

John Martin (1921-) Royal Air Force Tanygroes

Dates of Interview: 9th 16th and 23rd March 2021

Interviewer: Hugh Morgan

Early Years

John Martin was born in Willesden, London in 1921. John recalls enjoying his childhood though in financially impoverished circumstances. He passed the 11+ exam but John's father decided against his admission to Grammar school as he believed that his son needed to contribute to the family income as soon as he was able to go to work. John left school at 14yrs and started work in a local coachbuilder working mainly with commercial vehicles. Money in this North-West area of London was scarce all round, and John observed many married men with families to support suddenly being laid off a Friday afternoon.

After the long pause of the 'phoney war' which followed the outbreak of WW2; the first real action John witnessed was a solitary Bf 109 coming over Willesden and firing into the barrage balloons with impunity, facing absolutely no opposition. He remembers:

"As a youth you were waiting for the action to start but when the Blitz started, we could see the fires from the bombing in the docks glowing red quite clearly. The bombing then became more widespread across London. Whilst our house didn't get direct hit, the houses across the street were destroyed and the blast blew all our windows in.

"At the time my mother's mother had come to live with us and she had a little bedroom upstairs. Grandma was always moaning about her poor legs and how she couldn't move and was unable to walk so everything had to be brought to her. I used to listen to her with little sympathy. I was in bed when this bomb dropped across the road. The explosion went off and I woke up and realised we had suffered quite a lot of damage. I then remembered that Grandma must be still upstairs and thought I had better go and help her get down. But before I knew where she was, Grandma came behind me and passed me like a Greyhound, nearly knocking me over. She was in the shelter long before I was!

"I really wanted to volunteer for aircrew but knew I didn't have the education, so I volunteered to become an armourer, which sounded very interesting. I went to the recruiting office and seemed to be accepted when someone burst in and said 'I'm sorry we can't have you as you are in a reserved occupation'.

It turned out that John's boss, the owner of the coachbuilders, had contacted the RAF and said that he was needed in to continue with his job. John remembered *'I felt trapped and felt I was going to miss all the action in the War'*.

Royal Air Force: Training as a Wireless Operator

Eventually, John noticed that the advertisements for aircrew had dropped the requirement for a good secondary education, so he applied again, this time for aircrew and hoped to

become a wireless operator. Much to his surprise at the aircrew selection board he was selected for pilot training.

However, having started pilot training his whole class was without warning reclassified to become bomb aimers in order to meet a shortfall in bomb-aimers for the RAF. John stood up in the class and asked the Squadron Leader if he could be reclassified as a wireless operator as this was his original choice. Clearly 'fortune favoured the brave' as the Squadron Leader returned in a couple of hours to tell John that he could commence training as a wireless operator.

John was posted to Blackpool to learn morse code and then onto a signals school for wireless maintenance training. Then came a four months posting to an army cooperation squadron at Stoneycroft on the edge of the New Forest. There John found an excellent CO, who knew everybody by their Christian name and he really enjoyed his time there. This was followed by flight training from an airfield near Bristol on the De Havilland Dominie and then onto Percival Proctors. The Proctors were flown by fighter pilots who had recently been on front line operations and John experienced some hairy flights. By contrast, his found his flights flown by the Royal Indian Air Force pilots on the same station to be delightful.

"I was then posted to Stormy Down in Wales in 1943 to do some further training and after that up to North Wales to an Advanced Flying Training School flying Avro Ansons. We would take off over Anglesey, go across the Irish Sea and then over the Scottish Islands, mainland and Highlands, and then back again. Very enjoyable flying".

Shipped off to Cottesmore in Rutland to an Operational Training Unit John flew a 'half' sortie in a Vickers Wellington which had been sent out to try to find an aircraft which had gone down in the North Sea, but sadly didn't locate anything. He was then posted to Husband Bosworth on Leicestershire and Northamptonshire border.

"That was where I met my wife, Adelaide, who was a WAAF Flight Mechanic serving at Little Rissington in the Cotswolds. We met at a local dance and here we are now, still together, 78yrs later."

Shot Down

"I was then posted to the Lancaster Finishing School before going to an operational squadron stationed at RAF Kirmington in Lincolnshire. This was in January 1944. We took off on our first operational sortie not knowing what to expect and were hit by flak. The second op also to Berlin was worse and we got hit badly by flak. The on the third on 30th January 1944 we got attacked by a night fighter. Berlin was a hot target and we were coming up to the target when we were hit.

"There were cannon shells ripping around my right arm. Blue flashing lights all over. I think that the navigator must have been injured. I knew we had been badly hit and switched on the intercom just in time to hear the skipper say 'bale out, bale out!' The navigator couldn't have been very badly hit because he and I were both getting our parachutes on at the same time. As I opened the door at the back of the cockpit to go down to our exit position, flames came at me and I saw that the whole of the fuselage was ablaze. In the split second that I

opened the door I saw the mid-upper gunner climbing out of his turret which was completely wrecked and I knew that all I could do was to slam the door shut, so I went back into the cockpit.

“The aircraft was in a terrific dive. I climbed into the pilot’s seat (he was trying to get out through the escape hatch in the nose of the aircraft which had been blocked by the bombardier’s body). I tried the dingy hatch but that wouldn’t move and just thought to myself, ‘well that’s my lot’. I then remembered that I hadn’t turned off the Identification Friend or Foe button on the wireless set so I went back to the set and turned the two buttons to switch it off. The next thing I heard was this enormous explosion and I was knocked unconscious.

“I ‘half came to’ outside of the aircraft and saw this huge piece of Lancaster sail very closely past me and then my parachute jerked me into consciousness. I don’t remember pulling the ripcord at all and I what I imagine happened was that the ripcord got tangled up wreckage of the aircraft and was snagged by that. So, I was extremely lucky. When we had been first attacked, we were at 20,000ft but by the time I regained some consciousness, I must have only been around 1000ft from the ground. Part of my harness had been ripped off, but I was aware enough to realise that I needed to cling onto the straps as hard as I could until I hit the ground far harder than I should have done.

Prisoner of War

John was quickly picked up by a Luftwaffe searchlight unit, something of a relief as the civilian population of Berlin was known to be very hostile to RAF aircrew many of whom they attacked and even lynched. In Dulag Luft nr Frankfurt, he lost his identity discs (dog-tags), found himself accused of being a British agent and was told that he was being handed over to the Gestapo. Thinking that he may be tortured and executed he was ordered into a room, when much to his relief he found himself face to face not with a firing squad, but many Allied Airmen.

On 16th April 1945, John was in Stalag 357 at Follingbostel not far from Hannover in North-Western Germany when the Royal Irish Hussars entered the camp and eh and his fellow PoWs were liberated.

Post-War

Repatriated, John returned to England and he and Adelaide married in September 1945, honeymooning in Wales and bringing up two sons one of whom became a senior officer in the British Army. John and Adelaide eventually retired to West Wales where they still live today. John’s book of his wartime experiences ‘A Raid Over Berlin’ (Parthian) has been on the Sunday Times Best Sellers list.