

Peter Sidney Sturdgess (1925-) Royal Air Force

Fishguard

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Interviewer: Hugh Morgan

Material: audio recording with Peter and his wife Rowena; written description and photographs.

Description

Peter Sturdgess was born in 1925 in Northampton, the son of a dentist. Peter joined the Air Training Corps whilst at grammar school in Northampton, developing a passion for aviation. Volunteering for service in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) in November 1943, he planned to become a pilot. After a period of waiting, Peter was called up and instructed to report for basic training. Wearing the white flash forage cap which designated for aircrew training. He was then posted to various RAF stations to undertake various courses, none of which took him anywhere near an aircraft!

With the war drawing to close in Europe and with hostilities continuing with Japan, Peter was issued with tropical clothing for overseas posting and duly embarked on the SS Mauritania, one of the largest troop ships of WW2. Arriving in Bombay, he found himself as an Aircraftsman 2nd Class (AC2) in Far East Command. There he was taught to drive and how to waterproof a range of RAF vehicles. After a short period in India Peter was posted to Ceylon where amongst other duties he learned how to look after elephants. With Japan's surrender in August 1945, Peter spent over a year in Ceylon before being shipped back to the UK in December 1946 and was eventually demobbed from the RAF in May 1947. However, he remained as a member of the RAFVR for many years after demob.

Moving to Harlech, Peter and his wife Rowena ran a restaurant for four years before becoming the owners of The Old Bell in Shifnal. Close to RAF Cosford, Peter was invited to join the Cosford flying club and learned to pilot both gliders and single-engined aircraft. Peter quickly became an instructor and eventually became the Chief Flying Instructor at Cosford. Also a keen sailor

Peter and Rowena moved with their family to Fishguard in 1980. Shortly after moving in, Peter was invited to become the CFI for the glider club at RAF Templeton, following which he transferred to the Black Mountain glider club in Talgarth, Powys. Peter also owned his own wartime Auster aircraft. Around the Millennium, Peter finally stopped flying but carried on sailing for many years. Today, Peter and Rowena continue to live in Lower Town, Fishguard.

Early Years

Peter: “I was born in a small village just outside of Northampton. My father wasn’t well-off to start with but later became a dental surgeon. As a little boy I went to a private school but didn’t get on very well, though when older became a pupil at the Northampton Grammar school for Boys. There I joined the Air Training Corps. It is important to remember that at time Northampton was very much an RAF place. There was only minority of Navy and Army there.”

Rowena: “Peter’s maths teacher taught him the elements of gliding. They called this maths teacher ‘Brasso’ because he had crashed an aeroplane during the 1st World War and had a copper lid to his head. He rode a bicycle towing a primary glider behind him, teaching the boys how to fly.”

Peter: “The school buildings were at the top of the hill with staggered games fields below. This was ideal for this little framework to be towed on wheels until it took us off the ground and this is how Brasso showed us what it was like for pilots. We all aimed to go into the RAF.”

RAF Service

Peter: I volunteered for the RAF on 18th October 1943 and my service number 3002195. I was then called to RAF Bedford for Basic Training and wore the white flash on my cap to indicate that I was designated for aircrew training and was sent to the Aircrew Reception Centre.”

Rowena: “You were training and going over a wall with fixed bayonets when somebody bayoneted you in your bottom and pushed you off the wall and you ended up in hospital!”

Peter: “There were 200 in our ‘bash’ (*intake*) and I was sent up to Edinburgh for a short university course to learn how to handle the maths. We were then

sent off to do various other things, but it certainly wasn't flying! I was posted to do a telecommunications course and began to lose interest as I desperately wanted to become a pilot. But of course this was coming towards the end of the war and the RAF had no need for more pilots.

So the RAF decided to send me to India. The ship was SS Mauritania, and the famous boxer Freddie Mills dished out the self-protection necessities. He was the Sergeant PT instructor and he put on boxing exhibitions to entertain us on the voyage. He matched me up against one of the east end boxers who gave me a pasting in the ring, which was not welcome. But I liked Freddie Mills and he was funny. (*Freddie Mills, became post-war world light-heavyweight champion*).

Then we arrived in India. Most of the RAF and sailors on the boat went onto various courses and Freddie Mills got out in Bombay with us and immediately disappeared. We were initially sent to a Receiving Centre. At that stage Bombay wasn't a very pleasant place to be because there were thousands of RAF personnel in the streets and inevitably trouble occurred.

The first thing they did was to teach us to drive and sent us to an RAF driving school, about 200miles inland. They taught us how to waterproof wheeled vehicles and how where to use them and where they were not likely to be used. We were quite enjoying ourselves!

Just 25miles or so inshore there was this huge airfield stuffed with vehicles, so we were broken up into small teams and had to regularly drive these vehicles from just outside Bombay to Madras. By then we were the cream of the drivers by this time and began to get issued with nice jobs. I would be given 12 or 20 drivers with ten days in which to do a trip and then ten days to get back by the train! We were going backwards and forwards. There I was, leading a little gang of drivers and yet I was still only an AC2. We did quite enjoy ourselves and we were driving every type of vehicle. This of course was still before the end of the War in Japan. Then I found myself promoted to AC1! I was required to 'whoosh' the drivers along on their journeys and was allocated a Jeep, so it was now a posh job!

Then I was sent away to on a 'jungle training course' which was about how to behave and what to expect in jungles and it was a useful course. I was then posted to Kandi in Ceylon. We were issued with a rifle, tin helmet and taught to ride an elephant. Our barracks were in little squares on the edge of the

jungle. At night it could become quite nasty, so a young elephant was kept in the compound which would raise the alarm if we came under attack. There were also WAAFs in the camp and we stood on shifts throughout the night guarding against intruders.

I then became a driver for a very senior officer, whose name I cannot recall at the moment. I spent a lot of time swimming in the river and then they gave me a ticket to come home by ship on 22nd December 1946 at the height of the very bad winter. I was demobbed at RAF Bedford but remained in the RAF Volunteer Reserve.”

Civilian Life

Peter: “Rowena and I took a pub in Shifnal about a mile from Cosford Airfield. Quite quickly I was invited down to Cosford and shown around the hangers. I had always wanted to be a pilot and having got on well with two or three of the lads at Cosford, hey presto, became a glider pilot.”

Rowena: “Peter became an assistant instructor, then a full instructor and also took his Private Pilots Licence so he could fly powered aircraft. The name of the pub we owned in Shifnal was ‘The Old Bell’. We changed it into a 45seat restaurant with rooms. We were awarded Egon Ronay and Michelin ratings and we did very well. We were in the right place at the right time. We started off in the catering trade in Harlech in North Wales and were there for four years. We formed a company with friends and opened a restaurant. It didn’t work as there was only the summer season and come the end of the school holidays there was not trade at all.”

Peter: “I was sent down to the glider instructor school in Bicester to train as an instructor and was tutored there by Andy Gough (*a former WW2 veteran and famous glider pilot who in 1982 lost his life in a flying accident whilst entertaining the crowds at the annual Brize Norton Airshow*). I also later flew with Andy Gough’s son.

I became Chief Flying Instructor at Cosford having taken over from George Ross. I bought an Auster aircraft for £100. But I much preferred to fly the Auster with its wartime RAF roundels which was owned by the Cosford gliding club. I parked my Auster in the garage opposite the road and eventually sold it to Arthur Griffin to put in his vintage car collection just outside Shifnal.

Sailing then 'caught me' and that was reason we came to Fishguard. In our latter days in Shifnal we had bought a boat."

Rowena: "We started off with small boat and then bought a 30footer Kingfisher boat, and often sailed down here (*Fishguard*). We came down off the Fastnet storms and were going round to Milford Haven and berthed in Fishguard to wait for the storm to die down. We spoke to the Harbourmaster, Tommy, who found us a mooring and we were sat one night at the bottom of the harbour here and I said to Peter '*do you know, I would love to retire down here and he said what a good idea*'. So we went back to Shifnal and put the restaurant up for sale."

We sold it and came down here in 1980, bought a house in Goodwick. Peter had got the boat out of the water for the winter in the car park on the harbour and someone walked along with a 'for sale' notice which he put in the garden of this house. Peter returned home, walked in and said '*we have just bought No 10 Newport Rd*!' He had decided to buy it there and then. So we actually moved into this house in 1984 and have been here ever since."

Peter: "I was immediately visited by the local flying club at RAF Templeton which was a derelict wartime airfield. I became the CFI there, but it wasn't my scene. So I then joined the Black Mountain Flying Club in Talgarth which was run by a former Navy pilot and I had a very nice few years flying there. It was a beautiful place to glide. Occasionally Rowena would fly with me in the C21".

Rowena: Peter was in a film being made whilst he was in Talgarth. It was called something like 'Hobbies to take up' and was a Welsh language film. Peter took up the film cameraman in a glider and it was a very hot day and the thermals were bumping the aircraft. When they got down, the canopy opened and this cameraman got out and ran for a bush and was very sick. He walked back, put his hands on the glider and said in English 'No way again!'. He was absolutely green."

Peter: "One further thing to add. The world championships for paraglider/microlight flying came to Withybush airfield and I couldn't resist having a go. The owner of one of the microlights allowed me to take his aircraft up for a flight in it."

