



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

CHARLES FRY

FROM BIGGIN HILL TO NORTH AFRICA AND THE MED

During my stay at Biggin Hill, I was involved in flying calibration patterns and other flying activities related to the (then) secret trials for Radio Direction Finding (RDF) as it was known. The trials were, in fact, the beginnings of what was later named Radio Direction Finding and Ranging (RADAR). At that time, there were only three RDF stations in the UK.

My experiences with RDF/RADAR took me, at a later stage, to an informal dinner in Cairo with two RAF Air Marshals.

Air Marshal "Ginger Mitch" Mitchell was handing over Middle East Command to Air Marshal Longmore, just before war was declared in 1939. They were my hosts, and although I enjoyed being wined and dined, I wondered what diabolical plans they had for me.

As we relaxed with port and cigars, all became clear. Almost in unison they said "What are these trials you've been involved in at Biggin Hill"?

"RDF trials, Sir".

"What the Hell is RDF"?

The trials I had been carrying out were so secret that neither of those gentlemen had heard of RDF because details in those days were available only on a "need to know" basis.

RADAR, which has become commonplace in war and peace, was kept close to the British chest in those days, and I feel honoured to have taken a part, small though it may be, in the embryonic stages of such an important development.

On Crete, our squadron was equipped with 15 Gloster Gladiators which we had flown in Egypt, Libya, and Greece. Ours was the last RAF squadron in World War 2 to use biplanes as front-line fighters.

We inherited two Hurricane 2 (C) aeroplanes, gifted to us following the fall of Greece. One of those became mine. The pilot of the other one just disappeared one day, so I had a very proprietary attitude to our sole Hurricane.

At that time, Crete was being subjected to Stuka attacks and the sky was often thick with Messerschmitts. On a fateful day in May 1941, they appeared again in the very early morning, followed by JU88s Dornier 17s and Ju52s. Crete was subjected to a great softening-up before the troop-carrying gliders came on the scene. The sky also turned white with the canopies of German parachutists. The tide of our war had turned.

My Hurricane lay in ruins after I was shot down, but I survived, only to be taken prisoner. So I spent the next four years in Germany as the "guest" of the Third Reich.