

"Pippa-2" Long tape 15-37 6A/10

ONE DAY IN MAY ON A BOMBER STATION.

In 1942 I was based at Dalton in what was then known as the North Riding of Yorkshire. Topcliffe was really the home of the Squadron but we had recently been equipped with Halifax four engined bombers and as Topcliffe did not have concrete runways we had had to move to the satellite airfield at Dalton - which strangely did have proper runways - until they were built.

My Squadron was 102, the full title was really 102 (Ceylon) Squadron - the use of "Ceylon" did not signify that we originated from that country or anything just that they supplied money to help fund and support the Squadron, their contribution being mainly used to buy aircraft. Many Royal Air Force squadrons and other Service units were "adopted" in this way during the war as people from different countries in the Empire sought to help the war effort. The scheme even extended to many towns in this country, for example the people of Sheffield adopted the Royal Navy cruiser of that name.

As Dalton was a satellite airfield facilities were rather limited so the aircrew used a large country mansion as a dormitory and we slept at Skelfield House - an added advantage of this was that if the Germans bombed the base it was extremely unlikely that any aircrew would be killed! It was a costly business training members of the crews of bomber aircraft and we were losing too many as casualties on bombing missions without more being killed on the ground. Skelfield House was a boarding school for girls prior to the war and stood in its own large grounds with the River Swale running through them, it certainly provided ideal surroundings for crews to rest after bombing operations. Incidentally, there was a bell button in each room with a notice "if you require a mistress during the night press the bell" - I pressed that button every night but no mistress ever came!

Tuesday the 19th May 1942 dawned, if I can say "dawned" in reference to my awakening at 7-15am, somewhat overcast but with the feel that the weather would improve during the day. I pressed the button and heard the bell ringing distantly - I did not anticipate that a mistress would appear but at least the bell would rouse the people who were still sleeping! While still lying in my bed I wondered idly what the day might bring - would I be flying today -- would I be on operations tonight? Nothing for it, if I did not get up I would miss the coach which would be taking us all to Dalton for breakfast.

My musings were rudely shattered - as I got out of bed I was brought down to earth. There was that other empty bed, a stark silent reminder of my friend Doug. We had been sharing the room for some time but a week earlier Doug was shot down by one of our own night fighters as he was crossing the Yorkshire coast on his way to Germany. He and all his crew had been killed.

Doug was a super chap, he came from Brisbane, Australia and had trained there as a pilot. Before joining the Royal Australian Air Force he had done a variety of things including representing his country at speedway. He had married a short while before leaving for England and when he eventually arrived here, after a long and dangerous sea journey, among the mail awaiting him was a letter telling him that his wife was expecting a baby.

"PIPPA-3" - 45-64 on Long Tape - 64/10

At the beginning of May, Doug received a telegram saying his wife had given birth to a son and we had a party to celebrate the happy event - I could not help thinking that now, on the other side of the world, there was a lady who had lost her husband and a tiny baby boy who would never see his father. War certainly is not glamorous - just extremely cruel! Doug had died, not through enemy action but at the hand of someone on "his side" in a war that did not immediately affect his homeland but in which he felt he should help because his friends in Britain were suffering - that was the reaction of people in the Empire countries in those days.

Trying to forget these unhappy thoughts I hustled through the bathroom, dressed and hurried out into a cool, calm May day in the lovely peaceful Yorkshire countryside. As I strolled around waiting for the coach to take me to Dalton and breakfast I was comforting myself with the knowledge that what had happened to Doug would never happen to me!

After breakfast and checking that there were no letters for me I joined a number of friends and together we walked down to the "crew room". This was a large room running along the side of the hangar where we assembled each morning to receive details of our duties for the day. At about 9-30am I was called to the Flight Commander's office and told that I was on standby for operations that night. At this stage one did not know any more details than that, information on bomb loads, take-off time and target would not be given until the operations were confirmed at briefing just after lunch. However that did not mean there was nothing to do.

I gathered my crew together. Basically there were six of us but we generally carried several other people who were new to the Squadron and who needed operational experience before joining crews of their own. I was the pilot and captain, aged just twenty-two and married.

My navigator was Geoff Hobsbawn who had left this country when he was four years of age, his father was English but worked as a mining engineer in Chile. Geoff returned to England when war started, to join the RAF and train as a navigator.

Fred Ringham was wireless operator/air gunner, he came from near Tunbridge Wells in Kent and had been working in local government.

Fred Bell was the flight engineer, his home was in Ashington in Northumberland. He joined the RAF straight from school as an apprentice fitter, in fact he had been on the Squadron since the outbreak of war but initially worked as a ground engineer. "Dinger", as he was always known, and I were the only married members of the crew.

Last but not least was Bob "Swanee" Rivers, the tail gunner. He came from Birmingham and like Dinger Bell had been an apprentice, his training had been as a rigger which meant his skill was related to the airframe.

"Pipra-k" Logy Logy 70-91 64/10 TAB 1 = 7
TAB 2 = 40

Apart from these five, on this occasion we were to take three other people. Tom May, who was replacing my regular bomb aimer who was sick. J B "Robbie" Robinson, as second pilot and Frank Kuebler from Canada, he was a new wireless operator/air gunner.

Having warned all of them that they were on standby for operations I also told them that we would be taking off for an air test at eleven o'clock. The routine was that we would fly around locally testing all the systems and controls on the aircraft, including going out over the North Sea to test fire the guns. Another most important task for the captain was to ensure that the "new" members of the crew were fully aware of the escape drill in the event of having to "bale out" (escape by parachute) or "in the drink" (escape by dinghy in the event of crash landing in the sea).

The air test went off without incident, we landed having been airborne for 1 hour 15 mins. I confirmed to the ground crew that the aircraft was O K and asked them to fill her up with fuel. Petrol in a Halifax was carried in twelve tanks located in the wings, the capacities were:-

2 x No. 1 inboard tanks	247 gallons each
2 x No. 2 inner-wing nose tanks	62 gallons each
2 x No. 3 centre tanks	188 gallons each
2 x No. 4 outboard tanks	161 gallons each
2 x No. 5 outer engine tanks	122 gallons each
2 x No. 6 outer engine tanks	123 gallons each

That is a total of 1,806 gallons.

We all returned to the crew room, took off our flying clothes and as we were going to lunch we were told that briefing would be at 20-00hrs. (i.e. 8pm.), this indicated a fairly late take-off. Briefing generally took place as late as possible, obviously this lessened the chance of details of the operation leaking out to those who had no right to know. I told the crew that we would meet in the Mess again at 6-30 for our "flying supper, traditionally bacon and eggs - a luxury in a Britain severely restricted by rationing!

From lunch onwards came that dreadful period of waiting. Different people each had their own way of dealing with it, I generally tried to keep myself busy often using the time to write letters but sometimes just by playing snooker or even cards.

After our Supper we all went to the parachute "shop" to collect a parachute each then on to the crew room to get dressed for flying. This did not only mean putting on flying clothing but such things as carefully going through one's pockets to ensure that they were totally empty. We would not even have a cinema or bus ticket because, in the event of being shot down, this could reveal to the Germans the location of our base. It was at this point also that a person's superstitions would become apparent - I always used to take off my tie and replace it with a particular silk scarf and in the inside pocket of my battle-dress blouse I had a wallet, given to me by my father, in which I had some personal photographs.

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All the crews detailed for operations ^{even} this particular night gathered in the briefing room - there were to be only eight aircraft from the Squadron. Each crew sat as a group and the briefing commenced with the squadron commander revealing the target - which was Mannheim - and giving additional details which included the fact that only five aircraft from our squadron were going to the primary target, of the remaining three it was to be one each to Paris, Vichy and St. Nazaire.

It so happened that he had quite a lot of information to give us, this was to be the first night on which Bomber Command were to try "target marking" and Mannheim had been selected. We were instructed that we must drop our bombs within a ring of coloured flares dropped from aircraft with crews picked for their accuracy and experience - in August 1942 crews similar to these were formed into an elite unit known as "The Pathfinder Force".

"Pippa-5" 100-123 m. R. 1/10 64/10 TAB 1 = 7
TAB 2 = 44

From the crew room all the crews detailed for operations this particular night gathered in the adjacent briefing room - there were to be only eight aircraft from the Squadron. Each crew sat at a table as a group facing a small platform on the wall behind which was a large map of Europe, at the moment it was still covered. The briefing commenced with the Squadron Commander revealing the target by drawing back the screen over the map - the target was Mannheim which would mean a trip of about six hours with nearly five hours over enemy territory. He then told us that only five of the more experienced crews would be going to the primary target, of the remaining three it was to be one to Paris, one to Vichy and one to St. Nazaire.

It so happened that he also had quite a lot of other information to give us, this was to be the first night on which Bomber Command were to try "positive target marking" and Mannheim had been selected for the experiment. We were instructed that we must drop our bombs within a ring of coloured flares which were to be dropped from aircraft with crews particularly picked for their accuracy and experience - in August 1942 crews similar to these were formed into an elite unit known as "The Pathfinder Force".

After the talk by the C O we were given details on our bomb loads by the armaments officer - tonight it was a mixed load of incendiary and high explosives totalling 12,000lbs. Then the meteorological officer gave us the latest weather forecast, it looked quite good. He was followed by the intelligence officer who spoke about the expected state of the German's defences and lastly the navigation officer defined the route to and from the target. Take off was to be 22-30hrs (10-30pm). The Station Commander asked if there were any questions then wished us all "good luck".

At this point, with the exception of the navigation officer, all the briefing officers left then the navigators collected their maps including a large scale one of Mannheim, the "target map".

"Hobbie", my navigator, and I spent about 15 minutes studying them during which time he worked out our first two courses to steer using the winds predicted by the met. officer while the rest of the crew discussed their various tasks among themselves. It was now approximately 9-30pm and time to go to the crew room to pick our parachutes, flasks of coffee and packets of sweets.

Tension was now mounting as, with less than 45 minutes to go, we went out to the vans which took each crew to its aircraft to prepare for take off.

When we reached the aircraft we stayed outside for a few minutes, those who wanted to smoke took their last opportunity as they would not be able to do so again until we were back on the ground. I walked round the aircraft checking that there were no locks left on any of the flying controls and making sure the cover had been removed from the pitot head. The pitot head was a tube-like extension on a bracket beneath the nose of the aircraft, its purpose was to measure the speed of the plane in flight - not knowing your speed would lead to all sorts of problems most of them terminal! At 10 o'clock I said it was time to get aboard.

Once in their places the crew carried out their various tasks and checks with the flight engineer and I checking all the instruments.

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"PAPA-6"

130-154 Log 64/10

TAB 1 = 7

TAB 2 = 44

At 10-15 I gave the signal to the ground crew - they had to be on duty as well! - to go through the procedure for starting the engines, commencing with the port inner as that drove the generator and gave us the electrical power which previously we had drawn from our batteries. When all four engines were running I tested each in turn to full power. After finally checking that all flying controls were moving freely it was a matter of waving the chocks away from the wheels and building up power - we started taxiing -- we were on our way to Mannheim. I could not help but wonder what the next six hours might bring.

We rolled quite quickly along the perimeter track and stopped at the edge of the runway at which point we put on our safety harnesses. I glance at my watch - it is 10-29 - a green light flashes from the control wagon beside the runway and it was our turn to go. I rolled the aircraft right to the start of the runway - we were going to need all the run we could get loaded as we were with 12,000lbs of bombs, eight people and over 1,800 gallons of fuel. I straightened her up along the line of the runway, called on the intercom "O K chaps, here we go", I applied the brakes and pushed the control column hard forward as the second pilot pushed the throttles fully open to give us maximum power. With the aircraft vibrating with the power from the four Merlin engines I released the brakes and we moved forward gathering speed rapidly. Because of the wind direction we were having to use the shorter runway so had to gain speed as quickly as possible, I called to the second pilot to "go through the gate" (an emergency procedure which gave extra boost when the throttles were pushed beyond their normal limit but which could only be used for a short time). The end of the runway appeared to be rushing towards us but the aircraft was resonating well and our speed was building up. Safety take off speed is 155 m.p.h. but we are never going to reach that - at 110 m.p.h. I start to gently ease back the control column - she begins to lift and clears the end of the runway by about thirty feet.

Must keep straight ahead until we get a bit of height, select wheels up, that's better we are gaining height. At 500ft we throttle back and select flaps up, there is a momentary sinking feeling but all is well and we settle into a gentle climb at 140 m.p.h. Now we can commence a gentle turn to cross back over the airfield to set course at 1,000ft. I tell the crew that they may now undo their harnesses.

The navigator gives me the course and over base we head towards the point at which we are to cross the coast, Flamborough Head. We continue our climb and just catch sight of the coastline, our track has been good which confirms the wind direction so we use our prepared course for the Dutch coast. Things are going well but still I remind the gunners to keep watch for night fighters.

Over the North Sea we continued climbing and at 10,000ft I tell the crew to put on their masks and turn on the oxygen. When the enemy coast is about ten minutes away I start to weave hoping that no stray fighter will get on our tail. I begin to think that if it is going to be as quiet as this all the way it will be a good trip, then some distance ahead I see flashes - flak (anti-aircraft fire) it looks as though the natives are turning hostile!

"PIPPA-7" 160-134 Sony 64/10

TAB 1 = Y

TAB 2 = 44

I again told the gunners to watch out for night fighters - not that they really needed reminding!

As we drew nearer to the coast the amount of flak was increasing, obviously as the stream of bombers started to fly over land the defences were alerted. We altered course to head to our next turning point at Givet, then it was our turn. We were flying at 12,500ft and the light calibre anti-aircraft guns were doing their utmost to prevent us going much farther. I took violent evasive action by alternately turning, diving and climbing and eventually we were out of range of the guns but I knew we had been hit.

We set course for Givet again while the flight engineer clambered all over the interior of the aircraft to assess damage. As far as he could ascertain the undercarriage accumulator and hydraulic systems had been damaged, we had also been hit in the port wing but could not tell if there was any damage to the systems there. The aircraft was flying OK and would still climb, so I decided to go on.

Over Givet we made our last course adjustment and headed for Mannheim, I told Tom to leave the front gun turret and go to the bomb aimer's position and prepare for his job over the target. A little later we could see the ring of coloured flares about which we had been told at briefing and were over Mannheim at about 1-35am flying at 16,000ft.

At least, I thought we were over Mannheim as we were above the flares but "Hobbie", the navigator, protested that we were still about five miles short of the target! Remember our orders were that we must bomb over the flares and Hobbie was saying that we still had some distance to go, so after some discussion I compromised and we dropped our bombs in one stick on the edge of the flares at a point which the navigator said was closest to Mannheim, at about 1-50am. While all this had been going on, of course, the German defences had been firing at us for about a quarter of an hour - and it was heavy flak this time! With some relief I set course again for Givet - we were to return home on the same route as that which we had used coming out.

Soon we were out of range of the guns and settling down for, what I hoped would be, an uneventful journey home. I still had at the back of my mind that the undercarriage had been damaged but that would not affect us until we were about to land. Tom had gone back to the front turret, Fred was in the mid-upper - so that Frank could get experience on the radio - and Swanee was in his usual spot in the rear turret, Robbie was in the second pilot's seat on the right side and I was in the driving seat beside him. This gave five of us who could watch for any fighter activity, plus Dinger, who, when he could tear himself away from his beloved dials and switches, would stand with his head in the astra-dome.

Still weaving to try to confuse the defences we reached Givet without further incident and altered course for the coast. Things were going well and I had decided that as soon as we had crossed the coast "Robbie" could take over the controls and I could have a cup of coffee. At this time we were close to Brussels when, without any warning the port inner engine stopped - the one which drives the generator so we would have to rely on our batteries.

The Larch Slip Club

THE LARCH SLIP CLUB was organized in 1901 by a group of men who were interested in the preservation of the larch tree. The club has since that time been active in the preservation of the larch tree and in the promotion of its use.

The club has a number of members who are interested in the larch tree and who are active in the preservation of the larch tree. The club has a number of projects which are being carried out in order to preserve the larch tree and to promote its use. These projects include the planting of larch trees, the preservation of larch wood, and the promotion of larch wood products.

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RP, PPA-8" 190-216 Long tape 64/10 TAA 1 = 7
TAA 2 = 44

On checking, the flight engineer found that No. 1 tank had run out of fuel, he tried to switch to No. 2 tank only to discover that the cables had been severed. Trying all the alternatives he was unable to get any fuel to the engine, therefore we were not able to re-start it, we were now beginning to find out what damage the port wing had suffered on the flight to the target! However, we were flying at 14,000ft and I knew that the aircraft would fly safely on three engines so I feathered the propeller and carried on - still thinking about that cup of coffee.

Remembering our experiences when we had crossed the coast earlier I was steering a course to the south of our original track hoping to avoid the anti-aircraft guns and as we were now just approaching the coast and so far had not been shot at, I thought we had succeeded. It was just about 4-00am and we had almost reached the Dutch coast again when the tail-gunner came on the intercom to warn me that there was an arrow-head formation of lights with a single searchlight pointing parallel to our track. This was a typical method the German's had of indicating to their night fighters that enemy aircraft were in the vicinity and their heading. I started weaving more vigorously, increased power and put the nose down a little to lose height and gain speed.

We had just crossed the coast at 12,000ft, when the tail-gunner called urgently that there was a night fighter about 90 yards astern. In an instant I made a diving turn to port, the fighter opened fire with his cannon and machine guns and my tail and mid-upper gunners started firing - we could see the enemy's tracers passing along our starboard (right) side. The fighter passed beneath us and a few moments later made a second attack coming in from astern on the port quarter, all three of my gunners were firing as I dived to starboard. We could hear his shells and bullets hitting us but the Halifax was still responding to her controls. At only 3,000ft we were attacked for a third time again from the rear, I felt the controls react and knew we had been hit in the tail. Fortunately the pilot of the fighter then made a near fatal mistake, as he started to pull away, presumably for another attack, he exposed the underside of his aircraft to my gunners and the last we saw of him he was diving with flames trailing behind. I got the aircraft under control at about 2,500ft - having lost about 10,000ft - and began to think about getting home.

I called each member of the crew in turn to check that they were all O K and was very relieved to hear that none of them had suffered personal injury but the rear and mid-upper gunners both reported damage to the aircraft. Next I asked the navigator to give me a course to steer to get us to Norfolk, the nearest piece of friendly land and while he was working that out I started carefully moving the controls to check our flying condition while the flight engineer again checked his gauges and instruments. I established that the ailerons (moving surfaces on the trailing edge of the wings which maintain the lateral stability of the aircraft) were working satisfactorily. Then I checked the rudder - there was virtually no movement and it felt as if it was jammed. Lastly the elevators (which maintain the aircraft in level flight) - like the rudder they felt jammed.

"PIPPA-G" 220-244 Long Life 64/10 TAA1 = 7
TAA2 = 44

Our situation then, was that the flying controls were almost inoperable, we were losing fuel through damage to the wings, we had only three engines working and there was some damage, which we could not evaluate, to our undercarriage and hydraulic system. We still had approximately 100 miles of rather inhospitable North Sea between us and home, obviously we could not turn back to Holland or Belgium so we must try to get back to England.

The navigator gave me a course to steer to get us to Northam St. Faith - now Norwich Airport! - and we rather gingerly crept along for about thirty minutes. Hobbie's course must have been good for we eventually crossed the English coast at 1,200ft at 4-40am just north of Lowestoft. We now had only about twenty miles to fly, then land safely.

As we were approaching Horsham I instructed all the crew, except the flight engineer whose help I expected to need, to go to the "crash position" which was in the middle of the aircraft behind the main spar. I was a little concerned in that I could not see any lights from the airfield but called them up on the radio, seeking permission to land - there was no answer!

I called again, this time using "mayday" - the verbal form of SOS - to my great relief they responded. I explained that I was losing height, short of fuel, damaged and needed to land urgently. They in turn responded by putting on the aerodrome lights, had a searchlight battery light up to point a beam along the ground to head me in the correct direction and gave me clearance to land immediately.

I was not sure what would happen when I attempted to put the aircraft down but lined up on the runway and made my approach, feeling that it had to be right because I was unlikely to be able to make a second attempt. I selected flaps down and they worked, then lowered the undercarriage only for it to drop by gravity and not lock - the hydraulic damage! The flight engineer managed to apply the manual locks and we were committed to a landing without proper flying controls.

The aircraft behaved magnificently - bless her! The landing was a bit bumpy - the crew rudely said afterwards "that it was one of my better landings and less bumpy than usual!" - partly because the port wheel had been punctured either by anti aircraft gunfire or by the fighter's bullets. At least we were safely down and all that remained was to taxi up to the control tower, as I was doing so the remaining engine on the port side stopped - it was out of fuel - so I had to crab along on just two on the same side. We had been so very lucky!

We all clambered out, the time was 4-55am, it had been a memorable six and a half hours.

As there was some secret equipment on the aircraft I had to leave one member of the crew (I chose the Canadian, Frank) on guard while the rest of us reported to the control tower. I telephoned our base at Dalton to report our position and to get permission to have the aircraft guarded by some of Horsham's ground staff, then we were taken to the Mess where Frank was shortly able to join us. At last I got my cup of coffee!

"PIPPA-10" 250-268 Sony tape 6/10

TAB 1 = T
TAB 2 = A44

When it was daylight we all went out to inspect the aircraft, apart from numerous holes the main damage was to the tail, mid-upper gun turret and port wing. The tail fins, rudders and elevators were all damaged, the control wires and chains hanging broken and useless. There were bullet holes just below the rear turret so "Swanee" had had a lucky escape. Fred, in the mid-upper had been even luckier, apart from part of the Perspex covering of the turret being shot away the inspection light which was situated about six inches from his head had also gone. There was ~~also~~ extensive damage to the port wing but again we had been lucky, most of the fighter's bullets had hit the inner engine which had been dead at the time of the attack.

After breakfast I had my next problem to consider, as my poor Halifax was not fit to fly how was I to get everybody back to base - we had no money for rail fares and were loaded with our parachutes and all the flying gear. Once again Horsham came to the rescue, they provided two Blenheim aircraft with pilots and we were flown home, albeit in rather cramped conditions. We arrived safely and after reporting to the control tower we bade our two pilots farewell then made our way back to the crew room.

When we had off-loaded our gear we went to the briefing room and were questioned at length by the Intelligence Officer and the Commanding Officer - after all we had lost an aeroplane! - then to the Mess and a belated lunch. A little later I was able to arrange for a van to take us back to Skelfield House. As I walked into my room I saw the two empty beds and could not help feeling how close they had come to remaining like that for a while. It was nearly 3-30pm, thirty two hours since I had left the room - it had been quite a long day!

The sequel to the story is summarised in the copies from the Public Records Office.

"Pippa-11"

275-299 Long tape 644/10

TAB 1 - Y

TAB 2 - H4

EPILOGUE.

What happened to the Halifax? It was dismantled, repaired and rebuilt, it then went back on to operations. Its next crew were not so lucky - it was shot down on a raid on Frankfurt on the 8th September 1942.

Why was I not flying it? I was not so lucky on a raid on Essen on the 16th June 1942 when I was shot down and became a prisoner of war - but that's another story.

Was the raid a success? No! "Hobbie" had been right. When the reconnaissance aircraft brought back their pictures later it was confirmed that we had all bombed short of the target!

Regrettably, since the war, historians have carried on a policy of denigrating Bomber Command's bombing campaign. It should be remembered that the Germans had conducted a very severe bombing policy against this country in 1940 and 1941 and our attacks upon them were in a sense reprisals for their raids, many of which were upon non-industrial towns and cities. People in this country who suffered from the bombing were never critical of what we were doing!

If I ever felt that the destruction of German cities was pointless these feelings were rapidly dispelled by memories of hundreds of poor people in London huddled together on the Underground station platforms in dreadful conditions, trying to get a night's sleep safe from German bombs.

I believe that Bomber Command's efforts shortened the war and consequently saved Allied lives - in so doing their own casualties were 70,253 killed or missing - the highest percentage total of any branch of the Armed Forces! War is not glamorous!!

I am still proud of the very small part which I played in the overall effort!