

*The Ship, HMS Ocean, was cruising in the Med, south of the Dodecanese and preparing for an exercise in which she was to play a major part. She had been detached from the main body of the Fleet, her brief being to search for the Fleet during the dark hours and, hopefully having found it, continue shadowing until a dawn strike could be launched to "despatch" it!*

*Ocean's airborne complement comprised a squadron, 805, of Seafires under Lieutenant Commander Hutton and a squadron of Fireflies, 816, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Crabbe. To the latter squadron was attached a flight of four night fighter Fireflies for which I was responsible. This flight was known as Black Flight.*

*The date was September 19th 1946 and normal flying was the order of the day. This involved, for Black Flight, the usual night flying tests which provided the crew of each aircraft with the opportunity to check radar, homing equipment and other night flying aids as well, of course, as general aircraft performance.*

*All went well until Eddie Ward took off in Zebra. He was airborne for no more than three or four minutes when his engine failed totally without warning and, with little more than circuit height in which to make any kind of decision, he ditched his aircraft in copybook fashion. Both he and his observer were able to step into their dinghy with no apparent difficulty and they were soon back aboard Ocean. The aircraft, by this time, was well on its way to the bottom, taking with it the secret of any possible reason for the engine's behaviour.*

*Immediate examination of limited facts yielded no specific reason for the Firefly's engine failure. Fuel starvation, catastrophic failure of an engine component and other possibilities were considered but none could be verified and it was ultimately decided that the forthcoming exercise should not be jeopardised as a result of this single event; certainly there was no indication of trouble from any other source during the whole of the day's flying. The proposed programme would, therefore, continue with the first NF Firefly taking off half an hour after sunset.*



*I was the pilot and, with my observer John Keddie, I was airborne on a fairly dark night and heading north to the vicinity of the Dodecanese. Our original intended height was 3000 feet but after a short discussion with John we decided that 6000 feet would be rather more comfortable since we expected to be playing hide and seek around some fairly lofty pinnacles! The aircraft was behaving impeccably and we settled down to a cosy two to three hours flying.*

*We had been in the air for about 35 minutes when I felt a considerable forward pressure on the control column. I soon realised that we had lost all power from the engine - it had, in fact, simply died! The seriousness of the situation did not escape John and he wasted no time in getting off a Mayday and giving me a course back to Mother.*

*We debated baling out but John was not keen - indeed, we were of one mind as far as that action was concerned. The alternative was to ditch but ditching on a dark night with no engine and only a radio altimeter plus headlamp to aid final splashdown was quite a tall order and I did not really fancy our chances. There was no alternative therefore, other than to sort out the engine trouble and I asked John to monitor altitude whilst I wrestled with the problem in the front office.*

*I was convinced that no mechanical failure had occurred and I was further convinced that the problem was not electrical. The engine had simply died - apparently slowly. I considered a Griffon weakness by way of rocker arm flaking which manifested itself by loss of engine power but the power loss in the case of my engine was relatively quick - and total!*

*These considerations cost about 500 feet but by this time I was absolutely convinced that I had a fuel problem - not a delivery problem since the fuel pressure warning lights were out, but one of contamination.*

*It really is amazing how a positive conclusion can steady one's nerves - I felt rather superior having reached my conclusions but this euphoria did not last. "We are down to 4000 feet, any luck?" This*



was John. I told him about my reasoning and that I intended to work on the fuel system. "Well make it bloody quick, old boy, or we are shark bait! Incidentally, we have about 25 minutes before we can expect to pick up Mother on the scope." was John's reply. I needed NO further encouragement!

I was flying on main tank which I turned to off before switching off both magnetos and opening the throttle up to the gate. I left this set up for about 15 seconds and then operated the priming pump three or four times. I then closed the throttle to the idling position, turned on the main fuel cock, crossed my fingers and switched on one magneto. The engine coughed, caught and coughed again before bursting into life. I switched on the second magneto and gingerly opened the throttle. All seemed well - my fingers were still crossed!

For what it was worth, I had rocked the aircraft laterally - whether this had done any good by way of diluting any contamination I did not know, but the engine was running again and seemed to justify the action taken.

I asked John how we were doing - "about 15 minutes to go but we are almost down to 3000 feet - can't you get any more out of her?" to which "her" replied by coughing and again giving up the ghost. I continued my adopted routine - with diminishing success!

The altimeter was now moving far too fast for comfort - 2500 feet and falling -and no matter how much I tried, the engine refused to run for long on the main tank. One action was left. There were approximately twenty gallons in each of the wing tanks. I cleared the engine again, switched to wing tanks, and with "everything" crossed I managed to get the Griffon running again! We were down to 900 feet!

I set the controls for what amounted to a very long powered glide, zero boost and no more than 1800 rpm which I estimated would keep us airborne - engine permitting - for at least half an hour.

The engine coughed a couple of times but continued to run - we were down to 500 feet when John



*picked up Ocean at about 5 miles and some 5 degrees to port. I altered course very carefully feeling that any harsh movement might disturb our present equilibrium and within a couple of minutes I spotted the ship glowing like Piccadilly Circus on Christmas Eve.*

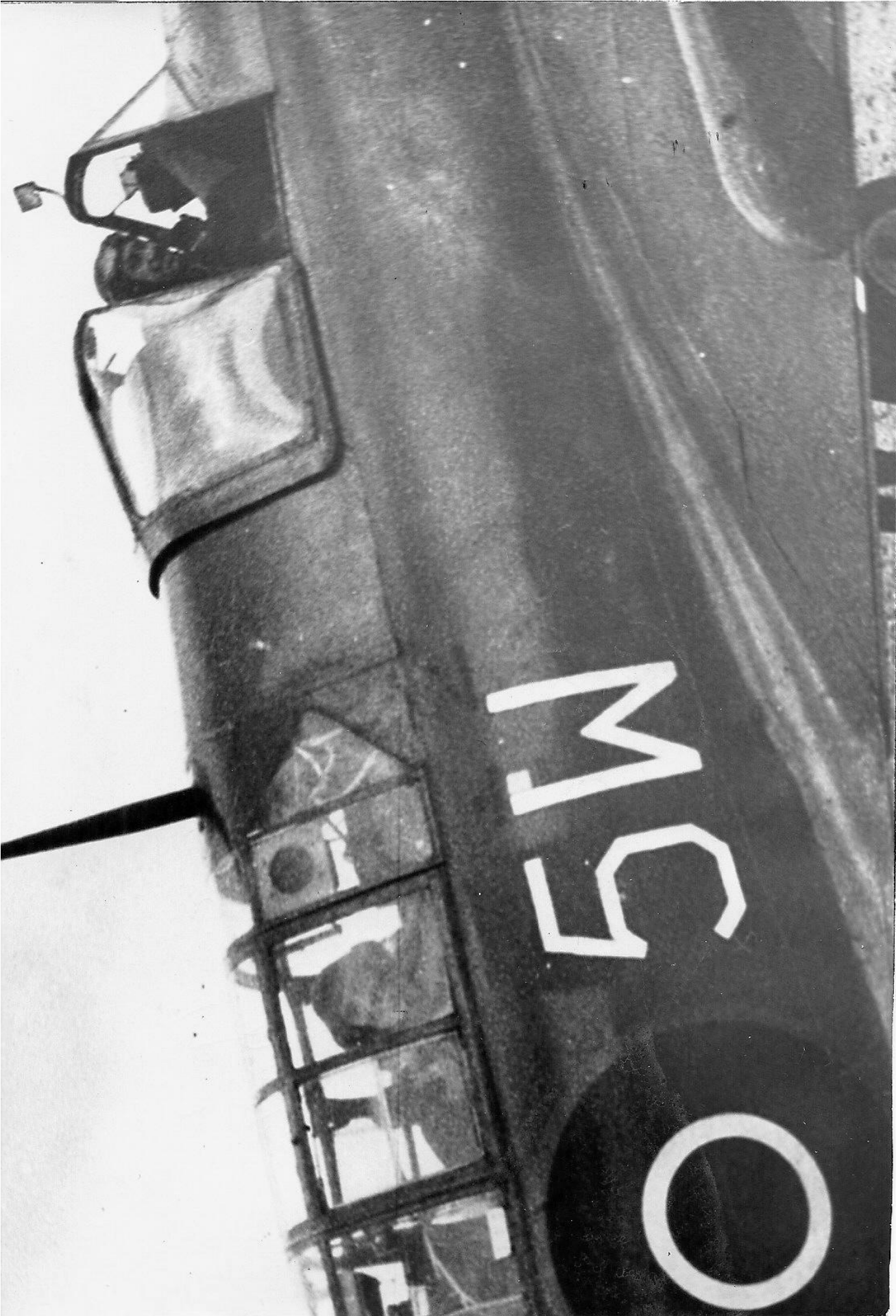
*A slight cough from the Griffon reminded us that we still had to get aboard. We were now below circuit height and I had no intention of carrying out normal procedures. Having identified the stern, I charged in. The DLCO was in his position and, without further ado, between us we completed a reasonable arrival. The Firefly was in one piece!*

*John and I gave all the information we could at the subsequent debriefing before surrendering to a couple of gins and a tasty "night-flying supper". Ocean's part in the Fleet exercise was suspended until aircraft William yielded a reason for what had happened, since it seemed likely that the earlier ditching had resulted from the same kind of failure.*

*The problem was soon solved, however, by the ship's senior AEO and the following day he revealed that fuel contamination was indeed the cause of engine failure. The engineers found water in the aircraft's fuel. Apparently, the ship's filter systems on the line by which my aircraft, and the one which ditched the previous day had been topped up, had broken down. All Black Flight aircraft had received some fuel from the same line so that the chance of X-ray and Yoke, the remaining two night fighters having the same engine problem would have been fairly high had they taken off. The aircraft of 805 and the rest of 816 had been fuelled from different lines.*

*I was naturally pleased that the problem had been solved and that "finger trouble" had played no part and was happier still when the CO returned my log book with a green endorsement signed by Captain Caspar John!*





Lieutenants Harry Hunt (pilot) and John Keddie (Nav/Radar Op.) – 1946, Malta