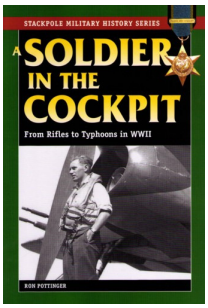
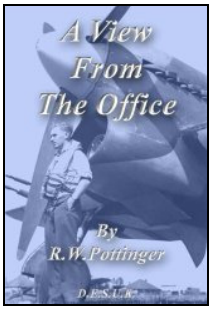
Extracts from "A Soldier in the Cockpit: From Rifles to Typhoons in WWII"
by Ron Pottinger (also published as "A View from the Office")





Having fully re-equipped the squadron with Tempests, and with a few hours of familiarisation at Bradwell Bay, we were moved to Newchurch on Romney Marshes. We were joined by 486 New Zealand Squadron, and Wing Commander Roland Beamont arrived to lead the No 150 Tempest Wing. A little later we were joined by 56 Squadron who still had Typhoons. They were re-equipped with Spitfires as an interim measure, since there were no Tempests available for them. The Spit was said to handle more like a Tempest than the Typhoon. Certainly, there must have been a good deal of difference between the Typhoon and the Spitfire. One Australian pilot got into a 'dog- fight' with some American Thunderbolts based nearby (only fun, of course!), used the same amount of beef on the control column of his Spit that he was used to using on his Typhoon and tore both wings off. The Typhoon was a strong aircraft alright, as was proved time and time again carrying bombs, and later rockets, but it took muscle to obtain the last bit of manoeuvrability.

Newchurch was preparation for things to come. Conditions were as near as they could be to the sort of airfield we might use after the invasion of France. We lived under canvas, six of us N.C.O.s to a ridge tent. Our mess tent was a marquee and this was where briefing before and after a 'show' took place. The airfield itself was 'L' shaped and comprised several farmers' fields with hedges down and Sommerfeld tracking laid on the rough ground. This tracking was made up of steel plates and made a pretty good runway on almost any sort of ground. However, it was not so smooth as the concrete runways of Bradwell Bay as I found out to my cost, but more of that later.

Our planes were dispersed at the north end of the longest runway, and there was a farm cottage that we used as our dispersal quarters. Workshops were set up in out-buildings at the back.

Many of our off duty excursions took us into Folkestone, and this was the scene of many riotous, not to say rowdy evenings. The dances at the Majestic Hotel were a favourite spot, and the Queens Hotel. It became the custom to bring back trophies from these expeditions, and our cottage was decorated with these. Someone painted a pub sign for it, which was hung up outside calling it 'The Gotsum Inn'. The sign from a static water tank was stood in a bucket of water and someone dragged an illuminated A.A. sign back onto our truck, among loud protests from those who could only expect an even more uncomfortable ride in the back than usual. Another hotel lost a sign advertising 'Crabs and lobsters served in season'. And we grumble about the high spirits of the young today.

Strangely, these evening sessions were usually more rowdy when things were bad, such as when we lost a pilot. One such occasion I'll always remember was when we lost Jimmy Mannion. He hardly looked old enough to ride a bike, much less fly a Tempest. He played the most wonderful jazz piano, and I can picture him now sitting at a piano in a pub on the marshes, four pints lined up on top of the piano, playing 'Body and Soul', dreamy eyed, and everyone else clustered around completely enthralled.

Jimmy and a Polish pilot called Zurakowski took off into the blue on a recce along the French coast, and just disappeared. When the war in Europe was over, and I returned from prisoner of war camp, there was at Cosford a board listing air crew who they would like news of. Jimmy headed the list. As far as I'm aware nobody ever discovered what became of them.

After one of these dodgy evening sessions, my flight commander Van Lierde and Lefty Whitman ended up in one of the many dykes which run alongside the roads, draining the marshes in that part of the world. Van had a Ford 10 soft top. A pretty rare car even then. In immaculate condition, the apple of his eye! They were driving back from the pub, obviously in a 'happy' state. Van said.
"Look, Lefty, 350 on the clock, no hands!"
The next thing Lefty remembered was being upside down under water. The road had turned, and Van hadn't! Neither were any the worse, except for the algae in their hair, and the stains of ditch water, which joined those of beer on their best blue uniforms.

Wednesday, 3 May 1944
Was on the first operational sortie to be flown by Tempests. A wing sweep to Mardyck, Lille, Armentieres, Berch. On take off one undercarriage light stayed on, but after pulling the undercarriage down and up several times I ignored it and chased after the rest of the squadron. We saw nothing as was usual on these sweeps, but I was amazed to see what large areas of country along the Belgium coast had been flooded.

Van weaved violently from the minute we crossed in until we were halfway back across the channel and made it very difficult for Teddy and I. I was on the inside next to the C.O.'s section and once he weaved so far towards them that I found myself among them and was lucky not to collide with Buck.

Monday, 8 May 1944
Went on leave. When I went to the orderly room to collect my pass C.O. suggested that I should go in for a commission. Didn't give him a definite answer as I wasn't really too keen on the idea.

I found that Bob Cole had also been approached, and he also was happy as an N.C.O. By now we had both reached the rank of Warrant Officer, the highest non-commissioned rank, and our standing was good in the sergeants' mess. To become the most junior of the officers mess was not all that attractive. Maybe we just lacked ambition! About a week later the C.O. had the pair of us in his office, and demanded to know why he had not received our applications. He said that we by now had gained quite a bit of operational experience, whereas he had several newly joined officers with none. He was not going to have N.C.O.s leading officers around the sky, so we'd better be sure our papers were on his desk tomorrow morning. They were, and in due course Bob and I received our commissions.

Tuesday, 16 May 1944
Bad weather all day. In evening had to stand by in sergeants' mess. Rain was leaking through the marquee and we sat in about three groups round oil stoves in about the only three places where the rain wasn't coming in.

Wednesday, 17 May 1944
A good day for the squadron. In the morning McCullock landed short in the ditch at the beginning of the runway and completely wrote off the kite without hurting himself. Van's engine cut on take off. Bailey and I did some formation with Teddy and during some tail chasing Bailey's throttle jammed shut and he just made an airfield called Deanlands near Lewes. Kite was again a complete write off and Bailey banged his head, not seriously hurt though.

Wednesday, 24 May 1944
Four of us went to Manston to refuel for a Ranger. Met Hutch there who is now on 137 with Tiffies.

Refuelled and took off on Ranger. Had to climb through cloud to nine thousand feet and how I hung onto Eddie I don't know, but somehow all four were together when we broke cloud at the top. Over there the cloud had broken up but it was still very hazy. We went down on the deck and flew round the back of Brussels without seeing anything at all. I fired at a factory on the way over, but as I passed over the top it looked derelict. At one small village they opened up with M.G. fire but didn't get near us.

When Wiggy started to climb he didn't give us time to get in close after a turn with the result we were all separated. The other three met up again at the top but not I. I came home on my own, crossing out in a screaming dive at seven thousand feet. Some hopeful types started firing with light stuff but didn't get near me.

Sunday, 28 May 1944
Scrambled on shipping recce from Gris Nez to Ostend. Bailey was my No2. Went up as far as Zeebrugge but only saw a few odd fishing boats. Came back down the coast to Calais and set course for home crossing in at Folkestone quite proud of my navigation, it was better than I thought it would be, quite hazy too.

Newchurch being so near the coast, as with Manston, had a fair number of planes returning in trouble of some sort, and landing at the first friendly place they saw. Most mornings there were one or two strangers on the field, two of which stick in my memory as the sort of thing that tended to make the majority of pilots fatalistic, and maybe superstitious.

One of these was an American Thunderbolt, which landed after dark towards our end of the runway. He obviously had come in too high or too fast and overshot the end of the airfield. Now, across that end of the runway ran a dyke, maybe some ten to fifteen feet wide. More or less in line with the runway was a small bridge over the dyke, intended to allow farm carts and farm machinery to get from one field to another. The pilot, with tail down, and in the dark, couldn't possibly have seen the bridge, and pure good fortune must have carried him over it. Looking at it in the light of day, it was almost unbelievable. In fact it was only with difficulty that the plane was towed back over the bridge with a tractor.

The other occasion was a Marauder which tried to land in the other direction, along the short leg of the 'L'. The approach from this direction was over a minor country road, bordered again by the inevitable dyke. The pilot had landed short, and the plane lay with its wings in the bottom of the dyke, the nose at an angle up one bank and the rear part of the fuselage and tail at the opposite angle up the nearer bank.

It must have decelerated from about 100 mph to zero in just a few short feet, yet apart from minor cuts and bruises the crew escaped unhurt. Perhaps they'd done the required amount of praying while nursing a sick aeroplane back home, perhaps Lady Luck decided to be on their side, maybe rubbing that rabbits foot did the trick, or maybe it just wasn't their time yet.

In the early days at Newchurch, most of our work was in patrols or sweeps, the latter usually at squadron strength, and being aimed at the enemy rail, road, and sea lines of communication. Bombs would have been useful for this sort of work, but nine up to twelve aircraft each with four 20mm Hispano cannons were a considerable weight of fire power, and any target found, was left in a pretty sorry state.

Trains were a favourite find. There were no diesel or electric trains in the Western Europe area at the time which we were able to reach, and the steam locomotives made quite an impressive sight when the boiler burst among great clouds of steam. I often felt quite sorry for the drivers and their crews who would have been French, Belgium, or Dutch, possibly working under duress. A wrecked train of course put that line out of action, for at least a few hours, with resultant disruption to timetables, and an adverse effect on morale of any of the travellers.

All this time there was a continuous build up to the event everyone knew had to come soon, the second Front, the invasion of Europe. Newchurch was good training for living and flying from temporary aifields. On many of our trips we would land at a different airfield on our return. Maybe Ford, Tangmere, or Thorney Island. There we would be re-fuelled, re-armed, and any troubles sorted out before returning to Newchurch. This gave us good practice, and of course enabled ground crews to get more familiar with aircraft other than those of their own squadron. This could be fascinating, especially when, as on one occasion I had to show the fitters how to undo the fasteners on the engine cowlings. I think they would have used crowbars rather than give up, if I hadn't arrived on the scene.

We were still having a good deal of trouble with oil leaks around the propeller seals, and on one trip spots of oil were coming back almost from take off. We were returning to Thorney Island, and by the time we arrived there my windscreen might as well have been frosted glass. I couldn't see anything at all forwards. We flew over the airfield in pansy formation, snapped into echelon starboard and peeled off to land, just to show off to those below how a real fighter squadron did it.

On those sort of landings you came in quite close together, probably three planes on the runway at any one time, but with visibility the way it was I left a bigger gap. I got quite low, mainly due to the difficulty of seeing forward, and had to put on throttle to reach the beginning of the runway. I remember flying up the sandy beach at about ten feet, and the relief when the end of the runway loomed up more or less in my line of flight.

I couldn't lock my harness, but came in standing up on the upper rudder pedals, with my backside about half way up the back of the seat, peering over the top and around the side of the screen. At 100 mph there was quite a breeze, of course!

Ron Pottinger

After landing we quickly re-fuelled, re-armed, and the screen was cleaned, but they couldn't do anything about the seals. This usually entailed changing the propeller. In fact at this time it was quite a common sight to see low-loader lorries -'Queen Marys' (after the ship, not the lady) they called them - tearing round the winding country roads of the Romney Marshes with half a dozen propellers on board

The seals must have been getting worse, because by the time we got to Newchurch, I was in just the same sort of difficulty, with zero forward visibility. As I made my approach, I realised that a flight of Typhoons was taxiing out to take off and were zig zagging all the way down the right side of the runway. My judgement was not so good on this occasion. It was as if I was drawn to that side of the runway, and I landed much closer than was comfortable to the taxiing aircraft. There were some irritable comments about this, but when the state of the aircraft was seen I was forgiven and considered lucky to get down without worse mishap. The whole flight was risky, for had the seals broken down suddenly and completely, as had happened on at least three previous occasions, then I would indeed have been in dire trouble.

Monday, 29 May 1944

Had an exercise to see how the airfields could cope with various squadrons coming in for refuel and re-arm.

We did an uneventful fighter sweep at ten thousand feet and returned to Thorney Island. Sweep was in the Lille area and apart from a little flak from Lille itself was just a formation practice. 'R' being a good kite had been pinched by the flight commander, leaving me to fly 'W' with oil streaming back from the prop, so that half way round I couldn't see a thing forward.

I spent most of the trip pumping the de-icer to try to wash the oil off, but it didn't work. Landed at Thorney Island in a long creeping approach over the water and up the beach. Not able to see Stan in front of me half the while and didn't see the runway till I was crossing the perimeter track. I was very lucky to get down safely.

When our kites had been refuelled we took off again for Newchurch. Even on that short trip my windshield oiled over so badly that I couldn't see through it and landed on the right of the runway nearly writing off a Tiffy which was taxiing out. I didn't even know it was there until it flashed past my wing tip. Van started to bawl me out when he landed but when he saw my screen apologised.

Tuesday, 30 May 1944

Was on early morning readiness at 3.45a.m. Later in day did a fighter sweep. We were due to go down to Paris but bad weather prevented us.

We crossed in at Cayeux and flew across Abbeville to Amiens, collecting a little flak from somewhere near Poix and came out near Le Havre. On one turn Scratch Adcock had an engine cut as he was crossing over and lost so much ground that I thought we had lost him altogether.

Undercarriages seem to have caused several of my most exciting moments and I suppose the following must come high among these. Soon after arriving at Newchurch I was returning from a patrol, just myself and a number two. I came in to land, made what seemed a normal landing, rolled about fifty yards when the port wing dipped, the plane spun round in its own length, the hood slammed shut, I banged first one side of the cockpit then the other, and then all was quiet and still.

The hood must have twisted its rails because it was firmly jammed shut. No amount of pulling, shaking or cussing would move it. I was trapped! A crowbar was fitted inside the cockpit on clips along the side of a floor board. It was quite impossible to reach it from a sitting position inside the cockpit. Someone from 486 Squadron fetched one from another plane and eventually, after about ten minutes, I was free!

Sitting inside the plane, I had felt quite okay - probably a couple of fair-sized bruises on each shoulder, but otherwise unscathed. However, when I stepped down out of the plane and saw its condition I felt quite ill! The engine had left its mountings, and with its propeller, blades bent all this and that away, was sitting dejected looking a couple of hundred yards down the runway. The fuel pipe's broken end was still pouring aircraft fuel, which was bubbling and steaming on the hot engine mountings. The one thing I never did like much was the thought of being burnt! The fuselage was broken behind the cockpit and at right angles to the front of the plane, broken again in front of the tail which hung down towards the ground.

Both undercarriage legs were gone, and the plane sat more or less level on two short stumps. It hadn't done the runway tracking much good either, and from the damage it could be seen that the port leg had broken, the plane had swung round on this stump at around 95mph. The other leg had broken on the way. No wonder I had been thrown about a bit.

Our senior engineering officer was a Wing Commander and ex-pilot. You would have thought he would have been sympathetic, but he wasn't. He was most irate at what had been done to his lovely new aeroplane and accused me of ground looping it. Fortunately, several people saw the landing and vouched for the fact that it was perfectly normal. In particular, the crew of the control caravan (there was no tower at Newchurch) that was located at the end of the runway within a few yards of my touch down. A ground loop generally involves digging one wing tip in and miraculously there wasn't a scratch on either wing.

Both undercarriage legs were sent to Farnborough for investigation and after some weeks I was called into Allen Dredge's office and told that a report had been received which stated that both legs had fatigue cracks which had been there some time, and that the breaks were in the opposite direction to that which would occur from a heavy landing. No one else said a word, no apology from humbled Wing C.Os, whose bloody aeroplane had so nearly killed me. As a result of the report, all the Tempests on the two squadrons were subjected to a careful inspection of their undercarriages, and five others were found with cracked legs. A modification was made on the legs with great speed and I never did hear of any further cracks of this sort.

Eventually the invasion of Europe took place and we did our share of beachhead patrols, without so far as I was concerned very much of interest happening. We certainly saw nothing of any enemy aircraft and had little time to study what was going on below.

As soon as the beach head was established and airfields laid we were expecting to move over into France, although priority would obviously go to the squadrons of rocket firing Typhoons which were to give close support to the army with such devastating effect.

Then something happened which changed our role completely. The first 'Doodlebug' came over.

At the time we were doing readiness from first light. Two in the cockpits ready to go, and two kitted out ready to run from the dispersal. I was on one morning and just arriving at the dispersal in a truck, at about 3.30am when we heard a strange burping noise, and a dark shadow flitted across the still dark sky, quite low and with a long fiery tail behind it. I'm afraid that first time of seeing one; we just stood and stared until someone shouted. 'Flying bombs, lets get up there after them!'

That ended any chance of joining in the second front. The Tempest was the fastest plane in operation at that time, and at the sort of height they came over, so that we were held back at Newchurch to chase them.

Usually they came in waves, at around a thousand feet, and travelling at about 350 mph. They varied, and the best of them we were hard pressed to catch, others were more easy. In the early days we had the field to ourselves. Lefty Whitman chased one right into the outskirts of London, shot it down, only to see it hit a block of flats. After that we were told to leave them alone once they were over the suburbs. After all they might possibly pass right over London and fall in open country beyond. It was soon made impossible to chase them far into London because a dense balloon barrage was put around the southern and eastern approaches. It was frustrating to be almost within range of one only to see it chug merrily on through the balloons. I don't know how many the balloons did bring down, but it was amazing how many V1s we watched pass through quite unscathed.

From an hour before dawn, until an hour after dusk, we maintained two aircraft in the air, two at immediate readiness, and two at five min. If an alert came these took off. If the Doodlebugs were detected in any numbers, everything flyable took off.

The area around Romney Marshes and in to Ashford was literally peppered with the craters made by these things. One early morning, I was on readiness and had just left for dispersal, when one came down only about thirty yards from our tent. Fortunately, between it and the tent there was a ditch with raised banks, and this deflected much of the blast upwards. Nevertheless, the tent was split from end to end and the late sleepers shaken out of their beds.

Eventually, a three-mile-wide band along the coastline was given over to AA guns, and any other device that might prove effective. We were allowed the space between the guns and the balloons, or the area over the sea. We were more or less obliged to stick to this area, but any gun whether in the area or not had a go. In particular the Americans who were stationed at other airfields on Romney Marshes, and had plenty of ammunition, most of which seemed to be aimed at the following aircraft rather than the Doodlebug. Maurice Rose flying my 'R' for Robert had half-inch shells through the wing, which meant the wing being changed. Strange to say, it was never so fast after that change.

Ron Pottinger in 'R' for Robert

Our own gunners too, were not allowing sufficient deflection and initially their success rate wasn't all that good, which frustrated us, because we also had greater difficulty in shooting them down in the brief time allowed us. However, the gunners had plenty of opportunity for practice and eventually, when provided with proximity fuses, were doing extremely well. Even we were forced to admit it!

The main difficulty I found was in seeing the Doodlebug. To gain a speed advantage we usually patrolled above their usual height and with their small size and khaki colour it was not easy to see them against the ground beneath. I was officially credited with six and a half shot down. Not very many compared with some others. I think there was one pilot claimed sixty odd, but I believe the plane was specially equipped. Several on 3 Squadron scored in the twenties and up to thirty. I realised later that my eyesight was not as good as it should have been, but of course, I was not going to risk being thrown off the squadron by saying so.

My half a kill was probably made up of several parts of Doodlebugs. It was amazing how you could shoot one down, with so far as you could see an otherwise empty sky, and yet you would find yourself sharing it with two other pilots who both reckoned they had got it. Mind you, it must have been a terrible job keeping track of it all, with so many coming over at once, but it could also be frustrating for us!

The people controlling us would give courses to steer to pick up a Doodlebug, but of course had quite often little idea of the conditions in the air. On one early morning myself and a No 2 were up on patrol and there were huge black cumulus clouds everywhere. We were out over the sea and were continually being guided into the heart of a really fierce thunderstorm. It was black as night, apart from which the rain lashed down so that visibility was nil. I had no alternative but to keep my eyes in the cockpit and fly back the way we had come on instruments. My No 2's eyes would have been glued to me flying formation, so that the chances of either of us seeing V1's were zero. But each time, we got out of the murk, and were given a fresh course to steer we found ourselves headed straight back into it again. The whole patrol was a complete waste of time. If there were any Doodlebugs around, we certainly didn't see them.

Another time, I was directed out to sea when there was low cloud down on the deck all along the coast. The only way through was by flying down the valley and out over Hastings. It was like flying down a tunnel, hills on either side and cloud above my head, and not knowing if the tunnel might be blocked. Again we saw no Doodlebugs, and then came the difficulty of finding a way back in.

Certain episodes stick in the memory. On one occasion I was flying No 2 to F/O Kosh, and we and a third pilot were all chasing after the same Doodlebug. I was in the middle and slightly below and behind the other two. As soon as I was within reasonable distance I gave it a good burst and was gratified to see large lumps fly off and the thing go into a nosedive. I was later complimented on my shooting but told I should have let my No 1 have first whack! I'm afraid my home was in London and I was only interested in stopping the 'Doodlebugs', never mind the niceties!

W/O Reid shot one down over Romney Marshes near Ham and it landed on a farmhouse, the only building for miles. It killed the old couple in the house. Reid was terribly upset.

One day I was down amongst the tents when one came over quite high and flew in large circles over our part of Kent. Probably it was hit, or possibly there was a fault in its guidance system. Anyway, you can imagine the scramble for cover every time it came overhead, and the almost audible sighs of relief when it passed over. Then it didn't re-appear so presumably it had come down somewhere else.

It was on a Doodlebug patrol with F/Sgt Everson as my No 2, when I had yet another undercarriage failure.

We were at a height of around 3000ft somewhere behind Eastbourne. On this occasion, we had been guided onto an oncoming V1. Suddenly I saw it way beneath us, travelling in almost the opposite direction. I rolled the plane onto it's back and dropped into a half loop, meanwhile trying to keep my eye on the Doodlebug. They were not at all easy to see against the ground. I was near vertical and, travelling at somewhere near 500mph when the plane suddenly and violently dipped downwards and under, trying to do an inverted loop. I throttled back, and heaved back on the control column. It took all my strength with my feet raised onto the upper pedals to pull the plane slowly back into more or less level flight, and a more reasonable speed. By then I had seen that the undercarriage light for the port leg was showing red.

My No 2 had stayed with me, he should really have gone after the Doodlebug, but maybe he didn't see it. He confirmed that the port leg was in fact down and swinging loose.

Back at base the advice which came over the air was tremendous in quantity, and varied in content. Land with wheels up, land with wheels down. It wouldn't be raised, neither would it lock down. It just swung loosely beneath the aircraft. I myself was uncertain how to play the scene, wheels up would possibly be safer for me, but would almost certainly write off the aircraft. Wheels down it could collapse on the port side with the possibility of a high speed ground loop with even more dire results.

Someone had fetched our boss, Wing Commander Roland Beamont, and he settled things by telling me to come in wheels down. I remember circling, uneasily, but too busy to be afraid. On the approach I yanked my safety straps as hard as I could, and made sure the hood was securely locked open. I didn't fancy being trapped in the cockpit again. The landing must have been the best ever. It really greased on, ran for a couple of hundred yards straight and then slowly turned left, despite all my frantic efforts on the right brake and judicious bursts of the throttle. It ended up about fififty yards off the runway, and at right angles to it, as if it had turned it's back on the whole sorry scene.

As I climbed out, everyone came running up, congratulations and smiles everywhere. Beamont congratulated me on the landing, and bawled me out for not knocking the switches off as soon as I touched down. In fact with my straps so tight I couldn't reach the switches, and in any case the engine was a good deal of use in keeping the plane straight after touchdown. My flight commander also bawled me out for not flying around longer to get rid of more fuel. Should I have cared, I hadn't even a scratch.

So far as the plane was concerned, it was still in one piece. However, the small strut, which had broken, had swung down during the landing and gone through the wing. This meant that the wing had to be changed. A pity because otherwise there would have been no damage except the strut which caused all the excitement.

The Tempest Wing and their successes against the V1 were making the news. Of course any good news was a boost to the general public's moral, so the press were invited down to Newchurch for the day.

I didn't see much of them but I think they talked to anyone who was around at the time. Some of the European pilots, who still had families across the Channel, were not too keen on the publicity and made themselves scarce while the news hawks were around. As usual, what they didn't hear, they made up. In particular several pilots acquired nicknames, which none of us had ever heard, and a good deal of amusement was had by all.

Around that time we also had a visit from the famous writer, Ernest Hemingway. He had come over from America as a war correspondent to cover the D-Day landings. I think he spent most time in the officer's mess, and talked to Roland Beamont and others. He did come out to dispersal where some of us, in a variety of states of 'readiness', were sitting in a group on the grass. From what I can remember he didn't take part in any conversation with the group. I recall it was a comparatively quiet time without a lot of activity.

The Air Officer Commanding, Air Vice Marshall Harry Broadhurst also paid us a visit, and took up a Tempest to try out his new super plane. Unfortunately the Sabre engine played up with it's old tricks. After sputtering and coughing on take off, he was glad to get down on earth again safely.

Then we started doing night patrols, and I didn't like that at all. A fighter is not like a larger plane where things happen comparatively slowly. Without any sort of a reference you can be upside down before you know it, unless you keep your head inside the cockpit, and glue your eyes to the instruments, and then you aren't going to see many Doodlebugs.

To assist us, searchlights at intervals along the coast would be arranged in pairs. One with it's beam vertical, the other with it's beam elevated to about 45 degrees and pointing out to sea. A single plane would patrol between two of the vertical beams, flying figure of eights, turning out towards the sea at either end. The searchlights helped in that you knew where you were, but the light did nothing for your night vision.

On the first of these night patrols (30 July 1944), I was directed onto a V1. I could see the flame from the rear of its engine from some way off, and turned to come up behind it, adjusting the trim of the aeroplane as I did. You can't shoot accurately if the plane is skidding or slipping all over the sky. It's difficult to judge distance at night, but as soon as I thought I was near enough I gave it a long burst of fire. It's fuel caught fire and the whole thing went up in a sheet of flame.

I pulled up to avoid flying through the flames, but was pretty well blinded by the explosion. The last thing I saw as I ducked my head into the 'office' to look at my instruments, was the grey shape of yet another plane which pulled up from beneath me passing within fifty feet on my port side and a little ahead, and then vanished into the night.

My thought as I went onto instruments was 'How many more moths round this particular flame?' I flew on instruments for a few minutes to let my sight recover a little, and an anxious few minutes it was too! Then I set a course for my friendly searchlight, and resumed patrol. I only had a momentary glimpse of the other aircraft, but I was fairly certain it was a Mosquito. However the next day I was told I had shared the kill with a Spitfire of 91 Squadron.

Friday, 1 September 1944
Did one patrol in the morning with Adams who was suffering from a hangover so we patrolled separately. Got horribly cheesed and tried a few aerobatics to pass the time away. C.O. asked me for a list of trips and claims, the boys say for a gong, I doubt it myself.

In the afternoon had a lecture on V2 the long-range rocket. Amazing the amount of gen they have collected about it already.

Sunday, 3 September 1944
Patrol in the morning with Adams, Hastings to Rye. In the afternoon we were patrolling Ashford to Canterbury. Before returning to base I beat up Joy's and Addie came down too, so if she was in she certainly heard us. Flew back to Newchurch on the deck.

Thursday, 7 September 1944
Weather was pretty duff and they released us about lunchtime. Bob and I went to Hawkinge for a bath and afterwards to flicks in Folkestone. Met the rest of the gang in Bobbies afterwards. When the dance finished, had a sign hunt and a good haul.

Friday, 8 September 1944
My commission came through, also Bob Cole's backdated to the 6th July. Celebrated the event by being on a charge for a dirty tent in the morning. Apart from the general mess in the tent, Bob was keeping a spare wheel from his car in there, and had made a bed from an old gate, complete with fittings, so that he didn't have to sleep on the floor.

Sunday, 10 September 1944
Did a show to Rotterdam area again. This time it was a wing show, splitting into squadrons when there. I was number two to our new flight commander F/L Sparrow. On take off the Wing Co did his usual tight circuit and I had to use full revs and boost for about five minutes to catch up. Bert Bailey who was Red 4 turned back at the Dutch Islands having trouble with one of his long-range tanks. Could see nothing of V2 targets but we shot up two trains and sundry barges at Leiden and Katwijk.

I didn't manage to get at the trains but got one large barge at Leiden and six tied up at wharfs at Katwijk on the way out. On the lakes there were dozens of small sailing boats. They were a wonderful sight with their white sails gleaming in the sunlight. I expect they all held German officers and their popsies but we left them alone.

On the way out I saw the odd bit of machine gun and rifle fire and somebody must have scored a lucky hit on Orwin's kite. As we were climbing away about a mile off shore he started streaming smoke and called up saying he was heading back to shore. He slowly lost height and made quite a nice ditching about a quarter of a mile offshore. He called up saying he was OK before he got out and the kite sank in a few seconds. Clapperton flew low over him and he was last seen swimming for the shore in his Mai West, so he should be all right.

In the shambles we got split up rather badly and three of us came back with 486.

Monday, 11 September 1944
Did another wing show in the Rotterdam and The Hague area.

We were to stay up as cover while the Wing Co with 486 went down to have a look at suspected V2 sites. They didn't spot any sites but went down on a train.

We then spotted a train all of our own and the Wing Co gave us permission to go down on it. We had to dive from eight thousand feet and I couldn't slow down enough to get out of the C.O.'s and Teddies way and couldn't fire. Everyone else did and it was left with clouds of steam coming from it and burning furiously.

Both squadrons then headed south followed by the odd spot of flak. McKenzie called up that he was hit and started heading for the emergency landing strip at Brussels, later it turned out that a strut had broken on his undercarriage in the dive.

Then we spotted another train and this time I dropped well back to make sure of having a crack. The C.O. stopped it between two houses and Teddy was too close to fire. I got in a long burst and scored strikes all over the engine. Some flak gunners on the train opened up on me and I broke so violently that I lost the two ahead. Apparently the flak got so hot that everyone else broke without firing. I did one circuit and the C.O. called up and said rejoin over Schowen. I headed that way and picked up a gaggle of other planes on the way. As we passed Overflakkee there was another train steaming merrily along and the whole mob went down on it. I was almost the last down and already it was burning and almost hidden beneath clouds of smoke and steam.

The C.O. and Teddy Sparrow had met up with Mc and were escorting him home. We formed up into something near a formation and headed back too. Wing got four trains destroyed in all.

Tuesday, 12 September 1944
Did a show in The Hague area. An armed recce with four aircraft, Teddy Sparrow leading. We spent quite a while looking at the woods north of The Hague. Just as we were approaching The Hague I spotted a V2 at about three thousand feet. Looked like a doodlebug going vertically upwards. At the time I thought it was an Me163 rocket job and kept my eyes glued on it. At about ten thousand feet it started leaving a vapour trail and the others could see it. Finally it disappeared into the sun at something over twenty thousand feet. I fully expected it to come whistling down out of the sun and kept a good look out behind. It wasn't till later I thought of it being a V2. After searching the woods pretty thoroughly for any sites without any luck we headed north looking for a train Clapperton had pranged that morning but couldn't find it.

As we turned out to sea we got showers of light and heavy flak. We set course straight for home and what an awful lot of sea we seemed to cross before crossing in at N. Foreland.

Wednesday, 13 September 1944
Did an early show beating up some woods north of The Hague suspected of hiding a V2 site. Wing Co was heading our squadron. Was rather hazy and didn't spot target until last moment and went down in a very steep dive pulling out at something over five hundred miles per hour and firing all the way across the wood. Personally I saw nothing at all to pick on, but some of the boys on my left got bursts in on a house with tents pitched all round it. S/L Wigglesworth was leading the section behind ours and blew something up on the ground, blowing himself up with it. Davies who was flying behind him nearly finished on his back too. I didn't see him go in but saw the cloud of smoke and his plane still burning on the ground. We did an orbit to starboard and went straight back to base.

Sunday, 17 September 1944
We did anti flak on the airborne invasion of Holland. We were over there quarter of an hour before the gliders started arriving, and had a couple of flak positions to deal with along the river W of Nijmegen. We couldn't find any guns nor did they open fire on us though we offered them a tempting target by stooging along round in small circles over the place they were supposed to be. Finally we beat up some barges which looked as if they might have the odd gun aboard but even this didn't provoke them into showing them selves. Got three barges Cat III.

Monday, 18 September 1944
More reinforcements were being dropped in Holland and again we did anti flak for them. This time we were a little later and flew up and down the line of gliders and tugs waiting for the guns to open up. One lot got really unfriendly along the riverbank and we went down and sprayed them with our cannon which subdued them somewhat. Bert Bailey lost us in the haze and after looking for us for some while he set off home on his own.

As we came home Overflakkee lived up to its name and let loose at us. We couldn't see where it came from and hadn't the petrol to mess around so came home.

Wednesday, 20 September 1944
We were due to move to Matlaske. Having seen the trucks off with all our kit aboard the weather clamped and stayed clamped all day. Went to Hawkinge for lunch and in the afternoon flew to Manston where we found ourselves billets and I promptly headed for Ramsgate, and Joy.

Ron Pottinger and his wife Joy