

Ft. Lt. Phil Ainley DFC
(Extended biography)

Phil was 15 when war was declared on the 3rd September 1939. He had always wanted to be a pilot and the only way to do this was to join the RAF or the RAF Volunteer Reserve. However, he couldn't join until he was 17 and so he took up an engineering apprenticeship. When Phil tried to join up again he was told he couldn't because he was in a reserved occupation.

Phil finally joined the RAF in November 1941 when he opted for aircrew as this was the only way he could get out of his apprenticeship. However, he couldn't start his flying training until he was 17½.

In November 1942, Phil was sent to St John's Wood, to the Air Crew Receiving Centre. Here he was given a uniform and white flashes to put in his cap to show that he was aircrew. He and his colleagues spent five weeks marching around London and having inoculations.

After St John's Wood, Phil was sent to Manchester's Heaton Park. This was a holding centre for volunteer aircrew and from here everyone was sent for specialist training as pilots, navigators, bombardiers and wireless operators.

Phil was sent for pilot training in Silloth, Cumbria. Here he received just a few hours of flying in Tiger Moths and then when he was safe to fly he was passed back to Manchester. From here, Phil was selected for pilot training and was sent with a batch of naval ratings to the US Air Base Gross Ille, Michigan, USA. It was extremely cold, but even so physical exercise had to be carried out at 5.30 in the morning and in singlet and shorts!

Phil passed out from his basic flying training and then proceeded to the US Aviation Base, Pensacola, Florida. Here, Phil learned to fly single engine aircraft of various types. In December 1942, Pearl Harbour was attacked and American patriotism was everywhere even on the pats of butter. Any Britons were treated as honoured guests and were adopted by local families.

It was decided that Phil was better suited to multi-engine rather than single-engined aircraft and so he was sent to train on Catalina, flying boats. In May 1943 he passed out as a pilot and was awarded his American Naval Gold Wings. The advantage of Phil's training was that he learned seamanship as well as airmanship.

Once back in Great Britain Phil went to Moss Bros to purchase his brand new Pilot Officer's uniform. His pay had gone up from 5 shillings a day to 10 shilling and 6 pence and beer was only 9d to 10d (old pence) a pint!

Unfortunately, there was no need for more flying boat pilots but as Phil had multi-engined experience, he was sent to fly 4 engined aircraft. This meant further training as landing aircraft on land rather than the sea required a different technique. Once this new technique had been mastered Phil was sent to a Wellington Operation Training Unit. Here people were either picked or they did the picking of aircrew.

Phil picked a Pilot Officer from the Canadian airforce as his Navigator and a fellow British Pilot Officer as his bomb aimer.

It was when training on Short Stirling aircraft that Phil met the rest of his crew; a wireless operator, a Canadian mid-upper gunner, a rear gunner and a flight engineer. Phil's wireless operator was only 17 ½ as was his rear gunner. Although they had flown in the aircraft for only a few hours, they were seen to be ready to fly Lancaster bombers and were sent to Nottinghamshire for training. This consisted of 14 hours flying time on the Lancaster, 7 hours during daylight and 7 hours at night.

On the 15th May 1944, Phil and his crew were sent to 57 Squadron East Kirby, Lincolnshire. He then experienced his first operational flight, sitting alongside a 'veteran' pilot. They flew to Amiens where they were due to deposit bombs on marshalling yards. However, they returned with their bomb load!

Phil's first operational flight with his crew was on the 24th May. Their target was the marshalling yards in Antwerp. Things were building up for the D Day landings and so the aim of the bombing raids was to cause maximum disruption to the Germans.

Although the crew were not told when D Day was to happen, they returned from a mission in the early morning on the 4th June and saw numerous ships and barges, so they knew something was occurring. By July, Phil and his crew had flown 14 missions and they were flying almost every other night. After the troops had been landed in France there were more trips into Germany and more aircraft went missing. In the summer of 1944, Phil's logbook recorded two trips, one with 31 missing and one with 49 missing and each of those aircraft had a crew of 7 men.

On the 16th August 1944 the crew were briefed to do a 'gardening' mission. Gardening was code for dropping sea mines. The area to be mined was the Stettin Bay Canal in Germany. The mines had to be dropped from only 250 feet and this area was fiercely guarded. Only 6 crews had been detailed to fly down the canal and Phil's was one of them.

Command had laid on an attack on the town of Stettin itself to draw attention away from the Canal. However, the bombing was delayed as the marking for the bombs was off track and the aircraft had the terrifying prospect of orbiting the target at only 250 feet, whilst marking was relaid. The aircraft in front of Phil was blown up and they had to negotiate the debris. Out of the 6 aircraft earmarked to bomb the Stettin Canal, one was blown up, one did not reach Stettin and one went missing. It was for this mission and pressing home the attack that Phil was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Having successfully completed 33 missions Phil and his crew left the Squadron on the 6th October. In 2002, after 58 years Phil was re-united with his Navigator at a Re-union at East Kirkby, the Station from where they flew during the war.
