

**CONVERSATION WITH ERIC CLARKE  
17 FEBRUARY 2009**



1051928 Sergeant Wireless Operator/Air Gunner . 49 Squadron.  
RAF Scampton  
21<sup>st</sup> September 1941 to 13<sup>th</sup> November 1942  
Commissioned 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1942  
(Flight Lieutenant 12<sup>th</sup> August 1943)  
Hampdens, Manchesters and Lancasters

SB – Right, could we start talking about the Manchesters please. I believe you did four ops in the Manchesters?

EC – Yes. I was on ops for 14 months, which is unique anyway. Hampden's went out and we got the Manchesters 42, prior to that 207, then 90. We got them around mid 1942. It was a revelation for us because in the Hampden you were like that.... Getting the Manchesters you almost could walk from the nose to the tail. In the wireless operator cockpit there was plenty of room. So that was great for us. But we didn't know and I didn't know either about its reputation. We started to train on them in the early weeks then I did four ops in the Manchesters, then again they went out. After that we got the Lancaster's. We had about a month of training on the Lancaster's then I did 12 ops on the Lancaster's.

SB – That must have been another step up again from the Manchesters?

EC – Oh yes, that was really wonderful.

SB – Did you experience any problems in the actual Manchester trips that you did?

EC – No, I flew in a Manchester 47 times. There were long trips, all sorts of things including the four ops which two of them included the 1,000 bomber raid. Operation Lift, I can only recall one...?? We didn't have a very charmed life. I do remember no problems whatsoever doing an air bomb. We just did our job. Whatever it was. Operation Lift, yes, I don't know if it was Cologne or E?? I'm rather annoyed at this

because I just wish you could look at pilot's notes. Things happened, and it wasn't recorded anywhere where I was concerned. Briefly in the Lancaster, we arrived back with six big black holes but I don't know ??? they must have been in the pilot's notes somewhere.

SB – I would have thought so. It depends how thorough the pilot was at filling in his logbook out.

EC – Back to the Manchester. One time we were caught in searchlights, they probably heard us approaching and switched on the searchlights. You would find yourself going down the corridor and suddenly there you are in it. I had an amazing experience. Jeffrey was my pilot, I was the wireless operator, and I was in my area and wondering what was happening. Jeffrey started to throw the aircraft around violently, we were about 15,000 feet, I don't know (again that would be in the pilot's report) we came down again, there was no air conditioning of course and when you come down from such a height it's like needles in your ears. I began thinking that this is it. Anyway, luckily we came out of it, nothing more but that was a scare. There was a bit of chatter on the intercom between the pilot and the navigator. I kept coming off the intercom to obey the rules and listen to the rules every 15 minutes. Everybody asked if each other were all right came away, landed and that was it. On de-briefing, which me being me, I used to get annoyed with the system anyway. You used to get out of the aircraft, then the flight sergeant and the ground crew would ask us if there was anything to report, and we would answer no or whatever we said, pile into the camp, mug of tea, and the crew were split up into two groups – those that went for the de-briefing and those that were sent for breakfast. It annoyed me because with my rank I wasn't allowed a chance to discuss. So that was the only operational scare I had, engine wise, it wasn't until much later on that I heard ??

SB – Let's go back then to Hampdens. Can you talk through from when you joined up really and run through the training that you did and then arriving on the squadron to fly the Hampdens

EC – I lived in Doncaster and I was in an office in Doncaster as a rent collector clerk with an estate agent. The office opened in 1936. I got used to seeing the boys in blue around the town and although I knew nothing about it, I knew the difference between the pilots and the navigators. The navigators wore the old ?? Some chaps came into our office asking for accommodation to live with their wives. War broke out and I knew that I was a military agent and possibly facing the danger of going into the trenches, that sort of thing which I couldn't imagine myself doing. I wanted to be up there and fly, so I went of to Sheffield straight away, I more or less registered all of my details and then told them about my education. I had left school at the age of 14. It was a grammar school. I was sent on to deferred service. August came along, I was signed up and was in.

SB – Did they give you a badge?

EC – Nothing like that whatsoever, just documents with my official number on them. I was on my first service with Mark May. I actually started on the 13<sup>th</sup> August and found myself in Blackpool in a squadron of fifty. Somewhere along the line I was a senior man almost straight away, probably because before the war I had been a

Captain with the church brigade. So I was a professional and disciplined and that sort of thing. The Corporal got hold of me one of those days after looking at my official documents and said 'Right, senior man.' Well you could imagine I was in my elements. 'You know the Blackpool procedures, two hours or more of drill every day.' We were marched off and put into sections. My Corporal, he was always being called away and would tell me to carry on. I was drill efficient, and got a medal there. I enjoyed it. From there we went down to ?? We were in some sidings just outside of Bristol, because they were bombing Bristol. We got there and 50 squadron and the original squadron. There were rows and rows of WW1 huts. We arrived there in September 1944 and I was the senior man and in charge. They firstly issue with a flying kit, graduated, upper havard. Again, there was a waiting list so they posted me to ??? for a few weeks. I got trips in the tin. My first scare in the Hampden was diving in one and that was my first experience of not flying straight and level. Then another posting to ?? Bomber and gunnery school. And I passed there. O T U 16 more Hampdens and I'm not sure if I was on 21 or 22 squadron. It was a course that had the most losses on the course.

SB – Are we talking about 1941 now?

EC – Yes. Blackpool three months, Yatesbury a few months, ?? and then in the.... I have a logbook... 16 OTU rear gunnery until the end of May, Upper Heyford until July.

SB – Did you come across the Hereford?

EC – No, I never came across it. But I knew of it. I was at Upper Heyford until September. I went onto the squadron on the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1941. I sat around from September 21<sup>st</sup> doing nothing then suddenly found myself on the board on the 13<sup>th</sup> October on an op with a Sergeant Robinson. We bombed ?? that was my first op, it was a six-hour flight. I was on the squadron for 14 months. Is that it with the Hampdens you don't want individual experience with them do you?

SB – Anything memorable during your time on the Hampdens would be fascinating.

EC – You would be here all night. No crashes, no engine failures in all my time on the Hampdens but lady luck looked after me. Once there was an urgent briefing and an immediate take off, while I was getting kitted up, one of the other crew had left his flying boots back at the billet which was against the rules. So I ended up not going and giving him my boots. Well my boots went down in the channel. I've been in touch although only in recent years, with the relatives by email. That was very moving. In the early stages of the squadron, again I was very critical. I was told to do a DI (daily inspection of other aircraft). When it came to ops, I went to the briefing room and didn't always know who I was flying with. I flew with 75 different pilots.

SB – I am very surprised to hear that.

EC – I have them all listed. I flew 47 times with Jeffries, the regular Hampden pilot. Back to the squadron, we were bombing quite frequently. One of our aircraft landed in Exeter with a duff engine and had a new engine fitted. We got a call to go down and fetch it. Jeffries and myself and another wireless op, and another pilot and another

navigator all crowded into the Hampden and were on our way to Exeter to collect the other Hampden and fly it back. No more aircraft could be bombed without a wireless operator. We got down to Exeter and the weather closed down. Exeter airfield is surrounded by hills on all sides, we waited in the Sergeant's Mess lounge. One of the crew wanted to have a beer and a smoke but had no money so I lent him 10 bob. I didn't smoke or drink. 15<sup>th</sup> March we set off from Exeter. There was a Polish Mosquito squadron also there, their Group Captain was Lord somebody somebody, Eventually we got the all clear. Being at the tail end you didn't know what was going on, but the pilot being an officer did. I always wanted to be involved. Someone had decided to give the Hampden's new engine an air test. He got off the ground and in no time at all he was in the cloud as the cloud was that low. He had decided to fly out to sea, so he could come out of the cloud, then come back in to land. He did that, but was too low and crashed into the cliffs. In the mean time, word had got back to Scampton about it. We flew back to Scampton on the 17<sup>th</sup> March and set off at 4.00. That was an experience.

SB – How many ops did you do in the Hampdens?

EC – Ten; four in Manchester's and the rest in Lancs.

SB – Am I right thinking that when you went on your Hampden trips, the only thing that you took on board was wireless codes on rice paper?

EC – Yes, we had the original back in the signal's office. We had a logbook, with a thick perplex with rice paper underneath them. And that was our logbook. When we landed it went into the signal's office.

SB – Let's go on through the Manchester and the Lancaster then.

EC – Right, so we then got the Manchesters...

SB – So your conversion to the Manchesters was while you were on the squadron then?

EC – I was at Scampton for 14 months. Right my first trip in a Manchester was on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1942 and it was with the squadron commander. I flew with him on circuits and landings and that was my first Manchester trip. The next one was an NFT in the same aircraft, we got airborne 10 or 15 minutes.

SB – There was something I was going to ask you, on Hampdens did you ever have to do night flight tests on routine or was it just occasionally?

EC – As routine. Basically if you did a NFT training you would basically be doing a night flight that night but it didn't always work out like that.

SB – You were obviously in charge of the guns as well. Were they always in the aircraft?

EC – They were always in the aircraft, the armour crew would install them and take them off.

SB – Did you have any control over the ammunition? Could you specify how much ammunition that you wanted?

EC – No. That was put in on briefing for a particular target or whatever. The aircraft had to have x amount of room between the cockpit and the walls spare.

SB – I was interested in the make up of the ammunition, all tracer....

EC – That was all armoury that did that. We knew nothing about it. When we climbed in it was already, or whatever. It had nothing to do with us whatsoever. We did have two big bombs under the wings on most trips.

SB – So we are now back in Manchester period, and you were talking about your first couple of trips with the flight commander and the squadron commander. Did you say you had a regular pilot?

EC – From then on, yes. I got Jeffries.

SB – So your four ops on the Manchesters were all with Jeffreys were they?

EC – Yes. Then on the 9<sup>th</sup> July I had a new pilot, Cook. Who was with me from the Lancasters until we got back to Scampton. That was the first time I was in a Lancaster. The plane wasn't that much different with the engines and the fuselage, you name it, it was almost all identical. Going back a bit during the 1,000 bomber raid, 4 hours 48, Cologne the first one 5 hours 45. We went to the ??? and FTs and local flying.

SB – Just touching on the 1000 Bomber Raids, were you aware at the time that they were such big efforts?

EC – No.

SB – On some of the squadrons there was quite a bit of apprehension apparently because of the number of aircraft that we're talking about.

EC – Well, as I was just saying, except in the early days I would have been an officer pilot or a navigator sometimes but apart from flying in the aircraft, you just reported to the briefing, if there was a seat, you would sit there and tried to take notes obviously but nothing else, when it was announced the officer went off to the messes and we went off with our crews. I was very critical off my early days on the squadron. There was only one thing with the Hampden/Lancaster pilot Jeffries, on the Lancasters up to Munich, I was in sick quarters I think I remember I had caught a stomach bug for five days and while I was there, my Manchester Hampden pilot turned up, later on he was shot down over Berlin. I am also in contact with his relatives. Anyway I can't think of anything else.

SB – So while the Lancaster struggled to arrive, where the squadron taken off ops while it was converting? Or not?

EC – Yes.

SB – So there were no defined ops with both the Manchesters and the Lancasters?  
Was it the conversion first and then back on ops?

EC – We collected a Lancaster on 9<sup>th</sup> July, the next day, we did an air test in a Manchester, the next day I did an air test in a Lancaster, I did an air firing in a Manchester and a FT in a Lancaster.

SB – So the last Manchester trip was when?

EC – The last time in a Manchester was with flight lieutenant Cook who became my Lancaster pilot, on the 28<sup>th</sup> June. Now twice I went up with Cook, and I think that Cook had already been flying on the Manchesters. And the last actual flying time in a Manchester with Cook was on the 6<sup>th</sup> July. On the 4<sup>th</sup> July, Jeffries and I were going on leave, I don't know how it came about but I got this leave and I was interested in doing some local flying. I was dropped off at Doncaster airport on leave and did some flying in a Whitley.

SB – Do you recall the identity of the Whitley?

EC – I don't know why I don't have the number, I just have Whitley. For some reason that particular Whitley was on the station.

SB – Do you recall what it was like inside?

EC – No, because I only just got inside. I was airborne for 20 minutes. Doncaster had been a civil airport for KLM. We flew low over Doncaster racecourse. And that was the last time that I was airborne with Jeffries.

SB – So, I think you said you did ten or twelve ops in the Lancaster?

EC – Yes 12 in the Lancaster.

SB – Are there any that stand out in the Lancaster period?

EC – Could I just go back to the Hampdens?

SB – Please do

EC – With late nights on Hampdens, ??? in the dark, we did drop ?? We went to the Baltic and it was shocking visibility, we were trying to fly as low as possible. I kept looking out. The pilot then over the intercom asks the rest of the crew if they could see anything? Suddenly I saw, that I thought was a flash of white, which I told the pilot. Anyway, we pulled up and went back, that was that.

SB – Some people say that the??? was a soft option but you say that there were a lot of losses.

EC – Oh yes. We had to stooze around the area then come down and stooze. Right back to Lancasters now. Cookie was marvellous, had great history with him. We started air tests on the Lancaster NFT, NFT, high level bombing.... Night circuits, NFT, Dusseldorf. Right, that's Lancasters. We bombed Rotterdam. Bombing Dusseldorf, that was the first, NFT. One story I have we were crossing the North Sea, the visibility was good, the rear gunner was called upon by the pilot who had said that he could see a light on the starboard side, everybody looked. The flight engineer who was sitting next to the pilot he came down and noticed that the navigation switches were on.

SB – I've heard of similar incidents where.....

EC – So I shut them off. This is true, when we got back all the Lancasters were grounded for 48 hours. The engineers cut the wire to the navigation lights so that they were permanently off. ????? The last op on the Lancaster, though I didn't know that it was my last op was low level daylight raid on Milan. Have you read about that one?

SB – No, but I know of it.

EC – Well 12 O'clock take off. 104 Lancasters flying at low level. Cross the Channel, then south where we climbed to go over to the top of the Alps and bombed Milan at dusk. Then off we went back to base. Supposedly because we were short on petrol. By the way on my Lancasters, I did 8 with cook and 4 with Sergeant Tom, because Cook had qualified to be on the Pathfinders. So in August we were going to go on Pathfinders. The day came when Cookie, September 19<sup>th</sup> I was in sick quarters and then I was sent home on five days leave, I came back on October 12<sup>th</sup> and was up on the board with a Sergeant Thom. So I did my last op with Sergeant Thom.

SB – How long was the Milan trip?

EC – 9 hours. On the Milan trip, we very nearly collided with a Stirling. I know there were about 104 Lancasters up at the time and I don't know how many Stirlings there were there also but as we were going in, the Stirling drifted in beneath us.

SB – Was this 1943?

EC – No, 1942. I joined the squadron in September 1941 and was there for 14 months. Back to the Lancaster, when we landed at Upper Heyford, again they wanted to know why we were landing there anyway. Eventually we told them that we were short of petrol. There was a bit of a joke amongst them later. There was a sergeant and he was being kidded that the only reason that we landed at the base was because he did a OTU ????? well that was all that was talked about. The only thing I knew again was which was left on the floor of the sergeant's mess, and the next morning it had been stamped on. The next day we were leaving Upper Heyford. 31<sup>st</sup> October I was waiting to be called for a flight or whatever and suddenly I was posted. November 21<sup>st</sup>.

SB – Had you been commissioned by that time?

EC – Yes. When this Flight Sergeant Gigsby in 1938 did his first op as a ??? he was posted. He did 67 ops on Hampdens. I have a story about his crew, I wasn't happy when I arrived. There were about 25 others and I was with a chap who had been posted with me, the next morning we had reported in, thick with smoke and we were just sitting around. ??? trying to cut that story short, I arrange it with my pals and after a few weeks we were still sitting around doing nothing. Have you been to Scampton?

SB – Yes.

EC – Do you know about Guy Gibson's dog?

SB – Yes

EC – My crew was straight there. There's the perimeter and the dog's grave, the hangar door and the entrance to ? so we went down, from the ground crew with a handful of brushes and tipped all the furniture out onto the grass. ?????? 1938 but he was a Goth type and you couldn't imagine him being in the Air Force. He was more of a farm boy. I always respected him and his rank anyway. ????? in July I was called to the flight office and orders from the flight office came through. The new Flight sergeant had asked me if I had any problems with him recommending him for me to be commissioned. I said 'No, sir.' He handed me the application forms and I filled them in, then there was a touch of bad luck for me in the air force in a way. Normally if you were recommended for commission you would be commissioned within about seven weeks. I went off flying and still didn't hear anything. July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1942 I was taken by truck, I had my sandwiches, I was interviewed and came away. Expecting that any time soon the commission would come through. It didn't come through. By the way did I mention that the life span of the bomber crew at that time was 7 to 8 weeks and I had been there for 14 months. So for whatever reason I was stuck there for a little while longer and had this sergeant for my last four ops and in the end Milan turned out to be my last trip. I was posted on November 21<sup>st</sup> from Scampton to 23 OTU at Pershore 91 crew OTU. I tried to find my way there a bit but was pushed out of the way as there was a new set up. I was allocated some duties. And then it was about five weeks, four to five weeks and during that time I had a weeks leave anyway. The wing commander was Canadian, he called me in and said to me congratulations Pilot Officer, he came round from his side of the desk, shook my hand and sent me home straight away. The week before Christmas I reported back as a PO. And it was backdated from July 2<sup>nd</sup>. So nearly six months. If you keep your nose clean normally you are a PO after six months.

SB – What about kitting out? When you were on leave, where you able to kit out?

EC – Yes. At that time there were shops. There was one in Doncaster. I was measured for a second suit, which I collected later on. And the green coat which had to be a tunic. Believe it or not I went from sergeant's uniform to Acting Flight Lieutenant in eight months. And that went down really badly with the other officers. I was saying that my PO was backdated six months and a week later when I had put the uniform on and oh my goodness. I was sent out to the satellite station at Stratford, in that mess there they looked at me. They say that faces tell stories, well there was one chap there and you could see it written all over his face that he disapproved of me.



SB – How long were you on OTU then?

EC – Three months.

SB – And what came after that?

EC – We were posted to Waddington. There was this chap, who I was buddies with and we were both posted suddenly to Waddington 44 squadron. We both arrived, you know the procedure when you arrive at the HQ, you go round sections getting signatures, and that led to HCU and you are on the pay roll.

SB – Were you one of the crew that was posted in to replace that was based on the Calsberg raid?

EC – No idea. Both of us were posted onto the OTU then on to Waddington. We were given a billet and slept in before we got a call to go to SHQ. We went and had to report to Scampton. We had to go round again, so we were in Waddington for one day. We both then arrived in Scampton, on September 21<sup>st</sup> 1941. Then I was on the squadron until the following November, then I went to Pershore in 1943.

SB – So you stayed at OTU from 1942 until the end did you?

EC – No, I was at Adderstone, satellite at Pershore 3 OTU that was 1943.

SB – How long did you stay there?

EC – I left Scampton 13<sup>th</sup> November 1942, I arrived at Pershore on the 13<sup>th</sup> November 1942.

SB – Right, Pershore 13<sup>th</sup> November 1942, and then the satellite through until January 1944, then back to Pershore again January 1944 to March 1944, then 24 OTU the end of March until the end of....

EC – When I was at the satellite I was suddenly posted on a Specialist Secondary Leader course at?? for six weeks. I was posted to North Wales on this Specialist course. We were supposed to be the best. We did this Special Category Classifications. I was successful and expected to be posted back to ?? I was posted to 24 OTU. What happened? Within a month of my posting there I was made a Secondary Officer there. It was the same group you see, with the same people. I arrived at Honeybourne into the Secondary Office. I reported there but I can't remember exactly the time. I get called in to see the wing commander and he gets out of his chair, and told me that he was sending me off to the satellite the next day to be in charge of there. He told me that from my experience that I had he had every faith in me and knew that I could do it. So I went out there and introduced myself, and one of the first things that I did there was I got out a sheet of paper and I started to write down their names. There were two English Officers, one Canadian Officer, and the others were supply sergeants and they were all instructors. I was there for a fortnight. My reputation had preceded me. I organised a reunion not that long ago with them all

and am still in touch with them. I was also the deputy commander of the OTU in the end.

SB – There were Wellingtons?

EC – Oh, yes. When we arrived at Pershore they had just converted.....

### **What was it like to be on Bomber Ops ?**

(If it is not written down, photographed, or recorded in some way , it is lost forever.  
Eric Clarke President, Carcroft Local History Society)

How often has this question been asked ?

On Sunday the 21<sup>st</sup> September 1941 I arrived at RAF Scampton, along with another Wop/Ag, Sgt Patrick Maloney (an Irish Cockney) having completed a 12 week course of operational training at No.16 OTU at RAF Upper Heyford on Handley Page Hampdens. I was to learn later that our course , No 21 I think, suffered the most losses in training.

Pat and I became very good friends and left Scampton on the same day Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> 1942 having completed 14 months on operations. He was posted north to RAF Lossiemouth and I was posted south to RAF Pershore, 23 OTU. I did not see him again until August 1943 when he called to see me at my unit on his way home on leave – I was a Flight Lieutenant, he was a Flying Officer We were both very lucky survivors.

*But Pat did not survive. He volunteered for a second tour(with 83 Sqdn I think).In August 1944 I received a letter from his brother informing me that Pat and crew baled out over Lincolnshire but Pat`s parachute failed to open. His crew survived only to go missing on a further Op. Some years ago I found that Pat was buried in a North London Cemetery with his Mother and I visited the grave. The War Grave Commission headstone was almost covered in weeds. I learned that the Cemetery had been sold for £1. ) Pat had gained F/Lt rank and had been awarded the DFM. He will always be a 4Y9er to me*

On arrival at Scampton we carried out the arrival procedure which consisted visiting certain Sections and `signing in` the final visit was to Station Headquarters which, among other things, ensured we were on the payroll. We were billeted in the former married quarters.

The following morning we found our way to the Wireless Operators crew room in No.2 Hangar which looked out on the airfield. (Wing Commander Guy Gibson`s dog Nigger`s memorial is now there)

There were about 20 Wop/Ags consisting of A and B Flights where Flight Sergeant Jack Gadsby said we were in his Flight, a Flight Sgt Wally Ellis who had a DFM and Bar was NCO in charge of A Flight. I learned later that both Ellis and Gadsby joined the Squadron in 1938, and that Jack Gadsby had done his first Op as an LAC, before all aircrew were made Sergeants. He also had a DFM.and was on his second tour.

Jack and about 5 or 6 others would be in their late 20's the rest seemed to be quite young, around age 20. Pat and I were both 28 – old boys !.- new boys !

The Hampden bomber had a crew of 4 – Pilot, Navigator (who also combined Bomb Aimer) Wireless Operator and Rear Gunner. Apparently there were no `straight` Air Gunners so the crew comprised Pilot, Navigator and 2 Wireless Ops. One Wop would be `on the set` in the upper position and the other in the lower gun position, known as `the Tin`

What was it like being on Ops ?

2

I was not to know until Monday 13<sup>th</sup> October 1941 Normally, we got word in the crew room by 9am that aircraft ,say 9, were serviceable and F/S Jack Gadsby would detail us to carry out a DI (daily inspection) on a specific aircraft and usually it would be the aircraft that you later flew in on an NFT (night flying test) to certify its fitness for an operation.. This involved a 10-15minute flight with the Pilot , usually the Pilot with whom you would fly that night, but this did not always happen Later in the morning , we could see from our crew room window a tractor towing a string of bomb trolleys and we might just get an inkling of the type of operation that night. Ruhr, happy valley !! or mining , known as gardening, but we just speculated. Sometimes F/S Jack Gadsby would be able to say that you were flying with such a Pilot in , say , K King. The rest of us would not know until we saw the Ops board at briefing but if your Pilot was an NCO , he would know and he would contact you but if your Pilot was an Officer you would not see him until briefing.

There were a few occasions in the early days where a crew stayed together in the Hampdens but not many. The merits of the Pilots were certainly discussed in the Wops crew room , comments like “spot on” “Super” “wizard” and so on but also not so others who might merit “dopey” “crazy and other unspeakable sorts. Obviously, affinities were formed but of a tenuous nature,.

When we got the Manchesters, we had seven crew and the majority stayed together, but we might not see much of the Officer members until we assembled for boarding. They had their own crew rooms

When Pat and I walked into the Wops crew room that first morning I must say I felt a sense of disappointment ,the room was full of blue smoke, a crowd of Wops looking somewhat dishevelled, sitting round small tables playing cards or dominoes, and the floor looked as if it had not been swept for weeks. Battle dress had not yet been issued and they looked a very untidy lot. Somehow I expected some thing different, however Pat and I fitted into and getting to know the routine. I stuck it for a week or two and then arranged with Pat to go down with me early one morning and clean the place up. We tipped all the tables and chairs out on the grass frontage, borrowed some sweeping brushes from the Hangar staff and gave the place a through clean up, much to the surprise of the arriving Wops. I suggested to F/S Jack Gadsby that a cleaning rota be set up and he agreed. I asked his permission re-arrange the notice board and he agreed. The first time I got home on a `48` I returned armed with card , lettering pens etc and set the board up afresh.

The daytime was a mixture of DI's NFT's, a lecture, parachute repacking, and some local flying, otherwise it was cards and dominoes for some. I only occasionally joined in when pressed, but always refused to gamble. Pat was of the same mind.

Amazingly, I did not get airborne until the 12<sup>th</sup> October, actually 0010 hrs on the 13<sup>th</sup> and it was an Op. I had not been informed that I was flying that night until F/S Gadsby told me at tea time to be at briefing 1800 hrs.

Arriving at briefing I found I was crewed with a Sgt. Pilot Robinson, Navigator Sgt. Black, and Sgt. Mossop Wireless Operator. I was in the Tin.. The target was Halse (also called Huls) and it was to be my first flight with 49 Squadron and it was to be an Op. I did not know the Pilot or Navigator but of course I knew the Wop Sgt Mossop, he was a buddy of F/S Gadsby and a `veteran`. *I did not know it at the time but in September Sgt Robinson and crew, including Sgt Mossop, crashed short of petrol near Banff in Scotland and all the crew were injured They were part of a force flying from Lossiemouth to lay mines in the approaches to Oslo Fjord where the German battleship Von Scheer was moored*

*In December Sgt Robinson and crew crash landed at Bircham Newton in Norfolk after a raid on Bremerhavenn in which Sgt Black was killed by a cannon shell. The others were unhurt.)*

The briefing was short, the Squadron Commander pointing out the target and the reason for the operation, and the route out and back and followed by specialist Officers, meteorologist, navigator signals and intelligence and take-off times were also announced, then the individual crews got into a huddle over the navigator's chart after which we returned to our Messes for a `night flying supper`. There was no excitement, just quiet conversation and discussion,

We all met at 2300 hours in front of the Hangar, fully kitted up, extra jerseys and the like as it was very cold in the Hampdens and along came the Wagon. No more smoking, cigarettes stubbed out. An officer would sit in front with the Waaf driver and we piled in, 2 or 3 crews at a time and we were off to dispersal.. No sign of `nerves`,s but quite a lot of banter. I think. to some of the younger ones, it was an adventure of a sort with little thought of the possible horrors. You would hear "I have done 10 now, how many have you done?" or "Get some in" or similar. I did not announce it was my first.

The Pilot, who, at this time was addressed as `Skipper` was in conversation with the ground crew Flight Sergeant, after which he just said "Lets get going" All this was in `black out` conditions and then the sound of engines starting up and some shouting.

The Pilot and Navigator entered through the front hatch the Wireless Operator and myself through the rear lower gun position – the Tin . I was the last, we were all in and individually commenced connecting up routines, I stowed my chute, checked the safety catches on my guns- twin Vickers gas operated, plugged in the oxygen tube, a bayonet type, and then listened in to the crew checking intercom contact with each other but firstly with the Pilot. "Hello Skipper, Navigator here" and similar from the Wop and myself. Good intercom was so vital, just one defective headset could cause the whole intercom to fail and possibly the whole operation. For take-off and landing the Tin `gunner had to squeeze in with the Wireless Op.

The engines were started up, with some vibration as they were warmed up and we checked the intercom again ,and then we commenced the taxiing to take off.

Waiting for take off, I found myself musing, if that is the right word, I went back to the time , while at Yatesbury Wireless School, I hitch hiked home on a `48` and found myself on the London North Circular road, making my way to a Lorry Park at Finchley where I could get a lift up the A1 to Yorkshire through the night.. The All Clear had just sounded and I had to wend my way (incidentally with a veteran hitch hiker who certainly knew his way around, through bomb damage, with fire engines and others doing their job, water mains burst, shop windows out, glass and goods all over the place, maybe because we were in uniform the Wardens took no notice of us.

As I sat in my bomber I began to ask myself what damage were we going to do. I also remembered, when on leave, the red sky over Sheffield some 18 miles away. I thought of the reports by radio and news papers of the damage , and countless civilian deaths in London and our big cities

Why was I here , ? listening to the engines of my bomber about to take off to do untold damage and death to another people. I consoled myself that my country was fighting for its very existence, and that I was a very small cog in a massive war machine . Germany had over run Europe and England could be the next victim. So horrible to think and yet possible?.

With these and other thoughts I began to ask myself “What happens now Are we going to be successful and carry out our mission with a safe return, to do more ? Or are we going to be shot down, shall I have to bale out ? I had no qualms about baling out, but would I be able to?

I certainly feared coming down in the sea? We now know that the North Sea is a graveyard of hundreds of our bombers.

My musings are interrupted, “OK boys we are off” and with a surge of the engines we rumble down the runway gathering speed and then the rumbling ceases and we sense a slight lift – we are airborne and I feel as if I am sweating. Some people say “God defend the right ”but as I muse I hear the Navigator telling the Pilot “Wheels up OK”o.and then reminds him of the compass course to the coast. Bill Mossop gave me a `thumbs up` signal and I clambered down to my lower gun position, and then re-checked my intercom During the steady climb I swung my guns from side to side checking my view and began musing again . I did not want this , I wanted to be on the set, however, my turn will come.

We were now flying level and the engines droned , what is to be will be ???!. My thoughts flew home , to my wife. Past midnight she would be in bed. We married in 1937, I was 24 she 21 and we lived with her widowed mother and right now we are expecting our first child – about the end of December, I suddenly felt very much alone, isolated apprehensive?.

What am I doing here ? When War broke out I knew I was of military age and in the 1930`s,as I worked in a Doncaster office , I got used to seeing various aircraft flying around and in 1936 RAF Finningley (5 miles south of Doncaster) opened and I also got used to seeing `the boys in blue` in the town mostly wearing an aircrew brevet, Pilot, Observer etc. and the aircraft were Handley Page Hampdens.

I did not fancy myself with a Lee Enfield .303 plus bayonet and I had some ideas about becoming one of those `boys` so at the first opportunity I visited the recruiting office at Sheffield and applied for aircrew navigation but refused on the spot as I did not have Grammar School education, but I was offered `Wireless Operator/Air Gunner` which I accepted.. I was called up on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1940.

My wife and I had decided not to have children –because of the War- but when I commenced flying training she changed her mind and now we awaited our first child.

Suddenly I heard the Navigator give the Pilot a new course, we were crossing the Norfolk coast, good bye England!. hopefully just for the time being. I think we were at about 10 to 12 thousand feet, and the Navigator sounded crisp and confident and the W/op reported `nothing from Group Throughout the trip the W/op must listen out to Group HQ every 15 minutes from the hour in case of recall or diversion, W/T silence was observed except in case of emergency and only with the Pilot's permission. As we approached the enemy coast the Pilot warned us that we were in a nightfighter zone but there was now a lot of cloud and I could see nothing. My first operation, In the next 14 months I was to survive 26 operations with 9 different Pilots, in 3 different bombers, Hampdens, Manchesters and Lancasters.

The Air Ministry report reads : “ AD979 Sgt.Robinson,10/10<sup>th</sup> cloud at Wesel on ETA, set course for Target, dropped flare without success for 25 minutes at 2000 - 4000 ft looking for target spending 50 minutes in area, Essen and Ruhr under 10/10<sup>th</sup> cloud, bombed drome and flarepath in Holland on return.” We landed at base at 0750 hrs, we had been airborne 6hrs20mins . We piled into the waiting wagon, to de-briefing and then to breakfast, somebody said everybody back. With a strange sense of elation I went to bed. In the billet Pat was just leaving for breakfast – he had not been on that Op. The next day I was able to have a talk with Bill Mossop, the W/op, and discussed the flight, my first Op. He laconically summed it up as “ a fat lot of good !!” He said he was about finished and I don't remember seeing him again. I think he had completed his tour. There was constant `movement` in the W/ops crew room – on leave, on a course, failing to return, new arrivals .One Sergeant arrived (Sgt Way) who made it known that he was expecting his commission to come through. He was on the Channel Dash detail the same week and did not return. He was posted missing as Pilot Officer W S Way. We lost 15 NCO aircrew, including 7 W/ops.

I went on to do 9 more Ops (raids) 1 in the Tin and 8 on the Wireless, with 6 different Pilots, including 2 with Sqdn Ldr P D S Bennett DFC our B Flight Commander. I was happy to be on the set and felt that I was really doing the job I was trained to do.

My second Op was with Sgt. Pilot Bow and a different crew – I didn't know if they were veterans or new boys. The target was Mannheim and the Air Ministry reports reads “ Flak and searchlight opposition over Belgian coast, cloud necessitated flying at 18000 ft. Target bombed at 14000 ft and point at river junction seen. Electrical storms prevailed over target area” We diverted on the return to Horsham St. Faith in Norfolk in pouring rain. We slept in the Sergeants Mess lounge and flew back to Scampton next morning. On the Op we took off at 1800 hrs and were airborne 7hrs 35mins. I was able to receive Group HQ transmissions but I would not have been able to transmit if required due to heavy static.

My remaining Ops on Hampdens were:-

PO Donald. Mining of Brest – mines laid but bombs returned. Airborne 7 hrs 45 mins..

Sqdn/Ldr Bennett DFC – Bombing Brests. Bright moonlight, chased by ME 109 on bombing run causing evasive action, could not bomb target, bombs returned. Landed on snow runway. Airborne 8 hrs.

Sgt. Downs – bombing Brest – cruisers , hazy conditions, bombs seen to enter dockyard. Airborne 7 hrs 20 mins.

Sgt, Slingo – Bombing Wilhelmshaven – bombs dropped in dock area but unable to distinguish bursts from flak. Airborne 6 hrs 39

Sgt. Slingo – Mining off Heligoland laid in target area. Airborne 5 hrs 55min

P/O Jefferies – Essen. Returned Intercom u/s. Landed Waddington.

Airborne 3 hrs 05 mins.

Sgt. Slingo – Bombing Lubeck (Baltic) dropped burners from 1000 ft whole town ablaze. 8 bundles of leaflets released. Airborne 8 hrs 40 mins.

Sqdn Ldr Bennett DFC – Bombing Cologne and dropped leaflets. 9/10's cloud, bomb bursts not seen. Airborne 6, hrs 55 mins.

The Manchester era.

“In late 1941 news began filtering through that Coningsby had got a twin engined heavy bomber called a Manchester and we began wondering how long it would be before we got them, we certainly felt that the Hampden had reached the end of its service. It had, however, produced a Victoria Cross, F/Lt R A B Learoyd gaining the award in August 1940,. Incidentally, Scampton also gained a second Victoria Cross, Sgt Hannah, a Wireless Operator of 83 Squadron. In early 1942, 83 Squadron got the Manchesters; we always seemed to play `second fiddle` to 83 and rumours began to float around that there was a lot of engine trouble with the Manchesters.”

“It is recorded that the Hampden did more sorties than any other Squadron in 5 Group. The last time I got airborne in a Hampden was, in a way, unique, since it was a lift to Doncaster Airport for me going on leave. The pilot was F/Lt Massey, and it was April 13<sup>th</sup> 1942, in Hampden AT217. On April 19<sup>th</sup> Sgt. Frank Slingo and crew in that Hampden failed to return from a minelaying sortie off Terscschelling - it was the last 49 Squadron Hampden crew to be lost in WW2. I was on leave on that date. I flew with Sgt Slingo on the Lubeck `burner` sortie on March 28<sup>th</sup> being airborne 8.40 hours.”

“My initiation to the Manchester occurred on 21<sup>st</sup> April 1942 when I was detailed to fly with the Squadron Commander Wg Cdr R D Stubbs DFC in Manchester L7524 for local circuits and landings. I did not know it then but I learned much later that he had flown and done ops in Manchesters with 61 Squadron at Coningsby. The next day I flew with our Flight Commander Sqn Ldr P D S Bennett DFC, and later the same day I flew with my Hampden pilot Flg Off Jeffreys on conversion flying and the next day I was called again to fly with Wg Cdr Stubbs, also on local conversion flying. I then found that I had been crewed with Flg Off Jeffreys and four other strangers!”

“On May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1942 I did my first Manchester op, a leaflet raid on Rennes and we were airborne 6.20 hours. The Air Ministry report reads ‘Unsuccessful sortie. Primary target not located. DR compass unserviceable, last resort target used to release nickels (leaflets) from 10,000ft at 0030 hrs.’ The next few days we did local day and night flying and on May 8<sup>th</sup> we did our 2<sup>nd</sup> op laying mines off Heligoland Bight., The report reads ‘A successful sortie carried out under ideal weather conditions Mine seen to enter water.’”

“By this time I was beginning to feel comfortable in this big bomber, mainly because, by contrast with the cramped Hampden position, I could get up from my platform seat and do a walkabout. The wireless installation was upright with a narrow but ample desk, and I could reach round and pass notes to the navigator at his table. My position was immediately forward of the main spar and down to the left was the trailing aerial reel and the heating control, and it is well reported as the hottest spot in the aircraft, almost a sweatbox, much to the dismay of the rest of the crew. I could stand up and with one step to my right I could put my head in the astrodome for a 360 degree look around, and similarly from there I could operate the loop aerial for direction finding. I could get up and walk forward, past the navigator up to the pilot, or to the rear towards the rear gunner’s turret. A major contrast in every respect as far as the Hampden was concerned, as I have said like converting from a Ford 10 to a Rolls Royce.”

“In size, the Manchester had a wing span of 90ft as against the 69ft of the Hampden and powered by two Rolls-Royce Vulture engines, each engine consisting of four banks of six cylinders. It was once described as two Merlins in one. We did not know it at the time but the Vulture engine became a serious problem resulting in the Manchester being taken out of service and on 9<sup>th</sup> July 49 Squadron got the Lancaster.”

“During the rest of the month of May we were briefed seven times for targets which were later scrubbed, until on May 30<sup>th</sup> when we were briefed for the 1,000 bomber raid on Cologne, but I do not remember any particular emphasis on the number except that some OTU crews would be taking part. 49 Squadron supplied 13 Manchesters and 83 Squadron supplied 12 Lancasters. The raid was fully reported as a boost to morale and that we were now taking the war to the enemy.”

“The report reads ‘R5775 P/O Jeffreys. 2303-0457 Light and visibility excellent. No cloud, Load dropped on target and bursts seen. Successful in every respect.’ I recollect that when we arrived at the target there were a great many fires and palls of smoke. Our bombing run seemed strangely devoid of flak although there were many searchlights. Of 1,047 aircraft taking part 41 failed to return. 49 Squadron lost two, its first Manchester casualties. The second 1,000 raid (actually 956) took place on June 2<sup>nd</sup> and the report reads ‘Primary attacked from 9,000 feet at 0203 on 40 true. Light and visibility excellent bombs seen to burst in target area and large fire started.’ To me the raid seemed quite uneventful – 49 Squadron lost one Manchester. It turned out to be my last operation in the Manchesters. The Squadron’s last Manchester operation was on 25<sup>th</sup> June to Emden.”

“On June 14<sup>th</sup> I was on a weather test detail with a new arrival , Flg Off Cooke DFC, on the 27<sup>th</sup> he was a Flt Lt and did a couple of dual details with Sqn Ldr Couch , our Flight Commander and from then on Flt Lt Cooke was my pilot on Lancasters.



Countless books have been published on the now famous Lancaster, the 'Flying Legend' the Manchester with four Merlins, an extended wingspan to 102 feet, the weapon of death to the enemy, a weapon of peace and so many tributes to its ability and achievements. Its reputation will live forever."

"On 9<sup>th</sup> July, 'Cookie' as he became known, collected me to fly to Swinderby and when we landed he just said 'Get your stuff, we are collecting a Lanc!' and that was the start of my unique association with my famous 'Cookie.' On the take off he got me to hold the throttles until he got airborne, that was my initiation to the Lancaster I flew with him continuously until 19<sup>th</sup> September which was an operation on Munich lasting 8hrs 55mins, the last of eight ops with him. My association with 'Cookie' was quite unique. Our crew had qualified for posting to the now famous Pathfinders – but without me, and I was never informed why I was not included, but I think the actual reason was that I had been operational for a whole year and had only a few ops to do to complete my tour. On the 6<sup>th</sup> October the crew said 'goodbye', I was a Sergeant, Cookie was a Flight Lieutenant."

"Ten months later he arrived at my unit, 23 OTU Satellite of Pershore, RAF Atherstone, near Stratford on Avon where I was a Flight Lieutenant Senior Signals Instructor (and Officers Mess Secretary) He was a Wing Commander DSO DFC. Our meeting was quite heart warming – he looked at me, congratulated me on my rank and said 'where is your DFM?' I replied 'No DFM Sir.' He said 'You were recommended twice to my knowledge.' Some days later he told me had examined the London Gazette in Station Headquarters but found nothing."

"I enjoyed a splendid association with him at Atherstone and we worked well together. We parted again in March 1944 when I was posted to Penrhos on a special Signals Leaders Course where I obtained the Special Category classification from where I was posted to 24 OTU Honeybourne as Senior Signals Leader, and later, again, as Officers Mess Secretary. In 1986 I attempted to trace Cookie but Air Ministry Records just replied 'Wing Commander J K M Cooke DSO DFC died in 1967.'"

"So, on 6<sup>th</sup> October 1942, 83 Squadron, our sister Squadron at Scampton for three years, were posted to Pathfinders at Wyton. As I have said, I did eight ops with Cookie and he became my 'Icon'. I had a warm feeling for him, I think he was a little older than me, he had a sort of laid back attitude, a very dry, laconic humour, and a slight speech impediment. His style was 'You clueless clots, pull your finger out!' Somehow I felt so safe with him. On three occasions we returned to base on three engines, even two and half engines! and I was instructed to break W/T silence and obtain emergency fixes, QDMs and the like for the navigator. When we disembarked he just said 'Good show Sergeant', I felt great!, and when he arrived at Atherstone as my Commanding Officer my joy was boundless."

"When Cookie left me at Scampton I really felt so desolate, I had a few ops to do to complete my tour, who would I be crewed with? My last op with Cookie was on September 19<sup>th</sup> to Munich and we were airborne 8.55 hrs and our new Squadron Commander – Wing Commander Slee signed my Log book for September 1942. I did not fly again until 12<sup>th</sup> October and it was an op with a Sgt Jimmy Thom a Scot. I did not know him or the crew. Our first op was to Wismar in the Baltic, target Dornier

factory and town, nine returned to base, one missing. On the 15<sup>th</sup> October we bombed Cologne and all 49 aircraft returned to base safely, but 18 from the main force failed to return.”

“On the 24<sup>th</sup> October we bombed Milan, an operation I do remember vividly; an early briefing, take off 12 noon in our regular Lanc, W4761. After night bombing since October 1941, this was a low level daylight! 88 Lancasters from 5 Group, independently due south from Scampton over the Channel and to the river Loire where we turned to port for the Alps and we rendezvoused at Lake Annecy from where we flew through the top of the Alps to Milan. As we did so I had my head in the astrodome and an unforgettable experience was, looking forward, easterly, I saw at eye level a big white full moon and looking aft, westerly, I could see, at eye level an equally large orange sun; quite unique. Down in the now dark valleys we saw quite a lot of twinkling lights, no black out there.”

“We bombed Milan at dusk about 1700 hrs descending through cloud and the force dropped 135 tons of bombs in 18 minutes. We had a real scare on our bombing run as a Stirling crossed just below us. We bombed below the cloud base at 4,500 feet. We returned, in the dark over Germany but fortunately without hindrance, steering round two flak concentrations. On the return I was instructed to break W/T silence to obtain radio navigational aids, M/F fixes and QDMs, after which we landed, short of petrol, at RAF Upper Heyford having been airborne 9.00 hours. We slept in the Sergeants Mess lounge, returning to Scampton at 1100 hrs next morning. We lost one Lancaster, Sgt. Bonnett and crew crashed on the south coast and all killed.”

“This op turned out to be my last, although I did not know that. I did some local flying, all in the same aircraft (W4761) with Sgt Thom, was briefed twice for Stettin in the Baltic which were scrubbed. I was sent on leave, returned on the 8<sup>th</sup> and on November 12<sup>th</sup> I was posted to Pershore. That same day King George VI visited Scampton. Sergeant Pat Maloney, who arrived at Scampton with me 14 months previously on September 21<sup>st</sup> 1941 was also posted off ops, the same day, to Lossiemouth.”

“What was it like on ops? In my 97<sup>th</sup> year, 67 years on, I have tried to answer that question. Why was I on ops? Our country was fighting for its very existence. I have had to live with the knowledge that some of the bombs from my aircraft must have killed many innocent civilians, women and children, I think I have read somewhere that our enemy killed 30,000 civilians in Britain.”

“What of the many colleagues, pilots and crews, some very close friends who were killed or missing - they were denied the life that I have had. Bomber Command lost 55,500 aircrew; my Squadron lost 907.”

“I shall continue to mourn them for the rest of my days.”

In memoriam

Eric Clarke

Sources.

My memory –I was there.

My Flying Log Book

My personal diary for 1942

John Ward's `Beware the Dog at War`

Air Ministry extracts obtained by F/Lt `Will` Hay DFC

