

Memories of 578 Squadron at Burn 1944

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Among the luckiest days of my life is the day I met Jim Allen, my pilot through 39 operations over Europe trying to bring peace to our suffering nation by destroying Nazism and defeating their armies as quickly as possible. He was also my pilot through Operational Training and Conversion Unit, which were quite as dangerous as ops over Europe.

Jim was not my first pilot. I had done an OTU and Conversion to Halifaxes with a crew that I regarded as the greatest. The pilot was an antique dealer, an old man 30 years of age, while the Bomb-Aimer was an Irish poet, Louis Chamberlain, and the others equally interesting. But on our final night exercise at Con. Unit I got lost. In my E.F.T.S. in South Africa I had emerged as top student. But navigation by map-reading in daylight in perfect weather in South Africa was vastly different from night-flying in British weather at 18,000 feet, using H2S, which I had little confidence in. I was also wearing an unfamiliar oxygen mask as my own had been taken in error that night. Whatever the reason, my navigation was a failure and the following day the C.O advised me to take further training, which I certainly felt in need of, and my place in the crew was taken by a Spare Navigator looking for a crew, while I was sent back to O.T.U. to find a new crew. I was deeply depressed and disheartened.

# Then I was introduced to Jim and his newly picked crew. We were all N.C.O.s and all under twenty one *except an old chap of 35* the Mid-Upper who was entering on his second tour. Eventually after miraculous escapes from certain death we arrived at Burn, and I, who had now done two O.T.U.s and two Conversion Units, was probably the best trained Navigator in Bomber Command not yet on Ops. Furthermore, to my great relief I never had to use H2S again. The Gee-Box was my friend everfaithful, and my guiding star. It could not mistake one city for another, nor could it be homed onto by night-fighters *as it was* we *one* discovered H2S could. Thirty-nine ops later we all said goodbye to Burn without a single scratch on our persons, although I at least had my digestion ruined for years after by the combination of stress, irregular hours and an unrelenting diet of fried Bacon, sausages and eggs. Which reminds me of the incredible hilarity that marked our meals on returning to base. We would laugh our heads off for an hour before making our way to our beds where we found it difficult to get to sleep for the sound of the engines that continued to ring in our ears. It always took two hours after landing before we got to bed, as it also took two hours from briefing to take off. The shortest sortie of four hours therefore always occupied us for eight hours, while the longest, of eight hours, kept us busy for twelve hours.

The next that I heard of my old crew, piloted by Bill Hogg, was that they had <sup>(got lost)</sup> gone missing on their first sortie, and later I heard that they were in a German prison camp. Quite remarkably, on VE Day, when, like everyone else, I made my way to London and home, the first person I met on getting off the train at St Pancras was my old rear gunner just having landed in England after three <sup>two</sup> years of Nazi hospitality. *(Mount -6 two, 1943-45)*

Jim was not only a brilliant pilot and a lucky one, but he had, rather uniquely I imagine, begun his training for aircrew as a Navigator and he was very quick to check any of my courses and ETA.s, ( and there has never been a Navigator who hasn't made at least one modest error in his career, though I can't remember a particular instance, and I double-checked all my calculations.). I, on the other hand, had begun my training straight into Navigation, with my Observer's wings, and knew virtually nothing about piloting.

But Jim was very 'highly-strung' and lived perpetually on a high level of adrenalin. He also felt very keenly his responsibility for the lives of his crew. The whole crew had absolute confidence in his skill and his courage and intelligence, but some of the crew found his intensity hard to live with at times. But they couldn't ever fly with with anyone else, although on one occasion they came to me to try to persuade Jim to ease up and relax a bit, <sup>(a lot!)</sup> which he very sensibly did.

Jim (or Al ) has described his feelings in graphic detail when flying over the target, braving the flak and dodging other aircraft. But while all this excitement was going on, I in my curtained Navigator's corner, was busy checking the Estimated time of Arrival, entering details in my log and calculating the course out of the target area, and seeing nothing of the War in the Air. The more Jim sank down in his seat hiding from the shrapnel the higher his voice rose and the faster  his speech. The Flight Engineer also had a rather disturbing habit of suddenly shouting through the intercom at moments of highest tension with some dire information about engines being on fire: <sup>\* Hey! Al!</sup>

*Another story  
about*

I therefore made it my business to speak very calmly and slowly into the intercom when instructing the pilot, as though I was lazing on the beach and sleepily commenting on the nice weather. <sup>I also used correct procedure - "Navigator's Plot"</sup> I hoped thereby to 'cool the atmosphere'. Of course it was easier for me to appear calm and relaxed, or at least to sound like it, for over the target I could see nothing except a glimpse of flares and bewildering lights over the bomb-aimer's shoulder. But although my voice may have sounded calm, my knees were shaking at a tremendous rate and with great vigour while my hands were trembling so much that I could hardly write at all as I tried to record everything in my log and work on my chart. In fact one could always tell from my log when we had crossed the enemy coast because my

writing immediately became a bit shaky until it became almost illegible over the target. Coming home, crossing the enemy coast the writing became neat and clear once more. As for the parachute, which was supposed to rest beside one, I always wore it clipped on my chest. The idea of trying to catch a parachute flying round the aircraft as we spun out control with only one wing did not seem a very hopeful exercise.

(ru-36 CP) 37<sup>th</sup>

On one occasion, a daylight raid deep in Happy Valley, Gelsenkirchen  
Jim invited me to come up to stand beside the pilot's seat as we approached the target, which was clearly visible to the bomb-aimer from about 50 miles away. So Jim called me up saying, "You've never seen the flak Joe. You've nothing to do just now. Come up here and have a look." So up I went. Unforgettable! All those black blobs suddenly appearing out of nowhere like magic. All the aircraft around us, one suddenly diving out of control, -- one or two parachutes blossoming in life.

(11 Sept)

Then, for some reason ( a little bored perhaps!) I looked above me, and there about ten or fifteen feet above my head the sky was blocked out by a whole bomb-bay full of bombs, bomb-doors wide open. Our Bomb-aimer was calling "Steady, Steady, left left, Steady." I punched Jim on the shoulder and pointed upwards. He took one glance and immediately threw the old Halibag into a steep dive to port. The bomb-aimer yelled "What the Hell!" Jim levelled out and as we found an even keel the whole load of bombs above us dropped past our starboard wing, it seemed within inches. A few seconds later the B/A called "Bombs Gone." Then the interminable wait, flying straight and level for the camera to do its stuff. As Jim has said, our photos showed our load straddling the target, so our friends above must have fallen short.

*Anger and his better English*

That was my only view of the outside world over a target, and it was, according to Jim, the most fearsome of our whole tour. But what made Jim call me up <sup>just</sup> ~~at that moment?~~ And what made me look up just at that moment? Another three <sup>one or two</sup> seconds at most and we and the aircraft would have been smashed ~~to smithereens~~ by "friendly bombs". Many of our squadron came home with 'friendly holes' and one was certainly lost as photographs were to prove. All this was reported at our debriefing and passed on to HQ Bomber Command. But at our next briefing the C.O. read out a letter from the Boffins at HQ in which they stated that damage from friendly bombs was "mathematically impossible!" Actual words! Never to be forgotten. Amazed and bewildered merriment (?) from all present.

What our wingless boffins did not appreciate was that in daylight navigation is much easier and more accurate than at night, and that therefore far more aircraft arrive overtarget on track and on time. Also the target is seen far ahead,

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So far, greater accuracy, and also that sheer fear, as with ground troops, tends to make men under fire bunch together. All this led to much closer concentration of aircraft over the target. There was little that one could do about it except to keep an eye on what was going on overhead, and perhaps below., but Jim, being a sensible fellow kept our old Halibag on the outside edge of the herd of aircraft approaching the target in daylight, not only to avoid bombs from above but also because he knew that the A/A guns would be shooting at the centre of the clearly visible mass of aircraft.

prob. sometimes

Although none of the crew suffered a single scratch in 39 ops, many of our colleagues died and our aircraft received frequent damage, often severe enough to require forced landings away from Burn. Such landings were quite pleasant, for they required us to travel back to Burn by rail through London, where Jim and I both had our fiancées working. A quick phone call, and when Jim and I arrived at Waterloo or wherever, there would be our lovely laughing girls running to meet us. Very good for morale! One memorable landing was made at the "Secret" experimental base at Farnborough, - by mistake! We were flying over ten-tenths cloudover Kent seeking a bomber sized aerodrome. Our call was answered by a drone south of London and we made our way there until I was able to give the pilot a Gee fix over the answering drone, - a fix that would in this area have been within a quarter of a mile. Receiving instructions from the Ground control we descended through the thick low cloud to find the runway dead ahead. Still speaking to the Ground control Jim, with his duff engine, landed safely, only to discover that we were not on the aerodrome with which he was communicating, but at a station which had no Mayday service, and therefore without any knowledge of our existence, being an independent experimental station, until we suddenly arrived out of the low cloud and landed in front of the control tower! Meanwhile our Mayday aerodrome was wondering what on earth had happened to us. Being driven away from our crippled Halifax we were intrigued to see little fighters with no engines! Our first encounter with Jets. But there was no way that our pilot coming out of low cloud with two duff engines and a runway almost under him could have known that it was an unmapped aerodrome only a mile or so from the one he was talking to. Farnborough would have had no identification letters, just as it had no Mayday on its radio receivers.

4. July 44  
St. Martin  
& Horton

D.L. emergency  
call over  
DARRIE in  
1944

But to return to our fiancées in London. They of course were suffering the horrors of the V1 Flying Bombs and the V2 Rockets, both of them massive and terrifying. My own girl, (whom I had known since childhood and to whom I have now been married for nearly 50 years), would be travelling every day from her home in south-East London to her office in the City of London by overland train as crowded as any modern Japanese underground train, the train stopping at the roar of the V1s

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overhead cut their engines and began their silence descent to blow as many people as possible to pieces. Flying out one night over Kent towards the V1 launching sites I once saw a little red light passing below us towards London, the back end of a V1 Flying bomb, and felt great satisfaction in the knowledge that I was on my way to destroy their launching sites and storage depots. Forty years later I watched and recorded a T.V. programme called "Wings of the Stern", concerning the Australian contribution to Bomber Command, which was massive, immensely courageous and skillful, and I heard Air Marshall Don Bennet say that Germany had 10,000, I repeat- Ten thousand! V2 Rockets to descend on London in one week! If Bomber command had not gone to a little place called Walton <sup>in Northern France</sup> and had not destroyed that store of enormous bombs we would have lost the war! The terrible thing is that Australian aircrew in England were receiving white feathers from people in Australia who thought they should be in Australia, where there were no aircraft and no sign of a possible invasion. What would have happened to Australia if Hitler and his SS and Gestapo had defeated the Allies, as they very nearly did, may be left to the imagination.

Behind all the tragic drama of ops from Burn, a few human drams:-

lost left out I think

One of our crew, our Mid-Upper on his second tour, was having trouble with his girl in Scotland, a Scottish nurse. She couldn't make up her mind to marry, and I believe that her mother was interfering. The rest of the crew were concerned that our colleague, very much in love, was not in a FIT STATE OF MIND to concentrate on finding night-fighters, so we concocted a letter, I think I was asked to frame it, to his nurse telling her of the situation and asking her to do something about it and give us all a better chance of surviving. She did so, she said "Yes" and they both lived happily ever after, as did the rest of us.

Another member of the crew had decided to get married during the tour. He was a strict teetotaler and non-blasphemer. His strongest expletive was "Flippin". Eventually our crew were given a few days leave and our friend went home to finalise arrangements for the wedding. Arriving back in camp on my return I found my hopeful bridegroom sitting at a table in the middle of the Sergeants Mess as pissed as a newt and cursing the whole world in the strongest possible language. I got him back to our billet and soon we were back over Germany and eventually I attended the wedding. It was only long afterwards that I learnt that on his leave my friend had discovered that his future father-in-law who had a respectable income and was to pay for the wedding, was quite penniless, In fact he had been keeping another family quite unknown to his own wife and

family. All this was discovered when the future bride and bridegroom went to pay for all the wedding goodies that had been ordered. No wonder our mate got sloshed. But he said nothing and we all went on to complete a long and successful tour. always bang on target and bang on time.. Three of the crew commissioned and all gonged, except for the poor rear-gunner.- the best gunner on the squadron. Although he had picked out a number of night-fighters he had never fired his guns as the enemy had never seen us. Perhaps they were homing on the other poor so-and-sos who were using H2S, the fighter pilots watching their Radar instead of the night sky around them.. On our last op, however, which was low-level to attack the ~~big German guns on the cliffs~~ <sup>high positions</sup>

at Calais our pilot, Jim, flew back and forth below the level of the cliffs, <sup>still</sup> ~~the Master Bomber, who cancelled the op~~ <sup>(bombing)</sup>, so that the gunners could fire at the search-lights and gun-emplacements and anything else that looked nasty, and at least could tell their grandchildren that they had attacked the enemy.

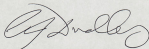
This final sortie to Calais was particularly difficult for me, for we flew out in heavy rain under clouds that became lower and lower until the pilot was able to check my watch by reading the time off the clock on Maidstone Town Hall! Halifaxes may have been reasonably waterproof on the ground, but at 180 mph the rain drove through the bodywork as though it was wire netting and my chart table and log were soon under half an inch of water. Not the easiest way to navigate an "easy" op.

The attack on Le Havre on 9th September was a disaster. The noise on R/T was horrendous, but had to be buffered in case of recall. In fact as we approached the target the Master Bomber aborted the attack with the code-word "Applepie!" But as we turned away we heard him repeating "APPLEPIE!" APPLEPIE!" more and more desperately until finally he cried "For God's sake stop bombing". It would seem that Allied troops on the ground had moved forward unknowingly or unexpectedly, which must have resulted from a lack of co-ordination or of communication somewhere but it also meant that someone in the air was not hearing the Master Bomber's words, either because they had switched off their R/T, or perhaps they were on a different wavelength. According to the official record Mosquitoes and Heavy bombers went out on the operation, but the bombing was aborted before the heavy bombers reached the target, which suggests that it was the Mosquitoes that were the problem. Anyway, our problem was to jettison our bombload. The problem there was that not only had we navigators been given areas of the English channel which were prohibited for such purposes that day, but all the way out the W/Op was passing me new co-ordinates extending the prohibited areas until only one square mile (a triangle actually) was left. When the pilot asked me where to go to jettison I gave him a course for this little spot and eventually a very clear Gee Fix over it. But below was tenths cloud, so Jim said, "I'm going down to have a look and make sure." We came out of the cloud at 2,300 feet to cries of amazement! We were surrounded by warships all firing at us. A quick press on the Bomb-Release and up we zoomed into the cloud, but not before some of the bombs exploded in the sea and bounced us around. Back at Burn every-one was closely questioned about what happened at the target and where the bombs had been jettisoned.

...for living accommodation on the Squadron was a *hiss...* but *concrete...* from the central administration. Because of this remoteness, and perhaps because of orders from a wise Commanding Officer, our hut was never visited by an orderly officer nor by anyone else except the *tho*ke cart to fuel our stove in the centre of the hut. This situation suited me in particular for I have always been one of the untidiest people on Earth. As it happened I had taken up a couple of correspondence courses before arriving at Burn, but the books didn't catch up with me until I was on ops. Before enlisting for Air-crew I had been at art school with the aim of becoming an art teacher, though with some hope of becoming an architect. Therefore I had entered into a course on the History and Appreciation of Painting and another on the History and Methods of Architecture. My bed-space, in the corner of the hut was strewn with books and papers, under the bed, on the bed and around the bed. My desk was the hut card-table propped up between the bed and the corrugated wall of the hut. I still have the essays on the development of the Egyptian temples, Greek and Roman style, and Portrait painting, as well as the books I used. One great advantage of being in the armed services for a student such as myself was that such correspondence courses were available free of charge and also we had access to all local libraries, even in South Africa. I was also freely able to attend evening classes in art-schools where-ever I happened to be.

But tragedy overtook my architectural ambitions. On my 21st birthday, which I celebrated on the 13th April 1944, by going to a Sergeants Mess Dance (ruining a few WAAF stockings, and trying to drink my first Guinness, which was over-ripe and frothed all over the bar), my parents gave me a fine set of Architectural Drafting instruments in a handsome chamois leather case. Although I had never had anything stolen in the RAF I decided to take my birthday present with me tucked into my battledress top during a bus trip to Pontefract. Returning to Burn I ran for the bus, only to discover immediately that my case was missing. Although I jumped off, ran back, searched madly, reported to the police and the bus company, I was never to see my beloved instruments again, and that was the end of my career as an architect. But as an art teacher I was never out of work and eventually became head of a University Department.

At the end of the tour, all nervous wrecks, the whole crew felt the need for a long rest from each others company. On the other hand we did not want to fly with any other crews, so we voted to apply for an immediate second tour on Special Duties (spies and saboteurs and all that). But by September 1944 the Second front was well on its way and spies weren't needed any more, so we were all sent off in different directions and never met all together again.



Colin Joseph Dudley (Joe)

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AFC/AFDE