Interview

with

MR. EDWARD BRISTER

and

Pupils of Lady Hawkins' School, Kington

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.

TED BRISTER: … green and you don't know what's going to happen, whichever operation you're on, whether it's a fighter or a bomber. And so for the first five, it was reckoned, ops you would have a state of nervousness, of learning. So the really big one that was very vulnerable, and potential, was the sixth one when you think you know it all.

Q. And you don't.

A. You take off that guard, that intensity of purpose and attention. And that's the same really with life. Whenever we get to the stage of taking anything for granted, whether it's driving a car or flying over, the same principle applies. I think you see it in business and in all grown-up activities, anyway.

Q. Mmh. I really remember passing my motorbike test actually and although you're always on your own when you're learning to ride a motorbike, you've never got anybody near you, but when the test … when the examiner said, "You've passed," I felt completely alone and, you know, quite nervous and it was almost like everything had changed.

A. Well, yes, it's got to be there and in your judgment and everything else. But it is, … Where's the psychologist? He's not here now.

A SPEAKER: Right, are we going to have a look at some of the photos? Are we ready to record some?

[1:38]

A. The desert. One of the major benefits of living together closely in an inhospitable climate and conditions was the friendship that could be built up quite quickly because people were all united for a common purpose. I'm looking at a photograph here which is headed, "RASC" (Royal Army Service Corp) "Taxi Kings". Three 'squaddies' (as they would be known as) with their three-tonner truck. I had never met them before I did a hitchhike for about 800 miles with them to get to my squadron in the desert and this picture shows the unity that one can have even at such short notice because of the common purpose. There is another picture alongside which I think is the brew-up, sitting on empty petrol cans with their three-tonner truck behind them and that is the picture headed 'A meal'.

There's another picture which I'll show you from another album which was when we were moving from Sicily to Italy to continue the war there. And, as we had more pilots than aircraft, I was selected to go by boat from Sicily through to Italy. The picture I'm looking at is "Pals Aboard TLC" (tank landing craft; not the reverse of tender loving care!) called "MSOA". And here are some not this time soldiers but sailors who ran the tank landing craft. And again the same unity was there and they gave me a welcome which lasted for however long the journey was there and took me safely across to Italy.

[4:33]

These are some of the strong points, some of the memories that one has of friendship and companionship. We all rely on one another. As some learned person said many years ago, "No man is an island" (John Donne). The down side of that was the question of meeting up with friends who subsequently died very soon after meeting with them. I'm looking at a picture under "Faces at Benina

– David and Peter. David from Hereford," *[check quotation]* little recognizing or thinking that one day I would live in and around Hereford. David from Hereford; Peter, I don't know where he came from but both, within one a few weeks and another one just a few months, were killed from their aircraft. And one had to get used to being with people who were not there that evening. So that is the downside of good relationships. But you can't not have relationships; that's essential to living. And that was one of the things that came out in the war-time.

Pause. [6:15 – 6:33]

Q. Shall we look back at these ones?

[6:34]

A. Yes … Well, we're coming on to those. I think we've finished with that album; we can put it out of the way.

The aircraft we were flying during the desert was a Spitfire. And, of course, developments were made in the course of the war and we started off on Spitfire 5Bs (which was the desert version; it had a special sand filter) and then we progressed to a Spitfire 9, which had a super-charger. We ought to say that the Spitfire is a very small aircraft, probably only about 32-foot wingspan and much about the same in length, powered by a Rolls Royce Merlin engine and the major difference between the 5B and the 9 was that it had a super-charger which could be either automatically … It could automatically cut in at a certain height, about 18 000 or 19 000 feet, and give you a boost, super-charger, or you could bring it in as you required. So it was two positions. And it was excellent in the competition for power with the German Focke-Wolf 190 and there was great rejoicing in the squadron when in the desert campaign we had sufficient Spitfire 9s to be top cover for the 5s in the course of operations because they had more power at the higher altitude.

[9:28]

Strangely enough, the succession to the 5B was to have been the Spitfire 8, but because of the urgency of pilots requiring something of a more powerful character the 9 was a very temporary extension in the sense that it just had a longer nose and a bigger engine and that was brought out. The 9 was in operation before the 8. It sounds complex, doesn't it? And then the 8 came in and superseded the 9 with all the mods that then could be found. So the Spitfire 8 was the one that we then took on for the whole squadron. I suppose it could have been in Malta; yes, I think we were flying them in Malta, because we went from the desert to Malta. At that time, when the desert campaign finished in the May of 1943, I had some leave in Cairo and two things: one is a rather posh photograph (not one of my making but one by an official photographer) and that is recorded just to show that when one was off duty one could look reasonably smart. There will be other pictures of me rather more down to earth in operations in due course. But one other little thing there I bought was something which I needed in case I was taken prisoner of war, and that was a little Bible, a complete Bible. That is it, if you want to take a picture of that, and that flew in my battle-dress pocket on all operations onward from June 1943

because that's the date in this little Bible, "Leave in Cairo, June 1943" and I didn't think the enemy would ever give me one of these, not even the Gideon's, if I'd been taken prisoner of war, and that's been in my possession ever since that time, a great treasure for me.

[12:00]

So that brings us to Malta and we have some pictures there of how we, for the first time, were in civilian billets as opposed to being in tents in the desert and in fact throughout the Sicilian campaign and the Italian campaign. But the pictures under "Malta" on the first opening page shows just some clips, two in the squad-room/crew-room and the adjutant and Joe, the intelligence officer, and then there's one at the bottom of that page, which is "John Baker and company," and that was the home of a friend who was the manager of Barclays Bank in Malta at that time.

From Malta, where we did some cover and sweeps over Sicily prior to the invasion (which occurred in the very early part of July) … and we went into Sicily very quickly in the far eastern corner, south-east corner of the island, Pachino, and there we can see on the second page under the title of "Pachino, Sicily" where the chaps went off on a little bit of exploration during their stand-down time and look as though they are getting hold of some wine from some illicit source. It has "CO wine taster". Well, in fact, it turned out all to be a type of juice for health benefit rather than alcohol. And then we see a picture at the bottom of that page, "Explosive cannon shell – ME-109". I was most fortunate on this occasion. We were bounced (that is, attacked) without being seen by two or three 109s. I was flying with five other aircraft on patrol and nobody saw this one and he fired and, fortunately for me, although he hit my wing and caused damage to that and the flaps, which are used for landing, it was very, very close to where the ammunition was stored in my wing and if that explosive cannon shell had in fact have been just a few inches or so to the right, I think it is, then I probably wouldn't be talking to you now.

[15:07]

And then we have a picture on the next page which is how we used to fare when on the move. And you can see, "Erks grub time," "erks" being the name for the fitters and the riggers, those who looked after our aircraft, and then there's one of the pilots' mess where there is just a covering for us to eat in the shade. And then there's a picture of Alexander and Monty (our leaders in the army situation).

Pause for rest!

Q. Do you want a glass of water, Ted?

A. Yes, that would be helpful thank you. Is that about the right ----

Q2. Ted, you can be as conversational as you like.

A. Does it come across conversational or not?

Q2. It does, but I'm not … When we were talking before the mic was switched on you sounded more kind of natural, if you know what I mean.

A. Right, I shall try and be natural. That would be awful.

Q. I thought you were fine. They are just perfectionists.

Q2. I am being nit-picky, aren't I!

A. No. We all need to be just leant on to do the right thing. OK, we're off again.

Under "Lentini, West Sicily" we have an ops truck. This is the operations centre for the squadron. Squadron, in fact, was one of a wing, which was five squadrons, 244 Wing, and we comprised the fighter arm of the Desert Air Force. And whether we were in the desert, in Malta, Sicily or Italy, we still were known as the Desert Air Force, similar to the Desert Rats in the army term. And the ops truck was the centre for giving information and receiving information and the intelligence officer had his hangout in that truck and there were seats and we could sit in if we were idly waiting our time to fly. It was the focal point, as indeed would be the mess when one … The mess being the eating place and the general living place when you were not in your own tent.

[18:00]

There is an interesting shot again, as we turn over the page, still under the heading of "Lentini, West" called "Moonlight shots" and there were three trees and it's very interesting to know why they were just these isolated trees, but they looked so good in the moonlight that I took a picture of them and they are there to show … They were a good landmark, which was quite helpful for us at times when getting back near base. Sometimes one had surprises and I found myself meeting an old friend from my home town under "Gordon and myself", not very far from the three trees; I'm sitting in some rushes by the look of it; it looks as though there's some water nearby; I don't know where we found that. That's Gordon and myself.

"Sicily". There's a very interesting picture, two in fact. One is under "Taormina, Sicily" and it is "Eleven o'clock noggin". Well, I didn't really want to draw attention to the "noggin" but it's a picture of a little boy on his little tricycle and there's a repeat of him too on the following page which says, "Our playmate, Taormina." Italian or Sicilian by birth but he could speak Italian of course, his natural tongue; he could also speak German; he could also speak American, which is a bit different to English, and he spoke English too. This was due to the fact that he was always listening to the soldiers who were passing through. There were the Germans and there were the British and there were the Americans, and so he got a flavour of all those languages, which must be an interesting case in point that to learn languages, let's start at about three to four years of age, which I imagine he was. But he was a delightful little chap and he was a great friend of all those who came in touch with him.

[20:36]

Taormina was a beautiful holiday resort, and it still is today, high up on the cliffs and there was one other thought there, although I've got it "Italy" I think it was Taormina; it's called under the Italian title, "Shave, sir?" and I'm being shaved by a lady barber with a cut-throat razor. I'm glad I was behaving myself.

Q. I wondered who she was.

A. I think she had a good trade there. You've always … often heard, I think, of the NAAFI (the Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) and they used to come along in different places to bring you cups of tea and sandwiches and it was usually a very welcome visit when they arrived, particularly in the desert. And here we are in Italy and it's entitled, "Not a frequent visitor" but you can see the crowd that has collected to get something different to what we normally had.

Q. So did they have like a mobile shop?

A. Yes. Well, it was a mobile truck, which I don't think there was much "shop" about it but it was just mainly for food. That's my recollection.

[22:18]

On the following page we have the squadron state board, which is 92 East India Squadron, A Flight and B Flight, and it shows the state of readiness, which I'll talk about in a few moments, and the names of the pilots involved. Readiness was when you were ready for immediate take-off, but there was an update on that if you were actually sitting in your aircraft waiting to have the signal to take off straight away. That could be very unpleasant at times, particularly if it was very, very hot, as it was one time in Malta and I think we were left on for two hours instead of one hour and one was pretty well soaked through. It would have been a bit of a nightmare climbing then to 20 000 feet and getting very much colder. I think we might have been encased in a bit of frost. But that's the way it goes at times. Then you could have a fifteen minutes' readiness or a thirty-minute readiness and when we were on the coastline in the desert we could even be swimming on thirty minutes' readiness, there was time to be airborne within thirty minutes if they gave you a good shout.

Interesting picture, obviously, the State Board, which, I should have said, Ken Warren (who is just applying some of the updating on that board) … it was he who designed that and also he designed the crest and the emblem for the Desert Air Force, which is sometimes pictured on a tie (as instanced). Yes, on another page we've got "Bed and mozzie net". One of the hazards, particularly in Sicily during the summer time and autumn, was there were mosquitoes and there was a lot of malaria prevalent in the Sicilian operation which faded out as we got to the autumn in Italy.

[24:42]

Q. Did you mention before that more people were killed by ----

A. Yes, it is said (I don't know whether it's absolutely true) that there were more casualties from malaria than there was from enemy action in the Sicilian campaign. There was a very interesting picture under "Gioia." There was another picture of the ops truck again but also there was an interesting picture at the base of that page "Wheel change" and you can see airmen pushing the wing up at one stage, at one part of it, and the other wing is being sat on by two airmen to give it a balance so they can change a wheel by not having to have any other equipment; it's simply some push and some balance the weight with their bodies, a wheel change desert style. Interestingly enough, the serviceability rate of our wing, the Spitfires in the desert and also throughout Sicily and Italy, there was a much higher percentage of

percentage *(sic)* serviceable aircraft than in Britain. I think that the fitters and the riggers and those who looked after our aircraft in those far distant places had no other distraction at all. The prime objective was to keep the aircraft serviced to the utmost efficiency and look after their aircraft, look after their pilots and they were just one-track driven and that was making the best use of their time.

Q. Can you describe a little bit about how you all felt about the aircraft?

[26:45]

A. I think we were very, very proud of the fitters. It is said that for every pilot in the air there were ten people on the ground and so really we quite ordinary people, like the others, but someone had to be in the front and someone had to be doing the mopping up and all the chores on the ground. So there was one spirit, very much, in the desert and on situations like Sicily and Italy.

Interesting picture on the opposite page to "Gioia" and it would have been at Gioia still, ex PoWs, ex prisoners of war. This is how two British chaps came back through the lines having escaped the Italian or the German captors further up, or further to the north of Italy. I don't know … I think they must have been bomber boys and how they got through … But you'll see their attire made them fit into the background of the situation as peasants of Italy.

Under "Tortorella" we have a picture of the cook and our dinner. It's "cookie and dinner" and it really is a … I think it was a turkey actually. I'm not quite sure where that turkey was won but it was very enjoyable. It made a change to bully beef, which was the standard diet and bully beef was served up in the mess in about 57 varieties and so it because known as Heinz bully beef for 57 varieties.

[28:59]

Q. What is bully beef?

A. Oh, you'd know it as corned beef but it was known as bully beef; I don't know why.

Q. So can you describe kind of what you ate normally?

A. Well, when in the desert I don't think we ever had eggs; it was all powdered eggs if egg was on the menu. I think sometimes we did get some bacon; I don't know where that came from. A lot of stuff would have been flown up or brought up to the squadron, but the further you got away from base, which would have been Cairo, you know, you're talking of many hundreds of miles and I suppose items more precious than food were the things to keep the aircraft going and the ammunition and petrol. Unlike the Americans who, in the desert, they had their deep freezers and their refrigerators, and to go and visit the Americans in their lairs was quite an education because they could never drink their water unless it was iced. They could never drink their beer unless it was iced. So, yes, they had quite a different life. But bully beef (known as corned beef, I think) was the same old tin, the same way of opening it as we have today. I've never seen anybody get through more than one tin at a time and, you know, we might have been on the move, literally moving from one airfield site to another in the desert, and it would be a stand-up meal and it would be hard biscuits, very hard biscuits (you would

almost break your teeth on them) and bully beef. And, well, if you were hungry, as my father used to say, "If you're hungry you'll eat anything."

[31:08]

Under the title of "Triola" we have a picture of "Readiness. Twelve aircraft" and so it means that all the pilots are geared for going up with their Mae West, which was the life jacket in case you came down in the water, and in fact, yes, all dressed for going up and it looks as though it's more autumn and winter rather than just the summer kit of the desert. And on the same page, top right, is "Waiting" and again you can see this lovely outline of a Spitfire with several pilots just waiting to go up on patrol.

We come to three shots of "Q for Queenie" the aircraft that I mainly flew with my two fitters and riggers at that time, Les and Doug, and that's in the bottom; the picture above is "The Great Q and crew" and then a picture on the side "Q, crew and driver". That's the two mechanics, one either side of me standing in the middle.

I had an interesting trip on one occasion because by then we were near Naples and Pompeii and we visited Pompeii there in 1943/'44. I've been there since and it's a fascinating place; if you get the chance of going to Pompeii it's worth doing.

[33:19]

There's a good picture on the next page, although it takes us back to Sicily, Lentini, Sicily, that's where the three trees were, and it must have been just before we left because it's dated 3/9/43, just before we went to Italy and it shows a good gathering of pilots. I think I took the picture myself, so I'm not in it, but there are several there who were great friends, great friends.

Then we move to another place now on the place called Canne at Termali(?) and this was really as we moved close to the Sangro area, and there are several pictures here. One in particular of interest is after a jump, a picture of myself with the parachute packer and myself holding what is called the pilot chute. When we talk of bailing out, we are talking of departing one's aircraft when it is out of action or for whatever reason and that was my situation over near to the Sangro River after a particular scrap, dog fight, and it's called "After The Jump" and I'm examining the pilot chute with the parachute packer, Tommy Mann, and this is the pilot chute which comes out … Because the parachute is something we sit on in the aircraft; it's strapped to you with a harness over our shoulders and through our legs and the straps then fasten to this, to the parachute itself, or to the cover of the parachute. And when one pulls the ripcord, this is ejected from the parachute, from the main body of the parachute and it just flies open and, if I can get it right, you can see that, that comes out … This is all made of silk, or it was in those days and that pulls out the rest of the parachute which then blossoms and takes you safely to the ground. I was most fortunate on that occasion because the problem occurred well into enemy territory and I knew if I got to the right side of the River Sangro I'd be amongst our own troops. Well, I managed to do that; from 20 000 feet I glided down and made the jump. Well, it sounds easy and simple. Parachuting like that is not as we know it today, where it's done for fun and for joy and

must be very exhilarating. But this is when there's no alternative. If you stay with your aircraft you go down with it but if you get out the chances are you'll survive. In my case, as I think Gerard Hoffnung once said … On a particular Oxford Union Debate when he was rehearsing a particular story, he said, "At this moment, I must have lost my presence of mind." Well, I had lost a bit of my presence of mind, I suppose, with all the excitement, and I failed to recognize that my altimeter (to show how high I am from the ground) it showed probably about 2 000 feet, but in fact that was at ground level, by the sea and of course, where I was, we were in mountainous country so in fact I pulled the cord, went over and got out of the aircraft safely and within seconds and just a couple or three swings I hit the ground, much more heavily than I should have done. But I didn't do any great damage, knocked my knee pretty badly and I think nearly knocked myself out. But, as I came down, so I was surrounded, fortunately, by New Zealanders and they opened tins of tinned oysters which had been sent from Italy and they made a fuss of me and then I got back to the squadron the next day after a very hairy ride in a jeep with the army on slippery roads, wet, rain, you name it, every other hazard, and I thought, well, if you've got out of the aircraft you may not even get back to the squadron, but I did. And so that was an interesting experience, which I didn't have to repeat again.

[39:13]

We can look smart, and you may wonder what sort of airfield we flew from. Well, on page "Canne, termali" you'll see airmen all dressed up very well because in fact there was going to be some VIPs (very important people) arriving. It turned out to be the Marshall of the RAF, Sir Charles Portal, Air Chief Marshall Tedder and Air Marshall Cunningham, and I think Broadhurst (who was the Group Commander) too, and so we were all ready for them, but you'll see metal track on the very smart airmen pictures where they've all been putting on their best blue, as it was called, to welcome these visitors. In fact, it was a bit unfortunate in some ways that Portal, when he came along and spoke to us, he asked me if I had ever bailed out and I said, "Well, yes, a few days ago, sir," and so he said oh, he sympathized with me, which I thought was very kind of him.

But I was talking about the metal track. This was laid down for us to fly from, but, of course, it didn't take account of the mud away from that track, and there's another interesting picture here of an airman with Ken Warren (my friend, the one who did the designing of the State Board and the Desert Air Force logo) and Dicky is sitting on the tail plane of a Spitfire, not a very big air-craft, not a very big tail plane. Well, to keep the aircraft on the ground when we were taxi'ing from the muddy dispersal to the track from which to take off, these two chaps would sit on the tail plane and, at the appropriate moment, they had to jump off. Of course, it was an accident waiting to happen and on this occasion Dicky didn't get off as Ken opened the throttle and went down the runway at about 70 miles an hour. And of course, being a fairly intelligent pilot, he thought something was a bit odd with the manoeuvring of the aircraft; by the time he was off the deck he realized that something was adrift and he looked in his mirror, a little mirror on top of the aircraft (which can be seen in a couple of pictures

which you'll see later on) and Ken looked up and saw Dicky on the back. Now, can you imagine the thoughts in Dicky's mind as they began to get airborne? He knew that Ken was scheduled then for climbing to about 20 000 feet, going in about 20 minutes/25 minutes to the battle area and then to fly over the battle area for half an hour/three quarters and maybe get into a tussle with enemy aircraft. So that was going through Dicky's mind. He sandwiched himself very well by getting his knees under the tail plane, as you can see, and then he hung on to the tail plane itself, the rudder or the fin.

[43:18]

And so Ken then realized that Dicky was there. So, fortunately, he made a circuit of the airfield at about 500 feet and then came in for a very good landing and Dicky jumped off. Well, whenever an aircraft took off or landed there was always what they called the blood wagon, which was the ambulance, and also the fire engine. The biggest danger, of course, on making a bad landing, crash landing, or whatever it might be, was fire, and so the fire boys were always there. Well, it so happens that only just a few months ago I met the medical orderly who was on the blood wagon that day and although it was 62 years ago he remembers very well Dicky's face when he got off the tail plane. He said he was white as a sheet, and I think I can understand why. But that is something which is not to be repeated if you can avoid it. But that's the picture there which we have.

Q. What an amazing story that was.

Q2. Is that actually after it happened or is that …

A. Well, I would say that that's a posed photograph afterwards, but it wouldn't be very long afterwards. So even airmen who normally stay on the ground have their problems! In fact, by the time they got down, very quickly, from group headquarters … The group captain in charge of the Wing was over and he was there when they landed and he said to Dicky "Would you do it again for a fiver?" and he said, "No, I don't think I'd do it again for a hundred pounds, thank you very much."

[45:40]

So, we were talking about mirrors. Well, there are two pictures which give you a slightly better idea of the … not the inside, you won't be able to see it very well, but of the pilot's position in the Spitfire. You'll see the little mirror at the top of the picture just fastened to the front cowling, or windscreen rather, of the aircraft. There was a little door which fastens us in and then there was the hood which slides across. It's a bulbous hood; it used to be just a flat one, but developments over the years made this a good thing. The little, apparently, stick is a small aerial for radio and telephone contact. And you can see what we call the Mae West, which is the life-saving jacket which we wear if there's any chance of us being over water. Incidentally, if you bailed out, as the saying goes, and you survived by getting in your dinghy, then you became a member of the Goldfish Club. If you bailed out under enemy action or in dangerous situations, then you became a member of the Caterpillar Club. Caterpillar links … All parachutes at that time were made by the Irvine Parachute Company (which is still functioning) and of course the silk comes from the silk worms (or caterpillar) and so I have a tie

which has the motif of a caterpillar, and the only way you can buy a Caterpillar Club tie is by showing your card, your means of identification, and also at that time they send you in the post that … a little tie pin really, a little brooch, of a caterpillar in gold. I don't think they do that anymore because parachuting has become quite a different situation.

[48:14]

I then … Staying on the squadron, that was in the November of 1943 and, having been on the squadron, I suppose, just over a year, in March I then left the squadron before the fall of Rome and went from there back to Egypt and then I was posted up to Palestine. Do you know what country that is now? What is Palestine called? Israel. So I went up to Israel, between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and I then taught air gunners how to shoot straight for some time and then, on a similar exercise, down in Egypt.

And it's worthwhile just saying that the Spitfire … by all those who have flown her would say what a marvellous aircraft she was to handle in that sense, easy to fly, very sensitive if you put the stick over, forward, aft, whichever way and it was a superb aircraft. When we were in Egypt and we were flying alongside Liberators, which are very big heavy bombers and we used to do mock attacks on these liberators and their gunners had to use cine cameras to shoot us down and they could see whether they had got a hit or a not from their pictures as they were developed and then we also towed drogues, which they were to fire at, and hopefully that didn't result in any mishandling of their sights, otherwise they might have hit the person towing the drogue rather than the drogue itself. A drogue is like a windsock. Have you ever heard of a windsock? It used to be on airdromes to show you the direction of the wind.

[50:33]

Anyway, this squadron leader, a South African Major, who was in charge of the Liberators, he always wanted to have a flight in a Spitfire; he always wanted … Well, you know, it was just one seat, that's all, and so we said, "Well, no, we don't think we'd like to trust you with one of our Spitfires when you fly these enormous big bombers." Well, he pleaded and pleaded and pleaded and then VJ-Day came in the August of 1945 and he said to us in the end, "Anything you want I'm willing to do, within my power, if I can have a ride." So we said ok how about a trip to Greece, to Athens. Well, it's quite some distance from Heliopolis, Cairo through to Greece, but he agreed, and so we all got a 48-hour pass, I believe, and he took us in the Liberator to Greece to Athens and it was remarkable because that was the first night they'd flood-lit the Parthenon, which is one of the very old buildings of Greece there in Athens. But, of course, he had had his ride on the Spitfire first. It was interesting to have his reaction because we, with some trepidation, wondered whether we'd done the right thing to let him take this lovely piece of machinery in the air. But he made a perfect take-off, because it can be sensitive fore and aft, and there was a time when you had to pump the undercarriage of a Spitfire up. In the later models you just made a selection and the wheels came up automatically. And in those early

days when in the Spitfire 1s and some of the early Spitfire 2s you had to pump. And to see a person take off the Spitfire for the first time, having to get his undercarriage up as he was pumping, so he was letting the stick go forward and backward, so you were going a long whack … a bit of a, you know, quite an experience but, you know, fortunately for Soapy Marsh, when he took the Spitfire up, the wheels came automatically. Anyway he made a good take-off, circled the airfield, had a ten minutes or so and we were all waiting anxiously for him to turn to the circuit and he made a superb landing, superb, and he just stood by the aircraft when he got out and just stroked it – just stroked it – and he came across to where we were standing and we all were very happy with him and we said, "Any reaction?" and he said "Yes. Treat it like a lady and it's fine." So I think that illustrates a little bit of the reason for the popularity of the Spitfire and it certainly was a wonderful plane to handle and I feel only greatly privileged to have flown one.

[54:00]

Q. Can you describe what the Spitfire was designed to do?

A. It was designed as a fighter and it had two … eventually it had two cannons, one in each wing, which were quite up from what was the normal machine gun and there were originally, I think, four machine guns in each wing. But they then dropped that to two in each wing so you had two cannons and four machine guns and they were focused on a point about 250 to 300 yards ahead. They were, you know, as you would have tracking of the wheels on a car so you'd track the guns and they are lined up with a sight in the aircraft so that you get the … There's deflection; you've got to make allowance. It's like when you're doing shooting grouse, or whatever, you've got allow for the flight and so with shooting aircraft.

Q. So how do you … What's the pattern, if you like, or what do you do?

A. That's pretty simple really. Everything operates mainly from the stick, which is called the joystick, but it's no longer just a stick but it has a spade-grip handle and on the spade grip there was a button, which is the firing button for the guns and also on that lever there was also a brake for when you are taxi'ing because with the Spitfire the problem is that it has a big nose sticking up in front of you, so you can't see ahead of you. So you move to the left and you look out to the right; you move to the right and you look out to the left when you are on the ground. But once you're in the flying position, of course, you've got good visibility. So on the stick you've got a firing button and also you have the brake. Then on the left you would have the throttle, which is a lever, and you'd also have a mixture control and I'm trying to think what else. Oh, flaps. There's a … I think that must be on the right. I haven't got my picture in my mind at the moment of that, but the flaps are an additional part of the wing that can come down to reduce your stalling speed. If you don't have enough flying speed you stall and you go into a spin generally. And so the flaps mean that our landing speed on the Spits increased a little with the 8s and the 9s but, generally speaking, they were … It was about 68/70 miles and hour. So when you think of you're racing down the motorway at about 70, in a Spitfire you could have been

airborne because you'd be off the deck at about 70 and once you get up to about 80 miles an hour, well you'd probably select 'wings up'.

[57:18]

In the early days of my flying on grass you would level out for landing when you could see the blades of grass; you know, it was just a visual thing. But then, of course, runways in the UK were the order of the day and they were in Malta. But runways were a bit limiting. In the desert we could take off six abreast, six aircraft going down virtually in formation, whereas I think in Malta we managed to get down to two off at a time, but it was a bit … tight formation was not always easy on take off. And of course at Malta, because of the danger of air attacks at any time, you had to be off … When you're off the deck, you got off very quickly and when you had landed you had to move away very quickly. And so our time as a squadron to get up, if it was six aircraft, of whatever number we were flying, it would be … You had to be very, very smart, whereas on the desert you had more time and more space and there wasn't quite so much danger of attack, although that would always be there. But certainly in a place like Malta it was pretty important that you got on, got off, got down, got out, that sort of situation. But it was excellent to handle. We relied so much on our fitters and riggers. The fitter was the man who looked after the engine. The rigger looked after the maintenance of the air-frame, the body, things like that, and then you had the firearms boys who would come along, the armourers, and they would deal with the guns. You would have a radio operator dealing with the radio. It's amazing how quickly they could turn things round, in other words, re-fuel very quickly to get up again if that was necessary. It wasn't always necessary but it had to be the case on occasions.

Q. Can you describe as well – I know you did before, but it wasn't when the mic was on – can you tell us the kind of qualities that you need to be a fighter pilot?

A. Well, fitness, physical fitness was essential. You could not be colour blind and become a pilot or really become air crew, I suppose, because it was essential to have the right colour sequence because at that time red and green lights were pretty desperately important.

Timing. In other words you learnt punctuality because I think, generally speaking, we're not too punctual but it's actually imperative if you're going to be escorting, shall we say, bombers and you rendezvous over a certain area and they say it's 2.30. Well, you know, if you skip time that can be a danger point for the bombers being unprotected. That's just one small incidence of being on time, on parade.

[1:00:42]

So, yes, physical fitness, a certain degree of intelligence in the sense that you … more and more, of course, now it's a hi-tech situation to what it was even in those days, but you need it for navigation if you were going to be involved in that. In that sense, fighter pilots didn't really need the degree of training for maths that, shall we say, bomber boys or navigators had to expect and had to deal with. But, even so, …

The other thing was all pilots had to learn to know how to send and receive Morse code – de-de-de-da-dit, de-de-de-da-dit – with a little buzzer and you had to receive a minimum of twelve words and send twelve words a minute, which was quite a hardship for many because Morse code listening and dealing with was not an easy thing. If you were a good musician, I think I was saying to you, I think it linked with being musical because when you get up to 20/24 words a minute, as wireless operators would do … I mean, these things were superseded, of course, by radio telephone in the end, but it's only of recent times that SOS by Morse code has gone. We don't have that now, but SOS would be tapped out on boats, on aircraft, on whatever. And then, of course, there was semaphore where you could give flags different positions; you could send messages visually over a distance. So communication has changed tremendously in that sense, if you think of radio, telephones. I mean, we used to have intercom but ours wasn't the type of quality that even they had in England. I don't know why but it was pretty poor at times. But we would have a ground controller sometimes guiding us who would say, you know, "Bandits" which is the enemy aircraft, "Bandit coming in at 30 000 feet or 25 000 feet flying …" in such a direction, so and so, and we'd be steered toward those.

We are onto physical fitness, we are on to intelligence, a certain degree, a certain standard of maths particularly, I suppose, and the ability to remember things, which tends to fade as you get older. What's my name!

Questions from the …

[1:03:36]

A SPEAKER: They've been sitting very politely, ----

A. I know, I'm sorry.

A SPEAKER: ---- fascinated. Don't apologize. It's absolutely fascinating.

Q. How much time have we got left?

A SPEAKER: We've only really got a few minutes.

Q. Fifteen minutes.

A SPEAKER: Less than that really if we're going to get off to Whitecross. Have we got any questions?

Q. Where were you when you found out that the War had ended and what did you do after that?

A. The War ended, as far as I'm concerned, when I was in Egypt, or Palestine. I can't remember exactly because that would have been May … No, I would have been in Egypt. I can well remember, though, when VJ was announced because we got the collywobbles. I'd been over, I suppose, about three/three-and-a-half years at that time in the Middle East and because the Japanese campaign, the Far East campaign, was still going on, there was the talk that they were going to then send us out to the Far East, which didn't go down very well. And then I was swimming in the lake just near the canal, the Suez Canal, and the news came through that the two bombs had been dropped in Nagasaki and, what's the other place?

Q. Hiroshima.

A. Hiroshima, that's right. And within a couple of days the War finished. So I remember being … swimming at that time and that what a great relief it was. I think it was an awful thing to have had such devastation from those bombs but really it saved thousands and thousands of allied lives. It's something one always has to try and balance between cost of War and the cost of peace and the cost of victory and there's no real answer. War is bad, war is desperate, war brings suffering and really what we're looking for is peace. That's what this is all about. That lady's face there is depicting peace because there is an aircraft and it's no danger.

[1:06:14]

Sorry, what did I do afterwards? Well, I started off in dentistry but I couldn't face seven years at 24, I think it was, when I came out; I couldn't face about seven years so I then went into commercial life and finished up with people like ICI and travelled extensively. I was doing marketing and selling. So that was very exciting too. And until September 11th (9/11) I used to always, when I used to fly out anywhere, I'd get up on the flight deck, you know, by saying there was a World War II pilot here who'd like to see how you do it today. I never came across the same chap twice, unfortunately, take-off, landing, you know, and I was up on the flight deck. But all that's stopped; you can't get there now. So, yes, I've had a very, very exciting life and I hope it still goes on for some time. Anymore questions?

Q. How do you think a Spitfire compares to, like, jump jets today? Would you prefer to be a jump jet pilot?

A. I think I must say because I don't know enough about jump jet pilots and what they have to contend with … but it's a very impersonal thing because they, you know, things are coming at them and by taking certain technical action, they don't have to move. They can steer it away from themselves. That's all part of the game. But from what I know, ours was both personal and impersonal because we were after knocking the aircraft down the same time we knocked down the man; hopefully he survived. But that's what it was. And there was a fair degree, not wholly, but there was a fair degree of comradeship even amongst the enemies. I was reading a diary of one of my squadron commanders only last night and he shot somebody down and within a few hours that man was in the mess with him; he had been taken prisoner and he came along to the squadron and he was able to talk to him and they commiserated and spoke with one another. You know, it was that sort of thing. But that wasn't always the case. So, yes, I don't think I'd want to do other than fly Spitfires, much slower pace of life.

Q. What's your favourite memory of the War?

A. Oh, I think the outstanding thing must be companionship really. I think that's a very, very big plus and I was able to meet people, all sorts, shapes and sizes. It firmed up my faith, which one might say, well, that's strange, being in that sort of job. But I'm very fortunate to have really been mainly in a protective role, which suited my outlook. But, yes, I think companionship at every level.

[1:09:38]

A SPEAKER: Ted, that's been absolutely fascinating; you've got some wonderful stuff there. Would you mind if we went outside and took some photos?

A. No.

A SPEAKER: And get you lot involved as well.

A. I ought just to show these as we go.

A SPEAKER: Are these your medals?

A. No gongs. I think I've got my … One thing I found, when I got my documents from the air force, I found that the officer who first of all turned me down for a commission and then the one who actually gave me my commission, of course, that was a reward for service I suppose. It was interesting to see their comments on … I think the first one had said, well, get him to come back in three months; we'll see him again. And, for whatever reason, nobody took any action on that until my squadron leader then gave them a raspberry and said, you know, you said three months and now it's twelve months, what about it? So they then … These are the wings which came off my battle-dress and they then went on that sort of khaki drill so you could pin them on. These are the … I think that's the defence medal; that is the desert; and I'm not quite sure what the clasp is for, I've forgotten now. That's the Italian one. I've lost track, but they are the give-away things. I must try and update them.

A SPEAKER: We can take a photo of them.

A. Apart from a little compass that was in your what-not, **that** was sewn into your tunic so that if you were … imagine trying to read that and maybe make your way home walking.

A SPEAKER: You were never tempted to blow your nose on it? It looks like a handkerchief, doesn't it? Pure silk, yes?

A. It is, yes. **This**, the real parachute was made into a pair of pyjamas.

A SPEAKER: Have you still got them?

A. No; it's a long time ago.

A SPEAKER: Anyway, that's fabulous. Could we come on outside because it's lovely by the tree.

[End of recording - 1:13:03]