

# Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

## GUINEA PIG CLUB

### **A Guinea Pig's story**

Extracts from *Shot Down in Flames*, by Geoffrey Page (Grub Street, 1999)

Geoffrey Page was born in 1920. As a student, he became a member of the University Air Squadron, then joined the RAF shortly after the outbreak of war in 1939. He became a fighter pilot, and flew Hawker Hurricanes in the Battle of Britain. He was shot down in combat on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1940.

Suffering from serious burns to the face and hands, Page was treated at the specialist unit at Queen Victoria Cottage Hospital, East Grinstead. He returned to active service in 1942. During the Battle of Arnhem, he crashed on landing and fractured his back, returning to East Grinstead for further treatment.

### **September 1939-Shot down**

The first bang came as a shock. For an instant I couldn't believe I'd been hit. Two more bangs followed in quick succession, and as if by magic a gaping hole suddenly appeared in my starboard wing.

Surprise quickly changed to fear, and as the instinct of self-preservation began to take over, the gas tank behind the engine blew up, and my cockpit became an inferno. Fear became blind terror, then agonized horror as the bare skin of my hands gripping the throttle and column control shrivelled up like burning parchment under the intensity of the blast furnace temperature. Screaming at the top of my voice, I threw my head back to keep it away from the searing flames. Instinctively, the tortured right hand groped for the release pin securing the restraining Sutton harness.

My fingers kept up their blind and bloody mechanical groping, and cool, relieving fresh air suddenly flowed across my burning face. I tumbled. Sky, sea, sky over and over as a clearing brain issued instructions to outflung limbs. 'Pull the ripcord – right hand to the ripcord.' Watering eyes focused on an arm flung out in space with some strange meaty object attached at its end.....

Realizing that pain or no pain, the ripcord had to be pulled, the brain overcame the reaction of the raw nerve endings and forced the mutilated fingers to grasp the ring and pull firmly. It acted immediately. With a jerk the silken canopy billowed out in the clear summer sky....

It was then that I noticed the smell. The odour of my burnt flesh was so loathsome I wanted to vomit. But there was too much to attend to, even for that small luxury..... Ten thousand feet below me lay the deserted sea. Not a ship or seagull crossed its blank, grey surface.

Still looking down I began to laugh. The force of the exploding gas tank had blown every vestige of clothing off from my thighs downwards, including one shoe. Carefully I eased off the remaining shoe with the toes of the other foot and watched the tumbling footwear in the hope of seeing it strike the water far beneath....

**Page was picked up by a British merchant ship and taken to hospital in Margate for treatment, then to London, and eventually to East Grinstead.**

I was trundled away to the operating room on a trolley. The surgeon, anaesthetist and gowned nurse comprised the skeleton of staff for surgical cases. All three helped to lift me onto the table beneath the huge over-hanging light.

The nurse and surgeon disappeared to scrub-up and the anaesthetist prepared his hypodermic syringe. A sudden desire to know the extent of my facial injuries absorbed me and I pleaded for a glance in a mirror. Sensibly the second doctor refused the request and changed the subject to safer topics. The masked and gloved surgeon returned with his assistant. Neatly the anaesthetist tied a rubber cord round my bicep and searched the hollow of the elbow for a suitable vein. Not wishing to see the needle enter the skin, I looked away and upwards, catching sight of myself in the reflector

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mirrors of the overhanging light. My last conscious memory was of seeing the hideous mass of swollen, burnt flesh that had once been a face.

The Battle of Britain had ended for me, but another long battle was beginning.

#### **Archibald McIndoe**

It was on Skipper's day off that I met him for the first time.....

Matron re-entered, followed by a young man, who looked to be in his late thirties. Having introduced him as Mr. McIndoe, she departed. The visitor had dark hair parted in the middle and brushed flat to the head, horn-rimmed spectacles, broad shoulders and a friendly mischievous grin.....He seated himself on an upright chair and viewed me from over the top of his glasses. The eyes had an incredible depth behind them and seemed to exude great understanding. The words came out crisply with the slight flatness of note peculiar to New Zealanders.

'Hurricane or Spitfire?'

'Hurricane.'

'Header Tank?'

I laughed. 'Yes. The wing tanks in my machine were self-sealing, but some bright type forgot to treat the tank in front of the pilot.'

The eyes twinkled again. 'Just can't trust anyone, can you?'

We both laughed.

He didn't stay long and during his short visit the conversation was light-hearted and dealt with seemingly inconsequential details. Was I wearing goggles and gloves? How long was I in the water, and how soon afterwards was the tannic acid treatment given?

The visitor rose and took a cheery farewell of me. He waved a large hamfisted hand as he passed rapidly through the door. 'Good-bye, young fellow. See you again.'

Little did I realise how often I would be seeing him.

#### **East Grinstead**

Sister Hall said 'This is your bed, Mr Page. I'll have a nurse help you unpack.' Without waiting she turned and left me.....Left to my own devices, I felt lost and homesick like a small boy on his first day at boarding school. The ward was divided into three small sections by glass partitions that rose to shoulder height. In each section were four beds. I noticed for the first time that, of the other three beds near my own, only one was occupied.

'Good afternoon.' I ventured cautiously to its occupant.

'Hello,' replied a youth in bed cheerfully. 'First time here?'

'Yes, it is.'

The other grinned. 'First two years are the worst.'

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'This is Pilot Officer Page, sir. A new arrival.'

Archie McIndoe looked at me over the top of his horn-rimmed spectacles. 'We've met before.'

I smiled. Somehow I always felt happier when talking to McIndoe. 'Yes, sir, at the Royal Masonic Hospital.'

The surgeon bent over my crippled hands, turning them over slowly as he examined the damage. Without raising his head he looked up over his glasses. 'Long job, I'm afraid.'

Hesitantly I asked, 'you'll have to operate?'

This time his head went back and the dark eyes met mine firmly. 'Yes. Many times I'm afraid. But you'll be alright in the end.'

I believed him.

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Gently the night nurse shook my shoulder. 'Your tea and toast, Mr Page.' Glad to be awakened from the chaotic nightmares that dogged my sleep, I propped myself up on an elbow. She left me to the darkness of the ward and my own thoughts. I sipped the warm

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brew slowly. I could feel it going down to meet the tiny knot of fear bunched in my stomach. Today was it – the day I had been dreading so long was now here.

Five hours later they would wheel me into the operating room to have the mass of scar tissue removed. Skin grafts taken from the inside of my leg would then be sewn into place to cover the raw hands. I shuddered and lay back on the pillow, staring at the ceiling with sightless eyes.

The toast grew cold and untouched.

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'Lie still and we'll give you something for the pain.'

Fuzzily through the mists of the lingering anaesthetic I heard the words. A shuddering moan escaped my lips.....This time Sister Hall made no attempt to soothe her patient, but swiftly set about administering the injection of morphia.

An hour later the torture began again. Slightly less in intensity though the pain was, it needed another injection to allow me to retain my sanity. That evening, McIndoe visited his surgical cases in the ward. I opened my eyes slowly at the sound of Sister Hall's voice.

'....and this is Mr. Page, sir.'

McIndoe grinned down sympathetically, 'Bet it hurts like hell, eh?'

One minute before, and the remark would have been a miracle of understatement. Now however, the surgeon's presence brought a slowing down to the steam hammer pounding away in my right hand. 'Oh, it's not to bad thank you, sir.'

McIndoe's glance took in the dark blue circles under my eyes. Nodding a farewell, he passed on. The steam hammer picked up speed again. Days and nights followed each other in agonizing shuffle. Time consisted of blessed stabs in the arm that brought temporary relief. Relief that seemed to be a period during which the next wave of pain built itself up to crash down pitilessly as the drug wore off. For five days it ebbed and flowed through the channel of my arm. Food was brought, remained untouched, and was silently removed without remonstrance. It was a steady diet of morphia and throbbing liquid agony.

Feeling hollow-eyed and emaciated I watched the white-capped and gowned group approach on the afternoon of the fifth day – or was it the fifth year? McIndoe nodded his usual friendly greeting, but the face that took my condition was serious.

'How goes it?'

The answer never came. I was too near to tears.

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Two weeks lengthened into a month and by now I was badgering McIndoe to perform the next operation. The call to the air and the opportunity for revenge were ringing in my head.

Dreading the repetition operation and all its aftermath, I was wheeled into the operating room once again.

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The worst period for me was the summer of 1941. On beautiful sunny days, if bedridden, the orderlies would push us out on the lawn alongside the ward. These days were hell. Lying in the sunshine. I would look up and watch the squadrons of Spitfires, as they passed overhead to carry out fighter sweeps over northern France.

How my heart yearned to be one of them, and not just a burnt cripple lying in a hospital bed. However, it hardened my determination even more to get back in the air as soon as possible. Then I made a bitter vow to myself that, for each operation I underwent, I would destroy one enemy aircraft when I returned to flying.

The task was getting big, as I had already undergone eleven operations, and there were obviously many more to come.

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### 1942-Flying again

Again my name was called. This was it, the final summing up by the President of the medical board, and then the verdict.....Carefully he read through he findings of the various specialists.

'Hmmm –' He looked up thoughtfully. 'Apart from your injuries you seem fit enough, Page. What would you like us to do, invalid you out or give you a limited category?'

'Limited in what way, sir?'

'Oh, fit for ground duties in the United Kingdom only'.

I swallowed hard. I disliked the use of falsehoods, but I knew that this was a critical moment in my life.

'Well, actually sir, what I'm after is a flying category. 'You see,' I added hastily as I saw a frown appear on the doctor's face. 'I managed to get some unofficial flying recently through a friend of mine in one of the squadrons.'

Both of us knew I was lying.

'Grip my hands'.

I stood and leaned across the desk grasping the President's hands in my own. Every ounce of physical and nervous energy I possessed was concentrated into my two maimed hands as I forced them to tighten their grip. Months of hard work with the rubber ball stood me in good stead. The Air Commodore raised his eyebrows again, this time in surprise.

'More strength in those than I imagined possible, Page,' he picked up his pen and commenced to write.

'I am passing you fit for non-operational single-engine aircraft only. At the end of three months you will be boarded again, and if you've coped alright, we'll give you an operational category.'

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I found my hands were shaking as I struggled into specially made gloves; long zippers down the sides allowed my bent and crippled fingers to work into place....

The patter from the rear cockpit went on and suddenly I realised I just could not absorb the words. Sweat covered my face beneath the tight-fitting oxygen mask. With difficulty and a certain amount of pain I had been able to unscrew the primer and administer the nine strokes of the pump. After that my instructor's words failed to register.

'Can you hear me, old man?' The traces of anxiety were noticeable in Constant's voice.

My mind was searching wildly for an excuse to postpone the flight. Could I say that I was ill or that my hands hurt? It was then that I caught sight of the ground crew standing by the starter battery and looking up at me expectantly.

'Ye-yes, I can hear you.'

'Good show,' I'll start her up, taxi out, and you can do the take-off, O.K?'

I nodded, aware that the man in the back seat could see my head. The little yellow gull-winged airplane taxied swiftly across to the east side of the airfield and turned into wind, the engine throttled.

'Usual score on take-off, bit of a swing if you open up too rapidly. Otherwise a piece of cake. Watch out in front of you when we get airborne – have to fly through the Cardiff barrage balloons – bad show.'

My mind was now too numb to be worried about mere barrage balloons. It was up to me to cope with the situation or confess to my mortal terror and abandon the whole project.

Almost in surprise I looked down and saw my left hand pushing the throttle firmly but steadily open. The airplane surged forward under the power from the Rolls-Royce Kestrel engine. Automatically my hands and feet moved to keep the spritely little aircraft under control, and my thoughts had no time to stray from the immediate situation. A

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final rumble from the undercarriage and the ground slipped away. The wheels retracted neatly and I set the engine and propeller controls to climbing boost and revolutions. No sooner had I time to relax for a second than a blind gripping fear took possession of me; what if the engine failed now over these houses? We were too low to bale out. In a matter of seconds we would be charred and smelly corpses burning amongst the rubble of what once had been a Cardiff house.

My imagination remained fixed on that one thought until Constant's cheerful voice broke through.

'Balloon ahead – turn a wee bit to starboard – good show.'

The very act of banking and turning the aircraft brought me back into the right perspective, and although the fear returned it was less violent. After two more take-offs and landings Constant climbed out of the machine.

'All you're doing is wasting my time acting as a wet-nurse sitting in the back.'

Half an hour later I was walking towards the hangar with my parachute slung over my shoulder and singing merrily away.

#### **1943-Return to active service**

'How about some shut-eye? Might be the last decent sleep you get for some time.'

I nodded in agreement and rose from the grass.

The two of us walked back to the officers quarters in silence, each preoccupied with his own thoughts.

For several hours I lay awake in an over-excited condition, my mind churning over the past weeks and trying to imagine what the next day would bring. The thrill of possibly shooting an enemy aircraft was tempered by the sober thought of the distance that would lie between conflict and safety. Perhaps somewhere along those hundreds of miles a burning plane might plunge earthwards roasting the pilot inside. Would I be the one?

Following my night of fitful sleep, I now had all the symptoms of a condemned man waiting for the last call. Nervously I kept on wiping my sweaty palms on my battledress uniform. From the edge of the grass airfield, I watched the unhurried actions of the ground crews as they prepared our aircraft for flight. My racing thoughts chased each other nervously like autumn leaves eddying in a whirlpool of wind. Why had I got myself into this awkward situation from which there was now no turning back?

Fear.

Each time my mind started off on a logical train of thought, a freshly remembered incident would destroy the sequence, and once again my thoughts would whirl off on a tangent. Fear, or was it fear of fear?

How did I come to find myself in this predicament on an overcast June day in 1943? To find oneself sweating with fear in the middle of a world war, and to know that bullets will be flying in one's direction within the next hour, is not a very enviable position. How I cursed the day I was posted to the Air Fighting Development Unit at Wittering.

A voice behind me suddenly called, 'All set?' My tense nerves jumped in surprise. Turning, I found Mac grinning at me. His warm personality had a cheering effect on my depressed spirits, and temporarily I cheered up.

'Let's get cracking.' Saying this he juggled with the claw-like mechanism to the end of his artificial left arm. 'Fine bloody pair we are,' I thought. 'Going off to tackle the enemy with only one good hand between the two of us.'

#### **September 1944-Injured again**

The Battle of Arnhem raged on and the massacre of the paratroopers continued. We did what we could to assist the poor Red Devils on the ground, but despite our efforts the battle had already been lost before the weather cleared to allow air support. Also my own battle flying days were coming to a close. My last sortie was attacking enemy ground positions close to the bridgehead. The sun was setting in a golden hazy glow as I lowered my wheels and flaps prior to landing on our airfield strip. All I remember is a dazed recollection of diving into the ground in the middle of the airstrip. The aircraft

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broke in pieces and the engine began a torturous scream as, bereft of its propeller, it increased its revolutions far beyond the designers' intentions. Instinctively I groped for the ignition switches as I became semi-conscious, and the nightmare noise died away.

Within seconds the breathless ground crews came running to my aid, and helping hands lifted and carried me from the tiny cockpit. With blood pouring from my face (I learned later I had broken a quarter inch steel plate supporting the gunsight with my left cheek) and a fractured back, I was carried on a stretcher to the ambulance which had arrived. I heard murmurs around me saying that my ailerons had been hit by anti-aircraft fire, but unconsciousness prevailed at that point. My active part in the war was finally over.

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The medical officer thought I was a good excuse to get him back to England for forty-eight hours leave, so the following day under his care I was flown home in a transport aircraft.

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As my taxi turned into the sloping green lawns of the Queen Victoria Hospital I felt I was almost indeed returning home. So many memories came crowding back as we drove up the entrance around the circular flower bed. Memories of friendly faces bearing the searing marks of fire, memories of gay parties and laughter drowning its constant companion, pain, for the thousandth time in a sea of comradeship. Laughter and pain. Yes, they summed up two happy, bittersweet years. 'My goodness, not you again!' Did I suspect a groan of despair in Sister Hall's voice as they wheeled me into the small casualty room. Archie McIndoe commented, 'The trouble with you is you're just plain clumsy.'

### 1945

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The dawn broke as I let myself in.....I tiptoed into the hall and took off my shoes to climb the stairs to the guest-room.....As I reached the landing, Bunny appeared.....

Seeing me, she relaxed – and then her face broke into a broad smile. 'Go to bed, Geoffrey,' she giggled; 'you can tell me about it at lunch.'

The source of Bunny's amusement was elementary. I saw it the moment I got to my room and looked in the mirror. My face was covered in lipstick! ...The sight of red lipstick – merouochrome-antiseptic-red lipstick - on my grafted eyelids drew me slowly back to the reality of my extraordinary good fortune.

Here I was, now four years on from seeing a pretty young nurse flee in horror at the sight of my charred face and hands.....It was a sobering moment, evoking memories of burning gasoline kindled by the Luftwaffe tracer bullets that shot me down and out of the Battle of Britain; of wondering, too, whether anyone, let alone a girl, would have looked at me ever again if Archie McIndoe and the Queen Victoria Cottage Hospital, East Grinstead, had not been there to make me appear acceptably human once more.

In 1946, Bunny's daughter Pauline became Geoffrey Page's wife. They had two sons and a daughter. Page worked in the aviation industry for the rest of his working life. He was an active member of the Guinea Pig club, and founded the Battle of Britain memorial Trust which erected a memorial to "The Few" in 1993. He died in August 2000.

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