

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

BATTLE OF BRITAIN

RAF Tangmere during the Battle of Britain

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RAF Tangmere in 1940, by Bill Smith

The outbreak of war on September 3rd 1939 found me on solitary duty guarding a bomb dump in the middle of a field in Lincolnshire and that now historic air raid warning had just sounded! I had been a pre-war entrant in the halcyon days of the RAF, when only those of A1 fitness were accepted for flying training. The wearing of glasses was considered a bar to such duties. After initial training, I had been sent to Air Armament school at Manby to begin my course and in the interim was placed on general duties with the Territorial Army.

By December 1939 I had qualified and was sent to 145 Fighter Squadron which was equipped with short nosed Blenheims. As the conduct of the war intensified, these aircraft were changed for the more heavily armed Hurricanes with four 303 Browning machine guns mounted on each wing. Thus equipped, we moved down to RAF Tangmere where the squadron was soon engaged in Hitler's Blitzkrieg giving combat over Selsey Bill. The station was over crowded and we were housed in bell tents erected between the barrack blocks.

Each armourer was allocated his own aircraft, being responsible for the correct functioning of the machine guns. A close relationship between the pilot and the man responsible for the firing capabilities of the aircraft soon developed. As the aircraft, or "kites" in service jargon, returned from sorties, the armourer would watch for the return of his own aircraft noting particularly the leading edge of the wing to see if the canvas patches covering the gun ports had been shot off. If so, it was his responsibility to remove the wing panels and change the tanks each holding 360 rounds. At the same time, oxygen bottles were changed and the three fuel tanks refilled with 33 gallons of high octane fuel.

The weather was beautiful in the spring of 1940 and the pilots, all commissioned in the early days of the war mostly Cranwell cadets, would sit outside listening to Bing Crosby records, waiting for the signal to scramble. Air and ground crews then raced to their aircraft, the starter trolleys would be wheeled into position and the armourer would help the pilot into the aircraft, securing his harness. Inevitably, a number of our aircraft never returned. Sometimes the pilots baled out over the channel and were returned to duty a few days after being picked up, but more often, we had seen the last of them.

After a sortie, the pilots would attend a de-briefing session at which they would give details of enemy action and aircraft possibly or probably destroyed. Late in the war, cine-cameras were fitted into the aircraft, operating as the guns were fired. Upon return, the whole unit was removed for intelligence purposes.

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Aircraft were kept at dispersal points on the airfield for safety purposes. Each morning at 3.30am, ground crews went out to warm up the engines ready for early scrambles. Despite the onerous duties of ground crew, every third night was spent sleeping rough at dispersal in order to be available for this duty. Our creature comforts, however, were not totally disregarded. The good ladies of the neighbourhood, together with their attractive daughters, took it upon themselves to supply such night duty personnel with refreshments. I well recall one such beauty arriving from nowhere in the early hours of the morning complete with hot tea. Mine was more than acceptable but the young lady did not feel she had fulfilled her role and enquired as to the whereabouts of the other airmen. I informed her that they were asleep in the dispersal hut.....At the ministering angel's request, I accompanied her bearing trays of tea, waking all and sundry.....Immediate reactions were stifled when they saw the bearer!

In August 1940, our squadron moved into the satellite station at Westhampnett, although there were no facilities for personnel. We slept once more in bell tents and ate food prepared in the field kitchens. For the purposes of taking a bath we were taken back to Tangmere. On one such occasion, I had just returned and was changing into clean underwear which had just been delivered. Suddenly, the sky was filled with the noise of aircraft. At first, reassured by the information that they were 'ours', the screams of diving Junkers 87 and the noise of exploding bombs soon had us hurtling into slit trenches for protection whatever our state of undress. After that, the bath visit had proved a waste of time!

The devastation at Tangmere was widespread. Three of the four hangers had been hit, the gunners on their roofs killed and many injured. Many aircraft had been destroyed in the surprise attack which had left no time to scramble. 154 Squadron was withdrawn in order to reform and we moved to Drem near Edinburgh and later to Montrose. We were joined there by two new pilots and the aircraft were used for training purposes.

Our squadron returned to Tangmere in the autumn. I flew down in an old Bombay well past its sell by date. The journey took three and a half hours, it was very bumpy and most airmen were sick. Landing did not solve our miseries either. The siren sounded and we dived into shelters and trenches as another raid began.

When the Luftwaffe switched to night bombing, our aircraft were grounded as we had not the technology for night fighting. I recall watching the bombing of Portsmouth. Early in 1941 I left the squadron for an instructors' course at the Air Armament School. After completion, I was posted to 31 Bombing and Gunnery School in Picton, on the north shore of Lake Ontario, Canada, sailing out unaccompanied on the Queen Elizabeth. But that, as they say, is another story.

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