

General memories

I volunteered for Aircrew aged 18 and after examinations and Medical reported for duty in March 1943.

RAF Number 1852721 (only the last three numbers were used)

Ops as detailed but not counted as part of tour 3

Number of ops 31

Therefore apart from training total number of ops was 34

I trained for 12 to 15 months in different places. As civilians we reported to Air Crew Reception Centre, at Lord's Cricket Ground in "The Long Room" London for three weeks. (6.98.A) We ate in the Zoo restaurant. Then to Initial Training Wing (ITW) Bridlington, Morpeth for Gunnery school where I was the course leader. Final exams had 98% Loved what I was doing. A Martinet towed a drogue for the rest of us to practise our gunnery skills above the North Sea. Wymeswold for "crewing-up", then Castle Donington to start training as a crew (Operational Training Unit); Lindholme Heavy conversion unit (HCU) to train on 4 engine bombers (Halifaxes); Hemswell Lancaster finishing school where we converted to Lancasters before going on to the Squadron in May 1944.

At ACRC I remember John Newbegin from Alnwick. I was in the bunk above him. He asked my name, I replied "Spike" and thereafter he called me Spike.

At the medical line up I was called in early. The MO said "Mr. Davy meet Mrs Davy". She was Thelma the wife of my cousin from Calstock. We had never met but she recognised my name on the list.

A lot of men were killed during training.

At Bridlington I got Scarlet Fever & confined to isolation hospital for six weeks. Plus two weeks recuperation leave which put me eight weeks behind those I joined up with.

When I went to Uxbridge for final Demob two others from that original intake said to me "We thought you were dead" They had accounted for only nine out of the sixty still alive. So perhaps scarlet fever saved my life.

To Wymeswold for 3 weeks Operation Training Unit (OTU).

At Wymeswold 200 or 300 crew were put into a hut and told to make up crews. Before this we were marching from place to place (perhaps to a lecture) and I was next to Sam Collens and we talked about our training experiences. I had passed out as 2nd out of 60 as a gunner. Sam said to me Harry Merry will join me as Flight Engineer, will you join us and I said yes can I be Rear Gunner and he replied yes you are my first crew member. After that the whole 626 aircrew intake was taken to a hut and instructed to form crews. All the men mingled and talked and somehow Sam collected his crew together. Tommy Birch BA, Joe Slack MUG, Ron Rainbird WO. Harry Merry would not join us until we had completed our initial training on twin-engined Wellingtons, the reason being that only 4 engine bombers carries a Flight Engineer. Harry joined us at Lindholme, a heavy conversion unit for 4 engine Halifaxes. Sam had met a Navigator Ted Davies, a pharmacist from Northampton. A Welshman, short stature, handlebar moustache, super chap. I gelled with him from the beginning & were great pals. His wife was running the business during his absence.

After Wymeswold half the contingent stayed there & half including us went to Castle Donnington for OTU.

We used ex-operational, clapped out Wellingtons for 6 weeks training. Very happy there. The Sword of Damocles hung over us as the culmination of this course was a series of decoy flights across the North Sea to draw German fighters away from the main Bomber stream. Also to carry out leaflet raids over Europe, in our case Paris.(called ops as detailed but not counted as operational). Bear in mind the Wellington had two engines & if one failed the plane could not get back on one engine. This meant they either crashed or ditched in the sea. Some crashed on take-off, one into the woods at the end of the run-way & all crew lost.

From Castle Donnington to Lindholme near Doncaster for Heavy Conversion Unit (HCU) & onto 4 engine heavy Halifaxes. Here Harry Merry joined us. A few weeks doing practice flights.

From there to Lancaster finishing school at Hemswell nr Gainsborough, Lincolnshire for final training in Lancs. End of training. Then posted to Operational Squadron, One Group Bomber Command, 626 Squadron at Wickenby near Lincoln.

Throughout the time of training as a crew we were warned on numerous occasions that if we withdrew from training no action would be taken, but if we withdrew after completion of training we would be reduced to ranks, lose our wings, & all documents would have Lack Of Moral Fibre written across them. (Cowardice in the face of the enemy). We would then be sent to a correction establishment at Sheffield before being posted into the Army.

At OTU the final chance was given. On this occasion the Navigator Ted Davies left the crew as his wife was bordering on a nervous breakdown due to his flying career. He wanted to go on but withdrew.

Immediately navigator Jack Leuty joined us. He was an "odd bod "waiting to join a crew. He had spent time training navigators in Canada and his experiences meant he had flown cross country from brightly lit city to city whereas in Britain we had had blackouts for four years.

Most of our operations were at night in the dark.

When we were on the Squadron Joe Slack left us and was replaced by an Irishman Paddy Fulton.

At the end of our own tour of 30 ops (31 actually) we went on 6 months rest from operational duty. Paddy had not completed 30 ops so was posted to another crew. He begged to stay with us, even cried, but was not allowed to. He was killed on his next op with the new crew.

At Wickenby

Pilot	Pilot Officer B.A. (Sam) Collens
Flight Engineer	Sergeant Harry Merry
Navigator	Flight Lieutenant Jack Leuty
Mid Upper Gunner	Sergeant John (Paddy) Fulton
Bomb Aimer	Sergeant Tommy Birch
Wireless Operator	Sergeant Ron (Ronald Thomas) Rainbird
Rear Gunner	Sergeant Herbert Davy (then k/a Bert now k/a Herb or Herbie)

Crews became closer than brothers. Age 19 I was the youngest of our crew. We spent leisure time together, drank together, spent leave together (Sam & Tommy came to Saltash). Relied on each other in the aircraft. We knew we might die together.

Accommodation was in huts. Officers had separate accommodation so Sam slept apart from us. We would wake some mornings and find 6 (or 7) empty beds in our hut. It was a fact of life that promotion was rapid because of the high rate of casualties and turnover of Aircrew.

Take off --- us from Wickenby
Up to 1 hour to climb to 10,000ft
500 planes all circling
Congregate over Mablethorpe, Lincs
9p.m. all navigation lights out
All to go in one direction across North Sea
Sometimes collisions in the dark
Could get caught up in the slipstream of the aircraft ahead and crash

Over the targets bombs dropping all around from other planes, from above.
Look up and see gaping open bomb doors in plane above
One fell between our wing and tail
Interrogation after each operation. (Now called de-briefing.)

Model -- Lanc III manufactured in Canada
Didn't use the same plane each time because we had 7 days leave every 6 weeks and they were used by other crews. The one we used last may have been shot down.
I remember three in particular :

Sugar 2 S²
Victor 2 V²
Roger 2 R² Also known as Bennets Beavers

Each Squadron had letters 12 was PH 626 was UM
Each plane in each squadron had a letter - 12 just the letter, 626 the letter plus 2
Station code name /call sign was GRATEFUL

e.g. our plane would be UM **O** R²

Also V² H² Y² U² T² Z² L²

When R² (known as Bennets Beavers after a previous pilot) became available Sam asked to use it because he knew it was a faster aircraft than others.
We now know PA990 R² Bennets Beavers was a "ton-up" Lanc. One of few that went out on and survived 100 operations or more. (105; some didn't even come back from one).

Roger 2 was the plane we used when we flew down across Kit Hill and Liskeard (where I could see our milkman delivering), the Lizard, 300 miles out into the Atlantic by daylight & under 1000ft to keep below the German RADAR & into Pauillac (near Bordeaux) to bomb

the oil tank farm. (I now know I flew across Coombe Park, a farm where Luke held Nancy (age 5) in his arms to see the planes passing overhead. August 4th 1944).

We used R² for Westkapelle.

Westkapelle was our last op. In 2005 I read that our Navigator was F/O L.Andrews. I have no recollection whatsoever of this substitute or why Jack Leuty wasn't with us. I remember the day well and it is recorded for the Polderhuis Museum at Westkapelle.

Again in 2005 I was asked if the crew ever swapped places. Some records showed that crews did, or flew with substitutes, but then records may not be correct. They were sometimes based on the planes that crews usually flew, not the ones they actually did fly.

The only time we did swap was when we returned from one op with a bomb still on board. We could not land (for fear of blowing up on the runway) so had to dispose of the bomb in the North Sea as was usual practice. Sam asked Tommy if he would like to pilot the plane, (he certainly would and did) and I went to bomb aimer's position and directed the bomb down to a wave I had my eye on. I cannot remember who covered my position.

.
Corkscrewing to avoid German air attack. The responsibility of the Rear Gunner was the protection of the plane and crew. He was required to give 100% concentration on continually scanning the sky – especially the dark side - to give adequate warning and instruction to the Pilot on what evasive action to take. Highly trained in aircraft recognition.

Majority of enemy fighter attacks were from the dark side of the sky so that we were silhouetted against the light. The RG had to concentrate his search on the dark side when the tendency would be to look to the light. (Instructions said never look at lights) e.g. if the attack came from port side the RG would instruct Pilot to corkscrew port – first a 1000ft dive to port followed by 1000ft climb to starboard, then 1000ft dive to starboard followed by 1000ft climb to port which would bring the plane back to it's normal flight path. This procedure was repeated until either the fighter abandoned his chase or either of us was shot down. (We now know that some German pilots gave up when they saw that we were alert and ready, and went in search of an easier target.) During a corkscrew anything loose and moveable inside the plane would speedily fly round and cause damage. Especially stomach contents!!

.
We used T² for Frankfurt when we were badly shot up. We went via Mannheim in error (Don't know the reason why – navigational , wind, what? I do not know why we should be separated from the others by 50 miles or so.) Approaching what we thought was the target Frankfurt, B/A Tommy offered to help Navigator Jack by describing the ground scene. It was clear moonlight and he described the railway lines and river."We're following the rail line now the river now the river divides" It obviously differed from the map because Jack said "Did you say the river divides? Christ we're over Mannheim!" That's when the blue searchlight came up. We were coned in searchlights, Sam called up "what shall I do Bert?" I replied "dive to port at top speed & get the hell out of here". I remember seeing the wings flapping. Speed was registered 400mph.by Harry Merry. (normal operating speed was between 180 – 210mph) dropped 18,000ft to 14,000ft. We were badly attacked by anti-aircraft guns, anything they could throw at us. After recovery, Sam said "navigator give me a course for Frankfurt".I can remember my thoughts-they are unprintable. I thought we'd had it. We were way after the main attack so we were a lone aircraft, vulnerable again but apparently not noticed /recognised by ground defences. Perhaps because we approached from the South instead of North. The target marker was still visible so dropped the bombs &

returned for home. Sam said "course for Woodbridge" The port side engine had to be feathered because the fuel tank had been punctured. I saw what I thought was smoke and reported one engine on fire, but it was fuel. Wireless operator went back through plane & felt what he thought was blood on mid-upper gunner. "He's had it" Minutes later crackle on line & MUG said "what's the matter with you lot. I can't get any reply". He was covered in hydraulic fluid. Tommy reported bomb bay doors would not close. At some stage I know I opened my door to get back into the plane and to my parachute if were possible. We had to land at Woodbridge an emergency airfield in Suffolk with a 5000yd runway, on three engines & bomb doors open. No radio & not knowing if undercarriage was down. The next day when we inspected the plane and talked this is what we found:

Each member of the crew had evidence of his position being damaged by missiles. I had a hole 2inches in diameter where the doors joined (centre of backrest) behind my seat and in the gunmounting in front of me. The pilot and flight engineer sat side by side on the flight deck. There were holes in the Perspex either side of the flight deck where their heads would normally be. Tommy lying on his stomach in the bombing position had shrapnel in his harness over his heart. There were holes at all crew positions. Did we all lean sideways to look at something at the same time? There was a hole in the bomb door and a dent in the top of the bomb bay obviously caused before the bomb was dropped. Why didn't the 4000lb bomb explode inside the plane?

The thoughts that went through my mind when we were over Mannheim:

If I get out of the plane where would I land? On buildings, trees, water, forest?

.On our second trip to Stettin

Did all the crew fall asleep returning over the North Sea? It was a crime. Crossed North Sea, crossed Denmark, across Sweden over Malmo, across the Baltic then to Stettin. Returned the same route. After crossing Danish coast into the North Sea I heard Bomb Aimer say to Navigator "We are just crossing the Danish coast" The Navigator replied "our ETA on English coast one hour" The next thing I can remember is hearing the Bomb Aimer's voice "hello Navigator, just crossing the English coast". Two or three nights later we were in the Adam & Eve (pub) Wragby. It was my turn to buy the drinks. Harry Merry helped me. He said "You were asleep in your turret, I saw you when I went to the "Elsan". He passed the Wireless operator who was asleep at his table, no reaction from Mid Upper Gunner, climbed over Elsan slid down to rear turret looked through window & saw me slouched over guns. Retraced his steps shone torch down into Bomb Aimer & saw Tommy asleep. Thought to himself I will keep watch. Pilot asleep in his seat & next thing Harry knew was when Tommy said "just crossing English coast". Meaning that at one point the whole crew had been asleep. Reasoning --- on this long trip we were issued with two wakey- wakey pills to be taken at regular intervals (4hourly periods). Perhaps we took them too early & when the effect wore off they left you feeling very drowsy.

The lights of Malmo –memorable after the darkness of Britain.

Premonitions

One day the rear turret was leaking oil. I told Pilot we could not or should not fly. He agreed. Terrible losses that night. The next day the leak had cleared up. Afterwards other crew asked did I have a premonition. Yes. They all did too. Harry Merry said "Why didn't you want to fly in that raid?" I replied "Because if we had we would not be here now" He said he agreed & that other crew had felt the same without mentioning names.

Over Stettin, over target, a voice from the cockpit said “crumbs, there’s a bloody fighter coming straight for us!” They envisaged a head-on collision. I saw it as it passed over and above us. I was sure it was an Me262 the first true jet fighter.

Over 50 years later I met Dave Wellard, another Rear Gunner from 626 Squadron who lived in Saltash and he told me the same story. (We had never met before.) His plane was on the same mission. Were we side by side? Was there only the one fighter or two? He also recognised it as an Me262.

After we finished flying Sam was posted to RAF Whitchurch, Bristol. Harry Merry came down from Weeton, Lancs where he was stationed. I came from Avonmouth where I was stationed & met at pub at Whitchurch. When I walked in the door Harry shook my hand and said “Here’s old Cat’s Eyes. If it hadn’t been for you, you bugger, we wouldn’t be here now”. He always called me Cat’s Eyes.

Jack Leuty always asking for a fag, but when someone asked him for one he said “I’ll sell you ten” I can remember being absolutely disgusted with his attitude. He was the only crew member who kept aloof from any of the others.

Mrs Lane a customer said to me when she heard I was joining the RAF “you might meet my son Pat” We didn’t know each other. One day in the dispersal someone was using my cleaning rods without asking permission. I said to him “Next time ask”. He had a Cornish accent. Told me he was from Saltash so I said to him “I suppose you are Pat Lane” He nearly fell over in surprise. “how the hell do you know that?”

Clothes:

Aircrew: I think only the gunners were issued with mustard- yellow coloured buoyancy suits but they proved to be far too bulky especially for Rear gunners because although it was possible to squeeze into the turret with them on it was virtually impossible to escape quickly. I never saw anyone wear one on operations!!! Consider temperature in the rear turret could be as low as - 40° C. The main fuselage of the Lanc had hot air ducted from the engines hence the rest of the crew did not need to dress like rear gunners. Also rear gunners removed the Perspex window to get better vision. See photo of HD standing beside turret.

Order of dressing:

1. Long johns – made of wool plated with silk. 2 pieces long sleeved vest and full length pants.
2. RAF issue socks
3. Shirt and tie
4. RAF uniform trousers
5. “SUB” socks. Socks from toe to crotch Naval issue, thick knit (Submarine)
6. “SUB” sweater as above. Full length sleeves and hip length.
- 7 Thin cotton type electrically heated suit
- 8 Battle dress top
- 9 Electrically heated slippers
- 10 Fur lined leather boots (Escape variety, cut the tops off with the knife in an inside little pocket and they looked like shoes)
- 11 Silk gloves
- 12 Woollen mittens and small woollen scarf
- 13 Padded heated gauntlets

- 14 Leather gauntlets with zips and elasticated top
- 15 MAE West floatation waistcoat filled with kapok
- 16 Parachute harness
- 17 Leather helmet with oxygen mask, microphone and earphones

We would take half an hour to dress, especially in summer. It was important not to get sweaty because it would freeze when we were airborne in cold temperatures.

It was impossible to use bodily functions in the rear turret. Sometimes for up to 10 or 11 hours. I drank little during the day before an op. The other crew could use the Elsan toilet situated in the aircraft behind the rear turret. I was only once airsick. I used one of my gauntlets and then threw it out the window. The gauntlet was replaced.

My parachute had to be stored in the aircraft behind the rear turret. If I needed it in a hurry it would have been impossible to get at it.

Personal Survival kit: (for all Bomber Crews) called Escape Kit.

Waterproof flat pouch approx 6x5 inches containing maps of European countries printed on silk each about 7 inches square, together with currency of European countries for use as necessary if shot down, could be used either to "pay" helpers or bribe people.

Celluloid flat box approx 5x4 inches containing 1 razor, 1 blade, 1 tube condensed milk, Horlicks tablets, aspirins, adhesive plasters, amongst other things now forgotten.

Compasses: small compasses were hidden on the uniform. E.g. a uniform button which unscrewed with a left-hand thread (to fox the Germans). A navigator's pencil which when broken in half revealed a bar compass on a piece of thread. Another small compass was sewn behind the brevet (flying wing badge).

Two metal trouser fly buttons when balanced one on top of the other had a white spot which indicated North

We were told that some crews who miraculously escaped their plane complained that the tube of shaving soap was useless. Of course it was an unlabelled tube of condensed milk.

Flying Rations for each operation consisted of 1x two ounce bar of Fry's chocolate cream, 1x two ounce bar of milk chocolate, one packet of chewing gum, and 1x 4 fluid ounce can of orange juice. One Benzadrine (wakey-wakey pill) which once taken kept you awake for four hours.

To open my small tin of orange juice in the turret I pierced it with a bullet held sharp end down which I hit with my other hand.

Pair of fleece lined shoes attached to gaiters. One gaiter had a small knife concealed inside. On crash landing gaiters were to be cut off so that shoes would look like normal ones.

.

The Rear Gunner in his turret was not inside the plane but on a "platform" at the rear.

To clamber into the turret was a time consuming and awkward business. The Elsan toilet at the rear of the fuselage had a hinged lid secured by an elastic rope. This was the RG's step onto a plywood chute. Partway down the chute was a hinged door secured by another elastic rope which closed automatically after passing through. Once through that door you placed your parachute pack in stowage on the port side of the aircraft, on hooks and again secured by elastic rope. Then still sliding, through two small sliding doors which were closed behind you after entry, forming a backrest. The gunner sat on a small lightly upholstered shelf-like seat for the duration of the operation with no room to move around. One door had a small porthole window. Plug in intercom & oxygen mask and check guns, sights etc. Equipped with 4x

·303 Browning machine guns. The windows were Perspex which after cleaning became scratched, difficult to see through and susceptible to glare from searchlights & suchlike. Most RG's cut a panel 3ft high x 1ft wide out of the main window between the guns. The temperature could be up to -40°C. If the engines failed there was no power to the rear turret so I could do nothing.

If I needed to escape from my turret, or had the opportunity to bale out, I had to open the small doors behind me (my backrest), & manoeuvre back up the chute to pick up my parachute, then through the first door back into the fuselage proper. In theory in an emergency it should have been possible to turn the turret around and fall backwards out of the "backrest" doors. If the engines failed, no power so I could do nothing other than laboriously hand-crank the turret using two handles, one in each hand and each turning opposite to the other.

I was facing backwards in my turret so had to remember when giving observations and instructions to the other crew that "port was starboard".

I used to regularly mentally practice how I would get out if I had the opportunity. I never wore my cumbersome buoyancy suit. I removed my Perspex window for better vision and I decided I would rather die of cold than being shot down in flames. On the trip which took us to Mannheim in error I can remember I opened my "backrest" doors ready for evacuation if that were to be possible.

Rear Gunners were usually the first target for German fighter planes, and they were often the worst casualties of other attacks or crash landings. A Lanc could land at home base minus the RG. There were stories of turrets being hosed out.

I am sometimes asked if I was afraid. Of course most of us were scared before take-off, but once airborne training took over and we all did our jobs. Anyone who professed to no fear often took stupid chances and made mistakes. Over the targets and when under attack we just had to get on with it, took evasive action when possible and hoped to survive. Once the bombs had gone there was a sense of relief but also easy to drop your guard. After leaving the target many planes were shot down by the following German fighters. I always said a prayer before take-off and heaved a sigh of relief and thanks each time my turret touched down at Wickenby. I know that our crew was among the lucky ones.

Many Aircrew carried a lucky charm or item on every op. and most carried out small rituals before take-off. When I was training my sister Peggy gave me a Cornish Piskie (Joan the Wad) bronze lapel brooch which I wore on my battle dress jacket all the time.

Sam carried a whole cashew nut. The others did not say if they carried such things.

Before briefing we usually had a shrewd idea of the sort of destination. The ground crew could tell from the fuel load and bomb load whether it was to be a long trip or short one thus guessing it would be Germany or Occupied Territories.

Briefing.

Pubs:

When at Bridlington the "Dun'cow" near Newcastle.

When at Castle Donnington the "Turk's Head". (with Sam & crew)

When at Lindholme the pub at Hatfield Woodhouse. (with Sam & crew)

When at Wickenby the "Adam & Eve" at Wragby (with Sam & crew) because the pub at

Wickenby was a long way from our billets and a long way to walk. Mainly No.12 Squadron used it.

Once or twice when in London on leave Sam, Harry and I, went to the “Queens” in Leicester Square til closing time 2p.m. Then to the Hong Kong Chinese Restaurant Shaftsbury Avenue. Then back to the “Queens” at 6p.m. Nearly all Aircrew there.

If we weren't on the battle order for that night we would all go down to the pub. The exception was Jack Leuty Navigator who seemed to keep himself to himself off duty. We made the most of each day because none of us knew if we would return from our operations. We did not go to the pub when we were on battle order.

I can remember one incident. Montgomery was held up at Caen the most heavily defended city in Normandy. He asked Bomber Command to destroy the German front lines so that 2nd Army could advance towards Germany. We had to bomb in daylight because the Allied Force was only 1200yds from the bombing area. Unfortunately the weather was bad so we were told to stand by in camp until it cleared. After three days there was no let up in the weather so most crews went down to the “Adam & Eve” for a few beers. At around 9p.m. the Wing Commander walked in. He very quietly said “I think you chaps should be back in bed, not down here”. We knew what that meant so we all duly returned to billets.

We were woken at about 2a.m. to prepare for ops.(breakfast, dress, briefing etc) The briefing was to bomb the target short of the Allied lines. We were told the Americans had bombed the previous day and hit the Allied lines. En route I wanted to vomit probably because of the beer the previous night – the only time I ever felt sick. That's when I was sick in my gauntlet & tossed it out through the clear vision panel. As we approached the target area we saw “box barrage” of flak put up by the Germans. We were flying at approx.12000ft, and the barrage was approx 1000ft above and below us. Like a curtain or a lethal Commando boarding net hanging in the sky. We had to fly straight through it. I personally witnessed seven Lancs go down. I have since met members of the Expediency Force who were on the ground who told me in words to the effect “your bombing was wonderful-not like those Americans yesterday. Not one of your bombs landed on our lines”.

Coming home after one operation with landing lights on we were attacked by USA planes. Sam to W/O “send up colour of the day”
Did they mistake us for Doodlebugs which had a red tail?

After the tour of operations all Aircrew were given a six months rest job before going back to another tour of flying operations. I was posted to report to an Aircrew Allocation Centre on a small disused airfield called Bracla near Nairn in North of Scotland. (Moray Firth). October. It seemed the coldest place on earth. The others were sent to different places. Don't know why and don't know why I was sent to Bracla. We were interviewed for three weeks for a choice of “Rest Jobs”. Harry Merry was at Weeton, Lancashire. Can't remember where Sam and the others went. Tommy did Instructing.

Given three choices:

1. Embarkation Assistant, Movement Control, Ships in Ports in ports anywhere in the UK being responsible for meeting personnel and families on leave from abroad and checking RAF cargoes mostly from America and Canada(supplies for Armed Forces).
2. Transport.
3. To be an Instructor of Aircrews.

At the end of the three weeks we were allowed to choose. I was allowed my first choice

Embarkation Control because I was interested in ships. Also someone had told me it was a nice job. Posted to a Service Camp at Kirkham near Preston, Lancashire for three weeks training for my new job. Discovered that Harry Merry was only twelve miles away but unable to meet because of the vagaries of transport in those days.

Then to Port of Bristol Authority – Avonmouth Docks where I was billeted with a civilian family the Bentleys. (Their son later played soccer for England team). Many happy weeks in that area. Among my duties there I was involved with unloading a ship carrying 128 wives and families returning from the West Indies on a banana boat which brought the first consignment of Fyffes bananas to England since 1939. Wonderful to taste this delicacy after so many years.(1945). Had a good time in the docks boarding ships and receiving hospitality. Whilst I was there V.E.Day was celebrated with street parties. During my time there met up with Sam & Harry in a pub.

After that I was posted to Newhaven, Sussex, checking RAF personnel coming ashore on the cross-channel ferries from France. Again billeted with a civilian family Mrs. Bishop.

Another happy time.

At Newhaven I was expecting to be recalled to flying duties to Burma when V.J.Day was announced. Shortly afterwards my father without my knowledge managed to obtain a compassionate discharge for me to return to the family butchery business in Saltash. I was furious. Later I understood that all ranks except officers were demoted and sent to other jobs. Many of course continued flying.

Afterwards.

At the completion of flying operations crews would part with a handshake and promise to keep in touch. Of course many did, some went on to illustrious careers and many have kept up contact with various Squadron and Aircrew Associations but strange as it may seem now a large number lost contact. Some were traumatised, some just wanted to forget. Some wanted nothing more to do with Service life. We all got on with our lives and some like me suffered no post-war trauma but never forgot those years. It was my impression that Jack Leuty and Ron Rainbird did not want to continue the bond we had made.

Sam, Harry & I met up a couple of times . Sam married Brenda and came to Cornwall for their honeymoon.at Looe. They & Harry returned to the West Indies.

I married Nancy in 1959 and she will tell you that it doesn't take much to trigger a story or on meeting a stranger soon find I was stationed in their part of the country.

In 1959 Sam, Brenda and their four young boys came to Plymouth on a liner, stayed in a bed and breakfast in Saltash for a couple of nights and spent time with us. Then we lost touch again. One day (date not known) Tommy and Jenny came to Saltash from Leigh-on-Sea and looked me up in the shop. I was at another of our depots, and left instructions not to forward telephone calls. However, Nancy phoned and said "a call for you". Tommy's voice came over the line "Bomb Aimer to Rear Gunner". The start of a renewed and lifelong friendship. Nancy remarked how eerie it was to hear the same stories and memories from a complete stranger.

I knew a Merchant Navy Captain who was going to Trinidad and asked him to find Harry Merry for me. He came back with an address.

As a surprise for our 25th Wedding Anniversary Nancy wrote to Harry and asked him to telephone on a certain day, certain time, and if he knew where Sam was to ask him to phone too. Sam & Brenda by now living in Canada.

Tommy & Jenny stayed with us for the anniversary (a party for family and friends) and lo and behold at the designated hour the phone rang & it was Harry, then Sam. What a reunion

down the line. Sam & Brenda came to stay with us on a visit to England and we had a most wonderful time. Harry died before Nancy could meet him. After Sam's untimely death Brenda came again and we to Missasauga. Tommy died having a heart attack whilst driving, but we keep up with Jenny.

On leave Sam came to Saltash once or twice with me.

Tommy came twice. On one occasion we put my motor bike on the train at Wickenby to London, somehow got across London then by train to Bristol. We had come straight from an op with no sleep so were very tired. I said I know a place in Weston Super Mare that might be able to put us up so we rode there. It was a sort of hotel/ retirement home (so-called in those days for retired gentle folk) where my father used to stay on his Ministerial visits. Mr.Cottle the owner recognised me and said of course he could find us beds. After a good breakfast the next morning he would not let us pay anything. The dear old ladies there were very excited to see us. We then took the train to Plymouth. Got fed up with the slow start/stop journey so got off at a place called Bittaford near Plymouth and rode the bike the rest of the way and across the river to Saltash on the vehicle ferry. Because there were railings and a swing gate at Bittaford we had to manoeuvre the bike over them to the road. I had not told my parents that I had started flying on ops, and on one visit Tommy said "Isn't it time you told them?" We were at the "Notter Bridge" pub at the time. Father was very proud and after that when I was on leave in the shop he would say "This is my son who is"

Now. A note from Nancy 2005

Herb is now 81 years old,(going on 65) still energetic with a vivid and accurate memory and I have been recording it all on the computer. Still adding to it. What started off as little memory joggers has grown into a full story. These are not the ramblings of an old man!!!!!! All his life he has remembered his experiences of those RAF days as vividly as though they were yesterday. His interest in planes and ships and that training has stayed with him and his observations are as acute as ever. Over the years he has often been asked to give talks and his Rear Gunner reminiscences are always popular. Especially one entitled "When Port Was Starboard". He has only recently told me he still repeats his little mental flying rituals whenever he takes to the air --- on holiday or any flight. Amongst his photographs and memorabilia is his lucky Piskie charm.

In 2009 during an interview he was asked what he thought about when on operations --- mother & sister perhaps? He replied once airborne all his thoughts were directed to being alert and scanning the sky and doing his job. But afterwards he told me that yes, he and Tommy had thought of their mothers and how devastated they would have been if anything had happened to them.

Heard that crews were very happy when they saw Lincoln Cathedral in sight on approaching base. How did I feel? "Well I never saw it because I was in the rear facing backwards."

Very relieved when the rear wheel touched down.

Between 1st day of war September 1939 and May 1945

Of every 100 Aircrew

Killed	51	51%
Crashes in England	9)	
Seriously injured	3)	
Prisoners of war	12)	25%
Evaded capture	1)	

Survived unharmed 24 24%

Of that 24% none were actually unscathed. All have stories of near-misses, lucky escapes etc.etc.

55,000 Bomber Command aircrew lost their lives out of a total of 110,000. Rate of loss never before borne by a Military Force of comparable size in the history of the world.

Entitled to Defence Medal (ARP Messenger 1940-1941), & Part-time National Fire Service. 1942-1943 (No. Had to be in for 3 years)
39/45 Star
France and Germany Medal
Victory Medal (War Medal)

Apparently not eligible for Aircrew Europe Medal because I did not fly on operations prior to D-Day (6th June 1944), but I was on Squadron 5th June 1944 and detailed to act as Rear gunner because of illness of another crew member. Unfortunately he heard there was something momentous going to happen that night and pronounced himself fit so I did not fly. But in Feb & March our crew had flown 3 “operations as detailed” over Europe which didn’t count. (See logbook)

Harris asked Churchill for a Bomber Command Campaign Medal, but Churchill refused. Montgomery & Tedder etc were all given Earldoms. They only made Harris a Knight. A lot of Bomber Command Aircrew took it as a personal insult but apparently it was his wish that he be given no higher award unless his Bomber crews were given recognition. I was not alone by any means in refusing to apply for my campaign medals. They knew where we were when they needed us, but if we wanted our medals we had to apply for them. We supported Harris. After the War Churchill omitted to include and thank Bomber Command for their involvement.

July 18th 2012 We went to London to see the new Bomber Command Memorial.

2013 Bomber Command “veterans” were awarded a “clasp”. He was not going to apply for it.

During and after the War new regulations. Medals were presented to serving crew but if they had already left the service they had to apply for them. Was that in 1948 or before? We now know they had to ask for a buff postcard at the Post Office in order to apply.

July 2013 Applied for all medals
Applied for Membership of Bomber Command

August 2013 Nancy trying to find proof he was in the Fire Service

Memories of being in the National Fire Service, Saltash 1942 (previously Auxiliary Fire Service)

Must have had a number. Cannot remember having a photo taken.
Had to give up uniform (overalls) but kept the axe. Is it in this house somewhere?

David Coles, George Rees, Douglas Vosper, Colin Squires father.

The London Fire Brigade were given a rest from the London Blitz by being sent to the country i.e. Saltash. One called himself Flicker because his name was really Fricker. One was an architect from Maida Vale.

From David Coles -- Two were husband & wife, there is a photo at Heritage. Sidney and Hilda Basset.

There appear to be no records or photos of NFS 1942, presumably because none were taken or had been destroyed during destruction.

2nd Sept 2013

Andrew found the axe in the roof along with some flying “souvenirs”.
Axe No. 553 758 (or it could be 555 758).

Leggings part of rear gunner flying boots with inner little pocket (no knife).
Floating tablet for dying the water yellow/orange to be trailed from a dinghy in the event of being shot down over the sea.
Floating torch from the Mae- West.
Compound and cloth from service respirator to clear and coat lenses of goggles and respirators.

December 2013. Great niece Stephanie Pender asked for details as she is determined to get the Medals. She is in the British Army

Medals received Feb 2014
War Medal 1939-1945
1939-1945 Star with Bomber Command Clasp
France and Germany Star

2014 French awarded Legion d'Honneur to all surviving veterans who helped liberate France 1944/45. 2015 Nancy applied.
September 2016
Legion d'Honneur arrived