

SECTION 3 THE WAR YEARS (1940 – 1945)

A brand new building offered hope for sustained growth and success but war changed everything. Whilst the Epsom area suffered far less than more densely populated parts of London this was nevertheless a time when people lived in fear and trepidation.

Clark's job of course was to attempt to retain some normality whilst issuing a Churchillian rallying call. 'Now that we are all within reach of the enemy we like to think that even boys at school can display a martial spirit by steadiness and devotion to duty and in English fashion pluck, as occasion offers, this flower humour from this nettle danger'

The school had to maintain a curriculum of sorts even though 40% of lessons in the early years of the war were held in the shelters housed close to the Canteen and despite the probably spurious claim that at 'one time Epsom County School was teaching boys who owed allegiance to a hundred other schools'. By 1942 there were 395 on roll as against 237 in 1939 requiring Speech Day to hold Junior and Senior ceremonies separately.

The school career path of boys was beginning to take shape.

Entry was in Form 2, the equivalent of Year 8 today, where there were three unstreamed classes A, B and C. After Form 3 three new classes were formed, A, who were fast tracked to do School Certificate a year early, and Shell A and Shell B. After Form 5 (Form 4 in the case of A) those capable of it went into Form 6 to do the Higher School Certificate although this was totally at the discretion of the staff. To get a School Certificate it was necessary to obtain passes in 5 subjects including English, Maths, a Foreign Language and a Science. Since the fifth subject was almost certainly History or Geography we could perhaps suggest EBacc as an alternative name!

Academic success was blossoming despite the privations. In 1943 35 boys passed the School Certificate and in 1944 55 passed. By this time there was a Sixth Form of 41, 24 in the Science Sixth, 14 in the Arts Sixth, and 3 in the Modern Sixth which was largely devoted to Languages and Humanities.

Behaviour seems to have been better than in earlier years possibly because of 'fighting a common enemy' or maybe because no boy dared misbehave in front of one of the female teachers employed to replace those at war.

There were still problems of course. Clark reported to Governors that 'Two boys ran away from home in the middle of November and have not been heard of since. They were a bad influence in the school and I do not wish to allow them to return' A splendid indifference to their welfare that wouldn't be recommended today!

Appallingly school holidays included 5 weeks for the boys in the summer but only 2 for the teachers!

What better way to learn of what life was like at the school in the early 1940s than by the first-hand experience of two who lived through those years.

Both Matt Skipp and Roger Manning were highly significant students at the school and both have continued to do wonderful work on behalf of the Old Boys' Association. We are grateful to them both for providing information and to Matt for these reminiscences:

'I joined the school in January 1941 straight into the third form. I was the right age for the third form but had lost a year's schooling having lived in London with closed schools during the Blitz.

Before school began we all wore our caps which we raised when seeing the Headmaster who acknowledged us by waving his walking stick aloft! The bell rang, we filed into our form-rooms, the roll was called and the whole school then filed into the hall for assembly. The masters stood on the quadrangle side and the prefects on the other side. We had prayers and a hymn and then went to our form-rooms. Unlike today the masters moved from room to room and the only lessons we didn't have in our form-rooms were Art, Chemistry and Physics.

During the course of the day there was the occasional air-raid "alert" when we all filed out to go down into shelters around the edge of the field. A good time was had by all in the shelters with impromptu community singing - unless some bold teacher tried to continue a lesson, with indifferent success!

By 1944 I had reached the fifth form and took School Certificate. The flying bomb raids started about this time and some exams were interrupted by visits to the shelters. We would hear the doodlebugs coming and all rush out of the shelters to watch them until their engines cut out when we knew they were about to dive and explode. Not very safe!

I was evacuated to Cornwall for a few weeks and joined the Sixth Form on my return. I also became one of the twelve prefects who inhabited the room behind the stage, driving the music master mad by the sound of our ping-pong playing on the stage behind the closed curtains. He would fight his way through the curtains on to the ping-pong area by which time we had all exited through the prefects' room window on to the lawn beneath!

Present day Glyn associates would find the attire of those days very odd. All the staff wore gowns and the Headmaster a mortar board. Because clothes were rationed few boys wore school blazers after they grew out of their second form ones. The staff, under their gowns, all wore suits or smart sports jackets. Very important was to look smart. If you were scruffy a Rosebery girl wouldn't be interested!

Talking of which, I first started to notice Rosebery girls from about the fourth form. I used to meet a friend and we cycled up to the White Horse pub to meet another friend who was the son of the licensee. This was really an excuse to chat up the Rosebery girls. One morning a middle-aged lady beckoned us to join her announcing that she was the Rosebery Headmistress and would like our names. Later that day we were summoned to FLC's office explaining that the pub was merely a rendezvous before proceeding to school. With a quizzical look he suggested we might like to "rendezvous further down the road"!!

School dinners were served in the hall, the kitchens being behind the doors at the opposite end from the stage. Each long table was presided over by a prefect or Sixthformer and he 'doled out' food which was pretty monotonous because of rationing.

One fine day lady teachers joined the staff. How were we to address them? The order came down that we should call them madam and so it was. There were, as I remember, no disciplinary problems with the ladies who shared a small staffroom adjoining the larger staffroom inhabited by the men.

I haven't yet mentioned lessons. Lessons are lessons! Some replacement masters, filling in for those who had been called up, had a bit of difficulty maintaining discipline but you didn't mess with Mr Dawkins, the deputy Headmaster who taught Latin or Mr Pritchard who taught Maths.

It was Pritchard who ran the Air Training Corps in Epsom and since my burning ambition was to be a RAF pilot I pestered him to be allowed to join. Eventually a school 'flight' was formed being part of 323 squadron. There was a social side to ATC membership there being a Saturday evening dance in the school hall. Costing about 7p in today's money the music was provided by a Glenn Miller type band. The lads would sit along one of the walls and the girls would sit along that opposite, each eyeing the other. At the striking up of the band the boys would leap up and cross the floor to ask a particular girl if she would like to dance, not a yard or two apart but in a dancing 'hold'! We all stood around and admired those who had mastered the tango. I never did!"

No matches were played against other schools because of early finishes to school and blackout regulations so the House events became ever more important. Boxing was introduced and the markings for the ring can still be seen in the main Hall! Swimming became more and more significant and there was a remarkable performance in 1945 when Skipp won all the Open events! The precursor of the Victor Ludorum was introduced, namely a 'cock house' competition, and with remarkable foresight the Head decreed that the House championship should be based equally on work, conduct and games.

For the first cock house competition in 1940 it was far from obvious who the winners were! Abbey reported that 'owing to lack of seniors we were not able to put up the show that we desired'. Carew said that they were 'not very successful in sporting events'. St. Benet were 'unable to put up the performance in the Cock House Championship that one would have wished' and Tudor claimed that 'strong opposition from other houses has prevented us figuring prominently'!

Sports Day continued unaltered except for necessary efficiency in organisation. For instance in 1943 the second heat of the 100yds started before the first had finished and the fourth heat of the 220 yds before the first had finished!

Lest the boys became too full of themselves there was always the cautionary comment. Ebba's Scrip gave these Cricket pen portraits - 'little style but plenty of courage' 'fielding can be improved' 'could never command a good length'. And this for members of the first eleven!

The 1945 cross-country was as usual held over Epsom Downs. Because of clothing coupons no two competitors dressed alike in the senior race and the writer spoke of the 'pleasant sight in the future to see every boy in a vest of his house colour'. Stretching a point rather too far he also mentioned the patriotic Junior race where 30 boys wore white vests, 1 wore red and 1 wore blue!

Non sporting extra-curricular events continued.

The first of a series of Arts Exhibitions was held in 1940 and, again it anticipated the present day by including songs sung by forms, drawings, paintings, models from the second year of woodworking and house play re-enactment.

A new society, namely chess, started and was destined for great things thirty years later. In 1942 a butterfly collecting club was formed and wasn't destined for great things!

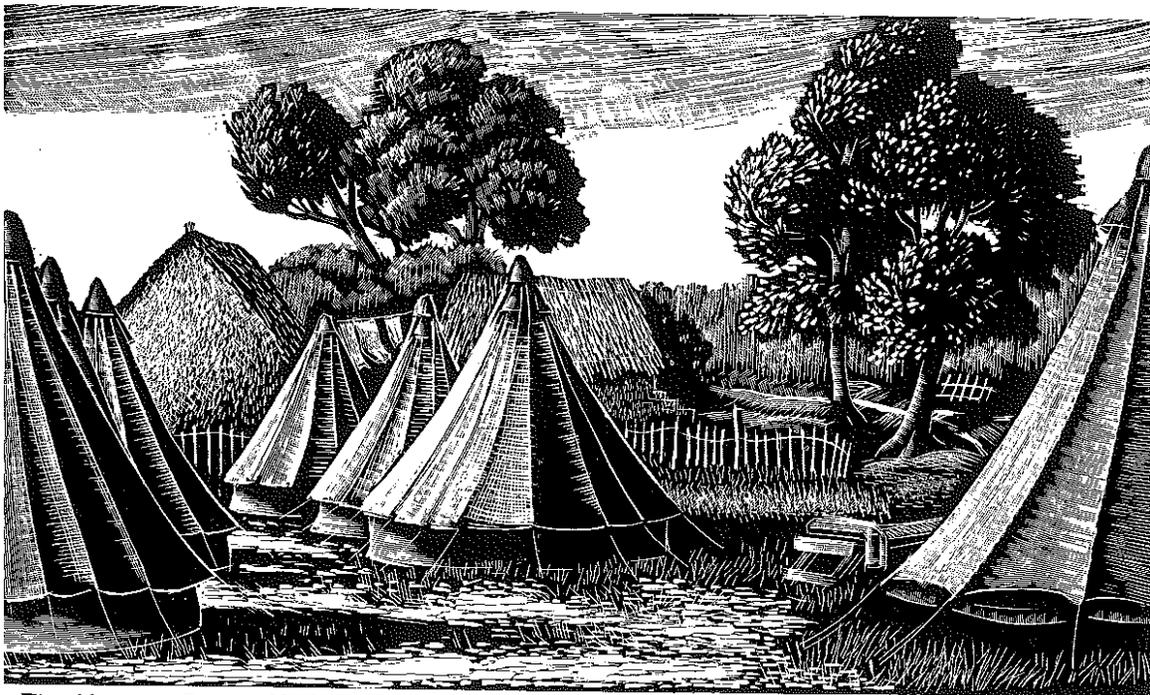
In austere times any donations were accepted and as well as the standard books for the Library there were also given a Bas-relief which to this day adorns the Headteacher's office and a small part of the old London Bridge the whereabouts of which, sadly, are not known.

The standard of plays and the acting continued to improve and generous donations were made in aid of the war effort, the play in 1943 raising a remarkable £65 for the Prisoners of War Fund.

All male members of staff were involved with the war effort in one way or another. By 1943 seven teachers were away on active service often to be replaced by women. Amongst those absent were Basford, who was the first but certainly not the last Old Boy to join the staff, and Neave, a senior master whose Chemistry pupils had to trek to Epsom College for their replacement lessons.

Other teachers not on service, including the Head, were generally Air Raid Wardens and senior students played their part by undertaking fire watch duties in the attic of the main building. It's still perfectly possible to walk from one end of the Maths corridor to the other end on the beams in the attic!

Younger students also 'did their bit' by attending a Harvest camp but lest this conjures up visions of Broadstone Warren it was rather different. One month turnip hoeing!



The Harvest Camp—Haslemere.

[J. Harvey-Bloom, R.B.A.]

And what of the impact of the hostilities themselves? An incendiary device did fall in the Quad with minimal damage and an Anti Aircraft shell was found on the school field but the building remained unscathed. Not so the houses of some of the boys. In November 1940 a Form 3 boy wrote, almost matter of factly, about how his house had been bombed and whilst he and his mother had escaped with bruising his father had been killed. He concludes ' I am back at school now, feeling that it could have been much worse for me' The courage of despair.

Amongst those decorated were RL Smith DFM DFC for 'engaging four German fighters over the channel and landing a badly damaged plane.' (Extract from Times) and JE Taylor DFM, pilot of numerous successful raids over fortified targets in Germany.

And then, of course, there were those young men who gave their lives and who are remembered each November by the modern school with reverence and gratitude. The bald statistics tell that 32 Old Boys died on active service between 1939 and 1946. Well over half of these joined the RAF and many of those who perished were not part of some glorious act of heroism, indeed often the opposite. Some died as a result of accidents, inadequately trained with poor equipment. Others were simply caught up in war, 'in the wrong place at the wrong time'.

What is indisputable is that all who served showed extraordinary courage and selflessness. 'Tenacious of task, firm of purpose'

As a tribute to all of them the following pages briefly describe the war experiences of five.

JOHN MILLER BLISS was born on 15th February 1923 and joined the school in January 1933 at a particularly young age. He was average at general schoolwork but was strong at Languages, in particular French. Art was clearly more of a problem if this entry in the punishment book is anything to go by.

'.....strokes for slapping another boy with a wet paint rag.....' !

Beyond the classroom Bliss represented the 2nd XI at Football and helped out at many school plays backstage.

He seemingly joined up soon after leaving school and was eventually attached to 15 Squadron.

On the night of 18th/19th November 1943 Bliss was the Radio Operator in a Short Stirling Mk III, serial number BK707 / LS  G, taking part in the initial stages of the 'Battle of Berlin'.



Following the attacks on the Ruhr and Hamburg, which stretched from March to August 1943, Air Marshal Sir Arthur Harris decided to unleash a new offensive, this time against major cities principally the German capital. This became known as the "Battle of Berlin".

The raids had to be carried out during the winter, providing the cover of darkness necessary to enable them to reach these distant cities and to get back. The downside was that the bad weather conditions that prevail at this time of year led to inaccurate navigation making identification of the target problematical.

In addition to these difficulties the German Flak defences and their Nachtjagd (night hunting) fighters proved to be far more formidable than first thought.

On 18th November, two squadrons, 15 and 622 were ordered to conduct a bombing raid against Mannheim. At 17.15hrs 12 Stirlings of 15 Squadron prepared to take off from Mildenhall Airfield. BK707 / LS  G was only just ready in time. Earlier in the year it had been damaged overrunning an airstrip and had only recently been repaired.

Bliss's plane was piloted by a New Zealander, Flight Sergeant Stanley Calder who, sticking to the flight plan, joined the stream of bombers leaving the English coast over Beachy Head, reaching the French coast at Cayeux. From there it proceeded to Ludwigshafen from where it descended upon Mannheim.

Beginning at 20.21hrs, the squadron's bombardment finally ended at 21.08hrs but despite the navigators' best efforts, the thick cloud cover meant the bombs were dispersed away from the principal target area. In Mannheim, most of them fell in the North of the city destroying four industrial buildings and severely damaging 11 others. Sadly the bombing resulted in the destruction of churches and schools and the death of 21 civilians. 7500 people were made homeless.

The crew of Stirling BK707 / LS  G had accomplished its mission. So they began the return trip taking a course leading first to Landau then Meuse-on-Revigny Ornain before turning north-west to leave the French coast between Dieppe and Fecamp

Unfortunately for the crew of Stirling BK707 / LS  G, their aircraft was intercepted by a German night fighter close to Marne and the Stirling was shot down killing all seven men on board.

It was later discovered that Bliss's plane had been shot down by Reinhard Kollak, a notable German 'ace' who earned the Knights' Cross with Oak Leaves and who survived the war.

The plane fell into a military camp and local people, under the direction of the Kommandant of the camp, arranged for the proper burial of the airmen. At an unknown later date all seven men were reburied and now lie in Souain Communal Cemetery, Marne in France.



VICTOR JAMES CLARK was born on 24th January 1919 and lived in Pound Lane Epsom. He joined the school in January 1931 and soon showed himself to be very able, never being lower than 4th in any end of year exam. He won a number of form prizes, a Chemistry prize in Va and gained distinction in Maths in his School Certificate. He also had a 'zest for living' which took him away from the Finance Department of Municipal Government and into the Merchant Navy before the war.

The incident involving the German battleship Graf Spee is well known. During the Battle of the River Plate she was cornered in Montevideo and, believing his ship to be outnumbered, her captain took to sea and scuppered her.



Wreck of Graf Spee

Clark was, at the time, on a meat ship approaching Montevideo. His ship was ordered to make for the nearest port and they ended up moored alongside the badly damaged Graf Spee.

In Clark's words 'The next time I saw this ship, after going up the river to Buenos Aires, she was a smouldering ruin, with her main-deck and tops just showing above the waters of the River Plate. Homeward bound, we brought home the British seamen who had been imprisoned on her, and the one thing I like to recall is that every one of those men spoke well of her commander, Langsdorf, and said that they were very well treated on her'

Convoy duty was one of the most thankless tasks of the entire war. Apart from negotiating treacherous seas in often foul conditions, the essential nature of the cargo meant that enemy attack was always likely and often severe. Clark, in suitably understated terms, describes action after one of his convoys had got separated. 'So rather than risk being caught by the next hurricane while waiting for the convoy to reform, the captain decided to run for it. This was risky, to say the least, as we had 500 tons of TNT and several thousand tons of turpentine spirit in the hold, and if torpedoed, we would simply have blown up'

One such convoy took Clark, now the Purser on SS Penolver, to the West Indies. Leaving Wabana in Canada on the afternoon of 19th October convoy WB-65 started its two day journey to Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Hunting in the vicinity was a U-Boat which, some days earlier, had laid mines. At about 20.30 hours the Penolver struck a mine and sank, with its cargo of 5300 tons of iron ore, within 3 minutes. Twenty six of the crew of forty perished. Fourteen were rescued and landed at St. John's but whilst another merchant ship Delisle attempted to find more survivors it too was hit by a mine.

U 220s life was to be equally short-lived.



Type XB U Boat similar to U 220

U 220 only survived this one mine laying mission. On 28th October 1943 plying the North Atlantic and heading for home, she was spotted by two Avenger and Wildcat aircraft of the American escort carrier [USS Block Island](#).

The captain, Bruno Barber, started to dive but his ship was hit by depth charges.

All 56 men on board were killed.

Clark was one of those to perish on the Penolver. His body was never recovered and he is remembered on the Merchant Navy memorial on Tower Hill



BERNARD MAURICE FOURNIER was born on 20th July 1920 and joined the school in 1932. Average academically he still contributed to school life, most notably with interesting and original contributions to Ebba's Scrip.

Fournier joined up in 1940 and was attached to 49 Squadron



Beware the dog

He wrote amusingly of a brief time on leave having just gained his 'wings' when he met an acquaintance in the street. "You're in the Air Force aren't you? What are you exactly?" "A pilot" I replied proudly. "Oh!" she said "I suppose they haven't let you handle the controls yet have they?"

49 Squadron's main role in the early stages of the war was to carry out bombing raids on targets in Germany.

On 29th August 1941 the mission was to bomb Duisberg, a major logistical centre in the Ruhr and the location of chemical, steel and iron industries. Eight aircraft left Scampton and the journey was uneventful until they met haze and flak close to the Dutch border. It soon became clear that 2 of the squadron's aircraft were missing. Pilot Officer Fournier and the crew of Hampden AD971 (EA-O) had become victims of a night fighter. At 03.30hrs their aircraft fell in flames into the Waddensee just south of the Isle of Ameland; there were no survivors.

After the war it became known that the crew had become victims of one of the top German 'aces', Oberst Helmut Lent, who shot down 110 [aircraft](#), 103 of them at night, far more than the minimum of five enemy aircraft required for the title of "ace. He was the first night fighter pilot to claim 100 nocturnal aerial victories, a feat which earned him the [Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds](#)

Ironically Lent died as a result of an accident when the [Junkers Ju 88](#) he was flying on a routine transit flight from [Stade](#) to [Nordborchen](#), crashed when one of the engines cut out and the plane collided with power lines.

Duisberg suffered arguably more than any other German city. By the end of the war a total of 299 bombing raids had almost completely destroyed the historic cityscape. 80% of all residential buildings had been destroyed or partly damaged. Almost the whole of the city had to be rebuilt, and most historic landmarks had been lost.



Fournier and his crew are buried in Nes Cemetery, Ameland, Holland.

JOHN HERBERT PILLEY was born on 31st October 1920 and joined the school in 1932. His was a checkered career at school and involved repeating years in an attempt to pass his school certificate. Describing him in the school magazine as having 'an adventurous spirit' was perhaps a generous way of suggesting ill discipline if his frequent entries in the punishment book are anything to go by!

A further report on Pilley states ' This boy, who is nearly 16 and was in the pre-school Certificate Form played truant last term and was allowed back only on strict conditions. These he broke and therefore it was suggested to the father that the boy should be withdrawn. This he has done'

However grave his problems at school, an adventurous spirit was very much needed during the war. Pilley was initially attached to 107 Squadron before transferring to 18 Squadron and it was during a mission with them that he received his DFM.



With courage and faith

On the morning of 12th August 1941 Blenheim bombers carried out simultaneous attacks on the great power stations near Cologne. A strong force attacked the station at Knapsack whilst a smaller force attacked two stations at Quadrath. These missions involved a flight of some 250 miles over enemy territory which was carried out at an altitude of 100 feet.



BRISTOL Blenheim MK 4

At Knapsack the target was accurately bombed and machine gunned from between 200 and 800 feet and at Quadrath both power stations were hit from the height of the chimneys, the turbine house at one of the two stations being left as a mass of flames and smoke. The success of this combined daylight attack and the co-ordination of the many formations of aircraft depended largely on accurate timing throughout the flight.

The citation goes on to say 'That complete success was achieved despite powerful opposition from enemy ground and air forces is a high tribute to the calm courage and resolute determination displayed by the officers and airmen who participated in various capacities as leaders and members of the aircraft crews.'

Another interesting feature of this mission was that it was led by Squadron Leader WJ Edrich who later found fame playing cricket for England.

On return to [RAF Bomber Command](#) the squadron took up its low-level daylight raids again until September 1941, when the aircraft of the unit and their pilots - the air detachment of the squadron - were sent to [Malta](#). From there anti-shiping missions were carried out around the Italian coast, [Sicily](#) and along the North African coast.

This was a desperately difficult time for Malta and the squadron whose losses at one time were so heavy that the squadron was commanded by a sergeant. In December that year Pilley, now a sergeant-pilot, took off with other Blenheims on a mission to attack the airfield at Catania.



Catania Airport 1941

According to Italian combat reports the only losses on the ground were one MC.200 destroyed and three more slightly damaged.

They also reported no British planes shot down.

Pilley was never to return from this mission and his obituary in the school magazine saying he was 'shot down in the defence of Malta' is now known to be wide of the mark. The truth is more tragic still.

In very poor visibility and diving towards the target Pilley's plane collided with another Blenheim from the same unit and there were no survivors.

His remains were never recovered and he is commemorated on the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede.



ROBERT SIMS WATSON was born on 26th March 1915 and joined the school at its opening in 1928. He was talented academically, particularly in Maths., where he gained a Distinction in the School Certificate. He was a fine all-rounder in sport being in the School Football and Cricket teams during each year of his career.

Before joining up he was a commercial clerk in a local milling firm. He then trained as a pilot and joined 252 Squadron some time in 1941.

In the first half of 1942, 252 Squadron flew with [272 Squadron](#) from bases in the Western Desert with some detachments going out to Malta occasionally. At this time their main role was long-range fighter patrols escorting naval convoys running between Alexandria and Tobruk.

When the Battle of El Alamein commenced at dawn on [23 October](#), 252 and [272 Squadrons](#) switched to escorting the torpedo carrying Beauforts hunting Axis supply vessels trying to get supplies to Rommel's forces.



On 30th October 1942 Watson had a different mission called 'Ground Strike'

Taking off at 15.15 five Beaufighters of No.252 Squadron attacked El Adem airfield, seeing 12 Ju 52s and two or three MC 202s on the ground. Four Ju 52s were destroyed, two more being seen coming in to land.

A war correspondent describes Watson's contribution in dramatic tones.

'Swooping down from behind a curtain of sand kicked up by his engine, the pilot poured cannon and machine-gun fire into two Junkers standing side by side. Almost immediately one burst into

flames and became a blazing mass while the other, riddled with shell and bullets, flew into pieces'

The same correspondent talks of Watson's return journey and how, flying at zero feet, he discovers he has picked up hundreds of feet of telephone wire draped around his tail and rudder ' thus neatly sabotaging the enemy's communication lines'

History may be less glamorous suggesting that he had to abandon his plane 12 miles North West of Domanhur because it ran out of fuel after an electrical storm rendered both radio and compass useless.

During November 1942 252's partnership with 272 Squadron broke up with the latter moving on to Malta. 252 remained in North Africa to keep the pressure on Rommel's retreating army by strafing ground targets and attacking [F-Boats](#) bringing in supplies. From December through to May 1943 252's role switched to convoy escort duties.

On 8th December Watson and his navigator Sergeant Hudson took off in their Beaufighter coded A for Apple and were soon engaged in combat with some Ju 88s of III./KG 76 over a convoy off the coast. Under heavy attack the only other Beaufighter in the fray made it back to base and successfully crash landed.

Watson was not so lucky. Last seen some 75 miles from Benghazi in combat with two Ju88s his plane was shot down. The bodies of Watson and Hudson were never recovered and they are commemorated on the Alamein memorial.





The end of the war brought fresh hope, fresh expectation and the anticipation that, with proper facilities and guidance, the school could continue on its journey to greatness.