

## **David “Dai” Griffiths**

### **Royal Air Force**

**\*1955 to 1960**



This is a brief narrative that accompanies a short film recorded with “Dai” at his home in December 2024. Dai was 91 years of age when he was interviewed, and this account relies upon his recollections of his service in the RAF regiment, photographs and artifacts in his possession and fact checking from various online resources.

The interview was conducted in Dai’s first language, which is Cymraeg, Welsh and the film is subtitled in English. His family spoke Welsh as first language, but David developed a good grasp of English from school.

\*Approximated service of 4.5 to 5 years. These dates are approximated.

### **Childhood**

Dai’s interview begins with him talking about growing up amongst a farming community in rural west Wales. He was born in November 1933 in the small village of Llandre, near Aberystwyth in Ceredigion. When he was about six years of age, the family moved to run a hill farm, a short distance away at Bont Goch. Dai remembers that it was wartime when the family made the move, in autumn 1939 or early 1940. Despite the war, Dai recalls enjoying life on the farm, with ample food available. Later in the war, 1943 to 44 perhaps, after the United States joined the war, an American army unit was stationed

near to the farm. The soldiers would frighten the animals when they were practising shooting. The loud bangs would cause the animals to panic. American soldiers were a familiar sight in the local area at the time. Dai would help on the farm after school, at weekends and during the school holidays.

Dai remembers a frightening experience one night, when a stray German bomber dropped two bombs. One landed in wild lands at Nant y Moch and another in fields near Llandre.

### **Work on the farm**

When Dai left school at the age of fifteen, he helped on the family farm before going to work on a farm at nearby Talybont. After two years working there, he moved to another farm at Blaenwaun, where he would spend another two years. Dai was nineteen years of age, when he decided that feeding, watering and cleaning out after the animals, across hills and fields in all weathers was not a life he wished to pursue. Therefore, he decided to leave the farm and try something different, very different.

Over the years, Dai saw many local boys receive call up papers for conscription into the military for National Service. He decided he also wished to broaden his horizons, but conscription was nearing an end, so he volunteered to join the Royal Air Force.

### **Royal Air Force**

At the age of 21, David joined the RAF Regiment as a Gunner. He may have completed an initial RAF recruit training course at number 7 school of recruit training at RAF Bridgnorth, Shropshire.

In any event, in the mid 1950's Dai went to the RAF Regiment depot for trade training at RAF Catterick in North Yorkshire. The RAF Regiment was formed in 1942 with a brief to protect the delivery of air power. Following the second world war, the mission was to protect RAF assets worldwide.

Dai endured a tough training period, with the Regiment seeking to turn out capable airmen who displayed a sound knowledge of soldiering.

*“Well keeping fit more than anything and learning how to shoot and nonstop drills”.*

He recalls training on anti-aircraft guns in particular, because of the loud noise from the guns as they were fired. He feels that his hearing was damaged from the repeated exposure to the loud reports from the gun barrels.

*“Being close to the gun itself, it was a horrible noise”*

An additional challenge for Dai was being immersed in completely new English-speaking environment, with a very different culture to his somewhat sheltered upbringing in rural Ceredigion, where Welsh was the dominant language. It felt odd to

go weeks on end without hearing his mother tongue. He did find one other Welsh speaker in the Regiment, a Butcher from North Wales.

*“Yes, it was a novelty for me (to speak Welsh) because there was no one else to speak it with “*

Dai especially recalls having difficulty understanding Air Force “twang” as he calls it. For instance, he found himself on the wrong end of a blast from a Sergeant who was shouting commands for his platoon to “Double up”, meaning double speed. Dai’s lack of urgency in changing the pace, was spotted and caused the Sergeant some angst, until he realised Dai wasn’t grasping the meaning of his commands.

Dai does recall spending some time at RAF Innsworth in Gloucestershire. From 1952 to January 1960 the RAF Regiment’s 33 wing headquarters was based at this nonflying base. Records show that 33 wing provided RAF Regiment resources for operations in Cyprus. Therefore, it is quite possible Dai was based at Innsworth before flying out to join his new squadron in Cyprus.

## **Cyprus**

Dai eventually found himself joining 34 squadron RAF Regiment. Not to be confused with no 34 (Flying) squadron, 34 sqn RAF Regiment was a dedicated air defence asset, equipped with 40mm Bofors air to ground cannon. Formed in 1951 in response to the growing cold war threat from the east, 34 squadron was immediately dispatched to Egypt. However, it soon found its home in Cyprus, where defending the RAF base at Nicosia became the primary task. The threat from the EOKA group was developing and turning increasingly violent. The Regiment took responsibility for VIP escort duties, protecting convoys and guarding the airfield.

When Dai arrived at RAF Nicosia, he found himself spending long hours on guard duty, joining work parties and manning the Bofors anti-aircraft guns. However, he did leave the station when on escort or convoy duty. He joined escorts, travelling around the island escorting senior military and political figures. He learned to ride motorcycles which accompanied the VIP’s and convoys, as well as carrying messages as a dispatch rider.

In fact, Dai bought his own Triumph motorbike and enjoyed exploring the island on his time off. This included a trip to Mount Troodos. He disassembled the bike and sent it back home to Wales, where he would keep it for many years.

He can be seen sitting on his pride and joy, offering a friend a ride, in the image below.



Dai has some interesting memories about Cyprus.

*“ I was sent over to Cyprus during the time of the troubles. I was on guard duty providing the security mostly. I remember the troubles well. It wasn’t a good time. “*

*“ It was awfully hot. The beach was so hot, you couldn’t walk on the sand. “*

At times, Dai’s duties left him alone with local Greek Cypriot folk and he tried to get along with them. He recalls that the local Cypriots he spent time with were from a group called Maronites.

*“ Nothing bad happened. I was very lucky in that sense. “*

He recollects manning the Bofors gun emplacements around the airfield at Nicosia and travelling on motorbikes or in Bedford TL trucks, protecting convoys of fuel, food and ammunitions.

Some of his old photographs, shows Dai and his colleagues in plain clothes, armed with holstered side arms, which illustrates how the Gunners would deploy on VIP duties.



He also remembers being on guard duty and watching the unmarked car convey the EOKA General, Grivas, to a waiting military aeroplane, as he was flown off the island. This was after March 1959, which suggests that Cyprus was Dai's first overseas posting.

## **Germany**

After Cyprus, Dai moved to join the cold war stand-off with the USSR, at RAF Wildenrath in West Germany. This station was home to 17 squadron, which held the tactical nuclear airborne threat the UK deployed to the European theatre. No 4 RAF Regiment wing was the resident headquarters authority, and 16 squadron RAF Regiment provided the local air defence capability. This was a fully operational station, maintaining a 24 hour, all year-round alert capability to counter then threat of invasion posed by the USSR. Dai would have encountered many aircraft at this busy station.

His memories of aircraft evoke images of silver and grey cold war fighter planes. Dai often operated so close to the jets, he could reach out and touch them. These are aircraft such as the De Havilland Vampire, Gloster Meteor and English Electric Canberra. The Canberra was operated by four RAF squadrons at the time and was enabled to deliver a nuclear bomb. Dai has vivid memories of the sensitive areas around the base, where the nuclear war heads were stored. His job was to guard and patrol these areas on a 24 hour on 24 hours off basis for weeks on end. It was tedious but serious work, given the tense relationship between the NATO and the USSR.

*“ We had to sleep with the guns and all the ammunition. There was a huge hangar that stored all the ammunition, and it would be our job to sleep in the hangar and guard the ammunition. It was a huge shed in the middle of a forest. “*

Dai's squadron also operated along the border with communist East Germany. They used to patrol the border fence between West Germany and USSR. Dai recalls the biting cold nights of the German winter. As 6am arrived, the morning was heralded by the Russians firing up their Tanks and revving them up. Dai found the spectacle very unnerving, but he says, *“ it was my job”*. Another anecdote being that his part of the border was patrolled by himself and three other Gunners armed with old fashioned .303 rifles. The situation didn't fill him with confidence!

His squadron also served in Berlin, at RAF Gatow. This was the former home of the Gestapo in Berlin during World War Two. Dai was impressed with the German workmanship in the barracks. The cold winter weather represented a real challenge, with temperatures rarely seen back in Wales.

*“ We were in Berlin for Christmas, and it was minus eighteen (degrees). I was there guarding the border (Checkpoint Charlie). I would have to come out at two o'clock in the morning and accompany people across the border. It wasn't a very nice job.”*

Given his experience of riding motorcycles in Cyprus, he was also called to perform dispatch rider duties. He would take messages between stations, riding the RAF service motorcycles.

*“I had a job as a Dispatch rider. I used to go from station to station, riding motorcycles across Germany. Taking packages and things like that.”*

*“One time I almost got killed. I was coming out of a small road onto the big road. I started off on the big road and I saw something just out of the corner of my eye. It was a big lorry. I was knocked off and I was spinning round and round. It caught the edge of my shoe. But it didn’t cause that much damage. I was able to correct it, just in time. It was a very close call “*

In addition to all the operational tasks the Regiment was called on to perform, the Gunners were drilled regularly.

*“ We would always be training for something. One time we had to go in a (tear gas) chamber. We had to walk around this room, with your hands on the shoulders of the next person. We had to do that for about fifteen minutes. There were no windows. When the door opens, run!”*

### **A near miss**

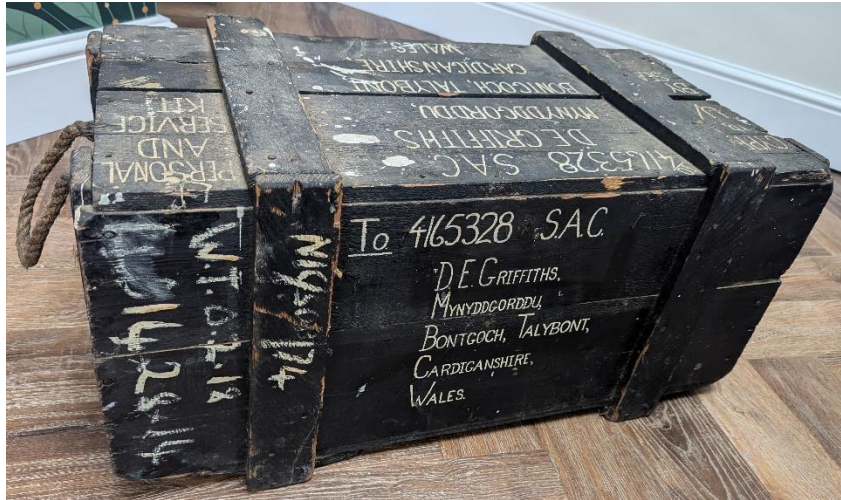
He recalls one incident where he got in to “hot water” because he was nearly run down by a pair of jets taking off on the main runway. These jets were part of the quick reaction flight, responding to foreign aircraft entering UK or NATO air space without permission. Dai had strayed onto the runway near his gun emplacement, but failed to notice the jets, which were picking up speed necessary for take-off. He recalls seeing the bright orange flames spurting out from the twin exhausts, as he jumped out the way. Whilst he managed to avoid a roasting from the flames, he “” a roasting from his Commanding Officer later that day. Did the Pilots report this near miss?

*“ A Gloster Javelin. That was the aircraft. I was at the far end of the runway on guard duty. These two aircraft fighters started up without warning and I was in the way. I managed to run like hell to the side. That was a narrow one””*

Dai has a photograph in his collection of a Gloster Javelin coming into land. Could this be the one returning from that mission that nearly ran him down!



As Dai's contract in the RAF came near to an end, he was offered a transfer to the Dog handling branch. However, handling patrol dogs wasn't something that interested him, so he decided to leave the RAF and return to Wales. Dai packaged some of his uniform and belonging into a packing crate and sent it back to Wales.



Dai has kept that packaging crate, his RAF Greatcoat, Jacket and boots and they shall remain in the family, to be treasured as a reminder of Dai's service to his country.

\*RAF Catterick closed in 1994 and was taken over by the British Army. It's now known as Marne barracks at the Catterick military complex.

\*RAF Innsworth was transferred to the British Army in 2008 and is now named Imjin barracks.

\*RAF Wildenrath closed in 1992 as the UK government wound down its presence in Germany.

- The video recording of an interview with Dai, and his photographs can be found in Dai Griffiths RAF on-line collection at the West Wales Veterans Archive on the Peoples collection Wales website.
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  - Wikipedia
  - RAF Regiment association (Online)
  - RAF(MOD) website