

# FLYING AT THE EDGE

20 YEARS OF FRONT-LINE  
AND DISPLAY FLYING IN  
THE COLD WAR ERA



Squadron Leader  
**TONY DOYLE AFC**

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*20 years of Front-line and Display Flying in the  
Cold War Era*



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# Dedication

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*Quem di diligunt adolescens moritur*

Dedicated to the memory of Dicky, Trevor, Jerry, Kiwi, Tom, Al and all the others who ended up losing an argument with gravity.

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# Preface

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This is a narrative account of my military flying experiences in which I have deliberately avoided reference to what was happening in the private side of my life. The fact that I do not mention how the wear and tear of daily life on an active flying station affects wives, parents and children does not mean that I was unaware of it at the time. Perhaps one day when my skill has improved, and I feel spiritual enough up to it, I might tackle the task, but for this book I have confined myself to the subject of me versus gravity. The style has given me some difficulty. In the RAF there has long been a rather vague tradition that it is bad form to 'shoot a line'. An exact definition of the difference between a 'line' and a good yarn is, however, not so easily come by. The RAF was formed from a merger of Naval and Army units, and some of their traditions have come down from the customs found in the services at those times. During the inter-war years there was a fairly determined effort to restore these traditions to the position of dominance they had lost during the dramatic expansion in the First World War. In the Second World War this tendency was more or less swamped due to the vast increase in size and the change in the type of recruit. Apart from a hesitant struggle to the surface in the late fifties, most of the social excess baggage has now sunk pretty well without trace. Operational pilots no longer need to be forbidden to talk of women, religion or politics in the mess for fear it might lead to their fighting duels. They don't wear hats with civilian clothes and they don't leave calling-cards. What most service pilots talk about, endlessly, are stories about flying. For the most part these conversations are concerned with the recalcitrance and machinations of the 'fickle finger of fate', and in the hope of capturing the spirit of such exchanges I have tended towards an informal, sardonic treatment.

As I wrote I was surprised, and pleased, to find quite a number of events I had completely forgotten, emerging, unbidden, from the past, and I had the assistance of my service logbooks to help me get the chronology more or less right. I regret that I had very little help from contemporary diaries, as, until quite recently, I was very bad at keeping them. Consequently much of what I write has come from memory, and memories are notoriously patchy. Most of the events described happened over forty years ago, and the bits that have remained in my memory inevitably form a limited and filtered version of the past. Where I think it matters I have stated that I cannot remember exactly what happened, but otherwise I have puttied up the cracks from my imagination to keep the narrative flowing. And I confess to the occasional exit through a door that did not, in fact, exist.

The world is full of idiots striving to involve others in their foolishness, and I have had my fair share. Some of my comments on the 'higher management' may seem unduly critical; however, it has been remarked by more than one commander that the common soldier must be allowed his grumbles, and if not quite a *poilu*, I was well down the chain of command for most of my career. As Tedd remarks in the preamble to his *With Prejudice*, a personal account of events is bound to carry some degree of prejudice, and the world would be a poorer place if everyone kept a strictly PC tongue in his head. In any case the reader should bear in mind that the air force I joined in 1952 was unrecognizably different from the Royal Air Force of today. To start with, it was in a state of considerable upheaval. The savage contraction that followed the Second World War had been suddenly reversed into a rapid expansion when events in Korea briefly threatened to expand into another global conflict. In no time at all the whole machine was thrown into reverse as it became evident that the Royal Air Force was not going to be involved. National Service made the planner's task even harder, as there was little time in two years to train anyone to a useful standard, and National Servicemen were, understandably, not well known for their spirit of helpful co-operation. For several years the organization was in a state of considerable upheaval, and administrators were so busy trying to catch up with events that



they had little time to plan ahead. Paperwork was retrospective, people got lost in the system, posting notices arrived days late, promotion was haphazard, etc.

It should also be remembered that Jet Jocks working at the coal-face were bound to have a rather one-eyed view of events. In a fighting service it is not always a good idea to let the front line know exactly what is in the wind, so those at the bottom cannot always see the big picture. Nor are the services any sort of a democracy. It is the specific duty of the military man to obey the orders passed down to him from above, and he has no right to demand explanations. I describe how things looked to me at the time, and there are bound to be others who saw things differently. Some people have a better nose than others for bizarre incidents that often only occupy a brief moment but, in the remembering and retelling, become more substantial than might be expected, considering the fleeting events on which they are based; therefore it would be unwise to try to form an idea of an individual's full character by extrapolating from their behaviour in such brief isolated incidents. This cuts both ways as I have seen normally upright citizens put up uncharacteristic bluffs and the most witless fools put off acts of stunning skill.

The problem of wishing to speak of the strange things that have happened to oneself without pillorying specific individuals has been around as long as publishing, as this quotation from Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, Book III Chapter 1 (p. 168, OUP 1970) attests:

*To prevent therefore any such malicious Applications, I declare here once for all, I describe not Men, but Manners; not an individual but a Species.*

Like Fielding, it is not my intention to criticize or draw attention to specific individuals. The events I describe usually involved human agents, but who these were is, in my opinion, of little general interest. For a brief moment these individuals, as it were, played a part that is of significance only because of its universality. What happened to me can have been in no way unique; there must have been similar incidents throughout the air forces of the world ever since their first glimmerings at the beginning of the twentieth century. By describing what happened to me, a more or less typical squadron jockey, my aim is to show some of the strange and amusing events that made up the lives of twentieth-century Cold War military airmen.

The desire to keep the identity of individuals out of it, combined with the new European Union laws about personal privacy, have required considerable surgery on the text, and I have done my best to disguise the identity of the players. Almost all names have been changed to alternatives chosen with a pin from a telephone directory. This makes the text read strangely to anyone who knows the various characters concerned, but should produce no adverse affect for those who do not. To those who would have liked to see their names in print I apologize, and refer them respectfully to those who are perhaps glad they did not.

## PART 1

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# PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS

*When I was a child, I spake as a child; I understood as a child; I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things: 1 Corinthians, 13:11*

## A Private Pilot

(August 1952)

My earliest recollection of seeing an aircraft close up was during a visit to my aunt who lived in Sawbridgworth. Somewhere on the way the road ran next to an airfield and, just as we passed, a single-engine low-winged monoplane taxied right up near to us, just on the other side of the hedge. At the last moment it swung round to face the open field beyond. The hood was open and I could see the pilot's head quite clearly. All I can remember is being astonished at how small it was.

For a young boy, the Second World War, no doubt a terrifying experience for the adults, was a period of great interest and excitement. I was 5 years old when it started, and naturally had no clear idea what war meant. I thought that there would be lots of knights in armour clanging away with spears and swords right outside our house. I used to spend hours lurking around my bedroom window in the hope that I would be the first to spot them. I vaguely remember my father and mother sitting and listening to that fateful Chamberlain broadcast, after which I drew a picture of a gas bomb. I made it a huge round object, like a monstrous sea mine, with cracks all over it and gas squirting out of the cracks. That night the air-raid siren went off and we were taken down to one of the cellars under the house, which was certainly something out of the ordinary and established right away that whatever was going to happen, the war was going to bring changes. This initial enthusiasm, however, soon wore off. During the worst of the blitz there weren't many bombs falling near Sarratt, and even when we lived in Ipswich for several months during the invasion threat, and there were plenty of bombs falling on the nearby docks, we never got as far as actually using the shelter which the previous occupant had gone to the trouble of building in the garden. In fact we were forbidden to play in it because it was full of stagnant water, which stank. We had moved to Ipswich to be with my father, who, although a doctor, and so in a protected occupation, had joined the Army Medical Corps for the duration. We shared a small town house with a fellow officer and his wife. I was thrilled to see a patch on the ceiling of the living room where an incendiary bomb had recently come through, and one night we were all taken out to stand on the street so that we could watch Felixstowe burning. One afternoon, while I was playing in the tiny urban garden, an aircraft with black crosses on the wings flashed overhead at very low level. I rushed inside in triumph. I had recognized it as a Heinkel He 111. All my knowledge came from studying a series of aircraft identification books that were issued at the time. My reading was still a bit rosy and I was not always sure about pronunciation. When I saw the name of German aircraft written as Heinkel He 111 and Messerschmitt Me 109, I didn't realize that the He and Me were part of the manufacturer's identification code, and always incorporated the two together in the one word Heinkel-he and Messerschmitt-me. I also had trouble with the British Defiant fighter, as I had not met the word defiant. I can remember trying to work it out phonetically and finding the second part of the word going all fuzzy. I imagine that dislexic people must experience something of this sort. The best I could manage was Defiant fighter, which it remained for ages until my elder sister mocked my ignorance and put me right. I suppose that the only activity to do with the war of which I had any direct experience was associated with flying. We were taken to see the film Target for Tonight, though to me it was always 'F for Freddie', which was the identification letter of the Wellington bomber, and

I imagine must have been used frequently throughout the film. I didn't understand what it was about in general, but I soaked up the details of the shots showing the crewmembers at their controls.

A palpable shock ran through the family when cousin John managed to crash and burn in front of his horrified parents who had come out to watch him give them an over-ambitious beat-up in his training aircraft. I can't remember having any unpleasant feelings about this news, so I guess it was only the glamour of this event that filtered down to my childish understanding. The small country road outside the house was shaken day and night by speeding 'sand and gravel' lorries for the new aerodrome being built nearby at Bovingdon. We were always being warned not to stray out onto the road because of them, and I wondered a lot at what 'sand and gravel' meant. I longed for the day when I would be old enough to cycle to Bovingdon and see the flying. As the war progressed I became more and more interested in everything to do with aeroplanes. I read every book and magazine on the subject that I could get my hands on, and played endless games to do with flying. I pushed the beds in our room slightly apart and sat between them with the fire-guard over my head as a cockpit. I drew tracks on a school atlas to Frankfurt and Düsseldorf, and had long exchanges with imaginary aircraft via two wooden bowls that served as my earphones and oxygen mask. We were taken to see the wreck of an Airspeed Oxford trainer that had crashed in a farm just up the road. Two Flying Fortresses collided in broad daylight and left me breathless with excitement and horror as the broken remnant slid swiftly down the sky. My friend Christopher assured me that one of them had been full of nurses being taken for a joyride. The boy next door, much older than me, had an absolutely immaculate collection of plastic model aircraft which I was allowed to go and gawp at on a couple of occasions. My own models were more rough and ready, and soon showed signs of wear and tear as Chris and I tore around the garden with them, strafing, bombing and crashing. One night I was sitting with my mother and brother by the fire in the cottage where we lived at the end of the war, when a strange roaring sound came down the chimney. I remember my mother saying, 'He's in trouble.' My younger brother, always incurably nosy, shot out of the room and opened the back door. Lumbering in his wake, I saw him standing there brightly illuminated from above. My mother grabbed me so that I couldn't follow him, and screamed at him to come back in. A moment later there was a colossal crunch as a four-engine American heavy bomber, ablaze from nose to tail, plunged into the village playing field. Apparently the crew had already baled out, and the only casualties were some chickens. One old lady, who lived on her own, left her kitchen briefly to get the teapot from the front room. She was stone deaf and heard nothing of the crash outside, but when she came back to the kitchen she found a smoking engine had got there first. My very first *Biggies* book was read to us by my father during one of his rare leaves, and I did not really understand much of it. I tried a couple of times to reread it myself, but failed. A little later I saw a second-hand copy of *Biggies in Africa* in the junk shop I passed on the way to school, and taken by the pictures, bought it. Suddenly I found I could read it, and that really sealed my fate as far as aviation was concerned. I became an absolute *Biggies* addict, and received new books for Christmas and birthdays year after year. Reading through them now I find most of them horribly skimpy and inaccurate, the later ones almost contemptuously casual, but it obviously doesn't take much to move a boy of 10 once his head has been thoroughly turned.

## FACT VERSUS FANCY

At 14 I went to boarding school at Epsom, where my obsession with the idea of becoming a pilot gradually metamorphosed from childish dream to something nearer reality. I joined the RAF section of the Combined Cadet Force as soon as I was allowed, and felt that the work we did on basic aerodynamics, navigation and aircraft recognition was, at last, taking me in the right direction. I was keen on art and got on well with the art master, who had been a Spitfire pilot during the war. He was

always willing to yarn about aeroplanes, and had many pen-and-wash sketches he had made from his flying days. He had even published a book of his experiences. Occasionally we were taken to Redhill Aerodrome to be given air-experience rides in one of the RAF Reserve Tiger Moths. The experience was quite unlike anything else I had experienced, and the feeling, the noise and the smell have lived with me over the years. A rather worrying aspect of these trips was that the real thing was nothing like my imaginings. Whereas I had been hoping that I would experience something along the lines of Paul on the road to Damascus, I found, in practice, the experience was rather aversive. I was a high-strung youth, and the actuality of being rattled and shaken into the air in what seemed to be an extremely unstable and delicate contraption produced in me a state of acute tension, and after a couple of minutes I began to feel dreadfully sick. By the end of the trip I was having difficulty preventing myself from actually vomiting. Of course I was by no means the only one in our group to feel like this, but I had privately anticipated this moment for so many years that the disappointment of finding it so different from my daydreams was humiliating enough without adding the shame of puking. I reckon that what made things worse was that these were purely passenger flights, so there was no opportunity for us to distract ourselves by trying to fly the aircraft. The pilot flies the Tiger from the rear position, so we were put in the front cockpit, from which the second joystick had been removed to make sure we didn't fiddle with it. By looking down between our knees we could see the socket in which it fitted moving about as the pilot operated his control in the rear cockpit. At the time I had a recurring nightmare in which the pilot collapsed and I was trying to fly the aircraft by jamming my thumb into the empty stick socket. There was no question of giving up my ambition, but I could see that sticking to it was going to be much less of a joy ride than I had imagined. Discovering a hangar full of strange and exotic prewar aircraft, which no one seemed to object to our examining, was something of a compensation. There was a tiny little monoplane called a Heath Parasol, powered by a small engine that looked as though it had come out of a mowing-machine. Another tiny single-seater looked like a miniature Fieseler Storch, called the ZaunKönig, which, appropriately, is the German for Wren. They looked to me far too frail and small to be real, more like the model airplanes people flew at Epsom Downs at the weekend. There was another quite extraordinary machine with a circular glazed nose reminiscent of a Heinkel 111. Through this ran a covered shaft that connected the engine, which was mounted behind the cockpit, to the propeller, which was right in the nose. I have since seen a picture of this aircraft with some details; it had an exotic futuristic kind of name – something like the Stella Satellite – but exactly what I cannot now remember. Perhaps if someone had pointed me in the right direction I might have been better suited to becoming an aeronautical engineer, but the thought never entered my head. I don't think any of the staff at the school I went to had ever heard of engineers. Many of them didn't seem too certain about aeroplanes.

## **A MINOR TRIUMPH**

Towards the end of the spring term it was announced that there would be a gliding camp in the coming holidays for those who could persuade their parents to agree to their going. Our CCF section was very big, and I can't remember there being much competition for the places. Perhaps they just sent the NCOs, and by this time I had risen to the lofty rank of cadet corporal. My parents acquiesced, and when term was over I packed my bag in great excitement, put on my uniform and took the train to Detling, near Maidstone in Kent. This was hallowed country, with names like Manston and Weir Mailing, which I knew so well from my reading about the Battle of Britain and the Fighter Command operations that followed it. The gliding camp was a free and easy place at which it was assumed correctly, that we were as keen as mustard to do whatever was asked of us. We slept on camp beds in a barrack hut that, for some reason, had no wall at one end, and in the morning we went to the RA

cookhouse for breakfast. The standard of service food for the other ranks at that time was atrocious which put it at about the same level as boarding-school meals, so it all seemed quite normal to our contingent at least. These were the days of national service, and it was notorious that the RAF seemed to take a delight in putting people into jobs that were as different as possible from their civilian occupation. Many lads, part of the way to obtaining their apprenticeships in trades such as electrician or motor mechanic, were stuck in the cookhouse, where, instead of improving their specialist skills they peeled potatoes and washed up. The Detling cookhouse provided me with my first example of the resentment bred of this sort of incompatibility, and I found the experience rather unnerving. The cook dealing out the porridge was a thin youth of about my age wearing a dirty apron over a dirty white blouse and even dirtier blue and white checked trousers. His cook's hat was pushed onto the back of his head and he wielded a long ladle. As we filed past in turn he used the ladle to throw a dollop of porridge into our upheld plates. His aim was pretty good, but you definitely had the feeling that he wouldn't have cared much if the porridge ended up on our uniforms. He paid special attention to those of us who sported stripes, which was understandable, as a corporal in the regular services was a figure of authority to be feared and despised as far as the unwilling national service 'erk' was concerned. After all, the hated military policemen, known as Snow Drops because of their white-topped caps, were all corporals. We knew nothing of this, and found his aggressive antics funny but disturbing. There was a popular song at the time that went 'It's breaking my heart' cause you're leaving, I'll be feeling so sad when you've gone'. As he served he sang his own version in a loud and tuneless voice, flinging a spoonful of porridge onto the next plate at the end of each beat. 'It's breaking my heart PLOP! 'cause you're leaving' PLOP! I was next. He looked me fiercely in the eye and almost shouted 'And I'll be fucking glad when you've gone' PLOP!

Putting the domestic difficulties to one side, we finished breakfast, cleaned our 'eating irons' in the greasy trough outside the mess building and mustered on the airfield. It was a perfect spring day and we were eager to learn. In no time I was strapped into the left-hand seat in the wide cockpit of a Sedburgh T21, a fairly big two-seat trainer. Like the Tiger, the gliders had a special smell that was absolutely unforgettable: a heady cocktail of wood, dope and possibly a very faint hint of vomit. I was shown how to strap in, but was already familiar with the system as it was the same as the one used in the Tiger. The assistant checked the release, clipped on the tow wire and lifted our wing off the ground to indicate to the winch driver that we were ready to go. 'Take up slack', called the instructor, and another assistant started to wave a bat slowly up and down. This was seen by the distant winch driver who began, very slowly, to wind in the cable. The wire ahead of the plane started to snake through the grass with a hissing sound as the loops were pulled straight, until it was straining directly from us to the winch away on the other side of the airfield and we started to move gently forward. 'ALL OUT', called the instructor, and the assistant moved the bat up and down vigorously. Suddenly the wings twanged and we were rushing forward. The assistant holding the wing sprinted alongside keeping the wings level until, eventually, he could no longer keep up. This was completely different from flying the Tiger. There was no rattling engine noise, just the swish of the air at a mild fifty miles an hour or so as we rode up on the end of the launching cable like a kite. Also unlike the Tiger, the view was spectacular, as the crew sat right at the front. The launch was thrilling, like a roller-coaster ride. As we reached the top of the tow at around eight or nine hundred feet it became quieter and we levelled out. The yellow Satsuma-sized wooden ball under the panel was pulled to operate the release and the nose bucked up as the wire fell away. I see from my logbook that this first trip lasted fifteen minutes, so we must have caught a bit of lift, but as is the case with the crowding-in of so many new sensations it seemed much less than that before we were sliding over the hedge to land. I cannot even remember whether I was allowed to have a go at the controls or not.

I was fairly high up on the programme list, so it was not long before I was being strapped into the

front cockpit of the smaller Kirby Cadet T31 trainer, where the cockpits were one in front of the other instead of side by side. The instructor had a bit of a struggle getting into the rear seat because it was under the wing, whereas I was able to step directly into the front cockpit, taking care not to tread on the unsupported skin of very thin plywood. The instructor went through the same launch routine, and in no time we were back up at the top of the towline. From this height the ground didn't look too remote and the grass expanse of the airfield still dominated the scene, so there wasn't any worry about getting lost. I had read and reread every 'how to fly' book I could get my hands on, so it was not surprising that I managed to sort out the controls pretty quickly, and the instructor allowed me to fly it, though I have no doubt he kept his hands pretty close to the stick. A turn through ninety degrees was followed rapidly by a second, which brought us round facing back the way we had come, with the take-off path down at about forty degrees to one side. Far away near the distant hedge I could make out the group standing near the launching site. Just beyond the far boundary we turned through another ninety degrees to flying parallel with the hedge. All this time the height was reducing, the airfield getting bigger and the detail becoming more distinct. A fourth turn brought us in line with the landing strip, and in no time the grass was rushing up and past. Coached by the instructor, I eased the stick back, and with a dwindling series of bumps from the landing wheel, echoed by a drumming sound from the wings and fuselage, we were running along the ground. A strong push on the stick and the skid under the nose was forced onto the grass to slow us down.

The T31 didn't have much of a performance, so each circuit lasted only four or five minutes leaving very little time to contemplate what had just happened. We stayed strapped in while the five-tonner took us in tow and pulled us back to the take-off point. Assistants ran alongside to keep the wings off the ground. We did two more circuits and then I had to climb out to make way for the next man. For the rest of the morning I acted as assistant for the others, hooking-on the cable and holding up the wing for launch and recovery or waving the signal bats. Each of us was given a spell at the winches to see how they operated. Later in the afternoon everyone had had their first three launches and it was my turn for a second lot. I felt I was getting on pretty well. On the first launch the instructor said that he was going to demonstrate what to do if the cable broke early on in the launch. I found that very exciting stuff. As we leaped up on the cable he yanked the release, which left us pointing skywards at a low level and rapidly slowing down. A smart forward push on the stick and we were poised above the grass for a landing about half-way along the take-off run. For the last two launches the instructor let me fly the whole thing from start to finish. By the end of that first day I had done six circuits, so, since each circuit took about four minutes, I had been in the air for less than half an hour and yet I was practically on my knees.

I was extremely competitive in a secretive sort of way, and nothing less than an above-average performance would satisfy my somewhat ridiculous ambition. Before starting I was absolutely terrified that I would prove inept and take longer than the others to go solo. Any question of actually failing to go solo by the end of the week was pushed right out of sight in a part of my mind labelled in large letters, 'NOT TO BE OPENED ON ANY PRETEXT'. At the end of the first day I had not done anything obviously wrong and felt that I must have done well enough, but it was difficult to judge from what the others were saying what my true standard had been. The next day dawned as bright as the first, and I was surprised to be told to get into one of the aircraft because since I had flown last thing the day before I had supposed that it would be the turn of some of the others first. 'OK!' said the instructor, 'Do me a circuit. I'll just watch.' Everything came back from the day before, but I felt that I was probably trying a bit too hard. Back at the start point I was preparing to climb out when the instructor told me to hang on a bit. He climbed out and went over to the other instructors, where there was a bit of a discussion. I am a natural pessimist, and when the chief instructor came over and climbed into the back seat I started worrying that I had done something awful without realizing it, and

was about to get the dreaded 'chop ride'. 'OK!' he called, 'Let's see a normal circuit.' Whatever the meaning of this change of instructor, I was horribly nervous and had to work hard to prevent my mind running off into anxious irrelevancies. The chief instructor said absolutely nothing, and as we touched down I was completely baffled as to what was happening. 'Perhaps', I comforted myself, 'my first instructor was feeling unwell and there is no significance that the chief instructor took his place.' As we were towed back to the launch point, the chief instructor asked me how I thought the circuit had gone, which started me worrying again, but I couldn't think of anything I had forgotten or botched, so I just stammered, 'Er! I think it was all right, sir.'

Having told me to stay in, he climbed out. Was he going to hand me back to the other instructor again? He came round the front and motioned me to remove my helmet. Kneeling down so that his face was on a level with mine, he asked, 'How do you feel? Do you think you could manage on your own?' This was completely unexpected, and I had no time to reflect that, half an hour's flying time ago, any such attempt would have been unthinkable and almost certainly would have ended in disaster. I actually wanted to say that I thought it was far too soon, but nothing in this world would have persuaded me to contradict his expectations. In any case, it promised to be a triumph beyond my dreams, providing I survived to enjoy it. I stammered some sort of reply and he said cheerfully, 'Good show! Remember, if you get a cable break just get the nose down quick and land straight ahead. Stay in after your first circuit and do two more. Okay?' and off he went. Many accounts have been written about the feelings that accompany a pilot's first solo, and I have read many of them. The actuality was as much a disappointment as my First Communion. Despite the expectations of all sorts of spiritual delights, I was obliged to accept that my feelings during my first solo were totally dominated by extreme tension and rigidly controlled anxiety. I was naturally rather nervous of the new environment but the thing that had me really twitching was the thought of making a mess of it. Of course in the event these three circuits went perfectly well. It turned out that I was one of the quickest beginners to go solo on the unit's records, and I was over the moon at my rapid qualification for the A and B badges. This success, however, carried an unfortunate penalty. I was given three more launches in the afternoon, but although it was only the second day of the camp I was told that I would get no more flying. The whole thing had been over so quickly that I had hardly had time to savour it. Unhappy at the thought of spending the rest of the week doing nothing but assist at the launches, I asked the chief instructor if I could drive the five-tonner recovery truck. I had recently passed my test but, of course, had never driven anything bigger than our family saloon car. The management were delighted at the suggestion as it meant one less job for the instructors. After a cursory check-out on the crash gear box I was left pretty well to my own devices, and I spent a happy three days ploughing up and down the airfield pulling the cables back out for the launches and returning the gliders to the take-off point after landing. The weather remained perfect, and I ended up with a deep sun tan from the shirt collar up. We had one moment of excitement when a member of our school group, also to take up the RAF as a career, undershot the airfield and landed, safely, in the field next door. We saw him disappear behind the hedge, so several of the cadets jumped into the back of the truck and I set off to see if we could help. When we reached the boundary one of my passengers misjudged the speed and jumped off too early. Heavens knows what he thought he was up to, as he didn't even try to hit the ground running and he went straight down onto the loose gravel, face first. Having established that the glider pilot was not in trouble, except for his visible nervousness in the face of the extreme curiosity with which a herd of bullocks was examining him and his aircraft, we carted the bruised and bloodied cadet off to the sick bay.

On the last day I was called into the presence of the chief instructor. He said I had been very helpful working the tow truck, and he wondered if I would like to have a go at getting my C certificate before I left. I wasn't really very clear what this would involve, but I gathered it would mean



converting onto one of the single-seaters with a higher performance and trying to stay airborne long than just the one circuit. In the aircraft there was a simple instrument called a variometer. This had two little balls in two vertical tubes, one red and the other green. When the aircraft was going down the red ball rose up the tube, and when the aircraft was going up it dropped back to zero and the green ball lifted. The higher up the tube, the greater the rate. Gliders are designed to have a very low rate of descent, so whenever they fly into air that is rising faster than they are descending they gain height. When the wind strikes a long bank of rising ground it is forced up, and the rate that it is going up can easily exceed the rate that a sailplane goes down. In moderate winds there can be enough lift to get gliders up to a thousand feet or so. Pilots flying from gliding sites that have a bank of this sort nearly can stay in the air for hours at a time by flying up and down the front of the bank in the band of rising air. The ground near Detling was pretty flat, so the only way of staying up was to get into a thermal. On a summer day the ground heats the air on the surface so that it rises up in a wide column until eventually the temperature drops enough for the moisture in it to condense and a cloud appears. This column of rising air is called a thermal, and finding one is the primary skill required of a sailplane pilot. Thermals are of course invisible, and would be a lot easier to find if the column of rising air lay directly under the cloud it was feeding, but it doesn't because the top drifts downwind. Consequently the lower part of thermal, which is where the pilot wants to join it, is often nowhere near the cloud at the top. To make things even harder, there are clouds that are no longer growing fast, so they have hardly any rising air beneath them and they look, to the ignorant eye of the beginner at least, much the same as the active ones. Thermals tend to start over particular kinds of ground, and glider pilots become pretty good at recognizing these and circling downwind of them to catch a ride. All these refinements were as nothing to me, as it was all I could do to keep the glider the right way up. The qualifying requirement for the C award was to stay above the point of launch for five minutes, but it was hardly possible for anyone on the ground to check this, so they settled for a trip length of, as far as I can remember, fifteen minutes. If a normal circuit took four or five minutes, then staying up for fifteen implied that the rest of the time was due to using an up-current. For my C attempts I was to fly in a single-seater with a medium performance called the Prefect, but first I was given a launch in a single-seat Kirby Tutor, which was a sort of half-way house between the Prefect and the T31 trainer. The Prefect was pretty similar to the trainers I had just been flying, but with bigger wings. Instead of leaving the pilot's head and shoulders out in the airstream, a streamlined cover left just the top of his head in the clear. To help me make the transition, the first two launches were made without the cover in which configuration it felt pretty well identical with the trainer. Then I did one launch with the cover on and found it a bit strange, but not a real problem. Now I was deemed ready to try for some thermal flying. The critical thing was the time in the air, and I found on these first launches that there was no way in the world that I dared to look into the cockpit long enough to glance at my wristwatch. Although an aircraft of this sort will fly by itself perfectly well for minutes at a time, I was completely convinced that if I took my eyes off the horizon for more than the fraction of a second it took to glance down at the instrument panel, something quite dreadful was going to happen. I hung my watch by its strap to the hook that secured the cockpit cover, and found that by squinting a bit I could just about read the minute-hand. I have a record telling me that I did a total of fifty-two minutes in the Prefect, but I cannot remember how many launches this represents nor what I actually did on them. I know I vaguely understood that the thing to do was to fly back and forth at the upwind end of the field keeping a close eye on the green ball. If it started to go up the tube the thing to do was to circle, in the hope that I would stay in the rising air column. If the height got down to three or four hundred feet then I was to give up, join the circuit and land. All this was far too much for me, really, and I was operating like an automaton, with only the haziest idea of what was going on. By the end of the last day of the camp I had managed a number of flights that fell only just short of the requirement, but had

not reached the magic number that would give me my C certificate. I was given one last go before packup. This flight I *can* remember. I hit a good big thermal almost as soon as I came off the towline and started turning as hard as I dared. Keeping the aircraft turning at a steady rate without losing gaining speed was right at the limit of my skill and required all my attention. I just put on blinkers, forgot about the airfield, the circuit and everything else, and concentrated on keeping the bank angle and speed as steady as I could. I was quite unable to shift focus onto the watch, and I can distinctly remember realizing that there wasn't much point in knowing the time as I was already doing all in my power to stay up. I was also not too worried about my position, because I was going up quite a bit faster than the normal glide rate down, and so wherever I ended up I should have plenty of height to get back to the field. What I had not reckoned on was the cloud. One minute I was in the clear and the next I was looking down at the ground through a sort of inverted funnel as I rose up into the base of the cloud that was sitting on the top of my thermal. It was fortunate for me that I came out of the side of the thermal as soon as I straightened out and dived to get clear, as a complete novice faced with a cloud flying is likely to end up in a spin, and getting out of a spin had not been on the syllabus. To my utter amazement I found I was well downwind of the airfield and up at a couple of thousand feet. Everything on the ground appeared to be a good bit smaller than the last time I looked at it. Once I had flown back into the overhead, still with plenty of height to spare, I began to relax a little, and although I was still obsessed with the horizon, a quick peek at the watch showed that I had already been up well over the required time. Since it would take at least another five minutes to get rid of the extra height and complete the circuit, it was evident that I must have done more than enough to get my certificate. But my return home for the remainder of the holiday was anything but triumphant. My parents, keen for me to follow in my father's footsteps and become a doctor were not anxious to show any sort of support for my flying ambitions. They made some unsympathetic remarks about my heavy sunburn and managed to emanate an atmosphere of mild disparagement, so I said very little about my achievements for fear of having them openly derided.

## **FLYING SCHOLARSHIP**

Summer brought the prospect of an even more desirable prize – a Flying Scholarship. This was much harder to obtain than the gliding course, for which there had been very little competition. Every year each CCF or ATC unit was allowed to nominate one cadet for a full course in flying to Private Pilot Licence standard. This was a glittering prize indeed, and one I coveted dearly. I did everything I could think of to induce the master in charge of the RAF section to think that I was the most suitable candidate, and I must have made some effective choices as, towards the end of the summer term, I was thrilled to learn that I was the chosen candidate for that year. Once again in a state of high excitement I packed my bag, donned my uniform and set off for Marshall's Airfield just to the east of the city of Cambridge. At 18 everything is just so new and amazing that you get used to finding yourself in completely novel situations. My visits to Redhill and Detling had given me some ideas about what to expect as far as the airfield was concerned, and I had had a couple of not very encouraging rides in a Tiger Moth, but despite having done so well on the glider course only a few months before, I found I really couldn't get my head round the thought that at some time within the next week I would be flying a Tiger Moth on my own. It just did not seem possible, but the idea that I might not be up to the demand and have all my most precious dreams shattered was still firmly locked in that space labelled 'NOT TO BE OPENED ON ANY PRETEXT'. To receive the scholarship, all the candidates had first to complete the aircrew selection board at Hornchurch. When the officer conducting one of the interviews asked me whether I would prefer to be a navigator or a signaller if I failed as a pilot, I said 'Neither. If I don't pass as a pilot I intend to kill myself.' He laughed rather nervously, and I was

saved from finding out whether I meant it or not.

I arrived at Marshall's on a Sunday afternoon and found half a dozen other lads from various units around the country already installed in the wooden hut near the gates that was to serve as our accommodation during the course. Excited anticipation running at a high level, we strolled out to have a look at the airfield. While we were watching, an Anson, an ancient twin-engine light transport that rejoiced in the RAF soubriquet of the Cloth Bomber, joined the circuit, and after landing taxied to the parking pan just in front of us. We were surprised when the door in the side opened and a cadet in uniform stepped onto the tarmac. An airman carried his bag down, and having deposited it next to him saluted and climbed back in. The door closed behind him, and with a wave the pilot taxied away to the take-off point. It turned out that the cadet was the son of a high-up air marshal, who had sent him in his personal transport. We were mighty impressed with his method of arrival, and since he didn't try to make anything of his father's exalted rank he was immediately accepted as one of the group.

On Monday morning we were marched down to the flight office in military style, but once there a more relaxed atmosphere prevailed. The contract for the Flying Scholarships was given to a number of flying units round the country, and though all the instructors were civilians many of them had been in the RAF during the war, and, no doubt, had had quite enough in the marching and saluting line to last them a lifetime. There seemed to be plenty more trade in the pipe-line, so they were keen to get the courses out as quickly as possible, and they were evidently not going to waste precious time if they could help it. The weather was brilliant, the days were long and they were prepared to work us seven days a week. I don't think any of us realized that in eleven days' time we would have completed the thirty-hour course and be on our way home again. I did my first trip on the eleventh of August and the last on the twenty-second. We had done our familiarization trips at Redhill in the front cockpit, but from now on we would be sitting in the rear. This was where you sat when solo because of the need to preserve the centre of gravity when fifteen-odd stone of instructor climbed out. I was inordinately proud to wear the voluminous Sidcot Suit flying-overalls, long leather gauntlets and leather flying helmet with which we were kitted out. My main instructor was a large, friendly man addressed as Mr Gilbert by me to his face but known to the other instructors and to us behind his back as Lugs, because of his very large ears. I even did one trip with Mr Tappin, who had been an instructor on this same unit when the legendary Johnnie Johnson, one of the top-scoring fighter pilots of the Second World War, went through his basic training here in 1940. No doubt they were flying exactly the same aircraft that we were now using. In those days the PPL course consisted of only thirty hours' flying, as opposed to the present-day forty. Some hours were saved because we did no blind flying, but the main difference was that we did not have to learn anything about air traffic communications, since the Tigers were not equipped with radios; they did not even have an electronic intercom between the instructor and pupil. Our leather helmets had hollow earpieces that were connected by rubber tube to a speaking trumpet in the front cockpit down which the instructor could shout encouragement or invective as appropriate. I can remember poor Lugs intoning the mantra, 'You won't live long in a Tiger at forty knots', over and over as I struggled to master the skill of paying close attention to three things simultaneously. Although we had a similar mouthpiece for replies, it spent most of its life tucked under the coaming and we just nodded or shook our heads to show whether we had understood the latest gem. A hand-operated rear-view mirror fixed to one of the struts provided the instructor with the means for keeping an eye on what his pupil was up to in the back.

Sometimes a particular tune becomes so closely associated with a place or time that, years later, it needs only a hint of it to provoke an instant recall. I had just seen the film *Singing in the Rain*, and the theme tune has become inextricably mixed with the sights, sounds and smells of that life-changing fortnight. I was extremely relieved to find that I was hardly bothered by airsickness. It is said that this is often caused by excessive nervousness, and I suppose the scariest manoeuvre we flew was the spi-

Though spinning in some aircraft is quite alarming, for some reason or other I never found it a intimidating exercise in the Tiger. I guess that most people found a good landing the most difficult thing to achieve, but the fact that we all completed our thirty hours, half of which were flown solo indicates that it couldn't have been all that difficult. Some of us had the advantage of having already flown a glider, but landing an aircraft like the Tiger requires a very different technique and is a good deal harder. In a glider you have a splendid view out to the front, and sit so close to the ground that it is very easy to judge the rate of descent, right up to the point of touch-down. The wheel in a glider, there is one, only just sticks out below, as there is no prop to keep clear of the ground, and so all that is required is to keep checking back on the stick to hold the aircraft more or less level until it runs out of speed and you are down. For a start, the view out to the front of a Tiger from the back cockpit is pretty poor in level flight. As you slow down to land, the nose has to be held higher and higher to keep the wings at a big enough angle to generate the lift that keeps you in the air. In this nose-up attitude the forward view becomes, by any modern standards, atrocious. Sitting in the rear cockpit you have in front of you nine feet of fuselage that rears up and obscures whatever is ahead. When there is a large instructor sitting just in front of you, then the view is even worse. The lower wings, which are over four feet wide, start just in front of the rear cockpit and consequently obscure the view downward and so from a height of around ten feet the nearest bit of ground you can see is some forty feet ahead. This makes it hard to see the surface texture clearly, and unfortunately it is this that constitutes the principal cue for the final rate of descent, which in turn is critical for the touch-down. If the nose is not high enough the wheels hit first and you bounce back up into the air. If it is too high then either you zoom back up, putting yourself in danger of stalling and coming down with a bone-shattering thump, or you hit tail first and end up in a see-sawing bounce, tail to nose, nose to tail, an arrival known as a 'kangaroo'. The art of bringing the stick back at exactly the right rate, so that just at the point at which the aircraft sinks onto the grass the wheels and the tail-skid touch down together, is one of those activities, like touch typing or playing a musical instrument, that takes place at an unconscious level and no amount of conscious straining is of the slightest assistance. You just have to trust to the god of three-point landings and let it happen. I, at least, experienced little sense of satisfaction when I managed a good three-pointer, as I somehow felt that it wasn't much to do with me, and every time I got down without a bump, a bounce or a kangaroo I said a silent prayer of thanks to whoever or whatever it was that had been in control. Despite these difficulties, which at first seemed insurmountable, we all went solo after six or seven hours dual. I guess my experience was pretty representative, and I see from my logbook I had six hours forty minutes dual before being trusted up on my own. The first hour or so was taken up with general handling at height, including spins and stalls, followed by five hours practising circuits and landings.

The other major difficulty, something that was much more under conscious control, was finding our way about, and since we had no radios we had to rely entirely on our own resources. The trouble I found, was that the world looked completely different from a couple of thousand feet, and I had the greatest difficulty in recognizing things that were literally staring me in the face. For example although railway lines were pretty obvious once you had picked one out, it was almost comically easy to sweep your gaze backwards and forwards over a landscape containing several and see none of them. The same applied to roads and even airfields, especially ones that were all grass, as Marshall's was those days. You would repeatedly sweep your anxious gaze down from a misty horizon and see nothing but a jumble of green fields and smoky towns and villages, when suddenly the airfield would appear as if by magic so close that you were almost on top of it. We did our practice forced landings some fifteen miles north, at Manea, a relief landing-ground situated alongside that unique Cambridgeshire landmark, the twin canals. These two large drains, some three hundred metres apart, run straight as a die for twenty miles between Erith and Downham Market. It would have taken a very

inattentive pilot to fly over this feature without noticing it, but when solo, this did not prevent feelings of doubt and rising panic during the nine minutes it took to get there. The return trip was even more worrying as there was no similar outstanding feature for locating Cambridge. The official method was to fly on a steady compass course for the appropriate time, having allowed for the current wind conditions, and when the time was up you should be there. In practice this was far too open to error for my undeveloped navigational and flying skills. My too vivid imagination had no difficulty conjuring up dire scenarios in which I flew around unable to find a place to land until the fuel ran out. Ignoring watch and compass I would fly all the way down to the southern end of the parallel drains to the south of Willingham, where I could pick up the B1050, which I followed for four or five miles till it came to the level-crossing just south of Willingham, where I transferred to the railway and followed that till it came to Cambridge. Even then I would worry that I was going to miss the airfield itself. A lifesaver was Smoky Joe, a tall factory chimney which rose well clear of the other buildings to the west of the airfield, and I soon learned that the best way to see old Smoky was to keep well down so that he showed up clearly against the sky.

They worked us exceedingly hard; on a couple of days I did six trips, taking just under a total of six hours. This turned out to be the greatest intensity of flying that I have ever experienced. At the time we had nothing against which to compare it, so we assumed it must be normal. It couldn't have been all that debilitating as I was still looking for more and managed to cadge a passenger ride in an Airspeed Oxford with one of the Volunteer Reserve pilots. I found this intriguing. The Oxford was used during the war as a twin-engine trainer, and was still in operation at some of the training schools. The Reservists were using it to practise interceptions with the local radar defence controller. The pilot seemed a jolly type who let me fly it most of the time, although he seemed to my inexperienced eyes to be somewhat out of practice. The Oxford's engines were too big for hand swinging, and so they were started using a device known as an inertia starter. First a heavy flywheel is spun up to a good speed and then engaged with the engine shaft, which winds up as the former winds down. This kicks the engine over two or three times and is usually sufficient to get it going. If there was no external battery available it was possible to wind up the starters by hand with an external crank handle. This was really hard graft and involved the poor mechanic working away like a madman for several minutes before there was enough oomph in the flywheel. The first attempt to start failed and the ground crewman walked round for a minute or two to get his breath back. When the second attempt also failed I detected a certain tension building between him and the pilot. Rapping furiously on the canopy he shouted something that I didn't catch, and pointed vigorously in the direction of the centre panel. Looking a bit sheepish, the pilot leaned over and changed the position of some switches and the winding-up started all over again, this time to be rewarded with a cough and splutter as the engine, at last given the benefit of an ignition system, caught. I hoped that the pilot did not feel too embarrassed. When you are a complete beginner struggling with what seem like impossible demands, you are a little sympathetic for anyone in a similar position. We had a wonderful trip in conjunction with a second Oxford, chasing about following the instructions of the ground controller and taking it in turns to try to find each other as we played cat and mouse between big cumulus clouds.

To get our Private Pilot's Licence we had to do a solo three-leg cross-country with a landing at each of the two turning-points. I see that I had only two dual cross-country trips in preparation for the hurdle, and one of those was cut short because of bad weather. On the last but one day of the course I set off with map, log sheet and some misgivings for a round trip to Southend, forty-five miles to the south, a short hop across the Thames to Rochester and then back to Cambridge. Nowadays a straight line between Cambridge and Southend would take you slap through the Stanstead Control Zone, and you would have to go round this and keep below a scatter of different heights as you flew under the various extensions of the upper air traffic areas that now cover the approaches to London. In 1952

apart from a sprinkling of small airfields along the way, there were no obstacles or hazards to add the burdens of a complete beginner desperately trying to pay attention to his compass, height and speed at the same time as juggle with his map in the confines of a windy cockpit. A glance at the map will show that the instructors, in choosing the route for the qualifying cross-country, definitely had a cunning plan. You would have to be a very distracted student indeed to miss the Thames Estuary lying right across the track and miles wide. Canvey Island and, for the blinder student, the River Road conveniently indicated the aerodrome at Southend. This was a moderately busy grass airfield presenting no difficulties even to a tyro. I landed, parked where indicated and went into the control tower to get my form signed, providing the necessary proof that I had actually landed at the right place. A quarter of an hour later I was started up by one of the club mechanics and was on my way. Once again the choice of route pretty well guaranteed success. Rochester lies at the head of the Medway Estuary, which could be seen straight after take-off. This leg of the trip should have been completed in twenty minutes, but though finding the place was simple, getting down on it turned out to be a bit of a nightmare. Rochester was a small grass field situated on top of a hill right in the town and it sloped gently downwards from the touch-down point. The Tiger has no brakes, and I suddenly became completely obsessed with the idea that I would not be able to stop at the end of my landing run. I made circuit after circuit, sometimes touching down but opening up again because I feared I was too near the far boundary. I had not refuelled at Southend, and fear of running short of fuel added to my anxieties. In the end I gritted my teeth and concentrated on landing as short a distance as possible from the near hedge. Of course my fears were all nonsense as I stopped shortly after landing and didn't notice the slope in the least. I parked and went into the control tower to be greeted by the duty officer. 'What the hell have you been playing at, then?' His curt manner was understandable, as it had taken me over half an hour of going round and round to summon up the nerve to land. I mumbled an embarrassed apology and said that I had been having trouble with the downhill landing. He muttered something derogatory, and I was glad to get away out into the fresh air again. Doubtless he would ring up Cambridge and tell them of my inept performance, but at least he had signed my precious landing record. I cannot remember much of the trip back. Though it lacked the obvious major feature of the Thames, it was taking me back into an area some ten miles in diameter that had become pretty familiar over the past week. All the anxieties of the Rochester landing were behind me, and it was with the cheering thought that, with my cross-country in the bag, only another day's flying lay between me and my licence. As I taxied into the dispersal Lugs came out to meet me. I had to take my helmet off to hear that he was saying, 'Some people have all the luck!' I didn't understand what he meant, but when I climbed out he took me round to the back of the aircraft and pointed to the rudder. There, jammed in the crack between the fin and the rudder, was my issue white silk scarf. It might just as easily have been caught in the elevator and jammed it, with at the very least unpleasant consequences. As it was it must have just been fluttering out behind like a flag or streamer. I don't think I knew enough about the hazards of flying to appreciate my escape, and was instead rather pleased that the scarf hadn't disappeared over the side, as I would probably have had to pay for it.

We were not taught any aerobatics during the course, though we did three or four sessions of spins and recoveries dual. Towards the end of the time there was some clandestine discussion among the students on the subject of doing an illicit loop. Most of the others openly stated they weren't interested, they would be happy enough if they got through without breaking anything. One other lad said he had already looped, and though I wasn't sure I believed him I decided that honour would not be satisfied until I too had done one. On my last solo flight before my final handling ride I got well away from the airfield and climbed up to four thousand feet. I wasn't at all sure what speed I would need nor exactly what to do, but having read all my Biggies books at least twice, I had the general idea. I thought that I would do a stall turn first to get the feel of going up so steeply, unaware that

general this is considered a trickier manoeuvre than a loop, and in the Tiger is more likely to get you into trouble. As long as you could get out of a spin and didn't dive so fast that you pulled the wings off there wasn't much that could go wrong in aerobatics that would do more than give you a good fright except for one thing, and that was stopping the prop. Under normal circumstances the propeller would keep on windmilling even if the engine isn't working, but it was possible to mishandle a stall turn in such a way as to end up with a dead stick. The Tiger had no self-starter, so once the prop stopped you needed a very steep dive to kick it round and get it windmilling again. This dive took well over a thousand feet and it did not always do the trick. If you couldn't get the prop turning again then you had to do a forced landing in whatever fields were offering below. Had I realized this I have no doubt I would have made sure I was near to a nice big area, preferably one of the disused airfields that littered the surrounding country. However, ignorance is bliss, so I did a stall turn followed by a loop, after which I shot off guiltily at top speed in case an instructor had seen me from a distance and came seeking my aircraft number.

Before our forms were stamped as holders of a brand-new Private Pilot's Licence, we had to pass the ground exam. These days this involves getting by heart the contents of half a dozen fat books and taking as many written exam papers. It is all done very seriously in a formal classroom. Our 'textbook' was a slim pamphlet giving the rules of the air, in which we were exhorted to make sure we gave way to balloons and gliders. The exam was a single sheet of multiple-choice questions. Our instructor stood nearby and watched as our pencils hovered near the next possible choice. If it looked like going in the wrong box he coughed significantly. We all passed at the required standard, and our completed applications were dispatched to the Ministry of Civil Aviation. There were handshakes all round and, it being Friday, the course broke up, having completed thirty hours' flying in twelve hectic days. My school days were now behind me, and, pondering on what my future held, I staggered off home with my head slightly ringing.

## Basic Flying Training (April 1953 to April 1954)

Almost without realizing what I was doing, I had managed to outwit the system that was conspiring to replace my exotic dreams about flying with something sensible such as a career as a doctor. My father was not well, and I could see that both he and my mother were hoping that I would qualify and step into what was becoming an ever-widening breach. On the other hand, my housemaster, having thought he could detect a literary streak in my make-up, urged me to take up the Arts in the sixth form. Whenever I mentioned flying, which realistically meant the services, he made discouraging noises, so I shut up about it and went along with his suggestion, mainly because being in the Arts gave me more spare periods in the week than lessons. I spent an exquisitely idle year reading, playing sports and dreaming of flying. Increasingly aware that the full extent of my idleness was bound to be discovered as soon as it came to the exams, I took advantage of the continuing pressure from my parents to switch in midstream to the Science side. I was sent for interview to St Thomas's Hospital, where my father's uncle and grandfather had done their training, and was accepted providing I passed my exams at the end of the year. That year the new 'A' levels had just been introduced, and I was fully aware that it would take me a very serious effort to catch up enough to pass them. I was also aware that, if I failed, I would be eligible for deferment from National Service call-up for another year, since I was ostensibly studying for a medical degree. The exams came and went and, as expected, I failed them. No one seemed to be too upset, as my failure was attributed to the fact that I had only had one year instead of two on the Science side. One sunny afternoon, armed with the necessary documents, I was packed off to the National Service Recruiting Office in St Albans to arrange my deferment. In the window was a large poster showing a Meteor fighter. Underneath was a notice saying, 'Sign on for a four-year commission in the RAF and you are guaranteed to be flying within six months.' I knew that if you applied for aircrew as a National Serviceman there was very little chance of being trained as a pilot. You might get lucky, but they were not too keen on the idea, as National Service only lasted two years, so it was a high outlay for virtually no return. This idea of a short-service commission was something completely new to me. Instead of going to the desk for registering I went over to the office recruiting short-service commissions. Yes, the sergeant at the desk confirmed, what it said on the poster was true. When I explained that I had already passed the aircrew selection board and had obtained my civil licence on a Flying Scholarship he said that all I had to do was sign on the dotted line and I was in. Didn't I have to get something signed by my parents or school, I asked in surprise. 'Not at all', was the reply. 'As far as we are concerned you are now your own boss. Sign on the line and you are in.' I signed. I had left home a child perplexed as to how I was going to manage to survive the contradictory currents swirling around my future. I returned a man, entirely responsible for my own destiny, and Oh boy! Didn't it feel good!

Six months later, having survived the rigours of boot camp at the Initial Training School north of Lincoln, I reported to RAF Clunton, a flying training station situated in the wilds of Ulster. On my sleeve was a brand-new pilot officer's stripe, and I was the recipient of a salary of £16 a month, a



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