

## New Forest Remembers WWII Project

### Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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#### Web Pages:

Oral History article:

<http://www.newforestheritage.org/memories-of-a-mossie-pilot/>

Project information:

[www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/wwii](http://www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/wwii)

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#### 00-00-00

*OK Doug, if you just say your name and where you lived at the beginning of the war.*

I am Doug Gregory and lived in Southampton. I was born in Southampton, went to school in Southampton and worked in Southampton. All this right up to the beginning of the war when I hoped to get some relief from the office but I'm afraid we were too young. So we had to wait until we got a bit older.

I saw the Battle of Britain going on and I was too young to join in, which was awful. There.

#### 00-00-45

*And I think you wrote a poem about your feelings about the start of the war.*

Oh yes, I've got a little bit here. See how it goes. It's called of course 'The Day War Broke Out'.

Yes I remember Sunday September the third,  
The radio had blurted out the word, WAR.  
Old Chamberlain's voice, sobering voice,

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Had given us but little chance. (Suggest that the last word should be 'choice' to rhyme with voice, please check for accuracy)

Old men in their fifties, predicted doom,  
The country's overcast with gloom,  
But for me and my pal Pete,  
We both went dancing in the street.

What fun to ditch our dull routine,  
And take on a more exciting dream,  
Of guns and bombs and aeroplanes,  
And exploding ammunition trains.

Although we'd seen it all at the local flicks,  
With the dirty Huns and their dirty tricks,  
And Errol Flynn and David Niven,  
Blowing the blighters to high heaven.

'Dawn Patrol', I watched it twice,  
To be absolutely precise,  
I saw myself as a future ace,  
With me taking Niven's place.

So off to the RAF recruiting station,  
To volunteer to save the nation,  
To be reprimanded by some three-striped rough,  
"Go home sonny; come back when you're old enough".

The office job, a tiresome bind,  
The next few months were most unkind,  
Few bombs and bangs, a phoney war,  
Life became a prolonged bore.

But of a sudden, the bombing blitz,  
When half the town was blown to bits,  
I wondered if this might forecast defeat,  
So much for dancing in the street.

Time took its ever lumbering course,  
A time at last to join the force,  
And become one of the Brylcreem blue,  
In the footsteps of the few.

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So dancing became a part of life,  
 Enjoyment in the midst of strife,  
 Gyration then so way up high,  
 Our dance of death was in the sky.

Yes I remember that old September date,  
 Was it luck or skill or fate, that still allows we all to meet,  
 Though we packed up dancing in the street,  
 We now, we crumbling ancient crocks,  
 Watch 'Come Dancing' on the box.

**End: 00-03-42**

**Keywords:** Southampton, Battle of Britain, poem

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**00-00-00**

*OK Doug, so tell me about when you joined the RAF.*

Well, eventually I got old enough to do so and went along, and it seemed in no time they plonked my on the train and off I went down to the west country. Places turned up that I'd never been to before, Torquay and so on, eventually to Newquay where I was presented with this wonderful blue uniform, and they even made it fit. We marched about and saluted and goodness knows what. I thought it was a jolly long way from aeroplanes. It got so bad that some of us used to put our arms out straight and go running along hoping we might take off. Anyhow, we were there for a while until we went up to Glasgow and got onto a troop ship. If anybody can remember troop ships, they were absolute hell! I should think being a slave would have been preferable. Anyhow, off we went down the Atlantic and called in at Durban. What a wonderful place. Absolutely marvellous, warm, lots of booze and we had a good time there. Eventually onto some sort of train – oh, two or three days on the train – ended up in Rhodesia. At least, it was Rhodesia in those days. It's something else now.

Then again an awful lot of talking about aeroplanes and navigation and goodness knows what. Still didn't see an aeroplane, but of course eventually we did. And there they were, on this aerodrome, the Tiger Moth. Wonderful machine, noisy, nice though. And we got our instructors. Now I got mine, as I said at the time he was something like Buddha. Large

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rounded gentleman who sat in the front of the Tiger and blanked off all the scenery, so I had to sort of try and look round the side. We then started to do this business of learning to fly. Took me a long time. Jolly aeroplane didn't seem to do what I wanted it to. It was very pig-headed. Of course, when it got round to old what's-his-name, he flew it no trouble at all. Plonked it on the ground – oh, he used to swear at me something awful. Nevertheless, eventually I suppose I must have been good enough for him to let me go solo, which I did. I did a circuit and got down again without breaking it and was very, very pleased. And so I did a whole course on the Tiger Moth.

#### **00-03-25**

After that, the Harvard. Went to another station, flew the Harvard which was a beautiful aeroplane. An American trainer. Powerful, had undercarriage which came up and flaps that came down and propellers which were constant speed. Oh, it was just terrific. You could aerobatic, you could low fly it – you weren't supposed to, but you could – and have a wonderful time formation flying, practice bombing, so on and so forth. And I thought “lovely, I'm going to be a fighter pilot”. Always wanted this.

#### **00-04-14**

Then of a sudden, things changed. Old ‘Bomber Harris’ back in England, said “I shall destroy Germany by bombing it to bits, so I want hundreds of bomber pilots”. It was going to be me and all the others that were going to be fighter pilots were to be made into bomber pilots. So to another aerodrome to fly twin engined Oxford aeroplanes. It was rather sad. I thought we'd all be going to the Middle East on Hurricanes but no, back to England and back again on Oxfords waiting to go to Wellington operational training units.

Now for some reason or other out of about sixty of us, three, including me, shot off to Scotland to become night fighter pilots. It was quite amazing, 'cos looking back, the number of those that didn't go to Scotland and went to the bomber OTUs, never saw them again. Anyhow, as far as I was concerned, onto the thing – well, the Blenheim. Strange aeroplane. Very nice to fly. No blooming good as a bomber, but nevertheless we flew them. We flew them at night and then eventually onto the Beaufighter. Oh, an aggressive creature they were. If you have ever seen the films of rodeos when chaps sit on mad bulls and come charging out of somewhere, galloping about until they fall off, well that's the Beaufighter, only you don't fall off, you jolly well stay on and fly it. Which I did. Powerful thing, swing all over the place it would, wouldn't keep straight, didn't like flying and it was only pleased when you put it away in the hangar for the night and then it settled down and it was OK.

Now, where are we?

The Beaufighter brought me to the squadron. Now in those days we were hoping the

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Germans might come over and we would shoot them down, but they'd done all that and we were bombing the hell out of Germany, so most of their fighters and things, or even bombers for that matter, were transferred to try and stop allied bombers going over there.

### **00-07-07**

So, that is what our job was going to be. It was called Bomber Support. I'm not quite sure how we were supporting them but we didn't fly too close to them or they'd shoot us down. But we would go to where we thought their fighters were and chase them up. They got very frightened about it, so we read afterwards. Managed to shoot down one or two, you know, but not a great score. Nevertheless, this was our job - chasing German night fighters.

Now, when you're getting ready to go – that means going on Ops – and it's dark and black, and cold and horrible, then if anybody said you hadn't got to go, I think you might have said "Oh good, I'll stay back", but you never did. And it was then that I wrote these few lines when I was sitting in the crew room. They mean a lot to me. It might just give the edge, anyhow, here we go.

### **00-08-30**

Concrete crew room, chilly, damp,  
Mae West too tight round my waist,  
Oh God, make the weather clamp,  
Coffee's got an awful taste.

Dry mouth, dry throat, straining eyes,  
Mozzie waiting in the dark,  
Steve had registered surprise,  
At the Wing CO's grim remark.

Courses plotted, watches set,  
Nearly ready for the show,  
Got, the latest gen from Met?  
OK Steve, it's time to go.

### **00-09-14**

*So Doug, tell me about a typical mission in the Mosquito.*

Well, I was mighty surprised. You know, they'd send over occasionally about seven hundred bombers. Big Lancasters carrying big bombs. I remember the first time I went there, it was a place called Wuppertal, and it looked like boiling toffee. The whole ground

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was bubbling red, boiling away there and that was the bombs exploding and churning things up. It must have been absolute hell down below. Nevertheless, that was it. Of course the dear old Huns, they didn't like it and they put up a bit of resistance. So there were guns and searchlights and God knows what coming up at you. Searchlights, once they'd caught you, it was just like daylight, as if you were in a greenhouse with lights all the way round and it was very bright and you thought you could be seen for miles – I suppose you could be. If you weren't careful of course, the fighters would come up and shoot you down. So you didn't hang about, you zig-zagged out of the way, even turned right round in the hope that you might find some fighter. Anyhow, this happened every time, just about, and it was very, very frightening as anyone who has been through it will assure you. But that's how it was.

Occasionally you did get hit by flak coming up. It made an awful bang when it hit you, and pinged off the propellers. In fact, worse than that, one night Steve, who was my navigator, said "Try turning off to the left a little bit, I think I've got somebody behind me". Well, I turned off a bit so that I could see behind and there was some chap firing away like mad, all these cannon banging away. They missed! He must have been a complete idiot. I wouldn't have missed, but he did. I put everything into the left hand corner and went down as if I was in a lift. I was about fourteen or fifteen thousand feet and when I tried to pull out it wasn't easy, but I managed to get out and saw the North Sea coming up a bit quick. I did pull out about three thousand feet. I thought "Here, this isn't right, I'm supposed to be doing the chasing, not him." But nevertheless we turned round, didn't see him again and I was a very frightened person. Nevertheless, lived through it. Next time it happened I got him. Not the same one I don't suppose, but nevertheless, we did get a few.

#### **00-12-42**

*So Doug, I think you've written a poem about the Spitfire and its relationship with Southampton.*

Well yes, you see my brother worked at the Woolston factory. In fact he told me when the first Spitfire was going to fly and I got on my bike and I shot off to Swaythling and there it was. What a gorgeous thing it looked. Pale blue it was painted. Beautiful looking thing and I thought "One day I'm gonna fly one of those". It took me a long time to get there but I did eventually fly them. And they are a very beautiful aeroplane.

Now I wrote a little thing about it. I called it 'Southampton's Heritage'. So here's my little poem.

The Itchen Bridge will take you across the tide  
And bring you to the city's Woolston side.  
And there you can still see a factory floor,

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Where once stood sheds down to the shore.

There too the concrete slipway climbs  
Up to the level used in former times.  
The passing years try hard to hide and fade  
The site where history once was made.

There from his office window Mitchell saw  
The flashing flight of seagulls rise and fall.  
Did this inspire that genius to make  
The streamlined craft which fought for freedom's sake?

Was it upon that floor now cracked and worn,  
That Britain's air defence was born?  
Though often since I've realised how few  
Because of this blest spot the Spitfire flew.

#### **00-14-49**

*So Doug, I believe you're still flying in your 90's?*

Yes, once it gets in your blood that's it. I suppose it's something like the sailor who goes to the sea and can't give it up. Anyhow, I can't give up flying. I think it's wonderful; I always did. I loved it and I still do.

So much so – well, I'd better go back a bit further than that. Because just after the war when I came out of the Air Force I ended up in a hospital because I'd been testing aeroplanes and that meant diving them like mad and I burst a blood vessel on my brain and there I was in hospital. But I got over it, as one does. Also in hospital I met my wife who was a young nurse. You know what young nurses were like in those days, they had short skirts and little frilly cuffs and little hats, black stockings – (fwoah!) – anyhow, I married her eventually. Took a bit of doing because she was a bit choosy.

The Air Force considered that after hospital I could never fly again. Well, that's a silly thing to say because I was jolly well going to fly again. Eventually, after some years, I went flying - quite a lot - and even after that when I retired as an old man over 60-ish, I built my own aeroplane. And I thought how nice to build an early type aeroplane – a First World War Biplane – and flit around the country. But it wasn't long before other people joined in with their First World War aeroplanes and we started a First World War display team going round to air shows and showing off what it was like to go dog fighting in 1917. It was great fun and I loved it.

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These days at 90, I was still flying on my 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Had to do that just to show off and I shall fly again tomorrow. So it's not gone altogether and I think I was made for that. And that hat was it.

**End: 00-17-47**

**Keywords:** RAF, training, Rhodesia, Tiger Moths, Harvard, 'Bomber' Harris, Oxfords, Blenheim, Beaufighter, bombing, Germany, night-fighters, Mosquito, Lancaster, Wuppertal, guns, searchlights, flak, Spitfire, testing aircraft, hospital, WW1 Biplane.

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**00-00-00**

... the young people of course don't know what people did. That was some of the ideas that he really could have told them at lot but didn't.

*So I think you wrote a poem about trying to recount your memories of wartime to your grandson.*

Right, on we go then. There's this little poem and by now of course I'm a grandfather, if not a great-grandfather. So, right. And this is the small grandson, how they keep on nagging at their oldies.

I asked my grandfather what he did when he was a lad.  
He said "Can't remember all those years ago"  
Mum said "He won the war", at least she thought he had.  
So I suppose she really ought to know.

She said "When he was young he used to fly a plane"  
She said "He was a Brylcreem boy" whatever that may be  
Granddad said "I guess she's right, I must have been insane"  
Then granddad mumbled softly "Gawd, was it me?"

Did you fly a Spitfire granddad, like my Airfix kit  
And did you meet old **Bills** or Churchill or the King  
And did you shoot down a Focke-Wulf or a Messerschmitt  
And did you see Dame Vera Lynn when she used to sing?

Tell me all about it granddad, I really want to know.  
One chap at school says his grad was at the D-Day do

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Mum said she knew that you'd had a go  
Were you one of those old fellers too?

I watched them march in Normandy, on the box  
All with their ribbons shining in the sun.  
Were you one of those meandering old crocks  
And where are all the medals you must have won?

Granddad said when he gets time, he'll write it in a book  
I wanted to ask him lots more, but Mum said don't  
She could see he's got that tired look.  
I'd love to think he'd write it down, but I'm pretty sure he won't.

**End: 00-02-37**

**Keywords:** poem

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