Aubrey Coles 1

SJB: 158 – a great friend of mine, who died only about six months ago, was also on 158 from about October '44. Was that about right for you? He was a WOp/AG from about the time you left, about Oct/Nov. '44, and he was shot down on his 12th op, on the way to Hanover in Jan. '45. He went on the run but was captured after nine days, but a few years ago I found out who had shot him down. That guy is still alive and I took my friend out to Germany and they had a few days together and got on like a house on fire. Anyway, that's another story but I'm just as interested in the Halifax so perhaps we could start with that, Aubrey, and just chat about it really? A log book is always a good thing to look at.

My late brother was a wireless operator, a special operator, out in India and they used to fly sometimes for about 15 hours, right over Japan and back, and the other crew operating with them were shot down and captured and all beheaded. I would never buy a Japanese car now.

SJB: I can understand that. So these are your ops and Lens marshalling yards 10th and 11th May is the first entry?

Yes and it gives the result of every op.

SJB: Just taking a bit of a step back, where did you do your OTU, HCU?

Marston Moor, and as we arrived some Irish corporal took us to our billets and said "Ah, you're just too late to see Gp Capt Cheshire. He's a marvellous man. He used to go out and play cards with the ground crew out in the sticks." How many ops did he do?

SJB: It was an awful lot; I think about a hundred. [I believe it was 92 (RSN)] So, Lens marshalling yards…

Yes, then they carry on in order.

SJB: This was building up to D-Day, wasn't it? Lots of marshalling yards, railway yards, those sorts of things.

I did one trip, I don't know whether it's on there, my first op was to Stuttgart with 640 Sqdn, which was an offset of 158. We were just taken for the experience. There were two of us there and 22 aircraft were lost that night. I was sat there petrified and counting them as they went down in front of us, then in the middle of all this there was a woosh and a single-engined aircraft shot across the front of us at about the height of this room. This bloke said "Keep your bloody eyes open" and I thought well, he didn't see it.

SJB: So you were acting as 2nd dickie then, were you? So what must have gone through your head then? This was your first op.

Never again! [? 06:30 Indistinct] Mind you, it's different when you are doing the job yourself, I think.

SJB: Now I notice there's one that you probably glad you missed, actually. When I was looking this up yesterday I noticed that the squadron had a really bad night on the 24/25th of May to Aachen and lost five aircraft that night.

Yes, but were they all over the target?

SJB: No, but that must have been a pretty tough time for the squadron.

Well, we had one op where they were going to do a daylight raid. I've forgotten where to, but we were up in Yorkshire and we had one of those fogs [the dreaded "Haar" (RSN)?] from about 200 ft down to the ground and we were going to take off in that. We then had to formate with the rest of 4 Gp over Filey, er Flamborough Head, and the chap who took off in front of me was a French Canadian, a funny little chap and I don't think he could reach the pedals. He was certainly having trouble and he lost control and went straight into the beach at Bridlington. There were a lot of flames coming up through this fog and I thought well I'm not going down through that so I flew round the top until we were all crewed up. I was telling another chap about it afterwards and he said "That's all right; I was following you."

Another night we had an American pilot, a quiet chap, he crashed in front of me, coming in to land, in a village near Foston-on-the Wold, I think. [? 09:07 Indistinct] Somewhere up near Bridlington. Two were killed straightaway, two died that night and he died so they were all wiped out but they went between cottages; no one was hurt on the ground but they hit a barn.

SJB: This sounds interesting – Sterkrade oil plant, 16/17th of June. Quite a busy time with night fighters, it would seem, on that occasion?

We didn't have too much of a problem because I had a good crew, there's no doubt about it. My wireless op was a star; he was a funny bloke to get on with but he was first class. One night he was operating the offshoot of the H_2S, the Fishpond, and told me we were being followed for a good half an hour. Despite everything I did in the way of flying all over the place, he still followed us. Then, out of the blue, he said "Oh, he's turned back." That night, a good friend of mine got the chop on the same bit.

SJB (talking to a 3rd party): Fishpond followed Monica, which they had to stop using because the Germans could follow it. Fishpond was passive so they couldn't follow it.

It wasn't much better than the other, really, because they could pick it up.

[12:37 SJB then gives a technical explanation of some depth].
Here's an interesting one – Wizernes, the V2 factory, a daylight raid at 07:00. Judged to be a very good attack against negligible opposition. Crews did report pinky/red flak bursting amongst the usual black stuff. Different.

I see the same Lancaster [Halifax?] is starting to crop up for you each time now. Did you tend to fly the same aeroplane once you'd got into your tour? I see HX329 crops up almost every time now. Was that *your* Halifax then?

Yes

SJB: And you did 37 altogether, is that right?

Yes, they put us up to 40 at that time.

SJB: Now this sounds interesting. 20th/21st July: Ardouval, and it says here that due to very severe turbulence and a storm over the Channel, some pilots reported some loss of control of their aircraft and you couldn't hear the master bomber. Against you, it says "Did not carry out - jettisoned part of load and returned to base with eight still in bomb bay."

It was called off, I think, and we hadn't dropped them. If it had been over the area we would have dropped them with no conscience but I can't remember the circumstances there.

I remember on my second op we joined what we thought was the circuit and all the talk was right but we landed at the wrong aerodrome. Fortunately a senior crew of our squadron did the same thing that night. We didn't stay long.

3rd party: Where was the base?

SJB: Lissett, in Yorkshire.

That was *our* base but the other one was just down the road. There were loads of others in that part of Yorkshire. I suppose Lincolnshire had most. In North Yorks you had the Canadians but we had a whole mixture of people; quite interesting really. We had Americans too. They [Canadians?] were offered the chance to join the US Air Force because they got three times as much pay and we had a flight sergeant who did take it up but a flying officer I was talking to had paid for his own flying lessons when he was at college in America and he said "I'm not going; I joined this to join the Royal Air Force and I like it" and he wouldn't go.

SJB: 2nd of August, Lehay and against you it says "Hit by flak over the target".

Yes – it wasn't much. Actually there were bits dropping from the top. One hit the flight engineer and another hit the bomb aimer. They were only bits about that big but there was a terrible smell. The bomb aimer said "I've shit myself gentlemen" and he had. There's always something to laugh at, even at the worst of times.

SJB: Ah, more excitement on a Brunswick trip, I see. Hit by flak again, over the target area. A thousand-pounder hung up and eventually jettisoned over the sea.

We only found that out *after* we'd left the area. We were supposed to check that sort of thing out. I think the Americans must have had better discipline for that but they were bombing in daylight. We led the squadron on one occasion in daylight and by the time we got to the target everyone had passed me – no discipline at all.

SJB: We've got one here – Bottrop, September, only one squadron identified the target and in general the attack was spasmodic and scattered, inaccurate flak.

Master bomber heard calling “sour grapes”. So what was the meaning of sour grapes?

I’ve forgotten but it must have meant “clear off” or something.

SJB: Yes, it sounds like it’s all gone pear-shaped chaps…….Ah, Duisburg. A friend of mine, sadly no longer with us, was a Hampden wireless operator. He did a full tour on Hampdens, very lucky chap, and when I chatted to him about it I asked what he most remembered about it and he said “Duisburg”. He said they’d had a terrible trip.

Yes – Duisburg. We did that in daylight and it was very well protected.

3rd party asks why the changeover to daylight raids. Was it because this is now post-invasion and the rules are different?

Yes. I liked night flying and always did, because you couldn’t see so much.

SJB: Oh yes, Duisburg again. Heavy flak encountered. No less than 14 aircraft were hit. Flak at its worst west of the Rhine…… You’re jettisoning your bombs again. This is Wilhelmshaven, your last-but-one. Returned on three engines and jettisoned the bombs off Bridlington.

Yes, three times I tried to take off but there was a problem with the port-inner engine. It was spluttering and blasting and not firing properly and shaking. Finally I took off but it didn’t improve and over the sea I told them I was not going all the way with this thing. The biggest bomb we had was a 4000-pounder and I thought, right, we’ll get rid of that. I made sure there were no fishermen underneath but I was a bit close in and they reckoned that every window in Bridlington rattled a bit that night. The ground crew reckoned that engine had been fitted with reconditioned spark plugs so I felt a bit better after that but I’m sure some people reckoned I was getting a bit, you know, like that. [LMF?]

On the next op we were supposed to be going to… [SJB: Hanover?] ….no, this is the one I didn’t go on. We were due to lead 4 Group and 4 Group were supposed to be leading the whole lot so we would have been No. 1 …. [SJB: Right up the sharp end then?] Yes, we were suddenly told that we were tour-expired and I did wonder if they thought I was getting a bit…. you know.

SJB: You were expecting to go on to do 40 before that?

Yes. I don’t know whether they kept it at 40 because a lot more people were having trouble by then.

SJB: Well, I don’t know. They put it up to 40 but then into about 1945 it seemed to go all over the place. One of the chaps I spoke to recently was a 100 Group pilot on Wellingtons on 192 Sqdn and their tour was 60. I asked him why that was and he said that they were told it was because they weren’t dropping bombs. They were eavesdropping and each op counted as only half an op, despite the fact they were flying in daylight, on their own. Anyway, the last one here is Hanover, recalled 16 mins after setting course. Did that count as an op?

No.

So, at that point you were informed that you were tour-expired, were you?

Yes, you were pleased and yet you were going to miss it. They were a good crowd. Just before that, while we were on leave, someone had used our aircraft and lost it. It won't be on there because…..

SJB: Yes, I noticed the change of aircraft.

Well, I was walking down the lane beside Lissett (where the memorial is now, and all the names are out of order) because I was billeted down there. I looked across and our hardstanding was empty. It turned out that a New Zealander, a quiet chap, you couldn't get a conversation going with him, took our aircraft and they got the chop. Only one person got out and that was the Belgian navigator, Andre Lelou, and he used to come to our reunions and I always used to say to him "Oh, you're the lot that lost our aeroplane". He used to say "I'm very sorry". I asked him what happened and how did he get out? It blew up and the others were all gone. He said that he thought things looked a bit dicey so he put his parachute on and when the aircraft disintegrated he was thrown out and it worked. He and his wife came to all the reunions and we became quite good friends. He died only last year. His wife was only seventeen when she became a messenger for the resistance. She used to carry messages stuffed down the frame of her bicycle.

SJB: So then what happened when you left 158?

Well, first of all I was posted to Abingdon but there was nothing for me initially so I had a gang of blokes painting the navigation room. It was about four times the size of a house and on the wall they had a diagram with little lights…… [32:41 Indistinct] ….it was all very old-fashioned but they had cabins down the side so you were looking at, this would be about 30 ft away, the target and you'd have the pilot, navigator and wireless operator in these little huts. It was in a Hell of a state and I had three aircrew blokes, who hadn't done any ops, painting it. We just painted it whatever colour we wanted. Then I got on the flights, after moaning about it…. [33:50 Indistinct] …..they'd just come from another station, just outside Oxford….

SJB: Stanton Harcourt?

Yes, that's right. There was a Hell of a row in the Officers' Mess; I could hear it. They said it was B Flight coming back. It turned out to be Bob Withers's crowd coming in; they were mad, barmy, but great fun.

SJB: What did you think about ending up on a Wimpy OTU after being in 158 Sqdn? How did that strike you?

I liked the Wellington. I had a test one day to get my grade up from C to B and a chap took me from HQ Training Command, a very experienced flight lieutenant who taught me things I'd never guessed about. You know that you should never turn in towards a dead engine - well he said that was a load of old rubbish. You just control it better and I liked that. You could do a steep turn that way and it was fine. I used to

show off a bit with that when I had a new pupil. I learned a lot from that man and my grade went up from C to B. To get an A, you had to go to further expense, another training course. Abingdon was a very happy station indeed. They had some marvellous parties in the mess. They used to set up a pond with an old dinghy and fill it with water and on one occasion there was an air vice-marshal present and his hat ended up in it. It was a mad place.

SJB: How long did you stay there for?

I think I was there about a year. I did a course at Finningley and I thought I'd get on to Halifaxes there because they had Halifaxes, Lancasters and Wellingtons….. [37:58 Indistinct] …Some snotty wing commander took me on a final test and of course in Yorkshire, in those days, we had fog everywhere and the place was virtually closed down but he told me to take the aircraft in. I had done a course in blind flying up in Scotland and I was the only one out of ten on the course who got "above average" for instrument flying. I liked it, so when this guy said take it down, and the fog was almost at ground level, I got everything right but he said I was too high and I had to go round again. Twice I went around and he said he'd been there only two months and he could do it better than that, but he didn't. He mucked it up and we were full brakes on and ended up at the end of the runway. I thought it served him right.

It was Wellingtons again. I trained on them and instructed on them and I quite liked them. Of course, they were slightly out of date by then.

3rd party: That's the one thing I learned when doing the archive material. How much the aircraft was right up front and then suddenly it just stopped as being a major operational aircraft and the Halifaxes and Lancasters took over.

SJB: And after Abingdon, where did you go then?

After Abingdon, we were sort of surplus to requirements and I was posted to somewhere up in the Midlands, somewhere near Leicester, and we were on Dakotas. I didn't even go solo there because my friend and I got into a bit of hot water there, the guy I met 60 years later at the memorial. We had great fun but were in all sorts of trouble. We weren't getting proper training on the Dakotas and one day I was doing dual and the instructor had been my pupil at Abingdon and he just lost control. He stalled it, but I sorted it out quickly while he was still mucking about. He said that I was not supposed to do it like that. I got a bit fed up with that and they were getting a bit short of aircraft and my friend and I asked to be taken off the course. I was interviewed by a group captain who was well known to be a twit and he asked whether we were putting ourselves before the service. I said "At this stage of my career, yes sir" and that was a silly thing to have said because we were then in hot water. They'd had so many people asking to be taken off the course and they'd let them go but I think they got into trouble with higher authority.

We finished up at some station near Northampton and I was assisting a squadron leader in the office and there was a wing commander sitting in there as well. They were all nice people and they had a prisoner of war camp - Germans. There was a little warrant officer from Malta and he ruled them with a rod of iron. They'd come

from America and they'd had the time of their lives out there and my friend was there too and, because he'd worked in a bank, they said he could do the accounts. I used to go and visit these prisoners and walked via the cookhouse, where they were doing the soup, and as we went by they all came to attention and then of course it was great fun to come back again. It was all a bit of a laugh really. Not long after that we were demobbed.

SJB: So that would have been '46, '47 would it?

1946. I went back to my old job with a bloke in Watford who made instruments and did a bit of time there and then he wanted to move away but I didn't so I got a job at Wembley, in engineering. Not much of a job, until I got into the drawing office at Rotax.

SJB: At Hemel?

No. We were at various places but eventually all transferred to Hemel Hempstead.

SJB: I spent six years with Lucas at Hemel when I came out of the air force. I was in the product support department in the late '90s.

In fact we have meetings and lunches with some of the people there. I don't know a lot of them, who came from English Electric, and it was they who put the stamp on me as they didn't want me. I was chief draughtsman there. It was just shambolic.

SJB: Can we have a look at the logbook please, Aubrey? Do you mind if we take a few photographs of it? I see you did your flying training in Canada.

Yes, at Karen, about 20 miles west of Regina, Saskatchewan. That was a funny place. I think they used to get prairie madness, some of these instructors. One chap said to me during night flying "Have you ever done aerobatics at night?" Like an idiot, I said no. I wasn't keen on aerobatics at the best of times. It wasn't even in moon light! The same chap took me on instrument flying one day and I was under the hood. He gave me a course to fly and after a certain time he said I could come out from under the hood. We were way out over the prairie and I could see a single house down in the middle of nowhere. We landed out the back of the place and a girl came running out to meet us and the instructor said "Oh, I left my hat here last night".

3rd party: How long were you in Canada?

SJB: You started your flying training on the 26th September '42 and started AFU back in England on the 1st July '43, so ten months.

3rd party: Did you like Canada?

Oh yes, very nice people.

SJB: Ah! I've found the op you went on when you were on the comms unit. When you were on 1652 HCU, Frankfurt op, 22 aircraft lost. I see you did your OTU at

Lossiemouth. Now Patrick Moore, he of Sky at Night fame, did you know he was an RAF navigator but he would never say what he did? It was known that he was a navigator, trained in Canada and he was at 20 OTU Lossiemouth sometime in 1943 and that's as far as anyone can take it. What happened after that I don't know.

We crewed up there, this marvellous way of putting you all together and it generally worked except that my wireless op went LMF. He was always drinking and out with women of low character; he was a shocker. That's when I picked up a spare wireless op at Marston Moor.

SJB: Right, and you lost your flight engineer there too, at HCU? They didn't go to OTU did they, flight engineers?

No, that's right.

SJB: What happened to the rest of your crew after you finished your tour, do you know?

My wireless op wanted to stay on; they didn't take him on but he managed to fly with a guy who was a squadron leader then but subsequently became the president of the Aircrew Association…. [53:20 - prompted here by SJB, who provided the name – MRAF Sir Michael Beetham] .

Yes that's right; he was a squadron leader then. He flew out to India with him.

SJB: Ah, here we are, 1381 TCU, Marston Moor. A green endorsement – "Good airmanship and a full operational tour has been carried out without being involved in any accident."

Well, nearly.

SJB: Well, none that you'd admit to. Now you got the DFC, didn't you? Was that for the tour or for anything in particular?

Nothing in particular, I think. Not that they told me.

SJB: Now, do you have a photograph of yourself in uniform or, better still, of you with your crew?

Yes, I've got one hanging on the wall.

[57:20 Personnel retire to another room]

[01:03:24] SJB: Now the last photograph I need to take is you. One for luck. Thank you very much.

[01:03:44] End of Tape 1

Brief content of Tape 2 on next page

Aubrey Coles 2

[00:16] SJB: What was your brother's name then?

Victor

SJB: You did tell me, he was aircrew as well, wasn't he?

Oh, he was a special operator. There were only two of them doing that special job in India and the other one got chopped.

SJB: What squadron was that? Can you remember?

139, or was it 159?

SJB: which aircraft were they flying?

Liberators. Australian captain.

SJB: It's 159; 139 had Mosquitoes.

Yes, you're right.

[01:20] End of Tape 2

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