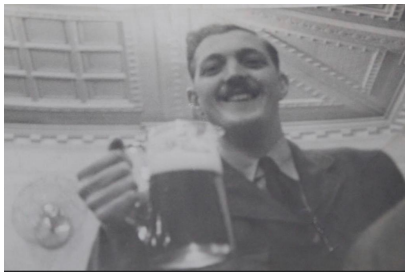
By AC2 (later Flt Lt) S.L. Ashby (pictured as a Sergeant on VE Day 1945, Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia)



Our training routine was disrupted by the 1938 Munich Crisis. As a result of this our course was curtailed by three months and we were rescheduled to finish training in April 1940 instead of July. The outbreak of war in 1939 resulted in a second curtailment of our course and we took our final Board in December 1939 and were posted to operational units in January 1940.
I was posted to No 500 (County of Kent) Sqdn , Auxiliary Air Force stationed at Detling about 5 miles from my mother's home in Maidstone. 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 AC1
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 had 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 & Lyles refinery. [Editor's note : My mother also saw the fire from the roof of her mother's flat north of Kings Cross. She was not to meet my father until 1946]

Eventually the draft of which I was part set off in the dead of night and in the middle of an air raid for Liverpool and Southern Africa, from which I didn't return until after VE Day, by now a Sergeant, having declined the offer of a wartime commission.