

## CONVERSATION WITH JIM LORD & JOHN ELLIOTT

LEIGHTON BUZZARD 15 NOVEMBER 2006



Key: JL – Flight Lieutenant Jim Lord DFC (above right), pilot with 550 Squadron (Lancaster), North Killingholme 1944 to 1945. Completed 31 operations with Flying Officer John Elliott (above left & right). Jim’s DFC was Gazetted on 19 January 1945.  
JE – Flying Officer John “Jock” Elliott, wireless operator with 550 Squadron.  
SB – Steve Bond

SB – “When did you crew up together?”

JE – “We crewed up together at 83 OTU Peplow, Shropshire (*Wellington*). The usual business, we got into a huge hangar, everybody milling around, ‘get yourselves sorted out gentlemen’. And then Jim, you take over from there.”

JL – “Well, this tall lanky fellow came up to me, he said ‘are you looking for a wireless operator?’ So I said ‘yes, I suppose I am’, and we took to each other, you know. We thought, well we could tell that we were much the same sort of breed, grammar school boys. And so I said ‘alright then, let’s go and find some more crew.’ We wandered around and got a crew.”

JE – “And that would be round about what, December ’43 wouldn’t it, thereabouts.”

JL – “Yes, before that I think.”

JE – “I had just finished AFU, wireless operator training, and then we looked around and found a navigator, Bob Sebaski a Canadian. And he comes over from Montreal every year to our squadron reunion. We met him in Montreal this year didn’t we?”

And the bomb aimer, another Canadian, Gus Vass. The rear gunner at that time, was an Irishman from the Irish Free State. And when we finished OTU, he went back to Ireland and never came back. So we got another rear gunner, at OTU, and that was Jack Schomberg, an Australian. And the mid-upper gunner was a chappie from London (*Sgt P J Scully*), so we were a very mixed crew really. There are four of us left now, and we all meet up each year.”

“Having finished OTU, we had to hang about waiting for another rear gunner, then we went to Lindholme, then on to Hemswell, Sandtoft Heavy Conversion Unit, Halifaxes.” (*1667 HCU*) That was a hairy time.”

SB – “In what way?”

JL – “Well, they weren’t very good aircraft to be honest. They were a bit teased out, they were superannuated. Well we had a bit of trouble in them now and again. I never told this lot (*pointing to John*), but we came nearer to killing ourselves on HCU than we ever did on the squadron!”

JE – “Well then we had a very unfortunate experience with a Halifax. Lancaster people loved Lancasters, and those who operated with Halifaxes were very happy with Halifaxes, and they were a different beast from the ones we used in Training Command. You’ve got to appreciate the training ones were clapped out, and they were Merlin-engine Halifaxes, rather than Hercules. We very rarely came back on four engines.”

JL – “As I say, I nearly killed this lot.”

SB – “How did that happen then?”

JL – “Well the story is, we were doing a cross-country and down to two engines, so I said to the flight engineer, ‘we’re on two, I’d better find somewhere to land’. So we called up, got permission to land at a place called Halfpenny Green. So we did all the necessary things, got onto the approach, and we were just coming into land and we got a red from the caravan. How do you overshoot a Halifax, on two engines?”

“And so very quickly, we un-feathered the two that we’d closed off and we went round. It took us twenty minutes to get some altitude. We came round again and got another red, so I ignored it and landed by the side of the runway. And that was the hairiest landing I ever did. And when we got up the next morning and went to look at the aeroplane, there were bits of twigs on the underside of the mainplane; and that is a line that nobody else would believe.”

JE – “Then after we’d finished at Heavy Conversion Unit, we went on to Hemswell, (*No.1*) Lancaster Finishing School. We just did two weeks there didn’t we, on Lancs. Then we were posted to 550 Squadron at North Killingholme. And that’s where the real stuff started.”

JL – “Where you suddenly realised that you hadn’t joined the Air Force to fly, you’d joined the Air Force to die!”

JE – “So we were very lucky, we had a good tour of operations. We did a full 30-odd, 31 I think. Possibly the one that stands out in our memory is the 13<sup>th</sup> op, I believe it was on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.”

JL – “It wasn’t on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, it was Wednesday the 13<sup>th</sup>.” (*July ’44*)

JE – “We were coming back from Revigny, and it had been a particularly nasty one. Coming back across the Channel everything clamped down, it was clamped down with fog.”

JL – “Well no, actually what did happen, we lost an engine over the Channel, obviously been hit by flak and didn’t realise, and I came in, saw Beachy Head, beautifully clear morning. We flew up England and about halfway up we got a call to divert to Norfolk. So we went to Norfolk, and by the time we got to Norfolk, missing the odd church steeple by a hair’s breadth, we decided we couldn’t land in Norfolk because it had already clamped down there. We just flew around until we ran out of fuel, and we jumped out.”

SB – “Where were you when you jumped out? Where did you come down?”

JL – “Two miles from Needham Market.”

JE – “Now Jim says to this day, he’s never seen six greener faces go past him.” (*laughter*) “We all went in a fairly orderly fashion. And the story which we will never forget and never let our navigator forget, he was told never, if possible, bail out on a full bladder. So Bob had a can, he did the necessary and stood the can very carefully on the navigator’s table so it shouldn’t spill.” (*laughter*)

JL – “Five minutes later the aircraft (*Lancaster III ED562*) was in little pieces on the ground.”

JE – “So that was how we became members of the Caterpillar Club.”

SB – “So apart from that, any particular events during the 31 ops?”

JL – “We were pretty lucky, we got (?) at now and again. We did one or two daylight raids. The bomb aimer used to say to me, ‘we don’t want daylights, just nights’”.

SB – “Any encounters with night fighters, or anything like that?”

JL – “Well not as I knew of. I guess we did.”

SB – “Night fighters?”

JE – “Yes, we saw one or two. My job was to watch the Monica screen, on the wireless operators you know, cathode tubes. And often they would come, aircraft come, from behind, and I was on the first course of radio operators, to become Wireless Operators Air, because we had this Monica. We never did a gunnery course.”

JL – “He saw coming on the radar screen that was faster than someone who was keeping pace with us. We knew it might be a fighter. My story is that he used to wake me up and tell me.” *(laughter)*

JE – “Mind you, I can remember one of the first daylights we did over Paris, I was standing up in the astrodome having a look around. And as you in Bomber Command you selected individual aiming point, every aircraft lined up. And I looked above, there was a Halifax just above us, and they came down, and of course that happened all the time. Scary.”

“We flew in the famous Lancaster ‘Phantom of the Ruhr’ (*EE139 BQ-B*) on a fighter-affiliation exercise against a captured Ju.88. It had landed intact in England (*this was the aircraft now in the RAF Museum at Hendon*). As soon as I switched on my Monica set, the Ju.88 knew where we were, so we had to switch it off again.”

SB – “When did you finish your tour?”

JL – “It would have been in October ’44.”

SB – “And what came after that?”

JL – “Well I was posted to an OTU, instructing. I did what they called a Group Instructor’s Course at Silverstone, (*17 OTU, Wellingtons*) and I became an instructor. I was eventually demobbed in 1946.”

JE – “I had damaged my knee when I bailed out actually, and it became a bit of a problem. So round about Christmas 1944, I was in RAF Hospital Halton. And then I went up to Loughborough for four-week medical rehabilitation, then I went down instructing in South Wales, Carew Cheriton (*10 Radio School*). Then round about August, I had a review of my knee, went up to London for a medical, and they said there was still a problem with it; that was it. We kept up together after the war but of course everybody split up.”

JL – “We’d got our own ways to make in the World.”

JE – “The next momentous event was in 1984, when I became a member of the Aircrew Association, and the first copy of the Intercom magazine I had, there was a photograph of Jim at the Leicester Branch! And that’s how we got together again. I was the best man at his wedding.”

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Further conversation with John, 17 December 2008

JE – “We went to HCU at Sandtoft (1667 HCU) which we called ‘Prangtoft’, because when we arrived we saw three or four Halifaxes dumped around the edge of the airfield. The HCU had old worn-out Merlin-engined aircraft, and in all the time we were there, we never completed a flight on all four engines.”

“This was where we were teamed up with our Flight Engineer, and he was responsible for raising the undercarriage, but the undercarriage lever was right next to the flap lever, so he raised the flaps instead of the undercarriage.”

“We realised at HCU that this was quite serious. Until then it had all been a bit of fun.”

END



*The crew of G-George and their groundcrew, 550 Sqn North Killingholme September 1944*



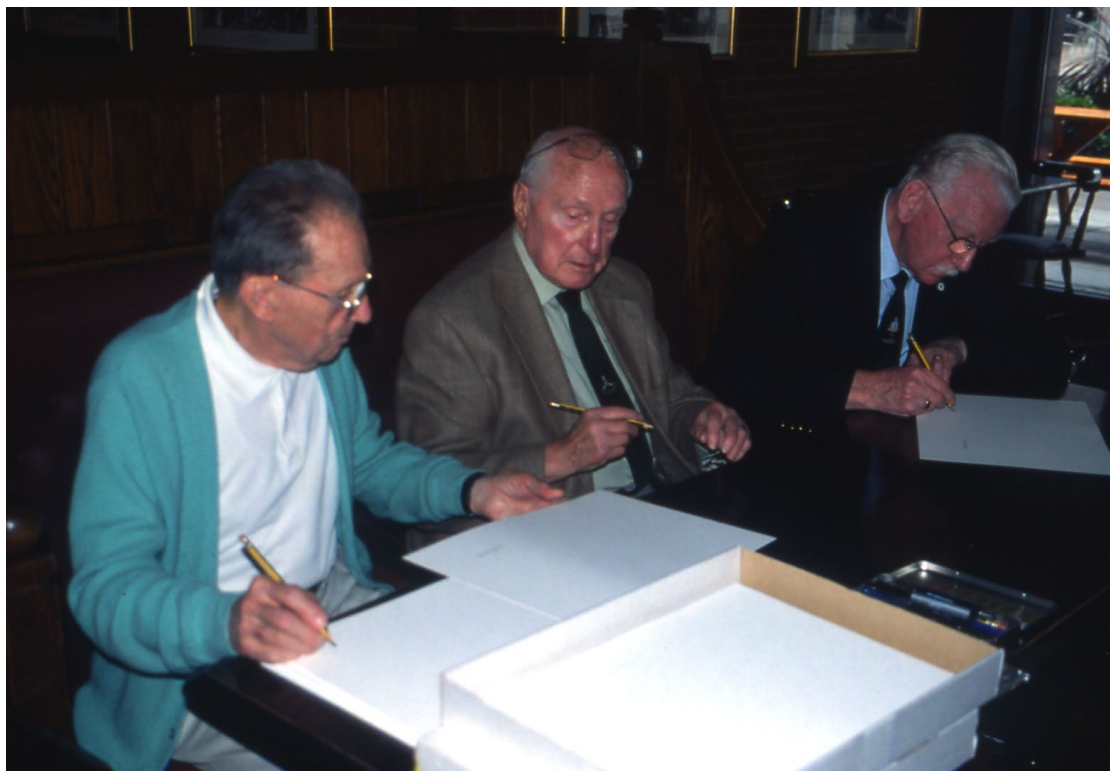
*L to R: Jack Schomberg (Rear Gunner), "Gus" Vass (Bomb Aimer), Pat Sculley (Mid-Upper Gunner), Jim Lord (Pilot), Ken Down (Flight Engineer), Bob Sebaski (Navigator), "Jock" Elliott (Wireless Operator), 550 Sqn North Killingholme September 1944*



*L to R: Ken, Jim, Gus, Jock, Pat, Bob, Jack, 550 Sqn North Killingholme September 1944*

Regular crew:

175190 Pilot Officer Jim Lord, pilot  
652806 Sgt E "Ken" Down, flight engineer  
R164752 Flt Sgt R "Bob" Sebaski, navigator  
R172919 Flt Sgt A "Gus" Vass, bomb aimer  
157873 Flg Off John "Jock" Elliott, wireless operator  
A420278 Sgt Jack Schomberg, rear gunner  
T181322 Sgt Pat Sculley, mid-upper gunner



*L to R: Bob, Jim, Jack, final reunion, London July 2007*