LOOSE ON THE WIND

Harold Yeoman

To those who never came back.

Their voices, dying as they fly,
  Loose on the wind are sown;
The names of men blow soundless by,
  My fellows' and my own.

A.E. Housman,
"A Shropshire Lad", XXXVIII.

"And how can a life be loved that hath so many embitterments, and is subject to so many calamities and miseries? How too can it be called a life, that begetteth so many deaths and plagues?"

Thomas a Kempis,
"The Imitation of Christ".

LOOSE ON THE WIND

Author's foreword

Never no more
We would never fly like that
Lennie
It makes you think
'Yes, my darling daughter'
Crewing-up
Images of mortality
Tony
Mind you don't scratch the paint
Rabbie
Letter home
Low-level
A boxful of broken china
The end of Harry
Silver spoon boy
Intermezzo
Overshoot
First solo
The pepper pot
Approach and landing
Knight's move
A different kind of love
Sun on a chequered tea-cosy
Photograph in a book

Glossary

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

During the years of the Second World War, some 90,000 men, from the British Isles, from the great Dominions overseas and from the countries of Europe overrun by the German enemy, volunteered as aircrew in Bomber Command of the Royal Air Force. Of these men, over 55,000 were to lose their lives and, to this day, more than 20,000 of that total have no known graves. In one particular operation there were more Bomber Command aircrew killed than there were casualties during the entire Battle of Britain.

There were many men whose names will bear for ever an aura of unfading brilliance, men such as Leonard Cheshire,(whom for a brief time I was privileged to know) such as Guy Gibson, or John Searby. There were also the thousands who could not aspire to the greatness of those remarkable men, to their almost unbelievable heights of courage and achievement. To attempt to assess what we in Bomber Command did achieve is no part of my aim. Much greater minds and more highly skilled pens than mine have already done this. This small piece of writing is solely an attempt, through the window of personal recollection, to tell of a few of the incidents which affected me and of a few of the splendid young men whom I was fortunate enough to know and to call my friends. Many, all too many of them, alas, gave their lives as part of the price of our freedom, the freedom from an unspeakable tyranny, that freedom which we now so casually enjoy and take so easily for granted. If, in this small book, I have planted their names like seeds in the garden of future years for even a few eyes other than my own to read, for a few other minds to remember, then I shall have done what I set out to do.

An eminent air historian has recently quoted some words which I wrote to him, words which I now venture to repeat. I said, "We simply had our jobs to do and we tried to do them as best we could." I believe that sums it up.

Harold Yeoman
November 1994

Never no more

".....And through the glasse wyndow
Shines the sone.
How should I love, and I so young?....."

(Anon.)

NEVER NO MORE

There was something icy cold running down my face and a brilliant light was shining into my eyes.

"What on earth?" I heard myself mutter.

I came to rapidly out of a deep sleep and tried to wriggle away from the cold wetness which was finding its way down my pyjama collar, but I could not escape it, nor the blinding glare.

"What's going on?" I half-shouted, then I saw her hand holding the dripping sponge. Bright sunshine was pouring through my window that winter morning.

A pale, laughing face framed in jet-black hair behind the hand. She was sitting on the side of my bed.

"Betty!" I shouted, "Stop it! What the heck are you doing?"

"Saturday," she answered brightly, twisting the sponge away from my hand, "Saturday, and it's your day off. We were going for a walk, do you remember?"

Her dark, lustrous eyes shone with mischief. I wiped my face on the sleeve of my pyjama jacket and shuddered with the cold. I tried to pull the blankets back around me, but she pulled them firmly down again to chest level. What on earth would my parents think, I wondered, a young girl coming into my bedroom - they'd have a fit. It was almost too much for them when I'd insisted on volunteering for aircrew when I was nineteen, but this - !

"I've brought you a cup of tea; now hurry up and drink it, 'cos it's breakfast time."

Betty got off the bed, handed me the cup and made for the door.

"Don't be long now, and if you don't take me for that walk, I'll never speak to you again, never no more."

"What, never, never no more?" I mimicked.

"No, never no more."

She grinned, but pretended to be in a huff and flounced out, tossing her shiny black hair which gleamed like coal in the morning sunlight. It became a silly, affectionate catch-phrase between us.

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We had arrived at the Knight's home at almost the same time; Betty from Coventry, after the air-raid, I from Initial Training Wing, to start my flying training at Sywell, a few miles from the centre of Northampton. We had seen the bombing from a safe distance, out of the train windows, on the way up from our I.T.W. at Torquay overnight. We had stopped, miles from anywhere, for hours, it seemed, while the raid progressed. We could hear the Jerries droning overhead and saw the fire on the horizon.

"Someone's getting a hell of a pasting," we had said.

Betty, then, was a refugee. Near misses from H.E.s had decided her parents to evacuate her from the shattered and blazing city to the safer home of her aunt and uncle; the R.A.F. billeting authorities had decided to send me to the Knights at the same time. So we quickly became friends; we were both of an age and of similar dispositions, light-hearted, fun-loving, undemanding and contented by nature. Two of a kind, I thought.

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We walked in Abington Park. It was brilliantly sunny but bitterly cold, a wonderful December day. There was snow on the ground, the bare trees were black and stark against the clear winter sky. With my white u/t pilot's flash in the front of my forage cap I swaggered a little. Why not? I was very proud of it. My buttons gleamed, my boots shone like glass.

"Bags of swank!" our drill Corporal used to shout at us as we marched through Torquay, and we obeyed that command, always. I was proud of myself and I was proud to be walking out with Betty. She was a lovely girl, her face in repose calm and radiant as some Italian Renaissance Madonna in a painting.

"No, I haven't gone solo yet," I was saying as we walked, "but I've only done nine hours up to now, you know."

"How long will it take you, do you think?"

"Oh, any minute now, but my instructor puts me off a bit, he is rather bad-tempered."

('Can you see that other aircraft?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well then, are you going to fly round it or through it?')

"That's not very nice, is it?"

"No, not very, but I try not to let him put me off."

"Will you be getting any leave at Christmas?"

"Don't suppose so, Betty; I mean to say, I've only been in three months altogether and we did get a 48 hour pass from Torquay, you know."

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The Knights had a radiogram in the lounge of their comfortable semi-detached house.

"Look what I got for Christmas," Betty exclaimed, holding out a blue-labelled record in its cardboard envelope, "would you like to hear it?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Hutch."

I had little or no idea who or what Hutch was, then.

"Yes, please," I said.

She put the record on and straightened up, standing before me in her simple, grey dress. The creamy, brown voice came out of the loudspeaker and I was immediately seized by some emotion which I had never before experienced.

"That certain night, the night we met,
There was magic abroad in the air," sang Hutch, and Betty was humming the tune along with him.

"There were angels dining at the Ritz
And a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square."

To this day, when I play that on my hi-fi and hear Hutch's lovely velvet voice and perfect diction, I am back with Betty at Mrs. Knight's, falling beautifully and adolescently in love with her from the exact moment that she played me that song. I find it, still, an unbearably moving experience, one which brings a lump into my throat and tears to my eyes.

"Did you like that? Do you want to hear the other side?"

"Oh, yes, please, I'd like to."

On the other side was "All the things you are," and it couldn't have fitted my mood better, either. She was all the things which Hutch was singing about.

"That's a wizard record, Betty," I said. She smiled happily.

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"Gosh, I've never had champagne before, Mr. Knight," I said. "Well, you went solo on Christmas Eve, when we were away and now you've done your first solo cross-country today, so you can try some, to celebrate, apart from the fact that it's New Year's Day, of course."

"Well, thanks very much, and - cheers!"

"Cheers," from Mr. Knight, "and happy landings."

"Chocks away," Betty said. Now where had she learned that?

"Would you like to hear another new record?"

"Oh, yes, I would, very much. What is it?"

"'You'd be so nice to come home to', it's called," she said, "do you know it?"

"No, I've never heard that one."

She put the record on and I listened as I sipped the unfamiliar but strangely disappointing wine. I thought, "Yes, you would be so nice to come home to, Betty darling." Maybe it was the wine after all.

But I really didn't know how to say that sort of thing to her. How did one start? Besides, my mind was still full of the voice of Flying Officer Lines from earlier that wonderful day.

"You don't need me, do you? I'm going to have a sleep. Wake me up if anything goes wrong."

And pulling out his speaking tube he had wriggled down into the front cockpit, out of the slipstream, that New Year's morning, as I set course, droning over snowy Sywell in the bitterly cold sunshine. He was a Battle of Britain Hurricane pilot, instructing for a so-called rest, and trusting me, with only thirty hours in my log-book, to fly from Sywell to unknown Cambridge, land, and come back again. If you did the trip without assistance from your instructor it counted as solo time, and I had done that. My cup of happiness was full, that day.

"You'd be paradise to come home to and love", went the song as the record ended.

I sighed.

"Yes, she would be," I thought,"but how on earth do you go about actually saying things like that to Betty?"

There were all manner of things I undoubtedly wanted to say to

her. But I hadn't even kissed her yet, and you couldn't say some things without kissing somebody first, could you? Besides, she might not want me to. So how, and when, did, or could, one start? It was very difficult, rather like trying to do a perfect three-point landing.

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Every other Friday we were paid. I was rich beyond my wildest imaginings. From the two shillings a day at Torquay I had progressed to no less than five pounds four shillings each fortnight. That was as a mere Leading Aircraftman. What I would be paid if ever I became a Sergeant pilot the imagination simply couldn't tell me. I used to split the money carefully into equal parts and with one half burning a hole in my pocket and the Friday evening feeling joyously pervading my system my little world was at my feet until Monday morning. I would go into Northampton, to the "Black Boy" in the main square, for a mixed grill and a pint of black-and-tan, sometimes with Len or Eric, sometimes alone. It became the high point of my week.

We would sit and talk flying to our hearts' content, comparing notes on our experiences. In retrospect how limited they were and how naive we were, and yet how miraculous and other-worldly it seemed to me to know the unutterable thrill of open-cockpit flying in the freezing winter air, strapped tightly into the fragile machine whose engine purred bravely in front of me; the wonder of the view of the blue-green and white hazy landscape spread out below, the icy slipstream on my numbed face, the thrill of the response, under my hands and feet, of the aircraft to small, smooth movements of the controls. There was the magic of the rising, tilting and falling of the snow-covered, mottled, dim countryside, blotched with the smoke of towns, the dazzling red disc of the sun as it set in the haze, the ecstasy of sideslipping in over the hedge and of smoothly straightening out the glide to set her down for a perfect three-pointer on to the frosty grass near the other Tigers, while a few fellow-pupils watched critically, and while over at the Vickers shed the engines of a great black Wellington rumbled ominously.

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"Are you coming down to the Y.M. tonight, Harold?"
My head was down over my books, in the dining room. I wasn't finding the theory of flight too easy.

"Oh. Yes, I'll be along; are you going to be there?"

"Well, I work there there three nights a week now, you know. Auntie thought I should do something to help the war effort until I'm called up."

(Called up? I hadn't thought of that; somehow I couldn't imagine Betty in uniform.)

"O.K., I'll see you down there later, then, I've got just about an hour's work to do. Keep a chocolate biscuit for me, will you?"

She waggled her fingers, crinkled her nose smilingly, and went out.

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I landed for the last time at Sywell in a Tiger Moth, sideslipping off the height and greasing her down on to the grass. I let the aircraft rumble to a halt, then I taxied carefully to the dispersal tents, faced her into wind and switched off. The prop juddered to a stop. An erk ducked down to chock the wheels. Dusk was beginning to fall; I could see Alex Henshaw, Vickers' Chief Test Pilot, on the circuit in his Spitfire. Everyone always stopped whatever they were doing to watch him fly, it was part of our education. But my eyes always returned to the huge black bulk of the Wellington by their hangar. I pulled out my harness pin and released the straps carefully, so as not to damage the aircraft's fabric. I sighed and reluctantly, as one would part from a girl, I climbed out of the cockpit. A chapter had ended.

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"I don't know exactly where, Betty, except that it's overseas. The lads are all saying Canada, but no-one ever tells us much. I suppose we'll not know until we get there. There's a few posted to S.F.T.S.s in England, Hullavington, Cranfield, places like that, but ten of us are definitely on the boat."

She looked down at her cup of tea. We were sitting together in

the Y.M.C.A.; she had an hour off duty. The place was full of uniforms, but I scarcely noticed them, I only had eyes for her.

"Will it be soon?"

"Next week, they think."

"Harold - ?"

"Yes, what?"

"Oh, well, nothing. You will write, won't you?"

"Of course I will, Betty, yes, I'll write to you as often as I can."

"What will you be flying?"

"Harvards or Oxfords, I suppose, I'm not really sure."

"What do you want to go on to, fighters or bombers?"

(Strange, how civilians thought there were only those two categories of pilot, but I suppose the news the press and radio gave concerned mainly those two. After all, they were the types mostly at the sharp end of things. But I thought of Betty, huddled fearfully in the shelter, that night of the Coventry raid and I felt a sudden and great anger that she should have had to endure that. And I thought of the Wellington over at the Vickers hangar at the aerodrome, sinister, powerful, black, and from then on I was never in any doubt.)

"Bombers," I said firmly, "definitely bombers."

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It is strange that I don't remember saying goodbye to Betty, nor to the Knights, if it comes to that. I must have done so, of course, but sadly, I cannot bring the occasions to mind.

I did go to Canada. Once we got out west we worked hard and we flew hard, by day and by night. We got no leave, very little time off. We didn't particularly want any. Things were getting rather urgent back home. Besides, I wanted to hurry back to Betty, and to my parents, too, of course.

I wrote to her as often as I could. She sent me her photograph, smiling and lovely in that grey dress, but I'm afraid I haven't got it now. I got my wings a few days before my twentieth birthday. In the late summer, after a stopover in Iceland, I was back in England, and with a couple of Canadian chaps, splendid fellows whom I had

met on the boat, I was posted to a Wellington Operational Training Unit at Bassingbourn, not too far from Northampton. Most of my buddies went on to fighters. As it happened, they had a little more future than us bomber boys. Not much, but a little. Of course, I was longing to see Betty again.

As soon as I had settled in I phoned the Knights one evening. It was an interminable business, repeating their number to different operators, waiting while the line buzzed and crackled, while disembodied and unreal voices spoke unintelligibly to one another in hasty, clipped syllables. In the end, a man's voice spoke up.

"Is that Mr. Knight?"

"Yes, who is that?"

"It's Harold."

"Harold! How are you? Where are you speaking from?"

I told him Bassingbourn. We were allowed to do that so long as we didn't give the name of our unit.

"How's Mrs. Knight?"

"Oh, she's fine, she's down at the Y.M. this evening, on duty."

"I see. And Betty, is she still with you?"

There was a slight pause. I thought we must have been cut off. Then he said, "No, she went back home a little while ago. Things are a bit quieter now, you know."

"Yes, I understand. But how is she? I'd love to see her again."

"Well, actually, Harold, she's fine. But look, did you know - did she mention that she's getting engaged?"

I felt as though I'd flown slap into a mountainside in the dark. I swallowed with difficulty, the perspiration had broken out on my forehead and my hand holding the receiver was trembling.

"No," I said, "I didn't know that."

"Sorry, I didn't hear what you said."

"No, I hadn't heard about that."

"Yes; he's quite a nice chap, a bit older than she is, works in a car factory, I believe."

We didn't talk long after that; I was too stunned to think very straight. I'm afraid I never saw the Knights again, and I am truly sorry, for they were good, nice people and they were extremely kind to me. I made a mess of my flying during the next few days.

I still think about Betty. I have quite a substantial record collection and after years of fruitless searching I finally got the record of Hutch singing what has become for me a poignant song, that song about the nightingale. And when I play it I can see Betty's lovely face, pale and calm, like the Madonna, and I can visualise the gleam of the firelight on her jet-black hair, that winter afternoon in Northampton.

I wonder, often I wonder, what became of her. Dear Betty, I shall never forget you for you were my first love. What happened? Where did I go wrong? I don't know why I should feel so very sad when I think of those days, for they were truly among the happiest of my life.

Sometimes, too, I think of the way she used to laugh, and of her words; I can almost hear her voice speaking to me, as though she were in the room here. But I know I shall never see her again and now, the touching little phrase sounds only like a cry of despair in the night - "Never no more, never no more."

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We would never fly like that.

WE WOULD NEVER FLY LIKE THAT

After I had described the incident to him, with the inevitable, automatic use of a pilot's illustrative gestures of the hands, he thought briefly about it, then looking directly at me, "You ought to write about it," he said, "Why don't you put it on paper?"

The following day I awoke early in the morning, earlier than usual, even for me, with his words still sounding in my ears. And remembering the words with which I had described the events of almost sixty years previously still fresh and vivid in my mind, I took up pencil and paper.

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Now, in the dying days of the twentieth century, almost every summer week-end, all over the land, you may buy your ticket for some air display. You may sit in your car with the doors open to admit the pleasant breeze, the warm air, the chatter of the crowd, the over-emphatic loudspeaker announcements, or you may lounge upon your hired camp-chair, your sunglasses shading your eyes as you look upwards into the limitless blue clarity of the sky, and watch, to the accompaniment of the 'oohs' and 'aahs' of the hundreds of spectators, the improbable antics of the ugly, purpose-built, monstrously-powered aircraft, meretriciously decorated with advertisements, performing their violent and ugly aerial manoeuvres. To me, the vicious use by their pilots of stick and rudder palls after only a few seconds, and I think, perhaps nostalgically, that I would much rather watch fewer and simpler aerobatics performed by pilots in standard military aircraft. And as I ponder this my thoughts are led back to a day on a Northamptonshire aerodrome when I was beginning my elementary pilot training in the R.A.F.

The time was the severe winter of 1940-41. The Battle of Britain had just been won; Coventry had only very recently been devastated by the Luftwaffe in one catastrophic night raid. I was one of twenty or so young men on our course. Most of us had never seen an aircraft at close quarters until we arrived at No. 6 Elementary Flying Training School. Here, there

were Tiger Moths - biplanes, gentlemen's aeroplanes, as I heard them many times described. They were docile, forgiving, vice-less, sensitive to both hands and feet, a sheer joy to handle once the initial strangeness of the sensation of controlling an aircraft in three dimensions had worn off. Most of us, I fancy, could see ahead no further than going solo on them, then completing the course with the required fifty or so flying hours before we went on to the next stage in our training, a Service Flying Training School. But we did not look far into the future; we did not know nor could we imagine what was coming to us. Perhaps, in many cases, this was just as well. All we knew was that we were, each one of us, filled with an unquenchable desire and zeal to qualify eventually as pilots in the finest Air Force in the world, to become - and we thought this and spoke of it without embarrassment or apology to any man - the elite of all the armed forces, an opinion which I still hold with pride today.

So we flew and we studied flying and talked of little else but the theory and practice of flying. We questioned one another. We pored over pilots' notes and airmanship notes and navigation books and the Morse Code. We questioned our instructors and our peers on the senior course. And we kept our eyes and ears open, sensitive and receptive to anything, however small, which would assist us in any way to obtain those wings which we longed to be able to wear on our uniforms.

Here at Sywell, the Tiger Moths were, during the day, dispersed around the perimeter of the grass aerodrome, standing in their training yellow and earth-camouflage paint, their R.A.F. roundels standing out bravely, awaiting their next pupils to take them up on whichever exercise they would carry out. We were divided into three Flights, six or seven of the boys on my course in each, with six or seven of the senior course. Each Flight had its 'office' in a camouflage-painted bell tent near the hedge. But what drew my eye almost hypnotically when I was standing there, not flying, perhaps watching other pupils performing their 'circuits and bumps' until it was my own turn, was the occasional sight of a Wellington, a twin-engined bomber, at that time the biggest we had, standing outside a hangar on the far side of the aerodrome - the Vickers shed, as it was called. It fascinated me constantly and unfailingly, massive in its matt-black dope with its very tall single rudder, standing squat, silent and menacing outside its hangar, contrasting against the snow-covered ground,

never approached by anyone except the Vickers personnel. What was taking place there I have never known, but all of us well knew who flew it.

He would arrive in his Spitfire, considerately keeping a respectable distance outside the circuit while we pupils took off or landed in our Tiger Moths. Then he would slip into a vacant place in the circuit and make his approach and landing, his aircraft, pencil-slim, perfect and graceful in its flight, the focus of all eyes from the ground, its appearance possessed of something of the beauty and poetry of a Bach fugue or a Mozart andante, a Shakespearian sonnet of flowing aerial beauty. The pilot, we learned from some of the senior course who were comparatively old hands on the aerodrome, was Alex Henshaw, Vickers' Chief Test Pilot, a fact which reduced us tyros, with probably less than thirty flying hours in any of our logbooks, to awestricken silence.

He it would be who would take the Wellington from its place at the Vickers shed, taxi it, ponderously, it seemed to us, into take-off position when all Tiger Moths were well clear, and without fuss send it charging with engines howling at full boost over the bumpy grass field and into the air, leaving traces of oily smoke in its wake from the two Pegasus engines as he eased it over the trees fringing the aerodrome and climbed away. Later, he would return to land, once again showing meticulous consideration for us pupils, and would taxy the bomber to its position by the Vickers shed. I would have not believed them had someone told me that less than a year later I would land and take off here in a more powerful Mark of Wellington on the strength of having seen Alex Henshaw's performances; I am sure that my audience, if indeed I had one, would have been quite unimpressed by the sight. I know that my own crew, in the tense silence as I scraped over the trees on take-off, were wishing themselves anywhere but with me in my inexperienced disregard for their safety. But it was watching Alex Henshaw that first sowed the seed of an idea in my head that, whereas almost all of the chaps on my course wanted to fly fighters, I thought that I would try my utmost to get on to a bomber Squadron, if only to hit back at those who had so terrified Betty, the niece of the couple on whom

I was billeted in Northampton, and whom I was beginning to regard as someone more than a friend. A year later I would be wearing my pilot's wings, having been half way across the world and back to earn them, having joined a Wellington Squadron in Lincolnshire and having survived a fire in the air followed by a barely controllable night descent in the darkness and the final crash-landing on my first operation against the enemy. I would also have gained, then lost, a love.

One afternoon, at Sywell, I was not flying, standing outside the dispersal tent with two or three others of my course, no doubt talking flying, and watching critically the take-offs and landings of a few pupils on circuits and bumps. (How readily I could point out their faults - a slight swing on take-off, a ropey turn, a bumpy landing, or a too-high hold-off; how slow I was to recognise my own failings and correct them, except on the sometimes caustic promptings of Flying Officer J - - , my instructor).

At this stage in our training we could detect instantly any appearance or movement of an aircraft in the sky, no matter how far distant it was - an attribute I have never lost - and we could also quickly and correctly identify it, an ability which, for obvious reasons, was essential by day or by night. But on that bright, very cold afternoon, first there was the distinctive note of the Merlin engine. Our heads turned. Here was the Spitfire with Alex Henshaw, assessing the position of the Tigers on the circuit. He would have been at about 800 feet; I had a splendid view as he cruised gently along, well outside the aerodrome boundary. Then there was a flash of sunlight off the wing as, quite unexpectedly,he rolled the aircraft on to its back and flew, straight and level, but inverted, into wind. We turned our heads and grinned at one another. This was good. This was very good. Exciting stuff. Soon he would roll back and finish his circuit normally. We were wrong. He turned crosswind, still inverted, his rudder pointing grotesquely earthwards. This was becoming quite amazing, an incredible sight. Then, still inverted, he turned again, on to the downwind leg and put his wheels down - or rather, put them up, as we saw them, rising like a snail's antennae from the duck-egg blue under surface of the Spitfire. Then he turned

on to the final crosswind leg, still inverted, undercarriage held high, flaps now out, and finally into wind, on to his landing approach.

Spellbound and speechless we watched as he lost height smoothly in the inverted position. What was he going to do? Open her up and roll her out, then go round again on a normal circuit? But no, he continued on his inverted final approach. I hardly dared breathe; the tension in our small group could be felt. Down and down he slipped until we were prepared to see simply anything - but surely not a crash? I could not truly estimate at what height he was, but finally, effortlessly and smoothly, he rolled her out, the engine popping characteristically as he held off at a few feet and set the Spitfire down for a perfect landing on the grass. We exhaled in unison, the tension gone, wonderment taking over.

I have never seen any piece of flying anywhere to approach the silken, wonderful skill of this, and I would be astonished if anyone else has; it was sheer unadulterated Henshaw genius, a sight that I have always remembered with awe, one I shall never forget.

There is a very fine novel, long since out of print, written by an R.A.F. Flight Lieutenant pilot who was killed in 1940. The action takes place at a civilian flying school; in one particular chapter some pupils are watching an instructor putting an aircraft through its paces on a rigorous test flight and one of them speaks some words which precisely matched my thoughts as I watched that incredible inverted circuit - "We'll none of us ever fly like that."

I am sure that none of us standing there on that wartime winter day ever did and I would be astounded if anyone else did, or could. It was flying by a genius; even the gods must have smiled to see it.

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Hennie

LENNIE

In those days, full-backs wore number 1, right wing threequarters threw into lineouts and wore number 2, and so on, down to number 15 at wing forward. Lennie wore number 2 in my local rugby club's first team, and also in the County side. As an aspiring wing threequarter myself, although just into my teens, Lennie, when I watched the team's every home game, wide-eyed on the open side of the exposed pitch, in whatever weather, Lennie became one of my boyhood heroes.

He was not by any means one of your greyhound-type hard-running winger, for he carried, in retrospect, perhaps a pound or two too much weight to be numbered with them. But he was as elusive as a well-greased eel. Although in defence, and in particular, his rather feeble kicking, he was slightly suspect, with ball in hand every spectator, whether at club or County match, unconsciously sat up or stood straighter, in anticipation of his jinking, sidestepping runs up the touchline, soldier-erect, dark head thrown back, mouth slightly open. I wonder how often in his career he heard the encouraging shouts of the crowd, "Come on, Lennie!"

The recollection of a particular incident in one particular match, against the strongest club side in the county still remains vividly with me. In all but the highest grade of rugby, receiving the ball as a wing threequarter within ten or fifteen yards of one's own corner flag meant that there was no choice. One kicked for touch, hoping to gain at least twenty or so yards. Especially so when one was pitted against the most efficient and successful team for miles around, and even more so when one was faced by the opposing winger, who in this case was an English international. But on this occasion Lennie eschewed the safe option. Perhaps it was that he himself knew that his kicking was rather weak.

About a hundred yards from his opponents' line and faced by a rapidly advancing and grimly competent opponent, he set off to run, up the appreciable slope of his home ground. With a jink and a sidestep he evaded the oncoming International, who skidded and was left floundering. Urged on by the home crowd, myself included, he ran, sidestepped, swerved and tricked his way through the opponents' entire team, his lately evaded marker in breathless and fruitless pursuit. He finally rounded the full-back and scored wide out to the left, after a solo effort of more than 120 yards. It brought the house down, especially as the England 'cap'

was finally left prone and exhausted in his wake. I have watched and played rugby for very many years and I honestly believe that I have rarely seen a finer individual try scored.

Came the war. Players and spectators alike of the necessary ages were scattered all over the world, many never again to see or handle a rugby ball. Very early in 1941, my elementary flying training - and Betty - left behind, the latter with some heartache, I and several other LACs from Sywell found ourselves en route for we knew not where to continue our training, gathered like so many shepherdless sheep in midwinter in a large and bleak Nissen hut at RAF Wilmslow, an overseas embarkation depot. There must have been fifty or so of us in the hut, sitting upon our respective beds, while a Corporal at one end lectured us on some topic relevant to our impending departure, then called us forward, alphabetically, of course - I was used to being the last in any roll-call - to hand us some sheet of instructions. Awaiting my turn I watched idly while others hurried forward to the Corporal's desk, then about-turned and went back to their places. Watched idly, that is, until a name I only half-heard was called, and a well-built dark man trotted, on his toes, up the aisle to the Corporal. I started up with a stifled exclamation, recognising the way he ran. It was Lennie, Lennie C - - of W - - R.F.C. I could scarcely believe my eyes. For a second or two the forage cap with the white flash of u/t aircrew almost deceived me.

As soon as we were left to our own devices I walked along the hut and across to his bed-space.

"Excuse me, but you are Lennie C - - , aren't you?"

"Yes, I am."

He looked curiously at me.

"I thought so, I've often watched you play, at W - - ."

He looked surprised and pleased. I mentioned my cousin, who played in the same team. To meet someone from one's own home town in the Service was a reasonably infrequent happening, and because of that, all the more welcome. He told me he was under training as a Navigator. We stuck together, despite the disparity in our ages - he was about ten years my senior - through our dismal stay at Wilmslow, then via Gourock and a ridiculously small ship to Iceland where we trans-shipped

to an Armed Merchant Cruiser. This was more of a morale-boosting title than anything else; the ship was a medium-sized passenger cruise vessel with two quite small guns which, at a guess, might have just about managed to sink an empty wooden barrel, but not much else. The news finally filtered down to us that we were heading for Canada. On setting out from Reykjavik we looked around for our convoy. There was none. We were to cross the Atlantic alone, with two paltry guns to defend ourselves against whatever there might be in the way of U-boats, pocket battleships or a combination of both. This was a very real threat. The 'Bismarck' was later to sink 'Hood' and itself to be sunk in the north Atlantic. We slept and lived, about 150 of us, I suppose, on the floor of what had been the Recreation Room with about twelve inches of so-called bed-space between mattresses. Half way across the Atlantic, in a February storm, the engines packed up and we tossed, helpless, for twenty four hours, a sitting target for the Kriegsmarine. Then at last we heard the welcome rumbling from the bowels of the ship.

An LAC whose bed-space was near to Lennie's and mine then reported that he felt unwell. Chickenpox was diagnosed, and the M.O., looking for all the world like an S.S. man selecting victims for the concentration camp, ordered that several of us, including Lennie, Brian S - , who had been on my course at Sywell, and myself, were to be sent into quarantine when we arrived in Canada. Brian, as it happened, was also a rugby man, having played for Broughton Park.

We duly and thankfully docked in Halifax, Nova Scotia and after, I'm afraid, gorging ourselves on steaks and chocolate, which we had never seen since before September 1939, about twenty of us, including two or three Fleet Air Arm airmen, to our eyes bizarre in their bell-bottomed trousers and flapping collars, were put on the train for Cape Breton Island, in particular for the small R.C.A.F. Station of North Sydney.

Our quarantine turned out to be farcical. After twenty four hours on the camp we were informed, amazingly, that we could please ourselves where we went and whom we met, until further notice. We looked at one another in astonishment - then proceeded to enjoy ourselves while we could. Our duties, such as they were, consisted of one night duty in six when three of us were left in charge of the kitchen and served meals to the RCAF airmen

who were on guard duty and fire picquet. The civilian cooks, who had never met anyone from the U.K., ensured that we were fed like fighting cocks, providing us with quantities of steaks, eggs and milk. Out of camp, the streets, cafes and cinemas of North Sydney and of Sydney itself were open to us. Lifts in cars belonging to the local people were there for the asking, and the friendly Nova Scotians, learning of our arrival, took us to their hearts and into their homes. They were astonished that despite the deep snow on the ground, we seldom, if ever, wore our great coats. The cold was so dry compared with that in England, and we were physically in such prime condition that we felt no discomfort, whereas our Canadian hosts went about muffled up in greatcoats and fur hats with ear-flaps. Our stay there was as good as an extended leave.

Off the pitch, most rugby players are determined to do their utmost to ensure that breweries never go out of business. Lennie was no exception. When a group of us were out together he drank his beer slowly but steadily, became more and more relaxed and laughed a good deal, sometimes uncontrollably. He never became objectionable or agressive, never used bad language and was always amenable to our advice that perhaps he had had sufficient and it was time to return to camp. Being a mere tyro, at the age on nineteen I drank only sparingly and with considerable discretion, my mental sights being fixed over the horizon, on the next stage of my flying training and the eventual gaining of my wings. So I took it upon myself, on several occasions, to steer Lennie, muscular but curiously boneless, laughing at only he knew what, safely into our barrack hut and on to his bed, where I covered him, still in uniform, with his blankets, where he would fall peacefully asleep. Lennie, even with several beers inside him, never did the slightest harm to anyone.

Of course, the idyll had to come to an end. After several very pleasant weeks, our postings came through. Brian and I and some others were destined for Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, No. 32 S.F.T.S., while Lennie was posted to Goodrich, Ontario, a Navigational Training School. I remember how we shook hands when we said 'cheerio'. His smile was as broad as ever, and his hand, I recall vividly, was large and surprisingly soft.

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It must have been on one of my leaves from Moreton-in-the-Marsh towards the end of 1942 when my father, who was on the committee of the local rugby club, gave me the news. Lennie had been shot down and was missing. He believed that it had happened off the Norwegian coast. It was yet another blow to me following the loss of my own crew. I had recently had a reply from the Commanding Officer of my Squadron in response to a letter I had written him, that my crew must now all be presumed dead. I felt that the bottom had dropped out of my life and I was nearing the end of my tether. I was suffering deeply, as was my flying, and I sensed that my forthcoming Medical Board would be the end of a chapter. I went about cocooned in silent grief so intense that it amounted to permanent depression, which was only temporarily assuaged by drinking far more than I ever saw Lennie drink. From what little my father had gleaned from his informant at the clubhouse I surmised that Lennie must have been on some squadron in Coastal Command. For some reason I visualised him on Whitleys.

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Years passed. I will not say that I had forgotten Lennie; occasionally some memory of those days would float unbidden into my mind and I would visualise him as I had last known him on Cape Breton Island, always smiling, playfully light-hearted, completely harmless. Then a friend gave me a cutting from a local newspaper with a photograph of the successful rugby team of the immediate pre-war years. Lennie smiled up at me from the middle of the front row of players, next to another young man who had been shot down into the sea off the Dutch coast as a wireless operator in a Blenheim on a daylight shipping strike. I was impelled to ask the friend whether any information could be obtained from the Internet as to what had happened to Lennie, and when it was he had died. Within days I knew enough to be able to consult a series of volumes of casualties of Bomber Command. For Lennie had not been on a Coastal Command Squadron as I had surmised, and he had not been shot down off Norway.

He was the Navigator of one of six Wellingtons from a Bomber Squadron at Mildenhall, (where much later, J -- ended her career in the W.A.A.F. as a Base Watchkeeper), detailed to attack shipping, in daylight, on the Dortmund-Ems Canal in North-west Germany on a September afternoon in 1942.

On reading this, I could hardly believe that Wellingtons were being used on daylight operations at that time; I had thought that the crippling loses that they suffered on such attacks in the early days of the war had meant their transfer solely to night bombing. (On my telling M -- about these circumstances, she said 'Suicide raid'. That was about the size of it.) Mr. Chorley's painstakingly collated and amazingly detailed book gives the bare bones of the tragic story. Four and a half hours after taking off, presumably on their way back to Mildenhall, and within sight of the Dutch coast and the comparative safety of the North Sea, his aircraft was attacked by a Luftwaffe Focke-Wulf 190, a formidable fighter aircraft. The wireless operator was killed in the attack and the aircraft was set on fire. The two gunners managed to bale out and became prisoners of war. The account says that Lennie was last seen using a fire extinguisher, bravely trying to put out the fire which was raging inside the fuselage of the Wellington.

The blazing aircraft crashed into what was then the Zuider Zee; the bodies of the wireless operator and the pilot were recovered and subsequently interred in a cemetery in Amsterdam, but Lennie's body was never found and, having no known grave, his name is recorded on the Runnymede Memorial along with twenty thousand others whose remains were never recovered.

So died a hero who for a brief time was my friend.

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It makes you think

IT MAKES YOU THINK

"Mail up!"

We jumped off our beds and hurried towards the door at the end of the barrack hut. At least, some of us did. The majority stayed where they were, on their beds, pretending to read, cleaning buttons, pottering about. There could be almost no chance of mail for them, for they were Norwegian, and their homeland was under German occupation. They accepted this lack of mail, as they did much else, with considerable stoicism.

We who were the fortunate ones gathered around the R.C.A.F. airman who called out the names on the envelopes, and who, while looking down at the handful of letters he held, handed us our mail without a glance. There was one for me. I looked at the postmark. Coventry. My heart bounded when I saw that. There was two-thirds of the width of Canada and all the Atlantic Ocean between us; she was back in devastated Coventry, I in smaller and completely peaceful Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, under training as a fighter pilot.

I walked slowly back to my bed, savouring the sight of her hand-writing, feeling the texture of the envelope smooth under my fingers. I sat down quietly, as far as one could be quiet in a hut with twenty-nine other blokes. In deference to us, the Norwegian lads did keep quiet as we read our mail. I held the unopened letter a long time in my hand, gazing at her rounded, shapely writing. I wanted this moment of pleasure to last as long as possible.

At the time I was with her, under the same roof, being so caught up in the novelty and the thrill of flying, I didn't realise what was happening to me, or to her, and it was all too foolishly late that I had become slowly aware of it. After we had parted, when I was at the Embarkation Depot en route for Canada, and when I had time to take stock of myself, it was only then that it dawned slowly upon me that I had fallen in love with her, and that I wouldn't see her again for the best, or the worst part of six months at least. Oh, Betty, I thought, the time I so stupidly wasted. Would I ever have the chance again?

I sighed, and looked at her photograph on my locker. She was

smiling at me enigmatically, her mouth curving slightly up at the corners, her dark eyes holding more than a hint of mischief, the gleaming mass of her ebony hair framing the soft pallor of her calm face. Slowly and carefully I opened the envelope. I turned to the last sheet, looked at the end of the letter first, fearful that it might say only "yours sincerely" or some such. It did not. The words were there that I wanted to read. I lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply and luxuriously, and started from the beginning.

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Tim spoke up from across the gangway between the beds, his English idiomatic and only very faintly accented.

"I hope she still loves you, but come on, we have flying to do."

"O.K., Tim, I'll be right with you."

I tucked the letter into my top left-hand tunic pocket, carefully buttoning the flap. Soren and Aage, next to Tim, both stood up. What opposites they were, I thought, Soren cheerful, muscular, blond, extrovert, while Aage was gaunt and rather silent, and toothy, with melancholy eyes which flickered nervously around him. We made our way up to the flights; it was going to be another hot day. Already the air was filled with the tearing rasp of the Harvards' Wasp engines as the fitters ran them up in preparation for a long day's flying.

We turned into 'F' Flight crewroom at the front of one of the hangars and looked at the flying detail pinned up on the board, next to the Coke machine. Aage was due off on a cross-country to Swift Current and back at 0900, while Tim, Soren and I had an hour's formation flying at 1000. Lower down the list I saw that I was due on the Link Trainer at 1500 for blind-flying simulation, and to round off the day, or rather, the night, one and a half solo night-flying hours at 2100. It was going to be a long day, as well as a hot one. Aage, now bent over a map, pencilling careful lines, was to take over my aircraft, I saw, when I landed after night-flying.

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After the snowy, tree-fringed grass field at Sywell it was a novelty to have these sun-baked runways, even more so when there were two parallel ones with a narrow grass strip in between, the whole field being patterned by this double triangle of concrete strips.

We took it in turns to lead our formation of three. Station-changing, as we had no R/T, was indicated by hand-signals from the leader. Soren was to lead first with me as his number two and Tim, three. Then I would take over the lead, and finally, Tim. I followed Soren's bright yellow Harvard out as he taxied on to the perimeter and turned towards the end of the runways in use. He took the right-hand runway of the pair and edged across to the left of it, braked and stopped. I gave him ten yards clearance and took the right-hand edge of the same runway. Tim stopped level with me, alone on the left-hand runway. I saw Soren slide the canopy shut and start rolling, and I followed, pushing the throttle firmly up to the stop. I never got used to the tremendous feeling of exhilaration as the power surged on. I lifted the tail and kept straight with small pushes of my feet on the rudder-bar. As I chased after Soren I could see Tim out of the corner of my eye, keeping abreast of me.

Suddenly Soren was airborne, then I followed, climbing into the summer sky. To maintain station, the rules of tidy and correct flying were suspended. You used no bank on your small turns to get into position, but skidded gently across on rudder only. It felt all wrong, it was like being told deliberately to mis-spell a word one had known and used for years. When I had first practised formation with F/O Sparks in the front cockpit I had been frightened out of my wits to see two other aircraft each within ten yards of me. But one was soon conditioned to accept this, and very quickly one learned the gentle art of close formation flying, when your own wing was actually tucked in to the space between the leader's wing and his tailplane, so that any forward or backward relative movement meant a collision. But provided you watched him like a hawk, and kept station by means of constant throttle and rudder juggling, you got by. It became great fun, and the early thoughts of comprehensive and devastating collisions were soon forgotten.

So I tucked myself right in on Soren's starboard side and stayed there while he climbed, turned or glided. We flew four basic formations, vic, echelon starboard, echelon port and line astern. The echelons looked great and the line astern gave you a bit of relaxation, for numbers two and three were slightly lower than the aircraft in front,

to keep out of the turbulence of his slipstream. Where we were heading was not my worry, nor Tim's. Soren was in charge of that side of things while he was leading. He gave the signal to change leaders. I skidded away from him and opened the throttle to draw ahead. He skated in to my left and Tim crossed to my right, as number two. Back to cruising revs as they snuggled themselves in tightly against me. I looked down at the baked prairie landscape and saw that Soren had headed us back towards Moose Jaw to make it easy for me. I grinned and mentally thanked him. I started to sing loudly to myself as we flew, running through the repertoire of the popular songs we were always playing on the juke box at Smoky Joe's cafe, just outside the camp gates. I felt on top of the world - a letter from Betty, a great day for flying and the formation going like a dream. I led them around until my time was up and signalled Tim to take it from there, over Regina Beach on Last Mountain Lake, at four thousand feet.

I slid into number three position in the vic and tucked myself in tightly into Tim's port side. He led us around in a turn to port, back towards base. We never did steepish turns in vic formation, it was too difficult for the man low down on the inside to keep station as he had to cut his airspeed back so much. Tim tightened the turn and climbed a bit as he did so. Watch it, Tim, I thought. Still tighter; I dared not look at my airspeed. Still tighter, and my controls were starting to feel sloppy, approaching the stall; I dared not throttle back any further or I would stall off the turn and go into a spin, and a Harvard lost nine hundred feet per turn once they did spin. Out of it! I shoved throttle on as I winged over and dived out of the formation, swearing to myself as I did so. The wretch! Playing silly buggers like that!

All on my own in the bright morning sky I screamed round in a steep turn to port, with plenty of power on, nearly blacking myself out in the process. I yanked the seat tighter against the straps to bind my stomach firmly in and keep the blood in my head, stopping the grey-out. I eased out of the turn. Five thousand feet. Now, where the hell were they? Then I saw them, now about six miles away, orbiting innocently. I flew over to them and sat just off

Tim's port wingtip, shaking my fist at him, which only made him throw back his head and laugh as he made come-in motions with his hand. I went in, tight. We formed up again into a sedate vic and finished the detail, as usual, in echelon port, about two miles from the field, when we did our line-shoot party piece - a swift wing-over to port in rapid succession and a dive on each other's tails into the circuit, making sure we were well clear of the more sedate pupils going about their quiet business.

When we had landed, taxied in and switched off, I collared Tim.

"Damn you!" I said, pretending to be about to sling a punch at him, "What the hell do you think you were playing at? Trying to make me spin in, were you?"

"No danger," he replied, laughing, "you had bags of height - can't take it, eh?"

Soren chimed in, smiling broadly.

"We thought you'd just decided to go home."

"Wait till I'm leader, next time, you two mad so-and-so's," I said threateningly, "I'll turn you both inside out!"

All the same, I threw Tim a Sweet Cap; Soren didn't smoke. We strolled back to 'F' Flight crew-room where I'm glad to say that Tim bought the cold Cokes. It was a hot morning.

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The Link Trainer Sergeant was a stocky little R.C.A.F. man who looked like a middleweight boxer.

"Don't forget to reset your gyro-compass every ten minutes or so or you'll be way to hell out at the end. Got your flight card? Do all your turns at Rate two and let's have a nice neat pattern on my chart at the finish. Give me the O.K. when you're ready and I'll tell you when I'm switching on so you can punch the clock."

"Right oh, Sergeant," I said.

I climbed into the little dummy aeroplane on its concertina-like base. I pulled over the hood, plugged in the intercom in the darkness and propped up the flight card near the small lamp on the instrument panel. I felt the lurch as he energised the system; the instruments

came to life with a sigh.

"I've put you at a thousand feet," he said, "do you read that?"

"Check," I replied, "turning on to 045 Magnetic, now."

"Got you. Just watch your height as well as your timings, won't you, bud?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

I was flying the awkward Maltese Cross pattern, the idea being to finish exactly where you started, after the completion of the twelve legs. The instructor had a wheeled "crab" which inked in the line of your track on his chart. At the end, you should have drawn a perfect Maltese Cross, but it took forty minutes, approximately, of solid, grinding concentration on your instruments alone.

"Switching on - now!" came his voice, and I hit the stop-watch.

After what seemed like hours I did my final Rate 2 turn on to my original course. I straightened it up, timed a careful one minute, then called out, "Finish - now!"

He acknowledged and switched me off. The needles sagged to their stops. I took off my headphones and opened the hood and side door.

"O.K.," the Sergeant said, "come right over here and have a look-see. Not bad at all."

I went over to his glass-topped table. My pattern was about ten inches across and I had finished about an eighth of an inch from where I had started. It looked pretty damn good to me, and for an instant I thought about Tink's brother in his Hampden.

"Yes," I said, feeling rather pleased, "just a bit out, Sergeant."

He grinned.

"You're doing O.K., buddy," he said agreeably, "now how's about seeing if L.A.C. Briggs is outside, eh?"

"O.K., Sergeant," I said.

He had just made my day.

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I lay back on my bed after the evening meal and read the letter once again. The hut was quiet. Those who weren't night flying had gone to Smoky Joe's or into town for an evening meal. The few of

us on the night flying detail were reading, writing letters or dozing on our beds, waiting for the darkness. There was no sign of either Tim or Soren, while Aage was actually sound asleep.

She wrote, "I miss you here, I miss our walks in the park. I wonder if you will be posted somewhere near when you come back, where we can meet? Do you still want to go on to bombers, like you told me? Will it be very dangerous? Whatever happens, I shall pray for you, as I do now, that God will keep you. I have always said what has to be, will be, but I feel he will keep you safe....." She went on to say she would be spending some time with her Aunt and Uncle in Northampton, as her parents still felt happier with her over there.

I folded the letter slowly and thought about Betty and the simple, almost idyllic happiness of life in those days six months ago. Tink, on the bed next to me, motioned to me and across at Aage, grinning, imitating his open mouth and his posture, his ungainly sprawl. Tink, the single-minded, I thought, hero-worshipping his brother flying his Hampden over Germany, and who could hardly wait to get on to the same Squadron. A faraway look would come into his eyes when he spoke about it; "When I get on Hampdens," he would always be saying, and his broad, boyish face would be raised to the sky, "When I get on Hampdens with my brother - "

But looking at Aage had made me feel tired, too. I yawned, then lit a cigarette and grinned at him. Tink was from Coalville in Leicestershire; I wonder often what became of him.

An hour later I was taxying my Harvard out in the darkness, the flarepath away to my right looking very long and very far away. Night flying without a navigator and entirely without radio consisted, at Moose Jaw, of circuits and bumps - and of not getting lost. There was no blackout and you could see the town for miles, no bother at all. But if the visibility went, you got down out of it, quick. So far, it never had; the prairie nights were wonderfully clear.

I got my green from the A.C.P. and, nicely central between the flares, opened her up. We charged down the runway and floated off

easily. I had done quite a few of these night flying stints before, and found I had taken to it naturally, much more so than I did to aerobatics, for example. Undercart up, throttle back to climbing power, keep the gyro on 0, shut the canopy, and up to 1000 feet. Level off, throttle back to cruising, turn port to 270. There's the flarepath down over my left shoulder. Keep the wings level, watch the artificial horizon. Rate one turn downwind, heading 180, throttle back a bit, then wheels down when we're opposite the middle of the flarepath. Greens on the panel as the wheels lock. There's the A.C.P. giving me a green on the Alldis lamp. Crosswind on to 090. Bit of flap. Drop the nose and turn in. Watch the airspeed, open the canopy. Engine noise surges in. Switch on the landing light and hold her there. Nice approach, I think. Now, hold off and let her sink the last four feet. The flares merge into a line. Hold it there. A bump and a rumble. We're down.

Keep her straight, flaps up, headlamp off. Touch of brake, not too much. Fine, now turn off the runway along the glim-lit perimeter track and back to the take-off position again. There's someone else up, I can see his nav. lights. Wonder who it is? I rumble along the peri. track to head back for the end of the runway. Must say, I can see Tink's point, I'd rather like a bash on Hampdens myself. After all, they're what I wanted when I first thought about joining up, except that my ambitions were no higher than to be a gunner.

"Will it be very dangerous?"

God knows, Betty, but as you say, what has to be will be, and there is no turning back, one must simply live for and through the minute, even the second, and do what has to be done, enduring what has to be endured with fortitude.

Something's irritating me, and I can't think what, except there's something here which shouldn't be. My God! Yes! The cockpit is full of red light, now it's flashing off and on, urgently. Stop. Tread on the brakes. She creaks and jerks to an abrupt halt. The red light stops flashing at me and someone taxies past me in the opposite direction. Wow! So that's what the red was all about?

Must stop this day-dreaming. Only two more circuits and I can pack it in, hand over to Aage and hit the sack. I'll be about ready for it, too.

There's my green. Hope he doesn't report me for taxying through a red. It was only a dozen yards - I think. Oh, well, can't do a thing about it now. No harm done, so here goes, back to my take-off point. Turn on to the runway, uncage the gyro on 0, open her up. We're off again.

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Turn on to 180, see the stars sliding around. Between the field and the town, now. Nice and easy, purring along, last landing coming up, then into the pit.

"I miss you here, I miss our walks in the park."

I wish I were meeting you after this, Betty, 'you'd be so nice to come home to' - I wonder if you still play that record? 'To come home to and love.'

Coming home - the lights of home - lights - lights - lights! What the hell's going on? All those lights, ahead, and coming straight for me? Hell! Get the stick back, you're in a dive, heading straight for the town! You've been asleep, you bloody fool. Come on, come on, ease out. The lights slide below me. Thank God for that. I risk a look at the altimeter - 500 feet. God. Another few seconds, and that would have been it, smack into the town centre, curtains. I reach up and slam the canopy open, letting the cold night air flood in, taking deep breaths to wake myself up. I climb cautiously back to circuit height, select wheels down and duly get my green from the A.C.P., as though nothing at all had happened. I turn across wind, edging towards the flarepath. Shove the nose down, turn port, full flap, headlamp on, heading straight in. I land, thankfully, and exhale with relief. Aage is ready and waiting to take over the kite as I dump my 'chute, blinking in the bright light of the crewroom, and fill in the Authorisation Book.

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The murmur of voices nearby awoke me. I pulled the bedclothes around my ears, but it was no good. I was awake, back to life again. I sat up, yawned, looked at my watch - 0820. Still in time for breakfast, if I hurried. Brian, Tim, Tink and Soren were in a huddle across the other side of the hut, talking in hushed voices, looking solemn. Two strange erks were standing near Aage's bed. I was puzzled.

"Hey, Tink!" I called, sitting on the edge of my bed and yawning again, "Tink!"

He looked over his shoulder and came across to me. I nodded towards the strangers.

"What's cooking?" I asked.

"It's Aage."

"Aage? What about him?"

"He's dead. He crashed, night flying, last night."

"He what?" I gasped, fully awake in an instant, "He crashed? How the hell did it happen?"

Tink shrugged.

"No-one knows, he just went in, about four miles away, that's all we know."

"Christ," I whispered, "poor old Aage. He's definitely - ?"

"Oh, yes," Tink said, "no doubt about it, I'm afraid."

I said, quietly, "He took over my kite, last night, you know." Tink said, "Was it O.K. when you had it?"

"Of course, no trouble at all."

I didn't want to mention my falling asleep, not even to Tink. He sighed.

"Makes you think, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I answered, remembering the lights rushing towards me, "it certainly makes you think."

('What has to be, will be.')

"Mail up!" someone shouted, and there was a clatter of feet hurrying down the hut. There would be no mail for Aage. Another day had begun.

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"Yes, my darling daughter"

"YES, MY DARLING DAUGHTER"

"What was it you did yesterday?" Flying Officer Sparks asked, "advanced formation, am I right?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, wondering what was in store for me that morning.

He pinched his lower lip between thumb and finger and frowned with silent concentration, his black moustache looking more luxuriant than ever.

"Well now, I think you'd better do some steep turns, climbing turns and a forced landing. An hour, solo. Take 2614. Don't do all your turns to port, you don't want to give yourself a left-handed bias, and watch you don't black yourself out in your steep turns. Now. Forced landings. Don't touch down anywhere, you only do that with an instructor. Don't go below a hundred feet, and thirdly, don't cheat and have a field picked ready, close your throttle at random when you're doing something else. If you do ever have an engine failure you won't be able to pick and choose the time or the place. All right? Any questions?"

"I take it I keep my undercarriage up, sir?"

"Yes, better a belly landing and a bent prop than a somersault if you try a wheels down landing on an unknown surface. Anything else?"

"No, sir."

"Right, off you go, then."

"Thank you, sir."

I came to attention, about-turned smartly and went out of the Instructors' Office into the pupils' crewroom of 'F' Flight, No. 32 Service Flying Training School, Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, on the Canadian prairies.

I felt buoyant that morning; I was feeling very fit and happy and I knew I was flying well. It was a beautiful early summer day with a few puffs of fair-weather cumulus at about five thousand feet, with a light breeze to temper the already growing heat. The constant drone of Harvards filled the air, punctuated by the fierce, ear-splitting howl and crackle of the high-speed propeller tips as one fled down the runway like a scalded cat, tail up, and took off, flashing yellow in the sunlight and tucking its wheels neatly up as it left

the runway.

Tim and Soren, two of the twenty or so Norwegians on our course - in fact, the R.A.F were in the minority on Course 32 - were sitting in the crewroom. They completed my formation of three when we flew, and we were great buddies. Tim looked up and grinned.

"No formation for us this morning, eh?"

"No, not this morning, Tim. I hear that you're grounded, anyhow, for trying to make me spin in off a turn!"

I was joking, of course, and Tim knew it; on's loyalty to one's formation was absolute. Tim laughed hugely, his lean, brown face, normally rather grave, was transformed.

"Anyhow," I said, "he's not fit to fly with a face like that," and I pointed to Soren, who was feeding a nickel into the juke box. There was a thud, and out came the seductive voice of Dinah Shore.

"Mother, may I go out dancing?
Yes, my darling daughter.
Mother, may I try romancing?
Yes, my darling daughter - "

It was practically our course signature tune at Moose Jaw, everybody sang, whistled or hummed it and selected it on whatever juke box was handiest, whether here in the crewroom or out at Smoky Joe's, the cafe at the camp gates, on the dust road which led to town. Soren looked up. He had a bottle of coke in one hand, a split lip and a discoloured right eye. He grinned at me.

"Ah, but it was just a friendly little fight with a couple of Canadians, nothing serious at all."

Soren's favourite occupation on his evenings out was to have several drinks then find someone to fight. Strangely enough, he never fought with any R.A.F. bloke.

"See you later, then," I said to them. Tim gave a vague wave, Soren's eyes were already shut as he lay full length on a convenient bench, arms crossed on his chest, his mop of incredibly blond hair gleaming in the sun which poured in through the window.

"What if there's a moon, mother darling, and it's shining on the water?" I sang to myself as I crossed the expanse of concrete

in front of the hangars, under the blazing sun, my parachute bumping against the backs of my knees, the morning breeze finding its way pleasantly inside my unbuckled helmet. It was so hot that we were able to fly in shirtsleeves. Up at eight or ten thousand feet it was delightfully cool, but at ground level the temperature could climb to the 120's in the sun by afternoon.

I found 2614 among the half dozen kites parked in line facing the hangar. Someone had thoughtfully left the canopy open to minimise the heat in the cockpit. I checked that the pitot-head cover was off, I didn't want to get airborne and find that the airspeed indicator was out of action. Then I climbed in off the port wing-root, clicking the leg-straps of my 'chute into the quick-release box as I did so. An erk was standing by with the starter trolley. I did up my safety harness while I was busy with the pre-start cockpit check. I operated the priming pump and shouted "Contact!", switching on the ignition, and with the stick held firmly back into my stomach I pressed the starter switch. The propeller staggered, jumped, staggered again, then caught as the engine roared into life. The prop-tips became a yellow semi-circular blur in front of my eyes. The erk wheeled away the trolley, parking it to one side where I could see it.

I tested the controls for full movement and ran up the engine, buckled my helmet securely and pulled the seat up hard against the straps, waving away the chocks. The erk gave me the thumbs-up. I toed the brakes off, opened the throttle a little, and we rolled. I taxied with exaggerated care, knowing that F/O Sparks was probably watching me. I had been told off by him once or twice for taxying carelessly. So I ruddered the nose meticulously, each way in turn, at 45 degrees to my direction of travel, which enabled me to see ahead, to the sides of the big 450 horse-power radial engine. A taxying accident was a very serious matter indeed, and a Court Martial was the automatic sequel.

I arrived at the end of the twin runways in use and squinted up into the glare; no-one was on his approach. A final check on the windsock and on the cockpit settings, then I turned on to the runway, pushing on a little rudder to ensure I was absolutely in

line and central. I set the gyro to '0' and uncaged it, then glanced up to make doubly certain that the canopy was fully back, just in case anything went wrong on take-off and I had to get out in a hurry. Then a final deep breath and we were off. I eased open the throttle to its fullest extent. We rolled, rumbling over the runway, keeping straight with small pushes on the rudder. The engine note rose to a deafening howl and the pressure on the stick increased as we gathered speed and as I eased the stick central. We were in a flying attitude, tail up and charging down the runway which was vanishing with amazing rapidity under the nose of the aircraft. At 65, a slight backward pressure on the stick - not quite ready. At 70, a bump or two, then the incredible smoothness of being airborne.

I whipped up the wheels, holding the nose just above the horizon to pick up speed, then I throttled back to climbing boost and revs, and reaching up, slid the canopy shut. It was a bit quieter then, and I could relax a little. I adjusted the climbing angle to give me 100 m.p.h., saw with satisfaction that the gyro was still on '0', and did a quick check on all the instrument readings, going swiftly round the cockpit in a clockwise direction. The altimeter slowly wound around its way towards the cotton-wool cumulus.

"Mother, may I go out dancing?
Yes, my darling daughter," I sang loudly to myself.

. . . . . .

"How right he was," I thought as I brought her smoothly out of a steep turn, "you can black yourself out in one of these."

I had tightened the turn gradually, to the left, which I could do without conscious effort, toeing on top rudder to keep the nose pushing around the horizon, the stick fairly tightly into my stomach to tighten the turn in on itself. As the rate-of-turn indicator hovered around the $3\frac{1}{2}$ mark I could feel myself being crushed down into the seat, my cheeks were being pulled downwards, and the instruments had become rather fuzzy as the 'g' took hold of the blood in my brain, sucking it down out of my head. Then, as I came out of the turn and the 'g' decreased, I stretched myself against the straps as the pressure slackened, and bared my teeth in a mirthless grin

to restore my features to their correct shape.

"Forced landing next," I said to myself as I slowly but firmly closed the throttle, stopping it just before the place where the undercarriage warning horn would sound. I was at about six thousand feet, to the west of Moose Jaw. Several miles away,to the north-east, I could see another Harvard stooging along, probably on a cross-country, and away to the north a civil DC3 was flying the beam from Regina to Swift Current. I gently pushed the nose down into the quietness, selected flaps down and hand-pumped on 15 degrees. In a real engine failure you would have to do it this way, the hard way. I slid the canopy open and was all set to pick what would laughingly be called my 'field'; in this part of the world what passed for a field was rather rare.

The prairie lay below in its muted colours, the occasional yellow dust road straight as a string, the sun flashing briefly on some watercourse. About thirty miles to starboard there seemed to be some line-squalls building up already above the low hills which marked the border of Canada with the neutral U.S.A. I put the kite into a shallow glide. Then I saw my field, a green, squarish paddock with two white buildings in one corner, a dirt road leading up to them. I settled the airspeed on 80 and turned towards the paddock, losing height slowly but steadily in a succession of well-banked turns like the descending hairpins of a mountain road. The green postage stamp of the paddock grew larger. From the smoke of a small fire somewhere on the prairie I saw I would be roughly into wind on my final approach. The white buildings grew into the size of matchboxes.

"What a God-forsaken place," I thought, "imagine being stuck out here, miles from anywhere, no towns, no trees, lots of damn-all connected by roads."

Then I noticed a movement near the house. One figure was standing just outside it, then it was joined by another. Still I glided down, mentally noting airspeed and altimeter readings with quick glances, checking and assessing my position in relation to the paddock. I used to sideslip Tigers with contemptuous ease to get them into the

field at Sywell, it became my trademark before I left there, but I'd never tried to sideslip a Harvard. Come to think, perhaps this wasn't the time to start. The horizon had lifted quite a lot. I was going to make it all right, I thought. The prop windmilled ahead of me and I had the urge to open the throttle to make sure that the engine was still functioning; it seemed an age since I had cut the power off. I dropped the nose and did a final turn to port. Airspeed back to 80, pump down full flap, line up, into wind, on to the paddock.

It was a man and a girl standing there watching me, the sun gleaming on their upturned faces. The man was pointing upwards, towards me, he had put his arm protectively around the girl's shoulders. His daughter, I thought. I imagined them speaking to one another in their slightly harsh Canadian voices, anxious as to what was going to happen next to the aircraft, to me - and to them and their home. I saw the girl give a small wave of the hand, nervously, encouragingly, almost as though she were trying to placate some force, to stave off a possible disaster,and I felt a pang of guilt, knowing that they would be thinking that I was in trouble. Two ordinary people, the tenor of their lonely lives disturbed as never before, by my so casual and uncaring intrusion.

Altitude 150 feet. Airspeed 80. It was, if I said it myself, a honey of an approach, I could have put her down with no trouble at all. They were both waving now and I could distinguish their features. I had them firmly fixed in my mind as father and daughter. Perhaps he was a widower, living out his hard life on the land which his ancestors had farmed since the Indians had left, perhaps his pretty daughter had sacrificed her youth, her prospects and hopes of marriage, to look after her father and help on their farm, burying herself in their lonely world. They were remote there from everything of violence, receiving news of the war over the radio from professionally cheerful and brash newsreaders, couched in terms that they could merely imperfectly comprehend: Europe was far away, dominated by some tyrant of whom they knew little, opposed only by distant and defiant English cousins whom they had never seen, and whose ways were as strange and unknown to them as those of the biblical characters of whom perhaps they read daily at the end of their quiet evenings together.

I saw him clasp her to himself protectively, and I saw also that I was now below 100 feet. Firmly, I opened the throttle fully. The engine surged with power, its roar doubly deafening after the long glide down. I eased the nose up and gently started to milk off the flap. The house slid beneath my port wing. I saw, out of the corner of my eye, the two figures. He was greying, slightly stooped, in brown bib-and-brace overalls, she a slim girl in a vivid blue frock, her dark hair like a halo round her face. I suddenly thought of Betty. They stood, their arms around each other, as I flew over them.

Then I had the strange and unaccountably peaceful feeling that in those few minutes I had known them all my life. It was as though time itself had become distorted, elongated, to envelop the three of us in some temporal vacuum in a cul-de-sac off the normal path of consciousness, where the clock of the world stood still and where we had, in some mysterious way, experienced a fragment chipped off the endless expanse of eternity, wherein the three of us had been united as one.

The horizon sank away below the Harvard's nose. I was back again in my element after those eerie few seconds. I looked down at them for the last time. She was standing with both hands pressed to her face. Then her father slowly raised his right hand, as though in benediction. I climbed away into the summer sunshine. And I sang, to no-one but myself, but thinking of the girl down there -

"Mother, must I keep on dancing?
"Yes, my darling daughter!"

I turned the Harvard's nose for home.

. . . . . .

Crewing - up

CREWING-UP

Although there are many things which happened at that time when we looked directly into "the bright face of danger", there are some, and regrettably, some of the most important, the recollection of which steadfastly eludes me. This of course pains me greatly, as the men I was about to meet were destined in those six all too short months to leave an indelible and now poignant impression upon my memory.

My recurring faint recollection is somehow associated with being in a group of other pilots, pupils at 11 O.T.U., Bassingbourn, not far from Cambridge, quite near to the place of execution of Dick Turpin at Caxton Gibbet, and later to become an American Flying Fortress base. We were gathered at the end of one of the hangars in the morning sunshine, practising what little skills we had acquired on the use of the sextant, taking sun-sights and from them plotting the latitude of our position, which was, of course, easily checked by our, at that stage in our training, benign instructors. Perhaps their thoughts were couched in similar terms to those which Connie was to use in conversation with me a year or more later, and in totally different circumstances and surroundings - "They don't know what's coming to them, poor sods, do they, Yoicks?"

None of us knew what was coming, for better or for worse, to us, and I was certainly not to know that within the hour I was to meet, and for the next six months - (was it really as little as that?) - become associated with and know intimately five of the finest men, in my opinion, who ever walked the earth. Men who became closer to me, closer to each other, than brothers, than my and their own flesh and blood, men who were mutually supportive in the intangible but unyielding bond which perhaps only aircrew or ex-aircrew can comprehend, men, four of whom had already entered the last six months of their short lives.

We put away our sextants, thankfully, in most cases. There were about twenty of us pilots on the course, both from the United

Kingdom and the Dominions. My own particular friends were Charlie from Newcastle, Hi-lo, a rugged, rangy Canadian and the man who was to become his Observer, a cheerful Australian named Laurie, and also Roddy, another Canadian, smiling and lively, whom I often addressed, attempting, not unkindly, to imitate his accent, as Raddy. He, Hi-lo and Laurie were soon to be posted with me to 12 Squadron. All three were also soon to die.

We had completed our introduction to the Wellington under the tutelage of 'screened' ex-operational pilots, on somewhat battle-weary ex-Squadron aircraft. The inevitable 'circuits and bumps' - a few of the bumps quite heavy - had been the order of the day, and of the night, a fortnight of them. I astonished myself by going solo on what were in my eyes monstrously large twin-engined aircraft, having gained my wings on single engined Harvards, in less than three hours. Perhaps it was due not so much to skill and ability as to confidence, or perhaps over-confidence. Looking back on it now it never ceases to astound me and I have to consult my log book to verify the figure of a mere two hours and forty five minutes instruction.

One interesting feature of this fortnight was that before we flew at night we practised what were known as 'day-night' landings. Flying in broad daylight with an instructor as safety pilot, we wore specially tinted goggles which gave the impression of surrounding darkness, while the runway was marked by sodium lights which showed up brightly and gave us the line of approach and landing. It was a novel and rather weird experience, but a very useful one, preparing us for the real thing, flying at night in much-reduced visibility, our eyes fixed almost exclusively on the blind-flying panel of A.S.I., altimeter, turn and bank indicator, gyro compass, artificial horizon, and rate of climb and dive indicator.

And so, to one degree or another proficient enough pilots of the Wellington, we were ready to be crewed up.

'George', as automatic pilots were universally known, were rare pieces of equipment in late 1941, so every Wellington was crewed by

two pilots who shared the manual flying (of anything up to 7½ hours on some operations) and one of whom was designated as captain of the aircraft, almost invariably addressed as 'skipper' or more usually 'skip'. Once in the air, however, the pilot was virtually under the orders of his Observer, a misnomer if ever there was one, as he was in no position, huddled in his tiny compartment with his plotting chart and maps, his parallel ruler and sharpened pencils, constantly reading his super-accurate navigation watch, his 'slave' altimeter and airspeed indicator, to observe anything outside the aircraft. No pilot, however privately doubtful he might be of the Observer's statement of the aircraft's position relative to the earth, or of his instructions to alter course on to a given heading at a certain time, ever had the temerity to question him as to these matters except in the mildest and most oblique of terms. To do otherwise was to risk a most sarcastic reply, usually culminating in the curt riposte, "You just do the flying and let me do the navigating." Later, on the Squadron I was to learn that Observers as a clan - and a Freemason-like clan they were, dabbling in the impenetrable mysteries of running fixes, square searches, back-bearings, drifts and suchlike - were sometimes irreverently known as the Two-Seventy Boys, after their alleged persistent habit of, having bombed some German target and being urgently asked by the pilot for a course "to get the Hell out of here", would airily answer, "Just steer two-seventy," that being West. The Observer was also the crew member who released the bombs, his bomb selector panel down in the starboard side of the aircraft's nose being somewhat inappropriately known as the Mickey Mouse, for a reason I never discovered, directing the pilot from his prone position between the front turret and the pilot's feet on the rudder pedals with what was usually a breathless series of instructions, "Left, left", "Right" or "Steady", the word "left" always being repeated so as not to be confused with "right" against the various external and internal noises of a bomber aircraft. Current at the time was a somewhat school-boyish joke that one Observer had so far forgotten himself in the excitement of the bombing run to call urgently to the pilot, "Back a bit!"

The remaining three crew members each wore the air gunner's 'AG' half-wing on his chest. But one, in addition, had the cluster of

lightning flashes of a wireless operator on his sleeve and was invariably referred to, not by the official designation of wireless operator/air gunner but with the racy and succinct abbreviation 'WopAG'. His was the task of obtaining as many bearings on radio stations, both R.A.F. and, if he was able, B.B.C. and German civilian stations such as Hamburg or Deutschlandsender and pass the information to the Observer in the next compartment. He must also, at designated times, listen out to messages from his base aerodrome and also his Group Headquarters. In addition, in emergency, he could attempt to obtain a course to steer to any given bomber station by requesting from them a QDM, the code for that information. But this was regarded as being rather infra dig.

The two 'straight AGs', as the other gunners were known, occupied their respective gun turrets with few inches to spare, one at the front and one at the rear of the aircraft, the coldest positions, despite their electrically heated leather Irvin suits. In the 'tail-end Charlie's' case it was the loneliest position in the aircraft and the most hazardous if attacked by a Luftwaffe night-fighter, but the safest if a sudden crash-landing became necessary, or if the order to bale out was given in some dire emergency, when he simply rotated his turret through ninety degrees, clipped on his parachute, jettisoned the turret doors and fell out backwards. Each turret was equipped with two .303 inch Browning guns, lovingly maintained and cared for by their users, pitifully inadequate when compared to the cannon of the German night-fighters.

To be in the firing line of these Luftwaffe cannon was not at all pleasant. Although never, fortunately, experiencing it in the air, Charlie, my room-mate, and I, billeted in Kneesworth Hall close to the aerodrome , on the old Roman road of Ermine Street, were quietly writing letters one evening in our first-floor room when we heard, and ignored, the noise of the air-raid siren from the village. Bassingbourn was one of the nearest training aerodromes, and certainly the nearest bomber O.T.U., to the east coast, although a fair distance from it. But this fact must have been well known to the enemy, who paid us periodic visits. One aircraft, in fact - I believe it was a Junkers 88 - either by design or mischance actually landed at

Steeple Morden, our satellite aerodrome and became the property of H.M. Government and the Air Ministry, subsequently appearing as part of the circus of captured German aircraft in flying condition which we once saw flying out of Duxford, a nearby fighter station, where they were based, and heavily escorted by a squadron of Spitfires indulging in some plain and fancy flying around them to discourage curious onlookers such as we, who might have gone so far as to try to shoot them down, if in sufficiently rash a mood. However, to return to Kneesworth Hall and the air raid warning. Charlie and I carried on with our respective writing until we were suddenly aware of a strange aircraft engine noise becoming rapidly louder, accompanied by the loud and staccato banging of cannon-fire as the German intruder shot-up the road, the village and approaches to the aerodrome. Our letters were swiftly thrown aside as we, with violent expletives, flung ourselves under our respective beds. My future rear gunner also had a tale to tell concerning an attack by an intruder.

The taking of sun-sights over, we were instructed to gather in one of the hangars to be crewed up. There was, as I recall, no formal procedure attached to this important and far-reaching event. One or two instructors acted somewhat like shepherds directing straggling sheep to make up a group of six which was to be a crew. There must have been a hundred or more aircrew of all categories milling around rather haphazardly until, perhaps, a beckoning hand, a lifted eyebrow or a resigned grin bonded one man to another or to a group as yet incomplete. The whole procedure, if indeed it could be graced by that term, seemed to be quite without organisation, the complete antithesis of all previous group activities I had experienced since putting on my uniform eleven months before. Here, there was no falling-in in threes, or lining up alphabetically. (And how I used to long for anyone named Young who would replace me, the invariable and forlorn last man in any line for whatever was to be received or done.)

"You lookin' f'r 'n Observer?"
He was tallish, rather sallow and thin-faced, in Australian dark blue uniform with its black buttons, Sergeant's chevrons on his sleeves, the winged 'O' above his breast pocket.

"Sure. Glad to have you," I said.

This was Colin, more often than not simply 'Col'. He was to guide us unfailingly through the skies, friendly skies by day and night, then through the hostile moonlit spaces over Germany and Occupied Europe. Col, from Randwick, near Sydney, with his baritone voice which quite often suddenly creaked, almost breaking as he spoke, with his wry sense of humour, his sudden, almost apologetic half-stifled laughter, his strange, colourful vocabulary - "Take five!" His term, sometimes sarcastically uttered, of approval. And when he suspected that I or some other member of the crew was trying to kid him - "Aw, don't come the raw prawn!" A single man, his father working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Later, one night on ops with the Squadron to Kiel where the Gneisenau was skulking after its dash up the Channel from Brest with the Scharnhorst and Prinz Eugen, Col performed a wonderfully accurate piece of navigation. It was on an occasion, of which there were several, when the Met. forecast was completely inaccurate, which we feared when we entered cloud at 600 feet after take-off. We climbed slowly until we could climb no more in the thin air and reached 20,500 feet, still in cloud, a faint blur of moonlight showing above us. We bombed the centre of the flak concentration in the target area, completely blind, but saw several large explosions which we duly reported on our interrogation back at base. Losing height slowly on the way back and with an unwelcome passenger in the shape of a 1000 pound bomb which had hung-up, I broke cloud at something around 1000 feet on return, a mere four miles south of our intended position, to see the welcome finger of Spurn Head down to starboard and the four red obstruction lights of a radar station near Cleethorpes gleaming ahead. Over seven hours in cloud and an error of only four miles, thanks to Col's abilities. It was on this raid, by Wellingtons, 68 in total, of our No.1 Group, that the Gneisenau was so badly damaged that she never sailed again from her berth. Many of her crew were killed. Perhaps it was our bombs that had done the damage, who knows.

I once found Col, on an op, being quietly sick into a tin at the side of his plotting-table, his face ashen, but carrying on despite that.

Such was his dauntless spirit. He had my unspoken sympathy as a fellow-sufferer.

A pale, poker-faced and very quiet Royal Canadian Air Force sergeant pilot attached himself to us. Elmer, as the rest of the crew came to christen him, was silent to a degree, but despite that somehow exuded a quiet if somewhat forlorn determination. When we reached the Squadron in October he joined Mike Duder's crew. Five of the six of them were killed when, damaged by flak over Essen on Mike's 29th trip, his last but one of his tour had he completed it, they were finished off by a night-fighter and crashed in Holland. It was not until many years later that I learned a little more about Elmer. Although in the R.C.A.F., he was not, in fact, a Canadian, but a citizen of the United States of America, from St. Paul, Minnesota. Before Pearl Harbor he had an urge to fly against the Germans, possibly because of his Central European forbears. He volunteered for the U.S. Air Force as a pilot and underwent his initial training. Unfortunately, like many others, he had trouble withhis landings and was failed. He returned home undeterred, with his desire to become a pilot undimmed. To raise money for the course of action upon which he had decided, he took a job in a sweet factory and augmented his wages by working as a petrol pump attendant. He then travelled to Canada and enlisted in the R.C.A.F. This time he successfully completed his training and got his long-desired wings. All this I learned years later when I was able to trace his sister-in-law and with a residual sense of guilt over my at times impatient, if not downright snappy instructions to him in the air, I have attempted to salve my conscience by having several times visited his grave, and those of his crew, in a war cemetery in a small, neat town in the Netherlands.

The 'father' of our crew was Mick, our Wop/AG, the only married man amongst us. In peacetime - or 'civvy street' as it was invariably known - he had worked at Lucas' in Birmingham and was knowledgeable on most things electrical and mechanical, owning a small Ford car as well as a motor cycle. The former was later well used on stand-down nights on the Squadron for trips into G.Y. (as Grimsby was known) and I once had the doubtful pleasure of a hair-raising pillion ride

over snow-covered skating rink minor roads, on his motor cycle, also into Grimsby, which was almost as nerve-wracking to me as a trip to Essen. Mick (this was not his given name) was tallish, fairly well-built, with a high forehead, a studious manner, a slight 'Brummy' accent and an unconsciously querulous voice. It was he, I think, who christened me 'Harry', by which name I became known by the rest of the crew, and the use of which, after their loss, I have strongly discouraged. Mick had done part of his training somewhere in Lincolnshire and had frequented, and knew the landlady, Edna, of the Market Hotel on Yarborough Road in G.Y., which became a home from home for us on stand-down nights. He had a habit concerning which Col and I wryly complained on several occasions, of, on being asked over the intercom. for some information, would testily reply, "Hey, shut up, I'm listening out to Group." We met his wife once, in the 'Market', Mick proudly introducing her to us all, a shy, rather self-effacing girl, soon to become a widow.

Our gunners were a wonderfully contrasted pair. Johnnie, from a small Suffolk town - and again, not his given name - in the front turret, was slim, neat in appearance, quiet of speech and demeanour, moderate in his choice of words and apparently completely without fear. No matter what the circumstances, his voice over the intercom. was as calm and measured as though he were indulging in casual conversation over a glass of beer. On the way to Essen one night we were suddenly coned in a dozen or more searchlights and the German flak gunners got to work on us. Cookie was hurling the aircraft all over the sky in his attempts to get us out of the mess, and I was being hurled all over the interior of the aircraft, which was lit up as bright as day. In a steep dive, attempting to escape from the combined attack of searchlights and flak bursts, Johnnie, without being told, opened fire with several short bursts from his twin Brownings on the searchlight batteries, and immediately we were freed from them as they snapped out as though all controlled by a single switch. Johnnie bought himself no beer the next time we went to the 'Market'.

In contrast to Johnnie's urbanity there was Tommy, our cockney rear gunner. I am still looking for Tommy, still seeking to discover what became of him after he was admitted to hospital after a few ops with us, whether even today, somewhere, he is alive. J - would have

described him, had she, like me, had the good fortune to know him, as being like Tigger, a very bouncy animal. Although not tall, he was built like a boxer or a rugby prop forward, solid, chunky - even more so when kitted up in his Irvin suit - with a gleaming broad red face, scarred in one place, topped by rather long and slightly untidy Brylcreemed hair, his face almost always split in a broad grin. He was cheerful, cocky, good-humoured, never short of a quip, lively and effervescent, and he was a tonic to us all when things were going against us.

He laughingly described to us one incident in which he was involved while in his training Flight in the weeks before coming into the crew. He had been on a night cross-country involving an air-to-sea firing exercise, aiming, presumably, at a flame float which they dropped in the English Channel. Several other gunners were taken along on the trip and after Tommy had fired his allotted number of rounds he retired to the rest bed half way down the Wellington's fuselage, unplugged his intercom., closed his eyes and fell asleep, the padded earpieces of his helmet dulling the noise of the engines and of the rattle of the Brownings fired by his fellow-pupils. He awoke with a start, someone shaking him violently and yelling in his ear, "Bale out! Bale out!" The aircraft was being jinked around the sky in evasive action from the attack of a German fighter. By the time Tommy had collected his wits, found and clipped on his parachute and jumped through the open escape hatch, the aircraft was down to approximately 600 feet, the lowest safe altitude to allow a parachute to open. No sooner had it done so than he was down to earth, to the softest of all possible landings - in a haystack.

He had no idea where he was, nor what had happened to the aircraft or to the others in it, and certainly no idea of the planned route of the cross-country flight.

"I hadn't a bloody clue where the hell I was," he told us, "could've been in France, Germany, England, any bloody where."

So he collected his deployed parachute into his arms and in the darkness plodded away from the scene of his sudden and fortuitous landing upon the earth. The unfamiliar countryside was silent and

dark. He came upon a ditch under a hedge and rightly decided to spend the night there. In the morning he would take stock of his position. In tne ditch, he rolled himself into his parachute, comfortably warm inside his leather Irvin suit and once more slept.

In the morning, at daylight, he cautiously emerged to size up the situation. On the other side of the hedge was a narrow road. Keeping well hidden, he awaited developments. Presently, the distant sound of voices alerted him and two men dressed in farm-workers' clothes came walking along the lane. Tommy strained his ears to catch their conversation, to determine what language they were speaking. To his relief he heard familiar English words. Tommy emerged and, perhaps too quickly, confronted them. But startled as they were by his sudden appearance and flying clothing, they were soon convinced of his nationality when he employed his colourful vocabulary to some effect. They directed him to the nearest house where he received some much-needed refreshment and telephoned his Flight Commander at Bassingbourn.

On our evenings out at the 'Market' in G.Y. he always made a point of collecting small empty ginger ale bottles after one or other of us - often it was I - had added the contents to our gin. These he would take along on our next op., storing them handily in his already cramped rear turret ready for use. We had heard it said that if caught in searchlights, a couple of empty bottles thrown out would, during their descent, scream like falling bombs and cause the searchlight crew to douse their light, and one night on the approach to the Happy Valley, as the Ruhr, with the somewhat black humour of bomber crews, was known, when we were trapped in searchlights he proved, by throwing out a few bottles, that this was no old wives' tale. It worked like a charm and we slipped through the defences and on to Essen.

(Soon afterwards, on leave, I was relating this to an elderly and very unworldly female relation, who, to my amazement and vast amusement was alarmed and scandalised, wide-eyed and open mouthed. "Oh! But you might have killed somebody!" she exclaimed.)

I have made several attempts to find out whether Tommy survived the war. In correspondence with a contemporary Squadron member, he

wrote to say that he had a copy of a Squadron Battle Order in which Tommy's name appeared in relation to an operation, as rear gunner in some crew whose names were unfamiliar to me, but that Tommy's name had been crossed out in pencil and another substituted. Whatever the significance of that, neither he nor I could tell after the lapse of time. A message on the Internet, placed by my Dutch friends,has produced no result.

Are you out there somewhere, Tommy? If so, you and I are the only two survivors of the six who came together on that sunny August day in the echoing hangar at Bassingbourn those years ago. I miss you all, more than words can express; I think of you every day that passes, and I never cease to grieve for you, nor ever shall.

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Enemy coast

Through cockpit window now,
The lemon-slice of moon,
Some random stars
Pricked in a hemisphere of indigo.
Ahead, the coastline waits -
Pale, wavering beams
As innocent as death
Rehearse the adagio ballet
Which will transfix us
On pinnacles of light
For ravening guns.

But for a space
In this brief, breathless safety,
Poised high above the metal
Of the neutral sea,
We hang in vacuum,
Scattered like moths,
Mute castaways in sky.
Until, inevitably, we penetrate
The charnel-house of dreams,
That swift unveiling of Apocalypse
Familiar to us
As the routine holocaust
Which other men call night.

H.Y.
June 1991

Images of mortality

IMAGES OF MORTALITY

Someone, once, to whom I had been talking - perhaps, it must be admitted, at rather too great length - of my time at Binbrook, cut across my words impatiently with, "Ah, yes, but you were at an impressionable age then."

Not being by nature argumentative I let the comment pass, and the subject was rapidly changed. But the memory of that remark has remained with me. Broadly, I would not dispute its accuracy, for surely, at whatever age one is, one should be, and should remain, impressionable. But here, the implication seemed to be that the events I had been speaking of were not of such importance to have remained so strongly in my memory as they had done. I was then, and still find myself now, a little annoyed by that viewpoint. The happenings of that period of time were of considerable importance to us participants, and the young men, or youths,as some of us were who were involved, were all, in their own individual ways remarkable to one extent or another, by any standards of unbiassed judgement. But perhaps my bias is showing.

Be that as it may, when I think of Binbrook now, there comes into my mind a cascade of kaleidoscopic impressions of scenes, small scenes maybe, and of faces and voices, images of places and of people fixed into my memory like the black and white snapshots secured in an album of photographs.

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It was a shock to me when I saw it for the first time, walking up the road from the Mess towards the hangars. Being a peacetime Station - only just - Binbrook was equipped with the standard pattern of permanent buildings, including a row of what had been married quarters - a few semi-detached, two-storied houses. For some seconds I couldn't think what had happened over there when I saw that most of the top storey of one of the houses had been shattered and was broken off. I halted in my stride, quite appalled at the unexpected and shocking sight. My first thought, an almost instinctive reaction in those days, was "enemy action", then it slowly dawned on me that

this was not so, that the building had, horrifyingly, been struck by one of our own aircraft, either on taking off or on landing, using the short runway. Who it had been, and what casualties had resulted, I never knew. I was too shaken to ask and no-one, certainly, ever volunteered the information. It was not a topic of conversation one indulged in or dwelled upon. But similar incidents were to involve my room-mate, Johnny Stickings, and I was to escape the same fate by only a few scant feet, and by the grace of God.

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Johnny had been somewhat longer on the Squadron than I, an Observer in Sergeant O'Connell's crew. He was short, rather chunky and pale, with straight hair the colour of dark sand. I think we were both much of a type, for while we never went around together, we were perfectly pleasant towards one another and quite happy to be sharing a room, never getting in each other's way or on each other's nerves.

One winter's morning I woke to find his bed still neatly made up and unslept in. At breakfast I heard that his aircraft had crashed the previous night, coming back from an op., on Wilhelmshaven, I believe. As far as anyone could tell me there had been both casualties and survivors. It was later that day when I returned to the room, and found Johnny in bed.

As I recall, he seemed rather dazed and quiet, as well he might have been. He went into few details of the incident; possibly his conscious mind was shying away from the harrowing experience, or perhaps he had been given a sedative. What he did tell me was that when the aircraft crashed he remembered being thrown clear. He had been flung bodily into a small wooden hut on some farmland in Lincolnshire. The hut had collapsed around him and he was only discovered lying in its wreckage by chance, when one of the rescue party noticed the demolished building.

For several years, on the anniversary of the crash, there was an entry in the memorials in the "Daily Telegraph", to Sergeants O'Connell, Parsons, Laing and Delaney, signed "Johnny". Then one year the entry no longer appeared.

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Life on the Squadron produced, naturally, shocks to one's nervous system. Shocks which one could reasonably expect as part and parcel of the normal run of operational flying, and which to one extent or another were predictable. It was the unexpected ones which shook one more violently than the rest; the dazzling blue of a searchlight out of nowhere which flicked unerringly and tenaciously on to one's aircraft, the long uneventful silence of flying through a black winter's night being suddenly shattered by a flakburst just off the wingtip. These were things which could set the pulse, in an instant, racing to twice its normal speed.

But there was an incident which occurred in, of all places, the ablutions of the Officers' Mess, an incident which was so completely unexpected and, at the time, heaven forgive me, so utterly shocking, that it froze me into complete immobility, open-mouthed, horrified, and, for an instant, uncomprehending.

Apart from, as they are termed, the usual offices, in the dimly-lit stone-floored room, there were, naturally, a row of washbasins. I was washing my hands at one end of this row one evening when I heard a soft footstep nearby and I distinguished a figure in the feeble blue light which served to illuminate the place. What was so shocking was the face, a random patchwork of different shades of vivid red, white and pink, two long vertical cuts from the ends of the mouth to the chin, the eyelids unnaturally lifeless and mis-shapen, the hair of the head in isolated tufts falling at random on the skull and over the brow.

As he moved, I recovered myself and muttered some vague greeting as I went hurriedly out, back to the normality of the well-lit, noisy anteroom. It was a while before I recovered from this un-nerving encounter. Someone subsequently told me about Eddie. He was a burn case, one of McIndoe's 'guinea pigs'. A pilot, he had crashed, taking off in a Hampden. The aircraft had burst into flames. The Hampden's cockpit was notoriously difficult to get out of in a hurry and he had fried in his own greases until he was rescued. Richard Hillary, in his well-known book 'The Last Enemy', described Eddie as the worst-burned man in the R.A.F. He was now a pilot in the Target Towing

Flight, flying drogue-towing Lysanders on gunnery practices.

Possibly because we both frequented the games room a fair amount, he and I slowly drifted together. No-one made any sympathetic noises towards Eddie, that was definitely not done, and no-one made the slightest concession towards him either. He played against me often at table-tennis, with a controlled ferocity which could have only have been born of the desire to live his spared life completely to the full. Frequently, a clump of his dark auburn hair would flop uncontrollably down over his eyes, to expose an area of shiny red scalp, upon which hair would never again grow, one of the numerous grafts on his head and face, the skin having been taken, he told me, mostly from his thighs. He would damn it cheerfully and push it roughly back again with his sudden slash of a broad grin, which never reached his lashless and expressionless eyes.

I had detected some accent which I could not place. One day while we were sitting together in the anteroom, chatting, he mentioned that he was a South African.

"Oh?" I said, "Where from? I've got relations out there."

"Where do they live?"

I named the town.

"Well I'll be damned," he said, "that's where I'm from; what's their name?"

I told him.

"Have you a cousin called Edna?"

"Why, yes," I said, astonishment growing every second.

"I used to go around with her," he laughed, "it's a small world, isn't it?"

Eddie, I am glad to say, survived the war. There is a photograph of him, among others of McIndoe's 'Army', in a book named 'Churchill's Few.'

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What can one say of Teddy Bairstow? Only that, had he lived fifty years before his time he would have been described, I am sure, as 'A Card' or as 'A Character'.

Unlike Tony Payne or Jim Heyworth, for example, he was physically unimpressive; very thin-faced and pale, sparse hair brushed sideways across his head, but with eyes as bright as those of the fox's head of our mascot. It was his voice, however, which one remembers best, grating, strident and penetrative in its broad Yorkshire accents. When he was in the room, everyone knew it, and the place seemed filled with his jovial, but somehow, rueful, almost apprehensive presence.

Teddy had a stock phrase which he used whenever anyone asked him, for example, what sort of a trip he had had. He would lift his voice in both pitch and volume and exclaim to the world at large, "Ee! 'twere a shaky do!" He had, to everyone's knowledge, at least one very shaky do. Coming back from some op, he found, for one reason or another, that he wasn't going to make it back to Binbrook. But he was reasonably close, he had crossed the Lincolnshire coast, and decided he would force-land his aircraft. But no wheels-up belly-landing, as he should have done, for Teddy. Incredibly, he did a normal landing, if it could be described in those terms, undercarriage down, in the darkness, into a field near Louth, and got away with it without nosing over into a disastrous cartwheel. Few would have survived to tell the tale - Sergeant O'Connell certainly had not done so - but everyone agreed with Teddy's usual comment. 'Twere indeed a shaky do.

Towards the end of February Teddy's luck ran out. We went after the German pocket-battleship Gneisenau in Kiel Docks, where it was holed up after escaping up the Channel. Teddy did not come back.

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Somehow, it happened that Eric and I tended to gravitate together to play billiards or table tennis in the Mess games room, and for the odd glass of beer. It was, I think, possibly because like me, he was the only one of commissioned rank in his crew, apart from Abey, that is, who was his pilot and our Flight Commander, a Squadron Leader, very much senior in rank to both of us. Eric was Abey's Observer, tall, well built, unfailingly polite, his manner polished and urbane, yet by no means superior. We got along very well; I enjoyed his company, and I like to think he enjoyed mine.

It was one afternoon when we had a stand-down. Frequently, my crew and I would go in to Grimsby, to the cinema, then to the "Market" for a meal with Edna, the landlady, possibly stay the night, and come back in time to report to the Flights next morning. We usually managed to cram ourselves into Mick's, our wireless operator's, Ford. However, on this particular afternoon, possibly because we were broke, there were no such arrangements. I happened to bump into Eric in a corridor, in the Mess. We said "hello", then he stopped suddenly and said, "I say, are you interested in music?"

"Yes, I am, rather," I said, not knowing what to expect.

"Well, look, I'm just going along to old Doug's room, he's going to play some records - would you like to come along? I'm sure he won't mind."

So I went. Doug was pleased to see us both. He wound up his portable gramophone and put on Tchaikovsky's 'Valse des Fleurs'. I can never hear that lovely, lilting piece without thinking of that afternoon in Doug Langley's room, lost in the beauty of discovery of orchestral music, and remembering Doug himself, with his light-ginger hair and luxuriant moustache, sitting, eyes closed, head thrown back, as Eric and I listened attentively. From there, on a subsequent stand-down night we went to a real symphony concert, my first ever, in Grimsby, and a whole new and wonderful world had opened up for me, thanks to Eric and Doug.

Abey's crew went missing on Kiel, the same night as Teddy Bairstow. It was years later that I knew that Eric, and indeed, the rest of the crew, had survived. Desperate for contacts after J - 's death, I hunted through telephone directories until I found his name, and contacted him. After a few phone calls, and the exchange of several long letters, I met him in London. Being the men we are, it was an affectionate but undemonstrative greeting, a handshake and smiles rather than arms around shoulders and tears.

His was a simple story. With quite typical frankness he told me, and M - who was with me, that it was all his fault that they had got shot down. There had, he said, been some fault in his navigation, a very common thing in those days when navigational aids were almost nil, when such things as Gee and H2S had never been heard of. On the way to Kiel they had strayed over Sylt, a notorious hot spot of an island off the Danish-German coast.

They were hit by flak in their starboard engine, which put it out of action. After a discussion as to the alternatives open to them, Abey had turned for home, in the fond hope that one good engine would be sufficient to carry them to the English coast. It was not to be; they were losing too much height to be able to make it back across the wide and inhospitable North Sea. The next option was to turn round again, fly across enemy-occupied Denmark and try to get to Sweden, where they would bale out and be interned for the duration. Again, their loss of height eventually ruled this out, they would never have a hope of reaching any Swedish territory. The third and final option was to bale out over Denmark. This they did, one after the other, successfully, over the island of Funen. They were all immediately taken prisoner. Eric and Abey finished up in the notorious prison camp Stalag Luft III, Sagan, the scene of the "Wooden Horse" tunnel - and of the murder of fifty aircrew officer prisoners by the Germans.

Eric, to my and to M - 's fascination, produced an album of pencil sketches he had made on odd scraps of paper, of prison-camp life. I asked him how he had been treated as a P.o.W., those three and more years that he spent behind the wire. Typically, again, he said, "Oh, I didn't have too bad a time, really, you know." What could one say in reply to that? I simply shook my head in wonder. Of course, among others, we mentioned Teddy Bairstow. He and his crew had not been so fortunate. Nor had Doug Langley, whose grave I found, quite by accident, in a quiet cemetery in northern Holland a short time afterwards.

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I returned to Binbrook after many years. But only to the village. I had already found the Market Hotel in Grimsby where I went so often with my crew. I had stood for several minutes, looking up at the windows of the rooms we used to have, and remembering kindly Edna, who treated us like sons. Remembering Col, and Mick, and Johnnie, of my original crew. Remembering Cookie, our skipper, and Mac, our rear gunner, the Canadians among us. Thinking of the man I never knew, Rae, the man who had taken my place, the man who had died instead of me.

When I arrived at Binbrook, I found I could barely contain my emotion. I recovered myself to some extent while I drank a cup of coffee in the Marquis of Granby, the well-remembered pub in the village. I stood for a long time at the top of the hill, on the road which led down into the valley and up again to the now deserted and silent aerodrome. I stood, remembering again, seeing, across the distance, visions of the Wellingtons I and my friends had flown, parked in their dispersals, the movement of men around them, and their faces, hearing their long-stilled voices. But I could go no closer to them than that. There were too many memories, too many ghosts.

On that fine morning the images of mortality were too real to be borne.

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Tony

TONY

At the time when I subscribed to 'Readers' Digest'there would appear in each issue a short article entitled 'The Most Unforgettable Character I Have Ever Met'. I find that this description could fittingly apply to Tony Payne.

When I had the privilege of knowing him, Tony, at the age of 21, was already a veteran in terms of ability and experience, looked up to almost in reverence as one of the elite pilots on 12 Squadron.

And whenever I recall the Officers' Mess at Binbrook with its high-ceilinged anteroom just across the main corridor from the dining room, with the eternal, homely smell of coffee from the big urn near to the door, I can visualise Tony as he was so often, standing slightly to one side of the fire, pewter tankard in hand, holding court, as it were, the focal point of all eyes and conversation, eternally smiling and cheerful, his crisp, clear voice sounding above the music from the worn record on the radiogram which would be softly playing a catchy little tune, a favourite of his, called 'The Cuckoo'. I have never heard it, or heard of it, even, since that time, but I could never forget it, as it was almost Tony's signature tune. But Tony was entering the last six months of his life.

He had the gift of holding everyone's attention by his witty observations on most things operational - and non-operational, his words rolling brightly and optimistically off his tongue, his eyes shining with the pleasure of living for the moment, and that moment alone, of good company and comradeship.

Once we were discussing a particular trip. (They were always 'trips', occasionally 'ops' but never 'sorties' or 'missions'). Someone was describing our attempts to locate some target in Germany one night recently. There had been only sporadic gunfire aimed at us whn we arrived at about 20,000 feet, and that gunfire, we knew, was not necessarily from the immediate area of the target.

"What did you think about it, Tony?" someone asked. Tony beamed at the question, leaned slightly forward and declaimed with mock solemnity and a judicial air, "Ah! Then I knew that something was afoot!" he said.

Among his many friends, or 'familiars' as they might have once been known, (a description singularly appropriate), was the Senior Flying Control Officer (or 'Regional Control Officer' in the terminology then in force) Flight Lieutenant Bradshaw, "Bradders" to everyone. He was old enough to be Tony's and our father, a World War I pilot beribboned with the 'Pip, Squeak and Wilfred' campaign ribbons of that conflict, slightly portly, fairly short in stature, of equable temperament and genial in manner, his iron-grey to white hair meticulously trimmed. A great deal of repartee was invariably exchanged by the two, doubtless born of their mutual affection despite the disparity in their ages.

To our delight one day, Tony hurried into the anteroom in a state of high glee, carrying a small, brown-paper wrapped parcel the size of a large book.

"Wait till you see this, you types!" he crowed to his audience, which included Bradders, who was as intrigued as the rest of us. Tony slowly, tantalisingly slowly, unwrapped his mysterious parcel then dramatically held up its contents for all to see. It was a gilt-framed oil painting of a side-whiskered old man in a country churchyard, his foot upon the shoulder of a spade, a battered old felt hat on his head. The frame bore the title - 'Old Bradshaw, the village sexton'. It brought the house down and it was ceremoniously hung on the anteroom wall near to the portrait of Flying Officer Donald Garland, one of the Squadron's two posthumous Victoria Cross recipients, and near also to the mounted fox's head, our Squadron badge, which had been presented to 'Abey', Squadron Leader Abraham, our Flight Commander, on his posting from a Polish O.T.U. where he had been instructing, to 12 Squadron.

At about this time the Air Ministry commissioned Eric Kennington, a noted war artist, to make portraits of outstanding aircrew members, many in Bomber Command, and Tony was one of those selected to sit for him. He sat in his usual place at one end of the anteroom fireplace while Kennington went about his work. The Mess kept a respectful silence while this was proceeding, conversing only in whispers and never attempting to peer over the artist's shoulder. Some time later, the finished portrait was hung in a place of honour on the wall, to Tony's laughing embarrassment.

It was only within these last few years that during a telephone conversation with Eric, my friend, fellow-survivor and table tennis and billiards opponent of those days, who had been Squadron Leader Abraham's Observer when they were shot down over Denmark, that he asked me if I remembered Tony's portrait, and whether I knew what happened to it. I confessed that I had almost forgotten about it and did not have any idea what had become of it. But his question touched off in me a desire to find out. It seemed logical that in the first instance I should consult my local Library to see whether they might possibly have any book of the Kennington portraits. It did have such a book, and they brought it out to me. Unfortunately, Tony's likeness was not among the hundred or so reproduced, but he was mentioned in the index of all the portraits which the artist had undertaken. Where next? I decided that the obvious next step was to contact the R.A.F. Museum at Hendon. There I struck gold. They had the original portrait in storage and swiftly sent me a photo-copy. I obtained two copies, one of which I sent to Eric. Today, a sizeable and well-produced copy of Tony's portrait hang on my wall where I can look on it with a mixture of affection, pleasure and great sadness, as well as a sense of honour that such a fine man and such a fine pilot could have wanted me to join his crew. I was more than a little surprised when he did so and have often wondered what prompted him to approach me. It was prior to his finishing his first tour, and I have described the incident and its calamitous sequel in the next chapter.

His crew, on his first tour with us, must truly have been quite exceptional. To have completed their tour made them exceptional enough. The chances of that were a considerable way short of evens. There was an example of their 'press on regardless' spirit and of the brilliant navigation of Tony's Observer, Sergeant Dooley, a dapper, smiling little Englishman, on one of our trips to Kiel to bomb the pocket-battleship Gneisenau.

We rarely had an accurate Met. forecast on the trips we did in that winter of 1941-2, and on this night the conditions turned out to be worse than even the Met. Officer had forecast. We took off in the darkness and gloom and entered heavy cloud at 600 feet We climbed

steadily out over the North Sea but at 20,500 feet we had still not reached clear air. With our bomb load we could climb no higher. We were somewhere in the top of the cloud mass, the moon a faint blur of light on our starboard bow. Below and around us were numerous gun-flashes from the flak defences of Kiel, and as obtaining a visual pinpoint was obviously impossible we bombed the centre of the flak concentration. We turned for home, still in cloud. After over three hours of manual flying, concentrating solely on the instrument panel in front of me, and losing height slowly down to 1,000 feet, I became aware that we had finally reached the cloudbase. Then to my relief and delight I pinpointed Spurn Head, our crossing-in point, about four miles to starboard, and saw the four red obstruction lights of the radar station near Cleethorpes dead ahead. We heartily congratulated Col on his navigation - seven hours plus in cloud and only four miles off track at the end of it.

But Sergeant Dooley and Tony had outshone us. Like us, finding the target in Kiel docks completely cloud-covered he had refused the opportunity to bomb blind as most of us had done. They set course for the Baltic Sea, topped the cloud and found moonlight - and stars. Flying straight and level, which one had to do to take astro-shots of the various stars on the astrograph chart, and which one could safely do over the sea, but which was a most unhealthy undertaking over hostile territory, Sergeant Dooley obtained an astro fix of their exact position. He then plotted a dead-reckoning track and course to the target, some distance away, and when their E.T.A. was up, bombed on that. The Squadron Navigation Officer subsequently re-plotted his whole log and found that they had been 'spot-on' the target. Such was the ability and experience of Tony and his crew.

When his tour was finally over and he had a well-deserved D.F.C. to his credit he was posted away to some hush-hush job at an aerodrome on Salisbury Plain, and both the Mess and B Flight Office were the poorer and less colourful for his going.

My final meeting with him before my posting and his shockingly unexpected and untimely death was a few weeks after he had left the Squadron at the end of his tour. He appeared one day, cheerful and unchanged as ever, in the anteroom one lunchtime. He had flown up,

unofficially, one guessed, in a small, twin-engined trainer. He was, he told us, flying all sorts of kites, at all sorts of heights, mostly over the Channel. He alleged that 'they', whoever they might be, and he did nothing to enlighten us on that, even wanted him to fly inverted on occasions. Beyond that he said nothing, and we did not ask him too many questions. He mentioned that although he had flown up to see us in the Oxford, one of the several aircraft at the secret establishment, he would have preferred something else - "I wanted to come in the Walrus", he chuckled, naming an antiquated and noisy single-pusher-engined flying boat, usually operated by the Fleet Air Arm.

"I'd love to have taxied up to the Watch Office and chucked the anchor out!"

He left us after a cheerful lunch and went for ever out of my life, for which I am greatly the poorer.

It seems that he came back to 12, without a crew, for a second tour and was insistent on taking part in the first 1,000 bomber raid, that on Cologne, with a completely new crew. His was the first aircraft to be shot down that night. It happened over the outskirts of Amsterdam. How he came to be there will always remain a mystery to me, as the route planned for that night to Cologne lay over the estuary of the Scheldt, mush further south, its numerous islands providing invaluable pinpoints.

He and all his crew are buried in beautifully tended graves in a shady part of Amsterdam's New Eastern Cemetery, which I have several times visited.

On one visit to Amsterdam I had contacted a Dutchman who had formed part of the team of volunteers who had excavated the remains of C-Charlie, Tony's aircraft on that fatal night in May 1942. I was able to visit the crash site in the suburb of Badhoevedorp. A small museum of remembrance had been created in some old underground fortifications on the outskirts of the city where were reverently displayed several small identifiable components of the aircraft, as well as one or two pathetic personal belongings of the crew. I was offered, and accepted, a small section of the geodetic construction of the Wellington and this now has a place of honour in my living room, where Tony, from his portrait, appears to be looking down upon it.

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Mind you don't scratch the paint

MIND YOU DON'T SCRATCH THE PAINT

After what happened that night to his beloved Z-Zebra when we, for the first and only time, were being allowed to fly it on ops, I could have quite understood if Tony had never wanted to have anything to do with me, or with any of the crew, again.

But instead, after it was all over, for some time afterwards, whenever he happened to see me in the anteroom there would come into his eyes a gleam of what I could only interpret as amusement, but something more besides; this was a look of amusement mingled with a knowledge and appreciation of our good fortune, the look which perhaps a proud parent gives to his offspring as he sees him emerge from the last obstacle of a tricky course in the school sports and run triumphantly towards the finishing line, a "by-God-you've-done-it" look. A fanciful idea maybe, but the more I look back on it, the more I am sure that was what it was.

It was when we had already done a handful of ops, I remember, and when he himself must have been well on towards finishing his tour - remarkable enough in itself - and quite some while after the events which led to his, and our, final trip in 'Z' that he caught my eye and beckoned me over, one day when there was no flying, in the mess at Binbrook. He and I were both standing among the small crowd of aircrew officers near the fireplace, tankards in our hands, nearly all of us smoking, under the gaze of the portrait of Donald Garland, V.C., and of the fox's mask mounted on its wooden shield.

And when I had made my way towards him he paid me a great and surprising compliment, he who was without doubt one of the finest of the many fine pilots on the Squadron.

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But the story, of course, starts some time before that, when we were very much the new boys, before I and the rest of the crew had been blooded on ops. When we had arrived on the Squadron from our Operational Training Unit at Bassingbourn, Elmer, my co-pilot,

had been allocated to Mike Duder's crew, while the rest of us had been taken over, as it were, by Ralph, a pilot who had a few ops already to his credit. We settled down comfortably enough with him and went through the final stages of our familiarisation and training on the Mark II Wellington in preparation for our first operation together. This landmark in one's flying career was something which I, at any rate, had looked forward to - if that is the correct form of words - with a mixture of curiosity, awe and a certain degree of ap apprehension tinged with excitement; I regarded it as a large step into a completely unknown world. Just how hazardous a step it would turn out to be I was soon to discover.

At that time, my logbook tells me, we had no aircraft which we could really regard as our own, perhaps because we were a fresher crew, I don't know. However, we had flown seven different aircraft since joining 'B' Flight. One morning we reported as usual, to the Flights. I had the privilege of using, along with others, Abey's, our Flight Commander's, office as a sort of mini-crewroom. It was late November and we sat around talking, shop mostly, until about ten o' clock, when Abey's phone rang. All conversation stopped. We knew what it would be - either another stand-down, or a target. It was a target, for freshers only. It would not be named until briefing that afternoon, of course, but I was fairly certain it would be one of the French Channel ports.

Abey nodded to me pleasantly and said, "Let the rest of your crew know, will you?" Then he looked quickly at the blackboard fixed to the wall facing him and said, "Look, I think you'd better take Z-Zebra, Tony's aircraft - he's off to Buck House tomorrow to collect his gong from the King."

Tony Payne wasn't in the Flight Office at the time, I suppose he had been told by Abey that he wouldn't be required in any case; an appointment with His Majesty would naturally take priority over anything. So it was lunchtime when we'd done our quite uneventful night flying test on 'Z', that I saw him in the Mess. Or rather, that he saw me, and made a bee-line for me.

"What's this I hear, then?" he asked.

I grinned at him.

"You mean about Z-Zebra?"

"Yes, I mean about Z-Zebra. My Z-Zebra. You're not actually going to fly my kite, are you? On ops? God!"

There was a look of mock-horror on his face.

"Well, that's what Abey said, so that's what we're doing. Don't worry, Tony, we won't bend it, or anything."

"Bend it? You'd better not! If you so much as scratch the paint I shall deal with you all personally, one at a time, when you come back, you mark my words!"

We both knew he was kidding, but I knew, too, that 'Z' was the apple of Tony's eye and that it had served him well. I hoped that it would serve as well, too.

Briefing was in the early afternoon. I cannot recall that there were many of us there, three crews at most is my recollection. The target was Cherbourg docks, time on target 2100 to 2130, bomb-load seven five hundred pounders, high explosive, route Base - Reading - Bognor Regis - target and return the same way. I felt nothing other than curious anticipation, once the time of take-off drew nearer. I think the thought that we were in 'Z' boosted my morale. Tony's aircraft must be good, for he was good, the best. That followed; 'Z' wouldn't let us down. The trip was going to be, if not the proverbial piece of cake, then quite O.K., quite straightforward, a nice one to start us off, of that I was confident.

It was a Saturday evening and dusk was falling as I went up to the Flights and opened my locker in Abey's office. He was there, of course, looking quietly on at the small handful of us putting on our kit for the op. I started to struggle into my flying kit. Roll-necked sweater under my tunic, brown padded inner suit from neck to ankle, like a tightly fitting eiderdown, old school scarf, which, while I would never have admitted it, was my good-luck talisman. Pale green, slightly faded canvas outer flying suit with fur collar, wool-lined leather flying boots, parachute harness, Mae West and, lastly, 'chute and helmet, which I carried. I checked that I had the issued silk handkerchief, printed very finely with a map of France, just in case, and I touched the reassuring small miniature compass,

sewn into my brevet, another aid to evasion if forced to bale out.

I joined Ralph and the lads in the hangar. There was a continuous buzz of conversation, the odd burst of laughter. Ralph was smiling with rather forced cheerfulness, no doubt wondering how his new crew would cope. Col, our Aussie Observer, looked more sallow than usual and was chewing gum rapidly. His Australian twang, when he spoke, was more pronounced, it seemed to me. Mick, the wireless op., looked worried, as usual, and said nothing, while Tommy, our rear gunner, was completely unconcerned and grinning from ear to ear. Johnnie, who would occupy the front turret, was his calm and quite imperturbable self, almost, I realised, the complete antithesis of Tommy.

Ralph said quickly, "Let's go, then," and we strolled out of the chilly, pale blue lighting of the hangar into the darkness. We climbed awkwardly into the waiting crew-bus parked on the perimeter track. A half moon was beginning to show, flitting in and out of the scattered clouds which were drifting out to sea from off the Lincolshire Wolds. It was cold, and despite my flying kit, I shivered a little. Col was still chewing stolidly, his face expressionless. There was a little desultory conversation as the bus rolled towards the dispersals, but the night's op was not mentioned.

"Z-Zebra," called the W.A.A.F. driver through the little window at the front of the bus. We started to clamber stiffly down the back steps, reluctant to leave the companionable shelter of the vehicle.

"Have a good trip!"

Someone from another crew shouted the conventional but oddly reassuring words, which were invariably used to send a crew on their way.

"You too," one of us replied.

Z-Zebra loomed over us in the semi-darkness. The crew bus rumbled away. The silence was intense, almost tangible. The ground-crew stood around, blowing on their hands and beating their arms around their bodies against the cold. There were muted greetings. Col and I walked several yards away from the kite, lit cigarettes from my case and took a dozen or so quick draws before stamping them out.

"Come on, let's get started," I muttered, and we clambered up the red ladder which jutted down from Z's nose. Johnnie was handing

the pigeon in its ventilated box carefully up to Mick.

We struggled in, heavily and clumsily, each to his position. I hoisted myself over the main spar and stood in the astrodome, reaching down to plug in my intercom lead, and I found the hot-air hose, aiming it to blow on to my body once the engines had been started. The port engine suddenly stammered and roared into life, then the starboard. We heard Ralph blow twice into his mike to test the intercom, then he spoke.

"Everyone O.K? Harry?"

"O.K., skip," I said.

"Col?"

"Yeah, skip."

"Mick?"

O.K."

"Johnnie?"

"O.K., skipper." Johnnie was always punctilious and correct.

"Tommy? All right at the back there?"

"Yes, fine, skip."

"Right, I'll take it there and do the bombing run, Harry, you can bring us back."

"O.K., skip," I said.

Ralph's mike clicked off. There was an increased roar from the port enging, shaking the whole kite, then from the starboard, as Ralph ran them up, checking the power, the magnetos, the oil pressure and the engine temperatures. The kite was shivering like a nervous racehorse at the starting gate, waiting for the off. A lull, then I felt a lurch as we moved slowly out of dispersal. The hangars, topped by their red obstruction lights, slid by, then we were at the end of the runway in use. Behind us I could see the nav. lights of the other aircraft which were to share the night sky with us over Cherbourg. A green Alldis light flashed directly on to us - dah, dah, di-di,- Z.

"You've got your green, skipper," I said. We were on our way.

"O.K., here we go, hold on to your hats."

Johnnie appeared alongside me and grinned rather wolfishly; the front

gunner went into his turret only when we were safely airborne. Ralph opened up the throttles against the brakes to lift the tail a little. Z-Zebra jerked and strained, then suddenly we surged forward, the engines howling. The Drem lighting of the flarepath smudged past, faster and faster as we charged down the runway. The bar of lights with the two goose-neck flares at the far end slid towards us, then suddenly all vibration ceased; we were airborne, we were on our way.

Johnnie gave me the thumbs-up and vanished up front to go into his turret. In a few seconds he called up to say he was in position. I felt and heard Ralph throttling back to settle into the long climb to operational height; we would aim to be at 20,000 feet over the target. He began a turn to port to bring us back over the centre of the aerodrome to set course accurately for Reading.

The night was clear, some cloud showing vaguely out to sea, a blaze of stars everywhere, with the half moon as yet low on the port beam. There were several flashing red beacons to be seen, scattered over the dim landscape like lurid and sinister fireflies, but no-one bothered to read their Morse letters on the way out; coming home, it would be another matter, they would be looked for and read as eagerly as one used to read the familiar names on railway stations on the way back from a holiday. From the astrodome the mainplanes were pale in the faint moonlight, the exhaust stubs glowed redly. The rudder was a tall finger behind us, under which sat Tommy in his turret, a lonely place. I could see the guns rotating from side to side as he kept watch. There was little sensation of height or speed as the engines roared steadily under climbing power, the passage of time seemed suspended and there was a sense of complete detachment from the earth and from all things on it. Conversation was limited to the essential minimum.

Ralph came up, eventually, on the intercom.

"Oxygen on, please, Harry, ten thousand feet."

I acknowledged, unplugged my intercom and left my position, going forward over the main spar to where just behind the Observer's compartment the oxygen bottles were in racks up on the port side of the

fuselage. I screwed open the valves on each one and returned to the astrodome.

"Oxygen on, skipper."

I plugged in the bayonet fitting of my oxygen tube to the nearest socket and clipped the mask on my helmet securely to cover my nose and mouth. After a while, "Glow on the deck, dead ahead, skipper," Johnnie said. I went forward quickly to stand beside Ralph.

"Looks like Reading," I said, "they always did have a lousy blackout. See those two lines of lights? The railway station. Wouldn't that slay you? I don't know how they don't get bombed to hell."

"Useful for us, anyhow," Ralph replied, "we're dead on track and two minutes to E.T.A., too. Good for you, Col," he called.

The faint glow of Reading vanished under the nose. The moon was a bit higher now. Col gave the new course for Bognor. I took a deep breath of oxygen and holding it in my lungs as long as I could, went back to the astrodome. Tommy spoke up, rather fractiously.

"Bloody cold back here."

"Shut up a minute, Tommy," I heard Mick say, "I'm listening out to Group."

No-one spoke for a while. Then I caught a glimpse of a white flashing beacon to starboard. These were very useful; Observers kept a list of them coded with their actual Latitude and Longitude positions. I switched on my mike.

"Occult flashing R Robert about five miles to starboard, Col," I said.

Then, "That's peculiar," I thought, "I didn't hear my own voice saying that."

I checked my intercom switch and repeated what I'd said. Still nothing. I moved over to the intercom point at the flarechute and plugged in. I blew into my mike - dead as mutton. Taking a gulp of oxygen I went forward to Col's desk and banged him on the shoulder. He looked up in surprise. I undid his helmet and shouted in his ear.

"Is your intercom working?"

He thumbed the switch and I saw his lips moving. Then he shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"Bloody thing's crook," he shouted.

After another gulp of oxygen I went forward to yell in Ralph's ear.

"Intercom's u/s!"

I saw Ralph check his mike, then he nodded, the corners of his mouth turned down ruefully.

"Not a sausage," he shouted, "see if Mick can fix it."

I pushed through the door into Mick's compartment. He beat me to it.

"Intercom's u/s, R/T, too."

"See if you can fix it!"

Mick nodded.

I went forward again to Ralph, who had scribbled a note on a message pad.

'If no joy in 15 min. we jettison and abort.'

Without the intercom we would be completely cut off from one another, an impossible situation. I settled into the second pilot's position alongside Ralph, thinking that I might as well stay up front for a while. Ralph was writing something again, letting the trimmers fly the aircraft while he did so.

'Tell the gunners,' I read, and gave him the thumbs-up. More oxygen, then I ducked under the instrument panel, past the bomb-sight, treading gingerly on the bottom escape hatch, and quickly opened the front turret doors.

My God, I thought, it's freezing cold in here.

Johnnie twisted himself round and looked at me questioningly.

"Intercom's gone for a Burton," I shouted, "we may have to scrub it."

He raised his eyebrows and nodded.

Half way back down the fuselage I saw the rear turret doors opening and Tommy emerged, slightly red in the face.

"My bloody intercom's u/s," he shouted, looking aggrieved.
I told him the situation quickly and he went back into his turret.
I bent over Mick, who was fiddling with the intricacies of the radio equipment.

"Any joy?" I shouted.

Mick grimaced and shook his head.

"Keep trying, Mick."

When I went back to Ralph he leaned over and shouted, "If Mick can't fix it by Bognor, we'll jettison ten miles out to sea and go home."

I wrote a note for Col and passed it to him. I was already hoarse with shouting and tired from moving around the aircraft on scanty oxygen.

Still we climbed. Bognor was now below us, I could distinguish the shape of the south coast, the Isle of Wight. Col came forward and made book-opening movements of his hands to Ralph who nodded and selected the bomb-door switch to 'open'. Col ducked down to the bombsight. I wondered idly whether there were any convoys below; even though the bombs would be dropped 'safe' they wouldn't like five hundred pounds of solid metal from this height. There was a slight shudder as the bombs went. Col came back.

"Bloody waste," he shouted.

Ralph nodded as he closed the bomb-doors.

He shouted to me, "We might as well get down lower where we can come off oxygen. Get a course from Col, will you?"

I did so and set it on the compass for Ralph, who did a wide turn to port, losing height steadily. The altimeter slowly unwound.

When we passed through ten thousand feet I turned off the bottles and went the rounds of the crew, telling each one we were on the way home. Their reactions were muted, impassive. Soon we were down to two thousand feet, droning over the dim November landscape. There were no beacons to be seen anywhere in this area. I stood alongside Ralph, wondering if I would get a chance to fly 'Z' soon, but perhaps he didn't like the thought of passing messages himself; the journey from front turret to rear, for example, was a bit of an obstacle race.

Quite suddenly, I noticed that the starboard engine temperature was up. I tapped Ralph on the arm and pointed to it. He nodded slowly, we droned onwards. I looked out of my side window, through the arc of the propeller, mere inches away, at the starboard engine. Was it my imagination, or was there a whitish mist streaming back from it? Ralph had levelled off at a thousand feet. Col came in and handed him a note of E.T.A. Reading. The starboard engine temperature was higher, and now the oil pressure was decidedly down, too.

We've got trouble, damn it, I thought, and I saw there was now

no doubt at all about the trail of vapour from the engine.

"Looks like a glycol leak," I told Ralph, who stared grimly ahead and nodded. Then he turned to me.

"Get Mick on the W/T to base, returning early, intercom and R/T u/s, glycol leak starboard engine."

I gave him the thumbs-up, seized a message pad and wrote it down, then went aft and handed it to Mick, who was sitting glumly at his table. He looked at the note, raised his eyebrows and frowned, then started to tap out the message on the Morse key.

Up front again I saw that the vapour leak from the engine was now streaked with red, and angry looking sparks were flying back over the engine nacelle and the trailing edge of the mainplane. I nudged Ralph, who leaned over to look, then grimaced. Now, the engine temperature was very high and the oil pressure had slumped even further. Z-Zebra was in real trouble. As is the way in flying, events thereafter moved in a downward spiral from bad to desperate with sickening rapidity. A lick of flame spat out of the engine, over the starboard mainplane, then horrifyingly, like the tail of a rocket, the flame shot back towards the rear turret.

"Fire!" I yelled in Ralph's ear.

I pressed the extinguisher button on the instrument panel. Ralph chopped the starboard throttle back and hauled the wheel over to counteract the lurch and swing. I looked at the flames which were now pouring out of the duff engine, over the cowling and the trailing edge of the mainplane. Suddenly Tommy appeared at my side.

"Hey! There's a hell of a lot of sparks flying past my turret!"

"Yes, we're on fire, but we're trying to get it out," I shouted back at him.

Tommy's eyes opened wide when he saw the blazing engine.

"Jesus bloody Christ," he said, in awe.

We were now below 1000 feet. Ralph had opened up the port engine to try to maintain height, but we were turning slowly to starboard the whole time. I thought about the best part of 375 gallons of petrol in the starboard wing-tank, then about the western edge of London and its balloon barrage, somewhere very close to us. We

were in one hell of a mess, I thought, and it began to dawn on me that the situation could well kill us all. I tried not to think too hard about that. Ralph was wrestling with Z-Zebra, trying to keep it on some sort of a course, but it appeared to be useless.

"Poop off some reds," he yelled, "and look out for a flarepath!"

I hurried aft.

"Put the I.F.F. on Stud 3," I shouted to Mick, above the howl of the good engine, and nodding glumly, Mick switched to this distress frequency which would show up as a distinctively shaped trace on all ground radar sets. I quickly found some double-red Verey cartridges and got the signal pistol down from its fixture in the roof of the fuselage. I loaded the cartridges and shot them off one at a time.

"Can't do much more now," I said to myself, and hoped for the sight of a flarepath, a directing searchlight, or anything that would help us. I went forward again. We were still losing height and I realised that we were too low to bale out. But the fire had died down and I sighed with relief at that. The prop windmilled slowly and uselessly. I wished that Z-Zebra had been fitted with propeller feathering devices, but it was useless wishing thoughts like that. I peered intently at the starboard wing; there didn't seem to be any fire there, thank God, otherwise we would simply blow up in mid-air and that would be that. Now, the immediate problem was how we were going to get back on to the ground in approximately one piece; there wasn't a flarepath or a beacon to be seen anywhere.

I felt completely helpless and at the mercy of a capricious and malignant fate which I could do nothing to influence. It was like being in a paper bag going down a waterfall. Ralph's face was grim as he struggled to keep straight and to maintain altitude. I heaved a length of wrapped elastic from my parachute stowage and tied the wheel fully over to the left, to take the load off Ralph a little. He nodded his thanks. Another length of elastic; I tied the rudder bar over to the geodetics. That was all I could do.

I looked out again. Still no sign of friendly lights and the treetops were looking damned close now. The port engine exhaust stubs were bright red due to the punishment the engine was taking and I knew it was just a matter of minutes before we hit something. I thought, "This is a hell of a shaky do." Then, ahead, I saw an interruption in the dark skyline and I was puzzled as to what it

could be. I took a glance as the A.S.I., just under 100 m.p.h., much too near stalling speed for comfort. I hardly dared look at the altimeter, it showed a mere 200 feet now. The curious, dim outlines on the skyline grew slowly larger as we staggered on. That was about it, Z-Zebra was simply staggering along and sinking through the air, almost on the point of stalling, when we would drop like a stone. I was holding the wheel over to port, helping Ralph all I could. Keep height and we lost speed; keep speed and we lost height. That was the quite hopeless situation.

The jagged skyline, which was now beginning to fill the windscreen, resolved itself horrifyingly, in the dim moonlight, into buildings. A town, and worst of all, a town with a tall, thick chimney, dead ahead.

"Jesus Christ," I thought, "we've bloody well had it now, we're going to hit that bloody chimney."

100 feet on the altimeter. Now we were over the town, churning over the roofs at 90 miles an hour. The streets looked so close that I could have put out a hand to touch them. The chimney loomed nearer, the black roofs skated away behind us, apparently just below the floor of the fuselage. I thought of the people in those houses, cringing as they heard the hideous noise just above their heads, praying that the aircraft wouldn't hit them or their children in bed and demolish their home about them in a cataclysm of bricks, rubble and blazing petrol. I was sweating as I frantically heaved at the wheel to try to help Ralph. His eyes were staring as though he were hypnotised by the sight of the chimney. With agonising slowness it slid towards us, slightly to starboard now, it seemed, then just beyond the starboard wingtip, a handful of yards away. I shut my eyes for a second, hardly daring to believe that we had missed it.

"Thank Christ for that!" I yelled at Ralph. We were over open fields again. Ralph shouted desperately, "I'll have to put it down soon, get them into crash positions!"

I hurried to the front turret, collected Johnnie, who was as pleasant and imperturbable as though he was sitting in an armchair in the Mess. He would have had a grandstand view of the whole thing, up to now. Together, we grabbed Mick and Col. The three of them lay on the floor of the fuselage, hands clasped behind their necks.

I hurried, stumbling, to the rear turret and wrenched open the doors.

"Crash landing, any minute now!" I yelled at Tommy. He would sit tight, his was the safest place in the kite in this situation. I almost envied him. I rushed forward again and took a final glance out of the windscreen. We were at treetop level. Then I went back to join Mick, Col and Johnnie. There was not enough room for me to lie down, so I stood sideways on, taking a firm grip on the geodetics, and hoped for the best.

Suddenly the port engine was throttled right back. This was it, I thought. A few seconds' silence, which seemed like a month, then a tremendous impact. A cool smell of newly-torn earth filled the aircraft. I heard, unbelievably, a long burst of machine gun fire and could see red tracer flying ahead of us. I couldn't think what was going on; surely we weren't being shot at? The kite bucketed along, everything twisting and grinding, the deceleration fantastic. I could hardly stay upright. The smell of ploughed earth was beautiful, almost intoxicating. I hung on grimly, and after what seemed an age, we finally lurched to a halt. For an instant there was total, blissful silence.

"Everyone out, quick!" I shouted.

The three of them hurried forward where I could see Ralph's legs vanishing through the escape hatch above the pilot's seat. Tommy came staggering from the rear of the fuselage, clutching his forehead.

"You O.K.?" I asked him.

"Hit me bloody head on some broken sodding geodetics," he said angrily.

"Hurry up and get out in case the bloody kite goes up," I said urgently, and I pushed him forward, ahead of me. He climbed out of the top hatch via the pilot's seat; I was hard on his heels. I could hear Johnnie telling someone, in his clear, modulated voice, that he had forgotten to put the safety-catch of his guns on to 'safe', the impact of the crash had set them firing. I hoped vaguely that no-one had been hurt. It was years later that I learned that one bullet had gone through a child's bedroom window as her mother was putting her to bed; the bullet had embedded itself in the mattress without harming the little girl.

I followed Tommy up and out. I was swinging my legs over the edge of the escape hatch, on to the top of Z-Zebra, when I saw a spurt of flame from the port engine. The strain had been too much for it.

"Port engine's on fire!" I shouted to them, "get to hell out of it!"

I jumped back inside the cockpit, quickly found the port fire-extinguisher button and jabbed my thumb hard on it, swearing softly under my breath. Then I clambered out again, found the port mainplane under my feet and walked down it on to the field.

The aircraft looked like a landed whale, its props bent grotesquely backwards, its back dismally broken, with the rudder towering up at an odd angle, its wings now spread uselessly across the stubble and the broad rut which we had gouged out of the field trailing back towards the hedge, between some tall trees. The crew were grouped together twenty yards away.

"Come on, Harry!" someone shouted.

A man was running over the field towards us, I could see the steam of his panting breaths in the moonlight as he got nearer, and heard him excitedly saying something about 'the biggest field in the district'. The moon shone palely through the trees which we had missed and the air was sweet as wine. I lit a cigarette and joined the others.

"Are you O.K.?" Col asked. I nodded.

"Bloody fine landing, Ralph," I said, "damn good show."

We followed the man over the stubble, towards the broken hedge, then to an Auxiliary Fire Station on the outskirts of St. Albans, where we had come down.

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"Look," Tony said confidentially, "you know I've got ..... as my co-pilot?"

"Yes," I said, wondering what was coming next.

"Well, between you and me, I'm really not all that happy with him. Would you like to come into my crew? I can fix it with Abey, if you would."

When I had recovered from my astonishment it didn't take me long to decide. I shook my head.

"No, thanks, Tony, no, really, I wouldn't want to leave my own crew, you know."

"Oh, well, I can quite understand that. I just thought - . But if you do change your mind, there's a place for you with me, any time."

I thanked him. I have never forgotten the honour he did me.

As I have said, Tony took the wrecking of Z-Zebra quite well, all things being considered. Shortly afterwards, he finished his tour. His crew were posted away, while he himself went on to some hush-hush flying, somewhere on Salisbury Plain, we heard, involving several different types of aircraft. It was something, we guessed, in connection with the development of radar and its applications. He paid us a visit once, in an Anson.

"I wanted to come up in a Walrus," he said, naming a slow, noisy and out-of-date small flying-boat, "and throw out the anchor in front of the Watch Office!"

We had a jocular half hour with him in front of the ante-room fire.

Tony Payne came back to the Squadron for his second tour of ops. He took a new crew, on their first trip, on the Thousand Bomber raid on Cologne. His was the first aircraft to be shot down that night. He was hit by flak over Ijmuiden, on the Dutch coast and the aircraft blew up over Badhoevedorp , on the outskirts of Amsterdam, killing him and the whole crew. They are buried together in a beautiful, shady spot in Amsterdam East Cemetery, their graves lovingly kept and cared for. I have visited the place where they fell; I have seen the place where they now lie at peace. Most of the aircraft was salvaged recently by some caring Dutch people, and I have a fragment of it on my bookshelf, to remind me of the man that was Tony. Not that I need much reminding.

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Rabbie

RABBIE

He was the sort of bloke one took to automatically if one was of a fairly quiet disposition, for he himself was quiet almost to the point of being self-effacing. On the ground, that is. But in the air - well, that was another matter. On the evidence that I had, at least, it seemed that another side of his nature took over.

In build, he was perhaps an inch or so taller than me, well made, with rather thick, limp, fairish hair, quite piercingly blue eyes and a mobile mouth which always carried the trace of a smile, as though he were laughing inwardly at some secret joke. His manner of speaking was strange until you got used to it; he would start a sentence then lower his eyes almost apologetically, as though he were afraid you were becoming bored with what he was saying. His voice was quite deep, very quiet, and his utterances were staccato, like short bursts of machine-gun fire, punctuated by little nervous laughs, almost sniggers. Now and again he would stammer slightly, and now and again a trace of his native soft Scots accent would ripple the surface of his halting, quietly-spoken sentences.

It was I who first called him Rabbie, on account of this inflexion of voice, which, when he became animated, would show more prominently. I think he secretly rather liked the name; there weren't many Scotsmen on the Squadron as far as I knew, and certainly, there weren't many in 'B' Flight. We became friendly, and although on stand-down trips to G.Y., as we invariably called Grimsby, crews usually went as crews, on nights when we stayed in the Mess he and I, more often than not, would gravitate together, along with Eric. Possibly because the three of us were a shade quieter types than, say, Tony or Teddy Bairstow.

I don't know how it came about that I flew to Pershore with him - he had done his O.T.U. there, it seemed, and on a stand-down day he got permission from Abey to do a cross-country there. He must have asked me if I would like a ride; anyhow, I went along with him. He had his own co-pilot, Sandy, with him, and his crew. It was then I discovered the other side of Rabbie. I had only been on the Squadron a fortnight and everything was new and a bit strange.

Rabbie and most of the others were comparatively old hands, and whereas I was a strictly-by-the-book pilot, I soon found that there were others who weren't. Like that day, when I flew with Rabbie. One normally did cross-countries at a sober and sedate height, say between two and six thousand feet. Perhaps for a few minutes, now and again, one might have a crazy fit and beat up a train or something or other, but unauthorised low flying was a Court Martial offence, and all pilots had been repeatedly warned of that fact ever since they started flying at E.F.T.S.

We went off in Barred C, Abey's own aircraft, and once we'd cleared the circuit, quite simply, it was a hundred feet maximum all the way. To begin with, I was shaken rigid, I'd never known anything quite like it; such sustained, hair-raising excitement, spiced with the occasional bad fright. Trees, villages, hills, hedges, they all streamed by; very little was said among the crew. When I'd collected my scattered wits and realised that this was second nature to all of them, I began to enjoy it a little more. We landed at Pershore, Rabbie said hello to one or two old friends, we lunched, took off again and came back at the same height, all the way. I was getting used to it by this time, but I still swallowed hard once or twice.

When we had landed and taxied in I came down the ladder after most of them. Rabbie and the crew were doing what we usually did then, taking off helmets, sorting out the navigation stuff, looking for some transport back to the Flights. As we lit cigarettes, and with his little secret smile, Rabbie said to me, "Enjoy it?"

"Rabbie," I said to him, "excuse me for asking, but do you always do your cross-countries at nought feet?"

He gave his little sniggering laugh and looked down.

"Well, no," he said softly, "but you have to let your hair down now and again."

Some of it must have rubbed off on Sandy, too, except that he gave himself a bad fright. It really could have been quite a shaky do. Several of us were in 'B' Flight office one afternoon, doing nothing in particular. We had a couple of kites on, that night,

but most of us had been stood down too late to go into G.Y. The phone rang and Abey answered it, his face, as usual, giving nothing away. He looked across at the blackboard as he listened and our eyes followed his, wondering.

"That's right, E-Edward," he said, and rang off.

The board said, 'E' - Sgt. Sanders - Local flying - airborne 1420.'

"We'd better go and see this," Abey said calmly, straightening a few things on his desk, "Sandy may be in a bit of bother, it appears that he's hit something south of here. He's coming in now."

We piled into the Flight van and hared out to dispersal. Just then, we saw 'E' land, quite a reasonable one, too. We breathed again. Then, as we waited, he taxied in and we could see that where the port half of his windscreen had been there was just a jagged hole. The air-intake on his port engine looked peculiar, too, it was half bunged up with something greyish. Sandy stopped in his dispersal and cut the engines. The ladder came down and he climbed down it a bit tentatively, looking decidedly sheepish when he saw the reception committee.

He and Abey talked rather quietly together while the crew climbed down and stood around, fiddling with their 'chutes and navigation stuff, surreptitiously brushing what looked very like feathers from off themselves and trying to look unconcerned. Someone who had overheard the conversation muttered,"Been low-flying over the Wash and hit a bunch of seagulls." We grinned at bit at that, once we knew they were all O.K. Abey's poker face said nothing as he turned away from Sandy. Then someone nearby said, "Hey, Sandy, what's wrong with your face?" and when we looked closely we could see a piece of pink seagull flesh sticking to his cheek. Sandy put a hand up to his face, then had a look at what he had collected. Slowly, his eyes rolled up, his knees buckled and he fell at our feet in a dead faint. Abey, good type that he was, hushed it all up.

Not long afterwards, a handful of our kites went as part of a smallish force to attack one of the north German ports. It might have been Emden. Rabbie was on it; I wasn't. Next morning, after breakfast, Teddy put his head around the door of the ante-room, his eyes starting out of his thin, pale face.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, "You want to have a look at Rabbie's kite, he's had a right shaky do!"

He tore off out, to tell someone else. Quickly, we made our way up to the Flights. 'E' was parked right outside 'B' Flight hangar, and most of the starboard mainplane outboard of the engine just wasn't there. The wing finished in a ragged, twisted jumble of geodetics. Obviously, they had had a very narrow escape indeed from a burst of flak. I climbed aboard. The wheel was tied over to port with a chunk of rope. I found Rabbie, poking idly about at this and that.

"Dodging the photographic bod," he said with an apologetic grin. There was one of the photographic section erks outside now, fussing about with a camera, taking pictures of 'E'. Rabbie looked paler than usual, thoughtful.

"How the hell did you manage to get it back like this?" I asked.

"Oh," he said, with his nervous little snigger, "it wasn't too b-bad, Sandy and I tied the wheel over a bit," and nodded towards it.

The photo erk had gone and the sightseers had thinned out to two or three. I climbed out, chatting to Rabbie, but as we talked, I could see something different. There was something in his eyes that I'd never seen there before, a distant, almost other-worldly expression.

When I left the Squadron I lost touch with everyone, including, at times, myself. It was a long time afterwards, and I was talking to Eric on the telephone. We had reached the "Do you remember" and "What happened to" stage.

"By the way," I asked him, "what ever happened to Rabbie?"

"Rabbie?" Eric replied, "Oh, I'm afraid he was shot down, you know."

It had happened near the Dutch town of Beverwijk. Rabbie had finished up as a P.o.W with Eric and Abey, then had been repatriated on account of injuries to his hands, Eric said. Some of his crew had been killed.

In June 1989 a Dutch air-war historian took me to a beautifully-kept cemetery in the small town of Bergen, near Alkmaar, to visit the graves of a contemporary crew of 'B' Flight whom I had known.

As I was turning to leave, my eye, quite by chance, noticed another name on a nearby tombstone, one which I immediately recognised, that of our Commanding Officer, who had gone missing while I was with the Squadron. Very near to him and to the others was yet another familiar name, that of Sandy.

Each name of all the aircrew, some 200 of them, who are buried there, is inscribed upon the bells of the local church, just across the way. One of the bells is perpetually silent, representing those who could not be identified. And one bell bears the inscription - "I sound for those who fell for freedom."

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letter home

LETTER HOME

I wonder how many premonitions the average person has during his or her lifetime. It's not the sort of topic which crops up very much in normal conversation, so I don't think it can happen all that often. But when it does, and you believe you are being given a glimpse of the future,it can be quite weird and rather frightening. So far, I can recall three instances personally. One was at a very long interval of time, one was just the opposite, while the third - . That is what the letter home was about.

A week or two ago I was watching a debate from the House of Commons on television. There was a fairly sparse attendance, the subject became rather mundane and my attention, frankly, was beginning to wander. I looked along the green leather seats where the numerous absentees would normally have sat. Surely, I thought, surely seats like those had played some part in my life at some time?

Then I had it - they were the colour of the wooden-framed armchairs in the anteroom of the Mess at Binbrook. And I was immediately reminded of the first, and very strong, premonition I had had there, and was coping with, as I sat in one of those chairs, almost alone in the quiet room on that winter's night, waiting to take off on a raid over Germany - and not expecting to come back.

Looking into my logbook now, I can narrow it down to one of four dates, but the actual date is of no importance. The premonition I had, though, was important, very important to me, very gradual, but extremely strong.

Abey, our Flight Commander in 'B' Flight was, in every sense of the word, a gentleman. He was then in charge of eight or ten crews of six men each which comprised 'B' Flight, and he had, among many other things, the responsibility of selecting crews under his command for any operations on any particular night, or day. Fortunately, the latter were scarce enough. Sometimes the choice was simple, if a maximum effort was called for by Command or Group, he simply sent everyone whose aircraft was serviceable. But sometimes

he had to choose, and no-one envied him that, nor ever queried his choice. Querying things like that is something that happens in films, usually bad ones. If a "fresher"target was specified for the night's operations then novice crews, who had done up to four or five ops were selected to go. If he had any choice at all, any crew due for leave went on leave, that same morning. He did his job well and fairly; he was a very considerate man.

On the day of which I write, our crew had done three trips, one of which had had an abrupt and near-catastrophic ending. A "fresher" was called for that night, so we were "on", in S for Sugar. I have been wondering, recounting this, trying to remember what my reactions were during the time of an op, from the first knowledge that I was going, that night, to some unknown target, whose location and identity would not be known until briefing that afternoon, until the moment after one's return, sitting down thankfully, tired and strained, into a chair, with a mug of coffee and rum in one hand and a cigarette in the other, for interrogation after the trip. When we would look around the room to see who was seated at the other tables with the Intelligence Officers, recounting their stories of the night's experiences. However, although I readily confess that not a single trip went by when I was not to some extent frightened, quite often very frightened indeed, my first reaction on being told that I was among those who were on that night's operations was one of intense excitement, of being immediately strung up to a very high pitch, reactions accelerated beyond their normal speed, like those of a sprinter on his starting blocks, alert for the sound of the pistol which will launch him on his rapid way.

We did our night flying test in S for Sugar as soon as we knew we were operating that night. It was winter, but not too bad a winter until then. This particular morning was cold and cloudy with a breeze from the south-west, the odd spot of rain in the wind, a typical winter's morning in Lincolnshire, in fact. We flew around for a while to test that everything in the aircraft was working properly, except for the bomb-release mechanism and the guns. We weren't bombed up yet, of course, and we would test the guns over the sea once we were on our way that night. I was still quite strung up with excitement

and anticipation. None of us thought or said very much about the target, it was bound to be one of the French Channel ports, the docks, of course, and they were reckoned to be a piece of cake - straight in from the sea, open the bomb doors, press the tit and then home, James.

Briefing was at 1430 hours. By that time the weather wasn't so good. The cloudbase was down, the wind was getting up and it was colder. At briefing there was ourselves and a handful of others. The target wasn't one of the Channel ports, it was Wilhelmshaven, on the north German coast, not what we had expected, and quite a tough target. Weather prospects were moderate to fairly poor, with a front coming across which we would have to contend with, a risk of icing. It didn't sound all that funny. But there it was.

The excitement of the morning had worn off and I was beginning to feel a bit deflated when I went back to the Mess after briefing. There was nothing to be done until teatime, and takeoff was fairly late, to catch the late moon. About five hours to kill. As I thought about it like that I realised that the expression could be taken more than one way, and I didn't like one way very much. I went back to my room with the sense of deflation sliding quickly downwards towards a feeling of depressive foreboding. It was not as though the target was the toughest one in the book, tough enough by any standards, but no long stretch of enemy territory to be crossed there and back. Not exactly, as we had thought, the reasonably easy one we had expected, but not as bad as it might have been. Or so I tried to tell myself.

The foreboding grew inside me the longer I sat in my room. I was alone; Frank Coles, my room-mate, was Squadron Signals Leader and usually had things to do even when the rest of us were free. Out of the window I could see that the weather was steadily worsening, which added to my unease. I sat there, smoking, and trying to read. It was useless. I became more and more certain that this trip was the one I wasn't coming back from, that we were going to be shot down. Once I had arrived at that realisation I found I was almost able to visualise it happening; I had already seen it happen to others nearby. But tonight it was going to happen to us, and that would be the end of me.

There was nothing I could do about it; I had to go through with it, it had to be faced. The only practical thing I should now see to was to write a letter home, to my parents. The trouble was that I had very little idea what I wanted to say to them. For several reasons, I felt they hadn't had the time to get to know very much about me, as an individual. But still, I felt I owed them this letter.

So I wrote to them. It was a very short letter, I remember, but its exact contents I cannot recall. I know I started in the conventional way - "by the time you read this you will know I have been reported missing," and so on, and I know that after I had addressed the envelope I added, "To be forwarded only in the event of my failing to return from an operation."

By the time I had stewed over this wretched little piece of writing it was teatime. There was still no sign of Frank. I was glad of some company in the Mess, although there weren't all that many in, with only the freshers operating. So I had tea. It was usually a high tea if there were ops on. On this evening, as on many others, there were kippers, toast and tea. Surprisingly, I found I was very hungry. I think I was determined to enjoy what was going to be my last meal. So I savoured every morsel. As dusk fell I stretched myself out in front of the roaring fire in an armchair in the anteroom to await the time to go up to the Flights to get dressed for the trip. The armchair had wooden arms and sides with a green leather padded seat and back.

Every time the tannoy went with some commonplace announcement that someone was wanted at his Flight or Section I would jump a little and stiffen when the W.A.A.F. said, "Attention, please, attention, please," and then slump down again when I heard that it wasn't ops being scrubbed. There weren't many people in the anteroom, and as the fireplace was at one end and I was very close to it, I couldn't really see who was in the room with me. I was concentrating on absorbing, I think, every scrap of physical comfort I could from the heat of the fire, in what I now firmly believed to be the last few dwindling hours of my life. I could hear sleet or snow spitting as it dropped down the chimney on to the fire.

I was seeing all sorts of strange pictures in the glowing coals. What they were I didn't know, faces mostly, it seemed, but whose, I couldn't distinguish. I started as one of the Mess waiters drew the big curtains across the blacked-out windows. Seeing me in battledress and roll-necked sweater and knowing that I was "on", he gave me a half-smile as he piled some more coal on to the fire. The heat on my legs died as he did so.

"Is it still sleeting?" I asked him.

"Yes, sir," he answered quietly, "still sleeting."

Tactfully, he didn't add "It's a rotten night to be on ops," or anything like that, but I knew that was what he was thinking. I nodded. He walked quietly away about his business and we left it at that. The wind was starting to get up quite a lot now. I could hear the slap of the sleet hitting the window like a wet cloth in the gusts. Surely they would scrub it? In an hour or so we were due to take off for Wilhelmshaven. I wondered what the weather was like over there, whether they were thinking that it was such a bad night that they were safe from R.A.F. raids. Then I thought about the letter. Was I being stupid? Was this all a lot of childish, hysterical nonsense, over-dramatising oneself? I still thought not; I was still convinced in my own mind.

Why did one write such things? I mused. It made no difference, really, to the outcome, someone would die, someone would be bereaved, that was all there was to it. I wondered how many people I knew actually wrote them, too. I suppose one reason for writing a last letter was to say a final goodbye to someone who was dear to one, but I think also it was to prove to oneself that one was ready and spiritually prepared to leave this life, to give up all those things regarded hitherto as important and to enter a new existence, to meet again one's friends who were already there, like going from one room of a house to another via the dark passage which we call death. There was a Sergeant pilot in 'B' Flight, whom I knew quite well, Norman Spray. He left a letter for his mother. He went missing on a raid the following spring and his words of parting from his mother were so memorable that they found their way on to the page of a national newspaper which I happened to read. I am sure he was an exceptional person to have written in the way he did.

The minutes ticked slowly by. Hypnotised by the heat from the fire and, I suppose, subconsciously withdrawing from what I believed were my final hours, I think I must have dozed for a few minutes. The tannoy announcement jerked me back to complete wakefulness. The W.A.A.F. said, "All night flying is cancelled, repeat, all night flying is cancelled."

I immediately started to shiver uncontrollably, despite the fire's heat. I moved my body around in the chair to try to stop the shakes, to try to hide them in case someone should see. I fidgeted around, stretched, blew my nose, then looked around the ante-room to see whether anyone was watching me. There were one or two ground staff Officers, and Teddy, Eric and Doug, the first two talking quietly over their beer, Doug reading a book, absently stroking his luxuriant ginger moustache with the back of his hand, an unconscious gesture which we all knew well. Outside, the wind moaned, the sleet was still tapping on the window, as though someone were asking quietly to be let in, perhaps like the messenger of Death itself. For not long afterwards, He would claim two of those three.

I took something of a grip on myself and pressed the bell at the side of the fireplace. When the steward came I ordered a beer. I could hardly believe this was happening. He was the man who had drawn the curtains earlier. He took my order, then hesitated and said, not looking directly at me, "You'll not be sorry, sir, about the scrub, not on a night like this?"

"No, I'm not," I said, "not on a night like this."

The shakes had just about stopped by then. I went across to Eric and had a chat and another beer. Neither of us said much about the scrub, he hadn't been on, anyhow, being in Abey's crew. I certainly didn't complain about it. Eventually I went up to my room and furtively tore up the letter into small pieces. I don't think Frank noticed anything, if he guessed what I was doing he was too tactful to mention it. Then I undressed and got into bed. I was probably going to live for another twenty-four hours.

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low - level

LOW-LEVEL

By the third day, those of us who were in the know were getting a little twitchy.

When you are briefed no less than three days in a row for the same target, when you are told it is to be a low-level night attack, when you learn that the whole thing is so hush-hush that only pilots and Observers are to know what the target is until after you are airborne, you only need one scrub to make you jump a bit at loud noises.

After the second briefing, when there was another scrub, and the following day, when there was a third identical briefing, you could have almost cut slices of the tension out of the air with a knife. To begin with, nothing in that city had ever been bombed before. When we knew where it was to be, we looked at each other with eyebrows raised. For very good reasons, we had to go in low and make one hundred per cent certain that we were going to hit the target when the Observer pressed the bomb-release. If we were not certain, then, 'dummy run' and round again. No trouble in that, we were told, there were no defences worth speaking of, only a couple of light flak guns at the airport some distance away. Just avoid that, and we shouldn't have any bother.

So we were told at the briefings, all three of them. Did we believe it could possibly be true? We made ourselves believe it, I think, but it took some doing. Weren't we used to the Channel Ports, to Kiel, to Essen and the Ruhr, where, in all conscience it was deadly enough at twenty thousand feet at night, let alone at - what was to be our bombing height? - two thousand five hundred feet, straight and level down a corridor of flares?

We would have liked to believe it, certainly. It sounded so - different, so well organised. 235 aircraft, which to us was one hell of a lot, including some Manchesters and four-engined Stirlings and Halifaxes. The first wave was going to drop flares, and keep dropping them so that the whole place would be well lit up, and once

they'd done that and let go some incendiaries and cookies to start the ball rolling, then the second wave, which was us, would come in and stoke the place up with high explosive, as low as the safety height, 1,000 feet per 1,000 pounds of the heaviest bomb, permitted. If there hadn't been some Manchesters carrying 2,000 pounders, in our wave, we would have been down around 1,000 feet, I suppose.

What was going through the minds of Mick, our wireless op. in S-Sugar, and Johnnie and Bill, the gunners, being completely in the dark as to what it was all about, I could only guess. But they accepted the situation stoically, and never asked one question. Except when we were clambering out of the transport at dispersal, really on our way, on the third evening, then Mick, who was a married man, said quietly to Cookie, "Is this a suicide effort, skip?" I believe he was recalling those two posthumous V.C.s our Squadron had won less then two years before, when we had lost five out of five Fairey Battles trying to stop the German advance through the Low Countries. Anyhow, Cookie shook his head.

"No, Mick, it's not a suicide effort, at least not if I can help it!"

I'm afraid I couldn't resist mischievously chipping in then, just as we were sorting ourselves out in the dusk of that early March evening under the shadow of S-Sugar's nose in the quietness of our dispersal.

"You won't be needing your oxygen mask, though," I said.

Mick's eyes widened. It was a bit cruel of me.

"You're kidding, Harry, aren't you?"

"No, pukka gen," I laughed.

"Oh, bloody hell," Mick said, his Brummy accent very pronounced.

Col, our Aussie Observer, came to the rescue.

"Don't let it worry yer, Mick," he said, "it's going to be a piece of cake. Or so they say, anyhow."

I was hoping this didn't fall into the category of famous last words, as we climbed aboard. I found I was yawning quite a lot, while a muscle in my back was trying to do something all on its own.

We took up our positions in the kite. As co-pilot, mine was in the Wimpy's astrodome until Cookie wanted me to fly it, or needed

a hand with something up front. I checked the intercom point, saw we had a flare handy in case we had to do a bit of target-finding ourselves, and I groaned inwardly when I saw the stack of nickels, as our propaganda leaflets were known, which I was going to have to shove out over northern France. I took one out of the nearest bundle and saw a cartoon of a depraved and vicious-looking S.S. man, headed, 'Personalité de l'ordre nouveau.' I hoped I didn't meet him later that night in some French gaol.

Faintly through my helmet I heard someone shout "Contact port!" and the engine shuddered into life with a roar, bluish flames spitting out of the exhausts. Then that tune, which remained obsessively with me throughout that night, and which, ever since, has evoked such vivid memories of it, started going through my head - 'The last time I saw Paris'. Now we were rumbling around the perimeter track. The black shapes of the hangars, topped by their red obstruction lights, came and went. A little group of four or five W.A.A.F.s near the end of the runway waved to us as we passed them. A dazzling green light flashed three dots, our aircraft letter, at us, Cookie opened the throttles and the tail lifted. Then we were charging down the runway, the Drem lighting whipping past the wingtips as the Merlins' roar rose to a howl at full throttle.

When we had turned on to the course for Reading, our first pinpoint, Cookie checked that everyone was O.K. Then he said, calmly over the intercom, "Now I can tell you where we're going. It's the Renault factory in Paris and it's a low-level do, two to three thousand feet, and there'll be bags of flares so we can bomb spot on." There was a stunned silence, then Johnnie said coolly, "Paris? That sounds like fun."

The tension was released and we all laughed immoderately. Cookie told them about the lack of defences, how the crossing-in point had been carefully chosen at the mouth of the Somme, near Abbeville, and how we had to be very sure not to drop anything outside the target area, in case of casualties to the French population.

"I've always wanted to see the Eiffel Tower," Mick said.

From the rear turret Bill, our Canadian gunner, drawled, "Don't worry, at our height you'll be able to count the bloody rivets!"

The evening was clear as our home beacon slowly fell away behind us. It seemed strange to be cruising easily along at about five thousand feet; usually we climbed steadily all the way to whichever target we were bound for. There wasn't much talk over the intercom, I think the boys were busy digesting the news about the target - and the bombing height. Then the moon came up, huge, brilliant and impersonal, a beautiful sight, away to port. Reading was, as always, easy to find, the railway station was like a dimly-lit flarepath, but it gave us a good pinpoint, however much it might have helped the Luftwaffe. We crossed the south coast dead on track and E.T.A. and headed out over the Channel. Cookie switched off the navigation lights. Shortly afterwards, Mick reported that he had switched off the I.F.F. We were on our own now.

In only a few minutes it seemed, Johnnie said, "Enemy coast ahead, skipper." I peered forward from the astrodome. The pewter colour of the Channel showed a faint line of dirty white a few miles ahead of us. A few degrees to starboard some light flak was going up, and I reported it for Col to log.

"Probably Le Tréport", I said, "they always put on a firework display for us."

Johnnie said, "I can see a big estuary dead ahead."

"O.K., Johnnie," Col replied, "let's know when we cross the coast. Next course one seven two magnetic, skip."

Then Johnnie said calmly, "Anyone see an exhaust almost dead ahead, same height?"

I hurried forward to stand beside Cookie, and we both saw it at once, a point of orange light, straight ahead of us, and nastily at our own height.

"We'll keep an eye on him," Cookie said, "I don't want to be formating on a goddam 109."

"Nickels due out in five minutes, Harry," Col told me.

"O.K., Col, thanks,"

I went aft again, to the flare chute. I heard Cookie say, "That fighter's still going our way, we must be bloody close to him. I'm going to alter course a bit to try to lose him, then fly parallel to our proper track. Turning ten degrees starboard now, Col."

In the darkness of the fuselage I unlocked and extended the flare chute and started pushing the bundles of leaflets out. Once free of the aircraft the slipstream would release each bundle from its elastic band and spread them all over the countryside below. In a little while I heard Cookie say, "That bloody fighter's still there, damn him to hell."

Johnnie said, "We're catching him up a bit, too, skipper."

"That's bloody impossible," Cookie exclaimed angrily. He sounded rather exasperated.

I finished the nickelling, stuffed a couple into my pockets for souvenirs, brought the flare chute in and went forward again, past Mick, who gave me a thumbs-up, and Col. Johnnie had been quite right, that glowing point of red light was definitely larger now. The countryside under the rising moon was a leaden blur, now and again shot with a vein of silver as the moonlight reflected off a river.

"How long to the target, Col?" Cookie asked.

"E.T.A. eighteen minutes."

The light was really getting quite a bit bigger now and we were still heading straight towards it. Suddenly, it all became clear to me.

"Hey, Cookie!" I exclaimed, "that's no fighter exhaust, it's the bloody target!"

There was a moment's silence, then, "Jesus!" Cookie said in awe, "You could be right, Harry, you could just be right, at that. Check our course, Col, one seven two magnetic, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, that's it, skip, one seven two."

Now we could see it. It was a fire on the ground, like a huge, glowing ember alone in the darkness. I went back to the astrodome. A pinpoint of white light hung above the glow, like a star, then a second, a third, a fourth. The flares were going down, dropped by the markers, for us. Cookie called out, "O.K., fellers, this looks like it, but we want to be good and sure where we bomb." As we flew towards the blaze Johnnie said, "I can see the Seine, the fire's right on it."

Col said, "Part of the works is on a sort of banana-shaped island

in the river, we've got to fly slap over it."

We could see almost a dozen flares now, brilliant, whitish-yellow, and trailing rope-like white smoke as they slowly sank towards the ground, suspended from their parachutes. I could dimly see buildings below us. Cookie was turning S-Sugar gently to come in from the south-west; all the action was now on our port beam, then on our port bow.

Suddenly, away to starboard, two light flak guns pumped a few rounds of coloured tracer upwards, but there could have been no aircraft anywhere near them.

"Light flak away to starboard, skip," I said, "only a few rounds, I think they've gone down to the stores to get some more ammo."

"Just keep an eye on it, Harry."

I was humming the words of that song to myself,

"The last time I saw Paris,
I saw her in the Spring...."

We were heading straight in now, flares on either side of our nose. The ground was almost invisible against the glare ahead from the fire and the lines of flares hanging in the sky. Col said, "Coming forward, skip."

A few more rounds of tracer hosed up, away to starboard, but I didn't even bother to report it. The lack of opposition near at hand was quite uncanny; we certainly weren't used to this sort of thing. I was searching the sky for fighters, tracer, heavy flak-bursts, but there was nothing. Just the flares, dozens of them now. We were right among them, flying straight and level down a well-lit avenue.

I saw a dim shape loom up, dead ahead, growing rapidly and menacingly larger every second.

"Turn port, skip, quick!" I shouted.

Cookie yanked her nose round. A Hampden, bomb-doors open, hurtled past us on a reciprocal course, obviously completely disobeying briefing instructions as to the direction of the bombing run. He was almost close enough to read his identification letters.

"The stupid bastard," said Cookie, "what the hell's he doing?"

"Bomb doors open, skip," Col said tightly.

"Bomb doors open, Col!"

The inferno had vanished under our nose. There was a long silence while Col directed our track up to the target. I peered down, but I could only see a jumble of city buildings; I was trying to find the Arc de Triomphe.

"I've got that island coming up," Col said, his excitement showing in his voice, "left, left, steady, right a bit, steady, steady - bombs gone!"

I felt the rumbling jolt as we dropped our load on the Renault factory.

"Bomb doors closed," Cookie called.

"Oh, bloody marvellous!" Bill almost shouted from the rear turret, "spot on, Col, you got the first one bang on the island and the rest of the stick went right across the factory, I saw them bursting!"

Some distance ahead there was a sudden flash from the ground, a yellowish fire which turned redder and spread out, in a bend of the Seine.

"Some poor sod's bought it, about one o' clock, five miles," I said.

"Yeah," said Cookie, I can see it. Don't know what the hell he was doing up there."

I looked back at the target, now a sea of flame beneath the brilliance of the unearthly light of the flares and the moon. A sudden eruption of flame shot up from the factory as I watched.

"Christ! Did you see that?" Bill called, "someone's hit a goddam petrol tank or something." We learned later that one of our Flight Commanders, Squadron Leader Jackson, had scored a direct hit on a large gas holder; it was that we had seen.

But the other fire, the burning kite on the ground in the bend of the river, drew our eyes to it as I took over the controls from Cookie.

"Poor sods," Johnnie said quietly, "I hope they got out of it."

We droned on over northern France, heading for Abbeville and home. But the excitements of the evening were not over yet. Half way to the French coast Johnnie reported a light flashing from the ground, to starboard of our track. I looked across between the nose and the mainplane and saw it, a square of yellow light, bravely flashing

di-di-di-dah, "V for Victory". Col came up to look.

"Good on yer, mate," he said laconically. Those people down there in Beauvais were risking their lives by signalling to us their appreciation and encouragement, and I felt a strong bond had been forged between them, whoever they were, and us, in S-Sugar.

We flew on towards the mouth of the Somme. Bill said he could still see the target burning, many miles behind us now, and we were riding on the crest of a wave at the obvious success of the attack. We'd never known anything like it before and we hoped we would know many like it again. And as the Renault factory burned in Paris and the V's flashed out from Beauvais I became aware that perhaps, after many disappointments, we were now beginning to win.

There was much elation as we flew homewards in "S". We were a cheerful and buoyant crew, that night of all nights. I never dreamed that five short weeks hence I alone, of the six of us in the crew, would be the only one left alive.

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A boxful of broken china

A BOXFUL OF BROKEN CHINA

It had happened to Abey's crew already (although I was not to know this until some years later), and no doubt it had happened to others whom I had known.

It was a common enough occurrence in those days, when we had simply to rely upon dead reckoning navigation with a bit of astro thrown in - there was nothing else to rely on, then - that at one time or another you would stray off track, fly unwittingly over a defended area, and get thoroughly well shot at. I use the words 'thoroughly well' advisedly, in the full knowledge that I shall be treading on many corns when I say that the German flak and searchlights left our own standing at the post when it came to accuracy and effectiveness. On several nights while at Binbrook, after our own air-raid sirens had sounded, we would troop out of the Mess to watch the progress of a raid on Hull and, so to speak, compare notes on the Luftwaffe's reception with what we received, over Germany. We were all left in no doubt as to which target we would have chosen to be over, and would retire to the anteroom when the all-clear sounded, shaking our heads sadly and making rueful and derisive comments concerning the lack of effectiveness of our ack-ack gunners and searchlight crews compared to their German counterparts.

There were well-known hot spots over the other side, places whose names sent a slight chill up one's spine when they were mentioned. Places such as Essen, or anywhere in the Ruhr, if it came to that, Hamburg, Heligoland, Sylt or Kiel. The list was a long one and the toll taken by those guns of unwitting tresspassers over their territory was heavy.

But no such reputation attached itself to a town called Lübeck, which we, among 234 aircraft, were to attack one night late in March 1942.

"Lübeck?" we whispered to one another at briefing that day, "Lübeck? Never heard of it."

We had it pointed out to us by our Intelligence Officer at the briefing, a bit beyond Kiel, a bit beyond Hamburg and between the two, almost on the Baltic coast. The defences, we were told, were

believed to be negligible. Oh, yes? Well, we'd heard that about the Renault factory in Paris and that turned out to be true, so why shouldn't this one be the same? Our confidence was very high after that Renault attack and this one was beginning to sound quite good. It was going to be largely a fire-raising raid. There were a lot of wooden buildings in the town, apparently. This really was beginning to sound very interesting, the chance to do to a German city what they had done on fifty-odd nights in succession to London. However, we were to carry an all-high explosive load in S for Sugar. We were warned, of course, of the proximity to our route of the defences, which we all knew about, of Kiel and Hamburg, but no-one really needed telling about those. We had experienced the Kiel defences twice before recently, once when 64 of us Wellingtons of 1 Group had put the battle-cruiser Gneisenau out of action for the rest of the war. I often wonder which of us it was that hit it, for I remember seeing some quite big explosions that night.

So, as far as the trip to Lübeck was concerned our crew, at least, were in a fairly happy mood. Looking back, I am sure that on that night, while not one of the six of us would have admitted it for fear of tempting whatever fates might be looking down upon us, we were each secretly thinking that this trip, this particular, and possibly only trip we would do, was going to go some way towards approaching the proverbial 'piece of cake'. One could describe a trip in those terms while drinking, in a post-operational flood of euphoria, one's mug of rum-laced coffee, waiting for interrogation, bacon and egg, and then bed, but no-one ever had the temerity to voice those words about any target before take-off. Not at any price. Fate was not there to be tempted in such a careless and impertinent manner.

The buoyant mood of the crew of S for Sugar was not in any way diminished when we gathered in B Flight hangar, all kitted up and ready - almost eager - to go. Mick, Johnnie and Col were standing near the crewroom door, looking amused about something, and with a fairly large cardboard carton half-hidden by their flying-booted legs. They had obviously said something to Cookie, now commissioned and doing his first op. as a P/O, for he was showing a lot of very white teeth in his amusement.

"What's going on?" I asked, puzzled. Such levity was very unusual before an op., we were invariably rather silent and very tense. Mick nodded towards the box.

"Present for the Jerries, from the Sergeants' Mess," he said in his Brummy accent, a broad grin splitting his face.

"What the hell have you got there?" I asked.

"Boxful of broken china," Col said, "we're going to chuck it out over the target. It's all got the R.A.F. crest on, too."

"Christ, you're a mad lot of so-and-so's," I said through my laughter. Had I known it, I wasn't going to laugh again for some time after that.

Recalling it now, although I cannot obviously tell where or how the navigation went wrong, it must have done so, somewhere along the line. Perhaps the reason was simply plain fatigue which led to our being off track and flying into trouble. Fatigue which, even as young, fit men, was inevitable when one realises that while the Lübeck raid took place on 28th March, this was our third operation in four nights. It almost alarms me now, to think of it as I write. We had taken off late on the evening of the 25th, the target being Essen, never any picnic. We had bombed what we believed to be Essen, but we had seen, remarked upon among ourselves at the time, and reported at our interrogation, that many aircraft seemed to be bombing much too far west, at Duisburg, we believed. But there were those among the Squadron aircrews who laughingly insisted that we had bombed too far east, perhaps Bochum, or even Dortmund. We still didn't think so; we believed we had been in the right place and that the main force of the attack had hit Duisburg.

Apparently 'Butch' Harris thought so too, for after a few hours' sleep we were awakened, fully awakened, with the news that ops were on again that night, the 26th. At briefing we learned the target. Essen again, time on target before midnight. It was a sticky trip, and we lost two of our crews, making three lost in the two nights. I have often wondered how many ex-aircrew are alive today who can say, "I was twice over Essen within twenty-four hours, and live to tell the tale."

So, after the double attack on Essen, twenty-four hours' rest

and we were off to Lübeck, the piece-of-cake target compared to Essen, the wooden town which would burn like Hell itself. Provided we got there to see it, which, in the event, we didn't.

It seemed that no sooner had we crossed the enemy coast, somewhere in Schleswig-Holstein, that a huge, bluish searchlight suddenly snapped on, and pinned us as surely as a dart hitting the bullseye. And not only one, but about a dozen followed. Then the flak started. Cookie was flying S for Sugar, I was in the astrodome. What use I was I don't really know, except to try to see if there were any fighters about to attack us. Which was ridiculous, with all the flak they were throwing up at us. In any case, I couldn't see a thing for the dazzling and horrifying glare of all those lights.

Cookie threw the Wellington about as though it were a Spitfire. The sensation was like that of being on a high-speed roller-coaster which had gone mad. And all the time, the intense, bluish flood of light which lit up the interior of the fuselage like day and the thumping of the flak-bursts around us. We had the sky all to ourselves, and, it seemed, all the defences of northern Germany were telling us that this time we weren't going to make it back home. I was hanging on to whatever I could to stay standing upright in the astrodome, striving to see beyond the lights, to see whether there was a gap anywhere which Cookie could aim for. One second I would be pressed down on to the floor as he pulled out of a steep dive, the next, I would be hanging in mid-air, fighting against the negative 'g' and clutching wildly at the geodetics as he topped a climbing turn then put S for Sugar into another screaming dive. We carried one flare, heavy and cylindrical, four or five feet long. This suddenly left its stowage with the violent manoeuvres and hit me flush in the chest, almost knocking me to the floor. I managed to grab it before it damaged the aircraft and somehow secured it again.

I was, of course, frightened, but not uncontrollably so. As the shellbursts thudded around us my fear was climbing steadily, like the mercury in a thermometer on a hot day. I felt I was useless in the astrodome and longed to be doing something active. Quickly I unplugged my intercom and oxygen and clawed my way forward, to see if I could do anything to help Cookie, perhaps to take over

if he was hit. Col was sitting with both hands clutching at the navigation table, looking rather sick and staring straight ahead of him, while Mick was fiddling with his radio, doing goodness knows what, I thought. I reached the cockpit, where Cookie was wrestling with the controls, his face shiny with sweat, his jaw tightly clamped. He glanced down at me as I plugged in my intercom. Dive, turn, climb, turn, dive - we were corkscrewing all over the sky, losing height all the time. Then Cookie snapped on his intercom switch.

"Col, get rid of the bloody bombs."

Col came forward, his face looking ashen in the awesome light. A few seconds later I felt the bombs go with a thud. I thought, "I hope they kill somebody, destroy something down there, after what they're doing to us."

My fear had now risen to such a pitch it amounted almost to ecstasy.

"Get your chutes on everybody," Cookie half-shouted over the intercom, "stand by to bale out."

I obeyed, gladly, and wrenched open the escape hatch near to where I was standing. As I did so, a hole appeared in the aircraft's fabric skin at my side and I wondered how much damage we had taken. It seemed it was merely a question of a second or two before we were hit and blown to pieces or set on fire, before I and the rest of the lads were torn apart by an exploding shell. They could not go on missing us for ever. I was impatient for the order to bale out; I felt I had had enough of this experience. At the same time I felt a deep sadness that I might be going to die without having led a complete life, a life in which I had not experienced many things. I had never known the love of a woman; I had never even had a steady girl friend.

Through the open escape hatch I could see the earth, a huge forest, stretching away under the moonlight. Still the lights and the flakbursts hammering at us, the smell of cordite. At that moment I came to accept that I was going to die, and at the same time, I now realise that I lost altogether, and for ever, the fear of death. Not the fear of pain, of great pain, which I still possess, but the fear of dying, of the flight into the unknown world of

the hereafter. I am convinced that in those seconds, a corner of the veil was lifted and I was granted a glimpse of the boundless quietude of eternity. A great and mysterious calm flooded over me, enfolding me in a sensation of complete and deep peace. I now understand what the prayer means when it speaks of 'the peace which passeth all understanding'. I could not then and cannot now understand it, but I am certain that at that moment, when I felt I was standing poised on the brink of death, the Almighty reached out His hand to me and I responded and touched it with mine. The memory of the incredible sensation of smoothly passing, as it were, through the fear barrier to another dimension, one of all-embracing calm, is one which has remained with me all my life.

Then suddenly it was quiet. Utter quiet - and darkness. We were through it, we had got away. There was the forest below us, and a stretch of water. The Baltic? It could only be. Cookie was almost drooping over the controls now, physically spent, nearly, I knew, at the point of exhaustion. He had saved all our lives.

"Take over, Harry, for Christ's sake," he said, and almost dropped out of the left-hand seat. I climbed quickly up into it and took the controls. Someone slammed shut the escape hatch and I inhaled deeply, very, very deeply, hardly able to believe we were still alive, still flying.

We were at a mere 2,000 feet. Cautiously but quickly I tested the controls for movement and response. Satisfactory. Almost incredible, I thought.

"Col, where d'you reckon we are?" I asked.

"I know where we've been, right enough, Harry," he said, "slap over Kiel."

"Look, then, I think we're a bit east or south-east of it now," I told him, "I'll steer three-one-five for the time being if you'll give me a course to take us to that big point of land on the Danish North Sea coast - you know the one I mean? Near Esbjerg?"

He knew it. He gave me the course and I started to climb; the more height we had, the better for us, in case of further trouble. We had lost thirteen thousand feet in all that evasive action but we needed to get at least some of it back. I had everyone make a check around the aircraft, but apart from a few minor holes we were intact, and there were no injuries of any sort. It seemed

unbelievable that we could have survived the pounding we had taken with such negligible damage.

In the brilliant moonlight I saw the Danish coast creeping towards us, with the glint of the welcoming North Sea beyond. Esbjerg harbour was sliding beneath our nose; about eight ships were anchored there - and we hadn't one single bomb left for them. I cursed aloud; they would have been sitting ducks for us. Not a shot was fired at us as I dived S for Sugar gently out to sea.

On the way back I discussed with Col where he thought we had been caught at first; he reckoned we had been trapped over Flensburg and then handed on, from cone to cone of searchlights until we were firmly into the Kiel defences, like a fly in a spider's web. I was sure his assessment was correct as we had arrived over Esbjerg exactly as we had planned. I settled down to the long, thoughtful flight home. As usual, there was almost complete silence all the way. I am certain that there was not one among us who was not offering up a silent prayer of thanks.

After we had landed, switched off the engines and climbed stiffly down the ladder, we gathered in a group to congratulate Cookie. He was quite matter-of-fact about his marvellous effort. Then Mick said, in that edgy voice of his, "But listen here, Cookie, we used to have decent trips when you were a Sergeant, I hope all your trips as a P/O aren't going to be like this one."

He little knew that two short weeks and three trips later, he, Cookie and the rest of them, apart from me, would be dead, in unknown graves.

Then, inconsequentially, I remembered something.

"Hey! What happened to that boxful of china?" I asked.

The tension was easing.

"Oh, that?" Col said, "don't worry, Harry, we'll drop it on the blighters on our next trip, get our own back for tonight. Anyhow," he added, "I'll bet it's the first time Kiel's been dive-bombed by a single kite!"

I recall, with crystal clarity, walking down to interrogation. Col and I were together, he on my right, the others a few paces behind

us. The moonlight was intensely bright and the hangars and the buildings of the Station stood out sharp and grey under its flood of cold light. There was not another soul to be seen and there was only the sound of our footsteps on the roads which led down from the hangars to the Headquarters buildings. I felt that I did not want to speak now, I did not want to break the spell of the feeling of that great "peace, from the wild heart of clamour" which was pervading my whole being, enfolding me in the purity of its white light, like that of the moon, shining down from God's heaven on those whom he had spared that night, the night of the Lübeck raid.

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The end of Harry

THE END OF HARRY

"And the king was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept: and as he went, thus he said, O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

II Samuel 18, v.33.

"Crews were given a forecast of clear weather over Essen but cloud was met instead. The bombing force became scattered and suffered heavily from the Ruhr Flak defences.....
7 Wellingtons, 5 Hampdens, 1 Halifax, 1 Manchester lost...."

Martin Middlebrook and Chris Everitt,
The Bomber Command War Diaries.

I open my log-book to refresh my memory of that trip. The entry lies there in red ink, under my fingers, as clear as the day on which it was written, as is now my recollection of the night, which comes flooding back to me.

The date. We were in M for Mother. "Operations, Cologne. Diesel engine factory attacked with 4000lb. bomb. Moderate heavy flak and searchlights in area, mostly on west side of town. Good weather." A pencilled note, "263 aircraft in attack; 179 Wellingtons, 44 Hampdens, 11 Manchesters, 29 Stirlings. A new record for a force to a single target. 4 Wellingtons and 1 Hampden lost." We got off lightly that night. Sometimes, like one we did to Essen, it was ten per cent. It was the last night I ever flew as one of Cookie's crew.

We approached Bonn from the north-west at about twenty thousand feet, into the brilliant light of the moon, dead ahead. The sight was fantastic, beyond all imagining. We were just off the edge of a solid sheet of strato-cumulus at about ten thousand feet, stretching as far south and east as the eye could see, lit brilliantly white by the moon, and with its north edge, nearest us, as well-defined as the edge of an immense shelf. Out of this layer there towered

a huge cumulo-nimbus, rearing up, its north side jet black, like a gigantic tombstone, to about 15 or 16 thousand feet and casting a tremendous shadow over the Rhineland. To the north of this cloud-shelf it was crystal-clear, hundreds of stars shone brightly and the Rhine writhed and gleamed like a thread of silver below us. We turned north, to track along it, the fifteen or so miles to Cologne.

We could see it ahead. There were six or eight searchlight cones, with a dozen to twenty lights in each, probing, leaning, searching the sky for a victim to pin like a silver moth in the beams. Every now and again the cones would re-form to close the inviting gaps between them. Each cone would split in half, the lights from one half leaning one way, and the other half the other way, to join the neighbouring cones, which performed the same manoeuvre, to form new cones. It was hideously fascinating, almost hypnotic, to watch. There would seem to be no way through. The dozens of red flashes of the flak-bursts, seen distantly, grew larger and more menacing as we approached. Light flak was hosing up, strings or red, green, orange and white, and below everything, the fires, three or four smallish ones, growing larger all the time. Big, bright, slow flashes as cookies exploded among the flames. We were tensed up as we carried ours in. M-Mother had been specially modified to carry the two-ton bomb which protruded some way below the belly of the kite, the bomb-doors of which had been removed. A single hit from a piece of shrapnel on the cookie's thin, exposed casing and - the mind shied away from it.

So we felt naked with this inches beneath us as we edged through the searchlights, to the right of the Rhine, weaving constantly through the flak, which we could hear, thumping around us over the roar of the engines. We could see it flashing close to us on all sides. In our imaginations the cookie was growing in size; they could hardly miss it, I thought. More fires started below, a stick of bombs rippled redly across the darkened city, then another. Some incendiaries went down in a yellow splash. Or was it an aircraft going in? Still, the slow, bright flashes of the cookies going down on to Cologne. Col went forward. We could hear his harsh breathing over the intercom as he directed us into the bombing run, guiding M-Mother so that the target slid down between the wires of the bomb-sight.