

SUZANNE  
CAMPBELL-JONES



# NO ORDINARY PILOT

ONE YOUNG MAN'S  
EXTRAORDINARY EXPLOITS IN WORLD WAR II

OSPREY

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FOREWORD BY  
WING COMMANDER  
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OSPREY  

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## Foreword

As circumstance would have it, I write this foreword whilst deployed on combat operations with the RAF in 1(Fighter) Squadron. It was not lost on me that the current cohort of 1(F) Squadron fighter pilots are again engaged in the application of airpower in close support of ground units – amazingly, flying Typhoons, as Bob Allen did in June and July 1944, just before his path took a catastrophic and shocking turn.

Every fighter pilot is hugely influenced by, and maintains a special bond with, their first frontline squadron – Bob’s experience on 1(F) Squadron is certainly no different. His time with the Squadron would provide him with the best preparation he could have hoped for to help him through the incredible, life-or-death challenges he would come to face.

A great deal has been written about the exceptional achievements of RAF fighter pilots in World War II. Indeed, there is even a significant volume of work dedicated to the exploits of No. 1 Squadron. However, not only are the gripping tales of courage and skill in this wonderful account worthy of a place alongside the best and most famous biographies, it brilliantly sheds light on the broader challenges of attempting to lead a normal life in the midst of extraordinary happenings. It provides a fascinating insight into a young family attempting to survive and grow in the way that any newlyweds would hope to do – showing how love can blossom even in the darkest of times, in absence and in despair.

## Foreword

As the Commanding Officer of an RAF frontline squadron, I pray that no person under my command should experience even a fraction of the extreme situations that Bob Allen did. Several generations later, it is hard to fathom the scale of destruction and misery that global conflict inflicted, nor the harsh realities for the countless families and individuals caught in the grip of war as they tried to play their part, or attempted simply to survive.

I have no doubt that you will find Bob's story as inspiring, gripping and moving as I have. He was a man who displayed courage, strength and compassion in adversity and a man who was loved and respected. Through her father's story, Suzanne Campbell-Jones has masterfully shown that in wartime there is no such thing as an ordinary pilot – a statement which certainly applies to Group Captain Bob Allen.

Wing Commander Chris Hoyle  
OC 1(Fighter) Squadron



## Prologue

We were in Paris. A spring day in 1970. My father, Bob Allen, looked up at the glass roof of the Gare de l'Est and surprised us. 'The last time I was here I was trying to escape.' We were full of questions but he would not elaborate. We had always known that he was a fighter pilot in World War II, decorated, a man who loved flying, who had been a prisoner – but his wartime experiences remained wrapped in silence.

Decades later, long after he had retired from a distinguished career in the RAF, one of his great-grandchildren was writing a school project on the war. He allowed her to open his black tin trunk. It was full of memorabilia, including his official flying logbook, right in the middle of which was the line 'KILLED WHILST ON OPERATIONS'.<sup>1</sup> Now, even the great-grandchildren joined in the questioning, prompting him to reveal that for family and historical reasons he had left us a memoir of his experiences between 1940 and 1945. He hoped it would give us some sense of those times when life itself was not too great a price to pay for justice and freedom. My mother, Alice Allen, had transcribed it for him and at around the same time decided to write her own account of life on the home front, bringing up baby – me – on her own. He presented us with copies of his memoir. He would not talk about it. The trunk was closed.

When we read Bob's memoir we realised that he had changed all the names and places. He had invented new ones for them. Why? It may have been an ingrained adherence to wartime secrecy codes or to protect the memories of his fellow

## Prologue

officers. However, he also changed his own name and wrote the whole account in the third person, so maybe it had the effect of distancing himself from the action. He recorded events as he saw them without emotion or any attempt to overdramatise or be heroic. He did, though, make a conscious effort to be scrupulously accurate and detailed. Despite this, without real names, times and places I found it hard to follow as an historical account. There were too many unanswered questions.

It was only after I inherited the black tin trunk that I began to decode the memoir, starting with the logbook, letters and papers. Research in museums and libraries and official documents<sup>2</sup> corroborated Bob's story. More than that, since as facts were released from their camouflage they revealed the wider context, political and military, that he could not have known at the time.

Bob was 19 when he left his reserved occupation as a chemist in a cement factory to join up. Within six months he was in 1 Squadron, flying a Hurricane in his first dogfight over the English Channel. He married his childhood sweetheart, Alice. Then he was sent abroad. Destination secret.

For almost two years he lived in West Africa. He earned a DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross) for his determined efforts flying dangerous unarmed photo-reconnaissance missions. His contribution to the protection of southern Atlantic shipping lines forms part of a largely untold story connected to the conflict in the Middle East.

Christmas 1942 found Bob back at home, meeting for the first time his one-year-old daughter and experiencing the conditions of austerity that had overtaken wartime Britain. He retrained as a fighter-bomber pilot flying Typhoons and was one of the first over the Normandy beaches on D-Day. On 25 July 1944, Bob was shot down. He leaves a vivid description of escaping from his burning plane and landing among German soldiers.

## No Ordinary Pilot

He spent the rest of the war as a POW. He was held in solitary confinement, interrogated by the Gestapo and imprisoned in the infamous Stalag Luft III until the ‘long march’ in the bitter winter of 1945. In the final weeks of the war, after the Russians had liberated their camp, he and a colleague escaped. They reached the American allies at Torgau on the Elbe just days before the war in Europe was over.

*No Ordinary Pilot* is the story of Group Captain Robert Neil Greig Allen, CBE, DFC (1920–2008) who went to war and came home with extraordinary memories that he kept to himself for more than 50 years. Its sources are threefold: Bob’s matter-of-fact account of adventures in unlikely foreign places; Alice’s more emotive account of life at home; and my own more academic research, which included visiting locations. It is the story of one man’s war in a global conflict. In wartime there is no such person as an ordinary pilot.

## Head in the air

**T**WO TALL LADS, PALE faced, slipped their shoulders beneath the coffin. Men from the undertakers understood, gave them a chance to feel the weight of their Grandad Bob. Their great-grandfather. They carried history with them as they left the high-vaulted church accompanied by a solo voice singing 'We'll Meet Again'. The wartime hero was accorded proper respect, his hat and his medals on view. He had been barely older than a boy when he left home one summer day in 1940.

The Spitfire straightened out. Bob Allen: 19 years old. Aim: to be a fighter pilot. Facing off the Hun. The German enemy. 'Flying level is difficult for a beginner. You'll soon get the hang of it.' Bob was flying solo. Not yet totally confident. Hands tense. Glancing down at a river below, he saw that he was wandering. Straighten up. Stand tall. Shine shoes. Buttons bright. It had been a tough few weeks. Now freedom. Careful. Try more speed. That's it. Check instruments. Head for the clouds. Swing higher, higher. Pull back. The horizon disappeared and reappeared behind his head. The air began to scream. No, that would be later, later. Another time. Another country.

There was no one in the house. Still the clock in the hall chimed the quarters, halves and hours. He gave the front door an extra tug. Just to make sure it was shut tight. A rainbow of coloured glass set in the fanlight sparkled in the early morning sun. A few strides and he was at the front gate, narrow, painted

dark green, attached by big bolts to a low pebble-dash wall. The latch made a definite click-clack as it shut. Click. Clack. An echo further down the street of identikit houses as another worker left home.

The street where Bob grew up is in the Medway towns, a collection of three random urbanisations, tight by the River Medway in North East Kent. Rochester has an ancient castle and a cathedral. Chatham is famous for its naval dockyards, crucial in the early 19th-century wars against France. Gillingham was built after the railway age. It expanded rapidly after World War I, with ribbons of terraced housing. Three up. Two down. An outside lav. A garden front and back. The back letting on to a narrow lane. There was an apple tree, currant bushes and fat hens named Queenie and Lil.

Robert Neil Greig Allen, Bob, was born in 1920 in Scotland in a castle. It still exists as a burned-out ruin marooned in an adventure theme park. There are family graves but none for Fanny, his mother. Bob kept her photo, a pretty young girl, on his desk all his life. A local archivist helped him find her name in the parish ledgers. She died of fever shortly after he was born. Fanny Greig was an assistant housekeeper at Loudoun Castle in Ayrshire when such establishments had a large staff. She married Arthur Allen in 1918, just after the end of the first great war. He was a warrant officer in the Medical Branch of the Royal Navy. After her death, unable to look after the child himself, he took his baby son to his brother and sister-in-law in Yorkshire. They loved their small charge. Three years later, while working at the Royal Naval Hospital at Gillingham in Kent, Arthur Allen met and married Gladys Claggett, a large, capable woman who managed the Personnel Department at Shorts Brothers, the local aircraft manufacturer in Chatham. Gladys welcomed her stepson and doted on him, always calling him by the diminutive Robbie. He called her Mother.

No cars in the street in 1940. Some windows still have blackout blinds shutting out the sun. Anticipating the terror of night raids. How quiet it is. No one else in the Gillingham house. Bob's step-mother was in South Africa. Stranded by the conflagration of war. She had been en route for Hong Kong where Arthur was stationed at the naval base. There is a photo of Bob and his father. Bob looking a shy young man in blazer and slacks, his father in tropical whites representative of a time when the British Empire encircled the world. When the British Navy patrolled the seas and sailors in sway-flared trousers and tight jackets swaggered through foreign ports. Girls swooned before a uniform. Bob's father would be dead before his son wore a uniform. Dying of a heart condition. Buried in Hong Kong in a military cemetery on the Peak. Both natural parents dead. Step-mother Gladys awaiting a ship home from South Africa. Bob 19. Home alone.

Bob was a scholarship boy. Good at sports. At Gillingham Boys Grammar, founded in 1925, the boys were taught well. They had a full curriculum to get them through Matriculation. They played rugby, tennis and hockey. They believed in Scout's honour, chivalric codes and held clearly defined ideas on right and wrong. They attended services in the Church of England, regarded Catholics with a degree of suspicion and French Catholics as definitely suspect. German Protestant culture was familiar, German politics barely touched them, while German was the second language of choice, especially for scientists.

In a later era, Bob would have had three or four years of higher education at university. Then, war or no war, university was an option for very few. Bob, like many of those interested in scientific or technical subjects, opted for external examination, studying at night school after a ten-hour working day. He cycled the 7 miles to the cement works. Cycling on history. Roman history. On Watling Street, a straight deliberate march along the North Kent coast towards clays rich with calcium carbonate, silicates and

aluminates. The Romans were the first to exploit the rich alluvial clays of Kent and Essex. Around 200 years ago these were the raw materials used to fortify the British coastline against Britain's traditional enemy, the French. A series of bastioned fortifications, the Great Lines, were reinforced, in Napoleonic times, to defend the Chatham dockyards. Then came the discovery that a correct mixture of chalk and clay could produce a hydraulic cement. It proved invaluable in the construction industry. By 1938, the Cement Works at Gillingham had become the premier supplier of modern building products. Patent after patent was developed in the laboratories where Bob worked. Cement would be useful in another war. The signs were all there, though few in Britain were ready to admit the possibility. News from across the English Channel was alarming. Barcelona and Guernica had been bombed. There were reports of bombing from far-away China. If there was to be war it seemed it would come from the air.

It was a hard winter, the winter of 1939. Bitter winds swept across Europe from Russia, following the shadow tracks of Panzer divisions and heavy bombers. Britain had had time to prepare. Gas masks were issued, trenches dug, barrage balloons launched, shelters built and children evacuated. The first Jewish refugees arrived from Germany. By the spring of 1939, with the invasion of Czechoslovakia, British opinion was beginning to change, along with the realisation that just 20 years of peace had been broken. It hardened swiftly. 'War came slowly and smoothly and there was no shouting, no demonstrating, not even much talking, and no flags.'<sup>1</sup> Just before dawn on 3 September, the news of Germany's invasion of Poland broke. Within hours, young men were joining up. By 11am, the time the Prime Minister announced that 'Britain is at war with Germany', there were long lines of men ready to put on a uniform to fight for their country. Some older men carried memories of the 1914-18 war, accounts etched in mud and trauma and bitter sacrifice. 'We

seemed to be going to war as a duty ... going in solidly to kill or be killed because we felt it was the only wise counsel to take.’<sup>2</sup> Bob Allen was 19 years old, studying for his chemistry degree and working at the cement works.

The first skirmishes of this new European war were at sea, around the north of Scotland at Scapa Flow and in faraway Montevideo, where there were reports of the Battle of the River Plate. The German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* was trapped by three plucky British cruisers. Cinemas and theatres reopened. Newsreels carried stories of derring-do. The black-and-white pictures were accompanied by stirring music. At Christmas, the blackout rules were relaxed. For a few months people once again moved about visiting friends and relatives. Then petrol rationing began. The news from Europe was bad. The cement works in Gillingham were never busier; preparations, inventions and productions were in high demand. The chemists were too valuable to be spared for the military. They were declared a ‘reserved occupation’, excusing them military service. Joining up was not an option for Bob. His work was considered too important to the war effort, although many of his friends and family were already in uniform.

There are photos of Bob and friends on a yacht – the smiling faces of confident young men sailing down the Medway and out into the English Channel; a group of friends playing tennis in the grounds of a big house overlooking the Downs. Within a few months, every one of those fit young men had joined the navy or the army. None of them survived the war. Bob had other ideas. Almost on impulse one Saturday morning in the spring of 1940, without discussing it with anyone, he walked into the local recruiting office and asked to join the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) as aircrew, preferably a pilot. Several of his friends had joined the RAFVR before the war and were now in front-line squadrons.



Just like that. He left a cold, quiet house to begin the big adventure. It would be a frustrating few months before his life would change forever. The first hurdle was passing the 'selection board'. He was called to RAF Uxbridge and tested physically and academically. He was, they noted, 5ft 10in., fair hair, dark eyes; his only distinguishing feature was that he was missing the end of his middle finger on his left hand. Physically fit. Academically able. He stood a reasonable chance of selection.

Other eager young men have described the process of joining up as almost one of elimination. The physical examination involved walking before a line of medics who checked hearing, eyesight, heart, lungs, genitals and possible 'risky' infectious diseases. The academic papers were nothing that a boy who had passed School Certificate couldn't manage. There was no real programme in place for testing aptitude. It was said later, 'If a candidate had been to the right school, was tall, smart and in possession of rugby boots and a Bible, he was officer material. If he rode horses as well, he was pilot material.'<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, this interview-style selection resulted in 50 per cent failing to stay the course. By 1942, proper psychological tests and a system of grading had been developed and the proportion of young men sent back into civvy street, swapping their military caps for a bowler hat, decreased. Bob was accepted as a trainee pilot. As an aircraftsman second class, he was entitled to wear a metal badge with the initials RAFVR on his civilian jacket. This marked him as a successful volunteer but he had to wait to begin active service. While he was waiting, the Battle of Britain began.

In April 1940, just before Bob started wearing the RAFVR badge on the lapel of his suit, Germany occupied Denmark and Norway. Within weeks the bellicose and brilliant Winston Churchill took over from Chamberlain the appeaser. Churchill was just in time to see Holland and Belgium attacked in a

blitzkrieg of dive-bombing and heavy artillery. On 20 May, the German Army reached the English Channel. Quite suddenly, the war was but a breath away from Britain's shores. British troops had to be rescued from French beaches. Over the course of two days, fleets of ships brought 338,000 men home during the evacuation of Dunkirk.<sup>4</sup> The first casualties of war were to be seen on streets and stations, in pubs and bars. What would happen next?

The government prepared for invasion. Emergency powers were announced for securing the safety of the public, the defence of the realm and the maintenance of public order. Leaflets stating what to do 'If the Invader Comes' were distributed throughout the land. Barbed wire snaked along the beaches. There were lots of new comrades in arms – Poles, Belgians, Czechs, Dutch, Free French and not forgetting the 'Colonial boys' from South Africa, the African colonies and Australia and New Zealand. By the end of June, 1.5 million men had volunteered for the Home Guard. These were the momentous events that occurred during the months Bob was waiting. By the time his call came and Bob put on his uniform and left for ground training in Wales, the War Cabinet was preparing the next stage.

Bob missed the Battle of Britain. During Britain's finest hour he was being marched to and fro. Being told to shine his buckles. Learning how not to answer back, however unfair the situation. Sleeping in a bunk in a hut with 20 others. Following orders. Saluting. Later – many, many years later – he took a parade himself. His men were marching with absolute precision. He was wearing a sword and medals and lots of gold braid. His salute was as precise as the men's. He smiled as he talked to each man in turn. He was an admired leader. But then, back in 1940, he was scarcely more than a boy.

Once in uniform, Bob wore a white flash on his cap to mark him as potential aircrew. The RAF was quite unlike the

other military services. Having been formed at the very end of World War I, it was only 20 years old. Military historian John Terraine noted that the RAF had some curious ways.<sup>5</sup> For a start, all the fighting was done by the officers, together with senior non-commissioned officers who were entitled to wear wings on their chests, though not wings on their sleeves. Airmen do not fly. Officer ranks are based on those of the Royal Navy. The most junior is an acting pilot officer. Next up, the flying officer is equivalent to an army lieutenant. A flight lieutenant is a commander of a flight – equivalent to an army captain – and so on to air marshals, of whom there are many. By the end of World War II, when numbers were highest, just 17.5 per cent of the service was aircrew; the remaining 82.5 per cent were there to protect them and get them ready for battle.<sup>6</sup>

There was a delay of some three months before Bob was called up to begin his training, but after that his progress was rapid: through ground training at Aberystwyth in Wales; basic flying training at a civilian flying school at Fair Oaks just outside London; advanced flying at Kidlington in Oxfordshire, followed by operational training on Hurricanes at Debden in Essex. In the brief memoir he left us, Bob says nothing about learning to fly – yet he loved flying and took every opportunity to do it well into his fifties. He leaves no description of his first flight. No sense of what it was like to be ordered about during square-bashing. Nothing about those months in the summer of 1940 when heroes were made in the sky and the Royal Air Force came of age as the saviour of British freedoms. An awful lot was happening during the four months he spent waiting to be called up.

All summer, while he waited for orders, waited for transfers and waited to be assigned to flying training, the air above was rent by vapour trails. The world's first major air battle was being fought above South East England. It was a battle of attrition. The speed with which Bob was trained as a fighter pilot was a measure of the

scale of losses and the need for more pilots to secure the skies above Britain. The threatened skies were blue. It was a beautiful summer. The sun shone on the harvest. The hops ripened in rows along the Vale of Kent. But German barges were being assembled in ports across the channel. Göring's Luftwaffe had bases in north-west France, Belgium and Holland. He had 3,500 aircraft. Facing them were 700 British fighters. Two-thirds were Hawker Hurricanes, tasked with stopping the bombers getting through. After the air battles of the summer of 1940 the RAF pilots became pin-up boys. Churchill's words 'never have so many owed so much to so few' echoed in newsreels and newspaper headlines. The fighter boys were true heroes.

Bob's flying training began in September 1940 as the battle overhead was easing. He was at Fairoaks, a small airfield near London. Soon all the flying training would happen abroad – in Canada, America or in the relative safety of British colonies in Africa and Australia. Fairoaks airfield is still there, tucked away among outer London's stockbroker belt of clipped hedges and smooth lawns, brick houses with mock Tudor beams. Now it is within the Heathrow zone. Small aircraft make careful approaches beneath intercontinental airliners carrying hundreds of thousands of passengers a year. Only the well-to-do could afford air transport 70 years ago. For the rest of the population, flying meant circus acts and seaside rides. Aeroplanes were, in some ways, more visible than they are today. Sir Alan Cobham's flying circus entertained the crowds from local fields. There were annual pageants and a race around Britain by little biplanes and monoplanes.<sup>7</sup> It would be decades before air travel was affordable. Flying was for the elite. Bob doesn't say why he was so keen to take to the air. Did he, as a boy, wonder how birds could fly? Did he watch seagulls wheeling on thermals or pulling out of fast dives? Or had he already, as a scientist, learned about aerodynamics?

Bob's first flight was in a Miles M.9 Master. This was a two-seat monoplane powered by a Rolls-Royce engine, built as a trainer for the RAF and the Fleet Air Arm. On 29 September 1940 he left earth behind and entered the third dimension, slipping away into another world where the ground looks small and unimportant and the aircraft feels motionless in space. His ear took in his instructor's voice as he calmly talked him through the cockpit layout and the effect of various controls. Initial flying training followed a relatively simple course: after breakfast there would be a morning flying lesson, then lunch, then afternoon lectures. Evenings could be spent in the pub. They were taught the art of stalling, gliding, straight and level flying, approaches and landing, taxiing and emergency action.<sup>8</sup> His progress was fast. In less than a month following his first flight, with just 12 hours in the air, he was flying solo. Soon it was cross-country flights with a map tucked in the pocket of his flying suit to learn navigation techniques. Then exams. Assessments. Bob had a natural aptitude for flying. But it would be many more months before he would be operational – ready to fight in the sky.

The RAF motto is 'Per ardua ad astra' (through hard work to the stars). Discipline, professionalism, good standards of behaviour and a sense of formality were expected from men who had been educated mainly at public (fee-paying) schools. From 1940, officers no longer had to wear mess kit (a form of fancy evening dress) for dinner and a simplified uniform was introduced. Officers were looked after by a batman, a relationship not unlike that between a student and his bedder or scout at university or a gentleman and his valet. The new wartime recruits often shared a batman, who woke them with a cup of strong tea in the morning and put out their uniform ready to wear. Basic uniform was supplied in a kitbag, a white canvas bag with a rope tie like those used by sailors in the Royal Navy. Refinements such as the famous leather flying jackets, which

were never worn while flying, were bought out of pay, which was £264 per annum for the most junior officer – the equivalent to £30,000 today. It was sufficient to pay mess bills and run an old car. Travel was mainly by steam train. Railway lines criss-crossed the country. Bob travelled by train to Kidlington near Oxford for advance training. Just 50 miles away, the bombardment of London known as ‘the Blitz’ had begun.

From the autumn of 1940 through to the spring of 1941, the period when Bob was being trained to be a fighter pilot, the cities of Britain were pummelled by bombs. London suffered sustained attacks over 57 consecutive nights. Refugees spewed from the big port cities – Plymouth, Liverpool, Hull, Clydebank and Belfast. Londoners went underground. Other cities emptied into the countryside. England began to look like a land of stragglers carrying all they could from their ruined homes. On 24 April 1941, perhaps 50,000 people walked out of Plymouth. London was devastated by incendiary bombs. On one night, 19 March 1941, 500 planes dropped 122,000 incendiaries and 470 tons of high explosives in six hours.<sup>9</sup> The worst day of all was 10 May 1941 when, on a clear, cloudless night with a full moon, many of Britain’s most iconic buildings were hit, including the Houses of Parliament, Law Courts, Mansion House, Westminster Abbey and 14 hospitals, the water mains, churches and more than 5,000 houses – the smoke from the fires could be seen for miles. It was a terrifying experience and one that Bob was not far from experiencing first hand.

During his training, Bob got engaged to a girl he had known since they were both at school. Alice Arnold lived on Chatham Hill in a detached house with a large garden. She was as good as a boy on the tennis court and counted as one of the group of friends who picnicked and sailed together. She had been residing in London while she trained as a teacher and had already experienced the terrors of bombing. She was living in

digs, renting a room and sharing house facilities with the owner, in South London. Bob visited her as frequently as he could. Alice had stayed in London because she was committed to her classes of primary-age children. Sometimes Alice and the children spent the whole night in shelters. Every night they could hear the bangs and crumps of bombs bringing death and destruction. Into this world came another uneasy realisation: that Bob's chances of survival as an inexperienced front-line pilot were slim. They married, despite parental reservations due mainly to their youth. Bob was 20. Alice not quite 21. A brief honeymoon was spent in a hotel in London. There were no wedding pictures of them in the house on Chatham Hill.

Alice was one of eight – seven sisters and a brother who was in the Royal Navy. Her older sisters and their husbands looked out from ornate frames in the family home. The wedding dresses elaborate, speaking of lavish ceremonies. Not so for Alice. 'It was the war', she would reply when asked. She had a small photo of a girl in a pale suit on the arm of a young man scarcely more than a boy in the uniform of an RAF officer. His pilot wings shone new and bright above the chest pocket.

Even in the desperate days of war only half of the hopeful young men who had begun training with Bob actually attained the prized RAF wings. By the time he got his in April, Bob had 160 flying hours in his logbook and quite a few of those were at night. 'Only birds and fools fly by day and only owls and bloody fools fly by night' was the much-quoted saying. Wartime England at night was very, very dark. The blackout prohibited any lights in any building, street or railway. All familiar landmarks were blotted out unless there was a full moon. Instructors told their pupils:

'... the moment you leave the ground and are off the flare path do not, repeat do not, no matter how tempted, try to look outside the cockpit ... it will be very black and you will

have no horizon or any means of orientation whatsoever and so we have to rely on our instruments. This is the whole secret of night flying.<sup>10</sup>

Night flying was like taking off into a black void. The pilot had to keep his eyes fixed on the cockpit instruments in front of him. The most vital information the instruments provided was an artificial horizon, rate of climb, air-speed indicator and a directional gyro.<sup>11</sup> It required a huge effort of concentration.

Preparing for the wings test gave young pilots the chance to show off their aerobatics skills. Knowing just how far to push the plane, how tight to make the turns, how fast to spin, were essential life-saving skills. They might be hurtling around in the sky when the examiner suddenly cut the throttle in a simulated engine failure to force a landing. Trying not to panic, the pilot would have to find a suitable place to land, and quickly. If they were lucky it would be an airfield, one of many grass strips that had appeared over southern England. After the flying test there were two days of written tests. Questions might require knowledge of fuel systems, hydraulics and engine data – such as correct revs and manifold pressure for all procedures, including landing and taking off – as well as a certain amount of Air Law and RAF regulations. Eventually, the great day for Bob arrived with results. By the time he returned to his room the wings had already been sewn on to his uniform by his batman. The final stage in the making of a fighter pilot involved gunnery practice, air-to-air and air-to-ground, with live ammunition. Bob did rather well. It was time for him to move on.

Bob flew his first Hurricane on 27 April 1941. He was delighted. Pilots invariably spoke warmly of the aeroplane. They said it inspired confidence, was responsive, strong, stable and forgiving. It was also a great platform for guns – a brutal machine. The Hurricane, designed by Sydney Camm, first flew in 1935. It was



an immediate success with the RAF, which ordered 600 on the spot. Those early Hurricanes were constructed along the lines of the biplanes they replaced. They had a girder-like fuselage, covered in doped (varnished) linen and fabric-covered wings. The 'canvas, string and sticks' design made them very easy to assemble and mend, though they looked rather old-fashioned. Modifications were constant. By 1939, fabric wings were replaced by metal ones that could stand greater stress loads – while diving, for instance.<sup>12</sup> The sloping nose gave the pilot good visibility – a factor in making it the choice for night sorties. When used for fighting, the Hurricane could manage tighter turns than most German aircraft, which was much appreciated during the Battle of Britain, in which the Hurricane outnumbered the Spitfire by three to two.<sup>13</sup>

The Spitfire, designed to the same brief by Reginald Mitchell, was immediately recognisable. It had beautiful lines, a slim fuselage, a graceful elliptical wing. The Battle of Britain became known as the 'Spitfire Summer' after Lord Beaverbrook used his newspapers to engage in a PR exercise, 'Saucepans for Spitfires', which encouraged housewives to give up their aluminium for the cause. Spitfire funds were set up in towns and villages all over the country and abroad – there was a Jamaica Plane fund, a Gold Coast fund, a Singapore fund. More than 20,000 were eventually built. The Spitfire caught the public's imagination but throughout the war it was the Hurricane that earned a reputation as a go-anywhere, do-anything fighter – an aircraft that 'could be danced in the air'.

The newest Hurricanes with their Merlin engines took their pilots higher and faster than was possible before. In his last few weeks of training Bob had to learn to master the new aircraft, flying it in formation, air firing, night flying, formation aerobatics, practising dogfights. Hurricane pilots describe 'testing the limits, height climbs, the tightest possible turns ...

“greying out”, sustaining a turn until “blacking out”, learning to tighten the stomach muscles, and tensing up to increase one’s “black out” threshold’.<sup>14</sup> World War II fighter pilots had to learn just how steep a climb they could afford to make. It was dangerous. Too steep and the pilot could lose his colour vision. Much too steep and he risked losing vision completely. Tightening the stomach muscles acted to force the blood back to the brain. Levelling out also had an immediate effect. Twisting and turning in the sky, they had to judge these forces while dodging bullets. It took courage, bravery and a lot of professionalism to be a fighter pilot.

It was summer, 1 June 1941, when Bob was commissioned as a pilot officer in the RAFVR and received his first posting – to 1 Squadron. He was delighted. It was one of the most prestigious fighter squadrons in the RAF. Formed in 1912 out of the Army’s 1 Company, the term ‘squadron’ was adopted from its use in the cavalry. 1 Company had distinguished itself in World War I and the war in Iraq in the 1920s. At the time that Bob joined, it had a hard core of surviving veterans from the brief battles in France, over Dunkirk and over London, during the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. They flew Hurricanes from Redhill, a small grass airfield some 15 miles south of London.

In the winter of 1941 tactics began to change. After months of being on the defensive, the RAF took to the offensive in a series of raids code named *Rhubarb*. The style of the raids appealed to young fighter pilots in their new, fast, well-armed machines. In pairs or two pairs they set off across the Channel and harassed any obvious German positions on the French coast. The first pair from 1 Squadron set out on New Year’s Day and, making use of low cloud cover, shot up various installations in the Boulogne area. It was not very efficient, extremely dangerous and the Luftwaffe often refused the bait and laid low to avoid revealing their positions. *Rhubarb* sorties were abandoned later in the year.

A more effective form of harassment, code named *Circus*, involved dispatching, in daylight, small formations of Blenheim light bombers with a fighter escort to bomb airfields, railways and other military installations in the Pas-de-Calais area. There were four types or layers of bomber escort: close escort surrounding the bombers; escort for the close fighters; high cover to protect the lower layers from enemy fighters; and finally top cover – tied to the bombers' route 'with a roving commission to sweep the skies clear of enemy fighters threatening the immediate area of the bomber attack'.<sup>15</sup> In some cases up to 200 fighters were involved in the escort of one bomber. The bomber might survive but at a cost in fighters. It was a tactic copied from the Luftwaffe but in this case the bombing was incidental. The main object was to entice the Luftwaffe positioned in France and the Low Countries into the air. It also forced the Germans to keep a disproportionate number of fighters in north-west Europe, drawing them away from the Eastern/Russian Front. It was a tactic, Bob noted, that to be successful involved large numbers of British fighters.

One unintended consequence was that air battles were frequently fought over the Channel. Air-sea rescue was in its infancy. Without a dinghy pack (dinghies became standard issue later in the summer), survival in the cold sea could be counted in minutes. German fighter pilots were issued with dinghies and a pack that stained the water around bright green so they could easily be spotted. The British pilots made do with a 'Mae West' lifejacket. Within the year, the RAF and Navy co-operated to develop an efficient air-sea rescue service. Pilots in danger of ditching in the sea were urged to turn their radios to Channel C and give the emergency call 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday'. This had been invented by a radio operator at Croydon Airport in 1923 and comes from the French '*m'aider*' or '*venez m'aider*' meaning 'come and help me'. The call triggered rescue aircraft and launches to search the area. It proved very effective.

All the squadrons flew convoy patrols to protect essential shipping from marauding German bombers and fighters. 1 Squadron were flying on convoy patrol in the late afternoon of 19 March when:

‘... between Dungeness and Hastings, two Me109s from 1.LG2 zipped in from the south and engaged the Hurricanes ... Tony Kershaw was hit, dived, and baled out too late. His body was later picked up by a minesweeper’s whaler and brought ashore. Sergeant Stefan’s machine was also hit but he crash landed without injury although his Hurricane was a write-off.’<sup>16</sup>

Squadron combat reports reveal how every day brought aerial fights, some lost, some won. As soon as they landed, the pilots would report to an officer from Y-service, the RAF signals and tactical intelligence service. He was the only person entitled to confirm whether there had been a ‘kill’ – an enemy aircraft shot down. The squadron flew day and night. In May 1941, the Luftwaffe renewed their blitz on London. On one night, 10/11 May, 12 pilots from 1 Squadron took off in pairs and fought through the night, only returning to refuel. Bob felt very much the new boy as he joined this experienced team.

An unusual feature of 1 Hurricane Squadron at this time was the many nationalities of its pilots. With the exception of the squadron commander and three or four others, who were either British or from one of the Dominions or Colonies, all were either Polish or Czech or, in one case, a Lithuanian. The squadron was divided into two flights. Initially Bob was in A Flight, which, without him, would have been entirely Czech, under Flt Lt Velebnovsky. He remembers one Sgt Plt Kuttelwascher, known as ‘Kut’ – a formidable fighter with a number of claimed kills. ‘Sergeant Kuttelwascher, acting as top weaver on the way out,

saw four 109's [sic] attack two Hurricanes and dived on the rearmost, firing two bursts from 50 yards. The 109 went down out of control pouring smoke.<sup>17</sup> A few months later, Kut was commissioned and led the flight. Flying at night without the benefit of radar, he specialised in raiding German airfields in France and picking off the German bombers as they landed or took off. On one occasion he got three in four minutes.<sup>18</sup> The Czechs and Poles were all veteran pilots from their own countries and had already fought for a month or so after they reached England and enlisted in the RAF. Bob remembered:

‘Their enthusiasm for pursuing the hated Boches often led not only to success but sometimes to failure due to foolhardiness. It was like learning to survive in what was practically a foreign air force, whose members, in time of stress or excitement in the air, often resorted to using their native language over the R/T.’<sup>19</sup>

Integrating a newly trained pilot into an operational unit had its problems. When rookie pilot Geoffrey Wellum was posted to 92 Squadron, the commanding officer looked at his logbook and said:

‘So at least you’ve flown something that folds up, undercarriage, flaps and that sort of thing? ... Well that’s the only thing in your favour, but even so you are not much use to the squadron. I pay little attention to an assessment made after a hundred-odd hours’ flying... half-trained youngsters who think they know all the answers are just a pain in the neck in an operational squadron in time of war.’<sup>20</sup>

Bob Allen said he thought his complete greenness actually helped his survival. When he first joined the squadron he was

kept out of the night operations and flew only daylight sorties, convoy patrols, escorts and sweeps, and Channel patrols meeting the Blenheims as they came home. He flew as number two to one of the experienced section leaders.

On 12 June 1941, Colin Gray, a New Zealander with a Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), took over A Flight. A fighter ace credited with 15 aircraft destroyed, he was one of the highest-scoring pilots in the RAF. Bob was appointed his number two. Bob described his briefings in his memoir: 'Oral briefings were usually to follow the leader in loose formation, keep a good lookout, give warning over the R/T of any enemy aircraft and, if necessary, to turn towards and attack any fighters that came at them.'<sup>21</sup> In fact, in his early days, all Bob *could* do was to follow his leader in loose formation, to stay with him while any engagement took place and return home to base afterwards, preferably with his leader. However, to achieve this was quite a major feat, especially when the more experienced members of the squadron threw their aircraft all over the sky either chasing German fighters or evading them.

On 16 June Bob recalled: 'We found an He59 over the Channel and shot it down. It didn't carry any Red Cross markings. I was no2 to Colin Gray and there were also ten or a dozen Me109s about who were naturally very aggressive. I took a shot at them, more in haste than in anger I have to say.'<sup>22</sup> The next day Bob wrote to his wife from the officers' mess, Redhill.

'My Dear Alice, As I write this tonight I am feeling very pleased with myself. I became an operational pilot yesterday afternoon and since then I have been very busy. Up to this evening we have had several patrols but saw nothing. Tonight however the whole squadron was sent off and we had a wizard show. We ran into some 109s in the Channel off Folkestone and did we

give them hell! I saw a 109 diving at me from the side so I turned into him and gave him a burst but he went past me too quickly to notice any effect – THEN about 4 of us saw a Hun sea plane stooging along at about 100' and we filled him really full of lead and he finally burst into flames and crashed. After that we were all split up so I raced home. We lost one plane but the pilot although burnt a little is safe in an English hospital. Other squadrons did well today – Jerry certainly has had a shaking! We have had 2 bottles of champagne for dinner tonight – everyone is very cheerful.<sup>23</sup>

Officer pilots lived in a large house near the airfield, once owned by the Goldsmiths Company. Bob shared a room with the Lithuanian pilot Romualdas 'Rene' Marcinkus – the only Lithuanian pilot to serve in the RAF during World War II. He had been a football champion before rising to the rank of captain in the Lithuanian Air Force. In spring 1934, Marcinkus and three colleagues flew a Lithuanian-designed aircraft on a promotional tour of 12 European capitals and became well known outside his own country. In 1940, he left Lithuania to join the French Air Force, a short-lived exploit. When France fell and he applied to the RAF, gossip has it that he took three years off his age or he would have been too old. He was posted to 1 Squadron just weeks before Bob Allen. Marcinkus wrote in a letter:

'I was transferred to night fighters – at that time the most dangerous kind of military aviation But I like danger – I faced danger during my entire life, in flying, sports, and personal life. With this I am satisfied, but ... I am lacking warmth and the comfort of my personal life in this country of cold slob weather and so called correctness.'<sup>24</sup>

Other colleagues describe Marcinkus as a friendly guy, a good character with a phenomenal memory. This would come in useful later when he was forced to ditch his plane in the sea, and was picked up by the Germans and taken prisoner. He ended up in Stalag Luft III, where he was a principal player in the notorious Great Escape, then was recaptured and was one of the 50 men shot by the Gestapo. But that final dangerous adventure lay two years in the future.

For the remainder of June 1941, 1 Squadron flew day and night. Bob writes:

‘The weeks passed quickly. The day began with squadron readiness at first light, which meant rising at 2.30am for breakfast in order to be on stand-by in the crew room near the aircraft by 3.15am. Often the day’s activities lasted until last light and sometimes those pilots who had been on stand-by would not get to bed until past midnight.’

On another occasion Bob describes how, when the squadron had been sent out over the Channel to cover the rescue of a bomber crew that had ditched and were reported to be in a dinghy, they ran almost straight into an equal number of ME109s at about 3,000ft. The sky erupted into a melee of diving, turning, climbing fighters and Bob fired his eight machine guns at a yellow-nosed ME109 that came at him almost head on. The encounter was brief. The two aircraft must have passed very close to each other as their paths crossed. Bob, forgetting his briefing to stay with his leader, turned hard to follow his adversary but when he straightened up there was no sign of any aircraft, whether enemy or friendly. He felt very much alone and not a little scared sitting some 1,000ft up in the middle of the Channel. After a brief look around for anyone who he might join up with, feeling



rather stupid and still anxious, he pointed his aircraft towards the English coast and returned to base as fast as his Merlin-engine Hurricane could carry him.

Fighter pilots say that no amount of training can prepare you for combat. That there is just one golden rule: 'Never, but never fly straight and level for more than twenty seconds. If you do, you'll die.'<sup>25</sup> If you see tracers flashing past then break hard and fling the aircraft all over the sky. Attempt stall turns. Fire. Gunnery practice was included in operational training but in the chaos of battle there was not much time to adjust one's aim. There was talk of 'deflection shooting'. Reflector sights could be lined up to touch the wing tips of the enemy aeroplane but the pilot still had to judge how much 'lead' or deflection was needed to make a hit at speeds of up to 350mph and closing. Most pilots opened fire far too soon. The best chance of a kill was achieved by approaching the enemy from dead astern and then raking him with all eight machine guns. Expert shots harmonised their guns to give a 'spot' of concentrated power. Air fighting was, after all, relatively new, and there was much discussion over the merits of astern, head-on, beam and quarter attack and the use of sun and cloud cover, or how best to get on the tail of a 109. 'They knew that all depended on teamwork, that they must never fight alone.'<sup>26</sup>

Fighter pilots were never far from death. They had to face the horrors of seeing aircraft blown to bits in the sky. Men falling, turned into burning torches. Friends spiralling uncontrolled into earth or sea. Winston Churchill praised the pilots for 'the canine virtues: vigilance, fidelity, courage and love of the chase'. Perhaps the greatest of these was courage. Courage supported by loyalty to tightly knit groups of officers and men in the squadron. Bob Allen was a newly married 20-year-old who admitted later that his 'preoccupation with a demanding schedule and keenness to do well in flying to match the skill and

enthusiasm of the others gave him little time to think about his wife'.<sup>27</sup>

Setting up a home was virtually impossible. Like many other couples, they lived apart with occasional brief meetings. Many wartime brides were obliged to live in the parental home. Alice, however, continued to live 'in digs' and teach at a school in Bexley. There were just a few opportunities to do 'normal' things, such as going to the cinema or taking a walk in the countryside. Alice was resourceful. Through a series of contacts and gossip at the local shop she heard of a couple, the husband in the navy, who wanted to share their house by letting off three rooms and sharing the bathroom. While waiting to move, Alice narrowly escaped being killed by a bomb landing in her back garden without exploding and had to spend the night in the community shelter. She always said it was down to chance; in one house the whole family was killed, in another a baby survived being buried in rubble. She tried not to think about the dangers her husband was facing. Then something happened that changed everything.

One sunny morning towards the end of June, Bob was sent for by the squadron adjutant. The squadron had been detailed to nominate one British pilot officer to join a new Hurricane squadron that was being formed in Africa. Because most of the other pilot officers were either Czech or Polish, there was little choice. Bob would have to go. He was devastated. He'd survived the most dangerous first few weeks of operational flying and was now a valued member of the team. He could not believe that he would have to begin all over again overseas. And of course he would not be able to tell his wife or family where he was going. He pleaded long and hard, first with the adjutant, then the flight commander and lastly with the squadron commander, but to no avail. He even brought up his marriage, but this cut no ice with anyone. He had to go. Compassionate leave was granted.