Donald Bruce from Rye, Sussex, England joined the RAF at the start of WWII and took his navigation training at No. 31 Air Navigation School, Port Albert. During the war, he was shot down and spent three years in a German POW camp. To document his experiences, he recorded a series of thirteen audio cassette tapes between 1977and 1995. These tapes were given to Eugene McGee and later donated to the Huron County Museum. The following excerpts are from an undated cassette about his time at No. 31 ANS Port Albert. *From the Eugene McGee Collection, 2010.0037.157*

Excerpt 1- Arriving at Port Albert and meeting his instructor
So after the long training journey, which I think took about 2 days, I remember sleeping on the train, we eventually arrived at number 31 Air Navigation School at Port Albert. 31 Air Navigation School had been moved from Saint Athens in Wales to Canada so therefore it was an RAF operated aerodrome, all the personnel were RAF. Port Albert incidentally is in Ontario, Canada.

It was a very happy station. Our pay as LAC's there was equivalent to 11 shillings a day, which of course, was a lot more than what we'd been earning in England. In fact, it was virtually double the pay we were getting there, so we weren't short of money and we soon settled into routine. The food was extremely good. I can remember we used to get ice cream as a sweet if we wanted it in the mess and of course this was absolutely unheard of in England.

So the day came where we sat in our lecture room waiting to meet our new instructor. Of course, we were still very much ITW types and we're really conditioned to bull, so we tended, still, to look upon a corporal as being 3 ranks higher than the king. And when we finally met our instructor, it was a bit of a shock because we had been sitting there waiting in the room and suddenly a head with a monocle appeared around the door. Next minute a cheese cutter flew across the room aimed for the table, which was on the far side of the room. The cheese cutter landed on one side of the table, slid right across it and fell off the other side and a chap stepped into the room and said "Nappin". And this was our first introduction to Flight Lieutenant Jimmy Boothby DFC who had been a hurricane pilot with the advanced air striking force in France. He was an incredible chap this Jimmy Boothby, had been put in charge of Number 6 Observer Course. He, as I said before, wore a monocle. He had a handle bar moustache and tended to stutter a little. And to finish his words, he used to whistle and then could get the last part of the word out. He was an incredibly funny person and he hated bull. The buttons on his tunic were absolutely green. And he used to smoke a pipe while he was lecturing to us and bits of tobacco used to fall off and set light to his shirt and he had holes in his pockets where he put pipes in, and they burnt through his uniform and he was altogether a very singular character.

At one stage during the course he came in all happy one Friday and said that he'd arranged weekend passes for us and of course, we were all delighted about this but we said hadn't got any money, it was near the end of the pay. So he said, "that's alright, I'll

lend you all," I forget what it was, ten dollars or something like that. Anyway, sufficient to cover us for the weekend and we were delighted about this. So we got all this arranged and then he sent the chief cadet along, the leading cadet, a chap called [?] and sent him along to the chief flying instructor with the passes to be signed. Incidentally, Boothby couldn't stand the CFI and [?] came back and said the CFI had refused to sign them to give us the weekend. So Boothby did no more but signed all the passes himself and we all went off on the weekend. We never heard anything more about it and I don't know what the outcome of it was."

Excerpt 2- Flying in an airplane for the first time

On the 21st of April, 1941 I made my first trip in an aircraft, that was in an Avro Anson T4 and the trip lasted 2 hours and 25 minutes. I see my duty is down as map reading, how much of that I did at that time, I don't know. I was sitting next to the pilot while we were taxiing. The second navigator, because there were two pupils in the aircraft, was back in the navigator's position and there was no intercom in these jobs, you had to either pass messages or shout in each others ear and the pilot leant over towards me and said, had I ever flown before? And I said, no. And he also asked about my friend who was Charlie Charlwood, was the chap who had gone up with me, and he said, "Has he ever flown before?" and I said, "No." I think this was a mistake because obviously the pilot was checking up to see if we were seasoned or not and it was a little game with some of these pilots to try and make peoples air sick and he managed to succeed on this particular trip.

It was very bumpy and noisy and it was a long while for an initial trip. And I was managing to hold my own, all right, but finally, just before we came back, just before we turned back, the pilot said oh it's a good landmark down here, it's a new dam they're building at Fergus. He said if you're ever lost, look out for it and it will give you position. He said let's take a closer look and he turned the old Anson on her wing and sort of did a sharp turn and started to dive and that just about finished it with me, I felt as sick as a dog. I rush to the back, stuck my head out of the window with no helmet on and got frost bite all over my ear but I'm one of those people who can't be sick anyway, so it wasn't successful. And that incidentally was the only time the I ever felt sick in an aircraft apart from when I was on ops and I used to sometimes feel sick with frightening but not with the actually motion of the aircraft.

Excerpt 3 – Airplane crash that killed two people

The day after my second flight, which I made on the 22nd of April, an Anson took off with two pupils who were on the more advanced Astro course and the pilot was Flying Officer Ransome. And they were navigating above the cloud and they came down through the cloud to try and find out where they were, to see if they were near the aerodrome and unfortunately it was a place, near a place called Mount Forest. Most of Ontario is fairly flat, but this part had some high ground and they struck a hill which was about 300 feet above sea level and smashed the kite up. Flying Officer Ransome was

killed and so was one of the under training observers, Donald Hughes. But William Goodman and the Wireless Operator Clifford Clark, they both survived the crash.

Excerpt 4 – Surviving a crash landing

However the following day, on the 24th of April, we took off again, at five minutes past ten in Anson D3. The pilot was Sergeant Ballantine and my duty was first navigator. And we had to fly a route Port Albert to Orangeville to Tilsonberg to Port Lambton and back to base. Sorry, not to Port Lambton, it was Port Albert, Orangeville, Tilsonberg and then back to base. We diverted on our first leg so that we could go and see this crash. And it was a pretty unpleasant looking site. The plane was spread all in these trees because it had landed in sort of forest land and it was all spread about. There was an engine somewhere, a wing somewhere else and so on. And then we carried on, on our journey.

Now on the third leg, I was upfront with the pilot and I was map reading. I was never really good at map reading, I always found this difficult. And I got lost. So Ballantine looked at the map and picked out a town which turned out to be a wrong town. It was even further south then we should have been and asked for an alteration of course to track over this town. And this took us even further south of our route. So we were running a bit short of petrol and as I was sitting in second pilot's position, he asked me to change over to the auxiliary tanks. Now this was typical RAF, we had never been shown to do this in an aircraft and there was fuel cock controls, four of them in fact, sliding controls on the right hand side of the cock pit and apparently they had to be open and shut in a certain order, which I had never been told. So I did what I was thought I was expected to do and Ballantine shouted out I had done it wrong. So he leant over and then altered the procedure and during the course of this, it transpired, we got an air lock in the feed.

Now about this time, I had to change places with the other UT observer, old Charlie Charlwood. So he went up to the front and I went back to the nav. table and we were going along at 2000 feet, about 140 miles from base and lost. And suddenly both engines cut out. Ballantine looked around and saw a field that he thought he could put down in and he asked for the under cart to be lowered. This was wrong, incidentally, because a crash landing away from the base is usually made with the wheels up, but he thought that the field was alright and he could put it down and land it with the under cart down. So I was sitting back in the navigator's position. And there you look along the port wing, you look out over the side and you can see the country ahead. And he started to glide down and I thought it wasn't going to be too bad, we got the wheels down. It was probably going to be a bit bumpy as we land in the field but nothing to worry about, so I settled back and I wasn't really bothered. The, Charlie Charlwood had come and sat, moved back next to me and was standing next to me. I don't know why he didn't stand up at the front, but he moved back and I thought this is going to be okay.

So he flattened out for his approach and we were gliding in beautifully and then, I just happened to look along the wing and the fuselage was heading for a gap in some trees. But what Ballantine had missed was the fact that the tops of the trees, of course the leaves weren't out on them - they were thin wimpy trees, the tops of the trees [tape skips]… the port wing. And as I looked out along the wing, I could see that the tops of them were a couple, three feet above and I thought, oh my God, this is going to be unpleasant. The next minute, the port wing hit the trees. They started to snap off and break, but of course it swung the aircraft around, the starboard engine, the starboard wing rather, swung forward, the fuselage went in the gap and that also caught the starboard wing, also caught the trees on the other side. So we were all jerked virtually to a stop and all thrown forward. I was fortunate in a way because I went up against the nav. table which smashed and broke and it was made of plywood and it was just one jagged piece that dug into my finger, but apart from that, I was okay.

The plane lurched over the top of the trees and then dived straight for the deck, hit nose first. That crumpled the nose up a bit and then it slid along its belly and we all straightened out on the ground. There was a lot of dust rising and a lot of noise. I looked around. Poor old Charlwood had gone up into the roof and hit his head, split his head open and that was pouring with blood. His arm, he went to put his hand up to his head and his arm fell back. It turned out he had broken a bone at the joint and that couldn't support his arm properly. I looked at Ballantine. He had gone face first into the wind screen and his face was just a mask of blood. He was lying back in the pilot's position. The Wireless Operator had been thrown across as the tail swung around, when the port wing first hit and then it swung 'round, he'd been thrown over to the starboard side of the aircraft. He got internal injuries from his table, as his stomach hit against the table and also he got multiple fracture of his right arm where he hit into the side of the fuselage.

I didn't know the first thing about first aid and the sight of blood always scares me to death. So I went to help the Wireless Operator who looked the worst of everybody. I went to lift him up and he let out a terrible groan. So, I thought the only thing I could do was get out of this kite and try and get help, so I climbed out and I could see right across the field there was a road and there was a chap standing there talking to a women in a car. So I started to run across this field. I hadn't even bothered to take my parachute harness off. I mean, had I been thinking straight, I would have whipped that off straight away. But I rushed across in this heavy tight parachute harness. I was wearing a green suit cart[?] that was covered in blood, incidentally from Charlwood, and when I got into this field there was a damn great black horse that kept charging around me. But I was so worked up about getting help that even that didn't put me off. And I raced across and finally I was shouting to this chap because I didn't want the car to drive away and he looked around and I said to him we just crashed over the back there, we want help and I was staggered at his reply. He said, "Oh, there's no airplanes around here." Where the hell he thought I'd come from, I don't know.

When I thought about it afterwards, I realized that we had come down perfectly silently because the engines weren't operating. And as we glided with no noise I suppose that was his immediate reaction. He hadn't heard a plane, so where the hell did it come from? So, of course, he soon cottoned on there was something wrong, when he saw the blood down my suit cart and what not and he said alright, well you just take your time and he said I will race over there and see what I can do and he asked this women if she would go and get the doctor. So of course, she tore off down the road and I started to walk back across the field because I feeling pretty exhausted and a bit sick by this time and when I got back to the aircraft, quite a number of farm workers had turned up. They got the Wireless Operator laid out on the wing and Ballantine was walking around in a daze, didn't know really where he was and Charlwood was also standing, bleeding from the head with his arm all peculiar and finally the doctor came over.

He had to walk part of the way because he couldn't get his car across the field because it was so boggy. So obviously it wasn't the sort of field to land an aircraft in, particularly with the wheels down. [previous tape recording cuts in] I was rather surprised to see that the doctor was absolutely white and shaking. He was a young chap and when he got across to the aircraft and he said to me afterwards, he confided to me, that when they said there'd been an aircraft accident, he expected to find bits of bodies around and he was awfully relieved to find out that we were all still intact, although, you know, three of them were injured. But not as seriously as he thought we were going to be.

So they got one of these things that's pulled along by horses, that carries the hay and so on, that just slides along the ground and they put the injured ones on that and took them out to the road and, of course, they were taken to hospital at Wallaceberg in an ambulance. I was left more or less standing guard over the aircraft. And we were just across from the American border. Of course America wasn't in the war then, she was still neutral. And word had spread and people were coming across from the American side to look at this Royal Air Force plane. Some of them thought we had flown all the way from England, ran out of petrol and crashed and I remember one chap pointing to the tarot, the blister and saying, "I suppose that's where the driver sits."

Anyway, apart from having to ask two types who came along, the tail plane, the part that one half part of the tail plane that had been wrenched off and it was just lying on the ground, and two types came along and started to cart this away as a souvenir. So I had to ask them to put it down, they were a bit displeased about it but finally they sent a detachment of soldiers up to guard the plane and a mounted police man. A Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman who was in service, incidentally, came and picked me up and took me back to his home. He had a charming wife and she cooked me a wonderful meal. I didn't really feel much like eating but she did me a marvellous meal and for my benefit, he went and changed into his full ceremonial dress, so it was quite pleasant. And then later on the airforce at Port Albert rang through and asked him to take me down to the hospital as well, to Wallaceberg, and an ambulance came down the

following day and took me back to the station. But I suffered from delayed shock and eventually had to go into hospital at Port Albert and I was in there for a week.

So that was my third air flight and I was beginning to have some doubts about this flying luck, after I had that. But eventually, of course, I recovered from it and got used to flying again, but I used to feel a little feeling of trepidation when I went out after that for the next few trips. The place we crashed at was Port Lambton. It was near Sarnia. And as I've said before, it is about 140 miles from base.

Of course there was a court of inquiry later on to establish the cause of the crash. And eventually it was put down that due to the inexperience of the navigator in changing petrol cocks over. But I still feel I was made a scapegoat to get Ballantine off the hook because he was due for commission, which he got shortly after that crash. But I still feel that he was the overall captain of the aircraft and that we were hopelessly lost because he had made a mistake with the map reading as well. And furthermore, he had given me the order for changing over the petrol cocks, which he should of done himself really, so I feel it was more his fault then mine. But as it happened, it hurt no one, so in the long run he became a pilot officer and everybody was happy.

Excerpt 5 – Losing an airplane over the lake

We had a kite returning one night and both the UT observers in that, I knew better then the two in the, in Flying Officer Ransome's crew. I think they were a course that was running concurrently with ours and I'd known these chaps coming over on the boat. And apparently, this was a night trip and they were in contact with the ground but they were lost so they were being given bearings to bring them in and they past right over the aerodrome and right on over the shores of the lake and they went right out over the lake and just vanished.

Now at that time we had no dinghies on the Anson's and neither did we wear Maewests. And as far as I know they were never found. I believe they searched the lake. The next day they had boats out but of course they were vast things those lakes, they were more like going out over the sea and I don't think the kite was ever found again. I believe they found one or two pieces floating around that they identified as from it, but there were no traces of the plane or its occupants. And after that, they started to equip the Ansons with dinghies so that if anybody did come down and had to ditch in the lake, at least they'd have something to get into.

And it was when this crew went that it brought it home to me and made me realize what it was like to lose people that you really knew well. Of course this was to happened later on, but this was the first real time that it came home to me.

Excerpt 6- Purchasing an old 1930 Essex and touring the country

Whilst at Port Albert, we tried to see as much of Canada as we possibly could whenever we got leave, weekend leave and so on. And we mainly used to do hitchhiking. But at

one stage, 5 of us clubbed together and we bought an old 1930 Essex, 15 horse power thing for $90. It was one with an outside dickey seat. Now-a-days, of course, it would be worth a fortune as a vintage or veteran car, but then of course, it was just an old heap and it was always breaking down. But we did use to have a lot of fun in it and we used to get around quite a lot in it.

But sometimes there'd be more than one person driving it and when this was happening once, one chap had his foot on the accelerator and another one was steering it and we had a tire blow out. We shot across the road but fortunately nothing was coming down the other side and we finished up in the ditch. It nearly turned over as we went in the ditch, but the only person who was injured and that wasn't seriously, was one of the chaps who jumped out, he tried to bail out as we were sliding across. And he grated his face rather badly.

Eventually it broke down in some fairly distant town that was on our journey. So we abandoned it in a car park, thought we'd come back later on and pick it up and we hitchhiked on to where we were going and then hitchhiked all the way back. Well we didn't get anymore weekend leave for about 2 or 3 weeks and when we eventually got back to it, some blighter had pinched the spare tired off it. Now it was a fairly new tire and we had enough of the car by then because it had let us down so many times, so we decided to trade it back to the chap and the first thing he knocked off was $10 for the tire which had been pinched. But we did have a lot of fun with that car and it didn't cost us an awful a lot of money. I suppose 90 dollars then was about, something around about 20 pounds or there abouts, just over.