

Alec Bowditch. RAF Number 1308526

His two years with 33 Fighter Squadron, Middle East Air Force

January 1941 December 1942.



Having volunteered for the RAF in late July 1940 I was accepted in the grade of ACH-GD-GG. This was not a personal choice, I wanted to be taught to drive but was refused the Recruiting Officer stating that they were not seeking Drivers at that time, but once a member of the service I could apply to re-muster to my first choice.. My attesting took place at the Winter Gardens Ballroom at Blackpool followed by two weeks of initial training of foot and rifle drill and a day visit by train to Fleetwood where at the firing butts we each got rid of 20 rounds of `ammo'.

In the company of seven other `Ground Gunners I was posted to No 3 school of Wireless Training at Compton Bassett, Wiltshire. Whilst there I made my application to re-muster to the trade of Driver-Petrol, this was acknowledged. The remainder of the summer when the Battle of Britain was being fought we were utilised on guard duties and early morning and dusk anti parachutist patrols. Limited instruction in the workings of the Lewis gun also was given.

To our complete surprise eight of us GG's were on draft for overseas service. Once `cleared' from Compton Bassett we were on our way to Padgate and fitted out with clothing for warmer climes. A train journey to Gourock and there we were put aboard the Canadian Pacific liner "Empress of Canada". The voyage lasted into nine weeks calling at Freetown and Durban and then via the Indian Ocean and Red Sea to Port Tewfik. At this place some of the boats in the convoy discharged their human cargo, however we were taken through the Suez Canal to Alexandria where we disembarked on the 1st January 1941. There then followed a train journey to Cairo where we were met by service transport and taken to Beni Yusef transit camp near Mena. Here we woke up to find the Great Sphinx staring at us with the Pyramids nearby. Posting

to 33 Squadron followed and we were soon on the train and back to Alexandria. A vehicle from the squadron met us and we were taken the desert landing strip of Amriya, scene of operations. The squadron had an advance party in the Western Desert in support of Wavell's 30,000 troops who were chasing the Italians out of Egypt and into Libya.

In late February it was rumoured that a move to Greece was in the offing to support the air presence already there. Rumour became fact and in a short while the squadron ground staff were on board the 'SS. Dumana' and in a slow five-knot convoy bound for the port of Piraeus. Once landed we were soon on our way to Larrisa, in northern Greece. This proved to be a grass airfield with mount Olympus in the distance. The town and surrounding area had prior to our arrival, suffered earthquake damage and looked as if 'blitzed'. The airfield had a couple of substantial hangars which, we were told, had been constructed by German contractors. The Greek Air Force had a presence in the form of some high-wing Potez monoplane fighters. Once settled in our bunch of ACH.GD/GG's were assigned to ground defence duties, manning Lewis guns (air cooled) at various points within the aerodrome. We were also expected to carry out batmen duties to assigned officers.

The Commanding Officer at that time was a Squadron Leader Riley, his adjutant was FILT G Rumsey. Pilots of the squadron , as far as can be recalled were:

F/Lt "Dixie" Dean

F/Lt "Pop" Littler

F/O Dyson (known by the name of "Deadstick")

F/O Starret.

F/O Butcher.

F/O "Chico Woods.

F/O John Mackie.

P/O's Winsland. "Ping" Newton. Sir J Kirkpatrick Bt. Holman.

W/O Cottingham. Sgt Genders (known as "Junior").

There were others but sixty years on the memory fades. Life on the squadron was quite active, our aircraft were sent off on either escort duties to Blenheim bombers of 30 or 113 Squadrons.

We had also a squadron mascot in the form of a large German Shepherd dog who answered to the name of "Mr Deeds". Food in the airmen's mess was passable and later made more attractive when 'extra messing', (purchase of food grown locally and paid for 'per capita' with

funds from the P.S.I account. Our cooks, known service wise as Cooks and Butchers, tried hard under the eagle eye of their senior NCO, W/O "Plum Warner, to supplement our supply of fresh meat, two live pigs were purchased. Incidentally they were slaughtered and eaten before the withdrawal began.

On April 6th 1941 Germany declared war on Greece and it was not long before Larissa airfield was paid a visit by the Luftwaffe. Early one morning a large formation of Dornier 215's appeared and gave the place a real working over. This was followed by ground strafing by Me 109's (the yellow nosed variety). Two of the squadrons Hurricanes on standby took off piloted by F/Lt Mackie and Sgt Pilot Genders. Whilst trying to gain some height near the airfield F/Lt Mackie's aircraft was shot down and crashed nearby. From memory one of the attacking ME 109's was shot down and crashed landed locally.

Within 24 hours the squadron was packed up and ready to withdraw south. This move was made at twilight and ground-staff were carried on the tops of well loaded vehicles. The road was well packed with vehicles of the army and other services. The Australian and New Zealanders were moving back south to form a new defence line. With the onset of darkness any vehicle showing lights were promptly dealt with by these Commonwealth troops. I shall always remember the Pass of Lamia with its steep hills and many hairpin bends. We did not halt in the slow movement to the south passing through the town of Lamia and on to the Plain of Thermopylae where British and Commonwealth troops would form a defence line.

Our destination however was close to Athens and the aerodrome at Elefsis. The situation at Elefsis became very uncomfortable almost from the time of our arrival. This was due to frequent visits from the Luftwaffe. They seem to know the most important targets and on one visit by Stukas the Maintenance hangar was bombed destroying aircraft being repaired. April 20th 1941 was the "crunch" day when our C.O Squadron Leader 'Pat' Pattle was killed in an air battle over Athens. Squadron Leader Pattle had been with 33 squadron only a matter of weeks having arrived from 80 squadron: At the time of his death he had been accredited with 30 plus enemy aircraft, some sources put this figure much higher. In the same action we also lost at least two other of our pilots, one was 'Busty' Holman the other I think was Charles Starret. The memory fades 60 years on.

Orders came for a withdrawal to the south towards Corinth and beyond. This journey was interrupted several times due to enemy aircraft and we were lucky in that there were no casualties. Having passed over the Corinth Canal, taken by German parachute troops within

days, we came to the small grass airfield at Argos Here there were some aircraft, mostly Westland Lysanders of 208 (Army Co-op) squadron, and the same evening when an aircraft was making a landing approach it was attacked by ME 109's, this aircraft, despite trying to out-manoeuver its attackers was soon destroyed as well as other aircraft on the ground.

We spent the night under the olive groves at Argos and the next morning we were on our way further to the south. Our destination was the small seaport of Kalamata and here, in a disused brewery, there were a few hundred airmen of various units holed up. Instructions were given that we were to remain under cover, no smoking or naked lights on show. The visits by enemy "reccie" aircraft ensured a minimal amount of movement. Following an interval of a day or so a Group Captain Lee from BAFG headquarters paid a visit and informed all present that an attempt would be made to commence evacuation of troops from the small port of Kalamata. This evacuation commenced under the cover of darkness and on arriving at this small seaport we found the Royal Navy's destroyer HMS Defender embarking troops. We were taken out into the bay and transferred to troopships which, in our case, was the vessel "City of London", boarding by scrambling nets was a slow business. The convoy sailed in the early hours of the next day hoping to get beyond the reach of enemy aircraft before daylight. However in the early hours of daylight we were attacked by JU 87's, our vessel suffered some near misses causing minimal damage but another vessel in the convoy "SS Costa Rica" was seriously damaged and eventually sank, the Navy by that time had transferred its passengers to another vessel.

It was a pleasant sight to see the port of Alexandria again where we disembarked and proceeded to a place named Edku near to Aboukir. Here some of our kit, lost in the evacuation, was restored but it would be many weeks before we were finally kitted out. Within a few days we were entrained at Alexandria and found we were bound for Ramleh in Palestine, a peace time Royal Air Force base. The squadron was to reform at Ramleh, generous leave being granted in the form of visits to Tel-Aviv and other resorts and also places of biblical association.

However we were soon on our way back to Egypt and of all places to Edku once more. There we were joined by those members of the squadron who were taken by boat or aircraft to the island of Crete and subsequently became involved with the German invasion of that place.

The members of the squadron who had taken part in the operations on Crete had acquitted themselves well particularly during the airborne invasion by German parachute troops. One member of the ground staff was subsequently to be given the award of a Military Medal and

others 'mentioned in dispatches'. The C.O of the squadron who replaced 'Pat' Pattle, prior to the Crete operation was Squadron Leader Howell who during the defence of Crete, was shot down and taken prisoner.

It was during this period that the aircraft carrier HMS Illustrious suffered serious damage due to dive bombing attacks and was brought into Alexandria. The two air squadrons of the FAA, 805 Brewster Buffalo's and 806 Fairey Fulmar's became land based and some of the pilots of 806 came to 33 squadron at Edku to train and convert to Hurricane's. Pilots of both squadrons took part in the action in Syria to put down a coup by an Arab leader, Rachid Ali who was pro German and saw the opportunity to sabotage the oil pipe line in that area. This action was soon put under control and the detachment returned to Edku.

33 squadron was soon on the move again, this time returning to Amriya to await replacement aircraft and retrain prior to heading for the Western Desert. Whilst there we learned of the German invasion of the Soviet Union which was a much needed fillip to men's moral. It was also at this place that I was informed that my re-mustering to Driver Petrol had been sanctioned and I was to receive training within the unit. In due course we made a move to Fuka and later to Gerawla near Mersah Matruh.

Rumour was circulating of a 'push' by the then newly named Eighth Army which meant that in early November we packed up all the gear and moved to our next scene of action. We moved into deep desert, travelling south for three days, we eventually arrived at Giarabub near to Siwa. This was what might be termed 'Beau Geste' country, we were on the borders of the Great Sand Sea and we appeared to be isolated until 113 Squadron, Blenheim N aircraft, also arrived. Being far south of the main route of supply the squadron existed on mostly Bully-Dog Biscuits-Soya Links with an occasional meal of tinned stew. The Italians had occupied the area just prior to our arrival and had, obligingly, fouled the water supply, which had to be fetched by water bowser from Williams Pass. In its chlorinated condition it was foul in taste, the traditional "cuppa" had to be taken without milk.

Each Tuesday a Bristol Bombay transport plane flew in with urgent supplies, mostly to keep aircraft flying. The squadron's long range Hurricanes were employed against enemy supply lines along the coastal road west of Benghazi. With the Eighth Army advancing towards Benghazi a forward detachment from the squadron was sent to the forward area to occupy LG 125 and later

to Antelat. We heard about Pearl Harbour and the American declaration of war against the Axis powers. Having spent a cheerless Christmas at Giarabub, and the coming of the New Year there was talk of a move towards the coastal road. We were pleased to leave and a smaller convoy travelled north, eventually crossing the recent battle-ground of Sidi Rizegh and on to the Tobruk bypass which had been constructed by Italian troops to circumvent that besieged fortress. The convoy then went forward to the large landing ground at Gazala. The armies advance had by now 'run out of steam' and with the German Army in pursuit a withdrawal came about. We were soon reunited with our mates from the advanced party when after a while we withdrew to the Fuka area to be rested and where leave for the whole unit was sanctioned.

Squadron Leader Marsden became our C.O after S/L Howells had been shot down and captured during the Crete campaign and had remained with the squadron until the end of 1941 when he was posted away and S/L. Gould came as his replacement. Under his command the squadron moved from the Fuka area to the landing ground at Gambut, a short distance from Tobruk. Gambut was situated on the escarpment overlooking the main coastal road. Movement of transport along this road gave an indication how things were doing 'up front'. Heavy traffic going forward meant things were stable, when in the reverse one became concerned and you made sure your 'small kit' was ready to hand.

Our aircraft was employed on various operations, chiefly patrolling the Tobruk area where dive bombers made life uncomfortable for the army. It was during this time that the Spitfires of 145 Squadron joined us at Gambut. There was also the first evidence of 'Lend-Lease' from America in that our 'clapped out' motor transport was replaced by 3 ton metal bodied Ford's and Chevrolets... During the period of a full moon our nights were disturbed by bombers from Crete. There was also the danger of strafing attacks by the Luftwaffe during one such attack Paddy Leeburn, a flight mechanic, was badly injured when refuelling aircraft.

At the end of May 1942 S/L Gould left the unit and was replaced by S/L Proctor. His arrival was shortly followed by the German ground troops and armour attacking the Free French in the Bir Hakeim area. This action was followed by an all out attack on our defences in the Tobruk area. Places such as Knightsbridge involved heavy fighting by armoured forces and our unit was kept very busy trying to protect our ground forces by Stuka and JU 88 dive-bombers. In the month of June partial withdrawal commenced when an advanced party from 33 was sent to the rear to occupy the landing strip at Gerawla. With the fall of Tobruk expected within a few

days the main party followed, taking the desert track through Cappuzzo in preference to the coastal road, which was full of our forces in retreat. We remained only a few days at Gerawla due to the swift advance of the enemy. Our final resting place was a desert landing strip at Mareopolis a short distance from Amriya.

After the defence line at El-Alamein had withstood persistent attacks by German forces the situation became less fraught the squadron went forward to occupy the landing ground at El-Hammam. We were subjected to ground strafing attacks at this place and had to fall back on Mareopolis. However we did return to El-Hammam in time for the offensive commencing on the 21st October when we witnessed the artillery barrage commencing at 21.00 hours prior to advance from El-Alamein culminating in the expulsion of Axis forces from the African continent.

Our C.O was posted back to the Cairo area to become the Chief Test Pilot at HQ.206 Group at Heliopolis. By coincidence, some weeks later I was posted to the same unit to enjoy the flesh pots of Cairo and the pleasure of driving staff cars and living in permanent buildings instead of sleeping under the stars. We even slept between freshly laundered sheets, "BLISS"!!

Whilst a member of ground staff with 33 Squadron during the period of January 1941 to December 1942 the unit was operational or semi-operational at the following places:

January 1941	Amriya	Egypt
February 1941	Elevisis	Greece
February 1941	Larissa	Greece
April 1941	Elevisis	Greece
April 1941	Argos	Greece
April 1941	Kalamata	Greece (Evacuation)
May 1941	Crete	
May 1941	Ramleh	Palestine (Regrouping)
May 1941	Edku	Egypt
June 1941	Sidi Haneish	Egypt (Operational)

September 1941	Garawla	Egypt
November 1941	Giarabub	Libya
January 1942	Gazala	Libya
February 1942	Fuka	Egypt
March 1942	Fuka	Egypt (Refit and Leave)
March 1942	Gambut	Libya (Operational)
June 1942	Mareopolis	Egypt
July 1942	Sidi Azziz	Egypt
September 1942	El-Hammam	Egypt

Commanding Officers

January – March 1941	Squadron Leader Riley
March – April 1941	Squadron Leader Pattle
April – May 1941	Squadron Leader Howell
May – November 1941	Squadron Leader Marsden
November – April 1942	Squadron Leader Gould
May – July 1942	Squadron Leader Proctor
July 1942.	Finis.