

Sq. Ldr Lighton Verdon-Roe, DFC, RAFVR,
156 (PFF) Sqn.

(Second son of Sir Allott Verdon-Roe - founder
of A.V. Roe & Co Ltd. - to be killed in the
RAF Bomber Command in WWII)



The antics of Lighton, Alastair
Lang, and Peter Isaacson.

FINAL

Sqd. Ldr. Lighton Verdon-Roe, D.F.C., R.A.F.V.R.

(May 1st 1921 — May 13th 1943)

Lighton Verdon-Roe was born at 'High Firs' on May 1st 1921, the third son (and seventh child) of Alliott and Mildred. He went to Seaford College to begin with, and later to Highgate School. His brother Geoffrey had also been to Seaford Prep School and Alliott had been persuaded to send them both there following in the footsteps of Robert Perfect, his youngest sister Dorothy's son.

Lighton grew up as a very cheerful and active child, always getting up to pranks, and even labelled a little 'wild' by some of the adults who knew him. But it was only an over-exuberance of spirit, and he was just the sort of material that goes a long way in life – and which the Royal Air Force would be glad to embrace.

Lighton didn't have much chance to join Saunders-Roe, like his older brothers Eric and Geoffrey had done, as he was only just leaving school in the summer of 1939, when the war was about to break out.

He joined the R.A.F.V.R. almost immediately, after working for a short time at Rex Paterson's farm at Hatch Warren, near Basingstoke. Both Eric and Geoffrey, already in the R.A.F., kept closely in touch with him over the next two years.

Lighton then progressed through Flying Training Schools at R.A.F. Shawbury (near Shrewsbury) in April 1941, and R.A.F. South Cerney in September that year (Alliott had called there to see him in July). While at South Cerney, learning to fly multi-engined aircraft, Lighton would occasionally well and truly 'beat up' Rex Paterson's farm at Hatch Warren in his twin-engined aircraft.

Alliott's diary also mentions "Lighton at home on leave" on January 12th 1942, then on March 29th 1942: "Lighton at home, now a Pilot Officer", and on August 12th. "Lighton at home on leave with broken wrist in plaster – due to a heavy landing".

Having passed his Wellington conversion course, but still nursing his broken wrist from the recent heavy landing, Pilot Officer Lighton Verdon-Roe was now posted to one of the four elite Bomber Command Squadrons that had just been ordered to form the brand new Pathfinder Force (P.F.F.).

The idea of a P.F.F. (or Target Finding Force) had originated from the Director of Bomber Operations at the Air Ministry in late 1941, following the success of the C.O. of 10 Squadron in illuminating the target with flares during a raid on Bremen on May 17th/18th 1940.

There had been a tussle between the Air Ministry and Sir Arthur Harris, the Commander-in-Chief Bomber Command, about raising such a Force, but the Air Ministry had won and the P.F.F. was set up in early August 1942.

The four squadrons initially enlisted were 35 Squadron (Halifaxes) at Graveley, 83 Squadron (Lancaster~~s~~) from Wyton, 7 Squadron (Stirlings) from Oakington, and 156 Squadron (Wellingtons) from Alconbury.

Wyton became the P.F.F. H.Q., where 83 Squadron was based, as well as 109 Squadron with Mosquitos which soon joined the Force as well.

156 Squadron moved a short distance to Warboys (also in Huntingdonshire), to where Lighton was now posted, becoming one of the original founding pilots of the P.F.F./

His new C.O. was not amused to receive a pilot with a broken wrist which still had to heal. He wrote in the Monthly Summary at the end of August in the Squadron's Operational Record Book (O.R.B.): "P.O. L. Verdon-Roe arrived on August 12th with a broken arm which he brought with him on arrival!"

Wyton promptly sent Lighton on leave on the 12th and he took the rest of August and most of September to get fit again.

When he arrived at Warboys again at the end of September, it was to find the new P.F.F. had had its first operations on August 18th/19th to Flensburg, but their efforts at marking the target had been singularly unsuccessful. The next raid had been to Frankfurt on August 24th/25th and had fared little better, six P.F.F. aircraft being lost (none from 156 Squadron). However, the third raid, on Kassel, on August 27th/28th had produced success as the P.F.F. crews had been able to accurately mark the target, which then received a pounding from the Main Force. 156 Squadron, however, lost three Wellingtons that night, another on August 28th/29th on a major raid on Nuremberg, and another on September 1st/2nd just after take-off for Saarbrücken.

Nuremberg

On a major raid on Bremen on September 13th/14th, 156 had lost two more Wellingtons, but it was on this raid that the P.F.F. developed the next stage in its target marking system.

The leading aircraft released a large number of white flares to float down and illuminate the town. Small concentrations of coloured flares were then dropped to mark the aiming point for the main bomber force. Incendiaries were then dropped over the coloured flares, starting fires which made the aiming point very conspicuous, for too often the Germans started large decoy fires outside the towns, to persuade the main force to unload their bombs in open country.

156 Squadron lost another Wellington on September 16th/17th – but the crew escaped on crash landing in the UK – and another on September 19th/20th. Thus by the time Lighton rejoined 156 Squadron at the beginning of October, his new Squadron had lost nine Wellingtons in the first two months of being in the P.F.F. In addition, 156 had lost 26 Wellingtons between the start of 1942, and being drafted into the P.F.F., making overall losses of 35 aircraft between January 1st and October 1st 1942. Lighton's future on joining them – like that of any other pilot – did not therefore seem to be particularly bright.

At this time of the war, the average number of operations a bomber crew could complete before being killed or shot down to become prisoners-of-war, varied between a minimum of 8 and a maximum of 12, and their length of time on a squadron was just three months on average.

When Lighton arrived back at 156 Squadron at Warboys in September 1942, with his wrist now fully mended, he found another pilot had just been posted there at the same time. This was Flt Lt. Alastair Lang who had already completed 22 operations, 19 of them with 150 Squadron on Wellingtons, and another 3 while instructing at an operational training unit, which had to supply aircraft for the three famous '1,000 bomber' raids on Germany in 1942. (These were on Cologne on May 30th, Essen on June 1st, and Bremen on June 25th.)

So Alastair arrived at Warboys with 22 operations completed and almost immediately took a liking to Lighton. They were both very much of the same mould, likely to get up to all sorts of 'pranks', more than a little wild at times, but intensely patriotic, and determined to enjoy themselves despite the times in which they lived and the almost certainty that neither would live to see the end of the war.

The two became firm and inseparable friends after an initial 'punch-up' in a local pub (usually the Red Lion in Cambridge, or the one in Warboys village called irreverently 'The 14 tits' after the landlord's seven daughters), where as Alastair remembers, for whatever reason they appeared to be on opposite sides at first! They subsequently got up to many escapades together, some of the more recountable of which will be mentioned below.

Unusually for such a young bomber pilot at that time, Alastair was already married, having met his 19 year old wife, Barbara, when he was 21, and as he had a young daughter now, called Virginia, he had rented a cottage near Warboys for his family to live in. Thus he was able to take Lighton back there at times, to a more 'homely' atmosphere.

the youngest of five children *His father had been a merchant trader*
Alastair had been born in Burma where his parents lived for some years, but when *he died suddenly, his mother had been the family back* they returned to England to live on the South Coast. *He was sent to prep school at Seaford before going to Christ's Hospital at Horsham (where A.V.'s sister Elsie had earlier sent her son, Rex).* The headmaster of his prep school was John Perfect, who was the brother of the husband of A.V.'s sister, Dorothy. Dorothy sent her own son, John, to this school, and he became head boy while Alastair was there and a contemporary of his.

In fact John Perfect and Alastair had become great friends, and when Alastair married his wife Barbara, in Eastbourne, John was best man.

It was a strange coincidence therefore, that Alastair should number as two of his greatest friends one of A.V.'s sons and one of his sister Dorothy's also.

Thus Alastair and Lighton had many things in common to talk about, and they were often out and about in Lighton's old Ford car – which was never taxed or insured! On one occasion they went to a party in Buckinghamshire to which they managed to get Royce to join them from Stowe School. After the party, they found a policeman snooping around the parked cars, and he asked Lighton why his car wasn't taxed. Lighton explained to him that as his chances of living very long were limited, it wasn't worth doing! And the policeman went away, shaking his head in a mixture of sympathy and disbelief.

October 6th saw Lighton's first duty, which was to fly his Wellington down to Manston in Kent, to pick up one of their captains, Flt. Lt. Greenup. Greenup's Wellington had been hit by flak returning from an operation to Aachen. He ordered his crew to bale out over the French coast, but then regaining some control he flew the aircraft across the Channel and, steadily losing height managed to belly-land it on Manston's famous long runway (often used for emergency landings.). 156 Squadron had lost two other Wellington IIIs that night in severe icing and electrical storm conditions.

On October 15th P/O Lighton Verdon-Roe took off on his first operation with 156 – to bomb Cologne. He left Warboys at 19.25 hrs and at 21.19 he released the single 4,000 lb 'Pink Pansie' marker over the north-west section of Cologne, from an altitude of 15,000 ft. These new markers were filled with a lethal mixture of granulated red oxide powder, benzyl, rubber and phosphorous, and burst with a vivid pink flash. He was flying Wellington III BJ709 on this occasion, but from his next operation onwards, he and his crew would use a dedicated aircraft for most of the time.

This raid had not proved very successful, as the Germans had lit a large decoy fire which attracted most of the bombing. Sqd. Ldr. J. Hobbs and his aircraft from 156 were lost.

Lighton's next operation was on November 7th/8th to Genoa in Italy. Operations to Italian cities had begun on October 22nd in support of the Eighth Army in N. Africa after the Battle of El Alamein, and Genoa and Milan were raided several times, one to the latter even being in daylight all the way. Lighton took off at 17.40 from Warboys, but because his G.E.E. radar had failed at take-off, he abandoned the sortie at 18.38 and returned to base. He jettisoned the 8 x 40 H.E. bombs he was carrying, but retained 6 S.B.C. markers to land back at 20.00. The aircraft he used was Wellington III BJ617, which he now flew seven times before the end of the year. One 156 Wellington was lost that night.

November 9th saw Lighton off to Hamburg at 17.25 carrying a 'Pink Pansie' and 6 x 500lb bombs. He dropped these through cloud at 20.45 from 17,000 ft and he recorded 'Moderate amounts of heavy flak'.

Before his next 'Op', Gp. Capt. (later Air Vice-Marshal) D.C.T. Bennett, CO of the P.F.F., came to lecture the 156 Squadron crews on November 12th 1942 on P.F.F. target marking techniques, and the latest methods they were using.

Alastair Lang remembers ^{ed} this 'Pep' talk very well – he said they all thought they were going to be congratulated – as the Squadron had taken some of the best photographs of their results over the target areas of any P.F.F. Squadron. Bennett suddenly called out: – "Verdon-Roeth and Lighton stood up – "I have a good photograph here of your drop over . . . (a recent target) . . . your drop is 100 yds from the aiming point". Lighton thought he was about to be congratulated – but Bennett then said "That isn't good enough – you've got to actually hit the aiming point!" Bennett was a hard task master.

It was back to Italy for Lighton again on November 20th, this time to Turin, flying his dedicated aircraft BJ617. Taking off at 18.22 he was over Turin at 22.12, and he dropped his 1,900lb marker and smaller H.E. bombs directly on the Fiat works from 9,500 ft. All the squadron aircraft returned safely, Lighton's sortie lasting exactly eight hours. He reported seeing an especially large fire in the Fiat works.

Two days later, on November 22nd/23rd Lighton was tasked to mark for a raid on Stuttgart. He took off at 18.06 and flew down to the west and south of Stuttgart until he came to Lake Konstanz, then the P.F.F. flew north to Stuttgart, taking the defences by surprise. There was thin overhead cloud, however, and some ground haze, and they were unable to identify the city centre. Lighton dropped his 'Pink Pansie' from 12,500 ft at 22.08, and they set course for home over France. Exhibiting some of the initiative for which he was famed (or called 'a little wild' in his youth) Lighton finished up flying his Wellington over France in the dark at 250ft, and they overtook and shot up a goods train between Amiens and Rouen.

His front gunner got in an 8-second burst. The train was hit and – as Lighton reported – “it stopped!”.

On another subsequent occasion, Lighton flew his Wellington back again at night at low level, and he spotted the lights in a large factory. They proceeded to shoot this up, putting out all the lights rather rapidly.

Doing this sort of thing was strictly against all the rules, Alastair says, “You were supposed to keep to a certain (high) altitude on the way out, and come back at a set level on the return”.

But then 'Avro' (as Alastair and his friends in 156 Squadron called him) was never one for adhering to the rules!

In December 1942, the marking techniques of the P.F.F. began to get more sophisticated and the makers of the pyrotechnics involved must have been working flat out to produce the various different types of flares and markers being tried out.

On December 9th Lighton was tasked to Turin again for what proved to be another successful attack on the industrial area. He was airborne for 8 ¼ hrs on this occasion in BJ617, dropping 12 x 3 flares at 21.23 from 10,000 ft. The target was so well defined already that he brought his big marker back home.

Two days later, on December 11th Lighton was off once more to Turin, but the weather was so bad over the Alps that he had to abandon the mission over Arleuf at 20.08, and was back at Warboys by 23.00.

Lighton's next operation was not until December 20th and this time it was to Duisburg, where things were about to get a great deal more serious, giving a portend of difficult times ahead. But this night also marked the first time that Oboe was used by P.F.F. Mosquitos, although on a different target. *italics*

So far, the P.F.F. Group was composed of a variety of aircraft types, which Gp. Capt. Bennett, the CO was trying now to standardise on the Lancaster and Mosquito. They

had developed the multi-coloured Target Markers of different types initially, but now would standardise on a 250lb casing packed with pyrotechnic candles which could be ejected at different heights by a barometric fuse, and cascade slowly to the ground in different colours, eg red, green or yellow, and white, or combination of colours and with ejecting stars of the same or different colours.

Barometric fuses were usually set to burst between 200 and 500ft above the ground, and the cascading would occur followed immediately by the main candles burning on impact with the ground. These would be so scattered that it rendered it impossible for fire fighters to deal with them all, before they burned out. This would not be many minutes, and replenishment from the air was then necessary.

Lighton's squadron would take off and fly to the target at three minute intervals, and each aircraft would aim to drop its markers on top of those dropped by the aircraft in front – three minutes being the time taken for the markers already dropped to be burning out, and need replenishing.

Sky markers were also now used by the Mosquitos and these were parachute flares of different colours, throwing out stars and burning for three to five minutes. They were dropped so that about half way through their descent they would then be precisely over the aiming point for the main force, taking into account wind drift, etc.

By the beginning of 1943, there were three methods of finding the target – by visual means in good weather, by the use of the new *Oboe* system (reckoned by the P.F.F.'s CO to be the single most effective method used by Bomber Command in WWII), and by the use of H2S.

Oboe was the code name given to the procedure where pulses were transmitted by two radio stations in the UK, and used by the specially equipped bombers to keep on track to their target. These aircraft would transmit the pulses back to the two radio stations, who would calculate the aircraft's distance from the target and send a signal to indicate when the bombs should be released. When all went well, an average bomb-aiming error of only 300 yds or less, could be achieved.

This system had a limited range – it could not follow the curvature of the earth; it could only handle six aircraft per hour, per station and as the maximum number of stations was only three, only 18 aircraft could be thus directed; and aircraft had to fly straight and level for some minutes before the aiming point.

The fast, unarmed Mosquito was ideal for this task, hence the P.F.F. gradually acquired more and more squadrons of these. And the Germans never managed to jam *Oboe* properly for the rest of the war – one of their greatest failures.

The H2S system was an airborne, ground-scanning radar that showed up on a screen in the aircraft the shape of the ground, towns and coastline below. Whereas *Oboe* could only extend as far as the Ruhr in Germany, H2S could be carried on the aircraft to any destination – but was temperamental to use, and often depended on the skill of the operator to pinpoint targets. It now began to be fitted to the P.F.F. Lancasters at the end of 1942, and gave their 'heavies' a more accurate method of target finding – especially deep into Germany.

So Lighton took off on December 20th 1942 to mark Duisburg. Take-off was at 18.00 in a different Wellington this time – BK508 – and at 19.51 he dropped a 1,900lb 'Pink Pansie' and 18 x 3 flares from 14,000 ft. He landed back at 22.15 and reported seeing three other aircraft going down in flames on the return journey. His squadron lost two Wellingtons that night, but the visibility was good and results were impressive.

The *Oboe* Mosquitos had attacked a power station in Holland, and proved the system worked, without loss to themselves. The very next day, December 21st, Lighton was on operations again, to Munich this time, a long ~~return~~ ^{round trip} flight of 8hrs 45mins which he fortunately accomplished safely.

With the end of 1942, Lighton had taken part in some nine operational missions as a Pathfinder in 156 Squadron. It had initially been decided that a 'Tour' of operations in the P.F.F. would be 60, rather than 30 operational flights that was the normal Bomber Command standard. This was to enable the skilled crews to be retained in the vital target-marking ~~role~~ ^{role}, so new ones need not be constantly recruited and trained. But this, of course, ran contrary to the odds of survival. By the end of 1942, Lighton's squadron had lost 45 aircraft in 12 months – 26 in the first seven and a half months, and 19 in the P.F.F. role over the last four and a half (in fact the loss rate had been higher since 156 had joined the P.F.F.).

In the P.F.F. each squadron was allocated 18 heavy aircraft, but only 16 were required to be available on each night, with 2 on heavy maintenance. In 1942, therefore, the squadron had practically been wiped out three times over. The chances of a pilot reaching 30 – never mind 60 – operations was therefore extremely remote. And they were all very much aware of this.

Thus the figure of 60 was eventually reduced to 45, to include the 30 from the first 'tour' as well. Those who survived – being now considered 'the Elite' – often carried on with the P.F.F. after a short rest.

With the start of 1943, Lighton's 156 Squadron was told to re-equip with the Lancaster bomber and January therefore saw the squadron training hard on their new four-engined aircraft – rather than the old twin-engined Wellington. The crew number went up by two – from five to seven now, and by the end of January 1943 P/O Lighton Verdon-Roe had his new team together and ready for action.

About the middle of January, a number of other pilots and their crews were posted in to 156 Squadron, and one of these soon to make his mark with the Pathfinders was an Australian called Peter Isaacson. Flying Officer Isaacson D.F.M. and his largely Australian crew, came from 460 Squadron R.A.A.F. at Brighton near York.

Peter had been born in London on July 31st 1920, to an Australian father and English mother, who had then returned to live in Australia in 1926. With a Jewish ancestry he was determined to join the Royal Australian Air Force and get to grips with the Germans in Europe. He had enlisted in 1940, learned to fly in Australia, and then been posted to Canada to advanced training as a fighter pilot at Uplands, near Ottawa.

Then it was to England, to 27 O.T.U. at Lichfield, in February 1942, and finally (as a bomber pilot now) to 460 Squadron in June 1942. Peter had flown Wellingtons, Halifaxes and then Lancasters before coming to join Lighton's Squadron, and had already completed 29 operations and been awarded the D.F.M. after his 22nd operation.

Being already trained on Lancasters, Peter Isaacson actually checked out Lighton and Alastair Lang onto their new Lancasters during January 1943, and by the end of the month the whole of 156 Squadron was ready for action on their ~~Lancasters~~ *new aircraft*.

During this conversion training on the Lancaster, Alastair had the only occasion when he ever 'lost' an engine on his aircraft, but as the Lancaster had four Rolls Royce Merlins and on a lightly loaded training mission, the aircraft still performed well.

t Making their last flights on their old Wellingtons, Alastair and Lighton flew them down to Whitle Watham airfield near Maidenhead, in order to snatch a brief leave near London, in company with others from 156 Squadron. En route, however, a radio message was sent to them all saying the airfield was flooded, and not to land, but return to base.

Lighton and Alastair were rather set on visiting some friends in the area, so they pretended not to hear the recall message, and went ahead to touch down on the rain-soaked grass aerodrome (the HQ incidentally, of the Air Transport Auxiliary, employing the men and women pilots who delivered aircraft from factory to units).

Of course, they found they then couldn't take off again in the sticky conditions, so they duly spent the night in a Maidenhead hotel.

Next day they travelled to London, and stayed there overnight prior to travelling back to base. They all (with their crews) had a great 'booze-up' in London, and Alastair duly sent the usual telegram back to base saying: "Pressing-on back to base". They stayed overnight again in London, rather the worse for wear, and sent another telegram: "Still Pressing-on!" When they finally got back, of course, they were given an almighty 'rocket' (by their revered South African CO, Wing Commander C. T. ('Tommy') S. Rivett-Carnac, but knew they were too indispensable to be court-martialled (and they were right!))

It was about this time, brought together during their sudden hectic conversion training on the Lancasters, that Lighton and Alastair - by now inseparable friends - joined forces in their off duty moments with their new-found friend Peter Isaacson.

These three stuck together through 'thick and thin' and the pranks and exploits they devised became increasingly daring in their scope and had a quite remarkable effect in uplifting the morale of the Squadron at a time when casualties were becoming very heavy. So much so that their CO, 'Tommy' Rivett-Carnac referred to them as the 'Terrible Threesome' with not a little trepidation about their next possible prank! (When a New Zealand pilot 'Terry' Kearns joined forces with them at times, Rivett-Carnac then called them the 'Fearsome Foursome'.)

Peter's Lancaster was 'Q for Queenie' and he was out on his first operation with 156 Squadron on January 30th 1943 to Hamburg. His bomb-aimer, Alan Ritchie D.F.M. soon showed he was the best in the Squadron, getting the most accurate individual result many times in a row – as proved by their photographs over the target. Peter's entire crew – all but one being Australian – were nicknamed rather unkindly the 'Shepherders' by the rest of the Squadron.

(The reason Peter always chose to have his aircraft coded 'Q' was because this was the first aircraft allocated to him when he originally joined 460 (R.A.A.F.) Squadron and he always took this to be a lucky omen – because his family lived in Queen's Road, Melbourne; he had his office in Queen Street, Melbourne; his navigator, 'Bob' Nielsen's mother's name was 'Queenie', and his then Front Gunner (Bomb aimer), Ed Wertzler, came from Regina (Latin for Queen) in Canada.)

And so it proved to be, Peter flying six successive 'Q for Queenies' in his career in the R.A.F.

On February 2nd the target for Lighton was Cologne, and he took off at 19.05 in his new Avro Lancaster I (W4851) – a product of the firm his father had founded – carrying a much bigger load of markers in this heavy bomber. He dropped 6 x Green Target Indicators, 1 x 4,000lb High Capacity bomb, a 336lb incendiary bomb and 24 x 4 incendiaries on the target at 21.06 from 18,500 ft, and landed back at Warboys at 22.55 unscathed.

It was on this raid that a P.F.F. Stirling of 7 Squadron was shot down and gave the Germans their first look at the new H2S radar equipment. This enabled them to develop a homing device for their night fighters onto anyone using H2S.

As if for making up lost time for the month spent converting to the Lancaster, Lighton was sent on operations again the next night – February 3rd and the next, February 4th. It was almost unheard of to fly on night operations three days running, but the pressure on the squadron at this time was immense.

The normal rule was to fly on alternate nights – or occasionally on two nights running. But in the latter case the crew then had to have two nights off operations to recover.

If they flew on three consecutive nights, then they had to have three nights off.

On February 3rd it was Hamburg. His squadron detailed five Lancasters this night, but only three took off, and only Lighton found the target and completed the operation – due to severe icing and cloud conditions over the North Sea. The visibility over the target was very good, however and Lighton saw the three 'steady Red markers' burning at the final turning point at 20.42, and then the three 'Greens' some 16 miles from the target, following these to his aiming point. He saw the three Sky Markers – red with green stars – dropped by one of the P.F.F. lead aircraft and at 21.07, from 20,000 ft, he dropped his four green Target Indicators, and the large 4,000 lb HC bomb. Lighton brought his flares back, as the visibility was so good. He noted: "Flak was intense and accurate" but landed safely at 23.40 at Warboys.

The third night running, February 4th, it was Turin over the Alps for Lighton. There was good visibility again and after take-off at 18.10 Lighton had a good outbound trip, seeing the target lit up by previous flares when he reached the aiming point. The whole city was well ablaze, flak was heavy and moderately intensive and some 40 to 50 searchlights were trying to 'cone' the bombers. Lighton released 4 x Target Indicators, 1 Red Flare, 1 x 4 Steady Red flares, 3 x 500lb and 1 x 4,000 lb HC bombs this time, close to the aiming point. When he landed back at Warboys at 01.20 after the 7hrs 10min sortie, he had just completed three operations in three days, totalling 16 hrs 05 mins flying altogether.

Three days later, more suitably rested, Lighton was off on February 7th to Lorient. This was part of a new directive from the War Office, because the U-boat offensive in the Atlantic was becoming so serious.

It had been decided to apply 'area-bombing' to four French towns where U-boats were harboured - by now under immensely thick concrete U-boat pens. In an attempt to destroy the infrastructure around each U-boat pen - including crew hotels, maintenance facilities and power supplies, etc. etc. - the French ports of Lorient, St Nazaire, Brest and La Pallice were to be devastated.

Bomber Command began with Lorient and St Nazaire but soon realised the Germans put everything vital under the bomb-proof concrete pens, or moved it (and the crews) into villages along the coast.

Lighton however, was off on February 7th in a different Lancaster I, W4849, and he marked the target area with 2 x Special Red Target Indicator flares, and 12 x 4 ordinary flares. The trip this time lasted from 1815 to 22.20 and again there were no losses from 156 Squadron.

The next few operations for Lighton were: back to Lorient, followed by two trips to Wilhelmshaven (where the U-boats were made), and then a trip to St. Nazaire. The offensive was then halted at the end of February, little having been achieved in the way of damaging U-boats.

For Lorient on February 13th Lighton took a new Lancaster III (ED 485) and dropped his load of 4 x Green T.I.s, 6 x flares and 1 x 4,000 lb 'G.E.L. bomb' from 11,000 ft over the town (the G.E.L. bomb is believed to have been a High Capacity (HC) weapon made to burst in the air above the target for maximum blast effect. These were tried out for a time, but discontinued after some weeks.

On February 16th Lighton was back over Lorient, in a Lancaster I (W4882) dropping 4 x Red T.I.s this time, with flares and a 4,000 lb G.E.L. weapon. It appeared to be a much more successful raid.

Before setting off at dusk on this raid, however, ^{and Peter} Lighton ('Avro') had agreed on another little escapade to liven things up a bit (which also helped to lift the morale of the rest of the Squadron).

They arranged to take off in first ^{and third} and second place that night, with Alastair first. ^{and Peter} After take-off, he circled to allow Lighton to catch up, then with 'Avro' in line astern, they dropped down to 250 ft or so and swept across the aerodrome to 'beat up' the ^{and Peter}

Lighton, Alastair Lang and Peter Isaacson

other Lancasters taking off. Their aircraft like the rest, were fully loaded with bombs, markers, and fuel, so this manoeuvre was not a little dangerous, and extremely skilful.

They then set course in front of the others and duly performed their tasks over the target. What they had not seen, however, was their C.O. 'Tommy', standing at the side of the runway shaking his fist at them as they roared over the control tower, leaving Warboys. When they landed back, 'Tommy' was duly waiting for them and summoned them each in to see him separately. He said they had shown a reckless disregard for other crews, and ended sternly by saying: "If you ever do anything like that again, I'll have you court martialled immediately". Then he paused for a moment, leaned closer to them, winked and whispered: "Bloody good flying, 'Avro'" (or Alastair!) *or Peter*

February 19th and 24th saw Lighton marking over the U-boat yards at Wilhelmshaven in Germany. He was flying W4882 on both occasions and on the 19th he dropped his Red T.I.s from as low as 10,000 ft, with the usual 4,000 HC bomb and 6 x 500 lb General Purpose weapons. He reported seeing an aircraft explode in mid-air over the target, and later he saw an aircraft shot down, and two parachutes emerging from it. Some 338 Bomber Command aircraft took part in this raid, but the post mortem afterwards discovered that the Pathfinders had mostly marked the wrong spot, to the north of the city rather than in the centre. It was then discovered that out of date maps had been issued to them which did not show recent urban developments. After this operation, all maps were re-checked and updated! A dozen aircraft had failed to return this night of February 19th/20th including the Lancaster MkIII that Lighton had flown on February 13th, ED485.

A much smaller force of 115 aircraft was sent back to Wilhelmshaven on February 24th/25th, and Lighton dropped some Skymarkers from 17,000 ft on this raid, followed up by the usual 4 x Target Indicators (Red) and the 4,000 HC bomb. There were no losses this night.

It was back to the U-boat pens at St Nazaire on February 28th 1943. Lighton was flying a newer Lancaster I (W4891) which, like the previous Lancaster Is that Lighton had flown, had been made by Metropolitan-Vickers Ltd of Trafford Park, Manchester, under licence to A.V. Roe & Co Ltd. Taking off at 18.48, he was over the target at 21.11 releasing 4 Target Indicators (Green this time) from 10,000 ft, with the 4,000 lb HC bomb, and 4 x 96 x 4 packets of incendiaries. He was back at 23.10. This raid caused widespread destruction of the port and town, 60 per cent of it being flattened. A total of 437 aircraft were involved, but only five were lost - none from Lighton's 156 Squadron.

Round about this time, 'Avro' (as Lighton was called) and Alastair and the Squadron Medical Officer, Dr. Peter Bryce-Curtis, went down to a party one night at Stevenage, and as usual things went very well. So much so that they wanted to stay on another night - but remembering their London experience they decided it would be better if the older Peter Bryce-Curtis phoned up their C.O. 'Tommy' Rivett-Carnac. The answer was an emphatic "No", and 'Tommy' said he would have believed such a request coming from 'Avro' or Alastair, but not from the older, wiser and more experienced Squadron M.O.!

(Peter Bryce-Curtis later married Alastair's sister Barbara, and they had a long and happy life together.)

Not long after this, the C.O. of the Pathfinder Group, Air Commodore 'Don' Bennett, came round to inspect 156 Squadron again. After the inspection and talks were over, Lighton and Alastair began to get ready for that evening's operation with the other pilots. In order to let off some of their pent-up emotions after the C.O.'s inspection, the two inseparables planned a little diversion. So, as the rest of the Squadron readied for take-off from their various dispersal sites, Alastair and Lighton drove ^{in a small car} around the long line of perimeter track past each Lancaster in Alastair's open top Hillman. Steering the car with his foot, Alastair stood up in it beside Lighton with their head and shoulders through the sunshine roof, and they both shouted 'Sieg Heil' and gave the Nazi salute as they solemnly passed all the bomber crews. Some of them saluted back and all of them cheered madly!

Peter Isaacson had an altogether different experience on the night of March 1st 1943. Both Alastair and Peter were tasked to mark over Berlin (Lighton was not flying this night). Alastair was flying a minute behind Peter as they went in to mark the aiming point, and Peter was holding 'Q for Queenie IV' straight and level at 17,000 ft as his exceptional bomb-aimer Flt. Lt. Alan Ritchie, D.F.M. dropped their markers and 'cookie' over the aiming point. They waited for the photo flash to go off enabling them to obtain a camera shot of the bombs exploding on the ground before diving and turning rapidly away for home.

Before the flash went off, however, a heavy ack-ack shell burst near their tail, and almost simultaneously a load of incendiaries dropped from an aircraft above hit the mid-upper turret, blowing it off, and injuring the gunner, Joe Grose in the face. The incendiaries also jammed the elevator cables that ran along the inside walls of the fuselage, set the aircraft on fire, and 'Q for Queenie' lurched into a steep uncontrollable dive, cascading all sorts of loose equipment into the nose area.

The Lancaster dived at a frightening speed (afterwards reckoned to be over 400 mph) and it took - after what seemed an age - the combined efforts of Peter with his feet on the instrument panel, his bomb aimer, flight engineer and navigator, to try to pull the control-column back against the enormous 'G' force, before the aircraft slowly responded and eventually levelled out at 3,000 ft.

The Lancaster had meantime taken more hits from ack-ack shells, and could only wallow along below 4,000 ft at around 140 knots. They flew westwards, by blind reckoning, having lost all their bearings, and managed by a miracle to survive over the Ruhr by flying at 900 ft through dense cones of search lights, where Peter was completely blinded by the lights, and relied on his bomb-aimer to tell him which way to steer and when to climb over church spires and dive over hills to hug the ground, etc. Receiving many more ack-ack hits on the way, they suddenly staggered out into pitch darkness and quiet over Belgium!

The lights of Brussels appeared (it had been declared an 'open' city during the war) and Peter managed to guide the Lancaster back across the Channel, over Dunkirk and Dungeness, with the help of his first class navigator, Bob Nielsen.

For this special occasion all the Lancasters up were up wingtip to wingtip along one of the runway.

the long line

Meanwhile, they had been given up for lost back at base, and their C.O., Tommy Rivett-Carnac, had been the last to land at 01.50 of the nine Lancasters despatched that night. He had flown with another pilot, Taylor, that evening, but almost as soon as they were down a radio message came in from Peter's aircraft 'Q for Queenie' saying: "Aircraft badly damaged, mid-upper gunner wounded, E.T.A. 0225".

There was a yell of delight from the Warboys station signal room, and the news was passed quickly around. Lighton and Alastair were already in the Mess with Kearns, drinking hot tea and hoping for some news, when the M.O. Peter Bryce-Curtis rang up and gave them the latest information. The three of them quickly ran out and jumped into Alastair's Hillman and drove back to the 'Ops' room. Rivett-Carnac was still there, drinking the usual coffee and rum, and welcomed the trio inside, being joined by other crews also waiting around after interrogation, to hope against hope 'Q for Queenie' would make it back.

Then they heard the drone of a Lancaster approaching, flying around the circuit, and lining up to land with its navigation lights on. Peter let 'Q for Queenie' roll to the end of the runway where he braked to a halt, engines idling, where the M.O. Bryce-Curtis, ambulance and Rivett-Carnac were waiting. Two medical orderlies took a portable stretcher and climbed up the ladder through the hatch under the nose and into the cockpit, followed by the M.O. and Tommy, who warmly greeted the crew. They collected Joe Grose and took him down the fuselage and out of the rear door, after which Peter taxied the Lancaster to a dispersal bay telling Tommy what had happened on the way.

When they disembarked, the C.O. walked around the Lancaster and drew in his breath in amazement. The mid-upper turret had been almost totally demolished, there were two large holes in the fuselage near the rear door, three other holes nearer the tail each about 3ft x 2ft, a hundred small shrapnel holes in the fuselage side, and what seemed to be two large ones and lots of small ones along the top of the Lancaster's fuselage. There were metal strips dangling below the wing trailing edges, and later, they were told two engine coolings had been blown off, and the wing and starboard outer engine had been hit, and ailerons damaged.

As Tommy said: "When you do a job Isaacson, you do a really good one! It must have been quite a job getting home." Then the whole crew was driven to the 'Ops' room with the C.O., and desperately hungry and cold now were given the usual hot coffee and if they wanted it – a good measure of rum in it. A pretty W.A.A.F. officer interrogated them – it was probably Pat Dey – and the C.O. then told them all to come with him to the Officers Mess, where he had the bar specially opened up for them all at 03.50!

Lighton, Alastair, the adjutant and others all joined Peter's crew in a welcome extra drinking party, and consumption of a good number of Spam sandwiches.

For their efforts on this raid, Peter Isaacson received an immediate award of the D.F.C. and was promoted to Acting Flight Lieutenant, and Bill Copley (radio operator) and Bob Nielsen (navigator) were both awarded the D.F.M. It had been quite a trip.

Alastair, who had followed Peter across the target, told him after his safe return that he had seen Peter's aircraft dive steeply out of control, and wouldn't have given him a chance in a million of getting out of it alive!

Peter's Lancaster, R5912 was repaired, but never flew on operations again, being consigned to a Navigational Instruction Unit (1668 C.U.), then as a ground instructional airframe.

The emphasis of Bomber Command's efforts now switched back from the U-bout menace to German industrial targets, and the 'Battle of the Ruhr' began as March opened in 1943. March 3rd/4th saw Lighton flying a Lancaster I (W4882) to Hamburg. Airborne at 18.45, he was over the aiming point at 21.25 flying at 19,000 ft. The visibility was so good he could see the Lakes clearly, and saw several large fires burning, one large one North of the river. This time he dropped 2 White Target Indicators, one Yellow T.I., the obligatory 4,000 H.C. bomb and 48 x 30 Incendiary packs. He landed safely at 23.45.

This was the last operation Lighton flew as a Pilot Officer. It was his 19th Pathfinder operation, and he was now made a Flying Officer in time for his next raid, on March 8th to Nuremberg. The levels of death and destruction from now on would escalate dramatically with this concentration on German cities.

Nuremberg was a long flight and Lighton took off in another new Lancaster I (ED622) at 20.05, but as he did so, one of his engines lost power and he had difficulty controlling it on the climb out. His friend, Alistair said: "he disappeared below the trees for a time and we all thought he had crashed". But Lighton re-emerged slowly above the horizon. However with an enormous amount of courage with such a long flight in front of him, he continued with his flight, as he knew how important it was to mark the target correctly for their main stream of bombers lining up behind. He flew lower than his assigned height, in order to speed up (with less power available) to keep on time at the aiming point. He was over the aiming point at 23.35, flying at 13,000 ft. Although there was no cloud, a layer of haze made it difficult to identify the target area, and the H2S sets carried by the P.F.F. aircraft were largely ineffective at picking out specific features below. The marking – and the subsequent bombing – was spread out widely in a band across the city and beyond, and Lighton for his part decided to bring back his two Green TIs, only dropping two Yellow TIs, the 4,000lb block buster and 8 x 8 x 30 incendiaries. Still nursing his sick engine, he landed back after some of the others at 03.15, and out of 335 aircraft on this raid, eight were lost, including one from his own squadron.

Immediately after this operation, Lighton was recommended for the award of an immediate Distinguished Flying Cross (D.F.C.), and the official citation issued a few weeks later stated:

"Fl/Lt Lighton Verdon-Roe:

This officer has completed 23 operational missions. One night in March 1943, he captained an aircraft detailed to attack Nuremberg.

During the take-off one of the starboard engines lost power, but Flight-Lieut. Verdon-Roe succeeded in gaining height and although the engine was barely functioning, he continued to the target, which he bombed and photographed.

This officer, who has participated in attacks on various targets in Germany and Italy, has invariably displayed great courage and determination to achieve success."

In one of their off-duty moments, the 'terrible threesome' and their friends went to London for a couple of days, and went to a delightful French restaurant in Soho for the evening. Lighton had a beautiful brunette Marjorie with him, whom he introduced to the others as "my lovely companion of unspecified responsibilities". Alastair Lang had his wife Barbara with him, and Peter Isaacson had brought along his two friends the Beilin sisters to partner himself and Bob Nielsen, his navigator (who recounts this story).

Nielsen remembered the "irrepressible Lighton had discussed the dinner menu and wines with the French-speaking staff in their own language". Alastair meanwhile ventured to the Australians that Lighton knew about as much French as the farmers in Yorkshire – but it sounded mighty impressive!

However, when the wines and dinner did arrive, everything was superb – a special 1938 claret appeared and the beef was cooked to perfection. Peter elevated Lighton even higher in his esteem!

Lighton must have been on a Course with most of the Squadron during the middle of March, because his next operation was on March 27th. Between March 8th and 27th, by the time Lighton was back on operations, 156 Squadron had lost two more Lancasters, with the Squadron's Navigation Leader on board one of them.

During this time, Peter Isaacson had been flying regularly and on three consecutive nights in a row – March 19th to 21st – he had to operate first to Berlin with 'Tommy' Rivett-Carnac on board, then next night to St. Nazaire, and finally back to Berlin again. The Squadron was being worked very hard at this time.

For his March 27th/28th operation to Berlin, Lighton was now promoted to Flight Lieutenant. In his faithful Lancaster I, W4882 (which incidentally finished the entire War unscathed) he took off from Warboys at 20.15 and was over the target at 23.06, flying at 19,300ft. But before reaching Berlin, they had been passing the island of Sylt when the Lancaster was suddenly shaken by being hit by three flak bursts. One engine faltered, and when they pressed on to Berlin, it stopped over the aiming point. Nevertheless, Lighton dropped 1 x Yellow T.I. and 6 x Green T.I.s with the 4,000 lb bomb and 2 x 250 'L.D.' weapons. He landed back on three engines at 03.15 – a trip of seven hours exactly. Another Lancaster from 156 Squadron failed to return this night, and nine aircraft in all out of the 396 taking part.

Two days later, it was Berlin again on March 29th/30th. Lighton was carrying his squadron C.O., Wing Commander C.T. ('Tommy') S. Rivett-Carnac on this trip.

The Wing Commander of a Pathfinder Squadron was supposed to only fly on 'Ops' once a month – to keep his hand in, but not to unduly tempt the 'Grim Reaper'. 'Tommy' however, who had the admiration of all his crews, made many more flights,

picking different pilots each time. On this night he was with 'Avro', and would have done a fair share of the flying himself.

'Tommy' had been on Peter Isaacson's Lancaster on a Berlin raid earlier that month. The presence of the Squadron C.O. inevitably raised morale a little but at the same time caused a little apprehension, especially when - as on this trip with Peter Isaacson - after dropping their bomb load on Berlin 'Tommy' had insisted on making two more circuits over the city while watching the results of the rest of the Squadron's aircraft.

In fact, it was on this particular flight that Peter Isaacson and his crew began to fly three operations on three consecutive nights.

After the third one on March 29th/30th, Peter had clocked up his 44th mission, and then they all had three days off to recover.

On March 29th, with his C.O. now on board his aircraft, Lighton took-off at 21.25 in W4850, and was over Berlin at 0104. He dropped 2 x Yellow T.L.s, 1 x 4 Green/Red Star flares, 3 x 4 White flares, 4 x Red T.L.s, and finally his 4,000 lb bomb from 18,300 ft.

The varied nature of these stores possibly indicates the C.O. was flying with Lighton to see how effective some of these new kinds of markers were in use. Lighton recorded his bombs fell slightly North of the concentration of Red T.L.s. They saw their markers explode (this was not often the case, usually due to cloud and smoke) and they saw several big fires starting. There was a large number of searchlights, but the flak appeared light and ineffective. They were back safely at 05.00.

Some 329 aircraft had been on this raid to Berlin, and like Lighton's previous visit two days earlier, the marking had fallen short of Berlin and several miles south of the city (south-east on March 29th, south west on March 27th). Lighton's squadron was intact, but 21 other aircraft were lost on the 29th/30th.

On April 21st, Peter Isaacson and his Australian crew were finally given the news they had been waiting for for some time now. They knew they had been selected by the R.A.A.F. Command in London some months previously to fly a brand new Lancaster all the way to Australia, and having flown 44 operations to date, Peter and his crew (except only his English rear-gunner, Robin Hazelwood) were now rested for the whole of April to prepare for a record-breaking long distance flight in a heavy bomber. His popular rear gunner was replaced by another Australian to fly with them back to Sydney, and poor Hazelwood was crewed up with Sqd. Ldr. The Hon. B. Grimston D.F.C., the son of the 4th Earl of Verulam. They were all lost over Kiel a few days later, on the night of April 4th/5th.

Something else that caught the fancy of 'Avro' and Alastair was the fact that one of the Intelligence Officers who used to de-brief all the crews after raids, was a very impressive W.A.A.F. called Pat Dey, who attracted much more interest at the end of an 'operation' than did her male counterparts. So much so that Alastair one night, returning over Holland and the North Sea after dropping his weapons, instead of flying a 'dog's leg' course to avoid German fighter bases and flak concentrations, cut across the angle of the corners, to overtake 'Avro' and get back first to be interrogated

and when

Alastair Lighton and later others began to race back from routine night flying exercises (between operations), screech around the perimeter track and brake their Lancasters (to a) abruptly to a halt to try to be first to be de-briefed by Pat. Then Alastair notched up the stakes

by this superlative female. He was successful, and 'Avro' was duly impressed, and wondered whether to try it himself in future! (Lighton himself was not short of female attention!).

Pat Day had been born in Darjeeling,
← India in 1919. Her father was a civil
engineer in the Indian Civil Service, and
at the age of 5 she was sent to boarding
school in England, when she was
9 her parents moved to South Africa ^{and} ~~at~~ took
Pat and her two brothers Doug and Peter ~~with~~ ^{and} them.
But only some two years later they returned to
England and Pat went to school at Caversham.
At the age of 16 she was asked whether she preferred
a finishing school in France or Germany, and Pat
chose the latter, going to Hohenfried^{School} in Bavaria,
near Berchtesgaden. On one occasion she
was lined up with her schoolmates on the road
outside while Hitler and Hess drove by to their
mountain retreat nearby. Hitler noticed she
was the only one not to give the Nazi salute, and
stopped to talk to her. He asked her where she was
from, and Pat said "England".

While she was there, Pat met Hitler a number of times ~~with her parents~~ and most of his top officials.

When the war started, Pat was back in England and working for an Australian boss. When Pat said she ought to do something to help the war effort, her boss said: "Don't – you'll never be able to stand the blood and guts!"

When Pat went out for her lunch hour that day, she went straight to a Recruiting Office and joined the W.A.A.F.s. With her knowledge of languages, she soon became an Intelligence Officer and was posted to 156 Squadron at Warboys, after seeing service at Bomber Command H.Q. at High Wycombe, (where she studied photographs of squadrons' bombing results to see how accurate their pilots were in trying to hit their targets). At Warboys she would snatch some sleep in the early part of the night, and when the first aircraft landed back from that night's operation, she would get a call and hurry down to the Operations Room.

As we know, some of the pilots would race back to try to be interrogated by Pat – rather than her two more senior male counterparts. Pat had a special routine to calm the often tired and nervous crews. She handed out cigarettes, had cups of coffee organized for them, and used to offer a bottle of rum for them to add a splash to the coffee. Most of them, she said, had never tasted alcohol before.

She took down details of their particular sortie, to establish how accurately they had dropped their markers etc, any unusual features about the route in and out, quantity of flak, night fighter engagements, contacts, any other aircraft seen going down, etc.

The photographs taken by the crews over the target, showing their markers, etc, exploding were rushed straight to Bomber Command H.Q. and thus the accuracy of each crew checked. Pat would not see these at the time of de-briefing, but later the

results would come back from H.Q. to give a league table of the Squadron's top crews.

In fact, in 156 Squadron they conducted a sweepstake among the crews for each raid, and the crew with the most accurate bomb-aimer on each operation would win the 'jackpot' when the photographs came back from H.Q.

(On one occasion Alastair Lang and his crew came back early from leave in London - having run out of money - and said their only chance now was to win the bombing 'jack-pot' on the next raid!)

Pat would wait on, long after de-briefing the early crews back, in the hope that those overdue would eventually turn up. Occasionally some of them would - or a signal would come through to say they had landed at another base, perhaps seriously shot up. But almost every night one or more crews would never return. Pat and her colleagues probably had already guessed who they were, from the reports of those already interrogated, who had seen Lancasters 'going down in flames'.

The trauma and pathos of those times in 1943, when losses were high and morale suffering in 156 Squadron, persuaded Pat to keep a fascinating diary for a time, personalising those young men she knew, worked with, de-briefed and missed when they failed to return.

Pat began this 'journal' of hers when she heard the devastating news that her fiancée, a young Canadian Flying Officer in 83 (Pathfinder) Squadron based at Wyton had failed to return one night from his last operation. Her loss was all the more traumatic, as Orville had finished his first tour of operations, and before going on leave was asked 'to do just one more'. Pat heard this phrase frequently as the war went on - in most cases resulting in the death of conscientious air crew.

navigator
in 109
Squadron

Later that year, Pat was sent, with a Flight from 156 Squadron, to form the nucleus of a new Pathfinder squadron, No 582 at Little Staughton. Happily, while she was here, Pat met a Mosquito Pathfinder pilot called Flt. Lt. (later ^{Group Capt.} ~~Major~~ 'Bill' Falkinder, D.S.O., D.F.C. and Bar. He came from Tasmania, and ^{was} ~~after the war~~ the two of them went to live in Hobart in 1946. Bill's local and community activities there later earned him the C.B.E. also.

Pat was also ^{later} elected a Liberal Member of the Federal Parliament, serving for 20 years, and was introduced to the C.O. of the Pathfinder group, Air Commodore Don Bennett, and his wife Ley, and she frequently acted as baby-sitter for their children over at Wyton, the Pathfinders H.Q. Pat and her husband, Bill Falkinder, kept in touch long after the war with the Bennetts, and saw them regularly in Australia. ^{Pat was also mentioned in Despatches for her services to the Pathfinder squadrons, while she was in April, Lighton was on another Course, and then had a few days leave with his parents at 'The Cockpit' at the end of the month. When he returned to Warboys at the beginning of May, it was to find the squadron had lost eight Lancasters in this period, including one flown by a Flight Commander, Squadron Leader the Hon. B. Grimston, D.F.C., the son of the 4th Earl of Verulam.}

Lighton meantime celebrated his birthday on May 1st in grand fashion at the Pelican pub in Warboys village, in the presence of Alastair Lang, Peter Isaacson, Terry

Pat married at Mildford-on-S in November 1944, and after the war

(particularly helpful ex RAF service men with the Penalties and Housing, etc)

was in 582 Squadron at Little Staughton.

Kearns and the rest of the pilots. Lighton kept a beautiful Harley-Davidson motor bike at the base, and about three times a week he would ride it to the local pub in Warboys, 'The Pelican', sometimes carrying a passenger with him. Although normally there would have been no shortage of willing pillion passengers, it was the trip back afterwards that had seen a number of hazardous excursions into the ditch, which had tended to discourage future applications!

On this occasion Lighton achieved what became known as 'Verdon-Roe's finest hour', which passed into the legends of 156 Squadron. He rode to the 'The Pelican' as usual, but after duly celebrating his birthday he made an even more erratic return to the base, and decided once inside, he would show the Officer's Mess a thing or two about his trick-riding (much in the footsteps of his father's old cycling antics).

Heading for the half-open front door of the Mess, he bounced it open on its hinges, as he blasted through, and then rode round and round the open lounge area, navigating between settees and scattering the other occupants wildly. He frequently hit the walls leaving black marks and some deep gashes in the plaster, and might well have continued circling, until his fuel tank ran dry – except that he then decided to try a broadside with his bike. This resulted in a spectacular slide into the corner by the bar, and Lighton ending on the floor.

He was pulled out from under his bike by his flying colleagues, and the bike wheeled outside. When Lighton was hesitantly asked "are you hurt?", he replied with a classic "line-shoot" (that later cost him dearly):

"Of course I'm not hurt, old boy! The Verdon-Roes have always lived dangerously!"

Lighton resumed operations on May 4th, in the biggest raid yet (excluding the 1,000 bomber raids) mounted by Bomber Command. This time 596 aircraft were scheduled to hit Dortmund as part of the Ruhr offensive.

Just before being scheduled to fly on this raid on Dortmund, both Alastair and Lighton learned they had been promoted to Acting Squadron Leader, with effect from April 12th 1943.

On the previous day, Alastair had been talking to 'Avro' and they had discussed the W.A.A.F. Intelligence Officer scenario. Lighton asked Alastair if he was going to cut the corners again on the way home from this operation to try to be first back (as he had done on the previous operation). Doing it in a playful way on night training exercises at home was one thing, but on return from an operation could hazard the aircraft if it flew over heavily defended areas, or night fighter bases.

Alastair told Lighton he wouldn't do it that night – but admitted afterwards that he secretly resolved that he would do so!

The night before the raid, Alastair and his wife, Lighton and some of the other pilots had all been out to one of the preferred local pubs, and Alastair's wife Barbara had overheard her husband and 'Avro' betting 10s.0d. on which of them would be first to fail to return from a raid. She was extremely upset, and angrily denounced Lighton for being so stupid. Alastair leapt to his friend's defence, however, and had a row with his wife, on the way back to their cottage that night.

Next day, both Alastair and Lighton were put down for the Dortmund operation and after being briefed – and contrary to all regulations – Alastair, by now considerably mollified by the effect of the row on his wife, paid a quick visit back to his cottage to make up for his behaviour – to his later great relief. And so the time came for their take-off that evening of May 4th.

Lighton had a new Lancaster III 'L. for Love' (ED857), and took off at 22.28. He was over the target at 01.12 at 18,000 ft and dropped his Red Target Indicators slightly beyond the aiming point, as ordered to. (Recently a 'creep-back' tendency in marking and bombing had developed on big raids, when the later arrivals tended to drop their stores progressively earlier on the run-in). Lighton recorded a moderate amount of heavy flak in the area, mostly accurate, and saw "two aircraft falling in flames over the target".

One of these Lancasters was from his own squadron and he was not to know for a few hours yet that the pilot was Alastair.

Alastair had been releasing his T.I.s and other stores over the aiming point, when the T.I.s hung up and refused to drop out of the bomb bay. These Target Indicators had a thin casing, and a timed fuze which started to act when Alastair's bomb aimer pressed the release button. Now, the T.I.s were activated, and when the timer ran out a few seconds later, they exploded under the Lancaster, breaking it in half behind the cockpit.

The two halves of Lancaster ED877 'N for Nan' plummeted to earth, trailing flames in the dark, and Alastair and his flight engineer, Sgt. J.L. Clark, D.F.M., were hurled out of the back of their nose section only a few hundred feet above the ground. Their parachutes both opened (how, Alastair has no idea, as he can't remember pulling a release handle), just literally a hundred feet or so up, because they both hit the ground in seconds, hard enough to break some bones. The rear half of the Lancaster fell and burned, and the rest of Alastair's crew were killed – Flt. Lt. E. McL. Gray, D.F.C., R.N.Z.A.F., Flt. Sgt. R. J. Lee, R.C.A.F., Flt. Sgt. D.G. Ridings R.N.Z.A.F., Sgt. N. H. Wood and Flt. Sgt. F.M. Venn.

Alastair and his flight engineer were found near the wreck of their Lancaster, and put into a local hospital for treatment, then sent to a Stalag Luft P.O.W. camp. It was Alastair's 50th operation in total, and with a few more under his belt, he would have been awarded a D.S.O. to add to his D.F.C. But, as he states today, it was all a matter of luck whether you survived or not. And he remembers that his first thought as he hit the ground at the end of his parachute was "Thank goodness I made it up with my wife before I took off".

Lighton of course knew nothing of this as he had his own problems on the return that night.

One other Lancaster from his Squadron also failed to return, as on arriving back in the UK, Lighton and his colleagues found very poor visibility over their bases, and some crashed attempting to land (and Lighton's fellow Australian pilot from 156 Squadron, Sqd. Ldr. 'Digger' Duigan, D.F.C., R.A.A.F. abandoned his aircraft over Cambridgeshire and bailed out with his crew). Lighton managed to find an alternative base to land at, and touched down at 04.20 at Sleaf, in Shropshire.

The P.F.F. marking on this raid had been accurate, but some had fallen short (hence Lighton being ordered to aim beyond the first T.L.s that he saw). The results from here on, as regards these cities in the Ruhr, were going to be very accurate with the help of the *Oboe* equipped Mosquitos leading the rest of the Pathfinders. But 31 aircraft failed to return from this raid on Dortmund – a loss rate of 5.2 per cent of the total.

When 'Avro' returned to Warboys and learned that his great friend had gone 'missing', he was obviously badly affected, and must have done his best to keep up the hope and spirits of Alastair's wife at their cottage. He was never to know whether Alastair was still alive, had been made a P.O.W. or had evaded capture, because his own luck was now about to run out.

One of those at Warboys who always did his best to console and look after the wives and fiancées of the pilots who failed to return from operations was the station medical officer, Peter Bryce-Curtis. He went to see Alastair's wife Barbara and daughter Virginia, the morning after Alastair went 'missing' early on May 5th over Dortmund, and would have been at her cottage some time before Lighton had returned to Warboys after being initially directed to Sleep on his return in the early hours.

Bryce-Curtis became a local legend for his help to all the members of 156 Squadron, and for even meeting those returning from leave at the nearest station, and informing them of friends who had been lost while they were away, to save them the shock of being told when they were back on the base.

He later married Alastair Lang's sister, Barbara and the two families remained close for the rest of their lives.

Lighton had a dog at this time, like some other pilots in the Squadron, and he was very attached to his Red Setter.

For the next week or so, there was bad weather over Europe, with gales and heavy rain. Lighton's squadron enjoyed a reprieve until May 12th, 1943 when he was scheduled for the next operation.

Just two days prior to this, however, on May 10th, Peter Isaacson and his navigator, Bob Nielsen had returned briefly to Warboys after leaving their brand new Lancaster (that they had just collected from Avro's at Woodford) at the Maintenance Unit at Colerne, for final fitting-out for the flight to Australia.

Peter had come to say goodbye to everyone in 156 Squadron, but in particular to see how Alastair Lang's young wife, Barbara and her young daughter were coping with his being 'missing' since the night of May 4th/5th, and to bid farewell to 'Avro' too. The two of them were picked up from the George Hotel in Huntingdon, and driven to see Barbara at her cottage in Warboys village. They found her – as Bob Nielsen recorded in his book 'With the Stars Above' – calm and composed, but with dark shadows under her eyes from sleepless nights since Alastair went missing.

After staying with her for two hours Peter and Bob took her back to lunch in the Station Mess, with Lighton, Terry Kearns, Geoff Womersley and Laughton, and the

C.O. Rivett-Carnac being host. A friend looked after Barbara's daughter at the cottage the while.

Afterwards, Peter and Bob left to go back to London, and asked Barbara to let them know when she received news of Alastair. She had remained remarkably stoic over lunch, putting on a very brave face. Just a few tears appeared in her eyes as they said goodbye.

Lighton had just been promoted to Squadron Leader in time for his next operation, and as such was now one of the three Flight Commanders in his Lancaster squadron (each squadron had 'A', 'B' and 'C' Flights, with a Squadron Leader in charge, and the overall C.O. of the unit was always a Wing Commander. On each base there were usually two or three squadrons and a Group Captain would be in command of them all).

Lighton had been a Pilot Officer when he began life in 156 Squadron. He had been a special Pathfinder pilot from the very inception of the Force (and entitled to wear the special Pathfinder 'Wings' emblem) and was promoted to Flying Officer on March 8th after some 19 operations. The attrition rate of his squadron's most experienced pilots then determined that only one operation later he was made up to Flight Lieutenant (on March 27th), and three operations after that, on May 12th, he was now a Squadron Leader, one of the youngest in Bomber Command. The next stage would be to be posted to another Pathfinder squadron as its C.O. and being made a Wing Commander.

So on May 12th 1943, Sqd. Ldr. Lighton Verdon-Roe was tasked to Duisburg on the Rhine, as a Flight Commander. A total of 572 aircraft were dispatched on this raid, and Lighton used his new Lancaster III ('L for Love') (ED857) with H2S equipment. His 156 Squadron launched 18 aircraft – the full compliment – this night, and Lighton took off at 00.13. It was the fourth major raid on Duisburg, the first three having been only partially successful on this inland port (the largest in Germany) with many steel and other factories. This time the P.F.F. marking was 'near perfect', and Lighton was carrying 6 x Green Target Indicators, the statutory 4,000 lb blast bomb, 4 x 1,000 lb G.P. and 2 x 500 M.C. explosive bombs.

There was moderate to intense heavy flak over the target area, and another Lancaster crew of 156 Squadron flying in ED734 behind Lighton saw two aircraft falling in flames near the target. They marked successfully, and saw a huge explosion on the ground at 02.07 and a large cloud of smoke. They landed back at 03.46, but as the squadron waited, there was no sign of Lighton and his crew, nor of another of their 'veterans' – a Sgt. Wendon and his mainly Australian crew. Both Lancasters had disappeared, and only months later would the news come through that both had crashed in the target area, and all their bodies had been recovered and later buried in the Reichswald ^{Forest} War Cemetery (near Nijmegen).

Sqd. Ldr. Lighton Verdon-Roe, D.F.C. and his crew (Pilot Officer F. Giles, D.F.M., Flt. Sgt. T. J. Pritchard D.F.M., Sgt. J. C. Stewart, Flt. Sgt. E.W. Banks D.F.M., Pilot Officer H.F. Jolley and Sgt. K. C. Harrison) had suffered the same fate as his brother, Sqd. Ldr. Eric Verdon-Roe before him, having been deserted by Lady Luck, and overcome by the statistics of war.

A total of 34 aircraft were lost on this raid – or 5.9 per cent of the 572 sent out. Lighton's squadron had now lost 18 Lancasters since the start of 1943 and by the end of the year would have lost 58 altogether. Statistically neither he nor his fellow pilots had any chance of surviving more than a few months in this Pathfinder Squadron, as it was being, in effect, wiped out numerically some 3 to 4 times a year. It was a grim war, and would get worse before it got better. But the achievements of Bomber Command in wearing down German and Italian industry to the point where the Allies on the Italian front, the Russian front and in the subsequent D-Day landings began to meet less resistance from the Germans, and gain the advantage, cannot be over emphasised. Both Eric and Lighton had played their part in the eventual achievement of victory. But this was small consolation for their parents, Alliott and Mildred, who would never ever forget their sacrifice.

All that remained now was for Geoffrey, Lighton's brother to fly up to Warboys from Saunders-Roe in a company aircraft three days later, sign for all Lighton's possessions and drive his old Ford car back to his parents house in a state of disbelief. Lighton's dog, the Red Setter, remained with his ground crew at Warboys, but despite all their efforts, it slowly pined away and died.

Alastair, for his part, in Stalag Luft III, did not learn of Lighton's death until he returned to England at the end of the war. Alastair's wife, Barbara, was lucky to learn that he had survived to become a P.O.W. only a few weeks later. Alastair's flight engineer together with a few more newly imprisoned R.A.F. crew members, against all regulations agreed with the Germans to make short radio broadcasts to Britain, saying they were being well looked after and giving their names. Alastair's colleague also said "my skipper survived" and the Air Ministry picked up this information and conveyed it to his wife. Alastair eventually began to receive letters sent by his wife and the Station Medical Officer, via the International Red Cross.

He returned after the end of the War in May 1945 having escaped once but been recaptured in the closing days of the conflagration. He rejoined 156 Squadron, then moved to 12 and 617 Squadrons and stayed in the R.A.F. for some years, flying Avro Lincolns (like Royce), and piloting one on a Goodwill Tour of N. America with 617 Squadron after flying it across the Atlantic (in Peter Isaacson's footsteps). Later, he became C.O. of 615 Sqd. R. Aux. A.F., and No 66 (Fighter) Squadron, held a post supervising the growth of the Ceylon Air Force. He left the R.A.F. in August 1957 to join the Mobil oil company, in London, retiring as a Director late in life.

To this day, Alastair regarded Lighton as his greatest chum, and the times they had together in the Pathfinders as a really enjoyable and unsurpassable experience. Both of them, despite the odds, seemed to really enjoy life at Warboys. Just before Alastair died on October 28th 2007 (two days after his 89th birthday) he joked that when he met Lighton again, he'd claim his 90th birthday from him.

On April 1st a long awaited signal had come through from the Chief of Air Staff, finally confirming something that had been mentioned as a possibility as far back as Peter's 35th operation on February 16th. They had all been selected to fly a brand new Lancaster all the way out to Australia, as part of a route-proving exercise for sending a large number out at a later stage ('Tiger Force') to begin operations against Japan; to act as a 'pattern' aircraft for Australian engineering and ground crews to learn how

12 Squadron and became its C.O., and was transferred back to 617 Squadron (The Dam Busters) to form Canada and the USA from Billy's 23rd self, etc. as a Flight Commander. Then it was back to 12 Squadron as its C.O. again.

later of and also that when he met Lighton again, he'd claim his 90th birthday from him.

to deal with them, on the ground; and – as it turned out – to demonstrate throughout Australia and New Zealand and help to sell War Bonds.

Peter had to leave his English rear-gunner behind, and take on a Tasmanian to make up his normal all-Australian crew. Then they were all rested throughout April, and after test-flying their new Lancaster Mk III, ED930 (dubbed 'Q for Queenie VI') at Avro's factory at Woodford, Cheshire, Peter and his crew flew it firstly to Colerne, to have it fitted out for the journey, and then after a break of some 11 days, up to Prestwick on May 21st, and started their long trans-Atlantic flight next day, via Montreal, Toronto, San Francisco, Honolulu, Palmyra, Canton Atoll, Nadi (Fiji) and Amberley (Brisbane) to Sydney. Peter had to fly it by hand all the way, but after a number of incidents, they all arrived safely on June 3rd, 1943. They had completed their Pathfinder tour, but before leaving England they knew that another of their 'Terrible Threesome' had gone missing on May 12th/13th – Lighton this time.

Once in Australia, Peter Isaacson and his crew flew their Lancaster the length and breadth of both Australia and New Zealand, taking all kinds of VIPs up for short flights (including the Australian Prime Minister, the Governor General, and hundreds of other officials), as well as thousands of school children and everyone who bought ~~£250 worth of~~ War Bonds, or more (if they wished).

They received the kind of adulation reserved nowadays for 'Pop Stars' and Peter's low-level (sometimes 'ultra' low-level) beat-ups and barnstorming in his Lancaster hit the news headlines wherever he went. The culmination to his aerial displays came with a roof-top fly-by over Sydney, and then a decision to keep the Lancaster low over the water and fly right under the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge. Someone took a quick if indistinct photo of him doing this, and from this moment Peter and his crew became a living legend in Australia (though he was nearly Court-Martialled for it) ^{later as a wing commander}. Retiring from the R.A.A.F. Peter started his own newspaper publishing and printing businesses and built them up into a respectable empire in South-east Asia – becoming a legend in his own lifetime for yet another reason. ^{until the latter's recent death,}

Today retired, he ^{was} still in touch with Alastair Lang in England, and Pat Falkinder (née Dey) in Tasmania, though the rest of his WWII Lancaster crew have passed on. And of Lighton Verdon-Roe, they all have special memories. Time does not dim them. The legends of the 'Terrible Threesome' live on.