or where we had come from!! But that was a situation which we had had to deal with on practically every day since we had left Durban those long weeks ago. We had however seen something of Africa and sampled the British

Empire in a way not accorded to too many of our contemporaries in the 20th Century.

All that remained was to locate an RAF Unit and find a bed for the night. In the finest tradition of the Air Force we did just that – in a bare tent, upon a bed of a paliasse stuffed with straw and instructions to report to the Station Warrant Officer first thing on the morrow. And so we were to be launched on a further series of travels and adventures through Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Transjordan before our operational training was completed and we were fit to take our places in the Italian based bomber force playing its part in the great Allied Bombing Offensive of World War 2.

End