

AN EXCEPTIONAL SECOND WORLD WAR 'S.O.E. SPECIAL OPERATIONS' D.F.M. GROUP OF FIVE AWARDED TO FLYING OFFICER, ROYAL AIR FORCE, WHO PARTICIPATED IN MANY PERILOUS COVERT SORTIES - BOTH IN EUROPE AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA - AS AN AIR GUNNER IN NO. 161 SQUADRON AND NO. 357 SQUADRON. AS SUCH, HE SERVED UNDER THE COMMAND OF LEGENDARY FIGURES INCLUDING GROUP CAPTAIN P. C. 'PICK' PICKARD, D.S.O., D.F.C. AND, MORE DIRECTLY, AS AIR GUNNER TO SQUADRON LEADER L. M. 'BOB' HODGES - AFTERWARDS AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR LEWIS HODGES, K.C.B., C.B.E., D.S.O., D.F.C.



DISTINGUISHED FLYING MEDAL, G.V.I.R. '1343639. SGT. R. M. RITCHIE. R.A.F.'; 1939-45 STAR; AIR CREW EUROPE STAR, CLASP, FRANCE AND GERMANY; DEFENCE AND WAR MEDALS 1939-45

D.F.M. *London Gazette* 13 July 1943. The original recommendation - submitted by Squadron Leader Lewis Hodges - states:

'Sergeant Ritchie has carried out 21 operational sorties and has been employed on duties of a special nature, requiring a very high standard of skill and judgement. His keenness to fly, and his high standard of efficiency both in the air and on the ground, is outstanding.'

Robert McGowan Ritchie's operational career commenced in August 1942, when he joined No. 161 Squadron as an Air Gunner at Tempsford. The unit, which operated in Halifaxes, in addition to Lysanders and converted Hudsons, was charged with 'taking by night, saboteurs to lead, guide, and maintain communications with the underground movement; in supplying the Maquis with arms, ammunition, radios, pigeons, and food; in bringing to this country from the continent those people of either political importance or important to the war effort.'



For his own part, Ritchie flew at least 31 special operations with the Squadron, not a few of them as Air Gunner to 'Bob' Hodges; the following coded S.O.E. circuits being among their allotted tasks:

'Sexto', France, 14-15 January 1943.

'Lucky Shot', France, 15-16 January 1943.

'Aridium', Czechoslovakia, 18-19 January 1943.

'Yaro', Poland, 13-14 March 1943.

'Marigold' and 'Lime 12', France, 14-15 April 1943: *'2 Agents and 2 Packages were dropped successfully from a height of 800 feet at 0128 hours ... proceeded on to 'Lime 12' which was reached at 0141 hours and identified by river and a wood close by ... Reception was immediately received and 5 Containers were dropped'.*

'Fresia' and 'Circle', France, 13-14 May 1943: *'Ran into convoy off coast of France, tail plane shot up badly and forced to return.'*

'Fresia' and 'Circle', France, 18-19 May 1943: *'Arrived over target at 0154 hours - this was identified by railway, bends in river and other ground details and here 1 package was dropped; proceeded to second target and half way between pin point and Meislains dropped 2 Agents - time was 0246 hours'.*

'Gags', 'Prop' and 'Mannintree', France, 15-16 July 1943: *'Arrived over vicinity of target at 0105 hours - 2 Agents were dropped as briefed at clearing north side of little wood - Proceeded on to 'Gags' where reception was noted at 0130 hours and here 1 Container and 1 Package were released. The remaining target was reached at 0136 hours and 2 Agents with 1 package were*

released north of road running East from Suce - seemed rather an unsuitable area owing to surrounding high cliff.

Awarded the D.F.M., Ritchie was commissioned in May 1944 and remained employed on special duties, a case in point being a clandestine sortie flown with Flight Lieutenant G. B. Abecassis, D.F.C. - later the founder of the HWM Formula One team:

'Hugh 2 - From St. Aignan before reception seen, found very close to us. 15 containers, 9 packages dropped at 0137 hours. Leaflets scattered between Conde and La Flaeche also pigeons.'

<http://www.tempsford-squadrons.info/index.htm>

SECOND TOUR

In early 1945, Ritchie was posted to India, where he joined another special duties' squadron, No. 357, under the command of his old pilot 'Bob' Hodges. He subsequently completed a further eight missions in the unit's Liberators, six of them with Hodges at the helm. A typical outing was that flown to 'Cox's Bazaar' in March:

'A/C map-read onto area at 0005 hours & reception was seen at 0012 hours, this consisted of a 'T' of lights & letter 'R' being flashed. 2 agents, 3 containers & 6 packages were dropped from 700 feet in 2 runs at 0020 hours & all chutes were observed to open & to fall in the area. Captain commented D.Z. is small & surrounding trees make observation difficult. 12 packets of nickels dropped on Alor Gajah at 0115 hours from 4000 feet. In position 1150N 6505E 4 destroyers sighted on course 060 degrees. A/C was challenged & replied. Weather fair with storms W. of Penang.'



Another operation flown with Hodges took place in May:

'Carpenter 11 - Successful. A/C was over D.Z. at 2212 hours where correct reception of 'T' of fires & flashing 'K' was seen. 4 agents, 1 container and 2 packages were dropped in 2 runs from 700 feet & all fell on area. George went U/S soon after take-off from Akyab and at intervals during flight this was followed by rear turret, radio compass and loran, all going U/S. A/C S/C base 2222 hours.'

Later that month, Ritchie flew with Flying Officer K. E. Roberts, who made the drop of '3 agents, 3 containers and 6 packages' to 'Galvanic 2'. Despite being 'Tour Expired' by July, he flew yet another a mission with Warrant Officer Tuddenham at the helm - it was aborted on account of their embarked agent getting cold feet at the moment of his dispatch:

'The secondary D.Z. was not visited as it was in the hills and the darkness and generally deteriorating weather inland made any attempt seem inadvisable. One agent sat on floor and refused to budge on arrival at the [first] DZ. He did not appear to be well and even if the correct letter had been received and the drop possible, he probably would not have jumped without some "persuasion". Left the area at 1204hrs and returned to base. The aircraft flew 3143 air miles.'



http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/357_wwII.html

Having flown his final mission of the war later in the same month, Ritchie was posted to Headquarters Base, Colombo on 1 August 1945



Condition NEF. Sold with a large file of copied research, including Operational Record Book extracts and a group photograph including the recipient.