"Just My Story"

To the memory of lost comrades

Lie in the dark and let them go
There is one debt you'll forever owe,
Lie in the dark and listen....

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1. To War.

I left school at 14 in 1937, deciding upon a clerical career with a local firm, Perkins Diesels. Though there was a lot to learn, after 10 weeks I left to start in Baker Perkins, an engineering firm, working in cost and stores accounting in Peterborough.

September 3rd 1939, war broke out and from then on all changed very rapidly. From being a general engineering company producing printing machines etc, Baker Perkins became an armaments factory, manufacturing a wide range of heavy artillery and anti-aircraft guns.

Large numbers of people were not wanted in the office as they were now an arms factory and were released, though some stayed to replace those who had been called up for service. Young blokes, like myself, were offered an apprenticeship in the factory if we wanted it.

I had words with my father about it. He said:

"Well, not much else going now, with all things in a state of flux, Frank. You could try an engineering apprenticeship if you like, but I don't think you'd like it much."

From starting as I did, as a clerk, from 9 'til 5, it was now 7:30 to 5:30 and often later, but I found I did like it, having adapted to working as an engineering apprentice I quite enjoyed it and that's how it was.

But at that time I still stayed in the Scouts as the Air Defence Cadet Corps, as it was, closed down on the outbreak of war only to reform 4 years later as the Air Training Corps. I was also in the Auxiliary Fire Service, press-ganged into it quite literally, as I was a Scout. We attended the first Scout meeting after the war broke out. This was all pre-arranged, it must have been, they said,

"Right, those of you 14 years and older must report to the Fire Station at Old Fletton, Friday evening at 7:30 to be told what to do."

There was no "will you?" or "would you mind?", you were told. That's how it was in those days. That was another of my activities.

When the four-year apprenticeship was up on my 20th birthday I volunteered. I went along to the recruitment office at Peterborough and volunteered as a Flight Engineer. A pal of mine came along, showing a little interest but not that much; he wouldn't put his name down.

When we got outside of this centre he said:

"You've done it now, Boa!"

Boa was my nickname then.

I said *"Yes, I have!"*

I was soon called for my tests and appraisals at Cardington[1]. Three days of medical and mental examinations and adaptability tests and at the end of that you are interviewed and I was told I had done reasonably well. I was offered Pilot Training if I want it. That sounded attractive and I asked how long would it be before I was wanted for training. They thought about 6 months,

"And what about as Flight Engineer?"

and was told almost straight away. So I said,

"Okay, I will stick to what I originally volunteered for: Flight Engineer."

[1]Historically, the home of the British Rigid Airships, at this time was operated by 20 Group, Flying Training Command.

Calling up for training was delayed a bit. Well I was called in September, but my Father had an accident, he was in the Auxiliary Fire Service too and had been injured. He was hospitalised and Mum was rather upset, so I delayed my entry for 10 days.

2. Regents Park.

Then I reported to the Aircrew Receiving Centre in London, which was at Lords Cricket Ground. From there we were billeted in the flats in St Johns Wood, overlooking Regents Park.

This was a question of being kitted out, being sworn in, learning to march a bit, and polish shoes and all that entails. It was not too bad; the problem was lack of sleep. We were raided almost every night by small formations of enemy aircraft. Quite a nuisance. Some anti-aircraft guns were just at the back of St Johns Wood and we could hear them all night long.

Then on about the third day we were in the Air Force, walking along for our meal in Regents Park, the restaurant there was used for our meals and we had to go along there for our breakfast and other meals. We marched along, which was not too far, and we could hear the sound of aircraft engines getting lower and lower, which was unusual in view of all the Balloon Cables that were up as they were. But this Dakota came out of the cloud with about 8 to 10 feet of his port wing missing, obviously in trouble and he was looking for somewhere to put down, which was difficult in a city like London. But he obviously thought he could get down in Regents Park. After doing a wide sweep around, missing balloon cables, he tried to put it down but in doing so crashed into the Monkey House in Regents Park. Up she went in flames, everyone perished, which was a bit upsetting, only being in the RAF for three days.

(The monkeys, incidentally, had been evacuated from London to other zoos; as all the animals were in Regents Park, they had all gone.)

We were there, I would think, about three weeks, going through all these preparations. Then we were posted off, a whole trainload of us, to a place called Usworth[1], in County Durham in think, or it might have been further

[1]A holding camp, operated by 20 Group, Flying Training Command.

north than that. An isolated airfield, inhospitable cold place. Fortunately we were only there a week before being sent off to Bridlington on the Yorkshire Coast.

3. Bridlington I.T.W.[1]

Here we learned how to operate Aldis Lamps, using Morse code, signalling to each other along the sea front, and given instruction on the Lewis and Browning machine guns, stuff like that. Learning to march properly, most important of course! That's how we spent six weeks. We were billeted in private houses; there were quite a number of private houses, which had been evacuated. They ran up from the sea front, these various roads, and the RAF, Air Cadets, used most of these houses. We used to go down to the front and walk along the sands if we had time off.

On the last Sunday, at the end of the six weeks that we were there, we celebrated by going for a game of football on the beach. It was a balmy day and quite enjoyable. At the end of it someone said last one in is a "so and so", and everyone made a rush for the sea. This was in December by the way and it was rather chilly so we didn't stay in long and we ran back to the billets to dry off.

We finished there and got a bit of leave and told to report to No.4 School of Technical Training at St Athan in South Wales. We had to report there on the 23rd December, it seemed a bit much having to report there the day before Christmas Eve, but they insisted we had to be there. Though we did get Christmas Day off.

[1] Initial Training Wing, operated by 54 Group, Flying Training Command.

4. Nº4 S.o.T.T.[1] St Athan.

Then started ten weeks basic training in flight engineering, which was hard going in actual fact. We started at eight in the morning in classes, which were held in hangars in various groups. You were taught by corporals, generally. Some were ex-teachers and were quite good, others didn't teach or lecture very well at all, but there you are, that's how it was.

It was a six-day week, Saturday being a normal workday. Sunday morning was various things, like how to prepare an Engineer's log, aircraft recognition, lessons in first aid, which Flight Engineers must know how to do. All those sort of things. Sunday afternoon we had off, believe it or not, but I didn't always, like a mug, I volunteered as when I belonged in the Boy Scouts I played the "kettle drum" and since they needed someone to play in the station band I volunteered. So that meant, sometimes, I was busy Sunday afternoons as well. But it was quite enjoyable. Then after the 10 weeks we got a leave of about a week.

When we got back from leave we had to choose (choose, we weren't told), which type of aircraft we wanted to specialise in. There was a pretty wide range to choose from. Of course, first of all was the Lancaster and Halifaxes. A few were wanted for Stirlings and a few for Fortresses in Coastal Command. A few for Liberators, a few for Sunderlands and Catalinas. Coastal Command flying boats, Sunderlands and Catalinas were reserved for the more elderly trainee Flight Engineers, those over 30, up to 35, possibly.

We could volunteer for the others. Well, I had already given some thought to this actually; of course the most popular was the glamour aircraft, the Lancaster, that's what everybody wanted to fly. But about that time there had been this infamous raid on Nuremberg - they had lost 90 odd aircraft[2], a raid

[1]School of Technical Training, operated by 24 Group , Flying Training Command.

[2]30th/31st March 1944, of 782 bombers despatched a total of 95 were lost, mainly due to the German nightfighter force.

on Berlin - they had lost 60[1] and another 60[2] over the Ruhr, one night. Bomber Command losses were quite high; the numbers of aircraft were quite depleted.

Well, it didn't look a very rosy future, quite honestly!

At St Athan, which was a huge military establishment, there were about three different Maintenance Units. As well as the Flight Engineers school there was a radio school and one or two other ancillary units. One of the M.U.s dealt with Halifaxes which were intended for Coastal Command. These were the older Mk.II's. They had been modified so they had long a slender nose. They were all white, with four bladed props, the old style of fin and rudder. They looked magnificent.

I thought I wouldn't mind flying in those. My chances, probably, of survival were slightly better in those than in some of the other aircraft. I was thinking,

"What's the use in being a dead hero if you can carry on flying in Coastal Command?"

So, my friends in the hut where we were, the group of us were very friendly with each other and they asked me what I was doing and I told them. Eventually they could see the sense of it because a group of about 8 of them also decided to do the same thing and put down for Halifax Mk.II or Mk.V. The Mk.V being the same as the Mk.II Halifax but it had Dowty hydraulics and undercarriage gear as opposed to the Messier that the other had. The Halifax Mk.III was flying at the time so quite a few signed up for that. That decision was made.

We had another 15 or 16 weeks, I think it was. Specialising on one particular type of aircraft, getting to know it inside out, how it operated and how we fitted in to the scheme of things.

[1] 24th/25th March 1944, 72 bombers lost from a force of 811 sent out.

[2] 19th/20th February 1944, 79 bombers lost from a force of 816 attacking Leipzig in Saxony

That ended the course; I think it was the end of June or early July 1944.

A little bit of leave, we were in need of that actually because it was a concentrated course. I found that after the first 10 weeks I couldn't really

absorb anymore. I needed a break from it. You reached this learning plateau where you could absorb so much and that was it. The leave was very welcome. I did reasonably well on this course. Each course had two flights of about 220, a few were weeded out leaving about 200 in all and 10 of us achieved 70%.

If you achieved 70% or more you automatically got an interview for a commission. So I had to go before an interview board, which wasn't very enjoyable. Nevertheless I went through it and afterwards I asked what happened now and they said:

"When you get to your squadron, see your Flight Engineer leader and tell him that you have had an interview and listen to what he says."

I was surprised I got a commission interview really as I had been in trouble once or twice. One time was because at the evening meal there was a lot of cake put out as an extra ration, but you weren't supposed to take it out of the hut.

I didn't hear those instructions, so I took a chunk out in my battle dress. I though it would be nice for my supper rather than a NAAFI[1] bun or something like that. But I was picked up by the corporal who marched me off to the Guardhouse.

I didn't get the chance to explain it all, I just said I didn't hear: "Well, you should have". So I spent the night in the "Glasshouse" and next morning up before the C.O. and got ten days "Jankers". Which means you reported at six

[1]Navy, Army, Air Forces Institute.

in the morning in full kit, did some marching, and were told to report in the evening about six. Where you had to spend 3 hours washing dirty tins. Not very pleasant!

The other time, there were quite a number of Australians on the Engineers Flight course. They were pretty wild boys; we got very friendly with them

and went out one night with them to a village, the next one up from St Athan, Cowbridge I think it was called, and we had a few drinks in the local and came back with them. We were a bit rowdy. The Corporal in charge of our hut started to lay down the law, we got fed up with this and one thing led to another and I told him,

" Get stuffed, Corporal!"

Well that was it, I was up on "Jankers" again, and another week confined to camp and all that goes with it.

Anyway I still got this interview.

Incidentally, I had my first flying experience at St Athan. The Radio School would take up Flight Engineers for a little while, just to give them experience. As there were many like me who had hardly been airborne at all, just to see what it was like. So I spent fifty minutes in an Avro Anson over the Bristol Channel and that was it, the sum total of my flying experience.

At the end of the course we were given this leave and, of course, we had the Sergeant's stripes put on and the Flight Engineer's brevet put on and, of course, we thought we were great, and then we had to report to the Heavy Conversion Unit at Topcliffe.

5. 1659 H.C.U.[1] Topcliffe.

I assumed Topcliffe was a Coastal Command base somewhere up in Yorkshire. So I reported to Topcliffe. Yes, there were some Halifaxes about, but they weren't white and there were an awful lot of Canadian officers and aircrew about. It suddenly dawned on me that we weren't going to be in Coastal Command. It turned out we were at a H.C.U., one of two that belonged to the Canadian Bomber Group, 6 Group. So that's how it turned out.

What do they say about the best-laid schemes of mice and men often go awry? So I hadn't been as clever as I thought I had been actually, here.

Anyway, we had to crew up and the way this was done was that the Engineers were told to report to the Flight Engineer's Section. The Flight Engineer's leader said:

"Go out there and have a game of cricket!"

We didn't need to be asked twice, so we went outside and had a game of cricket. Apparently, we were being watched, though we didn't know that, and after this game a tall lanky Canadian came up and said:

"Hello, I've been watching you, how would you like to be my Flight Engineer?"

I said: *"Fine, who are you?"*

"I'm Ron Cox, pleased to meet you. Shelburne, Nova Scotia."

"Hello, Ron."

Then I met the rest of the crew as well. Of course, they had all met up at the

[1]Heavy Conversion Unit.

O.T.U[1]. They had been flying Wellingtons at Wellesbourne in Shropshire, not far from Stratford upon Avon; it might have been Staffordshire, not far from Stratford anyway. They had spent six or seven weeks there in training. They were a crew already; I was someone extra who joined them at Con. Unit.

They had all this experience, I didn't even know, for instance, that when you had your flying helmet on and your microphone and oxygen mask, that you could switch it on and off. I left it on originally and you could imagine the 4 Merlins in the microphone. But that just shows how ignorant we were. I wasn't the only one. We never received any training like that, basic stuff, we did advanced training, but not basic stuff like that, which you had to learn as you went along.

But we crewed up. First of all, various members of the crew, the Pilot and Flight Engineer, had to be attached to more experienced crews and I had two cross countries as a Second Engineer, watching the other bloke do his job.

The Skipper did the same, he was Second Pilot.

Then it was up to us and off we went. As with the whole of the course, there was always a sense of urgency. Everything had to be done quickly, leave cut down to a minimum, rushed through as quickly as possible.

So here at Topcliffe, which was a very pleasant station incidentally, we weren't billeted on the station. We were in a country mansion about 20 miles away, not too far from Ripon. There were transports during the day, to and from this mansion to Topcliffe. We did about 60 hours flying in three weeks, which included a fair amount of night flying and then also we got a first taste of ops, after a fashion.

It wasn't really ops. We did "Bullseye" diversions as they were called; we had to fly to the Dutch coast, then up and down the Dutch coast releasing lots of

[1]**Operational Training Unit.**

metal strips, code named *"Window"* which was designed to confuse the enemy radar and put them off, so they couldn't read it. Not particularly dangerous, although some aircraft were lost.

After that we were posted to a squadron, but there were problems at the Conversion Unit.

On one occasion, we were in an aircraft going on this "Bullseye" diversion. I wouldn't take it because the starboard inner was acting up badly. The oil pressure was low; oil temperature was high beyond the norm, far beyond the norm. Obviously it was going to be troublesome, and the Mag Drop[1] also was excessive. They said they couldn't fix it, so okay, but assured me there was nothing wrong with it but I thought there was. Anyway they said,

"Take the spare aircraft."

Time was getting on, so we were rushed over to this spare aircraft with shouts,

"Get in, get away, off you go, get airborne, everything's ready."

So we got in, taxied round, started to go down the runway taking off. Suddenly - no airspeed. We hadn't gone too far, fortunately, so we were able to cut them, put the brakes on, just stopped before the end of the runway.

I suspected what the matter was. I went out and there was the pitot head[2] cover still on, so it was not ready for us to take. I couldn't reach it, so they

[1] Part of the start-up checks for each engine involves checking the efficiency of the magnetos. Two units supply the electrical current to each spark plug, sequentially. The engines are run with both magnetos in operation at a set supercharger level and the RPM is noted and the magnetos are switched off alternately. This causes a reduction in the efficiency and speed of the engine. This reduction, referred to as "Mag Drop", must be not greater than 150 RPM for the engine to be accepted as serviceable.

[2] The pitot head is a metal probe facing into the airflow. A hole in the end allows air to enter, raising the pressure in a hollow chamber. The increased pressure is directly related to the airspeed.

came round with a van and took it off, so once again we went off, eventually.

Problems like that.

I did actually watch a lovely Halifax come into land, I could see that he hadn't got his wheels down, he was well on the approach. I told the Skipper,

"Look, no wheels!"

He got over to the control tower, they warned him, but too late. He just started to put them down, but too late, he came in on his belly. It did happen.

So much for H.C.U at Topcliffe.

6. Operations, 419 Squadron RCAF.

We were posted after that, no leave at this stage, straight to a squadron, operational squadron.

So we along with three other crews were posted to Middleton St George, County Durham. Two went to 419 and two to 428 Squadron, both at Middleton St George.

Incidentally this was the end of August `44 and by Christmas `44 I was the sole survivor of those three other Flight Engineers, they had all gone.

But the point is having arrived at Middleton St George, we were not to fly Halifaxes but they had Lancasters, not only that but they were the Canadian built Mk.X. Now I had never been inside a Lancaster before. I had spent all this time preparing to fly Halifaxes, which I quite enjoyed, but no, these were Lancasters.

Well, I had one day of ground school learning where all the tanks were and how to operate them and other details about the Lancaster. I did one cross-country as Second Engineer again, watching the other chap operate all the taps. The Skipper did the same with another crew and then we were ready to go.

So we did a few days crew training.

The strange thing that first struck me about my first flight in a Lancaster was the Skipper hung on the brakes quite a bit, when I was doing this as Second Engineer, as a demonstration I think, and opened up. When the brakes were released, the acceleration hits you in the back. It was enormous, in this Lancaster, I was very impressed. Mind you it was very noisy too. The Merlins on the Halifax had got a manifold exhaust system and it did silence things a bit, but in the Lancaster there were just short exhaust stubs and they were very, very noisy.

Anyway after this little bit of training we got on with our bombing practice, air to air firing, fighter affiliation, cross-countries. All the stuff that you do when you are working up, being prepared for ops. And we were ready to go, at least that's what we were told. But I still had my doubts; we were as green as grass. But there you are.

So the first op turned up, it was going to be an easy one. One of the Flying Bomb sites in Northern France.

We were taxi-ing, marshalling for take-off. Following each other round to the take off point. I was looking out and down glancing at the wheel, "making sure it wasn't falling off". But I saw something white on the tyre. Paint, I thought. It came round again,

"That's not paint", I thought, it was metallic.

So I asked the Skipper to stop. I wanted to check the tyre to see what it was on that wheel. So I disconnected the intercom, climbed past the Bomb Aimer, past the Navigator, over the main spar, all the way along the fuselage and out.

And, of course, I couldn't see anything. So I waved the pilot on a few feet and he stopped and there was the head of a bolt, looked like a 3/8 inch bolt and the head was showing in the tyre. Now we didn't have a full fuel load, but we had 8 tons of bombs on board, I didn't think it was a very good idea. The Engineering Officer is always around at take-off, so I called him over; he came and had a look:

"No, scrub, you are scrubbed"

And ordered us to taxi on to the grass so everyone else could pass us. So we pulled off so as not to hold anyone up and my friends went off on their first op. There we were stuck, but actually if that tyre hadn't have blown on take off it certainly would have done on landing. So you can see the point of not

flying. Didn't know whether to take this as an omen, not getting away on this first op. Perhaps I should have done.

We did get away on our first op, I think it was one of the Flying Bomb sites in Northern France.

(872 aircraft were sent to bomb German defensive positions around Calais but encountered low cloud. Only 287 aircraft were able to bomb, through breaks in the cloud. No aircraft lost.)

Bomber Command did try, if it was possible to put you on an easy op for your first one. If it was possible they did try, they would do that and that was an easy one.

But the next one wasn't, we went to Bottrop in the Ruhr Valley, daylight.

(175 aircraft of 6 and 8 Group attacked the Ruhroel A.G. synthetic-oil plant in the suburb of Welheim. The target was cloud-covered and bombing was by Oboe sky markers.)

Fair amount of flak, thrown about quite a bit in the flak, I suppose it was something I had to get used to, flying through flak. Anyway, by the time we left the target one of the engines was vibrating rather badly. I tried to find out which one it was by throttling back in turn. Didn’t eliminate it completely. The Skipper was frowning at me as if to say,

“Find out what the bloody trouble is.”

So I did the same again, throttling right back completely actually, one engine at a time, and it was, I think it was, the starboard inner was the trouble. I didn't want to feather it in case we had trouble with others so we ran on that one with it throttled way back and the vibration almost subsided.

It turned out that a bit of flak had taken a chunk out of the middle prop blade and unbalanced it. That's what caused the vibration.

Straight after that, the next day in fact, we did a raid on the French coast.

(494 aircraft attacked 10 locations in this area. Cloud cover allowed only 198 (from 301) to bomb at Cap Griz Nez. No aircraft lost.)

The next op we did was against the U-Boat pens in Bergen, Norway.

(140 bombers with 12 Mosquitoes attacked the U-Boat pens. 7 bombs hit the pens, causing little structural damage, but completely disrupting the electrical system. Many civilian casualties were caused. One Lancaster lost.)

We were due to take the "Ruhr Express" KB700, VR-Z, I think it was. Now the "Ruhr Express" was the first Canadian built Lancaster, it was a load of trouble, always faults, and always things wrong with it and there was this time. I think it was the starboard outer, the Mag Drop was terrific. Obviously faulty. Now the point was on this operation we had to fly at sea level all the way to evade radar detection, and when the Norwegian coast was in sight then we had to climb hard with quite a heavy bomb load of armour piercing bombs to reach at least 14,000 feet, I think it was, in order for the bombs to penetrate the U-Boat pens.

On this old kite of ours it would never make 14,000 feet with an engine like that.

So we had to unpack everything and get out and take the reserve aircraft. There was always a reserve, and we took that one, but we were half an hour late leaving and, of course, we would not be with the bomber stream. We would be going over entirely on our own over the target. Which was not a good thing!

Nevertheless, we went. We had a fighter escort actually, a Mosquito, two Mosquitoes one on each wing tip, fighter Mossies escorted us all the way there. I remember seeing Jack Wilkins, the Mid-Upper Gunner, in his turret rubbing his hands together. He said to me:

“No work today!”

A magnificent sight those Mosquitoes. Of course they left us when we had to go into the target and bomb. We weren't bothered too much; the flak wasn't too severe.

The others had been bothered because there was a fighter airfield just south of Bergen at Stavanger and they came up and had a go at the others near the target but, of course, they thought everyone had gone by the time we came in on our own and we got away with it that time.

The idea on this operation was that with maximum bomb load and minimum fuel you would be diverted to an airfield in Scotland to refuel, on the way back. In any case they thought the Co. Durham airfields would be out of use anyway as they were expecting a lot of bad weather. We had to go into Turnhouse, Edinburgh and those other airfields. Kinloss was one, another one near Wick, all in Scotland, to refuel and come back when the weather permitted.

On the way back we had a radio message telling us to head for base as the Scottish airfields were closed. Well, we hadn't got much of a fuel reserve but getting the message at this stage meant we were able to turn and head for base. We had a better chance than the others did, and we made it, though we did not have a lot of fuel left actually.

One of our crews had been hit over the target or near the target. With a number of injured on board, crippled aircraft, lost and losing height, they flew into the top of the Cheviots, the highest hills in that part of the border country. Straight in. Apparently the navigator was killed, others were injured and they didn't know were they were, but that happened. I knew them very well, rather sad really.

(KB745, piloted by F/O G.R.Duncan, crashed near Hope, Northumberland. All aboard were killed.)[1]

I thought at this time I should mention to the Flight Engineer Leader that I had had a commission interview, he said:

"Oh yes?"

I asked what happens here,

"I tell you what",

He said in a laconic sort of way, he was a Canadian. There weren't many Canadian Flight Engineers, but he was. A Flight Lieutenant, of course, as all Gunnery Leaders, Navigation Leaders, were, all Flight Lieutenants that was their rank.

He said:

"Come back and see me when you have done ten operations. Then we will have a chat about it."

Well, of course, there was a fair chance, more than a fair chance, that he wouldn't be bothered with me again. Actually after ten operations I was called for an interview and this time it was with the Squadron Commander and his crew who questioned me. This was the way the Canadians did it, or at least it was on our squadron.

[1]Further details on this crash can be found in Chapter 16 of An Unexpected Foe by Peter Clark

The crew asked me questions about their job, what they did on the aircraft. Had I learned enough and been keen enough to learn what to do or what they did? For instance, the navigator said:

"Have you operated the Gee Set and what can you tell me about it?"

Fortunately, Blair Lindsey had let me have a go once or twice so I knew a little bit about the *Gee*[1] Set, and the Wireless Operator, I think there are a total of about 17 aerials on the Lancaster, the Wireless Operator said,

"Name me 12 of the aerials that are on the Lancaster.",

the dipole aerials etc. That sort of thing. The gunners talked about deflection, rate of fire, ammunition etc, capacity of ammunition boxes etc. Which I was also interested in anyway.

It was fascinating really, I thought it was reasonably successful but there it ended for a while.

[1]*Gee* (and later *GH*) were a means of directing aircraft by the use of ground stations broadcasting a radio signal, allowing the cross-referencing of the bearings to be used to obtain the aircraft's location.

7. October 1944.

We did a trip to Stuttgart, down in Southern Germany of course.

(565 Lancasters and 18 Mosquitoes, in 2 waves, 4.5 hours apart. 6 Lancasters lost.)

That was a different type of operation, it was in cloud. Complete cloud everywhere and at 24,000 feet we were still in cloud, but we bombed on H2S, that's the airborne radar system.[1]

What happens is that when you bomb through a bombsite there is a photo taken of your aiming point.[2] Likewise when you bomb on H2S there is a camera taking a picture of the screen. When the Bomb Aimer presses the "tit" then this photograph is taken of the H2S screen, so you can see exactly what you are aiming at. So if you're bombing Stuttgart it shows the outline of the city or what you were aiming for.

After the bombing there was flak, you could see flashes about but it was in cloud, and we stayed in cloud and seemed to pick up ice, even at that altitude, which was unusual but it's not unknown and we seemed to lose our way a bit. The Navigator, though, after a while worked out that we should be approaching Strasbourg before long he said,

"We shall know about it if we are."

Strasbourg was always very heavily defended; though it was French really the Germans had occupied it and heavily defended it. So, yes we were, because all hell let loose before very long. We were over Strasbourg, so we got a bearing

[1]A high frequency radar unit was mounted under the rear fuselage in a blister, using the hardpoint planned for a ventral turret, allowing ground features such as rivers to be identified.

[2]Aiming point photography was carried out by the use of a photoflash and required the bomber to continue to fly straight and level for even longer than the thirty or more seconds needed to allow the Bomb-Aimer to carry out his work. Some crews did not bring back a clear photograph, preferring to manoeuvre as soon as the bombs were released. However, this ran the risk that the sortie would not be credited to the total number of missions flown.

from there. What a way to get one though!

We could not get in at base, we were diverted to Stradishall in Norfolk, or Suffolk, I cannot remember, Suffolk possibly. There are three "halls"

Mildenhall, Stradishall and Coltishall. We were at Stradishall that was, we found a Heavy Conversion Unit for Stirlings.[1]

I had no idea that Stirlings were still being used. They were not being used in Bomber Command, but apparently they were excellent glider tugs and some were also being converted as transports for carrying cans of fuel and that sort of thing for the invasion forces. It was very interesting there.

Base remained closed. We couldn't get away that day, it was only late on the third day that we got away. Which was rather a pity really, because my sister was getting married to a Canadian. I had permission after I got back from this operation to nip off for a day for the wedding but, of course, I couldn't make it. They realised what had happened. The Skipper knew this, he knew I couldn't make it, so he said:

"What we will do, Frank, Blair will set us a course for Peterborough and we will do a low pass over the Church."

St Augustines Church, Woodston in Peterborough this was. Sure enough they commented on this. They said:

"We heard a Lancaster come over terribly low"

So I was there in spirit, if not actually in person.

When we got back, attention was now on the Ruhr. One night operation *(1055 aircraft dropped 4538 tons of bombs, 90% high explosive, as fire bombing raids earlier in the war had burned much of the city. 5 Lancasters and 3 Halifaxes lost.)* and one daylight

[1] **1657 Heavy Conversion Unit.**

operation on Essen[1], which was still operating, even after all the bombing that had taken place. *(771 aircraft bombed sky markers due to heavy cloud cover. The raid became scattered but caused heavy damage to the Krupps steelworks. 2 Lancasters and 2 Halifaxes lost.)*

We got a bit early on target, and since the Navigator didn't have much to do he popped out to see how things were going and looking he could see this huge black cloud of flak in the sky, which we were heading for. He commented:

"Holy Christ!" he said, *"Have we got to go through that?"*

We said *"Yes!"*.

Back he went to his desk, closing his curtains. He didn't want to know anymore.

We did the same to Cologne, one daylight operation *(733 aircraft in 2 waves caused very heavy damage in the Mulheim and Zollstock districts, including power station, harbour, and railway installations. 4 Halifaxes and 3 Lancasters lost*) and one night operation *(905 aircraft carried out an Oboe marked raid through cloud. Dropping 3431 tons of high explosives and 610 tons of incendiaries, massive damage was caused in the mainly residential areas of Braunsfeld, Lindenthal, Klettenberg, and Sulz. No aircraft lost.)*. Quite honestly, the daylight operations always seemed easier than the night operations.

You could see where you were going, you could see what was coming after you. None of them were easy, but I think it was much harder at night than what it was during the day. It seemed to be that way, anyway, at this stage in the war.

From the Cologne night operation we diverted again because as often happened in the Vale of York and north of the Vale of York industrial haze,

[1]**See "One Day in a Very Long War" by John Ellis, Chapter 19, for details on this raid.**

smog and everything blanketed out the airfields.

In fact it was apparently getting pretty grim everywhere over the U.K. We were diverted to a little airfield in Norfolk, Little Snoring. When the Wireless Operator got this he said:

"If this is somebody's idea of a joke, I don't appreciate it, there ain't no such place!"

But Blair had a look at his charts and said,

"There is, you know."

There is a Little Snoring, an RAF Station, so in we went and the fog was coming in off the North Sea quite rapidly. We made our approach on Little Snoring, but it was only 800 yards of runway and we were nowhere near touching down even half way along it. Opened up, full throttle, maximum boost, wheels up, off we went and round again.

But, it began to get rather dim down there and fog was drifting in.

The Skipper said:

"*We've got to get in this time, or we won't get in anywhere!"*

And of course fuel did not last forever.

Incidentally we were just given half an hour reserve of fuel. It was calculated what we needed to get to the target and back and just get half an hour reserve. You could cover 120 miles in half an hour, but it doesn't take in to account the amount used in the circuit or if you had to do an overshoot. So there wasn't a lot to spare really, but there was some.

Anyway, the Skipper put it down on the second attempt but we overshot the end of the runway. There was a fair sized overshoot area at the end of the runway that we ended up in, very muddy and messy. We couldn't shift the Lanc out, we were bogged down. A cheerful bunch of "Erks" arrived, turned up with all their gear.

"All right, don't worry, we will tow it out for you, go and get your meal."

So we left them to it and we went off.

This was a Mosquito airfield, they had half a dozen Mosquitoes, the bomber variety. These were the Mosquitoes that went to Berlin. They carried a 4,000lb bomb. They were in mourning, they had lost one the night before, one Mosquito.

I couldn't understand this, I thought about par for the course, I suppose.

"No", they said, *"We haven't lost an aircraft before, we never lose any on operations, just doesn't happen."*

They were very lucky, we reckoned on losing one aircraft on each operation, sometimes more than, but the average is about one. They were appalled when told this. But they treated us very well, they got the cook up out of his bed. This was about 2 o'clock in the morning. They cooked a marvellous meal, plenty of tea and coffee. They wanted to stay up all night talking, we were feeling rather weary. The Intelligence Officer debriefed us, of course, as far as he could and they were a very nice lot at Little Snoring, very pleasant. Little Snoring was seldom referred to by its full name of Little Snoring in the Mud.

8. Oberhausen, November 1944

1st November 1944. Operation was to Oberhausen, Ruhr Valley again, it was a "travel centre", lots of roads met at Oberhausen, so did lots of railways, communications centre.

(288 aircraft bombed through cloud. The bombing was scattered with only houses being hit. 3 Halifaxes and 1 Lancaster lost)

It wasn't too bad over the target, a bit of flak, which we missed. But we also missed a turning point by a few seconds, probably about 20 seconds, after we had left the target which, I suppose, put us slightly outside the bomber stream. There weren't many aircraft on this operation but we were attacked at about 18,000 feet.

There were two bursts from a night-fighter, one three-quarter rear, which raked us from the rear turret right up to just behind the mid-upper turret, and then came in behind and I thought he must have emptied his magazines. It went on for ages it seemed, a long time, this long, long, long burst. He must have been a bit too close to do complete damage, because you could see the cone of fire from the guns meeting, converging, in front of us.[1]

But, of course having said that, quite a number of shells hit the inner engines and other parts of the aircraft. First thing that happened was the starboard inner must have caught it, because that burst into flames but the "Graviner" extinguisher did work and put out the fire, I feathered it at the same time. A lot of things happened here. The Skipper seemed to have difficulty in controlling his end, but we had lost the intercom, we'd lost the blind flying panel, most of the other instruments had gone. Ron Cox shouted at me:

"I may not be able to hold it, Frank. You had better get your 'chutes on!"

[1] Frank later told that some of the cannon shells passed between his position and the pilot, Ron Cox, destroying many of the flying instruments.

So I told the Bomb Aimer, still down in the nose, we'd only just left the target:

"Get your 'chute on, Tony!" I yelled at him.

Tony, apparently, couldn't see. He was blinded by hydraulic oil. The pipes in the front turret had fractured and there was oil everywhere. Somehow he managed to pull the 'chute in the nose, it probably caught on jagged metal. It billowed out, started burning, like everything else was burning. The Nav's table was burning, his curtains were burning, everything that was combustible was burning.

We managed to get that out but poor old Tony was very upset, not having a 'chute now, very upset, so I said:

"We won't jump, Tony, we won't jump",

and I took my parachute off, which seemed to quieten him down a bit.[1] But a lot of things happened in a short space of time there.

I thought I had better go back and check on what things were like. Incidentally, the Nav had been hit, he'd passed out. He had been hit in the face, his oxygen mask was sort of buried in his face, but he came round from time to time. Once, when he came round, he asked for a fire extinguisher, which I took from the front of the aircraft, and he sprayed the leading edge of the starboard wing, which was burning. It had burst open and all the cables were burning there. He sprayed that and got himself burned a bit in the process, but he put it out. He brought his hand back inside and flopped down on his table again.

[1] Frank had previously stated that he further re-assured the bomb-aimer that if they did have to bail out, he would clip their parachute harnesses together and that they would jump out under a single parachute canopy. Obviously their chances of survival would have been slim.

I went back to see what I could find and the Mid Upper wasn't in his turret. He was on the floor with one leg hanging out of a very large hole in the floor

where the H2S was. It was just open. The Wireless Operator had been hit badly, only semiconscious. I pulled the Mid Upper back in, unconscious. I didn't know what the matter was with him. I couldn't see any serious injury, didn't seem to have been hit but obviously the detonators had been hit. His turret was just above the detonators to the H2S which you were supposed to detonate to destroy the H2S if you crashed or force landed anywhere in enemy territory to blow it up, highly secret and all that. But they had been hit, which had blown the H2S right off. The explosion had blown him up, apparently, I found out afterwards, had blown him up in to his turret and knocked him out and he had just flopped down.

I went to see if I could see the Rear Gunner, I couldn't see him. He was still in his turret. Well, I thought he was probably in a poor way and can't get out. Well, there's a handle, a dead man's handle they call it sometimes, which you could rotate the turret with by hand, but it had jammed. I couldn't move it; I had to leave him still in there and have a look at the Wireless Operator, who had been hit in the stomach, hand and arms, bleeding badly.

So I got the Ambulance kit out, which was quite a good Ambulance kit, lots of things, lots of stuff in it, including ampoules of morphine. He must have been in pain and I wanted to give him one but he wouldn't have it. So I cut his clothing off his arms and hands. He was in a bad way, you could see the bones of his hands, his arms were badly injured as well, and he had been hit in the face too. Couldn't see out of one eye. So I patched him up with the Ambulance kit to try and stop the blood flow, which at 18,000 feet, on a cold winter's night, temperatures in the low -50ºs, wasn't too difficult, it congeals.

Then I dashed back up to see how the Skipper was getting on.

As I did that the port inner caught on fire and once again the "Graviner" worked. Surprisingly really that it worked, but it did. So we put the fire out and feathered that one which just left the two outer. So we put those up to maximum cruising: 2650rpm, + 7 inches of supercharger boost.[1] Supposed to be for not more than half an hour, but not more.

Then the starboard outer started to act up, missing now and then. Fuel starvation, I suppose, and of course we couldn't hold height, not in a crippled aircraft. Whether the bomb doors were open or the flaps were drooping because of hydraulic failure, I couldn't really tell. Anyway, a lot of things happened.

The Mid Upper had come round and he didn't seem too bad, a bit dazed, and he said he would go and try to get the Rear Gunner out. I talked to him and the Wireless Operator again, who was obviously in pain and I wanted to give him morphine but he wouldn't have it, he said he didn't want it. He wanted to get the dinghy radio set out to get some interference through to let them know we were in trouble. So I left him at that.

By this time I had been able to talk to the Mid Upper, and I said:

"If we have to bale out and I am at the front, I will signal you with the torch just to bale out!"

Of course we had decided to head for Woodbridge after this happened, which wasn't our course at all but it was a long way across the North Sea and bailing out over the North Sea in wintertime you wouldn't stand much chance, a minute chance.

We couldn't hold height and gradually sank down. Jack couldn't get "Toaney"[2] out either, but he did get himself out shortly after and he was in a poor way,

[1]To compensate for the reduction of air density with altitude, engines were fitted with a supercharger. This sucked air in through a manifold and pressurised it before it entered the cylinders, increasing the combustion efficiency. This pressurisation was measured in inches of mercury.

[2]Rear Gunner, Flight Sergeant Raymond Toane.

too. Hit in the face, hands, feet, couldn't see very well. They stayed in the middle of the fuselage with their 'chutes on. I said:

“If we do have to bale out, if there's no alternative, I will try and signal you with a torch, from the front.”

Shortly after that the aircraft dropped into cloud at about 14,000 feet. We had lost 4,000 feet by that time, no instruments, crippled aircraft, we dropped into a spin very quickly. The rotations built up. It was very steep and tight, the G-force was tremendous. I was sitting on the end of the Navigator's bench actually and I couldn't move from there, but I did manage to get my torch out of my tool bag. I thought,

“Well, I don't think we are going to get out of this.”

I got ready to signal.

When we broke cloud we were about 5,000 feet, still spinning. I tried to signal but the torch wouldn’t work either so I couldn't.

Whether they could have moved and got out is a matter of conjecture, but you could see the moonlight patches on the sea going round and round and round and getting closer and closer. It looked all up,

“This is it, let’s get it over with quickly.”

The Skipper was yelling at me to help pull it out of this but I couldn't move. I passed out then. Obviously, he got it out in the denser air. The controls must have started to work better. When I came to we were going up like a rocket to 4,000 feet or thereabouts.

Obviously we would never make Woodbridge, so we turned back to the Dutch coast. With three badly wounded on board, we might be able to put it down on the seashore or the Dutch polders. That was the plan.

But below 4,000 feet the loss of height was far more gradual, we were still losing height but not at all that rapidly. So we crept along the Dutch coast and

somewhere near Zeebrugge they opened up with flak, anti-aircraft fire, all over the place. So we had to shear off out to sea. We had enough trouble as it was without that happening, crept back to the coast again but obviously we would never make it all the way down to where the occupying invading forces were. As we got to the Pas-du-Calais area we could see the searchlight cone over Manston, Manston was an emergency 'drome as well, like Woodbridge. They still had their emergency cone up, which surprised me. You could see it from our side of the Channel.

The Skipper said:

"Do you think we can make it to over there, Frank?"

I said:

"I don't know how much fuel is left, I'm really not sure, but it's worth a chance, it's worth trying!"

So we thought we'd try, so low level we went across the Channel. We crossed the Kent coast at a few hundred feet.

I had arranged with Tony, the Bomb Aimer, to fire off "reds" as we were going in to Manston. Showed him how to operate the "Very" pistol and where everything was but he couldn't see properly. Fortunately the Wireless Operator was conscious, and he showed Tony what he should do. So Tony was firing "reds" off on the approach.[1]

[1]Red flares were fired from a Very flare pistol to alert the emergency vehicles on the ground.

What the speed was on the approach, I had no idea. I managed to get the undercart down, with the emergency system, that came down. I don't think we used flaps, if I remember rightly. We had come in at a fair old rate, must have been 150 knots, I would think. The runway was three widths of a normal runway, divided into three. We were signalled to come in on the centre part, so we came in on that one. But as soon as the wheels touched down first the starboard folded, we had come in on the rims actually, both tyres had been hit.

The starboard folded, which swung us round and I was thrown all over the place. Then the port folded and off we went across onto the grass. Still got a terrific speed on, straight through a hedge into a field. Eventually came to rest. Of course the first thing was to get the wounded out in case it started to burn, though there could not have been much fuel. But, we were down at Manston. The emergency services were soon there, fire engines, ambulances, all the rest of it. They were very quick, but they had been warned by the "reds" being fired by Tony. The starboard outer was burning so I yelled at them to put some foam on it, but there wasn't much point really, there wasn't a lot to burn.

"U-Uncle" was looking in a very sorry state. Perspex missing, full of holes, fabric control surfaces were in tatters, non-existent in some cases. How it all held together in that spin. I don't know how the aircraft stood up to it - enormous strain, but it did. The three seriously wounded were carted off at 3.00 am by Air Ambulance to RAF Halton Hospital and we were given a room, but I don't think we felt like sleeping much, any of us. They had a look at Jack and Tony, the medical people bathed his eyes and that sort of thing and that was it.

I went down the next morning to have a look at the crashed aircraft. I ripped off a piece of elevator fabric, it was green, in tatters. I took this as a souvenir.[1]

[1]Frank still has the fabric, with a small remnant of the camouflage paint still to be seen in one corner. He had kept it, and other forces memorabilia, in a cardboard box in his loft for many years.

I found a 20mm shell, which hadn't exploded, in a pool of oil in the nose, I took that as a souvenir.[1]

We had to get the train back to Middleton St George and got a lot of frowns from our fellow passengers on the train, because we carried all our gear. We took it with us, couldn't leave it and it was badly blood stained. They didn't like it at all, but anyway we got back up there.

I was hobbling about for some days after this. Everybody has a crash position except the Pilot and the Flight Engineer. The Pilot, of course, was strapped in, the Flight Engineer was thrown about a bit, but I didn't report it. It seemed so minor after what happened to the others so I left it as it was.

We were to have quite a few problems on other operations but that was by far the worst. Some of what took place may not be in strict chronological order, particularly during the first hour following the attack. There were so many things to attend to and do but basically that was it.

I had some much-needed leave after that and I didn't fly again until December.

In recognition of this action, the following awards were made:

F/O Ronald L. Cox RCAF:	*Distinguished Flying Cross*
F/O Lyle W. Sitlington RCAF:	*Distinguished Flying Cross*
F/O S. Blair Lindsey RCAF:	*Distinguished Flying Cross*
Sgt (later P/O) John Wilkins RCAF:	*Distinguished Flying Cross*
FS Raymond A. Toane RCAF:	*Distinguished Flying Medal*
Sgt Frank Dennis RAF:	*Distinguished Flying Medal*[2]

[1]The Cannon shell, dated Aug 44, was eventually handed into the Police as his wife was reluctant to have live ordnance laying around the house.

[2]The circumstances relating to the award of the above decorations are in all particulars identical, with one exception: The Cross is awarded to Commissioned Officers with all Other Ranks being awarded the Medal.

The following account has been compiled using the information taken from the London Gazette of 26th January, 16th February and 26th October 1945, for the immediate awards, and the unpublished citations for non-immediate awards:

> *Flying Officer Cox, Sergeant Dennis, Flying Officer Lindsay, Flying Officer Sitlington, Flight Sergeant Toane, and Pilot Officer (then Sergeant) Wilkins were pilot, flight engineer, navigator, wireless operator, rear gunner, and mid upper gunner, respectively, of an aircraft detailed to attack Oberhausen one night in November 1944.*

The target was successfully bombed but, soon after leaving the area, the aircraft was hit and badly damaged by a hail of bullets and cannon fire from a Focke Wulf 190. Both inner engines were put out of action. The inter-communication and hydraulic systems were rendered unserviceable. Flying Officer Sitlington was wounded in the face and arm and Flight Sergeant Toane was injured in the face, the arms and leg. Pilot Officer Wilkins was blown out of his turret by the explosion. Flying Officer Lindsay was hit in the back; his face was also badly lacerated by fragments of shrapnel. A fire had started in the compartment but he was able to quell it by means of an extinguisher. Flying Officer Lindsay afterwards put out another fire which had started in the root of the starboard wing. In so doing his hands were badly burned. Soon afterwards he fainted through shock. Sergeant Dennis successfully put out flames with his hands and feet and then feathered the damaged port inner motor. Meanwhile, Flying Officer Sitlington had shown the greatest coolness and determination in successfully extinguishing a fire which had broken out in his cabin.

Flight Sergeant Toane had also proved his courage and resolution. Blood streamed down his face and, though almost blinded by it, he had remained in his turret to fire his guns at the attacker.

Sergeant Dennis proceeded to the rear of the aircraft, although the intercom was unserviceable and there was no oxygen supply available. He found Flying Officer Lindsay and Flying Officer Sitlington severely wounded by shell fragments. With the aid of Pilot Officer Wilkins, he very skilfully rendered first aid and dressed their wounds. The skill and speed with which Flying Officer Sitlington was bandaged undoubtedly resulted in saving his life.

A few moments later Sergeant Dennis was compelled to feather the starboard inner engine. Five minutes later, this engine broke into flames and Sergeant Dennis very quickly extinguished it with a Graviner system.

The enemy aircraft again came in with guns blazing. The bomber sustained further damage and with only two engines serviceable, bomb doors open, flaps down and elevators badly shot up, the aircraft became

very difficult to control and went into a spiral dive but Flying Officer Cox succeeded in levelling out after considerable height had been lost.

Flying Officer Lindsay soon revived when his injuries had been attended to and resumed his duties. Much of his equipment had been destroyed in the fight. Nevertheless, he navigated the aircraft to base. Sergeant Dennis very skilfully started the port inner engine windmilling, therefore restoring flying instruments, and acted as contact between Flying Officer Cox and Flying Officer Lindsay in order to keep the aircraft on course.

When Pilot Officer Wilkins recovered, noting that the fires were being attended to by other members of the crew, he returned to his turret, keeping a vigilant watch until the danger zone was passed.

Throughout the fight, Flying Officer Cox displayed great skill and coolness and he afterwards flew the severely damaged aircraft to the first available airfield. Here he effected a successful crash landing. On landing, Sergeant Dennis again showed exceptional skill in his assistance to Flying Officer Cox. The starboard undercarriage collapsed when touching down and the starboard outer engine burst into flames. Sergeant Dennis promptly extinguished the flames and then assisted with the wounded.

Flying Officer Cox displayed the finest qualities of courage and determination, and was awarded an Immediate DFC and promoted to Flight Lieutenant. Flying Officer Sitlington and Flight Sergeant Toane also proved themselves to be most worthy members of aircraft crew. Although injured and in much distress they showed the highest standard of devotion to duty, and were awarded an Immediate DFC and DFM, respectively. Pilot Officer Wilkins displayed courage, skill and great devotion to duty, he was awarded a Non-Immediate DFC. Flying Officer Lindsay displayed great courage, fortitude and resource in the face of most harassing circumstances, and was awarded an Immediate DFC. Sergeant Dennis showed throughout this incident the greatest courage, skill and coolness, and was awarded a Non-Immediate DFM and battlefield commission to the rank of Flying Officer, in recognition of this action.

Oberhausen: a footnote.

We had an intelligence room on the station and aircrew were encouraged to use it. I used to go up there quite often and read all the reports. Because all the conversations between Ground Control and aircraft were recorded and typed up. So you could see what happened on that particular night.

On the night we were "clobbered" there was some information given to a night-fighter 'drome to take off and search for an aircraft flying at about 18,000 feet heading on a certain heading west, due west and investigate what it was. Well it must have been us! It said "Locate and shoot it down". Well at that time we were losing height into cloud. So when he got there we weren't, fortunately, and he didn't locate us. I was tempted to keep that report but I didn't as I thought others would need to read it, and it was definitely an FW-190.[1]

[1]Ongoing research indicates that this may not, in fact, be the case. Luftwaffe records reveal that 12 interceptions resulted in 8 aircraft claimed by night-fighters during the raid (by Me-110 equipped units). Bomber Command records show 7 aircraft losses (six Halifaxes and one Lancaster shot down and a single aircraft written off on crash-landing). When comparing the details of the night-fighter claims (time, heights, and location) to the details of the attack on VR-U, the closest matches are an unknown crew from Staffel 6, NachtJagerGruppe 2, or ObLt Kurt Matzak of Staffel 4, NachtJagerGruppe 1. However, it must be remembered that surviving Luftwaffe records only hold details on kills, not claims for damaged craft or probable kills. No claims were made by FW-190 equipped units that night, but in the absence of clear evidence, no conclusions should be drawn.

9. December 1944, and into the Final Year of War

We started training again.

Jack was fully fit then after his concussion so he rejoined,[1] we got a new Rear Gunner, Pete Wiens. He was the sole survivor of a Stirling crash. He was the Rear Gunner in his turret, which broke off the aircraft but the rest of them were killed in the crash[2].

So we had a crew, a scratch crew of sorts. Some of us stood in for missing crewmembers. I was classified as a spare engineer and sometimes I had to attend briefings. If you weren't immediately required to stand in for somebody else then you had to go to your room and lock yourself in, because you knew exactly were they were going and when, the route they were taking, everything. You had all the vital information, so you had to isolate yourself, you weren't supposed to emerge until after the target had been reached and then you could come out. I did that two or three times.

I did fly one operation as a spare engineer, you weren't very welcome really. Superstition had it that if there was someone not a regular member of the crew flying in that operation, on that operation you would go down. It often did happen actually when a spare was flying with a crew.

The trip I did was to Cologne, but I knew the crew very well because they arrived there when we did or just before.

(136 aircraft attacked the Nippes marshalling yard, which were supporting the German Ardennes offensive. the target was cloud covered and only a few bombs hit the railway yards, but destroyed 40 wagons, a repair workshop and several railway lines. No aircraft lost)

[1] **Due to their injuries, Ray Toane, Lyle Sitlington and Blair Lindsay never flew again.**

[2] **Sgt Wiens was actually one of 3 survivors of the crashlanding of Lancaster KB708 at Boscombe Down, following the raid of 25/26 August at the Opel factory at Russelheim. F/O Milner RCAF, Sgt Trotman RAF, F/O Kischner RCAF, and P/O Anderson RCAF were killed when the aircraft crashed due to fuel starvation when overshooting.**

But I knew them very well and I knew the Flight Engineer very well, I was replacing, chap named Roper. But the Bomb Aimer, Tony, he stood in with another crew and this was a trip to Hemmingstedt.

(Hemmingstedt was raided on 20th March 1945. 166 Lancasters bombed the Deutsche Erdoel refinery. 1 Lancaster lost.)

Nearby was a night-fighter base and 419 were detailed to bomb this night-fighter base from 6,000 feet, in range of light flak. He didn't come back and is buried in the military cemetery near Hamburg.

(VR-P, KB786, piloted by F/O R.W.Millar, is believed to have been attacked by a nightfighter[1], only one member of the crew, Flt Sgt J.W. Aitken, survived.)

Strangely enough, Tony was the only married member of our crew. He was a little bit older and he was married and I think had some children as well.

(I tried to contact his family when I was staying with my sister in Chatham, Ontario. His name was Palanek, Tony Palanek, and he was known, all the family was known in Chatham. There was a Doctor and a sister but the only one surviving was down in Florida on holiday, so I didn't contact any of them.)

As a scratch crew we did operations on Opladen *(328 aircraft bombed the railway marshalling yards. 2 Lancasters lost),* Gelsenkirchen *(346 aircraft attacked the oil refinery by the use of Oboe Sky Markers through thick cloud. 300 high explosive bombs fell within the oil-plant with another 3198 bombs falling into Schloven and Buer, causing much property and some industrial damage),* Nuremberg and Hanau, near Frankfurt. That was during December and part of January[2].

[1]Probably by Hptm. Barte, Kommandeur of III,NachtJagerGruppe 3. The aircraft crashed at Odderade, some 12km southeast of Heide.

[2]Christmas 1944 was marked, as is traditional in the armed forces, by the junior ranks being served their dinner by the officers and NCOs. One of the WAAF officers, with whom Frank had become friendly, had previously said that she would have liked to have been a Flight Engineer. Just before going out to serve the meals to the airmen they swapped tunics and, for the day, Frank was an officer. He admits that he faced a great deal of good-natured banter, but the incident turned out to be rather prophetic, given the later turn of events.

I think Nuremberg was tough as it always was heavily defended target.

(521 aircraft carried out a very successful attack, with effective Pathfinder marking under a rising full moon. The centre of the city was destroyed. 4640 houses, and 415 industrial buildings were destroyed, in a near-perfect example of area bombing. 4 Lancasters lost, 2 crashed in France)

Sometimes difficult to find as it lies in a valley, we pranged it quite well, I think. A lot of heavy flak, and nightfighters were out. It was at Nuremberg that a lot of night-fighters were out before we reached the target. So they must have suspected were we were going despite all the dog-legging to try and confuse them, but they were there.

Normally you would not see a nightfighter over the target; they would not go into their own flak, probably wise. There was an Me-163 that had just been introduced into service. I saw this -163 on the starboard side. Below us there were some Halifaxes, four of the Halifaxes, quite close. You had to get over a target that's being hit and, particularly with incendiaries, even at 20,000 feet it's still quite light. You could see this -163 gliding down, looking for a target to knock off. But they had seen him first; the gunners on those Halifaxes had seen him. They all opened up at once and he must have been carrying some hydrogen peroxide fuel because he just disappeared in a sheet of flame, gone.[1]

They didn't have any choice, that's the way they attacked. They rocketed up to 30,000 feet and glide down and pick an aircraft up either near or over the target, which was what he was trying to do.

Nuremberg was a long way from Middleton St George. It was a long trip. We joined the circuit coming into land, instructed to land on the short runway. Someone had pranged on the main runway. So we were coming in on the short runway. In front of us was an aircraft, it was the "Ruhr Express". Apparently they hadn't got any brakes. They had been hit over the target and no brakes. True to the "Ruhr Express" they had brought back two cans of incendiaries, which they couldn't release.

[1]**This incident is included in "Reap the Whirlwind" by Spencer Dunmore.**

Normally if you get a hang up you release manually on the way back. They tried but nothing worked. Couldn't get rid of them. No brakes and the contractor working on the airfield had left his plant at the end of this runway, which the "Ruhr Express" went straight into and, of course, up she went.

The crew managed to get out without serious injury. We had to overshoot, we couldn't get in there so, wheels up, max revs and boost and around to join the circuit again, waiting instructions to land.

As we passed over we could see people diving out of the escape hatches. They all got out without serious injury, though one broke his arm as he fell on to something as he dived out. That was it. We were airborne for nine hours so

we were glad to get down, got permission to land and went in there. Couldn't have been a lot of fuel left on it after that trip.[1]

But there was all hell let loose the next day at Middleton St George.

The idea was that the "Ruhr Express" would be put on easy targets until it got to 50 operations up, which it didn't have far to go actually. Then it was going back to Canada to be put on display, eventually in a museum and of course it couldn't go back now.

The top brass were all out for blood. The Squadron Commander, Station Commander, Group Commander were all assembled. They were very annoyed that this had happened, but what could you do? They had asked for an all-out effort on Nuremberg and to keep the Squadron numbers up they had to send "Ruhr Express". But they were very upset about it, heads must roll, strips must be torn off, all this sort of thing. But there wasn't much alternative to it as far as I could see.

That's what happened to "Ruhr Express".

[1]**This incident is included in "Reap the Whirlwind", with the 'official' version being included in "Goosepool" by Stanley Howes.**

One more trip with Ron Cox, our Skipper. This was a long one; this was the one to Hanau, near Frankfurt, down in Southern Germany.

(482 aircraft aimed at the railway junction, with bombs spreading into the centre of the town. Approximately 40% of Hanau was destroyed. 4 Halifaxes and 2 Lancasters lost.)

He began to look quite ill, the strain was telling, really very tired. He suffered from nasal trouble, couldn't breathe very well, particularly when he had been on operations. Of course you were on oxygen most of the time, it was a sort of sinus trouble, which was aggravated by flying on ops.

So the M.O. picked him out in the Mess after that trip and said:

"I suggest you go on leave, young man - to Canada for a while, and have a rest."

So that broke the crew up, actually we were all odd-bods really after that.

Towards the end of 1944 some new crews arrived on the station with Flight Engineers who had trained and qualified as pilots. Apparently, there began to be a surplus of pilots and those who deemed suitable for Flight Engineers and Wireless Operators and were willing to be trained as Flight Engineers, which must have started way back in 1944 I suppose, were trained as Flight Engineers, were quite pleased to be coming onto the Squadron to be going on operations.

When four engined aircraft began to arrive in Bomber Command it was hoped that there would be sufficient ground crew from the engineering trades, that is fitters, mechanics, riggers etc, who would be willing to train as Flight Engineers. But most of these people were serving on Squadrons or Bomber Training Units, and were quite aware of the heavy losses suffered by the squadrons and so the majority were not very keen. But a few did, some ground crew did, including one or two Canadian ground crew did actually. But there weren't enough, which is why direct entrants, as we were called, were taken.

Incidentally all aircrew were volunteers, no one was made to fly, I was in a reserved occupation and the only way to get out of this reserved occupation was to volunteer for aircrew or the Royal Navy Submarine Service. So that's how I was able to leave. But there was a shortage of Flight Engineers apparently, so these chaps had been welcomed. Once you had volunteered it wasn't easy to reverse it, you were expected to go through with it. There was a way out but you lost your rank, weren't allowed to wear your brevet, taken down to AC2[1]. In one or two cases I heard this was done in public, which was a terrible thing because these people had actually gone through a lot of strain. The Canadians and, I think, the RAAF[2] looked after their own, as in the case of Ron, he had become unfit to fly and was a danger.

One of these retrained pilots who came onto our Squadron I got to know quite well, Sgt Reed, a nice chap. I met him once on a train he had been on leave, and so had I and were going back up to Darlington to join the Squadron again. We got to know each other quite well but he went down on one of his early operations, actually didn't last long.

(Strangely enough several years later when I was a schoolmaster a colleague in the school where I taught, a chap called Al Reed, told me his brother had been a Flight Engineer, he had been a pilot and retrained as a Flight Engineer. I knew who he was talking about straight away, strangely enough. No mistaking the fact that this was the Sgt Reed I knew. I told what I knew about his brother, but towards the end of our conversation, obviously he was very upset. He was very fond of his elder brother, apparently. Very upset just talking about it and he didn't choose to talk about it after that which was understandable, I suppose.)

[1]Aircraftsman Second Class, the lowest rank in the Air Force.
[2]Royal Australian Air Force.

After the Skipper, Ron Cox, was sent home what remained of the crew was split up and I was allocated to a new crew arriving on the Squadron skippered by F/O MacNeill who, for some reason or other, were without a flight engineer. They did have one but what happened to him I don't know. Went sick probably. They were a young crew, a pleasant lot. We did some training flights and were ready for operations.

The next weekend, because of atrocious weather over the whole of the country, the whole of Bomber Command was stood down, which was a very rare occurrence and we were told we could leave the station until Sunday evening, which was also something which rarely, if ever, happened.

I said that I thought I would pop off home to Peterborough, catch the train at Darlington straight down the East Coast Line to Peterborough. I asked what

they were going to do and they said they would stay on the station and take it easy. I said,

"Okay, see you Sunday evening."

On my return on Sunday someone in the Mess said:

"Pity about your crew, Frank."

So I said:

"Why, what have they been up to, in trouble with the Law in Stockton or Darlington?"

"No, no", they said, *"They went missing on ops on Saturday night!"*

"But there weren't any ops, we were stood down!"

Well, apparently the Russians needed some help in Eastern Europe and they got Bomber Command to operate as many crews together as possible for a raid on Dessau, it turned out.

(7th March 1945. 531 aircraft carried out a devastating attack on this new target in Eastern Germany. 18 Lancasters lost.)

Which was quite a long trip. It was their first trip with a spare Flight Engineer, many hours over enemy territory in atrocious weather. The chances weren't very good but theirs were reduced, it wasn't surprising they didn't come back, in actual fact.[1]

Would it have made any difference if I had been there instead of the spare Flight Engineer? I often wondered. It may have done, I had done quite a few ops by then. We were a crew. I don't know. But two of that crew did survive,

one as a POW, one escaped and got through to friendly territory, but the Flight Engineer didn't apparently. So that was very sad. [2]

(VR-K, KB797, was lost. There is no information on what happened other than that the Wireless Operator, Flt Sgt H.O.Cole became a POW and the Mid-Upper Gunner, Sgt D.C.Jamieson evaded capture and reached the advancing allied front line. F/O B.T.MacNeill, F/O W.E.Short, Sgt E.V.Beach, Sgt R.L.Mitchell, and Sgt R.T. Wilson have no known graves and are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial)

[1]The Nachtjager (Luftwaffe nightfighter force) claimed 41 Abschusse (kills), on the two raids being carried out during this night. There are two possible claimants for shooting down KB797 over the centre of Dessau at around 22:07 hours: either Oblt Peter Spoden of Staffel 6, NachtjagerGruppe 6, or Oblt Erich Jung of Staffel 5, NachtJagerGruppe 2. Both were experienced Nachtexperte.

[2]Unlike his earlier crew, Frank has no photographs of his new crew and once sadly admitted that he could no longer remember what they looked like.

10. 427 Squadron. Leeming.

I was crew-less once again and was then posted to 427 Squadron at Leeming and I was checked out by Squadron Leader Deegan and he asked me to join F/Lt Schmitt's crew

They were all second tour bods and all commissioned as I was then, by the way. I didn't know that I'd been commissioned but I met one of the admin people from Middleton St George in Darlington, the Sergeant in charge of admin at Middleton St George and he said:

"Congratulations, Frank, on your commission."

"What are you talking about?"

"Yes, you're commissioned now. Congratulations, Frank, you're a Pilot Officer now, you're commissioned."

I didn't know, but that's how things were, the British Flight Engineers in the Canadian squadron's bomber crews were all but forgotten about. So we were actually an all commissioned crew in that case, which was rather rare. In fact, I don't know of any other crew that was all commissioned, certainly not on 427 there weren't, or 419 for that matter, most unusual.

The rest of the crew had all flown, most of them, with Schmitt on his first tour on Wellingtons from Croft, which was a satellite of Middleton St George. He was known as "*Indian*" Schmitt[1], because he was a half-breed, in actual fact his mother was a pure bred Indian and his father was a German immigrant to Canada and he had got two gold teeth and a sort of "pallor", complexion, about him in actual fact. But he was a pre-war "Bush" pilot in British Columbia and the Yukon Territories.

[1] Real name: William Henry Schmitt.

He was probably the best pilot I flew with in actual fact. It was a revelation flying with him, very competent, very skilful, quite fearless, and half mad, that was *Indian* Schmitt! I think he did have a Flight Engineer when they went through Heavy Conversion Unit and I was told the Flight Engineer refused to fly with him again, that's how I got to be with F/Lt Schmitt DFC.

You can quite often judge a pilot's confidence on the way he taxied an aircraft on the weaving and winding perimeter track. He could do it just taxiing round at about 30 knots, manoeuvring with the two outer engines. He appeared to be part of the aircraft, knew what he could do, very confident in his own capabilities and he had every right to be. He was first class actually. It doesn't sound so spectacular being able to do that but it was actually. Most pilots had to use brakes and weaved and stopped and started a bit, moved around in jerks but he did it in no time at all, no problem at that, and his skills in the air were no less spectacular. As I was to find out to my cost. After a flight involving air to air firing by the gunners and bombing practice we returned to Leeming and as we taxied back he said:

"I think we'll practice some circuits and bumps."

He was obviously the last person who needed any sort of flying practice. I suppose I should have realised this at the time that something was afoot that I wasn't aware of. At this point the rest of the crew all got out, which just left the Pilot and Flight Engineer flying a Lanc, against 6 Group rules, this is. You must have at least Pilot, Flight Engineer, Navigator and Wireless Operator, that was the rule, but there were just two of us. That didn't make any difference to *Indian* Schmitt. As we taxied back for take off he was telling me that when he was at Croft he could take a Wellington off and turn it inside the perimeter track, at the end of the runway. That would take some doing, I can't see that happening myself. He said:

"I want to see if I can do the same with a Lanc!"

I thought *"Oh my God!"*

He said: *"Now, Max Revs plus Max Boost, of course, 10 degrees of flap will do fine. The moment we leave the deck get those wheels up, must get them up straight away, don't hesitate a second."*

So I did as I was told. At the end of the runway, he whipped it round just off the deck in a vertical bank. You could look down and the wing wasn't that far off the deck. The old Lanc began to shake and vibrate. I thought

"My God, we shall be going in here, we're not far from the stall".

But he got round safely. He didn't turn inside the perimeter track but just outside of that round the old A1. Then he turned inside that which I thought was pretty good. I think some of the dispersals crossed the A1 at Leeming, but there wasn't a lot to spare. But the control tower saw this and called:

"D-Dog, D-Dog, advise you to save aerobatics until you get some altitude."

He swore back down over the intercom to the control tower[1], where there's WAAFs in this. I thought,

"Oh, my goodness."

He said:

"Never mind, I tell you what, when I was at Wombleton[2] we used to have a lot of fun. I know everybody there, we'll go and have a bit of fun there."

So off we go over the York moors at nought feet to Wombleton, sheep going in every direction. When we got to Wombleton and he starts to pretend he's a

[1]Frank mouthed "F*-'em" at this point during the interview.**

[2]1659 Heavy Conversion Unit used Wombleton as a satellite airfield.

Spitfire going behind these Halifaxes in the circuit going:

"TAT, TAT, TAT, TAT"

Then he starts doing these vertical banks round the control tower, very low. You could look into the tower and some old boy came out on to the veranda shaking his fist at us. Of course, *Indian* could see this chap:

"Christ! I don't know him, we'd better get off."

So, off again back home. When we were back at Leeming, they had heard all about this and we were hauled into the Squadron Commander's office, for a right telling off. He said:

"I blame you, Dennis, for this!"

I said: *"It had nothing to do with me, I wasn't flying the thing."*

He said: *"When everybody else got out, you should have got out! He couldn't have flown it then, could he?"*

"Well, that's right but I didn't know what he was going to do."

"You should have known! Anyway, the pair of you will go to the Sheffield Aircrew Disciplinary School[1] *this weekend."*

I thought, I don't know about that.

"Anyway, we will deal with that tomorrow."

[1]**The Aircrew Correction Centre at RAF Norton, on the outskirts of Sheffield, was viewed with universal distaste by serving aircrew.**

Tomorrow came, operations on Bremen, all out effort 6 Group. So he said to me and *Indian*:

"You'd better put up a good show today. If you do put up a good show then we will forget about Sheffield."

It was a daylight on Bremen.

(767 aircraft bombed the south-eastern suburbs in preparation for the advance by the British XXX Corps, two days later. The bombing was halted by the Master Bomber due to target obscuration by cloud, and by smoke and dust.)

We were flying at about 17,000 feet, but as mad as ever apparently, he was stripped down to his underwear in his flying boots, having a smoke. The place reeked of aviation spirit. I can understand the other Engineer refusing to fly with him, but he could really fly. He could bring the old Lanc in so you didn't even know you were down, no bumping. He could grease it in every time. We weren't sent to Sheffield after that.

We did one more operation after that, which was to the Wangerooge Islands. They were holding out and the Navy or transports couldn't get in to the North

German ports. The islands were smothered in guns. These Wangerooge Islands covered the entrances to all the ports and they were protected, holding out and they weren't going to give up. So, could Bomber Command blast them out? Well, it was one of the last operations of the war, actually I think the whole of 6 Group and a part of 4 Group were sent off on this.

(482 aircraft bombed the coastal batteries on this Frisian island. The bombing was accurate until smoke and dust obscured the target area. The area was heavily hit but the guns were hardly damaged. 5 Halifaxes and 2 Lancasters lost - 6 in collisions.)

There was a fair amount of flak, they were well armed down there, plenty of anti-aircraft guns. The problem was the targets were very small and you had to converge on to the bombing run and as they did some aircraft got caught in another's slipstream, which you tried to avoid whenever possible and I saw four go down, Halifaxes, go down on this trip. I only saw 'chutes from one of them. Two were burning on the sea, which I thought was terribly sad on one of the last operations of the war. To go down on a target like this in daylight, great shame. Well they did, and I came back and that was my last operation of the war.

11. At War's End.

I think actually the war finished a few days after that, 4 or 5 days after that, in early May. We thought, right after peace was declared, as they say, we thought we would have a celebration in the Mess. I was talking about this to the Skipper and he said:

"We're not having any celebration, not tomorrow."

I said: *"Why not? The War's over, no ops."*

"Briefing tomorrow morning 7:30. Be there."

I said, *"Where the heck are we going?"*

"We're going to pick up some very sick POWs on an airfield near Amiens in Northern France."[1]

They had got to be flown back quickly. So we would be up at six, briefing and off we went. The airfield, it had been battered. Filled in shell holes, bomb holes all over the place. It was only a short runway, we managed to get down but I was having trouble with the port outer. One of the things you have to do on the downwind leg of the circuit in a Lanc is 10-15 degrees flap, undercart down, little more flap, open radiator shutters. Because, just in case you need to overshoot, might need full revs and boost. This was a hot day and the engine temp on the port outer was up. I thought,

"Strange, why should that one be up?",

open radiators again, but no, it still started to climb. In a Lanc if you put your

[1]Juvincourt, as Part of Operation Exodus, the repatriation of Allied Prisoners of War, which had begun on 2nd May 1945.

head right up in the turret you can look out and see the whole of the port-outer and the radiator shutters were closed, so we throttled that one back and went in on three and a half, no trouble with that.

But I wasn't happy with taking off with 20 sick people on board, on a short runway, on a hot day, with an engine that could seize. Because you need maximum revs and boost, even with no bombs on, on a short runway.

"No, can't do it, Indian."

So we got a lift back to Manston with another aircraft and brought our ground crew back the next day, who scrounged some trolleys and things from somewhere or other. Couldn't fix it, but we can wire it open, so it stays open. Fair enough, and we flew it back like that actually, with the problem.

Then we did a lot of cross-countries, French and German cross-countries, showing the flag really[1]. We were taking a lot of photographic work, German targets and such. During that the rest of 6 Group, except 427, flew back to Canada.

Then after that we cleared up our bomb dump, some of the bombs had been stored a long time. Both incendiaries and all kinds of H.E. Bombs. They were too dangerous to transport by road or rail. They had to be taken and dumped in the Irish Sea or North Sea in certain areas[2]. We had to dump them over deep water, we did a good job on Leeming, so good that we were then told that we had to do the same thing with the other 6 Group 'dromes where bombs were stored. So we went back to Middleton St George one day, cleared there all out and one or two others such as Croft, Tholthorpe, East Moor, Skipton on Swale, but we cleared the bombs. "Garbage Runs", as we called them, went on

[1]If the route passed the memorial to the Canadian fallen of the Great War, on the summit of Vimy Ridge in Northern France, it became customary to fly past at low level, and to dip wings in salute.
[2]Operation Wastage.

through June, July and August. Interspersed with more cross-countries and a bit of formation flying.

Schmitt and his crew, since they were second tour, they were sent home early in June. I flew with many other crews. I crewed up with a W/O Phil Wright, who hadn't got a Flight Engineer and he asked for me. I flew with him once on
one of these Garbage Runs and he said:

"I haven't got a proper Flight Engineer. Would you join my crew as a Flight Engineer?"

I said: *"Yes, fine."*

It didn't matter that he was a Warrant Officer and I was a Pilot Officer, when he was airborne he was Captain. It didn't matter if a Group Captain was there, the Pilot was the Skipper.

He was also a pre-war aviator, a Sergeant Pilot in the RCAF pre-war. So good that when war broke out, he was made an instructor and he was an instructor on the Empire Air Training Scheme[1] as they called it. But he was desperate to get on ops before the end of the war. Eventually they released him, but he didn't quite make it, missed it by about a month. He was a good pilot, did everything by the book. But he'd had so much flying he was fed up with piloting. So he would hand over the aircraft to me at the earliest opportunity.

The first time he did it he said to me:

"You know how the bloody thing works, so you fly it. Make sure I haven't got to fill in a log or change tanks or anything like that. I will have a kip. Come on, you take over."

[1]The scheme, based in Canada, by which many aircrew were trained to fly.

So I flew it. Mind you when we weren't flying, Flight Engineers had to do a fair amount of training on Link Trainers[1], that was all logged as well. I had taken over once or twice before anyway.

The first time he did this I took over we were on a cross-country up in Scotland, usual summer cumulus about. I thought,

"I'll get you."

We were flying at about 5 or 6,000 feet, carefully did a weave over one of these summer cumulus and of course there's still lift coming off the top of it, you fly through this strong thermal at 200 knots and bang!

Of course he jumped up:

"What the hell! You daft bugger, I told you not to wake me up. Right, tell me how you feather an engine."

So I explained how to feather an engine.

"Okay, then I'd like to feather the starboard inner."

To which I said: *"I don't think that you should."*

"Why not?"

"Well, it drives the alternator and we really need that, as well as other ancillaries, especially the alternator."

"Okay, what about the starboard outer?" he asked.

"Right, that only operates the hydraulics and things like that."

[1]An early, very basic, simulator for teaching flying, mainly on instruments.

"Right then," he said, *" I am going to feather that and you are going to trim the aircraft to fly straight and level, Okay?"*

"Oh…okay."

We did that and I trimmed it, he said:

"What about if I feather another?"

I said, *"If you are going to feather another* ***you'd*** *better come here and take over."*

"What about un-feathering this one then, un-feather the starboard outer?"

I said: *"You better let me do that actually."*

Because you cannot make mistakes, you've got to catch it right. You have to set the revs and the boost just right and ease it up. If you don't do that it can overspeed. So he came and took over but he did like to experiment, just to liven things up a bit. One of the things he practised was a 3-engined overshoot and this aircraft wasn't a very good one on the squadron, it was "V-Victor"[1] wasn't up to par and actually when we did this overshoot on 3 engines and opened up the three throttles to pull away she wouldn't take it. So we had to rapidly unfeather that engine to give us the power we wanted, some of them were ropey like that.

What he did want to do once, when were going to fly over Carnaby[2] was;

"What about we fly it on two engines?"

[1]Lancaster B.III NX550.

[2]Carnaby, near Bridlington, was one of three emergency landing sites (the others being Woodbridge in Suffolk and Manston in Kent), built with runways three times the normal width.

" Yes, that's okay," I said, and we tried it out.

"Well alright, on two engines at max cruising, it can hold height. So, what about on one?"

I said: *"What about on one?"*

"Will it hold height on one?"

"I don't think so, not at Max cruising."

So he said: *"We can try it but we will be over Carnaby, just in case there's any trouble."*

Well we didn't tell the gunners and by the time we had two feathered, they'd got their `chutes on, the door open and were ready to jump. On one at that altitude, about 10,000 feet, it lost about 100 feet a minute but this was fairly lightly loaded.

Talking of this, *Indian* Schmitt was the only pilot I flew with who would stall an aircraft deliberately, stall a Lanc and even he made sure he was at about 6,000 feet before he did it. The first time he did it of course one wasn't quite ready for this, dropped like a stone. I wasn't ready for it, signal cartridges all over the place, and this Lanc had got a full fuel load - that's nearly 2,200 gallons, weighing 10 tons. Still all the ammunition on but no bombs and he needed most of that 6,000 feet to recover.

He said: *"We will go up and do it again. I want to show you something."*

Though this was Schmitt and when we reached 6,000 feet and throttled back,

"Now look." he said[1] ,*"No joy, no joy, nothing at all."*

[1]**Frank demonstrated moving the wheel on the control column without effect.**

But there I was ready for him and he gathered speed but it takes an awful long time for him to pull out. In a Lanc if you were toppled by a slipstream, for

instance, the Lanc always went in to a dive with a tendency to go into a spin. It took a lot of height getting out of this dive, an awful lot of height. Whereas in a Halifax, we were toppled once, somehow in a Halifax it gets itself out.

Pulls itself out quite easily without any trim to do it, it had got that inherent stability which the Lanc hadn't necessarily got. Although the Lancaster was a better aircraft in my estimation.

But that's just one way of showing the differences.

In this time with Phil Wright, we did a trip down to Italy to fly the 8th Army back[1]. We either flew in to Pomigliano near Naples or Bari by the Adriatic Sea and fly back. Below 6,000 feet on the way back. Of course, Phil Wright thought this was terribly boring, all this low flying stuff. I flew it for about 5 hours, he flew it for 4, which he was quite happy with. He used to go back and chat to the Army chaps, he'd introduce himself:

"I am the skipper, the pilot."

"Who's flying this thing then?"

"Oh, the Flight Engineer, it's all right, he's alright."

I quite enjoyed it.

He would take us over the Apennines. As we approached the west cost of Italy, I would take over and take it across to the Isle of Elba. That's where you would turn due west, past the tip of Corsica heading for the French coast.

[1]74,000 servicemen were returned to the UK by Operation Dodge. Carried in passenger loads of 20 at a time, they sat where they could in the fuselage, with their kit being loaded onto panniers secured in the bomb-bay.

Turn about 340º north up the Rhone Valley, quite near Paris. Then he would take over.

We had been flying on main tanks and I had to change them over. You should never drain tanks on a Lanc, because two engines run off one tank and if you drained a tank, then two engines on one side would both cut. But if you were smart, you could catch it and whip it over to No.2 Tank without any loss of power. Just catch it, providing both sides don't drain at the same time. I took a chance on that even though it said empty, you could fly for another half an hour. That would drain it completely, then whip it over. So when we landed in Norfolk (I can't remember the name of the airfield but it will be in my logbook), you had to go to this airfield[1] to drop off your passengers and also for Customs.

It was well equipped for Customs. They suspected some contraband would be brought in, as it was of course. You could buy lovely wallets, even Schnapps, Chianti was very popular, all in rafeter bottles and you would buy a basket, strap it to the main spar, climb up the undercarriage nacelle, there was a space there, you would lash it to the main spar. It kept beautifully there and the Customs wouldn't look up there.

If you hadn't got to refuel you could get off without much delay, whereas if you had to refuel you could be kept waiting for ages. So we went off and got back at a reasonable time but we were all very weary and somehow we'd overlooked, we hadn't radioed "QDM" to get the barometric pressure at base[2]. It was dark by the time we got there and we were just above the deck when we

[1]Tibenham airfield, former base of the USAAF 445th Bombardment Group operating B-24 Liberators, now home of the Norfolk Gliding Club.

[2]This procedure allows the altimeter to be set to the landing airfield air pressure. This ensures that the altimeter will display zero altitude at touchdown elevation at the airfield. This is particularly important if the local air pressure is lower than that of the take-off point, as the instrument will still be displaying a safe altitude when the aircraft is actually dangerously low. When flying on instruments at night, such an oversight could easily have fatal consequences.

saw the approach lights and lost the trailing aerial, about 300 feet of it, as the Wireless Operator tried to get "QDM" before we landed and he had to winch in the aerial, which he didn't manage. Wasn't my job to remind anyone about

the "QDM" but there you were. But that was quite frightening when you think about it as we could have just flown into the ground.

12. My Last Flight.

I did some training of Canadian Flight Engineers, who had turned up from somewhere, who hadn't flown Lancasters before. Then it was time for them to depart and for me. We said our goodbyes. I had my last flight.

Squadron Leader Deegan, he was still there, the bloke I met when I first went there and he was still there, and he wanted to train one pilot in night flying, so we were in the station cinema watching a film and he said:

"Frank, I'm flying tomorrow night. Can you join me with another pilot? I want to do some training, night flying."

So I said: *"Yes, okay, fair enough."*

So we did a couple of hours, take off and landings, instruments, that sort of stuff. That was it. That was the last flight[1]. Then, 1st November, off I went.[2]

[1]On 4th June 2005, at the R.A.F. Middleton St.George reunion, held each year at the former bomber base, now Durham Tees Valley Airport, the R.A.F. Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster B.I PA474 landed, giving ex-wartime aircrew the opportunity, once again, to look around the aircraft in which they had served. Frank said that the smell inside the fuselage was just as he remembered, but the main spar running across the fuselage was more awkward to negotiate than he recalled.

[2]On 26th October 1944 the non-immediate award of Frank Dennis' DFM was published in the London Gazette. He was unaware of this and did not know that the award had been made until he was informed by two fellow Flight Engineers, whose award of the DFC, along with his DFM, were published in "Canada's Weekly" of 2nd November 1945. He retained the copy of the magazine, still clearly stamped "P.M.C. OFFICER'S MESS, R.A.F STATION LEEMING".

The R.A.F. had no record of Frank's service following his posting to No 6 (R.C.A.F.) Group, Bomber Command. He was told, more than once, that it had been assumed that he had been killed in action.

13. November 1945.

I got a spot of leave actually after all that, nine days. I went home. For once I didn't have to see all my relatives who wanted to see me. It wasn't so important then. So I went to a dance in the Town Hall on the 1st November and met a very pretty brunette. Across a crowded room, you know how it happens, and she thought I was a Canadian because I had been with them fifteen, sixteen months by then flying with them. We got on very well and married eighteen months later, 1947 that would have been.

In between time I had a series of tests, adaptability tests, intelligence tests, God knows what. For some reason based on these they said:

"We think you would make a good Equipment Officer."

I said: *"Yes, okay."*

"We're going to send you on a six week course at Bicester. We see you come from Peterborough?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Well you will have to move around a bit to learn the job fully, but as soon as we can we will get you as near to Peterborough as possible."

"Fair enough."

There was a group of us, all ex-operational bomber aircrew. We must have been quite a handful as pupils on the course, after what we had done, but we passed it.[1]

[1]**The course took two months, around the Christmas of 1945, and Frank remembers it as being quite tough. He, and most of the others on the course, only just managed to pass the course as it really didn't seem all that important in light of their recent experiences.**

So I did this and was moved round all over the place. One of them was a rehabilitation centre for ex-POWs, who were, perhaps, psychologically a little

bit unbalanced so needed a bit of help. But they were a very happy lot, really, that was at a place called Newbold Revell, not far from Market Harborough.

That was quite a good posting that was, and I closed down a place in London that had been used by the RAF as a sort of hotel block for officers really, which I didn't enjoy that much[1]. Then to Heaton Park near Manchester. Then this posting came along. Well they rang me up, actually, whilst I was at Newbold Revell.

"Do you mind this Equipment Officer lark?"

"No, it's alright, it's not bad at all. When you become involved in it, it becomes very interesting, I'm quite enjoying it actually."

"Right, thank you."

Not so long after that I was posted to the RAF hospital at Ely. And I was the Equipment Officer there, that carried the rank of Flight Lieutenant straight away.

I was very happy there, got on very well with all the medical staff and when the time came close to demob, they said, *"You can't go!"* They really didn't want me to go into "Civvy Street".

I said, *"But I've already arranged a teacher training course."*

"Well, we'd like you to stay here and take a short service commission, something like that. You're doing very well here."

[1]**Abbott House, near Regent Street.**

You feel you have been dealing death and destruction all over Europe, that sort of thing, you want to do something worthwhile. Teaching seemed a good idea. So that's what I decided.[1]

But as you can see, there was a lot of fun and exciting flying, not wartime conditions, but it wasn't dull.

I enjoyed that part too, certainly something worth talking about!

[1]Frank was demobilised in 1947.

14. Postscript: How This Book Came to be Written

Frank Dennis completed his teacher-training course and became a schoolteacher, teaching woodwork.

After retirement he moved to Winthorpe near Newark, with Joy, his wife. They were married for some 50 years, but sadly Frank is now a widower. He remains active spending much of his time tending his large garden. One day, while sitting in the sun, he happened to look up and see the circling gliders from the nearby gliding club, based at a long abandoned bomber airfield. He decided to give it a go.

Frank quickly got involved in many of the activities needed to run operations on a voluntarily run sports club, putting many of the younger members of the club to shame with his enthusiasm. This was reflected in the award of the Chief Flying Instructor's Shield in 2000, this also being the year in which he (officially) went "solo" and gained his wings. He followed this in 2003 with the Chairman's Award, in recognition of the work he carries out, putting his enviable woodworking skills to use maintaining the fleet of club aircraft. He flies regularly, but in 2004 had to relinquish his solo flight status.

One day at the airfield he was asked if he had any experience in flying:

"Oh, yes…" he replied, *"I've probably got a few hundred hours*[1] *in my logbook."*

"What in?" was the natural follow-up.

"Oh, erm…Lancasters."

The rest is history.

[1]Frank admits to "about 400 hours" in total, his logbook shows that 126:30 were on operations.

15. Afterword by Steve Payne (written in 2014)

I met Frank once he started flying gliders, and he occasionally spoke of his wartime experiences. I remember one sunny summer day on the gliding field when all of the aircraft had been launched and were soaring, and Frank started talking. He later told me that he spoke more openly about his time and experiences "*on Ops*" that day than he had for many years. As gliders returned and landed on the airfield, the pilots found that no-one was coming to help them move the aircraft off the landing area and back to the launch-point. We weren't going to miss a word from Frank, and no-one was going to interrupt him either…

I thought that his experiences should be recorded, and asked if Frank would be willing to sit and talk through his experiences, and for me to record our talk. Frank agreed. You have been reading the result.

Various events conspired for Frank and I to lose regular contact, but we continued to exchange cards at birthdays and Christmas, and usually added a note on what had been going on since we last corresponded. In March 2014, I returned to gliding. Many familiar faces were still flying and many asked after Frank. I was pleased to be able to put that news in with the latest birthday card to him, sent a few weeks later, and I invited him to come and see us at the new site. Sadly, a few weeks after that (on my birthday) I did not receive a return card from Frank.

On 8th August 2014, Lancaster FM213/C-GVRA, operated by the Canadian Warbird Heritage Museum, flew into RAF Coningsby and joined the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight's aircraft to undertake displays over the next 7 weeks.

On 18th August 2014, I presented a copy of this document to the aircrew of Lancaster FM213/C-GVRA in recognition of Frank's wartime service with the Canadians of N° 6 (RCAF) Group, RAF Bomber command.