



Right
Sgt Geoff Booth in the cockpit of Spitfire Vb 'RN-M' at Gravesend 1942. A member of ground crew looks on.

A house clearance in Leeds uncovered more than the owner expected. Stripping back wallpaper revealed a hatch to the loft and inside there was a long-forgotten box containing, among other things, a photo album.

There was only one clue for the new householder, the cover of the album carried the title: 'Sgt Pilot G Booth – 72 'Basutoland' Squadron'. Using this connection, the author – the unit's historian – was contacted and the story of a 'local lad' was revealed.

Geoffrey Booth was born in 1920 in Leeds. He was an athletic and bright young man who had something to live up to when World War Two started – his father, Harold, had served with distinction in 1914-1918. Initially with the army, Harold joined the Royal Flying Corps in late 1917 and became an observer with 36 Squadron.

Like father, like son, Geoff wanted to fly and to serve his country. In

1940 he joined the RAF Volunteer Reserve, going to 7 Initial Training Wing at Newquay, Cornwall in July. A caption on the reverse of a photo suggests where Geoff started his flying tuition: 22 Elementary Flying Training School, Teversham, Cambridge.

In June 1941 he was at Flying Training School, Montrose, Scotland, having progressed from Tiger Moths at Teversham to Miles Masters. The Master was intended to help transition pilots to Hurricanes and Spitfires. Geoff's next step was the Spitfire-equipped 57 Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Hawarden, near Chester.

CHANNEL DASH

A short period with 122 Squadron on Spitfire IIs at Catterick, followed. Geoff was probably building hours ready to join the front line, which came on September 21, 1941 when he was posted to 72 Squadron at Biggin Hill in Kent.

Geoff's time with 72 was tracked

through the unit's Operational Record Book (ORB). Equipped with Spitfire Vs, the squadron was engaged in offensive sorties and Geoff's first 'op' was as part of 'Circus 107' to the docks at Boulogne: engine trouble forced him to return after 25 minutes. A 'Circus' was a short-range bomber attack with fighter escort.

On October 20 the squadron deployed to nearby Gravesend where Geoff provided escort to a couple of search and rescue sorties and some convoy patrols, all without incident. The CO, Sqn Ldr Des Sheen, was replaced by Sqn Ldr Cedric Masterman on the 27th.

Convoy patrols dominated operations through to early February 1942. On the 12th Geoff took part in the famous 'Channel Dash' when several German warships made a daring run into the North Sea from French ports – the RAF and Fleet Air Arm (FAA) threw everything at them in an attempt to stop the audacious break-out. Claiming three

A LAD FROM

enemy aircraft destroyed, three damaged and one 'probable' for no losses, 72 was the most successful unit of the day. The FAA took a terrible pounding; all six of its Swordfishes were shot down.

Snow disrupted operations for the rest of February and in March Geoff flew a couple of offensive sweeps, an escort to a Circus and a convoy patrol. He was commissioned on March 26, becoming a Pilot Officer.

ATLANTIC SCOURGE

Geoff's photo album includes a snap of a Hurricane at Gravesend, probably taken during the spring of 1942. It shows a Mk.I carrying the codes 'KE' as used by the Merchant Ship Fighter Unit (MSFU), and this encounter seems to have influenced his future. Pilots volunteered for the perilous duties of the MSFU and 72 Squadron's records show that Geoff was posted on May 3 to "Special Duties with the MSFU".

From August 1940 Kampfgeschwader 40 started to

operate its long-ranging Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condors from French airfields and in just ten weeks sank 90,000 tons of Allied shipping. Not only was KG 40 a direct bombing threat to the vital transatlantic convoys but the Condor's surveillance capabilities meant that U-boat packs could be directed to the vulnerable supply vessels.

Churchill called the Condor "the scourge of the Atlantic" and demanded countermeasures be found to reduce the losses of shipping. The navy did not have



FROM LEEDS

THE DISCOVERY OF A PHOTO ALBUM ENABLED **ERIK MANNINGS** TO PIECE TOGETHER THE EXPLOITS OF GEOFF BOOTH, A FIGHTER PILOT FROM LAND AND SEA



Right
Geoff Booth with his father Harold, 1933.

Right
Geoff's 'chariot', a 1937 Ford Model Y.

carriers available to provide air escort and deploying long-range Beaufighters to Ireland to cover as far out as they could, was almost impossible without radar direction to help locate the Condors.

A proposal was put forward that radar-equipped ships be made available to provide 'fixes' for the Beaufighters. An un-named Air Ministry representative took this notion further by suggesting that vessels be fitted with catapults to launch fighters for close-in protection. The value of the convoys to the war effort, and the very survival of Great Britain, was such that the fighters flown from these ships were seen as expendable.

BANANA BOATS

The first task was to find a suitable fighter and the naval Fairey Fulmar was chosen with its crew of two and reasonable range. But it was only 10mph (16km/h) faster than a Condor so had little chance in a stern chase. A much better prospect was the sturdy Hurricane, which could be easily modified for a catapult launch and had superior performance.

The current FAA catapult was heavy and used hydraulics to launch the aircraft. A lighter and shorter version, powered by three-inch rockets, was developed.

All this would take time and the navy proposed to use HMS *Pegasus*, a former seaplane carrier, with Fulmars to start convoy protection at once. The Admiralty also advocated the modification of four banana boats – fast cargo ships – as interim catapult fighter carriers fitted with standard FAA catapults. Despite not being purpose-built for the job, these could reach the required minimum launch speed



even with no headwind. These were known as Fighter Catapult Ships and did not carry cargo.

The Fulmar proved of little use and was replaced with Hurricanes as soon as they became available. HMS *Pegasus* started convoy duty in December 1940 with the converted banana boats soon to become operational.

The long-term solution was the Catapult Aircraft Merchant Ship – 'Camship' – a modified freighter carrying cargo and a Hurricane for defence. The plan called for 35 Camships to be converted. While the navy provided a Fighter Direction Officer (FDO) on each vessel it was unable to provide the pilots or the servicing crews; this was left to the RAF.

Formed in May 1941, MSFU was set up to develop the training course and all the technical support to make the system work. Its base was Speke, near Liverpool, on the River Mersey, where shore-based catapults could be installed for 'dry' launches.

Aboard the Camships would be a loading party to hoist the Hurricane on to the catapult, one or two pilots,

a fitter, a rigger, an armourer and a radio technician.

Personnel were recruited on a volunteer basis as the pilots would have a very hazardous job. Even if they survived the launch and combat phase, they would be faced with a ditching or parachute descent into the sea – a predicted survival rate of 70% was thought to be optimistic. It was the nearest to a kamikaze pilot the RAF ever had, but fortunately, the loss rate proved far less than expected.

The first Camship – SS *Empire Rainbow* – sailed for Nova Scotia on June 8, 1941 and by July there

were six in service. They were used on the Atlantic and Gibraltar runs and later on the Russian convoys. Meanwhile the Royal Navy started to get small escort carriers and from June 1942 no more volunteers were needed for the MSFU. The last two Camships left Gibraltar on July 23, 1943 and on their arrival in the UK the MSFU was disbanded.

Over two years of service the 35 Camships undertook 175 voyages of an average of 3,000 miles (4,828km) per voyage. Twelve of them were lost to enemy action. There were nine operational launches and nine enemy aircraft were claimed shot down. Despite the hazards of a mid-ocean launch, only one pilot – John Kendall – was lost on 'ops'.

CATAPULT TRAINING

Without Geoff's logbook, the author has turned to the Speke ORB which lists all flights on the MSFU. Plt Off G Booth reported to MSFU on May 5, 1942 and his training began by learning both the organisation and responsibilities of the crew when on board, details of the Condor and how best to attack



Above
Churchill's 'Scourge of the Atlantic', a Focke-Wulf Condor.

Left
Personnel from 72 Squadron at Gravesend, January 1942. Left to right: Fg Off 'Doc' White (not 72, probably the Gravesend doctor), Sgt Jock Garden, Sgt Geoff Booth, Sgt Don Soga, Sgt Frank Jemmett, Flt Lt 'Sabu' Campbell, Sgt Robbie Robertson. COURTESY OF THE KENT MESSENGER

Below
Hurricanes of MFSU visiting Gravesend in April 1942.

them, instruction on the radio sets and the high frequency homing system carried by the ships.

The minimum requirement for MFSU pilots was to have carried out three land-based catapult launches and, if possible, one from a ship, plus air-to-air gunnery against towed targets. Additionally, pilots

would learn to work with a navy FDO on launch procedure and receive instruction on parachute and dinghy drills, and 'dead-reckoning' navigation techniques. All members of the on-board crew had lectures on aircraft maintenance.

The on-board pilot was nominated as the Detachment Commander

but all other RAF personnel had to sign on as 'deckhands' and were subject to the ship's master's orders. The tour length for pilots was set at two voyages or six months in post. At first it was argued that the long periods spent on standby or ashore would not qualify as operational, it soon became clear that the stress of the job warranted the change.

Geoff's first flight in an MSFU Hurricane was on May 6, 1942 practising circuits and general handling. Between the 7th and the 19th he flew a further 20 sorties on visual intercepts, cine camera combats, aerobatics, formation and instrument flying, navigation and practice intercepts. He made the three catapult launches needed to qualify him as operational on the 24th.

Three days later MSFU achieved its first success when Fg Off John Kendall shot down a Junkers Ju 88 on the North Russian route. Tragically, Kendall drowned after being injured when attempting to bale out after the combat. ➔

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Above
Bow view of one
of the converted
merchantmen

Above right
Fifteen rockets
propelling a
Hurricane cleanly off
the bow

LIFE AT SEA

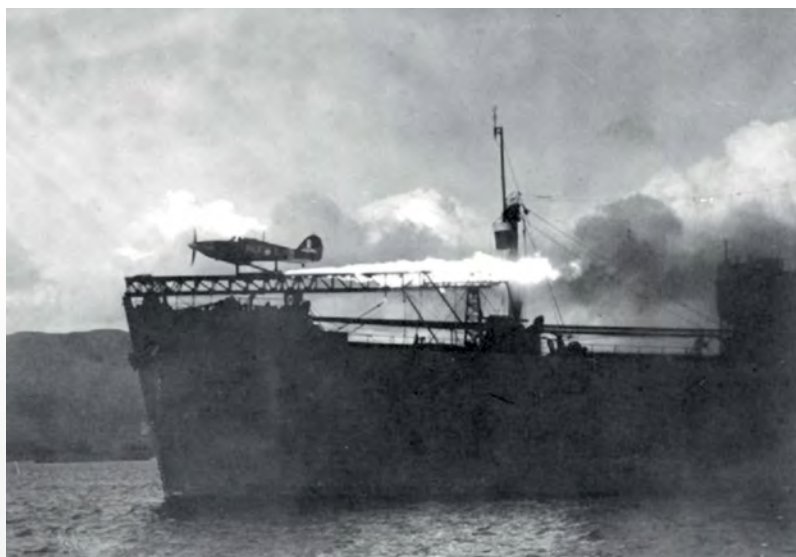
On June 11, 1942 Plt Offs Booth and Garner and FDO Lt Eccles embarked with Crew 5 on SS *Empire Shackleton* which sailed with Convoy OG 085 from Liverpool. Two days later she left for Gibraltar, carrying cargo, which included 18 crated Spitfires.

The daily routine was mainly dictated by the weather, with the swell and wave/wind direction regularly making launching even more hazardous than normal. The final decision was always left to the pilot, but the Convoy Commodore also had to understand the need for the Camship to quickly turn into wind to launch its Hurricane.

The salt-laden environment and the sheer brute force of waves hitting the exposed aircraft caused constant problems for the maintenance crew. Despite a cover over the cockpit and bungs in every hole, the corrosion of cables, pulleys and control runs added to the daily problems. Often the fabric-covered flying surfaces would be ripped and damaged in heavy seas.

Once the convoy reached the danger area for Condor attacks, if the weather was suitable to launch, the aircraft was made ready pre-dawn and the engine warmed up for about 30 minutes. The pilot would then start his stand-by period dressed in full flying kit with 'Mae West'. He would cover half the day when the second pilot took over.

The FDO remained on the bridge the whole time and monitored the radio traffic from the escorts for early warning of approaching aircraft. This routine could last for seven or eight days on the Atlantic run and imposed a heavy psychological strain on the pilots.



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Geoff's first voyage seems to have passed without incident. He reported back to Speke on October 25, having been promoted to Flying Officer.

SECOND CONVOY

A lack of flying practice at low speed just after launch had been identified as a problem at Speke following several crashes by trainee pilots. Geoff carried out three sorties practicing this at a safe height on November 16/17, 1942. He also started to practice deck landings in readiness for the introduction of the small escort carriers that were to replace the Camships.

The Air Ministry was also keen that MFSU pilots were fully prepared for baling out, and Geoff did a parachute drop at the Ringway, Manchester-based Parachute Training School on January 3, 1943. He later carried out two more jumps, both into Rostherne Mere in Cheshire, wearing a rubber immersion suit.

In February 1943 Geoff undertook another refresher catapult launch – the 372nd since MFSU was established at Speke. He also went to Machrihanish in Scotland for a deck landing course including five touch downs on the training carrier HMS *Argus*.

On May 13, Geoff, Plt Off Jimmy Stewart and Crew 1 took the train to Glasgow to embark on the SS *Empire Darwin*. They left the Clyde on the

20th to join up with Convoy KX 10, which arrived at Gibraltar on May 31. The convoy shuttled between Algiers, Casablanca and 'Gib'.

Empire Darwin left Gibraltar with Convoy MKS 18G on July 23 to rendezvous with Convoy SL 133 and the Camship *Empire Tide* on the 26th to make a procession of 48 ships. This was the last convoy to operate with Camships, which were being withdrawn.

FINAL COMBAT

The Camships took turns at keeping readiness and for the first three days nothing was seen. On July 28 the catapult on *Empire Tide* developed a fault and *Empire Darwin* took over. The FDO was John Pickhill and he overheard on the radio other ships reporting a suspicious aircraft approaching which he eventually identified as an Fw 200.

Geoff and Jimmy were sat on the fore hatch cover playing cards with the maintenance crew. The FDO told the duty pilot, Jimmy, to get ready – this would be his MSFU operational debut. At that moment, a USAF B-24 Liberator appeared and the FDO asked it to intercept the Condor rather than launch the Hurricane.

The whole convoy witnessed the battle as the two large aircraft engaged each other. The port outer engine of the Condor burst into flames and shortly afterwards its bombs were jettisoned before it



crashed into the sea. The B-24 had also been badly hit and an SOS was heard soon afterwards – it disappeared about 20 miles from the convoy. Due to the ongoing threat of attack no ship could be dispatched to look for survivors.

Minutes later two more Condors were sighted and Jimmy was

launched as yet another appeared at low level. Jimmy gave chase to the closest one, but the FDO's earphones went dead and he could not help his

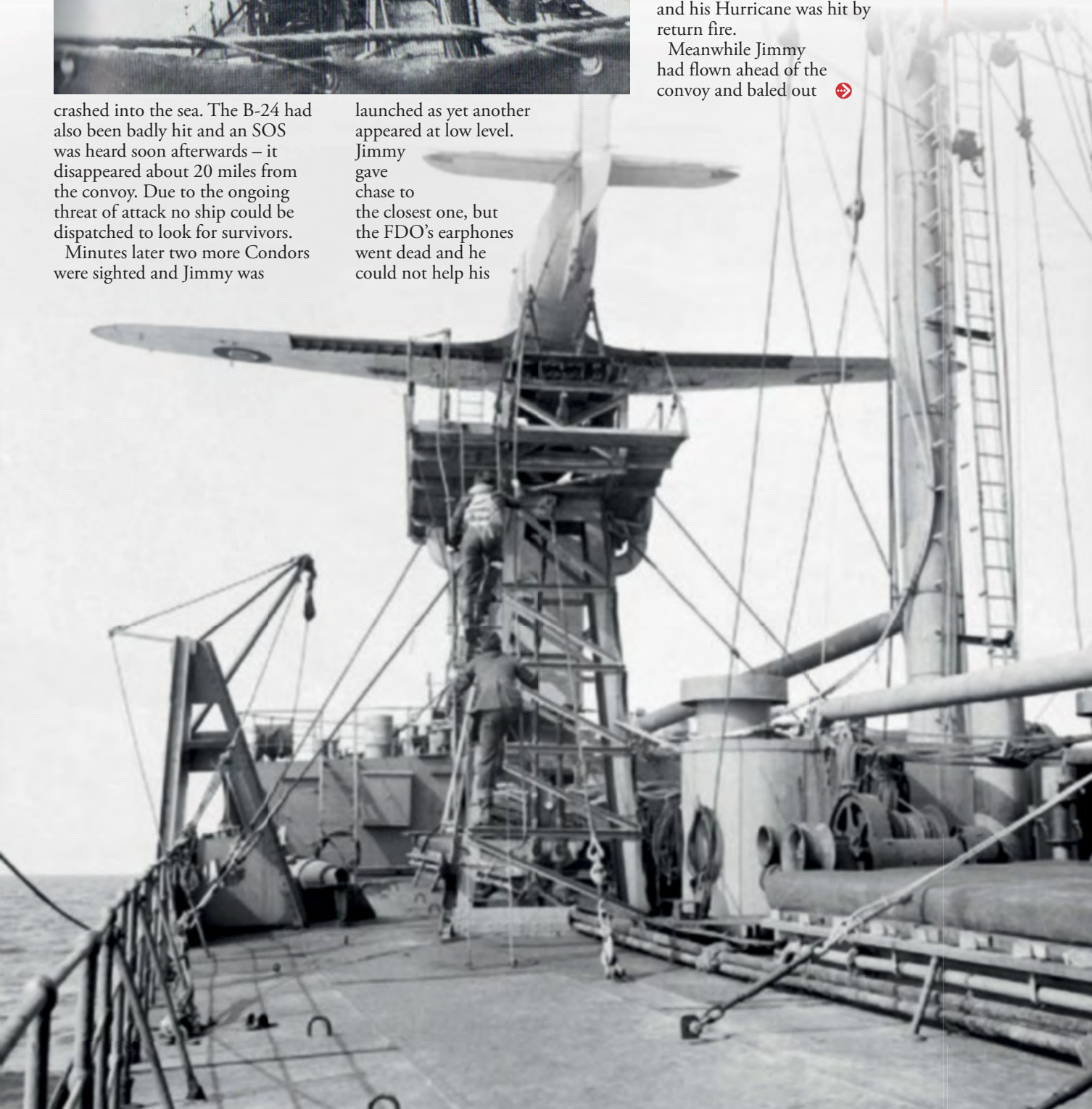
pilot. Jimmy made a successful first attack but his guns jammed on the second run. A ship in the convoy watched as the Condor crashed into the sea, at a point about 800 miles west of Bordeaux, France.

As this was happening, *Empire Darwin* was bombed from 7,000ft by one of the other Condors. Fortunately there were no direct hits. *Empire Tide* had rectified the faulty catapult and launched her Hurricane. Despite expending all his ammunition Fg Off Flynn only damaged one of the Condors and his Hurricane was hit by return fire.

Meanwhile Jimmy had flown ahead of the convoy and baled out ➔

Left
Exposed to the elements - keeping MSFU Hurricanes serviceable was an almost impossible task.

Below
A pilot climbing up into his Hurricane.



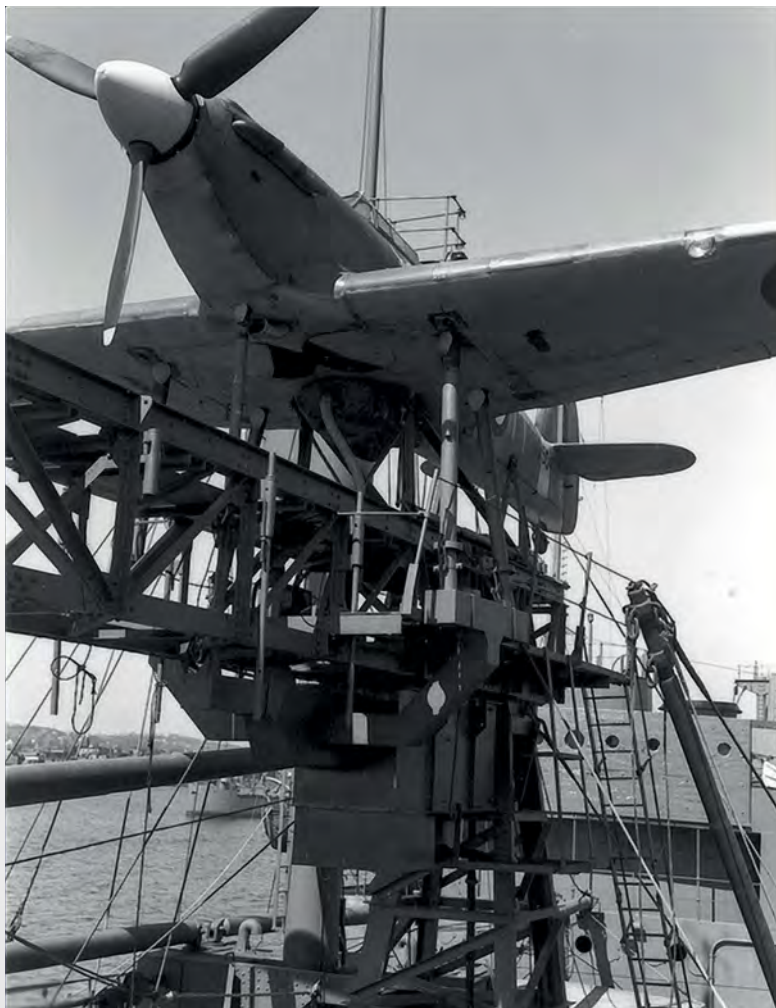
and Flynn followed suit; both were picked up safely. Later, German intelligence indicated that Flynn's target had failed to return to its base.

With no more Hurricanes available for launch the Condors returned the following day, attacking the convoy for 45 minutes. No ships were sunk but *Empire Darwin* was damaged. The combined convoy arrived at Liverpool on August 5.

ON DRY LAND

Geoff and Jimmy were placed in the charge of 9 Group on September 1 to await a posting to an OTU. They appear to have been the last two pilots on MSFU as it was formally disbanded six days later.

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Geoff is buried at the Chevington military cemetery, near Hadston in Northumbria. After frontline ops with 72 Squadron and then potentially suicidal duties at sea, the lad from Leeds had fallen victim to a training accident.

The author is very keen to contact any members of Geoff Booth's family – please get in touch via the editor. ●



A SQUADRON AT EASE



A gathering of 72 Squadron airmen at Gravesend in January 1942. Left to right: Sgt Frank Jemmett, Sgt Geoff Booth, Plt Off EPW Bocock, Sgt Bernard Ingham, Sqn Ldr Cedric Audley Masterman OBE, Sgt Liby (Norwegian), Sqn Ldr Sunderland-Cooper, Sgt Thor Waerner (Norwegian), Sgt Larry Robillard, Sgt F E 'Jonah' Jones (Canadian), Plt Off Don Soga (Canadian), Sgt Pat Campbell, Plt Off Bates, Plt Off Frank DeNayer, Flt Lt Ken 'Sabu' Campbell, Sgt 'Jock' Garden. COURTESY OF THE KENT MESSENGER