

255 Squadron RAF : Unofficial Diary

12th November 1942 to 25th December 1942

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At some time or other, the first few pages of the original document have had a soaking and are barely legible. Where totally illegible, recourse has been had to a typewritten copy held in the Lammer family archive.

Names of people and places, where known to be corrupted in the original, have been corrected so as to facilitate computer searches. Additionally, some abbreviations have been expanded in the interests of clarity. Please refer back to the original whenever a published quotation is to be made, citing the source as TNA:AIR27/1521.

The document is an unofficial Squadron diary covering the period between departure from RAF Honiley, Warwickshire, through to the time when the Squadron became firmly established in North Africa. This includes the disastrous period when the Beaufighters had been stripped of their airborne radar equipment on account of fear that secret technology might fall into enemy hands. In fact, the Mk.IV "AI" sets removed at Honiley before departure held little that might have been of interest to the Germans. They too had VHF/UHF radar ("Lichtenstein" radar, developed by Telefunken) fitted to night fighters such as the Bf.110-G4. The same could not be said of Allied Mk.VII, Mk.VIII and Mk.X radar sets used by 255 later in the war; those used microwave technology in ways unknown to the enemy until they captured examples of it.

Unlike the record contained in AIR27/1520, prepared by Ground Officers, the contemporary account transcribed here was written primarily from the standpoint of the aircrew and consequently gives much greater detail about the Squadron's forward base at Souk-el-Arba, Tunisia.

CE
Harrow, Middlesex
April 2018

The transcription:

This diary begins with November 12th, 1942, on which date a signal was received from Fighter Command to the effect that the squadron (which had been stationed at Honiley since June 1942) was urgently required for operations overseas and was to proceed to Portreath immediately.

The weather, however, was not fit for flying and the start had to be postponed until the following morning.

November 13th, 1942.

Everybody has got up at the crack of dawn and soon the camp is fairly humming with activity. The Mess Secretary's office presents a most unusual sight: A queue of officers who are eager to pay their mess bills! It is thought that the true reason for this phenomenon is the prospect of the horrible, ever-present vision of unrelenting sadistic Bank Managers becoming pleasantly blurred during the next few days.

At 10 o'clock all aircrew are ready at their flights - but there is a minor flap about the weather and No.9 Group decide at the last moment that we had better go via Fairwood Common¹ instead of taking the quickest route.

As only 18 Beaufighters are available, 5 out of a total of 23 aircrews have to go by sea - to a destination still unknown to us.

The following are going by air:

Wing Commander Kelly (Pilot) and Flight Lieutenant Lammer (Radio Navigator);

"A" Flight:

S/Ldr Eliot (Pilot) and F/O Lewis (Radio Navigator)
F/Lt J.D.Wright and P/O Sandow
F/O Graham and P/O Hickmore
F/O Humes and F/Sgt Sayer

¹ Then an RAF Station, now Swansea Airport.

F/O Wolley and F/Sgt Talbot
F/O Clarke and F/Sgt Biggs
P/O Cox and F/Sgt Croft
P/O Phillips and Sgt Pollard
F/Sgt Cameron and Sgt.J Hood

"B" Flight:

S/Ldr Player (Pilot) and F/O Wynzar (Radio Navigator)
F/O Wyrill DFC and F/Sgt Willins DFM
F/O Gloster and P/O Oswald
F/O Kench and F/Sgt Wall
P/O Greaves and W/O Robbins
P/O Kendall and P/O Hill
P/O Stephen and Sgt. W. Hood
P/O O'Sullivan and P/O Griffith

The squadron take off in sections of threes, the "Führer"² and his "Masterly Manipulator"³ being the first off at 12:35 hrs.

Portreath is safely reached after a flight of about 1 hr 10 mins - by all, that is to say, except Phil Kendall and Charlie Hill whose combined navigational skill has enabled them to visit the Scilly Islands and Portsmouth before joining the others at Portreath after 2 hrs 40 mins flying.

After lunch (which was consumed just short of tea time) our aircraft were lined up in the order of take-off. The next item on the programme was a lecture in the briefing room of the OADU in the course of which we were told that Gibraltar was our next destination. An American officer dished out some pukka gen on what to do or not to do when taken prisoner or in the event of a forced landing in Portugal or Spain and we also learned how to out-stare any Arab who might show himself reluctant to continue the friendly conversation which we hoped would follow our introductory "Salām alaïkum".

The second part of our briefing was decidedly more hectic and less enjoyable than the first.

2 Not Adolf Hitler! This was the Squadron's tongue-in-cheek nickname for their commanding officer, Piers Kelly.

3 For a decoder of this and other nicknames, see <www.255.org.uk/people.html#nicknames>.

Instead of neatly drawn-in tracks and fully prepared data which had been promised to our navigators (the qualifying word "radio" seemed to have been forgotten by the powers-that-be) a multitude of maps and charts of diverse scales was pushed into their unwilling hands with sadistic glee by a rather insolent and definitely unhelpful Flying Officer.

Owing to a complete lack of tables the ensuing efforts of sorting out maps and fighting for the only available ruler found the entire squadron spread out on the floor. A casual remark from one who obviously knew what he was talking about but at the same time was painfully ignorant of the nature of our navigational training, to the effect that all calculations had to be in knots, did little to cheer the sorely tried Radio Navigators.

November 14th, 1942.

We had hardly gone to bed when we were called again and breakfast was served at 4.00 am. A meteorological briefing followed and, owing to the extremely pessimistic nature of the weather forecast, caused alarm and despondency which, as events subsequently proved, was quite unjustified.

Of the two alternative routes the longer one following the Spanish and Portuguese coastline was chosen on account of the weather and the flight was carried out at a height of 2000'.

Wing Commander Kelly took off in the leading machine at first light (07:45 hrs)⁴ and the others followed at short intervals.

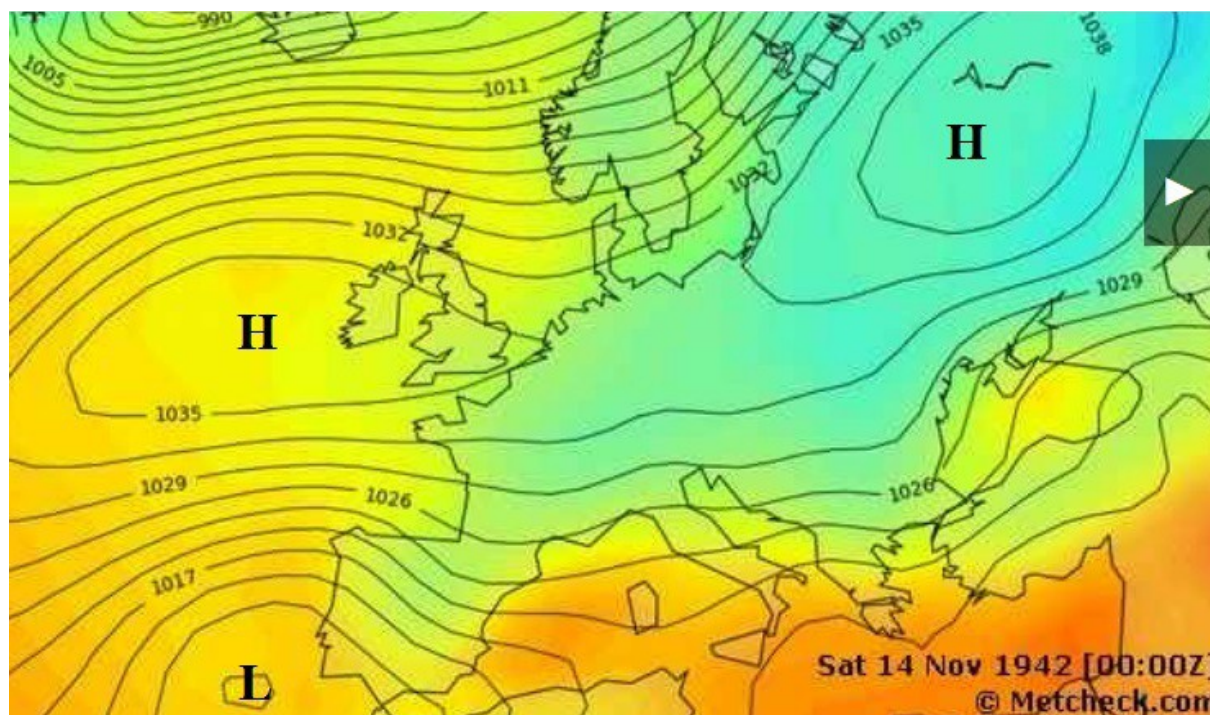
On the first long leg between the Scillies and Cap Finisterre the cloud⁵ varied from 1000' to 3000' but, instead of deteriorating as had been predicted the weather steadily improved as we went south and a good time was had by all.

Rumour has it that Squadron Leader Player and Pilot Officer Phillips espied some Arado seaplanes but considered it beneath their dignity to join battle with such inferior prey.

4 Clocks in the UK were on GMT+1 throughout the winter of 1942-43, having been on Double Summer Time through the Summer of 1942. The lateness of dawn at Portreath is also accounted for by the fact that it is a little over 5°W, adding about another 20 minutes to the sunrise time at Greenwich.

5 The author does not specify whether this was "cloud base" or "cloud top".

The following Synoptic Chart is not part of the original document:



This chart, the likes of which should have been available at the final briefing, indicates a strong East to South-Easterly wind that would have tended to blow the Beaufighters offshore as they passed Cap Finisterre and the northern part of the west coast of the Iberian Peninsular. Image credit: Metcheck.com.

The arrival at Gibraltar was impressive and the rock, bathed in sunshine and topped by a sinister cloud, together with the fleet in the harbour and the little aerodrome packed with planes, were a truly magnificent spectacle.

Viewing the scene from the other end, it is fairly safe to assume that the German "Duty Pilot" stationed at the Spanish frontier town La Linea must have had a headache trying to count all the Beaus that kept milling around the rock, queuing up for their turn to land. According to intercepted W/T messages this poor stooge has been terribly overworked recently counting Allied ships and aircraft and sent a warning to his government that he might drop down dead if they did not provide a relief for him soon.

Group Captain David Atcherley greeted us on arrival and informed us that our

final destination was not Blida, as had been intended, but Maison Blanche near Algiers, and that we would not proceed until the following morning.

Needless to say, hay was made while the sun was shining, as it were, and after a ruthless invasion of Messrs. Cable and Wireless Ltd., tobacconists, fruit and confectionery shops, the squadron settled down to an enjoyable evening in the town.

November 15th, 1942.

The briefing is short and sweet this time - in fact it merely consists of giving us the course to steer for Maison Blanche; but even so we cannot get away without acquiring another and even bigger roll of maps.

The humble diarist and his driver are off at 09:00 hrs and today - for the first time - the leading section of threes is complete (with Kendall and Stephen).

The flight might have been uneventful had it not been for the Führer's last-minute decision (before leaving Honiley) to carry Aldis lamps.

Having waggled his dihedral tailplane in the most cunning manner, thereby attempting to induce Nos. 2 and 3 of his section to form line astern, line abreast, Vic, Echelon port or Echelon starboard according to the violence of the wagging or some other mysterious code, and having failed to produce the desired result, the Führer then called upon his stooge and bade him to work the miracle with the aid of the above-mentioned blinking instrument.

A gallant attempt at signalling ensued, causing even greater confusion than before. On receiving "IMI"⁶ from Charlie Hill's position for the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ rd time, the Masterly Manipulator - urged on in no uncertain manner by the commanding voice in front - did his level best to convey the message "Line abreast" by sending one letter at a time and watching Charlie duck down to make a note before sending the next letter when (after an agonising pause) Charlie's head popped up again.

However, when at the end of this procedure the resulting formation turned out

⁶ "IMI" (the three individual letters run together as "Dit-Dit-Dah-Dah-Dit-Dit") is the Morse Code symbol for a Question Mark.

to be "Line astern" the Aldis lamp was finally discarded in disgust.

Fortunately the undaunted navigators involved in this operation were both well versed in the deaf and dumb language and as soon as this method of communication was adopted everything was just too easy.

Before making landfall the C.O. Decided to give the other chaps in his section a little practice in low flying, so down we went to 100 feet above sea level and twisted and turned - but although badly shaken (both Messrs. Stephen and Kendall being known to all as steady and cautious pilots) the "chaps" managed to hang on.

Maison Blanche was reached before lunch by all except Mike Gloster and Jim Oswald which crew was 'waterlogged' and had to remain at Gibraltar.⁷

The aerodrome being somewhat overcrowded we were forced to park our aircraft in the farthest corner. The next important item on the programme was lunch - and after many a fruitless search of apparently promising buildings the entire 255th eventually converged upon a café where an even larger and equally hungry mob was standing in a queue. We found that this was the one and only aircrew mess, so we patiently awaited our turn. When at last the golden gates were opened and we had eagerly devoured what we thought was the *hors d'oeuvre*, a waiter coldly informed us that we had had our lunch and pushed us out again. Famished, we dragged ourselves back to the aircraft which we proceeded to refuel. Lest there be any illusions on the subject, it should be explained that this did not mean, as it did in our more luxurious night fighting days (the paradox is intriguing) in England, that a bowser came rushing up and the ground crews were fairly flocking around the aircraft while the pilot and his R.N. were enjoying a cup of tea.

To start with, there were no ground crews, nor was there a bowser. There was petrol in plenty, it is true, but it was in 4-gallon tins and nowhere near our Beaus! However, a lorry was eventually scrounged to collect petrol tins from one of the numerous dumps on the aerodrome, and the slow process of refuelling from cans was completed just about as darkness descended on us.

Another palate-teaser at the aircrew café, and so to bed, or rather onto the

⁷ "Waterlogged" in this context means that the fuel they had taken on was contaminated by water.

blanket on the concrete floor of some huts near the aerodrome which the C.O. and Squadron Leader Eliot had found and requisitioned in the afternoon.

November 16th, 1942.

No peace for the wicked! The humble diarist and his exalted driver are sent off to Tébessa⁸ on a reconnaissance patrol to ascertain whether our paratroops, dropped in the vicinity two days previously, had captured the aerodrome. They had.

Meanwhile, at Maison Blanche, something happened which "Wilbur" Wright, our engineer officer, had been dreading like the plague. Our aircrews did their own Daily Inspections!! Fortunately, major damage was avoided owing to the laudable constraint on the part of most pilots and navigators who contented themselves with refuelling, topping up with oil, patting the engines and also the wings' leading edges in a hopeful gesture. Some pilots with an extra dose of nerve and a voice within their bosom that told them they were really cut out for the job of FME⁹ even went so far as to remove the cowlings and inspect the plugs. Full credit must be given to the sturdiness of the engines which survived this operation, and equally to the pilots for having enough common sense to refrain, without exception, from repeating such a hazardous undertaking.

The domestic side of the picture may also be worth noting: There is a two-seater concrete bath tub in the open outside our billets which enjoys great popularity. Not only are there swarms of people busily engaged either shaving, washing or doing their laundry, but there is also a continuous exhibition of nude bodies diving in and out of the tub which is filled with cold water except for the pansy boys who "can't take it".

Not a small problem is caused by the unusual type of lavatory with which all these conventional Englishmen suddenly find themselves confronted.

They call for an entirely new technique, lacking as they do any provision for a seat and a correspondingly restful attitude. Furthermore, they demand an accuracy of aim which can be obtained by the average human being only with

⁸ Approximately 20km short of the Algeria/Tunisia border.

⁹ Field Maintenance Engineer.

the aid of a first class bomb sight - so it is not so surprising that on the first morning "near misses" were the rule. However, just as there are a few men who rise to great heights of fame in their various professions, in art or literature all over the world, so we, too, can proudly point to our one brilliant exception. Let us not quarrel whether he achieved distinction owing to his inborn talent or through a careful, scientific approach to the problem, but let us praise unanimously our gallant "B" Flight commander who scored a direct hit every time!

The squadron has not yet assumed any night flying duties - mainly because our aircraft are not fitted with the all-important "Gubbins"¹⁰.

"Blondie" has not often been known to waste a perfectly good evening and, having been thoroughly reliable in this respect, he set off with Paddy Clarke to explore Algiers (which is only 11 miles away) and search for places of interest, for future reference. To his most profound disappointment, however, the expedition ended in dismal failure for he was caught in a thoroughly respectable place, to wit: the '*Restaurant de Paris*' which, in view of the available Nectar and Ambrosia¹¹, his companion firmly refused to leave.

November 17th, 1942.

The honour of the first prang on North African soil fell to Squadron Leader Player. Having put his beloved "T"¹² on the runway with the usual care, he discovered that the Gremlins (probably annoyed by the fact that J.P., quite contrary to his habit, used both engines for the landing) had sucked all the pressure out of the brakes and put oil on the brake drums as well when, to cap it all, an undercarriage tail-wheel Gremlin on his first operational trip thought he'd show the boys the stuff he was made of and gave the tail an unprecedented shove to starboard. This was too much even for Johnnie Player's skill (and the undercart's strength).

Some of us are hopefully sent off on dusk patrols [here there is a marginal note "J.D.Wright, Geoff Humes" in the original] as a poor view was taken of

10 The Mk.IV AI sets, nicknamed "the Gubbins", had been removed for the flight from the UK as a precaution against the secret technology being captured by pro-Axis forces in the event of a crash-landing en route.

11 Suspected drafting error in the original. Possibly should be read as "*Nectar and Ambrosia*", meaning the Food and Wine of the Greek Gods.

12 A reference to a particular aircraft stating only the second part of its Squadron Code. In full: "YD-T".

the bombs and booby traps which Jerry had dropped on us unopposed (except by A.A. Fire) in the early hours of the morning. A few soldiers who could not resist the temptation to pick up what they thought were some buckshee thermos flasks were badly injured.

No-one, however, entertained the slightest fear that a similar fate might befall any member of 255 Squadron since their abstinence from tea or any other drink likely to be encountered in a thermos flask is known to everyone.

November 18th, 1942.

Our Daily Inspections have become a little less strenuous and certainly less haphazard, for we are getting assistance from 154, 43 and 241 Squadron who are lending us some of their ground crews.

255 Squadron seem to have been saddled with a lot of ferrying jobs which are not apt to improve our serviceability but are difficult to refuse as long as we are minus A.I.

There was some night flying, but no Hun activity.

November 19th, 1942.

The culinary aspect of life has improved somewhat as we have begun to feed at the Officers Mess and said good-bye to the House of Famine (i.e. the Aircrew Café).

Regular hitch-hiking traffic into Algiers is now established and frequently used by the most ambitious members of the squadron. Even if there is nothing much to do when one gets there, it is better than doing nothing in the camp.

November 20th, 1942.

One of the local inns at Maison Blanche village, the Hôtel St. Georges, has been requisitioned by Group Captain David Atcherley as a mess for the officers of 255 Squadron and will doubtless provide a greater measure of comfort than has been hitherto enjoyed.

This evening will not easily be forgotten by those who were on the aerodrome, for it brought to them the first major blitz, and owing to its concentration rather than its size it was a nasty experience.

It was a bright moonlit night and conditions were all in favour of the raiders as the visibility was excellent and there were no AI-equipped aircraft available; nor was there a G.C.I. Station working at that time.

Although it is thought that only a dozen or less German bombers carried out the raid on the 'drome they did considerable damage, scoring hits on hangers and aircraft and starting many fires.

It was during this intense period of the raid that the squadron suffered a great loss; F/O Hugh Wyrill DFC (of "B" Flight) was killed by shrapnel as he was going to his plane to take off.

His radio navigator, F/Sgt 'Jock' Willins DFM, who was already waiting in the aircraft, fortunately got away with severe fractures of his right arm and splinter wounds.

Three of our Beaufighters, three Flying Fortresses (one with crew) and several Spitfires and Lightnings were completely destroyed by bombs or fire and at least five Beaus and many other aircraft damaged; and 14 people were killed and others injured.

A number of Beaufighters, Fortresses and Spitfires were either taxied or hauled away from the danger area during the raid by W/Cdr Kelly, F/O Graham, F/O Woolley, P/O Greaves, P/O Hickmore, an unknown Spitfire pilot and F/Sgt Barker of the REME Corps.

The less said about the Masterly Manipulator's own taxiing efforts the better, except that despite the incipient ground loop with which he started his brief career as an earthbound pilot, his F/Lt stripes convinced Doug Greaves (who had come up through the hatch to see what idiot was driving the aircraft) that this Beau was completely manned after all!

Two Beaus were airborne at the time and one of these, occupied by Messrs. Kendall and Hill, was used for target practice by the Navy.

Their aim must have been accurate in view of Charlie's report that he found the colour of his Heavy Duty dress most serviceable.

Bob Graham and Hickie were so eager to get at the Hun that they entrusted their lives to a damaged aircraft and took off in "C" - but having neither luck nor jinkbox¹³ their gallant effort was in vain.

November 21st, 1942.

Another "joy ride" this morning : W/Cdr Kelly and the humble scribe, escorted by Cameron Cox and Peter Croft in a Beau, as well as by six Spitfires, took the A.O.C. to Bône, a forward aerodrome 250 miles east of Maison Blanche.

The trip there was uneventful though on landing some difficulty was experienced in sorting the wheat from the chaff, or the runways from the perimeter track.

When after a most enjoyable lunch the diarist and Cameron were whiling away the time on one of the aircraft, the latter (seated in the cockpit) giving the former (standing on the wing) some pukka gen on the theory of taxiing through the opened top hatch they were most rudely interrupted by the whistling, hissing and splattering of machine gun bullets and cannon shells which, as somewhat hasty observation showed, were directed at them from three Me.109e's¹⁴ which had sneaked out of the cloud. Before they dropped their one bomb each, the said pilot had taken a headlong plunge through the front hatch and the R.N. had slid down the wing - and by the time the bomb burst both engines were primed and W/Cdr Kelly appeared on the scene. While Cameron was racing over to his aircraft, the Führer and his stooge got into the air with the minimum delay - in fact the take-off was effected cross-wind, across a runway, through some petrol tins and between a flock of Spits, with all three hatches open and neither pilot nor R.N. being strapped in or wearing parachutes.

Cameron, who took off only a few seconds later, was seen with his aircraft still on the ground going full bore for a group of trees and a Spitfire. The worst was feared by the onlookers, but the situation was saved by J.C.Cox who had a

13 Another nickname for an AI Set.

14 Misnomer; should say Bf.109e.

brainwave, put down full flap and went up to 1000' like the express lift in a New York skyscraper.

The Messerschmitts having disappeared into the cloud whence they had come, the Beaus and Spits proceeded to orbit base, eyeing each other with the utmost suspicion.

Since it was found that the hydraulic system of "B" was hit and out of action, our distinguished passenger was left to Cameron's care and we returned to Maison Blanche where our aircraft (with unlocked undercarriage and minus flaps) was ably pranged by the C.O.

Another raid on Maison Blanche was carried out this evening though on a much smaller scale than last night's.

Cameron Cox and the diarist, who had just successfully completed the process of getting outside a hearty supper and appeared on the aerodrome after a soul-shattering ditch crawl, found the offices deserted and the duty pilot stymied because the only available telephone line to Ops. had gone U/S.

During the ensuing search for a serviceable Beau which had proved fruitless as far as the remnants of the once proud fleet of 255 Squadron were concerned, they came upon a brand new and apparently sound Beaufighter of 600 Squadron.

Smacking their lips, the smirky poacher souls set upon their dirty work and lustily prepared for take-off when a sepulchral voice informed them that, apart from the fact that the aircraft had not been refuelled, the starboard engine had cut twice on take-off and the machine was most decidedly U/S.

Since the voice belonged to the unhappy pilot and it was obviously a case of having had it, the two thieves resigned themselves to their fate with a certain amount of relief.

A little earlier the same evening, we find the Führer restless and lonely, but determined to get at the Flaming Huns.

Suddenly he can bear it no longer, leaps into the aircraft and, with his usual confidence in the ground crews and his stooge (none of whom being,

unfortunately, present at the time) takes off with both hatches open, undercarriage locking pins securely in, and the cannons on "SAFE".

In view of this singular act of faith it has been decided to make an immediate award of "The Most Highly Derogatory Order of the Irremovable Finger" to this pilot and to grant him the use of the initials D.P.D.G.K.P.Y.F.O.

November 22nd, 1942.

A bar was added to the order bestowed last night when the aircraft, which was parked at Blida overnight, was found there this morning with switches "ON", pitch control in "Coarse" and flap lever in the "UP" position.

We have established ourselves in our new home, the Hôtel St. Georges, and today we held our first mess meeting. S/Ldr Player was elected Mess President; F/Lt J.D.Wright, Mess Secretary; and F/O Lewis, Messing Officer.

The officers have to clean their own rooms, sinks, lavatories, passages and stairs as there are at present no batmen available - but the owners of the inn, Mr. Pères and family, do the cooking (including heating our rations) and continue to run the bar. The latter is well frequented and the prevailing rate of exchange being Frs. 300 : £1, even champagne is extraordinarily cheap (50 Fr. a bottle!)¹⁵.

Unlike our previous billets, the lavatories here are of the ordinary "Home" pattern - much to the chagrin of our Kingpin squadron leader who is thus robbed of an opportunity of exercising his unmatched skill.

Rumours to the effect that he was seen standing on the seat with a wistful look in his eyes should be discredited, though it must be admitted that the happy expression of proud challenge has recently disappeared from his face.

The change-over to the more orthodox type of WC has, on the other hand, made at least one man happy. Ronnie Wynzar, who likes to enjoy a quiet hour in the seclusion of the said locality every morning - in fact it is known to be his favourite place for reading the baser type of French novel - has been feeling the strain on his tendons lately and is greatly relieved to find he can continue

¹⁵ Fifty *centimes* as the Franc became from 1960, in consequence of the "New Franc" being defined as 100 Old Francs. Use of the French "New Franc" did not last long in Algeria, the country gaining its independence on 5 July 1962.

to indulge in his hobby in perfect comfort.

It is announced that two pilots were today mentioned in despatches; one is F/Sgt Cameron who taxied his steed into a bomb crater from which it emerged (assisted by the Repair and Salvage Unit) with bent sternframe and minus tail wheel; the other is F/O Graham who, it is rumoured, actually saw "his" bomb crater but dared it to get out of his way. The bomb crater won the bet.

The Sultan of Sopley, alias Squadron Leader Brown, arrived today accompanied by his toy¹⁶ and both were heartily welcomed - the former with spirits at the Hôtel St. Georges and the latter just in spirit.

November 23rd, 1942.

Peter Dunning-White arrived in great form and took a flying leap at the bar where he implored the somewhat bewildered Monsieur Pères to give him something to drink, for God's sake. Seeing that the poor man just didn't understand, Peter quickly changed his tactics and pointed at the nearest bottle of Champagne in his best French.

It must be understood that this unfortunate officer who is not accustomed to the substitution of Eno's fruit salts for the more gentle and decidedly more enjoyable laxative properties of alcoholic beverages has been exposed to hardships of a strictly "dry" voyage for some considerable time and his desire to pour as much of the juice of life into his parched interior with as little delay as possible is therefore only natural.

F/Sgt Cunningham also turned up today with three A.I. mechanics and completely equipped with A.I. test gear - but, unfortunately, with no A.I. to test.

There was a German raid on the port of Algiers in the evening and some Beaus were sent up.

The Führer and the humble scribe went off in one of them (after some prolonged taxying, the duration of which necessitated the changing of the colours of the day, and not before a reconnaissance party consisting

¹⁶ A deliberately oblique reference to a COL (Chain Overseas Low) Radar Station.

of G/Cpt Atcherley and Geoff Humes had established on which side of the mutilated flare path the runway was situated) and patrolled the Ack-Ack infested skies for four hours and fifteen minutes.

This freelance enterprise, like the preceding ones, was not crowned with success, nor was a later one under G.C.I. control, despite ideal weather conditions. How we miss our gubbins!

November 24th, 1942.

Our senior NCOs have now moved to the new Sergeants' Mess, the Hôtel de France at Maison Blanche village, and F/Lt Dunning-White, DFC, is their Mess President.

The weather has turned cold all of a sudden and only the very toughest officers (and the best fed, like our gallant and honourable member from Derby) can now be seen in shorts.

Jerry has now complete confidence in the ability of 255 Squadron to finish off the few remaining Beaus themselves and has therefore decided to leave the aerodrome in peace and concentrate his mighty effort on Algiers and shipping in the bay.

This evening the Navy welcomed him with a hot greeting but unfortunately extended their reception to our friend O'Sullivan whose 'plane was hit and who had to return to base.

With one eye blinded by a perspex splinter and the other by rain, he made a commendable attempt to land "E" for Edward on both wheels but, alas, the gremlins thought this a golden opportunity for adding to past glory and pulled his wing down quickly, which caused the aircraft to rotate viciously before settling down to the inevitable prang.

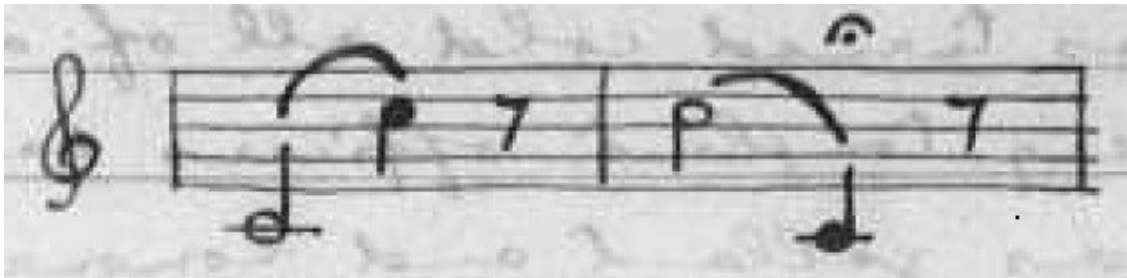
Bob Griffith, cunning navigator he was, unlocked his seat with great presence of mind and, defying the laws of gravity, spun round in the opposite direction in order to avoid getting giddy.

Johnnie Player, who has also been fired at while on patrol but was quite

An annotated transcript of UK National Archives document AIR27/1521.

prepared to continue despite a doubtful starboard engine, was hastily assured by his Back Seat Occupant (this being the official aircrew category to which our radio navigators have, in recognition of their new duties, been re-mustered) that in the circumstances bed was a far, far better place than the treacherous skies.

J.P., who is not easily caught racking his brains for a suitable reply, said "MMMMMMMMMMMM" to the tune of:



..... which in this case obviously expressed consent since there was no immediate prospect of a single-engined approach - one of Johnnie's favourite pastimes.

November 25th, 1942.

Peter Dunning-White risked the squadron's all by taking up "THE" 255 Sqn. Beaufighter - but did not succeed in writing it off.

In view of our sadly depleted stock it did not surprise us to hear that six Beaufighter crews complete with aircraft, spare parts and mechanics are due to arrive tomorrow from Egypt (via Malta) to take over our night defence until 255 have got themselves organized. A plan was immediately hatched for the prevention of poaching on the 255th's sacred grounds and it was decided to treat the intruders liberally with champagne and lure them to Algiers while our crews, stone-cold sober as usual, made for the aerodrome to fly their 'planes with the precious gubbins.

In any case our hopes are raised once more as a signal has been received ordering 12 crews to return to England and fetch a dozen brand new Beaus. The lucky devils picked out for this most desirable job are:

S/Ldr Eliot DFC and F/O Lewis
F/Lt J.D. Wright and P/O Sandow
F/O Graham and P/O Hickmore
F/O Humes and F/Sgt Sayer
F/O Woolley and F/Sgt Talbot
F/O Clarke and F/Sgt Biggs
P/O Phillips and Sgt Pollard
P/O Cox and F/Sgt Croft
P/O Greaves and W/O Robbins
P/O Kendall and P/O Hill
P/O Stephen and Sgt. W. Hood
P/O O'Sullivan and P/O Griffith

Tony Kench, who was originally on the list, had to stand aside for one of the married types but was immediately rewarded by the CO who conferred on him the honour of being appointed our Squadron Adjutant (acting).

November 26th, 1942.

Twelve pilots and R.N.'s were sent off to Gibraltar this morning. One bunch, however, were turfed out of their Douglas DC3 as soon as they had made themselves comfortable and did not go until after lunch. Among them was Phil Kendall who, on returning to the Hôtel St. Georges, was completely lost as he could not find his own room. The explanation was that during his brief absence it had been tidied up by Ronnie Wynzar and the diarist, this presenting a strange sight to its occupant.

The 89 Squadron detachment from the Middle East arrived and at once proceeded to make themselves comfortable in our offices which they were good enough to clear of our files, furniture and flying kit (with an eagerness that may almost be described as indecent haste) on our behalf though not exactly with our consent.

The grim determination thus displayed by our rival warriors of the skies, coupled with a terrible keenness that shone from their eyes and made us realise that they were thirsting for action and would not easily be led astray; and that it would take our utmost skill to divert them from their stern task

and direct their savage instinct into the more pleasurable channels of enjoyment available in Algeria's capital.

Our last spark of hope, however, did not flicker for long - it was prematurely extinguished when it transpired that our well laid scheme had been ruined by the dirty work of a fifth columnist who sneaked up to our prospective victims and informed them that a certain establishment known by the name of "Sphinx" (which constituted the focal point of our plans) was no longer on night readiness as its gates closed at sundown by order and for the pleasure of the General commanding the town.

November 27th, 1942.

To everybody's great surprise a Flying Fortress arrived in the afternoon, filled to the brim with real "Gubbins"!

After a somewhat frigid reception by higher authority F/Lt Ellis, the RDF king in charge of this precious cargo, was ultimately captured by F/Lt Dunning-White, DFC, and led in triumph to the Officers' Mess at the Hôtel St. Georges.

The question of whether the A.I. equipment was meant for ourselves or for the rival 600 Squadron was amicably discussed over a glass of vin rouge and satisfactorily settled during the 7th round of "Yo-Yo".

89 Squadron added insult to injury by greedily indulging in a mass murder of He.111s before our envious eyes - four Huns being confirmed as destroyed and one as probable. Congratulations, blast them!

November 28th, 1942.

Peter Dunning-White has definitely adopted the newly-born A.I. baby and become a most efficient mother, giving unstintingly of his milk of wisdom and sparing no labour in the good cause.

Some cynics have ventilated the question why this officer, who does not normally profess any intimate knowledge of this (to him, mysterious) equipment should show such sudden and unexpected interest therein.

One possible solution of this extremely puzzling problem suggests that during his recent solo flight in "S" (which aircraft is said to harbour the most powerful of R/T gremlins) he could obtain no navigational aids from the outside world and, in the absence of Cobber Kane's authoritative instructions, was cruelly left to his own devices.

Poor Peter found this a most shattering experience and indeed he might even have had to bale out over water - a distasteful thought - had not his guardian angel wisely arranged for a consignment of champagne to arrive at the Hôtel St. George at that moment, thus enabling Peter's natural homing instinct to guide him safely back to the village of Maison Blanche whence he managed to find his way to the aerodrome without any further help.

His safe arrival, however, did not blind him to the fact that good fortune had saved him from an awful fate and that an A.I. set, a homing beacon and an operator must be considered absolute necessity for any future aerial adventure.

In pursuit of his new aim in life, Peter included himself in a search party consisting of two magicians (Messrs. Kownacki and Ellis, both of whom are obvious A.I. infant prodigies), P/O Oswald, the humble scribe and 'Titch' Gloster. The latter was accommodated in the toolbox of the 15cwt truck to save space, but this did not prevent him from making his voice heard as loudly and as often as possible, as is his custom regardless of the circumstances.

The object of search was a Petrol-Electric Set which, so the magicians said, was sorely needed and which, therefore, Peter said they must have.

Having combed an Air Stores Park, the transit camp at Hussein-Day¹⁷ and the docks at Algiers our little party was encircled by several rolls of lavatory paper, some yards of soft cloth (scrounged in the hope that it might be useful and because it was too good to be left at Air Stores Park) and a most colossal appetite - but was still without the Petrol-Electric Set.

A council was held and with remarkable unanimity the conclusion was reached that the most important item on the programme was the feeding of the ravenous beast called the inner man. The party, invigorated by this happy

¹⁷ A suburb of Algiers.

thought, immediately adjourned to Algiers where a short snifter at the Hôtel de Paris was followed by a sumptuous meal at the Hôtel Oasis.

Today being the birthday of the diarist, the anniversary was welcomed as an excuse for a little intoxication and when the party left the scene of merriment with glowing faces it was obvious that the petrol-electric set had pleasantly faded into the dimmer regions of the brain and that everybody considered the main objective achieved.

November 29th, 1942.

Good old Peter Dunning-White is in the news again! This afternoon he went over to the Air France hangar to take away his own darling "L" which the Repair and Salvage Unit had resurrected from the pranged.

Unfortunately, the red section of the Gremlin squadron on readiness had spotted their victim as he came across from the Hôtel St. Georges and the three little beggars were therefore ready for the kill the moment the unsuspecting Peter started to taxi.

A suitable ditch was found a bare 50 yards from the starting point and the rest was just too easy; the starboard wing and undercarriage seemed to be a perfect fit for the available cavity.

Of course the gremlins laughed like hell when Red 2 (F/Sgt Dirtiwick) who had just been awarded the Distinguished Beaufighter Pranging Medal, told them the story of how Peter, whose face had assumed the colour of his greatcoat lining, had told his Flight Commander that he had no explanation for the accident and that the Beau just went into the ditch for no apparent reason at all - - - - -

November 30th, 1942.

Having found their handkerchiefs and underwear just a little off the original PERSIL white after a fortnight's continual use, the types decided that something had better be done about their laundry.

Everybody being agreed that Ronnie Wynzar held the honorary title of Master

Scrounger unchallenged, he was sent off to secure some soap - an article not known to the natives of Algeria, incidentally.

With uncanny instinct he made straight for a Naval store, dished out a little "Bull" and in return received enough soap to keep the squadron clean for a month.

Another French lorry (plus driver) was added to the squadron's already stately fleet of motor vehicles provided by our friend "Monsieur le Commandant". All we want now is a Humber Snipe for our Führer and, to use his own words, the squadron will be "getting somewhere".

The humble scribe appeared particularly elated today and the source of pleasure was found to be a genuine gubbins which produced, after some knob-twiddling, an actual blip during the course of a Night Flying Test - a joy unknown to the Masterly Manipulator and his fellow BSOs (the reader presumably remembers the new aircrew category specially created for 255) for many months.

Peter Dunning-White and his temporary adviser in navigational matters, Jimmy Oswald, were sent up on patrol this evening. The wily Hun, however, smelled the presence of A.I. and stayed away.

"Smelled" was right, incidentally, as the entire gubbins suddenly went up in smoke - causing Peter to make a landing in record time.

December 1st, 1942.

The 89 Squadron detachment who were supposed to have moved to a forward aerodrome returned to Maison Blanche, rather disappointed.

Our dispersal hut which, besides ourselves, has to accommodate telephone orderlies, 89 Squadron, ground crews, army liaison staff and other odds and bods, does not leave much room for orderly storage of flying equipment - in fact it presents a dreadful shambles, though the situation was eased a little by putting up camp beds for the aircrews on readiness and piling up our own kit around them.

The jinkbox experts managed to fit four of our aircraft with A.I. and to build

a "mother"¹⁸ from bits and pieces out of crashed machines - a stout effort from a small team of men.

December 2nd, 1942.

Cameron Cox and Geoff Humes returned from England in two brand new Beaus. Apparently their keenness to get at the Hun was such that when they heard of 89 Squadron's success they volunteered to take two aircraft back to Maison Blanche immediately, thus forfeiting a well-deserved 48 hours' leave.

With them they brought some fairy tales of pukka RAF stores which are supposed to be entirely free from a commodity usually found in a farmyard but also known in more 'informed' circles as "red tape". Apparently one walks into the equipment section at Lyneham and, instead of having to adopt the usual Stores procedure of knocking on, and eventually smashing, a window with a label on it which says "Closed to all ranks outside regular hours of issue (i.e. Wednesdays, 0745 - 0800 hrs)" whereupon an irate sergeant emerges with a red face and his mouth full and complains that a man who works himself to the bone can't even have his cup o' tea in peace and what the 'ell do you want 'ere anyway - instead of this customary formality an obliging voice says "Can we do anything for you, Sir?" or "What would you like to take with you, Flight?" and the poor officer or NCO, so unexpectedly confronted with this phenomenon, is stunned and utterly incapable of naming anything.

However, the POLITE VOICE is there again, ready to help, and suggests: "Perhaps a new parachute, Sir, or a Mae West and helmet, and maybe a new Irvin jacket¹⁹ would be useful?"

The man in dreamland just mumbles "Yes, please" and, after regaining consciousness, begins to think of other things he could do with until finally he walks out of the place resembling Father Christmas. He still has a slightly worried look upon his face because his memory conjures up horrible pictures of a formidable list of items on his clothing card to the return as repayment of which he has to commit himself with his signature, and of various chits and voucher numbers so-and-so, duly signed by the section and squadron commander in triplicate and approved by the accountant officer.

18 Nickname for a homing beacon that produced a distinctive blip on Mk.IV A.I. screens.

19 A highly desirable sheepskin and leather flying jacket; see RAF Museum Shop website for current price.

However, he is told by a most delightful WAAF corporal that NOTHING whatsoever is to be signed and, rubbing his eyes, he walks away quickly lest someone should awaken him from his dream!

The Führer left us today for an unknown Eastern destination to do an unknown job for an indefinite period of time. No questions asked!!

His aircraft "S" which was pulled out of the juiciest bit of mud available on the aerodrome (having been placed there with great foresight by Peter Dunning-White) suffered a slight bending of its undercarriage in the process.

It appears that 255 Squadron are losing the race upon which they entered with Messrs. Repair and Salvage Unit - for as fast as we are able to prang Beaufighters so the RSU (together with No.4 Mobile Service Unit) make them serviceable again.

Squadron Leader Passy of 89 Squadron had a hunch during the night, got up at 2am, took off and soon after shot down a Heinkel He.111 near Djidjilli.

Unfortunately our spies have not been able to locate the divining rod which he presumably carries with him on such occasions.

December 3rd, 1942.

Our Master Scrounger (Ronald Wynzar) and his runner-up (Cunning Dunning-Black) raided the local NAAFI most professionally this morning, wasting little time on unnecessary articles of luxury such as toilet soap, toothpaste or boot polish, instead concentrating their efforts in a most praiseworthy manner on essential commodities, to wit: Gordon's dry gin and White Horse whisky.

Full credit must here be given to the self-effacing altruism of our Saint Peter who, detesting as he does spirits of any kind, invested nearly all his (North African) fortune for the purpose of setting aside some liquor for his thirsty colleagues.

Despite the valiant efforts on the part of RSU and MSU, the general serviceability is far from good; in fact it is giving our deputy squadron commander Johnnie Player a severe headache. So desperately was this matter

preying on his mind that he was ready to seek escape from it, if only for a few moments, by whatever means available.

Not being given by nature to such diversions as tearing his hair out, or pounding his own head with his fists or running round the perimeter track half a dozen times, J.P. in his own quiet way obtained relief for his tormented mind by retiring to a lone room and studying the natural history of the louse!

December 4th, 1942.

More precious A.I. sets have arrived in a C.47 from Gibraltar - it never rains but it pours!

Arlette, our cheerful waitress at the "St. Georges" is leaving us for reasons not stated and, we are assured on good authority, not connected in any way with 'Blondie' whose well-progressing French lessons have now unfortunately come to an end.

December 5th, 1942.

The squadron's hopes were suddenly raised to unprecedented heights today! After years of stooging and three tantalising weeks of "taking it" on the ground without a chance to reciprocate, we are at last to be given an opportunity of doing the job for which we have been trained. An order has come through for three crews to go to our most forward aerodrome in Tunisia, Souk-El-Arba²⁰, from where 89 Squadron crews are already operating.

The idea of working a night fighter squadron so close to the front is a novel one, the tradition being a restriction of its activities to home defence.

The more courageous policy adopted by the powers-that-be in this particular instance may well become an eye-opener to the hitherto unexplored possibilities of night fighters being used close to the front as a direct support for our attacking forces!

S/Ldr Player is in charge of the advance party and, Ronald Wynzar being on the sick list, is taking the humble scribe as his operator for lack of a better

²⁰ Since 1966 known as Jendouba.

stooge.

The other two crews are F/O Humes and F/Sgt Sayer and F/O Gloster and P/O Oswald.

We set out from Maison Blanche at 15:50 and landed at Souk-el-Arba one and a half hours later.

As we were supposed to be operating the same night, we proceeded to look around for someone to give us the "gen" - but nobody seemed to be interested in our little party. Eventually some members of 89 Squadron were contacted at the "operations room", i.e. a field telephone on a couple of petrol tins somewhere on the aerodrome. Luxuries such as a dispersal hut, aerodrome control officer, petrol bowser and a runway clear of Spitfires are evidently not known here, and letter and colours of the day are fixed by mutual agreement among the aircrews on readiness!

Standing patrols under Bône GCI control started at dusk, 89 Squadron providing the first two aircraft.

Squadron Leader Player and the humble scribe took off next and patrolled for 5 hrs 20 mins but there was not a single Hun in the sky.

Shortly afterwards, however, things began to look up for the 255th nocturnal pursuit squadron²¹ when Geoffrey Humes and Johnnie Sayer were able to start our score in North Africa by shooting down two Heinkel 111s. Nice work!

The excitement over our first success had only just abated when news was heard that "Titch" Gloster, ably directed by Jim Oswald, was sitting on the tail of another Jerry - but as soon as the full story came out there was no end to our cheering.

Young Mike had shot down three He.111s in one patrol - all of them, as a matter of fact, within the space of less than half an hour!

Johnnie Player and the Masterly Manipulator took to the air again at 4am, somewhat tired but full of hopes, but apparently Jerry had "called it a day for that night" and our two intrepid stooges retired to breakfast at the cookhouse

21 The wording "255th nocturnal pursuit squadron" is a dig at the Americanisms creeping into "RAF-speak".

after flying on vectors 290° and 110° for a total of eight and a half hours. Browned off? No, just thoroughly "brassed"!

December 6th, 1942.

Our billets are in a school close to the aerodrome and consist of sufficient space (and no more) for a camp bed in a rather crowded room; we feed together, brass hats and erks alike, at the cookhouse.

Whoever organised the food supply for the present campaign deserves a gong - for nobody could grumble about the quality or variety of our "composite rations" which are all a hungry man needs and more.

Two Beaus arrived with the two Camerons (Flying Officer Cox and Flight Sergeant Tommy) and their better halves - no doubt pilots will here protest and radio navigators will agree - all of them thirsting for action.

In accordance with our mutual agreement which provides for the choice of order of take-off being given to the pilot who has had the least luck previously, Johnnie Player and his borrowed knob-twiddler, the humble diarist, took off at 8pm and were almost immediately given vectors by "Ping Pong" after a Hun. Contact was obtained and, in the course of closing in, the following conversation developed:

Freddie Lammer:	"Range now 1500 feet, he is dead ahead and 30° above, ASI 180 ²² ."
Johnnie Player:	"Mmmmmm".
Freddie:	"Up 200"
Johnnie:	(Silence)
Freddie:	"Did you hear me say 'Up 200'?"
Johnnie:	"Yeeeeeeeeessss".
Freddie:	"Can you see him?"
Johnnie:	"Yeeeeeeeeessss".

22 Air Speed Indicator 180 mph, *not* 180 knots.

It was a Henikel 111, that was, and incidentally it gave the Sultan of Sopley, our ace controller Squadron Leader J. Brown, OBE²³, his hundredth Jerry destroyed. Congratulations on the first century!

Far from resting on his laurels, S/Ldr Brown continued his fruitful work but this time Jerry had the better of us. Contact was obtained in an astern chase at a height of 11,000' but all the poor Beau could do, with 280 mph on the clock and its tongue hanging out, so to speak, was to hang on - and as soon as the E/A opened up it was a case of "having had it".

Nothing daunted, J.P. asked for another customer and soon a chase developed, resulting after much zig-zagging and altering height and speed (which was at the time ascribed to clever evasive action but from the only survivor's story later proved to be just bad instrument flying) in a visual on a three-engined Italian job - first thought to be a S.M.79 but later confirmed as one of the almost identical CANT Z.1007bis aircraft.

While the overjoyed pilot and radio navigator were watching the enemy aircraft's rapid and well illuminated progress towards the ground, another blip appeared on the gubbins entirely of its own accord and after a brief chase resulted in a visual on another CANT. Identification on the exhaust flames proved somewhat tricky in this case since only two out of the three engines were working or being used - but after a good look from underneath the silhouette left no room for doubt and the ITI was duly downed.

Meanwhile Cameron Cox and Peter Croft had not been idle, either, and everybody was delighted to learn that this keen and efficient crew had despatched a Heinkel 111 to the place where it ought to be.

Nine 'bandits' in two nights makes a most auspicious beginning to the hitherto unfortunate 255th and breaks the spell of inactivity in a heart-warming manner.

"Blondie" Humes, on coming in to land, all of a sudden conceived the idea that the aircraft he was flying ("J") would look really more streamlined without its ugly tail wheel. Translating his thought into action, he succeeded with uncanny skill in ridding his Beau of the said projection and though he may have felt a little naughty he undoubtedly felt even more pleased with himself!

²³ Transcribed here as written in the original, but actually MBE.

Unfortunately the night's good hunting was marred by a tragic accident. Flight Sergeant Cameron hit a lorry (which was rather close to the Chance light and showed no obstruction lights) on coming in to land, and one of 89 Squadron's pilots, Sergeant Kingsnorth, was killed. The Beaufighter was a write-off but our crew were unhurt.

December 7th, 1942.

Some visiting fighters (Type: FW.190) gave an effective display of low-flying at Souk-el-Arba aerodrome this afternoon and, to fill in time during a straight and level stooge, amused themselves by dropping a few delayed-action bombs on some Spits.

The latter blew up most obligingly and we might have enjoyed at least another half hour of quite impressive fireworks if our ground defences, with most accurate near misses, had not frightened all the spectators into taking shelter. Bereft of their appreciative public, our guests did not consider the game worth playing any longer and returned to their home base at Tunis.

Two more crews arrived today from Maison Blanche - Flying Officer Greaves with Warrant Officer Robbins and Flying Officer Kench with Flight Sergeant Wall.

December 8th, 1942.

As a result of repeated moans on the part of Squadron Leader Player, some of our own ground crews were sent up to us today. Loud cheers greeted Flight Sergeant Homer and his 31 men when they rolled up on the aerodrome and they became even louder when we sighted a pukka petrol bowser, heralding as it did the end of the exhausting job of refuelling aircraft from 4 gallon petrol tins by hand in which our aircrews had willy-nilly become expert.

Having derided the rainy season, supposed to be in full swing, during many days of glorious sunshine, we changed our minds today when the weather showed us what it could do if only it tried to be a little wet.

It was surprising in how short a time a torrent of rain could convert the pleasantly firm surface of the aerodrome into ankle-deep mud and slime,

making wheeled traffic almost impossible and progress on foot extremely slow and tiring.

Even more depressing was the news that 89 and 255 Squadron aircrews would have to find some billets of their own as from today, and make room in the schoolhouse for headquarters personnel.

Good clean billets had been secured for our ground crews earlier in the day, so when Squadron Leader Passy went off to the village in search of a place for the aircrews, hopes ran fairly high. They were raised to an even loftier level when he returned and triumphantly announced that he had found a suitable house.

Measured by Middle East standards, suitable they may well have been - but to us, only recently exported from the UK and therefore still handicapped by a rather more pansy idea of cleanliness, these billets appeared as the filthiest, bug-ridden, wettest and generally most miserable form of human habitation we had ever set eyes upon.

Unfortunately it was too late in the day to look for better quarters, so after great initial reluctance we settled in, putting our camp beds down gingerly and with the utmost suspicion.

There was a difficult choice of 'apartments' which had to be faced - one variety of rooms presenting a dry appearance but on closer inspection revealing a multitude of dear little brown creatures with many legs crawling all over the walls and ceiling - whereas the other kind displayed a large puddle covering almost the entire floor space and a sagging, broken roof through which the rain was pouring merrily.

Tony Kench was seen putting his nose into one of the Wog "suites" and, with a haunted expression on his face, beating a hasty retreat through rain and mud in the direction of the flarepath, where he volunteered to do the job of Duty Pilot.

Our boss's intensive studies of the life and habits of a certain insect are proving very useful. With foresight and the authority of a man who knows what he is talking about, Johnnie Player organised a whole box of A.L.63 - for the benefit of those who have spent all their nights in nice clean English beds,

this is ANTI LICE POWDER and it hurts.

As a matter of fact it not only hurts the louse, whom it is supposed to kill inside 24 hours, but it also hurts the poor human creature who has, by force of circumstances, become an A.L.63 enthusiast and has sprinkled the said powder all over his blankets, clothes, and even the inside of his pyjamas.

In view of the fact that the humble scribe, armed with a torch and a piece of wood, got over 200 bugs confirmed in less than two hours, and having heard the piercing death scream of Blondie Humes who had discovered two specimens of a fine strong breed on a book he had put down in his room but an hour ago, the entire 255th detachment became thoroughly A.L.63-minded and sprinkled it on everything in a most liberal manner.

That was all right until it was time to go to bed - a moment everyone did his best to delay as long as possible. As soon as the weary bodies had slipped into their various pyjamas it was painfully realised that the freedom from bugs was dearly bought.

It was a lousy sort of itch all over one's body and a maddening, burning pain in the more tender parts which made everyone wonder gravely which of the two philosophies was right - here the extreme European craze for cleanliness, with plenty of A.L.63 and no bugs - there the calm Arab endurance of the odd bug and the odd bite, but no pain from itching or burning!

December 9th, 1942

Our confidence in Squadron Leader Passy as a billeting officer having been somewhat shaken by last night's experience, we decided to try the professional variety and sent a delegation in the person of Johnnie Player himself to Group Captain Lees, our station master. A Flight Lieutenant in charge of billets was immediately sent off on a recco patrol and after a confab with the town mayor he secured a wealthy Arab's house for us which we are sharing with 89 and a day fighter squadron. By way of contrast our new abode even boasts a bathroom (!) and is generally perfectly clean. There is not much room, but although cramped we are happy.

The problem of transport or movement of any kind, for that matter, is

becoming rather serious. There is an ocean of mud on the aerodrome and most vehicles are in a permanent state of being bogged. Squadron Leader Player set up a new record this evening for the course from Dispersal via the flarepath to our new billets at Souk-el-Arba - total time 4 hours!

December 10th, 1942.

Feeling safe from bugs and having donned a pair of pyjamas pleasantly lacking the stimulating effect of A.L.63, our heroes of the skies thought how nice and luxurious it would be to spend the morning in bed and read, sleep or just relax. However, no peace for the wicked!

The air raid warning sounded and a voluble French warden shepherded everyone into the trench outside. Almost simultaneously a number of Ju.88s appeared overhead and proceeded to enjoy themselves in their own way.

A large oil dump and the railway station received direct hits and another egg was dropped, rather uncomfortably close, in the village.

While the aircrews were taking shelter in the officially sanctioned trench at Souk-el-Arba, Chiefy Homer (over at dispersal) was not particular as to the where and how of the cavity that would give him safety from the attack - so he just ran and jumped and landed right in the middle of a latrine ditch. What is more, he stuck it out until the "All Clear" was sounded!

Higher authority demanded a Beaufighter today to take the AOC to Maison Blanche. Had it been a mere request it would have had to be refused owing to operational requirements and the state of serviceability of our aircraft - and no secret was made of the truth - but it was an order and so Mike Gloster was detailed for the job with a heavy sigh.

December 11th, 1942.

Tonight of all nights Jerry would call a mass meeting of all his Sardinian and Sicilian OTU boys over Bône, when poor old 255 is "*hors de combat*" owing to its ferrying duties! With our one and only serviceable Beau away at Maison Blanche all we can do is whatever Mr. Tantalus did before us, and leave the field to 89 Squadron.

They did their job well, fortunately, and got two Ju.88s - but it is pretty safe to assume that tonight's score would have been higher had our crowd been in the running as well.

December 12th, 1942.

Another sigh went up to heaven this morning, though one of relief this time; two more Beaus arrived from Maison Blanche, via Bône, disgorging Paddy Clarke and Buddy Biggs and Arthur Woolley and 'Cobber' Kane. The latter was not recognised at first owing to the bristly growth just south of his nose - but when it was discovered that this officer had been promoted to Flying Officer recently, it was at once realised with sympathy and understanding that in view of his more exalted status some attempt had to be made to impart an expression of dignity to his features - once known to be virtuous and harmless to his fellow-members of the Sergeants' Mess but, during his commissioned life, sadly transformed into a frivolous grimace, telling a horrid tale of debauchery and degradation.

Flying Officer Greaves, whose night fighting in England for two solid years was confined to GCI practices, searchlight patrols (how he loved "candles"!) with an occasional "Bull's Eye" thrown in as an additional thrill, decided that he must get a Hun by hook or by crook while the going was good. Tonight he saw his chance and - may the Lord forgive him - did not shrink from twisting the truth to achieve his object.

While his ace stooge, Charlie Robbins, was having his night-flying supper side-by-side with Squadron Leader Passy of 89 Squadron in the Wog mud hut on the other side of the aerodrome, the controller rang up dispersal and asked for a Beau to be sent off immediately. Whereupon Duggie Greaves, with a commendable grasp of the situation, got on to Squadron Leader Passy and coolly (if not truthfully) informed him over the telephone that a Beau was wanted off at once and that he and his operator were all ready to take off. Realising that it would take him some time to get back to dispersal, S/Ldr Passy (although panting for a Jerry himself) grudgingly gave permission for Doug to take off. Charlie Robbins, cunning navigator he was, realised from the bits of conversation he overheard what was up and, having left the rest of the

crowd in the Wog hut with an air of nonchalance and without any apparent haste, proceeded to race across to dispersal as fast as his legs would carry him. He found our worthy friend Doug ready with both their flying kits and they got into the air with hardly any delay, thanks to perfect teamwork! The rest was a mere nothing, and a Heinkel 111 was smacked down without any trouble at all.

Tommy Cameron and Jimmy Hood also broke their duck when they made short shrift of a Ju.88 which had invaded our sacred hunting grounds, and F/O Etherton of 89 Squadron performed the hat-trick by cracking down three aircraft known to be hostile according to GCI, and believed to be Ju.88s. Fair enough!

December 13th, 1942.

This morning we proudly erected our brand new marquee in preparation for our camp life to which everyone has been looking forward very eagerly. Admittedly enthusiasm was dampened a little when the unrolling of the outer cover revealed a live and extremely poisonous-looking scorpion, but the incident was soon forgotten.

Paddy Clarke and Buddy Biggs, who had arrived without any kit, were sent off to Sétif (the squadron's new maintenance and rest base) to cover their naked bodies.

December 14th, 1942.

Squadron Leader Player and the diarist went off on a dawn patrol and thought what fun it would be to do an A.I. sweep out to sea at naught feet. This they did, and fun it was, until they made an uncomfortably close acquaintance with several 4.5 inch shells from a cruiser lurking in the vicinity. Being in blissful ignorance of the correct letter and colours of the day (after all, we are roughing it at Souk and can't be expected to provide all the latest, pansy conveniences) a quick consultation was held (Bang!) between Johnnie and Freddie (Bang!!) to fire off a red-red which had for simplicity's sake been appointed our permanent colour of the day (Bang!!!) just for luck. The firing miraculously stopped at once and our crew departed from the scene of action

in perfect peace.

The statement made on landing by our pilot and navigator, i.e. that on firing the "red-red" signal cartridge they distinctly saw the gunner on board the cruiser scratch his head and fidget with several printed sheets of paper in a file, looking lost and bewildered all the while, was not given due credence by their fellow aircrews. Some ignorant fellows who did not shrink from going to ridiculous extremes in their injustice, actually called it "shooting a line"!

Anyway, no more time was wasted hanging around "friendly" cruisers and our aviators landed at Bône - ostensibly to visit the GCI station but surely what prompted them was the prospect of a good breakfast and a good chin-wag with the Sultan of Sopley (or Prince of Bône?).

Group Captain Atcherley was there too, and - totally unexpected but very welcome - Flight Lieutenant Roebuck, alias Donald Duck of Comberton, was another of our happy party.

A visit to Bône followed where the other members of 255 who had come from England by convoy greeted our crew at the tobacco factory which was their billet, and gave them an excellent lunch. Doc Brennan seemed to have changed a lot, both outwardly and inwardly - the explanation being the acquisition of a magnificent moustache and his recent engagement!

Another noteworthy person encountered there was our new Adjutant - and considering the bewildering number of adjutants posted to, and sacked from, the David-Mills-less squadron in the space of a week or a fortnight before leaving England, each progressively less suitable than the last, we could have done a hell of a lot worse than picking up Pat Murfin. In fact since it has been discovered that he drinks like a fish, swears like a trooper, plays cards, has an exceedingly low mind and is a thoroughly bad type, everybody is quite certain that he will mix extremely well with the rest of the squadron.

Back at Souk, Peter Dunning-White and Ronnie Wynzar arrived, the latter claiming back his rightful "driver" from the disconsolate Masterly Manipulator. The latter, however, was not pilotless for long, for in the evening a stranger appeared at dispersal (in Air Force uniform with Wing Commander stripes and pilot's wings) who behaved as if he knew everybody. It was not, however, until

he exclaimed "This is terrific - what?!" that a few of the chaps pricked their ears as if they had heard that one before. Yet final recognition did not dawn on them till the distinguished stranger cried "I think this is worth a guinea a minute - don't you?!" whereupon great cheers went up and everybody knew it could be no-one but our own Führer!!

Doug Greaves and Charlie Robbins have been nibbling at Hermann Göring's proud Luftwaffe again and saved another He.111 the return journey to Sicily or Sardinia, thus swelling the squadron's North African score to the first dozen.

December 15th, 1942

More tents were pitched today for our new camp, under the supervision of Cameron Cox who is our camp-commandant-to-be and already displays a fine talent as a slave driver.

His merciless eye quickly fastens on anybody, however exhausted, who is not busy driving pegs, carrying tents or poles or digging trenches - and, cracking his whip, takes a fiendish delight in bending weary bodies to the task.

Blondie Humes and Johnnie Sayers were sent off to Sétif, under protest, to take a rest - which caused poor Geoff to be even more depressed than usual.

The Führer joined "Night-Murder Inc. Unlimited" not only in spirit but also in deed when he stalked a poor innocent Jerry this evening and shot him down in cold blood. The victim was at first thought to be a Heinkel but turned out to be a Ju.88. Bits and pieces flew off and hit the Beaufighter's starboard engine which took a poor view of this and petered out on the way home. The local controller (with his finger right up) homed the Führer and the diarist 10 miles past the aerodrome and so valuable height was wasted. After a hair-raising though efficient approach on the left hand side of the Chance light, contact with the aerodrome was obtained about two-thirds up the runway and all seemed well until an ill-disposed Hurricane (already half pranged) maliciously placed itself in front of the Beau which was so surprised by this unexpected impact that it disintegrated on the spot. The crew were unhurt, a statement noted by the humble scribe with feeling.

The following photograph is contemporary but not part of the original document:



Crash-landing on one engine at Souk-el-Arba 15th December 1942. Photographer unknown, possibly Freddie Lammer. Crew: Kelly and Lammer. Beaufighter V8462. Serial of Hurricane unknown.

December 16th, 1942

Two new aeroplanes arrived, piloted and navigated respectively by Bob Graham (now sporting F/Lt stripes), Dickie Hickmore (promoted to F/O), Johnnie Wright (still a mere F/Lt) and "Sandy" Sandow (also decorated with a better and fatter stripe).

Wing Commander Kelly nipped off to Sétif again for a quick jolly round and took Tony Kench with him as his B.S.O.

The Führer likes to have everything ready for the odd FW.190 or Ju.88 but little did he know that when he asked his passenger to put the cannons on "Fire" the latter smartly whipped the cocking levers down instead, unperturbed by the hissing of escaping air.

We moved into our camp on the east side of the aerodrome this afternoon and everyone seems very pleased with the prospect of a Boy Scout existence. There are eight airmen or four officers to a tent and a marquee is provided

for communal feeding.

The Greaves & Robbins combination has become a veritable menace to the Heinkel factory where the big Knobs are beginning to scratch their shaven heads, wondering how they can improve their output to offset this deliberate destruction of their products.

Tonight our friend Douggie did more than shoot down a He.111, however.

When he was approaching the wily Hun, who had put wheels and flaps down as soon as a cold shiver in his spine told him that not everything in the garden was lovely, he [Douggie] flew as slowly as possible with his own undercarriage and flaps down but found he was still overshooting. Deciding that it was a case of "now or never" he opened fire from a range of about 50 feet. The result was remarkable. An explosion occurred in the region of the Heinkel's petrol tank and a large sheet of flame shot up in front of our pilot who was temporarily blinded and, owing to his overtaking speed, was made to fly right through the curtain of fire before him.

When he emerged the other side of it and regained his full visual faculties, he discovered that his cockpit was completely blacked out with soot and that, according to his instruments, he was doing a steep turn to starboard.

Putting the wheel fully over to port, the turn to starboard continued at Rate 1 in an inexplicable and alarming manner and it seemed nothing could be done about it.

Contemplating for a few seconds the life of the Wanga-Wanga bird, the thought of his Beaufighter flying around in ever-decreasing circles and finally disappearing up its own sternframe gave Douggie little comfort.

He told Charlie Robbins, therefore, to abandon his crazy steed and bale out. Charlie, however, did not dislike the motion and thought he'd prefer to hang on and see what happened next.

Douggie then had an inspiration, throttled back the port engine and managed to fly the aircraft straight. He then opened one of his clear vision panels, stuck his hand through and contrived to scrape quite a lot of the newly-acquired camouflage (with which the aircraft was thickly covered all over) off the

windscreen.

Although the controls were exceedingly ropy owing to the fact that the starboard aileron, as was later discovered, had been burnt off completely, Duggie somehow succeeded in flying the Beau to Bône where he would have made a perfect landing if the flarepath had been laid out. With only the Chance light to guide him he struck a tent with one of the wheels - but even so the aircraft was not a complete write-off. It was a pity, though, that such an astounding feat of aviation was not crowned by the perfect finish which would have been so well deserved.

December 17th, 1942.

Our first lunch at the camp was consumed out-of-doors - or should one say out of canvas? - in glorious sunshine; erks, NCOs and Officers all happily rubbing shoulders.

Night activities included two patrols with mixed success. Johnnie Wright, who was sitting underneath a Do.217 (licking his chops), had trouble with his reflector sight which refused to stay in position at the critical moment and the Hun, considering discretion the better part of valour, dived away to safety.

Wing Commander Kelly and the scribe were luckier than J.D.W. - they encountered a Ju.88 (which had been sneaking in and out of GCI range on the edge of the tube and only made Bône when our pilot had asked for a relief) and although the Hun did his best to escape by turning and diving down from 8000' to 3000' he was shot down into the sea. His rear gunner put up a good show and scored several hits on the Beaufighter's nose and port engine but these caused no material damage.

Our North African score is now 15 Huns destroyed in 13 nights - a good deal more than can be said for High Er call or Honiley where one in three months was considered pretty hot!

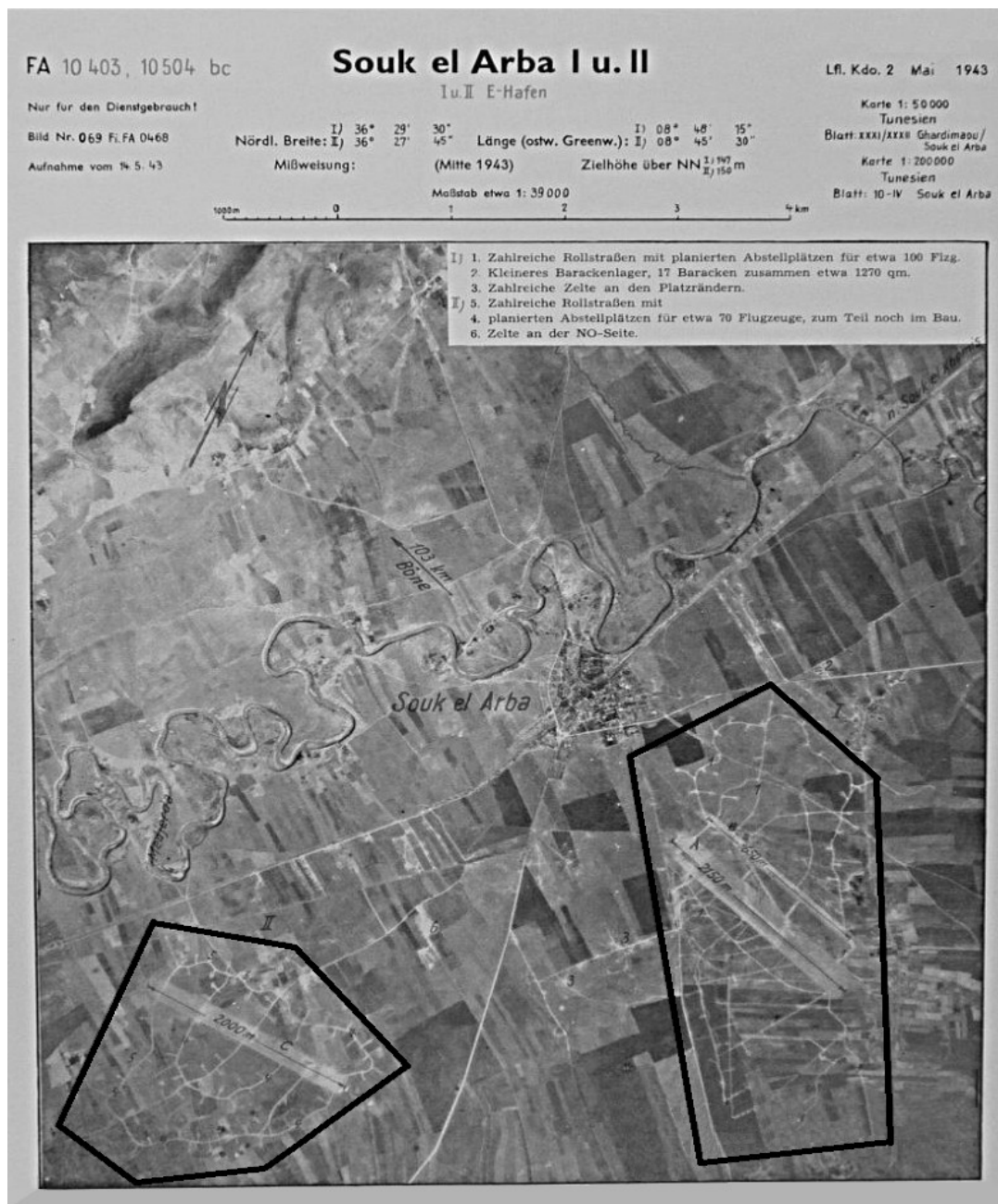
December 18th, 1942.

Wilbur Wright paid us a visit at lunch-time but did not stay, nor did the Führer one of whose numerous travels is taking him to Bône today - at any rate to

An annotated transcript of UK National Archives document AIR27/1521.

start off with. Nobody will be in the least bit surprised if he returns tomorrow from Tébessa or the day after from Oran via Gibraltar, having nipped over to Casablanca and Biskra on the way.

The following photograph is not part of the original document:



Aerial photograph of Souk-el-Arba taken by the Luftwaffe 02.May.1943. At the time of 255's presence in Dec.1942, only the right-hand (more easterly) site existed.

New arrivals are P/Os Stephen, O'Sullivan and Griffith and Sgt. W.Hood.

Arthur Woolley, returning from a night patrol, had to do a bit of quick thinking when both his engines cut, fortunately near the aerodrome. He made a steep gliding approach and landed with his wheels up, making a good job of a difficult situation. He suffered only minor injuries - a few cuts and bruises on his head, kneecap and shins - and Flight Sergeant Wall who was flying with him got away without a scratch.

A sing-song in the open air, led by one accordionist LAC Ray West, proved very popular.

December 19th, 1942.

Our camp commandant, Flying Officer J.C.Cox, who has become an excellent scrounger (second only to Ronnie Wynzar) took the scribe with him on a raid of the nearest Air Stores Park in a 3-ton lorry.

Having been there a few days previously and demanded of them everything that seemed useful under the pretext that 255 Squadron had lost everything in a 'Blitz' and its members were freezing to death for lack of clothes, it was only natural that Cameron's second appearance at the ASP with an empty 3-tonner was regarded with apprehension.

The Squadron Leader in charge, though obviously wearied by this renewed intrusion by an unscrupulous lot of beggars, was too suspicious of our hawk-eyed Cameron to let him walk the camp alone. Even so, our two pickpockets managed to whip a couple of towels, a few chairs, some bars of soap and the odd dozen torches, batteries and bulbs on the quiet - deriving far more satisfaction from the stolen goods than their legitimate prey. Not content with their haul, they went to even greater heights of impudence by asking themselves to lunch and innocently (ha, ha!) enquiring as to whether they would be allowed to treat their hosts to a bottle of beer each. Of course they were not allowed (and damn well did they know it) and, instead, the poor hosts were obliged to cough up a formidable array of Whitbread's best.

Their bellies and the 3-tonner filled to the brim, our two thieves returned to Souk-el-Arba, passing a long American convoy on the road. The faces of the

U.S. Troops looked grim and determined and wherever there was gun there was a finger ready on its trigger, undeterred by the fact that the fighting front was a good sixty miles farther east!

An aircrew readiness tent was erected today next to the marquee, putting an end to the picturesque spectacle presented by bodies in flying kit littered all over the floor of the marquee, sleeping in boxes, on boxes, on A.I. aerals or (the favourite posture of the late-comer) with the posterior firmly planted on a tin hat & the upper part of the body leaning insecurely against the central tent pole.

December 20th, 1942.

The Hun thought he could catch us with our pants down, as it were, by sending some FW.190s over at tea time. They beat us up, it is true, but two of them were shot down. Serves Jerry right for taking unfair advantage of an old English custom!

Dougie Greaves does it again - this evening he eliminated another He.111 from the unhappy flock of the Bône Bombardiers.

His initials, D.H.G., are now kept at Air Ministry Records with the interpretation "Douglas Heinkel Greaves".

Squadron Leader Passy of 89 Squadron shot down one Do.217 confirmed and one Ju.88 probable and Flying Officer Etherton, the aircraft recognition specialist belonging to the same outfit, destroyed what he said might have been a Do.217 but was later sorted out by the Intelligence Officer as a BR.20²⁴.

December 21st, 1942.

Flying Officer Clarke & Flight Sergeant Broadhead, also Flying Officer Weston & Pilot Officer Hiles arrived from Sétif whence Flying Officer Gloster & Pilot Officer Oswald departed.

²⁴ The BR.20 "Cicogna" (Italian for "stork") was a low-wing twin-engine medium bomber developed and manufactured by the Italian company Fiat. This Italian casualty appears to have been serial MM 24144. Pilot and Co-Pilot killed, three crew survived to become PoWs.

Cameron Cox & Peter Croft were sent off to Duzerville (South of Bône) to organise a prospective new base for the squadron.

Flying Officer Spurgin of 89 Squadron shot down a Piaggio 108 at 21,000' - the first 4-engined enemy aircraft destroyed by night in this theatre of war.

This success of the small but valiant and most efficient 89 Sqn. detachment was marred, unfortunately, by a very tragic accident which occurred the same night. Flight Lieutenant Mitchell and Sergeant Trebell, who were a most popular crew not only in their own squadron but also with our crowd, were both killed when their aircraft developed engine trouble and eventually crashed near Bône.

December 22nd, 1942.

Another visit by Jerry during breakfast! A FW.190 sailed calmly over Souk-el-Arba aerodrome and was followed a little later by a Ju.88. Neither of them did any damage, nor were they molested except by the customary and rather feeble A.A. barrage which might have worried an aircraft flying 500 yards behind our two visitors but certainly did not trouble them.

Peter Dunning-White and Cobber Kane left by road for Bône - to help with the organisation of the new aerodrome at Duzerville, so they said.

December 23rd, 1942.

Wing Headquarters chose the wettest and most miserable day of the year for asking us to return our only piece of home comfort, our marquee (in which we used to feed), and also some of the tents which they had lent us for our camp. Someone with a misguided sense of honesty who has obviously not yet grasped the true meaning of the RAF expressions "borrow" and "lend" said "Oh yes, of course - thank you very much - awfully good of you to lend them to us for so long - fair enough - you shall have the lot back right away!" and that's our marquee, that was - and now there is, at mealtimes, a sad procession of wet, weary wanderers slithering from their tents across the muddy waters to the cookhouse, collecting their "Compo" rations and plenty of rainwater as well; and slithering back again to their tents wherein to consume a stone-cold meal.

Pilot Officer Stephen was appointed air raid warden of our camp and whenever he isn't whistled he whistles very well.

Nearly everyone availed himself of the welcome opportunity of sending home a Xmas and New Year's telegram. Although there was not much scope for variety of individual expression, the cables being made up of stock phrases, it was better to say "Wishing you and the children a Merry Xmas" even to one's fiancée rather than not send a cable at all.

December 24th, 1942.

Today all available muscles were working overtime following an official warning of an impending mass attack by Ju.88s and some remarkably beautiful trenches were dug by our intrepid aviators who somehow don't feel quite so happy on *terra firma* as they do a few thousand feet higher up when the boot is on the other foot, so to speak, and Jerry is in a "more acceptable" position.

Xmas Eve, however, passed quietly without the anticipated Hun interference. The aerodrome has become a huge sea of muddy water and an order was received from Group Captain Lees (once more our "Station Master") that Beaus were not to take off except in an operational emergency.

There was a minor flap during the night but calm was restored when the GCI plot which caused the controller such anxiety was found to have originated from a surface craft!

December 25th, 1942.

Wherever he may be, the Englishman won't do without his Xmas dinner, and consequently elaborate arrangements were made by Ronnie Wynzar (our messing officer at Souk-el-Arba) for the traditional feast.

Our marquee having "Gone with the Wing" the question of a suitable locality presented a considerable problem, but Ronnie who was as determined as anyone to get outside his share of turkey suddenly espied an Arab barn a mere couple of hundred yards from our camp which appeared in every way suitable for the celebration.

Ronnie soon found the Wog who seemed to own the place and, setting forth in his best Bordeaux French, explained to his rather bewildered opposite number the purpose of his visit. It was not until our able delegate considered the deal closed and the barn secured that the fact emerged that our Wog friend could not speak a word of French!

As experience showed he did not seem to object to our celebration on his grounds - on the contrary, he and other members of his clan were seen standing around our happy party and following the strange proceedings with great interest, breaking out into loud cheers and clapping their hands when, after a sumptuous Xmas dinner and spurred on by the effects of the local red wine, community singing found officers and airmen exercising their throats at full blast.

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[At this point the hand-written text abruptly ends without explanation and the subsequent numbered folios are blank. The routine of keeping an unofficial Squadron diary during overseas service did persist, but apparently only in the version kept by the Ground Officers (this survives as AIR27/1520). Even that record is incomplete; the volume covering mid-September 1943 to the end of October 1944 has not survived.]