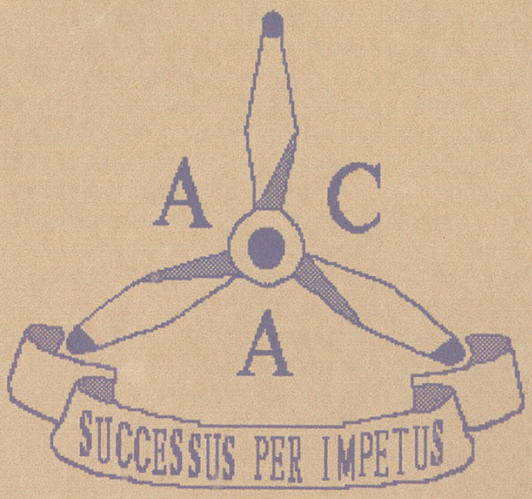


# ROYAL AIRFORCE CAREER & EXPERIENCES IN WORLD WAR TWO.

## F/O ARTHUR S. WOOLF.

## No. 630 Squadron, No. 5 Group.

## BOMBER COMMAND.

# R.A.F. CAREER AND EXPERIENCES IN WW2.

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As a youngster I was always thrilled by the thought of flying, so volunteered for aircrew and eventually in 1941 reported to Padgate R.A.F. Recruitment Centre at the age of 19. I was very much a home-loving boy from a close-knit family of just four, my older brother being already in the R.A.F. was serving in the Middle East.
I was first posted to Blackpool for 'square bashing', morse code training etc. Then on to Yatesbury in Wiltshire, No.2 Radio School, after which, due apparently to a 'log jam' of trainees (or a cock-up of some sort!) we were all individually posted out to various U.K. R.A.F. stations for "Radio experience". In my case this was to Martlesham Heath, an old pre-war airfield a few miles north of Ipswich on the east coast, where I became one of the station's Signal Section, though I still wore my white flash in my forage cap and was still untrained aircrew. It was here that I 'cadged' my very first and very unofficial flight, it was on one of my off duty days. Of all things it was in an old Walrus aircraft of the Air-Sea Rescue Squadron based there. I was crammed into the tiny space available and we chugged down the East coast just a few feet above the sea. I was thrilled to pieces!.

My second flight, this time semi-official, was in a Hampden on a practice bombing trip to Orford Ness bombing range just off the east coast, when I was supposed to try to fix a u/s radio. My, I was really progressing. From a Walrus to a Hampden! I must have been mad to go anyway near either of them, but where ignorance is bliss.....

After seven or eight months at Martlesham I was posted to the Aircrew Reception Centre at St.Johns Wood, London, much to my disgust. This seemed very much like a backward step in my R.A.F. career, just doing more 'square bashing' in the local streets, but it only lasted a couple of weeks or so, when I was then moved to I.T.W. at Bridgenorth. At the end of this course, at the Passing-Out Parade, it was announced that I had achieved the highest pass marks in all the various subjects ever attained since this course had commenced and I was presented with two hundred cigarettes to mark the occasion. Being a non-smoker at that time my colleagues benefited!

My next posting was to Yatesbury again, but this time on a more advanced signals course which included flying, officially this time, on air signals training, first in De Haviland Dominies, and later in Proctors. I continued obtaining high marks in virtually all subjects and just prior to the final tests and in the middle of lectures one morning I was told to

report to the Adjutant. Without being told why, I was questioned by him at length about my family background, my education and further studies, my interests etc., and then dismissed back to normal training with the rest of the squad. At the end of this course and before being posted to A.F.U. at Dumfries in Scotland, we were given our three stripes, although it was stressed that we were still under training and we were not to think that we could go throwing our weight around as "real sergeants"!

The A.F.U. course at Dumfries, where we flew in Ansons, lasted some two months or so and followed by O.T.U. at Upper Heyford, flying in Wellingtons, the faithful old "Wimpeys". It was here that we crewed up and it was done in the following manner. Each category of aircrew was told that they had so many days in which to find a crew, otherwise they would be "appointed" and teamed up with the "leftovers". We all felt that this would be a bit of a scourge and was to be avoided at all costs. In my own case, that evening I got talking to a Navigator type who said that he had just teamed up with the 'Yank' Pilot, Bill Adams who had crossed over from the U.S.A. into Canada to join the R.C.A.F. before the U.S. entered the war. Needless to say I agreed to be their Wireless Operator and in no time at all we had a full crew, comprising a 'Yank' Pilot and a 'Yank' Mid-Upper Gunner who had also crossed into Canada to join the R.C.A.F., a 'Canadian' Bomb Aimer (commissioned), a 'Canadian' Rear-Gunner, and three 'Brits'., one of whom was a 'Welshman' in fact.

Before we had even begun our 'Wimpey' circuits-and-bumps I was, for the second time in my R.A.F. training career, told to report to the Adjutant, where I was told, to my great astonishment, that I had been awarded my Commission. I was given a travel warrant, countless clothing coupons and a 48 hour pass to get home to Birmingham to buy all my Officer requirements,- a very extensive list was provided. For the next few weeks I almost felt like a Blackpool 'sprog' again, walking around in my brand new Pilot Officer uniform, especially in the Officer's Mess, but before too long I became Flying Officer, my uniform got to look more 'seasoned' and I became more used to the required "Officer and Gentleman" code.

After finishing our Upper Heyford O.T.U. course, during which as a crew we became quite 'bonded', possibly due as much to our off-duty time together (i.e. drinking sessions and such) as to our actual flying and training together, we were posted to Scampton.
Here, among much else, I attended courts martial, strictly under instruction I hasten to add!

Our next move, as a crew, was to Conversion Unit No.1654 at Wigsley, flying four-engined aircraft for the first time, the dreaded Stirling. We duly experienced here the usual type of problem that seemed to be associated with this aircraft when all flying was cancelled for a few days because of under-carriage problems. This was whilst an Air Ministry modification requirement was incorporated into all the Stations' Aircraft. It was at this time that I learned how to "play the dice" (the game of crap) from my American and Canadian co-trainees and enjoyed quite a slice of beginners luck.

Finally our last posting in training was to No.5 Lancaster Flying School at Syerston for a surprisingly rather brief conversion on to Lanc's., consisting of only sixteen hours flying training in this beautiful aircraft, over a period of two weeks. During this time I did however, on one of our training flights out over the Wash, manage to wangle a "go" in the rear turret for the one and only time and to fire off the guns into the sea.

Then we waited with somewhat bated breath and some excitement to hear which Squadron in No.5 Group we were to go to. This was to be No.630 Squadron at East Kirkby in the fenlands of Lincolnshire, about 14 miles from Boston; we were driven off in a van with all our gear, joking and laughing but all of us I think, wondering what the immediate future held.
We were allocated to 'B' Flight and the first week was spent in settling in and on day and night checks and training flights, during which time Bill Adams, our Pilot, went as "second dickie" on an operational flight. Then came our first "trip", which was to Saumer in central France to bomb an important railway junction, a flight of about 6½ hours. Boy! did that aircrew breakfast in the Mess (with an egg!) taste good after debriefing. It was a good feeling with our first "op" safely under our belt, and our initial fears now faced up to and if not overcome, then at least dealt with.

So we settled into an very busy and very exciting life. We were involved just a few hours before the D-day landings, bombing a heavy coastal battery in a bid to help to weaken the enemy defences against our invading forces.
At the briefing we were given dire warnings not to stray from the unusually circuitous route and we guessed that this was "it," the long awaited invasion of Europe, which was confirmed on awakening the following day.

In our first three weeks of action we did nine operational flights and the last of these, which was to Wesseling, just south of Cologne, to bomb a synthetic oil plant, was the "hairiest". From the time we crossed the Dutch coast to the target and back again we continuously encountered German



night fighters, searchlights and/or heavy ack-ack; we saw many aircraft going down in flames in the darkness.
Of the thirty or so aircraft despatched from East Kirkby (Nos.630 & 57 Squadrons) eleven were lost (77 men)!

Our ops. continued, to many varying types of targets. During one of these, on our return journey we were attacked from below by a Junkers 88 being used as a night fighter; although we immediately went into the conventional corkscrew avoiding action, his first gunburst caused some damage to the rear of the aircraft and the rear turret was put completely out of action. We were a sitting duck but either by complete luck or by brilliant shooting, Johnny Keisow, our U.S.A. Mid-Upper Gunner, scored "a Hit" although he was catching only occasional brief glimpses of the JU 88 due to the corkscrew action of our aircraft. The attack on us immediately ceased and the enemy aircraft started pulling away on a long sweep on to a reciprocal course away from us. We were able to resume normal flight and from the astrodome I was able to watch as the JU 88, now with flames coming from it, gradually lost height and after a while disappeared into the cloud-base below. We felt like giving three cheers over the intercom but it was strictly necessary to be particularly alert at this possible vulnerable time in case of the JU 88's "mates" were in the vicinity.

Our 13th op. was a daylight raid on vital bridges and German troop concentrations at Caen, where the Allied ground advance had been seriously held up. It was exciting being able for the first time to see "what was going on" in the lovely dawn sunrise, though again the ack-ack was extremely formidable and I saw a Lanc., flying in alongside us, across the French coast, receive a direct hit and just disintegrate into fragments, and any member of the crew possibly surviving was out of the question. It came as something of a shock, actually seeing the moment of destruction so close at hand, it was a case of "There but for the grace of God go I".

The 14th trip was, surprisingly, also a daylight op., this time to an aircraft factory at Thiverney, a few miles north of Paris.

So on to the night of 24/25th July 1944, our 16th op., which was to Stuttgart. All went well until we were approximately over the French/German border when we were suddenly attacked by a night-fighter and suffered very considerable damage, which included the loss of our port inner engine and, not least of all, yours truly. I had been hit in the left hip and buttock and quite soon was losing blood at quite a rate. We were in some trouble and our Pilot quickly decided that we must abort the op., ditch the bombs, then head back, hoping to reach Allied Forces territory in northern France on

which to crash-land, or to bale out. Soon however, flames began licking from the damaged engine and within a very short time the flames grew and spread rapidly and we were told to bale out. I was by now, not in a very good condition and I remember wondering whether I was going to "make it". I remember virtually nothing of getting out of the aircraft or of my parachute descent but the next thing I knew was coming-to in a field in the dark, with my parachute all around me and in addition to earlier wounds, an absolutely agonising pain in my left thigh.
On hearing voices I shouted and it proved to be a French farming family out looking for survivors of the stricken aircraft. I was carried on a step-ladder which was used as a stretcher, to a barn and there laid on straw. The French lady was extremely caring, constantly bathing my forehead and also feeding me soup.
Sometime after daybreak a French gendarme arrived and after earnest conversation with my "hosts" departed and it was not too long after there was the sound of a vehicle pulling up outside, followed by the appearance of a German soldier in the doorway. My heart sank into my shoes! I was taken in a small truck to a P.O.W. hospital in Nancy, in eastern France, where, I learned much later, I was the first 'Brit' to arrive, the other existing patients being mainly French Colonial troops, many of them originally captured in North Africa.
My first week there is more than a little vague in my mind, during which I was, apparently, somewhat delirious, due to delayed treatment for my broken femur, and probably my other wounds. Later, though still painful, my leg was put in traction by means of weights suspended from cords on pulleys over the end of my bed from a 'pin' through my knee. The resulting agony if anyone as much as brushed by the weights was intense! Eventually however, after some weeks, my leg was put into what should have been plaster but was actually more like concrete, and with no padding.
This cast covered my lower torso from the waist and then on down to the ball of my left foot and on drying out became extremely tight around my ankle, I was unable to get the staff even to examine it, so I had to put up with the agony I was in.
Food was very poor, consisting largely of black beans and some sort of macaroni just boiled in water. How I longed for the lovely breakfasts and meals we had in our mess in "Blighty". We did get some Red Cross parcels which were a Godsend.

Then suddenly, after all sorts of rumours about how near the Allied Forces were, the Germans decided to evacuate the whole hospital to Germany, with the exception of four of us, who they considered were too ill to move. We four were moved down into a cellar below the hospital and a French

Army doctor and a French Colonial orderly were left to look after us.

One of the other three 'types' was Dickie Richardson, an R.A.F. Wireless Operator, who had been transferred from another hospital, and was very severely burned over much of his body, - he was blind, and had a hand amputated. In spite of all this and being bandaged literally from head to foot he was a wonderful character. He was a Midlander, from Worcester, knew Birmingham, and there was something of a natural affinity between us in the particular circumstances. We spent about 10 days in the cellar, fed by local nuns. Towards the end of that period shell-fire broke out on the town above (at our ceiling level), which was later followed by small-arms fire, and then we could hear tremendous cheering; the Yanks (General Patton's U.S. Third Army) had arrived!

Within a short time a U.S. infantry lieutenant had somehow been directed to us in the cellar. Cigarettes were the first order of the day. Soon after his departure U.S. 'medics' arrived to give us some basic and much needed medical attention.
Within an hour army ambulances had arrived and we were transported to a field hospital, all under canvas and a few miles from Nancy.
Subsequent transfers to other field hospitals again under canvas, took us further west during the next few days but to my dismay 'Dickie' and I became separated and I was quite upset because I somehow felt 'responsible' for him. During these moves, and much to my utter relief, my 'plaster' cast was removed by the U.S. medics, the old one was replaced by a much better quality padded cast, only to reveal two very large gangrenous-like wounds on the instep and heel of my foot, caused by the too-tight cast.

I was eventually flown back from Verdun to an airfield somewhere near Reading. I was the only 'Limey' in the hospital plane, a Dakota, the rest being all U.S. infantry stretcher cases, virtually straight from the front lines. In due course I arrived at R.A.F. Hospital, Wroughton, near Swindon, where I was treated for about two months before being transported to the Queen Victoria Hospital at East Grinstead in Sussex, the hospital base of the world famous plastic surgeon, Archibald McIndoe (later knighted), the most impressive and wonderful person I ever met and knew in my whole life. To my surprise and delight I was settled into a bed just next-but-one to 'Dickie' Richardson!
Although by comparison to most of the other patients here, who were all fliers, my medical problems seemed small, as they mostly had all been terribly burned. Even so, the gangrenous matter in my foot had eaten through three of the tendons and I came close to having the foot amputated, but in the end this was avoided and I underwent numerous skin-

grafting operations and duly qualified as one of Archie McIndoe's (the Boss) Guinea Pigs, a matter of which I am very proud.

My hospital treatment lasted some fifteen months in all, following this I was medically discharged from the R.A.F. but my Guinea Pig friends have remained my dearest and closest over the ensuing years since 1944 and our Annual Reunions in East Grinstead, lasting for three or four days, are something special, though only about 25% of us still survive, of which some sixty or so are now fit and well enough to attend. 'Dickie' Richardson remained a very wonderful friend and character in spite of his blindness and all his other incapacitates until he passed away three years ago in 1997.

Just a few years after the end of the war, having, through the International Red Cross, traced the whereabouts of the French farming family Dupré, who had found me and looked after me that night in 1944, I wrote to them, sent them parcels, later motored across France with my wife, on route to an Italian holiday, to meet them again and to thank them. I was greeted with flags and bunting strung across from building to building in this so very rural and tiny hamlet of Tramont Lassus in eastern France and though there were some language problems, with the aid of books, paper, arms, hands, my whiskey and their home-made Mirabelle spirit, a great time was had by all! During the day I was taken to the barn in which I had lain and also some distance across the fields etc. was shown the site of our Lanc's final demise, there still, though a little overgrown were the five indentations in the earth of our aircraft's nose and four engines, with small pieces of metal still around, one of which I was able to bring home as a souvenir. I still have it.

Many years later in the mid-1980's I had the irresistible urge to trace my old surviving crew-mates again, our two Gunners, Ross Lough (Canada) and Johnny Keisow (U.S.A.) both having been killed when we were shot down.

What a task it turned out to be and in all took me over three years. My file just grew and grew as I corresponded with all sorts of organisations, associations, groups and individuals in the U.S.A., Canada and the U.K. and finally succeeded as follows:-

Pilot, Bill Adams (U.S.A): Died in Boston U.S.A. in 1979.

Flt/Eng. Trev. Tanner: Although Welsh, settled in Western Canada and just after the war and together with my wife, I visited him on two or three occasions prior to his death in 1998.

After our 'set-to' in 1944, shortly after bailing out, the above two teamed up and were taken under the wing of a French family, again farmers, and awaited the arrival of the Allied troops pushing east. They eventually reached the U.K. safely.

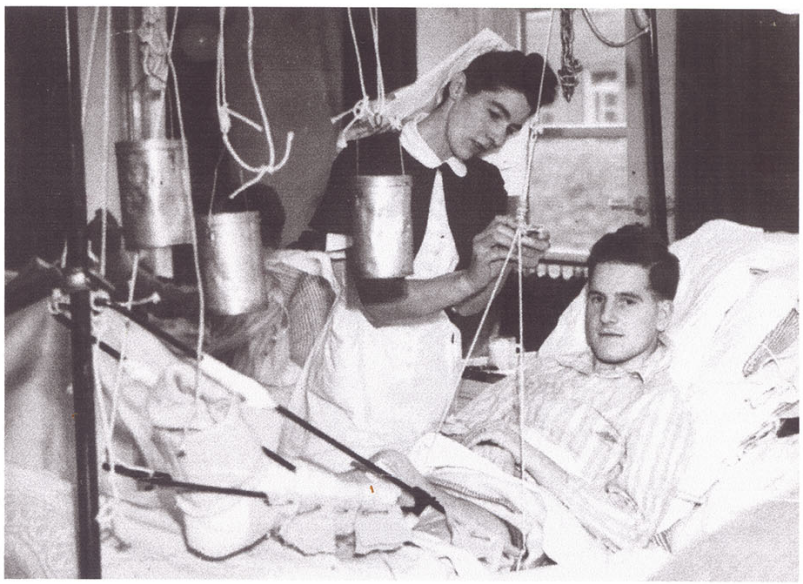
Bomb Aimer, Eddie Wood ("Woodie") (Canada): Lives in Hamilton, Ontario, and I am in regular touch, having also visited him, in the company of my wife.

Navigator, R.A. ("George") Toogood: lives in Radstock, near Bath, the nearest, yet was the most difficult to trace. We are now in regular touch and meet once or twice a year with our wives.

These two also got together after safely bailing out and undertook the very daunting and sometimes dangerous walk to neutral Switzerland, where they were interned, in reasonable conditions, until they were repatriated to the U.K.

So to the present and our autumn years. My wife and I live quietly and contentedly. I am Member (No.1367) of the Aircrew Association, Solihull Branch, whose monthly meetings I attend as often as possible and at whose request I have put my memories on paper.

A/C Arthur Woolf age 19 years in 1941



Flying Officer A.S. Woolf recovering in an R.A.F. hospital in the West Country.
November 1944.

Photograph taken in the 1950's at Tramont Lassus, Eastern France with the French family Dupré, my 'saviours' on 24/25th July 1944.
From left to right
Rose, Myself, Charles, Henri with Mère in front.