

In January 1940, after his training courses had been curtailed, Aircraftman 2nd Class Sydney Ashby was posted to No 500 (County of Kent) Squadron, Auxiliary Air Force stationed at Detling about 5 miles from Maidstone in Kent, on the front line of what turned into the Dunkirk evacuation and then the Battle of Britain. This is part of the memoire he wrote shortly before his death more than forty years later.

I considered the posting to be a stroke of good fortune (as did my mother). However, with the requirements of wartime operations ,the benefits of being close to home were very largely lost. My squadron were equipped with Avro Anson aircraft and were engaged in Maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine and anti-E boat patrols. I was allocated to Maintenance Flight where I was employed on major and minor servicing and rectification of aircraft instrumentation.

Our routine was pretty stringent. Alternate days we were on 24 hour stand-by and every day we worked from around 7 am to at least 5 p.m., often much longer. There were no days off but about once a month, if we were lucky, we had a one-day stand down. We were also entitled to 28 days leave a year but few, if any, managed to get more than a few days.

We were particularly busy during the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk ( 27th May - 3rd June 1940). Being quite near the Channel coast (by air) we received a constant stream of aircraft , mainly fighters, to be refuelled and re-armed. These aircraft were engaged in defending the troops on the beaches against enemy air attack. As time was of the essence they could not return to their own airfields. In the midst of this, on 1st June 1940, I was reclassified to Aircraftman 1st Class.

In August 1940, during the period which became known as the Battle of Britain, Detling received the attention of the Luftwaffe. We were extensively dive bombed by Stuka aircraft. The first raid was the most disastrous. All three of our hangars were damaged, several aircraft were destroyed and there were many casualties. I believe that some 30 or so personnel were killed, mostly in air raid shelters which received direct hits. Following this raid most personnel never again entered a shelter during a raid.

I and several work mates found a small hollow at the edge of some woods, just across the tarmac from our hangar, which we considered to be an excellent "hidey hole". Every time the air raid 'red' sounded we ran like the wind to this hollow. All went well for several days, then, during an early morning raid, we were shaken out of our skins by a series of loud explosions and severe vibrations. We thought "This is it - goodnight nurse". However, we found out that during the hours of darkness the "Ack Ack" battery of the Royal Artillery had positioned two 'Bofors' antiaircraft guns about two yards from the edge of our hollow. We had to find a new 'hidey hole'. I recall one memorable character at Detling, George Wooton a reservist called up at the outbreak of war. George ad left the RAF in 1924, working as a London bus driver, a real 'dyed in the wool' Cockney. If there was any fiddle going on you could guarantee George would have organised it or at least be deeply involved. The most lucrative was the section 'tea swindle' which George took over. He 'won' supplies of tea, sugar, milk and cake and expanded the swindle to serve the whole of Maintenance Flight, making huge profits for the members (the Instrument Section). If anything was in short supply, George could invariably obtain it (at a

price).

Near the end of August 1940 I was informed that I was to be posted overseas and was granted 4 days embarkation leave. Having been issued with tropical kit I was sent to RAF Uxbridge which was used as a personnel dispatch centre. I spent my 19th birthday at Uxbridge. While at Uxbridge, London received several air raids, both by day and night. At night the sky was red from the many fires. I saw the aftermath of the raid on the East Surrey Docks which set fire to Tate & Lyle's refinery.

Eventually the draft of which I was part set off in the dead of night and in the middle of an air raid.

The following morning we arrived at a port which I subsequently discovered was Liverpool and we boarded a ship which turned out to be the MV Durban Castle, a Union Castle line ship which had been used for the regular services between Southampton and Cape Town. The ship had only just been commandeered as a troopship and had not yet been converted; it was still in its normal configuration as a passenger ship and still had its full complement of crew including stewards whose services the troops enjoyed throughout the voyage. I (a lowly AC1) was accommodated in a tourist class cabin.

That evening the ship was moved from the quay out into the mouth of the Mersey, where it remained awaiting the formation of the convoy of which it formed part. Eventually the convoy set sail up the Irish Sea, round the north of Ireland and out into the mid Atlantic. It then turned south, dropping anchor in Freetown Bay some 20 days later. (Convoys were limited to the average speed of the slowest vessel. We never made more than 10 knots and always followed a zigzag path).

During this part of the voyage our draft was informed that our destination was Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. We were to form a newly created flying training school; No 21 Service Flying Training School at a newly built station, RAF Kumalo some 2 or 3 miles from Bulawayo. After a stop at Freetown (we were not allowed ashore) the Durban Castle left the convoy and proceeded at her own pace more or less directly to Capetown. (At this time the South Atlantic was considered to be safe from enemy action.) As we approached Cape Town we were very fortunate to see the magnificent sight of Table Mountain complete with its 'tablecloth'. It was to be almost 5 years before I had the pleasure of ascending Table Mountain by cable car and setting foot on the top.

The journey from Liverpool had taken just over four weeks. For young men in their teens and early twenties it was extremely boring. There was virtually nothing to occupy our time.

We were required to undertake lookout duties -2 hours on 4 off for 24 hours. our job was to scan the surface of the sea for 'periscope wash'. I think I did three such duties. We were also subjected to a series of lectures on the customs and practices of life in the colonies and we carried out lifeboat drill every couple of days.

Disembarkation took several hours. A train stood on the dockside alongside the ship. We move directly from ship to train being directed into numbered compartments and seats by name - six to a compartment. This proved to be an administrative masterpiece as I later found out that we had been marshalled into the flights and sections within which we were to be employed. The design of the compartments was quite ingenious. The seat formed a bed, the backrest hinged up for a second bed and the wall panel also hinged down to form a bed and when in the 'up' position formed storage for bed linen. Thus the six passengers slept in the same compartment as they sat in during the day.

After what seemed to be an age the train moved off. This was to be our home for the next five

days and nights. About three or four times per day the train would stop, usually at some very small township and we were directed to leave the train and stretch our legs. The two stops which stick in my memory were at Kimberley and Mafeking (for obvious reasons). We encountered some memorable scenery such as the Drakensberg Mountains and extremely boring landscapes such as the Kalahari Desert. Eventually the train pulled into a siding inside the camp bounds of RAF Kumalo at around mid morning. The journey had taken 5 days and nights.

We were mustered and allocated accommodation, personnel from the advance party showed us where our barrack huts were located, and then took us on a tour of such places as the mess hall, canteen, HQ, hangers etc. The rest of the day was devoted to settling in. The following morning flying training started and that afternoon there was a fatal crash. Thus started a long period of involvement with military funerals. I was detailed as a member of the firing party, a duty I was required to carry out many times over the next two years, not a pleasant experience.