

Review of talk by John Shipman at Bentley Priory in September 2017

In September John Shipman was invited to give a talk about his book which featured the story of his father's experiences before and during the Battle of Britain. The talk was well attended in the museum lecture room and attendees were able to tour the excellent exhibits which are constantly being updated and revised. This museum is a "must" for anyone interested in RAF Fighter Command and the Battle of Britain.

In 1930, Ted "Shippy" Shipman decided that weeding turnips on his father's Melton farm was no career for a young man interested in machinery. He applied to join the RAF to become an AC2 driver, petrol (as opposed to steam) after the mandatory drill training and potato peeling.

Over 40 years later he was persuaded by his son, John Shipman, to write about his subsequent distinguished career for a family history. Those notes together with his photographs form the basis of John's book "One of the Few".

After a trade test, Ted was promoted to AC1, engine fitter working on aircraft such as the AW Atlas biplane, an Army cooperation and training aircraft. In 1933 his friend was offered a training flight after entering a newspaper competition and Ted was persuaded to follow him. Ted took to flying and used his life savings of £20 for a PPL course on Robinson Redwings, going solo in 5 ½ hours.

He applied six times to the RAF for a pilot's course but was initially rejected as he was not a Halton apprentice. He was finally accepted in 1936 and after graduation at Brough was posted to 41 Squadron at Catterick where he became known as 'Shippy' flying Hawker Demons and Furies. His flying included Empire Air day displays designed to reassure (kid) the population that the RAF were at the forefront of aviation and well able to defend the Country.

During 1939, 41 Squadron became the second squadron to receive the MkI Spitfire with a two bladed propeller giving enormous torque effects on take off. In the absence of two seat Spitfires, the first flight for a pilot was solo after ground practice in an aircraft jacked on supports to permit undercarriage retraction. Development was such that aircraft were continually being modified on site by factory personnel to resolve problems. The most significant change being a three bladed propeller. During his later career, Shippy's log included forty-nine different Spitfires – such was the rate of obsolescence and attrition.

War was anticipated with trepidation and there was surprise to find fifth columnists when a painter was arrested and then the senior flight controller disappeared into a German submarine on the day before war was declared.

On October 17th 1939, Shippy was scrambled to intercept a Heinkel 111 scouting to locate the cruiser HMS Hood in the Firth of Forth. Such was the rush that he took off without his life jacket but located the target and dived close to ensure that he could see the black crosses for certain identification. To his surprise, the Heinkel shot at him before he downed it with a long burst that virtually emptied his guns. The German crew ditched in the sea and to survivors eventually paddled to dry land after forty-three hours to become the first Germans captured on British soil. There was celebration at 41 Squadron tempered by the feeling that they were not trying to kill other airmen but rather to destroy their machines. They were not permitted to meet the captured airmen for whom they wished to buy a drink.

Shippy was posted to Wick to deter attacks on the Royal Oak in Scapa Flow but the attacks ceased when the Spitfires arrived and resumed after they left. Being told incorrectly that no whiskey was available at Wick, the squadron took their own which they then consumed at Drem, when refuelling during their return flight, to avoid wasting it. Their arrival home was described as “uncontrolled”.

The squadron patrolled over the Dunkirk beaches where Spitfires operated at twenty thousand feet with Hurricanes at lower altitude. Problems encountered included poor radio communications and high altitude oxygen freezes that would cause a pilot to black out. Average pilot life expectancy at that time was eighty-four hours.

During the Battle of Britain, squadrons from the north were rotated south to relieve other Groups and Shippy flew from Hornchurch where Green Section of 41 Squadron encountered the Werner Molders ME109's and succeeded in damaging Werner Molders' aircraft, wounding him and forcing him to crash land at Wissant.

Back at Catterick, on August 15th 1940, known as “Black Thursday”, a reported attack by thirty German aircraft turned out to be two hundred planes and Shippy encountered a squadron of Me110's escorting the German bombers. After a head on attack he managed to latch on to one and bring it down near Barnard Castle where it forced landed with the crew being captured.

After the War, Shippy met and befriended the German pilot, Hans Kettling, so that they were able to revisit together the site of his forced landing. Hans was the son of a German craftsman and had entered the Luftwaffe to enjoy the flying, much like Shippy. Neither of them had any intention to kill in combat and shared much in common. Such was the effect of war.

Shippy was eventually awarded the AFC and went on to serve for thirty years, retiring as a Wing Commander.

His son, John's talk gave a fascinating insight into the experiences and more personal feelings of a pilot in 1939/40 that added to previous accounts of the Spitfire's qualities and handling.

John's book of his father's memoirs, “One of the Few” is published by Pen and Sword Books.