

‘Angels and Gremlins’
The Memoirs of James. A. Stewart DFC.

The 29th January 1942 saw me arrive at M.S.F.U. (Merchant Ship Fighter Unit) stationed at Speke, which is today the official airport for Liverpool. This was a very unique unit of the RAF whose history has been well documented by Ralph Barker’s book, “The Hurricanes” and Kenneth Poolman’s “The Catafighters and Merchant Aircraft Carriers”. They were named CAM (Catapult Armed Merchant) ships and MAC (Merchant Aircraft Carrier) ships.

Quoting from the former, “What have you done”, demanded Winston Churchill of his Chief of Naval Staff on 27th December 1940, “about catapulting expendable aircraft from ships”? With the Battle of Britain won and lost, Hitler had abandoned his invasion plans and proclaimed that Britain would be bombed, and starved, into submission. In the war at sea he had introduced a new dimension in the shape of the long range Focke Wulf ‘Condor’ aircraft of Kampfgeschwader 40, manned by an elite corps of airmen who roamed far out into the Atlantic, beyond the range of Britain’s shore based aircraft, to sink Allied ships almost at will. “The scourge of the Atlantic” Churchill called them and demanded an antidote, however desperate. Thus was born the expendable fighters, launched in mid ocean by catapult from the foredecks of specially modified merchant ships, to which they could not return. The aircraft used were Hawker Hurricane’s; their outstandingly courageous pilots were volunteers - RAF men, many of them veterans of the Battle of Britain, and members of the Fleet Air Arm. All these men knew that after being launched into combat, if they ditched or baled out successfully they stood a chance of being picked up by an escort vessel, but all were aware that failing this they had bought a one-way ticket. The story of Britain’s “suicide pilots”, as they were known, pitted as they were against a brave and resourceful enemy, adds a new and thrilling chapter to the saga of human endeavor in World War 1.

We were equipped with Sea Hurricane Mk IA’s, i.e., MkI’s converted by the addition of a catapult spool. The Rolls Royce Merlin 111 engine gave us a maximum speed of 322 mph and a ceiling of 34,000 ft. Our training at Speke consisted of flying at 70 knots -stalling speed- with flaps down, Air-to-Air firing, and lots of ADDLES (Assisted Dummy Deck Landings). A catapult, similar to that mounted on the ships, was installed on a runway. It consisted of a cradle fuelled by 13 rockets. The Hurricane, with flaps fully down and throttle locked wide open on full boost, waited until the pilot’s right hand indicated ‘Readiness’, then snapped down to lock on to left forearm as the aircraft blasted off, achieving 70 knots in just 75 feet. A sensation like a giant hand pushing through one’s back. Painted on the runway was a mock up of a carrier deck and approaches were made under the control of our ‘batsman’ - with practice we could almost land on a coin.

23rd February 1943. I was seconded to RNAS Machrihanish aboard HMS Argus, a World War One aircraft carrier - that gremlin again! My first dummy approach was fine, but when I came around for the landing the wind had changed and I was mistakenly landed with the drift, picked up the arrester gear, no problem, but due to the wire not having modern self centering features my aircraft slid along over the side, to be caught by the crash barrier. Thank you angel! It looked a long way down to the water. Typical Navy - they were about to push the Hurricane overboard, with the only damage a bent propeller and a damaged left aileron, but we managed to talk them out of it. The next day saw one dummy approach and three successful deck landings. Back to Speke on the 27th, and on 2nd March off to RAF Valley for nine days of air-to-air firing practice.

The 4th May 1943 saw us getting ready for sea duties and on 10th May, with first pilot Geoffrey Booth, we followed the transport of our Sea Hurricane to Glasgow Docks for loading aboard the SS Empire Darwin. We subsequently attended the Captains Conference at Gourock. We sailed on 13th May (which seems to be my eventful date). Having watched the convoy’s Commodore giving out instructions to 65 ships with Captains of every nationality, waking up the next day to find 5 lines of 13 vessels in formation is one of my most impressive memories. The ‘Whoop, Whoop’ of the escort destroyers and frigates was a sound never to be forgotten. The voyage to Gibraltar was uneventful, but with reports of U-boats around one had to sleep in one’s clothes with no tucked in blankets, and life

jackets as pillows. Luckily I was never sea sick, but our poor rigger never could get to the top of the ladder to service the aircraft. One night we were awakened by the sound of guns firing all around and the rumour of a U Boat actually sailing through the convoy. The escorts were busy, but no kills were reported. Just before arriving at Gibraltar we had a tanker torpedoed - just one big ball of flame, poor devils! Yet there are those who still do not recognize Merchant Mariners as 'veterans'. We flew the plane off at Gibraltar and spent a week there while the convoy was re-organized for a trip to Algiers. I still remember the taste of the 6 bananas I bought from a street vendor - I had not seen one for years, and ate the lot. I got severe sunburn on my knees and upper legs watching inter-service boxing matches on the quay. I recall that it was hard to sleep with depth charges being dropped all night long to forestall Italian miniature submarines. That Gremlin again! On one occasion I was on a test flight and just on finals when the engine cut. Thank you again, Angel - I had always preferred a glide approach to that of an engine assisted anyway, and it was nice to be able to sideslip in. I made it halfway down the runway with a dead prop.

Then it was on to Algiers to unload our cargo of war material - with good wine and food at the Hotel Alletti. Another anecdotal story: My uncle Sam Ross, Mum's youngest brother, who was not much older than myself, was in D.E.M.S. - the same branch of the Navy to which we reported, and I heard that he had been stationed in Gibraltar - when I asked for him I was told he had gone to Algiers. Naturally when I arrived there I went up to the Naval Mess first chance I had. He was out but "Would be back shortly" - but the lad who turned up, although a Sam Ross, was not my Sam.! A couple of days later, just as we were about to cast off, who should come running down the quay but Uncle Sam himself. He had just been posted to Algiers, to be told that some Air Force type from the Empire Darwin was looking for him. A small world indeed.

We sailed back through the Straits of Gibraltar and down the coast of French Morocco to pick up a bulk load of phosphate at the port of Safi. Safi looked so white from the sea, but it was typical North African dirt and smells when we got ashore. It so happens that this area was the home of the Moroccan Sardine industry and many of the white buildings which we had seen along the shore were in fact Sardine Factories. I never dreamt that I was to be involved in the same industry at Black Harbour. We attended the celebration of Bastille Day at the invitation of the local Governor. The local Bedouin came en masse from the hills outside the town to put on a show of horsemanship which had to be seen to be believed. The tongued supporting noise given by the veiled women was spine chilling and made ones hair stand on end. It reminded us that prisoners were usually passed on to the females of the tribes for indescribable treatment- nuff said! Hate to think what could have happened to us as we made our way back to the ship after midnight, stepping over all types of sleeping bodies in the dark, as we did, in the wet and dank narrow passages of the Medina. Young and foolish, I guess! Sailed again for Gibraltar via Casablanca, where we were not too welcome. Many of the French never did forgive us for the destruction of their Fleet at Oran.

After a few days again in Gibraltar where Convoy SL 133 was assembled, we headed off for the UK. My story is continued courtesy of "The Hurricats" and a copy of my combat report.

Convoy SL133 left Gibraltar on 23rd July 1943 on the final leg of its homeward bound run from Sierra Leone accompanied by the last two Cam ships in service, the Empire Tide and Empire Darwin. It was nearly nine months since the launching of pilot Norman Taylor on 1st November 1942, and with the knowledge that they were returning home to a disbanded unit where they had missed all the farewell parties and where postings to unknown destinations would be awaiting them, a certain lack of zeal on the part of MSFU crews might have been excused. Fortunately no such relaxation was discernible. It was known that sailings from Gibraltar were always reported by German agents watching from across the Bay of Algeciras. The pilots, two on each Cam ship, were unproven but keen. The FDO's were two of the most experienced and long serving on the unit. Recent reports of Condor sightings did not encourage carelessness or complacency. And two days out warnings were received of possible Condor attacks. The convoy consisted of forty ships, in eight columns of five. Empire Tide was leading the extreme port column, Empire Darwin the starboard. At 2025 hrs on the 26th, with the convoy 250 miles off Cape St.Vincent, a four engined Condor aircraft was sighted

flying at about 1200 feet some 12 miles away, the Condor was over a thousand miles from base, on reconnaissance. Next day the cruiser Scylla took up position in the centre of the convoy, to give maximum cover from her anti aircraft guns. Thirty six hours passed, then came news that a Gibraltar bound convoy 120 miles to the north east, was being attacked by eight Condors and that ships were being sunk. Consequent on the disbandment of MSFU this convoy had no Cam ship protection. That afternoon, with Empire Tide at readiness, a radar blip indicated an aircraft at 35 mile range but nothing was visible. Soon afterwards a fault was detected on Empire Tide's catapult and Empire Darwin took over guard. The FDO on Empire Darwin was John Pickwell, above average at aircraft recognition and following some radio chat about an unidentified aircraft he soon picked out and positively identified a Focke Wulf 200 coming up from astern on the starboard side. The two pilots were sitting on the fore hatch just below the port wing of the bridge, playing cards with the sea crew. Leaning over the bridge Pickwell quietly warned the pilot on watch, "You'd better get in your aircraft Jimmy. There's a Focke Wulf 200 over there" As the card players looked up he pointed to starboard. Instantly the crew ran to their posts as action stations sounded. Simultaneously with Pickwell's sighting a USAF B-24 was sighted dead ahead The convoy was passing roughly due west of the Condor base at Bordeaux, 800 miles distant, and from the experience of the southbound convoy two days earlier it seemed likely that several more Condors were in the area. With scattering clouds at 3,000 feet increasing to six tenths at 10,000 feet with many blue patches, conditions for the Condors were good. With this in mind the SOE was content for the Hurricanes to be held in readiness for the major attack that was likely and he asked the Liberator aircraft to intercept the condor. For several minutes both aircraft were lost to sight then re appeared on the opposite side of the convoy down to 150 feet and with the B 24 astern but closing. The gun battle between the two looked like a dual to the death and both aircraft were taking hits. Suddenly the port engine of the Condor burst into flames and the pilot jettisoned the bomb load, only to hit the sea and overturn. Soon afterwards an SOS was heard from the Liberator, now some 20 miles away, the convoy was unable to help and it was thought the aircraft went down into the sea. Minutes later two more Condors were sighted approaching at high level. Empire Darwin turned 15 degrees off course in order to launch Jimmy Stewart but before he could be launched Pickwell spotted another Condor at 500 feet, ten miles to the northwest. Stewart could see the Condor, from where he was sat in his Hurricane, and at 1938 hours was launched. "Tally Ho". The Condor climbed to 1,000 feet steering south then turned east. Pickwell was fuming, being unable to raise Stewart on the radio but Jimmy had no need of vectors, he had the Condor in sight and was closing in for the kill. The Condor took no evasive action as Stewart opened fire at 300 yards. Return fire was intense but inaccurate and Stewart made two attacks before his guns jammed and the Condor headed for a bank of cloud in the distance. Second Officer Francis, on the City of Exeter, kept the Condor in view and saw it crash into the sea; this was confirmed by Third Officer Nicholson of the Bactria. Returning to the convoy Stewart found the ships guns firing at a Condor which was up at 7,000 feet.

From:- R.A.F. Stn. Speke.
To:- Headquarters, Fighter Command
Headquarters, No.9 Group (for G.I.O.)
Date:- 4th August 1943
Ref:- SPK/S.388/INT.
INTELLIGENCE FORM F.
PERSONAL COMBAT REPORT

All times D.B.S.T.
A. Date:- 28th July 1943.
B. Unit:- M.S.F.U.
C. Type & Mark of Aircraft:- Hurricane Mk.I.
D. Time Attack was Delivered:- 19.45.
E. Place:- 43°03'N 16°06'W

F. Weather:- Vis. 15miles 2/10 cloud on horizon increasing to 6/10 at 10000.

G. Our Casualties Aircraft:- One Hurricane Mk.I. Cat. E.

H. Our Casualties Personnel:- Nil.

J. Enemy Casualties in Air Combat:- One F.W.200 probably destroyed.

I left Gibraltar 23rd July on aboard CAM SHIP "EMPIRE DARWIN" in convoy bound for U.K. at 19.30hrs on 28th July 1943 enemy activity was reported and I was ordered to readiness. At 19.38hrs I was signalled to launch, and did so successfully. I then received from the F.D.O. the instruction "Bandit at 9 o'clock." and immediately made visual contact.

I recognised it as a F.W.200 flying at 1,000ft and gave chase, he was flying N. but turned and flew south for a minute the proceeded eastward and reducing height to about 200ft. I had no difficulty overtaking at 6¼ boost, 2600revs and approximately 250m.p.h. and made my attack on the port quarter out of sun. My attack was delivered from 40° to 15°, opening fire at 300yds and closing to almost point blank. I aimed at the cockpit giving 1½ to 1 ring deflection and gave a five second burst. I could see strikes in the sea round the nose, then a vivid white flash from near the turret, return fire was very heavy and uncomfortably close, but I could not see any strikes on my aircraft. Having broken away to port I repeated the attack but my guns ceased firing after about ½ second. However I kept making dummy attacks but gave up when I saw I was drawing well away from the convoy, and returned.

I last saw him flying eastward towards a bank of cloud about 10miles away. On my return to the convoy I started circling at 1000ft. but reception on the R.T. had broken down. As I reached the port side of the convoy I observed the escorts opening fire at another F.W.200 which was making a bombing run from W. to E. at height of about 8000ft. I saw two near misses on H.M.S. SCYLLA and started climbing, I caught up with at 7000ft. and made a few dummy attacks, then followed him until he disappeared into cloud about twenty miles from the convoy. Having once more returned to the convoy I gave the appropriate signal to indicate that I was bailing out, about climbing to 4,500ft about three miles ahead I cleared the aircraft successfully and everything functioned perfectly. I was in the water for about 15mins. before being picked up by H.M.S. LEITH where I received every consideration including a hot bath and a glass of whisky.

The ships officer's also referred to the fact that they had seen the flash from the enemy aircraft.

Claims:- One F.W.200 probably destroyed.

J.A. Stewart F/O.

...After lying in the midst of the wood for two or three hours, I got pretty braced with lying still, so worked my way to the fringe of the trees, but the sight of a bicycle, two legs, encased in top boots, and the butt of a business-looking rifle, persuaded me to lie low again.

...In Paris, I settled down in four different houses for six weeks. I believe I was now in the hands of one of the escape lines set up by M19 from the UK, the Bourgoyne Line, although I was never able to confirm this. On June 11, Sunday after D-Day, starred in an underground movie, Reseau X, filmed mingling with German troops at some well-known Parisian locations.

...I had become fairly proficient in conversational French and we got into all sorts of fearless and foolish antics. One was drinking beer on the sidewalk of the King George V café on the Champs Elysees, surrounded by German Officers and raising my glass in a silent toast to the King. ...Our destination turned out to be the infamous Concentration Camp of Buchenwald.

...On September 10, 1945 I was contacted by the Military Intelligence of the American Forces that they had tracked down my treacherous Gestapo agent Jacques... I confronted Jacques and warned him, "If this fellow leaves us alone, you are a dead man". I know full well I would have strangled him. However he was executed by firing squad on 19 December 1945.

While landing at Marston, England, F/O Stewart hit the ground, bounced and crashed his aircraft. The emergency crew expected to find him dead, but he was sitting upright in the cockpit with only slight cuts on his left cheek and eyebrow.