

This photograph was published in The Glasgow Herald while I was training at Prestwick in 1938. The instructor was Lt.Cdr. Campbell-Waters. I am 4th from the left in the middle row.



PRESTWICK

I had now reached the age of twenty and my future was gloomy to say the least. This was to be confined to the precincts of a tailor's shop for 60 hours a week with, perhaps, the hope that one day I would become a manager.

But escape was possible. One day I saw an advertisement in the paper requesting applications from young men with a Grammar School education to join the RAF to be trained as Pilots or Observers and to subsequently serve four years with the colours and six years in the reserve. It was the Direct Entry Flying Scheme launched by the RAF to quickly expand the service. Required was a good knowledge of Physics, Geography and English and also be able to pass a medical fitness test. Realising that the medical fitness side was not my greatest attribute and thinking, perhaps wrongly, that the medical standard for Observers might be lower than that for Pilots I applied to join the former.

A reply to my application duly arrived and I was asked to attend a centre in Edinburgh for interview. The interviewing staff was concerned mainly with my academic attainments and explaining the conditions of service. But it was the medical interview that filled me with apprehension, especially when I saw broad, strapping young men who would not disgrace any rugby pack turned down because of, for instance, a faulty heart beat. I think it was my achievements in cycling that helped me to pass and as one doctor said, "Last week we did pass someone who had also suffered from osteomyelitis." To my delight I was accepted and took the oath to fight for King and Country. I was in! "Report to Prestwick Airport next week and here is your travel warrant for the journey there."

If one reads a copy of the Prestwick Airport Jubilee Book, on page 10 there is one short sentence – 'In 1938 a school for the training of navigators was opened, No. 1 A.O.N.S. using Anson Aircraft.' This then was to be my destination one November morning when I boarded the train at Newcastle to travel via Carlisle, Stranraer and Ayr. It was the beginning of a journey that was to be one long, exciting and dangerous adventure for a country lad.

A small white building, which still stands there, had classrooms on the ground floor, bedrooms on the first, a small central tower and a hangar used by Scottish Airways. It was to be this organisation and not the RAF, which had the responsibility for turning us into accomplished air navigators. We were neither in the RAF nor out; no uniform other than a flying suit and a helmet; no parades or marching, simply a school. In charge of twenty-six young men from various parts of the country was a man in uniform, an old sweat, put there to be a father figure and keep us out of mischief.

This then was the man who, standing on the tarmac, called us to attention at 6.30 a.m. in the grey light of dawn, and who delivered to us his favourite homily. "Now lads, the girls of Prestwick are very fertile and a standing prick has no conscience. The last lot got themselves into trouble with the police at the end of the course and I warn you lot, if it happens again you're for the bloody high jump."

We were shattered to say the least at this sonorous welcome delivered in a rich cockney accent. We never found out the high jinks that the last course had pursued but I'm afraid the warning became muted with the passage of time and youth was to have its fling.

We quickly settled down into the learning pattern with classes during the day, interspersed with flying in the Ansons on navigational exercises. The pilots were highly skilled and experienced, part of their time being occupied in flying the civilian routes to the Western Isles and Glasgow. The instructors were, in the main, naval officers and taught us such aspects as Maps and Charts, Compasses, Dead Reckoning, Radio, the Morse Code and Meteorology. One instructor was Lt. Commander Campbell-Waters, who is to be seen on the previous photograph, and the person in charge of the Prestwick Station was Squadron Leader McIntyre, a great pioneer of Scottish aviation and the first man to fly over Mount Everest.

Life was very exciting now with new subjects to study and always the thrill of flying over this delightful part of the Irish Sea with the isles of Arran and Ailsa Craig below, for ever useful pin points for navigational bearings.

The natives were very friendly and as the W.O. said, the girls were very co-operative and many a lad found himself at night bunkered on the local golf course not having a club in his hand. We played football, taking part in a local mid-week league, its members comprising mainly of shop assistants. We played against teams such as Troon, Saltcoats and Ardrossan. Every game had an international flavour and it was Flodden and Culloden all over again. In that part of Scotland, such was the effect of the Gulf Stream, we were able to bathe in the sea even with frost shimmering on the sand. Saturday nights saw us down in Ayr at the Green's Playhouse dancing like dervishes as we were initiated into the highland fling while understanding only half of what the girls were saying to us in their west country accents.

At weekends the RAFVR used the drome for tuition in their Tiger Moths. Such was the strength of the wind one day that a pilot, trying to land, hovered there with no ground speed forwards or backwards. He eventually touched down and went over on his nose, an incident we delighted in observing for we had no contact with the student pilots who messed in the Orangefield Hotel at the other side of the airfield.

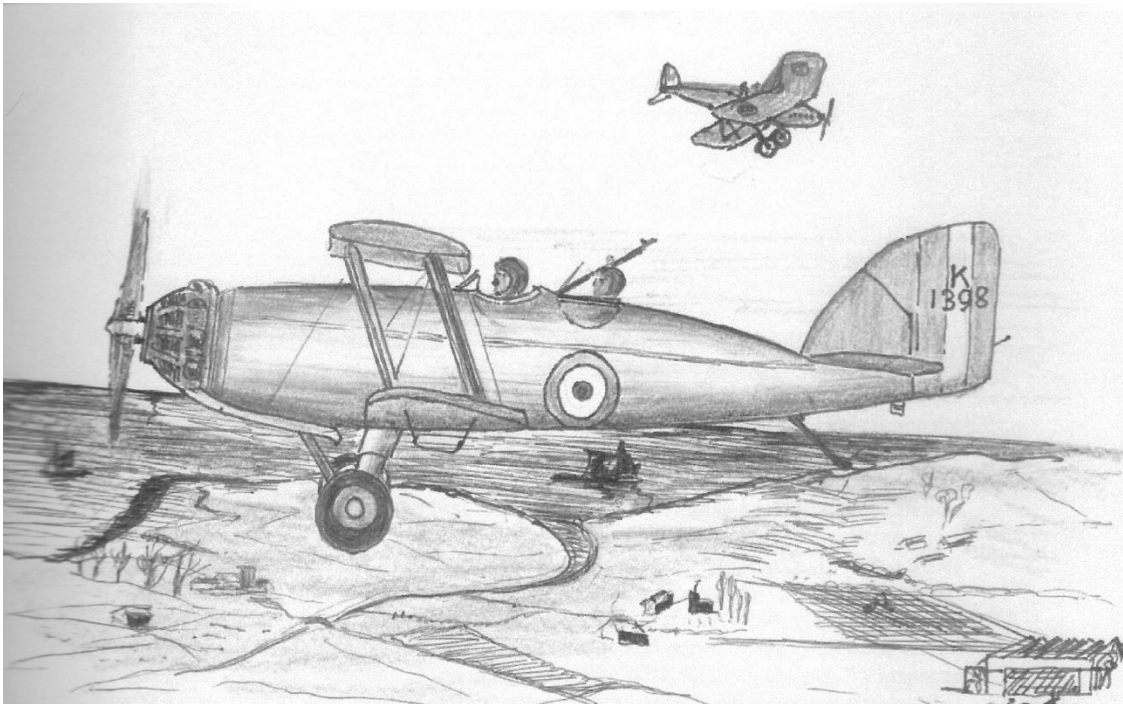
As a body of young men we had now settled into the routine, working and studying hard and had become more mature in our outlook and more assertive. Our sugar daddy WO, or Sir as he wished to be called, was becoming unpopular with the majority, as he tended to have his favourites among those who would kow-tow to his slightest whim. Retribution was to be at hand. One of the two Scots lads on the course was, one night, having difficulty in getting to sleep. His wandering thoughts latched on to Sir's failings. Knowing that the aforesaid's door key was in the lock he tiptoed along the corridor and quietly gave it a turn and returned to his room where sleep found him with a diabolical smile on his face at the thought of the repercussions from such a small secretive act.

At six thirty sharp, as was our wont, we were shivering on the tarmac below in our vests and shorts. Minutes passed and the usually prompt Sir was nowhere to be seen. Eventually an irate face appeared at the window above and in mime endeavoured to inform us that his door would not open. The tension and excitement gave way to hilarity and one wag led us into singing the popular song of the day 'Eleven more months and ten more days we'll be out of the calaboose' and the song was given dance form as we joined hands and skipped around. Some of the lads went upstairs again but no key was to be found nor was there a duplicate. Later that morning, while we were in lectures, a joiner arrived at Sir's door and while knocking with his chisel to force the door open, behold a key toppled from the lintel above. A week or so later Jock told his buddies that he was the culprit. From that time on, Sir's ego was deflated and his pomposity and bombast diminished. There were no repercussions for were we not half civilians or, as Sir might have said, "Half civilised"?

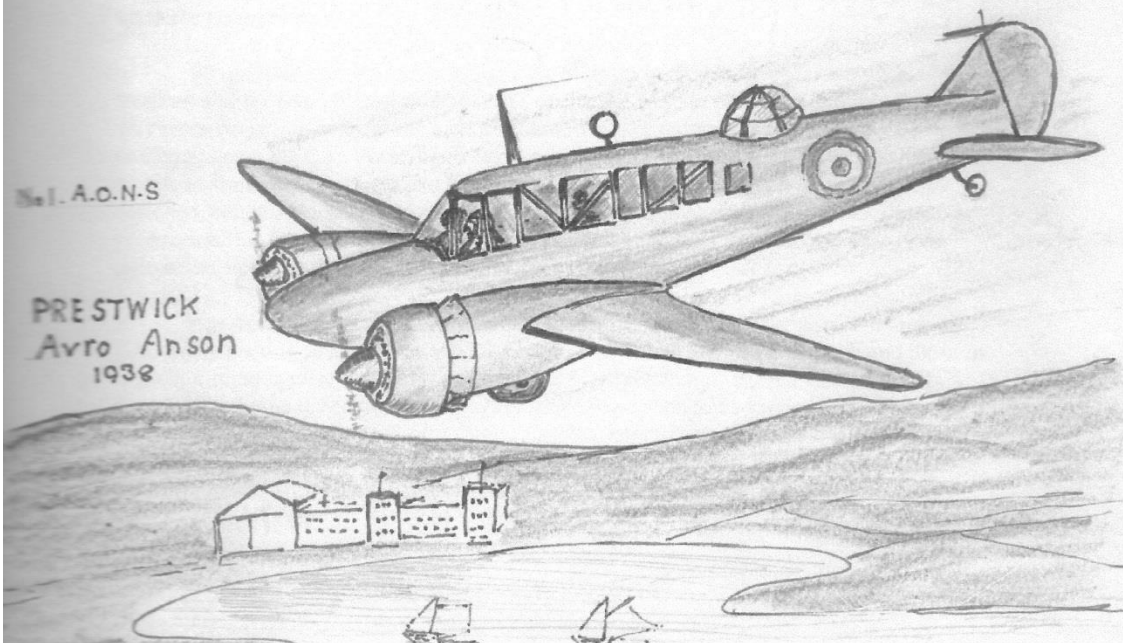
The winter of '38 was a very severe one and at Christmas we were given our first leave. Snow caused rail travel disruptions and I remember spending the whole night on a platform at Newcastle station waiting for the first morning bus home, but at least there were machines from which one could obtain chocolate and fruit, but no welcome dormitories such as those to be found in war time provided by the Salvation Army.

The end of February saw us with heads down into our books and plotting charts, with the usual mild Prestwick weather allowing flying to continue as planned. We became a close-knit brotherhood, but once exams were complete the pent-up anxieties demanded an outlet by such a bunch of young bloods.

Sir's initial warnings were forgotten when on the last night we descended on Prestwick. It took few beers to confound our senses and allow stupidity to take over. On our way home we sang and shouted, emptied full dustbins into the middle of the streets, flung seats off the esplanade and bent road signs level with the ground. To approach our 'monastic dwelling' we had to cross the grassed aerodrome and were about to enter the building when we spotted police uniforms at the entrance. There was no other way of entering the building and so we agreed on a story line. Sure enough the police quizzed us one by one and we agreed that we had seen the damage stated, but also things they had not seen. "We will be back in the morning," were their parting words of warning and when morning came they were there to tell us it was only the fact that we were leaving for London that day that had saved our bacon!



Westland Wapiti, North Coates, Lincolnshire, 1939
Air to air firing and bombing practice



No. 1. A.O.N.S

PRESTWICK
Avro Anson
1938

UXBRIDGE – PER ARDUA AD ASTRA

Next day we were heading south of the border to Uxbridge where we were to be signed, sealed and delivered i.e. to be signed up as a member of His Majesty's Forces, to be sealed into a blue uniform with bright buttons and to be delivered to a squadron as upright, fit and smart young airmen – all in the space of three weeks. If Prestwick had been described as heaven, then Uxbridge could be described as hell.

Our billets were of brick, fitted out with rows of iron beds and lockers down each side and the floor covered with the traditional 'bull' linoleum; the whole interior spartan in the extreme. Perhaps that wartime word 'utility' would be the best description. The billets had been built during the first world war, later condemned as unfit for habitation, but reprieved as '39 approached. At 6.30 the first morning, the corporal in charge appeared from his cell bawling Rise and Shine and it was feet on the deck, grab a towel and rush across a snow-covered, starlit space to the ablution sheds. Here were lines of troughs surmounted by a rail and, stripped off to the waist, one washed and shaved in the coldest of water. Half an hour later, form up outside and march to the cookhouse armed with plate, mug and weapons for eating. Back to the billet again to prepare for inspection with kit laid out as per regulation, floor swept and polished to a mirror-like finish.

The halcyon days of Prestwick's freedom had passed into history for we were now the bottom of the pile, now nobody's baby, just raw material to be licked, shouted at, yelled at, to be cajoled and dragged into shape. Wherever we went it was either by the march or at the double. The day's routine was divided up into consecutive hours of drill, with or without a rifle, P.E. and inspections of uniform and billets. We were incarcerated for three weeks but perhaps there was some truth in the fact that if they had allowed us a pass out or a leave ticket it would have been a one way journey. Evenings were taken up with spit and polish, webbing to be treated, as well as buckles and buttons to be polished up to the gold standard.

We realised that we would either sink or swim in the heavy water we were treading and for some of us who had doses of 'flu we were in danger of sinking. But no way were we giving in by going sick, for the thought of deferment couldn't be contemplated. One dose of medicine was enough. So arrived the day of our 'Passing Out' parade in front of the officers and Squadron Leader in charge. We fell in, fell out, marched, counter marched and saluted, sloped arms and presented arms. After all that he pronounced his blessing. "If I had my way, you would be here for a second dose. I've seen better in the Salvation Army."

However, the gates of hell were opened for us. We had a leave pass, the rank of LAC and a posting to a gunnery school. Our course results had come through and those in the lower regions were sent overseas, to India, Mesopotamia or Burma while the rest were sent to home-based bomber squadrons. We were soon to be known in the force as 'jumped up bastards'! Instead of serving fourteen years to attain the exalted rank of sergeant we, the pampered ones, attained it after only six months. But perhaps our shorter lives, compared with theirs, would balance up the equation. Per Ardua Ad Astra.

NORTH COATES No. 1 A.O.S.

Our next posting was to the flat, flat coastlands of Lincolnshire, to an aerodrome which took its name from the hamlet of North Coates. Like the observers of old, we were to be not just navigators but bomb aimers and air gunners. We used the vast beach nearby, whereon were displayed the triangular targets. We were back once more to the freer atmosphere of classroom and flying, having said good-bye to being a puppet on a square. Spring was in the air and the morning mists soon rolled away, pushed by the gentle sea breezes.

The C. O. had what proved to be a wonderful idea. The other course members were of more mature years having returned to a home base after serving as ground crews on the remote stations of Mesopotamia which had such romantic sounding names as Basra and Shaiba. Volunteering for aircrew training ensured an end to their term of years in these desert outposts, promotion and better pay. They were a rare breed of men who, in the harsh environment of the desert, had learned to create their own amusements and how to entertain themselves in hilarious ways. They had a great repertoire of bawdy songs, jokes and tales. This was the maturity recognised by the C. O. when in our living accommodation he applied a mix of 'sprog', that was us, and old sweats, that was them. So many a night was enlivened as we drank some beers, by bursting forth in unison with renderings of such songs as Salome, Old Riley and Shaiba Blues and listening to sagas and recitations. If the Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner was upper deck, then these came from the bilges. We laughed and roared the nights away like the Vikings of old drowning the sounds of the sea. The lower end of our vocabulary was extended, especially with words referring to the feminine gender – it was a new version of the 'Desert Song':-

The Desert Airman's Lament

*Sure a little bit of heaven
Fell from out the sky one day
And it nestled in the ocean
In a spot so far away
And when the Air Force saw it
Sure it looked so bleak and bare
They said that's what we're looking for
We'll put our Air Force there.*

*So they sent out river gunboats
Armoured cars and SHQ
And they put the good old 61
Out in the - - blue
So peachy I'll be coming
To a land that's far away
And until then you'll hear me say
Roll on that bloody boat.*

*Bless 'em all. Bless 'em all
The long and the short and the tall
Bless all the sergeants and WO1s
Bless all the corporals and their bleeding sons
For we're saying good-bye to them all
As back to their billets they crawl
You'll get no promotion
This side of the ocean
So cheer up my lads bless 'em all.*

For some of these men it overcame their sadness that during their time in the sand they had received their 'Messpots' – letters telling them that their romances or marriages had not withstood the test of a lengthy separation. Some nights we embarked on a wagon to GY or Grimsby and sampled the temptations or pleasures of dock areas, pubs and dives, thankful at times to have the protection and guidance of the old boys.

By day we learned the techniques of bomb sights and machine guns. It was a great thrill to see your bombs produce a puff of smoke around the triangular targets below and wait for the drogue-towing aircraft to drop the, hopefully, riddled cloth sleeve on the runway for you to run and examine.

The planes we flew in were old two seater biplanes called Wapitis, known affectionately as 'string bags' because of tension lines joining wing to wing and canvas covered frameworks. So stable were they in flight that the tale was told of one pilot congratulating his pupil on a good landing, leaving the pupil aghast and afraid to tell him that he had never touched the controls. And though the rule was drummed into us that our guns should always point out to sea, one disconsolate pupil did manage to pot a cow – he didn't respond kindly to repeated calls of 'Moo! Moo!'

The smell and sound of a roaring engine and air rushing past the open cockpits gave one some of the exhilaration our forebears of the RFC must have experienced as they flew over the fields of France. Soon, too soon, our days at North Coates came to an end and now we were to be dispersed to squadrons both at home and overseas.

Once more a great binge in the mess, for one lesson we had to learn was that in our chosen way of life friendships did not last for ever and always came the parting of the ways. Jack was my closest friend or 'Winger' and he was posted to India, later to marry a Bishop's daughter and be killed in the Burma campaign. I had the shortest distance to travel – simply westwards to the Lincolnshire wolds, to Hemswell, where 61 Bomber Squadron was encamped at the top of the escarpment, as Acting Sgt., Acting Air/Obs. On 12th April 1939 I was to be seen strutting away with three stripes on my arms. Acting-sergeant Wright – 580504! Step forward!

Samples of Impish humour

