

# My Grandfather's War Service

## 1940-1946

By Mark Wareham, updated 13<sup>th</sup> March 2012

Thanks to my late Aunt Pamela, a few years ago I was able to get hold of a copy of grandfather Sidney Wareham's Second World War RAF record. At the time Pam was the eldest surviving child of Sidney's and this documentary evidence was very interesting because I had only previously known snippets of his war service and knew he was RAF ground crew. Thanks to this official service record I am able to record a more comprehensive story about what he experienced between his enlistment on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1940 and his formal release in early 1946.



To the left is a pre-war picture of a young Sidney Ernest Wareham, aged about 14 and near his parents home at Landsley Cottage, off Salisbury Road near Shaftesbury, on the Coombe House estate (now St Mary's School). He was the son of Walter and Rose (nee Stainer) Wareham and his father was a groundsman on the estate.

### Enlistment

On the day that my grandfather joined the Royal Air Force the new Prime

Minister of France had asked Germany for peace terms, effectively surrendering after an unstoppable German onslaught. This was just three days after Paris had been occupied. Maybe my grandfather felt obliged to enlist after Churchill's stirring speech made on 4<sup>th</sup> June, after the Dunkirk evacuations, that 'we shall fight them on the beaches'?

Sidney's elder brother Reginald (pictured right) was one of

those who had been evacuated from Dunkirk whilst

serving with the North Staffordshire Regiment and which had been part of the British Expeditionary Force in France. There is a story that Reg was so deeply affected by his experience on the beach whilst awaiting evacuation that for years after the war he would duck for cover whenever he heard the sound of a plane over head.



Sidney probably felt that he had to do his bit now that his homeland was about to come under direct attack from the forces of Nazi Germany. He is recorded as being 24 years old and from Coombe in Wiltshire when he signed up to serve. He is married to Violet Doris (formerly Hiscock) and with two children - Donald George, born 1935 and Pamela Betty, born 1938. A third child Alexander Ernest is later added to the record in 1941. He was a shop assistant at the time and his physical

appearance is recorded as – 5' 8 ½ " tall, 33" chest, brown hair, brown eyes, healthy and with no scars. His home address at the time was 'Butts Knapp, Shaftesbury, Dorset'. His religion is recorded as being Church of England.

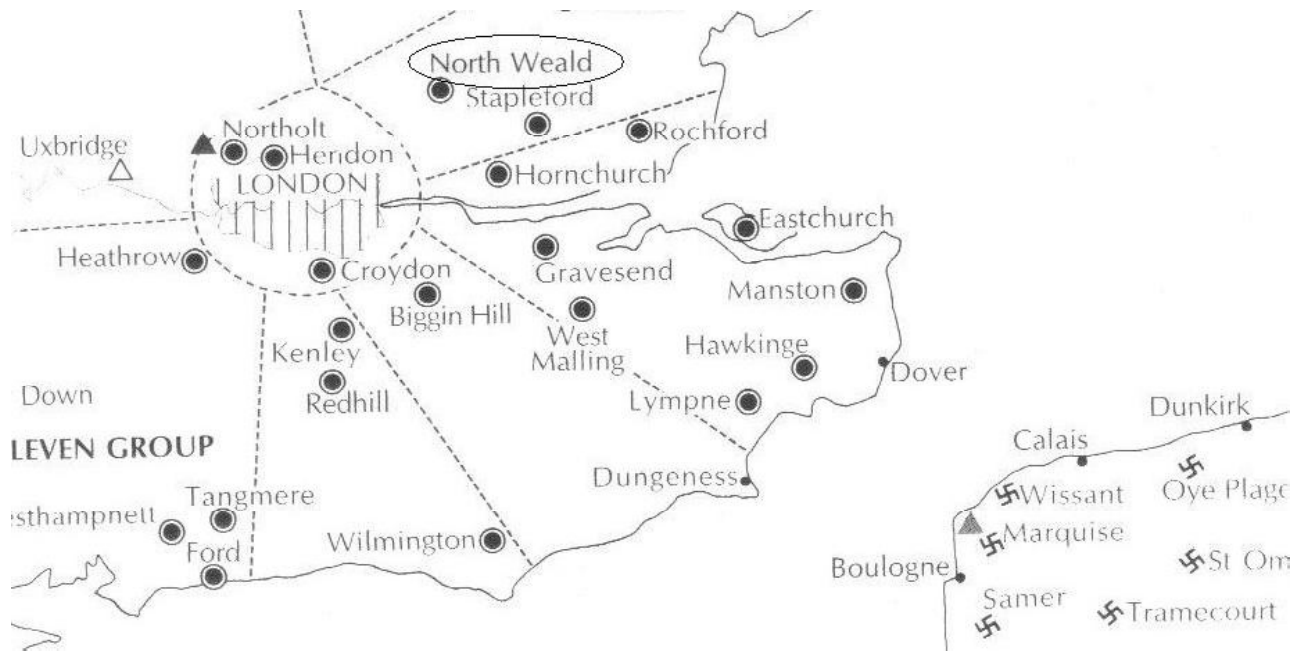
He was assigned the official military number 1156911 and his RAF trade was ACH/GD which means 'aircrafthand – general duties'. The picture of my grandfather above is, I think, from early in the war when he was based in the UK and in his blue RAF uniform.

Throughout his military service his character is recorded as being 'very good' and his proficiency in his job, when recorded at the end of each year, was mainly 'satisfactory' to having been 'superb' in 1941 and 1944.

## Chapter One – His First Posting – RAF Station North Weald

On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1940 Sidney is recorded as being enlisted at number 2 recruitment centre at RAF Cardington. He was given the lowest RAF rank of 'AC2' which is 'Aircraftman second class'. This was RAF ground crew and his initial trade is noted as 'aircraft hand equipment assistant'. Of just over a million people to have served with the RAF in the war only about 193,000 were aircrew. The rest, including my grandfather, were on the ground in support of the brave men putting their lives at immediate risk in the aircraft.

On 10<sup>th</sup> July Sidney was posted to 'ETS' which I think is the RAF 'Engineering Training School' and on 5<sup>th</sup> September he passed an exam and gained a qualification with a pass of 56%. On 14<sup>th</sup> September 1940 and in possession of his new skills and knowledge, he was posted to RAF Station North Weald.



RAF North Weald, near Epping in Essex, was part of the 'Eleven Group' in the Battle of Britain guarding London and the home counties. By the time my grandfather arrived on 14<sup>th</sup> September the battle had been taking place for about three months and since August the second phase of the battle had been raging with heavy attacks on the RAF defences from German bombers and fighters. 200 German bombs had fallen on North Weald on 24<sup>th</sup> August.

According to A. Morton on the North Weald Museum website (see reference below) at the time my grandfather arrived in mid-September there was "... an opportunity for the station to catch its breath when German attacks on the airfield abated." But Morton says that "... it was not long before the fighters were again in demand to combat German raids over London" after, thankfully for the RAF fighter squadrons, the Germans changed their tactics and "...North Weald played a pivotal role in the struggle to keep the skies above capital clear of enemy aircraft".

On 29<sup>th</sup> October, probably when my grandfather was at the base, North Weald was attacked by the Luftwaffe and six people were killed at the airbase with forty two others being wounded.

In late 1940 it became clear that the RAF could not be defeated easily. Without clear air superiority Hitler abandoned Operation Sealion and the plan to invade England. The Battle of Britain was over and Britain was still free.

The aircraft that my grandfather would have worked on whilst at North Weald were the Hawker Hurricane and Supermarine Spitfire (*pictures from Wikipedia*) –



Maybe this is him on the right relaxing in the shade of a Hurricane whilst refuelling? If it isn't it would have been a task and situation with which he would have been familiar.

*(Picture from the Life Magazine website.)*

On 17<sup>th</sup> December 1940 my grandfather was promoted to the rank of AC1 – Aircraftman, first class. Then on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1941 he was promoted again to LAC – Leading Aircraftman.



The period from late 1940 till May 1941 is the story of the Blitz on London and other industrial cities of the UK. Sidney would have been busy servicing aircraft and working on general ground duties around the air station. But by summer 1941 the worst of the Blitz was over as a lot of German air power was reallocated to the attack on Russia in the East. From late 1941 the pressure would have eased on the Eleven Group of the RAF and so servicemen like Sidney could be moved from primarily defensive duties in the homeland to defending British interests overseas.

## Chapter Two - Second Posting – North Africa

On 11<sup>th</sup> April 1942 Sidney arrived in the Middle East and was to play his small part in the successful North Africa campaign. After their Axis allies, the Italians, had suffered humiliating defeats in 1940, the German General Erwin Rommel arrived in Africa in February 1941 and pushed the Allies back with victory after victory. The German aim was to secure North Africa and push on to the precious oilfields in the Middle East. By the time that my grandfather arrived in the area Rommel was threatening Alexandria in Egypt and if that fell then the way would have been open for the Germans to take control of the Suez Canal.

My grandfather was assigned to the number 21 Personnel Training Centre, Middle East Command on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1942, probably for retraining on different aircraft than he'd been used to in the UK, and he was almost immediately allowed rest and recuperation. This was probably because of the long journey he'd just experienced, almost certainly the longest that any Wareham had undertaken since medieval days!

From 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1942 until 5<sup>th</sup> November 1942 the second Battle of El Alamein took place. This battle is featured in the RAF battle honours and I think that it is almost certain that Sidney would have been engaged in the Allied action in this famous victory, even if only in ground operations in the supporting RAF air cover than in the fighting itself. It was partly thanks to RAF air superiority that this victory was possible. Had Germany got control of the skies over north Africa then the war may have taken a different turn and may have had a different outcome. Unfortunately my grandfather's military record does not definitely state which squadron he was assigned to in 1942, but by 1943 he was with 89<sup>th</sup> Squadron RAF. I think that it is therefore quite probable that he was with this squadron before it is formally noted on his records because they were in the area from 1941. Sid was also later given the 'North Africa ribbon' on the award of the Africa Star medal (see later) so he must have been with the RAF in the area and supporting the 18<sup>th</sup> Army Group, which included the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, between 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1942 and 12<sup>th</sup> May 1943.



From December 1941 until January 1943 the 89<sup>th</sup> Squadron was based at the Abu Suier (or Suwayr) airbase in Egypt (*picture above from Wikipedia*). This is about 60 miles north west of Suez and to the east of Alexandria. El Alamein was a further 60 miles west of Alexandria.

At Christmas 1942 Sidney sent the Christmas card pictured on the right back to his mother Rose Wareham. The card shows that he was in the 52<sup>nd</sup> Refuelling party, 'B' section.





89<sup>th</sup> Squadron RAF was equipped between 1941 and 1945 with the Bristol Beaufighther Mark I and later the Mark VI and they generally flew defensive night patrols along the North African coastline. The picture of 'Beau' from number 252 RAF Squadron on the left (*from Wikipedia*) shows a bomber taking off from a sandy North African airfield, much like the ones that Sidney would have worked on in 1942/43.

In January 1943, as Rommel was pushed back to Tunisia, the 89<sup>th</sup> squadron moved to the Bersis airfield in Libya. Its location is shown on the map below. Then in March 1943, after its capture from the Italian air force, the squadron located at Castel Benito near Tripoli in Libya. This former RAF base is now Tripoli International Airport.

On 13<sup>th</sup> May 1943 the axis forces under General Rommel surrendered and whilst Rommel and most of his men escaped to fight another day, 275,000 others became prisoners of war. Italian colonies in Africa were occupied and the way was open for the allied invasion of Italy. This was a major defeat of the Axis powers both in terms of strategy, resources and manpower.



After May 1943 and the victory in Africa, the Squadron sought out enemy targets in Crete and later in Sicily.

On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1943 Sidney was awarded with his one and only good conduct badge, 1<sup>st</sup> class.

On 19<sup>th</sup> July 1943 my grandfather was admitted to 24th Military Field Hospital. The official service record does not say why but by 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1943 he was allowed rest and recuperation.



89<sup>th</sup> Squadron's final location in Libya, from August till September 1943, was at Bu Amud. This is on the coast at the bottom of the right hand dip in the 'W' shaped coastline.

In September 1943 the squadron returned to Egypt for a last time and was based at Idku, about 20 miles to the

east of Alexandria. But with the withdrawal of German nightfighter units further north in Italy, they were no longer required in Africa.



Motto: *Dei auxilio telis meis (By the help of God with my own weapon)*

## Chapter Three - Third Posting – Ceylon and India

On 28<sup>th</sup> October 1943 Sidney Wareham embarked from Africa to India. From October 1943 till March 1944 the 89<sup>th</sup> squadron RAF was based at Vavuniya in north Ceylon, modern day Sri Lanka. The squadron's tasks were initially to fly defensive patrols, probably guarding shipping and allied bases in India and the far east from Japanese attack. In 1942 the Japanese had threatened a full invasion of India and had occupied the Indian Andaman Islands which are on the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal, which Ceylon borders on the south west.



In Christmas 1943 Sidney sent the Christmas card below to his mother.



The squadron was relocated a short distance south east to Minneriya in Ceylon from March to June 1944 before returning to Vavuniya from June to August.

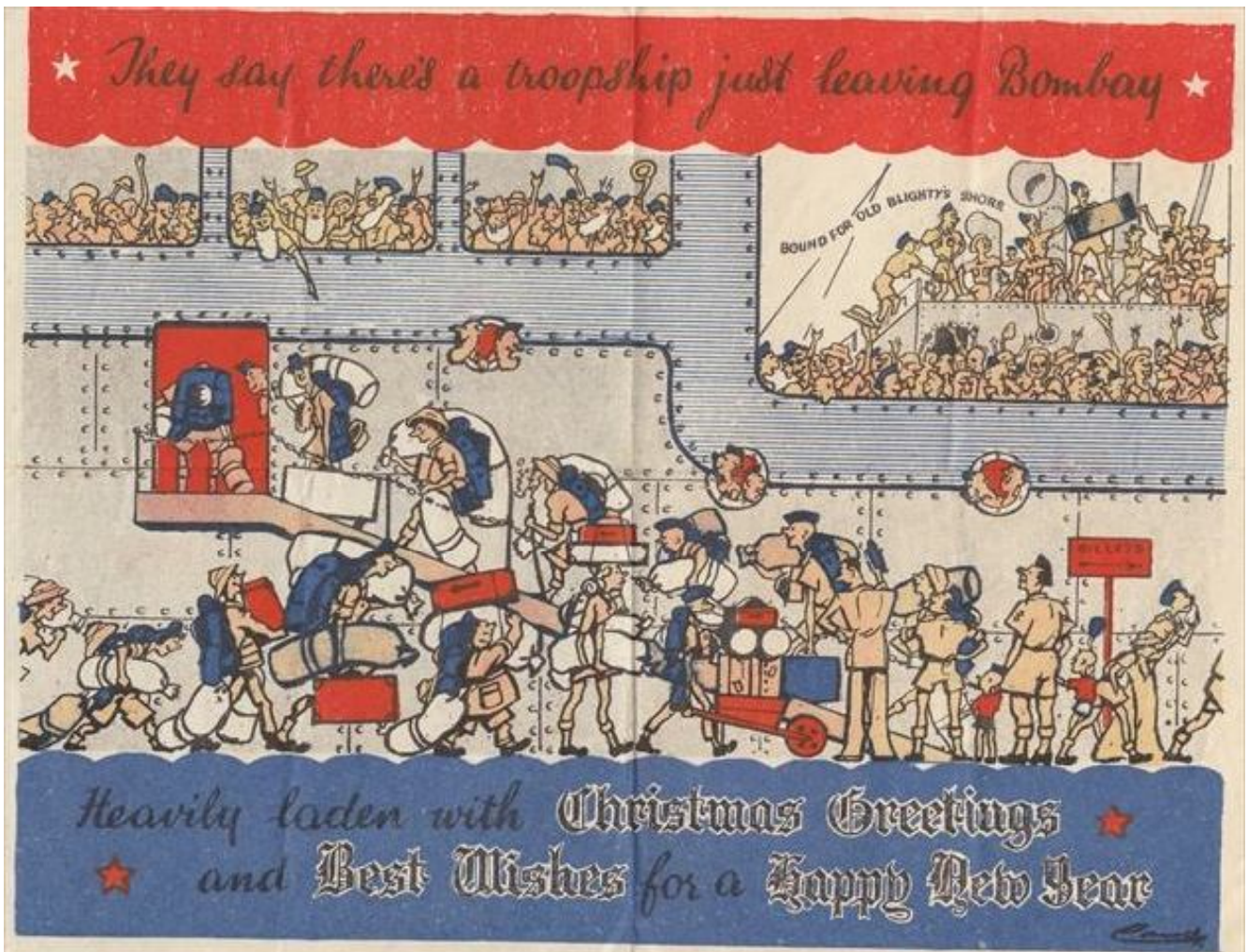
In August 1944 the 89<sup>th</sup> moved to Baigachi in India, about 40 miles from Calcutta (indicated on the map on the below). This relocation was because the role of the squadron changed from defensive operations in India and the Bay of Bengal to intruder missions into Burma. But it is here that things started to go badly for my grandfather's health and on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1944 he was admitted to 47<sup>th</sup> BGH (British General Hospital) in Calcutta. He was released on 22<sup>nd</sup> September.

On 13<sup>th</sup> December 1944 he wrote to his

sister 'Kathie' and said that "... I am OK now." He says that the weather in India is dry, quite hot in the day but that it gets rather cold at night. He says that he expects that he will feel the cold when he gets back home! He also says that the fruit is plentiful, with lots of oranges, and that the bananas are cheap and that he even picked some from the trees. This must have caused some jealousy at home in an England suffering from rationing!

Sidney also sent his sister a Christmas card, pictured below –





On 31<sup>st</sup> January 1945 Sidney wrote to his sister Kathleen and says that he is "...OK these days", comparing the weather in Britain he says that where he is "... the sun shines every day and all day for about six months without a break..." and wonders whether this makes his sister at home in shivering England feel like an iced cream. He says "... I hope it gets a bit warmer by the time I return, which won't be long now. I am looking forward to it very much". He further says that he gets to go to the cinema about twice a week and that they get quite up to date films where they are based, almost as quickly as they come out in London. However some time shortly afterwards he wrote this letter Sidney became very ill and contracted serious malaria. It is believed that for some time his family did not know his whereabouts and there were some concerns that he may have died. Sidney was though transported back to the UK and on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1945 he was at RAF Station Torquay in Devon, England. RAF Station Torquay is now the Palace Hotel (pictured right) and was used as a hospital for RAF personnel during the war.



Sadly my grandfather never fully recovered from weaknesses as a result of having suffering from this disease and through most of the post war years he suffered from poor health through to his premature death aged just 56 in 1972.



Some final interesting notes on Sidney's story of his service in the far east is that he



was in the area at the same time as his two brothers; George and Frank Wareham (pictured left and above, Frank on the right and George back row second from the left). George served with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dorset Regiment and was engaged in fierce, often hand to hand, fighting against the Japanese in Burma. Frank was with the 2962 RAF Regiment Squadron. The picture on the left shows the two brothers posing in uniform having met up in the area. The story goes that the two brothers were so affected by the war in their general appearance, that they did not immediately recognise each other whilst eating in an army mess.

It was also whilst in Ceylon in April 1944 that Sidney was awarded his one service medal. This was the 'Africa Star' which was awarded to serving personnel who were present in Africa during the famous and important victories over the German Afrika Corps.

The picture below must have been taken in Ceylon or in India after April 1944 as it clearly shows him wearing the 'North Africa 1942-43' ribbon clasp for his medal (shown below) on his uniform.



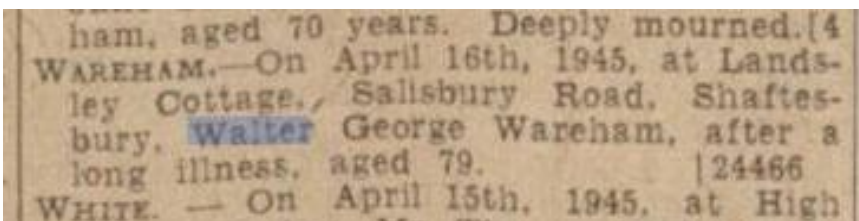
## Chapter Four - Home Sweet Home

There is a family story that grandfather Wareham arrived back in Shaftesbury whilst his wife was in the movie theatre on Bimport Road. In those days our family would not have had a telephone and he would probably have arrived unannounced back home and may have surprised everyone.

Sidney was certainly at home in Shaftesbury on 26<sup>th</sup> May 1945, just 24 days after he was recorded as being at the hospital in Torquay, because he is pictured at the wedding of his sister-in-law Iris Hiscock and Percy Bird at Cann Church in Shaftesbury. He is marked in the picture below and whilst it is only the top of his head it is unmistakably Sidney. He is standing near his father-in-law Robert Hiscock, who is wearing the trilby hat and is centre back row.



Sadly Sidney did not arrive back in Shaftesbury in time to see his father again as he had died on 16<sup>th</sup> April 1945 (he was buried on 20<sup>th</sup> April at Charlton, near Shaftesbury). This is his death notice in the Western Gazette newspaper (courtesy of British Newspapers online) –



Walter had become very ill after suffering from blood poisoning from a pesticide used on the roses of the gardens where he worked. He was bedridden for weeks before he died. He is pictured to the right in a greenhouse on the Coombe estate, where over the years he had worked for – firstly Mark Beaufoy (former Liberal MP and Quaker industrialist), who built the house, the Wormald family when it was an



hotel and finally during the war the house had become a hospital for recuperating US bomber crews. In 1922 Walter had been one of the pallbearers of Mark Beaufoy having been at that time one of his six eldest employees having worked for him for about 35 years. After the war the house became a convent and is now a school for girls.

Sidney's mother and Walter's wife, Rose (formerly Stainer), was to live until 1960.

Sidney's military service was not quite yet over and on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1945, after the war with Germany had ended, he was posted to RAF Station Millom in Cumbria. This must be a very quiet posting because it was a long way from much remaining military activity. It was also quite a strange assignment because it was so far north and was a long way from his home and family.

On 15<sup>th</sup> December 1945 Sidney was posted to number 3 GTS (Glider Training School), when, according to researcher Neil Jed, it was at Wellsbourne Mountford near Warwick, which is a bit nearer to Dorset.

Sidney was finally released from active service, after just a month at Wellsbourne, on 17<sup>th</sup> January 1946 (his effective release date was given as 19<sup>th</sup> April 1946). In 1946 he was able to resume home and family life properly, although he was held in the reserves officially until 1959. My aunt Celia was the first child born after the war followed eighteen months later by my dad, Rodney, and his twin sister Patricia (who sadly did not survive long) in late 1947.

## Chapter Four – His Small Part in the Big Victories

The remarkable thing about my grandfather's wartime service is that whilst he may not have been engaged in any direct fighting with the enemy, his support role took him to three theatres of the Second World War which were so important to defeating the Axis powers. Firstly there was the home war in the air with the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. Then the war in North Africa which Churchill described as being the turning point of the war because before El Alamein in 1942 'there was nothing but defeats, but afterwards there were nothing but victories'. Finally in the far east he played his small part in stopping the advance of the Japanese into the British Empire and, alongside his brothers George and Frank, in turning them back with the fight in Burma.

Sadly I was not able to get to know my grandfather very well. I was just two years old when he passed away. I do have one memory of seeing him when I was on my mother's arm when we met at Ten Acres in Shaftesbury and I have one treasured image in my head of this man. His war story, like those of many others, can make our family very proud.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of my granddad Sidney Wareham.

Pictured below, Sidney in later life with my aunt Maureen and at the wedding of my uncle Dave and Sue, alongside his wife Violet.



## Sources

RAF Record Office

North Weald Museum - <http://www.northwealdairfieldhistory.org/content/battle-britain>

89<sup>th</sup> Squadron history - [http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/89\\_wwII.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/89_wwII.html)

89<sup>th</sup> Squadron history and insignia - <http://www.rafweb.org/Sqn086-90.htm>

Wikipedia.