



# Childhood Memories of the Squadron Commander's Son No 46 Squadron, 1937 -39

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Royal Air Force 46 Squadron Commanding Officer, Squadron Leader P R Barwell (left) debriefs two of his flight commanders at RAF Digby, Lincolnshire, 8th August 1939. At the outbreak of World War II, 46 Squadron was equipped with Hawker Hurricane fighter aircraft.

## Childhood Memories of the Squadron Commander's Son

### No 46 Squadron, 1937 -39

My father, as Squadron Leader P. R. Barwell (widely known as Dickey Barwell), newly promoted, was posted to command 46 Squadron (Gloster Gauntlets) at R. A. F. Kenley in 1937 when I was six years old. The Squadron had just reformed as part of the pre-war expansion.

Dickey had just turned thirty. This was important because, to discourage the hasty marriage of its young officers the Service did not officially recognize the marriage of officers under that age and hence, previously, Dickey had not qualified for Married Quarters, nor even for a full marriage allowance! Kenley was therefore my first experience of life on a Royal Air Force Station.

Our quarters comprised a spacious first floor apartment in a big, old building which was, I believe, the original Officers' Mess when Kenley was first established as an R. F. C. station during WW1. From Internet research I have found that the present building designated "Officers' Mess" was built in the 1930's to the 1932 standard design. There was a well maintained garden to one side of our building, with lawns and rose-beds and it was there that Dickey checked me out on my first bicycle.

I have very happy memories of Kenley and seem to remember that I had, by today's standards, quite extraordinary freedom as a 6/7 year old. Dickey took me round the station to show me what was what, including the Squadron offices and hangar and a Gauntlet cockpit. The intricacies of helmets, oxygen masks, (the Gauntlet had a Service Ceiling above 30,000 feet and was therefore equipped with oxygen) microphones, earphones and parachutes were all explained and then I was largely left to myself. I seem to have recollections of being free to roam the station at will but in reality I am sure that everyone knew who I was. Unknown to myself I was probably being closely watched and never for a moment in danger. I even remember going in some fear and trepidation to the edge of the airfield itself, to watch those beautiful little biplanes taxi out, take off and land (no runways in those days, just a grass airfield) - in the evening when I told Dickey what I had been doing his only reaction was to say that he had seen me, so that was all right!

A few words about the Squadron Crest and Motto. It appears that in its original WW1/ R.F.C incarnation 46 Squadron had no official or heraldic crest. When Dickey took command in 1937 one of his first tasks was to attend to this. In those days the allocation of insignia was very much an individual matter for the unit itself: the unit had to make its own application and submit its own ideas for the design of its crest to, I believe, the Royal College of Herald. It so happened that my mother had a very sure artistic flair and Dickey accordingly delegated the design aspect of this task to the person he thought best suited! I thus remember Mum becoming deeply involved in the details of design. I would like to think that she single handedly designed the final version, as approved by the College of Herald but that is probably an exaggeration! Suffice to say that I believe that 46 Squadron ended up with by far and away the most inspirational Crest and Motto that can be imagined for a front line operational Squadron and this alone should have guaranteed that the Standard was never again laid up!

I don't remember very much about any formal education. In those far-off pre-war days we moved about quite a lot and every time we moved I went to a new primary, kindergarten or dame school and had to start again with the Romans, so school didn't mean very much to me! I do remember that Dickey made a private arrangement with the Station Physical Training Instructor to give me individual tuition in gymnastics and boxing. This must have done a bit of good because later, when I was sent to board at a Preparatory School, I did manage to win cups for PT and for boxing!

One figure I remember very clearly from my wanderings round the station at Kenley. This was an exceptionally smart airman, older than most, a slender fairly slight figure, oozing authority, rigidly stiff and straight as a ramrod, chest festooned with medal ribbons which was quite unusual in those days as there

were not many WW1 Veterans around. He always carried a swagger stick under his arm. This was, of course, the Station Warrant Officer.

Dickey was a fine athlete and keen sportsman. His team game was hockey and I remember watching him play from the touchline and shouting "Ritarroy!" at what I thought to be appropriate times – this was meant to be "Hip! Hip! Hooray!". He also played tennis and was a keen, mean squash player – I used to go to the squash courts with him to watch.

Although my memories of Kenley are important and quite vivid to me, we were not there for very long. Towards the end of 1937 the Squadron converted onto Hurricanes and moved to R.A.F. Digby, in Lincolnshire. There, we were housed in a proper Married Quarter on the "patch" and outside the working area of the Station and so my memories of Digby, exceedingly happy, are a little different – more domestically inclined! Our quarters faced onto a large sports field which I remember best as growing the most delicious wild mushrooms, which it was one my jobs to gather. Our immediate neighbours were Sqn Ldr and Mrs Finch (Uncle Finco and Auntie Doris to me). Finco Finch was CO of 46's companion Hurricane squadron, No 73 and I remember him as a kind and gentle soul with a fund of conjourer's tricks for entertaining small boys. I was intensely proud that my father was flying these wonderful, new aircraft that were so incredibly fast, and with retractable wheels!

Dickey was a keen shot, target shooting with rifle and game, particularly wildfowl, with 12-bore. I was given my first air rifle while at Digby and thus introduced to the care and use of firearms for which I have always been grateful because these weapons have never held any mystery for me but have always commanded respect.

Much entertaining went on at my home. There were frequent dinner parties and they always seemed, although fairly formal, to contrive to be quite noisy and boisterous as well – perhaps convivial is the right word. Squadron pilots were frequent visitors and I was always impressed by these, to a small boy, mighty men. My parents also had a great capacity for making close and lasting friendships among the local community. We were never insular or isolated. One Important Event occurred while we were at Digby – I ceased to be an only child when my brother Richard was born!

Again, I have no recollection of going to any school! Dickey took pains always to make sure that I was well informed and knew what was going on: I well remember him telling me about deteriorating International affairs and the looming war. When things were quiet at weekends he would take me to visit the Squadron offices and hangar where I could climb in and out of aircraft. I remember his explaining that they were doing some experiments with the lining up and sighting of the guns on the Hurricanes and for this he had had to borrow some of Mum's lipstick to put temporary marks on the aircraft windscreen. I think he must have been quite inventive!

On the outbreak of war, my parents thought that a front line fighter airfield would be much too dangerous a place for young children so my brother and I were dispatched to live with Dickey's parents in a Cambridgeshire village and I had to go to school! My lovely, gentle grandparents had quite a lot to put up with as my aunt's two children, cousins Jennifer and Peter were also lodged with them for the duration, so all-in-all they had their hands full but they took to the fresh infusion of young children and their new in loco parentis duties with gusto!

In November, 1939 46 Squadron was involved in one of the very first successful fighter interceptions of the war: led by Dickey, the Squadron shot down a number of HE 115 seaplanes which were attacking a convoy off Spurn Head. By later standards this would have been a very minor incident but at that time any successful feat of arms was big news, there would have been security blankets on some aspects of reporting but this didn't prevent the press from descending on my grandparents in the quest for a story, so, briefly we were major stars! After this incident King George VI honoured Digby with a visit and 46 Squadron pilots were presented to him.

### Epilogue

Shortly after the seaplane interception Dickey was promoted and posted away from the Squadron, whose fortunes we continued to follow. We knew about the Norwegian campaign and its ending with the tragic sinking of HMS Glorious and her escort after the wonderful feat of airmanship by which 46 Squadron landed some of its Hurricanes onto the carrier. We knew about the near miraculous survival of Flight Commander Jamie Jamieson of New Zealand and Squadron Commander "Bing" Cross, rescued after many hours afloat in the North Sea on a Caley float after the sinking. Eventually, as one of the youngest Group Captains, Dickey was posted to R.A.F. Biggin Hill, in 1941, to command the station and the Sector. Jamie Jamieson was one of his Wing Leaders and the famous "Sailor" Malan of South Africa was another. At that time, with the Luftwaffe defeated in the Battle of Britain, Fighter Command was able to turn much of its capacity to offensive action thus bringing the war directly to the enemy in Northern Europe. This required the development of new and radical fighter tactics, equipment and procedures. Dickey was convinced that in order to play his proper part as a Commander in this he had to share in the fighting experience and he frequently flew on operations, usually as No 2 to a wing or squadron leader. On 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1942 (the day before his 35<sup>th</sup> birthday) and

while flying as No 2 to Bobby Oxspring, CO of 91 Squadron over the Channel, near Beachy Head the pair were wrongly identified by another pair of Spitfires out of Tangmere and Dickey was shot down and killed. The incident is graphically described (but, I think, with a modicum of artistic license) in Bobby's book "Spitfire Command". A few days later Dickey's body was washed ashore at a beach near Boulogne. He is buried at a Canadian war graves cemetery near Calais. This is a beautiful, sad place, on a North facing slope it looks out over Cap Griz Nez and the English Channel towards Dover and every time that I have been there the white cliffs have been in full, clear view. Many very young Canadians who were killed in the deadly, final struggle to liberate Calais in September 1944 are interred there. Dickey had a close affinity and shared a mutual respect with the tough, independent and sometimes cussed fighting men from the Commonwealth, beginning with the Canadian and New Zealand pilots serving on 46 Squadron during his time in command and I have come to believe that this Military Cemetery is an entirely fitting place for his final resting place.

John Barwell, Bourn, 2009



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