TYPHOON PILOT

Desmond Scott


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by

Group Captain
DESMOND SCOTT
DSO, OBE, DFC and Bar, Commander
Orange Nassau, French Croix de Guerre
and Palm, Belgian Croix de Guerre and Palm, MID

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Foreword

by

Air Vice-Marshal W. J. Crisham, CB, CBE, RAF (Rtd.)

This is a story about heroes, a record of their collective courage and skill, alight with the fierce enthusiasm of their young leader, Desmond Scott.

Scottie—himself a brilliantly able and magnificent pilot—forged his closely-knit team of young New Zealand pilots into a superb fighting unit, capable of meeting constantly changing operational needs with matchless efficiency.

Scottie's operations, whether he was squadron commander or wing leader, bore the stamp of immaculate planning and execution. He was always concerned for the safety of his pilots and other aircrew, especially those who had the misfortune to be 'downed' in the sea. Indeed, his rescue operations dangerously close to the enemy coast were cast in the heroic mould and gave a tremendous boost to morale.

The Tangmere Typhoons were extremely active during the build-up prior to the Normandy invasion, primarily in the neutralization of flying bomb and other missile-launching sites, and later in the destruction of heavily defended radar stations before D-Day. These vital tasks were successfully carried out.

On the Normandy bridgehead, with Scottie and his Tangmere Typhoon squadrons now in the Second Tactical Air Force, the rocket-firing Typhoons smashed the enemy's tanks and road convoys at Falaise and hustled him homewards via the Channel Ports and the Scheldt Estuary to the Rhine.

The job was done!

To the dauntless nothing is denied.

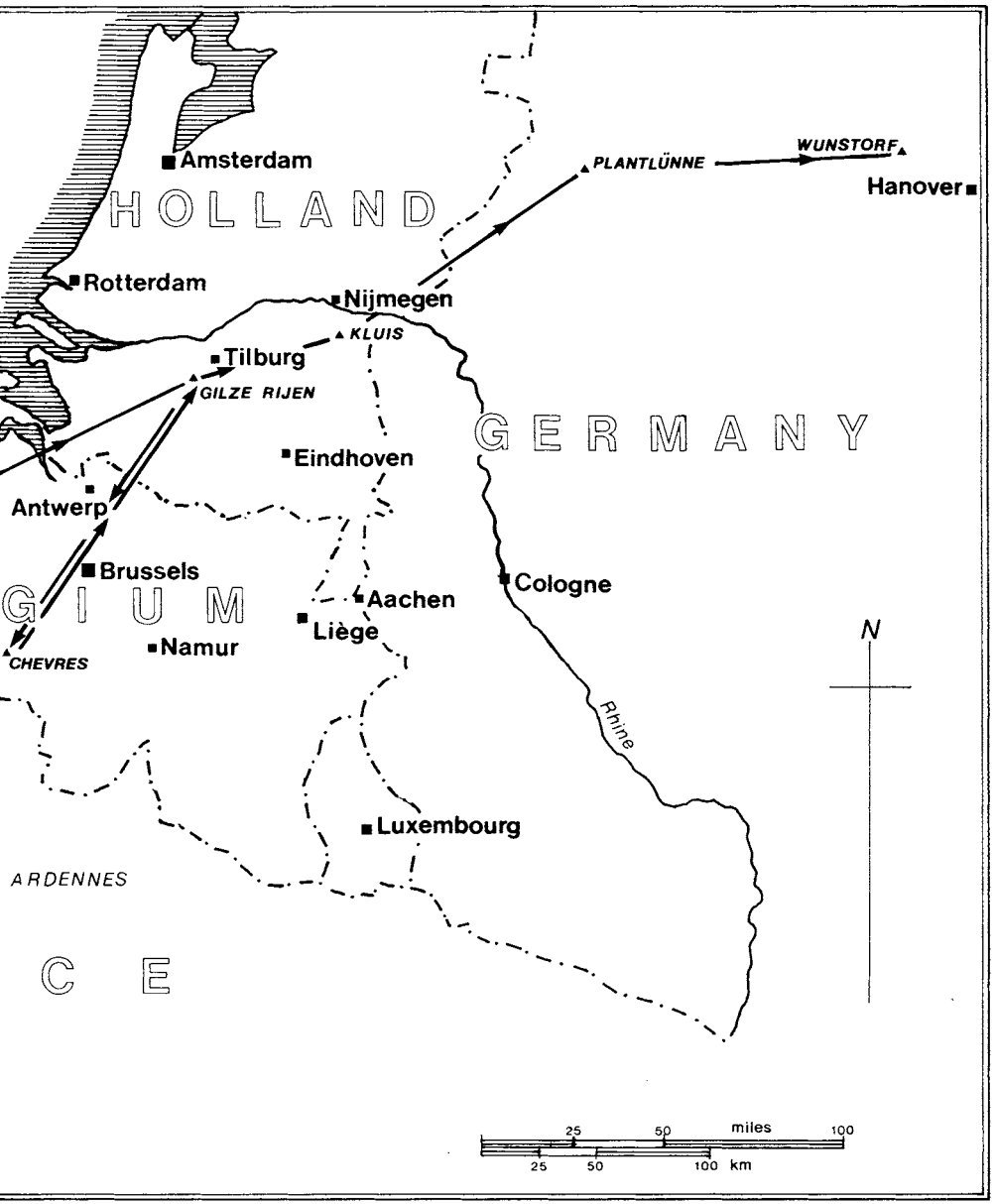
W. J. Crisham

Introduction

Whereas the Spitfire always behaved like a well-mannered thoroughbred, on first acquaintance the Typhoon reminded me of a half-draught: a low-bred cart horse, whose pedigree had received a sharp infusion of hot-headed sprinter's blood. It lacked finesse, and was a tiger to argue. Mastering it was akin to subduing the bully in a bar-room brawl. Once captured, you held a firm rein, for getting airborne was like riding the wild wind. One casual crack of the whip, and the jockey was almost left behind. But like the human race, the Typhoon had its good points too. In sharing the dangerous skies above Hitler's Europe I had good reason to respect its stout-hearted qualities. It gave no quarter; expected none. It carried me into the heart of the holocaust—and even when gravely wounded delivered me from its flames. As a young pilot I grew not only to respect the Typhoon, but also to trust—even to love—it.

After the death of the Third Reich, silently and unobtrusively the Typhoons flew off in obscurity. But I shall never forget them. Not ever, for by the war's end they had become part of me.

The travels of Desmond Scott and his New Zealand Squadrons.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Prologue

I was brought up with horses, and it was therefore only natural, when I left grammar school, that I joined the Territorial Army and became a trooper in our Canterbury Yeomanry Cavalry. The rattle of spurs, the mature conversation of older men and the orchestrated performance of our horses, was a welcome change from the classroom, but life in the cavalry had its sore points too, as I was quick to learn.

One day while on manoeuvres, our troop was 'attacked' by two Bristol Fighter planes, ancient relics of the First World War, and flown by pilots of the New Zealand Air Force. As they swooped low over our heads, my horse, which normally had the heart of a lion, took the bit in his teeth and bolted. One of the pilots, savouring my predicament, persistently pressed home his 'attacks' and, several fences and a few ditches later, Toby and I parted company. To add insult to injury, I received an impolite hand signal from above, and decided there and then, if I was to fight my wars in a sitting position I would need a steed that could not only fly, but outsprint any opposition.

When our annual camp disbanded, I began taking flying lessons in an Aero Club Gypsy Moth, but in those days dual instruction was 30 shillings an hour, and consequently my progress was expensive and slow. However, after a total of six and a half hours dual instruction, I managed to go solo, and was saved from my creditors by a stroke of good forturne. Just prior to Hitler's indiscretions, our government introduced a scheme in which successful applicants were given 40 hours flying at the taxpayer's expense. Much to my surprise, my application was successful. About the same time that I had completed my 40 hours, England declared war on Germany. I promptly received a registered letter from our Air Department

reminding me of a small clause at the bottom of our contract. Thus I was compelled to leave the cavalry and became a member of His Majesty's Junior Service, but it was not until August, 1940, and after much flying in antiquated Fairey Gordons, that I finally set sail for the other side of the world to take my place among the survivors of Churchill's 'few'.

Flying Hurricanes was a far cry from piloting slow old biplanes, but again I was lucky, for my first operational posting was to the Orkney Islands, a relatively quiet area in Hitler's blitz. A few weeks protecting part of the British Fleet at Scapa Flow gave me the opportunity to gain the necessary experience that helped me to survive in No 11 Group, the RAF's hot spot, which included London and most of the south coast. It was in this prestigious company that I spent the following four years.

Hurricanes were already the work horse of Fighter Command and for nearly two years I piloted them on almost every type of operation. There were many nights when I flew above a burning London. I participated in daylight shipping attacks along the French and Belgian coasts and acted as close escort to Blenheim and Stirling bombers, on raids that were aptly code-named 'Circuses'. I survived a mid-air collision with one of No 23 Squadron's Havocs, and it was also from a long-range Hurricane that I watched Cologne explode, as a thousand RAF bombers emptied their war load from the night sky. As with our adversaries, our offensive operations were often more spectacular than successful. Nonetheless, all were hazardous, and the experience gained by those who survived was always sorely won.

When I had completed the equivalent of two operational tours, I began to feel the strain and did not object when I was promoted to Squadron Leader and posted on rest to a temporary staff appointment at Bentley Priory, the headquarters of Fighter Command.

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Bentley Priory

No sane pilot would have wanted a posting to a Typhoon squadron in the winter of 1942. New types of aircraft always had their faults, but the Typhoon had far more than most. For a start, its huge 24-cylinder Napier Sabre liquid-cooled engine was far from dependable. If it stopped dead while you were in the air, you were faced with two alternatives—over the side, or the gliding angle of a seven-ton brick. Even worse was its tail section. For reasons which even the experts could not fathom, several Typhoons had shed their tails and buried themselves and their pilots in very deep holes.

Nonetheless, there was something about this all-metal aircraft which rather appealed to me. It had a very determined chin, its 20 mm Hispano cannons stuck out like ramrods, and its gigantic three-bladed propeller gave it a pugnacious air which few other aircraft of its time possessed. Head on, it was not unlike a bulldog. But unlike a bulldog it could outsprint anything that had so far flown in the European or any other theatre.

I had already completed two tours in the Typhoon's elder brother, the much smaller Hawker Hurricane. This gentle saviour of Britain was a beautiful aircraft to fly, by day or by night, but at this stage of the war it was rapidly being phased out of the European theatre for service in the desert and Far East air forces, where the opposition was less formidable. It was still quite capable on anti-flak missions, but it could not longer hold its own alongside the latest Spitfires, and it was no fun for the pilot of a Hurricane suddenly to feel he was flying backwards when he tangled with a Messerschmitt 109 or Focke Wulf 190.

In the Typhoon—with all its faults—I could see a ray of hope. If Hawkers could build the dependable Hurricane then they must be

capable—once the faults were ironed out—of turning out something similar in its younger and much faster brother. So I set my sights on a Typhoon squadron, and began plotting to escape from my temporary staff job at Bentley Priory, the headquarters of Fighter Command.

The Priory, once the home of Nelson's mistress, Emma Hamilton, was situated in the London suburb of Stanmore. Its cold stone walls hid a hive of industry, so all operational pilots naturally avoided it. Operational squadron life, although dangerous at times, was free and easy and in sharing the fortunes of war we relied so much on one another that differences just did not exist, and we jealously guarded this happy state of affairs from every intrusion. However, it was Command practice to post to the Priory certain tour-expired officers, in the hope they would help the chairborne types to 'keep up with the field'. Being posted to the Priory was like being sent from the follies to the morgue. The only redeeming feature was that it was within easy distance of the great metropolis, with its wide and varied range of attractions.

The Command's regular staff were not all Air Force officers. Many senior First World War naval and army officers were there on liaison duties for their respective services. Having spent a good part of my early operational life blasting my way into enemy shipping, I soon grew impatient with two old naval captains who persisted in re-fighting the 26-year-old Battle of Jutland on the mess bar. Fortunately the army officers were not so boring, but after their retreat from Dunkirk they appeared to have little if anything to talk about. However, I did feel sorry for an elderly brigadier-general—after I had nearly killed him! He was not a member of the staff but was visiting the Priory and had asked me if I would consider flying him over his old tank regiment which was on manoeuvres near Framlingham in Suffolk. My heart softened when he confided that he had served alongside New Zealanders in the First World War, and after a drink too many I agreed to meet him the following morning at Martlesham Heath.

I selected a Miles Magister, a low-wing monoplane with two very open cockpits, one set some distance behind the other and connected by a simple voice tube, like a vacuum cleaner hose, into which we also plugged our earphones. Before helping him into the rear cockpit, where I considered he would command the better bird's-eye view, I enquired whether he had ever flown before, and received the haughty reply that he had been airborne before I was even chair-borne.

I strapped him in and we were soon off into the cold, rough morning air, flying low over the Suffolk woodlands in search of his troops. A freshening in the wind did not help, and the little aircraft began to flip and flop like a puppet on a string. The general did not complain, and I carried on, executing steep turns to the left followed by figure eights to the right, fairly close to the tree tops. After about half an hour I was feeling cold and asked my passenger if he had spotted any tanks in the woods yet. There was no reply, and I assumed that his earphones had become detached.

As I banked again to the left I looked round—not easy when your neck is frozen stiff. The general appeared to dive half out of the cockpit as if to retrieve something from the underbelly of the aircraft. This also happened when I banked over to the right. He flopped over in that direction like a rag doll, and when I straightened up on to an even keel, his head and arms remained vertical, as if he were hanging upside down.

I could see all was not well and hurried back to land at Martlesham Heath. He was unconscious and had lost his helmet and his false teeth. The ground staff helped me lower him to the grass and I was greatly relieved when an ambulance arrived and a medical orderly pronounced him still alive. He was carted off to the station sick quarters, conscious but suffering from severe shock

I don't think any of us temporary staff officers left our mark in the annals of Command staff history. Not having distinguished myself at school, the mess bar was the only place where I could hold my own with the Oxbridge dons who pushed their pens in pursuit of victory. However, I did have the dubious distinction of being the only officer to be ordered from the Command conference room. This happened during a high-powered conference on operational policy, and at which only two of us present had actually flown operationally during the flying under discussion.

This conference was to evaluate plans to help Bomber Command in its early saturation raids on the Ruhr. Wing Commander Sammy Hoare, my contemporary, sat opposite to me in the lowly seats allotted to us at the far end of the table. Both Sammy and I had done a lot of offensive night work and I wanted to suggest that the RAF should cover all German night fighter bases during the raids, even if it meant calling on Training Command and our light day bomber forces. I knew from experience that it did not take much to upset our night traffic control if our airfields were visited by German intruder

patrols. No pilot could concentrate on shooting down bombers when he was told by his ground control that his base was being patrolled by the enemy, was covered in craters and delayed-action bombs, and worse still that all neighbouring airfields were receiving the same treatment.

It was up to Sammy, senior to me in rank, to speak first. But he just sat, twiddling his moustache, his eyes far away in the clouds. However, as the meeting was about to close, there came a familiar voice from the far end of the conference table: 'What do you think, Squadron Leader Scott?' It belonged to one of our great war leaders, Air Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory. Two rows of balding heads on either side of the table turned my way and it took me a moment or two to collect myself and blurt out a reply:

'I don't—Sir! This plan you are adopting is a lot of cock!'

There was dead silence. Then the Air Marshal pointed a finger at the door, which thankfully was at my end of the room, and thundered 'Out!'

I made for the door with my head held high, but my discomfiture was not yet complete. There was a blackboard and easel to the side of my line of flight and, my left foot just clipped its base, I tripped and shot through the door almost before opening it. If someone had laughed or even sniggered it might not have seemed so bad, but there was total silence. I slammed the door shut as soon as I was through—much swifter than was necessary.

I still like to believe that this brief encounter with my Commander-in-Chief had a happy and fruitful outcome. A few days later another conference was called. Although I was not present, I had submitted my thoughts on paper and these ideas were adopted almost to the letter. When they were put into practice the percentage of our Bomber Command losses dropped, and remained that way until the German air force was able to invent more sophisticated aids for its night fighter operations.

Two years later, when I was commanding a mobile wing of rocket-firing Typhoons on the Normandy bridgehead, I was to meet Trafford Leigh-Mallory again, only on this occasion I inadvertently ordered him off my airfield.

My leg was in plaster at the time, having been broken a few weeks earlier. The dusty airstrip near Bayeaux was busy as my four squadrons of Typhoons were taking off and landing in a continuous procession. In the midst of all the noise and dust a little Beaver-type communication aircraft landed on to the runway, and wildly

waving a crutch at its pilot, I told him to take his bloody toy elsewhere. With an air of resignation he pointed down towards the cabin, and there through the thick Normandy dust I could see Sir Trafford. I almost dropped a crutch while attempting to salute, and we quickly led his aircraft to a quieter spot near the marshalling area.

We saw one another quite frequently after that, and I became rather fond of him in a distant sort of way. It was at Merville airfield, near Lille in the Pas de Calais, that we met for the last time. He was relinquishing his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Air Forces and called in to say goodbye before flying out to the Far East in a York aircraft of Transport Command. Regrettably, it flew into a mountain and all aboard were killed.

Before leaving the shelter of Bentley Priory I was almost shot down—and in a most undignified way. We usually made sure that we were not always confined to our desks and often flew far and wide on visits to the many stations of Fighter Command. I even attended two RAF station parties, 200 miles apart, in one night. And if the Windmill girls were performing at a certain station, we always found good reason to be there.

Our own communication flight was at nearby Northolt and consisted of an assorted collection of small unarmed prewar aircraft such as Proctors and Vega Gulls. After a rugged night attending a party at Westhampnett with the New Zealand Spitfire pilots of 485 Squadron, during which I was filled with whisky and canned New Zealand oysters, I climbed into a Vega Gull to fly back to Northolt. My way was blocked by thick cloud over the hills behind Arundel, so there was no alternative but to break the rules and fly up the coast in the direction of Ramsgate in the hope of making my way home via the Thames Estuary. No unarmed aircraft was permitted to fly in the vicinity of the south coast because of the many Luftwaffe low-level fighter bomber raids that were taking place at that time. FW 190s and Me 109s would fly in low, drop their bombs, and after straffing the streets of the coastal towns make off back to France before our own fighters could scramble off and intercept.

Nursing a fierce hangover and near Hastings flying just below the cloud base at about 600 ft, I suddenly noticed several large explosions below and to starboard. Almost simultaneously, four yellow-nosed Me 109s zoomed up after me from near ground level. As a stream of tracer sped past me I yanked back hard on the stick and beat the next

burst into cloud only by a bare margin. Feeling like a rabbit that had just made his hole an inch ahead of the terriers, I flew around in cloud for what seemed an eternity, but as soon as I poked my nose out I received a burst from our own friendly anti-aircraft gunners below. In no position to stay and argue, I was forced to fly in cloud until well out to sea before letting down into broken fog and making my way over the waves towards Ramsgate, hoping I would not run into the Royal Navy.

I made my landfall near Deal, and flew up and down just off the coast waggling my wings frantically to make sure that every gunner could see I was a British pilot in trouble and begging for friendly recognition. But I was not so lucky. As I crossed in low between Deal and Sandwich I received a hot reception from small arms fire, and discovered after landing at Manston that parts of my Vega Gull resembled a colander. Since we did not wear chutes in those prewar aircraft, I could only mop my brow and utter a thankful prayer.

Getting myself clear of Fighter Command HQ at Bentley Priory was difficult. Air Marshal Leigh-Mallory was determined that each tour-expired pilot posted to his HQ for temporary staff duties would spend a full six months there before returning to operations. On reflection I suppose he was right, but at that time I could have thought of many happier ways of resting from operations. The Luftwaffe pilots had the advantage over us when it came to resting from the strain of operational flying. They had a variety of choices—from skiing in the Harz mountains to sunbathing and swimming in the Mediterranean. We had no choice, but just stayed in Britain and busied ourselves in some way towards the conduct of war. However, a couple of weeks fishing in Scotland would have been more beneficial to me than six months at Fighter Command HQ.

Comparatively speaking, the Priory was a safe place. But it lacked the squadron spirit and we all longed to be back on operations. For a time I saw a channel of escape when Squadron Leader Don Parker, whose office I shared, was returning to Bomber Command. Don had friends on the staff at High Wycombe, Bomber Command's HQ, and he considered there was a good chance of arranging a posting for me to a multi-engine squadron, where I would be his second pilot until I became proficient enough to have my own aircraft. Although I did not know at the time, Don did his work well. Within a few days of his departure from the Priory I was asked to report to my