MY LIFE IN THE ROYAL AIR FORCE BOMBER COMMAND

By

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As a young man the years were slowly passing and the storm clouds of war were gathering over Europe again. This was something that youth and many others in the countryside were unaware of because news was very limited, wireless was in its infancy and newspapers were few; in fact, many of the older people could not read. The young did not see newspapers because some parents considered them a corrupting influence. On reflection, perhaps this was a good thing. Now seventeen and on the first Sunday in September 1939, I decided to visit my grandmother at Ramsgate and cycled the thirty miles there through the lovely countryside, past my old schools and my birthplace and on along the road that passed through Manston aerodrome. Already there was greater activity at the air station and once more, my boyhood ambitions came to the fore.

Soon after arriving there the air raid siren sounded, it was eleven o'clock the 3rd. September. The government had declared war with Germany. Being apprehensive, and, like many others, thinking there would be an immediate invasion as the place was near to the South East Coast of England, I decided to return home straight away. History relates that nothing much happened until the following springtime. The winter of the year 1939-40 was very severe with frost and snow. Overhead Aircraft were making long contrails that made patterns in the sky. There were sounds of machine gun fire. At times aeroplanes would streak fast and low across the countryside further kindling my love of flying machines and the air.

In January 1940 I became eighteen years of age I began to feel more independent and assertive. One day in April I cycled the fifteen miles to Canterbury Recruiting Office at Canterbury and volunteered for the Royal Air Force and was immediately accepted and placed on reserve service until called for duty. I had accepted the 'Kings Shilling' signed the Oath of Allegiance and proudly travelled home wearing the badge of the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve. The first part of my dream had come true. Overhead the air fighting continued with Fairy Battles streaking low over the Kent countryside. They had taken great losses over these early days of the war.

On the 19th July 1940, the time came to leave home. My dream was coming true. This was a day of apprehension; I was now committed to whatever lay ahead. Where would life lead me? RAF service could be worldwide as the Empire still existed and now there was a war on. My dreams of being an Airman did not include war. There was nothing to take with me other than the clothes I wore and a little money. Walking away down the lane there was a last look back at the cluster of cottages nestling at the foot of the wooded downs before they disappeared from view. Looking back there was a mist in my eyes; was this because of the traumas of the past.

On the Monday afternoon the 19th July 1940, I arrived at the sand bagged and barbed wire protected gate of the RAF Depot at Royal Air Force Uxbridge, entered the restricted doorway into the guardroom and reported for duty.

There were many Volunteer Reservists from all parts of the country joining for duty that day. We wondered what was before us. Each barrack room contained about twenty beds and a certain amount of overcrowding was necessary because large numbers of new recruits. The iron beds were rather unusual in that the foot part slid under the head part. The mattress was in three parts named 'biscuits'. When not in use the whole bed was neatly stacked away. This provided extra space in the barrack room for day use and was in accordance with the spick and span neatness of service life with a place for everything and everything in its place, a form of discipline. The staff NCOs explained the routine of the barracks.

Next was the first and foremost of the induction formalities. This was the 'Swearing In' to become legally bound by the Air Force Act and allegiance to the Crown. This made one legally bound by the Air Force Act and to ones allegiance to the Crown. There was a roll call of Names, Initials and Religion. Each airman received a service number. Mine was 922297.Afterwards we were officially Airmen of the rank of Aircraftsman 2nd. Class. Each Airman received an Identity Card RAF Form 1250 and Identity Discs; called 'Dog Tags', both to be carried on the person at all times, uniform, kit and accoutrements. The kit was such items as shaving brush, button stick, cleaning brushes, knife, fork, spoon, mug, kit bag, and mess tin. The button stick is still in my possession. The accoutrements were, webbing belt and harness to support a haversack, water bottle and bayonet, finally there was a gas mask. In the evening, the new recruits were off duty. I went to the cinema in Uxbridge town.

The new intake of Airman were mustered for training as Airframe Mechanics and on the Wednesday, we travelled by troop train to the training school at Morecambe in Lancashire. On the way to the railway, station at Uxbridge small local boys offered to carry the heavy kitbags for a few pennies, an offer taken up by many of the new Airmen. It was obvious that the lads were well versed in the routines of the RAF and were showing enterprise. Each group carried food rations for the long slow journey and at various stops on the way urns of tea appeared.

Some of the recruits passed the time by playing cards. This was wartime and the trains were steam driven. Rail traffic was heavy with troops and war material on the move.

Towards evening, the train arrived at Morecambe. The Airmen then were marched round the streets and given accommodation in private houses known as billets. Billets were private houses where the occupants with space to spare were required by law to accommodate Service Personnel. Compulsory billeting is only authorised by Parliament in wartime. Three of us found ourselves in rather a poor billet whereas some other Airmen found relative luxury, a home from home atmosphere. The billeting was rather unexpected as everyone thought we would be in Royal Air Force Station barracks.

The technical training took place in various commandeered large garages and factories. Tuition was by lectures and practical work amongst a collection of Aircraft and Aircraft parts, workbenches, tables and chairs completed the layout of what was a large classroom. Here I was in my element and enthusiasm made it easy to learn and the practical work was most satisfying. A Fairy Battle was in the classroom. It was the first aircraft that I was able to inspect and sit in.

Towards the end of December the course was finished and we became qualified Flight Mechanics 'A' (for Airframe) and were promoted to Aircraftsman 1st Class. Over the Christmas, I went home in uniform for the first time. I carried posting instructions for a new unit. On this leave, there was a shot down German Me 109 fighter Aircraft at Park Farm. Later I would be required to dismantle crashed German Aircraft.

The new unit was No.257 Hurricane Fighter Squadron whose Commanding Officer was Squadron Leader Stanford-Tuck, one of The Few of the Battle of Britain. Soon my new skills were tested. This was a fighter squadron. The Aircraft took off to repel approaching enemy Aircraft. The term used was "scrambled" When the alarm sounded, the mechanics would rush to their allotted aircraft to assist the pilot into their parachute harness and strap them in the cockpit seat. When the engine was started and the Aircraft ready to go the wheel chocks would be removed before positioning oneself at a wing tip to help turn the aircraft if necessary and then salute to the pilot before he took of It was then a wait, hoping that all aircraft would return. Sometimes they did not return and everyone waited for any news of what had happened.

After three months on No.257 Fighter Squadron, it was time for more training at RAF Insworth near Gloucester for a three-month course to increase my skills to that of a Fitter. The course finished in July, 1941 and I was re-mustered to a Fitter IIA in the rank of Leading Aircraftsman after being in the Royal Air Force for the happiest year of my life, so far, despite the fact that there was a war on.

The new posting was to No.71 Maintenance Unit at Slough in Buckinghamshire. Arriving there, I found that the unit was in a commandeered garage close to the Hawker Aircraft factory at Langley. The factory was manufacturing Hurricane aircraft.

At Slough, one of my billets was in the suburb of Wrexham with a gentle old couple in a tiny cottage near to the hospital. They were charming and gracious and treated me like a son. At one stage, there was a month's detachment to the RAF Station at Cosford in Shropshire to do a Junior Non Commissioned Officers course to learn the disciplinary aspects of service life and leadership. The course member's accommodation was in Fulton block, a barrack that was a byword in the service for its extremely high standard. Here we were taught the art of commanding Airmen on parade and of Air Force Law. I returned to Slough as a Corporal and given charge of a servicing party.

Not long afterwards I was sent to RAF Burtonwood in Lancashire to study the American Boston aircraft. It was not long before my party went to service a Boston Aircraft at Royal Air Force Manston in Kent. This was the airfield of my boyhood dreams when living close by with my grandparents. The work was in a hanger that had escaped the German bombing; it still stands today, and is close beside the road that goes through the centre of the aerodrome. I have such memories of travelling that road in the years before

One morning there was a damaged Short Stirling bomber standing outside the hanger. It was very impressive, long and tall and the biggest we had seen. This type of Aircraft was new to the Royal Air Force. The basic wing and engine were of the Short Sunderland Seaplanes design. The sight of the Stirling was very impressive.

This was the day the 2nd of May 1942 when I flew on my first ever flight. The Station Commander had come to the hanger to fly a small tandem two-seat aircraft and I ask him if I could fly with him. He replied by saying, "Go and get a parachute". We flew over Canterbury to see the damaged caused by the German raid during the night. This day would trigger a drastic change in my service career.

After the servicing of the Boston Aircraft at Manston, the party returned to Slough travelling once more by train with heavy toolboxes. A few days later there appeared on the Daily Routine Orders an appeal for Aircraft Fitters to volunteer for flying duties as Flight Engineers to assist Pilots in flying the new four engine bombers that were rapidly coming into service; the Stirling's, Halifax's and Lancaster's. The experiences at Manston made me volunteer.

My next servicing party duty was at RAF West Malling to repair a Hurricane where the Squadron there were flying Boston's. Here I was able to get a flight in the back cockpit with the Radar Operator. The aircraft was practising radar interception and we were flying along the South Coast. Fortunately we encountered no German aircraft

The next serving job was another Boston at Hunsden in Essex where I was informed that I was required to report to the Aircrew Selection Centre in Euston Road, London for a medical examination to see if I was fit enough for Aircrew duties. I passed the examination and went to RAF St Athan in South Wales for aircrew training as a Flight Engineer.

It was October 1942 when training commenced. (Photograph – Thomas, back row third from right)

Being an Airframe Fitter the first part of the course was on the theory of Aircraft engines and their construction, working, servicing requirements and finally on how to operate them for maximum efficiency particularly in relation to range flying.

After engine theory, it was instruction on the airframe side of the Lancaster airframe. The flying controls, the fuel system, and the hydraulics that operated the undercarriage and the flaps and other miscellaneous services. There were vacuum and air pressure systems to drive instruments, automatic pilots, wheel brakes and other emergency apparatus. The aim of the course was to understand the whole Aircraft. Part of the course included a week's visit to the Rolls Royce Engine factory at Derby and a week's visit to the Aircraft factory of A.V. Roe at Chadderton.

Finally, there was a short course at Stormy Down in South Wales on air gunnery and gun turrets. For the Flight Engineer to know something of gun turrets and gunnery was to not only complete the knowledge of the Aircraft but also so that an Engineer could operate a gun turret especially during low level, mine laying when the Bomb Aimer was busy.

The course was finished at the end of December and the successful course members promoted to the rank of Sergeant Aircrew and awarded the coveted Flight Engineers flying badge. It was time to leave Wales where it seemed to be always raining.

Lancaster Aircraft - Flying Training

My new unit was No.1661 Heavy Conversion Unit at the Royal Air Force Station at Winthorpe just outside the town of Newark in Nottinghamshire. Here I joined the following aircrew to form a seven man crew to fly Lancaster's.

922297	Sgt	T J	Page	Flight Engineer	Self
1345759	Sgt	J	Morrison	Pilot	"Jock"
1479510	Sgt	J	Dorian	Navigator	Jimmy

1553978	Sgt	H C Annett	Bomb Aimer	Hughie	
1294976	Sgt	R I Green	Wireless Operator	Ralph	
1580722	Sgt	E Green	Middle Upper Gunner	Ernie	
1578799	Sgt	H. T. Maggs	Rear Gunner	Hayden (Taffy)	

On the 20th February 1943 the all sergeant aircrew assembled at the Aircraft dispersal point with a Flight Sergeant Staff Pilot Instructor to fly on their first flight together as a crew. This was to familiarise themselves with a new type of Aircraft. Disappointedly we found that the Aircraft was an Avro Manchester and not a Lancaster. The Manchester was a two engine aircraft and was unsuitable for Squadron operational service. The shortage of Lancaster aircraft had made it necessary to use them for the initial training of new crews at the Heavy Conversion Units. This particular Manchester was No.L7398, which had seen operational service on Nos.49, 97 and 106 Squadrons. It was in poor condition and did not inspire confidence.

Now it was my job as the engineer to see that all external protective covers had been removed from the aircraft and the inspection panels checked for security as they could cause a great hazard if they came off in flight. That the flying control locks and undercarriage safety struts on the aircraft were removed. The caps of the petrol tank filler had to be checked for security before priming the engines with petrol ready for the start up. With pre-flight checks done I would secure the entrance door, stow the entrance ladder and go to my position beside the pilot to start the engines and assist with the preparations for take-off.

On this first familiarisation flight, the Instructor Flt Sgt Hamilton said to me "Watch what I do". This was to be only my third time in the air, an event in its own right. Now I was to be instructed how to assist the pilot in flying the Aircraft. The Instructor did the take-off, talking and demonstrating as he did so to both the Pilot and me. Away from the airfield, he showed the handling characteristics of the Aircraft, its flying and stalling speed in various configurations. Jock my Pilot would then try the various manoeuvres himself to get the feel of the Aircraft. The duration of this first flight was 1.55hrs. We did a total of six hours with the Instructor mostly on circuits of the airfield with landings and overshoots of the runway.

On the 26th February we did our first flight in the Manchester without an instructor and went on to fly a total of eleven hours mostly on circuits and landings with some bombing and air firing exercises.

On the 6th March 1943, the day came for conversion to the Lancaster and after three hours flying with an Instructor we took off in Lancaster No.W4190 for a further period of practising circuits and landings. On the 13th March, we flew Lancaster No.R5541 on a six-hour cross-country flight followed by periods of flying by night with the emphasis on taking

off and landing in the dark. After a total of 53 hours, flying on the 24th March the crew became proficient and ready for full operational flying.

On the 26th March 1943, we went to No.49 Bomber Squadron at RAF Fiskerton, an airfield about five miles east of Lincoln. Lincoln Cathedral was to become very prominent to us in the next few months for on most take offs the runway use was East to West which took the aircraft directly over the cathedral.

On the 31st March, we flew our first flight on an operational squadron with some local flying in Lancaster Mark III No. ED 452, followed during the next two weeks, with practice bombing sorties, air firing and cross-country flying. On the ground, there were practices drills for emergencies and explanations as to what to do in a crash landing and how to escape from the aircraft by parachute. In addition survival if forced down into the sea.

By the 12th April Jock the pilot had already flown on two operational bombing flights over Germany as second Pilot with other crews to gain experience of flying amongst enemy defences before taking his own crew as Captain of an Aircraft.

Before we commence serious bombing operations let us look inside the Lancaster to give you some idea of the duties and conditions under which the crew work. As the Engineer I would be the last crewman to board after I had checked that all flying services were free to operate and that all inspection panels and fuel tank filler caps were closed and secure.

Starting at the entrance door note the red tops of the entrance ladder, immediately inside the fuselage there is a flare chute. This carries a high velocity flare that is dropped at the same time as the bombs to photograph and record the bomb strike. To the left are two stowage's one for the Rear Gunners parachute and one for a portable oxygen bottle. We then see into the rear gun turret.

Above the entrance door is stowage for the entrance ladder. It was my duty as the engineer to see that the ladder was in the stowage and the door locked and to inform the pilot. Close by the door to the front is suspended a remote recording compass positioned here away from all radio and electrical interference; the readings were shown on instruments in the pilots and navigators positions.

Going forward up the fuselage we pass under the Mid Upper Gun Turret

On the port side is a rest bed for use if a crew member is injured. Underneath it are 16 bottles for the supply of oxygen to the crew at altitude. Here I would see that the master cock was on and I would monitor the supply to all the aircrew positions from my controls in the cockpit

Now we come to the front cockpit with the Pilots control column with his flight instruments on the left. On the right are the Engineers engine controls and instruments. There are further engineer's fuel controls and instruments on the right side of the cockpit.

I did have a drop down seat but most of the time I stood up as I was required to move about.

On the 13th, our names appeared on the Battle Order for operations that night to fly Lancaster Mark III No. ED 620. The decisive moment had come for us, the apprehension before each bombing operation was to start. These feelings were relieved to some extent by doing all the preparations necessary before take off.

The first thing to do was to fly the Aircraft on a Night Flying Test (an NFT). This was to ensure that everything was working satisfactorily before the bombs and the correct fuel load for the flight were loaded on the Aircraft. Afterwards the time was with things personal, this included having a meal, and resting.

Later we would dress in the clothes suitable to withstand the cold of the particular aircrew position in the Aircraft. Air from the two inboard engines warmed the main cockpit.

The flying kit included:
A helmet with a microphone, earphones and an Oxygen mask
A Mae West Life jacket
An observer type parachute harness
A parachute pack
Flying boots
Gloves, these were both silk and leather.
Woollen underwear

Soon it was time for the briefing. There was a buzz of excitement as we trooped into the briefing room. There was a gasp as the route map on the wall was uncovered and the Target shown as the docks at La Spezia in the north of Italy. This would be a very long flight requiring full petrol tanks and flying for maximum range. Two hundred and eight Lancaster's and three Halifax's were to attack. A good point about this operation was that the route was out and back over the South Coast of England and the South of France where the defences were relatively light.

The next thing was to go to the Locker Room to collected flying kit, helmet, parachute and flying boots. I also carried a toolkit. During the flight, I had to complete a log of engine conditions every twenty minutes. The other crew members would also collect their flying kit together with those things necessary to their particular duty; maps and charts, target details, radio frequencies, a sextant for the Navigator a carrier pigeon for the Wireless Operator. Each crew member would also have received in flight rations of sandwiches, a tin of orange juice and a bar of chocolate.

Now came the worst part of the preparations, waiting outside the locker room for the buses to take each crew to their Aircraft. It was at these times that the stomach would churn needed a call to the latrines as one thought of what lay ahead. This could be a nuisance when all dressed up and ready to go. There would be banter for some, quietness for others at this time and during the drive out to the Aircraft dispersed around the airfield.

At the Aircraft, the Pilot and Engineer reported to the dispersal Flight Office to check the Aircraft loading and talk to the ground staff and the Pilot would sign the Aircraft logbook. Before flight, as the Engineer, I inspected the aircraft both inside and out. This was to see that everything was in order and that a battery trolley was plugged in for starting the engine and there was ground crew standing by to prime the engines with fuel before it was time for the crew to board. Each crew member would do his check of his particular part of the aircraft.

I would now secure the entrance door and stow the ladder. Moving forward up the fuselage I would see that the oxygen supply under the rest bed was turned on and the electrics were connected to the external battery trolley

I would then take my place on the right hand side of the cockpit beside the pilot. Here we would start the engines and do the pre-flight checks.

On seeing a green Verey light from the control tower, it was time to taxiing to the runway for take-off. I was checking engine temperatures and oil pressure, as it was easy for engines to overheat at this stage. The Pilot called up each member at his crew position to see if all was ready for take-off.

before the turn westwards. This very long first operational bombing flight at maximum range had been quite a lesson.

The Battle of the Ruhr started in March 1943. The aircrew, because of the intensity of the defence's searchlights, fighters and anti- Aircraft fire, knew the Ruhr area as Happy Valley.

On the 26th April, we attacked Duisberg with five hundred and sixty other aircraft. The Ruhr area was visible for miles away, a solid ring of searchlights surrounded it. Inside the ring, it was a fireworks display of rising shells, shell bursts, tracer gunfire and marker flares. Seeing the Ruhr it for the first time made me gasp and I said, "How do we get through there" no one answered, each had his own thoughts, the Navigator in his blacked out compartment declined to look.

Soon we passed through the searchlight belt and were amongst the anti-aircraft bursts and tracer fire, the Pilot, the two Gunners and me, keeping a sharp lookout for other Aircraft to avoid collision and for enemy fighters. We saw Aircraft exploding, some catching fire and going down, others in searchlights. I was standing up at this time being required to move about to operate controls and to be able to read and to make a record of the instruments. The run up to the Target flying straight and level seemed to take a very long time although in reality it was only minutes. When the bombs left the aircraft, I would feel the movement of the cockpit floor. This was a relief. The Aircraft would rise up from the sudden loss of weight and the aircraft remained on course until the photoflash had gone off and the camera had recorded the bomb strike Only then was the Aircraft turned and dived away to get out of the target area. To look down from 20,000ft and see the great area of fire and the bombs bursting was a sight I would never forget. The explosions of the heavy 4000lb bombs affected the Aircraft. This flight took five hours and was without mishap but 17 other Aircraft were lost that night.

On the 28th April, we tried to drop magnetic mines off the coast of Juist in the Fresian Islands together with two hundred and six other aircraft. The weather was bad in the area, dark, rain and low cloud. At 500ft in cloud and bad visibility, the target area could not be located. Because the position of mines in the sea had to be known, they were returned to base. One hundred and sixty seven of the Aircraft laid 593 mines in the area of the islands that night. Twenty-two Aircraft failed to return. This was the greatest loss on any mining during the war. It was the only mining sortie undertaken by us.

The bombing operations continued. What was I doing in these frequent infernos? What had made me volunteer for aircrew duties in the year before not expecting this? It was not my knowledge of the German tyranny; so much of that had been, and still was, unknown or knowing that Germany had unlawfully invaded and conquered the countries of Europe, had bombed England and would have subjugated the British Isle as well if they had not been stopped in 1940. Fate had decreed I would be here because of my love for aeroplanes, and, if I was destined to be a combatant, what better way was there than to do this. The results of bombs dropped on German military Targets gave me no qualms of conscience, even if they fell on houses and killed civilians. All Germans had participated in the Nazi fanaticism of world domination and their excesses, these and the Italian had to be stopped.

It is not practicable to describe each raid but some are worthy of note especially the first two raids on Hamburg that started those great fire storms.

13th May Aircraft Lancaster ED 452 Target Pilsen in Czechoslovakia

There was the instance where the target was the Skoda factory at Pilsen a place deep in the east of Europe. Out over the North Sea, the starboard inner engine shed its exhaust flame cover and some of the cylinder exhausts. In the dark a long sheet of flame curled back over the leading edge of the wing, this would have been a fire risk and a beacon to enemy night

fighters. The engine was shut down and the airscrew feathered. The Aircraft now lost air speed and was no longer able to keep up with the rest of the force; it would become a sitting duck to the opposing fighters. It was time to return to base to live to fight another day. It was dangerous to land with a 4000lb bomb on the Aircraft. It was dropped into the North Sea.

Arriving back at base still heavily laden with 6 x 500lb bombs and a large quantity of fuel on board the Flying Control gave instructions to land on the short South West/North East runway. This was to avoid any obstruction on the main East/West runway in case of mishap and with the subsequent need to divert the other returning squadron Aircraft to another airfield. The approach to the runway was faster than normal because of the high landing weight and with a gusty side wind blowing the aircraft floated before touchdown. With the heavy load and poor braking the pilot realised he could not stop before the end of the runway and shouted a warning to his crew to brace. ED452 plunged off the end of the runway into a field and the undercarriage collapsed. With fear of immediate fire and explosion, I quickly had the escape hatch in the roof of the cockpit off and dived straight out ignoring the drop from the top of the fuselage to the ground. The rest of the crew quickly followed and all ran as fast as possible across the field to get away. Fortunately, neither fire nor explosion occurred and the crash crews were soon on the scene. Taffy the Rear Gunner suffered a severe shake-up in the crash and was not able to fly again. We went to the sick quarters for a medical check.

At one time, we flew a total of 22.15hrs on 4 nights in 7 days in stressful conditions and were very tired. In May, the darkness of night was quite short. Take off was always late in the evenings. By the time, aircraft had landed and crews had been collected from dispersal, removed their flying clothing at the locker room and then been de-briefed at the Intelligence Section it would be daylight. Sleep was difficult before returning to the airfield by 11.00hrs to carry out a Night Flying Test (NFT) in readiness for the next flight.

On the 12th July, we flew to Turin in Italy. Two hundred and ninety five Lancaster's took part on this raid in clear weather conditions. The view of the snow-covered Alps was fantastic. To see the twinkling lights of neutral Switzerland and later Sweden when leaving Berlin was quite something. Once again, it had been a long flight at maximum range. LM 306 was short of fuel when nearing the South Coast of England and the aircraft landed at Exeter. We returned to base later in the day.

On the 12th August, we flew to Italy again to attack Milan. This was another long flight. Over the Alps, there were storms and flying in cloud, St.Elmos Fire danced across the windscreen and ice formed on the airframe resulting in a lower bombing height of 17,700ft because of the extra weight. It was a successful raid with only three Aircraft lost. The Alfa Romeo motor works, the railway station and the La Scala opera house suffered substantial damage.

LM 306 had now completed three operations in four days with a total of 22.30hrs flying. It is not surprising that we had little sleep over those four days. It was a great relief to have leave. After debriefing, a meal and a change of uniform we travelled into Lincoln on the bus to catch a train to our respective homes. Two of us were travelling to London on the first part of our journey and after changing to a very full train at Grantham we both fell asleep exhausted in the corridor all the way to London and other passengers just walked over us.

There was relief, as always, as the enemy coast was crossed but no one could relax because of possible dangers ahead. The North Sea was very wide, wet and cold. Mechanical failures could occur from various causes not least from unsuspected enemy damage. The chances of survival if forced down into the North Sea were minimal. There was always the chance of bad weather over the base and collisions with other circling aircraft waiting to land. The circuits of other adjacent airfields were very close. It was easy to approach the

wrong runway. There was also the possibility of enemy intruder aircraft in the airfield circuit.

One night we were returning below cloud at 3,000ft just off Cromer with other aircraft. Navigation lights were on. Suddenly cannon fire hit the aircraft. It was from the British Navy. Also attacked was Aircraft JB 235 of the squadron. The noise was uncanny as red-hot shrapnel passed through the fuselage close beside us. We waited to see if any faults developed but things, so far, appeared normal. The Pilot called for reports and the Navigator said "Ralph's been hit." Ralph was the Wireless Operator and sat in the centre of the aircraft with his back against the hefty main spar; this no doubt had shielded him from more serious injury. Squeezing past the Navigator I went to Ralph's aid to see that he had received wounds in his legs and shoulder area but the most serious at the time was a hole through one of his hands. Getting the first aid, I applied bandages and put a tourniquet on the wrist before going back to my duties in the front cockpit leaving the Navigator to watch Ralph. I returned later later to release the tourniquet to prevent gangrene setting in.

At Dunholme Lodge, the weather was foul with low cloud and driving rain. The aircraft was required to circle for some time before getting position six for landing. Air Traffic Control had been informed that on board was a wounded aircrew member. Eventually the turn came to land but on the downwind leg of the landing circuit it was found that the undercarriage would not come down; it was obvious that the hydraulic fluid from the system had been lost. There was damage in the bomb bay area where the pipes were located. Fortunately, the emergency air system was working and I was able to lower the undercarriage and flaps. The landing was very heavy.

At dispersal, when the engines were shut down, the levers that operated the fuel cocks failed to work and hung loosely down. The control cables in the bomb bay had been severed. Fortunately, no petrol lines to the engines had been damage. There were shattered bomb doors, broken pipes and cables, holes in the tail plane and flying control rods shot through, luckily they held to keep control of the rudders and elevator. This new aircraft was taken out of service after one bombing trip. The original crew was now down to five having lost Ralph and Taffy and spare aircrew were to fill the rear gun turret and the wireless position on subsequent operations. Jock, the Pilot, had been a Warrant Officer since the 6th of June and was now commissioned to the rank of Pilot Officer. Jimmy the Navigator, Hugh the Bomb Aimer and I were Flight Sergeants.

2nd October. Lancaster ED 426. Take off 18.36. Target Munich. 03.15

Two hundred and ninety-three Lancaster has attacked the target. Eight were lost. ED 426 bombed at 22.41 from 19,000ft.

On the 20th October after a raid on Leipzig Jock, the Pilot completed his tour of 30 operations and afterwards we sadly broke up leaving the others to complete their tours flying as spares with different crews. I still had four more to do. No longer would we men experience the close friendship and respect that had built up over the last ten months flying, living and working together and going out on the town. The memory of the bond that bound us, especially in periods of great danger, would never fade. Such a depth of comradeship would not be experienced again.

Jock left the service in 1948

Hugh the Bomb Aimer became a Flying Officer. On No. 97 Squadron, he killed on 11 November 1944 whilst on a second tour. His name is on the RAF Memorial at Runnymede

Ralph the Wireless Operator settled in Bournemouth and suffered in his later years from the wounds received.

Could ~~not read~~
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~~Date~~.

F/SGT T. J. PAGE

49 SQUADRON

RAF FISKERTON

Abt. Oct. 1943

A commission was granted to Jimmy the Navigator. He left the Service in 1946. Sergeant G Green was demobilised in 1945. Since those days, there has been no contact with them but I was proud to have served with them.

I stayed on in the squadron as the Flight Engineer Leader. During the next five months I flew as a spare Engineer. To Berlin with Plt Off Rowntree on the 21st January 1944. To Leipzig on the 19th February with Plt off Dickinson. To Stuttgart with the Sqn CO Wing Commander Adams.

My last one was on the 15th March to Stuttgart again with Pilot Officer Lett.

906 Aircrew of No. 49 Squadron failed to return. This was a loss rate of 33% of the Aircrew who flew with the Squadron

Fifty years later, on the 24th April 1994 a Roll of Honour showing their Number, Rank and Name, date of death and place of burial in a foreign field was dedicated in the Fiskerton village Church of St. Clement of Rome.

In May 1995, a memorial was placed in the centre of the old airfield at Fiskerton to all those who were lost and those who served on the Station during the two and a half years from January 1943 to mid-1945.

I flew 211.50hrs by night on 30 sorties over enemy territory plus 2 almost to the enemy coast. Seventeen of the sorties had been in one Lancaster Aircraft No. LM 306 with the Squadron letters EA-F (F for Freddie). The Targets were The Ruhr = 11, Berlin = four, Italy = three, Hamburg = 2, 11 other German Targets and one Mining operation. I remember the stress, the tiredness, fear, and the pride in belonging to Bomber Command

My next posting was in April 1944 to RAF Winthorpe near Newark where I had done my flying training, there to be a Staff Flight Engineer Flying Instructor. This was not much fun, as we had to fly old Stirling aircraft to teach new crews. This was to save new Lancaster's for the operational squadrons.

Soon after my arrival there, I saw a Stirling approaching the airfield at about 1500 feet. The port outer engine caught fire and within minutes, it dived into the airfield and exploded. The new crew of seven, a Staff Pilot and a Staff Engineer died.

On one flight, I had an engine doing 3800 revolutions when the maximum was 2800. There was every risk of the airscrew shearing off and hitting the cockpit. Fortunately, we got it under control.

After a few weeks and 32 hours of flying, 13 of them at night, I was sent out to all the Stations in Number Five Group Bomber Command to lecture on the new Airborne Lifeboat that was being introduced to the Air Sea Rescue Squadrons. When this was finished, I returned to my base at RAF Scampton and on the 19th July 1944 I was commissioned as a Pilot Officer

Whilst visiting RAF Strubby the Commanding Officer informed me that I had been decorated. The London Gazette had promulgated the award of the Distinguished Flying

Medal. (L.G Volume II 1944 Page T. J Entry 3090) The public Record Office reference is ZJ1 985. The Pilot "Jock" Morrison was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

On Tuesday the 16th February 1947 I was posted to No.44 (Rhodesia) Squadron at Royal Air Force Wyton in Huntingdonshire. On the Wednesday, I was once again in the air flying as a Flight Engineer in Avro Lincoln aircraft a larger version of the Lancaster. Now back where I belonged there began the happiest two years of my RAF life.

The months of 1947 passed with plenty of flying, it was different and relaxed after the hectic and dangerous wartime operations. On the 12th November, there was a pleasant flight out to Egypt to deliver spare parts to some of the squadron's aircraft. They were on detachment to RAF Shallufa in the Canal Zone. The Pilot was Flt. Lt. Cumber and the aircraft Lancaster No.TW 909, this being my first flight with a landing outside England in a foreign country.

The first part of the flight was to RAF Lyneham in Wiltshire for custom clearance. At 23.05hrs, we took off to fly by night to RAF Castel Benito in Tripolitania on the North Coast of Africa. Prior to World War II Castel Benito had been an Italian airfield and during the war the German Luftwaffe had used it. Later the airfield was renamed Castel Idris and in years after it became the International Airport for Tripoli.

The next day it was a 5hr flight along the North African coast to Shallufa in Egypt passing over the great battle areas of Sollum, El Alamein and Knightsbridge. On this flight, I flew the aircraft for two hours. RAF Shallufa was beside the Suez Canal and it was quite a sight to see large ships appearing to be travelling across the sand and to experience an RAF airfield in a hot desert.

After three days, we took off for the return flight to the UK via Castel Benito making a detour to fly over the Pyramids and the Sphinx. On the 20th November, we arrived back at Wyton after a total flying time of 25.40hrs.

On the 1st March 1948, the Squadron flew out to RAF Shallufa in Egypt for a month's stay on exercises. I flew as the Flight Engineer to Flt. Lt. Bristow in Lincoln No. RF 426.

On the 24th March with Flt. Lt. West in Lincoln RF 514, we flew to Khartoum in the Sudan for an overnight stay returning to Shallufa the next day. This round trip took 11.20hrs. On the 31st March, the whole Squadron return to Wyton via an overnight stop at Castel Benito.

In May 1948, the whole Squadron was engaged in preparations for Operation "Chessboard". This was to be a goodwill visit to Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) at the invitation of the Government. It was in recognition by the Royal Air Force to the people of Southern Rhodesia for the Rhodesians, who had served, and those who had been lost, with the Royal Air Force during the war.

On the 9th June 1948 the squadron of six Aircraft took off on the first leg of the flight to Southern Rhodesia with an 8hr45min flight to Castel Benito in North Africa. I was flying as Engineer to Flying Officer Barnes in the lead Aircraft KM-L No, RF417.

On the following day, the Squadron flew on to RAF Shallufa in the Canal Zone of Egypt for a three-day rest and for servicing of the aircraft. This flight took 6 and half hours.

RAF SHALLUFA, EGYPT 12 JUNE 1948

The journey continued from Shallufa on the 14th flying along the Nile Valley to Khartoum in the Sudan for an overnight stop.

From Khartoum it was on to Nairobi in Kenya the next day for another overnight stop.

On the 16th it was on to the Belvedere airport at Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia. The outward flight took 38hrs 25mins. This was to be the base for the Squadrons stay in the Country. The aircraft arrived over Belvedere in formation and after landing the personnel paraded for a reception by the Prime Minister Sir Godfrey Huggins.

In the evening the Officers and Airmen attended a Government banquet and a highlight for me at this function was to sit next to, and talk with, the Prime Minister, Sir Godfrey.

There was now a two day rest for the Squadron. On the 18th Barney and I with the rest of our crew took off to take mosaic photographs of the area of Salisbury for the local authority. We think it was for a proposed building of a Dam on Lake Kariba. It was a flight of over five hours.

On the 19th and 20th the Squadron did formation flying over Rhodesia to be seen. On the second of the flights we had on board a passenger Mr Catsicas the Mayor of Umtali a Town in the NE of the country.

The Squadron now had a two stand down. The Squadron personnel were split up into groups of six to be the guests of prominent Rhodesians. Barney and I with two of our aircrew and of the two of our ground staff were to be the guests of the Mayor of Umtali. This involved a long overnight sleeper journey in a rather antiquated colonial train to Umtali there and back. This was an experience. Barney and I were the guests of the Mayor. The entertainment of Sun downer Parties of good food and drink in comparison to conditions at home was appreciated' There were visits to the Vumba Mountains and an upmarket Hotel the Leopards Rock. We were also taken to Gold Mine and an orange orchard. What lovely orange juice it was.

On the 26th June the squadron flew from Belvedere to Kamala Airport Bulawayo flying over the Victoria Falls on the way. Here was another Sun downer Party and an overnight stay as guests of the locals. Barney and I stayed with a lady Doctor

We returned to Salisbury on the 28th. On the 29th we took off to return home via the way we had flown out. We arrived back at RAF Wyton on the 5th July having flown for over 80 hours on a good will trip. What an experience. On the way home we flew low over the African Veldt.

On return to Wyton the Squadron, members went on leave. There was a break in flying until August. I then flew regularly as the Flight Engineer to the Squadron C.O and served as his Adjutant until the end of the year. On the 29th October 1948 came an appointment to a Permanent Commission in the Secretarial Branch. I was now a Flying Officer. The need for Flight Engineers was ending with the introduction of the new jet Aircraft and so, after

nearly one thousand hours of flying my General Duties flying career was ending. It was two very happy years on 44 Sqadron..

This was not the end of my duties in Bomber Command. In January 1949 I was posted to Headquarters No. 3 Group Bomber Command for Intelligence duties for while on 44 Squadron I had attended Intelligence and PR Courses. After Three three months I was moved on to Headquarters Bomber Command at High Wycombe for Intelligence duties. The post was for a junior in the Intelligence Section of four Officers. A few years before my wartime flying destiny had been under the command of Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Harris (Bomber Harris). My feelings when working in the underground Operations Room from where my wartime flying operations had been ordered and controlled cannot be described. My new Commander in Chief was Air Chief Marshall Sir Hugh P Lloyd. One day in the Officers Mess there was the pleasure of meeting and talking to Marshall of the Royal Air Force Sir Hugh Trenchard the Father of the RAF.

The posting to High Wycombe was ended in January 1951, when as a Secretarial Officer I was required to attend an Accountant Officers Course. After the course, I was posted to No.9 School of Recruit Training at RAF Bridgnorth in Shropshire to be an Accountant Officer. This involved collecting cash from the local Bank, the payment of bills, the accounting for the cash transactions and the conducting of pay parades for the Airman.

So ended my service in Bomber Command.