

TEXT OF LETTER FROM HARRY HARRINGTON TO PETER JENNER OF 2<sup>ND</sup>. TAF MEDIUM BOMBER ASSOCIATION RECALLING OPERATIONS OF 226 SQUADRON WITH B-25 MITCHELL AIRCRAFT FROM RAF HARTFORD BRIDGE IN 1944.

(A copy of the hand-written text is also included with the other items of memorabilia).

Dear Peter

I take up pen again in my attempt to provide you with information which might be of use to you in your search for items of interest connected to R.A.F. Hartford Bridge.

From my log book I notice an absence of flying operations between 7<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> February 1944 and I must assume that 226 Squadron moved to Hartford Bridge between those dates. I do remember travelling in convoy by road from Swanton Morley but I don't know the exact date.

There are severable memorable events which occurred during my time at the airfield and I will list the details as best I can.

The Martinvast raid on 26 November 1943 has been well documented and I won't dwell too much on the actual raid but give a few details of what happened afterwards.

The twelve aircraft of 226 Squadron took off from Swanton Morley at 08.45 on that day and flew to the usual rendezvous at Pevensey Bay to meet up with the fighter escort. It must have been assumed that the escort was in position because we set off across the Channel in the direction of Cherbourg. At some point over the Channel it was realised that there was no fighter escort and we were ordered to abandon the operation and make for Lasham in Hampshire. In the event one Spitfire turned up.

At 13.50, together with other squadrons, we set off for Martinvast where a reception committee was well and truly awaiting our arrival having been forewarned from our obvious intentions of the morning.

The flak was at its most intense and two aircraft from another squadron were hit on the bombing run and another lost later. The plan was to do a U-turn at the end of the bombing run and fly back over the target to take photographs of the results. The squadron commander decided that that was nothing short of suicidal and that the photography should be left to the photographic reconnaissance squadrons at a later stage.

Instead of doing an about turn the squadron continued across the peninsula and out over the sea. I was thrilled at this point because I thought we would have a good view of the Channel Islands. My young lady, now my wife, had not been able to get away from Jersey before the Germans invaded the islands in 1940 and she was destined to spend the last 5 years of the war under German occupation. However the situation became serious again as the anti-aircraft guns on Alderney opened up and violent evasive action had to be taken. A Spitfire flying alongside our aircraft must have been hit as a stream of fuel was pouring out of it and he was in a shallow dive towards the water. I did not get to see the island of Jersey.

On reaching the English coast our squadron set out for Swanton Morley but only 10 miles from base we were ordered to return to the south and find an airfield to put down as our own airfield was fogbound. This is how we came to land at Hartford Bridge.

After we landed and parked, our mid-upper gunner, Jock Chapman, and I started to count the flak shrapnel splinter holes on the underside of our aircraft starting at the tailfin and rudder area. We had

reached a figure of 250 and had not reached the leading edges of the mainplanes before we were called to attend de-briefing. After de-briefing we were told we were in the middle of a 'flu epidemic and would not be allowed to leave the station. Mattresses were laid out on the floor of the gymnasium and that is where we slept for a couple of days. There was no let up in the fog and it was decided we should return to Swanton Morley by road. A coach was hired and we set off for Norfolk.

For the last few miles into our base in Norfolk the coach driver couldn't see where he was going so we took it in turns, two at a time, to walk in front of the coach and guide the driver. I was one of the guides on the last few miles through the country lanes to the station and as we entered the gates we were cheered by other aircrew, mainly from 88 Squadron with caustic remarks such as 'So you flogged your aircraft and walked home. Hope you got a good price for your rotten Mitchells'. 88 Squadron had Bostons at that time.

A second story, only a minor item, but with potential for a disastrous ending concerned a ground incident which involved a cadet from the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. On a day when there had been no operational flying an invitation had been sent to Sandhurst for a party of cadets to have some flying experience in the Mitchells. This was a reciprocal gesture in response to an invitation we had received some weeks earlier to attend a passing-out parade at the academy.

The cadets were given a short flight, a few at a time. The squadron crews not involved had borrowed three stumps and a bat and were having a knockabout game of cricket on a grassed area near the aircraft dispersal tarmaced areas. At the same time we were keeping an eye on aircraft movements connected with the cadets. We did not want to score a six through the pilot's windscreen.

During a pause in our test match we watched the cadets leaving an aircraft which had returned to the dispersal after a flight. Some left by the ladder at the front and the others at the rear underside of the fuselage. The props were still turning ready for the next flight. To our horror we saw one cadet descend the ladder at the front and instead of walking to the rear of the aircraft to get clear of the props he started to walk forward between the side of the fuselage and the turning propellers. We shouted to him to go back but he misinterpreted our message and continued to come forward. We expected to see him cut to shreds but he cleared the aircraft and then, realizing he should have gone to the rear and that was what our shouting was all about, he did a smart about turn and went back again. With the yellow tips of the propeller blades clearly visible from where we were standing as the engines revved and the minimum amount of space between them and the fuselage we could not believe that he could get away with it once, let alone a second time. But he did. A very lucky man. We tried it out later with stationary props and found there were only inches to spare.

Another recollection and another miraculous escape concerned an attack on a target in Northern France where we ran into murderous heavy flak. With shells exploding all around our aircraft we knew we must be suffering some damage and this became even more apparent when the mid-upper gunner's Perspex cupola shattered at the same time as a shell burst immediately under the fuselage.

On our return to base, which was Hartford Bridge of course, the other crews gathered round our aircraft to look at the damage, particularly the gunner's cupola. The gunner was adamant that a shell had not burst close enough to him at that particular moment which caused the damage. He asked why the offending piece of shrapnel could not be found inside the aircraft after a careful search and he also showed us a large tear in his Irvine flying jacket underneath one armpit.

A check was made by the Armament Officer and staff and this is what they came up with as the only possible explanation, after finding that a piece of shrapnel had struck one of my .5 Brownings positioned in the retractable under-turret under the aircraft : the shell that had exploded under the aircraft and which rocked it at the time had sent a piece of shrapnel in the direction of my guns and as I swung my guns the shrapnel was diverted on its way to my face and sent inside the fuselage in the direction of the mid-upper turret positioned above me and as he swivelled in his seat it went underneath his arm and out through the cupola, shattering it as it went. It could so easily have hit the gunner in the middle of his back.

My final item is the story of our crew's last operational sortie which took place on 15 May 1944, although the story begins on the previous afternoon. There had been no operational flying on that day and everyone was looking forward to a dance which had been arranged for that evening in the Sergeant's Mess. The station had received a visit from the Air Officer Commanding No. 2 Group, Air Vice Marshal Basil Embry, during the day and as it neared five o'clock we figured the V.I.P. wouldn't be coming to see us – our offices and dispersals were tucked away on the far side of the airfield and we thought he wouldn't bother to come over at this late stage, he would want to get back to Group Headquarters. We were wrong : he wanted to visit 226 Squadron. We received a call to say he was on his way as we hastily tidied ourselves up and formed up in two long lines outside the crewroom.

The A.V.M. duly arrived and made his way along the lines of aircrew asking each crew how many operations they had taken part in and giving particular encouragement to those crews who were approaching the mandatory thirty mark and who hoped to reach it unscathed before going on rest and to less dangerous duties. When he reached our crew our pilot, 'Ace' Taylor, said fifty sorties and forty-three actual operations. The A.V.M. asked the squadron commander how this had come about. The C.O. explained that when the crews converted from Bostons to Mitchells they had nearly all commenced their tour of operations at the same time and this meant that those surviving would all reach the thirty mark together. This would leave the squadron with a large number of inexperienced crews coming straight from training units as replacements for those leaving. He had asked the crews leaving to volunteer to do a few extra sorties and ours was the only one willing to do so.

Our visitor then stunned us by saying we were to stand down immediately : we were to report to Station Headquarters the next day, collect railway warrants and several weeks' pay and proceed on indefinite leave. We would be recalled when we were wanted.

I should explain that our crew had reasons for wanting to go on. Ace Taylor was a Canadian who had paid his own fare to come over to join the R.A.F. and he didn't want to leave operational flying with the job only half done. Jock Chapman, our mid-upper gunner, had lost his wife in childbirth when we were at Swanton Morley ; he was very bitter about that and wanted to take it out on someone – he thought the German nation would do fine. My young lady was under German occupation and that was good enough for me. Our navigator, Martin Blade, did not have any specific reason but felt that if he pulled out it would break up the team and he didn't want to do that after all we had been through together and how dependent we had been on each other in the air.

After our visitor departed our crews' thoughts turned not to the dance at the Sergeant's Mess but to our families and to tell them we would be posted away on non-operational duties. Our pilot had permission to be away from the station overnight – his wife was staying at an hotel in Camberley so this was easy for him. Our navigator caught a train to London to tell his family and fiancée who lived in Ruislip. Jock Chapman stayed on the station and I caught a train to tell my family who were living at Wembley. They had managed to get on the last boat out of Jersey before the Germans arrived. Except for our pilot we were all required to be back at base by midnight.

I was the first back and the dance was in full swing. The usual arrangements had been made : invitations had gone out to the nurses' homes at the hospitals in Reading and to the Huntley and Palmer biscuit factory telling the girls that three 3-tonners with seats would position near the bus station at Reading to transport them to the dance and take them home afterwards. Another usual arrangement had also been made. All the senior N.C.O.'s had a second uniform, and this enabled the aircrew and other officers to come to the Sergeants' Quarters, change into Sergeant's uniform and go to the dance.

I bought myself a pint at the bar and stood near the door to get away from the smoke and watched everyone enjoying themselves. Everyone was very merry – there was a stand down the following day and with no 5 a.m. early call, the chaps could let themselves go.

It was at my vantage point near the ante-room door that I heard a movement at the main door of the building and was startled to see the squadron commander come in. I thought we would be in trouble now because he would see many of his officers in N.C.O. uniform and he might not be amused. However he obviously had other things on his mind.

The wing commander soon realized that I was probably the only one sober and he came straight to me to say the dance must be brought to a close because we had been put on an important operation the following day and the crews must get as much sleep as they could. It was agreed we should get the girls way and then the C.O. would tell us what was required.

When the ladies had departed the wing commander stood on a table to tell those present that we had a job to do the following day. This was greeted with cheers because, in the state they were in, they all thought it was a joke to finish off the evening and they asked for the ladies to come back in again. It was some time before the officers and sergeants realized he was serious.

The wing commander then asked me to get my crew together to lead the second formation on this operation. I pointed out that we had been stood down by the group commander and virtually ordered off the station the following day. He said he was prepared to turn a blind eye to that if we would volunteer to do just one more. I told him it was alright by me and hoped it would be with the rest of the crew if I could find them – I said if I could locate them we would be there at the briefing. I managed to do so and they were not that pleased.

It was decided not to let those present return to their quarters because they would never surface the following morning. Instead, armchairs were positioned along the side of the ante-room and the chaps slept where they were.

Next morning the aircrews were called early, had a wash and shave, had some breakfast if they could face it, attended briefing and, according to my log book, took off at 10.05 hrs. The target was marshalling yards at Charleville. We were told to bomb visually and not by instruments and would probably have to go back a second time if the target was not obliterated on the first attempt. The takeoff was something to be believed ; I shut my eyes when one aircraft left it a bit late to leave the runway. I thought the pilot had fallen asleep.

We met up with the fighter escort on the south coast and set off across the Channel. On reaching the target we found 10/10ths cloud with no chance of a break to bomb visually. We circled continuously until the leader of the fighter escort indicated he was concerned about fuel running low. A little later he made it clear the fighter escort would have to leave for home. Our squadron commander told him we would carry on without them and the fighters departed.

The squadron commander realized we were not going to be able to carry out our task but also told us he was not going to take the bombs back home and we would find another target somewhere else.

In searching for another target we came across marshalling yards at Courtrai. Visibility was good and we lined up in two boxes of six aircraft. We made a first class approach, steady and true, up to the target. I left my position and went to the perspex window at the tail to watch the bombs go down. The bomb aimers must have had icepacks on their sore heads : it was a beautiful piece of bombing and every bomb landed where it was intended to go and must have caused an enormous amount of damage. We left for home very pleased with ourselves.

On return to Hartford Bridge we went for debriefing and the squadron commander outlined the sequence of events, culminating in his decision to bomb an alternative target. At this point the door of the Nissen hut opened and a group captain, not known to us, came in and quietly sat on a chair just inside the door.

Also at this point one of our crew mentioned that I had viewed the results of the bombing from the tail of the aircraft. I was asked to come on to the platform and describe what I had seen. I gave a graphic description of events as I saw them. The group captain then came forward and asked if he could say a few words.

The visitor had obviously flown down from Group Headquarters. He told us that in their wisdom Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery, in their planning for the coming invasion, had left certain areas on the continent free from attack. This was because the facilities at those locations might be of use to the invading forces. There were originally thirteen of these attack-free locations but as of this morning there were only twelve.

The officer then told us that the two generals thought that thirteen such areas might be one too many and were trying to decide which of the thirteen should be eliminated. We had made up their minds for them.

You may have guessed that the squadron C.O. was required to attend at Group Headquarters to be told about the error of his ways for attacking a target without authority. However it did not appear to do him much harm as he was posted to that same Headquarters soon afterwards to take up an important post which included responsibility for Mitchell squadrons in the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Tactical Air Force and their role in the invasion of Europe. He became an Air Commodore but sadly died in 2002.

Those are my principal recollections of Hartford Bridge, a very fine station which performed a great service and where I met a lot of fine people (as well as in the pub at Yateley Village).

I don't know if any of the foregoing is of any use to you or whether you already have it but at least I have told you all I know and hope some small item may help in the project you have undertaken and in the great work you do to keep memories alive.

Yours sincerely

Basil