

DAVID AND THE RAF

My brother David's very distinguished wartime career with the RAF - two DSOs and a DFC, and promotion to Wing Commander at 28 - warrants a separate appendix to these family notes. He has kindly helped me to compile it by giving me the run of his log books, and I have supplemented them from a number of other sources.

He became interested in flying in the early 1930s. I recall him taking his small brother of 9 or 10 to an air show at Eastleigh and abandoning him while he went up as passenger in a Tiger Moth doing aerobatics. That may well have given him the incentive to join the RAF Volunteer Reserve in 1934 as a weekend pilot. He did much of his training at Hamble, on the Solent. When war broke out in September 1939 he was called up immediately and had to abandon his legal training. He spent the "phoney war" towing target drogues at a bombing and gunnery school at Evanton in Scotland. His log books show him rated as an "average" pilot.

At the end of April 1940, just before the Germans attacked in the West, he went to Brize Norton for intermediate training (earning an "above-average" rating) and then to Harwell for operational training on Wellingtons, the main twin-engined heavy bomber of the early war years. On 20th September, just as the Battle of Britain was ending, he was posted to his first operational squadron, No 149, part of No 3 Group, at the big pre-war air station at Mildenhall. His first operational sortie was over Calais towards the end of September, no doubt to attack the invasion barges.

Over the following five months he took part in some 31 night raids. The German defence at this time was relatively feeble by comparison with what was to follow, and so the tour was correspondingly tolerable; however bitter experience had shown that day bombing was much too costly, and the night bombing techniques were very inaccurate. His first raid on Berlin, at the end of October, was particularly eventful; they got hopelessly lost on their return, came in over Bristol, and ended up over Clacton as dawn was breaking with very little fuel left. There both the Army and the Navy opened up on them, and even the Home Guard succeeded in putting a bullet through the wing. They eventually made a forced crash landing at St Osyth. The Home Guard commander, a retired general, entertained him generously and he finally got back to Mildenhall where his Group Captain forgave him for the damaged aircraft and advised him to go out and get drunk. He took the advice, and in the pub he met a WAAF whom he married eight months later (maybe that is why he remembers that particular day so well.)

The gauntlet of Friendly Fire seems to have been a not uncommon hazard to be faced. On another occasion, when he had to make three circuits returning to Mildenhall, the airfield machine gunners opened fire on him from ground level; he thought they were higher up and judged his height accordingly, and narrowly missed the radio masts which were *not*, as he thought, below him.

The longest raids on this tour were trips of over ten hours to Italy: to Venice, which they overflew at low level, and to the Fiat works at Turin. He described the latter raid, and the spectacular views of the Alps it afforded, in a BBC broadcast in December 1940. The commonest targets were the Ruhr and other German cities, and some raids were made at lower level on shipping in French ports. The raid which won him the DFC was on 22nd November, on Merignac aerodrome near Bordeaux, which "difficult target he attacked from a height of 1,500 feet and successfully bombed hangars, causing large fires and explosions. As a result of his efforts the task of following aircraft was made easier He has at all times displayed conspicuous determination and devotion to duty."

It was at Mildenhall that he featured in a series of propaganda photos by Cecil Beaton,

“A Day in the Life of a Bomber Pilot”; they were given a good deal of publicity and in fact David appears in one of them on the cover of the recently published video of the 1941 propaganda film “Target for Tonight”, also made with the help of 149 Squadron - though he did not take part in the film. Beaton describes the occasion at some length in his published diaries, though he has thoroughly scrambled the names and personalities, and he “demoted” David from captain to co-pilot in his scenario.

On completion of this tour, early in March 1941, David was detached on secondment to the Air Ministry to assist with buying aircraft in North America, and later to ferry aircraft within North America and across the Atlantic - he flew the Atlantic at least twice in Hudsons, taking 12 hours or more.

The “chop rate”¹ in Bomber Command increased substantially during the first half of 1941. This coupled with increasing doubts about the value of the results obtained led to a serious decline in aircrew morale. During the summer of 1941 the Germans had considerable success with intruders - fighter aircraft attacking the bombers as they took off or landed at their own bases. At the end of September David returned to No 3 Group and joined No 57 Squadron at Feltwell, still with Wellingtons. His third raid, over Dusseldorf on October 13th, was particularly difficult; they were badly shot up and with their hydraulics out of action they crash landed at Marham on their return. After two more raids the strain finally proved too much and he was admitted to hospital just before Christmas 1941; for the next two months he was there or on sick leave. From then until mid-July he was Group Tactical Officer at HQ No 3 Group, and not directly involved in operations. In July 1942 he was posted to No 15 Operational Training Unit, at Harwell and Hampstead Norris, where he spent six months as a flight commander flying Ansons and Wellingtons, though he did participate in one raid on Dusseldorf while he was there.

In spite of the appointment of Harris early in 1942 and the introduction of the Gee radio navigational aid, results were still considered disappointing, particularly over the Ruhr, and serious questions were raised about the future of Bomber Command. To improve matters, in August 1942 the elite Pathfinder Force was set up under Don Bennett, albeit in the face of considerable opposition from most of the group commanders who were reluctant to lose their best crews to it. At least initially, all the crews joining it had to be volunteers, and to be ready to undertake extended tours. Their task was to fly ahead of the Main Force in four waves: the Supporters, mainly less experienced crew carrying HE bombs, who were to saturate the defences and draw the flak; the Illuminators, who lit up the aiming point with flares; and the Primary Markers and Backers Up who marked the aiming point with indicators. Their methods became more and more refined as the war went on. The increased accuracy required of them, and their position at the head of the bomber stream, inevitably exposed them to greater danger and a higher casualty rate than those of the Main Force.

No 156 Squadron was one of the original units in the Force; it operated from the wartime airfield of Warboys with Wellingtons until the end of 1942 and thereafter with 4-engined Lancasters, the very successful heavy bomber which was the mainstay of Bomber Command in the later years. The squadron flew a total of 4,584 sorties with the loss of 143 aircraft - a ratio of 3.12%. David joined it in January 1943, again as a flight commander. In the following four months he carried out a further 23 raids (all but one as a pathfinder) in Lancasters. The log books note occasional problems - “coned²”, “shot up on way

¹ The average sortie life of aircrew in the Command was never higher than 9.2 and at one time was as low as eight, and during the dark days of 1941-1943 the average survival chances of anyone starting a 30-sortie tour was consistently under 40% and sometimes under 30%. In one disastrous raid, on Nuremburg in March 1944, 795 planes set out, 94 were shot down and another 12 crashed in Britain. During the war as a whole, out of some 125,000 aircrew who served with Bomber Command, 55,500 died.

² “Coned” = caught in a cone of converging searchlights, an experience which he says put him off hunting for life.

in”, “slight flak damage”, and so on. Much of the period became known as the Battle of the Ruhr, though other targets were also being attacked. He told me once that the raid he was *really* proud to have been on was the one where instead of marking the targeted town (I think Dortmund) they marked in error a nearby wood, which the main force behind them duly obliterated; only after the war did the Germans express their admiration for the British Intelligence which had identified the highly secret installation hidden in the wood.....

One of the pages in his log book has a cutting from the Times inserted, evidently dated some years later, recalling how in April 1943 the spring came very early and the hedges were billowing with white hawthorn blossom. This puzzled me until I read in a book on 156 Squadron how that blossom had come to have the same significance for them as the Flanders poppies of the 1914-1918 war.

David was promoted to Wing Commander half way through the tour (pathfinders rated one rank above the comparable level elsewhere), and awarded the DSO towards the end of it. The recommendation for this said that he had “at all times pressed home his attacks with the utmost determination and courage in the face of heavy ground defences and fighters. As a pilot he shows powers of leadership and airmanship which have set an outstanding example to the rest of the squadron” - and Bennett himself added, noting that David had just flown four operational sorties in the last five days, “he has provided an example of determination and devotion to duty which it would be difficult to equal.”

On the end of this tour in June 1943, he was sent to command No 1667 Conversion Unit at Lindholme and later Faldingworth. In December 1943 he transferred to a staff appointment at the headquarters of the newly formed 100 (SD) Group at West Raynham and later Bylaugh Hall. At this stage in the war the methods of attack and defence were growing increasingly complex, and this group was formed as a Bomber Support Group, including nightfighters, deceptive measures, and radio countermeasures (RCM). In June 1944, just after D-Day, he was given command of No 192 (SD) Squadron based at Foulsham, another wartime airfield. This squadron had been formed in January 1943 as a specialist RCM unit, and it pioneered this type of operation in Bomber Command; it flew more sorties and suffered more losses (19 aircraft) than any other RCM squadron. While RCM and electronic intelligence were its primary purpose, its aircraft often carried bombs and dropped them on the Main Force targets. RCM took a number of forms - swamping enemy radar and jamming it with “window” tinfoil, looking for new radar types and gaps in its coverage, deceptive R/T transmissions to nightfighters, and so on - and one of the attractions of the work was the considerable measure of autonomy, and the freedom to plan their own operations. These extended to tasks such as searching for V2 launch sites (recorded as “whizzers” in David’s log book) and trying to identify the radio signals associated with them, and supporting the invasion of Walcheren in September. The squadron was equipped with Wellingtons (phased out at the end of 1944), Halifaxes and Mosquitoes, plus a detachment of USAAF Lightnings.

This role was the climax of his career, and lasted until the end of the war and after. It involved him in 25 operational sorties, all in Halifax IIIs, the much improved version of this initially disappointing 4-engined heavy bomber. They carried special electronic equipment and an extra crew member known as the Special Operator. The record of these sorties in the log books, for the most part so formal and statistical up to this point, becomes a little more anecdotal: “rubber-necking on beach” (when he took two senior officers to see the breaching of the dykes at Walcheren), “Munster shambles”, “Lanc blew up and made small hole in aircraft [but only] 4 lost out of 1200!” The furthest east he went was to Gdynia in Poland; on returning from there he had the privilege of becoming the first heavy aircraft to land at Foulsham using the FIDO fog dispersal system. “Finger Finger Fido” was the cryptic comment in the log book.

A number of these sorties were daytime; on one of them, on September 13th, he was chased home by two ME109s which made six attacks on him. One of them opened fire but thanks to violent evasive action his aircraft was undamaged: his own gunners never got a chance to fire. No doubt it was skill of this sort, as well as his survival record, which gave his crew great faith in David's ability to get them home safely. An encounter on December 29th 1944, on a Window patrol over the Ruhr, was not quite so satisfying; they claimed to have damaged a Ju88 which subsequently proved to be an unhurt Mosquito X from Swannington - and the Mosquito had identified them as a Lancaster. The log entry concludes "Oh dear. FIDO landing, flew into ground. What a day."

He was awarded a bar to his DSO in July 1945. The recommendation, made in March, recorded that "since being posted to his present squadron he has carried out every one of his sorties in the same exemplary fashion and has set his crews an extremely high standard of devotion to duty and bravery. This standard has had a direct influence on the whole specialist work of the squadron.

"He has been personally responsible for the planning of all the sorties carried out by his special duty unit and by his brilliant understanding and quick appreciation of the everchanging nature of the investigational role of his squadron, much of the success of the investigations performed by his aircraft can be attributed to him. He has shown himself to be fearless and cool in the face of danger, and towards the end of his tour made a point of putting himself on the most arduous and difficult operations.

"Both on the ground and in the air he has been untiring and has not spared himself in his efforts to get his squadron up to the high standard which it has now reached."

The squadron was disbanded in September, by which time David had completed 501 hours of operations against the enemy in 86 sorties, the great majority of them as captain of his aircraft. He had no ambition to make a permanent career in the RAF; he has commented to Richard that this fact gave him a degree of independence in his dealing with his superiors that he thinks they appreciated and valued. He was demobilised in November and returned to his interrupted law studies.

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I showed these notes to David, who thought them well written but suggested that they gave a twisted view of the reality - a reaction that I can understand. Since then, however, I have managed to contact one man who flew with David: H B (Hank) Cooper DSO DFC, who first met David in 149 Squadron which he joined in January 1941 as a wireless operator / air gunner for his first tour, and later did two tours as a Special Operator in 192 Squadron, the second of them under David's command. On two occasions he flew as a member of David's crew.

He has written of David that "he was always completely fearless and outstandingly brave and pressed home his attacks to the uttermost. As the Squadron's CO he generated loyalty and warmth, he was an outstanding model to follow. He spent much trouble and time encouraging his junior air crews as well as helping and seeing to the needs of the ground technicians who serviced the aircraft, generally in cold and difficult conditions. He was completely non-boastful, in fact he belittled his own actions (which were always of the highest order) when discussing air operations. *[That rings very true!]* He was an outstanding squadron commander in all respects, much liked and completely respected by all his air crews and ground crews."

G N D