

HOW I JOINED THE RAF

By Gerhard Heilig

One Saturday afternoon, it was the 9 January 1943, I happened to be walking along the Euston Road when I spotted a recruiting office. For quite some time now it had been my ambition to fly and on the spur of the moment I decided to go in and make inquiries. A kind and solicitous army Sergeant politely inquired what he might do for me.

"I want to volunteer for air crew duties with the RAF."

"You've come to the right place, sign here."

"I don't think it's going to be as simple as that. You see, I am Austrian, technically an enemy alien. Is there any chance of being accepted for flying?"

"Oh yes. You'll have to make a special application stating your case and it will be considered on its merits. This will take about six weeks. Now if you'll sign here and take a preliminary medical, don't worry, if your application should be turned down you won't have to join up in any other capacity, for being technically an enemy alien you can't be called up at all. Thank you, good luck."

I stopped at the next phone box and called my father.

"Hullo, would you mind sitting down? Never mind why, are you comfortable?"

Good. I just wanted to tell you that I have volunteered for flying duties."

My father agreed that it had been a good idea to have made him sit down before telling him my news. I'd been worried how he would react to my decision but he didn't bat an eyelid. He helped me to formulate my letter and later on he told me that he had also written one himself in support of my application. He wasn't in fact all that taken with the idea but very sensibly took the attitude that it was really my life, to do with as I thought fit. We had become very close since I had come to live with him in London. He never asked any questions but was always very interested in anything I wished to tell him. I enjoyed these talks and his quiet confidence in me produced a natural urge to communicate my doings to him. I might leave out the details, later on at any rate, for at this time there were no details worth talking about, but I found myself desisting from doing things I might have been ashamed to mention. I was an absolute innocent at the time, for some time to come in fact, but I am sure that my father's attitude helped considerably to keep me out of trouble. If in doubt I used to ask myself: could I tell dad about this? If the answer was no I would desist. There must have been numerous occasions when I was being over-scrupulous, a habit which I fortunately lost later on, but it was better being safe than sorry. Even if a surfeit of safety sometimes resulted in some matters to be taken to a less than satisfactory conclusion. He was more than a father, he was a friend and comrade as well, and both his and my mother's example have ever been good guiding lights throughout my varied life.

A number of well meaning people scolded me for attempting to play the little hero when in fact I could not have been called up for active or any other kind of service, but there was nothing heroic about my action whatsoever. My motivation was twofold. First of all I had been smitten by an overwhelming desire to fly. Not only was this the sole means available in order to achieve my ambition, but it could also be done at someone else's expense. Secondly, I was only too aware that Britain had undoubtedly saved my life and I would not have been happy to take advantage of my situation and let others do the dirty work. I had found not only safety but also a great deal of happiness and contentment in England, intended to stay in the country after the war and saw this as a good

way of paying my way. No heroics, simply combining personal ambition with a desire to do the decent thing.

But I also countered my well-meaning critics by questioning the so-called safety of the civilian life I had chosen to leave behind me. Had not more than enough civilians been killed or hurt through enemy action? Were air raids not still a regular occurrence? Even in peacetime one did not have to venture far abroad to risk injury or death, enough housewives suffer injury and worse in their own kitchens. There was no guarantee that I would be involved in action or hear a single shot fired in anger. And if I did, I would not necessarily get hurt in the process and the possible permutations were endless. This was simply what I wanted to do and all my instincts told me that I was doing the right thing. Many years later I came across a saying: If there is something you really want to do, go ahead and do it. This was the spirit which had moved me, a guiding principle which has never failed me throughout my life.

About this time I got my first political education. I had always been aware of my father's communist leanings and he now indoctrinated me with Marxist theory. It was all so utterly logical that I found it impossible not to believe the truth it implied. But fortunately I had far more exciting things to occupy my mind so I just tucked it all away in the innermost recesses of my mental filing tray and left it at that. But it did not take me long to discover that this apparently wonderful ideology had left out one tiny but all-important factor - the human one. I then dug out the dusty file, added this human factor - and discovered communism to be the biggest and most dangerous confidence trick of all time.

Eleven days after volunteering for the RAF I passed my aircrew medical and two months after my first visit to the recruiting office, on the 9 March, a letter from the Air Ministry informed me that I had been accepted. On 12 March I passed my aptitude tests and appeared before the aircrew selection board.

Not unnaturally I wanted to become a pilot, preferably a fighter pilot, and if at all possible flying Spitfires. I was soon brought down a peg or two, they wouldn't have me as a driver, airframes. Just as well as I was to discover later. More pilots had survived than expected and there were already more trainees in the pipeline than the system could easily digest. Only very few applicants were being accepted for the PNB (pilot, navigator, bomb-aimer) category, generally from lads with long service in the Air Training Corps. Had they taken me, I may not have finished my training before the war ended, finished up doing a variety of jobs on the ground or at best playing air attendant with Transport Command, though still classed as air crew.

They did not actually tell me all this but merely intimated that nowadays the key person on a bomber was the flight engineer. I remained unconvinced, expressed my appreciation of modern needs but stubbornly stuck to my guns. Disfavoured or not, and I could not help noticing that they all wore the mark of this downgraded category of aircrew, pilot's wings, I wanted to be a pilot. After a while I was sent out of the room while the board conferred. A few minutes later they called me back and told me that a further scrutiny of my aptitude tests had revealed that I had the makings of a first class radio operator. If I wanted to fly, this was the ideal job for me. If not ...? I did not believe a word they said but realized that for some reason or other it was this or nothing. At least I would be flying and some day perhaps I would be able to use this as a stepping-stone to achieve my ultimate ambition, and so I accepted. As a parting shot I asked whether I might have a chance of pilot training once I had completed a tour as a wireless operator. "Oh, certainly," they said, "you'd be the very type we would be looking for!" I actually believed them.

The next day I was attested and became officially an aircrew cadet on deferred service pending my call-up. I was given the King's Shilling, twelve of them in fact as befitted a budding bold aviator. It was the Ides of March, near enough, and all but five years to the day since Hitler had marched into Austria.

The minimum age for the commencement of aircrew training was 18 years and 3 months and, in order to fill in the intervening time usefully, I joined the ATC. By June I had reached a Morse proficiency of 6 words per minute and I thought I was very clever. I did not know what I was in for. On the 2 June I received my call-up papers with instructions to report on the 28 June to the Air Crew Reception Centre, or ACRC, at Lords' Cricket Ground in St. John's Wood.

Source : Gerhard Heilig