

Chapters taken from “A First Class Group – The 1939-45 war experiences of S/Ldr W.G. Curtin O.B.E (Mil’y) in 11 Group and 83 Group RAF Operations rooms” (by Simon M. Curtin), and relating to his time at Debden with the Eagles Squadrons

Chapter 7: September 1941 to April 1943 – Commissioned as an Officer and Operations at Debden

Sometime in September 1941 Bill departed RAF Hornchurch to attend Officer School Cosford (nr Wolverhampton) on No 3 Course. I am not sure of the exact dates, but they were sometime between 2nd August 1941 - when Bill had his pre-course Medical, which classified him as Fit A4B - and 16th October 1941, the end date of the course.



No 3 Course Cosford – Bill is third from right, third row from front (picture from Bill’s memorabilia).



Enlarged section from above Cosford line-up showing Bill

Amongst Bill's memorabilia is a small (A6 size) hard-backed 146 page notebook, which is filled with his very neat (and sometimes small, to fit two lines of text on one line of the page) handwritten notes from the course, and gives a valuable insight to his diligent way of working. Bill numbered each page individually in the top corner, and in the back of the notebook included an Index to thirty-three different topics he covered in the course, such as Ranks & Badges, Officers Responsibilities, Discipline & Morale, Gases War & Effects, Treatment of Correspondence (including seven pages on Central Registry), Airmen Conditions of Service etc.

<u>Equivalent</u>			<u>Ranks</u>		
<u>Navy</u>	<u>Army</u>	<u>Royal Air Force</u>	<u>Wrens</u>	<u>W.A.T.S.</u>	<u>W.A.A.F.</u>
Adm of the Fleet	(1) Field Marshal	(1) Marshal of the RAF			
Admiral	(2) General	(2) Air Chief Marshal			
Vice Admiral	(3) Lieut General	(3) Air Marshal			
R. Admiral	(4) Major	(4) Air Vice			
Commodore	(5) Brigadier	(5) Air Commodore			
Captain	(6) Colonel	Group Captain	Director	Controller in Chief	Commandant in Chief
Commander	(7) Lt. Colonel	Wing Commander	Dep. "	Chief Controller	Air Chief Comm.
Lt. Commander	Major	Sq. Ldr.	Superintendent	Chief Commandant	Group Officer
Lieutenant	Captain	Lt. Lieut.	Chief Officer	Senior "	Squad. Officer
Sub. Lt.	1st Lieut.	2nd Officer	1st Officer	Company "	Flight Officer
Deputy Sub. Lt.	2nd "	(2) Pilot Officer	2nd "	Junior "	Staff Officer
	(1) Comm. over 20 days in service in the RAF	(1) 4 x 9/16" " "	3rd "	Comp. Ass.	Arrest Officer
	(2) Comm. over 10 days in the RAF	(2) 3 x 9/16" " "			
	(3) Comm. over 5 days in the RAF	(3) 2 x 9/16" " "			
	(4) Comm. over 1 day in the RAF	(4) 1 x 9/16" " "			
	(5) 3 stars	(5) 1 x 2" " "			
	(6) Comm. over 2 days in the RAF	(6) 1 x 2" " "			
	(7) Comm. over 1 day in the RAF	(7) 1 x 2" " "			

<p>30</p> <p><u>Responsibility of Officer</u> (R.R. Chapter 15 Sect I)</p> <p><u>Rules of Conduct</u> Acquaintance with regulations (para 70). Ensure reading R.R. & S.S.O. An Officer will conform to established custom & practices of the Service. (Inclusion of the Service 3/6 Gale & Haden) Co's responsibility to see that R.R. are available to all ranks. <u>Officer's Secret Act</u> Co's responsibility to bring the Act to the notice of all personnel and that must sign from 108 and notice from 1520 must be prominently displayed. <u>Publication of Books etc on Service Matters</u>. See R.R. 1072.</p>	<p>31</p> <p><u>Responsibility of Officer (cont'd)</u> It is forbidden to publish such books either in your name or that of another. Special Air Ministry sanction can be obtained but script must be submitted first. <u>Relation with the Press</u>. Information invariably given by A.M. only. AOC in C of Overseas Commands may make their own press announcements. Visits of press photographers, reporters etc, press representatives should always carry Air Ministry permits. Officers will be detailed to escort representatives around. Press reps. not allowed to fly except with special permit when they must sign "Blackout".</p>
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Above – two pages from Bill's Officer Training School notebooks showing his neat, small handwriting. Top; a table of comparison of Ranks across the Armed forces and, Bottom;

Responsibilities of Officers (bottom – note the page numbering and the section on Official Secrets Act). (From Bill's Memorabilia).

Following successful completion of the course, Bill was promoted to Acting Pilot Officer (P/O) in the RAFVR on 17th October 1941, at the age of 33.

On 7th November he was appointed as a Supernumery in the 11 Group Head Quarters Operations Room, Uxbridge where he spent a week, presumably doing extra training.



The 11 Group HQ, Uxbridge in 2011, now sadly disused.
The entrance to the underground Ops room is a few hundred yards to the left (author's photograph).

When I visited the 11 Group Ops museum as part of my research, it was poignant to think that my Grandfather, Keith Park and Winston Churchill had all entered through the insignificant doorway and descended those 65 stairs to the subterranean Ops Room over seventy years earlier.

Bill was then transferred to RAF Debden. The RAF Debden ORB for 14th November 1941 records the posting of;
"P/O W.G. Curtis [their spelling!] from Uxbridge to Debden – For Operations duties."

His service record also confirms he was based at Debden on this date for 'Ops Training'.

It seems that Bill left Hornchurch at around the right time, as in December 1941 a number of his ex-colleagues lost their Acting ranks;
"....owing to a reduction in the establishment. Four Controllers suffer the same fate, for the same reason. A/S/Ldrs Holmes, Milward and Tollemache, all revert to F/Lt., and A/S/L Kemp to F/O (Act F/Lt). Everyone is especially distressed about Johnnie Holmes, who has been a S/Ldr for 20 months." (Hornchurch ORB 6th December 1941).

On 7th December 1941 the Japanese attacked the American Fleet in Pearl Harbour, on Oahu Island, Hawaii and Germany declared War on the USA on 11th December 1941, bringing long awaited reinforcement to the Allies.

Bill was appointed as a full Pilot Officer at Debden on 17th December 1941.

RAF Debden was located in the village of Wimbish, near Saffron Walden Essex, approximately 40 miles away from Bill's home in Romford. It was the Controlling base for Sector F of 11 Group, which also included airfields at nearby Great Sampford and Martlesham Heath, near Ipswich, Suffolk. During late 1941 and 1942 Debden Ops room 'Controlled' Numbers 3, 65, 71, 111, 129, 157, 350, 403, 412 and 418 Squadrons for various periods. These latter two were Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Squadrons. 418 (RCAF) Squadron was formed at Debden the day after Bill's arrival there on 15th November 1941. 350 Squadron was known as Belgian Squadron, as its pilots were all Belgians, and 65 as E.I. Squadron (East India, as it had been donated a number of aircraft by the East Indian Company).

71 Squadron was known as 'Eagle' Squadron, and consisted of American pilots who had been training since September 1940 when the Squadron was first formed, and operational since 5th February 1941, even though the USA had not entered the War at that stage. They had slipped over the border into Canada and enlisted, the first group sailing to England and arriving at Southampton on 21st August 1940. A contemporary account (written by US Colonel James Childers) described them as follows;

"Despite their being in uniform, when the Eagles first arrived in England they were unmistakeably civilians; military courtesy or discipline had almost no meaning at all for them. Old soldiers around the station were amazed at the behaviour of these young Americans who, in some cases, were plain saboteurs of military tradition. They forgot to salute. They forgot to rise when a senior officer came into the room. They forgot to stand at attention when reporting to the C.O. And as for polishing their buttons – to hell with it....."

And English officers, reared in British army tradition or down from the Varsity, marvelled at the table manners and the methods of drinking of some of the newly-arrived Eagles. Amid continuous and hilarious talking, some of the boys would reach across a neighbour's platter, spear the oleomargarine with their fork, yell for some goddam water, bust the potato with their fists and gobble it down, Skin and all.

Such behaviour was not limited to the mess. Long before they were trained, long before they were ready to go into action against the highly experienced Luftwaffe, the Eagles were screaming for action. Having no true conception of what waited for them in the skies over the channel, they wanted to get going...

Patiently, with infinite forbearance, the experienced pilots of the RAF restrained the boisterous Eagles. Knowing the sight and sound of lead streaming past them, and flak coming up, and 109s hurtling down from nowhere, Churchill, Woodhouse and Meares quieted their difficult charges and trained them until they were fully ready to into battle....." (8. Note the mention of S/Ldr Meares, an early commanding officer of the Eagles Squadron. He had originally been a Controller at Hornchurch and would have known Bill).



ALL-AMERICAN: The first All-American squadron in the Royal Air Force. This picture was made in February, 1941. *Left to right:* Sam Mauriello, D.F.C.; Ed Bateman; Mike Kolendorski; Bill Taylor, squadron commander, now in the United States Navy Air Force; Nat Maranz; Andy Mamedoff; "Red" Tobin; Luke Allen; K. S. Taylor; Pete Provenzano; Gus Daymond, D.F.C. and Bar, now commanding officer of the Eagles; R. Tongue, a British officer who was flying temporarily with the Americans, Bill Nichols.

Picture of the first – No 71 – ‘Eagles’ Squadron taken in February 1941 (photograph from 8)

Even though they had probably matured greatly by the time Bill arrived, the American pilots were clearly unconventional compared to their British counterparts, but Bill was still very fond of them and a number of photographs of American personnel appear in his memorabilia.

The Debden Operations Room was sited on the Debden airbase, in a well-protected mound, as was the general practise;



Debden Operations room (taken 2000)
(both pictures from website www.subbrit.org.uk)



Inside Debden empty Ops room, note raised dais

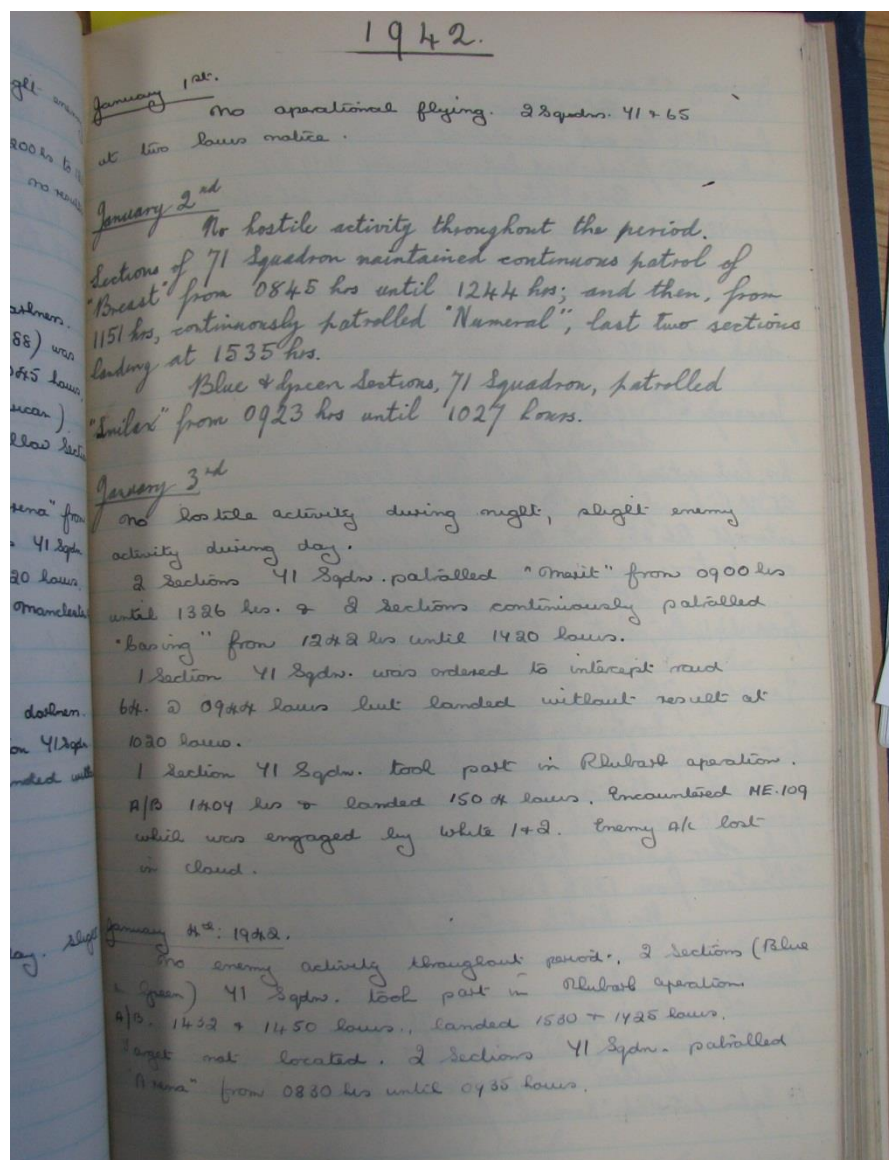
Main Debden operations involved patrols in geographically defined areas across Essex, Suffolk and offshore (to protect convoys moving through these areas), each with different code names such as Merit, Prize, Booty, Ocean, and Numeral.

As well as ‘Circus’ operations, Debden Squadrons were also used in offensive ‘Rhubarb’ (small sections of fighters, mainly in pairs, attacking targets of opportunity

in France and Belgium such as airfields, aircraft on the ground, trains, and enemy troop movements which might be seen during the flight) and 'Rodeo' (a fighter sweep without bombers) operations.

The AOC in Chief, Fighter Command, Sholto Douglas paid a visit to Debden on 7th January 1942 to watch Night training and spent a night in the Mess. Night operations were to be a core part of the role of Debden Squadrons.

Included in Bill's responsibilities at the beginning of 1942, was the writing of the daily ORB. In the National Archives I was excited to find the original hand-written Debden ORB, which was used to prepare the finally typed report. Bill's handwriting is so distinctive, I could pick it out easily, and it was very interesting and nostalgic to see his handwriting in the book. He wrote the ORB's first entry of the year (on 1st January), and on a number of other occasions throughout 1942.



A page from the handwritten Debden ORB in 1942, showing Bill's handwriting on 1st, 3rd and 4th January (compare this to the writing shown earlier from Cosford. From National Archives File Air 28/191)

Poor weather hampered Operations in the early part of 1942, for example for two weeks between 1st and 15th February, Martlesham was unserviceable due to heavy snow.

There is some confusion as to what rank Bill was during the early part of 1942 as his service record shows that on 1st April he was a Controller, ranked Flight Lieutenant (F/Lt). This must have been 'Acting' F/Lt, as research of the London Gazette records, which show promotions, indicates he was not promoted to permanent F/O until 1st October 1942, and to permanent F/Lt until much later (31st October 1944). I suppose it was dependant on the other ranks and experience available around him i.e. to have other Flying Officers working for him he would have to have had a more senior rank.

Between 27th April and 6th May 1942 Bill was on a 'First Commission Deputy Controllers' Course at CTU (Central Training Unit) Woodlands, which was on Clomp Hill in Stanmore, Middlesex. The published account below gives a useful and humorous account of the CTU;

"The Unit dealt with a considerable variety of courses for Sector Controllers, Flying Control Officers, Controller cadets (pre-commission), and other ranks of the RAF, United States of America, Dominion personnel, Czechs, Poles and other Allied forces as well as Army and Navy personnel. Courses covered the principles of aircraft control, the organisation of Fighter Command, the art of interception, R/T speech and procedures, meteorology, RDF, including AI and GCI techniques, which had moved to the CTU on 16 mar 41. From the opening of the School in June 1940 until 25 December 1942 the number of students trained by the CTU was 2140, an average of just over 71 students per month! It should be mentioned that the CTU not only catered for Controllers but also ran Deputy Controller courses for NCOs and airmen and even Naval Fighter Direction Officers' courses. The main room of the CTU was laid out like a normal Sector Operations Room of the time with a large GSM on the floor on which plaques were used to indicate the position, height, heading and speed of both fighter and target aircraft. At the foot of the GSM was a raised dais from which the controller issued his directions and orders. These were relayed over the R/T by deputy controllers on a smaller dais in front of and below him. In an adjacent room was the R/T fixer table on which the relative target and fighter positions were determined.

To add realism to the controllers task of directing the fighter plaque onto the target plaque, whilst at the same time educating them on some of the problems facing their pilots, tricycles were acquired from a well-known ice cream vendor to simulate fighter aircraft and their targets (21/22). The hostile or target tricycle, bearing a large red flag to show its identity and propelled by a U/T controller, was pedalled at a fixed speed and predetermined course across a nearby field. The aim was for the intercept controller to guide a similar but more elaborately equipped tricycle to intercept the target tricycle. Sporting a large blue flag, the interceptor tricycle was equipped with a compass mounted between the rider's knees and an R/T set carried in the box section normally used for transporting the ice cream. A headset, volume control and transmit switch were also provided on the box in front of the rider. A metronome was fitted in front of the rider to enable the tricycle's speed to be carefully regulated in accordance with the controller's radioed instructions.

On the signal for the exercise to commence, the target machine set off on its predetermined track across the field. Detected by visual observers around the field, the bearings were passed by phone to the fixer room, where the position of the target was fixed and passed as a position plot to the GSM. A decision to intercept was taken by the Sector Controller who ordered the fighter into the air. The "fighter pilot", who was, presumably, the student controller who lost the toss of a coin, leapt onto his blue - flagged tricycle and reported, "Airborne" on his radio. Following the instructions given over his R/T set he proceeded on his bumpy way to intercept the enemy tricycle. Further bearings on the fighter were taken and these also were passed to the fixer room, there they too were converted to an appropriate grid reference and passed to the GSM. With continuous updates on the fighter and target's positions the controller was able to direct a successful interception.

Only one documented example of one of these synthetic interceptions exists. As such it warrants a place in our history and is reproduced for interest.

"Dogsbody Red one, Dogsbody Red one" came a call through the heavy background interference that was, and is, always present on the HF R/T. The ageing trainee controller perched uncomfortably on the hard saddle of the blue tricycle strained to hear the text of the message he was receiving over the unfamiliar R/T. "Vector 170 degrees, vector 170 degrees, Buster, Buster, Bandit Angels two zero, range twenty, over." Struggling to compose and transmit acknowledgement of the message in the newly learnt R/T procedure, the "pilot" endeavoured at the same time to increase his pedalling rate to that required by the codeword "Buster", and measured by the metronome, with its wagging arm, oscillating on the vehicle box in front of him. Setting the new course on the compass fixed between his knees the tricycle was turned onto the new heading. Cold and tired, exhausted with the effort of pedalling the heavy tricycle across the rough field, the "pilot" found that the compass needle refused to settle down. Exasperated and discouraged, he ceased pedalling, dismounted from his machine, lifted the rear wheel and dragged it sideways until the compass course lines were parallel to the compass needle. He then remounted and carried on with the interception."(Extracted from RAF Fighter Controllers Association Website).

The Debden ORB for the end of May gives a summary of the operations for the first five months of 1942, showing that in that period of one hundred and fifty days, Numbers 65, 71, 111, and 350 Squadrons carried out only 23 'Circus' (by 2nd June 1942 the number of 'Circus' operations run by the RAF had reached Number 182), 14 'Rodeo', and 7 'Other' operations. This is a reflection of the fact that most of the activity recorded in the ORB was patrols, and interceptions of enemy raids. Also there were some increasing concerns in the upper echelons of the RAF about the effectiveness of these offensive operations carried out under the orders of Leigh-Mallory. They have since been criticised by historical commentators as costly and ineffective (the RAF lost 500 pilots in 1941 alone, and lost 4 Aircraft for every 1 Luftwaffe Aircraft destroyed).

In June 1942 'Fighter Nights' and 'Night Patrols' were mentioned in the Debden ORB, showing that night operations were now a standard part of Sector activities. At the beginning of June numbers 3, 157 (Night Squadrons of Douglas Havocs, and de Havilland Mosquitos), 65, 71, 111, 350 and 403 were all operational under Debden control.

There was a Ground Control Interception (GCI) station at Trimley Heath near Felixstowe, which was linked to Debden. This was controlling Debden Squadrons during the day and night by May 1942, as was the Ops room at Wartling. By early August a mobile station had been built at Trimley Heath and permanent buildings were progressing satisfactorily. The mobile VHF station there was moved 3 miles away to Nacton to prevent R/T interference with the GCI station.

On 19th August the Allies embarked on the ill-fated raid on Dieppe (Operation 'Jubilee') in a combined operation involving the Army, Navy and RAF. The Debden sector provided five Squadrons; 416 (RCAF) from Martlesham (which operated from Hawkinge on the day of the raid), 616 from Great Sampford (also operating out of Hawkinge), 71 (Eagle), 124 (Baroda), and 232 all from Debden (and all operating out of Gravesend). The Squadrons were ordered to cover the raid, protecting the Navy and Army from Luftwaffe bombers and fighters, and performed 4 sorties on the day. The Five Debden Sector Squadrons lost 10 aircraft and 4 pilots in the day's action.

Harry Broadhurst had been promoted from his role as C/O of Hornchurch Station to deputy SASO (Senior Air Staff Officer) of 11 Group on 12th May 1942, reporting directly into Leigh Mallory. Broadhurst argued unsuccessfully against Leigh Mallory's plan to use multiple wing formations (as Leigh Mallory had pushed for and won when as leader of 12 Group in the Battle of Britain). As Broadhurst suspected, it turned out to be a poor tactic on the day, as the RAF lost 97 aircraft with 64 Pilots either killed or made POWs, against the Luftwaffe's loss of 48 aircraft and 13 Pilots killed. It was a very bad day for the RAF. Broadhurst had flown over Dieppe three times during the day and had seen small groups of FW190 fighters 'bounce' the 'unwieldy' wings in formation. The FW 190, which became operational in France in May 1941, is generally believed to have outperformed both the Hurricane and Spitfire Mark V. A typical Debden ORB debrief from that day (in total these took up 21 pages in the ORB!) reported;

"Meanwhile many FW 190's in 2's, 3's and 4's were in the air. Their tactics consisted of making high speed dives out of the sun from inland, hoping to secure a victim en route. They would then sweep over the southern end of the Anchorage and return inland again." (232 Squadron report, 19th August 1942)

Broadhurst lobbied with some success for the use of single Squadrons and flights later in the day, although the damage had largely been done by then. Modern commentators point out that at least the use of Wings of large numbers of fighters prevented the enemy bombers getting through to the Navy armada.

70 RAF Squadrons were utilised throughout the day, 61 of them under the Control of Fighter Command, so it was a massive and complex operation for Controllers with so many aircraft in the air. A number of pilots commented throughout the day that there was so much R/T 'traffic' they could hardly hear or be heard.

Dieppe is now widely thought of as a military disaster. Of the 5,000 Canadians and just over 1,000 British Troops who took part in the day, 907 Canadians and over 100 British Troops were killed and over 2,000 taken prisoner. The only positive from it was that there were many lessons to be learnt, and errors corrected, which would

prove extremely valuable when the D-Day landings took place less than two years later.

The charismatic American C/O of 71 (Eagle) Squadron, S/L Chesley Peterson had a lucky escape in the third sortie of the day when he was shot down by a J88 bomber he had destroyed, and had to bale out in the Channel. He was picked up by a motor vessel and brought back to Gravesend by 'Maggie' (The nickname of the Miles M-14A Magister aircraft, used to transport individual airmen from one base to another) the next morning, describing his experience as 'rather fun'.

Peterson was awarded the DSO a week later. There are two signed photographs of Chesley Peterson in Bill's memorabilia. At 21 Peterson was the youngest Squadron Commander in the RAF and went on to become the youngest Colonel in the USAAF at 23.



(Picture from 8)



Signed photographs of Chesley Peterson, (in left photo he is leaning over map), from Bill's memorabilia. In Left Photo; Major Oscar H. Coen is 1st left and Captain W.T. O'Regan is 4th from Left

On the 29th September 1942, the three RAF 'Eagle' Squadrons – Numbers 71, 121 and 133 (The latter two Squadrons had been formed in May and July 1941 in Kirton-in-Lindsey and Coltishall respectively, as more American Pilots joined) were officially handed over to the USAAF and became the 334, 335, and 336 Pursuit Squadrons of the USAAC. RAF A/CM Sholto Douglas visited the station to officiate along with General Spaatz (Commander of the 8th US Airforce), and Brigadier General Hunter of the USAAF and A/M Edwards of the RCAF. The party proceeded through the pouring rain via Hurricane Hill to the parade ground where the American Stars and Stripes flag was raised alongside the sky-blue flag of the RAF and the band played 'The Star Spangled Banner'. Following this, personnel from the Debden Workshops, Echelons, Headquarters and WAAFs, were reviewed and the 'Eagles' were formally passed out of the RAF.

Debden was regularly visited by dignitaries from around the world, for example HRH Prince Bertil of Sweden (which was neutral during World War II) visited on 17th September 1942. Then on 4th November 1942 Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the American President visited Debden alongside A/M Sir Leigh Mallory, who had just replaced Sholto Douglas as the head of Fighter Command. Her visit to England and Debden was truly historic, as it was the first time that the wife of a serving U.S. President had made an official visit overseas on her own. She was in the UK from 21st October to 17th November, at the invitation of the Queen, and was also the first First-lady to address a foreign people, when she broadcast over BBC Radio. Bill clearly remembered her visit to Debden as there are two photographs in his memorabilia.



Official Photographs of Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to Debden (Marked Sport & General 78823 and 78824 – both from Bill's memorabilia).

Elsewhere in the War; the German and Italian forces had been defeated at El Alamein at the end of October, and by November 1942, North Africa, from Morocco to the Suez Canal, was under Allied Control. By 19th November the German attack and siege at Stalingrad had failed and their troops were being encircled. In the Far-East, following their losses at Guadalcanal and New Guinea, Japanese forces were beginning to withdraw from their previous conquests.

On 10th November 1942, Winston Churchill, who had sensed the tide of the War was turning, was speaking at the annual banquet for the Lord Mayor of London (held as a luncheon, because of the threat of night-time bombing), famously quoted;

"Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."

The Debden ORB for the end of December 1942 summarised the operations undertaken by the Squadrons during the year as follows; "

95 Major Wing operations, 40 Intruder Flights, 24 Rhubarbs and innumerable convoy patrols."

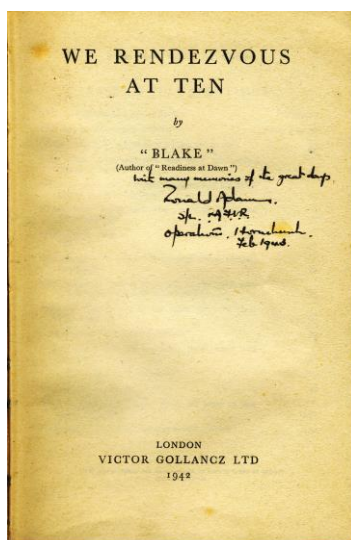
It also listed the 14 Squadrons which had been based at Debden or Martlesham throughout the year;

At Debden; 65, 71 (334 USAAF), 111, 124, 232, 350, 418, 616, 121 (335 USAAF), and 133 (336 USAAF) Squadrons.

At Martlesham; 71, 412, 416, 132, and 182 Squadrons.

At the beginning of 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill met at Casablanca, in recently liberated French North Africa, on 14th January. At their meeting they agreed to an invasion of Sicily (Operation 'Husky') when the opportunity arose, and to immediately intensify the daytime and night-time bombing of Germany (Operation 'Pointblank'). On 27th January USAAF bombers, based in Britain, carried out their first bombing raid over Germany. USAAF P-51 Mustang fighters, which had a much greater range than the British fighters, were used to escort the bombers.

Bill's memorabilia indicates that sometime in February 1943 he met up with ex-Hornchurch controller Ronald Adam again, as it contains a signed copy of Adam's book 'We Rendezvous at Ten'. I have concluded they actually met, rather than the signed book being sent to Bill, because he had already written his own name inside the front cover, dated December 1942.



Inside cover of Bill's signed copy of Ronald Adam's book with message 'With many memories of the great days'

Meanwhile, for Debden Squadrons, 1943 began in a similar operational vein to previous, with daily defensive patrols, 'Night phase' defensive patrols, and 'Circus'

offensive operations (which had, by 26th February, reached number 274) when the winter weather allowed.

However, all was about to change for Bill, with the commencement of the operational exercise codenamed 'Spartan'.



Picture from Bill's memorabilia showing him home on leave with son John (Dad), sometime between 1942 and 1944. These periods of leave were no doubt few and far between.

Chapter 8: March 1943 to June 1944 – Exercise Spartan, the formation of 2nd TAF, 83 Group and 483 GCC, and preparations for D-Day

During the 1942 desert campaign in North Africa, which had culminated in the final decisive victory at El Alamein, the Western Desert Air Force (DAF) was commanded by A/VM Arthur 'Mary' (a jokey twist of 'Maori' – He was a New Zealander) Coningham. From late 1942, Coningham's SASO in the DAF was none other than Harry Broadhurst.

The DAF had played a significant role in the victory, but it became a source of much contention and bitterness between Coningham and Bernard Montgomery, who was an advocate for Army/Air Force cooperation, when Montgomery claimed the victory for the Army alone. This was to forever taint their relationship.

Coningham's doctrine was that the greatest attribute of tactical air power was its ability to speedily concentrate its force. It followed, he believed, that its command must also be concentrated, and (in line with the US Field Manual on the use of air power) whilst there should be close coordination with the ground forces, the Army should not command it. He advocated a three phased approach;

- 1.) Gain air superiority.
- 2.) Use the air superiority to interdict enemy reinforcements of men and materials.
- 3.) Combine air attacks with ground assaults on the front lines.

Following the desert campaign, the Western DAF (which had supported the Eighth Army) and the North-West African Air Force (which had supported the First Army) were merged to form the DAF or First Tactical Air Force. Their first priority was to prepare for the invasion of Italy.

Allied High Command was also interested in forming a 2nd Tactical Air Force in preparation for opening up a second front in Western Europe. Between 1st and 12th March 1943, Exercise 'Spartan' was held with the purpose of refining the organisation required for this invasion.

'Spartan' took place in the South of England between 'Eastland' (representing the German forces) and 'Southland' (representing the Allies). Both groups had roughly equal sized Air forces comprising fighters, fighter-bombers, army co-operation (Reconnaissance) aircraft and light bombers plus one Squadron of night fighters; Eastland were supported by 'X' Group with 18 Squadrons, and Southland by 'Y' Group with 20 Squadrons. To distinguish between the aircraft of the two forces, Eastland were ordered to distemper the spinners and underside of the port wings, and paint the front section of both sides of the fuselage of their aircraft white, up to the pilot's cabin.

The Debden ORB for 1st March 1943 notes the formation of 'No 2 Mobile Control Unit of X Composite Group (Exercise Spartan)' at Debden Sector Operations Room. Debden was responsible for the Control of ten of the eighteen 'X' Group Squadrons (therefore in 'Eastland', representing the German forces);

Fighters; 303, 350 and 453 Squadrons (All Spitfires)
Bombers; 464, 487, 21 (all Venturas) and 98 (Mitchells) Squadrons

Reconnaissance; 613, 268 and 2 Squadrons (All P-51 Mustangs)

In his report of 12th March in the ORB, S/Ldr Hydes, who was the Debden Controller for the Exercise, filed the following;

“Operational Control for ‘Spartan’ demonstrated once again the importance of the following features:-

- 1. Controllers need knowledge of the individual Squadrons and the ability of the Formation Leaders, particularly in such matters as navigation, R/T procedure, leadership and morale.*
- 2. A HOMER is a necessity. It is not adequate to have a HOMER to another Aerodrome a few miles away; if weather is bad it is in the last few miles that D/F homing is most necessary, otherwise Pilots will be landing all over the countryside and the Squadrons dispersed to the detriment of further operations.*
- 3. Indifferent and indistinct communications are a feature of work in the field. Smooth and good tempered passing of orders and messages is vital and it is strongly emphasised the Ops ‘B’s should be both first class Sector trained Officers, and men capable of working in exacting conditions with sustained pleasantness. (This particular point, I found to be of real importance in maintaining good relations with the Squadrons in the harassing conditions of the Malta Blitz).*
- 4. Group Control should be personally acquainted with the Sector Controllers, and an effort made to avoid the tendency for a Group to be a remote voice too busy or impatient to assist Sectors in the executing of orders in a manner which will secure the fullest cooperation of the pilots doing the job.*
- 5. Some skill in map reading and the use of maps should be demanded of all Operations officers. It is nonsense for Operations to be handicapped by the passing of inaccurate map references.*

Paras 3 & 4 are not intended as criticism of Spartan Personnel but as reminders of factors which must not be overlooked when the real battle has to be fought.”

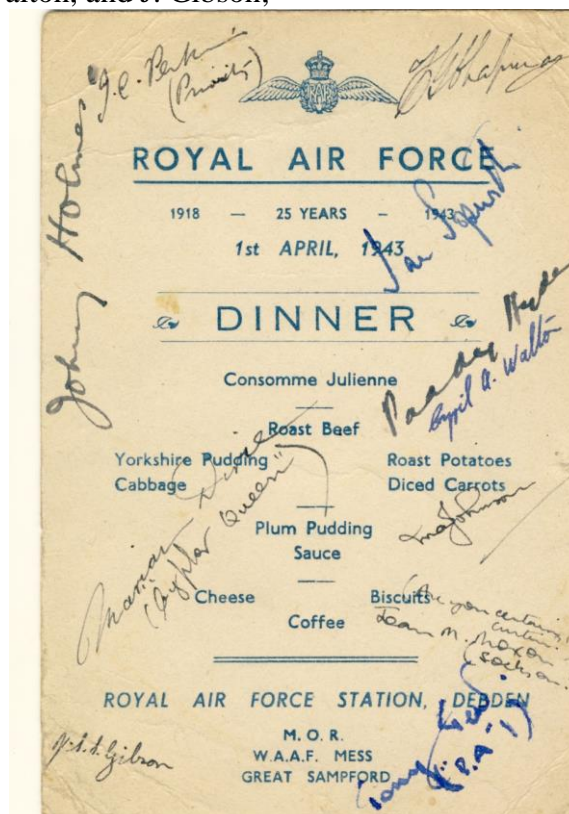
I have included the ‘Spartan’ report above because, whilst Bill was unlikely to have been involved in the exercise (see below), the report does set out what it sees as the key characteristics for a Mobile Control Unit Fighter Controller. This is important, because this is the position that Bill would ultimately hold.

Bill’s service record also has an entry for 1st April 1943, which indicates he was attached to H.Q. 11 Group (Uxbridge) as an Assistant Fighter Controller, but the record then goes on to show that on this day he was stationed at Debden with Control duties at Trimley Heath. This suggests a few things to me; Firstly that the RAF’s role at Debden was winding down as USAAF personnel gradually were taking over, so Bill was one of the few RAF personnel left there in key roles but was now officially on attachment from 11 Group HQ; and secondly, that as he was based at Trimley Heath, this was probably being used as the Sector station for day to day operations whilst the Exercise ‘Spartan’ operations were run from the Debden Operations Room. This suggests to me that Bill was not involved in Exercise ‘Spartan’, although I have no proof of this.

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Whilst there were numerous learnings from Exercise 'Spartan', it was deemed so successful that the 'Z' Group Headquarters and some of the Field Force units were retained and these became the core of No 83 Group, which was officially formed within Fighter Command on the 1st April 1943, based at Gatton Park, Redhill in Surrey under the Command of A/VM W.F. Dickson. Within this structure, 'No. 2 Mobile Operations Rooms Unit' (2nd MORU, formed out of the No 1 MORU used in 'Spartan') had been established by 12th April with S/Ldr A.W.E. Gouriet as Senior Controller and C/O, and F/Lt F.M. Turner as Deputy Senior Controller (both from RAF Honiley, Wroxhall, Warks.), and was at that time based at White Waltham near Maidenhead, Berks.

The 1st April 1943 was an important date for another reason, as it was also the 25th anniversary of the RAF. Bill was still based at Debden in Operations at this time as one of 'the small number of R.A.F personnel remaining' there 'pending hand over to the USAAF'. As a result, the Station Commander G/C L.C. Nixon, decided to observe the Anniversary at nearby Great Sampford. There was a parade of RAF regiments at 10.00 before G/C Nixon gave the command for a general salute for the 500 personnel marching past. A dinner was provided at 12.30 in the WAAF's Mess. We know that Bill attended at least the dinner because there is a souvenir menu within his memorabilia, showing that a meal of Consomme Julienne, Roast Beef, followed by Plum Pudding was served to the guests. Bill's menu has been signed by a number of people (some signatures I cannot decipher) including Johnny Holmes (his Controller at Hornchurch – Johnny Holmes also wrote a small short story called "Fighter Controller", see Epilogue), Jean M. Moxon ('Are you certain Curtin? Jean M. Moxon, socks on.'), J Perkins, Ian Sopwith, Marian Dime (or Dine, 'Cypher queen'), M.A. Johnson, Cyril A. Walton, and J. Gibson;



Signed Menu from the RAF 25th Anniversary Dinner

Following the dinner there were 'Sports' at 14.30 and a 'Camp Smoking Concert' at 19.30. Each of the Airmen was provided with a free pint of beer.

On 27th April 1943, Bill's service record states his unit as HQ No 11 Group (Uxbridge) on Controller Attachment. However, it is unlikely that he was based there, as the next entry in his record is for the following day, which shows that until 22nd June 1943 he was an 11 Group Controller at Saffron Walden. By 22nd June his unit was described as the 11 Group 'RAF Detachment at Debden', and his role as Sector Controller with the rank of Squadron Leader, indicating he had been promoted to this Acting rank sometime time between April and June 1943.

This information concurs with the ORB, which on 3rd May 1943 reported the handing over ceremony of the Debden station to the USAAF, and from this date the RAF unit name in the ORB changed from SHQ Debden to SHQ Saffron Walden (which had previously been used as the Emergency Operations Room for Debden). Below are some photographs of Bill's American colleagues he would have worked with over this period;



Photo of US Officer – reads “To my Friend Bill from Steve for remembrance – 9th March 1943.”
He is actually Col Spiros N Pisanos, but was known as “Steve” or “The Greek”

This his biography from the American Air Museum archives website;

Steve was born in Athens, Greece, in November 1919. Although he desperately wanted to fly, at the age of 18 he discovered that he did not have the academic qualifications required to enter the Greek Air Force Academy. Undaunted, he decided to go to America, where he understood he could get an excellent education free and learn to fly.

Getting to the U.S. was beset with obstacles; he didn't speak English; he had no money; and he knew no one in America to help him. He tried to stow away on a luxury liner, but he was caught. He was able to join the Greek Merchant Marine, and

soon found himself on a freighter bound for Baltimore. He managed to jump ship in the harbour and buy a train ticket to New York. In New York, by sheer luck, he ran into a couple of men who were speaking Greek. Three days later he started working in a bakery owned by a Greek family. Unable to attend night school and take English lessons, he obtained a Greek/English dictionary and taught himself English.

About seven months later he had mastered enough English to take up flying lessons. Almost every dollar he made went for flying lessons, and he earned a private pilot's license from the Civil Aeronautics Authority. Meanwhile, the war in Europe was in full swing, so he tried to join the U.S. Army but was turned down because he wasn't a U.S. citizen.

Desperate to get into the war, he contacted the Clayton-Knight Committee and joined the RAF. Training in England as a fighter pilot, he graduated as a Pilot Officer and was assigned to No. 228 Squadron. He was later transferred to No. 71 Eagle Squadron, even though he was not a U.S. citizen. In May 1943, Steve was naturalised in London. He thus became the first person in American history to become a U.S. citizen on foreign soil. He recalled this as being the happiest day of his life. That night the sign at the bar in Debden read "Tonight all drinks are on Steve Pisanos, American".

On a mission on 5 March 1943, fifty feet into the air and wheels up on takeoff, His Spitfire's engine lost power - he crashed and nosed over. One crash was not enough, however; while being towed to the hangar the cart on which the Spitfire was being towed broke down and the plane again crashed to the ground!

On 5 March 1944, after more than 100 combat missions in Spitfires, P-47s, and a P-51 Mustangs named "Miss Plainfield", and the destruction of 10 enemy aircraft in the air, Steve's luck ran out. His engine quit on an escort mission over France and he was forced to crash land. He had decided to bail out at 2000 feet. He trimmed the aircraft to fly on its own, released the canopy, and tried to stand up and step out on the port wing, but was hung up by something in the cockpit. He saw that the plug at the end of his nylon dinghy cord was caught somewhere underneath the seat. He tried in vain to loosen it, so he reached for his escape knife in his right boot, but it wasn't there. He sat down and worked the cord free, so again he stood up and stepped onto the wing. Just as he was about to slide down the wing he saw that he was too close to the ground to bail out, and he saw that the powerless plane was headed for the roof of a barn in the clearing where he was planning to land. fearing that he would hit the barn, and with no time left, he reached into the cockpit and pulled back on the stick, barely missing the roof. Passing the barn, his right wingtip hit the soft ground and the plane skidded along with Steve on his knees on the wing hanging on for dear life.. The plane stopped suddenly and Steve was hurled through the air, and landed thirty feet away.

When he regained consciousness severe pain made him think he had lost his left arm, but he soon discovered it was still attached to his body. In spite of the intense pain, he crawled back to his plane and set it on fire. He dragged his parachute and placed it in the cockpit. Then he took off his silk scarf, dipped it into the wing tank to soak it with fuel, and while searching for a match in his escape kit, he became aware of soldiers running toward him, shooting as they ran. With no time to finish the job he

scrambled down from the wing and ran full bore into a nearby wood. By doubling back in the wood he eluded the soldiers and he spent the next five days distancing himself from the scene.

Finally, he made contact with the French Resistance. They verified his identity, hid him, and arranged medical treatment for his shoulder, which had been dislocated. He soon became involved in sabotage with his French comrades. After six months working with the Resistance in Paris, Steve was able to escape from occupied territory and make his way back to England. His knowledge of the Resistance made it too risky for him to return to combat operations, so he was sent back to the States. Steve was assigned to Wright Field as a test pilot. He tested all types of aircraft including Me-109s, Fw-190s, and Me262s. He later tested the new Lockheed P-80 Shooting Star at Muroc Lake, California. In 1946 he left the service and went with TWA as a First Officer. He was recalled to active duty in 1948 and served at the Pentagon. He later was assigned for a tour with NATO.

He flew 375 combat missions in Vietnam while commanding an airlift squadron. Steve was promoted to the rank of Colonel and made Deputy Commander of a SAC ICBM Wing.

In 1973, with 30 years of distinguished service and 7,000 hours of flying in over 50 types of aircraft, he retired from the Air Force as a Colonel.

He had shot down 10 enemy aircraft, and received over 25 decorations from four different countries. Among his awards were the Legion of Merit with two Oak Leaf Clusters, the Distinguished Flying Cross with four Oak Leaf Clusters, the Purple Heart, the British Star, the french Croix de Guerre/Silver Star, and the Vietnamese Medal of Honor, 1st Class.

He later published his autobiography entitled 'The Flying Greek'.



Back of photo reads "All the best Bill; Frank M.Fink. The same from me Frank J. Smolinsky – 121 Eagle Squadron, 335 Pursuit Squadron (Both photographs from Bill's memorabilia).

The following is from the American Air Museum website;

1st Lt. Frank M. Fink was a talented caricature artist. On 9 September 1943 he baled out of his P-47C Thunderbolt 41-6328 4FG/334FS near Paris, due to engine failure, and subsequently became a POW.

Frank J Smolinsky was killed in a nonoperational flight in P47 41-6181 on 3rd April 1943. He developed engine trouble and attempted to crash land near Sawbridgeworth airfield when the aircraft spun into the ground and exploded.



Bill with 3 US and one RAF colleague (all unknown, probably taken in 1943)

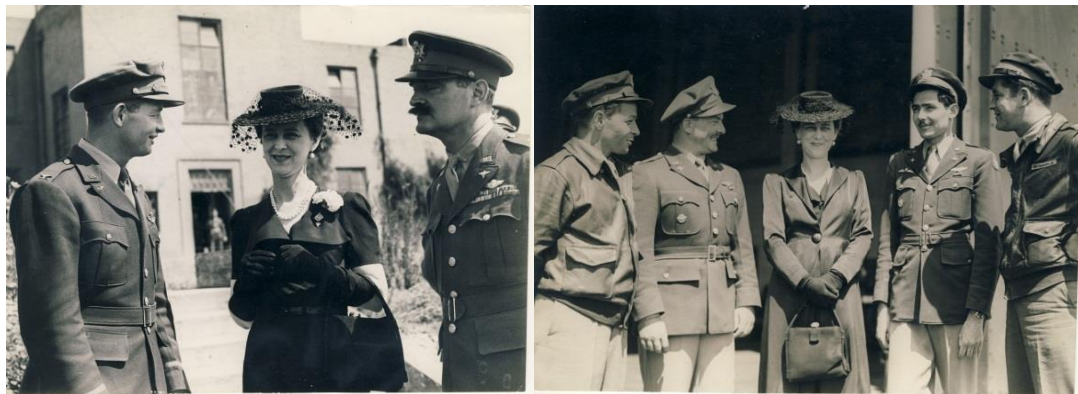
Meanwhile, away from Debden, the 2nd MORU had already undergone some changes since its formation. As its name indicates it was a Mobile unit and had made its first move to Woldingham (near Caterham, high on the North Downs in Surrey; the base was known as “Slime’s Oaks”) on the 6th May 1943, when it became operational, controlling 11 Group Squadrons in ‘Circus’ operations.

The 2nd Tactical Air Force (2nd TAF) was formally established on 1st June 1943 under the command of A/M Sir John D’Albiac. As well as No.83 Group (from Fighter Command, which included the 2nd MORU), the 2nd TAF was composed of; No.2 Group (transferred from Bomber Command), No.84 Group (which had yet to be formed), No.38 Airborne Wing (from Army Co-operation Command) and No.140 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron (a unit of No.35 Wing).

The objective of the 2nd TAF was to prepare for, and take an active part in, the forthcoming invasion of Western Europe, which would have three phases; 1.) The crossing of the Channel and landings in France, which would be supported by units based in England, 2.) The establishment of a bridgehead, when some squadrons would operate from airfields on the continent, and, 3.) Expansion on the continent as required to support the army’s progress.

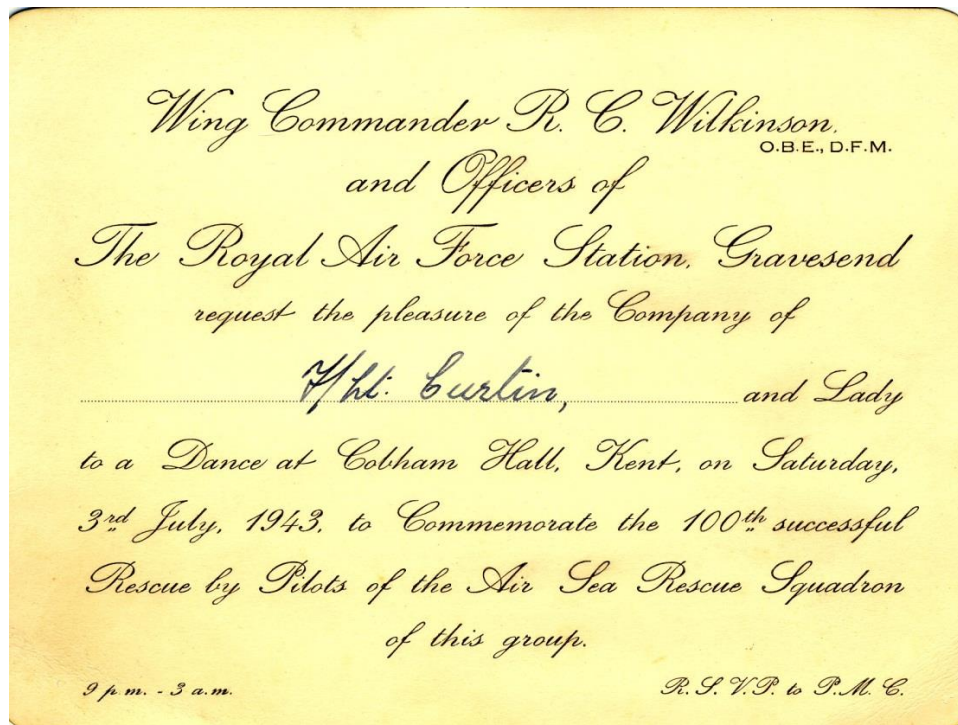
The 2nd MORU moved from Sline's Oaks to Goodwood in Sussex on 2nd June, and to Paddlesworth near Folkestone, Kent in early July. W/C Sprott replaced S/Ldr Gouriet as Commanding Officer of the unit on 7th June. By the end of July the unit had been involved in numerous 'Circus' (which had by then reached number 314), 'Rodeo' (249), 'Ramrod' (159) and 'Rhubarb' operations, controlling aircraft including Typhoons (Fighter – bombers) and Spitfires (Types V and IX) which were based at Lydd, Kingsnorth, New Romney, and Newchurch airfields (Denoted numbers 121, 122, 124, and 125 airfields respectively, and all situated between Ashford and Dungeness in Kent).

Back at Debden, Princess Marina, Duchess of Kent visited the air base on 25th June 1943. Bill was still stationed there with 11 Group, based at Saffron Walden, and two photographs of her visit are included in his memorabilia. The Duchess's husband, Duke George of Kent had died less than a year before in a RAF Sutherland crash in Scotland, on 25th August 1942, and she was wearing dark mourning clothes for her visit.



Official photographs of Princess Marina's visit to Debden (Pictures marked Planet News Copyright, and both are in Bill's memorabilia). In Left photograph Col Edward B. Anderson is on left and General Frankel D Hunter on right. In Right photograph L to R; Captain Gilbert Halsey, Major John G. Dufur, Princess Marina, Capt Thomas J Andrews, Capt Don Blakeslee.

On 3rd July 1943, Bill attended a Dance at Cobham Hall, Kent to celebrate the 100th successful rescue by the pilots of the RAF Air Sea Rescue Service, since its formation two years earlier. A picture of the invitation is shown below (Note, Bill's rank on the invitation is written as F/Lt and not S/Ldr).



The invitation to the Air Sea Rescue Commemoration Dance (Bill's memorabilia)

Elsewhere in the War, on 10th July Allied forces, supported by the 1st TAF, landed in Sicily, and by 22nd July US troops had entered Palermo.

At the beginning of August 1943 A/VM Trafford Leigh-Mallory was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force (AEAF) for the Normandy invasion (operation 'Overlord'), with the responsibility of preparing the air plan. Also on the 1st August 1943, the designation of No 2 MORU changed to No 483 Group Control Centre (483 GCC). In the early part of August, the unit was involved in a number of 'Rhubarb' operations, but also a combined exercise, as part of the preparations for the planned invasion of France, which was known as operation 'Starkey'.

This plan, under the leadership of the Chief of Staff Supreme Allied Command (COSSAC), Major-General Frederick Morgan, was part of the deception operation aimed to persuade the German High Command that the invasion would take place in the area of Boulogne, which was situated in the heavily defended Pas-de-Calais area on the North French coast. It was planned as a combined operation involving the Army, Navy and Air forces (aircraft from 83 Group and 11 Group were heavily involved), with British, Canadian and American Personnel. Operation Starkey had three parts; preliminary, preparatory and culminating phases. In the Preliminary Phase, 16th to 24th August, some 680 USAAF and 156 RAF aircraft bombed airfields as well as transport, industrial and other targets in the Pas-de-Calais area. The 483 GCC ORB for 16th August reported as follows;

"At 00.01 hours operational control was handed over to 11 Group until the air operations working in conjunction with land and sea exercises were completed. The hand over was also a practice situation such as would occur when 83 Group was ordered overseas."

Bill's service record shows that on 18th August 1943 he was appointed Sector Controller for the 483 GCC with the rank of Squadron Leader. There is again some debate as to exactly what rank he was at this time, because the 483 GCC ORB recorded his arrival as follows;

"F/O (A F/L) W.G. Curtin posted from RAF Station, Saffron Walden for duty as Sector Controller." (18th August 1943)

Two other officers, who were to work closely with Bill during the remainder of the War, joined 483 GCC at around the same time, namely F/O R.H. (Ron) Assheton (Controller), and F/O E. (Bobby) Howes (Ops B).

A day after Bill's arrival, the 483 GCC carried out an exercise on dummy invasion barges at Hythe as part of operation Starkey. During the next, preparatory, phase of 'Starkey' from 25th August to 8th September, the bomber force grew to 1,754 USAAF and 640 RAF aircraft, with the targets being broadened to include enemy ammunition and fuel dumps concealed among the forests inland from Boulogne.

I believe it is very likely that Bill was actively involved in operation Starkey, because on 30th August he reported back to his old station, RAF Hornchurch, 11 Group on temporary duty. He had, by then, experience of Controlling British, Canadian and American pilots, which would have made him a valuable addition in a combined operation such as this.

Elsewhere in Europe, on 3rd September 1943, after Allied troops landed on the mainland of Italy, the Italian government agreed to an armistice, and Italy joined the Allies, although the Germans were to fight on as occupiers of Italy for another eighteen months.

Hornchurch was to play a significant role in operation Starkey's third and culminating phase on 8th and 9th September, when the USAAF and RAF bombers switched their attention to known sites of enemy gun emplacements. As these would be a clear threat to any seaborne invasion force, it was intended that bombing them would heighten the enemy's expectations of an imminent landing in the Pas-de-Calais, which was still by then the purpose of the Operation Starkey. However, by this time it had been reduced significantly in scale, as a result of debate at Allied High command as to its real effect (probably as a result of intercepted and decoded German 'Enigma' messages).

The RAF's role in Operation Starkey was put into effect on 8th September and was to involve an increase in bombing operations and fighter sweeps over the Calais area; *"At 8.45pm Fairlop's station commander, squadron and flight commanders came over to Hornchurch to be briefed for Operation Starkey. Also present were Hornchurch's commanders, operations officer and personnel due to be on duty during the operation."* (4)

It is possible that Bill would have been present at this meeting. In this culmination phase of Starkey, Spitfires flew 786 sorties and nearly 300 allied light bomber sorties were directed at the Boulogne area. Nearly 340 heavy and 85 light bombers and fighter-bombers attacked thirteen airfields.

At dawn on 9th September 1943 a 355-strong mini-armada of self-propelled Thames barges, cross-Channel pleasure steamers and destroyers, was sailing across the Channel towards France in a dummy invasion, although carrying no invading army. The lack of Royal Navy battleships, which were being used elsewhere in the Mediterranean to support the real invasion of Italy, was probably one of the key reasons why German High Command did not take the bait - one R.N. officer commented that the reason for the lack of German response was, "there was not enough cheese in the mousetrap!"

At 09.00, in response to the code word 'Backchat', the 'invasion' force returned back to their UK ports. It was the invasion that never was, and its real impact on the German High Command has proven since to be negligible. It did however provide the opportunity to test out new markings painted on all Allied aircraft (black and white stripes under the wings and on the fuselage), which had become necessary after a number of tragic 'friendly fire' incidents experienced during the invasion of Sicily. These markings, having been successfully tested during operation 'Starkey' were to be used on and after D-Day, nine months later.

His operational record shows that at on 9th September Bill was still on Controller attachment to Hornchurch, and the 483 GCC ORB records that this attachment ceased on 13th September. It is possible that Bill may have had some leave then, as his next Operational Record shows him as Fighter Controller (with rank as Squadron Leader) at 483 GCC back at Paddlesworth in Kent on 1st October.

This was just in time for the start of another operational exercise, code-named 'Pirate', which was to be staged at Studland Bay, with the objective "to exercise the forces of all three Services in their functions during a major combined operation". The plan included practising embarkation, assault against a heavily-defended beach, the work of the "Turn Round Control" organization (Turco), which controlled shipping during the build-up phase, and even the rapid construction of an airfield in the bridgehead. Particularly vital was the fire plan for the assault, which was the subject of a detailed memorandum by General Harry Crerar, and included most of the elements that had emerged from the operations and studies of the last few months: naval bombardment; air bombardment (attacks by medium and light bombers before the landings, plus cannon and rocket attacks by fighters); and a "beach barrage" by two field regiments of army artillery firing from tank landing craft.

On 5th October 1943, 83 Group handed over operational control from 483 GCC to 11 Group HQ, Uxbridge. At 18.30 on 7th October, 483 GCC left Paddlesworth for the last time. It travelled in convoy, being joined by other subsidiary units on the way, to the Concentration area, which was at Camp Popham between Basingstoke and Winchester in Hampshire, where it arrived at 11.00 on the 8th. The "B" Echelon of 483 GCC, which included Bill, moved from Popham to the Assembly area on the 17th, and then a day later to the Marshalling area, where the personnel were accommodated at Cowplain Camp, near Portsmouth, Hampshire. "D-Day" for Exercise Pirate had been set for 17th October but unfortunately, the proceedings were disrupted by *"bad weather in the opening stage which necessitated a change of the general plan and which shut down again after the assault and terminated the exercise prematurely."*

"Fog on inland airfields prevented the smoke-laying and bombing aircraft taking off and with the exception of the provision of air cover to the convoy at sea and dummy attacks by Typhoon aircraft against pre-arranged targets on the beaches, the air support plan as arranged was not carried out."

In spite of these and other deficiencies Exercise Pirate was judged to have been a success; the conclusion of the 3rd Division's commander (Major-General R. F. L. Keller) and his staff was that the *"Combined Fire Plan of RN, RAF and Army proved itself to be workable and feasible, subject of course to further training based on the detailed lessons learned"*.

Despite all this, all units involved in the exercise must have been immensely frustrated when it was cancelled, and 483 GCC would have been no exception. It was ordered to leave Cowplain camp on 18th August, doing so at 18.00 and arriving at Middle Wallop (between Andover and Salisbury, Hampshire) at 21.45. The unit moved a number of times more in the next week; first on 21st October, arriving at the RAF station at White Waltham, near Maidenhead; then on 23rd October to close to the RAF station at Redhill, Surrey; and finally two days later to their winter quarters, on Westenhanger Racecourse (Folkestone), Kent. The ORB for 26th October records *"accommodation for personnel in Horse Boxes found to be unsuitable"*!

Two days later alternative accommodation was found at a holiday Camp in nearby Dymchurch, with the operational site remaining at the racecourse.

During the nineteen days of the exercise, 483 GCC had moved locations six times and travelled a total of almost 400 miles across five counties in a large circle. It was a major logistics operation, with large convoys often travelling at night, which was notoriously difficult (given the lack of road signs, which had been removed from the roads to hamper any enemy invasion force) and dangerous during World War II (all vehicles had to have slotted covers fitted to their headlights to direct the beams downwards, drastically reducing visibility, and as they often travelled at night it would be difficult to see the road ahead). The 483 GCC ORB supports this, as it carries records of numerous accidents, including that of Filter Officer F/O H.L. Owen who sadly died on 20th June 1943 after a motorcycle accident.

Patience in dealing with delays and changes of plan would prove to be valuable assets for all military units, including 483 GCC, in the months ahead.

483 GCC resumed operational control on 2nd November, and from then until the end of December 1943 was involved in an ever increasing number of operations. These included; offensive 'Rhubarb' operations, often over 10 each day; 'Popular' operations; 'Rodeos'; 'Ramrods' (which had reached number 406 by the end of 1943); Air Sea Rescue and photo reconnaissance sorties: and defensive Patrols.

Up to 15 Spitfire and 15 Hawker Typhoon Squadrons (some called 'Bomphoons' as they carried a single 500lb bomb) were utilised on a daily basis, organised into numbered 'Airfields' (e.g. 125, 126, 127) which was the collective name used at that time for a group of squadrons, and was later disposed of and replaced by the term 'Wing'. Squadrons of P-51 Mustangs were also controlled by the unit. As well as the Bomphoons, a number of Typhoon squadrons had been fitted with R.P.s (Rocket

Projectiles) since June 1943, each aircraft carrying 8 rockets. F/O Ken Adam, who flew with 609 Squadron in 84 Group, wrote about the arrival of this new weapon;

“Then they decided to equip us with this new secret weapon, eight rockets, four under each wing, each rocket with a 60lb warhead, more or less the same explosive as the six-inch naval gun shell, a very powerful weapon. On top of that we had our four 20mm cannons. We were probably the most powerful support weapon in the RAF. But we had no electronic aid, no way, except physical aiming, to aim the whole plane, through your gun-sight, so we had to allow for angle of dive and wind direction. And in those dives, we used to get up to 550 mph. You released your rockets at about 800 feet, because you need to pull out quickly. The Typhoon has a nasty habit, if you pulled out too suddenly, of going into a high-speed stall. A number of our pilots lost their lives that way. So you had to pull out gradually, and so many of us were hit not only by the flak, but by our own explosion.” (7)



Left: A Hawker Typhoon Mk IB, RB389 'I8-P', "Pulverizer IV", a Bomphoon of No 440 Squadron RCAF, armed with 1,000-lb MC bombs under each wing, taxiing out for a sortie at B100/Goch, Germany. Right: An armourer attaching the electrical plugs which fire the 3-inch rocket projectiles on the rocket-rails of a Hawker Typhoon Mark IB of No. 121 Wing at B5/Le Fresne Camilly, Normandy. (both pictures from IWM website).

Targets for the operations were given codenames 'Popular', 'Noball' and 'Crossbow', which we now know all involved operations against suspected German V-1 sites. The V stood for Vergeltungswaffe, which translates to 'reprisal weapon', but the V-1 was to become better known by the names 'Buzz bomb' or 'Doodlebug'. Photo Reconnaissance, known as 'Popular' missions, identified unusual constructions, which were subsequently identified through 3D analysis at RAF Medmenham, as rocket launch sites. 'Noball' operations attacked what were thought to be V-1 manufacturing, storage and launch sites, and 'Crossbow' operations targeted the V weapon launch sites, which was later to include the V-2.

During December 1943, the Operations room of 483 GCC, was hit by sickness, with F/O Bobby Howes being admitted to the unit sick quarters from 2nd to 7th December, and the Controller F/O (A/F/L) R.T. Wallace, who was admitted to the Princess Mary RAF hospital at Halton on 6th, until 21st December. Life outdoors 'in the field' during winter was clearing taking its toll on some! This would have increased the workload on all other Ops staff, including Bill.

The ORB for Christmas Day 1943 reported;

“Only a skeleton staff remained on duty throughout the day. Meals and entertainment were held at Beach Camp, Dymchurch.”

Sickness in the 483 GCC continued in the first few months of 1944, with Controller F/O Wallace again being admitted to hospital on the 4th January (and not returning until the 1st March 1944), and the unit's commanding officer W/C Sprott admitted to the unit sick quarters from 1st to 12th February (he was to be posted to 83 Group rear HQ as non-effective sick on 1st April 1944).

On 21st January 1944 A/M D'Albiac was replaced as Commanding Officer of 2nd TAF by A/M Arthur 'Mary' Conningham, who had been recalled from Italy to lead the Group during the Normandy Invasion. 483 GCC also received a new Commanding Officer on 6th February 1944, when W/C (A/G/C) Harold. A. Fenton joined the unit (from 484 GCC).

Meanwhile back at 11 Group, in Hornchurch, Bill's original Sector Operations Room was officially shut down on 18th February 1944, at 19.35, and W/C Ronald Adam, who had previously been an Operations Controller at Hornchurch, sent the following message from HQ Fighter Command, Uxbridge;

“Hornchurch Sector Operations Room, which has controlled Malan, Gray, Bader, Berry, Lock, Scott, Mungo-Park, Tuck, Kingcombe, Wells, Gillam, Broadhurst, Freeborn, Stapleton, Denholm, Kingaby, Hugo, Esmonde, Stephen, Duncan-Smith, Scott-Malden, Hesselyn, Beaumont, Wlash, Deere, Finucane, Gilroy, Compton, Stevens, Gribble and many others who have contributed to the total of 906 enemy aircraft confirmed destroyed since the outbreak of war, will now cease to operate.

Despite 7 major daylight bombing attacks during the Battle of Britain and innumerable night bombings, Hornchurch Sector never allowed itself to become non-operational by reason of attack. Hornchurch Operations Room will now stand down and its personnel are released to their duties elsewhere. What of the future? Though the Sector no longer exists its unique spirit of comradeship lives on. Per Ardua ad Astra.” (4)

Shortly after this a farewell party was laid on for the personnel. WAAF, Joy Caldwell was invited back for this;

“A large crowd of Hornchurch Ops, WAAF's and other Ops personnel attended. During the middle of the evening, the side doors opened and in stepped 'Boy' Bouchier, 'Broady' Broadhurst and Ronnie Adams. They had all had a real 'skin full' previously in the Mess; we clapped like mad when they appeared. Drinks and food were consumed in great quantities, then much to my embarrassment 'Boy' Bouchier came over to me and gave me a great big hug saying, 'there's one of my Battle of Britain girls'. He wanted to know how I was, and where I was being posted to etc. I couldn't believe he could remember me after three years, then I guess the Battle of Britain was a special time at Hornchurch. It's hard to imagine now how closely we worked in Ops, during the summer of 1940. Rules, regulations and rank didn't stand for much. When I worked at Biggin Hill Ops, it was never the same for me.” (4)

I have no record as to whether Bill was able to attend this farewell party, although I think it likely that he would have been invited.

Back at 483 GCC in Kent, F/O (A/F/L) J.M. Jenkins joined as a Fighter Controller on 5th March 1943, and on the 15th March another Fighter Controller F/O R.T. Wallace left the unit.

Types of operations continued as previously in the early part of 1944, but with significantly increased volumes of 'Ramrod', 'Rhubarb' and 'Ranger' (stray fighter sweeps over enemy territory, hunting Luftwaffe Fighters) attacks. 'Popular' missions and attacks on 'Noball' targets continued and also accelerated. For example between 1st January and 9th March 1944, with 483 GCC still based in Kent at its winter HQ of Westenhanger, there were 233 'Ramrod' operations (from Numbers 407 to 640) carried out by the Allied airforces. The 83 Group, with 483 GCC controlling operations, was responsible for 82 of these 'Ramrods' in this period, i.e. over a third of the total. On one day, 2nd March 1944, the 483 GCC controlled five individual 'Ramrod' raids, when 15,000 lbs of bombs were dropped, as well as eight 'Popular' missions.

On 25th March 1944, A/VM W.F. Dickson was replaced as Commander of 83 Group by A/VM Harry 'Broady' Broadhurst, who had been brought back from Italy by Coningham to prepare the units for D-Day.

At around this time operational control of 83 Group passed to the Command Control Centre at 11 Group Uxbridge, where it was to remain until 483 GCC was established in France.

At the end of March, 483 GCC was on the move again, in what I can only assume was an exercise to test their ability to move location quickly, both at day and night, and to work and live out of Bivouacs (tents).

On 21st March 'B' Echelon, including Bill, left their winter base at Westenhanger Racecourse at 10.00 and travelled 91 miles to Goodwood racecourse near Chichester, West Sussex arriving at 18.30 Hours. They were operational by 22.00 that day. The area had been selected as it was "*most suitable from a concealment and signals point of view*" (483 GCC ORB, 19th March 1944).

On 26th March, 'B' Echelon left Goodwood at 10.30 and travelled 56 miles to Sline's Oaks, near Caterham, Surrey, arriving at 16.00. 483 GCC was operational by 18.00, two hours after arrival.

On 1st April, 'B' Echelon left Sline's Oaks at 20.00 and travelled 36 miles to Detling, near Maidstone Kent (to what is now the Kent County Showground). When they arrived at the site later that evening, they bivouaced for the night, and were operational the next day.

On 6th April, the unit moved again in one convoy, leaving Detling at 11.00, travelling 30 miles and arriving back at their winter base at Westenhanger racecourse, where they became operational the same day. At the same time, S/Ldr (A/W/C) A.H.H (Tony) Tollemache was posted to 483 GCC from 12 Group HQ for general duties. He

had been an officer in the Ops room at Hornchurch with Bill and was to be a close colleague and friend throughout the remainder of the War, and afterwards. Ten other officers arrived between 8th and 17th April, as 483 GCC establishment increased in readiness for the D-Day invasion.

Less than two weeks after arriving back at Westenhanger, 483 GCC were on the move again, but this time they would not return. The 'B' Echelon, including Bill, left Westenhanger for the last time at 10.00 on 18th April. They halted at their bivouac point at 20.00 for the night (I would guess this would have been Goodwood, but it is not mentioned in the ORB). At 09.00 the next morning they left the bivouac point, arriving at their new site, near RAF Hurn, Dorset (now Bournemouth airport) and becoming operational the same day. They had travelled 157 miles.

I can only imagine how congested the South and South-East of England must have been at that time, with well over 500,000 Forces personnel and all their equipment based at various camps concentrated around the area, ready to embark for France. The logistics operation to arrange appropriate accommodation and organise movement of units from one location to another must have been immense.

The 483 GCC unit was honoured, on 21st April 1944, to receive a visit by the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, General Dwight Eisenhower, who would lead the Allied forces during the invasion of Normandy. He was accompanied by A/M Sholto-Douglas, A/M Arthur 'Mary' Coningham and A/M Leigh-Mallory - the three most senior officers in the RAF - so it would have been a big day for all at 483 GCC.

On 27th April 1944, S/Ldr J.F. McEnnis was posted to 483 GCC as Roman Catholic Chaplain. A day later the unit moved 57 miles to Walderton Down, to the west of Portsmouth, Hampshire - its final location before the D-Day invasion.

The final Allied exercise to practice for the Normandy landings was called Exercise 'Fabius', which was held in the first week of May 1944. On 30th April, 'B' Echelon of 483 GCC, comprising Bill, 13 other officers and 97 other ranks left Walderton Down for the exercise, returning a week later (7th May).

The 'A' Echelon of 483 GCC, which comprised 14 officers and 116 other ranks and would be the forward echelon of 483 GCC to be landed in Normandy on D-Day + 1, left Walderton Down for the troop concentration area around Portsmouth on 22nd May.

Bill and the remaining personnel of GCC ('B' and 'C' Echelons) were to stay at Walderton Down until 3rd June 1944, when they proceeded via Old Sarum near Salisbury, to nearby Roche Court, where they remained until required at Portsmouth for the sea journey to Normandy.