

## WARTIME MEMORIES

My story starts on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 1940, when, as a 17 year old member of the Civil Service I arrived at Paddington Station, London to take up a new appointment with the Ministry of Labour at an Employment Exchange in Holloway N.7. I was just two months away from my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and this was to be my first experience of living away from home. The evacuation of our troops from Dunkirk had recently been achieved and on the day of my arrival it was announced that France had capitulated to the Germans. What Next? was the question uppermost in my mind. London at that time was quiet and untouched by bombing but I realized that it must be only a question of time before the Luftwaffe would turn their attention to the Capital. However, for me, the excitement of actually living in London was overwhelming and I couldn't wait to get out and about in my spare time to explore.

The weather was beautiful, as I recall, and I spent many happy evenings and weekends cycling far and wide all over London on the ancient bicycle which I had brought with me from my home in Cardiff. I visited the famous landmarks and places of interest, most of which I had only seen in photographs or in the cinema. This happy state of affairs continued until the 15<sup>th</sup> of August when the first bombs were dropped in the Greater London area. For me that was when the war really started!

At the time I was living in a Hostel, also in the Holloway area, which provided accommodation for young lads like myself who were on the bottom rung of the earning ladder; my weekly pay was around £2 per week at that time! We were on our honour to offer to pay more, if we had a pay rise. Such was the trust that the founder and "Guvnor" of HYELM (which stood for Hostel for Youthful Employees of Limited Means) placed in his young residents. His name was Arthur J. West and I shall always be grateful to him for the "home from home" which he provided.

The London Blitz has been well documented over the years so suffice to say that I lived and worked right through the Blitz until I donned R.A.F. uniform on May 11<sup>th</sup> 1942. What is not so well documented, in my view, are the thoughts and feelings of those who were there at the time, coping with the day to day business of night and day air raids. Looking back, I am amazed how life went on as near to normal as possible. It never crossed my mind to consider asking for a posting back to the relative safety of South Wales. I say relative, because my home in Cardiff was damaged by blast from a nearby bomb whilst, ironically, the Hostel in London came through unscathed. Whilst at work we all used to troop off to the air raid shelter whenever the sirens sounded but this led to massive disruption and a large backlog of work. More often than not there would be no enemy activity in our immediate area, so the decision was made to post a lookout outside to warn us if he saw bombers in the vicinity. If the local A.A. guns, in a nearby Park, started firing it was definitely time to take cover and head for the shelter!

After work we carried on as normal, the local cinemas were still showing films and if the sirens sounded the audience were informed by a notice superimposed on the screen. The film continued, a few people might get up and leave, but everybody else just carried on watching until the Cinema Manager decided that it was getting a bit dangerous outside. On one occasion, in Sept 1940, my diary records "Just after 9 pm the show was stopped because the gunfire was so heavy. Everyone moved under the balcony and stayed there until about 10pm. As there was a lull nearly everybody left and we were given re admission tickets. We started to walk home but intense gunfire made us take cover in one of the nearby street shelters. We heard aircraft overhead and bombs drop. When things were a bit quieter we ran home" I did go back at the end of the week and see the whole show using my Free ticket!

In the West End a lot of the theatres, restaurants, pubs and clubs were open for "Business as usual" and, from time to time, I would go there with friends from the office. We would travel by the



Underground, after work, see a theatre show or a film, have a meal in one of Lyons Corner House Cafes and return by the Underground, if possible . If there was a raid, obviously, one felt a lot safer but sometimes the trains were not running so it was a case of finding a bus and hoping for the best!!! If no bus, it was a long walk back to Holloway.

HYELM had it's own shelter built into the basement. The ceiling was shored up with huge wooden beams which would have given protection from falling debris but not a direct hit. By bedtime, if there was a raid in progress or the Alert had sounded we would all sleep in the shelter; this meant most nights to begin with. As the weeks passed and the Germans moved their offensive to the provinces, London did have the odd quiet night and we were able to sleep in our own beds for a welcome change. During the evenings we kept ourselves busy with various group activities e.g. Debates on current affairs and Amateur Dramatics etc. etc. and listening to the radio in the Common Room. We had a Games Room as well so there was always something to do or someone to talk to. We only went down to the shelter in the evenings if there was enemy activity in our immediate area; otherwise it was a case of carry on as usual until you heard the sound of a bomb exploding nearby or local A.A. gunfire. I used to cycle to work in the morning and if there had been some local bombing it made you wonder if the office was still standing! Like the Hostel it too came through intact.

As the months passed through the Winter of 40/41 the night raids became fewer and fewer and shorter, at least in our part of London. However, one notable exception was the night of April 16<sup>th</sup>. 1941. I was on Fire Watch Duty with two colleagues at the office and the Alert had sounded just after 9pm. My diary records "Then followed the most terrific and concentrated raid that London or any other British city has had since the war began. The first H.E. (High Explosive) bomb we heard came down at 9.30 pm and rocked the Office, followed by another one about 10 minutes later. A big fire broke out in the Highbury district and we heard later that it was the Arsenal Football Stadium. This fire continued to burn until about 1130pm when it appeared to die down. All the time aircraft were going over and the guns were firing. Round about 1am things eased off so we had a cup of tea! After this lull the German aircraft came back and the raid became worse than ever. We maintained a watch either at the front or back of the building from then until about 4.30am when the gunfire ceased at last. We lost count of the number of H.E.'s we heard come down: we also heard explosive incendiaries and terrific explosions which we took to be the result of exploding landmines. Combined with this we could see many really big fires burning in the City and the West End. The All Clear came through at 5am so we turned in and enjoyed a couple of hours sleep, then I went home for breakfast " We were allowed to take the afternoon off, so after lunch and a couple of hours sleep I jumped on my cycle and rode down to the West End to see what was going on. Most roads were closed except to Emergency vehicles but a young lad with a bicycle passed unnoticed and I was able to go all over the place, carrying my bike where it was impossible to ride because of the fire hoses. I recorded that many buildings were still burning and I saw very many wrecked and burned out buildings. That evening I went to see the local cinema show!! Such was the resilience of youth! We had one more fairly heavy raid during the night of May 10/11th and after that the Luftwaffe stayed away, at least in our area.

During this period a number of my friends had left to join the R.A.F, many for Aircrew training, and I began to think " If they can do it , why can't I ?" I had never thought of myself as bright enough to fly with the Airforce but they really gave me hope, so on 15<sup>th</sup> August I applied for permission to volunteer for R.A.F. Aircrew. As I was a Civil Servant ,on a Permanent engagement, this was a requirement but I gathered that in the case of Aircrew it was only a formality. I decided to volunteer before my "call up date" because , if you waited to be "called up" you might be sent to any part of the Armed Services regardless of any preference you might have. . On the 23<sup>rd</sup> Aug I got the Go Ahead from the London Regional Office of the Ministry of Labour.



On the 27<sup>th</sup> Aug I went to the Edgware Recruiting Office and volunteered for Aircrew. After a Medical examination I was accepted and then told to wait for a notice to attend an Aircrew Selection Board at some date in the near future. On 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct, together with 7 other hopefuls, I was on the train to Oxford to go through the selection procedure. Written tests were completed that same day and the following day we underwent a series of rigorous medical tests followed by an interview with the Selection Board Officers. Much to my relief I was accepted for Pilot training, only three of the other seven managed to get through. After that I was "sworn in", or "Attested" as it was officially named, given my R.A.F. number, 1600363, and paid 2 Day's R.A.F. pay which amounted to the magnificent sum of 5 Shillings or 25 Pence in current money!! I was also issued with a much desired silver coloured R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve lapel badge which proclaimed to the public at large that I was a member of His Majesty's Forces, awaiting the call to report for uniformed duty. This would not happen for some 3 to 4 months I was informed.

People have asked me why I wanted to fly rather than go for a relatively safer groundcrew trade. I think that there were a number of reasons apart from the obvious glamour and prestige. I had seen for myself what the Germans had done to London and had seen plenty of newsreel reports about other British cities. I had always despised and detested bullies and I just felt a deep down anger towards Hitler and his murderous gang. It was not a revenge feeling but rather a feeling that these evil people had got to be stopped at all costs. I think that all my contemporaries at that time felt the same but rarely, if ever, talked about it. We were all highly motivated which of course makes the difference between the volunteer and the pressman!

I couldn't wait for the time to pass before my call to the Aircrew Reception Centre, which was situated not that far away at Lord's Cricket Ground in the St. John's Wood district of London. Life in the Office became intolerably boring, more so as weeks passed and then months without a word from anybody. Eventually, a good friend who worked at the Air Ministry, managed to find out what was going on. Apparently, I had been classified as an "Eye Case" and marked down for eye training, which would take place when a sufficient number of similar cases were available to make up a class. So it was a case of, just be patient, your time will come. Eventually, it did, and I reported to A.C.R.C. at St. John's Wood on the 11<sup>th</sup> May 1942. This 7 months delay may have contributed in some way to my survival, as subsequent events turned out--- but more of that later!

In actual fact A.C.R.C. was spread over a large part of St. John's Wood. There were classrooms in the London Zoo and I seem to remember that some animals were still there but the dangerous ones had been evacuated to other less vulnerable provincial zoos. Large garage premises near to the cricket ground served as the Clothing Stores and that would be the first place we were all marched to for kitting out. Our billet was a large block of flats called Viceroy Court in Prince Albert Road N.W.8. and the Airmen's Mess was down in what had been the Resident's Car Park. The Medical Centre was across the road in Regent's Park at a place called Abbey Lodge. Many other blocks of flats nearby had been commandeered and were being used as accommodation. The buildings of Lord's were used as classrooms as well as offices.

Our first week consisted of lectures on Maths and Morse Code followed by tests in both subjects punctuated by endless marching to and from the various parts of the Unit for further medical tests, lectures on General subjects etc. etc. At the start of the second week I was detailed to report to Abbey Lodge for further eye tests in connection with the eye training requirement. The outcome came as a great disappointment when I was told that my eyes were unlikely to improve with eye training and therefore I was unfit for Pilot training. This meant remustering to Air Observer which later became the trade known as Navigator. My visions of becoming a fighter pilot or some other glamorous figure disappeared and I had to face up to the fact that it was just not going to happen! In the event I never really regretted having to become a Navigator after the initial disappointment.



May 28<sup>th</sup> saw me on the move, this time to a holding unit at Brighton, known as A.C.D.W. which stood for Aircrew Disposal Wing, as far as I can remember. I spent a very pleasant 3 weeks there, mainly engaged in "Keep Fit" activities whilst awaiting posting to the start of real training. We were billeted in the Grand Hotel on the seafront, which was the scene of the infamous I.R.A. bombing. One of my abiding memories is being up a ladder with a bucket of water busily scrubbing the stonework at the front of the hotel in preparation for an inspection by some senior officer. We may have been considered as "elite" Cadets but no task was thought to be too menial for us to tackle!!

June 19<sup>th</sup> was the day I was on my way to Scarborough; my posting to Initial Training Wing (I.T.W.) had come through at last and I was about to mount the first rung of the training ladder. We left Brighton in the evening, arriving in Scarborough at breakfast time the following day. Our home until the end of the October would be a school known as Scarborough College, a little way out of the town, south, along the road to Filey. Our classrooms were in various requisitioned properties which included the swimming pool changing rooms and tea rooms at the foot of the Italian Gardens and a number of guest houses along the Esplanade above the Gardens. We had to march at a very fast pace between all these different venues for lessons and meals. As the College was about 1 to 2 miles out of town this involved a lot of footwork.!

The course lasted some 10 weeks, taking in Navigation, Maps and Charts, Meteorology, Aero Engines Principles of Flight, Signals and Armaments from Monday to Saturday lunchtime. We did have Sunday off after morning Church Parade. At the end of August we sat our Final Exams and having passed I was promoted to Leading Air Craftman (L.A.C.) from Air Craftman 2<sup>nd</sup> Class. Then followed a very frustrating 2 months, waiting for something to happen. The Empire Air Training Scheme was starting to gain momentum but it just could not cope with the numbers involved. Our next posting would be to either Canada or South Africa after a wait in yet another holding unit, at some date in the future, we were told. In the meantime it meant lots of Physical Training, endless Route Marching and endless menial jobs, known as "fatigues".

Then on 31<sup>st</sup> of October we were posted to the No.2 Navigator/Bomb Aimer Pool at Harrogate to be billeted in a hotel somewhere on the outskirts. We were only there for a fortnight and my main memory is of marching along moorland roads in thick fog looking forward to the next stop for a cigarette! The older and more experienced members of the Flight (usually Airmen who had remustered to Aircrew from ground trades) would contrive to be right at the end of the column, out of the sight of the Corporal i/c. When we got back to the hotel it was noticeable how our numbers had reduced as the tail end had melted away into the fog!!

On the 14<sup>th</sup> Nov the whole Unit was moved and we found ourselves back in Brighton, on the seafront, in the Metropole Hotel, which was next to the Grand. We spent nearly 3 months there filling in the time with lessons on Navigation, Signals, Aircraft Recognition, General subjects, P.T. and the inevitable Drill, Drill and more Drill. Then in early Feb 1943 we were told to be ready to move and on 5<sup>th</sup> we entrained for an overnight journey to the Aircrew Disposal Centre at Heaton Park Manchester to be kitted out for training Overseas, wherever that might be! Joy of joys, at last the prospect of flying looked like becoming a reality. Myself and two other chaps were billeted in a private house in Salford but only for sleeping purposes. This meant getting up at some ungodly hour, standing in a queue with the mill workers to catch the bus to Heaton Park, then standing in another long queue for anything up to an hour for breakfast, so as to be on Parade by 0830hrs. Fortunately this only lasted for a week and after another overnight train journey we discovered that we were in Scotland, on the quayside at Greenock, on the Clyde. It was an open secret that we were enroute for Canada because of the cold weather clothing with which we had been issued. Our Troopship was a Liner built for the South America run aptly named ANDES and she was going to be our floating home for the next ten days.



We gathered from the crew that the ANDES was not entirely suited to the North Atlantic in Winter and that the voyage just completed had been very rough indeed. In fact the Sickbay had been full of people with broken limbs and other injuries sustained on the high seas ,with the emphasis on HIGH. With this cheering prospect we settled in to our new quarters, umpteen decks down and below the waterline. In fact we were in the bows and like all sailors we would be sleeping in hammocks!! We remained off Greenock for around 4 days which at least gave us the chance to tackle the tricky business of sleeping in a hammock. People were allocated various duties and I was lucky to be detailed for a “ make yourself useful ” job in the hospital. This proved to be a very fortunate thing once we were at sea because the ship had a pronounced tendency to pitch. The hospital was amidships which meant that the pitching motion was at a minimum and seasickness was not much of a problem. Elsewhere those less fortunate were suffering badly. I spent all day in the sickbay except for the mandatory Boat Drills up on deck and the visits to the N.A.F.F.I. to collect chocolate etc for myself and others working in the hospital. Much to my surprise I discovered that we had German P.O.W.s on board who were allowed to buy from the canteen counter the same as ourselves. It was a strange feeling standing in the queue next to a German soldier whilst his British guard stood nearby with a rifle just in case there was any trouble. I imagine the prisoners were only too glad to be out of it and were looking forward to life in Canada, if they survived the crossing.

Talking of survival, we were not in convoy, we had no Royal Navy escort but had to rely on speed and tactics to evade the submarine threat. The ship altered heading every ten minutes or so and thus we zigzagged our way across the Atlantic. We also had a small gun mounted on the stern , I seem to remember. When it came to bedtime the occupants of the bow section seemed to split into two groups – The “hopefuls” and the “fatalists” –I was in the latter group. The hopefuls turned in fully clothed in case we were attacked during the night , but I had it figured this way ; we were below the waterline, it was winter in the North Atlantic and if a submarine hit us with a torpedo our chances of survival were nil, so I might as well try and get a good night’s sleep and die in comfort if need be!!

After nearly 7 days at sea it was noticeably colder and we got our first sight of land in the afternoon of 23 Feb. Late that night we disembarked in Halifax , Nova Scotia and were immediately put on a train for Moncton, New Brunswick. After about 8 hrs we arrived at No 31 R.A.F. Depot and began to realize what the Canadian winter was all about. I had never experienced such cold before in my life but the way in which the buildings were heated inside was a welcome revelation. We were issued with extra cold weather clothing such as mittens, caps with ear flaps and over boots but even so we were surprised how numb exposed flesh could become in a short time!! The other great surprise was the plentiful food on camp and outside in the various eating places. After more than 2 yrs of food rationing at home it was marvellous!! Not that I had ever gone hungry back in U.K. but it was the variety and choice of food that was so noticeable. Our time seemed to be spent mainly on fatigues and waiting about between Pay Parade, Issue of Flying Clothing. Medical and Dental inspections etc .etc.but we did have time off to go into the local town and look around as well. After 10 days came the welcome news “ You are posted to Flying School at last ; to No.4 Air Observer School at London, Ontario, to be precise” We left Moncton in the early afternoon of 5<sup>th</sup> March on the longest train journey that any of us had ever experienced, probably. The train was a sleeper so we were able to have a reasonable night’s rest after a very good evening meal in the Restaurant Car. After breakfast we changed trains at Montreal and arrived at Toronto in the evening. It was snowing hard and we noted the track gangs out with blow torches, presumably to keep the points free from ice. We finally reached our destination close to midnight and it was still snowing hard!! A truck was waiting to take us to the Airfield at Crumlin, on the outskirts of London. After a welcome meal we finally got to bed about 02.00 hrs. Quite an eventful 36 hrs! It was a Sunday, so we had most of the day to ourselves and a chance to relax. before the real work began the next day. It would be nearly 3 weeks however before we actually climbed aboard an aircraft and took off.



The weather continued to be cold but snow gave way to rain, from time to time, as we continued our classroom activities leading up to the great day. I had never flown before and was looking forward immensely to watching the moment when the ground slipped away beneath the aircraft wings!! The reality was somewhat different, however. Our training aircraft were rather elderly Ansons , probably the Mark 1 version, which did not have a mechanically retractable undercarriage. The wheels had to be manually wound up by someone sitting in the right hand seat up front with the pilot. Guess who did the winding on this occasion! It entailed bending right down and winding a handle hard with the left hand for a number of minutes. Needless to say, by the time I was able to look up, breathless and perspiring freely, the magic moment had long gone and we were some hundreds of feet up in the air!! Nevertheless it was exhilarating after that long wait since August in 1941.

Although the Ground School was run by the Royal Canadian Air Force the Flying side was in the hands of a civilian company, who supplied the pilots and did all the aircraft maintenance. The actual training syllabus was still under the control of the R.C.A.F. of course. It was quite a surprise to find a chap in a cloth cap sitting in the pilot's seat, on that first flight. Training flights took place two or three times a week, weather permitting, and even in April some were cancelled because of snow. Trainee Navigators flew in pairs, each with his own particular task to accomplish and so we progressed from day to night flying after about 6 weeks. The time in between flying was spent in the Ground School learning the theory before putting it all into practice in the air. Our airfield was located in southern Ontario, some 50kms { 30 miles } from the northern shore of Lake Erie and flights usually lasted around 3hrs, depending on the type of exercise, of course. Our training area was bounded by Windsor, just across the water from Detroit in Michigan, Hamilton on Lake Ontario, Lake Erie and Lake Huron to the North. As there was no "Blackout" night navigation was not too difficult; the lighted towns stood out like bright jewels against a black background. It did strike me , however, that things were going to be a whole lot different when we were flying over the U.K. and Enemy Territory.

At weekends we worked in the classroom or flew on Saturdays or Sundays as required but we did have some time off and it was not all work, work, work. On two occasions we were granted 48hrs Passes which allowed the lucky recipients to be " off Camp " from Friday lunchtime to Midnight on Sunday. The first time, a number of us made our way by train and bus to Detroit to sample the American way of life for real, having only seen it in films before. The second time we were more adventurous and set our sights on Niagara Falls! This involved taking the train to Buffalo, in New York State, where we stayed for the weekend. On the Saturday, a one hour bus ride took us to the American side of the Falls and what an experience that was! I shall always remember the overpowering roar of all that water cascading down.

So the weeks passed and the weather seemed to go from Winter to Summer, in no time at all. As I mentioned earlier, it was cold enough for snow , at times, in April then by early June we were sweltering in temperatures approaching the 80 F mark. After 20 weeks the Final exams were over and I was told that I had passed and would be promoted to Pilot Officer. Wings Parade was on 23<sup>rd</sup> July and I was formally presented with my Flying Badge, with 104 Flying Hours in my Log Book. It was customary for everyone to parade and receive their Wings as Sgts and those who were Commissioned would adopt their new rank after they had returned to the Depot at Moncton. We were given 5 days leave and a Rail Warrant and told to make our own way to Moncton and report in by the 28<sup>th</sup>. I decided to break the journey and spend a couple of days in Montreal, which would give me the chance to see a bit more of Canada before returning home. So I duly reported in on the 28<sup>th</sup> and met up with many old chums who, like myself, had completed their training. I was there for just 4 weeks, during which time I attended the Officer School to learn the basics of being Commissioned, and also the Ground School for Navigation practice in the Synthetic Ground Trainer.



21<sup>st</sup> Aug was my 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday and it happened to fall on a Saturday, so I was able to celebrate, in a very modest way, by enjoying an outing to a local seaside resort for a swim. Two days later my posting back to the U.K. came through and on 25<sup>th</sup> Aug I was on the train to Halifax..The vessel moored at the keyside looked familiar and then I realized that it was the R.M.S. Queen Mary. We sailed after two days lying offshore. What a difference compared to the trip over the previous February. This time I shared a cabin, albeit a small one, with 3 other Officers and we had our own “en suite” facilities. Other Ranks were not so fortunate, they spent alternate nights sleeping up on deck. The weather was good and the sea state was smooth, so it was not all that bad. During the day a period of some 4hrs was needed to effect the changeover and freedom of movement for the rest of us was suspended during that time. I learned later that there were some 16,000 troops from all three services on board. As you can imagine, feeding that number of mouths posed a major problem and needed drastic measures!!! The solution was to feed everyone in 4 sittings starting at 06.00 and then again at 1800 in the evening. Thus we only had two meals per day and I can tell you the odd bar of chocolate was very welcome after about 6 hours. Entertainment was provided by film shows and I can vividly remember sitting in a comfortable Lloyd Loom chair, in one of the large spacious Lounges, watching a film, thinking that it was hard to believe that we were in mid – Atlantic and there could be a German submarine lurking out there somewhere! The same zig zag tactics were used as on the East to West crossing and once again we were without a Royal Navy escort. After 4 days of fast sailing we were joined by a Sunderland flying boat of Coastal Command so we knew then that we must be getting near to our destination. This turned out to be Greenock, once again, and the following day, 1<sup>st</sup> Sept, we were on the train to Harrogate to join yet another Holding Unit, awaiting posting to the next stage of training. We were billeted in the Queen Hotel and after some days of various formalities we were away on leave for nearly 3 weeks. On return, training continued with lectures on a variety of subjects until 12<sup>th</sup> October when I moved to Dumfries, in Scotland, to join No. 168 Air Observers Advanced Navigation Course at No. 10 Advanced Flying Unit.

Dumfries airfield was the first R.A.F. Flying Station that I had experienced and could be described as a typical wartime hutted camp. Classroom training started very soon after the usual arrival formalities and within a week I was airborne in another old Anson aircraft for my first flight in the U.K. This was devoted to map reading in the local area. After a couple of local area flights, it was down to more difficult things like navigation cross country flights using radio bearings and sun position lines using a Sextant, otherwise known as “Astro”. Our training area was bounded by the Mull of Galloway to the West and Hexham to the East and then down to Goole on the Humber and across to the Isle of Man. After only 5 daylight flights the real tests came when nightflying started and looking out of the window was not a lot of help!!! This was wartime Britain, the “Blackout” was in force and although there was some very low power street lighting in places there was little or no help from ground observations. The primary methods of navigation were once again radio bearings and Astro using the stars and moon when they were visible. As the navigator, you began to get that sort of lonely feeling up there in the dark hoping and praying the position that your dead reckoning put you at, was the right one. In hindsight, I feel sure that the Pilot and Wireless Operator were quite capable of getting the aircraft safely back to Base but it would have been so ignominious, not to mention a very black mark on the training record. By 19<sup>th</sup> Nov I had completed the course, with another 42 flying hours in my Log Book, and was told that I would be shortly posted to No 30 Operational Training Unit of Bomber Command, at an airfield named Hixon, close to Stafford in the Midlands. Flying Training Command was now behind me and I was approaching the deadly serious business of fitting into a crew, which could be Life or Death for all concerned. Four of us made the overnight journey to Stafford on 22/23 Nov and we were quickly introduced to the Ground School routine which would last until the end of December. Saturday and Sunday were treated as normal working days except for Church Parade in the local church, on the Sunday morning.



Hixon was ,again, a typical wartime hutted camp with dispersed living quarters and aircraft dispersals dotted all around the airfield. The training aircraft were Wellington bombers which had a crew of 5 --- Pilot, Navigator, Bomb Aimer, Wireless Operator and Rear Gunner. People often ask how the crewing up process was carried out ; were we just detailed to fly together or did we have some choice ? The truth of the matter is that it was left entirely to the individuals concerned , to sort themselves out into the appropriate number of complete crews. In my case I think it was the Pilot who chose me and I'm not sure, to this day, how the other three members came to join us. All I can say is that we were probably the luckiest people there to be crewed with that particular pilot. His name was Leslie Wareham, he came from York and had been a school teacher in civilian life. The great thing was that he had been a flying instructor for some time before and he was some 10 years older than myself. With the rank of Flying Officer he was also the senior member, not that rank really came into things. It was his authority as Captain of the aircraft that mattered. The other 3 members were all Sergeants; Tony Mckernan from Liverpool, was the W/Op and was a couple of years my senior. Gerald Bodman was the Bomb Aimer and came from the West Country. He was 4 or 5 years older than me, then last, but by no means least, there was John Washington, the Rear Gunner. He was from the Irish Republic but had been living and working in London before joining the R.A.F. He was 19 years old and therefore the the youngest.

Flying as a crew started at the beginning of January 1944 and continued through until the end of February..This was now serious stuff, aircraft handling and tactics for the Pilot, bombing and gunnery practice for Gerry and John, Bomber Command signals procedures for Tony and then .for myself the job of getting us all around the country on the various training exercises. We had to learn to work at altitudes up to 20,000 ft which entailed having an oxygen mask clamped firmly to the face above 10,000 ft. Those masks were really diabolically uncomfortable but so necessary for survival. After 2 or 3 hours your face began to itch and there was not much you could do about it apart from a quick 2 or 3 second scratch ! The other great discomfort was the cold , especially at night on the 5-6 hour long Cross Country flights. The Wellington did not have a very efficient heating system, which meant that at times the temperature inside the aircraft was below freezing. We had warm flying clothing but for me it meant working without gloves in order to plot our progress accurately on the Mercator Chart, which was the normal procedure. The oxygen mask had a tendency to condense the water vapour in the breath as it was exhaled and this in turn became a small pool of ice as it landed on the navigation chart!! So what with having frozen hands there was the added problem of scraping the ice off the chart if it got in the way of the pencil and straightedge used for plotting. We were issued with silk gloves which were intended as linings for the leather flying gauntlets; these were quite useful on their own when operating pieces of equipment which had knobs and switches but I could not get on with them when it came to drawing fine pencil lines on the chart.

When I was training in Canada, I used to wonder how on earth navigators managed to find their way over occupied Europe with little more than a Bubble Sextant as a navigational aid. They must be supermen I thought, how am I possibly going to match up to such expertise? The sad truth of the matter was that, in the early years of the war, only a tiny percentage of crews were finding and bombing their targets because of the lack of accurate means of fixing the aircraft's position. Astro could be useful but only under ideal conditions viz. no air turbulence and a very good pilot to keep the aircraft flying straight and level. About 1941, I believe, the boffins came up with a very clever system known by the code name " Gee ", which depended on ground signals transmitted from various sites around the U.K. The signals were displayed on a cathode ray tube in the aircraft and the information they produced could then be plotted on a special "lattice chart" and the resulting accurate "fix" transferred to the Mercator chart. Thank goodness our training Wellingtons were equipped with Gee Boxes, as they were known, which gave people like myself a lot more confidence.



One afternoon in February word went around that there was an aircraft in the circuit with engine trouble which was giving the trainee pilot handling problems. Eventually he managed to get the aircraft down but veered off the runway and after the undercarriage collapsed, the aircraft went up in flames, watched by most of us on the ground. All the crew got out but suffered varying degrees of burns. This was just one of many training accidents due to the ever present risks caused by mechanical faults, bad weather and inexperienced pilots. We came to hear of many other crashes, sometimes involving friends and many were fatal write-offs. Our final night training flight turned out to be something rather special; being part of what was known as an Operational Diversion Force. This entailed flying across the North Sea almost to the Danish Coast and then turning away back out to sea before finally heading for Base. Whilst this was going on the the main Bomber Force was heading somewhere else, all done to confuse the German defences! This was the nearest we had come to doing the real thing and made us all realize that life was soon to become somewhat more dangerous. That flight completed our O.T.U. training at Hixon and I had another 103 flying hours in my Log Book.

After a welcome spell of leave it was time to report to the R.A.F. Station at Lindholme, near Doncaster. This was a pre-war airfield with brick built accommodation and permanent buildings. Les and I were allocated a room in what had been an Airman's Married Quarter and we assumed that we were allowed to use the nearby, rather splendid, brick built " peacetime " Mess. To our dismay we soon found out that trainees were banished to a Nissen hut Mess some distance away, where the service was very much sub-standard !!! Our disillusionment was further aggravated when we discovered that a Halifax training aircraft had crashed just behind our Mess, the day before, killing all the crew. Lindholme was designated as a Heavy Conversion Unit, No. 1656 to be precise, and this was where pilots converted from twin engined to four engined aircraft and a Flight Engineer and another Air Gunner joined the crew to make up the full complement of 7. Our new crew members were Jack Thrush, a Londoner who was a few years older than myself, who would be our Sgt Flight Engineer and Bob Kemp, from Birmingham, who was about the same age as our pilot. Bob was a Flight Lieutenant with some years service and he would be our Mid-Upper Gunner. After yet another period of Ground School we started our conversion flying on 13<sup>th</sup> April and two weeks later we were finished, with another 28 flying hours logged. I must admit that I did not enjoy flying in the Halifax Bomber, I really cannot explain why, but it was with a profound feeling of relief that I learned we were destined to join a Lancaster Squadron sometime in May! On reflection, perhaps it was that pile of wreckage behind the Nissen Hut Mess!! One incident, during our short stay, comes to mind and it turned out to be an isolated event fortunately. In the middle of the night we were awakened by the Tannoy exhorting all personnel to take cover in the nearest Air Raid Shelter. Before we had time to gather our scattered wits the reason became apparent when we heard cannon fire and a low flying German intruder aircraft swept across the airfield. It transpired that no-one was hurt but a W.A.A.F in the Control Tower had a narrow escape when a cannon shell whizzed past her head and slammed into a filing cabinet. We now had just one more course to complete before we could be declared as " Ready for Operations ".

The course in question was rather quaintly called " Lancaster Finishing School ". This involved a move to R.A.F. Hemswell, another " peacetime " airfield, a few miles away to the east of Gainsborough. This course was quite short, a few days of Ground School and just three days of flying, 10 flying hours, and we were ready to be posted to 550 Squadron based at North Killingholme, near the Humber and close to Immingham. When the Skipper ( By this time Les was always referred to as Skipper ) announced that we going to a place that sounded like Killing 'em I thought that it sounded rather ominous but decided that it would be better to keep quiet under the circumstances!!!



We moved to North Killingholme on May 12<sup>th</sup>, just 2 years and one day after I had reported in at the Aircrew Reception Centre in London. Throughout the past winter, while we were training, Bomber Command had suffered very heavy losses, especially during the deep penetration night raids into Germany. It was therefore with mixed feelings of achievement and trepidation that we realized we were on the brink of the biggest adventure of our lives!! It was customary for new crews to be given a few days leave before starting their Operational Tour and as most of us did not have a car it meant long railway journeys in poorly heated or unheated trains in some cases. The journey from the local station near Killingholme to Cardiff took me just over 16 hours, changing trains at Sheffield, Birmingham and Gloucester. At the latter station I had a mind numbing wait of 6hrs and 25minutes for the next train to Cardiff, arriving there at 0330 !!! This was typical of wartime rail travel , especially in the months before D-Day.

There was still a little bit of training to do, such as one final visit to the local Bombing Range and one night Cross Country, then we were declared fit to go to war! I had by then 296 hours in my Log Book, just over half of which were at night. It was customary for the aircraft Captain to gain some Operational experience before taking his own crew " On Ops ". Les flew as Second Pilot with an experienced crew on a night raid while we all prayed for his safe return. Our prayers were answered and so, just after Midnight on 27<sup>th</sup> May, we lifted off the runway at North Killingholme, with a full bombload, heading for the railway yards in Aachen , Germany. My Log Sheet records that we were On Target at 0226, at a height of 10,000 ft, just one minute later than our briefed time. What the Log does not record is the drama that unfolded as we were on the Bombing Run. We were nicely lined up with the Aiming Point and the Bomb Aimer was intoning his patter to the Pilot " Steady, Steady, Steady " when night was turned into day as a flare from a German Night Fighter ignited above us, somewhere very close. My first thought as I sat there, waiting for something disastrous to happen was " Of all the rotten luck ! we're going to be shot down like a sitting duck on our first and only Op " I don't remember feeling frightened , it was a feeling of anger more than anything, that it should happen to us! Quite some seconds later the Bomb Aimer called " Bombs Gone " and Les put the aircraft into a steep climbing turn as we wheeled away from the Target area. Whether the fighter fired at us and missed or went for somebody else I do not know- I just remember the feeling of intense relief as we headed for home. The flight back to Lincolnshire passed without incident until we were overhead Base, then we got the message to divert to Kelstern, near Louth, some 18 miles to the South East. The Bomber airfields had a wartime lighting system known as " Drem " lights, ( named after the airfield in East Lothian, Scotland, where, presumably, the idea was developed ) which were basically a circle of lights on poles denoting the airfield circuit. The approach to the runway in use was marked by a funnel of lights which the Pilot could then turn into, knowing that it would lead him to the touchdown point. So it was that we headed for Kelstern, but when we arrived there were two sets of Drem Lights with nothing to indicate which was Kelstern and what the other airfield was. We were cleared to land so Les made his approach to what he believed to be the right place and it was only after we were down on the ground that we found that we had landed at Ludford Magna by mistake. Looking back on the incident I shudder to think what might have happened if another aircraft had , quite rightly, been cleared to land at Ludford, at the same time. This illustrates just how crowded the skies were over wartime Lincolnshire with so many airfields so close together.

We made two more raids, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> June, this time to attack gun batteries at Calais and Boulogne. These were evidently meant to fool the Germans into thinking that the invasion of mainland Europe would be in the Pas de Calais area instead of Normandy. They were relatively short trips of about 3hrs each with very little time spent over Enemy Territory. I think there must have been some A.A. gunfire but nothing for us to worry about



By the 5<sup>th</sup> of June it was evident that the the invasion was imminent. All Officers were instructed to draw revolvers from the Station Armoury but no reason was forthcoming. We were detailed for Night Ops and the briefing revealed that the target was another gun battery, at Crisbecq, a small place on the Cherbourg Peninsula. However, this time, a certain piece of Navigation equipment relating to the Gee System, was installed in the aircraft for the first time and most importantly we were shown a large area of the English Channel that had been declared a Danger Area. We were warned, in no uncertain fashion, that should we stray into this area we would certainly be shot down--- by our own Allied Forces--- a chilling prospect!!! We took off just before 2130 Local Time and bombed the Target Indicators put down by the Pathfinder Force at 2337, without encountering any opposition. We did experience some gunfire from the A.A. Batteries on the Channel Islands as we flew home, but that was all. We got to bed about 0400 feeling pretty sure that we had been part of the Invasion Force, but it was not until lunchtime that we had confirmation from the B.B.C. News. We learned later that we were just one aircraft out of 1,000 that had hammered 10 big coastal gun emplacements that were protecting the landing beaches. The following is a quote from Notes recording our first Squadron Reunion at the R.A.F. Museum, Hendon on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1992 “ Most of these raids took place before dawn but two targets , including the one attacked by 550, had zero hours before midnight because of their proximity to airborne landings to be mounted later. 550 was sent to Crisbecq each with 11 x 1000lb and 4 x 500lb bombs to attack a battery of 6 guns of 155m calibre. This was the first target to be attacked with a zero hour of 2335. 18 aircraft from 550 bombed from 8500 – 10000 ft. in conditions of bright moonlight.----- The attack opened at 2334 and the first aircraft to bomb was that of F/O Bowen-Bravery and crew from 550. The fact that this crew launched the invasion attack was recognized much later when, in 1986, the entire crew were awarded a collective Croix de Guerre decoration by the French authorities.” A case of being in the right place at just the right time if ever there was one !!

Navigation on Ops was not only a matter of finding the target but also, most importantly, of keeping to the briefed route and timing. To ram the message home, above the door to the Briefing Room, there was an exhortation “ KEEP ON TRACK, KEEP ON TIME, KEEP ON LIVING !!!” It was all a case of “ Safety in numbers “ ,the German fighters were reluctant to fly into a crowded Bomber stream, the risk of collision, the likelihood of being attacked themselves were just two of their considerations. It was generally accepted by crews that if you were ahead or behind the main stream or off track, either to left or right, you were the sort of victim the fighter was looking for.

However, that was not the end of our contribution to D-Day. We were back in the Briefing Room at Ten o'clock that evening preparing for a raid on a railway junction at Acheres, near Paris. We took off at 26mins past Midnight and 2hrs later we were on target, bombing from 5,000 ft. The object of the attack was evidently to hamper any attempt by the enemy to get reinforcements up to the Front Line. We did not encounter any problems and landed back at Base at around 0430. 5 Ops out of 30 behind us , only another 25 to go !!!! We, as a crew, then had four clear days respite from Ops, before being briefed on the evening of 12<sup>th</sup> June to attack one of Hitler's Synthetic Oil Refineries. This particular one was at Gelsenkirchen, in the Ruhr Valley, one of the most heavily defended areas in the whole of Germany. Take off was just after 2300 hrs and we bombed at 0104, some 3 mins late, from 19,000ft , “ with little trouble from the defences “ according to my diary. The Navigator's table , in the Lancaster, was surrounded by a blackout curtain, to prevent any light from my small Anglepoise lamp, escaping to the outside. Thus, the rest of the crew could see what was going on outside i.e. coming up or going down, as it were, but I was in blissful ignorance most of the time. It was only later that they could tell me just what had been happening as we went through the Target area.



Our next sortie on June 14<sup>th</sup>, saw a distinct change in Bomber Command's tactics, in that it was the first Daylight High Level Precision attack of the War. Daylight raids, earlier in the war, had been at relatively lower heights and were discontinued because of the heavy losses. Now, however, it was deemed a justifiable risk because of the fighter protection we could expect from our own aircraft. Our target was the E-Boat pens in the harbour at Le Havre. The E-Boats were the high speed torpedo boats that were capable of inflicting severe damage upon the sea traffic to and from the Invasion Beaches

On this occasion there was no blackout to worry about, so for the first time I could see for myself the activity as we flew through the Target area. I have no written record of my observations but, from memory only, I seem to recall intense A.A. fire as Les zig zagged through the air bursts before we started the Bombing Run. It was late evening, in fact it was 22.42 Double British Summer Time but still quite light. After dropping our bombs we thankfully turned and descended over the Channel before heading for Base, landing around a Quarter after Midnight. Our groundcrew did find some holes in the fuselage after we landed!!

In less than 48hrs we were off again, this time on a night trip to the Ruhr Valley, to attack another Synthetic Oil Refinery at Sterkrade, near Duisberg. For me it was an uneventful trip but the crew were to tell me later of seeing aircraft going down in flames, at various times. We had a strict rule regarding keeping the intercom clear of non essential talk, so that only instructions to or from crew members were allowed. On more than one occasion, when clear of enemy territory, I would remark that it had been very quiet, only to learn that all hell had been going on outside !!! A true case of "Where ignorance is bliss" !!!!

There were times, however, when I was very much aware of what was going on outside. This was when the gunners believed that we could be under attack from an enemy fighter. The procedure was for the Gunner to order the Pilot to "Corkscrew Starboard ( or Port, as the situation demanded ) GO !!! " The aircraft would then be put into a steep climbing turn followed by a roll off the top and a steep diving turn in the opposite direction. This manoeuvre would then be repeated until it was considered safe to resume straight and level flight. For me this meant that one minute I was pinned down hard in my seat by the positive G force and the next minute I was floating on air as the G force reversed!!! After a few minutes this became quite wearing, especially if I was in the middle of a tricky piece of chart work.

My Log Book shows no flying from June 18<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> but my Diary tells another story which is rarely mentioned. On each of those four days we were on the " Battle Order " which meant we were detailed for an Operational sortie, only to have the Op cancelled at some stage. Twice it was cancelled before briefing, once after briefing and the fourth time we were on the end of the runway just about to take off!!! After all the stress of a day spent wondering what the night would bring, when the order to return to dispersal came, we did not know whether to be glad or sorry! Glad that we were given a 24hr reprieve or sorry that the stress had been all for nothing and would have to be repeated another day.

The next four days, however, were full of action---- two short trips to the Pas de Calais and a long 7hr+ trip to a railway target at Saintes, to the north of Bordeaux—our longest trip to date. The first Pas de Calais sortie was to a very small place named Mimoyecques and the target was described as " Constructional Works ", which did not convey very much to me at the time. It was many, many years later that I learned from a T.V. Documentary that the Germans were building an experimental, huge, long range gun which they hoped would be capable of firing shells as far as London.!!



The other Pas de Calais target was a Flying Bomb Launch Site at a tiny place called Flers. Here they were launching the infamous "Doodle Bugs" which were beginning to cause much death and destruction in and around the London area. The trip to Saintes was flown at night mostly over the sea to the West where the risk of interception was much reduced. We did encounter some stiff A.A. fire around the target and had to take evasive action after we had dropped our bombs. If the shell bursts were nearby I could hear them; if they were close I could feel them as the aircraft was rocked by the air turbulence and if they were very close I could even smell them as the fumes of burning Cordite wafted into the aircraft through the open bomb doors!!! By the 25<sup>th</sup> June we had completed 11 Ops and the "Powers that be" decided that we should take a break and go on Leave for 7 days. The time sped by and all too soon I was back on the train heading for Lincolnshire. At this stage, having experienced the realities of operational flying, I did not believe that I would live to see the end of our tour of 30 Ops. It was not a morbid dread of death or anything like that, but just a feeling that we would have to be extraordinarily lucky to get through unscathed.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> July it was back to the business of winning the War. We briefed in the late evening for what proved to be our longest trip to date, an 8 hours 30 mins haul to a railway centre at Dijon, well into France towards the Swiss border. We never flew directly to any target, of course, and the designated route might cover twice the straight line distance, in order to keep the enemy guessing as to just where we were intending to bomb. The next day we were off again, this time to a target in Northern France. The location was called Foret du Croc, S.E. of Dieppe and was described as "Constructional Works", probably another of the V Weapon Rocket sites. Just after leaving the target I noted in my Log "Lanc with starboard rudder missing, heading North with second Lanc". I wonder if they made it safely back to Base.? They most likely did, as the Lanc was a very well built aircraft and could take an awful lot of punishment.

Then, on 7<sup>th</sup> July, we took part in an historic raid against another target in Northern France, this time in support of the British Army. They were desperate to break out from the Normandy beach-head but were being held back by strong German defences in and around Caen. Many hundreds of heavy bombers went in late on a fine Summer evening and two days later Caen was taken. I watched as we approached the target area and could not believe how much "flak" was ahead of us and at our flight level. Nevertheless Les somehow got us through and we were back home before Midnight. I have been asked "Were you not frightened, at a time like that?" and the answer is "No, not really". Apprehensive, maybe, but at the time, there is so much going on that you do not have time to be fearful. In any case, the last thing you would want to do, would be to upset the morale of the rest of the crew by showing fear. The worst time for feeling apprehension was always on the ground, before take off. Once we were airborne and the Navigation equipment was working satisfactorily I personally used to feel much happier. I had plenty to do to occupy my mind and was thankful for it.

For the next four days we were stood down from Ops but this did not mean no flying. There was still training to be done and we flew training exercises on two of the days. On 12<sup>th</sup> July our names appeared on the Battle Order and what followed turned out to be one of the most memorable nights of our tour, for the all the wrong reasons. The target was a railway marshalling yard at a small place called Revigny, which was being used by the enemy to supply the battle zone. It had been decided that it must be destroyed at all costs. Revigny-sur-Ornain lay some 150 miles to the east of Paris, and about 15 miles to the north of St. Dizier. We gleaned the information, early on in the day, that it was going to be a long, hard night from the fact that a full fuel load had been ordered. This was confirmed at evening briefing, when we knew the target and saw the route miles were over 1,500 !!



The Saga of Revigny entailed 3 raids spread over a period of seven nights. The full story has been well chronicled in Oliver Clutton – Brock's book ' Massacre over the Marne ', published in 1994. My crew were only involved on that first night of July 12/13. We took off at 21.15 Local Time and headed off to the target, leaving the English coast behind us at Bridport in Dorset. From there we passed west of the Channel Islands, crossing into France near Mont St. Michel in Brittany. Our route took us south east deeper into France until ,near Bourges we turned north east for the target. So far, so good, as far as we were concerned but when we reached the target area the trouble really started. Because of low cloud and haze the Marker Force were unable to positively identify the Aiming Point and drop their Target Indicators. To minimize civilian casualties they had to be 100% sure that they had got it right, so the Master Bomber ordered the Main Force to hold off and circle the area while they searched for the A.P. This meant that there were some 100 aircraft milling about in the area, a recipe for disaster, if ever there was one! We circled for about seven minutes, until ordered to abandon the raid and return to Base. The night fighters, who could not fail to see the many white flares dropped by the Marker Force, closed in for the kill. One Lancaster, close to us was shot down then two Lancs collided and another was rammed by a fighter, both going down in flames. I have a confused recollection of standing close to the Flight Engineer and looking out on an awesome scene of burning wreckage flying through the air as Les did his utmost to avoid it. Strangely , I did not feel any fear but rather a sense of detachment, as if I was an onlooker rather than a participant. I learned, many years later, that in time of extreme peril this is not an uncommon experience. Once we had received the ' Return to Base ' order, it was back to the Navigation Desk for me and full concentration on the journey homebound. The fighters were active all the way across France but we were lucky and crossed the enemy coast out some 2 hours later. It was a great relief to be away from enemy territory but we still had a couple of hours to fly before reaching home. However, a new problem arose when we were told that our Base was shrouded in fog and we should divert to a U.S.A.A.F. airfield at Hethel near Norwich, now the home of the Lotus Car Co. We had been airborne for nearly 9 hours and fuel was running low. It took us some 30 mins to fly to Hethel only to find that area too had fog problems!!! The fog was fairly shallow and we could see the odd clump of trees sticking out here and there but nothing that looked like a useable runway. By now the fuel situation was becoming critical and of course we still had a full bomb load on board. After about 10 mins of circling we finally located the end of the runway in use, with the help of flares fired from the ground, and rolled thankfully onto the tarmac, all fuel gauges reading zero and the engines ready to cut out any moment! The time was 0648, 9 hours and 35 mins after leaving Base, it certainly was a night to remember! Our Squadron sent out 19 aircraft that night , sadly 2 were lost over France, there were no survivors. Of the rest, one crew baled out over Suffolk when their fuel ran out and another crew crash landed at Hethel; the remainder landed safely spread over some ten different airfields in East Anglia. All told, 10 crews were lost over France but there were a few survivors.

We were lucky to have no further part to play. Two more attacks were launched, 31 more aircraft were lost, including our Squadron Commander. Generally speaking, once a crew had settled in they were allocated their own aircraft for the rest of their tour. Our aircraft was Q " Queenie " Lancaster LL 837. C.O.s did not have either a crew or a specific aircraft of their own but would take a crew of their choice, whilst the Pilot , of course, stood down. On the second raid the C.O. wanted to take the Wareham crew but Les talked him out of it. Consequently he opted for a different six individuals but took our aircraft. Sadly they were all lost. Call it Fate or whatever, it does seem that there is a guiding hand shaping our destinies somehow.

We were half way through, only another 15 Ops to do !!!!



(15)  
WARTIME MEMORIES - CONTINUED

In contrast to the Revigny raid our next Op was a relatively short one in daylight. The Army needed some help near Caen, so we were dispatched, along with a few hundred more heavies to attack "Enemy Concentrations" on July 18<sup>th</sup>. Our target area was named as Sannerville, a few miles to the east of Caen. We were on target at 0545, cleared the enemy coast out shortly afterwards and were back at Base in time for breakfast. Having had little or no sleep the night before, we were glad to turn in for some much needed rest around 0900, only to be awakened in mid afternoon and informed that we were on the Battle Order for that night and briefing was timed for 2100. There was no time to savour the fact that you had survived another Op, only the realization that the night to come might be your last!!

Take Off was just after 2300 as a rather weary crew headed for The Third Reich to hammer another Synthetic Oil Refinery at Buer, in the Ruhr Valley. For us it was relatively uneventful, but there was the ever present threat from night fighters and the usual barrage of flak in the target area. We bombed from 20,500 ft, a much higher level than recent Ops, reflecting the strength of the defences in the Ruhr. We touched down at 0308 and got to bed at around 0500 on the morning of July 19<sup>th</sup>. It worked out that in the 48 hrs since breakfast on the 17<sup>th</sup>, we had had about 6 hrs sleep and completed two operational sorties. Such was the intensity of operational flying following the D Day landings.

My diary records that Les and myself went out that evening and sampled the local brew in a nearby pub. Life was a strange mixture of doing the simple, normal things of life, punctuated by the very stressful demands of war. We were fortunate in that, if we did come back, we had a decent bed to sleep in and could enjoy the normal comforts of life, unlike the poor devils at sea or those in the Army fighting the land battles. However, having said that, I recall talking to an Army chap after the war ended. He had witnessed our attack on Caen and confessed, that at the time, he thought that he would not wish to be up there, in one of the bombers, for a King's ransom while I was thinking that no way would I wish to be down there slogging it out on the ground!!

The following day started off quietly enough, doing odd jobs like chart preparation, and making Log Book entries followed by a visit to our aircraft dispersal to inspect the damage we had suffered from "flak" during our last Op! Then came the word to stand by for an evening take off. It turned out to be a short daylight trip to Northern France to attack another of the many "Constructional Works". This particular one was at Wizernes, to the S.E. of Calais; I learned later that it was being developed as a V Weapon site.

We were on the Battle Order for the next two days but in each case Ops were cancelled before briefing. Then on Sunday July 23 we were on again, this time for real. A late evening take off, and we were on our way to Germany to attack the Naval Base at Kiel. It certainly was a busy and varied time for us all, ranging from high to low level, day to night, long to short range over France and Germany. We bombed from 19,000 ft in this raid, facing the usual flak barrage as we flew through the target area. We got to bed about 05.30, got up for lunch only to be greeted with the dreaded news, for me at least, that we on again that night. This one turned out to be quite different from previous Ops, as far as we were concerned; a long 8hrs and 40mins haul across Europe to attack the German city of Stuttgart

This was our 20<sup>th</sup> Op and the first time that we had been ordered to attack an industrial target in a large city area. Post War critics of Bomber Command tactics seem to think that all we did was to attack German cities and cause Civilian casualties. This, of course, was far from the truth as my own experience has shown. The night fighters were active all the way across and back again but we came through unscathed and landed just after 06.00.



Later that week another raid on Stuttgart was scheduled for 550 Squadron and our crew was on the Battle Order. Again, it was a long night flight across Europe lasting over 8 hours. I can remember looking out as we passed over the city on our bombing run and realizing that the whole area was ablaze, probably from earlier raids made during that week. There was too much going on around us, to give any thought to what might be happening on the ground, and so we flew on through the flak just hoping that we would come out safely on the other side. There was still the long flight across Germany to face before we could relax, of course. On the return flight we almost collided head on with a German fighter; Gerry, our Bomb Aimer, just saw him as he passed underneath us, very close!! The German was no doubt as startled as he was!! The near miss really brought home the ever present risk from collisions, not only with enemy aircraft but also with our own side. Another hazard, not often mentioned, was the chance of being hit by a bomb from an aircraft above in the target area. More than once, during daylight raids, Les had to take evasive action when the Mid Upper gunner warned that there was an aircraft just above us with his bomb doors open. I have often wondered just how many bomber aircraft were lost that way. Many did struggle home with great holes in the fuselage but they were the fortunate ones.

We landed from the Stuttgart raid just before 06.00, on July 29th, had some sleep during the day, only to be awakened by the Service Police at 02.30 the next morning with the news that we were required at Briefing for another raid in one hour's time!! We were airborne again at 06.35, heading for Northern France to give close support to the Army. The target this time was at a place named Caumont, to the south of St. Lo, with orders to bomb from 8,000 ft. In fact, on instructions from the Master Bomber, we descended some 10 minutes before the target and bombed from only 2,000ft. I remember quite vividly being intrigued, as I looked out, to see the shock waves caused by bombs exploding on the ground. Great circles of shimmering, misty, energy rapidly expanding and then disappearing into nothing within seconds. There was a lot of light flak about but we came through without incident and headed for home. On the way across Southern England, we were informed that our Base was fogged in and we were told to land at the U.S.A.A.F. Base at Framlingham, not far from Woodbridge, in Suffolk. The Americans were very hospitable, their offer of breakfast was most welcome although the mixture of flapjacks, maple syrup and fried bacon did seem a bit strange at the time. The fog at Base soon cleared and we were home by early afternoon. We had now completed 22 sorties in the space of 64 days and I must confess that I was beginning to feel the strain. There was never enough time between trips to feel really rested. I had an awful dread that, through mental fatigue, I was going to make a navigational blunder that would end in disaster. There was no let up, however, in fact just the opposite. In the next six days we went on to complete another 5 sorties, but at least they were all in daylight which meant that we could get some night time sleep. Also, the daytime trips were never as nerve wracking as the night ones. There would be fighter cover a lot of the time and of course, being able to see other aircraft was reassuring from the navigation point of view.

Two of the sorties were to attack the dock installations and U Boat pens at Le Havre, two were to attack an oil refinery and oil storage depot at Pauillac, near Bordeaux and the other was a V Weapon Site under construction at a place with the imposing name of Belle Croix Les Bruyers, N.W. of Arras. In the latter case we returned with our bombs, probably because the Marker Force was unable to positively identify the target. This was, of course, to safeguard the lives of French civilians.

Two incidents stick out in my memory from that hectic six day period. On the first Le Havre raid, on the bombing run, an aircraft ahead of us was hit by flak and exploded in mid-air. We all held our breath for some 60 secs until we heard Gerry say " Bombs Gone " and we were able to take evasive action and get clear of the target area. The second incident again involved the loss of an aircraft and crew, but not from enemy action.



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We were routed to fly out over the Atlantic and to come in on the target from the West. We flew over the sea, low level, at only 1,000 ft, a great gaggle of aircraft spread over many miles. Not far behind us, two Lancs were flying in close formation, in fact too close, as it turned out!!! There was a collision, one went into the sea but the other pilot maintained control and flew on. I can still see that great pall of black smoke hanging over the water and we could only conclude that there were no survivors.

By this time we had completed 27 sorties but there was still no certainty that we would live to see the end of our Tour of Ops. Would the unthinkable happen? We could only hope and pray !!! Only 3 more trips to go. After the second Pauillac raid we were given a 36 hr respite after being diverted to a nearby training airfield at Sandtoft, N. E. of Doncaster. We had spent the night sleeping on the floor of the gymnasium. There were no special arrangements for the comfort of Operational Aircrew, you just made the best of what was offered !! Our 28<sup>th</sup> Op was on the evening of Monday 7<sup>th</sup> August again to help the Army at a location called Fontenay La Marmion, to the south of Caen. It turned out to be a short and uneventful trip with little opposition from the ground, as far as I can recall. Bad landing conditions at Base forced us to divert once again, this time to another training airfield called Oakley, near Oxford. Once again, it meant a miserable night, spent trying to snatch a few hours sleep in an armchair in the Mess. On reflection, we were still far better off than the poor devils over the Channel who were still fighting hard to make the big breakthrough in Normandy.

After our return to North Killingholme we were given a short two day rest period before taking off at 09.00 on the 10<sup>th</sup> Aug to attack an Oil Storage at Dugny, in the northern outskirts of Paris. This time there was fierce opposition from the ground and I remember the aircraft being rocked by the bursting flak. I believe we collected a few holes in the fuselage but nothing serious, thank goodness.

The following day we were off again to France to bomb the Railway Marshalling Yards at Douai. At this stage of the bombing campaign, Bomber Command had decided to adopt the American daylight raid technique of appointing a Lead Navigator, who would literally lead the rest of the Force into the Target. Unfortunately, in this case the Lead Navigator got it wrong, and most of the force, including ourselves, bombed the nearby yards at Cambrai. It was a rather disappointing end to our tour, in a way, but in hazy conditions, from 16,000 ft, it is only too easy to make a mistake.

The great thing, however, was the fact that we had completed our allotted task of 30 Operational sorties and were still in the land of the living !!! We could now look forward to at least 6 months screened from further operational flying, which for some of us would mean a posting, as an instructor, to a training unit. I had imagined, that if we did survive, we would have a riotous party to celebrate, but strangely enough it did not work out that way. The Squadron Commander invited us all to have drinks with him at one of our local pubs, where we were joined by our ground crew and others. I think that we were all just so thankful to be alive that we did not want to do anything other than talk quietly, happily and relish the moment.

Next day we were away on leave and our lives had restarted after being "on hold" for the last 75 days. Our tour was one of the quickest on record, for which we had a lot to be thankful. I mentioned, a long way back, that the delay in my early training probably saved my life. Had I joined the Squadron some 5 to 6 months earlier I would have been involved in the long winter campaign which Bomber Command waged against Berlin and other targets. This entailed long night flights across Germany, against ferocious opposition, leading to very heavy casualties. The chances of survival were very low and I can well imagine the strain of trying to complete a tour which dragged on for month after dreadful month whilst familiar faces gradually disappeared from the Squadron. Many managed to Evade and made it back to the U.K. and many others finished up as P.O.W.s. Many did not!! The official figure of casualties throughout the war stands at some 55,000 either confirmed Dead or Missing!!!