

Flying Boats and Fellow Travellers

Interviewer: Trevor Avery (I)

Interviewee: Wing Commander Derek Martin (D)

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Subject: Flying a Sunderland Flying Boat in Coastal Command

This is a start of an oral history project by felt – Flying Boats and Fellow Travellers, the date is Saturday 18th November 2006 I'm Trevor Avery conducting the interview with Wing Commander Derek Martin in the surroundings of Ambleside Library in the Lake District.

If we could start first of all Derek if you could introduce yourself and date of birth and maybe say a few words about your early years and how you came to be in the coastal command associated with the Sunderlands.

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Well I was born on the 4th July 1920 which makes me 86 now and when the war looked imminent in about 1937, the government was trying to expand the air force and make up for all the lost years of running down the forces, and there came an opportunity to become an air force pilot and I was in a dead end job and so I applied and became one.

At the age of 18 I started my training in the air force. By the time war broke out in 1939 I had almost finished the training and at the time before the war, flying boats were reckoned to be the elite of the air force and so it was my ambition to become a flying boat pilot. I passed on wealth and flying school and I was posted to the flying boat training unit at Calshorts (*inaudible*) in Hampshire and there I trained on Singapore flying boats which were large twin, four engined biplanes – old fashioned ones.

And from there I went to first 228 squadron for a short time and then to 10 squadron to, sorry, then first of all to 10 Australian air force squadron flying out of Plymouth and I flew with them as a second pilot on the aircraft for quite a long time for patrols over the Bay of Biscay and then we moved up to Oban and I was up at Oban flying out on the Atlantic and this was really a temporary arrangement because the Australian squadron was manned entirely by Australians but because of the casualties they hadn't been able to get new pilots over from Australia and I was simply there filling in for a time until new Australian pilots came from Australia.

And after about 6 or 8 months with them I transferred to 210 squadron in Oban and I became captain of one of the Sunderland aircraft. At the time Sunderland was the largest operation aircraft in the world and I was 20 years old and I used to do anti submarine patrols over the Atlantic with a crew of 12 for 12 or 14 hours at a time and this was how I came to be on flying boats and doing what I did.

I had a very bad crash in Oban in March 1940 and, 1941 and crashed into the sea in bad weather at night and I was eventually fished out and sent to East Grinstead where I had plastic surgery and (*inaudible*) and then after about a year in hospital I went back to 201 squadron this time flying out of Northern Ireland again as an aircraft captain and after a few months there I went from Northern Ireland to command of flying boat training unit at Pembroke Dock and that took me up – I had my 21st birthday party in East Grinstead having plastic surgery and er from that I came up to Windermere because one of the duties of my unit was to collect new aircraft from the factories and take them back to Pembroke Dock to be equipped and then hand them on to squadrons for operational use and when Sunderland building started in Windermere I came up here to take off the, I think I flew the first 3 or 4 Sunderlands off Windermere and back down to Pembroke dock and then after that pilots from my unit took over and did the rest of them so that was my connection with Windermere and how I got up here eventually.

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Can you, there's obviously some very special relationship between the crews of the flying boats, the Sunderlands, can you start to talk a little bit about the running of a Sunderland aircraft and you mentioned before we started that it was run like a ship – what made it, can you try and say something about the daily routines on board, or something about what happened when you went on an operation from sort of beginning to end and what, why was it considered an elite of the airforce, what was the special quality about these aircraft, which are magnificent, but you know

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Well the first thing is of course you not only have to qualify as a captain of an aircraft, you have to qualify as a captain of a ship because when the aircraft is on the water you are bound by the international rules for collisions at sea, so you are a captain of an aircraft when you take off, but when you get back on the water you are a captain of a ship, and it's a ship 120 feet wide which tends to be rather different to an ordinary ship because if you think about it the wings tend to weathercock the aircraft into wind and the keel tends to turn the aircraft into tide, so if you've got a tide running and a bit of a cross wind and some waves, you've got to take all that into account so you've got to be first of all an above average pilot and secondly you've got to be able to cope with handling a ship.

Now, as far as the crew moral is concerned, you fly with your own crew of 12 standard crew. You are together flying for 12 or 14 hours at a time and obviously you work as a crew and the success of the operation depends on everybody, it's no use saying oh I'm only the gunner or I'm only the navigator, of course everybody on the ship, on the aircraft, has to work together to make the thing a success and this creates a bond between people and I know when I first became an aircraft captain my ambition was to make the best boating squadron and everybody worked on that basis so that they would be proud of that if you flew in your own aircraft. You had your own aircraft, your own crew and you got to know each other and you'd know that everybody depended on everybody else so this is how you got it.

As far as the trips were concerned, you the captain and navigator would go to the operations room and be briefed on what they were doing and in the meantime the crew would go down and get the aircraft on a short mooring ready to cast off as soon

as the captain arrived and then you'd get your briefing - you might be going up to Iceland to look out for enemy submarines up there or if you were flying out of Plymouth you'd be going down the Bay of Biscay, it depended whether, where it was at the moment, and then you'd go and go on board and sit down and brief the crew on what we're going to do and have a cup of cocoa and off you went. And very often, particularly in Oban where I did most of my flying as captain, you perhaps take off in light snow or rain off to spend the next 12 hours in the middle of the Atlantic and it was the north Atlantic weather was not very good for flying.

You have no radar and no radio, your only way of finding out where you were is either by astro navigation taking star shots or sun shots, and if there was no star, no sun and no stars well it was just hard luck, you had to keep (*inaudible*) reckoning the navigation and of course you, over the Atlantic, you very often have low cloud - 4 or 500 hundred feet and you would have to fly the whole 12 hours between the cloud and the water so you would be perhaps 400 feet and you would fly the aircraft the whole time because there were no automatic pilots which you have now and it was a very very tight task and then of course after 12 or 14 hours you come back and you have to land the aircraft which is always tricky and in a mountainous area if you imagine coming into Windermere on a dark night, no lights because you had a total blackout during the war, if you imagine coming in through the mountains and landing on Windermere it gives you an idea of some of the problems you had when you were doing that. So, there we are

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I know we chatted earlier, there was issues with simply keeping alert, briefly what role did the Sunderland have, did the crew have when they were out on a flight - what was their principle job?

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Well the principle job it varied, if you were out over the Atlantic north Atlantic particularly up near Iceland and so on, there was not any significant air enemy activity so your principle job is looking out for enemy submarines and you had to be on the alert and on the wake the whole time. So you would have a look out in the 2 (*inaudible*) positions and you would have the tail gunner and then the captain and the second pilot in the cockpit all looking out the whole time. It was the most deadly boring thing to do because you fly for hundreds and hundreds of hours over thousands of square miles and see absolutely nothing and you were looking out for at best a snorkel or - a snorkel enables the submarine to stay just between, beneath the waves, this stick, this thing up to get air to run the engines and it gives a slight, if you imagine putting a broomstick through water you'll get a little wake behind, that's all we would see, and if you can think of the Atlantic with the waves going up and down 20/30 feet high, you're hard pushed to see anything at all really and you have no radar. I mean nowadays it's simple.

That's in the north Atlantic, down the bay of Biscay you have the additional problem of enemy aircraft from the French, the bases in France, and so you would have the guns manned all the time and everybody on the alert looking out for enemy aircraft as well as for the submarines, and this would go on throughout the whole of the trip. There were some amusing things sometimes, I remember coming back again up between Iceland and Greenland coming back and somebody I think it was the rear

gunner, reported a, he thought he saw the red glow of an aircraft exhaust pipe which you can see in the dark, and so I told him to keep an eye on it, keep an eye on it and then he said it seems to be following us, it seems to be following us, and after a bit the navigator said what's going on and I said well the rear gunner says there's a red glow in the back there and he thinks it might be enemy aircraft so the navigator went away and looked up his (*inaudible*), came back and said no it's not an enemy aircraft it's mars (laughs) he could see mars! But that sort of thing didn't happen very often, it was usually hard graft all the time, and the main problem was of course coming back and after 12/14 hours as you'd imagine, landing on Windermere was difficult.

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How did you keep, you must have had refreshments when you – if you were out for 12 hours.

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Oh there's a galley, on the Sunderland there was a galley and in the tape or (*inaudible*) the one of the – it's usually the fitter does the cooking and there are 2 primas stoves and so you have hot meals and of course you have air crew rations. During the war air crew, operation air crew have priority for rations so I mean you'd have a nice steak and sitting in the middle of the Atlantic and flying along eating a grilled steak but we did quite well for that.

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I did hear that you did see some action – that you did engage.

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No you mostly saw water, if you were escorting a convoy you would see the ships and you'd be going around the convoy and you would be able to go, keeping circling the convoy to pick up any possibility because the submarine has got to put up his periscope and if you can spot it when the periscope comes up then that's the best time to get a hit. I never saw a submarine in my life, so and hundreds of others didn't but one of the things we learned was that the very fact that the aircraft was there would make the submarine dive and if they dived they're not likely to get a good shot at the ships.

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I would have thought your role would be as a deterrent in that sense.

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Indeed yes, but of course the air force sank 220 enemy submarines – more than the navy and er so other people were luckier than I was, but there was an awful lot of people just did the (*inaudible*)

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You flew all year round did you? I mean if it's fog I presume you would cancel the operation but this would be 12 months of the year no matter what the weather was you had to go out

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Oh yes, you had to go, and then if you got back and sometimes we were not allowed to transmit while we were up there because that would have told the enemy that there was an aircraft in the vicinity and this was not a good idea, but we could receive (*inaudible*) and so we had a radio operator on duty all the time. This was alright unless you were flying very low because we used a long trailing aerial and I mentioned about the low cloud, well if you were down really low over the sea you might lose your trailing aerial, but anyway, you could perhaps get a message to say that Oban was closed for weather and go onto one like we went into Stranraer and landed at Stranraer which was just up the coast and I remember we went ashore about 11 o'clock at night and there was nowhere to stay for the night, and they put me and the navigator up in the local police station – we spent the night in the cells and the crew slept on board, so and of course the most interesting one was when we took some American journalists out on new year's eve it must've been 1940/41 new year, and we took these journalists out and they were very impressed with the convoy as you can imagine and we got back and we couldn't get back into Oban and we landed at (*inaudible*) on an island and went ashore there and by this time it was about 3 o'clock on new year's day and we went along to, there's a well known hotel called the Macraes (*inaudible*). I don't know if you know it, and we all went into this *inaudible* and we were all tired and a couple of crew went into the kitchen and rustled up breakfast for us and everybody in the hotel was, well it had been a Scottish new year's eve party you see, and when they came down the morning they found the hotel lounge complete with a dozen crew and 2 American fast asleep in their hotel so that was quite a start for them. But these things happened sometimes, usually it was just a long slog.

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Talking about the crew did they, was there a selection process was it quite a rigorous selection process.

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The crews?

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You know were they specially selected to do to be a part of Sunderland crews, was there some, when you said about them being

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Oh yes, well again on boats you see you're a self contained unit and so the (*inaudible*) was the engine fitter would be qualified actually it is possible to take a Sunderland engine off, lower it down into a boat, take it away and bring a new one and put it up on the water, and the Sunderland fitter would be qualified to do that so they would be very highly skilled, highly trained, because you operate as a unit.

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If you can tell us a little bit, there's a lot I want to go on but we'll break for lunch shall we, if we can just go back a little bit to Windermere, to recollections of Windermere, is there much you can piece together about when you arrived – is there anything about the Shorts factory or anything you can remember about arriving or were there any strange incidents.

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Not particularly no, it was a fairly routine thing in those days and, for me, and I've flown 123 different Sunderlands so you know 2 or 3 Sunderlands on Windermere was neither here nor there really. The chap I always dealt with was the chief test pilot at Shorts and he was John Lancaster-Parker who used to be well known and I remember I came in and I said to him are there any particular points to look out for and he said no and I said there's an island just off, with as I remember a house on it, and he said well make sure you miss the house when taking off, and that's all it was really. It was quite straight forward. One thing I did find with the hills around here, the wind tends to come from different directions so you thought you were taking off into wind and then you got to a point where the wind was either coming like that or else it was coming round the other side of the mountain and that was always, until you got used to it, that was a little, that's the only thing I can remember.

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I presume you came – did you catch the train to Windermere or Kendal

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To Windermere – we'd come to Windermere. I think I mentioned that in the thing I gave you. Yes, I arrived as I mentioned there, there was a taxi at the station and there was a very large old Rolls Royce, very nice, one of these you know sitting up things which was in and the chauffeur had been made redundant and his employers had given him the Rolls Royce as his redundancy payment, I suppose he was running it as a taxi.

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And you, again later there's the your crash incident at Oban – did that come before because we have a mutual point of contact with (*inaudible*) did you crash – I just want to talk a little bit about that – it's a remarkable (*inaudible*) at the weekend the remarkable achievements of the people who put you guys back together again – can you remember much about it or is it sort of a blank you know the

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Well I remember the circumstances of the crash – I'd been out on an Atlantic convoy on the must have been on the 13th March 1941 and it was just a routine night convoy I suppose, and we'd been out about 12/13 hours and came back at about 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, landed and everybody thought oh good, that's us – we can get our heads down and have a sleep and in the (*inaudible*) we were immediately landed we were put on strike boat duty, now every flying boat squadron had a strike boat which had to be ready to take off within 30 minutes, and that meant the crew had to be on board, it had to be bombed up, fuelled ammunition, everything, the idea being that if there was an emergency they just pressed the button and off you went and we had just landed from a 12/13 hour trip and we were immediately put on standby again and so it meant that none of us could get to sleep or rest, we had to, the boat had to be fuelled and ammunition and so on, checked up.

The captain, the navigator and I had to sleep on a camp bed in the operations room and just hope that you weren't called out, and in fact we were called out and it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon, by which time of course we were pretty tired having had no rest since coming in the night before, and anyway, we were called out and we went off and we went up off the coast of Iceland. At that time the British were

intercepting radio transmissions from enemy submarines and by those transmission they could locate roughly where the submarine was and the radio transmissions had identified an enemy submarine somewhere up near Iceland, I forget exactly where it was, and so we, they wanted a strike no doubt, to go up there while the news was fresh. We would take about 4 hours to get up there, and so we went off on this trip and then got back again – didn't see it at all, and got back again at home again the early hours of the morning for the 2nd night we were now in the early hours of the 15th March and for classical scholars they will know that it's the Ides of March, and in I suppose 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and the weather was bad – there was fog and a flat calm and the floats, it was always difficult to land a flying boat in a flat calm and because you were landing on a sort of mirror, you don't know whether you're there or there, and anyway, there was.

Anyway, what exactly happened I don't know, but I found myself underwater and I remember my reaction was thank god the noise has stopped, because for the last 12 hours I'd had 4,000 horse power about the same distance away as he is, and you can't, you can't hear anything, and fortunately then my boy scout training kicked in, and I was underwater obviously the thing to do is to go to the surface, and as I paddled up to the surface, and paddled around until a boat came out from Oban and picked me up and put me onto the, they were high speed launches where you had a couple of Rolls Royce engines and there on a, in an engine covering roll like that and so you would put your body on the top of the engine cover and you could hear the or feel the engine reversing as they went back and forth looking for other people, and they took me into Oban north pier and left me on the pier, they thought I was dead actually and they looked, tended to others of the crew who seemed to be less badly injured, and then, this was all, I wasn't there, this was sort of learned afterwards, and I was taken up to the hospital and they put me in a shock cage which is a sort of a toaster over your body, because the water was about 5 degrees and I think you would stay at 5 degrees for 15-20 mins, they put this over me to warm me up and when I was suitably warmed up I was apparently moved and they started to sew me up and (*inaudible*) and when I gathered consciousness I was in bed (*inaudible*) and all sort of sewn up and bandaged up and looked after very well. And then I was sent down to East Grinstead about 7 weeks later where they (*inaudible*) did the finishing work.

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This is remarkable – I know it's now – were all your other crew ok – was it?

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No about half the crew were killed

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And after – did it take a year for you to, was it a year before you decided you wanted to go back into an aircraft again.

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Oh I wanted to go back to flying when I woke up the next morning in hospital, but it took nearly a year because with plastic surgery you have to wait, you can't sort of have operation, operation, operation, you have to wait for the skin to settle down – 3 or 4 weeks, or 6 weeks or something before you can go onto the next bit you see, and I was sent on one 3 or 4 weeks and I went off to a convalescent home in Torquay, that

was another story, and then back again to more sewing and then sent off again for another, and I went to Coast command headquarters and I don't know how I did it because I was bandaged up rather like a Sikh and I persuaded them that I was 4 weeks out of hospital and I got 4 weeks back on the flying, how I did it I don't know. They sent me up to the operational training unit at Invergorden and when I arrived there I walked in to see the commanding officer and he said 'good god' and anyway they gave, they had a Singapore flying boat there and nobody there had ever flown one and I'd trained on a Singapore flying boat before the war, and it turned out to be the same flying boat that I had last flown at Calshot – exactly the same one and my job there was to give air experience to new crews because once people, once the crews were going to be fitters or riggers or radar operators or something, they had to be given any air experience just to get them into the air and so I just flew them off and flew them around that part of Scotland, just to be in the air you see. Fortunately there was no connection between the pilot and the place in the aircraft where the crews were getting their experience, otherwise I think if they had come up there and seen me it would probably have put them off for the rest of the time! And so when I went back to East Grinstead, he was very cross because nobody had ever gone back on flying in the middle of a plastic surgery series of operations, so.

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Does it, when you were up there, a lot of work, well a bit of research into the *inaudible* and there were a lot of accidents/crash sites in the water from not Sunderlands but all kinds of (*inaudible*) and there was one, probably you were hinting at earlier on, where he was located with the mountains around but there, can you remember any incidents when you were – the one I tracked down was I think was an American bomber landed on a house overlooking I think it was on the Cromarty site – there seemed to be a lot of incidents in that area. Would it be because of where it was?

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Yes and nowadays of course you read of people using those diving sites but my aircraft had 8 depth charges on board, so if anyone starts diving on that they'll get quite a big shock. Whether all the positions are actually plotted I don't know.

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inaudible.. Alan will be very good tomorrow. He does a lot of this kind of work and you have to handle them with real extreme care, any sites like that, and there's an ethics attached to it as well you know there is an ethical side to doing aircraft archaeology but beware of what you are dealing with.

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Indeed you never know what you're going to find. In fact I don't know if John Evans has been in touch with you, I've told him of your project, and John Evans is at Pembroke Dock and he got the BBC to do a programme on a Sunderland which had sunk at Pembroke dock and they're all over the place and as I say if you touch the wrong thing it could go up with a bang