

Memoirs of Flt/Sgt William Brookes 78 Squadron RAF Brighton

Why – after 60 years am I sitting here writing about my experiences flying with Bomber Command during WWII?

1. My daughter Alison works at Brewhouse Yard Museum in Nottingham, and like her Mother is keenly interested in historical facts. When one of her leaders found out about this aspect of my life she said: “Tell him to write it down, if he doesn’t then this piece of history will go with him when he dies”. I didn’t really want to put pen to paper, and so as a compromise, and because she was so interested, I turned over to her my Flying Log Book, photograph album containing several target photographs, and two logs kept by me on operations.
2. I watched on TV the other night ‘Who do you think you are?’ featuring Ian Hislop, who had two great-grandfathers, both soldiers, one served in France in WWI, the other in the Boer War. So he set about trying to discover everything about them, visiting battlefields, talking with people who either knew them or could point them in the right direction. At the end of the programme two researchers echoed almost exactly what the lady at the Museum had said. Masses of information can be obtained these days from archives or on the internet, but if someone keeps that information locked away in their head, all the research in the world won’t bring it to light! So write or record it.

So here we go, but I must warn you that this account will be rambling and disjointed. For some time after the war they came, uninvited, unannounced, at any time, when they came at night they were nightmares, my wife Joan would shake me violently awake to stop me shouting, screaming and thrashing about in our bed. Having spoken to other Servicemen – Army, Navy or Air Force, this was not uncommon.

People asked Ian Hislop how, faced with what his two relatives had endured and seen, how would he react? To which he replied quite honestly ‘he didn’t know’.

Max Hastings wrote a book called *Bomber Command*. I don’t think he intended it, but for me it was the finest ANTI-WAR book ever written!! When researching it he called on ex air crew, listening to their stories, told quietly and with no bragging, what it was like to go out night after night into the skies over Germany, and he wrote he hoped his generation, nor any other were ever called upon to measure themselves against what these men did.

There will be one overriding theme running through this chronicle, and it is this; to survive a war you have to possess one vital element – **LUCK**.

I was born on 1st December 1923 and so was unable to join up on Sept 3rd 1939. I had two brothers, older than me, who joined the army and went to the Middle East. As soon as I was able, I volunteered for the RAF, over the Birmingham for a rigorous medical and many aptitude tests, declared A1 and “you will be trained as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner (WOP/AG) and sent home on what was called deferred service. It must have been close to 18 months, but then with impeccable timing the called me up 3 days before Xmas to report to Padgate to be kitted out, then onto Blackpool for the first part of our training. At this point I met this fellow Harry Parker from Wolverhampton whose tastes, interests and outlook on life were like mine, and we became big friends. He was the only person I’ve known who could pour a pint of beer straight down his throat without having to swallow. This caused a lot of interest and in the NAAFI we were never short of beer!!

Then the months and months of training started during which I was on a 48 hour leave at home and Mother switched on the radio for the news. It came from various battle fronts then this: “Last night a strong force from Bomber Command raided the city of Nuremburg causing widespread damage – 97 of our aircraft are missing”. I don’t know what I looked like, but when I turned to Mother I shall never forget the look on her face – it was if she had seen a ghost. I mumbled about baling out, or force landings but I didn’t convince myself, let alone her.

Then at last came the day we were turned out as Sgt. WOP/AGs and posted to Operational Training Unit Lossiemouth, Scotland. Here there would be 20 Pilots, Navigators, Bomb Aimers, WOP/AGs,

and 40 Air Gunners, and the Pilots were given 5 days to sort out a crew for themselves that would fly together for the rest of the War.

After two days we felt like a couple of wallflowers – nobody had ‘solicited’ us! But then came an event that although I was unaware of it at the time, subsequently showed this to be the first of many that had that vital element about it – **LUCK**. We were standing in a queue for a meal, in front of us was a Pilot, name of Shaw. He looked at us and asked if we were crewed up. “No” was our answer. “Well I’m looking for a WOP/AG to complete my crew” he said. Harry looked at me, I looked at Harry, there was an awkward pause, then Harry held out his hand and said “I’ll join your crew”. Later that day a beanpole of a Canadian Pilot popped the question at me, and I said yes, thus joining an all Canadian crew. The Flight Engineer, a Geordie named George, joined us later. So our crew was Bob – Pilot, Eddie – Navigator, George – Bomb Aimer, me, WOP/AG, Johnny – Rear Gunner and Ted – mid-Upper Gunner.

Now the serious training began, to teach us how to operate over Germany, and, hopefully, to survive! From OUT to HCU – Heavy Conversion Unit where we learnt all about the Halifax (yes, there were other bombers than the Lancaster!), then the posting to our Squadron. This was 78 at Brighton, Yorks, and was part of 4 Group Bomber Command. Harry was sent to Burn, also in this Group and not far away.

So we started operations, our 3rd one on the night of November 4/5 flying Q Queenie, a scantily clad nubile girl painted on the nose, along with line after line of bombs, showing that far from being a young girl, this was a real old War Horse!! Bomb load a 4000 cookey, plus incendiaries, bombing height 19,000 our target, Bochum. This was a large steel-producing city in The Rhur, known with a certain macabre sense of humour as Happy Valley, on the grounds that if you went to the cities there often enough (and lived!) you became Flak Happy, like a punch drunk boxer who can no longer appreciate the punishment he is taking. Over France – tracers from German night fighters, and two planes going down in flames. On we went, then on our starboard side a fighter flare and an ME110 (this is where your training comes in) you DO NOT look at the flare or the fighter, because if you do it ruins your night vision and in the meantime his mate on the port side has you silhouetted against the light, and is coming in to blow you out of the sky. Well they played this game with us for what seemed an eternity, with Bob corkscrewing us all over, so they eventually pushed off, looking for easier meat, and because up ahead was Bochum. At this point I should mention that although our bombing height was 19,000, no matter how much Bob tried, he could not coax the old girl above 18,000. Near to the target we gave up trying to count the searchlights, but they had a number of Radar Controlled ones (blue in colour) that only came on when they had a plane, then the ‘slave’ ones white converged to form a cone, then the AA would pour as many shells up as possible and if you didn’t get out very very quickly there would be a flash and they held the cone so that everyone could watch the bits and pieces dribbling down. By now they had worked out course, and bombing height, and the approximate point at which you had to fly straight and level so the B/A could bomb accurately, so they filled that area with as many shells as possible and called it a box barrage. Eddie and George looked at this and said “Bob, we can’t fly through that f----g lot!!” Bob said “Get over your bombsight, George. The quicker we do the job and get home out of here the better”. When we landed Eddie and George said “That’s it, we’re not flying any more ops”. Bob said “Come on, it can’t get any worse than that” and talked them round. We lost 39 aircraft that night. Next morning Queenie had been taken to a Maintenance Hangar, so Johnny, Ted and self cycled down out of morbid curiosity. The people working on her asked if we had been the crew the previous night. When we confirmed this they said “Well, we’ve patched up the holes (box barrage) but there were two on the top of port wing but not underneath, which we couldn’t understand, so we removed the panel and guess what we found? Two live incendiaries nestling against the wing petrol tank!! We looked at each other and thought “Wonder how close that 4,000 bomb to us”. We didn’t tell the rest of the crew what we had just heard. **LUCK**.

By this time most aircraft had been fitted with a Radar device H2S but on one of our trips we were on one without it. Near the target a fighter came from starboard, but just above us in a shallow dive, ignored us, and raked a Halifax on our port side, setting fire to two engines. We watched to see if

any chutes came out, but then it tipped over onto one wing, and went like a blazing torch. He had homed in on its H2S. **LUCK**. The one fate all aircrews didn't want was to be trapped inside a blazing aircraft, and roasted alive.

So on to Xmas, and the time of the German Ardenne Offensive which stunned everybody, and the weather (fog) had stopped the Tactical boys getting at them. A new crew had arrived in our hut, didn't even have time to introduce us to them when on Boxing Day the call went out for crews to report for briefing at a certain time. We looked out and thought this must be a joke, you couldn't see the next hut for fog. Down to the mess for the traditional bacon and egg, and the 'joke' "If you don't come back can I have your egg?" Now on all ops one of the Flight Leaders (or the CO if he was flying) would lead the Squadron off, but on this one, guess who was to be privileged? Bob Penrice, and we thought "Yes, and if we plough in on take off they'll all be able to bugger off to their parties, leaving us to be scraped up!!" and still they didn't cancel. Our target was called St Vith where a mass of German armour had ground to halt, so with gritted teeth down the runway we went and above 50 ft up burst out into brilliant sunshine and a clear blue sky. Only 12 of us got off before they stopped the others. At this point I will digress to give you a poem by John Pudney from the film "*The Way to the Stars*" called Johnny, the significance of which will be revealed later:

"Do not despair for Johnny head in air
He sleeps as sound as Johnny underground
Put out no shroud for Johnny head in cloud
And keep your tears for him in after years.
Better by far for Johnny the bright star
To keep your head and see his children fed."

An American pilot (Johnny) is trying to bring his crippled Flying Fortress in to land safely but he has a 50lb bomb hung up that should have dropped with the others (if not, a light should appear on the B/As panel). Well, he lands, so does the bomb – finis.

Back to St Vith, now. The new crew that came to our hut could have been the best in the world, piloted by Guy Gibson or Leonard Cheshire, but to no avail. They caught an 88mm shell right on the nose of the aircraft, doubt they would have been alive when they hit the ground. **LUCK**.

So back to base we thought. Then over England we were called up and 'told' "Divert to East Fortune" and the co-ordinates in Scotland!! The whole of the UK was fogbound. Now in the air Bob was brilliant, but landings were not his forte. However, we were about the 7th Halifax to be brought in, and we touched down like a feather, wonderful we thought – then came the second landing, then the third, by which time all our teeth were rattling!! They were parking all these uninvited guests on the perimeter track and we joined them. Waiting for the trucks to take us to the mess when there were frantic shouts for Bob to return to the aircraft, the reason apparent when he did, we had a 50lb bomb hang-up, but Bob's landing had brought it down in view, hanging onto the buckled wing bomb-bay doors. A fourth landing, and we would have made an awful mess of East Fortune's runways! – **LUCK** – better than Johnny's. Back to base to continue our tour. To do this you had to believe that it would always be the others that would 'get the chop', never you.

There were times when this belief for no reason started to fray at the edges, then you grappled with it by getting a mate or mates, and becoming blind drunk. This started a period when we flew 9 ops in 11 days, had done I think 5 nights on the trot, fell into bed, only to be told after a couple of hours that we're down for a daylight trip. Johnny and Ted were 'getting laid' as often as possible by two cookhouse WAAFs, but at this period we didn't seem to have time to even get any sleep. They were furious and accused Bob of doing it deliberately, so they couldn't get their hands on them! He couldn't believe his ears. An Air Gunner had done 29 trips with his crew but had missed out on one. In this case you were placed on stand by so that if a crew required someone, you were available to fill in. Now this chap had become somewhat twitchy about doing this last one, so when called he had bad earache, next time severe cold and so on. One of the Flight Leaders, a DFC, pilot on his second tour, was due his 60th trip and wanted a gunner. "Ah", thought this chap, "this is for me". It was a tradition that on your final trip you were

allowed to be first back into the circuit to land, which happened in this case. The Control Tower called him up and asked if he would do an overshoot (mock landing to test conditions). Yes, of course, came in OK, climbed to turn for landing proper, one of his wings clipped the tree of a wood nearby, went in, exploded, and burst into flames. **LUCK** if he had accepted any of the other trips.....

Reminded me of a passage in a book by J O'Hara "A rich merchant goes down into the Market Place in Baghdad and is confronted by the figure of Death, who makes what he thinks is a frightening gesture. He turns, runs back to his home, tells his servant what has happened and orders him to saddle six of his fastest horses, for he said "I must flee to Samara". When he had left, the servant went down to the Market Place and confronted Death. "Why did you threaten my master?" he asked. "Oh I wasn't threatening him", replied Death. "I was startled to see him here, for I have an appointment with him tonight in Samara". At last our 30th operation came up. Now, superstition or not you wouldn't choose Friday 13th, but of course you do as they say. We looked at the Battle Order on the mess board. 4 crews only, one of them us. We knew then that this was to be a mine-laying job. Most crews hated them because you were on your own, had to fly over water at wave top height at night, and be spot on with your navigation. Into briefing, and there it was – Kiel Harbour, one of the biggest Naval Bases in Germany. Reason for the trip – they were pulling back troops and equipment to defend Germany, and felt it safer to do it by sea rather than road or rail under constant air attack. We were trying to prove them wrong, you fly at zero feet to avoid being picked up by their Radar, then at a certain point you climb to the height at which you are going to release the mine. We knew this was a hot area because we had been to a place Kamen near Kiel, and on the way back had seen a Halifax burning on the water like a fiery cross, marking the spot as were expected to do.

On towards Kiel, pitch black, no moon or stars, when up ahead for about 5 seconds a light – this could only be a ship or ships. We were not at the point to climb, so what to do? We all agreed – better the Devil you know... We would risk the reception waiting for us in Kiel and up we went. Further on, and suddenly the whole sky below us was filled with bursting shells, pompoms, tracer bullets. We all looked down, and it was Johnny who said in an awestruck voice "Jesus Christ". What the Germans had done was work out our probable course to the ports and had stationed 6 Flak Ships in a line across it, and but for a careless German sailor, we would have flown straight at zero feet down the barrels of all those guns. **LUCK**. Second poem;-

Less said the better
The bill unpaid, the dead letter
No roses at the end
Of Smith our friend
Last words don't matter
And there are none to flatter.
Words cannot fill, the post
Of Smith, the ghost
For Smith our brother
Only son of loving Mother
The waters lifted, stirred
Leaving no word.

Before our last trip I had received my dead letter, I hadn't known it at the time, but that blazing cross on the water had been Harry's aircraft. His name's on the wall at Runnymede listing all the aircrew with no known graves, but I know where it is, watery and at the bottom of the North Sea.

So for 60 years, I have felt illogical guilt – why didn't I reach out my hand and say "I'll join your crew", but then my name would be on that wall, and I would never have married, and had not only a wonderful wife, but a daughter who begged me to place all this on record. **LUCKY, LUCKY ME**.