

Fred Penrose

Fred grew up in North London with his parents John Wilfred and Louisa Sophia, brothers John and Frank and sister Florence.

From school he worked on the railways. After World War II broke out he joined the Home Guard and Air Defence Corps until he was old enough to enlist in the RAF in October 1941. Training at Scarborough he experienced air raids and guard duty with a Lewis gun in a holiday chalet. He first flew near Carlisle in March 42 – a first experience of which he had vivid memories.

Having 'made the grade' after 9 hours of flying he crossed the Atlantic to Canada in May 42 on the SS Banforda squeezed in with 2500 other servicemen. After 7 months training on the Arnold Scheme in the American South he refused the offer of staying on as an instructor and returned to England via Canada in February 43 with his US Army Air Corp wings (plus Royal Canadian Air Force wings) – this time on a larger ship, Empress of England, on which he and his mate got to 'play' with the ack ack guns (practice only).

Commando training was followed by a long wait near Bournemouth where he experienced air raids and was enlisted in the recovery of dead and injured. Eventually, he was back with flight training and was soon flying Hurricanes for gunnery training from an airfield near Wooler (a location that we were privileged to visit with him in the autumn of 2009). It was here that he experienced an engine failure at 20,000ft and was obliged to crash land on the airfield.

While stationed near Arbroath he took 3 days leave in February 1944 to get married to Pat. They returned to Scotland for a few days honeymoon (with poor weather and with Fred having to fly each day). During this time, in a practice attack on local gun batteries, 2 of his comrades failed to come out their dive and were killed while Fred and one other successfully pulled out of their dive. Pat returned to London on her own braving crowded troop trains and air raids.



After training for night flying in Hurricanes, often in appalling weather, Fred was attached to a bomber Pathfinder squadron. For a few months, and with over 100 hours of flying, he flew hurricanes and spitfires in dummy attacks on bombers to train them in counter-offensive measures.



In October 1944, Fred did a conversion course to fly the Mustang long range fighter. In December he joined the squadron that had previously been so successful in the defence of Malta. The following month he went to pick up a new Mustang but while he was having lunch another pilot took the plane and was killed when it crashed on take off.

From January to the end of the war in Europe Fred then flew in many missions escorting bombers over German occupied Europe and Germany itself.

These missions included

- a low level raid on the Gestapo headquarters in Copenhagen (he later found himself giving flying instruction to one of the inmates of the prison who had managed their escape during the raid)
- escorting the Dambuster squadron on a attempted attack on the Bielefield viaduct with 10 ton 'Grand Slam' bombs
- a raid on Hitler's Berchtesgaden country house
- a low level attack on submarines and German shipping in Kiel Bay just a few days before the German surrender . His CO was killed in this raid.



In one raid on Sweinmunde Fred found himself separated from his flight, in cloud over the North Sea and battling to stabilise his plane as well as flying blind with several instruments disabled. He jettisoned his cockpit canopy and was about to bale out at 20,000ft when a break in the clouds allowed him to regain his orientation, descend and make landfall.

On another raid, this time on Bremen, his flight was dispersed when attacked by a 109 and having to dive sharply to help dislodge one of his wing tanks he again found himself on his own (having previously been in a formation of 100 bombers and 30 fighters!). Encountering a crippled Lancaster followed by 2 fighters he prepared to attack the fighters, but when they turned out to be American he took over their escort of the bomber back to England.

In July Fred's squadron escorted the King and Queen's flight to the Isle of Man and back. Shortly afterwards he left his squadron and received the endorsement 'above the average' ability as a fighter pilot from his Wing Commander.

Fred went on to train as a flying instructor, training first Dutchmen and then Turkish officers. The Turks had little English but Fred got on quite well with them. They turned out to be quite weak though when it came to aerobatics. Then on one occasion they had watched Fred give a flight to a woman ground crew, who had not flown before, but when given the controls and some instruction managed some rolls, spins and a loop the loop. Fred asked them what they thought of this and shortly afterwards their performance showed significant improvement!

Another example of Fred's sense of humour in his own words-

"A few days later we were returning to the aerodrome after flying a cross country flight. As we came up to Grantham railway station I could see to the south Stoke tunnel through which trains from London came before arriving at the station. I said to my Turkish pupil we'll just make an attack on the tunnel before going in to land. I had seen an express train from London being hauled by a huge Pacific type locomotive approaching the tunnel from the south. Down we went pointing our nose at the tunnel exit, as we neared the target- said bombs gone - and pulled up and away. Well did we get a hit, and my pupil looked down just as a huge ball of white smoke and steam was pushed out of the tunnel followed a few seconds later by the express train. He thought this was great and I wasn't sure whether he thought we had made a real attack or not."

It was about this time that while travelling home for a 48 hour leave he was in his first (apparently he was in another one later on!) train crash at Potters Bar when his train ploughed into a de-railed freight train.

After a final spell of instruction, this time on gliders with a regiment of paratroops destined for Palestine, Fred was finally demobbed and returned to work on the railways. An earlier prospect of a posting to Canada with an extended flying career had come to nothing and so Fred's flying career came to an end. In his war memoir he lists over 120 names of men that had trained with him in class 43A in America that were killed in action.

Times were hard in post war Britain and Fred and Pat started out living with parents before they managed to get a ground floor flat in Hornsey. John was born in 1949 and in the 50s they eventually bought a bungalow in Billericay where they lived until the British Railway headquarters moved to York in 1968.

With John off their hands, Fred and Pat took to some foreign travels and later, in retirement, spent many happy years caravanning and enjoying, first, their golden retriever Candy, and later their Ihasa apso, Cindy.

When Kate first went to York with John to visit Fred and Pat she was immediately struck, and somewhat disconcerted by the reversal of roles in the household. Fred was busy with the washing machine and ironing while Pat was out washing the car. Kate was also later struck by his generosity in time and material help when John and Kate first set up home with their new baby near Normanton.

A loving Granddad, Fred took great interest in his granddaughters Naomi and Rebecca. On reaching John and Kate's new home after they had first moved in with Naomi, less than 2 weeks old, his first words were "Where's my granddaughter?"