

Bob Burns (1525609)

Bob Burns was a F/Sgt Navigator with 106 Sqn based at Metherringham in Lincolnshire. Bob's memories of Metherringham were lots of mud and for an Ops squadron lots of "Bull". This Bob attributes to the squadrons last CO, Guy Gibson before he left to form the Dam Buster Sqn.

Training was still in "Shades of Gibson"

In Bob's first 48 hrs at Metherringham 30 were in the air. When not flying, dingy parachute and other drill.

This intense training later proved to be a life saver.

On 25th April 1944, having just returned from a 10 hour bombing raid over Munich Bob along with other members of his crew (Pilot F/O Cyril Bishop, Radio Op. Sgt. Percy Daw, Engineer Sgt Ted Healy, Bomb Aimer Sgt Jack Pickstone, Mid Upper Gunner Sgt Harold Jo Brad, Rear Gunner Sgt Stevens) climbed aboard Lancaster J-Jig having been briefed that the nights operation was to be Schweinfurt. A small town in Bavaria containing a factory which produced a major supply of Germany's ball bearing requirements. This was to be Bob's 7th Op.

After flying a very hostile route because of night fighters and the opposite weather conditions to those forecast they arrived over the target at 17,000 ft, around 2.30 am, amidst fires, smoke searchlights and flak. To quote Bob "Like arriving in Hell"

Jack Pickstone, the bomb aimer, gave his skipper the approach instructions for bombing.

On release of the bombs the Lancaster leapt into the air having got rid of its deadly load.

Almost immediately the Lancaster was attacked by a night fighter at which point the rear gunner, Bill Stevens shouted "I've got the bastard, he's going down".

Simultaneously an alarming crunching noise ripped through the Lancaster and the bomber now on fire went into a steep dive. Bishop, the pilot shouted 'Bale out', and the crew reacted immediately. Bob, after clamping on his parachute, climbed with difficulty over the main spar and headed for the rear door.

By now the aircraft had gone into a spin and the crew found themselves pinned to the floor due to the G-force.

Bob had resigned himself to the inevitable when, at around 3000 ft, there was an enormous explosion and he was propelled upwards and outwards through the roof of the bomber, being knocked out in the process.

The cold night air brought him to his senses and it was then that all the previous training kicked in. He pulled the parachute rip cord and floated gently to earth, arriving with a bump in a ploughed field.

He discovered that the battle dress trouser covering his right thigh was torn to shreds and although in no pain his thigh was covered in blood.

Bob had landed near to a small town called Arnstein, 20 Km. south of Schweinfurt.

After collecting his parachute and hiding it under a hedge he looked up to see the last remaining Bombers turning for home.

"Lucky buggers" he said out loud "back home for breakfast and here I am in a field in Germany"

Hearing train engines shunting nearby Bob headed for what he hoped would be his route for escape. He was struggling across the station yard when all the lights went on and he found himself facing German guards, all with their rifles pointing at him.

After realising he was badly injured he was taken to a local cottage hospital run by Nuns.

Bob and Jack Pickstone were the only crew members of Lancaster J-Jig to survive.

Of the 199 Lancaster's detailed to bomb Schweinfurt, 16 were from 106 squadron. Twenty one aircraft failed to return which included five from 106 squadron. (35 aircrew who would not be at breakfast the next morning)

After around 3 months of treatment in a military hospital and with parts of Lancaster J-Jig finally removed from his thigh he was taken to Stalag Luft VII at Bankau in Silesia

Bob had been a semi professional musician before joining the RAF so imagine his surprise when, on the 24 November, a crate of musical instruments arrived at the camp, courtesy of the Red Cross. Bob immediately laid claim to the saxophone and the clarinet which he says were better quality than the ones he had at home.

He immediately set about forming a 14 piece orchestra (see photo) writing all the music for the other instruments.

Unfortunately Bob's time at Stalag Luft VII was not to be for long as the camp had been built on a direct path of the advancing Russians heading for Berlin.

At 3.30 am on the 19 January 1945 around 1,500 prisoners were given two and a half days rations and evacuated from Bankau into a raging blizzard and one of the severest winters in memory.

Bob of course was one of these prisoners carrying with him his most prized possessions, a saxophone and a clarinet.

Although regularly falling from his grasp because of the cold, no way was he going to leave them behind.

For three weeks they marched in atrocious physical and weather conditions sleeping in barns and cattle sheds surviving on very limited food.

They arrived at Goldberg On 5 February, after walking 100 miles, suffering from dysentery, malnutrition and frostbite. They were then herded into cattle trucks and taken by rail to Stalag IIIA at Lukenwalde near Berlin.

Stalag IIIA was greatly overcrowded and food just as scarce as on the walk.

Amazingly very few prisoners died on this walk

The Russians arrived on the 21 April, handed over the prisoners to the Americans and Bob finally was sent home on two weeks leave.

Bob remained in the RAF, now promoted to warrant officer, until the end of 1946, returning to his musical career.

He then retrained as a civil engineer, a job he continued to do until retirement in South Devon along with his wife Anne and two sons, Peter and Tim.

Bob carried on playing his treasured saxophone with all its memories for family and friends until he died aged 95 in 2015.

In 1990 Bob returned to the site at Arnstein where he had been shot down, meeting with residents who had been children at the time of his crash.

He received a very warm welcome and was treated to official lunches by the Mayors of Arnstein and Schweinfurt which he found quite embarrassing

When the Lancaster crashed the local Pastor arranged for the dead crew to be buried in the local Church which must have been very brave. This defied Hitler's edit that allied airmen should not have a Christian burial.

After the war the crew were buried in the military cemetery at Dambach, Bavaria.

During the same visit Bob met with a German researcher seeking information on a German JU 88 night fighter pilot (Haufman Walter Bernschein) who had been shot down over Arnstein during the raid and he thought was probably the pilot who had shot down Bob's Lancaster.

"The Long Road" by Oliver Clutton-Brock gives a detailed description of the 100 Mile walk.

"To Hell and Back" Chapter Seventeen "by Mel Rolfe describes Bob's experience in being blown out of the Lancaster J-Jig.

John Usher (Brother in Law)