

LEN PLUMBE

Rob Forsyth



Len is second from the right, 'somewhere' in the Far East

Len did his training as a flight mechanic (engine fitter) in Bristol specialising in Bristol 14 cylinder radial sleeve valve engines. His first appointment was to Bomber Command air station RAF Stradishall in Suffolk where he worked on Wellington (two-engined) and Stirling (four-engined) aircraft. He then moved many times around 3 Group Bomber Command airfields - Waterbeach, Wrating Common and Marham amongst them.

It took 50 ground crew and seven aircrew to turn round a bomber returning from a sortie early in the morning to have it airborne for the next night's sortie over Germany. The top of a Stirling's engine was 22 feet from the ground and, in winter on an east coast airfield, this could give you frostbitten fingers working on cold metal. Sometimes they hardly slept for days at a time when big raids were in progress.

Many aircraft were badly damaged and could not make it back to base; in which case Len would be part of the support team that was dispatched to find, recover or salvage them. Len recalls that the racecourse at Newmarket was a favourite place for belly landing aircraft with damaged undercarriages. No doubt race tracks were similarly useful elsewhere across the country.

In 1944 he embarked on *SS Athlone Castle* and spent six weeks travelling to Bombay in convoy. The ship was crowded with troops and clearly was not much of a pleasure cruise. He does not know which route they took because they did not call in anywhere and every time they looked at the sky the sun was in a different place due to the zigzag courses they steered as an anti-submarine measure.

His unit went by train to Chittagong in East Bengal (now Bangladesh) and from there they set off down the east coast of Burma as a mobile Beaufighter support unit in a variety of places as far south as Cox's Bazaar.

Admiral Mountbatten had decreed that, in order to defeat the Japanese, Allied Forces would fight through the monsoon period - previously it had been thought too wet to do this. Len's unit was flown into small strips cleared in rice paddy fields which would be a runway for one or two days before they moved on. They were a long way from any civilisation and never quite sure on which side of the front line they were, and so supplies were dropped in canisters kicked out of the doorways of low-flying Dakotas operating out of Dum Dum in West Bengal, India. A very important part of the supply was cigarettes; not so much for Len and his mates to smoke but because they were the only 'currency' that villagers valued in return for good information on the whereabouts of Japanese army units.

Mosquito aircraft suffered from being made of wood. Termites could eat them and wood rot quickly set in in the monsoon rains. Wings sometimes fell off because of the combination of both!

The standard practice in the UK had been for support parties to be dispatched on trips of up to six days to find crashed aircraft; in the jungle the same routine was followed with the addition of compasses in their kit together with silk maps (paper maps were useless in rain) and 'compo' rations for food. The latter were almost inedible once you had consumed the bar of chocolate and the small can of bully beef; the rest was sawdust. So they also had to learn what was edible from the forest. All the usual jungle problems existed - getting lost and very small snakes being the worst. When an aircraft was found it had to be destroyed by fire and all sensitive instruments removed to stop the Japanese getting them.

Nearly everyone contracted malaria at some time or other and it took Len several years to get over it on his eventual return to the UK.

Len remembers that finding clean water was a major problem because the Japanese had poisoned the water in surrounding villages and even the drinks in shops and bazaars. The problem was solved by using Japanese PoWs to drink the water first!



Len with Abdul the water fetcher

When Rangoon fell to Allied forces his unit was brought back to Madras in India where they were re-outfitted in new 'jungle greens'. There were two sizes - big or bigger! They embarked on a New Zealand ship, *SS Tamaroa*, and carried out a beach landing on 5 August 1945, rifles at the ready, at Port Swettenham on the east coast of Malaya. The first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima next day and Nagasaki three days later.

The long road home began with a move to Kuala Lumpur, then to Singapore after its liberation. Some of the Japanese aircraft remaining on the base were those used for Kamikaze missions.

Len finally went back up into Malaya to the RAF camp in Butterworth before returning home by ship to be demobbed in 1946.

He continued using his engineering skills in civilian life; working at Hopcroft Holt Garage until he opened the Archway Garage (now Deddington Dental Practice) on New Street in 1957. He ran this until he retired in 1991. He also provided his expertise to a private collection of vintage cars.