

THE BATTLE OF BERLIN
From: Arthur John Pugh Lee
(FLIGHT SERGEANT, NAVIGATOR, 626 SQUADRON)

GENERAL COMMENTS

Berlin was our first sortie from RAF Wickenby with 626 Squadron. We had crossed the enemy coast on one previous occasion, a 'Nickel' operation to Chartres in a 'Wellington' in August 1943, our final O.T.U 'exercise' from RAF Hixon.

We arrived at RAF Wickenby and 626 Squadron in mid November where I was, to say the least, 'surprised' to learn that we were on the battle order for Berlin on 23rd November, our first 'serious' operation. We had completed a more or less successful 'Bullseye' a few days earlier and our Skipper had survived his 'second dicky' trip to Berlin (with Victor Wood) on the previous night. I was sure that all 'sprog' crews were sent on 'essy' trips for their first few operations to gain some practical experience and 'play themselves in', and anticipated a little light 'gardening' before our first visit to Germany. I still believe this would have been more sensible, but it seems that Headquarters 1 Group was determined to show that their Squadrons were composed of good "press on" types and that "maximum effort" would be the order of the day. In those days it was also believed that the first few operations were the most dangerous for new crews, which makes it difficult to understand why they were sent to what was probably the most heavily defended target in Germany. It was also a very long, dangerous and tiring journey.

On the other hand, having made it to Berlin and back was a great morale booster for a 'sprog' crew.

Our morale suffered a set-back a few trips later when we discovered that the armour plated door forward of the main spar had been replaced with one of a grey painted ply-wood. When we enquired of the fitter what was the purpose of the modification, he replied with a mirthless smile, "You can carry more bombs".

I was also naive enough to believe that Bomber Command attacked only military objectives, which included munitions factories, marshalling yards and oil refineries. Berlin undoubtedly contained many 'military targets', but it came as a shock at our first briefing to hear 'Intelligence' inform us that "Tonight we intend to 'take-out' the north-east corner". Until then I had thought of bombing in terms of target maps with 'military objectives' clearly marked. This is not intended as a criticism of the bombing policy. The leaders of Bomber Command knew well enough that with the equipment we possessed and the conditions in which we operated, it was difficult enough to find Berlin let alone, say, the Siemens factory. Blow the haystack to pieces and there was a good chance that a number of needles would also be destroyed!

WEATHER

The weather was appalling for most of this period. The greatest hazard was fog and we were 'diverted' on several occasions because fog had reached Wickenby earlier than expected. I remember at one briefing being given the warning, "Butch" says don't hang about, we're expecting fog! It seemed to me at the time that too small a margin was made for errors in 'Met' forecasts. Statements like "You all should be back well before the fog is expected" did not inspire confidence when "well before" meant not more than one hour. Our diversion instructions were also fairly sloppy. We would pick them up soon after leaving the enemy coast and they seemed very short on detail. I remember the wireless operator passing me a slip which read "Divert to Bicester." I knew that Bicester was somewhere between High Wycombe and Oxford, but not its exact location and in any case I did not think Bicester had runways, only Tiger Moths! which was a bit depressing for a weary crew, who had perhaps been airborne for eight hours and knew that fuel was running low. I do not think we ever reached our authorised diversion. We looked for any airfield with lights and reasonable runways and 'got in' as soon as possible.

Berlin and most of Europe seemed to be completely cloud covered during this period which meant that our aiming point was always the centre of a cluster of sky markers. It also meant that we never brought back any photographs which showed any ground detail. We were also subject to very strong winds. Wind speeds in excess of 100 m.p.h. were not uncommon. Since the prevailing wind was from the West, this gave us very fast times to the target and very low ground-speeds for the journey home. Ground speeds could be as low as 90 m.p.h during the homeward journey of 700 miles or more depending on the route. It also meant that even small undetected changes in wind direction could result in serious navigation errors because of the distances involved.

TACTICS & NAVIGATION PROBLEMS.

At every briefing, the importance of keeping strictly to the flight plan was emphasised. It was believed that safety lay in keeping together and laying a carpet of 'window' so that ground controlled enemy fighters could not be vectored to an individual aircraft in the bomber stream. I remember that the frequent 'judder' of the aircraft as we encountered another's slip stream was always produced comments of relief from the crew - "We're still with the lads". Apart from the ever present danger of collisions, I now wonder if the safety of a tight bomber stream was a delusion. We may have been safe from the fighters in the 'boxes' but the rapid development of 'Tame Boar' tactics after Hansburg meant that once the fighters had found the stream their airborne radar provided a wealth of targets. I recall when we had been 'promoted' to 'first wave crew' watching fighters laying flares to port and starboard with such regularity and frequency that I was reminded of the brilliantly lit 'arterial roads' of a few years earlier along which we cycled in our schoolboy cycling clubs. The fighter flares began about 60 miles from the target and ended at the searchlight belt surrounding Berlin.

As a new crew we were allocated the oldest aircraft. This seems to have been normal procedure. I remember that 'Victor 2' had completed about 60 operations when we took her over and was sent for an engine-change after we had completed our first four trips to Berlin. Of course it also did a great deal for our 'issge' when we diverted to an OTU airfield and the u/t crews came out in the morning to gaze in wonder at a real operational 'Lanc'. It also meant that we had the minimum of equipment. No 'Boozer', no 'Fishpond' and no 'H2S'. The absence of the latter was not a problem since we had received no training in its use. I do not recall any 626 Squadron aircraft equipped with H2S at this stage although I believe some 12 Squadron aircraft did have the equipment.

The allocation of the oldest aircraft to the newest crews seems yet another example of the lack of any particular concern for their survival. Accepting that the senior were entitled to the best equipment available, should a 'sprog crew' have been sent Berlin in a 'beat-up Lanc'? Would a little less than a 'maximum effort' have made much difference? ~~Old Lancs were the Victor 2's flight crew's~~
~~With 4000 hrs, well used veterans scheduled for complete engine change, 219 hrs only~~
~~left.~~ When fully laden, 'Victor 2' demonstrated a marked reluctance to leave the runway. We reached the Dutch coast at 12,000 feet, some 8,000 feet below 'operational height'. A little more safety was gained by depositing our incendiaries on a searchlight battery, but we were later advised that we should have dropped the 'cookie', as the incendiaries would be more useful at the target. With a little more experience we would have known that dropping the 'cookie' might have improved our own chances of survival. On this and subsequent trips we watched many 'cookies' going into the North Sea. We cursed these crews as miserable cowards, who were ruining the operation, but with the passing of time, I have realised that they were chaps like us trying to slightly improve the near impossible odds against survival. They had probably seen more than we had and knew the danger of being caught with a sluggish aircraft when the nightfighters struck. Having dropped our incendiaries on the searchlights, 'Victor 2' developed a defect in its hydraulic system which meant that the gun turrets could only be rotated manually. However, such was the 'press-on' spirit or 'greeness' of this new crew that it decided to press-on to Berlin and hope for the best.

I might add that in spite of the mechanical defects of 'Victor 2', it survived the war, which was more than my crew could manage.

We were equipped with 'Gee' and an 'Air Position Indicator'. We also climbed to operational height over base before setting course. I spent this period using 'Gee' and the API to check the actual wind velocity against the forecast, every six minutes. By the time operational height was reached I had a reasonably good assessment of the accuracy of the forecast wind. The check continued after setting course by using the 'Gee' to fix our position every six minutes until we reached the enemy coast. At this point, the Gee screen was jammed by enemy radar and we proceeded by 'dead-reckoning' until the first PFF route marker flare was seen. We were also required to use wind velocities sent to us by radio. These were code-named 'Zephyrs' and were the average of the wind velocities radioed back to base by 'Wind-Finder' aircraft. I always believed that the wind-finders were PFF aircraft with the latest navigational equipment and the hottest of hot-shot navigators. I have since discovered that they were delegated main force aircraft who did this work. Frequently, 'Zephyrs' were hopelessly wrong. I wonder if the 'experts' at base averaged all winds received without rejecting any obvious 'rubbish'. I remember one occasion when we were due to leave Europe via Boulogne we emerged over the islands off the Dutch coast, as result of using a dud 'Zephyr'. Home from Berlin via the Ruhr!

DEFENCES.

The only occasion I can recall when our gunners actually opened fire was on a return journey when a "twin engined aircraft" approached from "dead astern" when we had reached 5,000 feet over the North Sea during our descent on the final leg to Wickenby. The gunners opened fire as we 'corkscrewed' to port and the stranger dived to starboard and disappeared.

Berlin seemed to possess thousands of searchlights. They did not move, but their concentration illuminated the clouds above the city as we moved slowly towards the target indicators "like flies on a tablecloth", and perfect targets for the nightfighters. Flak caused us no problems since it burst well below our operational height, but together with the sky markers and the exploding aircraft, it added to the 'angry boiling cauldron' appearance of sky over Berlin. Many combats were seen although we were never singled out. Our closest contact over the brilliantly lit target was with a pair of JU 88's which streaked past our nose in a shallow dive. It came as a shock to see clearly the black crosses on the sides of their fuselages. I understand that nightfighters always operated individually, but these two were flying a typical leader & wingman formation (a rotte?).

FINAL OPERATION

Our last operation and seventh attack on Berlin took place on Thursday 27th January 1944.

Strong tail winds brought us over the target within three hours of leaving base. We then turned south for the Czechoslovakian border before turning west for the long leg to the French coast at Boulogne. Our groundspeed was little more than 100 m.p.h. We were routed through the Bonn-Koblenz gap in the Flak defences, but shortly before 11 pm. some 25 miles short of the Rhine we were attacked by a ME 110 from I/NJG6 (Emil Nommennmacher will confirm). There was no warning of the attack. Cannon shells struck the starboard wing with what felt like three blows from a giant hammer. The shock and noise of the impact was transmitted through the main spar to the interior of the fuselage. I emerged from behind my curtain with the aircraft in a steep dive and the starboard wing in flames. I made ready to abandon the aircraft by removing my helmet with inter-com and oxygen connections and attached my parachute.

I must have 'blacked out' at this point for I remember no more until becoming conscious of lying face down on the floor of the aircraft at the top of the steps leading to the bomb-aimer's compartment. The cabin was well alight and appeared to be empty. I saw that the forward escape hatch was open and assumed that I had been left for dead. I struggled to drag myself down the steps to the hatch but could not move. I felt that my harness was entangled but it was more likely that centrifugal force from the spinning aircraft was pinning me to the floor. I could smell my hair burning and the heat was intense. There was a moment of terror at the thought of being burnt to death but as ~~the time passed~~ I seemed to hang head downwards into the bomb aimers compartment it came as a relief to realise that I would soon hit the ground head first! The certainty of death had a strange effect. I felt no fear, only an intense moment of sadness. I remember the thought "I shall not be going home on leave any more". I resisted a temptation to pull the rip-cord of my parachute - "just to see if it would have worked" - and relaxed into a period of calmness in which time seemed to pass in 'slow-motion'. At this point I was ejected violently from the aircraft, observers from the ground later reported a mid-air explosion, and I found myself apparently on my back grasping one of the carrying handles of my parachute. There was no sensation of falling. I

frantically pulled the carrying handles, thinking "the bloody thing went open" before sanity returned enabling me to transfer my grasp to the metal handle of the rip-cord. The parachute billowed above me and the flaring wreckage of my aircraft hurtled past me into the clouds. I quickly followed and within moments was on the ground, my fall broken by trees at the edge of a wood on a hillside. The aircraft had crashed into the wood where I could see it burning and hear the ammunition exploding. Large chunks of the aircraft were burning within 20 feet of where I had landed so I assume that I had left the aircraft at a low altitude.

We had been warned during "Escape & Evasion" lectures that the first emotion we would experience after being shot-down would be lethargy. We were to resist this in positive action by burying the parachute and leaving the scene as quickly as possible. They were absolutely correct. I sat on that cold wet hillside feeling alone and friendless without the slightest desire to do anything at all. My first thought was to question whether I had survived. Perhaps this was "the other side" where it all began again. I was returned to reality by the drone of aircraft overhead, the pain from my burnt hands and head, and the realisation that I had lost my boots on the way down. All of which only increased my lethargy.

I became aware of a group of men approaching with flashlights. Feeling rather foolish and over-dramatic I raised my hands above my head and surrendered. Nobody said, "For you the war is over!"

The group consisted of elderly men and boys wearing white armbands carrying shot guns. They were led by giant of a man in army uniform carrying a revolver. He searched me and kept repeating "pistol?, pistol?" I was tied to a tree and left in charge of several youngsters while the majority went in search of my crew. The youngsters were friendly and since I spoke no German and they spoke no English we spoke in 'schoolboy' French. They asked where I came from and I told them London. They received the news that we were on our way home from Berlin with such excited laughter. The larger group returned and I was untied and we began the walk to the village of Katzenelnbogen. On the way we met another search party and a heated exchange took place. We finally arrived at the Burgomaster's office where I was left in no doubt of my whereabouts when I saw on the wall a large framed photograph of Hitler in uniform with his familiar scowl.

In the light of the office, I realised that the soldier who had led the search party was a young man of roughly my own age. He was friendly which contrasted with most of the other mainly middle-aged men who joined us in the office. There was much agitated telephoning and angry shouting among themselves; a futile attempt was made to interrogate me by a small schoolmaster type with metal rimmed glasses and a 'Hitler' moustache. His English was quite good but I acted as if I did not understand what he was saying. Eventually everybody left with the exception of the young soldier. He produced my parachute which he folded and indicated that I should lie on it and sleep. He took off his greatcoat and

covered me with it, a kindly act which I remember vividly. In the morning he escorted me to a local Doctor who, assisted by his nurse, cut away the blisters which covered my hands, dusted them with a white powder and bound them with paper bandages. It was here that a mirror revealed a large cut on my forehead, blistered ears, not much hair and blood on my battledress tunic.

We did not return to the office but was transferred to the village school and kept under guard in the basement. Coffee and sandwiches were brought to me. This was my first taste of ersatz coffee and I did not find it pleasant. I was visited by a young blond Luftwaffe Officer whom I have since learnt was the Adjutant of I/NJGG. It was a brief visit. We formally greeted each other and by signs he asked that I was warm and had been given food. He clicked his heels, bowed slightly and left.

Late in the afternoon of Friday 28th January, a Luftwaffe truck arrived to collect me and a large crowd had gathered to watch my departure. I spent that night in a guardroom cell of an airfield near Wiesbaden. The following morning I was escorted on the journey to Dulag Luft by a Luftwaffe guard who was very short and fat. He entered my cell with the instruction, "You come with me, you not run away, me got big pistol!" The journey to Oberusul was a little bizarre. We boarded a civilian bus at the airfield gates which took us to the railway station at Wiesbaden. However, before we could begin our train journey the air-raid warning sounded and my guard and I retired to an air-raid shelter. The shelter was crowded with civilians and I felt very much like "The man who coughed at Lords!" However there was no display of hostility or of any other emotion but I did feel very much "out of place".

However, the 'all-clear' sounded quite soon and we took the train for Frankfurt. This had obviously been the target of the 8th Air Force from which we had sheltered in Wiesbaden. There was considerable smoke and the smell of burning. My guard and I entered a large waiting area where he purchased coffee for himself and unwrapped his packet of sandwiches. He seemed unaware or not interested the fact that the room was also full of air-raid casualties. They were lying on a large collection of camp beds and were attended by nursing nuns. I was also aware of the many distressed relatives kneeling and weeping by the beds. I felt very much worse than I had felt earlier in the air-raid shelter! My situation was obviously appreciated by an official who was probably the Station Master. After an angry exchange with my small fat guard, I was locked in a small upstairs room to wait for the departure of the train to Oberusul and Dulag Luft which we reached during the afternoon of Saturday 29th January 1944.

MANY YEARS LATER

I discovered the name of the village where I had been shot down, when, towards the end of 1946, I received a letter from a Lt.Col.Dryden. who asked for my assistance for Robert Stauch, former Burgonaster of Katzenelbogen in the Taunus. Robert Stauch was to appear before a French de-nazification court and he had asked Dryden to seek me out and obtain an affidavit concerning his treatment of me. He claimed that he had saved my life by preventing me from being "removed" in accordance with "instructions from the party". Before doing this, I visited the Air Ministry to seek clearance. I must say that the Officer who discussed the matter with me seemed surprised that I intended doing anything about it. His comment was, "He's only a bloody German!" I set out the facts as I knew them and swore my affidavit. The events described were correct but with no knowledge of German, I could neither confirm nor deny the substance of Robert Stauch's claim. However, Dryden was sure that it would be of great help to Stauch. This certainly proved to be the case as he was later elected a member of the Bonn Parliament and I believe became a Minister.

I again visited Katzenelnbogen in 1973 and introduced myself to Robert Stauch. He greeted me like a long lost son, showed me the site of the crash and generally made me very welcome. However, he spoke no English and my limited German made conversation difficult. I subsequently presented a Bible to the Church which listed my dead crew and described the events of the night of 27th January 1944. I am an amateur bookbinder and calligrapher and I bound a facsimile copy of Tyndall's first translation of the New Testament into English. After studying some early German Bibles in the British Library, I adopted a similar style for my project and the book was sewn on leather thongs and bound in oak boards with a white pig skin spine.

The presentation was well received by the Church who also recorded the names of my dead friends in their own book of Remembrance and their names, together with the men of the village who were killed during that week of the war, are read to the congregation each year on the Sunday following the anniversary.

I had long wished to discover whether the young soldier, whose act of kindness in the Burgonaster's office I had always remembered, had survived the war. Contact was at last made in 1982 mainly with the help of Emil Nonnensacher. His name is Rudi Balzer and he was at home on leave from the Afrika Corp when I was shot down. Emil Nonnensacher has confirmed that it was Rudi Balzer who had saved my life at considerable personal risk to himself. It seems that the intention of the Nazi fanatics in the village, acting with the approval of 'high authority' intended to set up a 'Court' in the Burgonaster's office where I was to be tried for terrorism and executed. Rudi said there was a secret 'Werewolf' order which authorised this act. As a soldier, Rudi would not support them and indicated that he would use force to prevent them carrying out their intentions. As he wrote to me, "We were both in great danger, you were to be shot and I was threatened with a Court Martial." If you should need confirmation or elaboration on this story, I suggest that you ask Emil Nonnensacher.

I have often wondered if my crew had been murdered since I believe that 'Party' members were also out that night searching for survivors from the aircraft, but Rudi says this was not so. Their bodies were found near the aircraft and it seems that their parachutes did not deploy. There may be some explanation for this:- We were briefed for Berlin on the previous night, 26th January 1944, and were sitting in the aircraft when the operation was 'scrubbed' because of bad weather. In our delight to return to the crew room followed by an evening in Lincoln, we left most of our equipment in the aircraft including our parachutes. It rained continuously all that night and when we carried out a pre-flight check of the aircraft the following, I realised that our parachutes were damp. I remarked that we should return then to the parachute store, but this meant a long journey from dispersal and the crew were confident that "we wont need them anyway." My highly developed sense of self-preservation made me exchange my parachute at the store and I wonder if that is the reason I survived. Did my friends' parachutes freeze when they abandoned the aircraft? The air temperature at 20,000 feet was, I believe, 'forty below' in January 1944? I wish I could discover the truth of what really happened.

The final chapter in my 'Battle of Berlin' was written forty years later, when Rudi Balzer constructed a ten foot high oak cross and with the approval of the villagers and the help of Emil Nonnensacher, erected it on the site where the Lancaster crashed and my friends died. No explanation of why it was erected is provided, but on the cross beam are carved the following words:-

FATHER FORGIVE US - VATER VERGIB UNS

Are any other words necessary?

CONCLUSION.

Was ^k all worth it? I have to believe it was because so many of our friends were killed. It is impossible to accept that they achieved very little or that so many bombs and so many acres devastated did not fatally weaken the power of the enemy to resist.

But you are the historian, you tell me!



Arthur Lee

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