

## **John Dering Nettleton, VC (28 June 1917-13 July 1943)**

**Date of Birth:** 28 June, 1917

**Place of Birth:** Nongoma, Natal Province, South Africa.

### **Early Life:**

John Nettleton was the grandson of Admiral A T D Nettleton, Paymaster-in-Chief of the Royal Navy. He was educated at Stanbury's private school in Cape Town, and, wishing to follow the family tradition, attempted to gain entrance to RN College Dartmouth. However, he failed to pass the entrance exam. Consequently, in 1930 he joined the famous South African training ship "General Botha" as a cadet, at age 13 yrs, from where he graduated three years later, becoming Third Officer on MS Mattawin, one of the ships of the Elder-Dempster Line. After serving for 18 months, he returned to Cape Town and took up a civil engineering apprenticeship. He worked in various parts of South Africa, all the while remaining a member of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR).

### **RAF Career:**

During a visit with his mother to England, seeking a more fulfilling career, he decided to join the RAF, which he did on 6 October 1938 (aged 21). After elementary pilot training he was accepted as a short service commissioned officer, beginning his flying career in Reading. He was commissioned in December 1938 and graduated as a pilot on 22 July 1939.

His first posting was to 207 Squadron at Cottesmore to fly the Fairey Battle. He then transferred to Handley Page Hampdens on 185 Squadron, also at Cottesmore. He was promoted to Flying Officer in July 1940 and to Flight Lieutenant in February 1941. Four months later, on 26 June 1941, Nettleton joined 44 (Rhodesia) Squadron, at RAF Waddington, again flying Hampdens – his first operational posting, which involved him flying several sorties over Europe. Just a month later he was promoted to Squadron Leader and was Mentioned in Despatches in December 1941.

On Christmas Eve, 1941, the first Lancaster Bombers to reach an operational unit arrived at Waddington and John Nettleton led the first raid on 3 March 1942 – a mining drop in the Heligoland Bight. The Augsburg Raid, for which he was awarded his Victoria Cross, took place on 17 April 1942 (see details below)

John met his wife, Betty Isabel Hevelock, during a visit to London five weeks after the Augsburg Raid (May 1942). Betty was originally from Paignton in Devon and was a WAAF. Just one week later, on 1 June, 1942, they were engaged. Shortly afterwards, he was sent on a goodwill tour to America, with 14 other war heroes. This took in visits to 21 American cities and included a ticker-tape parade along Broadway in New York, as well as a dinner in Hollywood with 15 film actresses. He returned to the UK and almost immediately married Betty in Lincoln on 17 July.

On 1 November, Nettleton attended the investiture at Buckingham Palace and received his Victoria Cross from HM The King. He refused to be grounded or become an instructor, so was promoted to Wing Commander and, in early 1943, returned to operations as the

Commanding Officer of 44 Squadron, who were by now based at Dunholme Lodge, just five miles north of Lincoln.

In the weeks to follow, he led the Squadron on two major raids, one on Berlin and the other on the U-boat pens at Lorient.

John Nettleton was killed on the night of 12/13 July 1943 (aged just 26), during a heavy raid on Turin in Italy. The Sicilian invasion had begun two days earlier and it was imperative that German reinforcements were prevented from being brought through to Turin and Milan. His Lancaster KM-Z ED331 took off from Dunholme Lodge in Lincolnshire and, having successfully attacked Turin, was believed to have been shot down by a night-fighter off the Brest peninsular on his way home. His body and those of his crew were never recovered. All are commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial.

John Nettleton's death was officially announced on 23 February, 1944, just four days after the birth of his son, also named John, was announced. [John Dering Nettleton junior is still alive and himself has a son, (James I think but not absolutely certain)].

### **Memorial**

RAF Dunholme Lodge ceased to be an operational station at the end of World War 2. Part of the airfield and buildings were purchased by The Reverend William Farr to establish a secondary school, and this was opened in 1952.

On 4 November 2010, a memorial to John Nettleton VC was dedicated in the William Farr School. The headmaster, Paul Strong (himself the great grandson of a VC winner), even managed to arrange for a Lancaster from the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight to pass over the school to mark the occasion. Subsequently, the Victoria Cross Society added its own contribution to the school's memorial room, presenting a framed Victoria Cross display, dedicated to John Nettleton VC.

In addition, John Nettleton and his crew of seven on the Turin raid are commemorated on the Air Forces Memorial at Runnymede. (The memorial's panels contain the names of more than 20,000 air force personnel who died during the Second World War and have no known grave. They served in Bomber, Fighter, Coastal, Transport, Flying Training and Maintenance Commands, and came from all parts of the Commonwealth. Some were from countries in continental Europe which had been overrun but whose airmen continued to fight in the ranks of the Royal Air Force.)

There is also a painting of the Augsburg Raid, commissioned by the Sergeants' Mess at RAF Waddington, where it now hangs, and executed by Gordon Sage. The artist consulted with Bert Dowty, a front gunner on the raid (part of WO Crum's crew in T-Tommy) and Pat Dorehill (Nettleton's crew), on the details he portrays.

### **Award of the Victoria Cross**

John Nettleton was awarded his Victoria Cross for his leading role in the Augsburg Raid on the MAN factory near Munich. His VC was gazetted on 24 April 1942, less than a week after his return from the raid, as follows:

“Squadron Leader Nettleton was the leader of one of two formations of six Lancaster heavy bombers detailed to deliver a low-level attack in daylight on the Diesel engine factory at Augsburg, in Southern Germany, on the 17 April 1942. The enterprise was daring, the target of high military importance. To reach it and get back, some 1000 miles had to be flown over hostile territory. Soon after crossing into enemy territory his formation was attacked by 25 to 30 fighters. A running fight ensued. His rear guns went out of action. One by one the aircraft of his formation were shot down until in the end only his own and one other remained. The fighters were shaken off but the target was still far distant. There was formidable resistance to be faced. With great spirit and almost defenceless, he held his two remaining aircraft on their perilous course, and after a long and arduous flight, mostly at only 50 ft. above the ground, he brought them to Augsburg. Here anti-aircraft fire of great intensity and accuracy was encountered. The two aircraft came low over the roof tops. Though fired at from point blank range, they stayed the course to drop their bombs true on the target. The second aircraft, hit by flak burst into flames and crash-landed. The leading aircraft, though riddled with holes, flew safely back to base, the only one of the six to return. Squadron- Leader Nettleton, who has successfully undertaken many other hazardous operations, displayed unflinching determination as well as leadership and valour of the highest order.”

Nettleton's Mother, upon hearing of her son's endeavours and his award of the VC, apparently expressed a mother's anxiety when she related that although thrilled, she hoped her son would not be sent on “too many of these dangerous exploits after this”, and although proud, was also “thankful” for his safe return.

### **The Augsburg Raid – 17 April 1942**

In April, a daylight bombing mission was planned by RAF Bomber Command against the MAN diesel engine factory at Augsburg (near Munich) in Bavaria. With the increasing Allied losses being suffered in the Battle of the Atlantic, this factory, which was responsible for the production of half of Germany's U-boat engines, was rated as one of the most important targets in Germany. The mission was to be the longest low level penetration so far made during World War II, and it was the first daylight mission flown by the new Avro Lancaster.

Unfortunately, radar aids which facilitate precision bombing at night were not yet available and past performance precluded any likelihood of such an operation being successful without them. For this reason the raid was to take place in daylight. In addition, long-range escort fighters did not exist at that time, therefore, the force had to carry out the raid unsupported.

This operation, involving a round trip of some 1250 miles, mostly over enemy territory, was among the most audacious undertaken to date by Bomber Command. From the point of view of precision, in both bombing and navigation, it was certainly one of the most ambitious. For a week prior to the attack, the selected crews were withdrawn from operations to practise formation flying at low level, including flights over the hills in Scotland. The greatest secrecy was maintained and the crews themselves were not told of the target until briefed just hours before take off on the day of the raid. The whole operation was planned very carefully and, since the crews had to be able to identify a single shed in the middle of the complex factory, they studied photographs and pencil sketches.

Twelve Lancasters, in two sections of six, from each of Nos 44 and 97 Squadrons were to fly the outbound leg at the lowest possible level. The attack was also to be made at low level, using 1000 lb general purpose high explosive bombs, fused with a delayed action of eleven seconds.

The return flight, most of which would be at night, was to be made individually at a more customary altitude. The low level approach was intended to delay the appearance of the aircraft on enemy radar screens and, in the event of interception, to make the task of the German fighters more difficult. It was also considered the best defence against Flak. A large scale diversion, in the form of raids in the Pas de Calais area by 30 Bostons with fighter escorts, was also arranged.

The mission was scheduled for 17 April 1942, to be led by Squadron Leader Nettleton, flying Lancaster Mk I, R5508, coded "KM-B". Briefing took place at [12 noon] and at [15.00] Nettleton took off from Waddington with the first vic, followed by Flt Lt R Sandford leading the second.

The second section of six No 97 Sqn aircraft took off from Woodhall Spa. Sqn Ldr J S Sherwood led the first vic and Flt Lt D J Penman the second. At the French coast Nettleton took his section down to 20 feet. Maintaining between 20 and 30 feet, the formation kept as tight as possible as they flew wing tip to wing tip over hills and skimmed down valleys, anticipating by twenty years the tactics adopted as standard in the sixties by subsequent generations of bomber crews.

Frequently the Lancasters had to ease up to clear trees that appeared ahead. Then their flight path clipped the German fighter base at Beaumont le Roger, where Me109s and FW190s were recovering after operations against the very diversionary forces intended to draw enemy aircraft away from the Lancaster force. These fighters belonged to the II Gruppe/Jagdgeschwader 2 (Richthofen). Spotting the unescorted Lancasters, they turned towards their prey, a fighter pilot's dream!

Attacking first the rear vic, L7575 skippered by WO Beckett was subjected to a hail of fire from Hauptman Heine Greisert. Within seconds it was transformed into a mass of roaring flames and then dived into a clump of trees. Feldwebel Bosseckert tackled Flt Lt Nick Sandford, setting fire to all four engines before his R5506 hit the ground and exploded in a fireball. Then the pack turned on WO Crum, and L7548 was subjected to numerous attacks from a number of directions in the course of which the interior became a nightmare of ricocheting bullets. Both rear and mid upper gunners called out that they had been hit, and a fire started in the port wing. To climb would have been fatal and Crum ordered the bomb load to be jettisoned safe while he prepared to force land on any open ground that presented itself. Such a manoeuvre had been foreseen and discussed during the preparation for the raid. Now Crum and his crew were to benefit from his thorough preparation, for they all survived the subsequent arrival. Their assailant had been Unteroffizier Pohl, flying Me109 "Black 7", and his victory was recorded in the Jagdgeschwader's "Game" book as their 1,000th "Luftsieg" of the war.

Having disposed of the rear vic, the German fighters turned on Nettleton's formation. Major Oesau and his wing man, Oberfeldwebel Edelmann, commenced firing and closed to within 10 metres of WO Rhodes. Both port engines erupted into flames followed quickly by the starboard motors. L7536 reared up abruptly, stalled and plunged vertically straight down, missing its two compatriots by inches. They, too, had suffered. The engagement had lasted barely 15 minutes yet fortunately, at this point, the fighters broke away, presumably to refuel and re-arm.

Nettleton flew on, together with the remaining survivor, Flt Lt Garwell. Fortunately, they met no further opposition until they reached Augsburg. To men more accustomed to flying at great heights in darkness, this flight seemed full of incident. Horses and cattle in fields scattered in front of them and two Germans out riding had their horses bolt as the Lancasters roared overhead!

At Lake Constance, Nettleton circled before running in for a timed attack. Augsburg was hidden behind a hill at this stage and did not come into view until he was clear of the crest. From there it was straight ahead.

The two bombers crossed the Munich-Augsburg railway at Mering and had originally intended to fly directly to the target. However, since the presence of many tall factory chimneys would have forced them to climb, they chose instead to follow the river Lech and then turned in to attack the target from the east.

The factory showed up as predicted in the pre-flight brief, where a canal forks from a river. Light flak came up and, because they were so low, the German gunners frequently shot into their own buildings. There were a large number of quick-firing guns and the bursting shells made holes in both the Lancasters. Their target - the engine shed - appeared on the nose and Nettleton rose slightly as he released his four 1000lb bombs. He then commenced evasive action.

Garwell then attacked, but was almost immediately hit and burst into flames. Nettleton saw him turn and carry out a forced landing about two miles from Augsburg. The rear gunner, Sgt Huntley, saw their bombs explode, throwing whole sections of buildings into the air. As Nettleton turned for home, light was just beginning to fail. He remained at low level and waited until it was quite dark before climbing.

Sherwood's formation arrived just as the previous two aircraft attacked. They, too, flew in against a heavy and well-concentrated fire. One rear gunner retaliated successfully and shot a German counterpart off the roof of a building. Three miles from the target, WO Mycock's aircraft was hit in the front turret. The hydraulic oil caught fire and the aircraft fell in a mass of flames.

Sherwood then bombed but was also hit and set on fire. He was last seen 10 miles from Augsburg, burning on the ground. Flt Lt Deverill was also hit and a fire started in the fuselage. Fortunately, this was extinguished just as the aircraft came to the release point and he was able to bring his aircraft home.

Nettleton finally landed near Blackpool and returned to RAF Waddington with his crew by train.

Of the total force of 12 aircraft, eight had bombed the target but only five returned home. All of these had been severely damaged. However, their target, the main diesel shop, was severely damaged by direct hits and a subsequent fire. It was believed that the production of diesel engines was severely delayed.

HM The King, approved the following awards for gallantry to members of the Nettleton crew and, in addition, Flt Lt Nick Sandford, who was reported missing during the Augsburg raid, was also awarded the DFC.

Sqn Ldr J D Nettleton	Victoria Cross
Flt Lt L S McClure	Distinguished Flying Cross
Plt Off D O Sands	Distinguished Flying Cross
Plt Off P Dorehill	Distinguished Flying Cross
Sgt C F Churchill	Distinguished Flying Medal
Sgt D N Huntley	Distinguished Flying Medal
Flt Sgt P H Harrison	Distinguished Flying Medal
Flt Sgt L Mutter	Distinguished Flying Medal

Other than Nettleton himself, three other members of his crew, (McClure, Huntley and Mutter) were later lost on operations with 44 Squadron. Of the remaining four, Charlie Churchill later became a POW, Pat (Patrick) Dorehill finished the current and a subsequent tour with the Squadron while Frank Harrison also survived a further tour, in this instance with No 97 Squadron.

## **First hand accounts by surviving crew members:**

**Sgt C Churchill (Wireless Operator, Sqn Ldr Nettleton's crew):** *Nettleton opened by saying that, unlike a normal briefing, at the end of this one there wouldn't be the ritual "Any questions?" We were to listen attentively and then keep quiet. We, who represented the most experienced crews on the Squadron, were temporarily withdrawn from operations. We were to undertake special training in the course of which we would develop techniques for flying in daylight in close formation, not only at high speed but also at very low level! It sounded very exciting and, as he warned us, very dangerous. We were told to say absolutely nothing about the flying we were doing. "Think what you will", said Nettleton, "but keep your mouth shut".*

*Of course, this opened the gates to speculation, hasty types saw us as the beginning of a new formation like the later Pathfinders. More speculative observers considered we were to reduce enemy defences prior to the invasion of France. The 'couldn't care less' types only saw it as a reprieve from Ops so they could whoop it up more regularly in Lincoln.*

*We started with the loose formation over the sea, which gradually got tighter and lower. Finally, we were flying with our wing tips overlapping just above the sea. Then we moved to flights over land, to sorties over Scotland. It was exhilarating, flying down the valleys, scattering sheep in the process. Now and again we flew alongside trains and, much to the amazement of the passengers, even below them where the tracks ran along an embankment.*

*On 17 April it was on. In the manner of all aircrew, as soon as we entered the briefing room we scanned the wall map to determine the "Target for Tonight". This one was different and that's the understatement of the year. That morning will live in my memory when all else has faded. The course drawn on the map went across one wall and well into that on the adjoining one. I thought I was dreaming. This I cannot believe, I thought, it takes us to Bavaria!*

*Also present were some very high ranking officers which, with everything else, made the briefing a very solemn affair. One of them opened proceedings observing that this was the biggest attempt to date made by the Lanc. (How right you are, I thought.) Do not be overawed by the distance to your objective, the position is this. The allies are being brought to their knees by efficient German submarine packs which operate in the Atlantic. Our convoys are being massacred and we are losing this battle. The situation is now critical. We in the RAF have been tasked with striking a major blow in an attempt to break, if only for a short time, a very efficient and formidable foe. He went on to explain at length that, if we could successfully bomb and neutralise our target, the M.A.N. Diesel Factory at Augsburg, the supply of diesels to more than half the submarine fleet would be interrupted, thus dealing a heavy blow to the enemy's war effort. The Lancaster was the only aircraft in Bomber Command that could strike a target some 1,000 miles inside enemy territory in daylight and stand a fighting chance of survival.*

*This made us feel a little easier. Nevertheless, I could not see us getting away with it. Bomb the target, yes, I thought, but to get back afterwards, ha! This I cannot visualise.*

*We were to fly in two vics of three and were also to be followed by six more kites from 97 Sqn based at Woodhall Spa.*

*Seven very serious crews returned to their quarters to make preparations. I wrote some letters and had a meal, then I tried to take a nap, but was far too tense to think of anything other than the impending operation.*

*At 1500 hrs, six Lancasters with their 1,000lb bombs and laden to capacity with fuel, left Waddington. As we coasted out we went right down to sea level to avoid detection by the enemy radar. I can recall our slipstream ruffling the water as we flashed along. Overland, crossing the patchwork of fields, people waved sheets and suchlike and we all had a good laugh at the sight of a group of Germans on horseback scattering in all directions.*

*As we passed over some wooded country, some flak opened up and I could see lines of tracer peppering two of our kites. In the process, we presumed that they put paid to Beckett's rear turret for it was to remain silent throughout the action that we were shortly to encounter. Overall, we were lucky to escape from such an engagement so lightly. We were at the peak of our alertness and, reminiscent of our training in Scotland, we flew alongside a train passing along an embankment. We could see straight through the windows. There were no passengers to be seen, presumably they were all lying on the floor, even the engine seemed to be driving itself. Our gunners, Frank Harrison mid upper, Buzzer Huntley front and Len Mutter in the rear, all asked to rake the train, but Nettleton would not hear of this and told them to hold their fire until we were either intercepted or at the target. How wise he was!*

*We thundered over France but, unknown to us, overhead were two fighter squadrons returning to their base near Evereux. Beckett spotted some 30 or so and called over the RT, "109s 11 o'clock high". Nettleton tersely told the formation to close up and use concentrated gunfire. At this height there was no question of evading. The Messerschmitts subjected us to severe fire and came so close during their break away that I could clearly see the pilots' faces behind their oxygen masks. One aircraft sported a distinctive yellow spinner. When I reported this during my post flight debrief, I was subsequently told that this sighting had identified the location of a unit that had been withdrawn from the Middle East.*

*In the running battle that followed, we were sitting ducks for such a force of fighters. WO Beckett was the first casualty; almost at once he was ablaze and disintegrating. There was no chance of any survivors as he hit the deck. WO Crum was next. Later, I found out that, amazingly, he had managed to pancake successfully and all his crew survived.*

*Nick Sandford, leader of the rear vic, was now alone and no match for the three 109s that harried him. He flew low with his damaged Lanc but to no avail. I believe that a wing*

*touched the ground and that was it. I saw the undercarriage wheels bouncing through the flames, again surely no survivors.*

*Then the aircraft on our starboard side took a fatal hit. It reared up poised for a second and then turned on her back and dived into the ground. No hope for Dusty Rhodes and his crew. Four gone and only two of us left. Jerry came in for another attack and gave both of us a battering. Garwell's wing tip was flapping like a bird's wing, but we pressed on. We summed up. We were still less than half way to the target but we were going on and for two more hours on we went.*

*Suddenly, we were there, Augsburg. There was the factory alongside the river as briefed. Then it all started as the flak began pumping shells up at us. Buzzer Huntley, in the front turret, shouted excitedly that he had scored a direct hit on a flak position. Shortly afterwards McClure, the bomb aimer, placed his bombs plumb on the factory roof. Ginger Garwell was in close attendance. The fuse delays of 11 sec. enabled us to see our bombs explode. Then Ginger collected another shell just about midships and it was curtains for him. He pulled back his window and gave us an inverted V sign and then pancaked.*

*We turned for home and, thank the Lord, saw no more flak or fighters, just a few searchlights. After we seemed to have been airborne for hours I heard Nettleton say to Des Sands, the Navigator, that we should have spotted the coast of France long ago. "I am going to call for assistance despite the radio silence". He then spoke to me and said, "Radio Operator, call base and get a fix". I asked if I could use the top priority SOS, to which he replied, "Use what you like but get me a course for home". This was my moment. I tapped it out, SOS.... SOS.. followed by our special callsign V, followed by our aircraft call sign and a request in code for a fix and homing. All radio traffic seemed to stop and there was only a gentle mush in my earphones. Then, suddenly, it was broken by the most beautiful resonant morse I have ever heard. First we received instructions to turn through 90 degrees and then K. This meant carry on, maintain contact and don't lose me, as if I would! Eventually, we were brought to Squires Gate, Blackpool, where we landed with our tanks all but dry. I tapped out X496, which meant, 'We have landed'. This was acknowledged, AR, followed by the unofficial GBY - God Bless You. From then on we were famous.*

**Sgt F Harrison (Mid Upper Gunner, Sqn Ldr Nettleton):**

*On 13 April, we carried out a short daylight formation sortie. After two more such trips, there followed on 15th a cross country of 5hrs 20min duration. Two days later, we went to Augsburg. This was my first bomber Op. My one undying memory of the briefing is of a Rhodesian WAG who spent the time reading a novel! When I mentioned it, he replied that this was his last opportunity to finish it. He was wrong, although his chance to finish his book was delayed by a number of years. By that evening he was a POW!*

*On the raid, we flew in two vics of three. Nettleton led with Garwell to port and Rhodes to starboard. The second vic tucked in close behind. I never saw the No. 97 Sqn contingent. All went well until shortly after crossing the French coast. Then I saw a mass of German fighters manoeuvring and diving down onto our tails. Len Mutter, in the rear turret, and I fired like mad throughout the entire engagement as the fighters, one after another, came*

*up behind us and then broke off to port. They were only within range of my 303s for a short time, whereas they seemed able to fire at us throughout their pass until they broke away.*

*The rear vic was shot down almost immediately. Then Rhodes was hit in the port wing and it began to drop, which would have meant curtains for us. He levelled momentarily and seconds later hit the deck. A wheel bounded out of the inferno and seemed to chase after us. The end of the action saw but two of us remaining. Only one of my twin Brownings was operating and only one of Len's four.*

*All went well until the target, where we carried out a successful attack at low level as briefed. The brisk light AA claimed Garwell and, alone, we headed for home. As the light failed we were able to climb but, with the heavy broken cloud, it became apparent that we were very lost. At a late stage a beacon was spotted. Des Sands consulted his flimsies and concluded the code letters indicated either Hurn or Squires Gate. The Skipper plumped for Squires Gate, used their call sign on RT and asked for permission to land which, after 9 hrs 45 min, we did with much relief.*

*Squires Gate kindly accommodated us for the night and then, next day, Nettleton asked us whether we wanted to fly home or go by train. We went by train. I, for one, had been amazed when undressing, to find my underwear as clean as it had been that morning.*

*Later the crew was scheduled to tour the USA on a propaganda trip, for which I was allocated a new uniform. Apparently objections were raised over an exclusive No 5 Group Bomber 'Do' so only Nettleton and Buzzer Huntley eventually went, accompanied by bods drawn from other Commands.*

**WO Crum (pilot):** *The long training trip with six of us in formation at nought feet had been a very enjoyable affair. We had left our base at Waddington, flown south to Selsey Bill, done a smart about turn and proceeded to the North of Scotland, done another about turn and, finally, did a shoot up of the hangars at Waddington. We had all suspected that this was a prelude to something more sinister, and so it was, for the subsequent briefing revealed that our target was to be the MAN diesel engine factory at Augsburg. Thus, it all tied in, for we were to travel the whole distance in formation and at low level, and the target was to be this particular factory, to deny the Germans getting engines for their convoy sinking submarines. To carry out the intentions, we each carried 1,000 lb bombs and our full complement of 2100 gallons of petrol.*

*Recalling the day's events more than thirty years later, WO Crum was to lapse into the present tense as, mentally, he flew the trip again. Came the day, 17 April, a very nice one and, for me, a day of decision. Taking off was uneventful, as was the trip to Selsey Bill. Right there stood the Navy and one of the things we never did was to fly near them for fear of attracting their gunfire. Thus we did a quick turn which, at nought feet in a thirty ton bomber in close formation, causes one to perspire. The English Channel sped by and the French cliffs appeared. Nothing shot at us. Onwards, over their countryside we flew,*

*while briefly in the distance I could see another Squadron heading for the same target as ourselves.*

*Then things began to happen for, suddenly, we are flying alongside a German aerodrome where fighters are taking off to intercept us. We keep very close as cannon and tracer shells from the rear pass through the formation, ricocheting off the land and hitting the sides of haystacks and houses. Some confusion seems to set in as aircraft are hit; flames from Joe Beckett and smoke from Dusty Rhodes. My own port outer becomes useless as I press even lower up one of the forest firebreaks below tree top level and under power cables. Soon my port inner goes along with part of the fuselage at my side. Shells rattle off the steel plate at the back of my seat. Because we are maintaining a fast speed and my port engines are useless, I have to keep my starboard engines racing more than I would want to. This is carrying me over to the port side of the Squadron where I have to shut off and allow myself to drift back to my own position. By doing this I am dropping behind and it must not be long before I have more attention from the fighters. This is not long in coming and, when half of my tail unit is missing, the RT goes dead and smoke starts coming from one of the dead engines, I had to make that decision that I mentioned before. The bombs have to be dropped safe, the new equipment we carry destroyed and a quick landing attempted. Everything goes to order and we finish up with a wheels up landing 20 yards from the edge of a wood.*

*Poor Bert Dowty, the front gunner, was trapped in his turret unable to turn it. Dick Dedman the co-pilot was still holding on beside me, John Miller in the mid upper turret had suffered a cut face and later found a spent bullet in his flying boot. As for me, I too had a cut face, while the others, Nick Birkett, Sandy Sanderson and Frank Cobb, came out of it OK. I was able to step out, for the side of the Lanc had disappeared, as had the windscreen in front of me. Nick Birkett had climbed through the top hatch expecting the wheels to be down and jumped, landing on ground much sooner than he expected. I had to take the axe and chop Bert Dowty out. It must have been an awesome sight for a lad in his teens to be attacked by a man with blood on his face wielding an axe on this, his first operational daylight trip.*

*The Lanc lies there bent but proud. Still on the secret list! She would be a valuable asset to the Germans. It must have been quite a sight, British aircrew standing around trying to set fire to their aircraft. With petrol flowing we were trying to light it with matches and cigarette lighters until someone attacked it with a Verey pistol and then she started to burn. As the blaze increased, so the ammunition started to explode and we departed in haste. Remembering that at least one of our aircraft had come down nearby, I decided to dash over and see what help I could render after putting the other five on their way.*

*It was like looking for the end of the rainbow, the clouds of smoke never seemed to get nearer while, overhead, German fighters were milling around, no doubt gloating over the fallen Lancs burning below them. Then, hearing the engine noise of motor cycles and other vehicle, I abandoned my mercy mission. So, remembering the rule to put 15 miles between yourself and your aircraft, I set off to join a party of French folk working in the*

field. One of them took me to his very substandard house and changed my uniform for civvies. He gave me some food and I gratefully went on my way.

*I walked into the night but, after passing a military barracks, decided not to push my luck any more and lay down in a copse for a rest. To acclimatise myself, I advanced slowly until the following night when I slept under some hay in a barn. Early next morning, I was still dozing when a woman came in with her pike, presumably to get hay for her cattle, and chose the bit covering me. Not relishing her pike, I stood up, giving her quite a fright in the process. I feigned to be Belgian. She summoned her husband and within a short time they offered me breakfast. As I was eating and conversing with them in basic French, a party of German soldiers walked in. The coincidence leaves little to the imagination.*

*So my trip landed me in German hands and then via Chartres, Paris, Frankfurt on Main, to Stalag Luft 3. The rest of my crew stayed free from capture until they reached the South of France. To complete the circle, one night towards the end of the war, as we were marching through a town in East Germany, I heard a voice calling "Crummy". There to greet me were four of my crew.*

In the front of WO Crum's Lanc was **Bert Dowty** (Front Gunner): *We set off with the intention of forming up over Grantham. Ahead of us in the distance I could see the 97 Sqn aircraft. Once we had coasted out at Selsey Bill, we were quite low and stayed there for the rest of the trip. We thundered across France getting an occasional excited wave from the ground when, suddenly, I was aware that we were flying across an airfield, which later I was to discover was at Beaumont Le Roger. We were the right hand aircraft of the vic, Sandford was leading, and Beckett was off to the left in the No. 3 position. We tracked along the tarmac peri track while off to my right three Jerry aircraft were in the act of landing. One was well down the runway, another just on and the third in the act of touching down. Around the perimeter were gun emplacements, similar to our Bofors, and I watched the passage of two clips of five that were loosed at us. Fortunately, they did not come close to causing any discomfort.*

*A short time later the fighters were among us. never heard subsequent transmissions over our intercom, presumably because an early hit had caused some damage. I remember checking during a brief pause in the action to see if my jack plug had been pulled out. I would estimate that we were at this stage around 100 to 200 ft, but not so low that the fighters couldn't pass beneath us. The action was lively with the Me109s coming very close. One presented a full wing span to me as he broke below, I could clearly see into the cockpit and pick out the pilot's face and mask. Naturally, I gave him a squirt in the process but to no immediate effect. I did see a couple go down in such a manner that I think it unlikely that they recovered, but I was too busy with the next phase to be able to wait and observe an impact. Then I looked across and saw that we were a little behind the formation, Joe Beckett to our left and now slightly forward was a mass of flames. He plunged steeply into the deck.*

*I was still hammering away with my guns when we hit the deck ourselves. Although this was a surprise because Crummy had done such a good job that, apart from a shaking, I*

*wasn't at all hurt. It was thanks to his efforts that, out of all those brought down that fateful day, ours was the only crew to survive intact. Unfortunately, because of the action, my guns were swung to the beam and I couldn't get out.*

*Without intercom I was, of course, completely unaware of events elsewhere in the crew. All I could think of was a full load of delays which I thought were still sitting in the bomb bay. I dismounted the gun, using it as a battering ram to smash away at the perspex windows. Suddenly, an axe head appeared through the side of the fuselage to my left; Crummy was getting me out. In no time at all, I was freed. Our Lanc. rested in a wheat field belonging to the farm Bois-Normand, near the hamlet of Folleville, and some 10 km North of Conches.*

A number of crews had completed the preparation but had not participated in the raid, WO Wright was one of these.

**Flt Sgt Bud Gill, Rear Gunner (WO Wright):** *Initially we were not told anything about the raid but simply that we were to practise flying at low level or 'hedge hopping' as we called it. Although the flights were laid out in general taking place over Yorkshire and Scotland, sometimes but not always in formation, we were at liberty to do anything that would give us the feel of low level. We took great delight in attempting, and succeeding, in blowing the heads off the tulips in Lincolnshire. WO Jones came back with sheep's wool in the engine cowlings.*

*When we did get the message about the target, everyone was really excited. We had trained hard and earnestly, calling for skill and endurance especially from the pilots and navigators and felt that we were good at it. I was personally quite down when, through no fault or shortcoming in the crew, we were not selected for the raid. Even afterwards, when the results and casualties were known, I still felt the same. It was a very important target and it would have been a great achievement to have been part of it.*

## Sources of Information:

Grateful thanks to Mr Henry Horscroft, Secretary of 44 Squadron Association, who freely provided invaluable information and most especially photographs from the Association's records.

The Journal of The Victoria Cross Society, 18<sup>th</sup> edition, March 2011, pp46-49. *Ed: Brian Best BA (Hons)*

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