



# SILVERED WINGS

THE MEMOIRS OF AIR VICE-MARSHAL  
SIR JOHN SEVERNE

*Foreword by*  
HRH THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH

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by

Air Vice-Marshal Sir John Severne

KCVO OBE AFC DL

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HRH The Duke of Edinburgh KG KT



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# Foreword



BUCKINGHAM PALACE.

John Severne is a very lucky fellow. There are not many people who have a single-minded ambition about what they want to do with their lives; who manage to realise that ambition, and then turn out to have a real talent for it. As this book makes abundantly clear, flying was his consuming passion, and it gave him years of satisfaction, a career filled with challenges overcome, and the comradeship of a very wide circle of service and other friends.

I was very fortunate to get him as my Equerry, and later to have him as Captain of the Queen's Flight. Having learned to fly both fixed and rotary wing aircraft, and having the obligation to travel a great deal both in this country and abroad, I relished every opportunity to fly myself. This was made much easier with the help of someone who was only too willing to aid and abet me. I have many reasons to be grateful to him, and I hope his book will give pleasure and interest to aviators and aviation enthusiasts of all kinds.

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# Preface

Recently I was discussing the King's Cup Air Race with a retired aeronautical engineering friend when he said, 'You must have led a very interesting life', and when I thought about it I had to agree. He said I should write a book and several people in the past have suggested that, but I had not previously considered it would be worth attempting because I have never kept a diary and I doubted that had anything worth writing about that would interest others. However, now that am well and truly retired, I have had time to reflect on all those happy memories which now keep flooding back and so I decided I would try to share with others the joy of flying which I have experienced, and to discuss some of the interesting appointments I have had during my RAF career.

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The book is sold for the benefit of the Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund.

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For once you have tasted flight, you will for ever walk the earth with your eyes turned skywards, for there you have been, and there you will long to return.

Leonardo da Vinci 1452 - 1519

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# Chapter 1

## In the Beginning

As a small boy I spent most of my time building, flying and crashing model aeroplanes. Most of my school holidays were spent in the company of a near neighbour, John Urmston, who shared the same passion. We were at kindergarten together and have been good friends ever since; he will feature significantly as my story unfolds. He designed a 5 ft span Tiger Moth, powered by a 7.5 cc petrol engine which we built together - it even had movable controls from the cockpit, but I have to admit that he built all the difficult bits. The caption in my photograph album reads 'it even flew after a fashion', but John added in his own hand 'it flew bloody well!'

Each year I used to follow the reports of the King's Cup Air Race, which at that time was a major national event well covered in the newspapers and I hoped, one day, that I might be able to take part in it. The only other ambition I had at that time was to own one of those magnificent Mercedes sports cars.

Our 5 ft span flying model Tiger Moth.





My mother and Jim Breakall after my first flight in 1935.

My father flew with the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in the First World War and although he subsequently became a doctor, he retained his interest in flying and was on the committee of our local flying club at West Malling in Kent, which was very close to where we lived at Wateringbury. In my school holidays I used to cycle up to the small grass airfield, which at that time consisted of just two hangars, a club house and a squash court. I spent many happy hours watching the flying and wandering around the hangars. Then one day, when I was ten years old, the Chief Flying Instructor, Jim Breakall (another ex-RFC flyer), asked me if I would like to go up. We flew in one of the club's Gipsy Moths, G-AACZ, and from that moment in 1935 I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my life - I wanted to fly aeroplanes. I found out later that the flight had been arranged by my parents who had agreed to let Jim decide when the time was right.

I also had some rather grandiose ideas about my future - I thought I would become a famous aircraft designer and test pilot - but it was not until I went to Cambridge on a short wartime course that I realized I did not have the brains to become either.

In the summer term of 1938 I was recuperating at home after an operation. My younger brother Dick was at the same prep school, Fonthill near East Grinstead, and my father and I thought it would be fun to fly over the school and drop a message to Dick by parachute. I spent hours developing the parachute consisting of a message, some cigarette cards - we all collected them in those days - and some coins to act as ballast, all suspended from the canopy which was a

handkerchief. I tested this device by throwing it out of a top-storey window at home. On the great day we flew in a Spartan three-seater, an open-cockpit biplane with the pilot in the front cockpit and two passengers in a separate open tandem cockpit behind. When we found the school we realized a cricket match was taking place, but the game was immediately suspended whilst the players and spectators watched us swoop down and drop the parachute. The arrangement we had with the pilot was that I would throw it out when he gave the signal - his judgement was spot on because we saw the parachute land close to the middle of the pitch. Thus we inaugurated the first and only direct air mail to Fonthill and my brother was the local hero for the day.



A DH Gipsy Moth, similar to the one in which I enjoyed my first flight in 1935.  
Aeroplane magazine/ [www.aeroplanemonthly.com](http://www.aeroplanemonthly.com)

The Spartan Three Seater showing the tandem open cockpit behind the pilot. Ronald Neil





Messerschmitt Bf 108 at Lympne in 1938.

My father took me and Dick to the 1938 International Air Rally at Lympne, where I saw for the first time an aircraft with a retractable undercarriage, the attractive Messerschmitt Bf 108 Taifun. Also in the line-up was Alex Henshaw's Mew Gull, G-AEXF, winner of the 1938 King's Cup Air Race. I followed Alex Henshaw's aviation exploits with great interest, particularly his remarkable 1939 flight in the Mew Gull from England to Cape Town and back in 4½ days, setting a solo record which has never been beaten. He became a Spitfire test pilot during the War. The Mew Gull is still around, but sadly, Alex died in February 2007 at the age of 94.

Alex Henshaw's Mew Gull at Lympne in 1938.



During the summer holidays of 1940 my brother and I remember watching the Battle of Britain being fought overhead - we actually saw a Heinkel 111 being

shot down. It was being circled by a number of fighters whilst it attempted to carry out a forced landing at West Malling which, by then, was one of the main RAF airfields in the Battle. The previous year I had gone to school at Marlborough where, initially, I joined the Officers Training Corps, but I did not enjoy pretending to be a soldier, although I did like rifle shooting and became a member of the college VIII. In 1941 the Air Training Corps was founded and the school formed one of the first squadrons, No. 529 (Marlborough Schools) Squadron which, of course, I joined, rising to the dizzy rank of corporal. We were given an old Puss Moth to play with and I just enjoyed tinkering with it and imagining I was flying it. On many afternoons I would cycle to one of the nearby airfields (Upavon, Netheravon or Membury) with my ATC uniform in the saddle bag, crawl through the hedge and pretend to be on one of the ATC camps. So much for the security of the day - on one occasion I actually talked my way into flying in an Oxford.

We had the occasional air raid warning at Marlborough and on those occasions we would go to the cellars and sleep in bunk beds. One night I was sleeping in a top bunk when I fell out of bed and bruised a rib. We did not know it at the time, but a bomb had landed about five miles away so I was able to claim that I was the school's first air raid casualty. We had our own Home Guard unit at Marlborough and I am proud to be able to say I really was a member of Dad's Army. On the whole I found school very frustrating because I felt I was just marking time before I could join the RAF.

Soon after the Battle of Britain our house was requisitioned to accommodate some Canadian soldiers, so we rented a house at Maidstone. I soon found that during school holidays, as an ATC cadet, I could usually scrounge some Link Trainer flying at RAF Detling which was within cycle range of our new home. The Link Trainer was the forerunner of the modern simulator and was an excellent device for learning to fly on instruments. This proved to have been a great advantage to me once I started flying.

My First World War uniform of the Marlborough College Officers Training Corps



From Marlborough we went to an ATC camp at RAF Lyneham which I thoroughly enjoyed. I was so impressed with the Station Warrant Officer that I decided that there was no point in becoming an officer as it was obvious to me that the RAF was run by the NCOs. However, that notion did not last long because shortly afterwards I applied for a place at Cambridge on a 'University Short Course for Potential Officers'. My second choice was for St Andrew's, but I was fortunate in being selected for Cambridge where I was accommodated in my father's rooms at Christ's College. I don't know how he fixed this, but it must have been more than a mere coincidence.

I read mechanical sciences and the course, beginning in October 1943, lasted for six months. During that time we did first-year work and, if we decided to return after the War, we would be able to start with second-year work. It was a valuable six months and a very good deal. We were members of the Cambridge University Air Squadron and occasionally flew in their Tiger Moths at Marshall's Airfield. I shared rooms with a colleague who did not have the same educational advantages I had been given, but it was obvious that he was intellectually my superior, so much so that I gave up all thoughts of ever becoming an aircraft designer. In any case, by then I wanted to be a pilot so much that I had no 'Plan B' - if for any reason I had not succeeded at any stage of my training, I had absolutely no idea what I would have done. As I neared the end of my time at Cambridge I could hardly wait to join the RAF.

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# Chapter 2

## Joining Up

In April 1944 I joined the RAF and was immediately posted to No. 6 Aircrew Reception Centre at Scarborough. We were billeted in the Prince of Wales Hotel at the top of the cliff. My room was a small attic bedroom with a very low window sill which had probably been a staff bedroom, but to me it was bliss because I could lie in bed and watch the sea. The east coast was a restricted area at the time so there were no visitors to the town. The next door hotel was occupied by an evacuated teachers' training college - which perhaps accounted for the rumour that our tea was laced with bromide. Although we experienced the expected military discipline and a certain amount of 'bull', I found the training less irksome than the discipline at boarding school - perhaps because, at last, I had reached the first rung of the ladder leading to becoming a pilot.

From Scarborough I went to No. 4 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) at Brough near Hull for 'grading', in which we were given ten hours or so of Tiger Moth flying to see if we were suitable to undertake flying training. I went solo after seven and a half hours which was about average, although I did have a problem with landing. I remember doing guard duty one night and spending most of the time going over and over in my mind the landing process. To my amazement I had no trouble the next day and it was then that I was sent solo. I subsequently used this technique several times in the future when I had problems - like sorting out slow rolls. I vividly remember that first solo as the most thrilling event of my life to date and I can picture now the empty cockpit in front of me as I climbed away from the airfield. For some unaccountable reason I found myself singing the theme of a Chopin nocturne - the one in E flat major - at the top of my voice. Whenever I hear the nocturne now I think of that momentous event. Although I passed the grading process, my only regret is that we were not issued with log books at Grading School and I never thought of recording each flight - so it all has to remain a memory. One of the instructors, an experienced pilot, told me that he still always got a kick every time he started a take-off - that same kick never left me throughout my flying life.

One day a B-17 Flying Fortress arrived, presumably for work to be carried out on it at the Blackburn factory at Brough. All the cadets gathered round to see it taxi in. As the engines were shut down we walked towards it and I was amazed to look through the bomb aimer's window in the nose to see a pair of shapely female legs at the pilot's seat. A young Air Transport Auxiliary pilot got out and as far as



we could tell she was flying the aircraft alone. We were mightily impressed.

Unfortunately for us there were more pilots in the training pipeline than the RAF needed at that stage of the War, so we were offered a choice of four trades to kill time whilst we waited for the next stage of training at an EFTS. I chose motorcyclist because I thought it was the only one of the four where I wouldn't have an NCO on my back all day. I therefore found myself on a course at No. 8 School of Technical Training at Weeton, near Blackpool, where I spent an enjoyable month learning how to be a dispatch rider. At the end of the course I could ride a motorcycle and fly an aeroplane, aged eighteen, but could not yet drive a car – just like my father who could fly before he could drive.

I was posted to the HQ of No. 75 Signals Wing based, or so I was told, at Keston Bromley. I arrived one afternoon with my kitbag over my shoulder only to find a large bomb crater and no Headquarters. A passing pedestrian told me the HQ had been destroyed by a V2 rocket the previous month and had been relocated at Broadstairs, so I made my way to Victoria Station where the Railway Transport Officer gave me a warrant and off I went to the seaside. The Wing HQ was based in Stone House Preparatory School which, I presumed, had been evacuated elsewhere. I was billeted in the gym together with twenty or so other airmen and my job was to take urgently needed spares to the coastal radar stations between Walton on the Naze and the Isle of Wight. My sturdy steed was a 500 cc BSA side valve motorcycle. We had a few Harley Davidsons in the MT section, but unfortunately we sprogs were not allowed anywhere near them. It amuses me these days to go to an agricultural show and to find my machine amongst the vintage exhibits. We were not issued with any proper clothing so my father, by now a captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps proudly wearing his RFC observer's wing, made me some excellent waterproof kit out of an army gas cape which must have fallen off the back of a lorry.

My father proudly wearing his First World War medals and Royal Flying Corps observer's wing on his Second World War Royal Army Medical Corps uniform.



There were no signposts in those days and I always found it difficult to navigate my way through London on the way to the east coast. If I got lost my technique was to go downhill to try and find the Thames, identify a bridge and then start again. One very cold wet November morning about 2.00 am I was hopelessly lost but fortunately I found a friendly policeman. 'Excuse me, officer,' I said, 'could you please tell me the way to the river?' I must have been looking very cold and miserable - which I was - because he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'I wouldn't do that if I were you, lad.'

Those were the days of the dreaded V1 Doodlebugs. I remember listening to the distinctive sounds of their engines, and then the apprehensive silence when the engine cut and one waited for the inevitable explosion, hoping it wasn't going to be too close. After an enjoyable three months rushing around on my motorbike I was, at last, about to begin my flying training.

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# Chapter 3

## **Flying at Last**

I arrived at No. 11 EFTS at Scone, near Perth, in February 1945. This was my first visit to Scotland and I very soon realized what friendly generous people the Scots were, quite different from the music hall caricatures. We were billeted in a hotel by the River Tay called The Durn; it was a delightful spot. This, together with some eighty hours of wonderful flying, added up to a memorable time for me. I count myself very lucky to have been one of the last of the generation of pilots who were taught to fly with our heads in the fresh air, with no radio, no navigational aids except a map and wobbly compass, and no Air Traffic Control - and all this over such beautiful countryside. I soon found that I particularly enjoyed aerobatics and, not surprisingly, I was determined to become a fighter pilot.

I had originally hoped to do my flying training in Canada or Rhodesia under the Empire Air Training Scheme, or even in the United States, but so many of my contemporaries who were training in those countries at that time had their courses cancelled. It was our good fortune that we were able to continue whilst so many fell by the wayside.

In May 1945 we were posted to No. 1 Course of 19 FTS at Cranwell to fly the Harvard. In fact we were the first flying course to 'march in' to the College towards the end of the War. We do not call ourselves 'Cranwellians' because our course was to last only six months and this bore little comparison to the pre-war two year Cranwell course. When VJ Day was declared on 15th August - my twentieth birthday - in 1945 we obviously celebrated the occasion, but I have to admit to a slight sense of disappointment when I realized I would not be able to fly operationally in the War, but then perhaps that is why I am still alive today. We were commissioned and received our wings on 19th October 1945 from Air Marshal Sir John Slessor, whose son John was a fellow cadet and received his wings from his father at the same time.

My hopes of becoming a fighter pilot were dashed when I was posted to the Transport Command holding unit and sent on indefinite leave. At this stage in one's career the thought of a long leave was the last thing one wanted and it was made worse by the thought of eventually having to fly transport aircraft, probably Dakotas, the exact opposite of what I had hoped for.



The 19 FTS Graduation Parade in October 1945, the first flying course to graduate at Cranwell since the War.

But salvation was at hand. Five months after leaving Cranwell, Christopher Blount, a fellow cadet on No. 1 Course, was already at the Mosquito Night Fighter Operational Training Unit at RAF East Moor, a few miles north of York. He invited me to stay for a weekend and so I drove up from Kent in my car, a BSA three wheeler, to join him. I was so impressed with what he told me about the Mosquito that I decided I would approach the Chief Flying Instructor (CFI) on the Monday morning and ask him if he would apply for me to join his course. I was astonished when the CFI, a Wing Commander, said, 'Can you start tomorrow?' I replied, 'No sir, because I will have to fetch my uniform which is at home in Kent, but I can start on Wednesday.' And so I did.

At the end of the three week ground school phase the authority for me to start flying had still not come through, so the CFI flew me in his own Mosquito to the Holding Unit at Snaith to try to persuade the staff to re-post me from Transport Command to Fighter Command. He was not immediately successful, nevertheless he took it upon himself to allow me to start the flying phase, even though I was technically still on leave from Transport Command. I will always remain extremely grateful to that Wing Commander, Bill Gill, for giving a young Pilot Officer the chance to fulfil his ambitions because, if I had bent one of his aircraft, I'm sure he would have been in serious trouble. I met him many years later when I was an Air Commodore and he was a retired Air Vice-Marshal and took the opportunity then to thank him for what he had done for me. He simply said, 'My thanks are to see you where you are now.'



Air Marshal Sir John Slessor presents my wings.

I believe we were the first students to train on Mosquitoes having had no prior training on twin-engined aircraft. The Mosquito was delightful to fly, but it did have a tendency to swing badly on take-off or landing – the answer was not to let it. I well remember my first solo on the type because when my instructor, Squadron Leader Basil Primavesi, got out of the aircraft and sent me off, I discovered I had forgotten to bring a map with me so, although I flew for an hour I took great care not to lose sight of the airfield. Needless to say I never admitted this stupid error to my instructor.

After three weeks leave I was posted to No. 264 Night Fighter Squadron equipped with Mosquito Mk 36s at Church Fenton, still in Yorkshire, where, lo and behold, two days later my posting came through – to Bomber Command. Needless to say things were soon sorted out and together with my navigator, 'Red' Hall, we set off for eighteen very happy months flying together on our first squadron. We were the first post-war qualified crews to reach squadrons and I

was very conscious of the fact that everyone else on the squadron had a row of gallantry and campaign medals together with a wealth of wartime experience. I realized I had a long way to go before I was going to be able to catch up with them.

Shortly after my arrival on the squadron we were detached to Lübeck on the Baltic coast for an armament practice camp. I remember flying over Hamburg and being moved by the appalling devastation caused by Allied bombing. It was two days before my twenty-first birthday and my squadron commander allowed me to take a Mosquito home to West Malling for the weekend to celebrate the occasion. Two months later the squadron moved to yet another station in Yorkshire - Linton-on-Ouse.

My first photograph of Mosquito Mk 36s of No. 264 Night Fighter Squadron.





My navigator 'Red' Hall, left, on No. 264 Squadron.

My parents had given me my first car, the 1933 BSA Three Wheeler, for an advanced 21st birthday present. This was very second hand and cost £110. It was in good condition except for the tyres which were almost down to the canvas. The War was still on and tyres were very difficult to obtain, especially 19 inch tyres. The only way I managed to get hold of any was by visiting scrap yards and hoping to find some with more tread than I had on my own at the time. Punctures and even tyre bursts were frequent occurrences. I named the car 'IKANOPIT II' and proudly painted the name on the bonnet. It was powered by a 1,000 cc V twin cylinder air cooled engine which tended to seize up if the car was driven faster than 35 mph, although it would usually quickly free itself after cooling off at the roadside.

One day I had a minor fire when an oily rag which I had carelessly left between the cylinders ignited; the problem was quickly solved by removing the rag. However, the incident convinced me that it would be a good idea always to carry a fire extinguisher, so I promptly obtained one. The very next time I used the car I was returning from a pub crawl when it seriously caught fire. The carburettor was positioned between the two cylinders and the fuel pipe connecting it to the tank broke. Consequently petrol poured out on to the hot cylinders and the inevitable happened. Luckily the car was fitted with a fuel cock so I was able to turn off the flow of petrol before using the new extinguisher which quickly put out the inferno. I have carried a fire extinguisher in my cars ever since, not just to be able to put my own fires out, but perhaps to be able to help someone else in trouble. The fact that this serious fire happened on the first run with the new extinguisher made me think that this might be more than a mere coincidence. Subsequently, over the years, several other incidents have occurred which led me to believe that perhaps

someone was looking after me; they used to call them guardian angels. Why should they bother? Perhaps there is a purpose in 'fate' being so kind. If so, I haven't yet found out what it is.

Cars in those days were very simple and easy to maintain. I had several breakdowns and usually managed to solve the problems myself; I was even able to remove the engine and de-coke it, something the amateur couldn't even contemplate with today's sophisticated electronic wizardry, hydraulic systems, fuel injection etc.

All this was well illustrated when I was about to drive through London on the way to our home in Kent (no M25 in those days) when there was an enormous bang and the most horrid noise coming from the engine. On lifting the bonnet it was obvious what had happened - the exhaust valve of one of the cylinders had disappeared, presumably it had fallen into the cylinder and had been pounded by the piston. In fact the cotter pin holding the valve in place had failed. Nothing daunted, I took the cylinder head off by the roadside, removed the exhaust valve which had been pounded into an 's' shaped lump of metal, and put the head back. I then removed the sparking plug to reduce the resistance caused by compression. When I started the engine the air rushing in and out of the sparking plug hole created a loud and most peculiar noise; consequently I received some very funny looks whenever we stopped at traffic lights etc. It never occurred to me to seek assistance from a garage and I drove like this through London and reached home without further trouble on one cylinder. I have kept that valve ever since as a memento of an exciting journey.

The Mosquito was an astonishing venture. The Air Ministry policy at the beginning of the War was for bombers to be made of metal and to be heavily armed, which naturally resulted in slow aircraft. Geoffrey De Havilland thought that a wooden unarmed aircraft, which would be light and fast, could be built by the many highly skilled cabinet makers currently being mis-employed on munitions. Furthermore, suitable wood was available. The first prototype flew in November 1940, less than eleven months after design work began, and Mosquitoes became operational the following year, a process that nowadays takes at least ten times as long. They were faster than the current German fighters and they had the range to take a meaningful bomb load to Berlin. Nearly 8,000 Mosquitoes were built in forty-three versions and they served in every command and theatre, staying in service until 1961 - a true success story.

Already at Linton were two other squadrons, Nos 64 and 65, equipped with single-seat Hornet day fighters. These were splendid aircraft which, to me, were rather like sports car versions of their older big brother, the Mosquito. They were said to be the fastest piston-engined aircraft in service anywhere in the world. They had 'handed' propellers going round in opposite directions to each other so that there was no tendency to swing on take-off. There were serviceability problems with this new aircraft and the hours the squadron pilots were allowed to



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