

The Story of Flight Lieutenant John J Blair, DFC

102 (Ceylon) Squadron and 216 Squadron

Royal Air Force

1942 to 1963

Author's Note

This story is primarily the transcript of a taped interview with my Uncle John Blair that took place in 1997. Following the creation the raw transcript, I researched several aspects of the story to fill in some gaps. Very sadly, Uncle John began to suffer the effects of Alzheimer's Disease soon after I spoke to him, and he was unable to review this text. Any errors of fact contained in the story are therefore mine.

Mark Johnson

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Chapter 1: **On the Pedro Plains**

Let's start the story from the beginning, bearing in mind the fact that I was born way back in 1919. This was in the Pedro Plains district of the Parish of St. Elizabeth, in south-western Jamaica – a real country parish where families barely got by on farming and fishing.

There were eight children in my family and I happened to be the last one. In fact, I really came out of the blue because the sibling I followed was seven years ahead of me. So I was the “little last one”, what they used to call in those days a “wash belly” child. Well anyway, there I was and so off I went, trying to catch up with the rest of my family.

Life in rural Jamaica had a very slow pace back then, there being no motor vehicles around, no television or radio, no electricity in fact, nor anything else that depended on that. Our farming and fishing community was labour intensive and used techniques that go way back to the olden days. Life followed the seasons; not those of the northern hemisphere, but ‘rainy season’, ‘hurricane season’ and even ‘mango season’!

We experienced long, dry, hot periods in Pedro Plains and rainfall has always been scarce there. The soil is very red and it's a dusty place, with few trees. At many points sharp limestone rocks stick up out of the ground like little mountain peaks. When I was a child, most people still lived in thatched cottages. You made do and you recycled everything.

One of my brothers and two sisters, as well as my brother-in-law were all teachers, and in time the two men rose to prominent positions in the field of education in Jamaica. In those days, teachers were amongst a group of people who were held in high esteem within the community, as were nurses and doctors, veterinarians, police constables and the local postmistress. Nowadays it's all about lawyers, politicians, musicians, gunmen and drug dealers, but back then, in Jamaica at least, we still lived by the old values.

As I was so much younger than my brothers and sisters, I didn't have the opportunity to go to school at the same time as them. In fact, when I eventually started school one of my sisters, Jemima Blair, was already the teacher there. In the 1920s these country schools were tiny places with only a single class made up of children of all ages, and just the one teacher. This was old style primary education. The teacher stood at the front of the class and taught, while we sat at our little wooden tables and recited. When you weren't supposed to be reciting, you kept quiet or else you would know what was coming next; a good hiding! You didn't raise your hand and ask questions; questions were asked of you, and you had better know the answer.

I actually started school before I had reached the required age at that time, which was seven. I started at the age of five, and this created some interesting problems. One day there came a visit by a School Inspector. (In those days of British colonial government the Inspectors were all Englishmen – we would have called them 'white men'.) I recall that I was literally pushed out of the back of the building by my sister when the Inspector arrived so that questions about my age would not arise!

I remained in school in St. Elizabeth until I was ten years old and then my parents were forced to move away for work for a while, and my eldest sister, Clarissa, took me in. She was also a teacher and had married yet another teacher, a Mr. Enos Bertram Johnson, or 'E.B.' Johnson as he was called.

They lived in a teacher's cottage in the parish of St. Mary, almost at the other end of the island. Mr. Johnson was a serious and imposing figure and a respected educator. He also led the local scout troop and I can remember the boys parading, all smartly dressed in their khaki uniforms, but barefoot – most of them could not afford shoes in those days. I spent about a year and a half with the Johnsons until my brother Stanley returned home from the Cayman Islands. Stanley was the other teacher in my family, and he later became a School Inspector himself. I moved to live with him where he was teaching in St. Ann and eventually, after yet another move, Ocho Rios is where we ended up.

Stanley's teacher's cottage was a ramshackle affair and in very poor condition. There was little in it in the way of furniture or fittings and things were so tough for the pair of us that as soon as my parents had returned to Pedro Plains, I was sent home. In reality, home was not much better than my brothers' cottage that I had just escaped from. Nevertheless, I spent the rest of my time in elementary school there and, all in all, I can say that I received a good basic education.

When I reached the age of seventeen I decided to become a teacher like many of my siblings and I made an attempt to enter the Mico Training College in Kingston as a trainee. Mico was highly regarded and competition for places there was intense. It took two attempts, but eventually I was successful and I spent three years at the College, and experienced life in the 'big city'. I left there as a qualified teacher in elementary education and I soon joined the Greenwich School near Tinson Pen, Kingston where I taught for about a year and a half.

By now the Second World War had been in progress for a year and many local people were volunteering to serve in uniform, irrespective of their qualifications. Some were selected to do manual labour and others were considered capable of more sophisticated activities. Although we lived far from the centre of things, we all knew about what was taking place in Europe. In those days our educational curriculum was set by the Colonial Government, and it was essentially the same as that studied by English children. We were therefore more familiar with British history than we were with our own, and goings on in the war with Germany had been well publicised. I recall that a couple of my younger Johnson nephews in Kingston (E.B. and Clarissa's sons) kept a map of Europe on their bedroom wall, and plotted the course of the war from the information they heard on the BBC news broadcasts. Their hero was the Soviet general, Zhukov.

The general view of Hitler was that he was a man who needed to be stopped. Although a lot of Jamaicans resented colonial rule, I don't think anyone was confused about the difference between that and what the Nazis stood for. We felt that we were all in it together – all the small countries of the world.

So, it was with this attitude that I applied to the Royal Air Force (RAF) as 'aircrew', and I was accepted for training. Up until this time the official British policy was that only *'British born men, of British born parents, of pure European descent'* could receive officer's commissions in any of the services. The RAF was the first to relax the restriction as their officer casualties had been so high in relation to the other services, but the colour ban was not lifted in the Navy or the Army until 1948. It was for this reason that so many of the West Indian volunteers opted for the air force. Altogether, I understand that about a thousand West Indians served as RAF aircrew during the Second World War, while thousands also served in various ground staff capacities.

Having returned home briefly to bid farewell to my family, I left St Elizabeth on the fish truck that ran to Kingston regularly from in front of the old Post Office. My nephew George Henry was amongst those gathered to see me off and he told me much later that his earliest childhood memory is of me coming to say goodbye to his mother Jemima – my sister and former teacher. George was about three when I set off and he remembers that behind the Post Office fence there was a lot of broken glass lying on the ground. He thought at the time that this was where the war was!

That trip to Kingston on the fish truck was no small affair – it took hours. When we left St Elizabeth and started the long climb up Spur Tree Hill towards the town of Mandeville, the truck would begin to overheat. The brakes were so poor that when we stopped to top up the radiator, we had to jump down quickly and 'cotch' the rear wheels with large stones, otherwise the thing would just roll backwards down the hill and a lot of fish would be lost! In those days, by the time you got to Kingston you were in need of a vacation.

After a short period of orientation at Up Park Camp in Kingston about thirty of us, all RAF volunteers, left the island by ship in October 1942, bound ultimately for Canada. We were off to commence our training for war. So there I was, a 23 year old elementary school teacher from Pedro Plains, St Elizabeth, Jamaica, on my way to fly against the Nazi war machine.

Chapter 2: **Cold Like the Devil!**

Our journey from Jamaica was really quite comical at the outset. We were ordered to board an American ship and I remember the crew just looking at us coldly and pointing below decks, saying 'You all go down there'; remember that in most parts a black man couldn't even vote back then! When we descended to the first level we saw a lot of empty bunks, so everyone selected a bed and we started to make ourselves at home. However, we did not have time to get too comfortable because within a few minutes an officer appeared and shouted, 'No, not here, go down two more levels!' And so we volunteers spent the rest of our time on that ship sitting in the hold!

This was my first time on the open sea, and my first time out of Jamaica, so I was fortunate to be in a good group. That ship pitched and rolled like crazy, and it was dark, hot and damp down there in the hold. Several men were sick and the smell in that confined place got quite bad, which didn't help.

We stopped for a short time in British Honduras, as it was known then (now Belize) where we took on board some forestry workers who had volunteered for labour duties, as well as a few more RAF fellows. I chatted with some of the workers as our enlarged group squatted down below decks, and they said they were going to Scotland where they would be working in the forests, cutting timber – or so they believed. They probably ended up loading cargo, in the rain, in an English port somewhere.

We travelled together as far as New Orleans where we all disembarked, with a great deal of relief. The RAF party then travelled up to New York and spent about two weeks there waiting to be told where we should go next. This was an opportunity to have a good look around, and we made full use of it. Leo Balderamos from Belize joined me on a trip to the top of the Empire State Building, then the tallest structure ever built. Now that was something! Finally our orders arrived and we set off once again, bound for the largest RAF station in Canada, Monkton in New Brunswick.

That camp covered many acres and held a large number of trainees. I don't know how many people were there in total, because all students coming from various parts of the United Kingdom to do their Air Force training came through there. Whether you were bound for training in Canada or in the United States, you would be shipped through this base, so it was a very, very large place indeed, swarming with recruits. Before we left Monkton, we got our first issue of uniforms and we were given our basic training.

This 'basic training' activity had nothing to do with flying; it was just the initial qualification for getting into any of the services. A lot of our time was taken up with morning parades, and this parade and that parade, and saluting here and saluting there, stamping your feet at every chance, and using rifles, which I had never touched before in my life. It was quite an initiation.

Our first uniforms were uncomfortable and they made you itch. In addition to the trousers and jacket, we had a heavy greatcoat and great big, black leather boots, with nails in the sole. These made a crisp sound as you marched and you felt as though you were already set to jump on the Germans. We had brass buttons to clean every night, as well as our boots, and lots of brass bits all over our belts and webbing. A lot of cleaning and polishing had to be done and the evenings were generally spent sitting on the edge of our bunks in the barrack room, shining our gear, and telling jokes or speculating about the future.

We left Monkton at the end of November 1942, there being twenty-one of us remaining in our group now, and we were sent to an RCAF (Royal Canadian Air Force) training base. We spent more time there being familiarised with the Canadian military and Air Force systems.

Our group was what we would today describe as 'multi-cultural'. There were only two Englishmen and the group covered all shades from black to white to grey! One of the Englishmen was a teacher like me, although he taught at a college in the UK, and the other had been living in Belize. In those days it was common practice to describe a man by his colour, and it wasn't necessarily derogatory – it depended on the tone and context. We all travelled together and lived together without tension.

After about three weeks of further basic training we were sent to Toronto. It was here that we would be classified for different roles, so this was a critical period for anyone who had ambitions to fly. We had lectures and exams on a variety of subjects and the results determined which end of the airfield you were destined for. This was our 'ironing out' phase.

Those who failed to qualify for flight training went off to be trained for ground staff roles while those who had qualified were assigned to the next phase of training, in preparation for flying school or navigator's training. The process really was conducted purely on the basis of qualifications, not race. Our two Englishmen were selected for preliminary flight training from our group, as was Arthur Wint (the famous Jamaican athlete) LO Lynch from Jamaica (who later won the prestigious) RAF Air Gunner's Trophy) Leo Balderamos from Belize, and myself.

We spent quite a long time in this stage of training, and this was in the deep, dark Canadian winter, which I had never experienced before. I can remember that the snow was up around your knees if you were not careful where you went walking. Once they had broken us down into groups, those of us who were selected for flying were sent to McGill University, where we spent about 4 weeks in the classroom. Suddenly, myself

and Arthur Wint were sent to a special school up in Ottawa. Whatever unearthly reason there was for this was not explained at the time – it seemed the authorities had just pulled our two names up out of a hat. They hadn't even made provision for our accommodation and we had to sort that out ourselves. Anyway, off we went as ordered, and on arrival it dawned on us that the Canadians had somehow got the idea that we didn't know anything about maths.

When these special classes started, we realized that we were being taught the most basic levels of algebra and trigonometry and on the very first day we looked at each other and said, 'This is a joke!' Arthur said to me, 'Look, let's try and see what we can do to show these people who we actually are'.

When the teacher came into the room for the second session he set up a simple algebraic calculation on the blackboard and Arthur spoke up and asked him to set us a tougher challenge. The fellow looked at Arthur and said 'Alright'; you could see that he thought Arthur was going to make a mess of it. Arthur got up and solved the problem on the board, and I recall that it was quite a complex one. Well, all I can tell you is that in no time flat we were back in training with the rest of our group!

Not long after this, almost as compensation, Arthur and I were sent on another special training course. This time we arrived at our destination to find that the course was an advanced flying course for experienced pilots. Once again, we were sent packing! Confusion reigned!

We now went to what was known as the Initial Training Wing. This was more advanced than anything we had done before and the place had a very modern feel to it. We knew that when we finished this stage of training we would be assigned our area of specialisation, becoming trainee pilots, navigators or bomb aimers. Although Arthur and I were joining a week late we joined forces and quickly caught up with the group.

Not long after we arrived, we were told that we had to attend a flying medical, which is more difficult to pass than the basic medical all servicemen and women had to take. At this stage, my flying career almost ended before I got off the ground.

We'd been out drinking up in Montreal, and we got back to base by train at about four o'clock in the morning. Almost as soon as we had arrived I heard a voice call out, 'Blair! Medical!' It took them all of ten minutes to 'wash me out' of aircrew!

I was now an outcast, sent away to what was known as the 'Holding School' in Toronto. This was an old exhibition hall, made up of several huge buildings with a variety of strange fixtures here and there (now empty) for the displays. I was alone as I left my group behind, and I arrived at the Holding School alone. It was a horrible feeling and when you walked into the place there were bunk beds stretching away as far as you could see - nothing but beds! Anyway, at least I got a bed for myself this time.

Within this facility there was a holding office specifically for RAF people who had failed their courses and were going back to England without doing flight training. So it appeared that I too would go to England without any training, and with all these strange Englishmen! And boy, let me tell you, I had never seen so many of them in one place before. There were about five hundred men in my area alone, and if you take into account the whole compound, there were probably several thousand men there waiting to be shipped home. But I was there now on my own as I didn't know anybody else in this large assembly.

After about three weeks cooling my heels, feeling rather low about my plight, I went and saw the Canadian Medical Officer. I told him what the problem was, and he said 'Alright, we'll give you another try'. He ran a series of tests, most of which involved looking at various coloured pictures and telling him what I saw. It was a hell of a job to do but I just told him what I saw and the very next day I was given a full medical. Two days later everything was cleared up and the MO called me to his office and said

'Alright, we are going to send you back to the training school.' That was a relief, I can tell you.

However, as I had missed almost a month of classes, I was now placed in a new group, and I was the only Jamaican, the only coloured man there; all my coloured friends had gone on ahead. This was a new experience for me, but as it turned out it was not a problem at all. I was treated just like another member of the team. In fact, I never had any problems with racism or unfair treatment throughout my career in the Royal Air Force, right up to 1963. This might be because I felt I knew what the dangers were and I didn't expose myself to them. But I believe that one's attitude was the most important factor.

I focused on the task at hand, and towards the end of this period I was informed that I had been selected for Navigator training. This was quite a responsibility because after the Pilot, the Navigator is the key man in the crew. I would have to navigate the route to and from the target, normally at night, using some complicated scientific aids, and often while under attack.

I was told that I had to know my aircraft's position at any time, regardless of bad weather or enemy action to ensure the survival of aircraft and crew. This would all involve working constantly during any flight to keep my aircraft and its crew on track and on schedule. With my head down over the maps and instruments I would always be aware of the fact that any deviation from the prescribed course can take the aircraft across the path of the hundreds of other craft in the stream behind me, or leave us prey for enemy night fighters. Great concentration would be required, and for much of the flight the only contact I would have with the rest of the crew would be a few instructions and remarks on the intercom.

At flight school we flew a total of sixty four hour's day flying and thirty eight hour's night flying between 5th September 1942 and 28th January 1943, before we took our examinations and attempted to qualify. I passed the Navigator's Course, which included

Navigation, Signals, Aircraft Recognition, Photography, Armament Training, and Day and Night Flying. It was intensive as we worked seven days a week, and very comprehensive, but enjoyable, and we were feeling increasingly confident about our potential. However, at this stage you were not yet ready for operations, no matter how cocky you might be feeling. In operational terms, you were just a baby that's learning to walk, only half ready for the real thing.

We trained on Ansons, twin-engine things, and the only navigational equipment we had back then was a map, a compass and a radio you had to tune in order to obtain your bearings. You had nobody else there to help you. The Anson only had room for the pilot, myself sitting behind him, and a second trainee Navigator who would sit in the co-pilot's seat. The other trainee and I would alternate, and whoever was navigating would scribble directions on course and airspeed for the pilot onto message pads and pass them forwards. The second Navigator would practice map reading as well, and also wind the landing gear up after takeoff and down before landing.

I remember my first flight as though it were yesterday. We squeezed into the aircraft, weighed down with all our gear, and sat there a while waiting for things to start. I was looking out of one of the windows at the little strip of runway beside me and thinking, 'What the hell am I doing here?' The Pilot goes through his procedure, flicking a few switches and calling out the steps on his checklist. Then the port engine makes a kind of whining sound, then a splutter with lots of black smoke being whirled around by the propellers, and finally the engine roars into life and the whole aircraft starts to vibrate. That black smoke is worrying the first time you see it, but you soon get used to it.

The Pilot goes through the same procedure for the starboard engine, and before you realise what's happening you are rolling down the runway. You speed up slowly, bumping along, and finally the Pilot heaves back on the stick and the aircraft seems to claw its way into the air. Looking out of the window, I could see the buildings, roads and fields diminishing in size below me until they looked like little toy structures.

You didn't really go anywhere, each flight being a set piece event lasting between two and three hours, navigating from waypoint to waypoint. We also had to do of bombing exercises against dummy targets, so it was starting to feel like the real thing. I still have a picture of that particular course with only one black man in it! The rest are all Canadians and there's that old Anson behind us.

Once I had completed this phase of training I was sent back to Monkton. On the way I stopped off in Toronto to visit one of the people I got to know there when I was at the Holding School, and who should I see while I was sitting at the railway station but Arthur Wint! Out of nowhere, there he was, big and tall, walking up to me. I was surprised, but happy to see him. Like me, he was now wearing a little white flash on his cap, to indicate that we were now 'Flying Trainees'.

So after a long period without the company of my countrymen, I was able to travel with Arthur, back to Monkton. And we were big men now! Qualified! Arthur was a Pilot and I was a Navigator – it was a good feeling and we knew that we were part of a small group who had achieved something unique for that period in history. I remember that when we got to Monkton it was cold like the Devil! Oh man, the snow was falling, let me tell you, and I can still see Arthur and I struggling through it with all our bits and pieces. We were reminded that we were Officers now, and so we went to live in the Officers' section of the base. We were well taken care of there and we met up with more Jamaicans who had also qualified. I recall that one of them was a Navigator and the other was a Bomb Aimer, but I no longer remember their names.

Although we were officers, we didn't hear very much more about the progress of the war than we got on the news and in the papers. So, with all the training and preparation we had been doing we were just hoping to get into the front line before it was all over. It was now January 1944, and we knew that the Allies were winning. We were ordered to board ship once more, but this time we were bound for the UK and the war. There were still three of us from the original group travelling together, Arthur Wint, myself and one other.

We didn't sail as part of a convoy although submarines were still active at that time. We sailed from Halifax on a huge troopship full of Canadians and landed in Glasgow. On this voyage we weren't stuck in the hold, but space below decks was very limited all the same because of the large number of men on board. During the entire voyage I didn't see another vessel and I know that we went far to the north, close to Iceland before turning south again. This route was the best for avoiding enemy submarines, although nobody mentioned that threat.

On arrival we were given forms to take to the local tailors, and there we were fitted for our new Officer's uniforms. These were a great improvement on the kit we had been wearing up to that point. We were due some leave, but before we could head out into public view we had to get ourselves properly dressed.

There was no negative reaction to us at all from the people we met around our base - they were glad to see us. For us, however, it was a very strange feeling at first to put on our new uniforms and walk into an English pub, although a few pints gave us some relief from the great pressure we felt. People expressed gratitude when they saw us. We would walk into a pub full of strangers and within a few moments someone would walk over and say 'Please have a beer with me'. These were Yorkshire men and I will always have fond memories of those kind and friendly people.

It took us a fortnight to get fully kitted out, and as soon as we had achieved that we all headed in to London to enjoy our three week's leave. The RAF had reserved hotels for its personnel in the city, and we were given free accommodation in one of these. We spent the next three weeks touring the city and seeing its famous sights for the first time, and of course drinking occasionally.

When we returned to our base in Yorkshire we were sent on a Battle Course which included the use of weapons in combat and many other aspects of infantry training – this was done in case we were shot down over enemy territory and had to fight to survive. Next it was back onto the Ansons for familiarisation flying over the UK. There

was a big difference between navigating in the wide open spaces of Canada where you really can't lose your way, and England, where there is a new town every few miles which makes it much more confusing and challenging.

We were closer than ever to the day when we would have to go to war and once the familiarisation was finished we were posted to RAF Kinloss in Scotland. This was the stage when Pilots, Engineers, Gunners, and Bomb Aimers would be teamed up to form the crews who would fly and fight together. We were assembled in a large group in a cold hangar, and I don't think any of us knew more than five or six of the other people in the group. Each Pilot was simply told, 'Pick the rest of your crew' from the group, and he would just walk around and pick people he liked the look of. Now, I was the only coloured man there as neither Arthur Wint nor the other Jamaican fellow who had come with us from Monkton had been posted to Kinloss.

So, I just stood there in this cold, noisy hangar and eventually a Canadian Pilot who was older than the average and who turned out to be very quiet person, came up to me and asked, 'Will you come and fly with me?' This was Ralph Pearson who would be my Pilot for the duration of the war. He then selected the two Gunners, one of whom was named Morris, and the Flight Engineer, Laurie Wilder, as well as his Wireless Operator. The Bomb Aimer would join us later, and he also turned out to be a Canadian. We were all strangers in this crew of seven. In a sense it's an effective, if haphazard process, but at the same time you are now going off to war with a group of strangers, without so much as a formal introduction. Of course, we would soon get to know each other much better, and the strangers would become human, with good points and bad like any other person.

To start the process of building crew spirit and cohesion we were assigned a rather old aircraft now, a twin-engine Whitley. We spent four weeks flying that old Whitley, and when I look back on it now I can only say that we must have been mad! That was an *old* aircraft! But it was tough. The Whitleys were solidly built because they were

designed just before the start of the war when the British realised they would have to fight, but it was built with pre-war knowledge and this was by now a modern war.

Looking at my flying log today, I realise that we had to learn very quickly; fifty hours flying is not much time to prepare to fight with a new crew. As the Navigator, I was now using a radio system called Gee. This gave me directional readings from a beam transmitted from the ground. We had none of the new radar systems that some of the heavy bombers were equipped with. We only had the radio bearing from various points, a look out of the window to plot our track on the ground when the cloud cover allowed, and the Met reports – if you could actually find the wind blowing in the right direction that would put you on track and help you to stay on track.

Chapter 3: **The Real Thing**

Finally, our long and exhaustive training was over and we were considered ready for posting to an operational squadron – we were off to war. I was posted to 102 (Ceylon) Squadron, based at Pocklington in Yorkshire. During the Second World War the Squadron flew bombers, first Whitleys, and then the Halifax 2 from 1942 to 1944. In 1944 they were upgraded to the Halifax 3 and then with the Halifax 6 in early 1945, and I flew the last two Halifax models during my tour of duty.

The addition of the word 'Ceylon' was granted to the Squadron after the inhabitants of what we now call Sri Lanka adopted the Squadron and set aside some of their savings towards its maintenance. The squadron was made up of men from Great Britain, Canada, Ceylon, the West Indies, Australia and New Zealand, among other places.

The squadron history says that 102 (Ceylon) saw non-stop action over Europe from 1939 to 1945. In 1944 the Squadron flew its highest number of sorties. (A sortie means one aircraft on one operational mission). 2,280 were flown of which 308 took place in August. The Squadron supported the D-Day landings in June 1944 in Normandy, bombing a coastal gun battery that could have opposed the Allied operation. Other major targets during the war included Berlin, Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg, Munich, and the Ruhr industrial area, Turin, Genoa and Milan, all of which were struck from our base in Yorkshire.

I arrived at the squadron in December 1944 and if you just look at a sample from the list of 102's losses for that period you can get a hint of what we were about to face. We lost eight aircraft out of a total of twenty four in just the first three weeks following my arrival, and six of those went down over Germany – that's 50% losses in less than a month, and I still had five months of wartime flying ahead of me!

24 Dec 1944 – *Halifax MZ871DY-G, target Mülheim, crashed near Neuss, Germany, two crewmembers killed, one missing, four taken prisoner.*

24 Dec 1944 – *Halifax LW168DY-O, target Mülheim, hit by flak and crashed near Krefeld, Germany, one crewmember killed, one missing, five taken prisoner.*

29 Dec 1944 – *Halifax MZ426DY-D, target Koblenz, damaged in combat, one crewman wounded.*

01 Jan 1945 – *Halifax LW158DY-P, target Dortmund, undershot on landing and hit house, entire crew injured.*

02 Jan 1945 – *Halifax NR186, training, overshot and crashed, crew uninjured.*

05 Jan 1945 – *Halifax MZ796DY-M, target Hannover, hit by flak and crashed at Neustadt, Germany, five crewmen killed, two taken prisoner.*

05 Jan 1945 – *Halifax LL597DY-X, target Hannover, shot down over Germany, five crewmen killed, three taken prisoner.*

05 Jan 1945 – *Halifax NA602DY-Y, target Hannover, shot down over Germany, seven crewmen killed, one taken prisoner.*

16 Jan 1945 – *Halifax LW179DY-Y, target Magdeburg, shot down over Germany, all eight crewmen killed.*

So, this was it. We had a short familiarisation course on the Halifax, just twenty one daylight hours and eight at night and then we were thrown into the thick of it; “There’s your plane, there’s the target, now get on with it”!

Our first flight was a bombing exercise with the new aircraft, because it was even more sophisticated than the one on which we had done our training. We also did some cross-country flying to ensure that we were familiar with the country around our base. This was on a Halifax Mark III. The crew was all lined up by now, and a good crew it was too! Together we would survive the next five months of battle, and thirty three bombing missions over Germany, without a single casualty.

Sixty years on, I am embarrassed to admit that I can’t recall all the names. However, the Pilot was the Canadian from Vancouver, Pearson, who had first picked me

out of the crowd in that hangar in Scotland. I remember that the two Gunners were Englishmen, one for the mid-upper turret, and one for the tail. The Wireless Operator or Radio Operator was a Scottish fellow, the Engineer was an English gentleman from around Liverpool, the Bomb Aimer was from Canada, and of course there was I –all the way from Jamaica! It was an international crew all right, but we all got on well together, and worked as a tight knit team.

We all had to learn the special language of the air force. Many people, particularly the more senior officers, really did talk in the fashion that you only hear in old war films today. By now, this manner of speech had become a habit for me also, and I recall that when I returned home it caused some amusement.

On the 21st of December 1944 we took off for the real thing. The target for our first operational mission was Cologne, classified as an 'Industrial Target' and the scene of many casualties on both sides during this stage of the war.

A lot goes on during a mission, both before and after takeoff, and much of it is just a blur now. I had been afraid of feeling fear, if you understand what I mean, but when the time came I found that I had so much to do that I simply didn't have time for feelings. I experienced this on all the operational trips I made - you just don't have time for it. During the flight you have to make sure that you stay with your group and your timing must be absolutely right. There is simply no room for error.

During our briefing we were told when to get to each waypoint, one after the other, and finally the time to be at the bomb release point, which was absolute and inflexible. You see there was not just one aircraft on missions like this; there would be hundreds of planes up there with you, sometimes as many as a thousand. We would typically have two hundred or more aircraft attacking any one target at a time. We would fly to the target in a long column of aircraft, called the 'bomber stream' and you needed to know exactly which section you were in, where you were in relation to the

other sections of the stream, and where you needed to be next, to avoid colliding with any of the hundreds of planes in the air around you.

Collisions were commonplace and they caused many casualties. It wasn't unheard of for the bomb load to detonate as well, and I know of at least one case where this happened and three nearby aircraft were brought down, along with the one that exploded first.

Let me try to describe the experience of setting off on my first mission. I had finished an intensive and extended period of training and I felt ready for this first operational flight, but let me tell you, it's not an easy thing to do; it's a hard, hard thing. That first morning we were all told that we were scheduled to fly that night. 'On duty tonight' they said. We were given this warning at about ten o'clock in the morning, and the mission took place between ten that night and two o'clock the following morning. In that four hour period we would have had to complete the total course to the target, drop our bombs and get back to the UK, but as the Navigator I also had a lot of work to do in the time remaining before takeoff.

We had lunch, and then, clutching our navigational charts, the navigators from each Squadron aircraft headed off to our briefing, where we were told the identity of the target and the track to be flown. Most of the crew was still in the dark, and didn't yet know where we were going, so they had more time to ponder. I took out my maps and drew in the route. This zigzag course is designed to confuse the enemy. It was made up of a series of legs, each ending at a waypoint, and each going in a different direction, because if you just fly straight to the target, the enemy will be fully prepared, ready and waiting.

Walking out to the aircraft for that first operational flight was like walking through deep mud, or a strong wind. I felt as though we were moving in slow motion and my legs didn't seem to want to carry me out there. Mentally though, I wouldn't say I was afraid as such. I was just unusually aware of my surroundings and completely focused

on the task at hand to the exclusion of all other thoughts. The time for thinking was past; it was time for action now.

I sat at my little table with the charts laid out before me, and listened to the talk on the intercom as the Pilot went through the now familiar procedures for takeoff. Then we were trundling over the surface of the airfield towards the runway, the four engines drowning out all other sounds. A brief pause at the end of the runway followed, while we awaited clearance to takeoff from the Controller. Then the engines went to maximum power as Pilot Officer Pearson set the throttles to full, and we started to bounce and vibrate our way down the runway, gradually picking up speed, before straining into the air. The vibration ended, the undercarriage came up with a heavy 'thunk' and we were airborne. Eventually the engines settled to a steady drone, and we turned and climbed to form up with the rest of the Squadron. The takeoff and ensuing climb allowed us to gain the prescribed height, but the real action began when we crossed the English coastline and headed towards Europe.

The pilot didn't have the vast array of gauges and instruments that the pilots of a modern bomber possess. There was an altimeter, to show the current height above sea level, a tachometer to display airspeed, an attitude indicator that showed the angle of the aircraft relative to the horizon, RPM indicators for each of the four engines, a compass and a few other dials. Flying a heavily loaded bomber in congested airspace with none of today's tools required real skill and could be physically demanding.

In those old Halifax's and even in the Lancaster I flew in later, the Navigator couldn't see or hear much at all. I sat behind a little curtain because I didn't want to expose a light that might attract a night fighter. We kept red lights on to read the maps and the fighter would be on the lookout for any little flash of light in the black sky. Initially, he would have used radar to find your approximate location, but in those days radar wasn't yet accurate enough to guide him precisely to you. The Germans had jet fighters in the air as well at this stage of the war, and let me tell you, they didn't waste time – quick as the devil those things were.

The two gunners had a different perspective. The Mid-Upper Turret Gunner had his head literally protruding from the top of the aircraft, protected from the elements by a Perspex cone. This gunner would be constantly revolving his turret throughout the flight, scanning 360 degrees for any sign of enemy aircraft. The Tail Gunner sat alone at the rear of the plane and he had a more limited field of view. His mount was a ball-shaped device that also protruded from the body of the aircraft, and he could swivel his guns left and right, but to a limited extent.

As I said, I couldn't see a great deal from my position and for most of the journey I had my head down over my charts and instruments, working hard to keep us on track. In addition to several maps of northwest Europe and a collection of odd bits of paper, protractors, rulers and various coloured pencils, I had repeats of the altimeter, airspeed indicator, and the compass in front of me. I recall that next to these in a Lancaster was also a device called the Air Position Indicator which indicated our latitudes and longitudes, but I don't recall whether we had this tool in the older Halifax bombers. Occasionally, I would get up to take a quick look outside to check the Met and get a fix on our position, but while we were over the target I couldn't see the effect of our bombs or indeed any of the flak that was exploding outside the aircraft.

So, the work of guiding the pilot there and guiding him home again, is the navigator's, and it's is hard work I can tell you. And while we were doing this twisting and turning there were hundreds of other aircraft in the black night sky beside us, above us, below us, everywhere, but you couldn't see a single one. This entire thing was done at night!

I recall that for this mission we were divided into three waves, and these were further broken down into flights of aircraft. Our wave, the first, would be over the target at midnight, and we would take ten minutes to pass over it, releasing our payload of bombs as we went. The first flight would bomb at the appointed time precisely, while the flight behind would bomb a minute later, and the next flight a minute after them until the entire wave of bombers had finished and the second wave would start. So it

stretched on over a fairly long period of time, and a large slice of the sky, and in order to be on time you had to work out exactly what your speed needed to be with great accuracy. Getting that right was very important indeed.

The first thing we noted as we approached the enemy coast was the searchlights and we knew that German night fighters were out there in the dark looking for us. Then, as we approached Cologne there were more searchlights and lots of flak (anti-aircraft fire) over the target. The actual bombing run, the last leg leading in to the target, only took about ten minutes between the time we turned onto it and the time we released our bombs. When the bombs fell from the bomb bay, in the belly of the aircraft, the plane leapt upwards as it was now much lighter. I felt my heart leap upwards as well, happy to be rid of all that high explosive. After the bombs were safely away, we twisted and turned as we left the target in case there were enemy fighter aircraft waiting to hit us, and then we made our way home through the dark, back to our base away over the sea.

Once we had cleared the target and cleared the zone where we could expect to meet enemy night-fighters, I felt quite relaxed. I think that my experience was shared by many other crew members. We had too much work to do and everything you did had to be re-checked, because you can't make mistakes. A mistake in those conditions could be fatal.

Throughout the flight I could hear the other crew members talking on the intercom. When the gunners spotted a fighter they would call out its position and the whole crew would be aware of the threat. If you were some distance from the target you could manoeuvre up and down, but not sideways. Once in the bomber stream you can't go left or right, and if you were to turn in there, across the path of the stream, God help you!

On that first night we had attacked the important Cologne/Nippes rail marshalling yards which were being used to serve the final German offensive in the Ardennes. No

aircraft were lost and the target was cloud-covered, so only a few bombs hit the railway yards but I later read that these caused the destruction of 40 wagons, a repair workshop and several railway lines.

I don't know if photographs of the results of that raid are still available, but the picture below, showing the Giessen yards in March 1945 will give you some idea of what was involved. In the centre you can just make out the railway tracks with several trains on them, and all around you can see the craters made by the bombs when they detonated.

Three days later, on the 24th December, Christmas Eve, we set out on our second operational mission ('Ops II' as it's called in my log book) to bomb Mülheim. There were 'bags' of flak waiting for us and the attack was what we called 'a complete hang up'; a nasty business. Altogether there were 338 aircraft on this mission, attacking the airfields at Lohausen and Mülheim (now Düsseldorf and Essen civil airports).

Three Halifax aircraft on the Mülheim raid were shot down, two of which were from my squadron. I later learned that of the fourteen men who went down in those two aircraft, three were confirmed killed, nine were taken prisoner and two were listed as missing. I think the missing men eventually turned out to have died.

You see, the danger we faced was not just in the air. Even if you were shot and down, managed to escape the aircraft and parachute to the ground you were still in a great deal of danger as you were descending on the very people you had been engaged in bombing only a few minutes earlier. When you think about it, it's really amazing that anyone was ever taken prisoner.

While I flew that second 'Op', Sergeant Arnie Coope and his crew from 102 Squadron were among the three crews shot down. This is what he later wrote about his experience on that night.

“As I hung suspended, (in my parachute) frightened and all alone, I watched the rest of our bombers complete their mission and head back home for the Christmas festivities and at this stage I looked at my watch – it was only 1430 hours.

“As I neared the ground, I could see people converging towards where I was expected to land and I got the distinct impression that I was shot at several times. I thought that I had better do something about this so I jerked around in the harness and just hung limp until I hit the ground with a thump. I was immediately surrounded by a hostile crowd, but before they could do something to me, soldiers arrived.”

It's a very sad thing, but the truth is that some of 102 (Ceylon) Squadron crews shot down on the same mission were lynched by angry mobs of German civilians. You can only speculate on the chances of survival for a Jamaican airman landing in Hitler's Reich! Luckily for me, I was in one of those aircraft that Arnie Coope could see, still flying overhead.

Ops III and IV saw us heading to Koblenz on the 29th, when Halifax MZ426DY-D was damaged in combat and one crewman was wounded, and then back to Cologne on the 30th of December. In spite of the damage to one of our squadron aircraft, no aircraft were lost and at least part of the bombing of each raid hit the railway areas. The Koblenz-Lützel railway bridge was out of action for the rest of the war and the cranes of the Mosel Harbour were put out of action by our group.

Our attack on the 30th December, 1944 was directed at the area of the Kalk-Nord railways yards, near Cologne. There was heavy cloud cover over the target and we could not observe the effect of our bombing, but later reports indicated that two ammunition trains had blown up, and that we had badly damaged the yards, two railway stations and the nearby Autobahn. The cumulative effect of these raids, and many of those that followed, was to severely hinder the German's ability to move troops and critical supplies to the battlefield.

Between 2nd and 22nd January, 1945 we flew another six missions (Ops V to Ops X) dropping our bombs on Ludwigshafen, where we destroyed the IG Farben chemical works (this company produced the gas used in the Nazi extermination camps); Hanau where the wind scattered our bombs over a wide area of the city; Saarbrücken railway yards which were hit accurately; Dulmen Luftwaffe fuel storage depot, where our bombs landed in open fields; the city of Magdeburg, an area target; and Gelsenkirchen where residential and industrial zones were targeted.

Our crew didn't fly on the 5th January, but the Squadron did attack Hannover and had a rough night, losing three aircraft at the cost of seventeen men killed and six taken prisoner. I believe that at least one of our squadron aircraft was shot down by a night fighter piloted by Hauptman Georg-Hermann Greiner, who shot down a total of four of our bombers in only ten minutes that night, the other three being Lancasters. Greiner was a Luftwaffe Ace, who shot down a total of 51 allied aircraft during the war. At the time we didn't know much at all about the identities of the enemy pilots, but later I was able to learn that several hardy and highly skilled German night fighter aces continued to engage us right up to the end of the war and some of the top enemy pilots survived the war.

On the Magdeburg run, on 16th January, our compasses stopped working, and we had to navigate without them (quite a challenge) but we got home in one piece. We suffered heavy losses during this attack, which also destroyed 40% of that city. Altogether, 17 Halifax aircraft were lost, representing 5.3% of our attacking force. Halifax LW179DY-Y from our own Squadron, and flown by Squadron Leader Jarand, was shot down over Germany on this mission with all 8 crewmen killed, bringing the total number of men killed in 102 Squadron to 29 in just 4 weeks. Nevertheless, although we didn't know it then, we were through the worst. In the last months of the war our squadron lost only another 5 aircraft. Other squadrons were less fortunate and continued to lose men and aircraft right up to the end.

The effect of our bombs on the target was devastating, particularly when large cities were struck. Later in the war when daylight raids were more frequent, I had the chance to observe some of these targets from the air, and as the photographs show, there was almost nothing left standing in most German city centres.

On 29th January 1945 we headed for Stuttgart on Ops XI. This time our bomb load 'hung up', meaning that the bombs wouldn't release and we had to release them manually. This was a difficult business at twenty thousand feet, the crew labouring over the high explosive cargo with the bomb doors open and the screaming dark rushing by beneath their feet. We finally got the bombs away and landed at Tangmere. A combination of cloud, dummy target indicator rockets set off by the Germans, hilly terrain and dummy target fires, also started by the enemy meant that our bombing was very scattered and in this final RAF raid against this city, and casualties on the ground were relatively light on that night.

I continued to feel as though a great weight had been lifted off me each time the bombs were released. We still had flak and fighters to face, but at least we were rid of all the explosives we had been carrying. There was a collective sigh of relief, because if we had been hit with the explosives still on board – oh Christ! A hit in those circumstances means that there is a chance that the whole aircraft would simply blow up before we even hit the ground. Even if we did hit the ground in one piece, we would certainly explode.

Only a third of my way through the tour, I was already a veteran. Our squadron had already lost 8 aircraft out of a full strength of 24 since I joined. Of course, each loss was replaced as it occurred, so we were generally at full strength. And so the sequence repeated itself, night after night. Sitting in the briefing room with my fellow navigators, listening to details of the weather and the target, noting the details of flak positions on my charts and trying not to think about enemy fire. Walking to the aircraft in the evening twilight with the rest of the crew, clambering aboard through a narrow hatch

and sitting at my navigation table, listening to the nervous chatter on the intercom. The aircraft engines starting, belching that black smoke, their whine rising to a roar, the aircraft lumbering and jolting down the runway, taking me with it regardless, straining to lift itself off the ground, clawing at the cold air and climbing up into the night sky. The long, bumpy flight over dark countryside and black waters, turning this way and that. The long hours of waiting and then the enemy night fighters coming out of nowhere at high speed, guns firing all around, other aircraft burning as they fall, their crews dying, beyond any help I could offer. Then the flak and searchlights over the target, the aircraft leaping upwards as the bombs fall away, the steep dive to low-level flight, and skimming over the trees and the black water back to base, for hot tea and eggs and bacon, and sleep, and trying not to think about the comrades who would never come home again.

On 2nd February, our bombing was again frustrated by cloud and it is reported that we did not hit the oil refinery we were trying to get at. We then lost an engine due to enemy fire over Wanne Eickel, and once more we flew home on three engines. There was the usual crack of flak going off around us, and then we heard a sudden loud bang and the aircraft was shaken violently. Our starboard outer engine died immediately and we lost some altitude before the pilot was able to level the aircraft. A mission over Bonn followed, and then we had a tough time with the flak over Goch on Op XIV and at Wesel, where cloud forced us to abort the attack, on Op XV.

The anti-aircraft fire was always extremely unpleasant, but we soon learned that we just had to live with it. On most missions, our commanders would attempt to route us around known enemy flak concentrations so that our route through the air to the target would depend on the position of the gunners on the ground. But many of those guns were mobile and the Germans would switch locations so that at least some of their fire simply couldn't be escaped. In those circumstances you had to fly on through the shell bursts and hope for the best. Of course, there was always plenty of flak

surrounding the target. We knew that wherever the target was, it was going to be loaded with flak, and once we got there we just had to say, well, 'Here goes!'

The Goch raid comprised 464 aircraft and was intended to prepare the way for the attack of the British army across the German frontier near the Reichswald; the Germans had included the towns of Goch and Kleve in their strong defences there. Our Master Bomber ordered us to come in below the cloud with the rest of the Main Force and as the estimated cloud base was only 5,000ft the attack was very accurate at first. However, the raid was stopped after 155 aircraft had bombed, because smoke was causing control of the raid to become impossible. We didn't bomb for this reason, but our course took us through the smoke and directly over the target, nevertheless.

Considerable damage was caused in Goch but I read later that most of the inhabitants had probably left the town. Kleve was also attacked, and the photograph of that town below shows the effect. One of our aircraft was lost during this attack, and although several of the crew parachuted to safety and returned to Pocklington, the pilot didn't get out in time and he burned to death in the crash.

On the 21st, while hitting the city of Worms, of which 39% was destroyed, we had an extended tangle with German fighters. Several of these infiltrated our formation and made good their attacks and 25 bombers were shot down over various parts of Germany that night, 8 of them from our mission. Hauptmann Greiner was active again, shooting down two of our aircraft. Flying with him that night were three more German aces; Gunther Bahr, Heinz Schnauffer and Heinz Rökker who between them accounted for 24 of the 25 bombers downed. So you see, some of these enemy pilots were coming up at us and shooting down 6 or 7 bombers each in one night, single handed. You can read about the fellows I named here in the Appendix.

I judge that the stress put on a German fighter pilot must have been much greater than that put on the crew of one of our bombers, simply because we had more eyes watching the night sky around us. We were flying in such massive formations that, as

long as we stayed on course and on schedule, the odds of a fighter targeting our plane specifically were relatively low. At the same time, as we were flying a big, heavy bomber, we would never go off chasing the enemy.

So, if he chooses to attack the main bomber stream, the fighter pilot finds that he's operating at a major disadvantage. If he does come close (and many did) and picks a target, all the nearby aircraft would swing their guns towards the single fighter and he would find himself facing very heavy fire. It took great courage on the enemy's part. At the same time, all of our gunners, excluding the ones in the aircraft actually being attacked, would know that they were in no immediate danger and they could operate without that pressure. They knew that they had a chance to get the fighter while it hadn't a hope in hell of hitting them.

What this meant was that, nine times out of ten, the fighters would go after the stragglers and 'strays' – aircraft that had dropped out of formation due to damage or poor navigation. Imagine, if you can, a huge, dense stream of aircraft, with the odd wayward fellow off to one side, below, or lagging behind. These were the ones who would most likely be picked off by the night fighters, who would come in like sharks, nibbling at the edge of the 'fish' in the bomber stream.

The majority of the German night fighters were actually modified fighter-bomber and light bomber aircraft that were no longer effective in daylight. These twin-engine planes had been fitted with radar and extra armaments to enable them to find and destroy allied bombers in the dark. The crews were specialists who flew only at night, and they belonged to elite 'Nachtjagd' or night fighter units.

Most of those enemy fighter pilots would attack us from behind and below, because that was our blind spot. The enemy aircraft often had special gun mountings, fitted to point slightly upwards to support this direction of attack, in a configuration the Germans called '*Schräge Musik*'. This meant that the Tail Gunner was critical to our defence and he had to be constantly alert. Many tail gunners were killed during the war

and it wasn't unknown for the whole tail gun assembly to be shot off, with the gunner in it. That was a hard way to go and there was no way to bail out of a tail gun position as it spun to earth. As soon as either of the gunners saw an enemy fighter coming in they would call out, and the whole crew would know that we were under attack.

We rarely had prolonged engagements with the enemy fighter pilots. They would come in fast and try and get in close, but our gunners were very good and the enemy would generally be chased off after one or two passes, because for obvious reasons they were not for pressing forward when our fire was accurate. Navigation was an important factor in this. If you could stay on course you would have the company of many other aircraft with all the tail gunners and top gunners in your vicinity firing simultaneously. The enemy didn't approve of that. You needed steady nerves and lightning reflexes to survive however, and the wayward paid a heavy price.

Below is one of the claim forms the enemy would fill out if they shot you down, so that their victory would be recorded against their name. I am happy to say that I was never referred to on any of these!

The month of February 1945 came to a close with attacks on the huge Krupps armaments works at Essen where the Germans recorded that we were very accurate, dropping 300 high explosive and 11,000 incendiaries on the target. We also made an attack on the synthetic oil plant at Kamen. In the final week of the month we were upgraded to the Halifax VI bomber, which had better engines and a longer range, and on the 25th we flew a cross country to familiarise ourselves with this aircraft.

We returned to Cologne for the third time on Ops XIX on 2nd March 1945. That city really took a hammering from us and others during this period, and the damage was very extensive, as the picture shows. There really was almost nothing left in the centre of most of these German cities. Four days after this raid, American troops captured what remained of Cologne.

Another trip to Kamen the following night saw us being hit by intruders once again, this time on the return leg as we crossed the coast of England. The enemy had adopted a new tactic that involved attacking our forces as we were preparing to land, and on this first occasion it caught us completely by surprise. Once again we had been forced to fly home on three engines owing to a technical problem. I don't know if Greiner was in the air near us, but Luftwaffe records show that he shot down three more Lancaster bombers on that night. This time, however, we had hit the synthetic oil plant without suffering any losses in our squadron, and that plant never went back into production after that attack.

In the week that followed we struck Chemnitz and dropped mines in Flemsberg Fjord. The Chemnitz raid required us to takeoff in icy conditions, and one squadron lost several aircraft due to mid-air collisions.

One of my 102 Squadron pilots, Flight Lieutenant Jim Weaver, wrote this account of a raid on Stuttgart in July 1944, which gives a good idea of what the experience was like for most of us.

"It was a nice run up to the target with instructions from the Master Bomber, then 'Bomb doors open', 'Left, left', 'Right, right', 'Steady', 'Bombs gone!' The Halifax jumped up, relieved of its burden and now there was the long 25 seconds while the photo was taken and then 'Bomb doors closed'. This whole procedure was not long in time but seemed to be the most intense part of the trip, especially over the most heavily defended targets.

"Leaving Stuttgart, it gradually became quieter, but exceptionally dark when suddenly, all hell broke loose. Tracers and cannon shells were tearing into the tail assembly and port wing. Almost instantaneously, I reacted with a dive to starboard, away from the tracers as, obviously, the fighter was astern. I shouted to the rear gunner 'Paul – get that guy!' It was a Junkers 88 astern, below and to starboard. The defensive

action we took brought him up in full view of the rear gunner who shot him down, seeing it break up with a fire and explosion around one of its engines.”

I was lucky as I was too busy to be frightened. But there were others who weren't busy enough! I wouldn't have wanted to be sitting down there all alone in the tail of the aircraft as a tail gunner, waiting for a night fighter to come in and take pot shots at me. Nor would I want to have been a pilot, forced to hold the aircraft straight and level while flying into flak, able to see everything that was coming up at me. With all that twisting and turning and with the need to be accurate at all times I was simply too busy to worry. As I told you before we never seemed to fly in the same direction for more than 50 miles. Every five minutes we would turn left or turn right, descend or ascend in order to make sure that the enemy couldn't train their guns on us.

It was the same on every mission and I was always just three or four minutes from the next turn, working like crazy to get everything ready. Some of the other crewmembers really had nothing to do, unless the fighters came in to attack us. They were the men who suffered, you see, because they were just sitting there waiting, and that is a hell of a lot of pressure to put on anybody. We navigators were too busy to think about what could happen, and fortunate to have this responsibility.

We hit the shipyards in Hamburg on the 8th March, and then on the 11th we took part in the last 'thousand bomber raid' on Essen. Essen was a major target in the heart of Germany's industrial centre, the Ruhr, and large raids had headed this way repeatedly. RAF reports said later that 1,079 aircraft of all bomber groups attacked Essen this night. This was the largest number of aircraft sent to a target so far in the war. Three Lancasters were lost but 4,661 tons of bombs were dropped through complete cloud cover. The reports stated that the attack was accurate and that this great blow virtually paralysed Essen until the American troops entered the city some time later. This was the last RAF raid on Essen, which had been attacked many times. Most of the city was now in ruins. 7,000 people had died in the air raids and the pre-war

population of 648,000 had fallen to 310,000 by the end of April 1945; the rest had left for quieter places in Germany.

Wuppertal, Bottrop and Witten were attacked by us between the 13th and 19th March. The flak over Bottrop on 15th March was very bad and one Halifax was shot down. The Witten raid was an area attack and it destroyed 129 acres of the city, or 62%, including both industrial and residential districts.

We then had two dream missions, with almost no enemy action being observed, over Dulmen and Osnabruck at the end of March, although we lost an engine due to technical problems on the 25th and had to return from Osnabruck on three. I was getting used to that by this time. These were both area attacks, and we could see large fires and lots of dust and smoke as we flew away from the target.

With only four Ops to go to complete my tour, and counting down, we returned to Hamburg for the last time on 8th April, 1945 to attack the shipyards. Altogether, 3 Halifaxes and 3 Lancasters were shot down that night, and this also turned out to be the final RAF raid on the city. The following night we dropped more mines into the Flemsburg Fjord.

On 13th April we bombed Nuremburg, the future site of the war crimes trials. This city had a special meaning for me as a black person. It was here that the huge Nazi rallies were held, and here that the German race laws were created in the 1930s. I could recall hearing mention of this place many times in my late teens and early twenties. To be flying in one of the aircraft assigned to bomb the city provided a reminder that the journey I had taken and the risks I had shared were in a just and important cause.

Finally, on 18th April, 1945 we flew our last mission of the war, Op XXXIII, thirty three operational flights being the compulsory allotment. On this final mission we attacked a fortified island near Heligoland called Wangerooge, and that was a hell of a

'prang', I can tell you. This place was armed and defended like no other place in the world, but we really gave them a hammering, although 3 Halifaxes were also lost.

I don't recall exactly how many aircraft were committed for this attack, I think it was a hundred, but I can tell you it was a large force because of the heavy fortifications on that island, which included thick reinforced concrete bunkers and many anti-aircraft batteries. It was one hell of a blast and the attack was made in daylight. We carried very heavy bombs specially designed to pierce the thick ceilings of the enemy bunkers, and there were also fighter-bomber aircraft involved, smaller than the heavy bombers, that carried rockets to attack and suppress the anti-aircraft positions.

On that final raid, after we had dropped the bombs, we did something that was totally wrong; for the first and only time we went around and circled the target. We knew that there was nothing left down there to touch us. In fact there wasn't a single gun firing, just lots and lots of smoke. We could see explosions as well from bombs being dropped by aircraft that had flown in behind us and secondary explosions caused by munitions or fuel stored on the ground being hit. Following our assault two more squadrons went into that target and essentially wiped it out militarily - there was just nothing left.

Of course you know by now that Heligoland was just one small military target while many of our missions were directed at industrial targets and large cities; this was what they called 'total war'. It had been declared as such by Hitler and we were now paying him back.

The massive quantities of bombs that we carried and dropped on a target were bound to cause large numbers of casualties on the ground. You would try your hardest to navigate accurately and to bomb with precision but you can never be right on target every time. You think you have the right wind direction, you think you have the right wind speed, and that there won't be any deviation between the wind at your height and the wind nearer the ground, but at the end of the day if you're going to drop that kind of

weaponry from that sort of height you know that you're really just going to wipe out whatever is on the ground below you. Remember, we were bombing from 30,000 feet which meant that there were several miles of air beneath us, with winds blowing this way and that, and we were unable to observe or measure any of those deviations.

On many occasions we were confident that we had the aircraft perfectly aligned, just as it should be; the bomb aimer had his sights on the target, all his calculations had been completed and the aircraft was ready for a perfect bomb run, but when he released the bombs they just didn't fall where he intended because of a wind shear somewhere beneath us. The wind would just take the bombs off target and they would land some distance away, often on civilian areas that were not being targeted. You would do your best, but there were just too many factors to take into account, many of them out of your control. That's the nature of the beast. You tried your best.

So, that was that. Thirty three operational missions, all of them over Germany at the climax of the air war, with just over 197 operational hours and 25 non-operational hours, for a total of 223 hours aloft with no casualties amongst our crew.

Sadly, many of our comrades were not as fortunate. In the course of the war 102 Squadron had the third heaviest losses in Bomber Command. We lost over 1,000 men out of a Bomber Command total loss of 55,000, suffered the heaviest losses in Number 4 Group (shared with 78 Squadron) and had the highest percentage losses in the Group. As I explained earlier, these heavy casualties continued almost to the end of the war.

It's also important to bear in mind the fact that, although we were only four or five months away from the end of the war in Europe, 46% of the total tonnage of bombs dropped by Bomber Command during the entire war was dropped between September 1944 and May 1945. It's very sad, but with a strength of 120 or so aircrew on the Squadron more than a third (47) had been killed during the last six months of the war, 2 were missing and 18 had been taken prisoner.

The courage of my comrades is reflected in the fact that a total of 74 Distinguished Flying Medals (DFM) and the Distinguished Flying Crosses (DFC) were awarded to squadron members between 1939 and 1945, along with one CGM. I was one of the recipients of the DFC, awarded for my service with 102 Squadron, although it was not presented until after the war had ended and I had transferred to another unit. I also received the *1939 to 1945 Medal*, the *France/Germany Cross*, the *Defence Medal* and the *War Medal*. I don't know specifically why they gave me the DFC. They kept that secret from me.

Our commitment was limited to those thirty-three operational missions. A few fellows got really worked up about the length of it, affected by the stress of constant flying and exposure to danger. In those cases the RAF would quickly pull them off flying duty and put somebody else into the crew. The affected person would be given a rest and in most cases he would eventually be put back on duty once he had recovered. There was a pretty modern attitude towards that kind of thing, even in those days, and we felt that we were fairly treated.

My operational tour ended before the end of the war. After I finished my tour it was time to go and get drunk! It was a big relief to come through that alive, yet I am sure that if the war had continued I would have signed up for another tour of duty straightaway. I can't really explain why, it's just something to do with the way I felt at the time, that we were doing the right thing, that it was important.

I know there were people who would go up for their first flight and then decide that they weren't ready for this at all, that they were not going back. I have to admit that I don't think that what we did was something that most people would do in the same circumstances. Without meaning to sound conceited, I believe that the process of selection and the intensive period of training brought a special group of people to the top of the pile.

Ralph Pearson, our pilot, one air gunner and I all volunteered to join the Pathfinder Force. The Pathfinders were an elite force trained to arrive at the target first and to drop flares and incendiaries to mark it for the main force bombers. Our applications were approved and we were posted to the Pathfinder training school to train on the Lancaster bomber. However, after about two weeks of this familiarisation the war in Europe came to a close as the Germans surrendered.

Well, with that our pilot Pearson just disappeared; in fact I tried to contact him before he left, but he was going straight back to Canada as the Canadians were being taken home very quickly by their authorities. Pearson was more or less engaged to a girl up in York, so he rushed off to join her about three days before the actual end of the conflict, while I was stuck at the training centre cooling my heels.

As soon as the fighting had ended I hopped on the first train to York, but I couldn't find Pearson. I visited everybody I knew trying to get some information about his whereabouts but I wasn't able to contact him. Eventually I gave up and, as I couldn't get a room in a hotel anywhere, what with everyone returning from overseas, I ended up spending the whole night sitting in the railway station. Thank God it wasn't too cold. The next day I caught the first train back to my base and I never saw Pearson or heard from him again. He left so quickly, you see that I never got his address.

Chapter 5: **My World Tour**

I actually stayed with the RAF until 1963. I transferred to Transport Command and I even ran for the RAF track team, my events being the two-twenty and four-forty. I was formally entitled to wear the RAF Athletics Blazer, something that required written approval. At the end of my career I was serving as the Chief Navigation Officer for 216 Squadron, which operated the De Havilland Comet, a brand-new jet aircraft suited to carrying passengers. The Comet was really the first genuine passenger jet.

In 1959 or 1960 I flew out to Vancouver, where Ralph Pearson had lived before the war, as a navigator in the Comet. While there I wrote several letters to various addresses in an attempt to contact Ralph but I still couldn't find him in spite of sending letters here, there and everywhere. I don't know if he eventually married that girl from Yorkshire.

I did stay in touch with Laurie Wilder, our Flight Engineer. He was posted to the Middle East for a time, but when he came back he took ill and he died a few years ago. Of the others in my crew, I met only one after the war. I was walking along a street in London and I heard someone walking behind me. I knew it was a policeman but I didn't worry about that as I knew they were just walking past me. Suddenly, one of these policemen turned around to face me and said, 'Excuse me, sir'. I thought he was going to arrest me, but as it turned out it was Morris, one of the mid-upper gunners, who had now joined the police force. I exclaimed, 'My God!' I had a shock you know, as I just heard this uniformed gentleman say 'Excuse me, sir' and when you hear that from a policeman you know that the next words coming are, 'You are wanted for questioning down at the Station'!

I used to work on the de-mob ships coming back to Jamaica with Jamaican servicemen from the UK. I was on duty, in my uniform, and it felt good to walk the streets of Kingston and to meet up with members of the family, dressed as a flyer returned from the war. On the first trip, I took sixty days leave and went home to see my family for the first time in four years. I was proud of what we had done, and I'm not ashamed to admit that. I also believe that people really looked up to us and appreciated our efforts.

I did about three de-mob trips out here, and we actually had some serious trouble on a few occasions because of the long drawn out demobilisation process for Jamaican servicemen, and the rough conditions they were forced to endure. Men from other nations appeared to have been given priority treatment when it came to repatriation, and our men felt that they had been badly treated.

I was down in Middle East in November 1945 and for some unearthly reason heavy rain started to fall. In addition, at this time in England they had one whole month of fog, and we were supposed to fly via Italy to pick up some passengers and carry them home to the UK. When we were ready to leave Italy the controllers told us, 'Well you can't move because you can't get in; you can't get into any airfield in England'. After sitting there for two full weeks, we were told to fly over to Naples. We then spent about two weeks flying over to the heel of Italy, and bringing people over to Naples to catch a ship home from there.

We finally got back to England in December 1945, after almost a month of trying. They must have had a hell of a lot of fog there. We left Naples with about twenty-five soldiers on board, which was the standard load, and believe it or not, we got as far as the Channel and then we had to go all the way back to Marseilles, as we still couldn't fly in.

Finally, the following morning, with the wind against us, we were able to get into our UK base and drop off our passengers. This was a Saturday with Christmas right around the corner. As I climbed down from the aircraft I saw three or four staff cars and a gaggle of senior officers standing there waiting for us. I said to myself, 'What the hell did we do wrong?' That's the first thing that comes to mind when you see a gathering like that - something must be wrong! Well, they stepped away from the cars, and I saw the Wing Commander at the head of the group. He said 'John Blair come here!' So I went over, trying to work out what kind of trouble I was in when he handed me something and said, 'This is yours! You've been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross! Well done!' And I said, 'For what?'

There were no less than three Squadron Leaders standing there with the Wing Commander, and one of them said, 'What the hell is this? You won a DFC and you didn't say anything to anybody! But here you are; you have been awarded the DFC for the work done during your tour with the bombers in 102 Squadron.' There was no

particular mission or event that caused them to give me that award, just my overall performance during the whole tour.

So that was it – I was surprised, I can tell you. There was a citation and a short letter from the King enclosed with the medal, but I have lost those unfortunately. All I can say is that I did the best job as a Navigator that I could have ever done. Well, we came through thirty-three missions and many, many crews did not.

Of course, that night after they gave me the medal was a terrible night! From whisky to beer to whisky again! Beer by the barrel-full and whiskey by the bottle! That was after suffering in Italy for a whole month, and since I had even had to go and buy new shirts down there, money was tight. I really couldn't afford that medal.

With Transport Command I went all around the world, flying as a Navigator in Hastings aircraft and also the Comet. I met my future wife Margaret on an aircraft flying into Hong Kong. I was navigating and she was idling! She was the Senior Flight Sister but with nothing to do as there were no patients going outbound, although we would take patients on the journey back, mostly army personnel. That aircraft was actually a hospital ward with stretcher patients and seated patients. The Sisters were kept busy when they had casualties to attend to, but fortunately for me we were empty on that flight.

Later, I was based out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean dropping off cargo destined for Christmas Island in the period leading up to the British nuclear tests. I went fishing before the tests and caught a few really big ones.

In 1995 I was invited to represent Jamaica at the 50th Anniversary celebrations of the end of the war, held in London. Several of us represented Jamaica, including my friend John Ebanks, who had been a Navigator/Bomb Aimer in a Mosquito Squadron. Well, that was quite something. It was very well attended indeed and I had never before seen the streets of London with so many people on them. We marched from Greenwich up to big, old Buckingham Palace. On both sides of the street all the way to

the Palace, people must have been standing more than twenty deep. It felt as though there were millions of people there on that day.

While we were fighting we never thought about defending the Empire or anything along those lines. We just knew deep down inside that we were all in this together and that what was taking place around our world had to be stopped. That was a war that had to be fought; there are no two ways about that. A lot of people have never thought about what would have happened to them here in Jamaica if the Germans had won, but we certainly would have returned to slavery. If a youngster today should ever suggest that we had no business going to fight a 'white man's war' I would just throw my foot at him where it hurt him the most!

EPILOGUE



Flight Lieutenant John J Blair, DFC, 1919 to 2004

**Remembrance
for
Flight Lieutenant John Jellico Blair, DFC
1919 – 2004**

Read at his funeral service by Mark Johnson, nephew

What motives led John Blair to tread the path he did and what must he have felt as he travelled from the dusty plains of southern St Elizabeth, Jamaica, to the air over Germany in 1944; from educator to Royal Air Force navigator, to lawyer and air accident investigator; from poor rural roots to a Distinguished Flying Cross and a career as one of the first West Indians to serve in the officer's ranks of His Majesty's Forces?

Uncle John went to school in Pedro Plains, to be taught by his elder sister Jemima; what a fate that must be, to be taught by one's sister! There was a single class for children of all ages and he was actually told to start school two years early. When the English schools inspector came to visit, Aunt Jem would push him out of the one-room school by the back door, so that she wouldn't get into trouble.

As a child, John was moved around between his home, his brother Stanley's teacher's cottage in St Ann and his sister Clarissa's house in St Mary. In the latter, John used to watch his brother-in-law, Mr E.B. Johnson, leading the local scout troop. The troop was smartly dressed, with uniforms and scarves, just like their English counterparts, but they were all barefoot! None of them could afford shoes for day-to-day use.

In the late 1930s, John left St Elizabeth to study at the Mico Teachers Training College, and he graduated as a teacher in elementary education after the 2nd World War had already started and in the words of Uncle John's lifelong friend and RAF comrade, John Ebanks, 'Hitler was a bully who had to be stopped'. John Blair decided that he would be one of those who would do the stopping.

So this reserved, 23 year-old school teacher from the countryside volunteered to join the Royal Air Force, and in October 1942 he was put on a ship in Kingston harbour along with twenty other Jamaican volunteers and sent to Canada for training, by way of Belize, New Orleans and New York. This was a man who had never held a gun, never before left Jamaica, and never once flown in an aeroplane.

That experience on board the American ship stayed with Uncle John, and he found it both ironic and amusing. When his group went on board, they were told to go below. As they arrived on the first deck they found empty bunks waiting for them, so they started to unpack. However, an officer soon appeared and told them that their proper place was two decks further down; in the hold! And that's where they travelled all the way to New Orleans, via Belize!

John trained in Canada as a Navigator in bomber aircraft, and he said it was "Cold like the Devil!" As the navigator, John Blair was responsible for telling the pilot how to get to the target and how to get home again after the bombs had been dropped. This was done mostly at night and with very limited technical assistance, just maps, compasses, a radio signal for taking bearings, star sightings and a regular look out of the window at the ground below, when you could see it. No radar. No computers. And no lights!

And while doing all this, with hundreds of other aircraft all around them in the night sky, the bombers were under attack by enemy fighters and anti-aircraft fire. Understand this – Uncle John's squadron (102 Ceylon Squadron) possessed 16 Halifax bombers, each with a crew of 7 men taken from many nations. During the first 3 weeks of his service with the Squadron, 8 of those 16 planes had been shot down over Germany; that's 50% of his squadron in less than a month, with most of the crews being killed. John Blair would fly for a total of 5 months, and fly 33 bombing missions in that period.

Imagine, if you can, just a few moments in this long period of strain and tension; John Blair sitting in the briefing room with his fellow navigators, listening to details of the weather and the target, noting the enemy flak positions on his charts and trying not to

think about the effect of their fire; John walking to the aircraft in the evening twilight with his crew, clambering aboard through a narrow hatch and sitting at his navigation table, listening to the chatter on the intercom. The aircraft engines starting, belching black smoke, their whine rising to a roar, the aircraft lumbering and jolting down the runway, taking him with it regardless, straining to lift itself off the ground, clawing at the cold air and climbing into the night. Imagine a long, bumpy flight over dark countryside and black waters, turning this way and that, long hours of waiting and then the enemy night fighters coming out of nowhere at high speed, guns firing all around, other aircraft burning as they fall, their crews dying, beyond any help he could offer. Now picture the flak and searchlights over the target, the aircraft leaping upwards as the bombs fall away leaving it so much lighter, the steep dive to low-level flight and then skimming over the trees and the water back to base, for hot tea and eggs and bacon, and sleep, and trying not to think about the comrades who would never come home again, or the fact that it would all need to be over again the following night, and the next, and the night after that.

That is what this man did.

He admitted that this was a hard, hard thing to do; there was fear and danger, and there was discomfort. Thousands of airmen died on both sides, and his Squadron suffered the second highest losses of any RAF squadron during the entire Second World War. The enemy was expert and resolute and many of the German pilots who attacked John's squadron were combat aces with years of experience.

For example, Hauptman Georg Hermann Greiner, who downed an aircraft from 102 on 5th January 1945 was a Luftwaffe Ace, who shot down a total of 51 allied aircraft during the war. Major Heinz-Wolfgang Schnauffer, who attacked the squadron on 21st February 1945 bringing two planes down, shot down a total of 121 allied planes during his career. In fact, on that night Schnauffer, Greiner and two other German pilots accounted for a total of 25 allied bombers in less than 30 minutes.

So this was serious business; it was life and death, and more often death than life for the allied aircrews.

What did John Blair do when he had completed this tour? Well, he volunteered for a second tour with the elite Pathfinder Squadron, and he was accepted. He also went out and got drunk with his crew, and I wonder if he didn't get drunk first and volunteer afterwards! For his service with 102 Squadron Flight Lieutenant John Jellico Blair was awarded the *Distinguished Flying Cross*, the *1939 to 1945 Medal*, the *France/Germany Cross*, the *Defence Medal* and the *War Medal*.

At the end of the war in Europe, Uncle John stayed in the RAF and transferred to Transport Command, flying all over the world. It was on one such flight to the Far East that he met his future wife Margaret. She was the Senior Flight Sister on board and they were on their way to pick up British casualties and ferry them home. As Uncle John put it, 'I was working and she was idling!'

He also flew as a navigator in the Comet aircraft, the first passenger jet, and he remained in the RAF until 1963, a total of 21 years. John and Margaret Blair had two children, John Julian and Sarah, both of whom now live in the UK but who are here with us today. The family returned to Jamaica in the 1970s, and John Blair practiced law, worked as Deputy Director of Civil Aviation and tried his hand at farming.

Severe illness struck Uncle John in the late 1990's. Throughout his long illness his wife Margaret and their children demonstrated the incredible devotion and strength that John himself had displayed throughout his life. How ***should*** we remember that life? In keeping with his own style, I propose just a few simple words; devotion to duty, to his country and to his people; love for his wife and for his children; compassion and humility; respect for others and concern for all mankind; self-sacrifice. Let us remember him thus, let us thank him and his comrades for risking *their* lives to secure *our* freedom, and let us hope that each of us can be just one tenth the human being that was John Jellico Blair.

Appendix A

Transcript of an Interview with John Ebanks

July 1997

I was a very religious young man and even now I can't understand my motivation for going to fight in the services. In 1940 I was the youngest lay preacher in the Anglican Church in Jamaica. But I was just annoyed when I listened to the news and heard how Hitler was just bulldozing his way through those little countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia. I was hurt - he was just a damned bully using his strength to dominate those people, and that triggered my decision.

I had five brothers and six sisters and came from a very traditional family background but I didn't tell my parents what I was planning to do until I had already been accepted by the RAF. I waited till the last minute to tell them.

My father was a teacher from St Elizabeth in Jamaica. In fact, there's a story in the family that states that by rights we should be in the owners of the whole of Treasure Beach where my good friend John Blair comes from. There were two brothers from Scotland call Eubanks (Ebanks is a corruption) who decided to leave their father's carpet making business and follow in the footsteps of Columbus. Well they set sail and they reached as far as the Cayman Islands, where one of them settled. The second brother continued but his ship ran into a storm and they were shipwrecked on the South West coast of Jamaica at what is now called Treasure Beach. And so that's how the family came to Jamaica, and up to 40 years ago anywhere you heard the name Ebanks you could be certain that you were talking to someone who hailed from St Elizabeth. In 1954 there were only two Ebanks in the telephone directory and now there are about 30.

In 1939 I was a teacher. One day I was sitting with the headmistress listening to the radio when suddenly Churchill came on and we heard that amazing speech, "We will

fight them on the beaches". I was very moved. The Germans were just rampaging across Europe, and these people were going to stop them.

So the following day I made an application to the RAF. That was in 1940 but I didn't hear from them until the middle of 1941 when they told me to report to Kingston for medical and mental tests. Incidentally the educational tests we got out here were much tougher than the ones we received when we arrived in England. We didn't actually join up here in Jamaica. There was a committee here and they were very strict because at that time all the fellows who applied were applying for aircrew duties - no one was applying for anything else. My first choice was to be a pilot but I received a 100% score in the mathematical aspects of the test and apparently the English school system wasn't turning out as many good mathematicians as were required. So I was asked to become a navigator, given my skill at math. I didn't mind because I already knew that this was a critical job and that many aircraft were lost not because of enemy fire, but due to errors in navigation. It was common to hear of planes going off course and flying into mountains or heading far out to sea never to return.

After a few months in England I was posted to Canada for training. We had a good time in Canada. There was no blackout, there was plenty to eat and the girls were very nice, but that didn't interest me! What disturbed me was the comment that people trained in Canada as navigators were very poor in their performance operationally, because there was no blackout and so navigation was easy compared to Europe.

When I joined my squadron I was the only non-commissioned officer on the station so I was stuck in a great big, big building all by myself. Eventually I was transferred to a place named Oakington.

I recall that during our bomb aiming training, on my first flight with live ordinance, I believed I had dropped the bomb on the target, but as we were returning to base we realised that the aircraft wasn't handling properly and indeed the bomb was still attached! I said to my pilot, 'I don't believe the bomb is gone!' Now at this stage we

were at 30,000 feet and I said let's go down another 10,000 feet because I suspected that ice was the cause of the problem. When we had descended to 20,000 feet I pressed the button again and the aircraft jumped up about 4000 feet as the bomb left us. After that experience we never had any doubts as to whether or not the bomb had gone.

All in all I flew 50 sorties during the war. I think my most dangerous moment was over Hamburg. We lost one of our engines hit by flak, the starboard engine as I recall, and that occurred at 25,000 feet. Then suddenly the second engine packed up apparently because of an airlock. So we were just gliding with no engines at all. By now we were over the North Sea and the pilot told me to prepare to bail out. I said 'Master, you can bail out but I not bailing out'. This was one time I was not obeying any instructions, because when you looked down below you know it was as black as pitch, it being two o'clock in the morning. No way was I going to bail out at night in the winter over the North Sea - I would prefer to die in my plane.

When we got to 5000 feet the blockage cleared up and engine started and we were able to land on an emergency strip on the east coast of England. You see no matter how bad things get there is always a chance something will happen and you will scrape through. I just wasn't prepared to bail out because you had no chance of surviving you would freeze to death in two minutes in the water.

I also recall another occasion when we lost an engine and had to turn back to the UK. Now, each squadron leaving the UK had a designated re-entry point at which you could fly back in to the UK. As long as you flew on the correct course you were expected, but if you were tempted to return on another route there was always a chance that the gunners on the ground will treat you as an enemy aircraft. As we hit the coast on this flight the English anti-aircraft batteries, or 'ack-ack', opened fire on us. But fortunately we always carried a Verey pistol with the flare of the day, a specific colour that everyone knew, and as soon as I fired that thing the anti-aircraft firing stopped as though by magic.

I remember that I flew as part of a force of 30 mosquitoes to mark the target at Cologne for one of the thousand bomber raids. Well I'll just let you imagine what happens when 30 aircraft attack a target that's defended by 600 guns. And yet, as we left the area weaving and turning violently to avoid the enemy fire I saw one aircraft circling the target, taking a look. It turned out to be one of the squadron commanders. Of course, he was shot down and killed.

When I got back to Jamaica I didn't find the adjustment difficult, but I had a hell of a time getting a job. At every interview I was told that I had a brilliant war record and that they had no place for someone like me.

I was at a gathering recently when a fellow came up to me and said "Oh! So you are one of those who went to fight for King and country." I got very angry and I told him in no uncertain manner that I did not go to fight for King and country, I went to fight for myself. I went to fight for freedom, for Jamaica, and for all the little countries of the world that would otherwise be controlled by bullies.

John Ebanks

1997