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ROUGH NOTES ON A CONVERSATION WITH JOHN FISHER

In 1999, during a conversation with John at Moon River, he told me something about his memories of both World Wars. I took some notes at the time. I am sure you have heard all this before and a lot more, but there may be a couple of snippets that you may have forgotten.

World War I

Although only six years old at the time, he retained a vivid memory of a German Zeppelin drifting slowly down in flames, half way between Theberton and Langston, even though it fell many miles from Ipswich where he lived. His father had woken him up to see it. Subsequently, he was taken to see the wreckage of the front end that had fallen into a ploughed field. 12 German airmen had died, the rest of the crew being taken prisoner.

Apparently, the Zeppelin had been shot down by Britain's first night-fighter plane; it had to stay in the air until dawn before being able to land. Much of the Zeppelin's aluminium structure had melted, but this did not stop entrepreneurial locals from using it to make ashtrays and other ornaments, not only for themselves but also for sale as souvenirs.

World War II

Before the war, while working for Alliance Insurance in Oxford, he joined the Civil Air Guard, undertaking a course at Witney. When war broke out in 1939, as part of "Dad's Army" he patrolled the Thames in a boat, from Folly Bridge in Oxford to Abingdon, at night (6.30 pm - 6.00 am). The aim was to capture German parachutists. He recalled that the five-man patrol had only one revolver between them, and the bullets they had did not properly fit the revolver.

When his job was declassified as a "reserved occupation", he applied to join the RAF. Although told initially there were no vacancies for someone his age (he was too old at 29), he persevered, eventually completing 3 months of basic airforce training in Blackpool, followed by 12 months in Calne (Wiltshire) as an instructor at its wireless operator/air gunner school. While based at Northolt, he successfully applied to attend a course at Hertford College, Oxford that would commission him as a "Code and Cypher" officer.

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Subsequently, he became the Adjutant of 152 Fighter Squadron, based at Stamford (between Leicester and Cambridge). Most evenings were spent riotously at the "Hole in the Wall" pub, the young officers obliged to drink at the bar without trousers. He implied that the young women in the pub were also quite mischievous.

During the war, he stressed that one never knew where one was going. When ordered to board a Greek ship in Liverpool, the ship sailed almost to New York, before re-crossing the Atlantic, passing through Gibraltar and docking in Algiers. Having been issued with "tropical kit", justified later as a well-conceived War Office strategy to deceive the enemy, he was amazed to end up in North Africa, and with kit unsuitable for desert conditions.

While camping near the beach after disembarkation, his tent was shredded by shrapnel during a bombing raid. Initially based with 152 Squadron at the Maison Blanche airfield, about 7 miles from Algiers, he was transferred to 43 Fighter Squadron, a mobile unit that operated from different airfields. The squadron became part of the "Desert Airforce", supporting the 8th Army.

* 1942

Between February-June 1943, he worked closely with Air Vice-Marshall Elmhurst, who promoted him from Pilot Officer to Acting Flight Lieutenant. Elmhurst, after the war, wrote a glowing testimonial (I saw it), referring to John's "force of personality and organising ability", as well as "bringing order out of chaos".

In North Africa and in Malta, still with 43 Squadron, he was heavily involved in creating new airfields. On Gozo, an island close to Malta, he became the RAF Liaison Officer to a large US engineering unit that built airfields (in 10 days), where for the first time in years he ate well: huge waffles with bacon and maple syrup, and chicken for lunch "if you please". As the US doctors observed, "nobody gets sick on our rations".

Returning to the UK, in late 1944 (I don't know how close it was to D-Day) he was transferred to France, disembarking at Ramatuelle (near St Tropez) by landing craft without enemy opposition.

(In the early 1970s, he was able to return to Ramatuelle during a trip to France with Eve and Mum. According to Mum, John disappeared for several hours to try to reunite with some old acquaintances, returning entirely successful, but somewhat the worse for wear, being obliged to accept their hospitality and innumerable toasts on behalf of the Allied forces.)

Another snippet. Apparently, the Americans had access to crates of whisky. One evening in the Mess, he witnessed a US officer downing an entire bottle in one go. Not surprisingly, the man collapsed and died. Perhaps this explains why John always measured out his tots so precisely.

Unfortunately, we were unable to continue our conversation. Nor was I able to talk to Eve about her memories, as I had intended.

I shall always remember the enormous support the entire Fisher family gave Mum and myself, when aged 16-22 in the 1960s, not least John and Eve, who acted as surrogate parents to me. My enduring thanks to you all!

With best wishes,

Nigel (DESEBROCK)

22 July 2004