A few minutes before 7 o'clock in the evening of 22nd March 1944 I took off on my last operational sortie as the mid-upper turret gunner of Lancaster OF-P ND351.

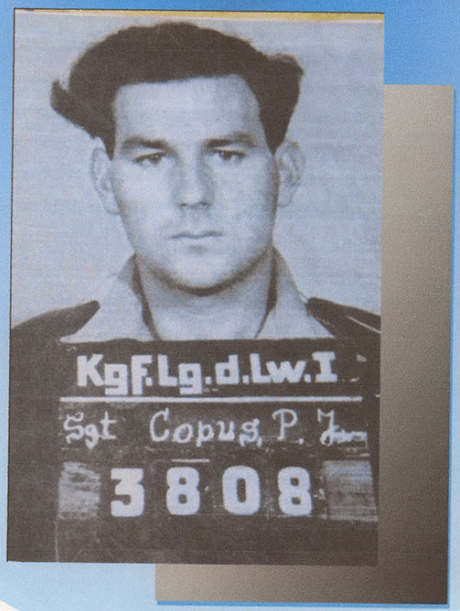
By the end of that night I was a prisoner of war having bailed out of the aircraft as it fell crippled and burning, the victim of a German night-fighter.

This is the story of that night and the year in captivity that followed.....

W/O James Collins 97 Sqn
POW Stalag Luft 1.
2011

Love from Dad xx

ABOVE - THE AUTHOR ENGLAND 1943



ABOVE – THE AUTHOR GERMANY 1944

TARGET – FRANKFURT

by P.J.Copus

An extract from 97 Flight Operation Records 22-23 Mar 1944 :-

TARGET-Frankfurt Lancaster III OF-P ND351

P/O R.E.Cooper, Sgt. F.S.Witcher, F/Sgt.McFadyen,Sgts.H.Lunt,H.A.Smith, P.J.Copus, R.R.Hinde.
Up 18.50 aircraft missing (4 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 2 x 1000lb, 600 x 4lb incs, 40 x 4lb incs).

TARGET AHEAD!

We have made our turn to the south over Hanover at 18,000 feet. The target, Frankfurt, is now directly ahead of the aircraft and already burning. My attention is elsewhere, however. The Flak, which we can do nothing about anyway, has stopped, a sure indication that fighters are up. An "own goal" by the Flak crews would mean a double-quick transfer to the Russian front. Any night-fighter attack will come from the rear of the aircraft. Only the rear gunner and myself, the mid-upper turret gunner can offer return fire and so we are a fighter's primary targets in the hope that he can silence our guns and finish off the aircraft without risk. We are well-aware that the odds are stacked heavily in his favour:

each of our Lancaster's four Merlin engines produces a double row of exhaust flames

we have shiny turrets which can reflect any stray light

the fighter pilot can quickly re-position his aircraft to improve his view of anything suspicious whereas we have a full bomb-load and can only manoeuvre very gently for fear of tearing the wings off the aeroplane!

Should we be spotted then we *must* see the slender, head-on fighter profile before he gets within range, a very tall order indeed considering that we have to search all that volume of the night sky within our range of vision to the rear of the aircraft. Our rifle-calibre machine guns mean that the best we can hope for, should we be attacked, is to put the fighter pilot off his aim or maybe even make him break off his attack and perhaps lose us again in the darkness. However, since it is possible that the fighter was equipped with radar that he used to find us in the first place, there is no reason why he shouldn't be able to find us a second time. In an exchange of fire, we are at a severe disadvantage since the fighter has 20mm cannon as well as machine guns and the resulting weight of fire far exceeds our own. Taking all these factors into account means that our chances of survival depend almost entirely on the size of the night sky which although apparently empty contains our friends and our foes in unequal proportions; there are many more of the latter, ground-based as well as airborne, who are as determined to prevent our

reaching the target as we are to get there. The element of surprise is no longer a factor. Other aircraft in front of us have already released their bombs and the target is liberally sprinkled with fires. The fighters will be more concerned with preventing additional attacks than shooting down aircraft that have already bombed. The chances of being seen in silhouette against the ground fires by a fighter pilot increase as we draw nearer the target. Our course, height and speed were all fixed before we took off in order to reduce the chances not only of a collision over the target but also of bombs falling on aircraft flying at a lower level. In spite of these precautions, instruments inevitably have minor calibration tolerances and variations of a few hundred feet are possible. We all know that both these scenarios *have* occurred. Their very nature means that the number of occurrences is impossible to quantify since survivors of such an eventuality are improbable.

It is as well that we are all too preoccupied to think too carefully about the multitude of situations quite apart from enemy action that could kill us all in the blink of an eye.

THE BEGINNING

Our training as a complete crew had involved many 8-hour flights around the UK almost always at night on what were primarily navigation exercises. However, their indirect purpose was to get us all functioning as a team. Apart from that we gunners were just along for the ride. On completion of training in Lancasters we were posted to ..... a Stirling station! In that remarkable manner which it seems only the Military can achieve, we had been wrongly directed and no-one knew anything about us. Our pilot, F/O Cooper told us to stay put and that he would arrange something. He disappeared for two days. On his return he announced that he had fixed us up with a Pathfinder Squadron, No.97 .

That is how, one day in late December, we arrived at Bourn in Cambridgeshire. Only a fortnight previously, on the night of 16/17th. December, known ever since as "Black Thursday", Bomber Command had experienced its worst bad-weather losses of the war, a tragedy which cruelly emphasises the fact that the enemy lurks not only in human form. We were posted to Bourn as a contribution towards making up 97 Squadron's share of the losses.

THE ATTACK

That night, 22nd./23rd. March no-one saw the fighter, a Messerschmitt Bf110, in time. His first attack was probably at the end of a gentle climb from behind and below. The climb reduces the speed differential that the fighter needs to catch the target thereby avoiding the risk of an over-shoot or even a collision. This tactic also meant that the bulk of the Lancaster on top of which I was sitting, hid the fighter from my view and even the rear gunner's view downward is restricted enough to hide the approaching fighter. In any event that initial attack knocked out the hydraulics which operated the turrets. I was then in the embarrassing position of being able to do nothing

but watch the '110' flying alongside, straight and level, slightly below us and 200 to 300 metres off our starboard wing. The '110's relative position enabled the gunner, facing aft in the rear of the cockpit to fire bursts from his machine gun with zero deflection into our fuel tanks and number three and four engines. The results were exactly what one would expect; both engines burst into flames. Some of his rounds, passing within inches of my head shattered my turret at about the same time as our pilot ordered over the intercom "Prepare to abandon aircraft" and then very quickly afterwards "Abandon aircraft". All members of the crew acknowledged the order including the rear gunner who by some miracle had survived the initial attack. The bomb-aimer jettisoned the bomb-load. We were on our way down, both starboard engines blazing furiously.

THE ESCAPE

I tear off my oxygen mask, intercom leads and harness and folding my small seat upwards and out of the way manage to drop from my turret into the aircraft's fuselage where it is pitch dark. Although we gunners wear the parachute harness at all times in the aircraft, there is no room for the parachute pack itself in any of the turrets and my own is stored on the port side of the aircraft, aft of my position and opposite the rear fuselage hatch. It takes only a few seconds to find my parachute and to clip it onto the harness. The rear hatch is now my emergency exit and I begin wrestling with the release handle. The door is jammed! More determined wrestling. The handle breaks off in my hand! I now have to scramble forward virtually the whole length of the Lancaster's fuselage encumbered by parachute, heavy flying suit and boots. In pitch blackness! Although the entire fuselage is extremely confined and packed with equipment, this is nothing compared to the gymnastics required to wriggle over the wing-spar. All this must be achieved in the dark making sure that the parachute's rip-cord does not get snagged and cause premature deployment and with the knowledge that at any moment the aircraft could steepen its dive, suddenly flip into inverted flight or simply explode as the engine fires touch off the fuel tanks in the wing. It is also possible that the fighter could attack again. Any chance of hiding in the night is now gone, our demise highlighted by sheets of flame. There are numerous other scenarios none of which is likely to improve our chances of survival. I dismiss these thoughts and continue floundering towards the under-nose hatch, now the only means of escape. The hatch is in the very forward part of the aircraft and access to it is achieved by crawling under the pilot's instrument panel to the right of his seat. The manoeuvre can be likened to crawling through the knee-hole of a writing desk. The pilot is still at the controls. I can see him clearly. This forward part of the aircraft is illuminated by way of a hole in the fuselage admitting light from our engine fires. As I duck under the instrument panel I tap him on the leg and indicate that I am about to go. He nods briefly in acknowledgement. There appears to be no-one else in the aircraft because I am able to walk upright towards the nose, still in pitch darkness of course, until I simply plunge feet-first through the open hatch! None of us is well-prepared for the experience which follows. Training for bailing out had been limited to little more than a few minutes' jumping from a bench in the gym and attempting a landing-roll. After all, we all knew for certain that it was only some of the

other crews who would have to face the experience. That sort of thing happens only to the other chaps.....

This night, however, it is not the 'other chaps'. It is us. Our lucky mascots, our youthful confidence in ourselves and each other, our training, all now useless. What happens next is uncharted territory!

The slipstream seizes me and whirls me around furiously and noisily. During one of my violent gyrations, I catch a glimpse of the aircraft as I free-fall away from it. I have kept hold of the rip-cord handle and knowing now that I am well clear of the aircraft, haul on the handle. The parachute explodes out of the pack as the airstream seizes it. The opening shock is immediate and extremely violent and I am wrenched into an upright position, completely winded and in some considerable pain from the contraction of the parachute harness. The sudden peace and quiet is extraordinary. The only noise is my own laboured breathing. I am hanging apparently nearly motionless. It is cold. Very cold! We were flying at 18,000 feet when attacked and I imagine the aircraft was down to 15,000 feet when I bailed out.

Surprisingly my all-consuming thought is that it will take a long time to get back home from this operation!

Pictured with the R.A.F. Museum's Lancaster September 2010 - the door directly over my head is the one that altered my exit plans!

The descent takes an enormous but unquantifiable amount of time. I know the ground will be covered in snow and therefore easy to see. Straining my eyes I can see a vague brightness below. I brace myself and wait for the shattering crash of the landing. Nothing happens! What I take to be the ground is a thin layer of low cloud. Just cloud. As I begin to relax a little, comes the landing; surprisingly gentle. I am in a ploughed field covered with snow. My only injury is some bruising and scratching on my face as a result of pitching forwards on impact with the ground.

To borrow the Germans' own favourite expression in these circumstances "For me, the war is over".

A PRISONER OF WAR

The field in which I had landed was only yards away from a row of houses. Their occupants were on me immediately I landed and I was dragged into one of the houses amid much shouting and bravado. It was widely known that German civilians were not exactly welcoming towards aircrew who fell into their hands and I was very nervous about the whole situation. They shoved me into one corner of a room. My 'chute had been gathered into an untidy bundle and was dumped beside me. In the other corner were grouped a cross-section of the neighbourhood. They were gesticulating and shouting at me in unintelligible German. Some of the shouting, however, needed no translation! In the circumstances I did not feel at all like a "Terrorflieger" as the Nazis called R.A.F. bomber crews. Some young wide-eyed children were among the crowd. As a gesture of goodwill I took some chocolate from my flying-suit pocket and offered it to them. They recoiled hastily, either not knowing what it was or suspecting it was poisoned perhaps. To prove it was safe I ate a little myself and returned the rest to my pocket but the atmosphere was tense and I hoped that some sort of authority had been alerted and would remove me before something unpleasant happened.

Fortunately, the civil police (they were referred to as 'gendarmes') arrived promptly and I was hauled off on foot to the local police station where I was thrown unceremoniously, without food or water, into a damp cell in which the only piece of furniture was a bed. There was not even a blanket. I attempted to sleep but it was extremely cold. In an attempt to keep my feet from freezing I managed to squeeze both into one flying boot.

At some point during the night I was dragged out of the cell and upstairs to an office where I was confronted by the local Bürgermeister (Mayor). There were, he told me, the bodies of several aircrew in the mortuary. If I would tell him the names of my crew he would let me know if any of them were among the dead. I felt unable to cooperate in this 'kind offer' which was, of course, a fairly transparent ruse to get more information out of me. My response was perhaps equally transparent but served well enough to show that I knew what he was up to. The crew I had been flying with, I told him, were completely unknown to me. My presence on the aircraft had been a last minute arrangement as a substitute. However, I added helpfully, I would be prepared to go to the mortuary and point out anyone I recognised. This offer was refused and I was returned promptly to my cell.

In the morning, after an extremely uncomfortable night, I was brought a cup of ersatz coffee and something unidentifiable to eat. Shortly afterwards I was dragged out of the cell and outside where a horse and cart was waiting. Surprisingly my 'chute was returned to me and as I flung it

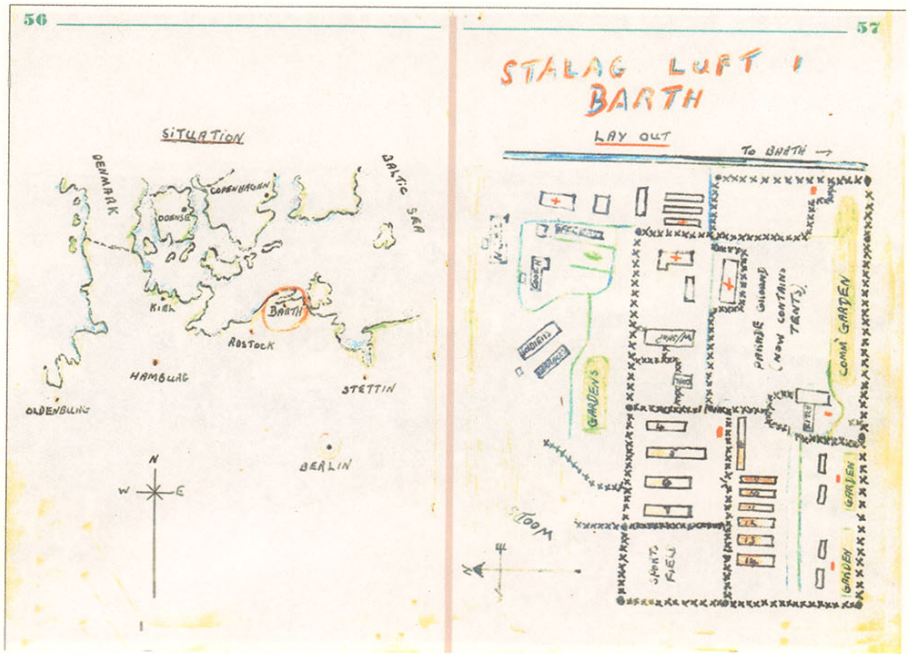
into the cart saw Lund, the bomb–aimer, already aboard. He had a leg wound. As I started to climb up into the cart with him, I was pulled back and told that I must walk along behind thus presenting the entire populace who had turned out to watch, with another opportunity to shout and scream abuse as we plodded slowly through the town.

We arrived eventually at some sort of holding area, a single room in an official building into which we were directed. Shortly after, Lund was taken off to hospital. My parachute was not returned to me and I imagine provided some luxury under-wear for a "Hausfrau" or mistress somewhere. It was not for many years that I discovered that the rear-gunner, Ron Hinde, whom we all knew as "Slick", although he had acknowledged the order to bail out, had been killed. Exactly what had happened remains a mystery. Clearly something had gone wrong after his acknowledgement of the order to bale out. As I had discovered there was ample capacity for The Unexpected! The aircraft crashed in woodland outside Hanover and Ron Hinde is buried in Hanover War Cemetery.

It appeared that when the holding area reached a certain number of inmates, they were moved out for transfer to a permanent camp (Stalag). The first step in the transfer process was to get to Frankfurt. Accompanied by two guards, I was shoved onto a train and began the two-day trip. Progress was very slow, the timetable somewhat upset by Bomber Command's constant re-arrangement of the rail network! The guards were pleasant and pointed out landmarks along the way. During one of the halts one of my guards announced that he was going to get some water. In due course he returned and sat down, sipping at his water bottle. After a while he offered me the water bottle. "Wasser?" he asked. I took a gulp. Schnapps!

Thus I was delivered to Frankfurt station where a large number of weary and disconsolate aircrew were already gathered. The station was a mess! There were hardly any buildings standing, just several platforms. I did not feel the need to point out that this had been our handiwork! We were crammed into cattle-trucks, thirty per truck. We had no idea where we were going or how long the journey would take. We travelled day and night. There were occasional stops when we were given food and water.

Three days later we arrived at Stalagluft 1.



Pages from my POW Log-book showing the location and layout of the camp

The POW camp, Stalagluft 1 was close to the Baltic coast near a town called Barth. There were British and American aircrew there numbering nearly 10000 in total. The days were spent walking about, playing football perhaps, talking, reading. There was a lively black market trade based on Red Cross food parcels. It was not unknown for the guards to join in, running the risk of joining short-sighted Flak crews and other defaulters in Stalingrad!

It can be imagined perhaps that for young men used to an active, adrenalin-fuelled life, the resulting boredom was a particular form of torture. The reader must remember too, that we had no idea how long this would go on and how it would end. One of the original inmates of the camp had been shot down in the middle of September 1939 only a few weeks into the war. How were we new arrivals to know that our own confinement wouldn't be just as long.....or longer!?

Above: A general view of the camp.

But for the resilience of youth and the comradeship, it would have been easy to fall into hopelessness and despair.

One of the first people I met on entering the camp was a chap who had been on the same gunnery course as me on the Isle of Man. A fortnight after my arrival, our pilot, F/O Cooper turned up. Although I was unaware of it at the time, he had been wounded in the back when we were shot down and had been in hospital since that time.

The most senior German officer whom we saw regularly during his "rounds" of the camp was a Major Mueller. He was a decent chap, clearly one of the "old school" bearing a duelling scar across one cheek. He was not above joining in and on one occasion, after watching some Americans fencing, took over one "foil" (actually a stick) to show them how it was done. Of course, the camp was run entirely by the Luftwaffe, much preferable, we all felt, to Wehrmacht personnel who no doubt gave their prisoners a much harder time. There was the empathy of airmen albeit on different sides.

The Germans routinely produced their version of The News riddled of course with propaganda: a rain of V.1's and V.2's had reduced London to rubble: the Wehrmacht was pushing the Red Army back into Russia: an attempted Allied invasion had been thrown back into the sea while a German invasion was imminent and so on. Fortunately we had our own sources – the BBC via an illicit

radio hidden somewhere in the camp. It was not therefore entirely unexpected when one night, 30th. April 1945, after we were locked up as usual, all the Germans fled! We already knew, as they did, that the Red Army was approaching. We were not overjoyed at the prospect of being liberated by the Russians and were somewhat concerned by what might happen. Had we known then what is known now about how the Russians sometimes handled these situations, we would have been even more concerned!

LIBERATION

For some days after the departure of our guards the only signs of our liberators were in the distance. In the meantime our own officers advised us not to venture outside the camp confines. Free to explore the entire camp we discovered a hoard of Red Cross parcels which the Germans had stopped distributing since December. This windfall allowed us to celebrate in some style. The Russians' eventual arrival was marked by an hour-long speech, delivered in Russian by a senior officer. Since hardly anyone understood a word we were obliged to follow the speaker's lead and applaud or cheer at what seemed to be suitable pauses in the oratory. Thereafter we saw very little of the Red Army, a situation which suited us very well!

It was two weeks before we were picked up. Our removal from the camp had been expedited we found out much later, by the highest possible authority. The Russians had apparently revealed that they intended to move us all to Odessa from where we could be shipped home. Or so they said. The British and American Governments did not believe at least the latter part of this stated intention and the mission to pick us up was put together in something of a hurry and without consultation with our liberators. The suspicion was that the Russians intended to hold us as hostages to improve their bargaining position when it came to dividing up the spoils of war.

We were marched in batches to the airfield on the southern outskirts of the town. On the way we passed within yards of the perimeter of a concentration camp. The occupants did not appear "liberated". It is probable that they had simply swapped one captor for another. We knew of the existence of this camp because several inmates having presumably escaped in the chaos after the Russians' arrival had turned up at the gates of our camp begging for food and sanctuary. To have rendered any form of assistance, not that there was much we could have done, would have meant the end of all of us had the Russians discovered that we had helped them.

I returned to England in a USAF B-17. We were eventually taken to Biggin Hill where we were told that none of us would fly again with the R.A.F. and given two weeks' leave to make up our minds whether to stay on or not. In a "Land Fit for Heroes" there was little on offer in the way of employment and so I elected to stay on in the R.A.F. and chose to join a transport unit. Here I learned to drive and acquired my driving licence which stood me in good stead for my eventual transfer to "civvy street".