

Don Briggs A brief description of Wartime service

How it all began

1939 saw a rapid build up of the armed forces. The Royal Air Force were recruiting ground servicing personnel in large numbers. I was a 15 year old schoolboy and saw my chance to learn Aircraft engineering so applied to take the Aircraft Apprentice entrance examination. I passed OK and two days after World War 2 was declared I was on my way to RAF Halton No. 1 School of Technical Training. There is little doubt that the harsh discipline coupled with excellent theoretical lessons in Schools (known as Kermode Hall after the well known aerodynamasist) and many hours filing pieces of metal in workshops, turned boys into men. Later in the course we worked in teams stripping down and reassembling many types of aero engines. At the end of training (which was reduced in length due to the demand for Engine fitters) I passed out as a Fitter 2E.

My first posting was to RAF Finningley where I worked on the engines of Wellington and Hampden bombers. The Rolls Royce Vulture engines in the Avro Manchester were giving trouble which meant I assisted with several engine changes.

My next posting was to RAF Upper Heyford where I was promoted to Corporal at the age of 18. There I worked on The Wellington MK 3 with more powerful Hercules engines. After carrying out rectification on an aircraft if an air test was necessary I usually asked if I could accompany the pilot.

After approximately two and a half years I decided that more excitement was needed so I volunteered for Aircrew. _The President of the selection board said I had passed all the aptitude

tests for pilot training. However there was little demand for pilots at that time (Mid 1943) and in view of the fact that I was already a Non Commissioned Officer aero engine fitter all I needed was the three months Flight Engineer's course and I could be operational in less than six months. So I became a flight engineer by passing the course at RAF St. Athan.

During the crewing up procedure I was fortunate in meeting the captain of the crew that I was to fly with. He was Flying Officer Bill Neal with his crew and they had already completed a tour of operations on Wellingtons. Bill explained that they had been selected to join the Pathfinder Force and what our duties would entail. Our first step was to convert onto the Halifax Mk 1 at RAF Lindhome. During our training sorties Bill Neal gave me a "potted" flying lesson and I handled the controls of an aircraft for the first time! We completed the course of 30 hours then went on to convert onto the Lancaster at RAF Helmswell. I did the night conversion on my 20th birthday. After attending a short course to learn the Pathfinder procedures we joined No. 156 Squadron at RAF Upwood near Peterborough.

As a new crew we had about two weeks of training to complete during which time I took on the additional role of bomb aimer and dropped practice bombs at a nearby bombing range. Also during this time Bill Neal vacated his seat (there were no dual control Lancasters on the squadron) and allowed me to fly this superb aircraft.

On completion of this training we were declared Operational and 11th June 1944 saw our crew on the Battle Order. The target was the vast marshalling yards at Tours in the South of France. The Germans were routing most of their reinforcements through here to the Normandy battle front.

What were my feelings about starting operational flying? Well firstly I volunteered for aircrew and I was fully committed now - there was no turning back. Destiny would decide whether or not I survived. Secondly I was fortunate in joining a very experienced crew and they all made me a welcome addition to the crew. They had not flown with a flight engineer previously. I should explain that in Pathfinder crews the reason the flight engineer took on the extra duty of visual bomb aimer was that the primary bomb aimer operated the H2S radar. No.156 Squadron were primarily a Blind Marker squadron which meant that if no target indicator flares were seen cascading the radar operator would release Red Tl's. The Master Bomber would then know that the markers were dropped blind and the target had not been visually identified. On this first operation we were about to fly, we were part of The Illuminating Force and carried twelve hooded parachute flares. The master bomber or his deputy would then be able to identify the aiming point visually. Our first ten operations would be mostly dropping flares. On this first operation to Tours I received my baptism alright as we had two night fighter attacks just before the target which Bill Neal corkscrewed to shake them off. Also the Marshalling yards were well defended by heavy predicted flak and searchlights. So it was a great feeling to be safely back on the ground at our Upwood base.

Our crew flew several sorties in support of allied ground forces on the battle front where we dropped sticks of 14 X 1000lb from only 4000ft ! Needless to say the aircraft shook with the blast. We also attacked V1 launch sites in the Pas de Calais area. They were well camouflaged so the technique was that six Lancasters formed on a Mosquito Bomber equipped with "OBOE" a very accurate blind bombing system. When his bomb doors opened the Lancs also did so, followed by bomb release by all the Lancs when we saw the bomb leave the Mosquito. Thus we achieved a bombing

pattern which should have rendered the buzz bomb site unusable. This must have saved many lives in and around London ! My first German target was Hamburg (13th OP !) which was heavily defended but we came through the barrage unscathed. Night fighters were in the area and although we saw several bombers going down in flames we were left alone. A sickening sight knowing our comrades would meet their end in a fireball from bombs and fuel. We made a note of the position and got on with our own job.

I gradually became used to flying on operations but there was always that nagging thought that the worst might happen and I may not be climbing down the ladder again. Most of our operations from August 1944 were German - we were even sent to Rhur targets in daylight ! Several oil refineries were on our list of targets - the German war machine became more ineffective during the final months of the war mainly due to fuel shortage. Our longest flight in the Lancaster was to Stettin (8hrs 30 mins.) and we landed back at base with barely enough fuel for a diversion !

After completing 40 operations (end of my first tour) I became Pilot Officer Don Briggs and was able to join the rest of my crew in the officers mess. I was given a couple of weeks end of tour leave then pressed on with Skipper Bill Neal for a second tour who had now flown two tours and was awarded the DFC. We flew deep into the heart of Germany attacking oil targets at Stettin, Leipzig, Mersburg, Chemnitz and Dessau. In March 1945 we attacked Nurnburg for the second time and were lucky to survive three night fighter attacks. Our rear gunner had amazing night vision and saw the enemy first thus enabling Bill Neal to take evasive action successfully. We were told at debriefing after a safe return to base that the Germans were using jets at night for the first time.

During a daylight operation to Kleve in October 1944 we had a flak burst on the port wingtip which damaged the aileron quite badly. Our skipper with his amazing piloting skill brought us back to a safe landing back at Upwood !

I pressed on into my second tour with Bill Neal apart from one operation with another crew, as their flight engineer had completed his tours of operations.

I'm happy to say that despite several very close shaves I came through 62 operations unscathed. Lady luck was certainly on my side !! Bill Neal pressed on with another flight engineer and notched up just short of a hundred ops! He was awarded the DSO, DFC, and the French awarded him the Croix de Guerre. I am eternally grateful to Bill for getting me through the most dangerous period of my life. He made sure that my operational record was recognized resulting in the award of the DFC in July 1945.

A few statistics

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| French Targets | 24 |
| German Targets | 38 |
| Night operations | 41 |
| Daylight Operations | 21 |

41 operations in "our own" Lancaster GT - J (NE 120)

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| Oil refineries | 3 |
| V1 Sites | 5 |
| Battle Front | 5 |
| Marshalling Yards | 4 |

Rhur Targets 10 (4 in daylight)

My last 30 operations were all German targets

It was a massive relief to have survived and great to be able to enjoy end of second tour leave with my parents and four brothers.