

Brat Ripping Tales

The Life of Aircraft Apprentice Frederick Williamson 'Taffy' Higginson

Frederick William Higginson was born in Swansea on 17th February 1913, the son of a policeman. He was educated at Gowerton County Intermediate School and following graduation in January 1929 joined the RAF as an Aircraft Apprentice (trade of Metal Rigger) and became a member of the 400 strong 19th Entry at RAF Halton. On completion of training, in December 1931, he passed out 260th in the order of merit as a qualified tradesman and was posted to the Vickers Virginia-equipped No. 7 Squadron as a Fitter/Air Gunner based at RAF Bircham Newton.

In April 1935 the squadron re-equipped and replaced the elderly Virginias with the modern Handley Page Heyford; a few months later Higginson volunteered for pilot training and on the 6th August 1935 began his elementary flying at No. 4 Elementary & Reserve Flying Training School (E&RFTS) at RAF Brough before moving onto 5 FTS RAF Sealand on the 2nd October.

On completion of training, 1st July 1936, he joined 19 Squadron, C Flight, based at RAF Duxford as a Sergeant Pilot flying the Gloster Gauntlet; 3 weeks later, C Flight was split from 19 Squadron to become 66 Squadron and Higginson found himself as a member of the newly reformed squadron and for his role for the next 10 months to be flying Anti-Aircraft Cooperation sorties out of RAF Biggin Hill and later RAF Bircham Newton where his man-service had begun.



Sgt. P Hillwood, Flt Lt E J Gracie and **Plt Off F W Higginson** of 56 Squadron

On 20th of October 1937 Higginson was posted and joined 56 Squadron at RAF North Weald where he made the relatively easy conversion to flying the Gloster Gladiator, a short-lived experience for over the next year the squadron began re-equipping with the new Hawker Hurricane.



The outbreak of the second World War saw a newly promoted Flight Sergeant Higginson being sent with 56 Squadron's 'B' Flight to be an element of the BEF in Northern France at Vitry-en-Artois. This was to be a detachment that ended with the squadron covering the evacuation from Dunkirk and during a 3-day period he opened his account with claiming the shooting down of a Do17, a He111 and a Me110.

With the German advance threatening the base at Vitry-en-Artois, 'B' Flight retreated to the new location of Norrent Fontes. As a final act, Higginson and fellow squadron member Sergeant Whitehead returned to Vitry-en-Artois to destroy the remaining aircraft and stores that had been abandoned. By the time their task was done, the Germans were less than 4 miles away.

June 4th saw the last troops leaving the Dunkirk beaches; many of them would have witnessed Higginson shooting down a Me109 on 29th May. Six weeks later he added to his score with a probable Do17. In recognition of this and his other achievements, on 30th July he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal (DFM).

Now operating out of 56 Squadron's home of North Weald he was well placed to be involved in the Battle of Britain and accordingly on 12th August he damaged a Do17; on the 16th destroyed a Do17; on the 18th shot down another Do17; on the 25th probably destroyed a Me110; on the 26th destroyed a Me110; on the 31st a Me109 met a similar fate; on 14th September a Do17; on the 27th damaged a Me110 and on the 30th he shared a Me110 and damaged another.



In recognition of this demonstration of skill and leadership, Higginson was commissioned on 24th September. It was only a week later when the 'B' Flight Commander, Flt Lt Edwards, was shot down and Higginson was further promoted to become his replacement in the role.

Spring 1941, with the Battle of Britain successfully concluded, the RAF shifted its focus from defensive operations to concentrate more on offensive sorties and began flying daylight raids over Northern France. These sorties, known as 'Circuses', were primarily attacks by bombers on targets in France carried out with a fighter escort or, in some cases,

fighter sweeps. It was on the 17th June when Higginson, participating in 'Circus 14', a raid on Lille, that he and his Hurricane (Z2575) was shot down.

The direct hit on his aircraft caused the control column to snap at the base, his left flying boot to be torn off and his trousers to be shredded. With an aircraft that was impossible to control he was left with only one option which was to bale out; an option which he took.

As he later reported in an interview, *"A Cannon Shell went through the bottom of the aeroplane taking away my control stick. A complete surprise.*

"The crate went into a vertical dive. I undid my straps, slid back the hood and was more or less sucked out of the aircraft. Luckily the parachute was undamaged.

"I pulled the rip-cord, the parachute opened, and after the tremendous noise all was peace and quiet. The countryside below looked delightful in the summer sunshine."

His period of peace decreased and his troubles increased when he landed in some woods from where his descent had been observed by German troops on the ground who awaited his arrival.

He was seized and placed in the sidecar of a motorbike combination under the command of an Officer and his driver and driven off. They had not gone far when his captors were distracted by a low flying Me109 (maybe the same aircraft who had shot him down?). The distraction allowed Higginson to grab the handlebars and for the combination to tip over ejecting the occupants. In the confusion, Higginson ran off and successfully evaded his angry (and, no doubt, embarrassed) pursuers.

After making his way and reaching Lille he met Paul Cole, a Dunkirk survivor, a petty criminal, a confidence trickster, a British soldier, an operative of the Pat O'Leary escape line and, not known at the time, an agent of Nazi Germany.

(In 1940 and 1941 Cole helped many British soldiers escape France after the surrender at Dunkirk but he later became a double agent for the Germans. His greatest act of infamy was the betrayal to the Gestapo of 150 escape line workers and members of the French Resistance whom about 50 were executed or died in German concentration camps.

Described as 'the worst traitor of the war,' Cole deceived both the British and the Germans and escaped from prison on several occasions. He survived the war, but was killed while resisting arrest by French police in Paris in January 1946.)

Cole took him to Abbeville where Abbé Carpentier, a local priest, provided Higginson with false identity papers which allowed him to travel onward, escorted by Cole, to Paris, where he lodged in a brothel for a few weeks. His brief stay was followed by being accompanied by Cole to travel to Tours and the nearby town, Saint-Martin-le-Beau, close

to the Vichy line which divided Occupied France from the so-called Free Zone, Vichy France.

It was on arrival in Saint-Martin-le-Beau that they were questioned by a pair of German soldiers who were not convinced by Cole's explanation that Higginson was an idiot seeking work and the sceptical soldiers then insisted on looking inside his valise. Fortunately, its contents and his papers were smothered in chocolate which had melted in the summer heat and then their luck further held when Cole was ordered to open his own bag but the soldiers failed to discover a pistol and incriminating papers which had been rolled up in dirty laundry. The pair were sent on their way.

After entering Vichy France Higginson reached Marseilles where he was welcomed by Georges Rodocanochi, a Greek doctor, and his wife Fanny who ran a safe house for Pat O'Leary's MI9 escape line.

It was in Marseilles that Cole and Higginson parted company. After his departure, Higginson who was acutely aware of the debt he owed his companion, was shocked when he learned that Cole, far from being the Army captain he claimed to be, was a sergeant who had absconded with mess funds. (Among Cole's many other betrayals were that he had informed on the priest, Carpentier, who was later executed).

On 4th July Higginson caught a train to Perpignan close to the Spanish border where, impatient at being kept waiting, he teamed up with an Australian corporal who persuaded a Catalan guide to point them in the direction and start them on their way to Spain. Unfortunately, before they got too far they were stopped by gendarmes and Higginson, incensed by their attitude, struck one of them. Big mistake, he was arrested and imprisoned for six months for having false papers.

On 5th March 1942, just about as he was to be released, he was further detained in reprisal for an Allied raid on the Renault factory at Billancourt and 12 days afterwards he was transferred to the prison of Fort de la Revere above Monte Carlo. It was there that he decided to assume the name Captain Bennett, since he believed the Germans, with some justification, particularly disliked airmen.

At this stage MI9 in London urged O'Leary to make every effort to get Higginson out, in view of his exceptional record as a fighter pilot.

O'Leary recruited the assistance of a Polish priest, Father Myrda, as a go-between to smuggle a hacksaw blade into the prison where Higginson was being held. The blade was used to great effect and it was on the night of 6th August that Higginson and four others, under cover of a noisy concert, sawed through bars and then dropped through a coal chute to land in a moat full of sewage.

Evading his pursuers, Higginson reached Cap d'Ail, on the Cote d'Azur, where he discovered that he had lost his ID card. Despite this setback with the assistance of Father

Myrda he managed to slip into Monte Carlo and reach a safe house in owned by Eva Trenchard, a spinster who had run the principality's 'Scottish Tea House' since 1924. She welcomed him with a cup of tea and gave him refuge.

At the right time Father Myrda provided Higginson with a cassock and accompanied him to Marseilles. On 17th September Higginson made for Canet Plage, a beach resort, where he was picked up from a dinghy by the *Tarana*, a Polish trawler employed on clandestine missions in the Mediterranean as a Q-Ship. A week later the *Tarana* rendezvoused with a Royal Navy Destroyer, *HMS Minna*, to which Higginson transferred, to sail and subsequently disembark at Gibraltar from where he was flown home by the RAF in late September 1942.

Higginson rejoined 56 Squadron, then at Matlask, on 6th October; in his absence the squadron had exchanged its Hurricanes for Typhoons.

On 5th January 1943 he was posted 'on special duties' in London to the engine manufacturer, Napier Aero Engines, makers of the Typhoon and Tempest powerplant. He had only been in post four weeks when, on 9th February 1943, in recognition of his service and ordeal, he was awarded the DFC.

15 months later, on 1st April 1944, he was posted to 83 Group 2nd TAF, firstly at Redhill, then Thorney Island and, from 6th August 1944, to continental Europe to join the invading Allies.

Following Victory in Europe in 1945, Higginson served with 11 Group on organisation duties. He went on to RAF Staff College, Army Staff College and eventually retired from the RAF on 5th April 1956 as a Wing Commander.

On retirement from the Air Force, he joined Bristol Aircraft, firstly as a military adviser, later becoming Sales and Service Director. After two years British Aerospace appointed him to similar role in their guided weapons division. In 1963 his success in opening up overseas markets for guided weapons, particularly Bloodhound, was recognised with the award of an OBE.

In 1969 he bought Peny-Coed, a 250-acre farm in his native Wales, with a large 17th century house.

He died at St Clears, Carmarthenshire on 12th February 2003, five days before his 90th birthday.
