

## New Forest Remembers WWII Project

### Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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Checked by: Sue Jackson

Date: 08/05/2017

File name	D-L	007	_0001M0.WAV	Interview date: 8-06-13
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**00-00-00**

*Could you just tell me your name and where and when you were born?*

My name is Dennis John Leng and I was born in Sheffield on the 19<sup>th</sup> July 1918.

*Thank you. Can we talk first of all about your memories of RAF Beaulieu? What do you remember about the airfield there?*

My memory of Beaulieu is very, very faint. I remember I was living with my wife in Eastleigh and I caught the train to Brockenhurst, alighted from the train, took my cycle off the guard's van and then cycled up to Beaulieu, arriving there round about 9 o'clock I would have thought. And then it's a very, very hazy memory, because I was posted there before I was demobbed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1945. But what I did during the day I haven't got the foggiest idea except that I joined the handicrafts club and I had a lovely treadle sewing machine, which I enjoyed using because I was a fulltime balloon operator.

*So what were you making with the sewing machines?*

I had a sort of a side-line making sort of - what you them, bags – you know, carrier bags, which were in short supply. I used to buy the cheapest fabric that I could get and the zips,

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make them up in rectangular form with a handle either side and a zip across the top and then sell them for whatever I could (laughter). It was a side-line.

*And this is your membership card for the handicrafts club?*

Yes, I think it's dated inside the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1945. Price 1s/6d. That was the subscription. But what I did during the day I just cannot remember because I was just waiting for demob.

**00-02-44**

The base, all I remember was, it was the headquarters – they were testing the Martin-Baker ejector seats, and that's all I knew about it. But I believe it had more going on than one realised. Somebody told me that they were supplying the underground, you know, they were taking spies in and out and all sorts of things, but that is only hearsay as far as I know.

*Do you remember the buildings at RAF Beaulieu?*

Well, they were just ordinary wooden buildings as far as I can remember. You know, just the standard RAF buildings, built to a pattern, and that was it. My memory of it is so skimp that it makes me wonder "what were you doing?"

*Do you remember how many people were there at that time at the base?*

Well, there were quite a number of people. I would say hundreds, but other than that, I look back on it, it's as if I was in a daze.

**00-04-04**

But I remember one thing that does stand out in my memory, when I was told I was going to be mobbed on a certain day I thought "what am I going to do for a living?" And posted up in one of the huts was a list of all the things that you could retrain for. So I sat down looking at it. "Oh yeah, that's not bad" – "oh, there's holidays there" – "yes, you get a pension with that". And I finally decided I'd like to become a teacher. I thought "yes, you get a salary, you get school holidays and you get a pension". I decided to apply to become an emergency trained teacher. Well, luckily I was accepted and when I was accepted Hampshire said "yes, you can go and do some practice at the comprehensive school at Totton". So I got onto the train at Eastleigh, arrive at Totton and make my way to this large comprehensive school. And it seemed like a little village. I got there and the headmaster said "Oh, sit down lad". He said "that's right, you've come here to do some teaching, you know, see what it's like". I said "Yes, sir". I said "If I may, I would like to start next Monday". He said "Lad, you're going to start right now. He said take your coat off, hang it up behind the door", and he took me along the corridor to the first classroom and there was no one in there. The kids

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were sitting at their desks doing something and he said "Right lads, take out your English books and open them at page" - whatever it was, I don't remember – and it happened to be 'How a fountain pen works'. He said "There you are Mr Leng, I'll be back in a minute". And there I was, facing a class of about 20 of these young lads. Never been in a classroom like that beforehand. I said, "right, here we go".

So I thought, "well how a fountain pen works is pretty obvious", and I sat down there and after a while I got the class to discuss various things and in he comes, you know, without any warning. I thought "now this is a bit off-putting being suddenly pushed into this situation". So I took stock of the situation and I realised that if I sat on the wall – there was a row of windows going down one side of the classroom and there were large windowsills - if I sat on one of those windowsills and spoke to the class sideways, I could see right down the corridor and see him coming. So this is what I did and he never ever came in again (chuckles).

But the strangest thing was he ruled that school – oh – that's it, with a rod of iron.

*So that's the school that's now Testwood School?*

I don't know the name of it.

*Was it a brand new school?*

Well, it was a very large comprehensive. Oh, I suppose it was called a comprehensive in those days. It was 11 to 16 or whatever it was. I think his name was Mr Bridges.

*So you didn't have to have training, you just went in ...*

Oh, ah, yes, that was before I went for training you see. It was more or less to give me a bit of experience. And I suppose they were short of people that were going into it, and I'd had a reasonable education. But on a Friday afternoon, as soon as the bell went for finish of school, I have never seen grown men act so childish. They raced down to the staff room to have their registers checked. It was checked by the headmaster, who checked the vertical column and the horizontal columns for any absences in the register. If there was a discrepancy "Mr So-and-so, go and check your register, you're two out". Those men used to race down there worse than children. Oh, honestly! But oh he ruled that – like a rod of iron. It was amazing. But it stood me in good stead that.

*Did you carry on as a teacher, for the rest of your career?*

Oh yes, I then went to Cooper's Hill in Egham. Which is - now I think it's Goldsmiths, isn't it? I had a year's teaching there, trainer teaching, and then was posted to Deanery in Marsh

Lane. When I was looking out for my record book I came across two references for when I applied for another job. One was written by Mr Johnson who was the headmaster in those days. I went in there 1947 and left in 1960.

**00-10-52**

*So when you were demobbed, was there a particular event or were you given any money or civilian clothes or anything?*

Oh yes, you were given a complete outfit of suits and shoes – a general outfit – and so many weeks' pay and that was it.

*The start of a new life.*

Yeah, that's right. I think my suit was a light grey with pinstripes (chuckles). I can't remember much about it. So long ago.

*Were there aircraft coming and going at Beaulieu at that stage?*

Oh yeah, aircraft coming and going. But I had virtually nothing to do with them. It was just background noise, coming and going.

*And were you living at the airfield?*

Oh no.

*You came home each day then?*

Came home each day. That was a strange thing about it.

*So you were 'half-&-half' ...*

Half-&-half, yes. Just had meals there.

*Do you remember anything about Brockenhurst station? You went there every day presumably?*

Oh yes, it was – well there was not much to reckon – there was very large gates and the station was right by the gates.

*Not large numbers of troops moving through at that stage?*

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Not at that stage, no, because the troops had already gone by then.

*Yes. Do you remember any particular incidents that happened while you were at Beaulieu?*

Not really, no.

*Did you go out around the rest of the New Forest at all at any stage?*

Not in those days, no, because we had no transport at all then. The war was on. There was no point in doing it because most of the four years I'd been in Eastleigh. We were married and we more or less concentrated, weren't we, in Eastleigh.

*And you cycled from Brockenhurst ...*

Brockenhurst up to Beaulieu each day when I went there. Oh, no, it's very, very vague in my memory except that I was there (chuckles). It's rather unfortunate in a way.

[Wife] It's a long time ago.

Yes, yes.

Oh it is, but I'd know a lot more about Eastleigh and the surrounding areas than I would about Beaulieu.

#### **00-14-03**

*Yes. Shall we talk a bit about your time at Stoneham Rectory when you were working on the barrage balloons?*

If you wish to, yes.

*What do you remember about that?*

Well, I'll go back to – I will start in the summer of '39 when I was posted to 924 Squadron at Buile Hill, Salford, in Manchester and we set up balloons around Manchester. In January 1940, 924 Squadron were posted to Le Havre in France and we put up a balloon barrage around Le Havre. I was in C Flight and that was in the docks area – right in the docks area. We had some wonderful sites. Some on the seashore, some in land. We were there until we were told to evacuate. Now, several days before we had to evacuate there was what we call a petrol island, right just outside the dock area. They burnt all the storage facilities of the petrol and the gas, and at midday one day it was just like the pitch black night. And then we were told to evacuate everything. We just bundled up everything and went along a road

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just outside Le Havre and we had to spend the night – I slept underneath the winch all night, just on the road surface. And luckily in the morning there was a boat waiting for us and we were evacuated. We spent the night at sea. In the morning I thought “right, if I look out ahead and see a coastline, I’ll think it’s Portsmouth”, but it wasn’t. It was Cherbourg. We came to Cherbourg to pick up more troops. We then sailed, landed in Portsmouth, discharged, went up to Cardington. We were re-equipped with things and our squadron was posted to Southampton, and our Flight landed up at West End in a bungalow called Duncable, which was our Flight Headquarters.

#### **00-17-45**

From then onwards we put up balloons around that part of West End. Then I was posted to C Flight at Stoneham Rectory at the end of Stoneham Lane and then I spent four years there. I had eight or ten balloon sites, although as a sergeant it was my responsibility, with another two corporals, to make sure that the balloons were manned day and night or kept in the air, although each balloon site had ten men on, to do the dirty work. We had to go round the sites daily to check everything was alright and do the necessary.

#### **00-18-50**

*Could you just explain briefly what barrage balloons were and what they were for?*

Well, the balloon barrage – balloons - were what they say, balloons. Their gas capacity was 19,150 cubic feet of gas. That didn’t completely fill the balloon tight because it had an air space underneath which could fill with air when it faced into the wind. So if the gas as it went up expanded, there was air space to push the air out. As it came down, so the air went in and took up the space and it kept its shape. The maximum height was what we called **cappa** five, which was 5,000ft. But it wasn’t a dead straight 5,000ft because it was very often in a wind and it took a curve. The original cables were 3 a ton breaking strain and they were what we called a laid cable which you could splice. That was one of our trainings when we were being trained to splice a cable.

Now when the balloons were told to go up, we fitted what we called DPLs on them, one at so many feet and then when it had gone up so many thousand feet we put another one on the bottom. So there was a DPL at the top and a DPL at the bottom. And the DPL stood for Delayed Parachute Link, so if an aircraft flew into the cable the inertia would cause an explosive in each DPL to explode, cut the cable, and then there was a piece of cable with a parachute on each end so it would drag the plane down or tear the wing off. Or there was another device on the top of the cable that if a balloon suddenly made an upward jerk, that inertia would also cause a device to explode and let the balloon go free without dragging the cable all over the countryside, which sometimes they did and they caused havoc.

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*What was the balloon made from?*

It was made from a very good cotton material, which was about – in those days a yard wide but now it would be probably a metre wide. And it was, oh, now what do you call it – oh it was offset. One was straight and the other one was at an angle.

*Oh yes, to taper it at then end.*

No. What do you call it? It was stuck together at an angle.

*Oh yes, sort of interleaved?*

Oh there's a proper word for it, isn't there?

[Wife] I don't know.

Well, it was two layers of fabric stuck together but they weren't parallel to each other, they were at an angle so they couldn't tear. And it was stuck with a glue mixture I expect.

[Wife] Almost like a bias?

A bias, that's right – two ply biased – that was the word, bias. Two ply biased. It was aluminium faced I suppose to give it extra protection and to make it gas proof.

*And what was the gas?*

Hydrogen.

*So you had cylinders of hydrogen ...*

Oh, yes. We had hydrogen trailers with 30 cylinders of gas on and these cylinders were about 20 foot long from what I can remember. They were on trailers that could go over a ploughed field because they had torsion bar suspension on each axle and they were fantastic pieces of equipment.

**00-24-13**

Now we had one balloon opposite the old school in North Stoneham, which is now the Concord Club. It had been close hauled and we had taken the purity of it, and the purity was above 87. We topped it up with hydrogen. We'd all done the work, we'd finished for a tea break and the next thing we knew it was aflame. It didn't explode, it just burst into flame. And within two minutes it was just ash on the ground. No one was hurt. But we always

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wondered why that happened. Because the purity was above what it should have been.

**00-25-15**

*What sort of locations were chosen? Why were specific places chosen for the barrage balloons?*

To stop the aircraft dive bombing Eastleigh airport. I won't say Southampton airport because it's in Eastleigh (laughter).

*I see, so they were in a circle ...*

That's right, yes. Because if the balloons were flying at 5,000ft, the Stuka dive bombers couldn't come in and make a low level attack. They had to do it from a height. Because one year – and I know I've got a photograph of it somewhere – I was at the top of Witts Hill which is just on the outskirts of Southampton when a Stuka did come in and the balloons were high and the airport was bombed. I've got a photograph of it because I always carried a camera in my gasmask case (chuckles).

*You had film for the camera?*

I used to get films, yes. It was the old reel 120 size because when I was 21 and was at Manchester my uncle gave me a little camera which folded up into a very nice little compact - and I always carried – and I even carried it in France, when we were in France, and I've got pictures of France.

*Gosh, because so many people have said to us "Oh no, we haven't got any photographs because you couldn't get film in those days".*

If you want I can show you more photos.

*Alright maybe we'll have a look at those when we've finished talking, yes.*

Yes.

*So, were the barrage balloons up day and night every day?*

Well, if the weather was good they would be, sort of, what we would call "close hauled". That would be probably be flying about probably 100/200 feet. Very often they were about that. If it was a day and there was no raids or anything, they would probably be about 1000 or something like that, depending on the weather. If there was a raid, up they would go to **cappa** five to make sure that the planes – because we had two crashes that I know, both in

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Allington Lane. One was – I do not know the names of the planes – but one came down and I think it came down in very soggy ground and went right down into the earth. But another one came down in another part of Allington Lane at the join of Quob Lane and Allington Lane. And that was a very nasty one. We were called out to it and I can still remember the gruesome details of finding a shoe here and a shoe there. The house is still there. It crashed into a tree and that. But long forgotten.

**00-29-07**

*Do you know whether there were barrage balloons up around the New Forest at all? Round any of the airfields there.*

I don't think so. It was more or less to protect places like the docks in Southampton and industrial places because lots of aircraft were being built along the river at Southampton. The Spitfires – you see they had to sort of keep the bombers high, but nevertheless they still – 5,000ft was probably even safe for them.

*So British planes coming into Eastleigh, they would have known where the barrage balloons were?*

They should have done, but both planes that crashed in Allington Lane were British. They were British ones, yes.

*Each balloon would be manned all the time it was up, with some of your ...*

Oh, there was always someone on site. There was either 8 or 10 people allocated. Even if they were on leave, there was probably the maximum of 8 people there at a time, and they had to be catered for. They had daily rations and that. Oh, it was quite an undertaking.

**00-30-39**

*Yes, yes. So you met your wife while you were there did you?*

Yes, yes.

*So it was a wartime wedding?*

Yes, '42.

*Can you tell me a little bit about the wedding, getting clothes and so on? Was that a problem?*

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[Wife] At that time I had actually used the coupons to get a bit of material and I'd made a dress, and I hadn't worn it. So I had a blue dress that I'd made for the wedding and a hat that I'd turned into a shape that I preferred.

[Dennis] Actually over there, there is a photograph of ...

*Shall I stop ...*

**End: 00-31-17**

**Keywords:** RAF, Beaulieu, airfield, Martin-Baker, ejector seats, teacher, school, Totton, Brockenhurst, station, Stoneham Rectory, balloons, Manchester, Southampton, dive bombing, Eastleigh airport, crash

File name	D-L	007	_0002M0.WAV	Interview date: 8-06-13
<p><b>00-00-00</b></p> <p>[Mrs Leng joins conversation]</p> <p>[Mrs L] Our dresses were a very fine lawn that you made your nighties and things like that from.</p> <p><i>Oh, that was made from parachutes?</i></p> <p>[Mrs L] Beautiful it was, beautiful material. Because you couldn't get material. You had to pay coupons for material.</p> <p><i>That's right. So this is a picture of the wedding – with your lovely hat?</i></p> <p>[Mrs L] Yes, and it was a blue dress. Oh, just various things from the family afterwards.</p> <p><i>And you had a suit you wore. You had a suit?</i></p> <p>[Dennis] Yes, I did. (chuckles)</p> <p>What was a wartime wedding – was it much smaller scale than a normal wedding?</p> <p>[Mrs L] Of course it was, we didn't have ...</p> <p>[Dennis] No, it was a Registry Office.</p>				

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[Mrs L] We had only about three - my parents, because your father couldn't get there, and a male friend.

[Dennis] Well they didn't know. I didn't tell my parents. You see, I had a step-mother; I never knew my mother. She died when I was very young and my step-mother – I never wanted for anything – but there was – you know ...

[Mrs L] There was no love there.

[Dennis] ... there was no love. And I thought "right, to hell with it, I'm getting married and they'll find out in due course." Never regretted it.

*So did you go off for a meal afterwards?*

[Dennis] Went to a restaurant, didn't we?

[Mrs L] Yes we did, yes. Nothing very spectacular.

[Dennis] No.

[Mrs L] 'Cos I mean, everything was rationed, wasn't it, but we did have a meal out. There wasn't, I mean – my friend that came to the wedding was upset in one way that she'd always hoped that I'd be able to wear her dress when I married, which I couldn't because we weren't married in that sort of thing. It was just an afternoon dress. It was blue and it was nice – and it was new.

**00-02-11**

[Dennis] I don't know whether you want to record this because I've still got something that was made from a German parachute, hanging up, I'll let you see it in a minute. I don't know whether you want to record it or not?

*Would you rather I didn't?*

Oh, no, no, if you want to record it.

*Yes, they can always cut out anything they don't want.*

Yes. Is it recording?

*It is at the moment, yes.*

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Oh right, well, while I was at North Stoneham Rectory, when the raids were going on in Southampton, I never stayed indoors. I always stood outside up against a wall, to listen to the noise. But one night they raided the airport and a German landmine landed between North Stoneham Rectory and the airport because there was an ack-ack battery in between. This German landmine landed somewhere in that area. In the morning we raced over there and we found a large amount of the parachute which, needless to say, had soon disappeared. Alwyn had a blouse made, didn't you? And I had a shirt made out of it by a local seamstress. But it was so heavy material I hardly ever wore it. It was really thick synthetic fabric; a greeny colour, wasn't it? But it's a good trophy (laughter).

*I'm trying to think whether there are any other questions to ask you about the – so you say you've got a collection of photographs. Did you take any photographs while you were in the New Forest – at Beaulieu?*

No. Oh no, because there was no point in it. I didn't think there was. I was there for – to me it seems just like a few weeks because I was waiting to be demobbed. Because the thing that puzzles me in there – in my demob book it's stamped the 12<sup>th</sup> of December. In that little pamphlet there it's stamped the 1<sup>st</sup> December. Now that to me is a very, very short space of time, so I couldn't have been at RAF Beaulieu for very long.

*And did you know at that stage – was there any sort of programme of when you were going to go home, or did you just have to – was it all rather in limbo just waiting ...*

It was sort of in limbo because we were there basically waiting to be demobbed.

*And after all the exciting, frightening experiences you'd had before, it must have been rather a sort of limbo stage presumably.*

It was. Yes, it was just ...

[Mrs L] You just lived through life, didn't you?

You did. Oh yes.

**00-05-47**

*Was there still a great shortage of food, presumably?*

Well, being in the services, you never noticed it. You see, Alwyn must have noticed it because she was a civilian. In the services we never noticed it. Whether we had smaller appetites (chuckling) or what I don't know.

[Mrs L] You had a reasonable appetite because you were young. I mean, it was something you coped with. Everybody was in the same boat. You did hear of people that had “black market” stuff, but you were sort of looked down on if you did that.

[Dennis] I’ll always remember Alwyn’s mother making the most wonderful soup whenever I went there. I only wish I could make it now (chuckle).

[Mrs L] You could get bones from the butcher and she used to make a sort of stock and then put vegetables in. It wasn’t a soup with – yes we’ll make such-&-such a soup – you made what you could, and it was very nourishing.

[Dennis] Oh it was. It was delightful.

**End: 00-07-09**

**Keywords:** Parachute, German, raids, Southampton, airport, landmine, ack-ack, food, black market, soups

File name	D-L	007	_0003M0.WAV	Interview date: 8-06-13
<p><b>00-00-00</b></p> <p><i>So we’ve got your Service and Release Book here. Were you actually given that at the time you were going to leave or in advance?</i></p> <p>No, no. As you went through all these were stamped and you were handed this as you went.</p> <p><i>That was it?</i></p> <p>That was it.</p> <p><i>Oh yes, 12<sup>th</sup> December, yes. And you said they had signs around the building. Was that pretty much all the help you were given with deciding what you were going to do?</i></p> <p>As far as I ...</p> <p>[Mrs L] They had a bit of a list of professions on the wall.</p> <p>[Dennis] Oh yes, a list of professions, which you could apply for.</p>				

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CHAIRMAN OLIVER CROSTHWAITE-EYRE CHIEF EXECUTIVE ALISON BARNES

[Mrs L] Yes, we had to think a lot about it because he'd had a good education, which was fortunate, and fortunately he chose teaching, which was a good thing because he obviously had a knack at it. Now that's gone down through the ages; our children and grandchildren have been teaching. So, you know, it's been ...

**00-01-28**

[Dennis] You see, the strange thing is, my father worked in St James's Street at Furnished Shipbuilding Company. At the time I was going to the London Polytechnic in Little Tichfield Street. I must have been a lazy sort of so-&-so because when I sat my Matric, I failed everything. I failed everything. My father got so fed up. "What do you want to do?" "I dunno!"

And being in the city he must have known one or two people. First of all he got me an interview with a big insurance company who asked me all sorts of odd questions. The person who interviewed me said "What do you really want to do lad?" I said "I want to be a motor mechanic". Well, obviously this got back to my father, who later on took me to see somebody – I think it was in Hyde Park Corner – who had a very large garage. He was showing me around, and the manager said "You want to be a motor mechanic?" I said "Yes, I think it would be very good". He said "Well, I don't think there's a future in it lad". Obviously, being primed by my father.

So I then thought "right, what in the hell do I do? I'm blocked everyway". So at the last minute, I thought I'll join the RAF. "What do you want to do in the RAF?" "Oh, I'd like to fly" "Well, you haven't got the qualifications". So I finally trained to be a wireless operator. I was accepted for that; to be a wireless operator. So I went to RAF Cranwell in 1936 and I spent nearly a year training to be a wireless operator. And I failed!

I wrote to my father. I said "I've failed". I said "It's not fair, other people that have failed have been referred back and had a further training". He must have wrote to the Air Ministry. The next thing I knew I was up before the Commanding Officer. "You can't do this lad. You should have done this or that". Anyway, I wasn't referred so I was posted to RAF Wyton, as a telephone operator. I had a lovely time there as a telephone operator, it was a doddle. But after a while I got fed up with it. In DRO's – that's Daily Routine Orders - 'Volunteers wanted to be balloon operators' you see.

So I thought "Group 2, oh that's good pay, isn't it? Oh yes, right." So I volunteered. I had to sign on for another two years. Was posted to RAF Cardington. I did a 3 months driving course. You just think, 3 months to be taught to drive. Had to drive heavy lorries. Start by handle. I passed all that.

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Oh, before I volunteered for that, on DRO's it came 'Volunteers wanted to be rear gunners. An extra 3d a day'. A lot of money in those days, 3d a day. I failed at that. So then I volunteered to be retrained as a balloon operator.

When I did that, everything went right. I wasn't meant to fly!

No?

I wasn't meant to fly. And then when I got into teaching, I taught retarded children and I absolutely loved it. I did 20 years, because I basically - when we moved, Alwyn's father found out there was some land for sale in this area, and we bought this plot of land for £150. We weren't allowed to build a permanent dwelling, so we put a Nissan hut up on the back and we lived in that for 5 years then we got permission to build this. I thought "If I've got a head on my shoulders, I can read plans". So we built this between us and subcontractors obviously. Started Easter '52, moved in January '53 and we've lived here ever since. So you see, so Fate said "you're not going to fly". You can't argue with Fate! So that's it, more or less.

**End: 00-07-43**

**Keywords:** London Polytechnic, wireless operator, RAF Cranwell, balloon operator, RAF Cardington

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