With a new foreword by Patrick Bishop

GEOFFREY WELLUM

FIRST LIGHT

THE PHENOMENAL FIGHTER PILOT BESTSELLER

'Vivid, wholly convincing, compelling. One of the best memoirs for years about the experience of flying in war'
Max Hastings, *Sunday Telegraph*

PENGUIN BOOKS

FIRST LIGHT

Geoffrey Wellum was born in Walthamstow, and educated at Forest School, Snaresbrook. In August 1939, aged seventeen, he joined the RAF on a short-service commission and served with 92 Squadron throughout the Battle of Britain. In March 1942 he went to 65 Squadron at Debden as a Flight Commander and from there to Malta later that year. He led a group of eight Spitfires off HMS *Furious* to Luqa during Operation Pedestal.

Returning to England, Wellum became a test pilot on Typhoons at Gloster Aircraft. He later became a gunnery instructor until the end of the war. He stayed in the RAF after 1945, serving in Germany as a staff officer, followed by a four-year tour of duty with 192 Squadron. Wellum left the RAF in 1961 to take up a position with a firm of commodity brokers in the City of London until his retirement to Cornwall. He died in July 2018, aged ninety-six.

Patrick Bishop spent twenty-five years as a foreign correspondent covering conflicts around the world. He is the author of two hugely acclaimed books about the Royal Air Force during the Second World War, *Fighter Boys* and *Bomber Boys*. His other books include *Wings*, a history of the RAF, and *Air Force Blue*, which celebrated a hundred years of the RAF and was a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

First Light

GEOFFREY WELLUM

With a new introduction by Patrick Bishop

PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK

First published by Viking 2002
Published in Penguin Books 2003
Reissued with a new introduction 2020
001

Copyright © Geoffrey Wellum, 2002
Introduction copyright © Patrick Bishop, 2020

The moral right of the copyright holders has been asserted

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–98784–1

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

This book is dedicated to all fighter pilots

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

The time will come, when thou shalt lift thine eyes
To watch a long-drawn battle in the skies.
While aged peasants, too amazed for words,
Stare at the flying fleets of wondrous birds.

England, so long mistress of the sea,
Where winds and waves confess her sovereignty,
Her ancient triumphs yet on high shall bear
And reign the sovereign of the conquered air.

Stanzas composed in the style of Thomas Gray,
Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

	List of Illustrations	xi
	Introduction	xiii
	Prologue	xxiii
1.	Ab Initio	1
2.	Ad Astra	26
3.	Fighter Squadron	90
4.	First Light	133
5.	Mars, God of War	159
6.	Brief Encounter	174
7.	Parting Day	186
8.	Snappers About	199
9.	Convoy Pair	209
10.	Over There	248
11.	White Cliffs	262
12.	Twilight	284
13.	Beyond the Hill	288
14.	Return to the Fray	294
15.	Operation Pedestal	306
16.	White Clouds	330
	Epilogue	337

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Illustrations

SECTION 1

1. School first XI cricket team, 1937
2. My father and I at Buckhurst Park, Sussex, summer 1941
3. The Harvard I
4. Tony Bartley, Allan Wright and Brian Kingcombe
5. Allan Wright getting out of his plane
6. Repairing the plane
7. Pembrey aerodrome, 1940
8. Spitfire Mark IX
9. First light
10. Crashed Messerschmitt 109
11. 92 Squadron photographs from Allan Wright's album
12. Debriefing
13. By the swimming pool

SECTION 2

14. A sky full of Heinkel 111 bombers
15. Dispersal hut
16. 'B' Flight scrambling
17. A flight of Spitfires scrambling
18. Biggin Hill celebration party, 1941
19. Take-off in the snow
20. Our tally board, Manston, February 1941
21. Into the wide blue yonder
22. Bob Stanford Tuck
23. Johnny Kent and Tom Wiesse

Copyrighted Material

24. Messerschmitt 110 under fire
25. Group on an aircraft at Biggin Hill
26. Cecil Beaton photographs, summer 1940
27. HMS *Indomitable*
28. *Ohio* arriving in Valletta harbour

The author and publishers are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce photographs: 4, 22, 23, Lesley Kingcombe; 5, 11–13, 25, Allan Wright; 6, 8–10, 14–21, 24, 27, 28, Imperial War Museum; 7, RAF Museum, Hendon; 26, Cecil Beaton Archive (photographs from *Winged Squadrons* by Cecil Beaton).

Copyrighted Material

Introduction

Geoffrey Wellum was in middle age when he began work on this book and an old man when it eventually appeared. That it ever made it into print was due to a slice of the luck that had smiled on him during the frantic air battles of the early years of the war. In 2001 he was a forgotten figure living in straitened circumstances in the Cornish village of Mullion, when an aspiring young writer turned up to talk to him about his experiences. James Holland was researching the background for a wartime novel he was planning and the two hit it off over pints and a meal in the local pub. Geoffrey revealed that a quarter of a century before, in the midst of emotional and business difficulties, he had sought solace by writing down his memories of a period of his life when he felt he was 'doing something useful'.

He passed on a typewritten manuscript, covered in pencilled notes, to James, who at the time was working at Penguin. It did not take him long to realize that this was 'something pretty darned special'. His bosses agreed. *First Light* was published the following year and sold hundreds of thousands of copies and was later turned into a BBC television drama. So it was that, after a life spent in obscurity, when Geoffrey died aged ninety-six in July 2018 he had become rather famous, the incarnation of how people imagined a Battle of Britain pilot to be.

The success of the book was proof of the continuing fascination that the Battle and the men who won it exercise on our imagination and the enduring place they have established in the national consciousness. It is easy to see why.

Copyrighted Material

The Battle of Britain story has all the essential elements of great drama. It's stocked with strong characters, divided neatly into goodies and baddies; a ticking clock, counting down to potential catastrophe; and a beginning, a middle and a happy ending. Of course it was not as straightforward or as clear-cut as that. Sober revisionist narratives pointing out that the odds were not as finely balanced as people imagine have attempted to blur the simple outlines of the tale. As far as the general public is concerned, these efforts have largely been in vain. Popular perceptions of what happened remain largely intact. Admiration for the skill, courage and brave show of insouciance displayed by the young pilots remains unshakeable – largely because, as Wellum's testimony powerfully, movingly and acutely demonstrates, this image was essentially accurate.

Eighty years on, the Battle still fascinates us because it is war on a human scale. There were under three thousand participants on the British side – Churchill's 'Few'. The group was small enough to take on a collective identity crystallized in the form of the Fighter Boy, that iconic figure. *First Light* does many things, but one of its outstanding achievements is to give us the authentic feel of the ethos of the men of Fighter Command in the crucial period of its war.

Even before the Battle, fighter pilots had established a style of their own; a look and a language that seemed to set them apart from the traditional services and which spoke of modernity and efficiency, but also of glamour and fun. As the eighteen-year-old Geoffrey reflected, as he slipped on his tunic for the first time, complete with wings brevet: 'There must be thousands of young men who would give everything to swap places with me.'

What attracted them was the flying not the fighting. The air was a recently conquered frontier and aviation cast a powerful spell, especially over the young. Flying was expen-

Copyrighted Material

sive, and for most the idea that one day one might fly was a fantasy. Hitler changed that. With the huge expansion of the RAF in the 1930s came training schemes such as the Short Service Commission (SSC) programme, for which Wellum was accepted in the spring of 1939. It is revealing that when asked at his interview at the Air Ministry his reasons for wanting to join up he replied: 'I want to fly aeroplanes and the RAF is the best way of doing so and making a career in aviation that I know. Also that it won't cost me anything: money, I mean.' It is only when prompted that serving his country and fighting in a war got a mention.

By this stage, of course, another war was approaching fast. Yet to Wellum, and many like him, the prospect seemed strangely unreal. Few of the letters and diaries of airmen during this period make much mention of the political or military situation, even though it was obvious that when the fighting started they would be pitched instantly into battle. Wellum was not alone in regretting that a machine 'that can impart such a glorious feeling of sheer joy and beauty has got to be used to fight somebody'.

The RAF was in the middle of a great upheaval when he joined it. During the twenty-one years of its existence, much energy had been spent on mere survival, fending off the predatory bureaucratic and political attacks launched by the Army and Navy who resented the decision to remove control of aircraft from their hands and assign them to a new service.

The airmen constantly had to justify their independent status. They did so by advancing a theory of war that gave air-power the primary role in any future conflict. They also constructed, with remarkable swiftness, an identity shaped to slot smoothly into the existing socio-military landscape. Like many upstarts they hankered for respectability. Auxiliary squadrons were founded, a sort of aerial yeomanry aimed at

Copyrighted Material

the socially prominent, and links were forged with the older universities. The approach was evident in the design chosen for the RAF Cadet College at Cranwell in Lincolnshire, which opened in October 1934. It was based on the Royal Hospital in Chelsea, and on the outside it looked as if it had been there for centuries. The classical exterior, though, was all facade and the building was held up by thoroughly modern steel beams – a gigantic metaphor for the RAF.

Snobs in the other services looked down on the new boys, who retaliated by taking on exclusive airs of their own. The specialized nature of their work allowed them to present themselves as a technocratic caste. They dazzled ignorant politicians with their expertise, and the soldiers and sailors were frequently infuriated by the rapt attention paid to the airmen when they held forth to ministers and officials – and even more so by the money that was showered on the RAF when re-armament finally got up steam.

The very success of the Air Force in surviving and prospering, however, brought about a change in its nature. As war approached, the tight, protective ranks of the peacetime force had to open up to a flood of newcomers. The exclusive identity, strengthened by adversity, could only be diluted. The question was: could a new spirit be fused from these new disparate elements?

The need for young men to crew the aircraft and skilled mechanics to keep them flying meant the RAF had to reach beyond traditional military recruiting grounds to fill the expanding ranks. In addition to the SSC scheme, in 1936 it launched the RAF Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR), which was, the official narrative relates, 'visualized as a collection of men drawn from the middle class in its widest sense with no suggestion in its organization of a pre-determined social hierarchy.'

By the time Wellum arrived on 92 Squadron in May 1940,

Copyrighted Material

the melding process had just begun. The unit dated back to the First World War, but had only reformed in October. Its CO was Roger Bushell, a pre-war stalwart of an auxiliary squadron, 601, which was a collection of clubmen and City boys who flaunted their money and social standing. Bushell was a forceful and well-connected South African-born barrister. The accounts of many novice airmen of the period suggest that perpetual irascibility, real or contrived, was a favoured management technique of squadron commanders, and Bushell was no exception. He was aghast that Geoffrey had never flown a Spitfire – with which 92 was now equipped – and unimpressed by the 'above the average' rating he had been awarded by his instructors.

It would seem logical that the greater your flying experience the more chance you would have of surviving and succeeding, but, as Wellum pointed out, the truth was that 'no amount of training can prepare you for mortal combat'. On 23 May the squadron had their first meeting with the Luftwaffe. That evening, patrolling over the Pas de Calais, Bushell's aeroplane went down in flames (he survived only to be murdered by the Gestapo after the 'Great Escape' from Stalag Luft III in 1944). He was one of five 92 squadron pilots killed, captured or wounded that day. In the autumn two more squadron commanders with impressive CVs managed only a few sorties before being shot down.

After the mauling of late May the squadron was sent to the relative calm of Pembrey, Carmarthenshire, and was absent from the front line when the Battle got underway in July, returning to the fray for the climactic weeks of September. The respite gave Geoffrey the time he needed to get thoroughly acquainted with the aircraft that would form a structural part of his existence in the coming years. While *First Light* is in some ways a book about love – love of comrades and love of country – it is also about the extraordinary

Copyrighted Material

emotional bond he felt for his machine. Fighter Boy style was understated, wry, flippant. When it came to Spitfires, though, restraint was abandoned and pilots talked of them in the besotted language of romance (the homely Hurricane never aroused the same ardour). Geoffrey's Spit was not only a super-efficient killing machine; it had the quasi-human qualities of sympathy and faithfulness.

The squadron's duties – flying night patrols over Bristol to intercept raiders – were hazardous, but largely fruitless. In the words of Trevor 'Wimpey' Wade, who became one of Geoffrey's closest squadron buddies, it was 'a case of showing the flag to the locals, who no doubt got some satisfaction out of hearing a couple of Spitfires screaming overhead, even if the screams were brought about by our own endeavours to get out of our own searchlights and subsequent AA fire.'

During the long periods of hanging about, the squadron had time to bond. It was a typical motley of pre-war professionals: both officers and NCOs, short-service bods and RAFVR types. Among them were a number of characters who stood out, even in the colourful ranks of Fighter Command. There was Tony Bartley, another SSC officer and, according to Brian Kingcome, 'so good looking it was almost in poor taste', who was also a brilliant pilot. The evenings were enlivened by the musicianship of Bob Holland, a Cranwell graduate who 'would often take over the piano stool from night club pianists on our nights off and sit there, a large drink standing on the piano top, his eyes half closed and screwed against the smoke from the inevitable cigarette that dangled from the corner of his mouth', stroking the notes of the squadron favourite 'In the Mood'. The social distinction between officers such as these and NCO pilots was quite marked in some squadrons, but was less so in 92. The unit included two outstanding fliers who had entered via the RAFVR, Sergeants Don Kingaby and Ralph 'Titch' Havercroft.

Copyrighted Material

Wellum, still not nineteen, looked up to Brian Kingcome, three years his senior and another Cranwell product, who became his flight commander. Kingcome had a lopsided face, the result of a car crash on returning from a night out, and a sardonic wit, which disguised a humane and sympathetic nature.

Geoffrey's susceptibility to the beer that fuelled the fun led Kingcome to nickname him the 'Boy Drunkard', later shortened to 'Boy'. His puppyish enthusiasm, occasional exasperations and glooms, and cheeky good humour meant he fitted in well enough to the bantering, public-school atmosphere. Acceptance came easily to men who, as they stood by at readiness each dawn, savouring the birdsong and the smells of summer, had no idea whether they would be alive to lift their tankards in the mess that evening.

Such intensity of experience forged emotional bonds that were perhaps more powerful for being unstated. Every fighter squadron had an ethos of its own, but 92's was unusually distinct. As Kingcome wrote, despite the comings and goings caused by death and injury, it 'always had the special ingredient that sets certain people or groups apart from the rest – a small, indefinable quality in the alchemy that gives an edge, a uniqueness. This quality can never by duplicated or planned for, but somehow it comes into being and is aptly called "spirit".'

Geoffrey received a warm and loving upbringing, the only child of Percy, who worked in the drink trade, and Edith. Yet he soon found leave visits to the family home in Walthamstow unsettling and life outside the company of his squadron comrades strange and uncomfortable. When he was told, after unbroken months of action, that he was being taken off ops and posted away, he reacted not with relief but dismay: 'This is the only life I know. I don't want to go.'

He was exceptionally lucky to still be alive. Having survived the Battle, the squadron was thrown into the new

Copyrighted Material

phase of fighter action that opened in early 1941. The new commanders of Fighter Command decided on a strategy of all-out offence against targets in northern France. Squadrons which might have been better employed supporting the army in North Africa were sent as escorts to small bomber formations, which acted as bait to entice the Luftwaffe up to do battle. The roles of the two air forces were now reversed and the enemy had all the advantages.

It was the RAF that was having to criss-cross the Channel and fight over hostile territory ('fighter sweeps'), risking death or imprisonment for no obvious gain. From mid June until the end of 1941 Fighter Command lost 411 pilots. Men who had come through the Battle of Britain perished pointlessly. Geoffrey did nearly a hundred of these operations and they were among the most harrowing combats he endured. Not usually one to question the wisdom of his superiors, he concluded that 'this is not what a fighter pilot should be asked to do'. Nevertheless, in July 1941 he learned that he was to be awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his conduct during these operations, just short of his twentieth birthday.

First Light is just one of dozens of memoirs written by Battle of Britain pilots. The first were published shortly after the end of the war. They tend to reflect the mores and moods of the time at which they appeared. The early ones are often written in the clipped, taciturn style of boys' adventure stories, in which emotion is all but absent and descriptions of the action are formulaic, of the 'I gave him a quick squirt and he rolled on his back and spiralled down, belching smoke and flame' variety. Fear barely gets a mention.

Geoffrey Wellum's book stands out because, although it was based on 'reflections . . . jotted down at odd times during those momentous early days', it has an immediacy that appeals to modern ears, and the events and emotions it

Copyrighted Material

describes seem more real and accessible than the tight masculinity of the earlier offerings. James Holland, who went on to become a leading military historian, felt that its quality lay in the fact that Geoffrey had written the book not for an audience but for himself, as 'an act of catharsis'.

He began it in the mid 1970s, almost as a therapy when his life had taken a turn for the worse. After the war he stayed on in the RAF, converting briefly to fly Vampire jets before serving with the Second Tactical Air Force in Germany. On returning to the UK he then flew B29 Washingtons, completing numerous 'Cold War' reconnaissance missions until 1957. He retired from the RAF in 1961 and became operational manager of a haulage company run by the family of his wife, Grace. The business and the marriage failed, and he retreated from the world, moving to a humble house in Cornwall, after several years working as a commodity broker in the City; work which he did not enjoy.

But for the intervention of fate, that might have been the end of the story. With *First Light* Geoffrey became a living symbol not only of the Battle of Britain, but of the heroism and sacrifice of the wartime generation. The book, though, was far more than a mere adventure story. It has a depth and honesty that marks it a classic, heightening our understanding of what wars do to those who have to fight them.

Most striking is his frank evocation of the fog of apprehension that hung over fighter operations, lurching frequently into sweat-drenched terror, and the candour with which he relates his thoughts and reactions. Geoffrey was never quite sure whether or not he believed in God, but, like the child he so recently had been, it was to Him he appealed in extreme moments. There's something very touching – and funny – about one prayer that went up from his cockpit before setting off on a sortie: 'Please, dear God, like me more than you do the Germans.'

Copyrighted Material

Flying fighters meant a constant erosion of a pilot's physical and mental resources. The RAF was beginning to become alert to the psychological damage inherent in aerial warfare. Even so, the conventions of the time meant that many kept their troubles to themselves. Geoffrey was quite open in later life that he suffered some sort of breakdown after his experiences in Malta. It is only surprising that, after nearly two years of almost continuous stress and countless close encounters with death, it hadn't come sooner.

Beneath the cheerfulness and the innocence of Geoffrey's prose, there runs a current of melancholy. He was aware that the transition from schoolboy to warrior had been brutally and bewilderingly swift. He was proud to have been one of the Few, and of his part in his country's finest hour. But there was always the uneasy feeling that this would be the peak of his existence and he had scaled it too soon. Thereafter, everything he did and felt would stand in relation to those frantic times. And nothing would ever quite match up to them.

Patrick Bishop

Copyrighted Material

Prologue

The co-pilot of the Catalina flying boat came aft to the crew's rest room where I, a worn-out Spitfire pilot, reclined on one of the let-down bunks, feeling cold and miserable. Smiling, he handed me a steaming mug of hot sweet cocoa and the thickest and largest corned beef sandwich I had ever seen.

I am on my way back home to England from Malta and, as the Catalina drones through the night sky somewhere between Gibraltar and Plymouth and fortified by the cocoa, I ponder the last three years.

It seems like an impossible dream. Did I really find myself in a front line fighter squadron within ten months of leaving school? Did I fly through and survive the Battle of Britain before I had reached the age of twenty? It appears I must have done.

Thirty-five years later I am sitting at the dining-room table in my small cottage. The french windows are open and the sound and smell of the steady summer rain create a peaceful atmosphere. Before me on the table is a pencil, sheets of foolscap and an old exercise book containing some reflections I jotted down at odd times during those momentous early days of the Second World War.

Without realizing it, I pick up the pencil and start to write. Something seems to guide that pencil as my hand moves back and forth, back and forth across the paper. The daylight fades. I switch on the lamp and continue until finally my hand stops. The writing has totally relaxed me. I must write some more one day when I think about it and before memory fades further

Copyrighted Material

with advancing years. I kept no diaries, so I'll just have to put all that I've written into some sort of order and call it a manuscript.

Copyrighted Material

1. Ab Initio

While men depart of joyful heart
Adventure for to know

Rudyard Kipling,
'The Song of the Dead'

There are some days in the early spring when the weather is such that, no matter where you are, either in town or country-side, England is at her best and it's good to be alive. I notice that it is just such a day as I emerge from the underground at Holborn, turn left and walk down Kingsway.

The morning sun is already warm and rather comforting, which helps to allay somewhat a feeling of apprehension that has been building up within me for the past couple of hours.

I am seventeen and a half years old and, I suspect, a rather precocious young man. It was some six months ago when I first wrote to the Air Ministry. I was leaving school within a year and very much wanted to fly an aeroplane, so could they give me a job, please? It must have been a frightening prospect because they certainly took their time replying, but eventually I received a response in the guise of an enormous and rather complicated form together with a covering letter.

The writer informed me that he had been directed to reply to my undated communication – always a communication, never a letter – enclosing an application form for completion in due course and he ended by saying that he was my most

Copyrighted Material

obedient servant. I remember thinking what charming manners and how polite the Royal Air Force must be to everybody.

So, one evening after junior prep, the members of the VIth Form descended on my study to hold a meeting. The object was to reflect upon and hopefully complete the application form by the simple process of discussing and then taking a vote on the answer to each question. In return I was to supply suitable refreshments for the duration of the discussion. Simple!

The whole meeting was a great success and the answers to the many questions really superb. Duly completed, the form was returned to the Air Ministry a few days later. 'Don't appear to be in too much of a hurry,' they said.

Weeks of silence followed. The Air Ministry had just laughed and torn it up. Then, one day, the headmaster summoned me to the presence.

'I have had an extraordinary letter from the Air Ministry, who require me to say something nice about you and so purge myself. Do you think I dare?'

'Yes, sir, of course; without question.'

'Really? Why on earth should I? And in any case, what could I possibly say?'

'Well, sir, you must have done the same thing before for many others and I'm certain it cannot be the first time that you have been faced with the dilemma of perjury.'

'In that case, I suppose I'd better think something up, but I was rather hoping that you would be here for the cricket season. I gather you have been invited to captain the first XI. That can't be right, surely, can it?'

'I'm afraid it is, sir. You see, lots of people left after last year and we'll be hard up for chaps this summer.'

'Obviously.'

'I shall be able to stay without too much trouble as I'm

Copyrighted Material

under age at the moment. You have to be at least seventeen and a half before you can join the RAF.'

'Let's see, how old are you at the moment?'

'Seventeen, sir.'

'All right, I'll see what I can do.'

He gave me a pat on the shoulder as I left him, which I thought strange.

Not all that long afterwards I received a letter from my father which informed me that he also had been in receipt of an Air Ministry communication. It appeared that what this said, in effect, was that if my dad wanted to get rid of me all that badly, would he please give his consent to my joining the Royal Air Force, if invited to do so, by signing the attached document.

It would seem that Father complied by return of post.

A further period of silence followed before yet another communication arrived, this one inviting me to attend a selection board to be held at Adastral House, Kingsway, at 10.00 hours on Wednesday 20 March 1939 in connection with my application for a Short Service Commission in the General Duties Branch of the Royal Air Force. This writer was also my obedient servant.

And so, this sunny morning finds me walking down Kingsway. I look at my watch. I'm in plenty of time, although it won't hurt to get there a little on the early side. Do I really want to join the RAF and become a pilot? I suppose I'm doing the right thing? Still time to turn round and go home. I take my time and stroll quietly onwards. It would be nice to be able to fly.

I am fully aware that the next hour or so could well be a turning point in my life. Throughout my comparatively short time on this earth I have had an awareness of the dramatic as it occurs, an awareness of the passing of time; that time, once behind you, can never return or be retrieved.

Copyrighted Material

As a boy of eleven, I went as a boarder to Forest School in Snaresbrook. I realized even then that infant days were over and a phase of life was behind me; another milestone was being reached. It is all so relentless that I wonder if life is mapped out from the day that you are born. Is everything pre-ordained? Maybe I'm a bit of a fatalist.

Assuming I am accepted by the RAF, next term at school will be my last. I shall have my study, VIth Form privileges and a young third former to do any job that I can't be bothered to do for myself; I'll be a little tin god. Better make the most of it – as an acting pilot officer on probation I shall be on the bottom rung of the ladder again and a lower form of life will not exist.

Businessmen complete with briefcases and copies of the *Daily Telegraph* hurry by me as I walk. Heads down, intent on another day at the office, the same sort of day as yesterday and no doubt a very similar day tomorrow. Finance, rates, banking, profit margins, insurance, shipping, broking, business lunches and, for the most part, boredom; a stereotyped curriculum. I look at the small fluffy white clouds contrasting against the blue English sky. I'd rather fly, if they'll have me.

Adastral House. Thanks in part to the businessmen, I have no hesitation. I cross the threshold and pass through the large important-looking doors into another world. The first step is taken, a decision is made.

A commissionaire comes up to me before there is time to stand around looking obvious.

'I'm here for an interview with the selection board for pilots in the RAF.'

'Third floor, Room 21.'

Room 21 is an unimposing and austere waiting room. Two commissionaires are present. I enter and approach one who looks a kindly sort of chap. He speaks before I have time to introduce myself.

Copyrighted Material

'Selection board?'

'Yes.'

'Name?'

'Wellum.'

He consults a list. 'Mr Geoffrey Harry Augustus Wellum?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'Right you are, Mr Wellum, just take a seat. You won't be kept waiting all that long once they get going. I'll be here to tell you where to go when you are called.'

Well, at least they seem to be organized. I sit down to wait and by ten o'clock some twenty would-be aviators are assembled. One person, of course, makes conversation – there is always one. He speaks non-stop in spite of the fact that nobody is really listening, or indeed is the least bit interested. He has done fourteen hours solo and so forth and it would appear he knows everybody who is worth knowing in and around London, to say nothing of the people he meets each year in St Moritz. I suppose he's bound to be accepted.

Things start to move at about 10.15. By nature I am always an impatient sort of person and as others are called before me I become agitated and apprehensive. Finally, my turn comes and I am ushered along a short passage. The commissionaire knocks at a door, opens it and stands aside for me to enter.

Three distinguished-looking men behind a large table. The one in the centre, who must be the primary member or the chairman, I suppose, is a pleasant-faced man with a steady gaze. On his right is an elderly grey-haired chap who looks harmless enough. It's the one on the left I don't like the look of all that much. Don't know why, really, but I bet he'll ask all the rotten questions, probably maths or something. My surmise turns out to be correct.

'Good morning. Your name?'

'Good morning. Wellum, sir.'

Copyrighted Material

'Take a seat.' Then, before I have had a chance to settle, 'Why do you want to join the Royal Air Force?'

'I want to fly aeroplanes and the RAF is the best way of doing so and making a career in aviation that I know. Also, it won't cost me anything; money, I mean.'

'I'm inclined to agree with you. Mr Wellum, what about service to your King and Country? Say there is a war, what then?'

'I've always taken as read that one serves, sir. I've not thought about war.'

'Hmm. Oh, well. Where are you at school?'

The plunge taken, the questions come thick and fast. Which newspapers do I read? What games do I play? Do I shoot, ride? How many battleships in the Far East? (None, they're all cruisers.) How old are you? A bit young yet, then. And on and on. The nasty one puts his oar in the water. What is the tan of an angle? Sine? Cosine? (I can answer that. I thought someone would bring that up and so I checked last night. Jammy!) I feel myself being drawn out in conversation and I get the impression that things are going reasonably well. I almost begin to enjoy the experience.

'Now, this question of your age. You are still at school, of course. Can you do another term?'

'I'd like to, sir, at least until I'm old enough to join the air force. You see, I've been asked to captain the cricket XI this season.' Can't do any harm to get that one in.

'Have you, indeed? Used to play a lot myself. Well now, let's see,' and, turning to his two companions, 'We wouldn't want to interfere with that, would we? Captain, eh? Right, so if you go back to school for one more term and brush up on your maths when you are not playing cricket – and that's important – that should bring you up to the right sort of age. Well, thank you, Mr Wellum, for your time. Take this slip to the commissionaire and he will tell you where to find the doctors. Good day to you.'

Copyrighted Material

'Good morning, sir.'

And that's that. The slip is blue. I hand it to the waiting attendant.

'That's only the fourth today, young sir.'

'What do you mean?'

'You see, if you get given a blue chit it means you have passed the interview. So now you go to see the doctors, and sooner you than me, sir. A pink slip and the next thing you hear is the Air Ministry regrets . . .'

He tells me what to do and where to go and by 12.45 I am about halfway through the medical. I never realized there were so many parts of the human body that required checking to see if they worked. Then everything stops for lunch and I am dismissed with a request to be back no later than 2 p.m. Finally, at 3.30, the ordeal is over and I walk out into Kingsway and a cloudy afternoon. There is no indication as to how the medical went, but I feel sure I haven't done too badly. I held my breath OK and blew up the mercury; I shall feel rather disappointed if I'm turned down.

I am not. Two days before the end of the Easter holidays comes the welcome news that I have been accepted for pilot training. I am to report to No. 7 Elementary and Reserve Flying Training School at Desford, Leicestershire, for ab initio training not later than noon on 28 July 1939.

There are instructions as to what I should take in the way of clothing (including a dinner jacket and a cap; odd mixture!), what books to read and so forth. I pay little attention. I am going to be a pilot and that is all that matters. Failure along the way doesn't occur to me and anyway, the cricket season is about to begin and I shall be fully occupied.

The summer term passes all too quickly. Days in the sun and the sound of ball on bat. Lunch taken under the large chestnut tree, the rest of the school seated round the boundary in their straw boaters watching the game and a dip in the

Copyrighted Material

swimming pool after close of play. I savour it all to the full, make the most of it and enjoy every minute.

Two of my closest friends at Forest School are John Howell-Jones and Henry Neil. Sometimes John, Henry and I walk round the playing fields along the edge of the forest in the twilight of fine summer evenings and discuss the future. They are both going up to Oxford. They seem to think there could well be a war and if it comes we will all be involved. I can't say that I have given much thought to it at all, yet of the three of us I shall be the first to be thrown into the deep end.

John is due to be killed leading his platoon in North Africa whilst Henry will spend four years or more chasing the Japs through the jungles of Malaya and Burma. But that summer we are young and full of confidence. We are happy. England is a peaceful place and life goes on at school as it has done for 150 years. Only vaguely are we aware that the country is rearming and preparing for war.

The last day of term arrives, and as I walk through the cloisters to the end-of-term service in the chapel I find it moving. As is routine, we monitors walk into chapel after the rest of the school, preceding the masters in their gowns, cloaks and mortarboards. 'Jerusalem' and the final hymn, 'God Be with You Till We Meet Again'. When in God's name will that be? Handshakes all round and my housemaster, dear old 'Pipes', saying, 'Cheerio, old chap; good luck and please come and see us if you get the time.'

A new boy will arrive next term and 'Pipes' will start all over again.

I walk out of the main gate for the last time, no longer a schoolboy. Another stepping stone; I am an Old Boy with immediate effect. As I get into the waiting car and move away, I don't look round or speak to Father, I just blow my nose very, very hard.

Copyrighted Material

Before I have time to really appreciate what is happening, I find myself at Desford saying goodbye to my parents. Mother says very little except to forbid me to go too fast. It is just about a week since the end of term.

The excitement of something new about to happen is upon me and in any case I don't want to prolong farewells. I quickly say my au revoirs. For just one moment I watch their car disappear round the corner of the lane. They have gone. That's it, then, so the only thing to do now is pick up my luggage and walk through the main gate at Desford into the Royal Air Force.

The welcoming talk leaves those of us who have assembled in no doubt whatsoever as to the situation. We are not yet in the RAF and not all of us ever will be. We are, in fact, civilian 'pupil pilots' and very much on probation.

Before the service accept us for any further training, we have to pass the ab initio flying course, which will take us up to fifty hours' flying time. We are to be taught on DH 82 Tiger Moths. By the end of the course we will be able to do everything in the way of flying the aeroplane that the RAF requires: aerobatics, cross-country and suchlike. Exams will be taken and there will be a weeding-out process starting as of this moment. The air force, we are told, is fairly easy to get into these days, judging by the appearance of our course, but it is also very easy to get out of and we are to bear this fact very much in mind.

This is a rude man, not the least like my 'obedient servant'. He is, in fact, the Chief Ground Instructor and very frightening. He, together with the Chief Flying Instructor, hands out the 'Bowler Hats'.*

The Chief Flying Instructor gives flying tests to doubtful pupils and the end-of-course tests to ascertain if we have

* RAF slang for a suspension from duty; effectively, being sacked.

Copyrighted Material

attained the necessary minimum standard. What he says, goes. He has the power to pass or fail. Between them they make a right pair.

As with all courses, we are a very mixed collection from all walks of life, each, it would seem, with a false sense of his own importance. There are some South Africans, four Canadians and one each from Australia and New Zealand, all of us excited to some extent and very near to being labelled an unruly mob.

For the remainder of our first afternoon we are left to our own devices to settle in. I chum up with a chap called Peter Sears. We are to become firm friends in the months ahead.

During the course of the afternoon I go for a walk along the tarmac among the aircraft, where I savour the smell of doped canvas, petrol, oil and the general aroma of aeroplanes. I revel in the atmosphere. Tiger Moths all over the place, dozens of them. A wonderful feeling of involvement comes over me.

The next day the course starts to get into its stride. We are issued with basic flying kit, helmet and goggles, overalls, a Sidcot suit* and a pair of gauntlets. I meet my flying instructor, a quietly spoken man who has charming manners. At the same time he's the sort of person who won't suffer fools gladly and will leave you in no doubt when you do something that displeases him. He makes it quite plain that the best is barely good enough. His name is Hayne. I'm sure I'll be able to get on with him.

The following morning I find myself standing beside a Tiger Moth with my instructor. He shows me over the aircraft, the controls and what they do, which surfaces the joystick moves (push it forward to dive, pull it back to climb), the purpose of the rudder bar, the general effect of airflow over

* One-piece padded flying suit. The name derives from Sidney Cotton, the First World War RNAS pilot who developed it.

Copyrighted Material

the airframe. He asks me finally if I understand and I say yes.

'OK. Then let me show you how to put on a parachute. If you ever have to jump, count three after leaving the aircraft and pull that large ring hard. Now, hop into the back cockpit and I'll show you how to strap yourself in. It would be a shame if you fell out, wouldn't it? There, how's that?'

Trussed up like a hen I'm left to make myself as comfortable as possible under these quite extraordinary circumstances. I sit totally immobile and scarcely able to breathe as I watch Hayne lower himself into the front seat.

Before I've really gathered my wits, a slow process at the best of times, the propeller has been swung and the engine started. We move quickly out on to the field, turn and, gathering speed, race across the bumpy grass with everything rattling and vibrating and sounding like a bag of nails. I just hang on to my seat like grim death and think what a damn silly expression that is to use at this particular time. I'll never be able to do this sort of thing. I've made one hell of a mistake joining this lot.

The bumping stops. We must have left the ground or something equally horrible. A quick look out as if I really don't want to believe what I'm afraid I'm going to see. We are flying.

The ground recedes and once in the air all sense of speed vanishes. The view that unfolds enthrals me; it is absolutely beautiful. A voice down the speaking tube asks 'How are you feeling? Not too bad, is it? Nice day for it.'

'Wonderful.'

'Good, then how about starting to earn your pay and getting down to a bit of work? I'm going to demonstrate the effect of controls; follow me through on the stick and rudder.'

I make a grab for what I think he said was the stick, if I'm wrong then at least it's something else to hang on to, and brace my feet firmly against the rudder bar. That's the only place

Copyrighted Material

there is to put them, so that part must be right. The aircraft jinks.

'For God's sake,' comes the instructor's voice. 'I said follow me through. You have got to fly this aeroplane, not castrate it. Look, like this. Relax, settle down, everything must flow smoothly.'

So a new way of life begins.

At the end of my first trip, which was mainly for acclimatization, I have actually flown the aircraft straight and level. Well, not very straight, or indeed entirely level, but after three weeks I am trying to master the knack of circuits and landings. Spinning and stalling are behind us but we have still to get this circuit business wrapped up. This is my first big stumbling block.

Most pilots have some sort of trouble mastering the art of landing an aeroplane but my personal problem, and I mean problem, is taking off. I am just totally unable to control the swing and I career all over the airfield in ever-increasing ugly great swerves. No matter how hard I try I just cannot keep the beastly aeroplane straight and, when things appear to be getting no better and I feel I am not making the progress that I should, I start to worry.

Surely I am going to master this take-off problem and become a pilot?

By now, most of us on the course have the sense to realize that we have a job on our hands. As a bunch of young men dedicated to the same cause, we are, even at this very early stage, becoming closely knit and a sense of comradeship is building up.

Yesterday, a chap called Hilton was suspended. The first Bowler Hat. For what, exactly, nobody knew or asked. He just faded away. He'd not been much of a mixer and nobody got on with him all that well. It shook us all a bit, though. After all, we've only been here for just over three weeks. It

Copyrighted Material