

## Tribute to a Pathfinder Captain

Squadron Leader William G. Neal DSO DFC Croix de Guerre

1912 - 2001

It was April 1944, and I had just completed the Flight Engineer training course at R.A.F. St. Athan S. Wales. Shortly after arriving at R.A.F. Lindholme near Doncaster to commence training on the Halifax bomber, about twenty or so of us new Flt.Engineers attended a "crewing up parade". The crews were lined up in sixes awaiting the additional member to make a full crew of seven. The pilot in each crew broke away and approached our group. I was asked for by name and stepped forward to meet Flying Officer Bill Neal. He knew from my training records that I had some limited flying experience through accompanying pilots on air tests following engine changes etc. Bill explained that his crew had all completed one tour of ops and they had been selected to go to a Pathfinder Squadron directly after four engine bomber conversion. He explained what it all meant and what the duties of a Pathfinder crew would be. Bill asked me if I would like to join his crew and I accepted without hesitation. And so it was that fate decided that I should sit alongside this outstanding pilot for the next almost twelve months!! All the crew were commissioned officers but Bill promised that he would do his utmost to get me commissioned after completing a tour of ops. That evening I received my "initiation" into the crew at one of the local "watering holes" !! I was not allowed to buy any beer!!

As our training on Halifaxes proceeded I quickly realized my extremely good fortune in becoming part of this very experienced bomber crew. In fact on our first night navigation exercise, an engine suffered a burst coolant header tank, quickly overheated and had to be shut down and the propeller feathered. Bill calmly and skillfully carried out his first night landing on three engines! Of course he must have done numerous single engine landings as a flying instructor on Wellingtons.

### William G. Neal ( Bill to all the crew) First Impressions

I was approaching my twentieth birthday and Bill was almost twelve years my senior. His mature friendly nature and jovial personality transmitted a feeling of well being in all who came into contact with him. I personally regarded Bill as my mentor and felt that he was the one who would get us safely through the war.

His leadership qualities were of the highest calibre, namely: great courage, example, coolness under fire, tenacity, professionalism, and the ability to maintain high morale in his crew. Above all, Bill was a superb pilot !! We were all encouraged to stay fit and healthy and our skipper set a good example by playing squash regularly!

### Operations and Training

Having completed training on the Halifax, the next stage was our introduction to the magnificent Lancaster. This was accomplished at the Lancaster Finishing School RAF Hemswell nr. Lincoln. It was only a short familiarisation course, both day and night flying, and Bill was immediately "at home" with this superb aircraft! So now we were all set to join The Pathfinder Force and proceeded to the PFF Navigation Training Unit at RAF Warboys nr. St. Ives Camb. (only five miles from RAF Upwood). It was a very short course lasting only four days. We flew a training sortie each day consisting of navigation and practice bombing. During this course I was taught how to use the bombsight, how to give corrections to our pilot, and after practice in a synthetic trainer, dropped smoke/flash bombs on a nearby bombing range. The reason for the flight engineer having to become the visual bomb aimer in a Pathfinder crew, was due to the normal bomb aimer or observer being fully pre-occupied on his radar (H2s). He would possibly have to mark the target with red target indicators (Ti's) if the "Master Bomber" called for them.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> May 1944 we arrived at Royal Air Force Upwood to join No. 156 (PFF) Squadron.

#### Our First Crew on PFF

Flying Officer W.G. (Bill) Neal PILOT and CAPTAIN (one tour of ops on Wellingtons and recent flying instructor at RAF Harwell, Oxon)  
Sergeant D.W. (Don) Briggs FLIGHT ENGINEER (ex NCO aero engine fitter)  
Pilot Officer Alan Lewis NAVIGATOR (one previous tour of ops)  
Flying Officer George Hodges 2<sup>nd</sup> NAVIGATOR and H2S RADAR OPERATOR (one previous tour of ops on Wellingtons)  
Flying Officer John Carrad WIRELESS OPERATOR (one previous tour of ops on Wellingtons)  
Flying Officer "Jock" McVitie MID UPPER GUNNER (one previous tour of ops)  
Flying Officer "Paddy" Kirk REAR GUNNER (one previous tour of ops)

The settling in period for the crew before commencing operations, was about two weeks of intensive training flights. These involved mostly radar navigation, practice bombing, fighter evasion which gave Bill some "corkscrewing" practice (we had a Spitfire making simulated fighter attacks from astern). Needless to say the gunners had their guns safe!! They were able to get live firing practice later on a sleeve being towed by special aircraft – even I had a go after being shown how to operate the guns in the front turret!!

During our training on the Halifax at Lindholme, Bill had very kindly given me an introductory flying lesson (I had never handled an aircraft in flight before!). After taking my place in the pilot's seat, he showed me how to maintain the correct nose attitude for level flight and how to use the roll control to level the wings also make gentle turns. Once we were established on the Squadron we had a training commitment in navigation and bombing to fulfil. This was necessary in order to "hone" our skills and maintain the very high standards demanded of PATHFINDER crews. During most of these flights Bill and I would change places and under his close supervision, I would take control of the big Lancaster – what a fantastic feeling! By

giving me plenty of handling practice, Bill, being a very responsible captain was ensuring that someone was capable of flying the aircraft in emergency. Thus I can take pride in saying that my first flying lessons were given by the excellent Bill Neal!! It's worth noting that no Lancaster on the squadron was equipped with dual controls, which is why it was necessary for the pilot to vacate his seat to allow me to fly the aircraft.

We were now declared "fully operational" and on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1944 Bill called us together and said "we're on the Battle Order for tonight chaps"! We lost no time in getting our flying kit on, then carry out a thorough check of our aircraft that we would be flying on the raid and fly a short air test. The aircraft would then be prepared for the operational sortie by our ground crew (they were a dedicated band of men and took great pride in their own Lancaster). The fuel load was usually maximum. Then last of all would come the bomb load on special trolleys quite often towed by a W.A.A.F. The bombing up team would then winch the bombs/flares/Target Indicators into the bomb bay.

After a few hours rest in the afternoon it was time to attend a mass briefing. The target for our Op no.1 was to be the marshalling yards at TOURS in Southern France. With all the flight planning completed we sat down to a good pre flight meal then made our way to the locker room. The air gunners had to wear plenty of warm clothing, as the outside air temperature at twenty thousand feet could be -40oC and very little heat from the aircraft system reached the turrets. Both gunners were issued with electrically heated thermal suits and gauntlets. The rest of the crew wore thick rollneck pullovers under the battledress jacket and of course everyone wore fleece lined suede flying boots. Each crew member had his own parachute harness and chest type parachutes were issued separately. We then boarded coaches and were dropped off at our own aircraft. The ground crew were already at the aircraft and the Form 700 (servicing record) was presented to Bill for signature. After the obligatory external inspection including an inspection of the bomb load and removal of safety pins, each crew member took up his position in the aircraft. It was my job to start all the engines when our skipper gave the order, and we had a precise time to start taxiing. To see twenty or so Lancasters in a stream round the perimeter track was a thrilling sight !! There was always a crowd of station personnel by the side of the runway to see us off (lots of W.A.A.F.'s!!). It was vital that each bomber took off precisely on its allocated time. When it was our turn, Bill entered the runway lining up the heavily loaded Lancaster as close to the end as he could. At the end of the navigator's countdown, Bill used to say "OK chaps as the earwig said - EARWIGO"! as he advanced the throttles to full power accelerating down the runway for a perfect take off. Ask any ex Lancaster crew member and he will tell you what a wonderful sound those four Merlins made at full power!! I suspect the "earwig" saying was not only routine but superstition also, but it was part of every operational take off for our crew.

Once we had set course and were climbing to operational height the "butterflies" disappeared as we all had plenty to do. The flight engineer's log had to be completed every half hour, recording all engine gauge readings and that fuel usage was according to plan. It was vital not to show any light in the cockpit. Bill's flight instruments were dimly lit by u/v lights directed on to the luminous dials, and I had to use a torch with a very small hole in the blacked out glass when filling in my log.

Both navigators worked under black out curtains. We had a very strict microphone discipline in a bomber crew. If a mic. was left ON after saying something there was a hissing noise caused by oxygen flowing into the mask. It was essential to keep the intercom quiet in case the gunners reported a night fighter and called "corkscrew (port or starboard) GO". Our skipper Bill was a strong chap and could certainly throw a Lancaster around!! On my very first op with the crew I had my "baptism" in the form of two fighter attacks. Paddy our rear gunner saw the fighter before he could get in close and during the violent corkscrewing the four brownings in the rear turret made a noisy "clatter". This was exciting stuff for the new crew member!!! In both attacks the fighter's shots went wide and he broke away.

On this sortie and several more night ops to follow we were part of the "illuminating force". This meant that we were one of the first to arrive at the target and would drop a stick of very bright parachute flares to enable the Master Bomber to visually identify the aiming point. He would be either a Lancaster or a Mosquito at a low altitude and would then drop cascading target indicators (mixed reds and greens). Further pathfinder aircraft were required to "back up" the marking by dropping more T's. Later in our tour we took on this role. Although anti aircraft fire (flak) on our first series of French targets was not intense, German targets were very heavily defended. Our first German target was Hamburg (op no.13 !!) and as we prepared for our bombing run the barrage of flak looked terrifying. Just as I was having doubts whether we could get through it, Bill said "don't worry it always looks worse than it really is and the puffs of flak you see are the ones that can't do us any harm". I felt slightly better!! The flak guns were radar predicted and the Germans had developed accurate height finding equipment. To make their job more difficult we used to fly a "weaving" course initially until the actual bombing run when the aircraft had to be held steady apart from small left and right corrections from bomb aimer to pilot. This is when we were most vulnerable to predicted flak and being "coned" by searchlights. Even after bomb release we still had to maintain heading until over the target and the photograph taken. This was a great relief to all the crew as it meant that Bill would usually dive for a few hundred feet then climb again and so on, until well clear of the target area. Our route away from the target was always planned to keep us clear of heavily defended areas, however, the threat from night fighters was ever present. Some ME110 fighters were fitted with upward firing canon. The pilot would fly formation below the bomber (in a blind spot to the gunners) and fire upwards with devastating results. In our Lancasters at the bomb aimer's position there was a rearward facing perspex scoop through which we used to drop bundles of "window" (each containing millions of thin strips of silver foil to fog the enemy radar screens). I used to spend as much time as possible with my head down looking through this perspex in case a fighter was underneath.

One of the most sickening and demoralising sights was to witness a bomber aircraft being shot down. The bomber would be spinning down in a mass of flames and when it impacted (possibly with a full bomb load) there would be a massive explosion and fireball. Our navigator would make a note of the time and position, then we tried to put it out of our minds. Throughout our operational tours this experience was to be repeated many many times. We felt great sadness at the loss of our comrades, but thankful that we were spared.

It was a relief to be back over friendly territory on the way home and once we were

crossing the North Sea the gunners could relax slightly. The aerodrome lights of Upwood were a most welcome sight and the controller had his work cut out fitting all the returning Lancasters into the circuit. Bill invariably brought our machine in for a well judged landing, tired though he must have been! Our ground crew were there on the dispersal to greet us climbing out of our trusty Lancaster and were always keen to know which target we had bombed. On return to the operations block for debriefing there was the usual welcoming committee- WAAFs with mugs of hot coffee laced with rum and the Padre having a chat as he handed out American cigarettes!! Then followed a debriefing by the intelligence officer and other specialists. Many times I remember walking back to the Mess for breakfast as dawn was breaking!

Some ops were very long flights (see record of operations following) and one might well ask "how did you stay awake and fully alert the whole time?" Well we had the option of taking "wakey wakey" pills as we used to call them. They were actually Benzzedrine tablets (a stimulant) and most of us took them.

The remainder of our operations followed the general pattern previously described, however, we flew many daylight ops particularly in support of our ground forces on the Normandy Battle Front. We also attacked flying bomb sites in the Pas de Calais area using a special method. Six Lancasters flew close formation on a Mosquito equipped with "Oboe"(an extremely accurate blind bombing device). At the same split second the bomb left the Mosquito every Lancaster released its full load of bombs. Thus the VI (buzz bomb) site was totally obliterated possibly saving the lives of many Londoners. Ops 2,3, and 4 were carried out on successive nights but were all fairly short trips to targets in France. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 1944 we flew a daylight raid on Duisburg in the morning, and with hardly any rest, attacked the same target that night! The target was an armaments factory in the Rhur and was heavily defended.

After completing my first tour (40 ops) having already had my commissioning interviews, sure enough exactly as Bill had promised, my commission came through. I was now able to join Bill and the rest of the crew in the Officers Mess.

At this time Bill had completed two tours of ops and decided to keep going as did Johnnie Carrod, George Hodges, and of course myself (I wanted to complete two tours also). However, Alan Lewis (nav), Paddy Kirk and Jock McVitie (the two gunners) decided to "call it a day". Thus our crew became :-

Flight Lieutenant (later Sqn.Ldr.) Bill Neal DFC Captain  
Pilot Officer Don Briggs Flight Engineer  
Flight Lieutenant George Hodges DFC H2S Radar Operator  
Sergeant ....? Archer RCAF Navigator  
Flight Lieutenant John Carrod DFC Wireless Operator  
Flight Sergeant (later Warrant Officer) ....? Patterson  
(Mid Upper Gunner)  
Flight Sergeant Eric Chamberlain Rear Gunner

And so we pressed on ! From then on every op except one was a German target. We flew some very long trips (two of them were over eight hours) Our longest flight was to Stettin

on the Baltic coast- almost to Russia – eight and a half hours! That was stretching a Lancaster endurance to its limits I seem to remember.  
 We bombed Chemnitz and Dessau in Eastern Germany and of course on 13<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1945, we were sent to Dresden. The firestorm was an awesome sight.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1945 I flew my last operational sortie with Bill – it was a daylight raid on a Rhrur target!

No words can do justice to the piloting skill, leadership, and fearless tenacity, coupled with the ability to maintain high morale, of our Captain, Comrade in Battle, and good friend, William. G. Neal – Bill to all of us in his Lancaster bomber crew.

It was an honour to be part of his team, and I shall be eternally thankful that he got me through the most dangerous era of my life. Sadly, Bill Neal died on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2001. I shall miss him enormously.

### RECORD OF OPERATIONS

OPS #1	11 <sup>th</sup> June 1944	Lanc III "J" (NE120)	TOURS (M/Yards)	5hrs 55min.
OPS# 2	15 <sup>th</sup> June	" Lanc III "B"	LENS	2hrs 20min.
OPS# 3	16 <sup>th</sup> June	" Lanc III "A"	RENESECURE	2hrs 05min.
OPS# 4	17 <sup>th</sup> June	" Lanc III "H"	MONTDIDIER	3hrs 30min.
OPS# 5	24 <sup>th</sup> June	" Lanc III "K"	MIDDEL STRAETE	2hrs 15min.
OPS# 6	27 <sup>th</sup> June	" Lanc III "J"	OISEMONT	2hrs 30min.
OPS# 7	2 <sup>nd</sup> July	" Lanc III "J"	OISEMONT	2hrs 50min.
OPS# 8	7 <sup>th</sup> July	" Lanc III "J"	VAIRES (M/Yards nr. PARIS)	4hrs 25min.
OPS# 9	10 <sup>th</sup> July	" Lanc III "J"	NUCOURT	3hrs00
OPS# 10	12 <sup>th</sup> July	" Lanc III "J"	TOURS	5hrs 05m
OPS# 11	14th July	" Lanc III "J"	PHILIBERT	3hrs 05
OPS# 12	18th July	" Lanc III "J"	CAGNY (Battle Front)	
			(Wg.Cdr. Bingham-Hall Sqn.	2hrs 50
OPS# 13	28 <sup>th</sup> July	" Lanc III "F"	HAMBURG	4hrs 55
OPS# 14	30 <sup>th</sup> July	" Lanc III "K"	BATTLE FRONT(Low level)	3hrs 05
OPS# 15	3 <sup>rd</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "J"	BOIS De CASSAN	3hrs 35
OPS# 16	5 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "F"	FORET De NIEPPE	2hrs 05
OPS# 17	7 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "J"	BATTLE FRONT A/P 5	2hrs 45
OPS# 18	9 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "F"	FORT D'ENGLOS	2hrs 20
OPS# 19	12 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "D"	RUSSELSHEIM(nr.FRANKFURT)	4hrs40
OPS# 20	15 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "J"	EINDHOVEN Airfield (Holland)	2hrs 55
OPS# 21	16 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "H"	KIEL	5hrs 25
OPS# 22	18 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "E"	CONNANTRE (,M/Yards)	5hrs 20
OPS# 23	25 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "J"	RUSSELSHEIM	7hrs 20
OPS# 24	29 <sup>th</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "J"	STETTIN (Our longest flight)	8hrs 30
OPS# 25	31 <sup>st</sup> Aug.	" Lanc III "D"	LUMBRES	2hrs 35
OPS# 26	15 <sup>th</sup> Sept.	" Lanc III "J"	KIEL	5hrs 05

OPS# 27	16 <sup>th</sup> Sept.	"	Lanc III "J"	MOERDIJK Bridges (Holland)	2hrs 55
OPS# 28	20 <sup>th</sup> Sept.	"	Lanc III "J"	CALAIS Area A/P 6B	2hrs 10
OPS# 29	23 <sup>rd</sup> Sept.	"	Lanc III "J"	NEUSS (DUSSELDORF)	3hrs 30
OPS# 30	25 <sup>th</sup> Sept.	"	Lanc III "A"	CALAIS Area A/P 1C	1hr 55
OPS# 31	26 <sup>th</sup> Sept.	"	Lanc III "A"	CAP GRIS NEZ (CALAIS)	2hrs 30
OPS# 32	27 <sup>th</sup> Sept.	"	Lanc III "A"	CALAIS A/P 11	1hr 50
(Our shortest Operational Sortie!)					
OPS# 33	5 <sup>th</sup> Oct.	"	Lanc III "K"	SAARBRUCKEN	5hrs 00
OPS# 34	7 <sup>th</sup> Oct.	"	Lanc III "J"	KLEVE (Flak damage to port wing)	3hrs 20
OPS# 35	14 <sup>th</sup> Oct.	"	Lanc III "J"	DUISBURG (RHUR)	3hrs 30
OPS# 36	14 <sup>th</sup> Oct.	"	Lanc III "A"	DUISBURG	4hrs 10
(Twice in one day !!!)					
OPS# 37	18 <sup>th</sup> Nov.	"	Lanc III "J"	MUNSTER (Plt. Off. Don !!)	3hrs 50
OPS# 38	28 <sup>th</sup> Nov.	"	Lanc III "J"	ESSEN (RHUR)	4hrs 30
OPS# 39	30 <sup>th</sup> Nov.	"	Lanc III "B"	DUISBURG (RHUR)	4hrs 25
OPS# 40	5 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	"	Lanc III "J"	SOEST M/Yards (End of my First tour of ops !)	5hrs 40
OPS# 41	6 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	"	Lanc III "J"	OSNABRUCK	5hrs 15
OPS# 42	29 <sup>th</sup> Dec.	"	Lanc III "J"	COBLENZ	4hrs 35
OPS# 43	2 <sup>nd</sup> January	1945	Lanc III "J"	NURNBURG	7hrs 40
OPS# 44	4 <sup>th</sup> Jan.	"	Lanc III "J"	ROYAN (Nr. Bordeaux)	5hrs 05
OPS# 45	5 <sup>th</sup> Jan.	"	Lanc III "J"	HANOVER	4hrs
OPS# 46	14 <sup>th</sup> Jan.	"	Lanc III "J"	LEUNA (Mersburg) Oil Plant (Diverted Tangmere - fog at Upwood)	8hrs 05
OPS# 47	16 <sup>th</sup> Jan.	"	Lanc III "J"	ZEITZ (Oil Plant Nr. Leipzig)	6hrs 30
OPS# 48	28 <sup>th</sup> Jan.	"	Lanc III "O"	STUTTGART (Flew with Flt. Lt. Williams)	6hrs 00
OPS# 49	7 <sup>th</sup> Feb.	"	Lanc III "J"	GOCH (Bombed from 4500ft)	4hrs 40
OPS# 50	8 <sup>th</sup> Feb.	"	Lanc III "B"	POLLITZ (STETTIN)	8hrs 05
OPS# 51	13 <sup>th</sup> Feb.	"	Lanc III "J"	<b>DRESDEN</b>	7hrs 45
OPS# 52	1 <sup>st</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	MANNHIEM	5hrs 05
OPS# 53	5 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	CHEMNITZ	7hrs 40
OPS# 54	7 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	DESSAU	7hrs 50
OPS# 55	8 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	HAMBURG	5hrs 15
OPS# 56	12 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	DORTMUND	4hrs 25
OPS# 57	15 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	MISBURG Oil Refinery (Nr. Hanover)	6hrs 20
OPS# 58	16 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	NURNBURG (3 fighter attacks)	6hrs 50
OPS# 59	19 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	HANAU Nr. Frankfurt	5hrs 45
OPS# 60	20 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "H"	HEMMINGSTADT (Nr. Heide 30 miles South of Danish border)	4hrs 35
OPS# 61	22 <sup>nd</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	HILDESHIEM (Nr. Hanover)	4hrs 25
OPS# 62	24 <sup>th</sup> March	"	Lanc III "J"	HARPENERWEG (RHUR)	4hrs 25

### NOTES

Operations printed in **RED** were flown at night. Those printed in **GREEN** were daylight operations

Forty one operations were flown in Lancaster "J - Johnnie" (that would be "Juliet" in present day international phonetic alphabet).

The most concentrated months were August 1944 (eleven sorties), and March 1945 (eleven sorties)

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