

Francis Bull, 2788 Squadron, The RAF Regiment

On the 11th November 1941 I was told to report to the RAF at Cardington, England. My call up had been deferred because of my job. I had never left the Land of Song and my education of life was about to begin. After being kitted out and receiving numerous inoculations, I was posted to Skegness in Lincolnshire. What lay ahead was six weeks of square bashing and adjusting to life outside Wales. I and another Welshman were put into private digs but unfortunately our first encounter with the English was not favourable as the couple who ran the lodging house were unbelievably mean. We were very happy to leave Skegness when our training had finished.

We were then posted to Whitley Bay (just outside Newcastle upon Tyne) and were not looking forward to our next encounter of English hospitality. However, we were pleasantly surprised and found that the Geordies (their nickname) were wonderful people and totally different to the couple we had lived with before. We were billeted in empty houses and the Geordies always had an open door for us making sure we had meals and facilities for washing. My first memory with the English had been wiped out by the genuine kindness that was shown from there on in.

I remember, as a boy, attending the Salvation Army Sunday School and listening to my teacher who had served in WWI. He had been shot through the jaw and after listening to his tales I vowed that I did not want to become a soldier—now here I was being trained to be just that!

In February 1942 we were sent to Filey in Lincolnshire (pre-war Butlins Holiday Camp) and we were once more trained under the Guards Regiment. They informed us that we were the first of a new formation to be called The RAF Regiment. We wore khaki battle dress but kept our blue RAF uniform with shoulder flashes and RAF ranks. After weeks of rigorous army training, five squadrons were formed and 2788 was amongst them. It was here that I found my comrades and five of us are still in touch to this day. In May 1942 we were posted to the Hawkinge, just outside Folkestone, Kent and we were about 180 strong. There were three rifle flights, armoured cars, mortars, anti tank guns and we manned Hispanos and Lewis guns. Life was not bad. In or about October of that year we were split up into echelons A & B and were sent to Scotland.

We boarded the SS Strathallan, not knowing that we were to become part of 'Torch,' the invasion of North Africa. It was my first trip by sea and I was sea sick for three days. I thought 'Thank God that's over' as we entered the Mediterranean, but just as I thought the worst bit of being at sea was over, we were suddenly torpedoed.

We were picked up by destroyers and taken to Oran, then weeks later joined the rest of 2788 at Bona, Tunisia. Life became quiet for a while, only some stukas annoyed us now and again.

Then our Commandant had a bright idea. I found out that his ideas were not too bright! After his flash of inspiration, he volunteered us for Front Line duties and he didn't even have the decency to ask us! When we got to Italy at the end of 1943 it was not long after (about March 1944) he had another flash of inspiration and decided to lend his boys to the Fifth Army. The only nice thing to come out of this for us was that we had American rations and were able to watch films. However, very soon we were in the Line. After about ten days we came out and at that time I shared a sangar with a chap from Liverpool. His name was Brian Atkins and he was known as Tommy. The second time we went in we were heavily shelled by 88's in the Bowl and Tommy was killed. It was 22nd April 1944 and he was buried in the Monte Cassino Cemetery. The third time we went in it was the Fall of Cassino.

After that we went to Corsica and onto the Invasion of South of France. Then back to Italy to take part in the Battles for River Po Northern Italy. So you can see the RAF Regiment played a big part in the Mediterranean conflict.