CHAPTER 8 – Overture and Beginners

June 6th 1944.

The train that pulled into Stafford station appeared incredibly crowded for that early hour of the morning. I somehow found room to stow my two kitbags, and I kept my case free to provide something to sit on in the corridor - the only space of any kind left.

My nearest companion, a cheerful naval rating soon started what proved to be an unending flow of conversation. He claimed to be in the know of something rather special, he said. He was prepared to bet that neither I - nor any of the others on that train knew what he knew - that yesterday morning, 5th June, had seen the opening of the second front - in other words the long awaited invasion of the continent! What I, and he, did not know until much later, was that the invasion, programmed to start just as he said on 5th June, was delayed by bad weather and postponed one full day, and that as he was telling me his secret, the invasion force was getting its first foothold on the beaches of Normandy.

I took all he said with the proverbial pinch of salt, and it was not until much later in the day, when changing trains at Aberdeen, that I heard the official announcement in a radio bulletin. However, I often wonder how he, so far away from the tight security area of the south coast, could have known what he did.

RAF Lossiemouth, which I remembered slightly from my earlier stay along the Moray Firth at Dalcross, had long been a Wimpy OTU. The main field, a few miles from the fishing port, lay almost on the coast, and seemed to have many of its buildings constructed in the peacetime style and consequently looked somewhat more permanent than the usual wartime airfield. A satellite field, where some of the aircrew were also stationed, was at a location near Elgin known as Bogs O' Mayne and consisted of simply a large grass field without runways. Another airfield, a few miles the other side of Elgin, and going by the name of Milltown, actually looked a better choice as a base but appeared to be used only for circuit training.

The next day, having completed my arrival procedure, I had an interview with the Wing Commander, the Commanding officer, when I made a last despairing attempt to direct the course of justice and tried to get it accepted that my posting was really intended to put me in line for Mosquitos, and that I really shouldn't be there at all! The Wingco was not amused - and made it abundantly clear that the war was not being run for my personal benefit, and suggested that the RAF and not I would decide where I went and what I did. So, the die was cast. For better or worse I was destined for 'heavies'.

So, what were the chances of getting through? No one could tell. One first had to accept that the individual had little or no say on where he went or what type of flying he would be called upon to do. True, most of us probably had a clear idea of what we would prefer.

Many thought of themselves as the idea fighter type, and I was among them, having had a front seat to view the action in the Battle of Britain from a vantage point just inland of the Sussex coast. I had set my sights on becoming one of 'them'. Others wanted for some reason to fly the big bombers, and a few more had ambitions for flying boats. I suspect that considerably less than half of all pilots got anywhere near their first choice. Some found themselves on the very opposite. My friend and Terrell colleague Ted Bacon, who wanted to get on the big flying boats found himself flying Spitfires on Photo Reconnaissance - which he did with considerable distinction.

On getting my wings I felt sure that I was obviously God's gift to Fighter Command - but no, I was turned into a flying instructor and later still a heavy bomber pilot. Nearly two years on instructing had given me an unexpected, and at the time, an unappreciated bonus. Those of my friends who went directly on to operational flying had no such luck and by the time I left Clyffe Pypard most were already dead. Whatever one said, luck did play a big part in our destiny, and particularly I felt, for those in Bomber Command in the awful days of mid-1942 to mid-1944, when some squadrons went three months or more without one crew surviving to complete a tour. Skill and experience helped but could not ensure survival. The only certain thing was that for all but the fortunate few, if one went on long enough one would get the chop.

I once heard someone sum up the situation thus. 'Survival', he said, 'was 90 % luck, 9 % doing well what we had been taught, and the odd 1 %? Well, that was sheer bloody skill in doing the impossible in circumstances in which no one had the right to survive!

The first three weeks at OTU were taken up with lectures and ground instruction on various subjects. At this stage we were still very much segregated in our specialist aircrew trades, although we were at some periods mixed in with navigators, bomb aimers, wireless operators and air gunners. In this period we were expected to sort ourselves out into crews of six - the seventh member, the flight engineer, we would not pick up until we were at HCU.

I felt thoroughly depressed at this time, having seen my last chance of Mosquitos apparently lost forever, and rather stubbornly and stupidly made no attempt to get myself a crew, whilst most of the other pilots were assembling theirs all around me. They'd probably already got all the best types spoken for by now, I thought. But how could they tell? I decided they couldn't - but still I made no move. Then towards the end of the second week something happened.

At a break in between lectures I was sitting in the sun with two of my pilot friends, Bob Harrison and Bob Dickie, and was lounging on the ground with my back against the running board of one of the station trucks. I closed my eyes and let the world go by. A Wimpy in the Lossie circuit lumbered overhead and passed with that characteristic whisper of its Hercules engines. Someone walked close by and stopped.

"Excuse me, sir" said the voice.

I opened one eye, tried to focus on a pair of shoes and raised my gaze to a thin shiny-faced flight sergeant who stood there expectantly. He wore the half wing and flash of a wireless operator/air gunner, and below the wing the dark blue, red and light blue ribbon of the 'spam' medal.

Bob Harrison stirred into a sitting position and prodded me in the ribs.

"I think he means you, old boy" he said.

"Yes, sir said the flight sergeant respectfully. "I believe you're not crewed up yet?"

"That's right" I agreed, yawning, - "haven't bothered so far - why?"

"Well, it's like this, sir" dropping his voice confidentially.
"I'm a spare bod from the previous course - done all the lectures - and if I can get myself a skipper I can get a spot of leave before we start flying."

"Oh? So it's leave you're after, not a crew? Well, I don't suppose it'll matter much. OK, tell 'em you're with me from now on."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much!" he was most effusive - and then, an afterthought - "By the way, sir, I've got a friend - a bomb aimer, and he's not crewed up either. I was wondering....?"

"Don't tell me. Let me guess! He'd like some leave too, eh? OK. Send him along - no reasonable offer refused."

So, I had one crew member, Flight Sergeant Cyril Pollitt, who it turned out had done one previous tour on Mitchells. His friend a chunky, cheerful-looking bomb aimer was a Sergeant Denzil Matthews, who before he departed for his few days leave must have spread the word around, for the very next day two gunners attached themselves to me and would not take no for an answer. Sergeant Dick Langley, a thin wiry ex-miner, and his pal a very young Bob Lillico, were both Geordies, and whilst I accepted them both I soon wondered whether I ought not to be taking a course in the language! Four down and one to go! Wanted - a navigator. But no navigators showed up and in another day or so my lethargic attitude returned. I couldn't be bothered to look.

The weekend arrived, and with it my two original crew members back from their short leave. Soon they and the two gunners were badgering me to find them a navigator. But alas! they appeared to be at a premium. After reviewing the few that I knew to be unattached I decided that I didn't care for any of them. One in particular I felt I must avoid at all costs. A short scruffy sergeant with longish straight hair, prominent teeth and a droopy moustache. A real bohemian type, this, with a pipe permanently stuck between his teeth and his nose forever in a book. Here, I thought, is one I must not get!

Eventually, continued pressure from my four fifths crew panicked me into grabbing the first navigator I saw. I could hardly have missed him - an enormous fellow of fully sixteen stones weight. The average Wimpy in its usual clapped out condition would be hard pressed to get him airborne!

So to our last day at Lossie. We were already assembling for the transport to go out to the satellite field at Bogs O' Mayne, when the tannoy boomed out a message that my presence was required at the Chief Ground Instructor's office.

"Sorry," the CGI said, "I have to pinch your navigator, he's had a long spell off sick and he's really not up to it yet. I've arranged a substitute for you though, Sgt. Gaunt - he's already over at No.1 Site."

Ah well, I thought, perhaps it's all for the best - we might never have got off the ground with our heavyweight aboard. On arrival at No.1 Site, I wondered whether it had been such a good change after all. We tumbled out of the truck to be greeted by a short, scruffy individual with long straight hair, prominent teeth and a droopy moustache. A regular bohemian type in fact. He closed his book, tucked it under his arm, removed the pipe from his mouth, and gave us a toothy grin.

"I'm Sgt. Gaunt." he said.

Bogs O' Mayne was a fairly typical satellite station, of wartime construction, with the buildings almost entirely of Nissen huts with a few others of wooden frame and tarred felt roofing. The hangars were the most solid looking structures on the place. It was a grass field with no runways and few areas of hard standing.

Our aircraft were the famous Vickers Armstrong Wellingtons – Mk. IIIs and Xs with Bristol Hercules engines. They had all seen better days and were hand-me-downs from operational squadrons who had by now moved on to bigger and better weapons. They received their nickname ‘Wimpy’ from the cartoon character J. Wellington Wimpy who appeared in many of the Popeye cartoons of the day. OTU Wimpys had their engines de-rated to enable them to use 87 octane petrol (instead of the 100 octane which squadron aircraft had as normal fuel), and as a result they were considerably down on power. Consequently, OTUs were regarded as being somewhat unhealthy places to fly – particularly for the unfortunate instructors, who had to endure the double hazard of clapped out aircraft being flown by inexperienced crews – a deadly combination if ever there was one!

The instructors were tour-expired aircrew who were ‘screened’ from ops until, at some later date, they were expected to return to do a second tour. These ‘screens’ were forever bitching to try to get away from the penury of OTU and would almost to a man, have gladly returned to a squadron where, they maintained, life was hardly more hazardous! At the time I had my doubts as to whether they were being honest and were really so keen to return so soon to the uncertainties of squadron life. I remember thinking – ‘You don’t really want that – and who can blame you? You’ve done your whack and are lucky to be still around. Now let someone else have a go.’ I never believed them or even suspected that it was

possible for anyone to think the way they did. That is, not until May 1945 when VE Day brought an abrupt end to operations in Europe. The crew and I suddenly felt cheated. We didn't want to stop. Just a little longer and a few more trips – enough to prove to ourselves that we were as good a crew as we thought we were. Madness, of course. But then we were all mad, and had been for several years.

We did, however, have one thing in our favour, at least the old Mk.1c Wimpy had now departed from the OTU scene, amid no doubt, sighs of relief from all concerned. The Mk. IIIs and Xs were in many respects reasonable aircraft, although in very second-hand condition. The 1c with the old lower powered Bristol Pegasus engines had been something different again.

My friend, Len Brooks, sent from his job as FIS instructor to Lossie to get some large twin engined experience, arrived when the 1cs were still on the strength, and as part of his 'experience' found that he was expected to actually fly one – although the majority of the aircraft available were the later marks. His comments after returning from his first encounter with the beast deserve recording for posterity.

He was asked what he thought of it – and in typical Brookes fashion, considered the question at some length before giving his reply.

'Well,' he said. 'I think that the kindest thing one could say about a 1c is that it's liable to gain height in a climb!'

After the Oxford, the Wimpy seemed quite enormous with its 86 feet 2 inch wingspan, and climbing into the long fuselage and looking down the length of it towards the rear turret we wondered how on earth we would ever learn to cope with this monster. With few exceptions, dual controls were not fitted, with in many cases not even a seat on the right hand side of the cockpit, so the poor unfortunate screen pilot was forced to stand there helpless and watch whilst his pupil pilot did the most awful things!

It was perhaps not surprising that accidents at OTU were frequent and although things had no doubt improved since the earlier days, we nevertheless had our share. There were, I believe, four during our first week or so. Some of these were mysterious losses where the aircraft had simply blown up in mid-air.

The screen pilot to whom we were entrusted was a Flying Officer Baker, who had completed a tour on Wimpys in the Western Desert. He proved to be a likeable character and we seemed to be all set for an encouraging start. My embryo crew settled in quite well together, and despite being all very different types had the promise of getting on easily from the beginning. Our very first member, the wireless operator Cyril Pollitt, soon proved to be a regular ladies man; a proper smoothie who could charm the birds down from a tree. He was several years older than the rest and his experience showed.

Our bomb aimer, Den Matthews, and our last acquisition, Harry Gaunt, hit it off together immediately, and formed an excellent navigation pair. The two gunners were complete opposites; Dick Langley, the

older, ex-miner was a blunt and likeable type, and acted as a protecting shepherd to his fellow young Geordie, Bob Lillico, who was just 18 years old.

As so often happens most had nicknames bestowed upon them from the start. Den Matthews became understandably Matt, whilst Cyril for no good reason became Cyrus! Matt quickly decided that Harry Gaunt, with his droopy moustache looked as he put it – 'like a big pussy cat' and was christened Tiger. Dick was rarely referred to by anything else, whilst Bob would occasionally answer to the name of Lilli!

As for myself, I perhaps supplied the steadying influence and the little extra experience gained from the accumulation of flying hours, and the rest of the crew seemed rather glad that their new pilot was at least one whose wings were not still wet. So we started on the great adventure.

We were soon a happy crew, and leaving aside the more obviously serious moments, got a tremendous amount of fun from our time together. We had no shortage of comedians and humour abounded. I received an abundance of encouragement from everyone during our early days in learning to handle the Wimpy and the crew seemed genuinely content to trust themselves to me.

Bogs 'O Mayne was a grass field quite unsuited to heavy traffic and most of our early practice circuits were carried out at Milltown which at least had runways and was ideal for the purpose.

Having once got accustomed to the sheer size of the animal I quite enjoyed flying the Wimpy and some of the few uncertain moments were caused by the totally inadequate brakes. As I recall, brake pressure was supposed to be kept above 130 lbs per square inch and never let drop below 100 lbs psi, otherwise it was considered that there was insufficient control for taxying. Had that directive been obeyed most Wimpys at OTU would have spent the greater part of their life on the ground – stationary! On practice circuits brake pressure would just about rise above 130 lbs in flight and be enough to stop the aircraft at the end of the runway – then taxying back became an exciting manoeuvre!

Engine revs had to be kept above 800 rpm to avoid oiling the plugs with the result that speed was liable to build up and enforce unwilling use of brakes, thus rapidly bringing the pressure down to a ridiculously low reading. However we managed to get by without hitting anything, but there were some anxious moments.

It was quite an occasion when we were launched solo as a crew for the first time, but in a remarkably short period we gained enough confidence to believe in our own ability and thought we were pretty good!

We flew once with the flight commander, a Squadron Leader James, to check our progress and seemed to do well enough. S/Ldr James had, after completing his tour, first been posted to an American B17 Bomber group as a liaison officer, and apparently during his time there had flown a few ops with them to get some idea of what it was like in daylight. He was quoted as having found it sufficiently alarming to

make the comment afterwards that he was glad to get back to flying at night when, as he put it, 'it's so damn dark you can't see how bloody dangerous it is!'

All our early flights were in daylight; circuits and landings, bombing, single engine flying, fighter affiliation, etc. and we had no real incident of note until we got to the cross country stage (although it did seem fairly certain that OTU Wimpys could be a bit of a handful when on one engine only).

We were on a four and a half hour trip on a rectangular course which took us down over northern England, with the flight plan calling for us to fly at 17,000 feet, which was just about as much as most of the old Wimpys could manage. The outside air temperature was forecast as well below zero – which meant that with the Wimpy being fabric covered, the inside temperature would be much the same!

The Wimpy had a primitive and very limited heating system, and what heat there was, was channelled out between the two bulkheads behind the pilot's seat, where the navigator and the wireless operator sat. These two members would often be sweating in shirt sleeves whilst the rest of the crew gave passable impersonations of brass monkeys! Under the pilot's seat was a small heater which was usually so ineffective that it might as well not be there.

On this particular day I had chosen to wear ordinary shoes rather than flying boots which were rather clumsy on the rudders, and after we had been going some two hours it seemed that my choice had been a fair one for my feet were certainly not cold. I had probably not moved them from the rudders up to that time, and on the first occasion I did so I felt a sharp pain in my left foot. I soon found why. From the usually ineffective heater was coming a piercing pencil of hot air – almost steam – which, starting from cold and gradually increasing, I had not noticed; it had sprayed a thin jet of air of every increasing temperature on to the back of my left foot without my appreciating what was happening until I went to move. My left shoe was bleached white and I was now conscious of an unpleasant pain which compelled me to fly the rest of the trip with my left foot up on the panel in attempt to ease things. By the time we got back to Bogs I could hardly put any weight on it.

I hobbled through the next two days with burst blisters and managed to survive a rather hectic session of fighter affiliation and another long cross country. But on the third day an infection had set in and I was carted off to sick quarters at Lossie with a septic foot. A fellow patient was P/O Patterson also from our course, he having shown symptoms of having got appendicitis. My foot trouble seemed a relatively trivial matter, but it did not appear to want to heal, and days surprisingly extended into weeks with me still out of action.

The crew and I were anxious that we were not split up – as was usual on such occasions, and we were fortunately able to avoid this by them being loaned out as 'ballast' to several senior officers who appeared to do a short course of experience on Wimpys, but who did not have a crew of their own. The experience was an eye-opener for the boys and a boost to my own ego, when on a visit to me soon after this arrangement commenced they pleaded with me to come out and save them from the hazards of being bounced and bumped about by incompetent drivers! But I still couldn't walk.

Further visits from the crew brought news of a different nature. Two more Wimpys had blown up in mid-air, one of them our friend Patterson. Then Lawrence, another of our course, crashed on the approach to Bogs and burnt up, fortunately without killing anyone. [See Note 1]

A French crew from Lossie disappeared at sea, presumably having ditched unsuccessfully. With its geodetic construction only fabric covered, the Wimpy was not the best of aircraft to put down on water, and although it was fitted with flotation bags in the bomb bay in the hope of giving it some buoyancy, it had, it was said, even if ditched successfully, only an expected floating time of some eleven seconds! Not much time for the crew to get clear and into the dinghy. I appeared to be, for the first time at least, in the safest place! Or was I?

The Lossie sick quarters was a one time private house some half a mile from the airfield, on the edge of the golf course, with the sea shore just the other side of the fairways and under the flight path of aircraft on the circuit. There was a constant procession of Wimpys overhead, and by leaning sideways out of my bed with my head against the window I could see all the traffic coming in.

One day I was craning my neck round to watch a kite passing directly overhead when it happened. As I watched, to my horror the port wing broke clean away between the engine and fuselage and the whole aircraft disintegrated in a flash. The greater part of the fuselage carried on to fall some hundred yards out to sea; the broken wing with engine attached crashed onto the golf course beyond the garden of the house, whilst the inflated dinghy which had burst loose, floated down on to the lawn in front of my window. It was all over in a few seconds. It had been a gunnery flight aircraft carrying air gunners on an air firing exercise. Seven in all were killed – including a would-be rescuer (a local civilian, Mr. Harold Woodcock) who swam out but was trapped underwater in the tangled wreckage. [See Note 2]

For weeks after I relived the crash in nightmare form, and to this day carry a mental picture in my mind of the scene with the action frozen at the moment when the wing and engine broke away.

We heard that as a result of the accident, all other Wimpys on the station were in turn grounded for inspection and that five more were found with serious cracks in the main spar. One couldn't help wondering how near they too were to a similar disaster. The accident rate seemed to be running unpleasantly high, but listening to some of the old hands we didn't know when we were well off. The old days of the Mk. 1cs were really bad they said.

A fellow resident of sick quarters was in fact a survivor of that era. Bill Rusby had been navigator in a crew which crashed one night in a 1c. He, with the pilot and wireless operator (Stan Mortensen, the Blackpool and England footballer) were the only survivors. Stan had a fractured skull and Bill had a leg amputated as a result of his injuries. He had spent a full year in and out of hospital and was in danger of losing his other leg. Despite this he had an incredibly cheerful outlook on everything and I heard later was able to recover after further operations on his leg and then insisted on being allowed to return to

flying duties. My affliction was made to seem like malingering by comparison but my foot was still healing only slowly.

My crew, having come to the end of their stint as 'ballast' obtained a couple of days leave and did their best to drink Inverness dry. On their return I had a sudden visit from them with a request for help. They had been told that they would now be split up and used as odd bods to fill in gaps in other crews, and they were very unhappy at the prospect.

I made my decision quickly. I declared myself fit and accepted that it was on my own responsibility. Back at Bogs the flight commander was both sympathetic and understanding and gave me a few days to prove my fitness before breaking up the crew. I coped over the next few days in a variety of footwear, by which time my foot could take a shoe and the crisis was over.

After a dual check and a few practice circuits, we picked up where we had left off and resumed with some more cross country exercises. One of these caused a bit of concern and also some hilarity. I had trouble with my helmet and had to borrow a spare – with, as I unfortunately found later when at altitude, a faulty oxygen mask. This only became apparent when the crew realised I was acting strangely and flying in a most odd manner. It seems that lack of oxygen produces much the same effect as intoxication – one believes one is doing fine, not realising that one is in fact behaving like an idiot! Dropping down a few thousand feet and using an emergency tube for a spell sorted things out.

We were also now doing quite a bit of fighter affiliation practice – with a Hurricane doing camera gun attacks whilst the Wimpy was thrown around the sky in a diving and climbing corkscrew manoeuvre. We also had to do an occasional 'self-tow drogue' exercise during which a drogue would be let out from the rear turret when over the sea, and live ammunition fired at it during the same corkscrew style weaving. If the gunners were a little doubtful that sufficient hits had been registered the drogue would be quietly wound in closer and another burst or two fired!

Some of our ground training exercises provided some occasional and unintended humour. Parachute drill was carried out in an old Wimpy fuselage parked in one of the hangars and when the order was given the scramble to bundle out of the escape hatches was funny to see. In dropping to the ground from the front hatch I somehow managed to get hung up on one occasion, remained suspended by a hook caught in my trousers which eventually ripped out most of the seat. First aid was rendered by one of our friendly WAAFs in the parachute section!

Ditching drill also often led to some equally hasty and confused exits, with crew members heaving out of the top escape hatches the survival kits, dinghy, radio, etc. and attempting to follow – all within the eleven seconds which we were assured was the maximum time a Wimpy, even if successfully ditched, could be expected to float.

F/O Plumstead always seemed to be the instructor in charge of our efforts, and when he was not exhorting us to speed things up he would always be whistling the same melody – the Waltz of the

Flowers from Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite. To this day, whenever I hear it played I am transported back to Bogs 'O Mayne and am again doing dinghy drill with F/O Plumstead!

Our time off during the course had been very limited, although we did manage a trip to Inverness and another to Buckie, where we visited a fish curing factory and arranged to have some kippers and haddock sent home. Unfortunately with the postal delays experienced in wartime it was not a success and most of mine were received by my mother in an uneatable condition!

On other shorter occasions when off duty we made our way into Elgin – usually as a crew, and made a regular port of call the 'Crown' where the local Youngers brew was found to be considerably stronger than the average wartime beer. Cyrus, Tiger and Matt in particular developed a fair capacity for it.

Now we were at the end of the day flying and all the rest would be at night. On night circuits at Milltown I found that the Wimpy lent itself very easily to my own particular technique of landing in the dark, and my favourite method of coming in on the red/green on the glide path indicator with just a trickle of engine all the way produced a rather feather-like touchdown that made me feel that I must surely be God's gift to aviation! The other crew members took it in turns to sit up front alongside me on these and other short flights and were able to appreciate a little more what was going on. It was all quite pleasant except on those occasions when we had to land back at Bogs when the short run on wet grass sometimes became a little hairy.

We as a crew had become a little concerned at the mysterious mid-air blow-ups and often discussed what might be the cause. After doing a little research we felt we may have hit on an explanation. Enquiries showed that the aircraft involved all had one thing in common – they all carried a second navigator. (Navigators from the new course just commencing would be put with a crew at a more advanced stage with the idea of giving them a little gradual experience, although in fact they did in practice have little to do). Our theory was that, with people being as they were, if someone is bored by sitting around with nothing to do, the likelihood is that if they are a smoker, they will light up a cigarette. The old Wimpys invariably stank of petrol fumes and the chances of creating a sudden big bang appeared to be there. We made ourselves an inflexible rule that no one, but no one, was ever allowed to smoke in an aircraft that we had anything to do with.

During our earlier night practice circuit training we had, I suppose almost inevitably, one of those incidents as a result of carelessness or inexperience and which could have become serious had it not been checked in time. It was all my own fault.

The flap control on a Wimpy was a rather odd device and looked as though it had been designed by Heath Robinson rather than Barnes Wallis. It consisted of a rod with a knob on the end projecting from the instrument panel; fixed on the halfway point of the rod was a ball which fitted into a socket in the aperture of the panel. To lower the flap one moved the ball inwards from the socket, set the required amount of flap and then returned the ball to the socket. An outward movement of the rod would raise the flap, and after any re-setting the ball was always to be returned to the central locking position.

Failure to do this correctly would result in the flaps bleeding up or down until they were fully extended or retracted.

We were engaged at the time in practicing single engine circuits and landings – one exercise I never really enjoyed – especially at night – and were downwind and at a point where a few degrees of flap was lowered. Having done this I was disturbed to find the Wimpy handling in a very strange manner. The speed dropped off alarmingly and came back dangerously near to the stall. It just would not hold height on full throttle on the one engine, and eventually I had to open up the second engine to avoid disaster.

Looking quickly for the reason for the trouble I found that the flap control was not correctly centralised and the flaps had bled down to the fully extended position. It had been a most uncomfortable few moments and I learned a lesson I never forgot. All flap settings were doubly checked from then on.

Bombing exercises we took in our stride, and the co-operation of the bombing team of Matt, Tiger and myself gave results that were showing up well. My own confidence in handling the Wimpy grew with each successive trip and even landing back on the wet grass of Bogs on a filthy night did not bother me as much as it would have done earlier on – even though on occasion we seemed to take an age to stop and went past almost every light on the field!

Bogs had very limited circuit lights and with no runways a flare path of glim lamps was set out at night using the best of the long runs – regardless of wind direction. Also, it was claimed that to the south the flare path was laid pointing in the general direction of one of the valleys in the distant hills with the wind factor being very secondary!

When we were there a wonderful story was still circulating of an incident in the earlier days, when it was said that a particularly decrepit old Mk. 1c took off to the south one filthy night, failed to gain height and literally smeared itself onto some rising ground a few miles away. It came to a stop mostly in one piece, enabling the crew to get out and walk back to Bogs! It was a great story – if true – and a good one even if it was not!

On one of our dual night bombing exercises there was an episode which suggested that I might have to be on my guard against possible over-confidence. Returning to Bogs from what had been a successful practice, I did far too tight a circuit and realised rather late that I was much too close to the field on the downwind leg. Instead of either going round again or at least altering my downwind heading to take me a little farther out and give more room, I quickly put wheels and flap down and began a descent to make my approach on a continuous sweeping turn. It was a closely judged thing. I lifted the port wing as we crossed the fence just in time for the wheels to touch.

The screen pilot, a Pilot Officer Bill Randle who, to give him all credit had stood through this performance without a word – he hadn't got a seat on his side of the cockpit! – waited until we had almost rolled to a stop before making his brief comment. Looking across to me, he grinned and merely said 'Spitfire pilot, eh?' [See Note 3]

The course was now nearing its close and we had just the long night cross country trips to complete. The nights were incredibly cold and the temperature at altitude severe. Tiger and Cyrus were cocooned in their nice warm compartment but for the rest of us it was extreme enough to often be painful. Bob had his electrically heated suit, but still complained of being very cold. Up front, Matt and I were most uncomfortable and one night when as I recall, the temperature was some 48 degrees below zero Centigrade, I had never felt more certain that I had frostbite! The stick felt like a bar of cold iron – even through four pairs of gloves, silk, chamois, woollen and leather– and after some hours I felt my arm and leg joints becoming stiff and without feeling. Eventually I had to climb out of the seat and let Matt have a go, even though we were virtually on instruments all the time. He did so and coped well enough to allow me to have a short spell thawing out with Tiger and Cyrus!

So to the last trip of all. The date was ominous. Sunday 13th. Take-off was at dusk and with a demonstration of target indictors being arranged at the bombing range along the Moray Firth, we levelled out at 3000 feet and headed east along the coast. Hardly had we been going more than a few minutes when we hit an extraordinary patch of severe turbulence. The turbulence was short-lived, perhaps a minute or so, but was replaced by a vibration the like of which I had never known. Everything was alive. The stick shook violently in my hand; the instrument panel danced frantically; the wings trembled and flexed in frightening fashion and everything loose in the cockpit rattled its macabre accompaniment. The intercom buzzed with puzzled and anxious comments as the mad jangle continued.

My heart leaped with fear. At this rate the Wimpy would shake itself to pieces or at least break something. A thought suddenly penetrated my brain. Sympathetic vibration? Could be. Hastily I changed everything at once. Nose down – airspeed up – revs 200 down – altitude 1000 feet lower. It did the trick. The awful vibration stopped and sanity returned. Our first reaction was to wonder what damage if any we had suffered, but everything appeared to be normal and we continued along the coast.

At the bombing range the TI's were ignited as planned and for a while we circled – watching and storing the impression on our minds for future reference before turning back to the west. Back over Lossiemouth we began our climb on our first course heading out towards the Western Isles.

In this area the cloud appeared to consist of layers of stratus of about 500 feet or so with clear lanes of shallow depth in between. In the clear air there was still a faint light in the western sky and just a slight horizon visible. With about half an hour gone we had just climbed through two or three layers of stratus and were in yet another band of cloud.

Breaking out into clear air we had a sudden and unpleasant shock. Immediately above us, almost it seemed within touching distance, was a dark shape of another aircraft flying an identical course – a Whitley – presumably one from Kinloss. He could not have seen us and had the cloud layer been a trifle thicker we could have had no warning of his presence and a collision would have been inevitable. I hastily lowered the nose and changed course – and we breathed again. Not a very good start! We had been airborne only an hour and already we'd had two bad scares! More were to follow.

Bad weather supposedly out in the Atlantic had arrived sooner than forecast, and by the time we had turned at Benbecula onto our next course heading for Butt of Lewis an electric storm was upon us. Radio contact was lost and weird lights flashed all around us. I tried hard to nurse the Wimpy up out of the cloud, but although the tops were only at 17,000 feet it was beyond the aircraft's capability to make it and we wallowed along somewhere near the top of the murk, mostly still in cloud. On we pressed for what seemed ages and eventually the storm conditions changed to a more normal thunderstorm, but with lightening of frightening frequency.

Still we had no radio contact and Cyrus maintained that getting any useful radio bearings was out of the question – not that they were a very accurate navigational aid at the best of times. Even Tiger was in some doubts as to where we were in relation to our intended track.

The night seemed endless but eventually we were on the last long haul from Bowmore, and cleared the storm area into one of more innocent cloud. Cyrus was able to report radio contact re-established and Tiger was now confident that we were running safely on to our last turning point at Keith. The bad weather had led to a general recall being sent out to all aircraft, but we and one or two others could not be contacted. Now, Met informed us, the local area was still well out of the storm, but we had fog below the cloud base. It just wasn't our night!

On the short leg from Keith to Lossiemouth I began the let-down, but seeing no sign of the Lossie lights turned for safety out to sea to continue the descent with the help of repeated QDR's which Cyrus was getting for me. It was impossible to tell whether we were still in cloud or in fog. I had had nearly five hours of concentrated instrument flying and was having to make a conscious effort to retain my concentration. There was that odd feeling of being in a vacuum; being suspended in space. I had to fight hard to prevent my thoughts wandering off into the realms of fantasy. With my little world bounded by the luminous dials on the panel in front of me, and the bulkhead at my back I got the ridiculous feeling that if I could somehow just go out to the other side of the windscreen I would find nothing there – no aircraft – nothing.

It was a dangerous moment and it took the sudden realisation that any mistake now would take us all into the sea to shake me back to the task in hand.

At a thousand feet we turned and headed back towards the coast, now running on QDM's to be sure of finding the field. There was still that awful wall of black outside and not a light to be seen. Then suddenly there was an enormous slow flash in the sky somewhere along the coast. Our thoughts automatically brought us to the same conclusion. Another Wimpy blown up? But we were far too busy to spare more than a passing moment of sympathy, being too concerned with our own survival.

Just when I was wondering how much farther we could possibly have left to go, Matt gave a yell and the lights of Lossie circuit appeared dimly to one side of the nose.

I had decided in advance to try to get back to Elgin if we possibly could, and we turned on to our pre-determined course starting our timed run towards Bogs, letting down another couple of hundred feet as we went. If we did not see the flare path at the end of the allotted time I had made up my mind not to fly on, for the hills and then the mountains were not far ahead. If we failed to find the field we would return to Lossie and land there.

However we were to finish up on a lucky note, for just as our timed run was up, Matt again caught sight of the lights in the murk. We turned to get a better view. It was the double row of glims of the Bogs flare path with its few reds dotted about the perimeter, all showing only dimly through the mist.

I did as tight a circuit as I could, not daring to lose sight of that thin row of lights and carefully began the approach. Those wonderful lights came up to meet us and with a whisper of throttle the Wimpy sat gratefully down on the grass of Elgin.

Tension released, we were all joking with relief as we scrambled out at dispersal. Dick sank to his knees on the wet grass and kissed the ground in mock prayer as we gathered our kit together.

The ground crew were not impressed. We were the last kite back and had kept them from their beds. As we walked into the mess and stood red-eyed under the strong lights I looked round at the others. It had been a night of hazard and fear but we had, I felt, behaved like a crew, worked together and had come through. The experience and the confidence in each other would stand us in good stead in the future if, as seemed likely, we were to face even sterner tests. We were now a crew.

Our spell at OTU had been the end of the road for some. In the relatively few weeks we had been there, a total of 12 crews were lost. Four in mid-air blow-ups, two lost at sea, one mid-air break-up, and the rest in a variety of crashes, some in bad weather when trying to land. Much, much later I compared the rate of attrition with that of our squadron over a similar period of time. There was very little difference. The squadron had lost 16 crews on operations against the 12 at OTU.

On getting my log book back I was gratified to find that I had been given an 'Above Average' assessment – (it was nice to keep up the continuity!) and as a last touch F/O Baker allowed me to see his own comments on my flying from my progress forms. He did a grin as he pointed out one which said 'An ex EFTS instructor whose only apparent fault is that he makes every turn into a steep turn!' So now presumably on to 4 Group and to the Halifax – but first to the aircrew holding unit at Acaster Malbis.

Notes

[NOTE 1]

Pilot Officer Philip Lionel Bennett Paterson was killed August 14th 1944 and is buried in Elgin Cemetery, Morayshire, Scotland

[NOTE 2]

Wellington aircraft Mk.X serial number HZ262 crashed in the sea on July 22nd 1944 after a wing separated, the crew were:

AUS427901 F/Sgt Allan Joseph Grigg Pilot Killed.
AUS429200 Sgt Edmond William O'Dwyer Navigator Killed.
AUS428291 F/Sgt David Bernard Barry Wop/AG Killed.
154310 P/O Sunter Air Bomber Killed.
913891 Sgt Pring Air Gunner Killed.
1827419 Sgt Kirk Air Gunner Killed.

Allan Joseph Grigg
Date of birth - 28 Apr 1912
Place of birth - BOULDER CITY WA
Place of enlistment - PERTH
Next of Kin - GRIGG THIRESE

Flight Sgt Allan Joseph Grigg played 129 Australian Rules Football matches for Perth

[NOTE 3]

Later Group Captain Bill Randle CBE AFC DFM.

CHAPTER 9 - Learning The Trade

Acaster Malbis was a few miles south of York and in the area of 4 Group Bomber Command - Halifax country. Whilst also an airfield used it seemed, mostly by Halifaxes from the Heavy Conversion Units for circuit and landing practice, it was in the main an aircrew holding unit for those crews who had just completed OTU and were awaiting posting to the HCU's.

On arrival there we found a few familiar faces - people whose paths had crossed with ours at some earlier stage of the war. One such among the pilots was Johnny Hodgson who had been instructing with me at Sywell some two years before, and his two gunners turned out to be course mates of Dick and Bob at Air Gunnery School.

Very little seemed to happen at Acaster and it was mostly a question of killing time before our postings. We had the usual round of lectures, and a fair amount of time free which we were able to spend in York - all very pleasant.

There on one occasion I met another former colleague from both Sywell and Clyffe Pypard. Dicky Ingham was a little ahead of us in that he had done his time at Con Unit and was now waiting to be posted to his Halifax squadron.

One of the less popular activities at Acaster was the time we had to spend on the assault course - supposedly to keep up our standard of fitness. It proved to do the opposite for some.

I had kept in touch with a D Flight friend from Clyffe, Alfie Westaway, a great football enthusiast, and who had at one time been on the books of Fulham and had played for the junior side.

Alfie had the opportunity of tickets for some of the big matches, and in a letter had informed me that Matt and I were all fixed to join him with tickets for the England v Scotland international at Wembley. Being scheduled for a Saturday there was no problem in getting a pass - but the problem was to come from another source.

It was Wednesday and we were put yet again on the assault course. I approached one of those obstacles where one took off blind over a ditch and a long drop, and was actually airborne when I saw in my path of descent another individual who had fallen awkwardly and lay there with a damaged ankle. I twisted myself in mid-air and hit the ground hard beside him with my left foot bent underneath me. I felt a muscle or something pull and a sharp pain right up the length of my leg.

Although I was forced to limp around for the rest of the day it did not seem at first that it would be too serious, but the next morning I had difficulty in walking. Life at Acaster was so easy going that I did not report to the MO immediately (I was thinking that in all probability the Wembley date would be off for me if I did) . So for the next two days I lay low, with the crew covering up for me as necessary, and was determined to make it to the international.

Early on the Saturday morning, Matt and I got a taxi to York for an early train, and we arrived in time to meet up with Alfie for the trip out to Wembley. The walk from the underground station to the stadium

was murder for me and we arrived late, just as the game kicked off. Scotland scored in the first minute and the England side, although containing several well-known players, had a hard time in keeping the Scots at bay. Goalkeeper Frank Swift, full backs Laurie Scott and George Hardwick, together with left half Joe Mercer did a valiant job and there was no more score before half-time.

The second half was altogether different. The England forward line which included Stan Matthews, Raich Carter and Tommy Lawton really put on the pressure and piled in six goals against the Scots who were left wondering what had happened. Tommy Lawton, the best centre forward I have ever seen play, was at his best, and encouraged by the trickery of Matthews and the scheming of Carter, scored a brilliant hat-trick.

The walk back to the station and the long night train ride up to York was painful to say the least, but I considered it all well worth it! By this time the bruising had all come out and I had a most odd dark blue line stretching from my ankle to the top of my thigh. The next morning a sympathetic MO put me on very light duties for the following week.

Our posting order came at last. No 1669 Heavy Conversion Unit, Langar, it said. It had us puzzled for we were expecting to be sent to one of the usual 4 Group HCU's, Riccall, Rufforth or Marston Moor, but Langar, we couldn't even find it on the map. The routing order provided the answer and also a surprise. Langar wasn't even in the 4 Group area and no wonder we could find no such place in Yorkshire. It proved to be so far south that it lay beyond the neighbouring 1 Group country and was in fact at the extreme southerly border of 5 Group - between Nottingham and Newark. How very odd!

Langar had at one time been the home of 207 Squadron of 5 Group, but was now a recently formed HCU equipped with Halifax Mk 2s and 5s, as well as housing a Lancaster maintenance unit dealing with Lanc Mk 2s.

In settling in we soon found that the Nissen huts which were to be our living quarters were not exactly adequate for the winter which was not far ahead, and it seemed that everything combustible had already been used to maintain the circulation of past inhabitants of winters gone by. Virtually everything not of structural necessity had disappeared.

The food too proved to be some of the worst we had yet encountered, although we would at that time have found it difficult to believe that we were to find even worse still on our first posting to an operational squadron.

Fortunately for all concerned, Langar had two farms situated practically on the airfield, and both were frequent calling places for air and ground crew alike seeking a decent meal. Eggs, beans, chips and other near luxuries were amazingly plentiful and the farm owners must have made their fortunes from the RAF personnel who regularly crammed into the various rooms which each farmhouse set aside for customers! It became standard practice for us to have an extra lie in in the morning and grab a quick breakfast at the farm before going on to the flight office.

Nottingham was within easy reach with special buses from the camp laid on, and each evening would see several double-deckers loaded to the limits and beyond, groaning their way to the big city, the mudguards often forced down on to the tyres under the excessive load, and with the underside of the vehicle frequently grounding on the peaks of the hump-backed bridges along the route.

Nottingham soon became our second home, with our favourite drinking places being the Flying Horse (known to all as the Airborne Nag), the Salutation, and the Trent Bridge. When we were flush with pay we would eat at the Beaufort Club where excellent illicit steaks and other fine meals could be had at a price - and when not so wealthy, the NAAFI Club was a good alternative port of call.

The NAAFI Club was a large and surprisingly well equipped centre for food and leisure. Cyrus, our W/Op was in particular a great patron. He had an eye for the girls (WAAFs were especially vulnerable to his charms) and an incredibly self-assured air coupled with the confidential air of the born con-man! His stately descent of the main staircase at the club was impressive enough to suggest that despite his comparatively lowly rank, he did in fact own it all, and Matt, deciding that a peerage was the least that Cyrus deserved, bestowed upon him the title of Lord NAAFI.

Beside our extra-curricular activities we found that we were also expected to fly, and one of the first essentials we faced was to get ourselves a Flight Engineer. Our choice was a Sgt Len Stevens, known immediately as Steve who, with Cyrus, became jointly the elder brethren of the crew, both being quite a few years older than the rest of us. We had no difficulty in absorbing our extra member, and it soon was as though he had always been a part of the team. So after the usual ground preliminaries, we took to the air for the first time under the guidance of a screen pilot, one Flying Officer Johnson.

Even when compared to the Wimpy, which itself was quite a large aircraft for a twin, the Halifax seemed huge. It had an impressive appearance standing as it did high off the ground on that solid heavy-looking undercart and with the four Merlins spread out along its 99 feet span. The square-ish, almost box-like fuselage with the rather pugnacious nose and the large rectangular fins and rudders gave it a business-like air, and it looked every inch an instrument of war. We christened it the 'Battle Wagon' and it looked the part.

The rear door was at an awkward height, making a dignified entrance impossible, but once inside it was surprisingly roomy in the fuselage. Apart from the two unfortunate gunners, the rest of the crew had ample space; both spars could be negotiated without difficulty and between them the two rest benches left plenty of room.

The controls were mostly easy at hand, apart from the main fuel cocks which were reached over the pilot's shoulder, and the fuel tank change cocks operated from a battery of levers reminiscent of a small signal box, and situated by the rest beds. Apart from this and the fact that the throttle levers for the outboard engines had no turned over knobs to make handling easier, it had few poor features.

At the front end the fuselage was some 9 feet deep. In the nose immediately below the pilot was situated the wireless operator and on his right the navigator's position. Forward of them was the bomb-aimer's normal place, with the front turret, if fitted, above him. The flight engineer's panel faced

forward immediately behind the pilot, with a jump seat beside the throttle box on the right-hand side. Except when down the nose for the run in to the target, or perhaps at other times when he was assisting in the navigation, the bomb-aimer on the Halifax acted as second pilot.

The Halibag, as it was rather oddly referred to by its crews, was considered to be an exceptionally good aircraft in its Mk 3 form with Hercules engines, but at Langar we had the usual 'hand me downs' in the form of Mk 2s and 5s which were long past their best. They regularly had problems which made the flying programme somewhat erratic, but rarely was any trouble of a very serious nature.

The old Merlins were prone to glycol leaks, identified by puffs of white smoke by day or fat white sparks by night. In the event of a serious leak one was supposed to stop the engine and feather the prop, but to follow that rule one would have sometimes been left flying a four-engined glider! Often we carried on and hoped for the best. Rarely did the Merlin or the Halifax let one down.

During our time at Langar, aircraft would go U/S for so many different reasons that we would joke about the possibility of being called upon to fly one with only 3 props. Incredibly, one night we were sent out to take a kite allegedly serviceable and reached dispersal only to collapse in hysterical laughter on seeing that one prop was indeed missing! I, and the rest of the crew quickly developed an affection for the Halifax and were not put off by the few unpleasant experiences which were the usual and unavoidable occurrences at such a unit.

Our first few hours spent on familiarisation, general handling and circuits were quite enjoyable, and I was relieved to find that the Halifax was a very straight forward aircraft to fly, as well as being surprisingly easy to land. It could in fact be almost landed by numbers. Over the fence, check - one, two, three - throttles closed - one, two, three - stick back - and we're down! And there was little inclination to float or bounce once it had touched.

One of the most difficult parts of those early days was in avoiding the quite considerable traffic frequently encountered on the perimeter track. Apart from other aircraft there always seemed to an extraordinary number of trucks, vans, and other vehicles which over a short period would appear and drive about, apparently quite oblivious of the danger to themselves and the aircraft. Discipline in that respect was amazingly slack, and it was surprising that there was no serious accident - although we came very near to being a part of one.

I had just gone solo and was doing a session of practice landings, taxying back for another take-off I found myself following an empty Queen Mary transporter which had threaded itself between ourselves and another aircraft. Sitting stationary in one of the dispersal areas to our right was a small truck with a high framed canvas top apparently waiting for us to pass by. As we taxied up almost level with him, to my horror, the truck drove out quickly onto the track immediately in our path. There was no way I could avoid him. I braked fiercely and swung the Halifax to the left but could not avoid a collision.

Our starboard outer prop whipped the canvas and tubular frame top clean off the truck, missing the driver's head by a fraction; the wooden blades shattered and a piece the size of a cannon shell sped like a bullet completely through the fuselage about a foot behind Steve's head!

In the preliminary enquiry which followed I felt that I was being set up to take the blame but was interested to discover by pure chance that some panic repairs were being carried out to the damaged truck. I then did some enquiring of my own as a result.

The driver of the truck had been a Medical Officer who, it turned out, had no authorisation to be driving the vehicle and certainly not on the airfield. Abruptly the official enquiry was dropped and the matter hushed up, but it still didn't seem to reduce the amount odd traffic around the perimeter track.

"One day", said Matt, "we're bound to meet a steam roller! You'll see!" And we did!

As we gained experience we moved on to other things. Bombing - in which we seemed to do rather well, getting some close groupings - and fighter affiliation. The latter was carried out in company with a Hurricane or Spitfire which made a series of dummy attacks from all manner of directions whilst the bomber took violent corkscrew evasive action. Afterwards the film from the camera guns of both aircraft was analysed to see how effective had been our efforts to avoid being shot down! I quite enjoyed these sessions, and threw the Halifax all over the sky with great glee.

We were detailed for such a trip one day when the weather was really bad with the cloud base at 1000 feet and lowering. Nevertheless we took off with our attendant Hurricane formating on our wing tip and climbed up through acres of solid cloud, but before we could clear the top, control recalled us as the weather had really clamped suddenly.

We turned and began our descent, but the Hurricane pilot, impatient get back, saw a gap in the cloud and dived away. As a result he lost himself completely, and crashed trying to get down at a small airfield at Rearsby.

We carried on, letting down for safety over the flat part of Lincolnshire and eventually broke cloud uncomfortably close to the ground - not more than 200 feet above some farm buildings. It was no time to be clever and I decided to land at the first airfield we saw.

Fulbeck came up through the murk and in response to our call on the R/T immediately gave us permission to land. By now the cloud and mist was so bad I could hardly see the runway when flying close in, and it took four attempts at a circuit before I could get in - landing finally off a near steep turn with the wing tip among the trees.

Amazingly the touchdown was feather-like and no doubt spectacular when viewed from the ground. Half the station personnel appeared to be watching, apparently waiting for us to crash - and it was the biggest audience I've ever played before without a doubt. Tiger was most disgusted at me for not attempting to make it back to base; he more than any of us was determined to get into Nottingham that evening!

After this episode we had a quiet spell but were treated to a front seat for some other crew's uncomfortable moment. Walking up the road to the farmhouse, we were almost by the end of the runway when a Halifax started its run from the far end and roared towards us. As it left the ground something went immediately wrong. The engine note changed as the two inboard engines failed, the

shadow of the props showing that they were giving little or no power. We watched with alarm as the aircraft staggered over the fence and almost flopped into the next field, but somehow held the air, then with nothing taller than patchy scrub to contend with, droned away into the distance to disappear from view. Incredibly the pilot kept it up and eventually got round to land safely.

A more deliberate show was put on by the Lancaster Maintenance Unit test pilot, who taxied out a Mk 2 Lanc with one prop feathered and then proceeded to take off quite easily on three engines on the short 1200 yard run.

On our last daylight trip but one we had a minor scare when almost back from a long cross country exercise the vent pipe between the two starboard engines fractured and broke away, syphoning a fine spray of petrol inches away from the exhausts stubs. It looked potentially dangerous and we were glad to get down.

About this time it became known that 5 Group would be taking over the output of all crews from 1669 HCU, so that on leaving Langar we would be going on to 5 Group Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston to re-convert on to Lancs.

Among the earlier crews just about to leave I found a former colleague from my days at Wheaton Aston - Bob Knight, the New Zealander, who sadly, was to go missing soon after joining his squadron.
[See Note 1]

Of the other half dozen pilots who had arrived with us I knew two, Tim Eames, who had been at Elgin with us, and a F/O Helmore who had been instructing at Clyffe. For the rest, those best remembered were the two Canadian Warrant Officers, Jake Johnson and Carl Peterson and 'Dad' Teague, a youngish Flight Sergeant who aged his appearance by affecting an old fashioned walrus moustache.

"You know", said Matt, "I do feel mean. Whenever I see Dad I feel I ought to throw him a fish"!

Among our training activities was now included dinghy drill - both dry and wet. The former carried out in an old fuselage and the latter at the Nottingham Baths. For myself, not then being able to swim, it was quite an ordeal to have to jump in the deep end in flying kit, then get to and right an upturned dinghy!

Many of our practice bombing exercises consisted of dropping a single bomb on each of eight different headings, which meant that each time there would be a different wind speed and direction to contend with. The fall of each bomb was registered and then the whole eight plotted to show errors as if from 20,000 feet. The eight hits then appeared as a 'group'. The combined efforts of Tiger (wind finding), Matt (bomb aiming), and myself (course flying) seemed to work well, and we had several occasions when we produced quite good results. Our best I remember, included groups of 28 feet and 38 feet when plotted from 20,000 feet. But that was in daylight, with no flak or fighters to contend with! At night on a real 'op', conditions would be rather different.

A few of the aircraft on the strength at Langar, although Mk 2s, had the perspex nose which became standard on the Mk 3, but the majority had had the front turret removed and replaced by a rather ugly black fairing. The turret base fitting had remained and the lower part formed a small curved shelf. On

this, during some of our practice bombing exercises, Tiger would curl up, cat-like and offer advice or criticism to Matt in his efforts on the bombing range. Originally the Mk 2 Halifaxes had the small triangular fins and rudders, but problems and accidents caused by rudder overbalance led to a redesign and the installation of the larger rectangular fins. All our aircraft had long since been modified.

Nottingham remained the focal point of our free time and we visited town as often as possible, usually as a crew, but occasionally individually in female company. Usually we did not delay our return to the last bus which was something to be avoided. Horribly overloaded, it would have between 40 and 50 on the top deck alone with more sitting or standing on the stairs, and a solid mass of humanity on the lower deck.

The conductor's platform at the rear was occupied jointly by the last arrivals (getting one foot aboard was reckoned to entitle one to travel) and those of the drunks who had sufficient foresight to anticipate the calls of nature. With the bus lurching through the dark country lanes, they had to be restrained by their fellow travellers from pitching head first into the night as some sharp right hand bends were negotiated on the way back to Langar.

The whole bus was a maelstrom of noise, with various squadron ditties being bellowed in competition with one another, whilst the un-breathable air was heavily impregnated with a combination of cigarette smoke, stale beer fumes and the smell of vomit. Catching the earlier buses was preferable to enduring this torture!

Whenever possible we chose to stay overnight, and if funds permitted honoured the Airborne Nag with our custom - otherwise we turned to one of the several small boarding houses in Shakespeare Street. Two of these were havens where one could usually get a bed at short notice and were run by two elderly ladies whose names we never knew, and who were known to us as Mrs Whosit and Mrs Whatsit.

Christmas duly arrived and with several of the crew opting to go home, despite difficulties of travel, it left Matt, Tiger and myself to see it out together. We stayed in Nottingham, had an early dinner at the NAAFI club, then moved on to the Trent Bridge, where we became involved with some very drunken ATS before we were rescued by a local family together with their Cockney relatives up from London.

We were persuaded to return home with them for a second dinner, and the day developed into a somewhat mad affair and an especially hilarious evening - when we had rather more liquid than we needed pressed upon us. "Whatcha need," insisted one of the Cockney relatives, "is a drop of tiddly dahn yer turning!" We certainly got that and the rest of Christmas was rather lost in the alcoholic haze!

By the turn of the year the weather had become arctic and winter was well and truly upon us. As a result our flying programme suffered, and the only notable event was the arrival on the station of several Lancasters, which we were told were for the use of future courses. Our old Halibags were to be laid to rest or inflicted on some other unsuspecting unit when we had done our worst with them.

The Lancs intrigued us. Compared to the Halifax and its sturdy appearance, they looked slender and almost frail - rather like large dragonflies when on the ground, with rounded lines and slim

undercarriage. "Definitely the female of the species", was Matt's assessment. We could not then know, but we were destined, as were all who flew her, to fall under the spell of that most exceptional of aircraft.

Winter remained with us, but snow and ice were replaced with high winds which persisted for several days and were of such force that the night flying which we were waiting to commence was postponed time after time.

Following the fourth such cancellation we were told that 'come hell or high water you fly tonight!' The decision had a hint of desperation about it, for the forecast was as bad as ever. However, we duly reported to the flight as instructed, and with our screen pilot, a completely insane Irishman by the name of F/Lt O'Brien, drove out to the kite in gale force conditions.

Starting up, we taxied out with extreme difficulty, the gusting wind making it almost impossible to control the aircraft on the short distance to the runway. It took the combined strength of O'Brien and myself to counteract the wind which snatched at the elevators and rudders; even so we failed to hold it on one outlandish gust and the control column was flung forward against the stop and the impact was sufficient to shatter the glass of the flap indicator gauge.

I could not believe that O'Brien would go on but he did, and turned onto the runway which was a good 40 degrees out of wind - apparently with every intention of taking off - when some slightly more sane individual in flying control decided against it.

"The wind", he said, "was forecast to drop considerably in a very short time". So we were to return to dispersal and wait there!

We taxied back with difficulty and switched off, leaving the aircraft standing nose into wind. For two hours we sat telling jokes until we ran out of stories, then sat listening to the gale outside. The Halifax rocked on its undercart and threatened to take off from a standing start. Time ticked by with the storm showing no sign of abating, and it was with a totally unbelieving air that we received instructions from flying control to go ahead and start engines.

We were using the short 1200 yard runway and the journey was as much a problem as before. Unfortunately, we were the first aircraft to arrive at the take off point and were at once given the green to go.

O'Brien said "I'd better take her and you stand by to give me a hand!" The statement did not fill me with confidence!

He opened the throttles cautiously and the Halifax moved forward slowly gathering speed, but as it did so the severe crosswind took it off the runway and we careered away into the darkness. O'Brien closed the throttles abruptly. That's it I thought. Even he can see that its stupid to try. But what was he doing? He belted open the two port engines, slewed the kite back onto the runway - then having got it straight again, went ahead with another attempt.

We shuddered along with the two port engines wide open and the two starboard on little more than tick-over, jointly holding full right rudder to keep between the runway lights. I still could not believe he was going to press on, and glanced anxiously at the airspeed which seemed far too low for take-off.

With the tail up but the main wheels still firmly on the ground we left the concrete and bumped wildly onto the grass - our 1200 yards of hard surface all used up! Instantly O'Brien slammed the two starboard throttles wide open and as the aircraft immediately swung to the left and became light on the wheels, he put the stick hard over to the right and hauled it protestingly into the air and over the unseen fence.

We missed the first of the two farmhouses which lay almost in our path and with a joint effort on the controls held the Halifax straight ahead, trying to remember what other obstacles, if any, lay in our way.

As soon as we had gained a couple of hundred feet, O'Brien called flying control and ordered them not to let anyone else attempt to take off. We were then faced with the problem of getting back down, but fortunately apart from an incredibly bumpy approach on which it was virtually impossible to keep the wings level, it went better than we could have hoped; as soon as the wheels touched in a very solid landing the kite spun off the runway to the left and careered away into the darkness. We switched off and left it where it stopped. Even O'Brien had had enough!

Eventually the weather relented enough for a proper start to be made although it was a few days before the gale finally blew itself out.

Snow, which then was with us for some days, introduced a new problem on some occasions, especially when the thaw set in and to put a wheel off the taxi track or runway would usually result in the aircraft getting bogged down in the mud. Dodgy brakes, a regular feature of HCU Halifaxes, led to a few hectic arrivals, and on one unpleasant night I found myself running out of room at the end of the runway with no option but to swing the aircraft onto the grass. It dug itself deep into the mud and we spent the rest of the night helping the ground crew dig it out.

The nights remained bitterly cold and the one ironclad stove in our hut was hardly sufficient to keep us thawed out. Tiger in particular seemed to wear more clothes to go to bed than he had on during the day! In the early evenings we nearly all went foraging for fuel, and anything combustible in the way of timber was appropriated and burnt. Dick 'found' a secret source of coal which added to our comfort whilst it lasted!

For a while things progressed in a more or less normal fashion and we suffered few incidents other than those usually associated with clapped out aircraft and an uncertain serviceability. There were occasions of brake failure on landing, kites getting bogged down in the mud, hydraulic failure on take off, wheels not retracting, throttles jammed open on the approach - and a few other diversions. We seemed to go for miles one night just above the trees with all hands taking it in turns on the emergency pump when we found that after leaving the ground we could retract neither wheels or flap.

We did not ourselves suffer any engine failure but a few others had massive glycol leaks and had no alternative but to feather an engine. The night that W/O Peterson came in on three led to a head-on

clash with the Group Captain who commanded the station. Having returned from a long cross country with one engine out and a bad glycol leak on another, Pete called on the R/T to say that he was coming straight in without doing a circuit. Flying control refused permission and primly told him to follow normal procedure.

Pete exploded with a fine collection of original Canadian swear words, ignored the order and landed. The Group Captain, who had for some reason been in the watch office and had listened to this exchange, bristled with fury, dashed out to his car and drove out to follow Pete back to dispersal.

As soon as the rear hatch was opened the Groupie scrambled in and forced his way up the fuselage past the startled crew. Pete was still in his seat as the Group Captain angrily demanded an explanation - and threatened disciplinary action.

Peterson cheekily interrupted him in mid-flow and announced in a voice heavy with sarcastic respect -

"Sir, I'm the captain of this aircraft. If you've got anything to say to me, wait until my feet are on the ground. Then you can pull all the rank you want. Now, will you get to hell out of my aeroplane!"

Incredibly, the Groupie withdrew - probably unable to believe his ears - but when Pete had shut down and joined his crew on the ground, he was nowhere to be seen. Even more strange, nothing more was heard of the incident.

The comedy of that night was unfortunately followed by a tragedy a few nights later.

On a night of bad weather and severe icing, Helmore's crew were in trouble. Over the Bristol Channel they became badly iced up and Helmore lost control. With the Halifax seemingly plunging to destruction he ordered the crew to bale out, then before following them made a last despairing effort to regain control, finally pulling out in time to prevent the aircraft from striking the sea.

With his crew gone, he could do nothing more than turn back towards the coast and land at one of the airfields in the West Country. Of the crew there was no trace. There would have been little chance of survival in the wintry seas. [See Note 2]

Dad Teague was having problems. He was apparently not the greatest of pilots and had so scared the life out of his bomb-aimer and both gunners that they flatly refused to fly with him again! None of my crew appeared to feel quite so strongly towards me!

The course was now drawing to its close and with a couple of long night exercises to cover we were all but completed. However, we were destined to follow the pattern of OTU by finishing on a hectic note.

We took off in conditions of low cloud and set course to the north west, heading for Scotland and the Western Isles, with the forecast of a frontal system moving in much later in the night. Not soon enough to bother us it said.

After a little more than an hour it became apparent that the forecast was awry for we ran quite suddenly into thick cloud with icing conditions. Soon the inside of the windscreen was obscured with ice

and through some small pinholes in the forward part of the fuselage which we could not trace came some bitterly cold air which produced a strange effect.

First condensing and then freezing again it turned into snow, and in a short time I took on the appearance of half a snowman. As I sat at the controls, the left side of my body became covered with a considerable coating of snow which was also enough to start accumulating on the floor by the rudder pedals.

The crew thought it hilarious and Matt wanted to know where I had left the reindeer! I failed to appreciate the funny side of the situation in the same way and was a little worried that the aircraft was becoming more and more iced up.

The airspeed indicator needle became stationary indicating that the pitot head was blocked, and very shortly afterwards we began to lose power and could not maintain height.

I wondered what to do for the best and could not help thinking of Helmore's crew. Perhaps their tragedy had started in much the same way. I had just decided that I would abort the exercise and turn back when the decision was taken from me with Cyrus reporting that base had discovered the true weather situation and had recalled all aircraft. Gratefully we turned about and ploughed our way back to safety; soon we were out of the icing belt, but our ASI still remained out of action.

Back home and over base the upper air was clear, but the cloud appeared to be solid below with tops at about 2000 feet. I called for a more complete weather report but only succeeded in getting some comedian who told me to look and see. Having been the first aircraft off we were now the last back and they had little understanding of our concern. I promised to sort the comedian out when we got back on the ground.

For safety we turned as usual to the flat country of Lincolnshire to let down, and started a slow descent through the cloud with Tiger picking up our track on a Gee line to take us home.

In the cloud it was soon raining hard and levelling out at a safe 400 feet it was difficult to decide whether or not we were clear of the murk. Not a sign of a light anywhere - just a solid blackness with no horizon and the rain streaming over the windscreen.

I had the feeling that something was wrong, and Matt, sitting beside me in the right hand seat, sensed it too as he peered out with his head pressed against the side window. Then he spoke.

"Christ! We're bloody low!" he said "I can see the ground!"

I laughed nervously in disbelief.

"Don't be silly. What? - from 400 feet on a night like this?"

"I tell you - I can see the ground!" he insisted. "There are trees going past! Try and take a look".

I risked a quick glance away from the instrument panel and to my horror saw something flash by under the port wing.

Matt leaned across in front of me and tapped the altimeter dial and I watched goggle-eyed as the needle unwound backwards to steady at 150 feet! It too was U/S. With fear snatching at my inside I eased the Halifax up a couple of hundred feet and wondered what to do next.

"If you're interested," said Tiger, "we should run close to Swinderby if we stay on this course".

"OK. If we find it we'll go in there", I said. "We'll only press on if we have to".

Swinderby was another HCU in 5 Group and in a matter of minutes the runway and outer circle lights appeared, offering a haven of safety. Carrying out a tight circuit I called for permission to land.

"Stand by", was the reply. I was uncertain what to do. Should I do a Peterson and go in regardless - or what?

We did several circuits awaiting developments - but nothing. Then Matt pointed out that the rain had stopped and that the visibility had noticeably improved. That did it.

"We'll press on to Langar", I said. No one disagreed.

The welcoming lights of our own field were waiting, and with both ASI and altimeter out of action I played safe and wheeled the Halifax in off a fast flat approach. In the crew bus on the way back from dispersal we went over the events of the night. A bit more experience to add to our store. True, the real thing was yet to come, but surely the more we encountered and overcame problems such as this night the better equipped we would be for any sterner times ahead.

Some 46 years later, the events of that night came back to me in a rather unusual way. My wife and I decided to spend a few days in Lincoln, a city which rather strangely I had never visited before. Odd really, for I had been stationed on 4 different RAF stations in 5 Group, most of whose locations were in Lincolnshire. However, 3 of the 4 had been just over the county border in Nottinghamshire, and Nottingham had been much the easier place to visit when our free time allowed.

I found Lincoln a very attractive city, with its aptly named Steep Hill surmounted by the ancient Cathedral, the triple towers of which were visible for miles around in the flat countryside. Steep Hill itself rises some 300 feet or so above the lower part of the town, with the Cathedral towers climbing another 270 feet into the sky. I was frankly surprised to find just how it stood out and towered above all else within sight. It was then my thoughts went back to that night in that severe winter in 1944. I wondered - just how close had we been?

Back home I got out the map and did something which somehow had never occurred to us 46 years earlier. I drew a line on the map joining Swinderby and Langar, and then back projected it to the north east to see where it went. The result was interesting, it went just a little west of Lincoln and its Cathedral, and I realised then what we had done on that memorable night. We had flown about one

mile west of Lincoln, about 200 feet below the triple towers of the ancient building! We had, in fact, almost gone into the history books as the crew that destroyed Lincoln Cathedral!

Looking around at the other six faces about me I decided that we didn't fit at all badly together considering the odd manner in which we first came to form up as a team. Perhaps it hadn't been such a bad way to find a crew after all!

We were, however, to shortly suffer an unexpected change over which we had no control.

On getting my log book back from the flight commander's office I was gratified to find that I had again been given the assessment of 'Above Average'. I now had the full set - above average on single, twin and four engined aircraft.

Then as we awaited our movement instructions to Syerston, Cyrus reported sick, and was taken into sick quarters and kept under observation. We were told that if he were cleared early enough he would be sent on to join us at Syerston.

Notes:

[NOTE 1]

Flying Officer Robert Baines Knight RNZAF of 630 squadron killed in action 9th February 1945.

[NOTE 2]

4th January 1945 - Halifax W7928 of 1669 HCU.

133361 Flight Lieutenant Terence Martin HELMORE (Pilot) - Landed at RAF Chivenor
165031 Flying Officer Hubert Dunstan DINMORE - Lost at Sea
1686415 Sergeant Reginald William HOLMES - Lost at Sea
979873 Sergeant Hugh Patrick McCAFFERTY - Lost at Sea
1880814 Sergeant George Alfred WILSON - Lost at Sea
1492739 Sergeant Thomas WILSON (Air Gunner) - Lost at Sea
1818890 Sergeant Albert Edward William JAMES - body washed up three days later on Porthmissen Beach, Padstow, Cornwall

F/Lt Helmore himself was killed 1st July 1947 flying Tiger Moth NL784 while practising low level aerobatics for the Blackpool Air Pageant. The accident occurred at RAF Little Rissington.

The pilot was carrying out rehearsals of low level aerobatics for the Blackpool Air Pageant. At the top of a loop at 1000 feet, the pilot spun the aircraft but failed to initiate recovery action quickly enough and, although the spin had stopped, the aircraft struck the ground before pulling out of the dive. The pilot

had not taken recovery action until the aircraft reached 250 feet, despite a height limit of 500 feet for the display.

Halifax W7928 was coded EY - R during its time on 78 Sqn and flew the following operations:

06 Dec 42 Mannheim
08 Dec 42 Gardening
09 Dec 42 Turin
11 Dec 42 Turin
17 Dec 42 Gardening
20 Dec 42 Duisburg
09 Jan 43 Gardening - Nectarine
14 Jan 43 Lorient
29 Jan 43 Lorient
02 Feb 43 Cologne
03 Feb 43 Hamburg
16 Feb 43 Lorient
18 Feb 43 Wilhelmshaven
19 Feb 43 Wilhelmshaven
05 Mar 43 Nurnburg
09 Mar 43 Munich
11 Mar 43 Stuttgart
27 Mar 43 Berlin
29 Mar 43 Berlin
14 Apr 43 Stuttgart
16 Apr 43 Pilsen
20 Apr 43 Stettin
26 Apr 43 Duisburg
30 Apr 43 Essen

04 May 1943 Dortmund Damaged by incendiary bombs from another aircraft Crew as follows:

PO McClelland Pilot and Captain
Sgt Goodall (2nd pilot)
Sgt Oliver Nav
FL Beveridge BA
Sgt Currie WOP
Sgt Ackroyd FENG
PO Stevenson RG
Sgt Brown MU

Aircraft repaired and back on ops with a different crew on:

12 May 43 Duisburg.
23 May 43 Dortmund
25 May 43 Dusseldorf
27 May 43 Essen
29 May 43 Wuppertal
11 Jun 43 Dusseldorf
12 Jun 43 Bochum
21 Jun 43 Krefeld
22 Jun 43 Mulheim
24 Jun 43 Wuppertal

CHAPTER 10 – Last Days in Europe

We arrived at Syerston, No 5 Lancaster Finishing School, and surveyed our new surroundings.
It was a pre-war permanent station with a generally solid appearance - little of the utility Nissen hut type of structures, but instead buildings which suggested we would at last have a little more comfort to enjoy. And so it was. Our living quarters were in a two storied barrack block with loads of room and reasonable facilities. The food proved to be excellent and quite the best we had yet encountered. Mostly there was a choice of two or three main dishes for lunch - a luxury previously unheard of!

Having settled in we were very disappointed to be told that our W/Op, Cyrus, would not be continuing with us as he was still kept in sick quarters at Langar. I protested and asked that we be given a little more time, but the Squadron Leader Flying, who proved to be a rather unpleasant character, was having none of that, and we were given a spare bod in the shape of one Harry Wilson, yet another Geordie.

Of the Lancaster, we had learned a little from those which had arrived at Langar before our departure, but were now in a position to make a more complete comparison with the Halifax. They were roughly similar in wingspan and length of fuselage with the Lanc some 3 feet longer in span and 2 feet shorter in length, but inside the difference was very marked.

A short ladder made the entrance to the Lanc a dignified affair, but once inside, well, as someone unkindly said, that's where the shambles started! The difference was mainly one of space. Inside the rear door one first negotiated a way round the master unit of the distant reading compass, then round the H2S cupola, up the step and onto the roof of the bomb bay which, running all of 33 feet up the fuselage, considerably restricted headroom. The rear spar was negotiated with some difficulty when encumbered with full flying kit and Mae West, but then the main spar with its ridiculously small opening needed considerable care and effort to get through even on the ground with all the time in the world. How, we wondered, could anyone manage it in an emergency, in the dark, and perhaps with the aircraft on fire and out of control?

Immediately to the left and forward of the main spar was the wireless operator's cramped position, then moving forward again one came to the navigator's bench, with on its left his plotting table over which were installed the various navigation aids, Gee, Loran, H2S, API etc. (The equipment varied a little between the Groups of Bomber Command - for example in my day 5 Group had Loran instead of H2S which was standard fitting in 8 Group). The pilot's seat, in the usual place on the left of the cockpit, had at its back, the only piece of armour-plating in the whole aircraft. The flight engineer, who in the Lanc was second pilot, had a jump seat on the right-hand side of the cockpit, but often used the end of the navigator's bench when working on his instrument panel which was on the right-hand wall of the fuselage at that point.

Down several steps to the nose was the bomb aimer's position with the usual equipment, computer box, sighting head and bomb selector panel. Mostly the bomb aimer was acting as a second navigator except

in the target area, when he was engaged in the run up and release of the bombs, and often before and after that time he would be in the front turret if there was a possibility of night fighter activity.
The two gunners were, of course, confined to their turrets for the whole trip - a cold and lonely job.

The Lancs at Syerston were a little war weary but nevertheless performed reasonably well. The radiator temperature was inclined to rise somewhat rapidly when taxying out and often we had to stop and turn into wind to wait and allow the reading to get below the permitted maximum of 130 degrees. Also, when on circuits, we had a brake and tyre check before each take-off to ensure that we were not about to burst a tyre!

The Lanc seemed most anxious to get airborne and when unloaded leapt into the air at the first opportunity. It handled nicely in all conditions but compared to the Halifax required considerably more effort to produce a good three point landing. It was little like an overgrown Tiger Moth, and was liable to float quite a way if brought in with even a little excess speed. The conversion course took in only some 14 hours flying, but there was a fair amount to be learned in the ground instruction as a lead in to the short day and night programme.

Over our last few days we did a little research prior to deciding which Squadron we would declare as our preference. We examined in particular the recent casualty rates, and also found which ones appeared to do most 'daylights'. (We had discovered that at this late stage of the war in Europe the Allies mastery of the air in daylight made operations by day far safer than those at night. Somehow the German night defences, particularly the night fighters, remained surprisingly efficient, and there did not appear to us to be anything attractive about becoming dead heroes!)

We finally settled on our choice - 227 Squadron, stationed at Balderton, just a few miles down the road, a little south of Newark. And so off we went. 227 Squadron was first formed in 1918 as a light bomber Squadron equipped with De Havilland DH9s, but as it turned out, too late on in the war to become operational, and it had suffered the fate of many units by being disbanded soon after the end of hostilities.

In 1943 it was re-born as a Beaufighter Squadron in the Middle East, operating mainly against Axis shipping from bases in North Africa and Malta. It was then later disbanded again, with many of its crews transferred to a Squadron of the South African Air Force, still in the Middle East. A third life awaited it, when in 1944, 227 became a Lancaster squadron in 5 Group of Bomber Command. Some crews from both 9 and 619 Squadrons were assigned to form the nucleus of the Squadron which then established itself with Balderton as its home base.

When I joined, the Squadron still had no official crest, although on the notice boards was an illustration of a proposed crest which had been submitted for approval. It was a little different from the normal. It had the usual circular surround surmounted by a crown, and at the base a scroll bearing the motto, but in the centre was an illustration of a rather aggressive-looking winged bull. The wording of the motto underneath reading "Look out below!" - the traditional warning cry of dock workers when swinging

heavy loads in or out of the hold of a ship. It seemed to be quite an appropriate motto for a heavy bomber Squadron, although having regard to the illustration above it, it may have raised some speculation as to exactly what was being dropped!

The crest was the work of two of our resident comedians, of which there was no shortage on the Squadron. One of these had been a Greek scholar before joining the RAF, and thought it a nice touch to have the motto appear in Greek. Family crests, coats of arms, Squadron crests etc. all have to be submitted to that august body, the College of Arms and Heralds for approval and eventual Royal Assent. The College appears to have not quite caught up with the 20th Century, and is perhaps somewhat lacking a sense of humour. Their reaction to our effort was one of distaste and horror. “It was", they said, "quite unacceptable, and totally inappropriate for an RAF bomber Squadron. Furthermore, in no circumstances could the motto appear in Greek, as only Latin or English was permissible". And so, a little disappointed perhaps, 227 continued its war effort, albeit somewhat anonymously. As someone was heard to say it just proves again the truth of the old service saying - bullshit baffles brains".

The aircrew of 227 was the usual mixture of British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealanders, and although as was often the case, the Aussie and Canadian members included a few wild characters, the mixture was a good and proven one. Its aircraft were Mk.l Lancasters (except for one only on each flight, these for some odd reason being Mk3s with the Packard built Merlin engines). The Squadron code was 9J. Our R/T call sign 'Jointstock' and base call sign 'Cheapride'.

Balderton proved to be another of those strictly wartime airfields with the minimum of comforts. It lay straddled across the Great North Road (now the A1), by the small village which bore its name, most of the operational buildings being on the west side of the Al, with the various living sites on the east.

Our arrival was a little off-putting to say the least. Reaching the end of the narrow concrete road the truck carrying us slowed and began to bump its way cautiously along the rough rutted track by No 3 Site Picket Post, coming to a halt in a patch of clinker and ashes, spread in a forlorn attempt to combat the sea of mud. About half a dozen long timbered huts with a covering of the usual black roofing felt were dotted around joined by odd streaks of cinder path, once black but now trodden into the slime and fast becoming a part of the larger sea of brown. We were not impressed.

I well remember Bob, first out of the truck, commenting in his usual cheerful manner - "So this is the Squadron!" We didn't notice any welcome on the mat.
As we busied ourselves turning out our kit from the back of the truck, a few other figures emerged from one of the huts, carrying kitbags and suitcases which they humped over to where we stood.

"Why, its old Jake's crew!" called the effervescent Bob, recognising them as from the crew of our Canadian friend from Langar, Jake Johnson.
"Where're you off to? Moving already?"
One of the Canadian gunners put down the suitcase he was carrying and greeted us without enthusiasm.
"Yeah," he replied. "I guess we're off again - back to OTU or some place to pick up a new skipper".

There was an awful silence as we all looked at one another. Then, knowing pretty well what was coming, I said
"Where's Jake, then?"
The Canadian looked at me.
"Jake went on his second dickey trip the night before last and never came back", he said.
"Christ!" said Matt, speaking for us all. There didn't seem much more to say.

Poor old Jake. It didn't seem possible. Jake Johnson was a fairly typical Canadian - a big and bulky man - without a care for anything - but a genial type nevertheless. We knew him and his crew well, having been with them both at Langar and Syerston. Except for their engineer they were an all Canadian crew and had joined 227 only a couple of days before us. Now Jake was gone; probably dead or prisoner of war at best. What a welcome for us! Conversation was difficult, so we said our goodbyes and moved our kit into the hut allocated to us. It was not the best of beginnings.

Jake had gone missing with a very experienced crew - that of F/Lt Hunt, one of the New Zealanders. The target had been Lutzkendorf and it had been a bad night. Another crew, F/Lt Bell's, had also gone missing and the total losses for the Group that night was 7% of the aircraft involved. Both the 227 aircraft had been carrying second dickeys, so it meant that two other crews were broken up as a result. Both Bell and Hunt were among the Squadron's most experienced crews. [See Notes 1 & 2]

Only a few nights before Bell had had a near thing, getting back to Balderton but having to crash land and seeing the Lanc (PB610 9J-O) partially destroyed by fire as a result. Its burnt out hulk was one of the first sights to greet us on arrival. A disturbing number of new pilots, captains of newly arrived crews were going missing and, more worrying still, they were all lost on trips with the more senior crews.

Several 227 crews had apparently just become tour expired, and together with a few recent losses had meant that several new crews were required all at once. So over the course of a day or so there were in all six of us new boys with their respective crews all being introduced to Squadron life. Two English P/Os, Gibson and Howard, one Aussie P/O Khan, F/Sgts Marquis and Wells and myself - the lone W/O. A little later we were to be joined by another former acquaintance in the shape of Dad Teague.

I was allocated to 'A' Flight whose flight commander had just completed his tour and was handing over to his deputy, a Canadian Flight Lieutenant by the name of Pond.
The Squadron had two tour-expired 'instructors' whose job it was to check out new crews and in general ensure that they were fully capable before commencing operations. F/Lt Perry, the pilot instructor and his henchman, F/O Blood, a flight engineer were those entrusted to this task. They were known to all as 'Blood and Sand' - (there was a film about bullfighting starring Tyrone Power which inspired that title).

On my categorisation test - as it was known - I was checked out by Perry, whilst his partner Blood went through various tests with Steve our engineer. Perry had decided that he wanted to visit a friend at Ringway and so it would be a good thing for us to make an organised cross country exercise of it with all the tests included.

All went well until we arrived at Ringway where the short runway was in use and there was also a considerable cross wind blowing. Perry decided that he would do the landing and that I should sit beside him in the right-hand seat and act as his engineer - why I have no idea. He did not do the best of approaches and came in with far too much speed. He touched down in an untidy way well down the length of the short run, then let the cross wind take it out of his control with the result that we swung alarmingly round to port and slewed way over on to the grass showing no signs of stopping. Whilst he wrestled with stick and rudders I endeavoured to help by banging the throttles shut and even pushing the pitch levers down into coarse. As we bumped over the grass to a shaky halt Perry yelled at me in fury.
"I'm flying this bloody aircraft!"
I could not hold back the feeling which I, and I suspect friend Blood (and Steve) also had, and replied fiercely -
"And a bloody fine mess you're making of it too!"
After that display he could hardly have any criticism of any performance of mine!

I was instructed to report for an interview with the Commanding Officer, Wing Commander E R Millington DFC who, I discovered, had also been an Army transfer like myself. He looked through my log book and then began to question me.
"How come," he said, "are you still a Warrant Officer? Why are you not commissioned?"
I told him that whilst I had been instructing I had been recommended for one but had refused to apply. He paused for a moment to let this sink in, then said
"It is 5 Group policy that all captains of aircraft be commissioned. You will apply for one immediately".
I tried to make the point that I was happy as I was. That I had an all NCO crew and wished to stay as one of them.
"You'll do as you're told," was the reply. "The adjutant will start things moving".

However, as I was to discover, there were several changes in the air and things were to move very slowly.
W/Cdr Millington, who was in fact quite a pleasant sort, had become both interested and involved in politics with the new Commonwealth Party of Sir Richard Acland. It was a sort of halfway house between the Labour and Liberal parties and was having some success in getting a few members elected in bye-elections. Another of these was shortly due to be held and W/Cdr Millington had been chosen as the likely candidate. If successful he would, of course, have to temporarily at least, leave the Service and relinquish command of the Squadron.

It was usual practice for a new pilot to do his first op as second dickey (second pilot) with an experienced crew so that he would learn a little of the procedure without having the responsibility which would be his when it came time for him to lead his own crew. The first time I was down to fly with 'B' Flight Commander, S/Ldr Meagher, but it was all scrubbed before briefing even commenced.

So the first time we as a crew ventured over the water with a bomb load was on a diversion raid, code named 'Sweepstake'. Usually new squadron crews were sent on this type of operation which was aimed at drawing night fighters away from the track of the main force, and generally turned sharply away and back at somewhere near the German border or wherever the front line then happened to be. The diversion force was routed in such a way as to suggest an attack on some prominent target, which the German night fighters were then directed towards to counter the threat, only to find that the main bomber stream, and of course the real attack, had changed course and was miles away. If all went well the main force were well on the way to their chosen target before the German control realised it had been fooled. The diversion force had by then itself turned for home and unless they were close enough to give chase the night fighters were left without any opportunity of any action. All nice and safe providing everything went to plan!

Our trip was a quiet affair way inland to near a place called Gerardmer - on the Swiss/German/French border. Early on during briefing we had a few entertaining moments when the time came for us to be given the Met. gen for our trip. The Met officer on duty was a very young man whose immaculate uniform suggested that he had very recently arrived from civilian life. He spoke with an impeccable accent which was not improved by his rather high pitched voice, and he was obviously nervous at having to address a rather scruffy bunch of aircrew.

Apparently the weather for our trip was going to be pretty poor, with much cloud and the possibility of bad icing conditions. In his attempt to appear as one of the boys, the little Met. man rather overdid things. He tended to stress the bad conditions whilst at the same time trying to make light of them.
He assured us that although the weather was going to be most unpleasant, we would not let that worry us - we would press on. Icing conditions would be encountered on the way out and could become worse on the way home - but we would not let that deter us. We would carry on through it and of course we would be OK.

During all this one of the Aussie pilots sat listening with a somewhat pained expression on his face, and eventually could take no more. He struggled to his feet and stopped the Met. man in full flow.
'Say, feller", he said, turning on the Aussie accent to the full. 'Tell me something. Have you ever flown in bloody icing?" The Met. man recoiled in horror.
'Well - er, no - actually I haven't", he replied uncomfortably. 'Come to that, have you ever bloody well flown at all?" persisted the Aussie.
'Well - " the embarrassment was complete. "Well - er - no.' Actually I haven't".
'Then," demanded the Aussie, "tell me - who's this bloody 'we' you keep talking about?"

The comedy over, we got down to the more serious business of preparing for the night's work. We were to carry some 6,000 lbs of bombs to give us a chance to get the feel of what it was like to take off with a bomb load, and as things turned out this proved to be the only hazardous moment of the trip.

I had been rather surprised to find that on the squadron it was the usual practice when taxying at night to use the aircraft landing light in spite of the adverse effect on one's night vision. On this occasion,

taxying out in the pitch black of 11 pm, I decided to stick to the Con Unit ways, and had Matt down in the nose with an Aldis lamp spotlighting the left-hand edge of the perimeter track.

Whilst in the queue for take off I double checked my vital action drill - trim, pitch, fuel, flaps etc - feeling that it would be just too bad to forget anything on this, my first take off with a bomb load. I got a green from the airfield controller and as I turned cautiously on to the runway, Matt came up from the nose position and squeezed past Steve to get to the navigator's bench.

As I opened the throttles the kite seemed very sluggish. Probably due to the bomb load I thought. Then I found that it was trying to wander off the runway to starboard. I kept straight with a bit of effort and a lot of rudder, and got the tail up, but somehow we showed no sign of becoming airborne. The lights of the flare path slipped by and I became a little anxious, for we were fast running out of room despite having the boost over-ride out.

At last the wheels bumped clear and I sighed with relief as the Lanc staggered rather reluctantly into the air almost at the fence, then the reason for the trouble came to light when Steve went to adjust the revs and found only three pitch levers instead of four. When Matt had squeezed past him earlier the starboard outer pitch lever had been pushed down into fully coarse and we had taken off virtually on three engines with several tons of bombs on board! Like myself, on the take-off run, Steve had been more concerned in watching our progress along the runway and had omitted to glance at the rev counters to check that full power was there! Another lesson we never forgot!

It was as well that the rest of the trip was uneventful.

Two days later, however, dawned a day that was to see a flight that was anything but uneventful.

It began when about 10.30 several of us were standing around 'A' Flight office, waiting for something to happen. Outside it was clear and bright with a slight nip in the air but all the same a very pleasant morning. As the phone rang the chatter subsided and there remained a comparative silence as the flight commander carried out a rather unintelligible conversation with the caller. He scribbled one or two notes and then putting down the receiver he addressed the assembled pilots. "OK, fellers," he said in his slow Canadian drawl. "There's a war on tonight. Somebody call in the rest and let's have your crew states."

An Australian nearest the door slipped out in search of other 'A' Flight pilots and whilst waiting for them the flight commander made use of the time by phoning the flight dispersal to get the Flight Sergeant's list of serviceable aircraft. In a few minutes the Aussie returned with half a dozen more pilots, by which time those already in the room had reported on the state of their crews. Most were all complete, but one or two had one member sick and another had one on compassionate leave. The flight commander drew up a provisional list for the night's operation; it wasn't a maximum effort so some crews would be standing down. Having more or less decided who would be going he put down his list and looked up with a grin.

"Now!" he said. "We come to the sixty four thousand dollar question! Second dickeys! There'll be two going, so who's going to take them? Any volunteers? Don't all rush."
And he grinned at his own joke.
It was, of course, sarcasm. Call it coincidence or what you will but recently several very experienced crews had got the chop - each of them carrying a second dickey (Jake Johnson had gone that way) - so that everyone now tended to look on it as a job to be avoided. A series of coincidences of course, but just the same, something that could easily prey on the mind of the superstitious.
"No offers, eh?" There was silence.
"Well, it'll have to be those old hands who haven't done it for a while".

The choice fell upon Flying Officer King, one of our Aussies, and Flight Lieutenant Croker, a New Zealander, both of whom were within a trip or two of the end of their operational tour.

I felt very much the new boy during all this and eventually found myself down to fly as second pilot to F/Lt Mervyn Croker, a small rather serious looking New Zealander, probably a year or so older than myself. He had apparently had one or two close calls during his 32 trips and it was sarcastically said that the hangars were full of Croker's aircraft that would never fly again.

"Flying with him?" enquired a cheeky looking Aussie, jerking his thumb at the New Zealander. I nodded.
"You've had it chum! He's an absolute menace!" and he grimaced with horror.
I smiled in sickly fashion, feeling rather uncomfortable but doing my best not to show it.
"Don't listen to him," advised Croker, drawing me aside. "Let's go outside".

He didn't attempt to lecture me at all, but instead gave me a few kindly words of advice and more or less succeeded in putting me at my ease, before introducing me to the rest of his crew which included some fellow New Zealanders. Behind the scenes much was now going on - all the hundred and one things which had to be covered and organised before any operational flight. Bomb load, fuel, window, air tests, briefing times, etc.

Apart from being known to the top few the target was always a secret up to the time of briefing, but many were the speculations made and many were the rumours that went about. Someone had 'heard' that the bomb load was to be all incendiaries - but no! someone just back from dispersal had seen the first few kites being bombed up and the load was definitely thousand pounders and a cookie.
"Petrol load's only 1650 - nice short trip!" said a gunner optimistically.
"Don't you believe it!" countered a navigator, overhearing. "It's a twenty one fifty four!"
Moans from all those present at this. The Lanc's full capacity was 2154 gallons and that meant a long trip. No one was very keen on that.

Eventually the battle order went up, showing the crews on, the aircraft, times of briefing, take off, etc. It was late 23.30 hrs.

My own crew were rather quiet about it all and I felt that they'd rather we had all been going together. I took a couple of hours sleep in the afternoon with the idea of being fresher later on, but somehow it didn't seem to work out that way.Taking Matt aside I handed him my few valuables and a letter to be posted to my mother in the event of my not returning. I didn't want to be pessimistic, but one could never tell.

Briefing was not until evening and was arranged so that we had the traditional egg and bacon before going out to the flight. I joined Croker as the crew bus dropped us by the flight offices and together we walked into the captain's briefing room, where a few other pilots were already seated. The first thing all did when entering the room was to glance at the large wall map of Europe to see if the curtain was back to reveal where we were going. It was. The route was already marked out with black tape stretching across to the Leipzig area - not far from the city itself.

The Wing Commander strode in and everyone shuffled to their feet. Quickly he called the roll of pilots, and then wasting no time went on to explain the target - a synthetic oil refinery at a place called Bohlen. I'd never heard the name until then, but after that night there would be no danger of my ever forgetting it - although as things turned out I've still never been there!There followed all the usual gen - bombs, petrol, weather, flight plan, method of attack, radar jamming, code words, master bomber and all the other intricate things that had to be covered in an operation of this kind. At last it was all over and picking up notes and target maps, we filed into the main briefing room where the navigators were already working on their charts, spread out on the wooden tables. The babble of voices increased as other members of the crews came in from their own specialist briefings.

Croker read out from his notes a few items of particular importance and checked each member on anything relating especially to him - for notes and most other written gen could not be taken into the air. A green canvas bag was emptied and the contents distributed; escape kits and maps in case we had to get out and walk back! Any personal belongings were turned out from pockets and placed in other separate bags to be handed in before we left. Nothing of use to the enemy, however slight, could be carried.

The room stilled as the Group Captain and Wingco entered, and main briefing began. First the general picture by the CO, and then the specialists; Met intelligence, signals, navigation, etc - all running over the important things to remember. Following on the Wingco had a little more to add, then the Groupie said his piece, wishing the boys best of luck, and so main briefing came to its close. We gathered up our bits and pieces when above the chatter of the room the wail of an air raid siren was heard. "Hell!" said somebody. "They're out looking for us already!" and there was general laughter. Recently there had been quite a bit of intruder activity in the 5 Group area. Jerry was sending over a number of JU 88s which prowled around looking for something to shoot up and only a few nights previously several Lancs had been shot down on the circuit at one of the nearby airfields. We hoped they'd have gone home by the time we took off!

There was the usual scramble to draw parachutes and Mae Wests and it was some time later before we had all struggled into our kit, drawn our rations, filled our thermos flasks - and in general completed our final preparations before going out to the aircraft. The usual bantering chaff was exchanged with members of other crews. The time-honoured joke was cracked - "Can I have your egg if you don't come back?" Croker assembled us like a sheepdog rounding up stragglers from the fold, and we shuffled out to where the Dodge crew buses were waiting. It was a grand clear starlight night. As we stood, weighed down with all our gear, waiting for the crew ahead of us to climb aboard, there came the sound of an aircraft flying low and all leads turned instinctively to the direction of the sound. It was an unfamiliar note and swelled into a roar as the plane turned not more than a mile or so away.

"That's an 88!" said someone. We strained our eyes into the darkness but saw nothing.
"Come on!" complained a voice from inside the bus. "Never mind him. Climb aboard!"
"G George!" came a yell from the cab, and we were there. Tumbling out with our conglomeration of kit, we crossed to the shadowy bulk of the Lanc, the ground crew coming out to meet us.

During the subsequent running up and testing of engines followed by the checking of just about every possible thing, I formed the opinion that Croker had what was probably an extremely efficient crew, and I thought, a fine example to follow. Later in the air I found that this impression still remained true.

Up to now things had gone nicely to plan, but from then onward it appeared that we were somewhat up against it. The first fly in the ointment came when a fault developed in the intercom, taking so long to fix that when we did finally get going we were not only the last to take off but didn't get airborne until some minutes after the "set course" time.

Being involved in my first operational take off, I found it quite an impressive affair, with the great aircraft crawling nose to tail around the perimeter track, forming two queues converging on the end of the runway by the chequered van of the airfield controller, by which a very mixed group was always to be found waiting to wave the departing aircraft off. The Group Captain, WAAFs, ground crew, some of those aircrew not on that night - airmen of all ranks - all going to make up that little knot of spectators who formed, all too often, what was the last living sign of England seen by those crews who never came back.

As it was, on this night, we had the field to ourselves when we finally taxied out and roared down the runway into the wall of darkness.

With several minutes to make up, Croker knew we had to get a move on and decided to cut a corner off by missing the first turning point, and heading straight across to the French coast near Dieppe. But later, with two hours now gone, Dickson the navigator, gave his opinion that we were still way behind the flight plan timing. Croker thought it over. At that moment we were still below 3000 feet - to beat the early warning radar, but soon we'd have to start climbing to reach our bombing height - therefore needed to make good the time gap quickly. Six minutes was a long time to catch up and it seemed

doubtful that it could be done, but after a little thought, Croker made up his mind and opened up the throttles to +6 boost whilst the engineer brought the revs up to maximum cruising of 2650.

On and on we went, never having to take avoiding action from another Lanc - a bad sign that - for it indicated we were still way behind the main bomber stream. Frequently we carried out banking searches, turning temporarily to one side so that with the aircraft banked over the gunners could scan the sky below - the blind spot of the heavy bomber. Even though we were at no great height we couldn't afford to take chances; there just might be a fighter about below. On we sped into the darkness and soon began our climb at maximum climbing power 2850 revs +9 boost.

Then the earth below came alive with tiny pinpoints of flashing light and here and there the odd flare burst, momentarily showing up some ground detail. We realised that down there a once mighty army was on the run at last, fighting with its back to the wall of its own homeland.

Quite soon the action was left behind and the flight seemed strangely uneventful. We were now well into Germany and so far no flak or fighter activity. A lone searchlight wavered uncertainly several miles over to port, but didn't seem to be interested in us.

It was too good to last. Suddenly came the first hint of action. About level with the aircraft and a little ahead, a yellowish white globe of light appeared hanging in the sky. Fighter flare! Several more followed at once.
"Keep your eyes open, everyone!" called Croker.

I was looking after the 'Window', taking the bundles of metallised strips, tearing out the string which ran lengthwise through them and thrusting them down into the funnel of the window chute. The trouble was that being on our own as we were it didn't do us much good. I could guess what Croker was thinking. We were probably so far behind the main stream that we got no benefit either from the window they were scattering, and on the Wurzburg screens our lone aircraft could easily be picked up..

Now the fighter flares were quite numerous and we were carrying out banking searches all the time. The night fighters dropped the flares into the bomber stream hoping to spot a bomber silhouetted against the glare, so we had one slight consolation - if they were relying on flares alone they'd be hard pushed to see a single Lanc. But unfortunately as we well knew, the flares were only one of the weapons against us and the unseen radar was the continuous problem.

More flares. More banking searches. But still we were not called upon to corkscrew to safety. I couldn't help feeling that it was all rather like a man having trapped a rat in a barn; he strikes match after match trying to illuminate his prey - but the barn is a vast space. So, thank goodness, was the sky!

When the flares had first appeared I again had that awful jump in the stomach. Funny how true fear seems to centre itself on the stomach; like a gnawing ache that saps all the strength. That feeling of being suspended over a bottomless pit, when every fresh alarm sends the trapdoor yawning wider.

Inexperience made the whole thing worse - not knowing what might be coming next.

After a while the flares became less frequent as though the fighters were giving up the chase. We were now far into Germany and, Dickson said, coming up to Kassel. I was sitting in the engineer's seat next to Croker, carrying on with my windowing, when it happened. No warning except a few flashes on the ground below the aircraft. To me it might have been anything.

"Looked like gun flashes, Skip!" called the rear gunner. "Strange, with fighters still about - rather odd if it's flak".

A few seconds passed, and then it came, a sort of metallic thump that shook the Lancaster like a leaf.

"Christ!" said someone. "We've been hit!"

"Steady everyone!" called Croker. "We're OK. Wireless Operator, see if you can find out what the damage is".

We didn't have long to wait for another voice broke in excitedly. "We're on fire, Skipper! The whole of the bomb bay is alight!"

And so it was. The flak bursting right under the belly of the Lanc had penetrated the underside of the fuselage and severed the hydraulic lines which ran along the roof of the bomb bay under the fuselage floor - putting both mid-upper and rear turrets out of action and igniting the hydraulic fluid which then poured burning over the bombs still in their places in the racks.

I felt a jump of fear take me. On fire! This was it! It was happening to me! The next few moments were loaded with action and disaster. Before Croker could decide what to do for the best, the voice of the rear gunner broke in urgently on the intercom.

"Christ, Skipper! There's a bloody great fighter flare practically on top of us! Just below to port!"

"OK", said Croker without emotion in his voice. "Engineer, come forward, will you? Second pilot - you'd better move down the nose - and keep windowing".

We both acknowledged the order and I had just risen from my seat when - "Fighter! Corkscrew port - go!" Who that was I didn't know but everything then happened at once.

In the space of a second, before Croker had time to put the stick over, several mighty thumps shook the aircraft. Flashes came from the starboard wing as the cannon shells struck. With both our rear and mid-upper turrets only on manual control there was no telling what was happening back there, but I heard the clatter of the front guns as the bomb aimer, standing in the front turret opened up.

Immediately G George gave a tremendous lurch and, as I was in the act of moving forward, the aircraft went into a violent dive, pitching me head first down the steps into the bomb aimer's position. My oxygen mask and intercom leads, still plugged in, pulled tight across my throat. In a panic I struggled to free myself, but when I eventually groped my way back to the oxygen connector it was jammed fast. But in the flood of events which had overtaken us, this appeared to be a minor detail.

A fighter had dropped on us - either picking us up in the light of the flares or seeing us burning. In the swift attack that followed cannon shells had blown large holes in the starboard wing and inner engine nacelle, setting both starboard engines on fire.

The Lanc was now badly out of control and using up altitude fast. Croker acted quickly and ordered the bomb aimer to jettison the bombs. At first the effect was disastrous. The bombs, covered with burning oil left all right, but the blast of air when the bomb doors were opened whipped the flames up inside the aircraft and immediately the rear end of the fuselage became an inferno.

But our luck was in, for the sudden rush stifled the fire by snatching it away from the source - the severed hydraulic lines, and so it was snuffed out. I crouched on the steps in the nose, aware of the compression in my ears as the Lanc plunged its way to destruction.

Croker sat calmly at the controls with eyes for nothing but the instrument panel in front of him - an instrument panel that was becoming more and more difficult to see through the thickening smoke. The fumes were choking, but Croker showed no sign of alarm. He just sat there, the stick moving slightly now and then as he patiently tried to regain control.

My oxygen tube and intercom leads were in a hopeless tangle and to free myself I had to wrench off my helmet; as a result I didn't hear the order to bale out. Someone tapped me on the head and I looked up to see the engineer with his parachute clipped on and making signs to me. I tried to make him understand that mine was by the navigator's position behind him, and after an eternity he caught on and passed it to me.

As I held myself up at the top of the stairs frantically trying to clip on the chute with one hand I saw the orange glare from one of the starboard engines. The aircraft seemed doomed. I scrambled back down the steps to the front escape hatch. The centrifugal force was now severe, suggesting that the aircraft was in some sort of spin or tight spiral. The bomb aimer joined me at the hatch and together we found the handle and tugged. Nothing happened. I pulled ferociously - fear lending me added strength - but it was no good. It was jammed. I tugged and tore at it until I was weak from the effort, then dimly realised that the only hope now was to reach the rear door by the tail.

In my tired state I crawled the few feet back to the steps and tried to haul myself up them. The aircraft must have been hopelessly out of control for the force was like that felt in a steep turn or a pull out from a dive. It pinned me to the floor. Weakly I tried to fight against it and drag myself up the steps into

the cockpit. My arms and legs seemed weighted with lead. Then I knew it was useless and collapsed - my strength gone.

Strange, I can remember now how surprised I was to find that in such a situation I could still think quite clearly. This was it, I thought. Death was only a few seconds away. I was no longer afraid. I just accepted it.

There was no past life flashing before me to have regrets over; no fear for the somewhat irreligious life I had led. It is often said that when faced with what appears to be certain death, some people pray like mad in an effort to retrieve past sins - but it didn't seem to occur to me.

I was sorry it was true, but my regrets were still relevant to earthly things, and were not prompted by any fears of any life to come. I don't recall feeling particularly sorry for myself. My main feelings were for my mother. Poor mother! She didn't know I wouldn't be coming back. In a few moments now, I thought, it'll be all over. There'll just be one bloody great bang and that'll be it! I was tired - so tired - and soon it would all be over ....

It was like waking after lying in a half dozing state as one often does in the morning, trying to summon up the will to get out of bed. Slowly I became aware that nothing had happened. The force that had held me to the floor had almost gone and my limbs were no longer leaden. Anxiously I turned to the front hatch with the idea of trying it once more. The bomb aimer was still there and signalled to me in dumb show to recover my helmet. I groped around, found it with the leads still in a tangle, but moved my position so that I could at least put it back on - in time to hear Croker say something about feathering the starboard outer.

I looked up. The engineer had returned to his position and Croker sat looking as if - as was indeed true - he had never moved from the controls. I automatically resumed my windowing, sitting on the top step and wondering exactly what had been going on. Craning my neck around the throttle box I caught a glimpse of the altimeter and saw that we were just below 5000 feet. We'd been at something over 13,000 when that lot had started.

I looked at the two starboard engines, no fire in either, although the engineer seemed a bit concerned in some way over the outer engine. Gradually we sorted out what had happened. After the fighter's attack, although we had got rid of the bombs and with them the fire in the fuselage, we'd gone into an apparently hopeless dive and Croker had reluctantly decided to bale everyone out. The rear gunner fortunately chose not to leave directly from the turret, but joined the mid-upper gunner and the wireless operator at the rear door which they actually had open when the order to jump was cancelled. The rest of us had never looked like making it.

Although the Lanc had seemed doomed, Croker had courageously stuck to the controls probably knowing that his own chances of escaping were nil, and when the smoke from the fuselage fire had cleared a little he managed by superb flying to more or less regain control.

Our luck was in again. The fire in the starboard inner engine died of its own accord probably due to the blast of air in the dive, whilst the outer engine burned, but not too badly. The engineer feathered the propeller and pressed the Graviner fire extinguisher button. The fire died - but something was not quite right for the propeller un-feathered and continued to turn.

With the situation now more stable Croker called up each member of the crew in turn and was as surprised as the rest of us to find that all were present and that there were no casualties. I continued to feed window into the chute in a mechanical fashion, taking a peep now and then at the instrument panel. We were now on an even keel and were heading back towards the Rhine, but things were still a little dicey. We had heard the swish of the Reaper's scythe and were not yet out of the wood.

With the prop little more than windmilling, the starboard outer was obviously a handicap, and the engineer seemed concerned that there was not normal power available from the inner engine.
I couldn't help noticing with some concern that the altimeter was continuing to unwind slowly. Outside all was black; just a velvet curtain that shut out everything except one or two of the brighter stars that were immediately overhead. There had been no more fighter flares and the flak had ignored us. But that altimeter was still back pedalling and even Croker appeared a little concerned. I began to wonder if we'd even get as far as the Rhine. Too bad to finish up as POW after coming through so much. The engineer checked his panel frequently and made the odd adjustment. I took another glance at the altimeter; only a little over 3000 feet now, but at least the aircraft had seemingly got over most of its trouble for we were now almost holding height.

Soon those flashes of light again formed a cordon across the invisible earth below and ahead of the nose - much clearer this time though and more real they seemed at this lower altitude. It was uncanny watching the ground offensive without being able to see anything of either of the combatting forces. Probably there was little more than nuisance activity going on down there but the flashes and explosions made it seem a much more intense affair.

I had a sudden thought and wondered whether it was possible at this low height to get hit by mortar fire or some other artillery aimed at each other by the unseen forces below! But I decided that the chances must indeed be very slight, and it would have to be some fluke shot - at least they weren't trying to hit us - which swayed the odds in our favour!

With the front slipping away behind us, Croker called a conference. The aircraft seemed pretty sound considering everything, and he proposed to press on back to one of the emergency fields in France and then review the situation again."In the event of us not being able to maintain height above 2000 feet we may have to bale out," he said. "But at least we're now over friendly territory".

We were now all much more cheerful, and even in joking mood. The worst was over. I could abandon my windowing now, and took the opportunity to dig into my chocolate rations - washing it down with a hearty swig from my flask. We were alive and we were going home! What more could one ask?

The time passed, but dragging a little for we were all impatient to get back. Over to starboard a few stationary yellow lights together with a red or two indicated the emergency field, but G George was performing well and it took only a short conference to make us decide to press on over the Channel.

Very slowly the eastern sky lightened as the dawn approached, and by the time we crossed the coast near Beachy Head the faint light was sufficient for us to see the coastline curving away on both sides of the headland. We felt quite good now! On and on over the friendly fields of England, with the woods standing out darkly against the green backcloth of the surrounding land, a slight haze spreading over the countryside making the horizon indistinct and hanging in thicker rolls of greyish-white in the valleys where as yet there was no breath of wind to disperse it.

As it slowly became lighter we could see more clearly some of the wounds we had carried from that struggle in the dark sky of Germany. A huge jagged hole was torn in the rear part of the starboard wing and seemed to be right through everything. The metal was twisted and saw-toothed as if from the bite of a giant. The starboard inner engine nacelle had also taken a severe blow and from the look of it the engine had no right to be turning. Something loose trailed from the underside. But still she flew and we asked no more than that.

Nearer home now. That was the Great North Road below.

Some time back Croker had turned off the oxygen and now in the grey light I could see that his face apparently showed no signs of his ordeal. He looked as serious and as capable as ever. I had resumed my seat next to him with the engineer perched on the end of the navigator's bench, and now by pressing my face to the perspex of the side window I watched Grantham slide beneath, with ahead the welcome sight of the familiar pattern of runways and the town of Newark slightly farther over to the north.

Below us on the Great North road a few vehicles were straggled out, crawling their way along like ants on wheels.

Croker jabbed button 'A' on the R/T control box and pressing the button on the control column he called base.

"Cheapride from Jointstock George, over".
The reply came quickly.
"Jointstock George, this is Cheapride" then ignoring official procedure - "Any casualties?"
"None at all thanks, all OK, over".
"Good. You are No 1 to land, runway 26, QFE 1013, over".

Croker repeated the details and pressed button 'B' on the R/T to change over to circuit control.

"I wonder if the flaps still work," he said with a grin. "20 frees flap, please".

"Flap 20 going down", I replied hopefully, pushing down the vertical lever with the spade grip top whilst watching the indicator dial. It worked! Well, that was a good start.

On the downwind leg of the circuit Croker called for wheels down and we both watched anxiously as the green lights flickered and then came steady showing that the wheels were down and locked. Or were they? The green may have come on but the starboard leg had an odd look about it as if it were not properly aligned and locked.

First the engineer and then Croker himself took a look and both decided that all was not well. Going back up to some 3000 feet Croker put the Lanc in a series of shallow dives pulling out sharply to try to get the damaged undercart to move. It did not. After several attempts he decided to chance it and attempt a landing, and then let flying control know of his decision.

Out on the field I could see a group of people gathered on the grass by the control tower, and as I watched they dispersed towards the fire tender and ambulance which were standing near a third vehicle - which appeared to be the Wing Commander's car. As we came downwind the fire tender moved onto the perimeter track followed by the other two in slow procession. Our reception committee!

"We may finish up in a heap on landing", said Croker addressing us all. "Engineer, come forward please. The rest of you take up crash positions".

I joined the navigator and wireless operator at the crash position by the rest bed and the two gunners left their turrets to position themselves alongside us. We heard the engine note change as the revs increased for landing and the trim of the aircraft altered noticeably as the flaps came fully down.

"Better get rid of this", said the W/Op, reaching up to the forward escape hatch in the roof and giving it a bard blow with the heel of his hand. We didn't actually hear what he said for the rest of us were no longer on intercom, but we guessed what he was about to do. The rectangular section of roof flew out into the slipstream and away, the rush of air adding a hissing note to the engine roar. We took up our positions on the floor, bracing our feet against the spars and bulkheads, whilst the W/Op, the only one now on intercom, reported to Croker.

"Stand by!" called Croker.
"Stand by!" repeated the W/Op yelling to us.

The power was cut off, the Merlins barking in their characteristic way as the Lanc sank slowly onto the runway. The touchdown was perfect but immediately something went wrong. There came a violent shuddering and a mad bumping from the starboard side as we swung crazily around. I guessed what it was. That wheel had gone.

We must have covered quite a distance that way, the vibration shaking the whole structure of the aircraft until at last it grated to a halt with the fuselage leaning at a drunken angle.

We scrambled to our feet as Croker, not wasting any time, shut down the engines and silence returned after six and a half hours. it was a relief in itself. He climbed wearily out of the cockpit as we crowded forward to congratulate him. Then collecting some of our gear we made our way back to the rear door and jumped to the ground. Good and solid it felt!

The Wingco, MO and several others were there to greet us. There was still much to be done - interrogation and all the rest - not to mention that breakfast we were all ready for - so we wasted no time in getting our belongings from the aircraft.

Poor old G George. She looked a mess and no mistake. Battered and fire-stained, with bits hanging from the starboard wing and thousands of holes punched in her belly. The whole of the starboard wing and the fuselage looked as though someone had spent several industrious hours with a bayonet or long knife stabbing holes through the skin.

We threw our kit into the back of a small truck that had just driven out. It was a grand morning - great to be alive! The slight haze was already dispersing and the ground felt good and firm beneath our feet.

The horrors of the night were already far behind us as I climbed into the truck. Could it have all really happened. Perhaps it had been a nightmare or even imagination?

Perhaps - but as the truck drew slowly away I looked back at the Lanc standing silent and shattered on the grass, and with the bitter taste of the fumes of burning hydraulic oil still in my throat, I decided that - yes! - it had happened all right! [NOTE 3]

From the Bohlen raid, which was carried out by 5 Group alone, nine Lancasters failed to return including one from 227 - F/O King's crew. This represented some 4 per cent of the number involved.
With F/O King we lost another pilot, F/O Pitts who with myself was second dickey that night. [NOTE 4]

The following night was Hamburg and again 227 were to lose an experienced crew, F/Lt Whitechurch, another of our New Zealanders who, most cruelly, was right at the end of his tour. Experience brought no guarantee of survival, and although the loss rates were much reduced from those awful days of 1943, crews were still getting the chop right up to the last. And those killed on the last day were just as dead as those killed on the first. [NOTE 5]

Much to the chagrin of 8 Group (Pathfinder Force), 5 Group which had its own Pathfinder squadrons, frequently operated independently of main force, and did a number of attacks on the small synthetic oil refineries.

My own crew's reaction to my experience on my second dickey trip was a little guarded, and difficult to assess. I think that most if not all crews regarded themselves as being indestructible. A sudden bad experience might waver the belief, but to come through unscathed seemed to confirm to those involved

that they could cope nevertheless. The loss rate seemed moderate and for most attacks acceptable; nothing like as bad as those awful years of 1942 and 43 - but still the German defences appeared to remain surprisingly organised and effective. Oddly enough, on daylight raids the losses were noticeably fewer.

Our CO, W/Cdr Millington, had now departed to fight his bye-election at Chelmsford (which he duly won) and the new man W/Cdr David Balme had taken over command. He proved to be a quiet, gentlemanly individual soon popular with his crews. He looked too nice a person to be a bomber pilot, but his DSO and DFC won on his first tour said otherwise.

After the war, when some of the stories otherwise unknown came to light, we learned of a most unusual link between our two Commanding Officers. Millington, who as a Lieutenant in the Army, had like myself and a few other fortunates, talked himself into a transfer to the RAF for aircrew training, had been sent to 22 Elementary Flying Training School at Cambridge for his introduction to flying. His instructor was a quiet, studious young man, a Sergeant Pilot. Millington, more outgoing, found conversation a bit limited, as the Sergeant mostly confined his contribution to that required by instructional matters.

One day, in a short lull between exercises, they were flying over Cambridge and Millington said to his instructor -

"You know, Sergeant, you are the only instructor I have had in either the Army or Air Force who has never asked me what I did before the war".
"Oh", replied the Sergeant, "that's probably because you would only want to know what I did".
"Well," prompted Millington, "what did you do?"
The Sergeant looked over the side of the cockpit, pointed at the many college and university buildings below the aircraft, and said
"I taught Latin and Greek down there!"

Just over 3 years later Wing Commander Millington DFC handed over command of 227 Squadron to Wing Commander Balme DSO DFC, his flying instructor who, pre-war had taught Latin and Greek down there!

It was already well into March and now obvious that the war could not last too much longer before the expected collapse of Germany. Our crew, in common with the other new members of the squadron felt hanging over us a feeling of frustration and impatience. Events moved so quickly that the scene changed from day to day and an air of increasing confusion reigned.

5 Group, and others of Bomber Command, were being used more against tactical targets in support of the Army, although the attacks against the oil refineries were kept going to ensure that essential supplies were being denied to the defending forces.

In the path of the advancing 21st Army Group lay Wesel, a small town on the banks of the Rhine, one of several devastated in recent weeks by raids laid on in support of Montgomery's drive to the east. The already ruined town was packed with German army units assembled to hold on to one of the selected strong points of the northern Rhine defence. On the night of 23rd March, elements of 21st Army Group were to cross the Rhine at Wesel as the next move towards the Ruhr. About 180 Lancasters of 5 Group were to soften up the defences in preparation for the crossing.

It was a rather strange affair. With incredible confidence in the Met forecast and the ability of the Pathfinders whose job it would be to mark the target, the briefing indicated that no flare force would be used. The primary markers went down from a clear sky and were assessed by the Master Bomber in the light of the silvery moon.

Opposition was very slight and confined as I recall to some light flak which, although we were bombing from the lower level of some 10,000 feet, did not appear to worry anyone. The TI's were put down, the main force piled in and out again, the whole attack being over in some ten minutes, leaving Wesel, already a heap of ruins before our arrival, a more complete burning mass of rubble than before.

From Montgomery's telegram sent to Bomber Command soon afterwards, it appeared that units of 21st Army Group, waiting some 1600 yards only from our aiming point, had crossed the river before midnight with the loss of only 36 men. The efforts of even a relatively small force of Lancasters showed again the potential strength of heavy bombers when used in a tactical role.

The attack against Wesel was another of those which was purely a 5 Group affair, and was in one respect unusual in that none of the 195 Lancasters taking part was lost.

About this time came a change which, although it appeared to have little point, was apparently of some help in navigation and the use of Mercator charts. (Why, if this were so, it did not happen sooner, I cannot recall). The alteration involved a changeover from miles per hour to knots. Air speed indicators were altered and now we had to learn new speeds for all manoeuvres. Instead of cruising at 210 mph we now cruised at 185 knots, and on the approach to land we came in at 105 knots instead of as previously, 120 mph. The changes were surprisingly easy to get used to, and we had no problems.

In a matter of days, with little in the way of warning, 227 Squadron were uprooted from Balderton and moved to a new station at Strubby, a few miles inland from the Lincolnshire coast. Here we joined 619 Squadron already resident there. It was another wartime constructed station with similar amenities to those we had just left although perhaps the food was slightly better. One thing was observed immediately by Matt.

"Have you noticed?" he asked. "We seem to have been posted to a station of bloody heroes!"

He did not mean the aircrew, but instead pointed out that a surprising number of the ground personnel in all sorts of jobs, wore the oak leaf emblem of the 'Mentioned in Despatches'.

In most ways the place was much the same as we had expected except that we were no longer the only squadron resident. Among the members of 619 I found a familiar face in Johnny Whitely who I had known slightly at Clyffe, otherwise it was a station of strangers.

We were somewhat farther away from civilisation compared to Balderton, for our new home lay mid-way between the small towns of Alford and Louth, neither of which seemed to have much apart from the pubs.

Among the oil targets on the receiving end of 5 Group's efforts was Lutzkendorf, situated just south of Leipzig. It had been visited earlier in the year but was judged to be worth further attention.

Often 5 Group operated in these attacks separate from the main force of Bomber Command. This, and the fact that the Group had its own Pathfinder squadrons and had developed its own target making techniques, led it to being sarcastically referred to by the other Groups as the 'Independent Air Force'. In particular, 8 Group (Pathfinder Force) seemed especially touchy in this respect, but we cared little - being confident that we were the best!

We found ourselves on the battle order down to fly 9J F - the aircraft usually flown by Freddie Hulance, who seemed rather anxious that we returned it to him in the same good condition in which we borrowed it!

The trip started in good weather and clear skies were promised for most of the night, with the risk of low cloud and some patchy fog due about the time of our return. A small diversion raid was directed to commence just before we made our final turn to the target and was intended to hopefully draw off any night fighter interference. All seemed to be going to plan. Tiger was happy with the navigation and the occasional bump when we rode into the slipstream of another aircraft suggested that we were well in the middle of the stream. Now and then the hazy shape of another kite appeared ahead with the pinpoints of exhaust flame to confirm that it was another Lanc.

We were well into Germany before the first alarm and Bob called me to corkscrew away from an unidentified shape closing up on our tail. Several times we dived away without being too sure whether or not we were being stalked by a night fighter, but our inexperience meant that we could not take any chances.

A few fighter flares had begun to appear and I wondered what lay ahead. Then almost immediately the flares seemed to multiply several times over with alarming suddenness. I gasped with horror and called Matt and Steve to look; then sheepishly we all realised just how much our inexperience was showing - we were looking at the Pathfinder flares descending over the diversionary target!

Soon Tiger gave me warning of the turning point which would take us on the run in to Lutzkendorf, and we had hardly settled on our new course when flak bursts appeared in the sky and almost simultaneously the green of the primary blind marker burst on the ground ahead.

As the Pathfinder flares appeared in some numbers, Tiger ventured the opinion that we were in fact several minutes early and would have to lose time somewhere. Dog-legging wouldn't be sufficient and there appeared to be no alternative but to carry out an orbit regardless of the collision risk. Eyes out on stalks we all practically held our breath until our course was regained.

The TI's showed and were duly backed up. Overhead the flak intensified and suddenly an odd flame burst in the sky and curved slowly downwards in a lazy arc trailing flaming pieces. At first we took it to be one of the scarecrow shells which the Germans fired into the bomber stream to imitate an aircraft going down in flames (an attempt to hit at the morale of the crews) but quickly it became apparent that it was the real thing.

Frequent flashes on the ground now indicated that the early arrivals of the main force had commenced bombing and as we started our own bombing run we saw another couple of aircraft become a flaming inferno. As Matt called for the bomb doors to be opened and began giving me minor corrections of course, several searchlights which had wavered over the target area added to the general illumination, and the ground below flickered continuously with the flashes of exploding bombs, with every few seconds the larger flash of the cookies.

Occasionally, as though a camera shutter was being opened, one got a momentary impression of the sky as a whole, with a number of miniature aircraft dotted around.

"Bombs gone!" Matt's call came after what seemed to be an age, and the Lanc leaped gratefully upward as our cookie and ten 1000 pounders left to add their contribution to the destruction below. Now the camera run. The few seconds were like an eternity as we held straight and level for the photograph. As we did so a searchlight flickered over us, then back to hold us steady in the beam - to be joined immediately by several more.

I crouched instinctively in my seat as if to avoid being seen and concentrated hard on the instrument panel. It was as though the whole world was looking at us! Like being caught in the middle of Piccadilly Circus with one's pants down!

Tiger called the end of the camera run and at once I put the Lanc into a steep dive to starboard - to get away before the predicted flak arrived - as it probably would. The searchlights failed to hold us, but as the airspeed built up I heard someone comment unintelligibly over the intercom, although I was momentarily too occupied to enquire the reason.

Several thousand feet below we sorted ourselves out. Harry the wireless operator confirmed it was he who had called out to let us know we had been clipped by flak which had chopped a piece off the astrodome where his head had been a few seconds before!

The return trip was uneventful, although after we had crossed the coast Harry reported that the radio was playing up and we appeared to have lost W/T contact. On the last hour or so of our run back to base the cloud had become solid below and when I made my call on the R/T for permission to land I was somewhat surprised to get a refusal, although the circuit lights were obviously on and could be seen faintly through the murk below.

Patchy fog had made a diversion necessary - an instruction which we missed due to our faulty radio, and most of the boys had been directed to Stanton Harcourt, an OTU near Oxford. After a short wait, we and one other crew from 619 W/O 'Gillie' Potter's, were despatched to Fulbeck where the freak fog had not affected landings. [NOTE 6]

At interrogation we found some familiar faces. Harley's crew from 49 Squadron had had a rough trip and the strain still showed. [NOTE 7]

Fellow residents, 189 Squadron looked to have had a bad night and up to that time had four crews unaccounted for. It certainly appeared that the German defences were staying remarkably efficient to the last.

Although 227 had no aircraft missing from this operation, 6 of the Group's 231 Lancasters involved failed to return.

We stayed at Fulbeck until mid-morning before flying the short distance back to Strubby - to be greeted with some obvious relief by Freddie Hulance's ground crew who, with our having failed to appear in the early hours of the morning, had taken it that we had really gone missing!

At this time, as we were still a fairly new crew, we had only second claim to an aircraft which we regarded as 'ours'. PA 283 (9J-J) was officially that of Tony Tate, but as he was about to leave the Squadron we were to inherit her as our very own! She, like ourselves, had not been very long on the Squadron, and we considered ourselves lucky to now have first claim on her. Tiger suggested that to match her squadron letter J we should christen her the Jabberwock, after the nonsense poem in 'Alice through the Looking Glass'. We had ideas on having a suitable painting on the nose, but never quite got round to it as we could not decide on what a Jabberwock should look like. It was to all intents a fearsome beast as I remember the poem describes - the "Jabberwock with eyes of flame, came whiffling through the tulgey wood, and burbled as it came". [NOTE 8]

The next couple of weeks showed an increase in the general confusion. Briefings were frequent but few operations were actually flown, some were scrubbed before the briefing could even be completed,

some after bombing up, and some after the aircraft were actually on the move out to the runway! We must have all done a full tour of scrubs!

Other changes were also taking place. Some of the Canadians and Aussies were posted away en route to going home, and included our acting flight commander. His replacement was an older Squadron Leader, who we understood was a pre-war regular officer. He had an indifferent attitude towards the aircrew and showed his obvious disapproval of their usual easy going ways and dress.

'Operation Manna' was set up to drop food to the starving Dutch people who were being given a rough time by the Germans. Much as we all would have loved to have taken part we were not to be allowed any involvement, and it seemed that 5 Group were not called upon.

Much of Germany was now being over-run both from the west and the east, and most of the POW camps were liberated with the released prisoners taken to Belgium from where they were to be flown home.

Starting at much the same time as 'Manna', 'Operation Exodus' was commenced to fly home from Brussels and elsewhere the POWs to bases in England from where they were to be rehabilitated and sent on home leave. We were anxious to be allowed to do something, for the shooting war was obviously near its end and we had a general feeling of frustration. It was clear to the crew and myself that we would not be doing much more to earn our corn before it was all over in Europe. Rather unbelievably we found we wanted to go on. We almost felt cheated. Just a few more trips to prove that we really could cope. That we were as good a crew as we felt ourselves to be. It was all building up to an anti-climax.

May 7th. It was virtually all over. Tomorrow was to see the end officially declared. VE Day - Victory in Europe.
That evening we were taking a few quiet pints down at the local pub at Withern and Matt, Tiger and I were talking over the situation. Exodus trips intended earlier in the day had been scrubbed and were possibly to be flown tomorrow instead. But tomorrow would certainly be different. That vague day we had all looked forward to for so long - and now it seemed to be in danger of falling flat. Maybe because the war was only half over and so much remained to be done in the Far East, when it came, the end in Europe was a strange anti-climax.

The collapse of Germany and those last few days with all their conflicting rumours - there was no clear cut finish that we could see. The end was there, we all knew - but all that sordid squabbling over the niceties of surrender robbed the occasion of any real feeling. It was like having worked all day in the sun developing a thirst and then finding that the beer was flat.

As for VE Day itself we were hoping that an Exodus trip would go ahead, as we were on standby for the next day. One was laid on for the morning of May 8th, but we were not very surprised when after an early breakfast, we arrived at the briefing room to find it again scrubbed. Had things been left to the

crews themselves, I think that every crew would willingly have gone every day. As it was it seemed to be the usual confused and half-hearted effort.

Instead we had a bull parade in the hangar, when we listened to Churchill's speech, then we were freed for the day and decided to go in to Louth. I don't remember an awful lot of the events of that afternoon and evening, except that after quite a lot of beer we were all in the mood of celebration - as indeed was every other inhabitant of that very overcrowded town on that historic day.

We returned to camp in the early hours of May 9th, each with a pint pot souvenir hanging on his belt, and it was just as well that the powers that be refrained from laying on any flying programme on that day.

The following morning dawned bright and clear and by mid-morning it had become pleasantly hot. The flying programme was all haywire as usual. An Exodus trip was intended for the morning, but after most preparations had been carried out it was postponed until the afternoon. Only six aircraft in all were on from 227, and were to go to Melsbroek airfield near Brussels to collect our passengers who were then to be flown to Westcott in Buckinghamshire - a Wimpy OTU which was being used as a clearing centre for those POWs returning to England by air.

After an early meal I shepherded my crew together and we made our way down to the flight. We were not taking chutes, but drew from the parachute section sufficient Mae Wests for ourselves and our 24 passengers - just in case! It was going to be crowded in the Lanc with 31 bods aboard. A Lancaster isn't roomy at the best of times, and it had taken some careful working out to find a place for them all to sit. It wasn't possible to stack too many back near the tail otherwise the aircraft would behave awkwardly - especially at take off and landing, so to avoid any misunderstandings each passenger position was clearly marked with a painted number 1 to 24, and it was up to us to see that they didn't stray.

The crew bus dropped us at dispersal and Charlie our fitter came over to greet us as we walked over to J Jig - or the Jabberwock as we called her. She was a fine aircraft, a fairly new one, and we now had first claim on her - which made her 'ours'. It's always best to fly the aircraft you consider your own. Naturally a pilot thinks that his is the best, just as he's equally sure that his crew is the best on the squadron, and that his squadron is the best in the Group and so on.

We checked over the Mae Wests, and counted out the cushions and blankets which we were taking to give the boys a bit of comfort - together with some chocolate and sweet rations - a thoughtful gesture on someone's part. Over on the far side some of the 619 aircraft burst into life and looking at my watch I could see that it was time we too were making a start. There were no hitches and a few moments later we were taxying out. It was a really grand day. The sun was hot through the perspex and although already having discarded my battledress blouse I was finding that even in shirtsleeves I was sweating profusely by the time we came up to the airfield controller's caravan.

The last of the 619 kites turned on to the runway and, given a green from the caravan, we followed and were soon charging down the wide concrete strip, leading the vanguard of the 227 contingent.

Later with the tip of the Norfolk coast sliding away underneath I could see ahead in the blue of the sky and sea three of the 619 aircraft dotted about at varying heights, and looking back as far as my seat would allow, the tiny specks of the other five from 227 were just visible.

We were purring along at about 1000 feet, 180 knots, and before us stretched the North Sea in a seemingly endless sheet of blue green water. I took the Lanc down in a gentle descent until we were skimming low over the surface, and on we sped just a few feet up. The sea was quite calm with not enough wind to whip the water into white horses, and there was not even the suggestion of a swell. Flying low like this didn't quite give the same exhilarating sensation of speed as one got flying over land where there was a variety of objects large and small speeding by at close quarters, but all the same it made a pleasant diversion from stooging along at higher levels - and it certainly required plenty of concentration - at least as much as over land, for flying over water, especially smooth water, is very deceiving and it's quite difficult to judge height accurately.

At this low level the visible horizon is limited to that seen from quite a small ship and one doesn't get landmarks coming into view as one does at greater heights when it often seems ages before they are actually reached. Consequently, although we had been going some time it came as a little surprise when the flat coastline of Walcheren came into view.

Soaring back up to a respectable altitude we crossed the shore near the Westkapelle light and flew on over one of the saddest looking scenes we had ever come across.

In October 1944, during the advance of the Allied armies, it was decided that Walcheren was being made into a stronghold of German resistance and it was going to be a very difficult place from which to dislodge the enemy. Without clearing the island fortress the Allies were denied full use of the Scheldt estuary and the Port of Antwerp, and as the greater part of Walcheren lay below sea level it was felt that the breaching of the sea wall would result in the subsequent flooding making the assault easier by reason of the fact that the gun emplacements and other defences would be made untenable by the onrushing water.

During October, Lancasters of 5 Group broke down the sea wall in several places, and when the Allied offensive was finally launched, German resistance came to an end after only ten days on November 10th. Now, six months later, the island looked very much as it must have done following that November struggle.

We flew a mile or so inland of the sea wall and looked out over the abandoned countryside. From way back in 1940 scenes of destruction were sights common to all except those living in remote backwaters untouched by the hand of war, and although we had all seen the ravaging effects of bombs and rockets this, our first sight of devastation by water, seemed somehow in its way, to be even more terrible.

As far as the eye could see to the east, right to where the distant coastline merged with that of the adjoining islands, it was the same.

The sea, surging over the broken embankment had inundated the low lying land and now by far the greater area of the island (about 10 miles square) was submerged beneath the waters. Here and there a group of houses in some deserted village would stand bleakly on a patch of high ground above the level of the flood - some farm buildings perhaps with empty barns - and with no sign of cattle in the fields adjoining.

Down the slope a farm track sank slowly into the dirty blanket of water, the fence continuing just above the surface for a little way longer, indicating the course of the road, until at last it too was gone.

Another village slid beneath our wings, only the roofs and upper parts of the walls showing; a church providing the highest point above the strangling sea - the spire pointing upwards like an accusing finger as though at us - representatives of the carriers of destruction.

Alongside us on the starboard side the untouched sea wall ran southwards forming the only high ground on that side, and way over to port the spires and roofs in a distant untidy cluster marked the corpse of Middleburg - chief town of the island. The entire scene was one of utter desolation. Not a living thing could we see; below us was a dead world; a world of water.

It all seemed so quiet. I know that sounds silly considering we had four Merlins hammering away in our ears, but looking down on the land below it did seem quiet, with no life and not a sign of movement anywhere. Even the sea, having done its worst, seemed content with the havoc it had wrought and was itself lying still. It was perhaps the loneliest sight I have ever seen on earth and surely a symbol of the stupidity of man. For some time no one said anything. Then at last Matt spoke.

"I wonder whether all that was really necessary?" he said.

We didn't reply. There didn't seem much to say. We were all a little stunned by it all. This destruction of the land itself - handing back to the sea this expanse of hard-won fertile countryside seemed somehow particularly futile.

On we flew, the dead town of Flushing appearing with its dockland showing up as the only colour in a colourless landscape; the red-rusted metal of shattered vessels and twisted buildings and much of its streets and houses standing dry and untouched on what was the largest area of relatively high ground we had yet seen.

With Flushing slipping behind us we were over the Scheldt estuary and soon the green fields of Holland were beneath our wings. The pretty farmhouses and cottages provided a considerable contrast and although rather flat the countryside had the appearance of being bright and alive again.

I took the Lanc down to about a couple of hundred feet or so and on we sped towards the Belgian border, our black shadow flitting along under our port wing. A few people working in the fields looked up at our approach and waved cheerfully as we flashed overhead, and as we raced over one bunch of cottages, bright yellow and red in the sun, men standing in the gardens took off their hats and waved them at us, whilst from the open door of one house dashed a woman with what appeared to be an armful of freshly washed clothes she was about to hang out to dry, and these too were flapped in salute. We all waved madly in reply.

As we flew on I couldn't help noticing that the mainland had so far shown few battle scars, due I supposed to the advance over this area having been so rapid that there had been no intense action to inflict the destruction that had been the lot of less fortunate parts.

But just as we were talking of this and discussing it over the intercom, we shot over the top of a deserted airfield on which lay the hulks of broken and burnt out aircraft to provide a reminder that there had, after all, been a war here too.

By this time we were well into Belgium and returned to a thousand feet for it wouldn't be long before Brussels came into view. Soon the city showed itself, with its spires and towers forming an impressive sight in the clear air. We didn't fly right over Brussels but instead made for Melsbroek airfield which we picked out easily when some miles away. There were a number of aircraft in the sky in the vicinity and appeared to be many more parked on the ground alongside the runways.

The runway in use was the long one running as far as I remember roughly north-east to south-west, and the direction of landing when we arrived was to the north-east. It ran alongside and almost parallel to the perimeter track, and on that side of field about halfway along its length a column of black smoke rose high into the air from what at first sight appeared to be a small building on fire.

As we flew over it we could see that it was indeed a building of some sort, but the reason for the blaze was a Lancaster which was piled up on top of it. The whole lot was blazing furiously, belching black smoke, and only the tail unit and rear part of the fuselage was now recognisable. [NOTE 9]

One or two trucks stood nearby whilst a group of men seemed to be doing little - apparently content to let it burn itself out.

"Wonder what happened there?" said Steve.

"No one seems at all hurried", commented Tiger, looking over my shoulder.

"Wonder if they were taking off with a load of POWs?" I hazarded. "If so - it must have been the first flight for some of them. What an experience!"

We orbitted the field and calling control on the R/T got permission to land. There were one or two Lancs in the circuit, but they were widely spaced so we merely took our place in the queue.

Coming in on the approach I noticed that a Lanc which from the air had seemed parked to the right of the runway at a rather careless angle was in fact stranded there with a burst tyre. The runway was very bomb scarred with several patches of different colours on its surface where repairs had been carried out - the largest of these being roughly mid-way down its length. [NOTE 10]

I brought her in with my favourite ultra-slow approach and she sat down firmly without float. We were just rolling quite slowly by the time we passed the point halfway down the field where the wreckage of the Lanc still blazed, and as we came about level with it we felt an enormous jolt shake the aircraft as we taxied over an extremely bad patch of first aid on the surface.

"What the devil was that?" called Tiger.

"Not exactly a billiard table, eh?" I grinned as he poked his head over my shoulder.

"That explains a lot. I'd say that burnt out kite burst a tyre or bust the undercart going over that bump on take off and swung into the building".

"That's right," agreed Matt. "That other Lanc has a burst tyre too - same reason, I bet!"

"We'll have to remember that on take off", I said. "Make sure we get airborne on the bump and stay up.- although it'll be difficult enough with 31 bods on board".

We continued down the runway and along the peculiar narrow stretch of track that led to the perimeter, then turning off right we carried on round until we came to the other long runway by the sides of which were parked Lancasters in their dozens - two long rows of aircraft each side of the tarmac strip.

In the distance a figure signalled us with arms upstretched and as we came nearer he waved us into a gap in the line to the left of the runway. I manoeuvred through onto the grass, and swinging the Lanc round with a burst of engine, taxied cautiously into line. I switched off, and leaving our Mae Wests on our respective seats, we scrambled out. It was considerably hotter than it had been back in England and we were plenty warm enough in just shirt sleeve order.

Set back from the runway stood a large tent standing out white against the green of the surround, and by its entrance a notice indicating that all pilots and navigators were to report there.

We wandered over and the boys stood around in the sun whilst Tiger and I made ourselves known. Having reported, we were briefed on the procedure to be followed whilst at Melsbroek, the route to be taken home, and were given a crew number (ours I believe was somewhere in the 800's). When this was

called over the Tannoy we were to report to the marshalling point and would be given our quota of POWs, after which we were to take off in our own time, fly back to England via France, crossing the Channel at Beachy Head before setting course on the final leg to Westcott, near Aylesbury.

Melsbroek was a hive of activity with Lancs coming and going all the time - or so it seemed. There were large groups of weirdly clad POWs, some pathetically thin and haggard, being organised into batches of 24 and being shepherded away by their aircrews to the aircraft which were all over the available space - often in double rows by the runways. There were little bunches of men everywhere and almost as many aircraft as men.

We strolled over to the refreshment tents standing well back from the throng of men and machines, and took the inevitable cups of tea. Standing there in the brilliant sunlight watching the constant movement of aircraft to and from the parking lines, we listened to the Tannoy booming against the incessant roar of engines. We still had quite a way to go before our number came up, and with obviously plenty of time in hand we wandered round the field and away from the crowd.

Standing some way over from the Lancs were some Mitchells with RAF markings, and we spent a little time climbing about inside them with professional curiosity, coming to the conclusion that a Mitchell crew was even more cramped for space than most.

One field away, behind the Ops tent, a few German aircraft were stuck on the grass, and we strolled over and pottered about among them. They were probably the remnants of one or two prangs which had been unceremoniously cleared from the main field. Over the wreckage hung the penetrating smell of that horrible distinctive oil that Jerry always seemed to use. The pungent stink of it took me right back to 1940. Funny how a smell stirs a memory!

The afternoon wore on and we were into the early evening before it seemed that our number would soon be called. Several trucks rolled in from the Brussels road and we watched in silence as an assortment of men in a variety of uniforms climbed out. Mostly from the Army - or at least clad in khaki battle dress - some obviously so new that it had almost certainly been provided to replace whatever it was the owners had been wearing when released from the prison camp. A few RAF were among them.

The marshalling officials got down to their task but things didn't move very quickly at first. Then our number was eventually called - the last in a short list. We stood by the marshalling point whilst the crews ahead of us were allocated their passengers, and soon it became apparent that there would not be a full quota left for us. And so it turned out. When it came to the count we had only 12 - some RAF aircrew and a few Army. The organising officer came over towards us, his batch of papers clipped to a board, and pencil in hand.

"It's not worth you going off with half a load," he said. He looked at his watch. "We're expecting a few more trucks in from Brussels so you'd better hang on for a bit - if they don't come you can stay the night and return in the morning".

"That's OK with us," Bob assured him. "We'd like the opportunity of a closer look at Brussels anyway!"

We all agreed, but it was not to be, for whilst we were discussing the possibility, another bunch of men, about a couple of dozen in all, were being shepherded on to one of the trucks which stood by the marshalling point.

"Where are they off to?" I asked curiously. The marshalling officer turned.

"Oh! They're some poor devils who had a bit of a rough experience earlier today. First of all they were aboard a Lanc which burst a tyre on take off and finished up on the grass - fortunately without damage - then they were put on another only to have the same thing happen - only this time it swung, hit a building and went up in flames. You probably saw it when you arrived. It's the runways, you know - they're in a shocking state".

"You can say that again!" murmured Matt with feeling. "Were any of them hurt?"

"No. Fortunately they all got away with only a few bruises, but quite understandably they haven't got much faith in us Air Force types anymore!" Then he had a sudden thought.

"Wait a bit," he said. "There may be a few brave souls anxious to get home tonight. It's unlikely - but if there are they'll help to make up your load".

He strode over quickly to the truck where the Army boys were already aboard and waiting to go. We trailed over to watch the result. He called to them.

"If any of you chaps feel like seeing England tonight we've got room for 12 more on a kite just about to leave. Any offers?"

He was received with angry murmurs of refusal. Most were completely inaudible but some outspoken type was heard quite clearly to make a most improper and impossible suggestion to the officer - hinting what he could do with his aircraft. We grinned, and even the marshalling officer himself smiled patiently.

"I know how you feel," he said, "but it’s entirely up to you. If you want the chance – it’s there. I'll give you five minutes to think it over before you go."

The crowd in the truck were still hostile, but after conferring for a moment or two a few of them decided to risk it.

"We'll come," they said. And soon we had our 12 volunteers. They climbed down from the truck rather sheepishly and we introduced ourselves whilst the final arrangements were made for them to join us.

Some were openly afraid of the thought of flying again after their earlier experiences and we tried hard to assure them that there was nothing to it.

"You will get us off the ground this time, won't you?" asked one of the Army boys anxiously.

"Sure we'll get off all right, old boy", said Tiger with a grin. "We've never failed yet!"

"We'll do better than that - we'll get you back again in one piece!" promised Matt. "We're the best damn crew that ever was, boy! You're OK with us!" Some were still a bit dubious although we tried hard to convince them. I saw old Dick holding forth to two or three, whilst Steve and Harry were putting on their best salesman act to several more. At last we were allowed to move off and quickly we collected the other half of our passengers who had been patiently waiting and took the whole 24 over to where the Jabberwock stood.

The sun poured quite warmly from the clear evening sky and the whole place trembled with the roar of starting engines as we unloaded the Mae Wests and blankets and began to hand them around. For the next few minutes we must have presented a rather comic picture with the seven of us assisted by the aircrew POWs helping the Army boys to struggle into the unfamiliar garments.

As ever, Matt was quick to appreciate the humour of the situation, and taking my small camera he crept away under the starboard wing to take a candid snapshot with none being aware that they were being photographed. Then he called to us to look round for a second whilst he took another picture with the faces showing.

One of the POWs asked if he could have a print of the finished picture, and this resulted in a happy inspiration on our part. Why not send them all one? Quickly Steve produced pencil and paper and took down names and addresses.

Then time was getting on so we speeded up things and gave the boys a short briefing on the return trip with a plea for them to keep to their places on take off and landing. We showed our first guests aboard and Matt made them comfortable in their positions forward. They had little kit to stow and most had nothing more than the clothes they stood up in.

Steve stayed outside to prime the engines (for we were starting on the batteries) and the rest of us climbed aboard. Steve, perched on the undercart, primed the starboard engines which never having got really cold started first time. Soon all four were turning and it wasn't long before we were at last on the move down the long runway, which I couldn't help feeling was in rather better condition than the one in use.

We were still in shirt sleeves and had left the escape hatches off for coolness, for it was more than just warm inside the Lanc.

Round the peri track we crawled, to come to a halt by the end of the short narrow section some fifty or so yards long, which provided the link between the perimeter and the long runway. (Why they couldn't have widened that bit and made it a longer run I couldn't fathom).

I went over my vital action check with particular care, and getting permission to take off I released the brakes and slowly eased the Lanc on to the narrow connecting strip. Then I decided to start my take off run from where I was and so gain an extra few yards. Reaching forward I pulled the boost over-ride lever down to give maximum emergency take off power, and holding the brakes on, opened up to zero boost - then with brakes released pushed the four throttles smoothly forward in a staggered line and on through the gate.

Steve locked the throttles as I held the stick well forward to bring the tail up quickly. We raced on down the runway, jolting over the uneven surface - and then it came - a mighty bump which projected the aircraft off the ground as we hit the danger spot. Instantly I eased the stick back and nursed the Lanc along in a mushy half stalled condition a foot or so up slowly building up the airspeed until we were at last flying comfortably and climbing steadily away - albeit feeling a little unwieldy due probably to the unfamiliar distribution of weight. At least we had made a clean take off and the boys could breathe again.

"D'you know?" said Matt on the intercom. "I believe I was holding the damn thing up on will power alone after we went over that bump!"

We all laughed, but Dick said seriously that there had been some anxious faces back there when we had started our run. I put the boost over-ride back to normal and Steve brought the revs and boost down to climbing power. A gentle turn brought us then back over Melsbroek when Tiger called to give me the first course to steer.

I settled down at 1000 feet and adjusted the trim; Steve again reduced the power to cruising and the grinning face of Tiger appeared over my right shoulder, sucking his empty pipe as usual and making rude gestures to me for being one degree off course. These navigators! They think all pilots ought to be able to fly their courses within a hairs-breadth! I made him a suitable reply and we settled into a comfortable stooge over the fields and woods of Belgium, soon crossing to France, flying now almost directly into the sun low in the western sky.

Now that we were safely airborne our POW friends had recovered their spirits and those who could see out were admiring the scenery below. Some parts of the countryside over which we passed showed surprisingly little traces of war - possibly due to the rapid advance of the Allies over that point, and it wasn't until we came to the Pas de Calais area that we noticed the occasional wheel tracks in the fields. It was here too that we saw several examples of what we took to have once been flying bomb launching sites - all having received some considerable attention from Allied aircraft.

As we approached the French coast the scars deepened. Whole fields containing a whirl of interlaced wheel and track marks, with shell or bomb craters strewn around in great numbers. It was at this point that our passengers began to show an increased interest in the proceedings.

Dick and Bob went so far as to encourage some of the bolder ones to try their hand in the rear or mid upper turrets and the backchat over the intercom at this stage was quite amusing. Tiger obliged with his off-key rendering of 'Home on the Range' - hardly musical, but we, the rest of the crew were used to it. To us it meant that Tiger was happy - and when Tiger was happy we were on track! The rest of the POWs must have thought him a bit of a barmy character. I looked round once to see several army bods watching with a fascinated look whilst Tiger took a Gee fix. He attempted to explain it, but gave up and contented himself with showing them our position on the chart.

At last through the slight haze which surrounded the sun, the English coast appeared as a blur in the distance, and I think we all felt that the moment of the day had arrived.

As many as could crowded forward to catch the first sight of England, and after the initial buzz of excitement, stood watching that smudge of a line gradually merge into the recognisable outline of Beachy Head.

I looked at their faces as they peered out wide-eyed. What were they thinking, I wondered? Steve caught my eye and I knew instantly that his mind was on the same thing - wondering what it felt like to these poor chaps - seeing once more the country they had left - long ago in many cases, for we had some veterans from Dunkirk and even earlier - and now to which they were returning at last to within reach of their families and homes.

I glanced at some of the aircrew among them. A W/Op from 4 Group. A navigator from our own 5 Group. What were they thinking? When they had last crossed this coast they were on what was to be their last operational trip.

We were now close in and although the light from the setting sun reflected awkwardly from the water we could see the downs of Sussex quite clearly. Someone pointed out Eastbourne pier and that did it. The spell was broken and everyone has something to say.

The aircraft was quite a sight just then. We had half a dozen up front by the bomb aimer's position, more by Steve and Tiger's bench, some in the astrodome and in the rear and mid upper turrets - and as there were still some who couldn't see out I opened the bomb doors as we came over Eastbourne and they took it in turns to look out through the rear inspection panel. It was a grand moment.

Order having returned I settled down on course once more and then had an idea of my own.

"How near to Caterham does this leg take us, Tiger?" I asked.

"We should pass over Reigate," he replied. "That is if you manage to fly a bit more accurate course than you're doing at present!"

I ignored the sarcasm.

"Think anyone'd mind if I wandered off a bit and took a look at the old homestead?" I enquired.

"No one'd ever notice!" he grinned, chewing on the pipe stem. "If they did they'd probably just put it down to your ropey flying!"

"Thanks for those few kind words," I said. We'll do a circuit of boom town then."

When I first saw Gatwick way over to port I altered course to the north, and with the white scar of the Oxted chalk pits on my right soon caught sight of the Eastbourne road. I'd never flown over home in daylight before and was a little surprised to see just how wooded the local area was. It looked rather an attractive place from the air with its many small hills and valleys with tree covered slopes, and the familiar roads and houses scattered about.

Quite easily I picked out the red roof of home, and opening up the throttles did two or three circuits at about 1000 feet. But the garden remained empty probably Mother was too used to the sound of aircraft overhead to bother about just one more.

I turned away as one of the familiar green double decked buses crawled toy-like past Westway Common, and soon we were on our way once more - over the outskirts of London, across the Thames, and on over the fields of Buckinghamshire.

Westcott was busy when we arrived. Lancs were parked almost as thickly as at Brussels and quite a long queue were waiting to take off. It was a Wellington OTU and most of the resident Wimpys were still at home on their dispersals around the field.

We were given permission to land, and joining the circuit at once began to orbit while our stewards Dick, Bob and Harry shepherded our passengers into position for landing.

I made a careful approach and got it to sit down smoothly without floating. I don't think I'd ever tried harder to make a good landing - and even Matt approved!

Turning off the runway we noticed for the first time the little knot of villagers standing on the road by the edge of the field, just where the perimeter track ran close to the hedge; they obviously knew what was going on for they all waved energetically as each Lanc taxied past. Only a few hundred yards more, then we parked along one of the runways not in use and switched off. We quickly climbed out - our passengers needing no help!

Back on English soil! It must have felt good to them! It made us all feel good to see them and we were almost as happy as they were. All agreed that it had been a great trip and even the 12 Army boys were glad that they had found the courage to defy the fates for that third time.

"Well," said the 4 Group W/Op with a broad grin. "Being on Hallibags I never thought I'd ever agree that a Lanc was any good - but I have to admit it - this is the finest trip I've ever done!" Then with a mischievous afterthought - "Pity you couldn't have brought a decent aircraft, though!" We forgave him!

We stood around the WVS vans which were doling out tea and cakes and chatted together until at last trucks arrived to take the boys away to where a real meal awaited - then pay, clothing, and best of all - leave.

We were quite sorry to see them go. It seemed that we'd known them for much longer than a few short hours. They shook hands all round, thanked us again and then climbed aboard. The last farewells were shouted as the trucks moved off and the seven of us stood watching in the fading light until they disappeared from view. By the time we'd sorted out the blankets and Mae Wests and replaced the escape hatches it was almost dark. The weather was still grand - a beautifully clear night, warm with a cloudless sky in which a multitude of stars had appeared without our noticing.

Several other Lancs were taxying out with nav lights on, and mingling with them were the bulky low-slung shapes of the resident Wimpys - off no doubt on a cross-country trip. Watching them rumble out our thoughts went back to our own OTU days. Well, they had a grand night for their cross-country - but they were welcome to it. For us it was home and bed.

Starting up we moved out and filtered into the queue behind a Wimpy and crawled around the perimeter, the blues and ambers of the taxy track peeping through the gaps between the aircraft.

Darkness was well upon us and the aircraft were outlined sombrely against the western sky where the last trace of day was fading. Sitting on the end of the runway, I warned the crew to stand by for take off, and as the Wimpy ahead of us cleared the distant fence there came a steady green from the caravan and I pushed the throttles forward.

As soon as the wheels lifted I went into a climbing turn onto course and in a few moments we were back at a thousand feet and heading homewards. The night air was still and wonderfully smooth. Having adjusted the trim the Lanc flew hands and feet off with hardly a tremor of airspeed or compass needle.

Tiger leaned over my shoulder and gave a nod of approval. He seemed pleased at something and it wasn't hard for me to guess why he was so. It had been a day to remember. A day in which we felt we had done something really worthwhile.

At any rate I know I was quite contented as I sat there letting the Lanc fly herself, and listening to 'Home on the Range' coming quietly over the intercom.

Tiger was happy. We were all happy. It had been a happy trip.

Notes

[NOTE 1]

W/O1 William Andrew 'Jake' Johnson RCAF from Lashburn, Saskatchewan was killed in action, along with three other members of his crew on the night of March 14th 1945.
The captain of his crew, F/Lt Maurice Leonard 'Morrie' Hunt RNZAF from Masterton, New Zealand parachuted to safety but was attacked and beaten by members of the Hitler Youth. He died two days later, having been refused medical treatment.

Their aircraft, RA546 9J-J was one of 8 Lancasters shot down in a single night by Hauptman Martin 'Tino' Becker of NJG 6 flying a Junkers JU88. He finished the war with 59 confirmed kills and passed away in 2009.

[NOTE 2]

F/Lt Matthew William 'Ding Dong' Bell RAF from County Durham, UK was killed in action along with his entire crew of eight. All twelve airmen are buried in the Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery at Durnbach, Germany

[NOTE 3]

Research has shown that F/Lt Croker's Lancaster G George (in which W/O Allam was flying) was attacked by Hauptman Johannes Hager, Staffelkapitan of 6/NJG1 flying a Messerschmidt Bf110-G equipped with 'Schrage Musik' upward firing cannon. Hauptman Hager shot down two other aircraft on the night of March 20th/21st 1945, a 619 squadron Lancaster and a 223 squadron Special Duties Liberator. His total claims for the war were 48 confirmed kills from 99 sorties making him one of the most successful Luftwaffe night fighter pilots.

Johannes Hager and Mervyn Croker both survived the war, passing away in 1993 and 2009 respectively.

Avro Lancaster Mk.1 'G George' (PD349 9J-G) was repaired and survived the war having completed 36 operations. She was scrapped in 1947.

[NOTE 4]

F/O Ray King RAAF, along with three of his crew baled out and spent the rest of the war as POWs. The other four crew members sadly did not survive and are buried in the Commonwealth War Grave Cemetery in Berlin.

Second pilot F/O Warren Pitts RAAF managed to parachute to safety but landed in a tree. Possibly dazed, he released his harness and tragically fell to his death.

[NOTE 5]

F/Lt Edward Kimpton 'Kim' Whitechurch RNZAF and his crew were last heard of when their aircraft transmitted at 05.03 hours in the vicinity of the Friesian Islands. The Lancaster is believed to have ditched in the North Sea about 40 miles west of Denmark. The body of F/Lt Whitechurch washed ashore three months later and was buried in Mosevraa churchyard, Denmark. The other six crew members have no known grave and are commemorated on the memorial to missing aircrew at Runnymede.

[NOTE 6]

W/O Albert Victor 'Gillie' Potter 657946 619 Squadron

[NOTE 7]

W/O A W J Harley 49 Squadron
Rank Warrant Officer
Service RAF
Service Number Not known
Crew Position Pilot
Posting Details Posted in 3/45

Flew 2 operations with 49 Sqn before the end of the war.

[NOTE 8]

Avro Lancaster Mk.1 PA283 9J-J was built by Vickers Armstrong Ltd at Chester and delivered in early March 1945. She completed 9 operations, survived the war and was scrapped along with thousands of her sisters in 1947.

[NOTE 9]

Lancaster Mk.III ME623 OF-Z of 97 Squadron. It had taken off at 15:35 from Melsbroek with a complement of 24 prisoners of war as passengers, but swung out of control and crashed heavily, injuring three of those on board. Captain F/L C.Arnot RAAF.

Name - ARNOT, CHARLES
Service - Royal Australian Air Force
Service Number - 418513
Date of Birth - 13 Dec 1922

Place of Birth - HAWICK, SCOTLAND
Date of Enlistment - 23 May 1942
Locality on Enlistment - Unknown
Place of Enlistment - MELBOURNE, VIC
Next of Kin - ARNOT, THOMAS
Date of Discharge - 3 Jan 1946
Rank - Flying Officer
Posting at Discharge - 9 ACHU RAF
WW2 Honours and Gallantry - None for display
Prisoner of War - -No

[NOTE 10

RA595 101 Sqdn SR-Q.
T/o 1213 Brussels-Melsbroek but swung out of control and slid to a stop, its undercarriage collapsed. One member of crew, who is not identified, was slightly hurt. The aircraft loss card gives the following information: "On t.o. a slight fast swing developed, which was corrected, followed by violent stbt.swing. a/c left runway + u/c collapsed."

Crew:
F/O P.G.L. Collett - RAAF
F/Sgt J. Horner - RAAF
F/Sgt R. Martin
F/O A.W. Tompson
F/Sgt A. Condon - RAAF
W/O M. Hann - RAAF
F/Sgt M. Smedley - RAAF.

Name - COLLETT, PETER GERALD LANGWILL
Service - Royal Australian Air Force
Service Number - 424149
Date of Birth - 6 Jul 1923
Place of Birth - ST LEONARDS, NSW
Date of Enlistment - 15 Aug 1942
Locality on Enlistment - Unknown
Place of Enlistment - SYDNEY, NSW
Next of Kin - COLLETT, BERNARD
Date of Discharge - 8 Jan 1946
Rank - Flying Officer
Posting at Discharge - 9 AIRCREW HOLDING UNIT
WW2 Honours and Gallantry - None for display

Prisoner of War - No

The second was Lancaster Mk.III ME623 OF-Z of 97 Squadron. It had taken off at 15:35 from Melsbroek with a complement of 24 prisoners of war as passengers, but swung out of control and crashed heavily, injuring three of those on board. Captain F/L C.Arnot RAAF.

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Prisoner of War - -No

CHAPTER 11 – The Odd Job Men

A few days later we were given the first insight of how some people at least saw the post-war Air Force.

The Wing Commander was for some reason away for a few days, and our new flight commander, the pre-war regular Squadron Leader, took it upon himself to call a full parade of all squadron personnel. [NOTE 1]

Having got us assembled he wasted no time but waded immediately into the attack.

"Now that lot's over" he said, presumably meaning the war in Europe, "we're going to get back to the real thin - the real Air Force".

We waited with a somewhat puzzled air for him to explain.

We were, he told us, 'a disgrace to the Service and to the uniform'. We were always scruffily dressed, had no semblance of discipline, and completely lacked any showing of respect to rank and position. Just because officers and NCOs flew in the same crew it didn't mean that they could behave as though they were all on the same level. This habit of everyone in a crew being on first name terms wouldn't do and had to stop. In future all officers would demand and get the respect due to them. Their NCO crew members would in future stand to attention when they addressed their commissioned colleagues, would salute them properly and call them 'Sir'!

At first we listened in a silence of complete disbelief. Then in the rear ranks someone started to hiss quietly. It was quickly taken up and in a few moments it was impossible for the S/Ldr to hear himself speak. He went red in the face and looked about to explode with rage. Then, quivering with suppressed fury he turned on his heel and walked away from us. The parade broke up in a mixture of laughter and anger - but strangely enough we heard nothing more of it all!

Soon after this episode I was informed that something was moving on the fact that after joining the squadron I should have been commissioned. In the changes which had followed quickly one upon the other - our change of CO, the move to Strubby, and then the confusion which overtook everything in the last months before VE Day, such matters had become lost and had only just come to light again. I was instructed that I, with three others, F/Sgts Heriot, Marquis and Well, was to report to Station HQ for an interview with the Group Captain. The Groupie, who we hardly ever saw, appeared to be a somewhat strange individual, and although he had apparently at one time commanded a squadron he looked rather out of place in it all, and we said, rather unkindly perhaps, that he had the manner of one who would be more suited to being on the bridge of a destroyer! [NOTE 2]

The four candidates duly reported to the Station Adjutant at nine a.m. sharp and were told to wait outside the office in the corridor until called. The Group Captain eventually arrived and stalked past us without a glance. The morning wore on with nothing happening, and I went in to remind the Adj that we

were still there. Yes, he said, he knew, but the Group Captain was terribly busy and could not see us just then - we were to continue waiting.

At lunch we were still standing there when the Groupie emerged from his office and completely ignored us on his way to the mess. Somewhat mad at this cavalier treatment I stormed into the Adj and demanded to know what was going on.

"Sorry", I was told, "He's still so terribly busy - you'll have to come back again after lunch and wait until he's free".

I was not amused. "No", I said, "I'm playing football for the squadron side this afternoon. If he really wants to see me I shall be out on the football field. If he doesn't, you can tell him he has my permission to stick his commission!"

The Adj looked suitably horrified but said nothing - and that, not surprisingly, was the last I ever heard of it!

On the flying side there was work to do. In the bomb dump had been found a large quantity of rusty and very dangerous incendiaries, and for a while we were occupied in taking loads of these out into the middle of the North sea and dumping them. At first we brought the cans back, until one day several kites opened their bomb doors when back at dispersal and out fell a heap of potentially lethal bombs - rusted in to the point where they had stayed in their cans when supposedly dropped, and apparently afterwards falling out to be held by the bomb doors all the time the latter remained closed.

Early in June we were on the move again. 'Tiger Force' which was to be the first group of Bomber Command due for the Far East was not to include all 5 Group squadrons and we were among several who were to move over to 8 Group, Pathfinder Force.

And so off we went to our new home at Graveley, near Cambridge. 692 Squadron with their Mossies had just moved out, and we joined 35 Squadron who were one of the original PFF units and long time residents of Graveley.

In 8 Group we found some of the navigation methods surprisingly rigid by comparison with what we had become accustomed to in 5 Group, who were usually innovative in almost everything they did and believed that there was always a better way of everything if only it could be found. 5 Group navigators put most of the important detail straight onto their chart instead of in the nav log which was the usual practice elsewhere. Tiger much preferred it that way. It seemed good sense to have the most important information actually in front of one as we went along, with just the major detail repeated as a standby in the nav log.

The move to Graveley proved highly popular with our friends, the crew of F/Sgt 'H G Wells'.

In their travels they had acquired two vehicles to give them some independent mobility. One, an old Morris 8 saloon (soon christened by our crew the V1) was rarely seen to move under its own power, but the V2, a long bonneted SS Jaguar was usually mobile, and somehow all seven of the crew managed to get aboard. The V2 was run on stolen 100 octane aircraft petrol laced, it was claimed, with a dash of hydraulic oil to tone down the fierce effect on the valves.

Graveley proved to be one of the stations fitted with the FIDO fog dispersal equipment - (this burned vast quantities of low grade petrol and cleared sufficient fog on bad nights to enable aircraft to land safely). The owner of the V2, F/Sgt Gibson, the Wells crew bomb aimer, regarded it as his birthday when we arrived at Graveley and found the bonus which was awaiting him.

A quick exploratory trip, a large spanner and a short length of hosepipe and the V2 was assured of an unlimited supply of fuel. Unfortunately our stay at Graveley was not to be for long, but it was a pleasant enough station. We had yet another change of CO, a W/Cdr McMillan of whom we saw little and cared about as much. Several years later he flew with British South American Airways, and was captain of the Tudor 'Star Tiger' when it disappeared with all hands over the Caribbean.

Someone got the idea of allowing representatives of the various ground sections a chance to see what the squadrons had done with their backing, and we flew a few low level cross country exercises around various routes over Germany with airmen and WAAFs from the transport, parachute, cookhouse and admin sections aboard.

A few more serious jobs came up for us when experiments were carried out with captured German radar, and a number of dummy operations under the code name 'Post Mortem' were flown against targets on the German/Danish border.

These were to 'targets' such as Flensburg and Frederica, and although organised as far as possible as if they were real operations, they were really little more than navigational exercises.

We landed back one afternoon from a 'Post Mortem' to find a sports meeting just ending and with personnel streaming from the field and making their way back to the messes. Walking back from the flight, Jackson, Dad Teague's navigator caught us up. He had not flown that day.

"Saw you come in," he said to me. "You were in B Baker today weren't you?"
"That's right," I agreed. "How did you know?"
"I can recognise you by your landings!!" - I wondered what insult was about to come! - but no! -
"You always touch down early and turn off by the first intersection - the rest float way down the runway."

I must admit to being quite pleased to find myself identifiable in a manner to which I didn't object!

Soon after getting accustomed to the Lancaster, and its peculiarities compared to the Halifax, I had become a little puzzled at the way in which everyone seemed to waste a lot of runway in landing by coming in over the fence and then floating for a considerable distance before touching down. On a shorter runway, and particularly at an unfamiliar airfield it was not a good thing. Surely, I thought, one could improve that by a slower approach speed?

Much earlier in my flying career I had developed a landing technique which, although not generally approved by others, was one I preferred to use. Instead of doing what we had been taught from the beginning - to check the descent, fly level with the ground until the speed died away, then bring the stick back to stall gently onto the ground - I slowed up my approach a little earlier, came over the threshold almost in the landing attitude, and throttling back all the time arrived at the ground in one continuous move. The dear old Wimpy had been an ideal aircraft on which to perfect this form of arrival, and I had found it fairly simple to adapt to the Halifax after getting my crew's approval to experiment. On the Lanc I used an approach speed of some 10 knots slower than the official one and found it resulted in a much neater and satisfying landing using far less runway in the process. Our friend Jackson had obviously noticed!

One of our incendiary jettisoning trips provided an interesting diversion. Our own 'Jabberwock' was for some reason unserviceable and we found ourselves - with some feeling of trepidation - down to fly D Dog. It was not my favourite aircraft and in fact could probably be said, with one possible exception, to be no one's favourite. It seemed to have had a history of unusual snags and had produced a number of embarrassing situations for just about all who flew her.

D Dog was the only Mk. 3 on 'A' Flight, the others being all the tried and trusted Mk.1s. When I joined the squadron it was the fourth of its line - the previous three aircraft with that identification letter having failed to return from operations. Consequently D Dog became accepted as something of a jinx to be avoided and it was said that some crews even positively refused to fly it.

The exception was, perhaps predictably, H G Wells crew, absolutely the scruffiest on the squadron, who claimed that for them D Dog always behaved itself. Undoubtedly it was different from other Lancs and like its patrons always seemed to have a slightly untidy and indefinably different look about it.

On the occasion of our clash with the Beast things started quietly enough. On the run-up engines appeared to be all in order and we taxied out. With a green from the caravan we opened up to full power and we were on our way.

D Dog lifted easily off the runway but having got wheels tucked away apparently decided that it had done its duty in seeing us safely airborne and now felt that it should exercise its usual influence over the proceedings. Quietly enough at first. The climb out was terribly sluggish and we now took what seemed to be an age to reach our cruising height. Eventually we were there, and having levelled out and got established on course, I called for Steve to reduce revs and boost to cruising power.

D Dog reacted by practically falling out of the sky. Hastily we opened up back to full climbing power 2650 plus 4 and after settling down tried once more. Again the Beast refused to play and floundered about like a stranded whale. Puzzled by the strange phenomenon, I told Steve to open up power once more and again we struggled back to our briefed height.

We flew on for some time whilst we pondered on the Beast's odd behaviour. Obviously we could not carry on in this manner for apart from drinking extra fuel we could hardly continue to give the engines a thrashing in this way for an unlimited time.

Then, while still uncertain what to do, we noticed that our airspeed had slowly built up and was now considerably above cruising. Steve and I discussed the situation in almost hushed tones (it was as though we did not want the Beast to overhear our plans) - then Steve reduced both revs and boost slightly to see what effect it had. The answer was none at all. The beast appeared not to notice. It ploughed onwards. Again Steve cut back the power, this time in two stages and still D Dog charged on at a healthy rate of knots - still well above cruising and without losing height. We reduced power still further to eventually down to 2100 revs and plus 2 boost - all without having any apparent effect. The stupid old Beast appeared not to have noticed what we were doing and pressed ever onward. We had the odd feeling that if we had the nerve we could have continued our experiment to the point where the old devil was left flying as a high speed glider!

Several hours later, and we were actually in the circuit when the slumbering Beast awoke. We had 20 degrees of flap selected and were flying downwind. Perhaps it was my call to Steve for 'Wheels down 2650' which broke the spell, for with little time and opportunity left, D Dog decided to have a final fling. We turned across wind and onto the base leg and I called for '2850, full flap'. The power went on OK but no extra flap. Steve played tunes on the flap lever as we turned into the funnels, but it was 20 degrees or nothing. I decided to go for a landing regardless, and increased speed to allow for the flat, virtually flapless landing.

D Dog touched down protestingly to the familiar accompaniment of popping exhausts, and took most of the long runway to stop. I felt somewhat relieved. Not much more could happen now, I thought. But the Beast had the final say.

Parked safely in dispersal, I had completed the run down checks and was about to switch off, when the complete radiator flap of the starboard inner engine fell off and bounced on to the concrete in a shower of sparks. The Beast had had the last laugh. I sighed in resignation and switched off the ignition.

A lot of our practice exercises now consisted of fighter affiliation - doing cross country trips of some and a half or so whilst being continuously 'attacked' by Spitfires - and quite a bit of formation.

The latter was fairly new to us, and to Bomber Command in general, as even on daylight ops the Command had almost invariably flown in a 'gaggle' as at night, this giving each individual aircraft the opportunity to take evasive action if attacked by fighters.

Our base at Graveley was very close to the area occupied by the USAAF B17 squadrons and often when we were flying around in our formation practice we would be joined by a few Fortresses who took a delight in getting close in on us and showing us just how it should be done. We got used to having a B17 wingtip thrust almost in our ear and seeing ten grinning faces peering at us, mostly with jaws champing away at the inevitable gum, and often with cameras recording the close encounter.

After we got tired of this we would break away and mix it in a gloriously hectic dogfight. The inhabitants of Cambridgeshire and Suffolk must have sometimes wondered what was going on when several Lancs and Fortresses could be seen overhead behaving like overgrown fighters! I think we had the advantage though, for we found that we could rack the Lanc around in a near vertical turn and get in a position of advantage with the B17 appearing unwilling to match us.

Soon we were on the move again. Together with Well's crew, we found ourselves posted without explanation a few miles west to 582 Squadron at Little Staughton, near St. Neots.

582 was a long established PFF squadron and shared the station with 109 Mosquito squadron. Staughton, another airfield of wartime construction, had much the same limited attraction as others of its type, but at least the food was eatable. It had something of an unusual record in that two of its pilots, S/Ldr Palmer of 109 and Capt Swales of 582 had both won the VC - but alas, both had not survived. Little Staughton too, had found its bomb dump loaded with rusty incendiaries, and soon we were again trundling back to the North Sea and jettisoning our loads in with the unfortunate fish.

Our bomb disposal trips we tended to use as a bit of fun and also to get some useful practice in switching jobs. Often there would be a complete 'musical chairs', with, say, Matt at the controls, Dick on the GEE set, Bob on the H2S, Tiger in the rear turret etc.

Up to this time I think very few of us had given much thought to what might happen when the war was over. After all Japan was yet to be forced into submission, and although the American were making considerable progress in their invasion of the various Pacific islands and were mounting regular and effective raids against the homeland of Japan, it still appeared that the end could be a long way off.

However, as always someone had an eye to the future. Flight Sergeant Gibson, the bomb aimer of Wells' crew. Some years older than most of us, he was a bit of a brainy old bird, and a clever engineer. He had trained in South Africa at the same flying school as Matt, our own bomb aimer, and had claimed that he had been involved in earlier years in the design of the tram cars which ran in some of the South African cities! Just before the war Gibson had had his own boat building yard on the Thames near Reading, and intended to return to that trade as soon as he was released from the RAF. He seemed very interested in the possible use post-war of the GEE navigation aids adapted for marine use.

After my own return to civilian life I was for a time based at the Dunlop Sports factory at Waltham Abbey in Essex, and by chance met up again with Gibson who had set up in business with a boat yard a

few miles away on the river at Broxbourne. One evening he showed me over an ocean going motor launch he was fitting out. With a grin he pulled aside a tarpaulin and low and behold, there was a complete GEE set as fitted in a Lanc. He laughed at my surprise.

"In the shambles after VE Day", he said, "no one seemed to know or care what went on, so one day I backed the old V2 up to the radio section and helped myself!".

A much more worthwhile task then came along. Under the code 'Operation Dodge' some of the long serving 8th Army were to be flown home to the UK from Italy, using Lancs of Bomber Command - and were, it was rumoured, to undergo training prior to embarking again for the Far East.

We were to fly out to two bases in Italy, Pomigliano near Naples and San Spirito, near Bari on the Adriatic coast - returning with our passengers to Tibenham in Norfolk.

Our first trip to Bari was something of an adventure and also in many ways an eye opener. We were there some 4 days and had the chance of getting around the local area a little before we were due to return. Bari had not much to recommend it and stunk to high haven with many of its side streets piled high with rotting rubbish. Going in on the truck from San Spirito, one could smell Bari several miles before we actually arrived there!

Some of those crews who went instead to Pomigliano found that Naples, although it may have looked picturesque, had the same drawback. One rear gunner, a Yorkshireman from Luddenden Foot (in his broad local accent he called it 'Looden in Foo-it) had a most lurid way of describing the smell. He was apt to overwork the same descriptive adjective for just about everything, good or bad, and we found that if, as was rare with him, something was exceptional, the highest praise possible was for him to rate it 'lush' (pronounced 'loosh').

Remembering from my childhood days in Bury St. Edmunds a firm of solicitors by the name of Oliver Lusher & Co., I christened him 'Oliver'. I never knew his real name, but Oliver he became to us all.

After completing our first return trip, several members of different crews contracted malaria, despite the fact that we had all taken the prescribed mepacrin tablets to avoid it. Steve and several of his fellow flight engineers, were laid low and the squadron was left very short of flight engineers as a result.

A day or two later, some shattering news was then made known - the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. It appeared that surely it would bring an immediate end to the war against Japan, but nothing more was heard to confirm this despite the Allies' threat to repeat the treatment elsewhere.

A second Bari trip was planned but Steve and others had not recovered, and a suggestion was made that some of the 109 Squadron pilots, some of whom had Lancaster experience, might like to fly as our stand in engineer. We raised no objection and found ourselves with a new temporary crew member - one of

109's flight commanders, a F/Lt Marshall, a second tour man who had done his first on Lancs. He proved to be a pleasant and easygoing addition to the crew.

Before we left, Nagasaki had received atom bomb No.2 and Japan had surrendered. We gave little thought to our possible future at that time, and were more concerned with the job in hand.

Arriving again at San Spirito, we found things had already started to move. There were masses of P51 fighters lined up on the airfield and it seemed were having the engines removed before the fuselages were destroyed as unwanted junk! It made us think. Probably before very long we too would be classed as 'not wanted' - and what then?

For the time being we were not too worried and spent three pleasant days in the sun, including an afternoon at the Army's motor cycle speedway meeting at San Spirito.

The next day we were due to return to the UK and after briefing, as we left the briefing tent, I found my way barred by a tall fair-haired Flying Officer sporting a huge bushy moustache.

He grinned at me and said "I bet you don't remember me?"
I looked hard at him and admitted I didn't.
"The moustache puts you off, I bet - but look again - you taught me to fly at Sywell in 1942!"

It was John Brown, who i had always regarded as the best pupil I had ever had, and who i remembered well from those early days of instructing. He was now in 115 Squadron in 3 Group, not too far from us at Staughton. After Sywell, John had been sent overseas to continue his training and had, by a strange coincidence finished up at No.1 BFTS Terrell, where I had been myself almost two years earlier. I remembered he had written to me from there when he was a member of 15 Course, and had described for me some of the many changes which had taken place since my day.

We stayed and chatted for a while until it was time to go out to the aircraft, and it was to be another 46 years before we met again - oddly enough in Texas, at the 50th Anniversary Reunion of No.1 BFTS!

On the trip back F/Lt Marshall took the controls for a bit and I dozed off in the right hand seat. Coming to with a start I saw two of the Army bods down in the nose showing some concern and I looked over to see Marshall also fast asleep! At least he'd put 'George' in before dozing off - but they couldn't appreciate that!

The trip back was uneventful and in good weather. Much later in the year when the 'Dodge' trips were still continuing into the winter, aircraft on one return trip ran into a dreadful and unpredicted storm with disastrous results. Several aircraft were lost with all crew and passengers, whilst others pressed on to land back at Tibenham with various forms of damage.

Back at Little Staughton, F/Lt Marshall promised me a trip in a Mossie as a return favour, and a few days later phoned me at the flight when he was about to do an air test. The Mossie was a great aircraft and the short trip showed me just what I had missed. The weather was pretty foul so he was not able to let me have a go in the left hand seat, which was a pity, but nevertheless it was all most enjoyable - and also a bit of an education when he showed me not only the fine single-engined performance, but also just how the Mossie was - as he put it - built to fly and not to do such ordinary things as to take off and land! With wheels and flaps down on the approach sudden closure of throttles to simulate loss of power called for immediate action by opening up to absolute full power to remedy the situation. Nevertheless I was impressed!

Then overnight our world was turned upside down.

Suddenly the war had ended. The dropping of the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had made even the fanatical Japanese realise that to resist further would only bring on themselves death and destruction on a scale beyond belief.

So now, the war which only a short time ago seemed likely to drag on for an unpredictable time, came to an abrupt halt. Only yesterday, or so it seemed, the island hopping of the Americans in the Pacific was merely a prelude to the final act of attrition, the invasion of the Japanese homeland. It would be a bloody affair and expensive in terms of lives on both sides. The terribly destructive raids of the B29s of the USAAF on Japanese cities seemed unable to break their resistance. We noted the comparison with the aerial attacks on Germany by the Americans and ourselves. Japanese defences, both flak and more particularly fighter appeared to be minimal, and at night the night fighter defences were reported to be almost non-existent. Over Germany, flak, and more especially the night fighters were both organised and effective up to the very end.

Suddenly VJ Day was upon us. It all seemed unreal, and it was hard to believe that it was all over. At Little Staughton, apart from those who were still engaged on essential duties, we had a holiday. For 48 hours there was free beer. The briefing room was cleared, barrels of beer lined up around the room, with a large supply of tankards, and at 6pm on August 15th serious drinking commenced!

Among outstanding exponents of the art was Sergeant Pinfold, the navigator of 'H G' Wells. Pinfold was a tall, languid individual, whose rather slight frame belied his capacity to absorb extraordinary quantities of beer. Matt and Tiger who were no mean competitors, felt that over the next two days a world record must be on, and persuaded Pinfold to keep the score of his progress in his efforts to drink Staughton dry.

Each pint was religiously marked up on the wall, and by late evening the fiftienth had been added. Armed with number sixteen, Pinfold was leaning casually against the vertical pipe of one of those ironclad stoves which formed the standard heating in winter of the Nissen or felt-roofed Air Force huts. Then disaster struck. He dislodged a section of pipe just where it exited through the roof, and it descended upon him, rendering him unconscious, cutting his head open and, worst of all, spilling his

pint. First aid was applied, the unfortunate and still unconscious Pinfold was carted off to sick quarters, and the record attempt was abandoned.

In the early hours of the morning, Matt, Tiger, Steve and I, now full to the brim ourselves, took ourselves off to the mess for a game of snooker. It was not a great success. We had difficulty in seeing straight enough to cue a ball properly, and found that Tiger, when drunk, was completely colour-blind, which did not help. Abandoning the game we returned to our hut and turned in for what remained of the night. Oliver Lush appeared and collapsed onto his bed.

"Be a good chap, Ollie" said Matt, "you're nearest the switch, put the light out".

Oliver did his stuff in an unexpected way. Rummaging in his kit bag he produced a revolver, loaded it, then after waving it around in a somewhat uncertain manner, took a bead on the light and fired. It needed several attempts to hit the target, but finally all was quiet and dark - and so ended VJ Day.

The days that followed were strange ones indeed. It was as though we, the aircrew, had overnight become the great unwanted. It seemed as though we had served our purpose and had now become an embarrassment to the Air Force and the Air Ministry, who had no idea what to do with us. The 'regular' service element on the station, both officer and NCO seemed even more delighted than we that 'that lot' (the war) was over, and that they could now look forward to getting back to the real thing. Once they had got rid of all we amateurs masquerading as aircrew there would be lots of parades, saluting, spit and polish, discipline, due respect for rank, and all the rest, so much of which had been missing thanks to having been contaminated by it being necessary to put up with this wartime lot.

Often we had been told just how lucky we were to be doing the flying when it took literally hundreds of them doing real jobs on the ground to keep one aircraft in the air. It was true of course, but there was another side. There could be many thousands of workers on the ground all toiling away in their multifarious jobs, but - one still wouldn't have an Air Force unless there were other young idiots prepared to risk life and limb by taking to the air.

The aircraft ground crews were, of course, very different to most of the rest. Working closely with aircrew they, and we, knew that our lives were often in their hands. We had great respect and admiration for them and their work, and we did not envy them when in the depth of winter they had to carry out essential maintenance out in the open, perched high on an inspection gantry, in freezing conditions, wind and rain, handling cold metal of engine or airframe with frozen fingers. Many of them were in any case, like ourselves, volunteer reserve and only there because of the war.

And so, with a general feeling of uncertainty affecting us all, we waited with some apprehension to see what was to be our fate in what now was obviously the final act.

Notes

[NOTE 1]

S/L J. W. Monk.

[NOTE 2]

G/C J. R. Jeudwine D S O, O B E, D F C. Killed 19 Oct 1945 in Typhoon IB JR390 at RAF Little Staughton and while practicing aerobatics over the airfield lost control and spun in. Aged 32 and laid to rest with full military honours in Cambridge City Cemetery.

CHAPTER 12 - Final Curtain

“Well, that seems to be about all, chaps. I'm sorry to sound so vague about everything, but that's the way things are just now.”

The Wing Commander looked round the room and gave a faint smile.

‘All that does appear certain is that In a few days time we shall cease to exist as a squadron - more than that I don’t know, So unless your flights have any particular jobs for you, those of you who are not leaving tomorrow or the following day can consider yourselves free until nine o’clock tomorrow morning.’

We shuffled to our feet with a scraping of chairs as he strode down the room to the door, followed by the two flight commanders.

We crowded through the door, along the empty corridor and out into the bright sunlight of that early autumn afternoon - the 19th September 1945. In little groups we wandered out past the deserted parachute section, across the road and over towards the dispersals that lay between the squadron buildings and our living huts on Number One site.

A few desultory jokes were passed, but conversation was limited - no one seemed to have very much to say. I think we were all rather uncertain about what was to come and all a little sad at the break up.

The disbanding of a squadron is a miserable business.

During its lifetime all its members - even the most insignificant of them, whatever their jobs - have a sense of pride and satisfaction in its activities, for it is their squadron - and their aircraft.

But comes the end and everything goes to pieces. The old faces disappear, crews are broken up, aircraft are flown away, until at the end to those few that are left the station becomes a place of the dead.

The wide expanse of a once busy field now empty and without sign of life, the hangars black and vacant, the oil-stained dispersals bare and desolate - just as though all the aircraft have left on some operation from which they will never return, and the rest of the station, knowing it, have not waited.
Soon grass will sprout from cracks appearing in the concrete of the long runways where not so very long before the ground trembled as the evening air was torn by the roar of Lancasters thundering down the flarepath and off into the black pit of night.

Soon all that will seem so very long ago. Soon there will be only memories. Soon only the odd, fragment remaining to remind the stray visitor that a small part of history was once fashioned here.

The posters pinned to the now peeling walls of the one-time briefing room, yellowing with age but carrying their messages still.

‘Do <u>you</u> know your dinghy drill?’

‘Remember! On your instrument flying depends the safety of your crew.’

The large wall map of Europe, discoloured with the passing of the years, still with a black tape stretched across - the last trip recorded for all to see.

Yes! A mere year or so and that’s what it would be like. But Little Staughton wasn’t quite a place of the dead - not yet - for 109 Squadron were still in occupation and their Mosquitoes were still parked on their usual dispersals.

But over on our side of the field there was almost a complete absence of aircraft, the only 582 Lancaster remaining being that on the concrete apron tucked away behind Number One site.

Q-Queen had had pretty extensive repairs carried out and apart from air tests hadn’t flown for more than two months. Now she stood in splendid isolation, the only one of her kind remaining.

As we wandered across the dispersal and passed under the shadow of her wings we were near enough to get that familiar smell - a combination of petrol, oil, rubber and warm metal — the sort of smell that even now, merely remembering it conjures up a mental picture of the inside of an aircraft.

Matt dribbled a stone across the concrete and crashed it away with a hefty kick. He waited a moment until we caught him up with a wry sort of grin turned to us.

“Y’know,” he said, “it's going to be strange not having you two around - I think I shall almost miss you!”

Tiger nodded soberly.

“It does come rather hard” he agreed. “We've been together now as a crew for quite a while and it’s no exaggeration to say we’ve got on better than most. After all, our only change in that time was due to illness - which is unusual.”

“I feel quite worried about you two” I said, with mock concern “How the devil are you going to manage? I mean, you’ve had me to get you out of bed in the morning - and see that you’re in the mess in time for breakfast - or at briefing in time. I make sure you don’t forget any kit - get your leave passes for you - see you catch your train - in fact, short of eating and drinking for you I do just about everything.”

I broke off to duck as Tiger hurled a particularly filthy piece of rag in my direction.

“Don’t kid yourself boy!”, said Matt. “You only got up in the morning because old Dick used to think he was on early shift in the pits!”

But I retained my serious air. “My personal belief is that you’ll both starve to death inside a month”, I replied. “I doubt whether you’ll ever manage to get out of bed in time for breakfast. There won’t always be the farmhouse as an alternative - as at Langar.”

“I remember somebody”, said Tiger reflectively, “who at Elgin missed both breakfast and the morning parade regularly and was just about awake in time for briefing! But seriously though - I’m not looking forward to this a bit”.

“Nor me”, I said. And Matt nodded agreement.

It had been the beginning of the end when a few days before the grapevine had carried rumours of the squadron disbanding - and from then on things began to happen all too quickly. First, a number of those with high release group numbers (mostly gunners, w/ops and engineers) were declared redundant and in a matter of a day or so were posted away. Our two gunners, Dick and Bob, and Steve our engineer had been among them.

I remember how awkwardly we said goodbye as they climbed aboard the truck by the Sergeants’ Mess. In a few moments they were gone, the wagon rolling quickly up the narrow road in a whirl of dust whilst the rest of us stood with the remnants of other crews similarly broken, feeling that this was the turning point for us - whatever happened now things would never be the same. The axe had fallen.

Rumour had it that some reshuffled crews would go to re-form a squadron destined for the Middle East - they were composed of those aircrew who still had some long time to go before release - although exactly how they were selected remained a mystery to the rest of us, Harry, our W/op was In yet another bunch who were supposed to be going to convert to Dakotas on Transport Command. Matt, Tiger and myself were, like quite a few others, left in the balance for some days, awaiting what we just didn’t know.

Meantime, each day found us with fewer and fewer aircraft until we were left with Q-Queen, the solitary representative of a once active squadron.

The news that both Matt and Tiger were among a fresh batch of redundants came as the final blow to me and indeed to all three of us. We represented widely differing types but nevertheless had a lot in common and, as the navigation section of the crew we necessarily worked closely together, each having a terrific amount of confidence in the other two. There was no doubt we would all feel the coming separation pretty keenly.

We paused at the entrance to our hut, then with hand on the knob I remembered that I had intended to make my log book up to date but had left it over in A Flight office.

“I reckon I’ll have to go back to the flight after all’ I said.

“I think we’d better press on and get our pay sorted out”, suggested Tiger, looking to Matt for approval. “That’ll probably take all afternoon so we’ll see you at tea.”

Plum Carter looked up as I entered. He was alone in the office.

“Ah”, he said, “you’ll do! Like to do a job for me?”

“That depends,” I replied cautiously. “What is it?”

“Take our last aircraft away – Q-Queen - she’s got to go over to Wyton. Have you any of your crew left?”

“Only two, and they’re on pay parade this afternoon - but I reckon I can find my way over to Wyton O.K. I can probably pick up an engineer somewhere - I don’t need any more.”

“Fair enough “, said Plum, “Let’s see - we’ll assume you start about three or a bit after - h’m, yes - I’ll arrange for transport to collect you at Wyton between 3.30 and 4. It had better pick you up at Flying Control eh?”

I nodded. “That's O.K.” I said. ‘I’ll get organised,’ and picking up my log book set off back to Number One site.

It didn’t take me long to find my crew of one. Coming back from the mess was one of the few engineers remaining on the squadron. I can’t remember his name now but he was a small, lightly built chap with a perpetual cheery grin.

“Hullo there!” I called. “Care to dice with me this afternoon?”
“Don't mind”, he said, “why - what’s on?”

“It’ll be your last chance here, I’m going to take Q - Queen over to Wyton in about half an hour from now - coming?”

“O.K. – I'll come” he said.

“Right! See you at the kite in ten minutes, eh?”

When I returned to A Flight the office was deserted but I found the authorisation book on the table with my trip entered, so without waiting about I signed in the appropriate column; then, crossing over to the locker rooms, took out my helmet and made my way out again via the parachute section. There was not a soul about here but as I needed neither parachute nor Mae West for this trip I was not particularly concerned and was soon heading back to the dispersal behind the buildings where Q-Queen stood.

Here I found that my crew had doubled itself, for my engineer friend sat on the grass waiting and with him a second engineer whom I knew vaguely - a large heavily built, rather jolly sort of chap who had I believe a short spell as POW near the end of the war in Europe.

“Mind if I come along for the trip?” he enquired.

“Of course not - it’s all free - and the last one we'll get at this place”, I replied.

“Or anywhere else”, he said, looking straight at me.

“It could be that too”, I agreed. “Though I shall be sorry if it turns out that way.”

Having found a fitter with a trolley acc we carried out the routine checks and climbed aboard. It was pleasantly warm inside the fuselage; in fact, quite hot where the sun beat through the Perspex.

I opened the side windows then stuffed one of those large aircraft cushions into the well of the bucket seat and made myself comfortable.

“Don’t we have a navigator?” asked the second of my two engineers.

I completed my cockpit check.

“Not on this trip”, I said with a grin. “I shall see to it personally - although I haven’t remembered to bring a map. Still, it’ll be only twenty minutes at the most and if I can’t find my way to Wyton – well!”

“Famous last words” commented the big chap, pulling a face. “We don’t need a map for this bit!”

“Well”, I said, “if you’d rather not come?”

“I’ll chance it” he said with a broad smile.

“O.K. then. Ready for starting?”

“O.K.”, said engineer Number One. “Starboard inner - starboard outer - port inner - port outer.”

Leaning out of the side window he gave the thumbs up sign.

“Contact starboard inner!”

“Contact starboard inner!”

The massive propeller turned a few revolutions in an uncertain manner and then with a spurt of black smoke and a splash of flame from the exhaust the engine broke into life with that unmistakable Merlin note.

Soon we had all four turning, and completing the run-up I waved away the chocks. I pressed the R/T button and called Control for permission to taxy out. No reply. Surely there was someone on duty? I repeated the call but still no reply. Having tried a third time with similar result I got impatient, and opening the throttles taxied cautiously forward.

Arriving at the point where the dispersal track crossed the road all seemed clear so I turned onto the main perimeter track by the hangars. Very few people were about. By far the largest number were grouped by the open doors of one of the 582 hangars.

As we passed they gave us a wave of farewell, standing there with the vast expanse of floor behind them seeming unnatural in its emptiness.

On our way around the peri-track nothing appeared to hamper us - no traffic - no other aircraft on the move - although on 109's dispersals there was a little activity and one of their Mosquitoes stood with engines running.

In almost leisurely fashion we arrived at the end of the runway in use and halted by the chequered van of the airfield controller. I went carefully over my vital action check and called for permission to take-off. No acknowledgement.

"No one at home", said the little engineer, with his head cocked on one side.

"I'll give 'em one more call", I said, and did so. But it appeared I was the only one on the air so I took off the brakes and let the Lanc roll slowly forward to turn onto the runway. From the caravan the airfield controller flashed us a steady green on the Aldis.

"Stand by for take-off!" I called automatically - forgetting that the big fellow hadn't brought his helmet and of course couldn't hear the intercom.

Holding the brakes on I opened up to zero boost, then releasing the lever, pushed the throttles fully open to the gate as the aircraft gathered speed.

"Full power!"

"Full power!", acknowledged the little engineer, and holding the throttles open, tightened the friction nut.

In a matter of seconds the Lanc had taken the air in her usual buoyant manner and we were climbing out over the familiar countryside. I levelled out at a thousand feet and watched by the critically professional eyes of his hefty friend the small engineer stepped down the revs to 2200 and eased the throttles back to +4 boost. I turned in a tight arc and came back downwind, heading over the airfield.

"Might as well give 'em one last look at us - as it's the last Lanc on the place", I said, and edged the stick forward.

We slid down towards the trees, our black shadow leading the way, flitting moth-like over the ground slightly ahead of us, the rush of air increasing as the speed built up until we were soon racing low over the grass parallel to the runway with the control tower and hangars over on our starboard side.

One or two figures by Flying Control stood watching as we shot by, and I waited for some admonishing call from the tower - but the R/T remained silent.

Very few people were about to see us go. A few outside Station H.Q. (probably waiting for their pay) - one or two straggling across to Number One site - a few more en route to the mess - but

that was all. Most of them gave us a wave or gesture of some sort, but we almost got away un-noticed.

The field behind us, I returned to a respectable height and turned onto a course which I estimated would take us within sight of Wyton.

The trip was all too short and we were soon over the field – an old permanent station with its huge stone blocks of living quarters and the large hangars built in the high peacetime style.
A few Lancs were on dispersal but for the most part the place was deserted and in fact looked quite as dead as Little Staughton.

I flew around in a wide orbit and joined the circuit in a meticulously correct manner. There was no reply from Control to my first call for permission to land so I pressed the button and tried again. No reply.

I looked over to the engineer and made a face.

"They've all gone home!" commented the little chap. His companion said nothing, for not being on intercom he could only guess what was going on.

Looking down at the buildings as we came round the circuit for the second time I opened up the throttles and did a series of steep turns at a somewhat lower altitude over the top of Flying Control.

Still no reply.

The engineer glanced at me.

"This is Wyton, I suppose?" he said, "you haven't been and gone and lost us!"

I treated the suggestion with the contempt it deserved - although I had begun to wonder myself! But no! Dammit! It was Wyton alright - I'd seen the place many times before - after all it wasn't more than a bombing error from our own base. If I couldn't find my way over that short distance without a navigator it was time I stayed on the ground. Perhaps it was just that our R/T was duff? But no, I didn't think it could be that either.

"Can't stay up here forever", I said, "I'm getting dizzy going round - we'll go in. Wheels down - 2650."

"O.K. Wheels down – 2650", acknowledged the engineer. We came downwind yet again and slowed ready for the approach, flap going down to 30 degrees as we turned onto the crosswind leg.

"Full flap – 2650" I called.

"Full flap going down - 2650 revs" was the reply. The engine note rose and I gave the elevator trim a turn or two to counteract the effect of the flap - then loosening the friction nut a trifle,

brought her in on a steady descent - steady enough to need nothing more than just the slightest adjustment of power on the way.

Down to a couple of hundred feet I eased the throttles back a little and commenced my favourite ultra-slow approach. Coming up to the fence the speed was already down to 95 knots (the book said 105 knots but I preferred the lower speed for there was plenty of control there and it cut out the float which on many Lancaster pilots' landings wasted up to a couple of hundred yards of runway).

My small engineer had flown with me before and knew my peculiarities but the big fellow didn't know and didn't like it either. He tapped my shoulder and pointed urgently to the airspeed indicator, the needle of which hovered back to 90 as the fence slid underneath.

I grinned at him reassuringly and with the speed now falling quickly back, called "Cut!"

The throttles snapped shut and to the familiar accompaniment of popping exhausts I eased the stick firmly back as the Lanc sank to the ground in a gentle three-pointer.

The big fellow gave a gesture of approval which I acknowledged with old-world courtesy and we rolled smoothly down the runway.

Slowing and turning off onto the perimeter track I stopped whilst the engineer raised the flaps - and from force of habit called the tower.

"Queen clear!"

"Thank you, Queen" - amazing - somebody's woken up!

"Please taxy round to Flying Control and park between the hangars there."

"Roger."

As yet the afternoon shadows had barely lengthened but already the tall buildings were cutting off the sunlight from a wide area around Flying Control as we taxied up to the tower and turned off right to the open space between the two central hangars. A lone airman appeared and waved us on in a somewhat disinterested fashion. In answer to his signals we crawled to a stop and almost immediately he vanished - his appearance and disappearance being rather like the genie in a pantomime.

I went through the running down procedure automatically and unhurriedly, wondering when - if ever - I'd be doing this again, for in spite of the tales of our going to re-form another squadron I felt rather dubious and sensed that the end of my flying career was near at hand.

Completing the drill, I opened the bomb doors to ease the pressure on the hydraulics, and turning off the master fuel cocks, flicked the ignition off.

With a series of shallow coughs the engines stopped - one of them very reluctantly. Having run rather hot it gave a last despairing shudder as the prop jumped an extra revolution or two

before finally coming to rest. It was as though it knew that it was all up and that stopping now it would never start again - making a last desperate effort to ward off the inevitable.

The engineer put the ground/flight switch off and scrambled down the fuselage with his pal, not waiting for me.

I took my time. I had a premonition this was it. This was going to be the very last time.

For a moment I sat looking slowly round the cockpit, going over every switch and control, making sure I'd forgotten nothing - then I heaved myself from the seat and made my way down past the navigator's position. The old smell, peculiar to aircraft - petrol, oil, warm rubber and hot metal - seemed strangely more noticeable now.

Unhampered by parachute I squeezed through that ridiculously small gap in the front spar, carefully ducking my head as always; then straightening up carelessly cracked my skull hard against the roof as I pushed through the comparatively wide opening of the rear spar. Just the same as ever! I must have done that every time I climbed out of a Lanc! I swore. Then, rubbing my head I groped my way down the step and out to the door.

My two engineers were already walking away in the direction of Flying Control as I jumped to the ground, and although I started to follow I somehow felt compelled to stop and turn round.

By the starboard fin I turned and looked back at the Lanc. The large dragonfly appearance was as pronounced as always but the smooth and rather frail lines were spoilt and broken by the jutting doors of the open bomb bay. The four props were stilled and the only movement visible was a slight flicker of heat haze around the silent engines.

It was goodbye to it all - I knew it for certain now. I should never fly a Lanc again - pity - a grand aircraft.

This was the end, The end that had somehow descended suddenly, and coming as it did, brought with it a strange feeling of sadness,

I stood for a moment or so longer; then, turning my back, walked slowly away.