



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of JAMES ERNEST PELLY-FRY



November 22, 1911 - December 6, 1994

Transcribed & Edited by SS (06/2003), Reformatted by JS (12/2009)

Career:

- Flew his own designs on Wimbledon Common
- Served as a council member for the Society of Model Aeronautical Engineers (SMAE)
- Appointed Air Equerry to Britain's King George VI in 1943
- Owned and operated a delicatessen in the mid-1960s and sold it in the early 1970s
- Wrote an autobiography called Heavenly Days that was published in December 1994
- Had models published in Model Engineer and the first Model Aeroplane Manual
- Helped formulate the rules for the Wakefield Cup
- Member of the British Wakefield team from 1928 to 1932 and then flew Gordon Light's U.S. entry to second place in 1933
- Was a pilot in Britain's Royal Air Force during World War II
- Some of his models, including versions of the full-scale Devon, Boston and Wellesley, can be seen at the Goosedale Model Museum

Margaret (Dolly) Wischer submitted the following information on James Pelly-Fry (from various sources) to the AMA History Project (at the time called the AMA History Program) in 2003. Pelly-Fry's autobiography, Heavenly Days: Recollections of a Contented Airman, was published in 1994 and can be found in the Lee Renaud Memorial Library in the National Model Aviation Museum in Muncie, Indiana.

The following is Mr. Pelly-Fry's obituary that ran in his local newspaper on December 29, 1994.

Group Captain James Pelly-Fry

Group Captain James Pelly-Fry, who has died aged 83, led Pelly-Fry's Hell Divers against Italian targets in East Africa in 1940 and two years later was awarded the DSO for his part in Operation Oyster, 2 Group's biggest and most complex air attack of the war.

In December 1942, as commander of the 88 Squadron of Douglas Boston light bombers, Pelly-Fry led one of the eight squadrons briefed to destroy the Phillips factory at Eindhoven, which supplied Germany with a third of its electronics products.

A high-level night attack by Bomber Command had been ruled out in order to minimize civilian casualties, and, at lunchtime on December 6, the force of about 100 light bombers swept low over the Dutch coast.

Despite an escort of three fighter squadrons on the homeward trip, the daylight sortie was a risky enterprise. Flying at 250 mph at "zero feet" left no room for error; the ground rushed past, Pelly-Fry recalled, "in a blur of fields, minor roads, streams, and farm buildings."

Flocks of birds on the Dutch mudflats were an additional hazard; the aircrafts' canopies and wings became plastered with blood and feathers.

Although attacked by FW 190 fighters, the force pressed on. As Pelly-Fry directed his Boston at the main factory building he was so low that the German anti-aircraft gunners on the roof were actually firing down at him.

Hit by the flak, he noticed that part of the starboard wing was sticking up vertically and the fabric on one of the ailerons was shredding in the slipstream. Then the starboard engine began an ominous rattle until, throttled back, it quieted.

He then found that there were two *Focke-Wulf 190s* on his tail. Only Pelly-Fry's evasive skill and the German pilots' apparent inexperience enabled him to lose them over the North Sea.

Losing height, he managed to make a belly landing on one engine. Nine *Venturas*, four *Bostons*, and one *Mosquito* had been lost in the operation, but the Phillips factory had been effectively demolished. It was six months before it resumed production.

When Pelly-Fry visited the works after the war – at the invitation of the Phillips directors – he was congratulated on the havoc wreaked by the raid.

James Ernest Pelly-Fry was born on November 22, 1911 and educated at Douai School. After the death of his father, a Ceylon tea expert, he entered the accounts department of the P&O Shipping Company at the age of 14.

Two years later he was apprenticed to Joseph Tetley and Son. His hobby was aeromodeling; he flew his own designs on Wimbledon Common and became a council member of the recently formed Society of Model Aeronautical Engineers. But he hankered after the real thing.

In 1933 Pelly-Fry was accepted for the Reserve of Air Force Officers, and the next year he joined an air charter firm at Heston Aerodrome, Middlesex, to fly Fleet Street newspapers to Paris.

The Royal Air Force (RAF) offered him a short-service commission in 1935 and he was posted to the 216 Squadron, flying bi-plane *Vickers Valentias* in Egypt.

In late 1938 Pelly-Fry was selected as personal assistant to Air Commander Arthur Harris, then air commander in Palestine. Harris dubbed him "Pelly" and the nickname stuck.

In 1939 he went as flight lieutenant to the 223 Squadron, flying *Vickers Wellesleys* out of Nairobi in Kenya. When Italy entered the war in June 1940 Pelly-Fry was immediately in action, and in August he received command of 47 Squadron, also in the *Wellesley* wing.

He was next posted as Joint Senior RAF Intelligence Officer Western Desert and, in the spring of 1941, was involved in the relief of RAF Habbanya, under siege from the rebel force of the Iraqi potentate Raschid Ali.

After making a chance recovery of a *Messerschmitt 110* fighter from the Iraqi desert, Pelly-Fry was inspired to set up a small RAF version of the Army's Long Range Desert Group to gather intelligence in the western desert.

In 1942 he returned to Britain where he joined 88 Squadron, whose Douglas *Boston* light bombers had just arrived from the United States. Pelly-Fry took part in operations over France, including the Dieppe raid, and his squadron established a warm relationship with its fighter escorts.

The wing leader would call "Hi-de-hi!" to the fighter pilots who would respond enthusiastically, "Pelly-Fry!"

When his crews were billeted at Bickling Hall, the Marques of Lothian's house in East Anglia, Pelly-Fry was nicknamed "Baron Fry of Bickling."

After a strenuous tour of operations Pelly-Fry was – to his astonishment – appointed Air Equerry to the King in 1943 and moved into Buckingham Palace. Several months later he discreetly arranged to get back to the war.

Now a group captain, Pelly-Fry received command of a Halifax bomber station, RAF Holme-in-Spalding-Moor. In 1945, he was posted in Australia to command RAF Camden, near Sydney.

After demobilization in 1946 he flew briefly in Kenya as a charter pilot, but disillusioned with civilian life, he returned to the RAF with a permanent commission. He re-entered as a squadron leader, until posted to RAF Syerston as Wing Commander Administration. He was appointed to the RAF Personnel Selection Board, and staff appointments in NATO followed.

In 1955, once more a group captain, he was appointed air attaché in Teheran. His remarkable rapport with leading figures in the Shah of Iran's regime was of great value to Britain, generating substantial export business for the aviation industry.

Pelly-Fry retired from the RAF in 1958, but was engaged by the Commonwealth Office acting as their civil air attaché for Australia and New Zealand until 1962. He then joined the aircraft manufacturer Handley Page, but the company soon folded.

After training in Harrods' Food Hall Pelly-Fry opened Epicure of Chichester, a delicatessen in Sussex. In the early 1970s, he sold the business and moved to Somerset, where he resumed his building of model aeroplanes. He recently published a volume of autobiography, Heavenly Days. [A copy of the book is in the Lee Renaud Memorial Library.]

He married, in 1949, Mrs. Irene Ritchie (née Dunsford), who predeceased him; they had a son.

The following obituary came from the Society of Model Aeronautical Engineers (SMAE).

The last remaining contact with the SMAE council of the 1920s has gone with the sudden death of James Pelly Fry on December 6, aged 83.

Inspired by the A.W. Siskins from RAF North Weald when 8, he was a total aviation person throughout his adventurous life. Through school days to his teens he produced a series of successful models, each illustrating his inventive originality. Low wing, geared motors, small sizes some of which were published in *Model Engineer* and the first *Model Aeroplane Manual*.

In 1928, when the 139th member of the SAME, he was invited to join the council. One of his early contributions had been to help formulate the rules for the Wakefield Cup, which had been donated by Viscount Wakefield the previous year. He was a member of the British team for the years 1928 to 1932 and then flew Gordon Light's U.S. entry to second place in 1933.

Having won a flying lesson at Brooklands from model contests in 1931 and 1932 he became determined to join the Royal Air Force. Frustrated at first, he persevered and was accepted in the Reserve of Air Force Officers (RAFO) and started flying training at Hatfield in June of 1933. It was to be the start of a career that took him all over the world and through to the Gloster Meteor from the *Tiger Moth* via Tutor's *Heyfords*, *Virginias*, *Valentias*, *Wellesleys*, *Blenheims*, *Bostons*, and *Halifaxes* and to command of squadrons of which 88 Squadron with its Douglas *Bostons* must have been the most notable.

In RH G he led Operation Oyster at the forefront of the 93 *Bostons*, *Mosquitoes*, and *Venturas* on the daring low level raid on the Phillips works at Eindhoven. Hit during the attack, the return to Oulton on one engine and no hydraulics ended in a heavy belly landing. For this raid he was awarded the DSO and his crew the DFC. It took place on December 6, 1942, and it was at the 52nd celebration of this that he collapsed in the company of S/Ldr Charles Patterson, DSO, DFC, who had flown a PR *Mosquito* on the raid and his published by Colin West of Crecy Books who had just released the long awaited James Pelly Fry memoirs, *Heavenly Days*. [A copy of the book is in the Lee Renaud Memorial Library.]

One had to read this 392-page book to absorb the innumerable facets of his remarkable life, and the illustrious company in which he found himself. He was PA to Air Commander Arthur Harris, an Equerry to King George VI, the Air Attaché in Teheran among so many other fascinating elements of a life throughout which he never forsook his interest in the aeromodeling that set him into a flying career.

When he returned to active modeling (after a void from his last rubber duration design in Egypt, 1935) he created a fully slotted and flapped ultra slow flying motorized sailplane, and followed with a trio of his favorite full-scale types, the *Devon*, *Boston* and *Wellesley*. Each immaculate and to perfect scale, they can be seen at the Goosedale Model Museum.

So passes a Grandee among aeromodelers, a personality of such stature that even those who knew nothing of the name or background have left the Old Warden Vintage events with a lasting impression of having conversed with a VIP from another age, if they had the good fortune to meet him.

Our sympathies are extended to his son Jonathan, daughter-in-law Anna and their children.

For more information on James Pelly-Fry, see his file in the National Model Aviation Museum Archives, which includes correspondence he wrote to the Wischers about model airplanes.

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