

Growing up

One thing I remember distinctly about my early childhood was that we were always moving house. I think this had something to do with our precarious financial position – if you can't pay the rent, you move. Our first move I recall was dramatic. We went to live with Auntie Ada.

Ada was not an Auntie, but a friend of my mothers. She was also a staunch member of the communist party, and she introduced us to walking which she called rambling. The walking was done by getting a train to one of the towns in the Penines. The Penines are a low range of hills between Lancashire and Yorkshire, some 2000 feet high. They were, in their higher parts, bare of trees, with waterfalls, cliffs and large areas of moorland. The lower valleys were dissected by stone walls.

We did not stay long with Ada, but moved to a fairly large, as I remember, in Higher Broughton. I recall there was a large tree in the garden that we used to climb. We moved from there to a house in St James Road, Higher Broughton, where we gradually established ourselves. This must have been in the 1930s and I would have been seven years old.

I started school close to Willows Street. We had a teacher who was Jewish and I enjoyed school.

The house in Willow Street was one of a row, it had a front room that traditionally was the best room and used only for special occasions. The other room we lived in and there was an annex for cooking. The toilet was separate outhouse near the back of the house. There was, if I recall rightly, no bathroom. It was traditional to go to a bathhouse, or for us kids a tin bath.

From this house in St James Rd I continued my schooling at what was called Grecian St Elementary School.

In the early 1930s there was an influenza epidemic and being susceptible, I was put in a large hospital called Hope Hospital. At first I had a bed to myself, but as the

epidemic progressed, they put another child in the bed with me and eventually there were three other children in MY bed. One of my companions had a condition which I believe has the name 'St Vitus dance' and could not keep still. One incident that alarmed me was a patient who was having difficulty breathing and the nurses rushed oxygen equipment to him and dropped it breaking a glass container. Shortly afterwards they put a sheet over his face and I knew he was dead.

As well as attending primary school, Jewish boys, not girls, had to attend Hebrew School Cheda (sp?). The main reason for this was in order to read a passage from the Torah when one became a man at the age of thirteen. After day school at Primary school was over, I would go to learn the Jewish Alphabet. This is a kind of script with characteristics of European script written with a broad quill, but none of the characters are the same and instead of reading from left to right, it is read in the opposite direction. For most of my time my Hebrew teacher was Mr King, Kingey we called him. Kingey was tall and athletic and I now know he was a sadist. From what I remember he maintained discipline by frequent use of the cane. It was a pastime among the students to find and destroy these canes, but Kingey seemed to have an inexhaustible quantity stashed in places we had yet to discover.

At eleven and twelve I was a chubby little fellow, blonde haired, peach skinned and Kingey gave me special treatment. He would keep me back after class and on the pretext of catching me would put me over his knee. I told my parents, but they simply said I must have done something wrong. I tried prayer, but it made not the slightest bit of difference. If Kingey did nothing else, he created for me a healthy scepticism about an all seeing and loving god. I was on my own and Kingey was great example of a sadism and hypocrisy that I had the misfortune to come into contact with.

One other part of Cheda was that the school was attached to a synagogue the

higher Crumpsall School. Many of the Boys in the Cheda were also in the Choir. I had a good voice and so was in the choir. Mr Fairman was the choirmaster and was very impressed with my voice and wanted me to take lessons and have it trained so that it would not be lost when my voice broke. At that time we had moved to St James Road and we were having difficulty paying the rent even with a lodger. I may have mentioned it at home but I knew there was no money.

My uncles used to go to the local town markets. Uncle Eric used to sell smallgoods. He also used to sell contraceptives on the quiet. This was illegal in those days before the second world war. Uncle Eric worked mainly at the weekends. Before he worked the markets he had worked as a musician in the cinemas. At matinees he would play the piano and in the evening he would appear in a tuxedo, playing trumpet, with three other people as a small orchestra. The introduction of sound films put an end to all this.

On Saturday afternoon I would often go to the market with one uncle and for working from 10 in the morning to nine at night I would earn 15 cents. This may sound a very small amount but my first weekly wage was seven shillings and sixpence, the equivalent of seventy-five cents.

Uncle Joe had an unusual and very productive business. It was mostly based on lost property sales, but he also bought up bankrupt businesses, so at one time he might be selling groceries or anything else he had bought cheap. Uncle Joe became in relative terms, very rich. He had a large house in a high class suburb (Prestwich), a big car, an attractive well dressed wife and even a maid. Eventually he moved to a more impressive house in Boulton, became a councillor and eventually Lord Mayor.

Uncle Joe gave me a chance to work on my own. He would drop me at the market with a load of lost property and I would set up a stall and pitch the way my uncles did.

One of the advantages of being on my own was that I could buy my own lunch and

this was a rare treat because there were stalls that sold dairy produce, good bread, cheese, and Horlick, a hot health drink. I became an addict. This of course was before I had left school and was on Saturday. I would often arrive home after 11pm tired but exhilarated, my hands black from handling money.

Most of my early education was at Grecian street Elementary School apart from very early days at Waterloo Rd School. I spent my formative days at this school. We mostly had men teachers but I recall a Mrs Miller who introduced us to plants. For a very small sum it was possible to buy a terra cotta pot, a hyacinth bulb and potting mix. It was a time when things were very tough at home, but it was a dormant seed. I had seen the possibility, and that it was a simple process.

Mr Small and Mr Gate looked after years 8 and 9 respectively. The class size, was, if I remember rightly, 45 and the cane ruled. The school yard was tarmac and we played fairly primitive games that required a minimum of equipment.

There was a school bully called Billy Bergan. I was regarded as a good fighter and a fight was organised for a morning playtime. I went in time quickly and got a headlock on him and brought him to the ground. I didn't have him there for long before a teacher on duty, seeing the crowd, came and stopped the fight and took us to the headmasters office. I had never see the headmaster close up. I remember him being very clean, small and wiry with ginger hair. He told Billy to touch his toes and gave him three strokes of the cane. Billy blubbered and then it was my turn. The sensation was a burning pain, I didn't cry. I made sure of that

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And buy large bundles of umbrellas and gloves. I also learnt how to repair umbrellas, mainly fitting new ribs taken from umbrellas that were past repairing. Uncle Joe made a very good living from this occupation. He had a very good motor

car, a 24hp Morris> He lived in a large house in Prestwich, at that time a very high class suburb. I began working for Uncle Joe and Uncle Eric before I had left school. I left school at fourteen, mainly because it was compulsory to do so. The market job was mainly at weekends and I needed a job for the whole week. I had another uncle, Harry, who had a factory and he made cycle accessories such as cycling jackets, capes leggings and hats. The job was as an errand boy. In a way it was a way of paying back Uncle Harry because he had given me a bicycle as a bar mitzva present. Unfortunately, the bike didn't last long, it was stolen. The bike I used for Uncle Harry was a heavy one with carriers at the front and back and I quite often carried heavy loads.

It was while I was working for Uncle Harry that war broke out. In the first world war Harry had been a quarter master sergeant and had managed to turn the job into a way of making money. He looked on this new war, not as most of us did with dread, but as a golden opportunity. One of his first designs was a satchel for a gas mask. When the war broke out it was assumed, as was the case in the first world war that gas would be used and it was compulsory to carry a gas mask.

One of the effects of the war was that many skilled men went into the forces. The government, aware of this, offered courses to unskilled people to take up these trades. I began a course to become a fitter, a skill that I hadn't even heard of. It was actually a job that I already had some skill at. I had begun taking bikes to pieces and repairing them so I knew what a file was.

The course in fitting was at the engineering section of a large soap works. There was an instructor and you were given a place on a bench with a vice, a number of files, a scraper, access to a micrometer, a faceplate and a set square. The task was to take a piece of mild steel, file and scrape it into a square exactly three inches by three inches by one quarter of an inch plus or minus one thousandth of an inch. After a few days I managed this task to the satisfaction of the foreman. The

next task was to drill a series of holes in this and file a one and a half inch square in this to plus or minus one thousandth of an inch.

After about three weeks I had completed this task and was sent to work as a fitter at the Shell Petroleum Company Maintenance Depot at Trafford Park. This was about 10km from where I lived and took 45 minutes on my bike. The day I started I was given a number of spanners and a screwdriver and told to take the cylinder heads off the Gardiner engine of a Scammell Diesel. This was no great problem as I had taken bicycles to pieces and had even built my bicycle from parts.

I found the work interesting and the two mechanics I worked for, once they saw I was a likely lad were very helpful. Eventually they would send me out in the van to take diesel pumps and injectors to be serviced. The place I went to was called Simms and was only ten minutes from home. I asked if they needed any fitters> There was at this time an acute shortage of tradesmen due to people being called up for service in the armed forces and despite the fact that this was a reserved occupation many men went and volunteered. As Simms had a shortage they gladly accepted me, so I went back and gave my notice.

Apart from the time I saved cycling to work, the hours at Simms were considerably shorter. I worked on magnetos mainly but did some rewiring and voltage control boards.

The workers at Simms were not much older than I was and on Friday night when we got paid it was the custom to go to the pub, usually the Half Way House, and down three pints of beer, throw up in the toilets and then stagger home. I might have done this forever, but I had this desire, probably a very romantic one to fly.

The house we lived in after being bombed out of St James Rd was a much larger than we had ever lived in. The only reason we were living in this house was because it had been unoccupied and we had been bombed out. We were asked if we would

billet airmen who were about to be posted overseas, and this we agreed to do. The airmen we billeted were only a little older than I was. They had just completed their initial training and were being sent overseas to do their flying training. There was no place in Britain where this could be done safely and there were also very few airfields that were not fully committed to the war. The scheme was known as the Empire Air Training Scheme and cadets were sent to Canada and Southern Rhodesia.

I asked some of these cadets how easy it was to be accepted as a cadet. 'A piece of cake', 'Easy' they said.

'What's an equation?' I asked. They showed me and it seemed relatively simple. I applied in due course went for my interview and was accepted on the 3rd of February 1942

The Royal Air Force

My induction into the Air Force was at Carrington on the 17th of August 1942. This airforce base was famous in that it still has at that time the hangar for the R100, one of the worlds largest dirigibles, a gas filled airship. Most of these airships were filled with hydrogen and met with a very hot fate.

At Cardington we were kitted out and it was here that I came across service food. Breakfast was bacon and fried bread, and if you were lucky a fried egg swimming in fat. Being Jewish, at first I refused to eat the bacon but after a few days I did. I think I may have spent Sunday there. It was C of E's to the right, Catholics to the left, other denominations to the middle. Jews go and clean the latrines. I quickly became a Christian and one week I was OP, another C of E, and even Catholic. I tried not to discriminate. What I saw confirmed my agnosticism.

From Cardington we were posted to London and were billeted in some very modern flats at St Johns Wood. This is near to the Lord Cricket Ground and we had our F.F.I. (Freedom from Infection) examination in the famous long room. We had to strip for the inspection and one of the examinations involved the doctor

holding your testicles and asking you to cough. It served to be a very useful test as it was used at many of the medicals I had.

Most of the airmen who were aircrew cadets were from private schools, and few were from working class backgrounds. There were however, a number that had entered the Air Force as ground crew from the same sort of background as I had with a State School education to fourteen. When eventually, I was posted to my initial training wing I had as friends, two such airmen, Steve and Snowy. They were riggers and fitters and had already been in the airforce for four years. My Airforce number was 1623665. Mine had seven digits, theirs five. They talked about an airforce where they knew nearly everybody, but more importantly they knew what you could get away with.

Drill was an essential part of the training. We had a corporal in charge of our intake, indeed it seemed that the most important thing in the course was polishing your boots and buttons, having a sharp crease in your trousers and marching with precision. They called it bullshit and it was regarded as a necessary evil. Our accommodation was in the Grand Hotel in Torquay, which was a high-class holiday resort in Devon. The food was reasonable and though the weather was winter, the climate was temperate.

Each week we had to complete a cross country run, but Snowy, Steve and I would find ways to make the route a little shorter. The subject that we studied were the Theory of Flight, which I found fascinating, Engines, which I knew about and Navigation. We also had to be able to use morse code. I think we were considered efficient at ten words per minute.

We marched everywhere and our little corporal gradually revealed himself to be quite human. The course finally ended, but one small incident had quite an effect. Torquay was close to the English Channel and across that short stretch of water was occupied France. As part of our duties we had to do fire watching. This was done 24 hours a day. We were doing our stint one day on the roof of a building when we saw

two aircraft approaching us not much higher than we were. They looked like a couple of Typhoons. In fact one of them was a FokeWulf and it opened fire with machine guns, presumably having seen us. We jumped through a hole in the roof. The FolkWulf then dropped a bomb which hit the hospital and did some damage as well as killing a few people. We last saw the FolkWulf heading back towards France with the Typhoon in hot pursuit.

After initial training I was posted to Booker, a small airfield south of London. The main purpose was to select people with an aptitude for flying. The field was a grass field and the aircraft were Tiger Moths. These were aircraft developed after World War I and were biplanes with a small engine that was started by 'swinging' a wooden propeller. They had two cockpits with very basic instruments.

The instructor explained that each control did and he took off into the wind which was indicated by a wind sock. Once airborne he explained how to bank and turn using the joystick and the rudder. After landing, he took off again and handed the controls over to me. He asked me to do turns using the horizon to prevent gaining or losing height. Having ridden a bike, I found this flying by the seat of the pants easy. Having done a circuit of the airfield, he said 'Go ahead and land'. I glided in and approaching the ground lost height slowly till I was on the ground. The instructor was pleased with this but pointed out that what I had done was not quite what I should have done, a three point landing but a wheeler. He took over and did a circuit and showed me. I then did a take off circuit and this time a three point landing. I still had plenty of hours left and we used them doing cross country flying. Booker was close to Windsor on Thames and one of our trips was to this historic site.

After this initial selection I was posted to the holding unit at Heaton Park near home ready to be posted overseas for flying training. Hardly any primary training was done in Britain. Apart from being very dangerous because of enemy aircraft, every available flying field apart from tiny

fields like Booker were essential for defence and offence. There was what was known as the Empire Air Training Scheme, Canada and Rhodesia being the main ones.

Unlike many airmen I did not stay at Heaton Park long – only a few days – then it was on a troop train to the north. Eventually we found that we were in Glasgow and got off the train and on to a large ferry boat.

We sailed up the Clyde to a nondescript looking ship. As we got closer we began to see that the ship was very big and as we passed under the stern we saw its name – Queen Mary. At that time it was one of the largest and fastest ships in the world.

There were various rumours as to where we might be going but we boarded and were given a cabin in what was probably the lowest class. It was hard to get into the cabin because it had nine bunks in it, three sets of three tiered bunks. Parts of the ship were palatial and in one of the dining rooms we had a lecture from some [man, lad, lord????] on the future welfare society that was planned for Britain after the war had been won..

We were on deck just before the ship was about to sail and a naval torpedo boat tied up and a single figure was taken on board. The person was unmistakably that of Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Britain.

Shortly afterwards we sailed down the Clyde toward the open sea, together with a cruiser. The Queen Mary was one of the fastest ships in the world and generally made the trip across the Atlantic unescorted but we were accompanied by a cruiser of the Royal Navy. The Queen Mary steered a zig zag course so that every few minutes the ship keeled over. This was mainly a strategy against being torpedoed by U-boats. A very large tonnage was sunk in the Atlantic despite the Navy and the RAF Sunderland flying boats. Presumably as a consequence of this threat we were accompanied by the Navy's fastest cruiser.

If I remember rightly it took three days to cross the Atlantic. We arrived in New

York during a stevedore's strike. The captain without the aid of tugboats turned the gigantic ship in the river and parked it as one would a car. Churchill was the first to leave.

Eventually we were put ashore and taken by bus to Grand Central Station where we boarded a train. This headed north to Taunton in New England. This was a historic town with many fine buildings built presumably by the very early settlers. We were put into a US army barracks where the food was good and the accommodation excellent. After a few days we were entrained again, travelling north and crossing the border to Canada. We eventually got off the train at Moncton [sp??] New Brunswick on the East coast of Canada. It was fine summer weather but we did not stay long. At this stage of the war there was flying training in Canada and we were assured that this was where it would take place, but within a week we were on the train again, going back into the USA. The journey was a long one. We spent a day in Chicago and then on south west to Kansas City and finally to Ponca City, Oklahoma, a hundred miles south of Wichita in Kansas and a hundred miles north of Oklahoma City in Oklahoma.

Ponca City at that time was about the size of Keswick in England or Penola in Australia. It was at that time a company town, somewhat like Broken Hill, except instead of mining lead, it pumped oil for one of the oil giants, Conoco. Being in a flat landscape with hardly any hills it was the ideal spot for flying training. It had low rainfall and little cloud. It was an area where twisters developed whilst I was there I actually saw one develop while I was flying. A big cumulonimbus cloud developed a roll in front of it, and this roll at one side dropped down to the ground and began tearing up small vegetation and dust. It later moved into the town and lifted a few cars.

The Darr School of Aeronautics (No 6 British Flying Training School) was a private school and the accommodation was good and the food excellent. The dining room was air conditioned by an enormous fan pushing hot air through a web where

water was circulating and the result was moist cool air.

My Flying Log Book records that on May 31st I took off with my flying instructor, Mr Simms in a Boeing Primary Trainer 17 with a 220hp Continental engine and did straight and level flying. Climbing and descending and medium level turns. On June the 9th I did my first solo flight and by the end of June I had 30 hours flying. 12 of these were solo, that is with no instructor. By the middle of June I was flying solo at night.

The next big step was flying the more powerful Harvard, a monoplane with a Pratt and Whitney engine. The flying was more advanced and included long cross-country with a navigator. As well as day cross-country, we also did so at night.

On the 2nd of November while returning from a cross country flight with a fellow student as navigator, an American called Porterfield, when coming in to land I decided to use landing lights. I had not been instructed in their use and had the impression that you shone them down the runway. I was doing this about 40 feet above the runway, a wing dropped and I stalled. I had lost flying speed. Porterfield, began screaming "cut the switches, cut the switches" He presumably thought we were going to spin and crash. At the same time the bloke in the tower was saying "Jesus Christ.....Jesus Christ"

However during training we had done exactly this and the way to recover was to full throttle and nose down. This I did and I managed to bring the wing up and then brought the nose up on full power and settled down with a large bump on to the runway. The aircraft began to do a ground loop and I corrected this, but began to spin in the opposite direction. We slowed down considerably and eventually stopped. Flood lights were turned on, a fire engine and other vehicles came out. I thought "This is it Salkin – the end of your flying career."

The following morning I was hauled up in front of the Chief Instructor Clyde [check spelling] W Fellers. He was the voice in

the tower calling on Jesus. I was severely reprimanded but that was all. I presume they thought that I was that lucky to get out of such an ordeal without wrecking the aircraft or injuring myself or my navigator. I might even make it through the course.

This was not the case with one other member of the course. He was universally liked and was an American from Texas. He was actually a cowboy and was allowed to wear high heeled boots, because he just couldn't wal in normal shoes. He went out flying one day and didn't come back. The plane was later recovered, a burnt out shell. It was the first of a number of military funerals I attended.

Most of the weekends were free and we would hitch hike to either of the two large cities, Wichita or Oklahoma City. It was generally Wichita and we were always welcome at one particular home.

On October 16th and 17th 1943 as a unit in the final part of the course, we did a two-day cross country in which we flew from Ponca City to Amarillo in Texas. The landing there was noticeably faster because of the high altitude of the airfield.

I was flying with an old friend Steve from Torquay ITW (Initial Training Wing). He was a one of the very few who were with the RAF before the war, a very laconic and unflappable character with a broad Cornish accent. We took turns to fly and navigate. From Armarillo we flew to a field called Hensley, which is near Dallas, also in Texas. Each leg of the trip was about 400 miles or in todays measure 600km or two to three hours flying depending on wind direction. The final leg for the first day was to Little Rock in Arkansas and we spent the night in a hotel.

The following day we flew to Independence in Kansas, to Kearney in Nebraska and finally back to Ponca City. Apart from the confidence it gave us in flying and navigating, we saw the vastness of the American continent and came into contact with American Servicemen. They called us Limeys and were curious as to why we were there. We had to explain how every airfield in Britain was precious

and how vulnerable a training plane would be to enemy aircraft. Few of them realised how small an Island Britain was and how close it was to continental Europe. Some of them no doubt discovered this at a later date

The course eventually came to a close and I think everyone graduated. We were given our wings at a ceremony and promoted from Leading Aircraftsmen to either pilot Officer or Sergeant. The criteria for selecting officers was perfectly straightforward, it was the old boys network. If you had been to a particular group of private secondary schools, you automatically got a ribbon round your sleeve. If like Steve or myself, you had finished your education at 14, no matter hoe good you were, you got three stripes. Pay being commensurate with you rank made it even more galling.

We went back to Moncton New Brunswick. This time it was winter with snow a metre deep with large ruts made by the cars. Fortunately we did not spend much time there. Our return to England was by another of the very fast ships that ran the blockade, the Muaretania, not as big as the Queen Mary.

Back in England we were posted to a holding unit at Harrogate, a watering place in Yorkshire. Like Torquay we were in a Grand Hotel and there were hundreds of us waiting to OUT (Operational Training Units). For some it would be flying twin engined aircraft in preparationfor flying bombers. For others it would be converting on Masters to British type aircraft and then onto fighters, mainly spitfires at this stage of the war.

The conversion unit was 5AFU (Advanced Flying Unit) and it was at Candover [check sp] near Ludlow at Shropshire. We called it Mudlow in Slopshire. I was there from the 15th of July to the end of August 1944The purpose of flying Masters was that we had been selected to fly singles and the instruments were similar to that of Hurricanes and Spitfires.

Flying in Britain was very different to the USA. The weather was quite often cloudy, the navigation difficult, but there was the

compensation of being able at times to hitch hike home.

We had a number of Australians on the course and the odd New Zealander. One New Zealander was a personal friend and he would share with his mates the fruitcakes his mum would send. He talked about the mountains that he likened to the Himalayas than the Alps because of their extensive glaciation

One event that occurred at Candover, which I suppose was life threatening. I was night flying solo and had lined up for take off, just after a Master had landed. I heard over the radio the sound of the horn and some extensive swearing in an Aussie accent. I was just about to open the throttle when a voice came over the radio "I've come a guttzer". The floodlights came on and there in the middle of the runway was an aircraft with its wheels still retracted. It was a close call for both of us.

After the course I was sent to Blackpool, a renowned seaside resort on the west coast. This was a holding unit prior to a posting to an Operational Training Unit. I had my 21st Birthday at Blackpool and as I was born on the 6th of June, it coincided with D-Day when the Battle to establish a Bridgehead in Northern France began. Shortly after turning 21 we went to Liverpool and boarded a troopship. We travelled in convoy and were attacked a number of times by U-boat and numerous depth charges went off. As far as I know no ships were sunk.

We passed through the straits of Gibraltar and entered the Mediterranean, eventually landing at Alexandria. Egypt was an exciting place and there were all kinds of attractions. We were warned against the dangers of going out with the local women. As the warrant Officer put it "You're going to put your old man where I wouldn't put this" brandishing his walking stick. There were actually much better things to do. I remember going to a string quartet. I cannot remember who they were, but they were no doubt world class.

From Alexandria we went by train to Cairo and were billeted in the Heliopolis Grand Palace Hotel. It was grand only in

name. It was summer and the flies were very numerous. It made eating difficult. Some airmen made a hobby of beheading flies which would then fly off without their heads.

I shared a room with three Aussies and one day there was a 'blue'. One airman called another one a dingo. A dingo is a native Australian dog which tends to avoid people and any sort of trouble. The fight didn't last long, one blow brought a bloody nose.

Shortly after this I was posted with other UK airmen to an Operational Training Unit. I later heard that all the Aussies were not posted and there were a number of them who eventually took over the Hotel and demanded to be posted. The Officer in Charge called in the troops and besieged the hotel. Eventually the Australian Liaison Officer was called in and on the promise that they would be posted immediately, the siege ended.

The Operational Training Unit that we went to was Number 71 (Middle East) OUT at Ismailia on the Suez Canal. This airfield was a historic one and was used on the first flight from England to Australia. From what I remember the runways were very long and were very close to the canal. Apart from the vegetation near the canal it was mostly desert.

My flying log book indicates that I began flying at Ismailia on November 15th 1944 and the first four hours were familiarisation of the area and conditions, flying with an instructor. I was then sent solo in the Harvard and immediately afterwards did the cockpit drill on a Hurricane IIC and took off. The Hurricane being a single seat fighter, the first time you fly it, you do so by yourself. They warn you that there is a slight lag of control with the backward movement of the joystick. That is, if you pull the stick back, nothing happens for five or so seconds, so the uninitiated pull the stick back further, the result of which is that the nose comes up too far and you push the stick forward and the nose starts to go down. Eventually you get used to this lag in control. I spent one hour landing and taking off. From November 21st to

