

Interview

with

MR. EDWARD BRISTER

and

Pupils of Lady Hawkins' School, Kington

On

14th November 2006

Edward (Ted Brister) was a fighter pilot in the Western Desert, Malta, Sicily and Italy. In Palestine he trained gunners. He had intended to enter dentistry, possibly as a dental surgeon, but in September 1940 he visited a cousin in Ilford and saw from a distance the bombing of the London Docks, and this inspired him to become a pilot. He joined up on February 11th 1941, his 19th birthday. He did his basic training in Blackpool, then went to South Cerney, then north of Newcastle and then to Torquay for initial training wing, then on to elementary flying training school. He trained in a Tiger Moth, then went up to Tern Hill in north Shropshire, then finished the course in Molesworth in East Anglia. He then went to an operational training unit and ended up in South Wales, where he began flying Spitfires. He joined a squadron in Scotland for about 4 or 6 weeks and then got a posting for the Middle East, which meant travelling to West Africa and crossing the continent to Egypt. He was in the Desert Airforce in the Western Desert based in Tunis from 1942 to May 1943. There were five squadrons of Spitfires living under canvas, with open air toilets. He then went to Malta, where they lived in proper buildings, defending the island and making sweeps to Sicily which was enemy territory. He then went to Sicily in about July 1943, where he operated from the edge of a landing strip, again under canvas. In September he went to mainland Italy, on the Adriatic coast, and later went to Palestine.

Life moving around during the war; relationship to ground crew; personalisation of aircraft; Protestant Church near the landing grounds from which he flew in Italy; fear of losing face and courage; flying Spitfires; flying to see the Acropolis lit up; incident where man flew on tail of Spitfire; eating grapes for breakfast in Sicily; malaria; flying around mountains; the ops wagon; experience of bailing out.

Brister (first interview)

[Edward Brister Recording 1 – 00:06]

TED BRISTER: This really only starts in Malta. I've got another album which starts actually in the desert.

Q. Were you actually in Malta?

A. Yes.

A SPEAKER: 'Cause they had a hell of a pounding, didn't they?

A. It did. Yes, I was just at the end of that and then we were covering for the Sicilian invasion.

Q. Ted, can I just get you to say your name and what you did during the War just at the start of the tape so that I've got it on the beginning?

TED BRISTER: Right - quick thought. My name is Ted Brister (Edward formally, Ted otherwise). My role was a fighter pilot, really guarding and protecting our troops in the Western Desert and in Malta and in Sicily and in Italy. After that I then went back to Palestine (as it was then) to help train gunners by doing mock attacks on their aircraft. So I'm one of the survivors of that era and just happy to be alive and recording this to you now.

Q. We're very glad you can be here as well, thank you. And so ...

A. Is that sufficient?

Q. Yes, that's great. So, yes, if we do what Nick suggested and just go through the pictures, that's probably ...

A. If you want to leave a gap – and there will be other occasions, I take it – to get the picture in sequence, we really ought to start from the desert time.

Q. And that's ... You haven't got that with you today.

A. I haven't got that with me. I didn't know quite what ...

Q. So perhaps if you maybe select just some of the pictures here we could have a look through before we record it and ...

[End of Brister 1 – 2:01]

[Brister 2]

TED BRISTER: I've got a few thoughts, so if we start off in the sense of we have just completed the desert campaign which finished in May, early May, 1943. Prior to that we had backup from I think it was the first army that landed in North Africa in the November of '42 and they tried to put the squeeze on. We came up from the Cairo end, Egypt end, and so we were in the area of Tunis, I suppose, the southern part of Tunisia, when the first army came into North Africa. That meant it shortened the desert war I suppose because the squeeze was on, if you can imagine, coming in from the east and the west. And so our role then ... We were still in the Desert Airforce and that continued to be our title and that consisted of five squadrons of Spitfires and we were always just behind what was known as a bomb line, in other words just behind the troops, and if we got too close then we had to run away quickly. That only happened once, fortunately.

Brister (first interview)

We then moved from that situation into something quite different. In the desert everything was under canvas; our messing arrangements, our sleeping, any other activities, it was all under canvas. I think I might say that the latrines, or the toilets, were not covered; they opened to the air. So when we arrived in Malta we had the privilege of living in billets, actual buildings to sleep in, but that only lasted for about three months because we went ... At the end of the Tunisian campaign, the desert campaign ... and we were there really to help defend the island in the next few months and also carry out sweeps over ('sweeps' is to make marauding patrols over enemy territory, which was) Sicily, just to let them know we were around really. And so that lasted for about three months. Then July the 7th or thereabouts at first light, which meant we took off before dawn and flew over to Sicily to see this whole armada of vessels, you know, unloading soldiers, making a beach hit in Sicily, and they covered from virtually the whole length of the south of Sicily, some coming in from North Africa and we coming in almost from the south. So that was quite an interesting situation and I think on day 3 we then flew with our kit in our aircraft and we then operated from about day three from a very ... Well, just a landing strip so we could be on the spot and not have the 60 miles' journey from Malta to Sicily. You never realise until you're faced with a situation of trying to find an island which is quite sizeable but if you are 60 miles away and you can't see it to begin with, it ... I suppose the only worse thing than that is flying off an aircraft carrier.

So we arrived then in Sicily but in the latter stages there are some pictures from the Malta experience, just three shots there of actually sitting in the comfort of a building, you might say. In fact ... No, this is quite separate. This is some friends, some Christian friends I met up with in Malta and the chap in fact was the manager of Barclays Bank in Malta and he opened his house for us to visit him. I think I'm just on the edge of the picture there. So we then moved to a place called Pachino in Sicily, which is right on the bottom end, south end (south-east to be precise) and these are pictures ... We were all under canvas; here is a situation that one aircraft that we didn't see that in fact very nearly blew me out of the sky because if he'd been just a few moments more in his firing, or a bit premature, he would have got my ammunition bag in that wing and the wing would have gone and I wouldn't be here now talking to you.

[0:04:54]

Q. That's you fixing the wing, is it?

A. No, that's one of the couple of mechanics looking at the damage, so I was able to get down safely fortunately. So this was ... When we are on the move, that is the pilots' mess. When I say pilots' mess, it consisted of anybody who flew, the Adj. (?), the CO (who was a flying man) and the medical man and the engineering officer. Whether you were a sergeant, NCO or an officer you were all in the pilots' mess. It just wasn't feasible to operate together and there was, you know ... the mix would have been something like 60/40, 60% officers and 40% NCOs who usually then earned their commission (as I did) after being on the squadron for some length of time, which is always a proud

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moment. But this is how, when you're on the move, you eat. I mean, nothing was cooked at that time; it was probably all 'bully beef' as it was known.

A SPEAKER: What happened to bully beef!

TED BRISTER: Yes. And I've never seen anybody get through more than one tin and two or three very hard biscuits, however hungry you felt at the time. But, you know, the spirit amongst folk was absolutely great because the aircraft really was the focal point; the aircraft and the pilot was the focal point for all the ground staff. The relationship was just fantastic. In fact, I suppose it's borne out by the fact that you had what they called a serviceability state, that was the number of aircraft you have on the squadron and how many are ready at a given time for action. I think our wing (405 Squadron's) was about 95%, whereas in Britain where the ERKS (?) (the ground staff, they) had other attractions (the only attractions we had were camels - nothing else!), theirs was about 65%. So, you know, that, I think, spells out the unity and the dedication that these chaps had. They were great fun. One in fact turned out to be my cousin – second cousin; he was a mechanic on the aircraft. I didn't know until ... I said ... I've forgotten his name now, but he then said it was Le Fever(?) and I said was your mother a Maud and did she have sisters who were Stewarts? Yes. And I said, well, we're cousins, how do you do!

[0:7:56]

Q. And so did you tend to keep the same ground staff?

A. Yes.

Q. Would they stay with the person and you stayed with the same aircraft?

A. Yes, as much as one could, yes. After all, don't forget there was movement of pilots, either those who have done what they call their tour of duty, which is, I suppose it can depend ... I was on ops, I suppose, for just over a year because there was a break in between. But I suppose on average it would be six to nine months, depending on the intensity of the actions. Bomber boys had a different means of saying what a tour was; it would probably be 25 or 30 trips that they would be ... I mean, our trips, on average, would be about 1hr 15minutes and it might be that you'd have two or three in a day depending on the situation. But bomber boys would be up for eight, nine, ten hours and so it all amounted to something like, well, probably six months to nine months. But then you have the casualties that come about, so you've got a movement of pilots. And as the new ones join, they don't get aircraft straight away. There was probably about 25 pilots and about 20 aircraft. And so, as you earn your spurs, as it were and get used to things and you get a bit of experience ... The learning curve could be quite quick, depending on the intensity of the actions and whatever goes on. So, yes ... So the aircraft in fact, as you became a bit more senior on the squadron, you'd probably have your own aircraft, but you would probably share it because they weren't all available immediately for flight. It meant that ... I mean, I had H for Harriet (which was my mother's name, Hettie, so I had an H for Harriet). I had a Q. I think

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it was mainly the Qs and the Hs that I had. Only twice did I not bring the kite back, so that cost the taxpayer a bit of money. But the thing was to get back yourself if you couldn't get the aircraft back.

Q. Could you personalize the aircraft in any way? You see it on the bombers; they added their own graffiti?

A. Yes, I did on one or more; I put what was to be my wife's, her ... I think I put her nickname on it. It might be on **this** one. Yes, 'T'uppeny'; that was a nickname I had for her. So that went on. I think things were personalized, and, of course, in the desert we had much more freedom of action. I mean, there were not Air Officer Commandings suddenly breezing on to the station to see what you were doing. We were a very isolated bunch. I suppose the whole outfit would have been five squadrons with about 25 pilots. So that's 125. We might treble that figure, or more, for all the ground staff, and there's the photographic sections, the medical side, there was the engineering side. Yes, it would be. So really as a group of five squadrons, you'd probably have a contingent of around not far from 3 or 4 or 5000 [*sic*]. And that's on the move on the time ... You know, things moved quite rapidly at one time in the desert and you'd move up and ...

[00:12:02]

Q. That's quite some feat of organization there, isn't it?

A. Well, it meant that we would know where we were going to land next, which might only be 50 miles on, but that's a saving of petrol. Don't forget, every drop of juice that we used – and the Germans, for that matter – had to come a long, long way to fuel our aircraft, and in the end, I suppose, that's a major factor in the supply operation. But it is surprising how one got used to life like that. You know, you read about it in books, but when it actually happens you fall into it. Well, you either sink or swim. And there are not many ... By the time you've reached that stage of getting to a squadron, after a really quite intensive training, you're prepared for it and at, you know, 19/20/21 you learn quite quickly. You haven't reached that age yet, have you? You've still got a long way to go!

But it is ... I've always been fascinated because, just as an aside, in 1980 I went out to find the landing grounds which I flew and by that time my first wife had died, having gained the age of 54, which was very sad, but I then had a second blessing of a second wife (we've been married for 29 years) and so I took off to Italy with her two kids (who I think were about 7 and 9 at the time) in the caravan; we drove all the way down, about 1300 miles from home, here; quite a few experiences along that line. But we then tied up with the Protestant Church out there, just near to where we were and for about 26 years now I've been going out helping in that church and also helping in the schools with English and that's fascinating. And I was thinking some time back, always trying to find a talkable sort of discussion you can work up to and I thought, well, the changes that come about in the human race from the time they're about 12 to the time of about 18; you just think back. You haven't reached that stage yet, but you're somewhere in the middle; you're in the most difficult part now because 'Mum doesn't love me, Dad doesn't love me,' you know, all these sort of things and we're going through

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tremendous changes in our chemistry, particularly girls. You know, at one time ... Well, you know, it's not long before you can become a mum, and nowadays that's much earlier than it was when I was your age. I don't know whether that's progress or not but it is a fact of life and that's caused a lot of problems.

[00:14:55]

Q. So how old were you when you started training, when you entered the RAF?

A. I think I joined up on my 19th birthday. But, you know, things were very different in those days to what we knew and what we did. We weren't so sophisticated. We weren't green, by any means; I think we thought we were quite the cat's whiskers, didn't we?

A SPEAKER: Well, I was a bit later on, but never mind.

TED BRISTER: Sorry, that was an aside, because I think these are changes that you have to take on board almost automatically and from that I've just developed one thing, that I think our biggest fear is destroying our own image. If we fear losing ground with our peers we do all sorts of things because that becomes a dominant fear, to let ourselves down, self-respect, and that's a very important factor and I think the fear of that kept many people sane and dedicated in their job, whatever their job was, in the War time.

Q. Mmh, in a very difficult time, that's it; so it helped a lot ...

A. Oh, it did; I think that self-respect is a major thing because to let yourself down in front of others is just something you can't accept.

Q. Mmh, especially when you're so close, I should think, as well.

A. Well, you are very close. I mean, if you take a ... Whether it's army or whether it's air-force, it's immaterial because you're very closely tied in with a small number of people which are part of a larger group of people and so they know you pretty well and there's not much you hide. You can't hide, well particularly in the desert where you're in a tent and you eat with people, you sleep, you know, close to another chap; that's all part of growing up I suppose.

Q. Being so close within a squadron in such isolated locations must have made the losses of friends and comrades that much greater.

[00:17:11]

A. It was; yes, it was. And if you should see a chap, you know, you were shouting over the radio to him, 'Bail out! Bail out!' if you could see he is on fire or being shot at and hopefully by then he might have been dead from the action itself, so it may have been that response. But if you'd get into a bomber you've got your six, five/six/seven or how many people dispersed down the aircraft; and if you're in the army on patrol, I guess, there might be six or seven people and you all depend on one another. If one ... This is where reliability and responsibility sort of come together because unless you can trust one another ... That's why people put others first and others that are saved means you go down, but that's glory. That's courage. But sorry, we've wandered. But it's all part of trying to get the

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atmosphere of that sort of time, which, after all, when you think what they're doing in Iraq and Afghanistan, it sounds terribly, terribly difficult. We can't imagine the sort of circumstances under which they are operating. 150 people marched out of a university?

Q. Kidnapped, yes.

A. Gosh, it's unbelievable! Sorry. Well, that's the sort ... That chap was lost, that chap was lost. The others weren't flyers anyway.

Q. Did you enjoy flying the Spitfire?

A. Oh, it was absolutely marvellous, like a dream. Let me just illustrate one thing. When I was off operations and training others, we were helping with a [19:16 - mobile phone interruption] ... Put it on hold; I'll wait.

[00:19:22]

We were flying Spitfires against Liberators, which was a whacking great bomber, and that was commanded by a chap called Soapy Marsh who was a South African (I don't know how he got the 'soapy' bit). But he said, "Oh, do let me fly a Spitfire," and we said, "With the size of aircraft you've been flying, no thank you. We don't want to spoil one of our aircraft." "No, no, no." Anyway, he pleaded with us, and this was ... We were flying at that time in Egypt and so he came along one day and he said, "Anything," you know, "a 48-hour pass and we can go somewhere. Is there somewhere you want to go yourself?" So we said yes; so we said "How about Athens?" And the War was just about over and he said, "All right, how about a 48-hour pass in Athens if I can fly in the Spitfire". Good bargaining. And so he took us to Athens and it happened to be the first night the Acropolis ... Have you heard of the Acropolis and the Parthenon? Well, they're whacking great buildings from way, way back. And it was floodlit for the first time since 1940, or something like that. Magic. Anyway, he came back and he said, "Now I want my flight." And we said, "OK. So we watched with some trepidation as he strapped himself in and took off. He made an absolutely perfect takeoff and then he came back and we watched to see what the landing would be like because that's the harder part. Anyway, he made a perfect landing, no problem at all, and he just got out of the aircraft, stood by it and he stroked it. He said, "Treat it like a lady." Marvellous. But, you know, the story for him was absolutely magical, it really was. But, yes, he handled it very well with every care. But, strangely enough, I was on a cruise about five years ago, or four years ago, and we went to Athens, went to the Parthenon, Karen [check – could have been 'carol'] and I, and we were in a group when they were telling us all of the history of it and they said, "Anybody been here before?" So the first to put his hand up, said, "Yes." "How long ago was that?" "Oh, about five years." So then I put my hand up very timidly and she said, "When were you here?" and I said, "1945" – the penny dropped then.

[00:22:02]

So, was it a fantastic aeroplane? It was. There's one chap who probably didn't think it was and he had every reason to think that it was. You're not supposed to fly a Spitfire or fly in a Spitfire

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sitting on the tail plane like **that** chap. When we were in Italy the weather was pretty atrocious (it was the autumn) and there was so much mud, and we were flying off metal track which had been lain down for the purpose; you can probably see it on one of these photographs. I'm sure it's somewhere here. Yes ... It must be here somewhere. I'll go back again. There it is: there's the metal track.

Q. Oh, right, yes.

A. All perforated holes. It's like a big Meccano set and they'd just lay it down and roll it down. That's what we flew from. To get onto that track to take off we had to fight through mud basically. If you rev up the engine too hard, of course the tail plane comes up, your nose hits the deck and you're in trouble. So we devised a scheme that the two fitters – the fitter engine and the fitter airframe as they call it – would sit on the tail plane whilst we were in the mud and we'd taxi along because their weight would hold that end down and then, just as we were about to take off, perhaps six aircraft very quickly, they had to jump off. Well, it was something waiting to happen, wasn't it? And Dickie didn't get off and this was his pilot (my friend Ken) and ... Well, Ken, being a fairly intelligent sort of chap, thought there's something wrong with this aeroplane as, once he's got his wheels off the deck and he was airborne, it upset the balance of the aeroplane. That was fine for Ken because he looked up in the mirror and saw Dickie sitting there and so he made a good ... Well, he climbed to a respectable height and then made a turn and came back in to land. But, of course, Dickie didn't know whether Ken had seen him until they'd made the turn back because the next thing he would have been at something like 20 000 feet, bitterly cold and there might have been a few enemy aircraft about, could have been over the bomb line, as we called it. So that was going through his mind, I guess, for the first few moments, quite apart from sitting still and trying to keep quiet. Anyway, that was soon dissipated in the sense that Ken turned and came round and landed. By then, of course, the Group Captain, he came on, he heard of it, because five squads would be flying off the same field, and so he came over and was there to greet Dickie when he got down. So he said, "Would you do it again? A fiver?" "I wouldn't do it even for a hundred," he says.

[00:25:51]

Q. Terrifying.

A. It must have been. Yes, there we are. So, I don't know how we got on to that. Flying, you were saying, with my Spitfire. Well, it wasn't intended that people went up on the tail plane - simple as that. In Sicily, it was ... We probably lost more casualties I think through malaria than we did from action – not air-force, but the whole lot ... And so **that's** how we slept out. That's our bed in there somewhere, and that's the mosquito net hanging up on the tree. Mind you, at that time, it was July, I think – that's right – and we could reach out of many of our little bivvies like that and reach out to marvellous plums ... Not plums, grapes. That was breakfast. So there were some compensations. But that's, you know, another place where the ... That's the mess, two fairly largish tents put together. That was that.

This chap, in fact, was Ken Warren who took Dickie up for a ride, but he was an architect in training and a very good artist, so he designed that state board to show the readiness of the aircraft and the pilots who would be in action next. I think I've got a picture of a crest he designed which became the motif on one of my ties. Yes, he designed that crest which became the crest of the desert air-force, which was rather good.

So Sicily was a very interesting place; it had mountains in the north and, of course, by more than ... Well, we were about three-quarters of the way through the campaign and we were then operating partly over Italy as well. So we had water to contend with, mountains, which we weren't used to in the desert, and other things in life, like bad weather or enemy aircraft. One of the things we had to learn very quickly as we began to fly over Italy was mountains and hitting them because you didn't know where you were. We were used to the sand and the desert and also a fairly easy navigable area like the top end of Africa, you know, coastline, so it makes ... Things like that make it so much easier.

[00:28:41]

A SPEAKER: You were taking off from Malta then, were you, or ...

A. When we were operating ... Yes ... Well, we were operating from Malta initially, then after four or five days, three days, we were in Sicily and then operating from Italy and then operating eventually from ... You know about September 3rd, when we invaded Italy, we then went on the Adriatic coast which is the coast opposite to Naples. Naples is on the west and the Adriatic coast with Yugoslavia and other places like that to the east. But interesting things like **this** stay in my mind. **That** was a swimming pool really made up of gliders which didn't really hit the ... A terrible night for the gliders coming in, that first night of the invasion of Sicily. And so that became a swimming pool area, quite nice now, except we'd better not let you girls look at that with a magnifying glass because nobody's wearing anything!

This was an interesting picture here. After a little while, the boys, some of the boys, went off to see what they could find and they thought they'd found some wine. In fact, it turned out to be some type of cough mixture which went down the sink. **These** are some of the types ... Newzealander, two English types, another English type there – that's me. **This** was my boudoir with a picture of my girlfriend (my fiancée, actually, she was) and other things precious to me. And **this** is the Catania coast. You've got a very big volcano in Sicily called Etna and that was quite busy. **This** is the picture I was looking for. This is a moonlight shot. These were – I don't know why or how these three trees were left or whether they'd always been there like that, but they were – a wonderful landmark for us, you know, finding our way back to base at times. Navigating in Italy was a lot more difficult than the desert and also in Sicily.

[00:31:20]

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This little chap at a place called Taormina (which is a lovely holiday resort on the east coast of Sicily), he was about three or four years old and he could speak English with an American version thrown in, German, Italian, because all the soldiers had gone through and they taught them a few words of their own particular language. He was an amazing little chap.

This was an Italian aircraft that we managed to win and so we used it ourselves. We even put our squadron markings on it. Here's our little boy again. **That** picture of Taormina was some of the damage that went on. **This** must have been the trip when we went across – I went across in fact – by landing craft to Italy. We went round from Sicily right round the coast to Taranto which is on the far side. **This** is a Sicilian shot ... No, ... Yes. It says 'Italy' but I think that was in Taormina where I had a shave by a lady; I thought she was going to cut my throat at one stage, but she was inspired not to.

But **this** is again an unusual shot because this was in Italy and it's the NAAFI wagon; we used to know it as a NAAFI.

A SPEAKER: Yes; we had a NAAFI wagon.

A. Which is the ... What does it stand for now?

A SPEAKER: NAAFI?

A. Yes.

A SPEAKER: Navy, Army, Airforce Institution

[00:33:18 - interruption, someone entered the room]

TED BRISTER: That's right, yes. Anyway, they were all coffee and biscuits and whatever; they weren't very frequent.

So what else have we not spoken about. I mentioned the ops ... **That's** the wagon. But this is what we called ops and our lives centred around that Gari(?), Gari being a truck, not the name of a bloke and there would be the state board, which we looked at somewhere here, which showed the ...

Q. Oh, that the gentleman designed?

A. Yes, the one he designed. That was the state board. **That's** it. Well, that would be ... That's up on the ops truck here, and we'd see who was on. That's where we stayed. I mean, we had no other means of leisure, no other attractions. If you felt you wanted to play a game of drafts or chess you might find some bits and pieces. There used to be an old gramophone, a very well-worn record called the Waiter and the Porter and the Upstairs Maid, which you would never have heard of.

A SPEAKER: Yes.

A. You did! That was a good one, wasn't it?

A SPEAKER: Yes, now I remember it.

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- A. That must have been worn out. But the ops wagon was a very important place because there we were briefed by what we were intending to do, if it was out of the ordinary, if we were linking up with a bombing escort, but in the main it was looking after our troops, and we would do that. But then we'd debrief, as we say, when we came back, of whatever happened on the op. And their ingenuity, instead of running out with the lifts, pneumatic lifts, and whatever, you get to change your wheel on the Spit, you get a lot of chaps sitting on one side, balanced by the other till that was off the ground and then you could change the wheel. But, you know, this is how you do things.

[00:35:33]

These are chaps who were prisoners of war, who walked through the lines; that's how they came through; they managed to get some clothing to get them through. When you think that they walked for miles and miles and miles out of enemy territory ... **That's** stopping for tea outside somebody's little tent. Then we had managed to get a car, and they're just photographs of people really, but they give an idea of how we lived, because the whole of the time, apart from Malta, we were under canvas all the time – hail, rain, snow, sleet, sun, whatever, that was it.

- Q. What's that little car there?

A. That was a Lancia, I think. I can't think what **that** one was.

- Q. A little buggy of some sort.

A. Yes. This is Sicily's buggy. He managed to get it from somewhere, I don't know. **That** was Christmas dinner, turkey; I don't know where the cookie got him from. Then we found an old motorbike. And here we are waiting for takeoff, you know. Often times, there was a lot of waiting that went on, and we were allotted aircraft and it was always a ...

- Q. 'T'uppeny' there.

A. Yes. But these chaps, they were great chaps they were. And there's a crowd at Lentini in Sicily on 3rd September 1943. **He** eventually became the CO of the squadron, South African; I'm still in touch with **that** chap; still in touch with ... I can't see him there at the moment. There's one chap I see quite regularly. **This** is Sorrento where we went for a break. They made this into an officer's club. There's Pompeii. **This** was when we came up to a place called Carnet(?). The memorable thing there ... Or two memorable things: we had a visit from the Chief of the RAF, Sir Charles Portal at the time, Tedder and Cunningham, and we all look very smart. In fact it was very early in December and, of course, one of them, I think it was Tedder or Portal, chatting to the pilots, said "Ever had to bail out?" so I said, "Yes, three days ago, sir." Bailing out, do you know what that is? It's not dishing water out. Do you know what bailing out is?

[00:39:00]

Brister (first interview)

A SPEAKER: Was it like a drop-out?

A. Not quite.

A SPEAKER: Having to exit quickly.

A. That chap, probably apart from the Doc(?) was one of the most important people on the squadron and, but for him, I wouldn't be alive today because we were looking at the parachute that he had packed, which you are sitting on, but when you go out of the aircraft you pull a cord and you are hoping that it's going to open. And it did for me.

Q. How many times did you have to bail out?

A. Only once fortunately, but it was enough. It was an experience that was quite interesting.

Q. Had your aircraft been hit really badly, or what had happened?

A. Yes; I'd in fact ... I think the chap had blown up in front of me and his hit made it a bit close quarters but I think the more dangerous thing was that we were well inside enemy territory, it was about 20 000 feet and I didn't want to come down on enemy territory, so I stuck with the aircraft until we crossed the river, which I knew would be home, as it were, but of course, as they say, at this moment I must have lost my presence of mind because I didn't take into account that we were up near the mountains and so I had pulled on the cord, having wanted to get to our side of the lines, which was a river in between which was the dividing thing, so I stayed with the aircraft and then went over the side, as they say, and with about three swings of the parachute, I hit the ground. So it was a bit tight. But that is because at the time you don't always realise how far above sea level you are. Your altimeter is set at sea level. So I was favoured, and I came down amongst the New Zealanders, which was very good. They opened a tin of oysters for me. So, in fact, I think the reason to show you that is because if you look ... Oh, yes, there's the parachute packer there looking on and there's me with the parachute.

Q. Did you have to actually open the canopy yourself as well?

A. Yes; we'd have to pull the ring and pull the cord.

Q. Because nowadays in jet aircraft it's all like you do it and the whole thing sets you off, doesn't it?

A. That's right, yes.

Q. But then it was very different.

A. Yes, it was. It was all, how can I put it ... Yes, you had to make your own decisions ... Well, you do now even if you press a button you get out through the roof, as it were. But in those days it was a question of getting out of the aircraft safely by various means. Yes, it's an experience which you never have any practice for and you just, you know, put a lot of faith and trust in that chap who packed the parachute because if he's not going his duty right ... In fact there it is, with a miniature, after the jump. So, crumbs! Have you got some of that down?

Q. That's all on there, yes.

Brister (first interview)

A. You'll have to do quite a bit of editing, won't you?

Q. Yes. What I'll do is stop it now ...

[End of recording 2 – 42:39]

TED BRISTER: ... that's the score.

Q. How did you decide that that's what you wanted to do at age 19? Was it in your family that people before had done?

A. No, it wasn't. I'd gone out into the country for about six months when my work finished; I was in an evacuated area on the south-east coast, a place called Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, if you know Leigh-on-Sea, South End? Do you know South End? How do you know South End?

A SPEAKER: She's an Essex girl.

A SPEAKER: I used to live there.

A. Well, I was born in London, a place called Forest Gate, and after about six months we moved to the north bank of the River Thames, Leigh-on-Sea. What started me on that track? Oh, yes, I was working in ... It then became an evacuation area and then we had to get out, 1942, after Dunkirk, and so it was a company ... I had a friend and they were moving out to the country, a paint factory, and so I went out there with them for about six months and then I applied for the RAF. But in that time I went up to London for a particular event and as I rode down in the train from Liverpool Street to Manor Park so there was a raid in progress, an air raid; it was a very bad one, September 3rd or 5th, I think, of 1940. And there were three burly dockers sitting in the compartment. I was going down from Liverpool Street to Ilford. At one stage there was a *[makes whistling sound]*. It was clearly a bomb coming down and for one moment I was a bit nonplussed and then I saw these ... *[phone interruption]*

Anyway, that was the first time that they carried on bombing throughout the night, September 7th or something like that. I'd gone up for a wedding. Anyway, these three burly dockers, I couldn't see them. All their bums were sitting down from underneath the seats; they were underneath the seats, so I thought I'd better get down myself. And that was a fairly close shave. Anyway, that went on through the night and the whole of the London docks had that belting that night and I thought "I know what I want to be, a night-fighter pilot," so I joined up. I didn't become a night-fighter pilot; I became a fighter pilot and that was really how it came about and my role really in many ways was quite defensive, but it was an exciting time.

A SPEAKER: Thanks, Ted, some great stories there.

[3:40]

Brister (first interview)