



FLIGHT-WATCH



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A VISIT TO THE ROYAL AIR FORCE MUSEUM IN LONDON

I.

HENDON AND THE MUSEUM CAMPUS

Hendon Airfield, which is northwest of London, served as the birthplace of aviation in Great Britain. With the outbreak of World War One, Hendon served as an air-base of the Royal Flying Corps which became the first independent air force when it was renamed and reorganized as the Royal Air Force on April 8, 1918. During the inter-war years (between the first and second World Wars), Hendon was the site of tremendous aerial displays conducted by the RAF. An active RAF base during the Second World War, Hendon Airfield was decommissioned after the war, the runway complex being devoted to construction of public housing.



Portions of RAF Hendon remain in the form of a pub, The Hind and Hart, and, more importantly, the grounds of Hendon now serve as the site of the Royal Air Force Museum London. The Museum is about one hour's travel by subway from Central London. The Northern Line Subway Station at Colindale is about a 10-minute walk from the museum. The aircraft and historical artifacts are housed in five hangars or venues:

(1) The Grahame – White Factory is the United Kingdom's first purpose-built aircraft factory. One-fourth of the original factory survives, and it was relocated brick by brick to the Museum. This venue houses a collection of First World War and pre-war aircraft.

(2) Milestones of Flight is a relatively new addition. It is a three-story structure that houses, among others, a Kawasaki Ki-100, a P-51D Mustang, a Fokker D VII, a ME-109G, a ME-262 jet fighter, a Sopwith Camel, and a host of other military and civilian aircraft.

(3) The Bomber Hall houses a B-17, a B-24, a Lancaster bomber, a Lockheed Hudson, a Beaufighter, and a Vulcan bomber to name a few.

(4) The Historic Hangars include artifacts from the First World War as well as a collection of fighters and bombers, such as the Curtiss P-40 and a DH-4.

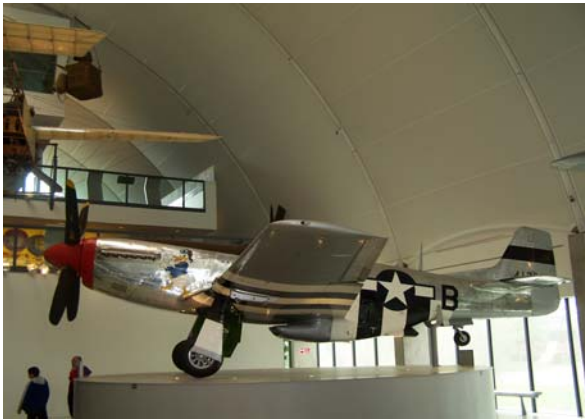
(5) The Battle of Britain Hangar includes a moving display and account of just how close Britain was to being invaded in the fall of 1940. The display includes a dramatic and informative film about this titanic struggle. Combatants involved in this struggle which are present in this hangar are an Mk. I Spitfire, an Mk. I Hurricane, a Messerschmidt ME-109E, a Heinkel HE-111, a Junkers JU-88, a Junkers JU-52 Stuka dive bomber, a Messerschmidt ME-110 fighter, and Fiat CR-42 Italian fighter. While in the Battle of Britain Hangar, I met a member of the staff, Gary Campbell, who is from South Africa. Gary is an aircraft enthusiast and built two model aircraft on display; an Mk. I Supermarine Spitfire and a Messerschmidt ME-109E



II.

MEETING ROY SMITH

I had just departed the Colindale Subway Station on a bus when I noticed the bus driver turned away from a sign pointing to the museum. Having departed the bus, I was making my way across the street in the direction of the museum when I came upon a gentleman traveling in the same direction. He asked if I was looking for the museum and I related that I was. He said he was going to the museum, so we walked along together in that direction along a sidewalk adjoining a narrow road lined with trees. As I looked at him, I expected he might have been old enough to have served in the Korean War, but I did not think he was old enough to have served in World War Two. Of course, I was wrong.



As we introduced ourselves, I learned my new acquaintance had flown 42 missions in the hostile European skies during the Second World War. His name was Roy Smith and I immediately sensed he was a soft-spoken and reserved gentleman not prone to revealing much information about his experiences.

Born in London, Roy was working as a civilian in the war industry and was in no danger of being called up for service. Requesting that he be allowed to serve his country, he was told he would be trained as a pilot. Because of intense aerial operations then taking place over the British Isles, Roy was sent to America for pilot training even though he had requested training as a navigator.



Arriving in the United States, Roy was sent to South Georgia. He wore an American Army uniform and received flight training in the Boeing PT-17 Stearman. When he went out one evening for some entertainment, he returned past curfew and attempted to crawl under the perimeter fence at the base. Shots rang out and Roy's indiscretion was revealed to his commanding officer who promptly had Roy shipped off to Canada for training as a navigator. Roy made his way to Portage La Prairie, about 60 miles west of Winnipeg, after he spent five days on leave enjoying Coney Island in New York.

When Roy served in RAF Bomber Command, a normal tour of duty was 30 missions. However, aircrews were required to serve a second tour after receiving a period of leave. After flying 30 missions, Roy's crew was offered a special deal. Since the RAF was short of aircrew, if Roy's crew flew 15 more missions before they took leave, the RAF would consider his two-tour requirement satisfied. Roy's crew accepted the deal, and his combat flying was finished by April of 1944. Roy had served in RAF Bomber Command having begun flight operations 11 months earlier.

After his training as a navigator was completed, Roy returned to England where he was posted to an operational training unit. He began flying combat in September of 1943. He was part of the seven-man crew that manned the Short Stirling, a four-engine heavy bomber. Serving in far greater numbers than the Stirlings were the four-engine Lancaster and Halifax heavy bombers. While the Lancasters and Halifaxes normally operated at between 19,000 and 22,000 feet, the Stirlings could only climb to about 13,000 feet. Unlike the United States Army Air Force, which flew in large formations for daylight bombing raids, the RAF Bomber Command flew at night in a bomber stream where each bomber navigated independently to the target although in close proximity to other RAF bombers. Roy explained crews seldom saw other aircraft until they were flying over the target. The other bombers were visible over the target due to target markers, fires, etc.

On a raid to Berlin, 10 of 50 Stirlings were lost which represented 20% of the Stirlings assigned to that mission. Loss rates for Lancasters and Halifaxes ran about 4%. Air Marshall Harris is reported to have declared that the Stirlings were flying coffins, ordering that they be assigned to less dangerous missions such as mining harbors and dropping supplies to French resistance fighters.



One night Roy's crew and two other Stirling crews were dispatched to France to drop supplies. As the three-ship formation made its way to the drop zone, one Stirling was shot down. Roy's crew discerned the appropriate light signal amidst the darkness and dropped the supplies. Years later while hiking the Swiss Alps, Roy would meet one of the Frenchmen who was on the ground that evening to receive the supplies.

There were seven crew members to a Stirling and 14 men assigned to a Nissen hut that served as their living quarters. Living with death was something Roy and his crew had to adapt to. Periodically, a seven-man crew would not return. Their effects were quietly collected and another seven airmen were assigned to take their bunks in the hut.

“Window” was aluminum foil dropped from aircraft to confuse German radar operators as the location of the main RAF bomber force. Stirlings in RAF Squadron 199 (Roy’s squadron) were dispatched to the north of the main force of RAF bombers. When they were just off the coast of Europe, the window was dropped. German night fighter squadrons then scrambled into the night air in the direction of the window droppings. As the German fighters were launching to intercept what they believed was a bomber force, Roy and his compatriots were reversing course and returning for England in hopes of not being shot down themselves. Meanwhile, the real bomber force was flying some distance to the south, and was able to make landfall after flying over the English Channel without being intercepted, thanks to the “window” droppings. As Roy explained it, the effect of “window” was to afford the bomber force a path to the target free of German night fighter interception. However, as the bombing raid progressed, the German fighters landed to refuel while the actual whereabouts of the bomber force became apparent. The result was the German fighters were in position to attack the RAF bombers as they departed the target and flew back toward England.



After taking leave, the RAF dispatched Roy to India to train navigators in the Indian Air Force. During this time, he contracted malaria and came close to death. According to Roy, the doctor who treated him told him the Indian bearer who served and took care of Roy had saved his life.

Discharged from the RAF in 1946, Roy went on to a successful career as a consulting engineer and retired at the age of 65. He and his wife then traveled about the world including Malaya, Indonesia, India, Western Europe and the United States. Roy and his wife have four children.

III.

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE OFFICERS CLUB IN LONDON

Roy Smith invited me and my wife to dinner at the Royal Air Force Officers Club in London. We arrived at the designated address on Piccadilly Street shortly after eight in the evening. The club has no sign on the exterior of the building. A person walking down Piccadilly would have no reason to know it was there.

As we entered the vestibule, my wife and I were greeted by Roy. Initially, it resembled the lobby of a well-appointed hotel. As Roy escorted us down the hall and up the stairs to a lounge, the surroundings were very impressive. There were busts of Reginald Mitchell (designer of the Spitfire) and Sydney Camm (designer of the Hurricane) on prominent display, together with a great number of original oil paintings distributed throughout the hallways and galleries. The oil paintings featured illustrations of primarily Second World War RAF aircraft. Many paintings had a Battle of Britain theme while others featured the exploits of RAF Bomber Command. There was a painting of a Short Stirling bomber over the door as we entered the



As we entered the lounge, there was an oil painting of a distinguished gentleman at the far end of the room. The painting was of Lord Cowdray who donated his family residence to serve as the Royal Air Force Club in London. By any standards, Lord Cowdray's residence would have been considered a mansion.

After a drink, we returned downstairs for dinner and enjoyed a wonderful meal and evening with Roy. The dining room was elegant with a high ceiling well-appointed and decorated. During dinner Roy revealed a great deal about his life experiences that are outlined above.



IV.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ROYAL AIR FORCE EXPERIENCE IN LONDON

Meeting Roy Smith on the walk to the Royal Air Force Museum London was serendipitous. In addition to absorbing the history at the Museum, I met a man who flew dangerous combat missions over territories controlled by Nazi Germany and risked his life to bring an end to tyranny. Dinner with Roy at the Royal Air Force Officers Club in London was a profound experience. Several centuries from the present, British folklore will remember the sacrifices of the Royal Air Force in a way not unlike tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable. The valiant aircrew of the RAF fought and died in the face overwhelming odds when the prospects of surviving the war appeared remote.

As RAF Fighter Command succeeded in preventing the invasion of Great Britain in 1940, RAF Bomber Command together with the United States Army Air Corps destroyed the industrial and war-making capacity of the Nazi war machine. Roy Smith and all airmen who served in the Second World War are deserving of our appreciation, respect and eternal gratitude.





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