

Ray Racy



Dr Ray Racy died peacefully on 23rd November. His granddaughter Sarah, who accompanied Ray to recent reunions, says that in his last weeks he talked often about his time on the squadron and he thought a lot of everyone within the Association. Sarah herself was grateful that she was able to experience reunions with him and to see how much respect everyone had for him.

Ray joined 74 as an NCO pilot on March 10th 1945 and was a Tiger until the end of the war. He had an eventful few months with the squadron, experiencing engine failure during an armed recce over Occupied Holland, making a forced landing and then being captured. He was released a few days before VE Day. When 74 returned to Colerne and transferred to the Meteor Ray was unfortunately made redundant as aircrew which he regretted greatly but he continued in the RAF after his time with 74 in ground based roles. He held the rank of Warrant Officer on his retirement in 1951.

Ray wrote several pieces for Tiger News over the years and I make no apology for including some of what he wrote here as our tribute to him. In an article entitled 'Bird of Passage' he explained how he came to join the RAF.

"When I volunteered to join in 1939 it was less for patriotic reasons than from outrage at what Hitler was doing to Europe and Britain. I had no inclination to spend days in a stinking trench as a dummy for German target practice. The Royal Navy might have appeared more inviting, but a youthful experience of seasickness ruled that out. So the RAF it was.

Although I suffer from vertigo, my first flight in a Tiger Moth with my instructor, Sgt Oakshott, was remarkably reassuring. Unlike peering over a cliff edge I felt buoyed up by the air, just as one is supported by water when swimming. After occasional bouts of air sickness I had an extensive and largely enjoyable training here and in Canada where I gained my Wings, on Tigers, twin engine Cessnas, Miles Masters and a few hours on Hurricanes. I was finally posted to a couple of Operational Training Units in leafy Shropshire. This period was particularly absorbing. Even on my first take off in a Spitfire Mk IIB I was aware of its quality, its powerful thrust and fingertip control. It was smooth and responsive – an inspiration to fly. Then on 30th November 1944 I was posted to my first operational unit, No 154 Squadron at Biggin Hill, the airfield famous for its outstanding role in the Battle of Britain. In fact the squadron was not yet operational. It had only just been formed and was made up of brand new Spitfire Mk VIIIs, an unusual variant of the type. They had tapered wingtips destined for high altitudes up to 44,000 feet, a pressurised cockpit and a Rolls Royce 60 engine operating with a two stage, two speed, intercooled power plant. The flying characteristics were quite different from the Mk IIs and Vs we had trained on. There was a noticeable delay between moving the control column and the aircraft's response. This slight pause was due, we were told, to the control rods and cables being encased in rubber to prevent the pressure from escaping. It was no problem in most common manoeuvres, but it required extreme concentration in formation flying.

My experience at Biggin Hill was marked by a few noteworthy events. After a short familiarisation flight, I was to take the aircraft up to 40,000 feet. I had never flown to that height before except in a Hurricane which climbed to about 30,000 feet where it began to lose lift. The Mk VII reached the prescribed ceiling with no trouble. It was a fine day and my only slight concern was that I might be jumped by an FW190 or other German aircraft. I would not have known how to respond as throughout our long and varied training the tactical advice we never received was on how to counter attack a strike by enemy aircraft. However, this didn't bother me at the time. I was too intent on taking in the experience of flying at such an altitude. The horizon in every direction was enormous and a light haze in the far distance made it hard to distinguish earth from sky. My main sensation was of loneliness in that vast emptiness, almost as if I was out of contact with the earth.

Another interesting event took place a couple of days later. I was taking off from the runway when a cloud of black substance streamed back from the spinner and completely obliterated the windscreen. I could not see a thing. What to do? Carry on and be forced to bail out somewhere, or try to get rid of it and return to the runway? I called the Control Tower and told them I was going to attempt to return to base. How I was going to clear some of that oily substance which covered the screen I had no idea. To this day I cannot recall where it came from, but I found a small piece of rag – not a normal item to be found in a Spitfire cockpit – thrust back the hood, set the controls to fly straight and level, released my straps and stood up in the cockpit. I just managed to reach round with my right hand to wipe off as much of the greasy muck as possible. Having achieved as much visibility as I could I returned to my seat, strapped myself in, completed the circuit and managed to make a tolerable landing. I was met immediately by a mechanic who had run up as I came to a stop. He seemed astonished that I had succeeded in returning at all.

It so happened that after less than a fortnight of actual flying at Biggin Hill I found myself in sick quarters with an attack of flu. This took place directly over the Christmas period. Apart from the unpleasant symptoms themselves, I cannot pretend it was not an unexpectedly pleasant interlude with the friendly attention of the WAAF nurses, especially on Christmas Day itself. However, when I returned to duty I discovered I had been posted. This was to 84 GSU (Ground Support Unit) at Lasham in Hampshire. As opposed to the high level activities of 154 Squadron, these were specifically directed to low level attack and dive bombing. The aircraft in use were mainly Mk IXs and Mk XVIIs with clipped wings for low level manoeuvrability. After about two months of practice dive bombing and air to ground firing I was finally posted to the fully operational 74 Squadron based at Schjindel in Holland. After an interesting three or four weeks with them I suffered an engine failure over occupied Holland and was subsequently taken prisoner. "

In another article for Tiger News Ray Racy told that story.

"We were flying Mk XVI clipped wing Spitfires as part of the 2nd Tactical Air Force. Our job was interdiction – a euphemism for bombing railway tracks, shooting up trains and trucks and anything else that moved. We were part of the widespread air strikes at the German retreat across the north German plains towards Berlin. My own brief experience with the squadron was not uneventful. One morning after returning from an armed recce I was greeted by an apoplectic maintenance sergeant. 'Did you know you dropped a bomb on the runway?' he exploded. Evidently the bomb had come loose on takeoff though I was not to know that. Fortunately it had not detonated!

On 5th April 1945 Flt Lt Peet and I had taken off on an early morning reconnaissance. After about an hour's uneventful flying Peet signalled to switch over the long range fuel tank to the main supply. Seconds after I had done so the confident roar of the engine gave way to an uncanny silence. The four bladed prop windmilled feebly in front of me. I was not unduly worried. It could be an airlock in the fuel system. I reached for the plunger under the instrument panel and pumped it several times. Nothing happened. I pumped it again and again. Nothing. I swore explosively and cursed the American built Packard Merlin engine with which this model was equipped. I had two choices – to bail out or make a forced landing. I opted for a forced landing. So I released the long range tank, trimmed the aircraft into a gentle glide and selected a suitable field. In Holland one was spoiled for choice. I circled the field and at 1,000 feet I slipped back the hood and secured it, banked to port and lined up for the approach. With the undercarriage up I reduced speed to about 90mph, switched off the ignition and raised the fuel cocks to OFF. Anxious not to overshoot, I judged the distance a bit short and just cleared the boundary hedge before jolting to a shuddering stop. I switched on the intercom and spoke briefly to my recce leader. 'Have landed safely. Am OK. Over and out.' I switched off. The less said the better. No point in giving away one's position.

My next move should have been to destroy the aircraft. I had visions of a massive explosion which would blow it up and take me with it. A further risk was that a fire would give away my position, the last thing I wanted to do. I reasoned it was too late in the war for the plane to be of any use to the Germans. So I left it as it was. As I walked away I noted that the starboard wing had been partly ripped off and the fuselage had broken in half behind the

cockpit. I had a broken nose and had gashed my face from hitting the giro gunsight. But my real problems lay ahead. Which way to go? Empty fields all around and not a soul to be seen. I now felt lonely, exposed and vulnerable. I stumbled across fields in a westerly direction towards Meppel, the nearest town according to my map. Eventually I came to a small shack. An elderly couple came out. I asked for some water to have a wash. They seemed completely indifferent to my condition but gave me a bowl and indicated a pump outside. Then they went back in. Perhaps they thought I was German. I trudged across more fields until I came to the outskirts of a village. After much indecision I succeeded in making contact with some Dutchmen. One of them spoke a little English and I explained that I wanted to pass myself off as a Dutch peasant.

'We can talk about that later,' he said. I was shivering. It was still early morning in April. Only much later I realised I was suffering more from concussion than the cold. The man must have seen my condition and he motioned me to a nearby bungalow. He showed me into a bijou living room and indicated a couch to lie on. I was so glad of the rest and the security I lay down and fell asleep at once. Suddenly I became aware of two burly men in grey green uniforms standing over me. They grunted something in German and ordered me outside. They led me to waiting truck and hoisted me over the tailboard. The truck revved up and drove away. Shortly it stopped at a small railway station. I was escorted into the booking hall and told to sit on a luggage trolley. I was not kept there long and I was moved again to a guardroom on a Luftwaffe airfield.

It was there that I met a young officer who was pleased to announce that for me the 'vor vos ofer'."

Ray was also a poet who penned the following about his early experiences of flying the **Spitfire VII**, the poem's title, with 154 Squadron.

Take off's at six o'clock.
Pull on your flying suit and fur lined boots,
Helmet, gloves and intercom.
Strap on that clumsy chute beneath your bum
And stomp across the grass to your machine
Haunches down, your Merlin sniffs the air
Like an expectant hound about to spring,
Flashing a glint of mischief and of menace.
She can be skittish and with wicked glee
Take to the sky and spit you out in spite.
Step up and climb aboard. Snap on the straps,
Check the controls and start her up.
Trim, mixture, pitch: fuel, flaps and revs.
All's well. It's time to taxi out.
The runway lies in wait.
Turn into wind
Full revs and let her go.
A rumble and a roar.
The ground falls back,
Wheels up
And level out at angels eight.
A patchwork quilt below.
Blue space among gigantic whorls of white.
This is a flier's paradise
Where he can roll and loop and dive
And pull intensive G in dizzy turns
And sail above the cloudbanks out of sight.
Those metal plates beneath our feet,
A thousand horses plus in the nacelle
Are all that separate us from the earth,
Unreal device to sling a man aloft.
Increase the revs and climb
To forty thousand feet.
It's lonely there, and cold.
Poised in this empty space
There's nothing here but sky

Above, around, below.
Earth is a flimsy dream,
A foreign shore that we no longer know.
In air so thin
The tapered wingtips wallow in the void.
It's time to raise the nose,
Flick over,
Throttle back, adjust the trim
And watch the needle sweep
Four-fifty on the clock.
As earth comes up
We hold her in the dive
And hope the wings won't crease.
Two thousand feet -
Time now to ease her out
And return her to the leash.
In level flight we set a course for base,
Regain the field and gently float her down.
Reality returns as we touch ground.
Boundless space intoxicates the mind.
Detached from scrutiny and mundane woes
We ride the skies in spirited delight
And purge the costive soul in powered flight.

Rest In Peace Ray. We'll all miss you.