

TALK TO THE HAYWARDS HEATH HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
at FRANKLANDS HALL by REG BARKER - JUNE 24, 2014

As a veteran of Bomber Command I am very lucky to be alive. As you know, more than 55,000 of our less fortunate colleagues lost their lives in WW2.

At last, we have a superb Memorial in Green Park in London to remind everyone of their sacrifice.

I like to think that the Memorial also recognises the 55,573 families who lost a son, or a brother, or a father, or an uncle. These families still grieve today for the loved ones whom they lost.

In December 1943 I was a guest at two Weddings attended by 3 other Bomber Command Air crew. In the following months, all 4 of us were shot down over Germany. 2 of us were killed and 2 of us survived as Prisoners of War.  
THAT WAS THE REALITY for us Air Crew!

In spite of the losses, our Morale was very high, because we knew we were doing an important job to help bring an end to the long struggle to defeat Hitler and the Nazis and to win the War! If we had LOST, our country would have been INVADED, the Jewish population would have been rounded up and sent to CONCENTRATION CAMPS where they would have been worked to death - or starved to death - and Men & Boys between the ages of 16 and 65 would have been sent to Germany as SLAVE-WORKERS, producing weapons of war, GUNS & AMMUNITION, AIRCRAFT and TANKS for HITLER'S GERMANY.

I volunteered to join the R.A.F. as Air Crew on my 19<sup>th</sup> Birthday. After initial training in this Country, I was sent across the Atlantic to Canada. There I was issued by the Canadian Air Force with a grey flannel suit. Was I going to spend the War playing GOLF in Canada? No, the plan was for me to travel to the United States, supposedly as a CIVILIAN, because at that time the U.S. was a Neutral country. Neutral? Their President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a great friend to this country and the U.S. Air Force was training R.A.F. Pilots. How neutral was that?

So I was fortunate in being sent to the Southern States of Georgia & Alabama to be trained as a PILOT!

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour on Dec. 7, 1941, the United States entered the War and needed to expand their Air Force. So after I had completed my Pilot Training and been presented with my Silver Wings, I was told by the R.A.F. that I was to serve with the U.S. Air Force as a Flying Instructor at Napier Field in Alabama, where the sun shines throughout the year!

During the following 12 months, I taught 26 American and R.A.F. Cadets to fly the HARVARD, an advanced trainer which was great to fly and fully AEROBATIC!

As an Instructor, I was allowed to take to the skies in a Harvard at any time, so I gained a lot of extra flying experience.

3) I have always felt that I was extremely privileged to be the right age to be trained as a PILOT - and to end <sup>my</sup> flying the AVRO LANCASTER - the most successful RAF bomber of WW II.

The Lancaster's performance, its ruggedness, its reliability and its sheer charisma endeared it to its crews, who felt proud to fly this famous aircraft.

In a letter which he wrote to the head of AVRO after the War, our Commander in Chief, Sir Arthur Harris, said:

"Without your genius and efforts we could not have prevailed, for I believe that the Lancaster was the greatest single factor in winning the War."

More than 7000 Lancasters were built - and half of that number <sup>3,500</sup> were lost on operations against the enemy. Sadly, there are only 2 still flying in the whole world - our own

Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Lancaster - and the Canadian Lancaster which flew here in August <sup>2014</sup>. They have <sup>been</sup> flying together at Air Shows around the country. Did any of you managed to see them flying together? I saw them at Euston - & I must say they did look like 2 elderly ladies compared with aircraft of today!"

In September 1940 - when the Second World War had been going on for a whole year - and the RAF FIGHTERS had fought off the German Luftwaffe in the BATTLE OF BRITAIN - our PRIME MINISTER - Sir Winston Churchill - stated : - " The FIGHTERS are our SALVATION but the BOMBERS alone PROVIDE THE MEANS OF VICTORY. "

Bomber Command was the only FORCE which operated against the enemy from the day war broke out, right to the very end of the War.

Bomber Command played an important part in WEAKENING the enemy in the run up to D-Day, by bombing their AIRFIELDS, damaging their RAILWAYS, destroying their wireless and RADAR stations and attacking their heavily fortified GUN BATTERIES on the coast.

Bomber Command also played a very important part in deceiving the enemy, making Hitler believe that our ARMIES would invade the French coast near Calais, and thus give our ARMIES time to get ashore & establish themselves in Normandy.

We were very effective in putting an end to the V1's, the DOODLE-BUGS which caused so much damage to London & the South East in 1944.

5. Our fourengined heavy bombers - Lancasters, Halifaxes and Stirlings - all carried a crew of 7. All 7 members worked closely together and we became a TIGHTLY-KNIT TEAM. As PILOT and CAPTAIN, it was my job to fly the AIRCRAFT, but I depended on all the other members of my crew to play their part.

We depended on our Navigator to work out the course for us to fly - and the speed - to ensure that we would arrive at each night's TARGET on time. The FIGHT-ENGINEER's task was to monitor the behaviour of our 4 engines.

Our WIRELESS OPERATOR's job was to keep in touch with our base in ENGLAND. Our BOMB AIMER's vital role as we approached the target was <sup>to</sup> peer through his BOMB-SIGHT and call instructions to me to ensure that he could release our BOMB LOAD at exactly the right spot:- "LEFT - LEFT, RIGHT, STEADY."

When SEARCH LIGHTS were coming dangerously close or our 2 GUNNERS thought we were about to be attacked by an ENEMY FIGHTER they would shout "CORK SCREW PORT, GO". That meant that I must DIVE the aircraft in a TIGHT SPIRAL - and then CORK SCREW upwards so as to avert the danger.

I like the story of the Rear Gunner who called out to his Pilot "CORK-SCREW PORT GO". Having carried out this manoeuvre, the Pilot realised that the gunner was rather agitated, so in order to calm him he said "It's alright linger, keep calm, GOD IS WITH US"! In a desperate voice, the Gunner replied "God may be up your end, but there's a blasted Junkers 88 Fighter up this end!"

6. When I was flying twinengined bombers — if a violent manoeuvre was needed to keep us out of trouble, I pretended I was doing aerobatics in a HARVARD. On one such

occasion, a cannon shell from the ground hit our rear turret, but because our aircraft was tilted at 90° with our wing vertical to the ground, a cannon shell went sideways through our rear turret without exploding!

It made a large hole, the size of a dinner plate in the perspex on each side of the turret. My rear gunner saw a blue flash as the shell passed in front of his face, but he was unhurt. If the shell had hit the rear turret from beneath, it would have exploded and sent us all to our deaths.

On Operations we flew Halifax Bombers with 76 Squadron based at Hovingham - on - Spalding Moor in Yorkshire and later we were chosen to fly Lancasters with a Pathfinder Squadron, No. 635, based at Downham Market, in Norfolk. It was when we were flying as Pathfinders, five minutes ahead of the MAIN FORCE, that we were eventually shot down.

That happened on Aug. 26<sup>th</sup> 1944, the day after the Allied Armies in France had liberated Paris, after it had been occupied by the German Army for more than 4 years.

Our target that night was the German Naval Base at KIEL.

KIEL was an important TARGET because it was where  
7, The German SUBMARINES were based.

Much of Britain's Food came from other countries in SHIPS. Enemy submarines sank so many ships that there was a severe shortage of some foods. The Government therefore had to introduce FOOD RATIONING, which meant that each person was allowed to buy a fixed amount of food each week.

In 1941 the RATION was 1 egg a week, and TEA, SUGAR, BUTTER and MEAT were also rationed. Lots more foods were rationed later, including SWEETS! There were NO BANANAS at all throughout the War.

Not only were German submarines such a serious threat to our FOOD SUPPLIES, after D-Day when our Armies in France had to be supplied with EVERYTHING by SEA, they were a serious threat to the ships which had to cross the Channel each day.

After we had successfully bombed our target, we set course for home.

Suddenly there was an explosion, a vivid flash and the aircraft was thrown onto its back. I managed to regain level flight, but soon realised that the cables to the tail plane were damaged and that I could no longer control the aircraft, so I gave the order to bail out.

At almost the same moment, the nose of our Lancaster plunged <sup>VIOLENTLY</sup> downwards and the aircraft went into a vertical spinning dive. Our four Rolls Royce Merlin engines were now driving us at very high speed headlong towards the earth.

The reason for this calamity, as I learned later from our Rear Gunner, was that the whole tail section of our aircraft had broken away from the fuselage. His turret was still attached to the TAIL PLANE, but he had NO ENGINES - and NO PILOT! Fortunately he was able to climb out of his turret and descend to earth by parachute.

Because the aircraft was spinning furiously, I was lifted out of my seat and pinned hand up against the cockpit roof along with 3 other members of my crew.

Such was the "g" force, that it was impossible to move so much as my little finger - and it quickly caused me to black out, to become unconscious.

9. THEN A MIRACLE HAPPENED !  
I found myself in the sky - regaining consciousness  
in the cold night air - and I could see my blazing  
aircraft close by !

Instinctively I tugged at my RIPCORD and as my  
parachute blossomed above me, I could see that  
I was about to drop into the tree tops, which were  
FLOODLIT by my BLAZING Aircraft.

As I landed in the TREES, my LANCASTER  
crashed a short distance away. I climbed down  
through the branches and landed safely on a  
cushion of leaves.

Overhead I could hear the main force of bombers  
making their way home to England and wistfully -  
I thought of the air-crew breakfast of eggs + bacon  
to which they were returning !

An excited crowd quickly surrounded me,  
each and every one of them grabbing my tunic or  
trousers, holding me as tightly as possible, nod and lot  
so that each of them could claim to have captured  
the English "terror flyer" which they called me.

After being captured I spent five days and  
nights in solitary confinement. I was interrogated  
each day and I was subjected to various threats,  
but I stuck to the rule of disclosing only my name,  
rank and number - and this was eventually  
accepted by each of my interrogators.

10. How did the enemy manage to shoot us down without our having any warning? Years later I learned that <sup>To 88.</sup> German fighters were able to home in on our H2S Radar Transmitter. I also learned that they were equipped with upward firing guns. Instead of attacking us from above and behind, <sup>AS WE EXPECTED,</sup> they were able to position themselves directly below us, where they were completely hidden from our view. The Germans gave this system the code name "Schrage Musik", meaning Jazz Music. Many of our Bombers were lost this way. It has always been a great sorrow for me that while 5 of us survived → as Prisoners of War, 2 members of my crew lost their lives — my Bomb Aimer and my Upper Gunner.

THAT NIGHT my Squadron lost 3 LANCASTERS of the 16 which they had sent to bomb KIEL. This was a loss rate of almost 20%, together with 21 experienced Pathfinders.

The remaining mystery is how the 4 of us who were trapped UNCONSCIOUS under the cockpit roof could have had such a miraculous escape from certain death. Perhaps the centrifugal force, the "G" force, created by the spinning aircraft caused the perspex roof to give way under the combined weight of our 4 unconscious bodies — and to hurl us out into the sky. We quickly regained consciousness in the cold night air, just in time to be saved by our parachutes.

I spent the last 9 months of the War in a  
prison camp - STALAG LUFT 1 - where there were  
9,000 air crew from many nations - Americans,  
Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, South Africans  
Poles, Czechs, - as well as huge numbers of R.A.F.  
from this country.

During the early months of my captivity, we PoW's  
received a Red Cross Food parcel every week. They  
were a real life-saver! However during the  
last 4 months of the War, we received NO parcels!  
We had to survive on the German ration of 1 bowl  
of thin potato soup each day - with 2 or 3 slices of Black  
bread.

By the time the Russian Army  
arrived to liberate us on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1945, we were  
really starving! That was a day of great rejoicing!

The Russians found a huge store of Red Cross  
parcels and issued each of us with 4 parcels! So  
for the next 2 weeks that it took to organise  
our return to England, every day was like  
Christmas Day!

Having flown to Germany in a Lancaster, I  
was flown home in an American B.17, a  
Flying Fortress. We landed at Ford Airfield,  
just along the coast in Sussex

12. After the War the Irvin Parachute Co.  
presented me with a gold caterpillar brooch.  
This is a constant reminder that I owe my  
life to the caterpillars which had spun the  
silk thread from which my parachute was  
manufactured. I wear my caterpillar brooch  
with gratitude and humility!

If you have been to see the Memorial, you  
will have noticed that in WW2, we Air Crew  
were 9 feet tall. We have all shrunk a bit  
since those days!