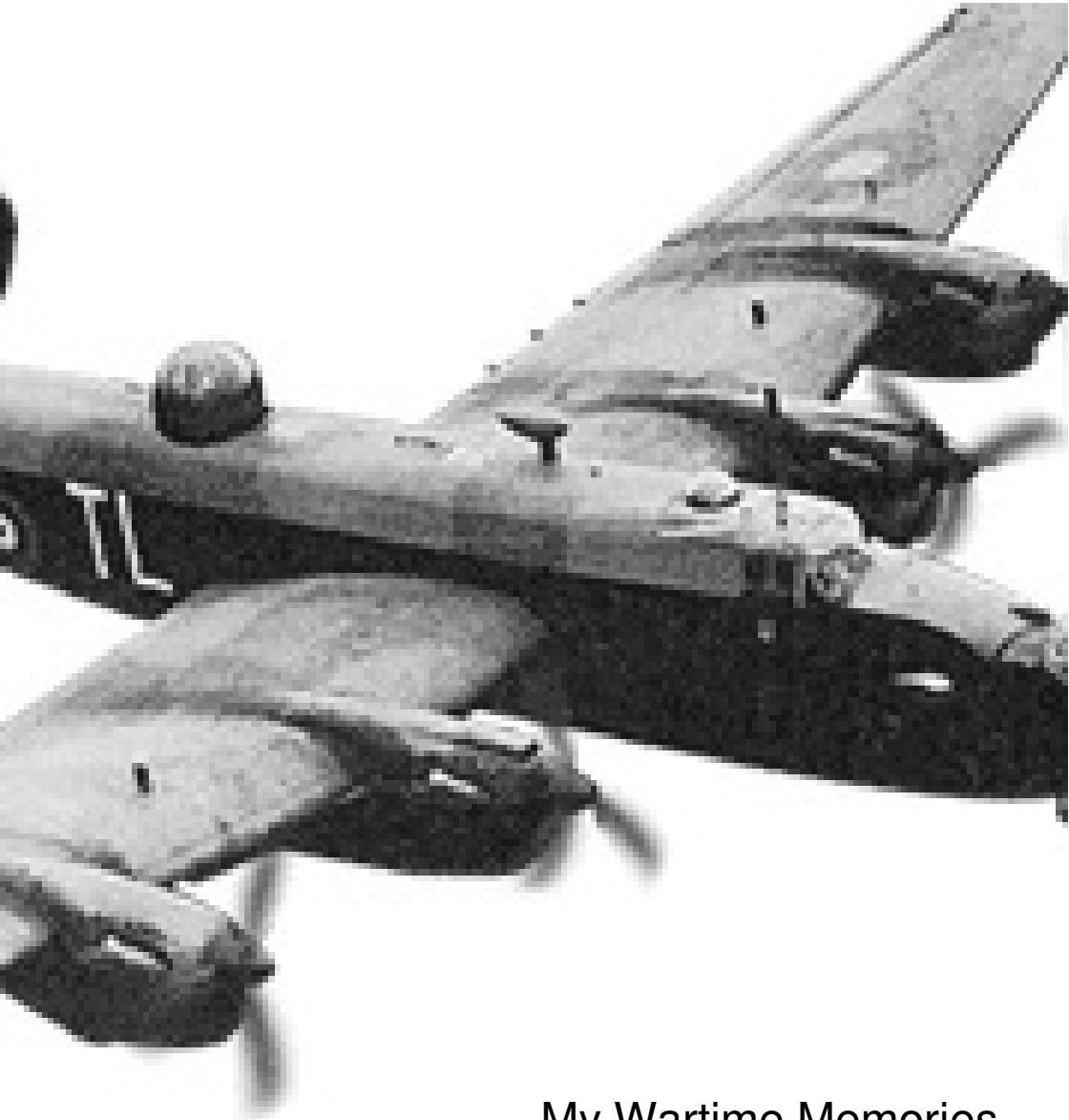


My Wartime Memories

FOREWORD

Having read through the completed memoirs, I can see that much of the minor detail covering my prisoner-of-war life has in fact not appeared.

The problem has been that I did not start even thinking about it until 50 years or so later, with the result that many day-to-day incidents have faded from my memory.

The ones who have written far more comprehensive accounts started far earlier when the incidents were fresh in their minds.

Nevertheless, I feel that I have covered the main events occurring during my period of incarceration . Much of the credit for even starting this long running saga must go to my son and daughter-in-law , who have urged me along over several years, even persuading me to buy a computer which, with the aid of a voice dictation system, enabled me (in fits and starts) to eventually produce the finished article. I hope that, despite the inordinate delay, it is at least readable!

FROM READING TO BLACKPOOL

I think that the best place to start these memoirs is in late 1938 when I was a 16 year old pupil at Woking County School for Boys and almost ready to start gainful employment!

Five pupils decided to join the General Post Office in a minor clerical post in order to obtain two years established service, which would enable us to sit the Limited Clerical Officer examination.

Unfortunately, war broke out on the 3rd September 1939 and all examinations were put on hold. Fed up with the anti-social hours and being picked on for excessive over time because our rates of pay were low, we decided to volunteer for the RAF.

We therefore took time off to go to the recruiting office at Reading in late April 1940. After being sworn in we came back and eventually received notices to report to RAF Cardington in Bedfordshire in mid July. There we were put under canvas to await our aircrew medical and intelligence tests. An abiding memory of Cardington was the perpetual smell of boiled cabbage!

The intelligence test consisted of question sheets with alternative answers followed by an interview with three RAF officers of, at that time, unknown rank! The aircrew medical and the eyesight test were very stringent and only three of us successfully passed the examination. This included spinning round in a chair to assess steadiness. Poynter, Trotman, and myself were selected for aircrew, the other two were asked to remuster as ground staff. We were all sworn in again but because of training delays we were put onto the R A F Reserve and given a lapel badge.

It has to be said that up to this point nobody in the Sorting Office was made aware of our intentions, but when we received orders to report to Cardington for aircrew intelligence and medical tests, we had no option but to advise the head postmaster of what was happening! We were given a distinctly frosty reception and told that we might not be accepted so easily (little did he know that we had already been sworn in as Members of her Majesty's armed forces!)

When we went to Cardington we were given a letter by the assistant head postmaster to take to the commanding officer but, being of a suspicious nature, we decided to have a look at the letter. Having opened it we found that

he was asking for us to be deferred indefinitely, as he was of the opinion that we would shortly be classified as a reserved occupation. By common consent we decided that the only course of action was to destroy the letter!

On returning to the Post Office we told the head postmaster that we could not understand why we had not been accepted. He was highly delighted but had quite a shock when three months later we were all called up!

On the 1st October 1940, the three of us allocated to aircrew, reporting for initial training in Blackpool where we were all housed in civilian digs. We were eventually issued with our uniforms and I became A C2 1168712 R A Yates! We were knocked into shape by physical training instructors with the dizzy rank of corporal! As our training was done on the Blackpool seaside front, the corporals took great delight in playing up to the holiday makers who were still coming to the resort. I still remember that we always took our coffee breaks in the Kardoma cafe on the front, at least while we still had any money left!

We were only paid once every two weeks at the rate of half a crown a day, so we were always broke but I was able to write home for

some money from my balance of post-office pay, which was made up automatically. However, Blackpool was very generous to service personnel and we had much reduced prices to pay on buses, trams, theatres, and even the Tower Ballroom and Winter Gardens. The fortnightly pay parade was housed in the Winter Gardens and pay was issued in alphabetical order, but being at the end of the alphabet it was nearly all day before I was able to get the enormous sum into my pocket!

An officer sat at a nearby table trying to encourage us to put some of our pay into the National Savings Account, but he did not have much success!

Our initial Morse code instruction and elementary electronics, took place in the basement of the Winter Gardens, an entirely different world to what we had been used to. We had several weeks' instruction but were occasionally marched to Squires Gate aerodrome for rifle practice. I did fairly well at this as I was previously in the school rifle club.

During my stay in Blackpool I had one 48 hour pass to enable me to visit home but because of continual air raids my train was so late that I was only able to do a quick run round the table before I was due back to Blackpool!

Soon after this I was posted to the RAF College at Cranwell to commence more advanced training, including my first trip in an aeroplane.

CRANWELL TO JURBY

In February 1941 I was posted to Number 1 Signals school at Cranwell in Lincolnshire. This is where the main RAF College has been since before the war, and very impressive it was. During my stay I spent some time continuing to practice Morse code, Aldis lamp and Semaphore. Quite why we were taught Semaphore was beyond my comprehension, as it could not have been any use in an aeroplane! We were also taught basic wireless technology.

Cranwell was also home to a large RAF Apprentice College and also housed its own cinema. The apprentices were segregated from us, probably to try and keep them from being led astray by us future aircrew! This segregation was maintained even in the cinema, a highlight of the performances was when the gong on the screen was sounded. As the hammer was raised the apprentices with one voice would emit a loud grunt, quite a sound!

Being an R A F College tradition played a large part in proceedings, part of which was the lowering of the flag at sunset. When this took place no one was allowed to walk across the

parade ground until the ceremony had been completed.

Unfortunately, we were sometimes trying to get to the main gate to catch a bus (infrequent) going into Grantham, the nearest town. The driver invariably watched while we waited, and before we could cross would start the bus with a two-fingered salute!

My first flying experiences started here as an initial exercise in air/ ground contact. My first trip was in a de Havilland 86 aeroplane in which we were taken up 10 at a time. Unfortunately, we were not advised in advance when this was to happen. I had a rich pork dinner not long before and as a result failed my first exercise because of air sickness! Persistent air sickness would have resulted in being remustered to ground duties, but fortunately flying after that one incident never affected me at all. Other aircraft used at Cranwell were Percival Proctors and a First World War Vickers Valencia, this plane was a revelation! It was a huge old twin-engined biplane, the windows kept sliding open with the vibration and the noise was terrific. However, it was very safe because of its slow speed and massive wing area. On one occasion both engines failed whilst we were

waiting to land but we gently glided to earth and made a perfect touchdown.

Having gained the necessary Morse speeds (18 words per minute receive and 20 words per minute send) I left Cranwell at the end of April 1941 and was posted to RAF Wyton in Huntingdonshire to await gunnery school. This was a Stirling squadron but I did not fly, as I was still a cadet. After hanging around for about two months I was unexpectedly told to report to Number 2 Signals school at Yatesbury in Wiltshire as it had been decided to increase our Morse speeds to 25 words per minute receive and 23 words per minute send and I arrived there in late June 1941.

A number of us reported in together and were made to stand to attention in two lines outside the Guard Room. We did not take kindly to this discipline after an easy two months previously, and I said something derogatory to the chap standing next to me but failed to notice a flight sergeant walking behind us on an inspection! I was immediately given five days ”Jankers”, which meant that I was confined to camp and given guard duties together with a spell in the cook house! My most lasting memory of my cook house duties was opening up dozens of individual Lyons fruit pies to be warmed up for the next dinner

session. Temptation resulted in my consuming several of these pies, so much so that I had severe stomach problems for a couple of days! To this day I have been unable to face a Lyons fruit pie!

We continued with flying sessions whilst improving our Morse speeds and flew in de Havilland Dominies and Percival Proctors. Most of the Proctor pilots were Polish and often pleaded ignorance of the English language whenever it suited them! They took great delight in attempting stunts when I was trying to contact ground by radio, I often felt that I was transmitting upside down!

By mid-July 1941 I had passed to the required standard, and after a few days' leave was posted to Number 5 AOS at Jurby on the Isle of Man. I remember the boat trip from Fleetwood only because half of those reporting with me had consumed more beer on the boat than they could handle and a rough looking lot disembarked at Douglas!

Incidentally, Douglas was used to house a large number of internees who had been taken into custody under the emergency regulations. They were held in hotels along the front but were kept in by barbed-wire fences.

I was at Jurby for most of August 1941 and there was not a cloud in the sky during the whole of my stay! We were under canvas and put in two sections for training, one section working from 6 am to 2pm, and the other from 2pm to 10pm. I soon plumped for the early session and after lunch each day we spent most of our time in the water!

There was no food rationing on the Isle of Man at that time, so we could indulge ourselves in the town. On several occasions I was able to send a box of Manx kippers home through the post. Flying was done in Bristol Blenheims which were ex- operational and well past their sell-by date!

Our gunnery practice took place over the Irish Sea and mainly consisted of firing at a drogue pulled by another aircraft (I would not have fancied being in the towing plane!) the drogues were inspected afterwards and the number of hits counted, I managed 10 per cent success which was said to be quite satisfactory!

On the last exercise the throttles jammed open on our aircraft, with the result that we careered right across the aerodrome and finished up in a field! None of us were injured,

and this type of accident was to become part of my flying career!

At the end of my stay we had an impressive passing out parade, complete with bagpipes and drums.

KINLOSS TO LINTON-ON-OUSE

Having successfully completed my radio training and air gunnery course, I was promoted to Sergeant wireless operator/ air gunner (WOP/AG) on 16th August 1941, and, after a short spell on leave, reported to 19 O.T.U.Operational Training Unit Conversion Flight at Kinloss in north-east Scotland. If my memory serves me correctly I never saw the sun during the whole of my stay, as it seemed to rain most days, and in between were spells of Scotch mist!

The conversion flight at an O.T.U. was primarily for the benefit of newly qualified pilots who had trained on single engined aircraft, but who were chosen to be transferred to Bomber Command rather than Fighter Command. When flying at Kinloss they were always accompanied by an experienced bomber pilot, usually one who had done a spell on operational duties. At Kinloss the planes were Whitley Marks 4 and 5 and were ex - operational, so somewhat long in the tooth!

Flying being mainly for the benefit of newly trained pilots, the other crew members consisted of a wireless operator and a rear gunner- being local flights a Navigator was not

really necessary. However, a rear gunner was carried against the eventuality of intruder aircraft taking a pot shot at us! The wireless operators took turns at rear gunner duties (dead boring!).

It was here that I had my first taste of night flying with wartime conditions imposed during landing (as few lights as possible for as short a time as possible). My main task during flights as a radio operator was to keep ground contact in general and in particular to obtain frequent radio fixes from pre-determined radio beacons. The quicker two fixes could be obtained the more accurate our position could be determined. In the absence of a Navigator the ground station would transmit our probable position, and I would pass this information to the pilot instructor. The more times this exercise was practised the more proficient we became, which was essential when we were eventually posted to an operational squadron.

Night flying was always a hairy business in wartime conditions with very little external help in the way of runway lighting etc, and a novice pilot at the controls, under the guidance of an experienced instructor. Us radio operators always heaved a sigh of relief when we had eventually safely touched down.

These trips were officially classed as circuits and landings, but we more properly described them as circuits and BUMPS! Much of the time during night time exercises the novice pilot was not sure whether we were 5 ft off the ground or 50 ft! As a consequence we often bounced along the runway like a rubber ball, each bounce a bit smaller than in the previous one until we came to a halt; a stiff drink was called for after one of these sessions!

It was on the Conversion Flight that the second of my near miss flying crashes took place. Sergeant Read was the instructor and sergeant Grayson the learner. It was a miserable damp night and on the approach to land it became obvious to Sergeant Read that we were coming in much too high, and he shouted to Grayson to pull out and do another circuit. Grayson panicked somewhat and as a result his reactions were badly delayed. We then proceeded to roar across the airfield,clipped a tree on the edge of the aerodrome and eventually force -landed in a field of newly harvested corn. When I had scrambled out I could see that the engines were packed with sheaves of corn! Luckily, there was no fire hazard but the instructor had a cut arm and the learner pilot a broken wrist. I was unhurt! We managed to cross the field to the nearest lane where we could hear the

squadron fire tender and ambulance in the distance! An old man happened to be cycling by when we stepped into the lane, and the shock of being confronted by strange men in full flying gear caused him to run straight into the hedge! We were taken back to the aerodrome and given a medical check and cross examined as to the cause of the accident. What eventually happened to Grayson I do not know, but I never saw him again. After a month on the Conversion Flight I was transferred to the Operational Flight to prepare for eventual posting to an operational squadron.

The objective of the operational flight was to familiarise crews for squadron duties, and to gain more flying experience on more diverse work, such as cross-country flights for navigation practice, full use of radio communication, together with bombing and gunnery practice.

This was scheduled to be achieved in about two weeks, which was really pushing it a bit as far as some of the navigators were concerned! During the two weeks that I was with the operational flight we lost three Whitleys on cross-country runs. They took off from Kinloss and were never heard of again! They probably lost their way, ran out of fuel and went into

the North Sea. These incidents were put down to a combination of a less than adequate crew, in particular a duff Navigator and a lousy wireless operator! A reasonably efficient operator should have been able to obtain sufficiently accurate fixes to give the Navigator a fair idea of their whereabouts.

Much of my flying time was spent with Flight Sergeant Fenning who was an excellent pilot, and gave us no cause to be concerned. During this spell I operated as rear gunner on several occasions, but spent most of my time on the radio sets, obtain beacon fixes, using the direction finding aerial, and generally practising all aspects of a wireless operators work. I was trying to be reasonably competent for operations! Half our flying time was on night cross-country runs to again familiarise us for operational conditions. Once we were considered to be fit we were posted to bomber squadrons, and after a few days' leave I was posted to 35 Squadron at Linton on Ouse in Yorkshire at the beginning of November 1941.

35 SQUADRON

Handley Page Halifax BII Series1

When I first arrived at Linton on Ouse the squadron was in the process of converting from Whitleys to Handley-Page Halifaxes, and was in fact the first Bomber Command squadron to do so. Deliveries of the new planes had just started, and there was therefore a delay in my getting into a crew, and much of my initial spell was spent in becoming conversant with the aerodrome and the layout of the new planes. It was well into November 1941 before I became airborne again when I took over as front gunner for Pilot Officer Joshua for a one-hour night flying test. Things happened quickly from then on, and the next day I was asked to join Pilot Officer Norman's crew on a permanent basis.

After a quick night flying test on 24th November we were briefed for a night raid on Brest, where German submarines were known to dock. Another night flying test was completed the next morning when I checked the front turret by firing about 200 rounds air to sea over Filey Bay. We took off for Brest at 16:15, successfully found and bombed the target which was easily identified, being a coastal target with a distinctive outline, and, apart from some light anti-aircraft fire, had an uneventful trip. My first operation and a great sense of relief!

After a few days' spent practising formation flying and getting more settled down as a new crew, we were briefed to go to Hamburg on 30th November. This was a somewhat different experience to my previous trip, and it took considerably longer (about seven hours in total). Again, identification of the target was reasonably straightforward because it was another coastal target, with a fairly easily followed coastline. The usual anti-aircraft fire was encountered but nothing came near enough to cause any undue anxiety- at this stage in the war the German night fighters were not making much of an impact (but this was soon to change).

After this we were non- operational for most of December 1941, as there appeared to be a general lull in Bomber Command raids, partly due to adverse weather conditions. Pilot Officer Norman was unexpectedly transferred, and I flew with several different pilots for the remainder of December, including the flight commander Wing Commander Robinson. This time was spent in further sessions of formation flying, night landings, bombing practice over the sea, and Fighter co-operation, when we were detailed to meet one or two fighters armed with camera guns and take avoiding action whilst they attempted to

shoot us down!. This was good sport and we were sometimes flying at nearly ground level in attempting to avoid a hit. Unfortunately, we were never advised of the results.

Incidentally, with the expansion of the squadron into A and B flights I was allocated to B Flight and billeted at Beningbrough Hall about five miles from the aerodrome. This was a large 17th century mansion in the middle of a huge parkland area and miles from anywhere! The nearest pub was the Alice Hawthorn which unfortunately was the other side of the River Ouse and several miles from the nearest bridge. However, we soon discovered that an old ferryman lived nearly opposite on our side of the river, and was happy to row us over in the evenings. He charged tuppence to go over and sixpence to come back! He was certainly a good businessman! I spent many happy hours there with others, particularly during the non - operational period of December 1941.

The landlord of the pub was a very affable individual, and turned a blind eye to some of the antics. There was even room for dancing to records, and I recall occasionally partnering a very pleasant young WAAF by the name of Anne Butterworth, a Yorkshire lass who was good fun. Her favourite tune was ”Moonlight

and Roses" played by Joe Loss and his Band. At this time I was not committed to anyone else, and in any case it was quite proper and harmless!

I well remember one night when thick fog made it virtually impossible to find our way back across the fields to the Hall, but one enterprising fellow produced a compass from the button on his tunic (these buttons were part of our escape kit) and we found our way back in one piece!

Beningbrough Hall, our billets whilst with 35 Squadron at Linton on Ouse.

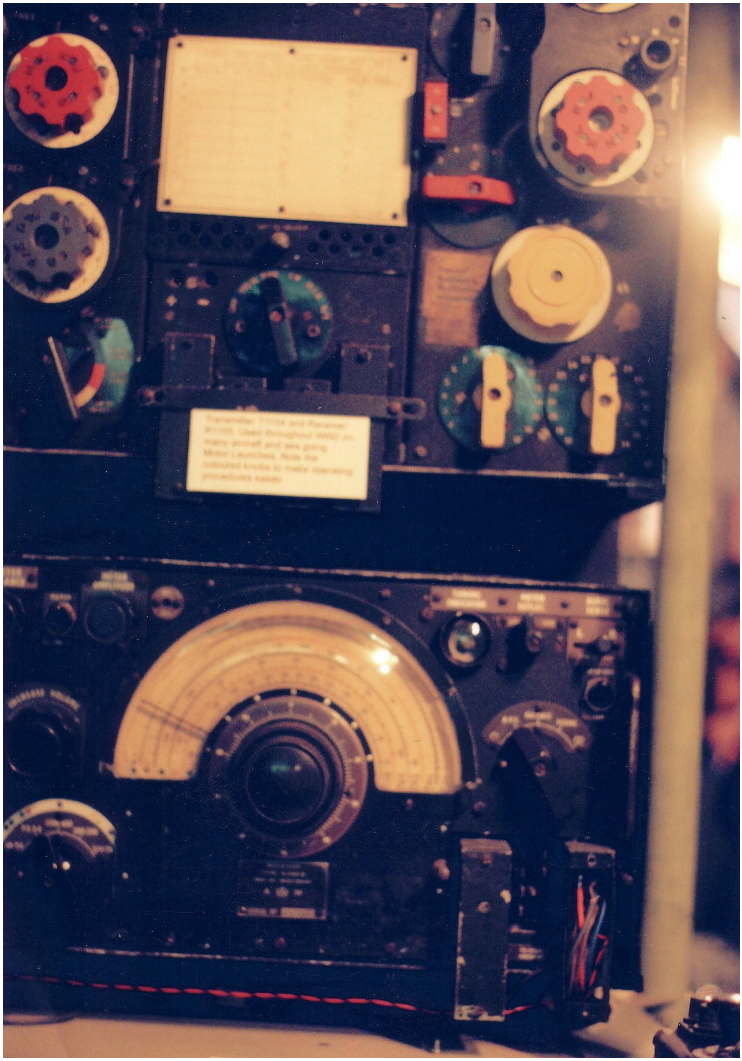
The ferry used to row us from Beningbrough Hall across the river to the Alice Hawthorn pub.

Our home from home.

Over the Christmas period of 1941 we were put on standby to be ready to take off at short notice to attack the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisneau which were in harbour at Brest, but expected to try any day to get into the North Sea to attack our shipping. We were ordered to lay off the beer during this standby period! All I can say about that order was if we had been asked to take off over Christmas I reckon some would have probably taken off upside down!

We in fact flew to Brest on my birthday 6th January 1942, but because of bad weather we failed to find the ships. We however bombed Brest harbour but experienced heavy, accurate flak. Not much of a birthday present!

Life on the squadron during my time there was a somewhat casual experience. As long as we were fully fit, efficient and available to fly at any time, we were often able to please ourselves! If we wanted to have a clay-pigeon shooting competition we could draw guns and ammunition from the armoury, together with the throwing mechanism and move across the drome to where we could safely fire to our hearts content. The Canadians almost always won but it was a pleasant way to pass an hour or two.



R1154 & T1155 as used by me.

One of my friends (I forget his name) owned a Wolesley Hornet car and four of us used to

make an occasional trip into York to sample the nightlife (not really much of a rave-up). But with the problem of petrol rationing it became difficult to do this very often. However, we eventually managed to increase the frequency of our trips by the simple expediency of using our oxygen mask tubing to surreptitiously siphon petrol from the station bus which was used to ferry us to the aerodrome! Unfortunately, others cottoned on to our scheme, with the result that one day the bus ran out of petrol on the way! That was the end of our regular York visits.

A few days after my Brest trip I became wireless operator for flight Lieutenant Wilding, and for the rest of January flew with him in several different planes during the conversion period from Mark 1 to Mark 2 Halifax, when we helped train several newcomers on the four engined machines.

At the beginning of February 1942 we took over Halifax No R9444 and except for periodic overhauls, kept this for about six weeks. During February we did no operations but concentrated again on formation flying, cross-country runs, air firing, and bombing practice with a revised bomb-sight (while there was this concentration on formation flying I was never able to find out, it always seemed a bit

pointless for a night bombing squadron, but perhaps the top brass had other great ideas).
The first half of March 1942 was busier, with three operations completed, the first being to Billancourt to bomb the Renault works at low level, and did considerable damage.

Luckily anti-aircraft fire was virtually non-existent so we did a quick circuit round the Eiffel Tower on the way back! Because of bad weather we were diverted to Waterbeach, but were again unable to land, so we were directed to Abingdon, and this was the only time I made money out of the RAF! Not being allowed to carry anything on operations which would help identify us in the event of capture, we had no money, but Flight Lt. Wilding persuaded their pay section to give us an advance which was to be adjusted on our next pay-day. However, these records must somehow have got lost in transit, because we were never asked for the money back!

Two more operations were completed during the first half of March 1942, one to Essen on the 9th and one to Cologne on the 13th. Unfortunately, the Cologne trip was aborted because of excessive petrol consumption, and we bombed Dorsten instead (we couldn't waste our bombload, could we?).

I appear to be glossing over details of these operations, but it seemed to me that we were not unduly bothered by enemy action so far.

The A.A. guns were always present, but never in any great numbers at this time. Occasionally one could see the black shell bursts and if they were a bit close the plane would bounce somewhat! I never seemed to be unduly alarmed by this activity, nor were the rest of the crew as far as I could make out (we seemed to think that they would never hit us, but this was a bad assumption!)
We were sometimes given leaflets to drop over Germany but we often pushed them down the flare chute without undoing the packets hoping they would do more damage! I was then entitled to some leave and on returning to the squadron at the end of the month I found that Flt Lt. Wilding had been transferred and I was attached to Sergeant Booth's crew and stayed with him for just over one month. The first two weeks of April 1942 was another operation-free period, with Sergeant Booth becoming fully conversant with our new Halifax 2.

During this time we did more night landing practices and night cross-country trips.

Our next operation was Lorient in South West France (a submarine-pen base). This was a trip of about six hours with no undue enemy action. There was always flak but much of it was light anti-aircraft fire generally well short of our cruising height.

On 8th May 1942 we were coming into land after a night flying test which we always did before an operation, in somewhat windy conditions. On touching down we suddenly veered violently across the aerodrome, and finished up smashing through the tail of another plane parked in dispersal.
A dispersal guard was always posted by aircraft not operational for security reasons. On this occasion the guard had decided to take a quick nap inside. The next in he knew was the noise of a another Halifax (ours) passing a few inches from him! The shock brought him too quickly to life, and he was found running round in small circles and screaming his head off!

Fortunately, no one was hurt but an official inquiry into the incident decided that Sergeant Booth was too short in the legs and arms to adequately correct the plane in adverse weather conditions! He was transferred to Beaufighters on a night fighter squadron, a plane more suitable for his build. It was a pity

that this was not discovered earlier as it cost us two Halifaxes.

After the departure of Sergeant Booth I was again unattached but soon joined Jim Watson, a Canadian from Quebec province (his home was a small-town called Maniwaki which name has caused many explanations since the war!) Our crew quickly settled in together and we all got on like a house on fire. The Navigator was G Cooper, a New Zealander, the Flight Engineer was Paddy Corcoran (obviously Irish!), the rear gunner was Doug Wrampling from London, the bomb aimer was Tom Drower from Birmingham, the mid / upper gunner was Harry Pike the from Wales, with myself as wireless operator and front gunner.
We got together early May 1942 and quickly completed some night landings and a five-hour cross-country run to settle ourselves in. After the usual night flying test we were sent on 19th May to St. Nazaire on the coast of south-west France to bomb submarine pens- a six-and-a-half hour round trip. Results were apparently not up to expectations, so we were sent there again on 22nd May when we had an engine damaged by flak and landed at Leeming, returning the next day after repairs had been completed.

Approaching mid summer, take-off times were just before midnight so by the time we returned over six hours or so later, were subsequently debriefed by the intelligence officers and had a meal, we did not get to bed until normal people were up and about!

Our next trip on 29th May was to Genevilliers where the Gnome/Rhone works were making aircraft engines for the Germans. I believe we did a fair amount of damage and managed to stop them working for quite some time.

The very next night was the now famous first 1000 bomber raid on Cologne. This was a really unique experience, the sky was full of aircraft from all parts of the British Isles, with even O T U crews pressed into service (the pilots of these crews were instructors and so well experienced, more than could be said for the rest of them!)

With such a large number of aircraft involved, it was imperative that every crew kept strictly within the height and route laid down by Intelligence, otherwise we would probably have lost more aircraft through collisions than by the German defences.

The German defences were overwhelmed by the number of planes and the weight of

bombs, so we had a fairly straightforward run. Flak was the main problem but we managed to avoid it. It was quite a sight, with fires burning over a large area and bombs bursting in continuous clusters. We appeared to be in more danger from our own planes dropping the bombs than from enemy action, it was a bit off-putting to look up and see someone's bomb doors opening up above you!

However, Bomber Harris was not satisfied that he was really stirring it up, so sent us two nights later to Essen in the Ruhr valley on another 1000 bomber raid! This was considerably hairier with heavy flak and some night fighter activity, but to rub it in even further we were again sent to Essen two days later with a smaller force! Quite why this was done we never did find out, but it was very dodgy to say the least! The Germans had quickly strengthened their defences and we were lucky to escape unscathed.

I have sometimes been asked if I was really afraid, but quite honestly once we were airborne we were kept busy, and also chatted to one another whenever possible, so never really had the time to think about it! I consider that the time when most worry took place was in the briefing room when the target for that night was first uncovered!

Our next trip on 6th June was really something of an anti-climax- we were sent to Emden, but part of the hydraulic system decided to play up with a result that the gun turrets became non-operational. We therefore had to abandon the trip, jettison our bombs, and force land at Leeming.

We returned to Linton the next day and on the 8th June we were again sent to Essen, the philosophy being that we might eventually bomb the Ruhr industries into rubble. In the event, it was the trip that significantly altered our lives!
We subsequently felt that it had been poorly planned from the start, only a token force of about 250 planes were sent against a defence expecting further raids of up to 1000 planes!

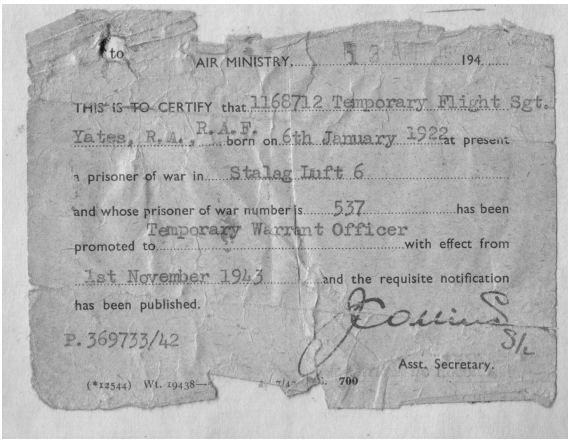
On top of this our homeward route was fixed to come back near Cologne! As a consequence, we were coned by searchlights and took a hammering from heavy flak which knocked out one engine, making the plane less manoeuvrable. We were struggling back over Belgium and not more than an hour or two from home when we were attacked by a night fighter.

Because of the lost engine avoiding action was severely limited and as a consequence we were severely damaged by cannon and machine-gun fire, some of which started a large fire in the fuselage. Because of the flames we were unable to check on the rear gunner and he was completely cut off from the rest of us. The onboard fire extinguishers were useless in such a situation. It was then a case of frying or jumping, so Jake gave the order to abandon aircraft and we departed in good order as we had often practiced. I was the next to last to leave (before Jake), making sure I had a firm grip on the release handle.

Descending by parachute at night was a most uncanny experience as, being dark, there was no sensation of falling, more a feeling of being suspended in mid-air, until the ground came into sight and I hit it with a fair old bump! My only injury was a cut under the chin from the releasing parachute harness. Luckily I had landed in a field and, although very disorientated, managed to link up with four others of our crew. Jake and Doug were nowhere to be found (we subsequently found out that Jake had nearly landed on top of some Germans, one of whom took a pot shot at him, but missed, and Doug was on the loose for about ten days before being picked up.) As we were shot down in June the nights

were very short, and it was starting to get light, so we decided to make for a nearby wood and take cover until it was safer to move on the next evening. In an effort to contact friendly locals, with the possibility of being guided to a neutral country, or even smuggled across the Channel by boat. Wishful thinking as it turned out!

Unfortunately, a German squad was detailed to search the area, surrounded the wood, and dug us out! The officer in charge then took out his pistol and for a second I thought that we were about to bite the dust, but instead he fired into the air to call off the search- what a relief! We were then taken away by lorry and spent our first night in captivity in Brussels jail. We were now prisoners of war.



to AIR MINISTRY, 194

THIS IS TO CERTIFY that 1168712 Temporary Flight Sgt. Yates, R.A., R.A.F. born on 6th January 1922 at present a prisoner of war in Stalag Luft 6 and whose prisoner of war number is 537 has been promoted to Temporary Warrant Officer with effect from 1st November 1943 and the requisite notification has been published.

P.369733/42

Asst. Secretary.

(*12544) Wt. 19438—

700

Notification of Warrant Officer promotion

PRISONER OF WAR

We were escorted by German guards to the station at Brussels and were put in a compartment on our own under guard, and this situation was maintained for much of the journey to Dulag Luft, although no food was forthcoming. At a station near Frankfurt-on-Main the train became so full that our guards were ordered to let others in our compartment which, in view of the damage Allied bombers were causing, could have resulted in some problems. In the event, apart from unpleasant mutterings between one or two younger elements, we were not harassed in any way. On arrival in Frankfurt we managed to persuade our guards that we were desperate for something to eat, and they reluctantly took us to the refreshment room where we were given bowls of soup (but don't ask me what was in it!) from there we were put on a lorry and soon arrived at Dulag Luft (in effect a transit and interrogation camp) where we were put into cells in solitary confinement. These cells contained just a bed and a table and chair.

My clothes were taken away and I was given a Polish uniform of rough cloth and wooden clogs.

We had all been warned about this camp and this I remembered when an officer posing as a Red Cross official gave me a questionnaire to fill in. I refused to enter anything other than my name, rank and number, but he was quite capable of completing it accurately himself! He knew many details of our squadron and was able to quote the names of the commanding officer, flight commanders, and others who had been shot down previously. I was told that I would join the others when I had finished solitary confinement with the remark that if I was reasonable it should not be too long.

Next I was visited by an officer who said he had been wounded in Crete and who professed to be interested in "Gee", the first of our radar navigation aids, only, he said, because he wanted to fly as a civilian pilot after the war. He was followed by an official interrogation Officer whose knowledge made me feel that one's reticence was of little use, and it was hard to reiterate that I was only prepared to give the regulation reply "I'm sorry I can't answer any more questions ".

Although I thought that solitary confinement would continue for some time, I was wrong. Following the heavy raids on Cologne and targets in the Ruhr, many more prisoners

than the Germans had been prepared for were arriving, so the interrogation cells were rapidly being filled. The cooler, a large converted house, was just outside the camp, and into which a group of us were now led. The accommodation consisted of long and low barracks surrounded by barbed-wire fences and this outlook, in various forms was to be my lot for nearly three years.

After solitary confinement it was a relief to be able to make conversation, but we were crafty enough to reckon that the Germans had hidden microphones in the blocks, so we were very careful what we said. Some days later we were loaded onto trains under guard enroute to Sagan (Stalag Luft 3).

Our route took us through Cologne, where we had to change platforms via a long underpass. We by now had our own uniform back on, and as it was only about three weeks after the 1000 bomber raid, the local population was in a belligerent mood when recognising our uniform. Our guards had to surround us to keep us at arm's length from a few who were keen to hopefully dispose of us in as painful a way as possible!

We arrived at Sagan in the evening of the following day, and we were somewhat

intimidated by the sight of the long rows of huts in the middle of a sandy wasteland guarded by sentry boxes and miles of barbed wire fences. The whole bleak area was surrounded by a forest of pine trees.

Apparently, this camp had been built fairly recently to accommodate increasing numbers of aircrew being shot down due to the now frequent raids by large numbers of aircraft and the increasing efficiency of the German defences.

Passing through the main gate we marched into the Vorlager which contained the German administrative offices, sickbay, cooler, Red Cross stores, and the shower hut. From this compound gates led into the two prison lagers, one for officers and one for NCOs separated by a wooden fence.

As it was late in the day we were locked in a reception hut for the night, as there was no time to search and sort us out before dark. Guards were posted outside but a party of prisoners was allowed in under escort to bring us cans of tea from their own short rations.

Next morning we were searched. Fountain pens and cigarette lighters were confiscated and we were given a numbered ticket for the

forfeited items! We were later gathered together and marched to the main gate. Beyond this gate stood hundreds of prisoners eager to greet us newcomers, and anxious for up-to-date news on the progress of the war, the situation at home and many other questions about life outside the wire. There was a confusion of faces, some bearded, some with shaven heads, homemade hats, and sunburnt bodies. There was a lot of shouting as men were recognised by the old inhabitants. We were offered cigarettes by all and sundry, the whole atmosphere was one of confusion and excitement. Among those greeting us I found Colin Burden with whom I shared a room on the squadron until he was shot down a week before me. I told him I had kicked out the"erks" who had come to clear out his locker, and I parcelled up anything that I thought was important and later passed it on to the padre for safe keeping. We knew that items went unaccountably missing after crews failed to return. I had in fact been on the same raid and was still in bed when they turned up! I also told him that the set of clothing which he had so industriously worn thin with the assistance of a razor blade ready for an imminent clothing parade I had used myself, as it seemed a shame to waste all his efforts! Unfortunately, I was myself shot down before

I could make use of it. his reply was quite predictable, " serves you bloody well right!"

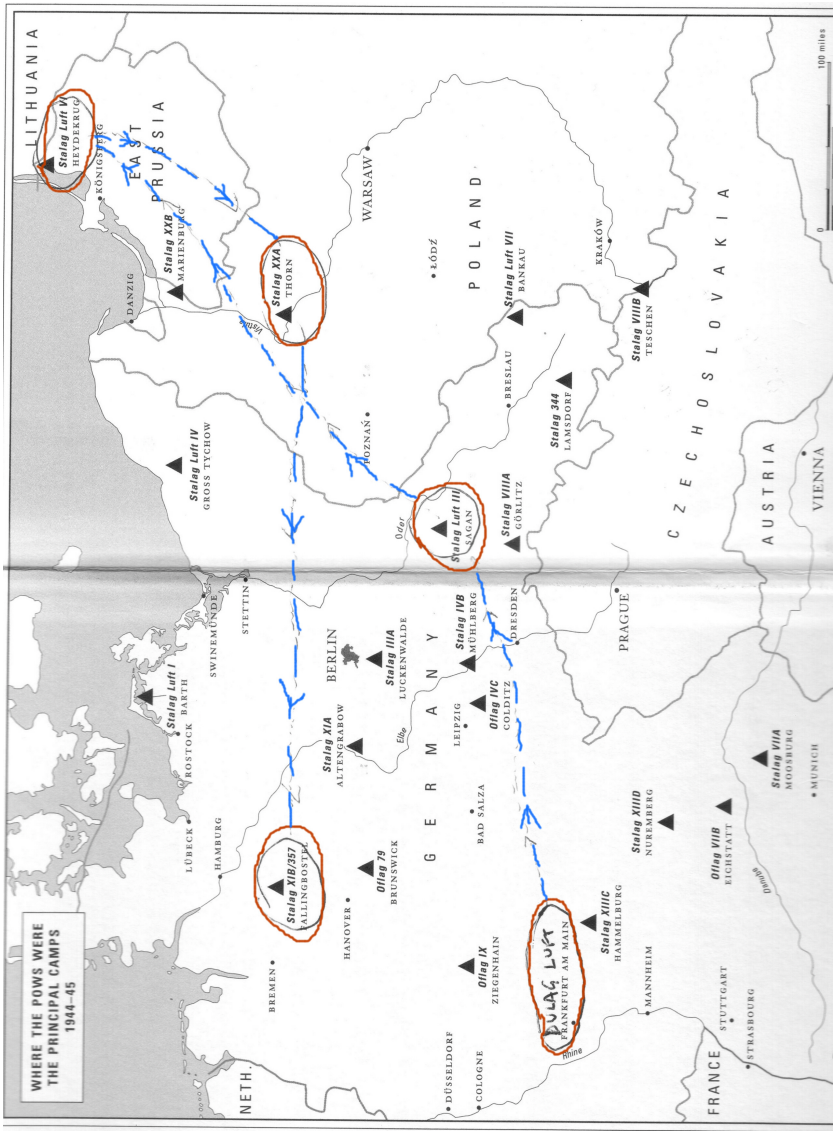
We were herded into Block 40 and gradually sorted ourselves out into small units we called combines. These consisted of groups of 4,6,8 or 10 men who pooled rations and shared chores, so that what little food we received was shared out equitably. For no particular reason that I could fathom I was chosen to look after these rations in our group of eight. This group consisted of myself, Jake Watson, Cooper, Drower, Pike, Corcoran, (all crew members) plus Ollie Olsen, and Blackie Porter, two Canadian sergeants. Our other crew member, Doug Wrampling, had evaded capture and been on the loose for about 10 days, and so was not with us at the time.

In one of the adjoining combines was Cal Younger & Pete Buttigieg, both of whom I met about 60 years later at a book-signing in Farnham! Cal is still on the committee of the RAF ex-prisoners of war Association.

The old hands invariably wanted to know how much longer the war was going to last. The answer was always "12 months". This was invariably met with smiles and

agreement, any longer was too awful to contemplate!

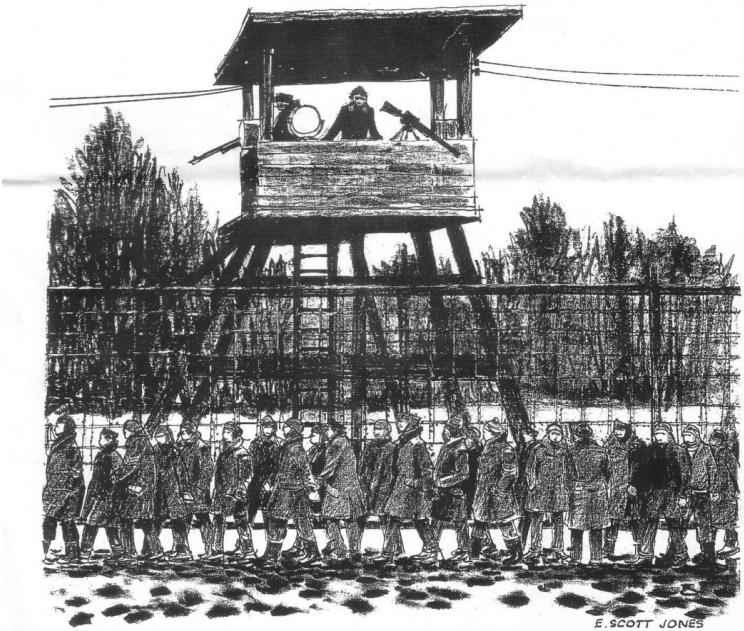
The N.C.O.s compound was by common consent under the control of Sergeant" Dixie" Deans who had been shot down on 10th September 1940. He and his crew had to bale out on the Dutch border, and he was already a well-known personality in other German prison camps as well as in Geneva and the Air Ministry. He spoke fluent German and was much respected by our German captors and all prisoners-of-war.
We were all called one by one to his room and asked about our experiences to which he listened patiently and carefully. In fact, his was a threefold interest. Firstly, he had to determine whether or not the stories were genuine; there was always the possibility of the Germans introducing an impostor. Then he wanted information which could be of value to the authorities at home (he in fact possessed the means of getting such information back to England). Finally, he wanted clues to the fate of men listed as missing, not only those recently shot down, but also those names appearing on inquiry lists sent from Geneva. He told us we could make allotments from our pay if we so wished, and his assistants would make the necessary arrangements.


WHERE THE POWS WERE
THE PRINCIPAL CAMPS
1944–45
LITHUANIA
Stalag Luft VI
HEYDEKRUG
KÖNIGSBERG
EAST
PRUSSIA
Stalag XXB
MARIENBURG
DANZIG
Stalag XXA
THORN
WARSAW
ŁÓDŹ
POLAND
Stalag Luft VII
BANKAU
KRAKÓW
Stalag VIIIB
TESCHEN
BRESLAU
Stalag 344
LAMSDORF
Stalag Luft IV
GROSS TYCHOW
POZNAŃ
Stalag Luft III
SAGAN
Stalag VIIIA
GÖRLITZ
CZECHOSLOVAKIA
AUSTRIA
VIENNA
Stalag Luft I
ROSTOCK BARTH
SWINEMÜNDE
STETTIN
BERLIN
Stalag IIIA
LUCKENWALDE
Stalag IVB
MÜHLBERG
DRESDEN
PRAGUE
LÜBECK
HAMBURG
Stalag XIA
ALTENGRABOW
LEIPZIG
Oflag IVC
COLDITZ
GERMANY
Stalag XIB/357
FALLINGBOSTEL
Oflag 79
BRUNSWICK
HANOVER
BAD SALZA
BREMEN
Oflag IX
ZIEGENHAIN
Stalag XIIIC
HAMMELBURG
Stalag XIIID
NUREMBERG
DULAG LUFT
FRANKFURT AM MAIN
MANNHEIM
DÜSSELDORF
COLOGNE
Oflag VIIB
EICHSTATT
Stalag VIIA
MOOSBURG
MUNICH
STUTTGART
STRASBOURG
FRANCE
NETH.
100 miles

11. Fallingbostel, 1944. Allied airmen watch an overhead air battle despite German attempts to force them into barracks.

Stalag Luft 3

I am furthest left on the roof of the hut. These were propaganda photos taken by the Germans (when they were winning!)



ROUND AND ROUND BEHIND THE WIRE
FALLINGBOSTEL 1944

Red Cross parcels were all important. The German rations were very small and their bread was compounded of rye and sawdust! The potatoes were bad and the issue of vegetables or grain did not go very far. There were always rumours about the supply of parcels which varied considerably. During the first three months or so of my incarceration the issue was half a parcel per man per

week- not much, but without it life would have been grim. For a while after this the parcel issue became one per man per week which brightened the place up considerably, but this was not to last.

There were regular influxes of new prisoners of war who were always cross examined for up-to-date news of the world outside, and under these ever-increasing numbers the amount of food available became much less, also the huts were more and more overcrowded.

Stalag Luft 3 during the period June 1942 to early 1943 was in retrospect the easiest period of my prisoner-of-war life- food was always short but the monotony was somewhat relieved by camp concerts organised by those with the necessary experience. We even had an orchestra (instruments provided by the International Red Cross) and conducted by Larry Slattery. We even organised a sports day complete with betting Tote. Cigarettes were the currency for the bets, as they indeed were for any transactions in the camp; the rate of exchange depended upon supply and demand!

Conditions varied considerably depending to some extent on the mood of the guards, and the weather always had an effect on morale. During the warmer weather we were plagued with flies, attracted by such delights as sauerkraut, dried fish which was well past its use-by date, and something which was called cheese but smelled like sweaty feet! This caused problems with bouts of gastroenteritis- the only cure was to give up eating for a few days!

The latrines, well-used during such periods, were in rows of about 40 - just holes in planks of wood, and were occasionally emptied by the "Poop Wagon " with the contents emptied on the surrounding fields - very nice!

We were allowed occasional letter cards (about two per month) to write home and we did receive replies from time to time, but as time passed these became more and more infrequent and were always heavily censored.

In August 1943 the NCOs were unexpectedly moved to Stalag Luft 6 at Heydekrug near the Baltic coast. Apparently, this was made necessary because of the increasing numbers of RAF prisoners of war. For the journey we were loaded into carriages with the windows

wired up and we spent two nights on this train with no food and very little water. On arrival we were marched into the camp and I finished up in Block D 5 with mainly the same friends from Sagan. Conditions were not so good and there were no facilities for cooking in the block, as all food was heated and distributed from the central cookhouses. However, we overcame this problem to some extent by making small blower cookers from the empty tins of Canadian powdered milk.

The fires were fuelled by slivers of wood, begged, borrowed or stolen. As it was of course impossible to use these in the block it was quite a sight to see dozens of these home-made blowers belching out flame and smoke in the spaces between the huts! Food became steadily less frequent and we were soon on enforced diets and losing weight steadily. As a result, any one caught stealing food from others was in dead trouble! I remember that on one occasion the unfortunate miscreant was frogmarched to the latrines and dumped into the sewage and his head pushed under! He probably gave up the idea of stealing food after that little episode.

Being so near the Baltic the weather became really cold during the winter, in fact that

particular winter the sea froze over and we were covered with a thick blanket of snow. We had to dig lanes through the snow to be able to walk from one hut to another but were not allowed to venture near the warning wires, the guards were somewhat trigger happy!

With all the extra prisoners in each hut the atmosphere became to say the least somewhat stuffy, particularly at night with the result that it became necessary to have some of the windows open. Unfortunately for me, my bunk was immediately under one of the windows and so I regularly woke up with snow covering my feet! Because of the weather there was not a lot we were able to do outside, so we concentrated our efforts on making illicit brews for our Christmas celebrations! The containers were kept under floorboards and the brews were made from raisins and prunes saved from what Red Cross parcels we received from time to time together with barley and potatoes acquired from the cook house. Although the Germans had announced that such brews would be confiscated, in practice the guards only searched in the most unlikely places and returned at a later date for a crafty sample! By Christmas Day our hut had converted one corner into a bar and one prisoner-of-war

into a barmaid! These brews appeared innocuous but most had a dramatic delayed effect. As a concession we were allowed to go from hut to hut and in A Lager there must have been about 1500 drunks, most of whom had badly underestimated the potency of the brews which for a little while had no apparent effect then were suddenly paralysing.

Camp security men (goons) regularly checked huts and the surrounding areas for tunnels and escape items with little success. The Gestapo made rare searches which were a different kettle of fish! We were herded out on to the parade ground on a bleak winter morning where we were strip-searched. We were not allowed to return for several hours and when we did so we found a shambles confronting us. Possessions had been looted and put into sacks outside the doors. It was not long however before diversions were set up and sacks quietly recovered. They finally decided we were all lunatics when they saw our clock made from a gramophone spring which only worked anti-clockwise. The hands therefore went anti-clockwise and the figures had been reversed!

As soon as the weather started to improve, there was the usual talk of escaping, and we therefore examined various methods of

achieving this. One tunnel was started under the heating boiler in our hut and was arranged so that the boiler itself could be moved as necessary and put back whenever Germans were about. This particular tunnel was started by an Australian called Buchanan and Ollie Olsen (who incidentally came to our wedding in June 1945). The biggest problem was disposal of the sand, particularly in view of the problems with an earlier effort when the sand was stored in the roof of the block. Unfortunately, the weight became so great that eventually the roof collapsed; what resulted was self evident! We solved the problem by making narrow sacks which could be pinned down trouser legs, filled with sand and carefully disposed of by walking round the outside of huts and the perimeter of the camp. Another tunnel was optimistically started by others in the latrine block but was soon discarded when the smell became unbearable!

The second problem was one of preventing the tunnel from collapsing. This was solved by the use of some of the boards on which our mattresses were laid. The Germans inevitably discovered the tunnel and soon took steps to forestall any future operations by regularly driving a steam roller round the perimeter, in the hope that the weight of the

roller would collapse the tunnel. This in fact did happen but the Germans had terrible trouble extricating the roller! Eventually, there was a purge on the number of boards on our beds, leaving us with five each. A lorry was brought in to take the excess boards away but we did our best to forestall them. This was successful in part when we caused diversions on one side whilst others quickly removed what they could from the other side. Eventually the Germans lost patience and brought in the dogs. We then had to scatter back into our huts!

Air was pumped up the tunnel by a pipe made from Canadian dried milk tins from the Red Cross parcels but we were never really successful in our efforts to complete a tunnel.

We still managed to keep up up-to-date on progress of the war through intermittent news reports obtained from the concealed radio built into a gramophone, which could still be used to play records normally. This was kept in Dixie Dean's room and was never discovered. On one occasion the Gestapo searched his room when he had the machine actually playing; the Gestapo officer switched it off, examined the record and then put it back on again!

Escapes were always being planned but every scheme had to be approved by the escape committee so that there was no overlapping and also to ensure that such schemes were indeed at least reasonably practical. Several attempts were made but no ”home run“ was achieved.

It was towards the end of April 1944 that we first heard about the Luft 3 officers mass escape bid. We were called out to a special assembly where we found hundreds of soldiers armed with machine guns and sub-machine guns surrounding the parade ground and in an ugly mood. The German Adjutant began to read from a document in German, followed by an official translation by an interpreter announcing that over 70 prisoners had escaped and that 50 had been shot dead whilst resisting arrest or attempting a further escape after being recaptured. It was obviously murder but with the huge presence of armed guards there was nothing we could effectively do to show our feelings.

Days and weeks passed by, occupied by various activities such as studies in preparation for post-war activities and jobs, sports of various kinds, helping with potential

escape plans (but these were very much more hazardous following the Luft 3 episode), and keeping as fit as the scarce rations would allow, but this time parcels were few and far between and we were always hungry.

One night in early June we were awakened by shouts of FIRE. We piled out of our huts with whatever buckets we could find to discover the camp theatre built by the prisoners from an empty hut, was well ablaze. The Germans were somewhat lax at organising any attempt to put out the flames but eventually it was doused without any damage to adjoining huts.

The cause was officially given as an electrical fault, but just a handful of prisoners knew the true cause. Behind the scenery was a cupboard, relocked every night by the Germans, containing amplifying equipment presented by the Swedish YMCA. As it was imperative to have part of this equipment to keep the secret radio working the experts broke in earlier that night to obtain it! In order that this crime was to be concealed, an ingenious time bomb was set, and the theatre burned to the ground.

Towards the middle of the summer of 1944 rumours were frequently heard about being moved. The Russians were steadily moving westward and many different tales were bandied about. Eventually, in mid-July the move became official and the Americans were the first, some time during the night.

These included firstly, the possibility that we would be taken out of camp in parties and summarily executed on Hitler's orders, secondly we would be taken to North West Germany as hostages in ceasefire negotiations. In the event we were herded out at short notice in parties to marched north-westward (away from the Russians).

In anticipation we had all made haversacks from what we could scrounge, and packed what little non-perishable Red Cross food we had been able to save over several weeks. We were eventually marched out of Heydekrug (in a very bedraggled state and weak through lack of food), and after some time eventually arrived at a station nearly on our knees! We were herded into the cattle trucks appropriately labelled 40 hommes or 8 chevaux! These trucks were divided into three areas, with 30 prisoners crammed into each end, leaving a quarter of the whole

space in the middle by the sliding doors for six guards.

It was several hours before we were on the move, and under a hot sun it became more and more uncomfortable. To requests for water the guards shook their heads; it was not their business to organise this! However, the platform was packed with local population and one woman sent her son away for a bucket of water. He was rewarded with a piece of chocolate and within seconds small boys were chasing home for buckets of water!

Eventually the train began to move and a nightmare journey began. There was no room to move, no food or water and no lavatory facilities, and the stench became overpowering. The guards were at last persuaded to slide back the doors a little to relieve the smell! We were about 36 hours on the train and frequently shunted into sidings to make way for troop and hospital trains movements.

At the last the train halted at a station out in the wilds and we were ordered out. We were then formed into a column flanked by guards and marched about four miles through a town called Thorn (in Poland) and at last

caught sight of our new camp which look like all the others we had already been locked up in. There were already about 3500 British Army prisoners-of-war who grumbled at our arrival and the half rations it would mean. We were in fact only at Thorn for about three weeks when we were again on the move because of the Russian advance from the East.
In retrospect the period from June 1942 to August 1944-was, compared with what was to come, reasonably bearable. Food was always in short supply and boredom was always a danger which most of us combatted by joining in various activities and studies-upsetting the Germans was always popular!

As time went on, however, the Germans became more abrasive and short-tempered, obviously caused by their change of fortunes in the light of what was in fact the obvious outcome of the war.

Out of the camp we were again marched through the town to the station where we had to wait a long time before we were once more herded into cattle trucks which still had a covering of straw and manure! The journey to Fallingbostel was less traumatic than the one to Thorn; the guards appeared resigned to defeat, and also realised that we were

unlikely to want to escape at this stage of the war. They were lax in the extent that, when the train started after we had been allowed to alight for necessary reasons, some prisoners had to run to catch the train up; on one occasion the guards on one truck were late and passed up their rifles to the prisoners-of-war and were helped back on!

They also allowed about four of us to sit in the guard's corridor in rotation thus giving us a little more space from time to time. After three nights on the train we arrived at Fallingbostel. We were marched in parties of about 200, and were pelted with stones by some of the townspeople. We marched about four miles to the camp which was called Stalag 357 and were immediately taken to the delouser and our clothes baked whilst we were given a hot shower.

The huts were a bit grim with floors below ground level and about 80 men to a room with a small night latrine. Bread was in short supply with about one loaf between seven men per day and each slice cut was carefully watched by all concerned! A major concern was the continuing gastroenteritis which steadily drained the body and weight loss became a real problem. This problem was

made worse as there was only one latrine between 80 men!

Red Cross parcels were virtually non-existent, with one issue of half a parcel per man in early September being the last. The German rations were bread, potatoes, and dried vegetable soup once a day. There was little to do, and the frequent air raids in the vicinity helped keep us optimistic. The weather however did not help, with nearly continuous rain which thousands of boots quickly churned to mud. Much of our time was spent reading books which were passed round and round.

A little Red Cross food did arrive occasionally but was kept centralised and doled out as evenly as possible. We only left our huts for Appell, a visit to the latrines, or to collect rations, such as they were, and hardly worth collecting.

On one roll-call aircraft roared overhead and dropped leaflets which we were forbidden to pick up on pain of death.

Soon after this the Gestapo paid us a visit and we were marched to the delouser for a personal search whilst others searched the huts which they deliberately wrecked.

Conditions were steadily getting worse; there were no shower parties and we had to make do with a cold water hose outside the back door. Out of the blue came a small issue of Red Cross parcels, and for a week or so things looked up, but we were soon back to normal; swede soup midday and two potatoes in the evening!
We were reduced at times going to the cookhouse and waiting for swede peelings to be dumped on the tip. On these occasions as many as 100 men would be poised when the peelings were dumped, and it was every man for himself! A handful or two was about as much as one was able to snatch and these were carried back to be carefully scrubbed with only the worst pieces discarded, then cooked until pulpy enough to eat.

Time dragged on, with the camp full of rumours as to the progress of the war. Luckily, the secret radio was still operational, and it was quite hilarious to differentiate between the German news items and the BBC, and it was obvious that the Germans were steadily on the retreat on both fronts.

Christmas 1944 eventually arrived but it was scarcely a time of goodwill and rejoicing although by then we were certain that this

would be the last one of our imprisonment. The main worry then was what in fact would be our final fate?
The mood was slightly lightened when a neighbouring camp 11 B, which had been longer established, gave us part of their store of food parcels, enough for one between four men. We managed to use this with the usual swede and potato peelings to make something a bit more substantial, but paid for it later with stomach pains and frequent latrine visits!

There were by then no shower facilities provided by the Germans, so we were forced to do what we could to keep ourselves partly clean. In our block we managed to steal enough fuel to keep our stove going for a short time in the evening and have enough hot-water to allow each man a pan once in nine or so days; this pan being only about 12 inches by eight inches there was a real problem in keeping clean, particularly as the same water was used to launder one's clothes!

About mid- January 1945 we were ordered out on parade and surrounded by dogs and machine-guns. A German officer then read out a document alleging cruelty to German prisoners-of-war in a British camp in Egypt

and that as a result reprisals were to be taken against prisoners-of-war in Stalag 357. These reprisals included removal of tables and benches, together with our palliases and half our bed boards. At the same time the library would be closed. Soon afterwards lorries arrived to take all this away and we did our best to hinder their work, but realised that the Germans were in an ugly mood, so we were careful not to start a shooting match! Sleep after that became difficult; some shared boards and tried sharing a bunk, but they were so narrow there was no comfort.

Tempers were often frayed owing to shortage of food. Food was a particular problem, and occasionally someone would be caught stealing from others, often nothing more than a piece of bread, but this was enough to bring retribution on his head, either by a severe beating or pushed into the latrines and held under! When this happened the culprit was fished out and hosed down with icy water. As this was in January with thick snow everywhere it was something he never forgot!

By now air activity was intense with large numbers of Flying fortresses flying over the camp to Berlin. Stalag Luft6 and Thorn had

already fallen to the Russians and we heard that Stalag Luft3 had also been overrun.

In March the bread ration was again cut to about one 8th of a loaf which, together with twice-daily swede soup with a little potato in it meant that malnutrition was soon a problem and bones became more prominent!

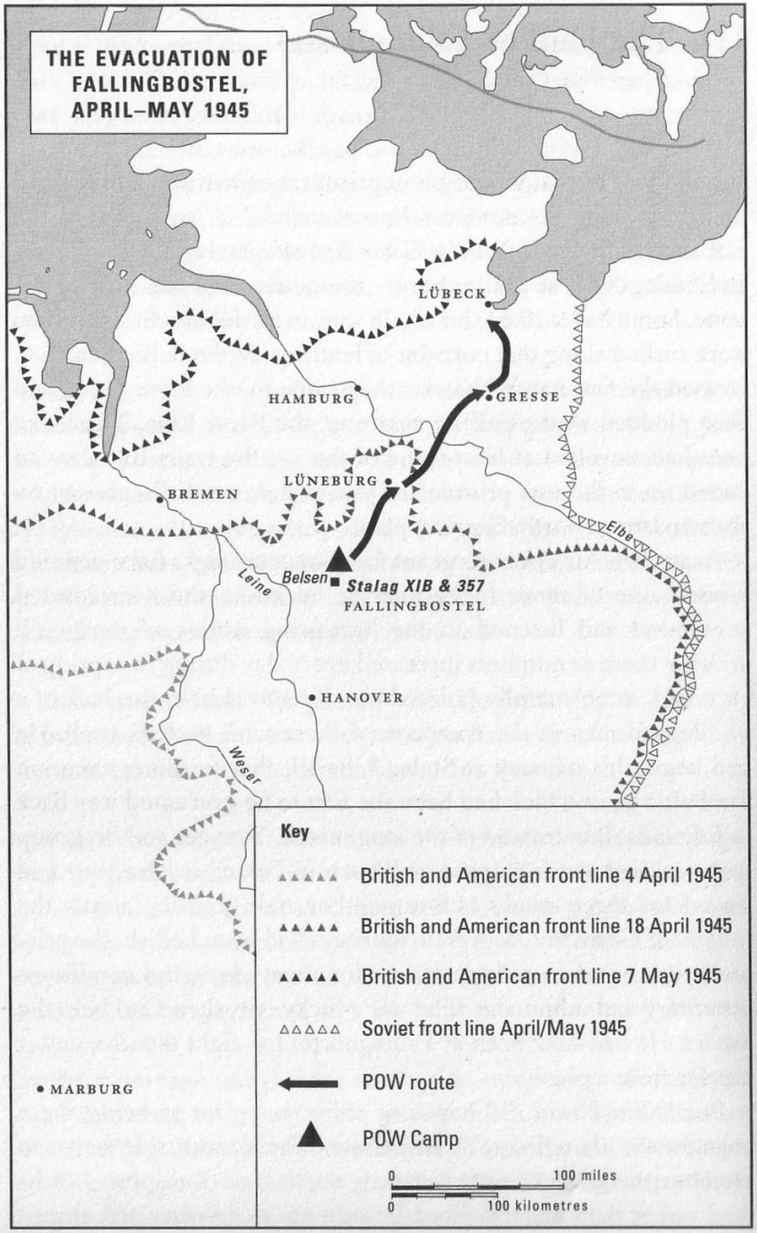
Dixie Dean persuaded the commandant to have him escorted to Lubeck where stocks of parcels were known to be stored. After much bargaining it was agreed that two trucks could be attached to a train going to Fallingbostel and this arrived towards the end of March 1945. These parcels were sufficient for one between two men. At the same time the Allies crossed the Rhine in strength, and rumours of imminent recapture became rife, all were wrong. A few days later we were told to prepare to evacuate the camp, and we understood we were to be marched towards northern Germany where the Germans planned to hold out indefinitely. We felt that a lot would depend on how things turned out. It was always possible that it might be decided to dispose of us rather than be responsible for our welfare.

At the end of March we were told to prepare to evacuate the camp as we were to be

marched out, apparently towards northern Germany where we heard rumours that the Germans were planning to hold out indefinitely. A couple of days later we were unceremoniously chased out of our bunks. We were only able to carry the barest necessities and we marched out in parties of about 1000, although over time these parties were split, primarily because of many who were far from well and thus caused the whole system to become somewhat chaotic. Eventually, we found ourselves primarily in disordered groups of about 150 to 200.

For six weeks we were marched by day and slept in barns or even in ditches or hedge bottoms at night. Food was scarce and we were forced to scavenge what we could as we went along.

I myself was carrying a home-made haversack with very little in it, just the remains of a food parcel and a spare pair of socks (donated by the Red Cross). There was considerable trepidation when it we thought that we might end up as hostages against a German surrender, as well as a chance that they might decide we were too much of a burden, and consider liquidating us (there had been many rumours to this effect).


THE EVACUATION OF FALLINGBOSTEL, APRIL–MAY 1945
LÜBECK
HAMBURG
GRESSE
LÜNEBURG
BREMEN
Elbe
Leine
Belsen
Stalag XIB & 357
FALLINGBOSTEL
HANOVER
Weser
MARBURG
Key
British and American front line 4 April 1945
British and American front line 18 April 1945
British and American front line 7 May 1945
Soviet front line April/May 1945
POW route
POW Camp
0
100 miles
0
100 kilometres

We heard much later that Hitler had in fact ordered all PoWs to be killed, but was eventually overridden by his generals, with the argument that there were also thousands of German PoWs in Allied hands, which made their position unsafe to say the least!

Apart from this we were very short of food and and had been for some time. Our morale was low and problems were compounded by frequent attacks of dysentery which further weakened our already poor health.

A couple of days later we marched past a concentration camp full of emaciated inmates who yelled at us as we passed. Guards in the towers had their guns trained on them and the situation became very dodgy. However, we were soon out of sight and things calmed down.

The going became very difficult, given how few rations we had to keep up our strength in addition to the frequent calls of nature when dysentery made itself felt. However, it was no dawdle, however much Dixie Dean had encouraged us to go slowly, as the Germans pushed us hard to cover 15 to 18 miles a day .
We had been given a loaf of bread and a piece of sausage when we started out but

after that we had to try to live off the land. Potato clamps were raided whenever possible, and occasionally swedes were found still in the ground!

The occasional egg was purloined from farms we passed by but they were a luxury! One or two PoWs managed to escape into nearby woods; most of the guards were reluctant to fire if they were spotted, but how much sooner, if ever, they got back to Allied lines we never really found out.

We wandered through a scarred landscape full of people apparently trying to flee from the fighting. Villagers were somewhat hostile, though this did not always stop them from trading food, a few eggs or some bread for so called luxuries which we had, such as soap and cigarettes. The Americans always seemed to be flush with cigarettes and shared them out so that everyone had some currency to trade with.

We were passed by German soldiers with tanks and large guns apparently heading for the Eastern Front, as well as columns of civilians in search of shelter. Dixie Deans continued to be a comforting figure, riding an old cycle up and down and encouraging everyone to stick together, as well as

discouraging escapers, telling us that there were SS detachments out there shooting escaped prisoners on sight. He kept in touch with the news of the war via the radio which John Bristow now carried hidden in a billy can and which he would set up secretly wherever we were billeted at night.

He also arranged for barns for us to sleep in, he was an amazing man. One piece of information he passed on to us to was that 2000 lucky PoWs who had been marched out of Fallingbostel had later been marched back to the camp in a panic and were now liberated. It was something to cheer about, proof that the end was near.

As we trudged along word spread that we were heading for the River Elbe, and that once we had crossed the bridge would be blown. The Germans were apparently going to make the river their last line of defence, and as a consequence us prisoners would be on the wrong side of it!

We had been on the march for two weeks heading roughly north-east along tracks through forests and fields and eventually reached the River Elbe. The front of the column waited until the early hours of the morning to sneak across the road bridge,

hoping the darkness would provide cover from Allied fighter planes. We raced over it nervously and our luck held. As we crossed we could see German soldiers mining the pillars of the bridge, while nearby allied planes were strafing the formations of troops heading for the front.

Whilst passing through the town we could hear explosions as the bridge we had just crossed was detonated. I felt that this was a low point in our predicament, as we were now on the wrong side of the river if the Germans did decide to use it as a last line of defence.

To make matters worse we were heading east in the rising sun, and it seemed it would never end. Dixie Deans thought the Germans had run out of ideas at this stage and appeared to have no orders. They did not seem to have any instructions and could not tell us what was going to happen. We were just travelling in a rough direction towards Lubeck and the Baltic Sea.

Dixie Dean's, however, had once again come up with a plan. The next day we arrived at a small-town by the name of Gresse and stayed the night in barns in and around the town, and the next morning we found he had

come up trumps! He had with great difficulty arranged for a supply of Red Cross parcels to be left for us, the first since we had left Fallingbostel. It transpired that one night he had persuaded the commandant to take him and an interpreter in his car to Lubeck, about 35 miles away. The Red Cross there had agreed to send a convoy to meet up with us at Gresse. Our spirits were somewhat lifted as we had had virtually nothing to eat for days. We marched out of the town and were soon sitting at the side of the road eating decent food after weeks of being without .

After this break we were marching along a country lane when we came up on open grassland. By now the column had stretched a long way and was somewhat broken up. I was near the back of our column, walking with Tubby Underwood, a Canadian soldier who had been captured at Dieppe, and a great chap to be with always cheerful and with a much more energy than I had!

We happened to look up and saw Typhoons circling, but we did not immediately take a lot of notice, as we knew that Intruders were constantly looking for German troop movements, but we had been advised that they knew columns of prisoners-of-war were also on the march, and that they had been

warned to make sure before taking any action.

However, we saw them come into line astern and start to dive towards our column. We screamed out a warning to scatter, and the two of us dived into the fields on our left as fast as we could go! Others who had heard us, including some German guards, also took off. The next thing I knew was the noise of rockets and machine gun bullets thudding into the earth around us. All I wanted to do was to burrow like a mole in get below ground!
The noise was horrendous and I just laid flat and hoped for the best. The planes seem to have come in more than once, but eventually the racket subsided Tubby Underwood said he had been hit but did not feel any pain. When I checked him I found a piece of rocket shrapnel had pierced his homemade backpack and lodged about an inch from his spine, a very lucky man!

However, when we got to our feet the sight that met our eyes was quite appalling. The rockets had done tremendous damage, with human remains lying everywhere. One torso was lodged in a tree, a head lay on the ground and limbs were everywhere, as many

of our comrades had been literally blown to pieces.

One vivid memory I have is that of an Australian air force chap who had been a great athlete, winning races in StalagLuft 3 and Luft 6 when we were able to arrange sports days to break up the monotony of daily life in the camps. My last glimpse of him was the top half of his body standing upright in the soil, whilst the bottom half had been completely blown away.

Many others had been killed or seriously wounded. We had a medical officer with us but there was little he could do. The whole area was a complete bloody shambles. The heart-rending tragedy was that we had been together for years and had survived many hardships, only to see so many killed by our own forces when the war was virtually over, and they would have soon be on their way home.

The death toll was estimated at 60 plus with dozens more injured. How the pilots had thought we were German troops, considering the motley, ragged mob they must have seen beggars belief.

Deans was able to arrange for the injured to be put into carts and taken to a hospital in a nearby town, and also to the digging of a communal grave and for a mass funeral to be taken by the Pastor from the local church. Some of the German guards had also been killed, many of them older types and had shown some kindest towards the prisoners. Amid all this chaos Deans knew he had to try to ensure that it did not happen again.
We found out later that he persuaded the German commandant to let him go to a point on the River Elbe which he knew was where the British had now reached. This point was in fact only about 12 miles away. The commandant approved the idea, and provided him with a better bike because the old one was full of punctures. After Deans had persuaded him that something should be done quickly- the Russians were in fact advancing quickly from the East- he gave Deans a written pass to help him pass through the German lines. He also took with him a German interpreter who he hoped would help to give them some protection if they ran into German troops.

After a hazardous journey, during which they passed groups of Germans, they encountered heavy mortar fire and ran for shelter in a house where they were told the British were

in the next village. That night they slept exhausted, and the next day the British caught up with them.

Dixie had some trouble in persuading the troops to pass them back, but eventually they were taken to a major and a Colonel, who later that day promised he would see the general at once. He was quick to act when told what had happened and he just managed to stop another attack about to be carried out!

He offered to get Deans back to England, but Dixie had given his word to the German Commandant that he would return to his men, and back they went through the front lines, but this time in style in a captured German Mercedes with a Red Cross flag across the bonnet. The Germans were amazed he had returned as promised.

Our column had moved on, and we were still heading north towards Lubeck. We heard on the 30th April that Hitler had shot himself in his Berlin bunker, but we were still on the move. Deans sent word soon afterwards that we were to stay put, and told the German guards not to cause any problems.

The next day our party was attempting to get a meal together- I chased an old hen until we were both exhausted, and put the bird in a pot to stew! However, before the bird was anywhere near cooked, a jeep rolled-up driven by a solitary military policeman who told us the 6th Airborne Division was on its way! We then tried to eat our chicken but it was tough as old boots and just as tasteless!

The next thing to happen was the arrival of an officer and a few soldiers, but we were told they could not stop to organise us and to make our way back west to Luneberg, where he had been instructed that PoWs were to be concentrated in preparation for flying home! When we asked him how we could make our way back all those miles, he said "easy", and ordered his men to throw off Germans who were coming in on lorries to surrender, and handed over their transport to us. He told us to watch for the frequent direction signs already in place, and look out for any military police depots where we would be supplied with food and petrol to enable us to continue our journey back West.

We decided not to hurry and took our time to eat, sleep, and eventually to cross the River Elbe over a pontoon bridge, eventually arriving a few days later in Luneberg. We

were confronted by the sight of thousands of released prisoners-of-war, all awaiting transport back to England.

The first thing to happen was a mass delousing centre, where we were sprayed head to foot with what we found later was D.T.T powder. Our clothes were heated up to kill any bugs inside, and we were then dispersed to various halls, huts, houses, and tents to be fed and await our repatriation.
The next day a large American lorry turned up and when opened it was seen to be frying doughnut rings! However, our joy was somewhat shortlived when we were told" Americans only". The same van arrived over the next few days with the same orders, but the Americans were flown away one evening in Liberators. When the lorry arrived the next day and called out" Americans only " we told them they had all gone home! Unwilling to waste good food we were given the chance to help ourselves. I quickly ate six hot doughnut rings, and a short time later was as sick as a dog !It was years before I could face another one !

THE LAST LAP!

After a further few days waiting anxiously for a move of some sort, we were taken by truck in batches to a nearby airfield, where a few Dakotas had been given the task of getting us back to England. Some however, were at first flown to Antwerp in Belgium and eventually back to England by boat after a wait of several more days.

However, I was one of the more fortunate ones and was put on the last Dakota waiting to take us back. The pilot was very concerned that the state of the runway, damaged by allied air attacks, would make it difficult to take off safely. Before he would take off we were given the job of checking the condition of the runway to ensure there were no loose rocks or anything else likely to upset our progress!

Eventually he was persuaded it was now safe enough and we boarded the plane with what little luggage we had managed to salvage. As the plane lumbered down the runway I think we all had our fingers (and legs) crossed until we had safely left terra firma. I could not see where we were, it was not until three or four hours later we were over England and coming into land!

All I can recall at this point was that we landed at an aerodrome in the Midlands but I have not got a clue which one it was! We were taken to a large hangar where we were treated to tea and sandwiches etc but we were again warned about over eating.

After a rest we were shepherded on to coaches and driven to RAF Cosford in Staffordshire. Apparently the main repatriation point for RAF prisoners-of-war, with a large number of staff covering the various problems we might well confront them with!
Here we were told we would be billeted for a while, during which time we would be interviewed, all our particulars checked and fresh clothing issued after another session of lice clearance, after which, all being well, we would be issued with railway passes and a cash advance to enable us to get home. In the meantime we were allowed to send a telegram home to advise them that we had at last arrived!

Eventually, the necessary paperwork was completed, and passes were handed out. The next step was least somewhat intimidating one of starting out on one's own on the journey home!

With a kitbag containing spare clothing and what few possesions I was able to save, I embarked on the final part of the long trek back to civilisation and to family and friends. As I recall after 62 years, my journey was somewhat hit-and-miss, as the railway and bus system was completely foreign to me, considering that the last time I had used it was several years earlier, and in wartime conditions.

In due course I made it to Woking station and managed, more by luck than judgment, to get on the right bus. However, being used to the pre-war system whereby one could get off when one wished by just pressing the stop button, I did this when the bus reached Holly Bank (next to the Woking Crematorium), where Rita and her mother still lived. I was quickly told by the conductor that I was out of order and must wait until I reached the next scheduled stop further up the road. However, he saw I was in uniform and lugging a heavy kitbag, and wanted to know where I had been to be so out of date with the system! When I told him I had been a prisoner-of-war he quickly relented and stopped the bus to let me off!

The next few hours were, quite frankly absolute chaos, with everyone wanting to talk at once! Rita and her mother's main concern was my obvious loss of weight(down to 7 1/2 stone), but I gave them some comfort by telling them I had been given a ration book with double rations (and extra milk), but had been given strict instructions take care what and how much I ate until my insides had adjusted to the completely new diet!

I must add that for some years later I was still periodically attacked by the dysentery bug which did lay dormant but occasionally became active!

Eventually I managed to creep away and walked the relatively short distance to my home in Herbert Crescent. The greeting there was more subdued but still very affectionate. Only mum and dad were at home as my two younger brothers and sister were still in the armed forces prior to being demobbed months later, and my older sister was in America working in a hospital as a dietician.

Incidentally, Rita’s twin brother Tony was still in the RAF police, swanning around Belgium on a Harley Davidson motorcycle!

The following few weeks passed in a hectic rush to prepare for our wedding; how it all fell in place at right time I was never able to fathom out!

Church banns had to be arranged with the vicar of st John's Church, and myriad other arangements were sorted out by family and friends, I was just a bystander.

In the meantime a friendly tailor in Woking came up trumps by tracing a second hand officers uniform which fitted me, and even sewed on the Warrant Officers badges! In retrospect I have a sneaking feeling that Rita and her mother had started to organise all the arrangements months earlier, before I had even been recaptured! What would have happened if things had not worked out I dread to think!

With wartime restrictions still very much in place, I really do not know how they gathered everything together, dresses, food, etc. nevertheless it all fell into place quite nicely with the reception taking

place at Hollybank. One outstanding incident which I still remember was organising a small barrel of beer from the Anchor pub in Knaphill, and in the absence of transport. Dennis, Rita's older brother (who was on extended leave) and I rolled the barrel all the way from the Anchor to Hollybank! We were told that if it was in place and settled for at least two days it would be quite ok! (and so it proved!)

As I intended that these ramblings were to be confined to my wartime recollections and experiences, I do not consider any divergence from this idea should be part of them and I will therefore gloss over what was a memorable wedding and really call a halt, except to remember one incident at the ceremony. As Rita and I were walking down the aisle at the end of the service, there came a loud call in Canadian accents "Good Old Dickie"! from my three Canadian friends (Jake Watson, Olie Olsen, and Blackie Porter) who were able to attend before embarking for Canada - a truly great send-off!

Thus must end these somewhat patchy memories of my wartime years

1939/1945-a lot happened in a very short time!

The standard issue flying suit – never used.

Richard (Dick) Yates