An Old Airman's Tale

by

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as told to Malcolm Brooke

HOW IT ALL CAME ABOUT

During my last years at School in Plymouth in the 1930s I had seen the rise of Hitler to become Chancellor of Germany in 1933. It did not then mean much to me, but later, it was with growing apprehension that I saw events unfolding in Europe and the rise of the Fascist Black Shirt Party under the guidance of Sir Oswald Mosley in England. Actually, they wore black jerseys.

I did not like what I saw. It was alien to me to see the "Black Shirt" Party marching through our streets to the Market Square. They were often led by Mosely who would speak from a market platform surrounded by arm-folded men in "black shirts" and, when required giving the raised arm Nazi salute and shouting "Heil".

Some of the lads whom I knew joined the "British Union of Fascists" and attended what purported to be a Club where they played snooker etc and had lectures. Some said to me, "Why don't you join? It's an all British Union". It was not for me; I could see through it. It is ironic to think that only a few years later, some of these very men were to die in the service of this country.

The Communist Party, which at that time was also prominent in this Country, seemed to me to be a rabble, hell bent on opposing the Black Shirts, but at least they were not threatening and attacking other countries.

The years leading up to WWII were times of worldwide unemployment, and it was vital to get a job. I was then living just outside Plymouth and as a young man on leaving school, obtained a job in a wholesale grocery firm in Plymouth. I was keen on athletics and gymnastics, as

were my immediate friends and our activities were confined to work, sport and home life. It was here that in 1936 that I met the girl who was eventually to become my wife. Although she did not become my fiancée until 1942, I shall refer to her as such as for convenience sake. We both liked walking and Dartmoor was accessible to us.

After a couple of years, I felt that promotion was a matter of waiting for "dead men's shoes". I found working in Devon somewhat parochial, so I applied for and was accepted for a job in London. By coincidence early in 1938, my fiancée, her brother and I all went to London to work in Government Service at about the same time. So we were all able to continue our friendship.

Although not interested in politics, I did not like to see the withdrawal of the "British Army on The Rhine", they had been there since 1919, but thought that the German occupation of the Saar was not worth a protest if that was what all the fuss was about. Later, witnessing Hitler's annexation of one Country after another, increasing his armed forces and making other breaches beyond the terms of the treaty of Versailles, was a portent of trouble ahead. The threats of occupation of Austria and Czechoslovakia were each in turn carried out and the treatment of the Jews and opposition parties were brutal in the extreme.

Looking at the well recorded events of those years, anyone now must realise that Hitler had no intention of keeping to his word when he said - "I have no more territorial claims to make in Europe etc" then, to promptly break his word. It was obvious that he was not to be trusted. The "invasion" of Czechoslovakia by taking over part of it to "protect German citizens who were (allegedly), being persecuted" was a typical example.

In 1938 and 39, Neville Chamberlain's visits to Hitler in Germany bought us time and Britain, however reluctantly, prepared for war.

Men of the 1914-1918 era formed a "Broom Stick" Army. They got young men to parade and be drilled. Of course they were unofficial and did not have any weapons, but used broomsticks instead for drilling and marching.
The Germans, who were holding massive parades of uniformed and armed men, must have been highly amused. Most of the "Broomstick Army" was to be officially formed as the L. D. V - Local Defence Volunteers, later The Home Guard.

Medical units and hospitals were extended; Police took on men as "War Reserves". Initially, they did not have uniforms, only a steel helmet and an armband. The Fire Service was increased and supplied with taxicabs adapted to tow small trucks with hoses and other fire appliances.
Ambulances were constructed from box vans etc and First Aid posts were prepared with staff to manage them. A Heavy Rescue Unit was set up for dealing with collapsed buildings etc. Blackout regulations were put in force and Air Raid Wardens came into being.

The wardens were responsible for directing and marshalling people to Public Air Raid Shelters when the siren sounded; also for the observance of the lighting restrictions. The latter often caused a great deal of friction. Another bomb shelter was the Andersen Shelter supplied for installation in private gardens. It consisted of a number of sheets of galvanised iron in the shape of an inverted half U. The sides could be bolted together and fitted at right angles to the vertical section for the ends. The front had an opening for access. When fitted into the ground, usually in the rear garden of a house and was covered with earth, sods of grass or even sandbags; they gave protection against the collapsing of a house. Of course, they would not, as some people imagined, stop a bomb but could be quite effective.

The householder had to use some intelligence concerning drainage and provision of seats, beds, light and heating etc. but the shelter could be made reasonably comfortable with a little ingenuity.

War work was essential. Everyone applied for or was given a job allegedly commensurate with their aptitude. It was stressed how important these jobs were going to be if and when the crunch came. Uniforms were everywhere and everyone became a "very important person" or thought that they did.

I remember one day at a junction of five roads, the traffic was snarled up with vehicles meeting from each of the roads. Drivers, who were stuck in the congestion, were shouting, "I'm on vital work, I have to get through", each was claiming priority.
I was reminded of the Gilbertian situation in the Gondoliers - "When everyone is somebody, then no one's anybody"!

Everyone was issued with an Identity Card and later with a Ration Card as food rationing was introduced for such items as meat, sugar,

tea and butter, which I think was 2 ounces per person per week. Other foods were in very short supply and were sold, if the shopkeeper knew you "under the counter" or bartered. A few people were able to keep some hens and were very well placed to barter. There was inevitably a "black market", and queuing at shops etc. became a way of life.

Gas masks were issued to everyone. Buildings were sandbagged and barbed wire appeared everywhere, and soon became a nuisance in the blackout as you could easily catch your hand or clothing on it.

In most towns and cities pre war, many houses had a cellar that ran under the pavement outside where there was a manhole through which the coalman could tip sacks of coal from his horse and cart - occasionally it was a lorry. These could be cleaned out and, shored up and used as shelters.

Public Air raid shelters were constructed of concrete at convenient places. There were cellars in many shopping areas; these were converted to air raid shelters by shoring up the inside and providing seats and fitting cellar flaps in the street outside. When the air raid siren was sounded from the roof of police stations and specific buildings and posts, the Air Raid Warden would unlock the cellar flaps in the pavement and open them for the convenience of foot passengers. These cellars gave protection from bomb blasts and shrapnel, but might collapse if the explosion was too near. I regarded them as rat traps.

There are many stories about stupid things that happened, one being when a first aid team was, for practice, dealing with an imagined casualty - a man lying injured unable to walk. The team leader examined him, suspected a broken ankle and told one of his team to splint and bandage it to render it motionless whilst he made further examination. The first trouble was that the wrong leg was splinted and a further one arose was when the "casualty" was placed on a stretcher. The first-aider's tin hat fell off, hit the nose of the "casualty and broke it.

He became a genuine hospital case and was therefore placed on a stretcher and put into the ambulance but the door was shut too swiftly and hit the "casualty" on the head, as he was not properly on the stretcher, rendering him unconscious! Whatever the truth, it was a good story to relate.

There is the story of a man who, regularly on leaving work used to walk home in the blackout with his pipe in his mouth. He lit it before going out in accordance with blackout regulations. He knew the way well, or thought he did, but on this he occasion walked into a brick wall and his pipe became stuck in his throat. Another hospital casualty!

Plans were afoot for evacuation of children from the cities as well as re-locating some government offices. All these took place as war approached. All men of military age had to register at their local Employment Office and, having done so, awaited their call to arms. I registered in my turn but being a little older was required to continue working in Government service.

WAR

The crunch came when on 1st September 1939; the German Army marched into Poland but when opposed by the Poles, Warsaw was razed to the ground. On the 3rd, Britain declared war and sent an army, the British Expeditionary Force, to assist the French who also declared war. The much-vaunted Maginot Line was the key to their defence and was a big obstacle for the German Command. Belgium and Holland were neutral.

Hitler stayed his hand and a stalemate existed; it was known as the "phoney war", which gave Britain time to build up some of its defences and extend training until 1940 when the Germans launched their Blitzkrieg. Denmark was taken over and Norway was invaded.
It was one of the outstanding crimes in history that on 10th May 1940, Hitler launched an attack on the neutral Low Countries. He by-passed the Maginot Line and attacked neutral Holland and Belgium. The Dutch resisted then, as in Poland, the centre of Rotterdam was bombed and flattened. The Dutch fought but were overwhelmed and had no option but to sue for peace and the Belgians did likewise.

It is a matter of history how the "Blitzkrieg", a new type of warfare was so successful that it forced our Army back to Dunkirk and other channel ports to return to England. The French, not wishing to see their beloved Paris flattened as had happened to Poland and Holland, declared it an "Open City" and the German Army marched in. The French then tried to negotiate a deal with Germany; they thought that they had done well when they were allowed to govern the southern

part of the country, to be known as Vichy France, under German supervision. That was a state of affairs that suited Hitler but, as soon as he was ready, he took over the whole of France.

The world held its breath. Would we in England give in and make peace "on the best possible terms", as some in government circles wanted? The Italians had seen their chance and Mussolini declared war on the Allies.
A number of people here said, "We've lost the war" which annoyed me. I felt awful; I had not done any fighting but was pleased when Churchill declared in his famous speech on June the 18th our intention to continue the war. I felt that my chance would come.

During the subsequent stalemate we learned to cope with all the problems that arose in the preparation for a forthcoming attack. For example, strips of gummed paper were used to prevent windows from shattering. At night, it was difficult to completely obliterate light showing from a house. The best method being to make a portable wooden frame covered with something that light would not penetrate. This, fitted tightly over the window and backed up by thick curtains usually did the job. It was all too easy to enter a room and without thinking to switch on a light. "Shouts of "Put that light out" would come immediately from the street below. In the early days a self-important Warden frequently came to blows with a householder who asked if he thought he was Hitler. They had a difficult job to do but a great deal of tact was needed.

One had also to put out all lights before opening the front door to go out, another thing all too easy to forget. Then there was the difficulty in getting about without streetlights. Every lamppost had sand bags beside it for putting on incendiary bombs. Kerbstones, uneven pavements were another hazard.

How does one find the way, and or a street when you couldn't see the name? Is it the 4th or fifth on the left? Then you had to find the house number! Were even numbers on the right or left? Were they in ascending or descending order? You learnt them by heart, often by a pneumonic.

This brings me to another aspect of the black out. Very few houses had telephones. Consider how you could even find a telephone box; you

had to remember where the nearest one was. When found, you then had to know how to dial the letter code, as well as the numbers, but you had to find them in the dark! The dialling system was, three letters followed by a number. The three letters contacted the district and was followed by four figures of the destination. Thus for example, Smith K. E of 6 High Street, Fulham, could be contacted at FUL 1234. There was however, a snag. The 26 letters did not fit the dial.

I am a bit hazy on this but as far as I can remember, the dialling system at that time was the first circle on the dial was a blank, followed by ABC 1. DEF 2. GHI 3. JKL 4 - but MN 5 were just two letters in one dial, "Q" was not used, the next being PRS 6. TUV 7. WXY 8. Number 9 was separate for emergency 999. In some cases there was a special button - Emergency. Police. Fire. Ambulance.

In the country there were no direction signposts. You had to know your way or have a map - not easy in the blackout! Later the few cars that there were could have a dimmed light with a grill over it pointing down.

Getting about was not easy; all names were removed from railway stations and a Station count had to be kept to know when to alight. Often fellow passengers, who had lost count or were strangers, would ask, "Is this - or - station?" Stepping off the train onto the platform was sometimes a problem as trains differed in height and on curved platforms, a gap.

During this period of preparation for attack, my fiancée joined a rifle club used by the LDV - Local Defence Volunteers, a Government Organisation that later became the Home Guard, and learnt to shoot using a .202 rifle and received training on the use of the .303 but never fired one. Ammunition was not plentiful. Her idea was that if we were invaded, she would be able to use a gun to kill some of the attackers.

It is, of course well known that in August 1940, Hitler launched his bombing campaign in preparation for invasion and in September, for 58 successive nights attacked London. All of us were subject to an experience that we would never forget. For me it was a lesson in bombing and its effects that were to be uppermost in my mind when, three years later, it was I who would be taking the bombs to German cities. Revenge did not enter into it; I knew from experience what bombing did to the war effort.

A pedal cycle was the best means of getting about, especially in London but there were many hazards such as unlit obelisks, stationary vehicles or other obstructions, especially later during or immediately after an air raid when broken glass and rubble covered the ground. Barrage balloon teams would occupy an area from which they could raise their balloons; gun batteries, that were set up in streets often moved around and opened fire just as you were cycling past, which was somewhat disconcerting.

Bombs fell everywhere but there was always someone who knew exactly what "Gerry" was after! "That railway line or that factory - they make washers for tanks there" or that is a store for military clothing! How little they knew about bombing! It did not matter where the bomb fell as every building, large of small, was requisitioned and used for manufacturing or storing something, or even military offices.

The disruption caused by bombing caused chaos. Collapsed buildings blocked streets, broken glass was everywhere, public transport was halted a long way from it's destination, or diverted to strange routes because of unexploded bombs.

Air raids were of course particularly hazardous. One had to be prepared for anything. I generally cycled, as transport was too unreliable. A bicycle could be carried over obstructions such as broken glass, rubble and bomb craters. It could get through narrow places where a vehicle could not.

I was living South of the Thames, my fiancée north of it and I cycled across London to see her. I was often caught in an air raid. I often had to jump off my bike and dive for shelter when I heard a bomb coming. Many times I found a shop doorway a good place for immediate protection, hoping that it would not receive a direct hit.

Sometimes, the only immediate shelter was flat in the gutter where I sought the protection of the kerb as a bomb blast goes upwards, but the great worry was shrapnel from our antiaircraft guns. It was small jagged pieces of metal that would whiz through the air - zit, zit, zit. I always wore a tin hat but shrapnel could give you a nasty cut if it hit you on the body. However, I learnt to cope with it by watching the searchlights and flak bursts ahead as I cycled along in the darkness. I could judge the time when the shrapnel would reach the ground and, if necessary, take cover in a doorway whilst it went clatter, clatter, clatter

on the surrounding roofs. I have seen tar on the road catch fire from a very hot piece of flak.

I came off my cycle a few times when watching the flak, as I did not see a brick or other object in the road. It also resulted in a flat tyre. Try repairing a puncture in an air raid was not easy. On many occasions I worked on my own or helped the rescue teams to get people out of bombed buildings and get them to hospital. I remember one particular occasion when I was nearing Putney where I lived; I heard a stick of bombs coming and dived flat into the gutter. The bombs passed over but one hit the Fire Station 50 yards away burying 16 firemen. Although the building was still on fire a number of us in the vicinity tried in vain to reach them. All 16 were killed. I was injured a little when a falling beam trapped my hand, but it was only a slight

On another occasion, I was nearly blown over when a parachute mine hit a five-storey block of flats about 100 yards away. These mines floated down and you did not hear them coming. The two top storeys of the flats had collapsed and I could hear groans. I made my way gingerly to the first floor where my way was blocked by a smashed wardrobe. I managed to get through it and found a bedroom where an old man was in bed injured. Using sheets etc. I gave him what first aid I could under the circumstances, and made him as comfortable as possible, saying that I would try to get an ambulance. He then asked me to get his wallet from the dressing table. I looked where his was pointing but there was no centre floor; we were in what appeared to be a bedroom with a gaping hole in the centre. I returned the way I had come in, through the wardrobe, found a telephone box, notified the Police who attended shortly with an ambulance. I believe that they got him and his wallet to hospital.

You might have had a narrow escape, as many people did, when a house close by was hit, or a bomb fell in the street and part of yours collapsed. When your ceilings or some walls fell in, should you have been in at the time and survived unhurt or not badly hurt, you were lucky. If you were out - what a scene to meet on return!

Fire watching, was done by most people, including my fiancée, who stood on roofs and other advantage points to see where incendiaries fell, and notify the fire services etc. Passers by would use the sand bags that were stored at the foot of lampposts. Householders, using a

dustbin lid as a guard used a stirrup pump and bucket of water to deal with incendiaries that penetrated their roofs. Next morning unexploded incendiaries could be picked up in the street.

One of the greatest hardships that the population endured was being bombed out of their homes or, almost as bad, dealing with the mess that resulted. Carpets drenched by rain or fire hoses, windows broken, glass china and household utensils everywhere, but the dust from plaster ceilings and walls penetrated everything. Every household in the street was affected to some extent.

Amidst all this chaos a spirit prevailed that perhaps we shall never see again. It was on occasions like these that a real neighbourly spirit came to the fore. Previously unknown people came and helped clear up the mess, offer accommodation and food no matter how little. There would probably be no gas or electricity, but people found means of cooking. A gas or electric ring might be working nearby and could be used; broken wood from bombed houses was used to cook over an open fire. Water was usually accessible from broken mains.

I was bombed out twice and my fiancée three times, once before we were married and twice afterwards. In those days she slept on a mattress in the basement but in her last flat. At the time of the flying bombs and rockets, she moved her bedroom from room to room as ceilings collapsed and windows were blown in. She relates how she went to bed after her first experience of being bombed - she moved the bed away from the window and had in the bed with her, her handbag, money, keys, and jewellery etc, shoes, dressing gown and some clothes for immediate evacuation. She found that, on the first occasion, her shoes had filled with debris that could not all be thrown out.
Her evacuation was much more difficult than it should have been.

This was a period when London and the southeast were subjected to "Flying Bombs" - these had short wings and an engine that cut out. The bomb then crashed somewhere in London. You could hear it coming a long way off and people would watch them to see if it was going to fall nearby; if so, dive for shelter.

The "Flying Bombs" were succeeded by rockets, which were much more powerful and travelled faster than sound thus giving no warning of their arrival. If you heard a rocket coming you knew you were safe, as it had already landed! One rocket could demolish several streets in a crowded area and do wide spread damage. It was these that caused

my wife to move her bedroom. Fortunately, the flat was a large one with 4 bedrooms. She also relates the story of a cat that, at the first sound of an air raid siren warning, flew into the nearest basement for shelter, and came out at the "All clear" siren. By then I was away in the Air Force in Lincolnshire and it was a worrying time for both of us, but I have jumped in time; what has all this rigmarole to do with my story as an airman? It sets the background of the times.

I knew by experience how a city could be incapacitated when a target within it was attacked. The disruption it caused to the area and damage to any factory and military installations was a big factor in the war effort. It was unfortunate that people who lived in and around these areas would be killed. Could this have been avoided? Only by the factory workers etc being evacuated every night and being brought back the next day; that is if there was a means of transporting them. Even evacuating them did not cover the night workers. Shifts generally covered a 24-hour period.

I had a long way to go before ever my chance would come to destroy enemy targets etc the same way.

That chance came about when the bombing spread to other cities. Early in 1941, more of us in Government service became available for training in the Empire Training Scheme, which was to train abroad as pilots or navigators in the Fleet Air Arm or Royal Air Force. I jumped at the chance, applied immediately for the latter and waited impatiently until March when I was notified to attend the Air Ministry for selection.

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE.

I had a tough medical examination; a series of tests - physical, written and oral, then went before an Interview Board and was accepted. Not many remained of the number of men applying. We were then sworn in, pledging allegiance to His Majesty King George VI, his heirs and successors etc: Even then my call up was several months later, and it was a very restless time for me. I wanted to get on with it. In retrospect, I need not have worried. Service life consists of exasperating periods of waiting. It was always "jump to it" which, when we had more experience, was translated as "hurry up and wait". My

call up papers ordered me to report to ACRC - Air Crew Recruiting Centre - at a building near the London Zoo.

Having packed up my few remaining belongings, which were not many, as I had sent most to my parent's home, I deposited the rest at the flat of my fiancée who lived in London, then set out. On arrival, I found myself with a large number of others all reporting for aircrew training. After a great deal of shouting of instructions we formed into squads of men each numbering 50 and were called "flights", which is what every group was called thereafter.
We were marched to a nearby block of flats, which, like a great many buildings in the country, had been requisitioned by the government. We were issued with three pieces of mattress about two feet square, called "biscuits". Each of us found a space on the floor of one of the empty rooms and this was our home for the next three weeks whilst we were "kitted out", instructed in what was going to happen, medically examined, inoculated, drilled and generally shouted at about "Kings Regulations" from morning till night. These, we were told, were guidelines not law, but woe betides you if you failed to comply.

Catering was at the restaurant of the nearby London Zoo, which had also been requisitioned. We formed long queues for breakfast, dinner and tea, and these extended past many of the cages for the animals; we got very friendly with some of them. The monkeys were a great attraction as they had a crescendo of whistling which seemed to be their conversation and we quickly imitated them, which got them very puzzled. There were dozens of "flights" of trainees drilling, marching to various preliminary lectures and tests, or sick quarters for injections etc: Each man was allotted to a flight with a corporal in charge. He, in turn was shouted at by the Sergeant who was shouted at by the Flight Sergeant and the Warrant Officer who was responsible to the Officer - one to each flight.
Flights were, of course, formed of men from all walks of life; some were service men who had applied for air crew training. They all regarded themselves as the "gen" men, that is, they knew it all or thought that they did and were forever quoting regulations and saying how much better it was elsewhere. Our reply was obvious. We "rookies" were beneath them. They "had some service" and were always saying, "Get some in" which became a general expression.

After three weeks we were ready for posting to our 1TW - Initial Training Wing. My flight was posted to Cambridge - some 50 miles away. We were no longer individuals, but marched in a flight

everywhere, halted, stood at ease until told to board the train. So it began. On arrival at Cambridge our corporal handed us over to a Sergeant who was to be in charge of our flight for the next three months. Outside the station we waited, as usual. We were becoming used to waiting which is just as well as it was to be our lot until the end of the war. This was the first occasion I saw training aircraft; there were many flying all round and the "gen" men were happy to air their knowledge. I had seen many enemy aircraft, and our fighters over London, but I looked at these with new eyes.

Our sergeant marched us to one of the University buildings - requisitioned, as had most of the colleges. Having told us that the pace for training aircrew was 140 to the minute, which is quite fast. He kept shouting that he could hear feet dragging and "pick your feet up" was, amongst others, standard practice hereafter. I enjoyed it, I was fit but others found difficulty. The sotto voce remarks were always funny and usually very uncomplimentary. We were allotted rooms in one of the colleges and there were beds! We had not seen one for three weeks, we drew "biscuits", blankets AND sheets - pure luxury or so we thought but with the very cold winter of 1941 they were like sheets of ice. There were no fires in the rooms, windows had to be kept wide open, and our damp towels froze stiff in our lockers. Although we went to bed tired each day, it was hard to get to sleep for the cold.

When my fiancée visited the city to see me, she brought a small electric fire, which I smuggled in past the guardroom and kept under a floorboard in my room. I rigged up a device to work it off the light. This nearly got me into trouble as, one night, when I had it on I dozed off, and was suddenly awakened by the voice of the SP - Service Police - in the building bawling "Lights out".

I had about a minute to switch off the fire and disconnect it, take down the "black out" from the window which I had to open and fan as much heat out as I could in the time and jump into bed. The police were in the next room and I did not have time to put the fire under the floorboard. There was nothing for it but to have the burning hot metal in bed with me. I didn't burn myself and I got away with it although it seemed a very long time before he left.

INITIAL TRAINING.

At 1TW we were, of course drilled daily and instructed in the theory of flight, navigation with maps, charts and astro, aircraft recognition in darkened rooms and using very faintly lit slides, Morse code on the buzzer and Aldis lamp, meteorology, hygiene and general service practices. Our evenings were usually free unless you had to do a guard duty or one of the many jobs they invented or found it necessary for you to do. Most of us spent our time revising and discussing our work or going to the local cinema.

We had to be back before "lights out", but some, who spent too long with the opposite sex, had to make a hazardous entry over the college wall and across the grounds without attracting the attention of the S.P. (Service Police). This is one case where the "black out" was an advantage.

When we arrived at Cambridge, there were some additions to our flight. Two Dutchmen in naval uniform, they had escaped from Holland and wanted to join the RAF. There was also an army sergeant who had applied for a transfer. Little did I know then that 2½ years later he was to join my Squadron and is now a member of our Squadron Association!

There were two incidents that I specially remember. The first occasion was shortly before Christmas, when we were being marched from one class to another and due to be dismissed for our mid morning break between lectures. This took place outside the "NAAFI" where you could get a cup of tea, possibly a bun and if we were lucky, our ration of cigarettes. I did not smoke but took my ration, which was very valuable currency in trading for chocolate or services etc: (i.e. bribes).

This break was for 10 minutes only and, if you were not well up in the queue, you did not get anything so there was always a mad rush to get to the front. Normally, we would be halted outside, then dismissed but on this particular occasion, we were a little late getting there and knew that it would be difficult. As we passed through a narrow archway leading to the courtyard where we would be dismissed, the front men suddenly made a dash to the NAAFI, followed instantly by the whole flight a number of which, including me, were carried forward in the rush. We did not realise that our flight officer was following at the rear and he called the sergeant to account. A crime had been committed. Not only had we not waited for the order to be dismissed, but we had failed to salute the officer on our dismissal - another crime and more serious. The sergeant burst into the NAAFI, ordered everyone

immediately out on parade, a few managed to disappear including me; I managed to get behind one of the college pillars; I guessed that there would not be a head count.

The flight was made to run round the grounds in their overcoats for the rest of the tea break, whilst the few of us enjoyed a cup of tea and our rations, at the same time keeping a look out for the reforming of the flight when we appeared and joined them, but it did not end there. There would be no leave on Christmas Day and there would be a parade and roll call at lunchtime.
I was now presented with a problem as I had arranged to catch the milk train, i.e. the first train to London, have Christmas lunch with my fiancée and return before "lights out". I had about a week in which to devise a plan. I gambled that the roll call would be name and number only; we were very seldom counted. The Officers and NCOs were, strange to say, human and wanted their Christmas day lunch and celebrations like everyone else. Five cigarettes was an easy bribe to get one of our heavy smokers to answer to my name and number. The more difficult part was that I was not the only one who would dodge the parade but the corporal who would take it was also a heavy smoker and a combined bribe from the "evaders" took care of him. Now came the difficult part. I had no pass and the Service Police were always at the railway station and would certainly check any Service man. The answer was - civilian clothes.

My fiancée had some that I deposited with her when I joined, so she sent them to me in a small case via someone who was travelling to Cambridge & I stowed the case under the floorboards in my room. However, I needed a hat to cover my service haircut, which was a complete give away, and I never wore one.
I obtained one, I cannot remember how, but I did. It was a little large so I hit on the idea of wearing a bandage, not unusual in those times when injuries from bombing were frequent. It also detracted from my hair cut. The great day came. I could not catch an early train, as I had to assess the situation before making the attempt. It was a free day except for the noon parade so, after breakfast I had a careful look round then, with a little bunch of "escapers", I went safely past the guard room my small case being hidden in the group.

In the town I went into the nearest public convenience where I swapped my uniform for the civilian clothes in the case, put on my head bandage and hat and went to the station. The Service Police were checking all service men's passes. I bought a ticket and caught

the train. One or two escapers who were in uniform joined the train further down the line at small stations where they thought there would be no police.

All went too well - dead easy or so we thought. On arrival at Kings Cross - one of the main London termini, the train emptied and we walked towards the barrier. Then came the blow. Not only were there RAF Service Police, but Red Caps (Military Police), Naval Pickets and civilian Police who would be looking for deserters, men on their own and dressed like me! To say the least I was a bit anxious.
What started out as a bit of fun and good practice for escaping if ever I should find myself on land in Europe now had prospects of a day in the cells then court martial on return.

Then came my best piece of luck. I was only one of many from all three services and most of the others were in uniform. On seeing the formidable opposition at the barrier, one or two quick-witted individuals who were also travelling without a pass, jumped onto the tracks and hurdled across a number of platforms towards another exit, which was unmanned. A similar move was made by all the police who realised that these men were, to say the least, all evaders and the barrier was left empty except for the ticket collector who took it all in his stride. I walked through without hindrance. I would like to have stayed to see the fun, but I was not going to push my luck.

The return journey that evening was without incident and, reversing the outward-bound system, I slipped into the camp. Two were caught and we did not see them again. On the way back I began to wonder where the enemy lay - at home or on the continent!

So we progressed through ITW and eventually passed our monthly tests and final examinations much to our relief. The first hurdle was over; we were promoted to the rank of Leading Aircraftman and wore a propeller on our sleeves. We had "got some in".

We had a short spell of leave during which my fiancée and I visited both our parents in the West Country and planned to get married. We decided this although it was in advance of our plans, as we did not know what the future would be for either of us, if any.

Nothing could be really planned. I was due to go to a grading school. That is where some first flying and aptitude tests were made and assessed. After this, providing that I should be successful at the

grading school, I might be sent abroad for training as was expected without getting any more leave, and not return to the U.K

On return to Cambridge to await posting, we were really revising what we had already done. At this time we were billeted in a different college and issued with some new kit including flying kit.

For some reason we were issued with web belts, which had to be blancoed and the brass, polished. My colleague, with whom I shared a room, duly made ours spick and span and left them hung over the back of a chair to dry over my little electric fire whilst we went to the NAAFI to get some tea. On return, we found two ribbons of ash still hanging on the back of the chairs. They had ignited and just smouldered. Just then the shouts of "lights out" came and we knew that the police would be looking in to check. We put our light out and when the door opened called out "All in order, lights are out" and they left. Next day we went back to stores where, after much argument and surrender of a large quantity of cigarettes, in the form of bribes, we came away with belts, satisfied in the knowledge that there would be no charge of losing service equipment.

It was a difficult situation not knowing whether I should get any leave before being posted and if I did, how long, so I applied for special leave to get married, but the application was turned down. My fiancée and I then had the banns called in three different churches so that we could be married at either of our own churches in Devon if there was time or, where I was stationed if there was no leave. I just had to wait and see.

GRADING SCHOOL.

Those who had passed the Initial Training Wing course were then marched with our kit (140 paces per minute) to the nearby Marshall's Airfield, which had been a small private flying club prior to being taken over by the RAF. The first day we were shown an aeroplane, a Tiger Moth. I had, in the early 1920s, seen through a gap in a hedge, Sir Alan Cobham's Flying Circus giving flights in a biplane at 10/- a time. However, this was the closest that I had ever been to any aeroplane. I was not impressed, as it seemed to be held together by bits of wire. It was a two-seater bi-plane with open cockpit.

There followed explanation and instruction, first about parachutes, then of the interior lay out and starting up procedure which had to be done by two men, one in the cockpit to work the throttle and ignition switches, the other to swing the propeller by hand until the engine fired. There was no battery starting procedure on those aircraft. After going through the drill of swinging the propeller by hand to start it and stepping smartly back to avoid losing one's head when the engine fired, I climbed in.
The seating was in tandem and I was duly installed behind my instructor, a Pilot Officer, who gave a running commentary as he taxied out and took off.

This was one of the thrills of my life, a never to be forgotten moment of which I had never, in my wildest dreams thought would ever happen to me. I handled the controls with my pilot going through various manoeuvres and he gradually let me try to fly straight and level, only taking over again when we fell out of control. Each loss of control was a lesson in itself. So I progressed, and one day my instructor got out and said, "Right, off you go, take it round on your own." Was I hearing right?

Surely he didn't think that I could do that! I was not one to admit that I couldn't. My flying career depended on it. So he secured the harness, rendered his control column inoperative, removed his parachute and walked away. To my surprise, I took off and made my circuit but, on the approach to land, at 700 feet when I cut the throttle and glide in, the aircraft vibrated and I thought that something was wrong. I gave a couple of bursts on the throttle and discovered that, as I did so, the vibration stopped. I then realised that the absence of another person made a difference.

By this time, I was further on my approach line than I wanted and, of course, had not the experience to sideslip off excessive height, so made another circuit and landed - relieved. I think that it put me in a good standing as my instructor realised that I could cope even at that stage, with factors that were strange to me. He had to start the same way, and probably knew my difficulties.

This was followed by a test by the Chief Flying Instructor, a squadron leader, who graded us. I felt as if I had put up the worst show that I possibly could but, talking to others, I felt that I might have just scraped through. Our three weeks of aptitude tests were completed, but we

were not given the results until later when we arrived at our next destination but, before that there was a problem.

We were suddenly paraded; the Station Commander appeared and told us that there was to be a new crewmember for the bomber force "A bomb aimer". He said that there would be a huge intake of men, a chance to "Get in on the ground floor", commissions were almost a certainty, we would all be "gen" men as no one had any experience of it. Volunteers were requested and told to take one pace forward. Nobody moved.

My colleague, who had been with me since we joined said, out of the corner of his mouth, "Shall we? It's a good chance to get in at the start." I felt that that there was too much "sales talk". I thought that I had not done too badly so far and was prepared to take a chance on their assessment of me, so I said, "No, we came in to train as pilots let's hold out. If they fail us we are no worse off". Then a few men stepped forward, but not enough. The C.O glared at the rest of us, then said threateningly, "Right, you've had your chance. Break for lunch and parade at 14.00 hours. Unless I get the required number of volunteers, I shall fail 70% of you", and strode off leaving most of us in limbo.

It was an unhappy situation and the short break was taken up with an animated discussion. I didn't express my opinion, as I wanted others to do the "volunteering". I reasoned that a big failure on the flying assessment course was bluff as it might reflect of the instructors. The parade after lunch saw about 10 men step forward as volunteers and that is the last we heard of it.

As it was a few days before Easter, we were unexpectedly given 7 days leave and, as my fiancée and I had already made the necessary preparations for the banns to be called in three different places, we managed it all in the few days. On the evening of our wedding we caught the night train back to London so that we could convert my wife's flat, making it suitable for two people. Furniture was only obtainable on points but those that we applied for only enabled us to buy two utility chairs! Another single divan bed was obtained from a neighbour whose husband was posted abroad.

When I reported back to my grading school, I was posted to Heaton Park, a sorting - out centre" in the very spacious grounds of a country

house near Blackpool. We were billeted in requisitioned rooms in private houses. My colleague and I shared a room in the house of a family, and went daily to the sorting centre. There seemed to be thousands of men there and we were rather at a loose end whilst all the records were checked and the paper work prepared. Rumours were of course rife. I spread a few myself just to upset the rumour mongers, namely, those with experience, who "knew it all, the 'gen' men".

Eventually the day came when we would learn our fate, and for what we had been selected. Hundreds of us were paraded and stood inclined towards the torrential rain and wind whilst the officers tried to keep their lists of names etc dry long enough to read.
The sergeants and corporals had the time of their lives shouting at everybody and trying to convey the information to the ranks. As a name was called so another officer called the allocation and the man concerned was marched off to join the ranks of the various categories. It was a nail biting time as we stood before "God" who ordered the sheep to his right hand and the goats to his left. After about two hours with no let up in the downpour it came to the turn of our section. It seemed as if about one in ten was selected for pilot, many were for navigators but most were to train as bomb aimers. My colleague's name was called - Pilot! "Good luck", I said jealously and waited. Eventually my name was called and I swear that the officer waited five minutes before he said "pilot". I could have shouted for joy but refrained. It was another step on the road. That night there were many celebrations and a number of rowing boats on the huge lake in the grounds were sunk. There were no repercussions they couldn't punish everybody, and I got the feeling that it was not unexpected.

We waited for many more days - When were they going to let us get into the war? It would be over before we had a chance to fight! Well, that is how it felt. Waiting, waiting, waiting. That was one thing at which we got the most practice, but this was only a start. Rumours were of course numerous, but one day my flight was called urgently to the stores. Names were called we drew tropical kit and were ordered to be fully packed, kitted, and on parade within the hour. So it was South Africa, probably Rhodesia!

My pal and I performed a miracle and made the parade with about two minutes to spare. The officer appeared, announced a change of plan, all tropical kit to be returned to stores. We were marched off, returned

our kit, which was minutely checked, and we proceeded to "hurry up and wait". In due course, somewhat of an anticlimax, we were paraded with full kit, marched to the station and entrained. For where - no one knew except the "gen" men and they were never right. Our direction was northwards and, on passing very slowly through one station, we never knew it's name as, during the war, all place names and sign posts throughout the country, had been removed, we were handed packets of food by the ladies of the W.V.S (Women's Voluntary Service) an excellent organisation which ran canteens and suchlike providing many services to help the troops.

The ladies were spaced along the platform and they passed bags of food to a man at the window until each man in the carriage was supplied. I can't remember how we were informed that this was going to happen but it worked. The W.V.S was probably coerced and supplied by the R. A. F. That was the only food we got since breakfast and, late that day, we stopped at Gourock on the Clyde.

THE EMPIRE TRAINING SCHEME.

After the usual waiting and roll calls, we were taken by tender, thousands of us, to a boat moored in the centre of the river. It proved to be an American ship the Thomas H Barrie. We were allotted decks and picked our own bunks, which were in, I think, five tiers and consisted of a canvas sheet strung on a metal frame. It was home for each of us and our kit for - how long? No one knew. Life belts were drawn and had to be worn day and night. Anyone found without one, even in the ablutions, was automatically on a charge.
We went to get a meal and took our place in a very long queue which wound round and round the bunks, miles of them or so it seemed. It was said to be a meal queue or was it "duff gen" spread by a practical joker who got everyone going round in a circle? There were plenty of them, but this was too serious a matter to play that kind of prank. We eventually ended up in a huge messing area. Then came a big surprise. As we passed down the serving line we held out our mess tins into which the American cooks slapped half a chicken followed by figs, potatoes, carrots sweet corn and other strange vegetables.

This was followed by a huge chunk of rich sweet plonked into another of our tins and accompanied by apples, oranges, bananas etc: all

things which we had not seen since the outbreak of war. Our stomachs were tuned to wartime rationing and we were hard put to cope with it.

There were long tables gradually being vacated by those further ahead in the queue so we sat down and did justice to our meal. After this we went up on deck, it was early June, double British summer time and, at 11 pm, still daylight. Ships were assembling in the river and we could see Naval craft ordering them into position behind a boom, which protected the mouth of the river. What a sight, balloons overhead and shore guns surrounding the harbour.

We remained at anchor for three days. Hurry up and wait. The ship was so crowded that to keep us in order men were being allotted jobs. We had very many more men than jobs but we were found the most ridiculous things to keep us occupied. This was done in the first instance, when the, I presume captain, made his rounds followed by his staff accompanied by the senior RAF Officer and his staff taking names and allocating jobs as they went. I seized the opportunity to tag on the end as part of the procession with the idea of stepping in when I heard of something nice going. I held a sheet of paper and a pencil to look as if I was part of the team. Nothing came up that I fancied, but I kept out of the rotten jobs like ablution cleaning etc:

During the three days of waiting, the ships crew spent most of their time playing crown & anchor on which they would place a month's wages on a single bet. Our lads with their poor pay could not hope to match them and most, very wisely kept out of it. I would sometimes stand at the rail and look at the shore where men and women were working hard in their various wartime occupations.

I thought what would they give to have the food with which we were being served only about a mile from them?

We were asleep in our bunks on the third night when the ship quietly slipped anchor and left the harbour. Next day when we looked out, we were at sea - no land in sight, but we were not alone. There was an American cruiser and six destroyers surrounding our ship and two others, which, we learned, were prisoner of war ships. Rumours abounded, bets as to our destination were being taken.

The budding navigators were all plotting different courses. I found the sun to be the best guide but after some days was puzzled as our direction at noon GMT, was usually to the south. We had sailed for five

days and, each morning, everyone was looking ahead. No land in sight.

The rumour was that the troop ship ahead of us had been sunk. I did not start that one, had I thought of it, I might have done, but I didn't. We were definitely on a southern course and the betting became hotter and hotter as did the weather, and favoured South Africa; perhaps they forgot that we had handed back our tropical kit. On about the 8th day, one of the accompanying destroyers went ahead and an alert sounded.
After a while we saw something in the water; all the "gen men" knew that it was a "U" boat but, as usual, they were "duff gen men". It turned out to be a ship's boiler floating in a calm sea. Where was its ship? I wondered. Were they right when they said the ship ahead had been sunk? Our bow gun opened fire on it, but the boiler remained afloat until a "Pom Pom" gun sank it as we went by.

So we sailed on into dazzling tropical waters; it was very hot. We only wore a pair of shorts. I was fascinated at the sight of dolphins playing for hours in our bow wave. Huge turtles swimming lazily seemed to smile at us as we passed and flying fish leapt right over our decks. These were sights that we had never witnessed before. It was another world, how different from blacked out war torn Britain

Some of our "bookies" would not take any further bets on Cape Town as our destination. On the 10th day, we turned northwards and saw land on the port side. That evening, we saw lights ashore. The whole coastline was lit up; we had not seen this for over two years. The betting immediately turned to New York, though we were well south of it.

We woke next morning, 27th June 1942 to find ourselves sailing up the Hudson River and we crowded the decks to see, in reality, those things which we had only seen in pictures. As we docked, I noted that the stevedores were all large overweight men with big stomachs as were the policemen who had revolvers in their belts, an alien sight to us. Some of our lads, realising that their English money was of no use, threw it to the men on the wharf where it was examined curiously and they began to toss American money back. However, one man mistook the intention and thought that we were tipping them or giving charity, and angrily threw back a coin which hit one of our men causing a nasty gash over his eye. How quickly a situation can change. We looked forward to seeing New York but, when paraded on shore and, after the

usual long wait, names were called for two destinations. South and North. Security was paramount. Here, on the quayside, I parted company with the man who had been with me since our first day in the RAF. I learnt, post war that he went south to Pensicola, and got his wings.

I entrained for Canada. It was all very strange. The trains were bigger, people walked along "the tracks" and, as we got near the border, there were flags of each country in the gardens of houses abutting the railway and their occupants all waved as we passed.

It was dark when we arrived at the town of Moncton in New Brunswick where, nearby the "rail head" as they call it, was our transit camp which was a large holding area for arrivals to await trains to their ultimate destination: Also, for those returning after having been trained. As we passed through the small town it was unbelievable to see the street and shop lights - it was 10.30pm. People were in the shops purchasing all manner of things. Barbers' shops with men having their hair cut whilst sitting in the window looking out on the street. The wooden houses with rocking chairs on their porches were something that I thought only existed in American films. Boot blacks at the street corners!

At the camp, we waited with frustration for three weeks enviously looking at the wings worn by the successful men of previous courses who were waiting to he dispatched elsewhere. Eventually, we were formed into new flights and entrained for an unknown destination. Nobody would tell us. However, the waiting gave me time to get an aerogramme - a letter microfilmed and sent by air - to my wife. It transpired that the censor cut this first letter to pieces!

The train journey to our destination was very tiring due to the heat. All we wore was running shorts and gym shoes. Every 100 miles or so, the train stopped to take on water and huge blocks of ice. There were many carriages and we soon discovered that, when the train started, we should be sitting down and have everything secured, as there was a lot of play on the couplings between the carriages. This meant that, after the initial pull the carriages towards the back were jerked into those in the front sending a series of bangs right through the train. The bang, having reached the front was then sent back right through to the rear carriage. After about four or five bangs, the engine settled down into a steady pull. On the first occasion when this happened, most of us were on the floor with all our kit from the racks above, on top of us.

We soon learned to cope and it became quite a joke. Our route took us through such cities as Montreal and Winnipeg. As we approached we were warned to be fully dressed in best blue (not battle dress) as there would be a reception at these stations.

We were marched out to the large concourse where there were flags and a band with First World War service men and a crowd to greet us. There were presents of cigarettes and chocolate etc and welcoming speeches for "our brave boys".
Like most of us, I was very embarrassed. We were not brave and certainly not heroes; all we had done was "Hurry up and wait" and we were good at that.

The intentions of those who greeted us were excellent. It showed what good kind people they were and we had to accept it, but in reality, I felt a big fraud, as did so many others. In case I forget to mention it further on, I will say now that this attitude of hospitality continued throughout our time in Canada. They were different people and we were their links with "the old country". As our journey progressed, every 100 miles or so, the scenery changed from rolling countryside, to vast areas of forest interspersed with lonely lovely lakes. It was the real outback.

The occasional log cabins miles from anywhere except the tracks appeared and, occasionally, a very small station or halt with names like Signal Post, Sioux Look Out and Hudson Bay Trading Post - where furs and other articles hung round the door. It was like a Wild West film.

Each day we stopped to disgorge a flight of potential aircrew for a camp somewhere out of sight. We were all potential pilots or navigators. On the evening of the 4th day, having passed through Moose Jaw, we stopped and my flight was told to alight and fall in on the tracks; not put as politely as that, but that is what they meant. I watched our train leave and head due west on a single line track until the red light on the rear disappeared through the wheat into a narrowing perspective several miles away, then surveyed our surroundings. We were beside a pile of wood and a grain elevator bearing the name "Caron" in large letters, there was nothing else but wheat, wheat and more wheat through which passed a dusty road. I felt that we had reached the back of beyond.

After a long wait, a couple of lorries (trucks in Canada) arrived and took us to our camp which was an entity in itself, an airfield surrounded

by prefabricated barrack blocks forming the residential quarters, messing facilities, sick bay, administration and a cinema. There was nothing else but the wheat. The accommodation was good. We then had a shower, which, after four days in a train with little washing facilities was very welcome indeed. There followed a meal and bed.

A new day - 19th July 1942. We had, at last reached our EFTS - Elementary Flying Training School, all dead keen to get going. It was not going to be easy and failure at any stage would result in return to Moncton and re-mustering for bomb aimer training. We were formed into two flights A and B. The programme was, because of the hot weather when flying conditions at mid day for trainees would be difficult, that A flight would commence training at 6 am and fly till 11 am followed by ground school - lectures etc: until 5pm, the evening being free for private study or cinema about twice a week. B flight 8am lectures till noon. 2 pm - 7pm flying instruction, then free time. The rolls were reversed each day - 7 days a week with the occasional 48 hour leave pass. We were so keen and anxious not to fail that we couldn't get enough of it.

The Canadian Tiger Moth differed slightly from those in England. They had a rear wheel not skids, flanges on the rear part of the fuselage and slots in the leading edges of the wings. The airfield had a tarmac runway, which we did not have at our grading school of those distant days way back in England.

Ground school was an extension of the work done at ITW, whilst the flying commenced with familiarisation of the aircraft itself, together with the oil, fuel and ignition system, cockpit layout, effect of the controls, taxiing and handling of the engine, straight and level flying, climbing, gliding and stalling. From here on, certain of the exercises were compulsorily repeated and had to be underlined in our log books to agree with the wall charts kept on each trainee. As the days passed, this was extended by medium turns, spinning off a straight glide. Incipient spins off gliding turns and off insufficiently powered turns, all both ways, that is to the right and left, taking off into wind, gliding approaches and climbing turns; low flying, action in event of fire, abandoning aircraft, as well as gliding and powered approach landings. Then came the Flight Commander's test at 20 flying hours, followed by first solo at EFTS. The heat causing rising air and bumpiness in the late mornings was another thing with which we had to contend.

Days followed when I was sent up to practice what I had learned, interspersed with flights accompanied by my instructor to learn steep turns, side slipping, instrument flying, precautionary landings, low flying, air navigation, recognition of pin points and forced landings. These were followed by a test from the Flight Commander. I enjoyed this flying, but was anxious to get off more on my own, however, they kept a careful eye on us and gradually we were being trusted more. I, of course, enjoyed the low flying, who doesn't?
Perhaps those who did not return from it in one piece! I also liked the challenges from my instructor who, after about an hour of various manoeuvres, would look round and, with a malicious challenging grin say "where's the airfield?" I had to think quickly and not be caught out. When I gave a direction he would say "All right take me there and land". Nail biting moments but I managed it.

I usually had a day of flying on my own to practice, followed the next with my instructor teaching flying by compass, turning onto courses, precautionary landings, instrument flying, take off and landing out of wind. Then came aerobatics, a word covering a variety of manoeuvres taught and practised over the period of a week, interspersed with previous lessons practised on my own. Then came the CFI's (Chief Flying Instructor) test at 50 hours. To my surprise, I passed without an adverse comment and now I was flying for days on my own with occasional checks by my instructor.

One comment that I would like to make is, that when instrument flying, which was done under a hood so that you could not see out, I felt that the aircraft was lop sided and was automatically trying to sit to balance it until I got aches in the body; it was a matter of learning to trust the instruments and not your feelings, but it took me a long time to get over the strangeness of it. There followed two cross-country tests to put into practice the navigation, which we were doing in ground school.

Then came night flying. This was done in an area away from the wheat where a grass airstrip had been prepared. 'There were no electric lights as the "runway" was merely the direction of the wind, and they used six goose necked flares, paraffin fuelled, to mark it. A double flare marked the point where touch down had to be made. This was very different and took quite a bit of practice but, by the time I had done eight take offs and landings in the two hours flying, I was getting the hang of it. There followed more and more practice of all that had been taught concluding with solo night flying. At the beginning of September,

I had my final check having completed nearly 100 hours flying. It seems that the CFI must have been reasonably satisfied with my efforts as the only note he made on points to be watched were steep turns. I remembered the nose wavering somewhat up and down in a rather loose turn, but I was graded as "average".

Regarding the life at the school we were, of course, a very closely-knit body of men. Everything was done together, eating, sleeping and leisure time.
We slept in two tier bunks in large blocks each room holding about 12 bunks. When not flying or ground school, we discussed and compared our progress, our instructors and things in general. The war was a long way away but was still going on. Would we be ready in time to get into it?

We always enjoyed the shows at the cinema and the remarks were usually as good as the film being shown. If there was a war film concerning the Air force, the audience reaction was a show in itself. Of course all the gen men, who like the rest of us, had a little flying experience, were in their element. It was generally a concentrated effort. There were no parades, no physical training, and no inspections. We just got down to learning and that was all that was required of us. As long as we kept our bunk with the locker above it, tidy, and the block clean, there was no trouble. The facilities were excellent.

Hot or cold showers were always available and the food was such that it gave one a guilty conscience to eat it and realise what the people in the UK had to put up with. If only we could have got some of it to them. I managed, as we all did, to do the next best thing.

Having concluded our course we were given a 48-hour leave and we hitched lifts into Moose Jaw or Regina, which was about 100 miles away. Here I was able to avail myself of a service supplied by one of the big shops, Heatons, which had a system whereby you were given a card, selected your purchases and handed it in for the goods to be packed and delivered. There were articles there, which had not been seen in England for nearly three years, and I took the opportunity of sending what my limited money could afford, to my wife at home. The only difficulty was that Canadian sizes differed from the English ones, but I overcame this by asking one of the staff who was about my wife's size, to help which she willingly did. It was just as well as I discovered that shoes and garment sizes were not the same as ours in the U. K but I think that I did fairly well. My wife could always do a swap with

someone in England. During my sojourn in Canada, I sent several of these parcels which all arrived safely.

Most of us were then posted to SFTS - Senior Flying Training School at Weyburn, still in the prairies with its wheat lands, but nearer to the border with America. The camp was similar in design, but nearer to the town than Caron had been. I visited it on the occasional weekend off.

Just outside the camp was a small shop with cafe attached, set up by an enterprising man with a view to supplying things not available in the camp. He did a good trade with the flights after they had been successful in obtaining their wings. For a couple of days after we arrived, each of the preceding flights was waiting for their train to return to the sorting centre at Moncton. Those who had been successful had been on their passing out parade and received the coveted pilot's wings award and promotion. We felt that we should genuflect each time we met one on the camp!
Would we be successful?

We became very apprehensive when we saw our new aircraft, the Harvard. This was a very different one from the old Tiger Moth. It was a monoplane with a hood, flaps and retractable undercarriage. It was much more powerful, but the seating was still in tandem.
The cockpit layout was quite daunting and much more advanced than that which we had got to know well.
There were some 40 instruments and controls to deal with as well as fly the aircraft. Whilst settling in, and getting general camp instructions, several of us got hold of the aircraft manual, and went up to the hangers where the aircraft had been put away for the night. We would spent our evenings sitting in the cockpit going over everything again and again to familiarise ourselves with the lay out. We were certainly not discouraged from doing this, in fact I got the feeling that our instructors were pleased to see how keen we were, but warned us that should anyone cause the undercarriage to collapse by selecting "wheels up", he would find himself back in England before the aircraft hit the hanger floor!

Again, as at EFTS, ground school was another extension of our lectures and covered the petrol, oil, ignition and hydraulic systems of the Harvard with a signed and countersigned chit saying that we fully understood them. We reported to the flights for flying, at times dictated by the weather as it was now past the very hot period. The flight

Commander took each of us up for aircraft experience and local flying. On the first take off, I knew that this was going to be different.

The Pratt and Whitney Wasp engine was so much more powerful than the Gipsy Moth to which we had become accustomed and my head hit the back of the seat as the throttle was opened up. It was an initiation that left me wondering. I liked the feel of it, but of course the instructor took over for landing with a "talk down" procedure whilst I held the duplicate controls. There was a lot more to be learned here.

The next day, I was introduced to my instructor and we took to each other right away. He was not an ex operational man, resting as some were, but proved to be a good instructor. He must have been if he could teach me. He was fond of low flying and even on my first flight we did some. All the trainees thought their instructor to be the best and this was obvious by the comments made when we were discussing flying generally.

The flying time procedure was much as at the elementary school but quickly dealt with every day things that occur during all flights. Then went through the same things that we had been taught on the Tiger Moth and discover how this aircraft handled when doing them. After a few days, when all the compulsory exercises had been completed, I was handed over to the Flight Commander for solo check. Again, to my surprise, he let me go.
There followed days of practice on my own, my instructor being with me less and less and only joined me for new things like forced landings and other vital manoeuvres, a number of which had to be completed in the training procedure. He would sometimes suddenly cut the engine and say, "make a forced landing"!

At first, he gave me time to pick an area, assess it and land, but later he did it so low that I had little time to think. I suppose that I was successful in these exercises because I did not panic. I knew that his neck was at stake as well as mine and, if I couldn't do it he would.

This brings me to a little story about one of our trainees who, on a solo trip, had to make a forced landing due to engine trouble. He telephoned the camp giving his position, and his instructor accompanied by the Chief Flying Instructor, flew out to collect him and report on the aircraft. They found the pupil in a very small field and wondered how he managed to land there.

If he could do it they must be able to the same. So, after a couple of attempts they put the aircraft down, but ran into the boundary hedge. The trainee, on being asked how he did it, said that he was trying to land in the previous field, which was much larger, but approached too high and too fast. On touch down bounced about 15 feet over the hedge into the small field where he came to rest. There were some red faces in the mess that night!

This brings me to another story. I mentioned that my instructor liked low flying and took every opportunity to do some, so I was very familiar with it. However, there was one instructor, a sergeant pilot, who relieved others on leave, sick etc: He was reported by the trainees to fly very, very low. In fact, many were downright scared. On one occasion, when my instructor was on leave, I was sent up with this sergeant who, of course took the opportunity to visit the low flying area, although it was not in our scheduled exercise. He flew dangerously low, little more than a wing tip height above ground and I must admit that I was apprehensive. He then went a bit higher and handed over to me. He kept saying lower, lower, and I was down almost to the ground. My philosophy being that his neck was also at risk and would take over if necessary (and if there was time) in the event of something going wrong. In these aircraft with the instructor sitting in front and the pupil behind, I had rather limited vision and had to rely on the instructor.
On this flight, we were flying over wheat that had been harvested and stacked in heaps about eight feet high. As my vision was limited I didn't see one and the port wing brushed over the top of it scattering the stook in all directions. The sergeant turned round and with a happy grin, gave me the thumbs up sign. I felt that I had just lost another of my nine lives and hoped that I didn't fly with him again.

I was now flying only about twice a week with my instructor on something new, such as flapless landings, height test, taking off and landing out of wind, side-slipping and instrument flying under the hood. The other days I would he practising more on aerobatics, cross country flights and forced landings - this was done to just before touch down when I would open up the throttle and pull away. I had previously found that this required a lot of judgement but now, having learned to side slip (which I enjoyed), I could approach fairly high and slip off the surplus height.

The year had passed into November and, although the snow did not affect our flying much as the ploughs constantly cleared the runway of

loose snow, the remainder was rolled in. However, the temperature was very low and the aircraft when standing outside waiting had to be run up to a certain temperature every half hour or so, particularly when there was heavy snow falling and it was deemed that flying should he suspended. The "No flying" flag would he hoisted. Sometimes it was necessary to put hoods over the engines. Even so, I was surprised when they let us fly in some of the weather. None of us got lost though some had to make forced landings.

Navigation in Saskatchewan was really just an exercise and presented no difficulty. 'The seemingly limitless prairie was crossed by two railway lines running through very small towns, or just a halt at a grain elevator. Each of these bore the name in large letters. All the roads, which were just dust - there were no tarred ones then, ran north/south, east/west. If uncertain of the area, it was only necessary to drop down and read the names on the elevator. This, of course, would be bad practice as in Europe, where no such sign posts, and a blacked out world would leave you lost.

With this knowledge we, from the U.K generally stuck to the navigational practices which were taught namely, pin points, headings, speed, wind finding etc: but the features of the prairies were so obvious that there was no difficulty.
We were getting on with our flying which was now not just exercises, but formation flying, aerobatics, cross countries, instrument flying day and night, air to air, and air to ground firing. We were now so well advanced that handling the aircraft became second nature to us and we were left to practise.

Several of us would arrange to meet over some small town and "practice" air to air firing and formating. The former led to mock battles and the latter was never at the distance between each aircraft as prescribed in regulations. It was great fun and gave us confidence and I specialised in getting inside the wing tip of another aircraft. We would chase each other in and out of the beautiful cumulous clouds getting into such positions that either you or your opponent fell out of the sky. He was then the loser but of course he would right his aircraft before it was too late. These manoeuvres had always to be done above 3000ft.This was a rule to which I stuck and insisted upon. We had attended too many funerals of our number who had crashed through some folly usually "playing" too low in the low flying area or "beating up" a farm where the lads had spotted some attractive girls. When we carried coffins over the prairie to our little cemetery, I used to look at

the vacant areas and decided that if I was going to occupy one, it would not be through my own stupidity; though, I must I suppose, admit that I broke as many regulations as anyone, but always insisted on "safe heights" for these exercises.

In our innocence, we thought that we picked an area for these nefarious activities away from the usual flying training areas. However, our instructors had once been trainees themselves and, undoubtedly did what we were doing, probably worse.
They had means of getting information and would go to an area from which they could watch us through binoculars and, we later discovered, bets were exchanged. I later realised this when, after one of these escapades, my instructor with a big smile, said to me you did well today.

I pondered that remark for some time and, after discussion in our rest period we pooled our instructors' comments etc; we realised that our crimes were overlooked. One of our trainees could not hide his crime. He had been on an acrobatic exercise, which like all such, had to be carried out above 3,000 ft, but returned with a duck lodged in his air intake!! This could only have come from the low flying area.

His story of engine trouble forcing him to prepare for a forced landing near a farm, in that area, and the engine picking up at the last moment caused great amusement amongst us, but he got away with it. A very good cartoon appeared on our notice board, and I think that, secretly, our instructors were as amused as anybody.

Tests and checks took place regularly and the day came for me to take my wings test, but the weather held it up. Eventually, although the "No flying flag" was up, the CFI, to my surprise, elected to give me my wings test. We took off in a heavy snowstorm and gradually found clearer places. In between, he put me through my tests. Ever since, I felt that the weather did me a good turn as it proved my instrument flying capability, navigating (here the land marks were of no avail) and reaction.

The last one being somewhat unusual, in as much as, on coming out of one of the main snow clouds, I was suddenly confronted by an aircraft head on. Without thinking, I flung mine over to starboard, which was the correct manoeuvre, only to find that the other aircraft was going the same way. I had no time to wait and see but reacted to avoid, what might have been, a mid air collision. I got the feeling that the

Chief Instructor was nearly as frightened as I was but it was something not in the scheduled check and I noted that his assessment showed "reaction excellent".

When we returned to base, my landing was not good, but he made no comment and for some reason I passed the test. Then came the passing out parade, which, because of the weather, was held in one of the large hangers. It was a smart, well-drilled "best blue" affair (not battledress), attended by local dignitaries and friends from the nearby town. It seemed like a decoration ceremony at Buckingham Palace. We had practised for about a week for it and each successful man, with sergeants stripes already sewn on his sleeves marched up before an Air Commodore to have THE WINGS pinned on his jacket. We had passed but, sadly, not all of us. That evening, proudly wearing our wings, we had dinner in the little cafe just outside the camp where the proprietor had prepared an excellent meal for us. Plenty beer was drunk accompanied by songs.

One of our number had a lovely bass voice and gave a very good song about comrades in arms, which fitted time occasion well. I could not help wondering how many would survive the war.

As we were a small number, we returned to Moncton, this time in a civilian train not a troop train like that on our outward journey, but it still took four days, and waited impatiently for our posting back to England. Whilst there we received the envious glances of those on their way to training schools. We had come a long way and the war was still going; we should be able to get into it very soon. We ought to have known better. I often went for a walk in the nearby woods where I saw the small black bears climbing trees; also the pika, a little rodent, something like a squirrel that frequented the woods and logging areas.

I well remember sitting in the YMCA, writing Christmas cards whilst in the background the wireless played Bing Crosby singing I'm dreaming of a white Christmas! Winter in Canada is a time that everyone should try to experience. I shall never forget it but although it is not really relevant to the war, I should like to mention the ice.

It was decided, I suppose to keep us occupied, that an ice hockey game should be played. A hose was played on a flat piece of ground and in a few minutes we had a skating rink! I had never skated but soon found that I could stand upright long enough to guide the puck if I didn't have to turn. It was good fun, but oh how my feet ached after the

game. Skating is natural to Canadians. In ponds in the local woods local people spent a lot of time there. The children from about 5 upward would delight in kicking our skates from under us, leaving us sitting on the ice unable to catch them! A favourite game would commence when a person in the centre of the pond would start to turn and be joined by hand to another and so on until a cartwheel was formed. Those on the outside would reach a high speed, one that we air force lads had no chance of joining, but the children took it all in their stride.

I think that it was about this time when we had moved so much further east, that we saw the aurora borealis at its best. We had seen this phenomenon from the prairies as the winter deepened, but now it seemed a most brilliant and awe inspiring sight. I never tired of looking at it. I must say that I felt very guilty. Here we were several thousand miles from a major world conflict and doing nothing towards it except. "Hurry up and wait"!

Waiting is one of the essentials until you are wanted, then you don't move quickly enough. When we arrived at Moncton and took over the barrack blocks of the outgoing flights, we found that they had left behind a large number of things - suit cases, clothing, wireless sets etc: and we were at a loss to understand it until we were told that our luggage must be one kit bag only. We had already bought a number of things to take back to England with us and now understood why our predecessors had left things behind. This presented a problem for me also as I had, of course, done the same thing. I went into the town and, in a general store, found kit bags for sale, and bought one. I cut out the bottom and attached it to the top of my issue one, thus making one long kit bag.

So, after another three weeks of impatient waiting, it was now early February, 1943, the day came when we entrained for Halifax, Nova Scotia where we were to board our ship for where? England - we hoped. The snow was deep, the ice-covered roads were very slippery and the wind was capable of freezing bare flesh. As we left our barrack block, I had my kit bag on my shoulder. It was heavy after being crammed full and, as I walked out with it on my shoulder, I was top heavy. I leaned forward against the biting wind and fell flat on my face nearly crushing my right hand with the weight of the bag. That was not

too bad; the real damage was to a small model that I had made of the Harvard aircraft which I had spent much of my waiting time making. It was crushed flat! All this was much to the amusement of my colleagues who suggested that I'd failed to take the necessary action for stalling and completely forgotten the forced landing procedure. However, their misfortunes were to come later when it would be my turn to laugh.

At Halifax, we boarded our ship; a British one, "Andes" used in peacetime as a cruise ship for Mediterranean waters and was never meant for the Atlantic in winter. We boarded, were allotted our decks and told to find berths.
There was a rush for the 1st and 2nd class cabins by those men who arrived in the foremost carriages, and then the 3rd class cabins were occupied. However, my flight was at the rear of the train and we were allotted the lower decks well below the water line. We slung hammocks from the hooks attached to the sides of the ship or between numerous wooden posts. I did not fancy this. If we should he torpedoed or hit a mine, we had no hope. It made me appreciate the dangers faced by our royal and merchant navies and I decided that the air was a much safer place from which to fight a war.

One incident even before we sailed amused me. As we lay at our berth, we were all looking out at the harbour when some of the Canadians from the mid west and who had never seen the sea, looked at it and said "is that all it does?"

Little did they, or even we English who had experience of it, know what was to come. We received instructions regarding the procedure during the crossing, accompanied by the usual a large number of regulations. The chief of which was that no one was allowed on the decks after dark and, showing a light or smoking there was almost a firing squad offence. We were back to wartime regulations and for the Canadians it was the start of something to which they had to quickly become accustomed.

I remember an incident, which occurred whilst we lay at anchor. When we sat down to our first meal, the wireless broadcast the news direct from England over the tannoy, it was preceded by the chimes of Big Ben which we had not heard for nine months, loud cheers went up all over the ship which, on the mess deck was almost deafening. We had heard nothing but the Canadian Broadcasting System for the past eight mouths. We were really now in touch with home!

The drill at meal times was that we sat at huge wooden tables, which were fastened to the floor by iron brackets that could easily trip you up. One of us, on a daily basis would collect the meals from the galley and bring them to the table - one of the procedures given out in the original instructions. I shall return to this later. We set sail and enjoyed our freedom on deck but soon saw that there was no escort like we had on the trip out. We just relied on our speed to keep us free from U boat attack. The days were short and we were battened down at about 4pm until 8am, the hours of darkness, when we would be below deck. We lived with our hammocks, which we rolled and stowed, secured with our kit bags when we were allowed on deck.
We soon learned the art of getting into a hammock even in those cramped conditions and, whilst wearing life jackets. Each man decided on his own state of undress. During the night I would listen to the water against the side of the ship and wonder what would happen to all the swaying lumps of meat in their hammocks in the semi darkness in the event of an attack!

There were compensations for being in a hammock. These were quickly revealed as we hit the Atlantic winter weather. The ship was rather top heavy with guns, radar and various antennae above, though we carried some fairly heavy cargo in the hold. There was even a swimming pool (it had been a luxury liner) no water in it of course and I was surprised to see that it was not used for anything. All was to be revealed. The weather worsened and the ship rolled to such an extent that the decks had to be roped in small squares to enable men to get along. I saw a man slip and nearly disappear over the side but was saved by his feet catching in the rail. There was not a great deal of sickness as there was on the way out when the ship just swayed. The action now was too violent. Most visits to sickbay were for broken limbs obtained at an unwary moment.

At the commencement of this turbulent time, meals were a joke. When the ship rolled, the plates would shoot down the length of the table and it was the duty of the end men to stop them crashing to the deck. We soon learned to use only a fork in one hand and to hold the plate with the other, but when one escaped which frequently happened, everyone took a stab at it with their fork as it flashed by in an endeavour to relieve the loser of his ration. Later, when things got worse, the large wooden tables broke from their moorings and were sent flying across the mess deck to crash into other tables. It became a real shambles

with broken crockery and food everywhere except inside us, and a deck so slippery that it was difficult to keep upright. Repairs were affected surprisingly quickly and we coped, but it was something that I shall not forget.

This was the time when we had the last laugh over all those who initially had rushed to grab the bunks in the cabins. They could not stay in them and were thrown onto the floor, which, they decided, was a better place, but they still rolled around in the night. We, in our hammocks, did very well as we stayed still and the ship just rolled around us.

I returned with another reminder of the bodily injuries we all sustained which, apart from body bruises, my shins from knee to foot were almost raw from constant contact with a foot high oval shaped step which had to be negotiated when walking from one bulkhead compartment to another. This was a point where watertight doors could be closed to prevent flooding in the event of an attack. Not a good thought upon which to dwell, as you would be trapped.
Usually this step would be negotiated without difficulty but it seemed that just when you thought that your foot was raised high enough to step through, so the ship pitched or rolled and the shin made another painful contact.

Under these conditions, the lavatory was a place to be visited as little as possible. The centre was occupied by rows of seats, back-to-back and divided by a wooden bar, the whole surrounded by seats attached to the side of the ship. I favoured the side ones as they had a bar which gave the user some form of support as it was necessary to time things according to the rolling or pitching of the ship when those occupying the centre places would be projected, often with the contents of the pan, onto the deck. Fire hoses were in constant use in an endeavour to keep the place clean. There was even amusement here! The men occupying the seats in the centre found it more practical to sit in the reverse position, which enabled them to hold onto the centre bar. They were thus able, as the ship roiled violently and tipping the contents of the pan, to raise and lower themselves in time with the movement of the ship. The sight of scores of men all bobbing up and down was quite funny. Some tunes, which fitted these actions, were sung, often with words to suit the occasion, such as in the Russian Boat song - "Yo-ho heave ho"! Fortunately, the ablutions with hot showers were adjacent and, although soap does not lather in seawater, we kept ourselves clean.

About three quarters of the way across, we were met by a Catalina flying boat, which got a resounding cheer, but greater cheers came a little later when Sunderlands began to escort us constantly. We returned to Gourock harbour, entered the boom and docked at the quayside. We were told that there would be a search by customs, but as it was impossible to search everyone, men would be picked at random.

I felt that my very large kit bag would be an eye catcher but had to take my chance. Some men who were, I suspect, deliberately carrying contraband "accidentally" dropped parcels in the water as they came down the gangplank. I need not have worried,
I walked straight through the custom check, bag on shoulder, without seeing them as they were on my blind side. I had only half a crown on me, which would not pay for anything. It was a beautiful February day, a clear sky, with a weak afternoon sun.

In the train, heading for an unknown destination, I felt overwhelmed by the sight of the Scottish countryside. The greenness of it, and the colour of the earth where men with horses were ploughing little fields surrounded by beautiful hedges; the hamlets and villages blending so well with the landscape. How different it was from the prairies. Scot's verse leaped to my mind:

Breathes there a man with soul so dead,

who never to himself hath said

this is my own, my native land.

Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned

as home his footsteps he hath turned

from wandering on a foreign strand

This was the land that we were to defend, the reason why we had worked so hard for the last 12 months and now we were to be given a chance to do just that. Foolish thoughts. What about "hurry up and wait". Yes there was plenty more exasperation to come. Please hold

the war till we could get there. Well, there was no 2nd front yet so we stood a chance.

We arrived at a big transit camp at Harrogate in Yorkshire where we would be sorted out when our papers, which always were sent separately, arrived. In the meantime we paraded for various checks whilst those in command were doing the paperwork. It was remarkable that, although it was early February and the temperature +3°C, it felt very much colder than it did in Canada when it was far below freezing. As the Canadians and Aussies found the wind blows right through you. They shivered.

On 1st March I, with a number of other pilots was sent on a commando type training course to Whitley Bay in Northumberland, much to our annoyance. Delay after delay. However, I thoroughly enjoyed it, as it was the first real opportunity for exercise for a long time. Training in Canada was concentrated flying and ground school, which, combined with good food made us all, put on a lot of weight.

On return, there was another two weeks of waiting before we were sent to a pre Advanced Flying Unit in Scotland to keep our hand in on Tiger Moths. Quite fun after the Harvard, but got us no nearer the war.

I found this an embarrassing time. The civilian population, fed by the newspapers and wireless about air force bombing, could not do enough for us. I felt that I was a fraud as I was a sergeant in RAF uniform with pilot's wings but had not done any fighting. In Scotland I was embarrassed whilst standing in a crowded bus, when an elderly woman made her daughter aged about 30, sit on her lap to offer me a seat! In London it was terrible! People would pat you on the back; bus conductresses would not take a fare from you. It was worse In London where people slept on the Underground platforms. On making my way to the exit, I was greeted with, "Good luck", "Give 'em one for me" etc. I could only say, "Thanks" or "I will, I will", and thought 'what a heel I am'.

On return to Harrogate, we each appeared before a selection board to be told our assessment and allocation. For me, it was twin-engine intruder night fighters. I would have to go on a conversion course for twin-engine flying, then to an OTU operational training unit, for conversion to Beaufighters. I liked the assessment and the allocation and felt that I might be getting a little nearer to the war which, in 1943 was still going strong. It was obvious from the crews, which were

assembling from the Empire training schools that we were gathering a huge air force to attack Europe. I thought - please don't open the second front until I am ready.

I, with a number of other pilots, duly arrived at an advanced flying unit - Little Rissington in Gloucestershire in May, and converted to twin-engine Airspeed Oxford aircraft. We did day and night flying over a blacked out England, which was vastly different from Canada. Navigation was of paramount importance so, we always flew with a navigator. I had the pleasure of flying with one who had joined up with me in 1941. I still correspond with him.

The small cramped countryside, little fields, railways and roads running in all directions, often cloud covered, and dozens of airfields, all of which were things to which we had to became accustomed. What a change from the wide-open prairies of Canada.

At night, there were beacons flashing Morse code letters giving the location of airfields, the code being changed daily. We completed the course in July and waited impatiently for our posting to our O.T.U - Operational Training Unit.

HURRY UP AND WAIT

Then came a big blow, instead of the Beaufighter O.T.U. several of us were sent to a radio school at Madley in Herefordshire where we were to fly single engine Percival Proctors carrying a trainee wireless operator to give him air experience exercises. I was devastated. Didn't the Air Staff realise that here were young men only too eager to get into the war? Surely this was a job that could have been done by older men! However, in retrospect, I feel that I gained from this posting. Although I was still in Training Command, we, the pilots were not training and were treated as staff.

I decided to make the best of it and use this opportunity to put some of my training into practice. Our sole responsibility was flying. This we did in eight trips each of one-hour duration a day carrying a trainee wireless operator, known as a "Goon", we flew two days on and one off. It was not always possible to get all the flights in, as the weather would often clamp down. I used this period of flying as an opportunity of experimenting by finding "winds", using them above cloud to make time and distance runs, then dropping down to get a fix and see how

accurate my assessment was. It also gave me great experience in map reading etc and there was a lot of interest. After the first hour we, the pilots, would exchange news. Haystacks on fire, Army convoys jamming roads, aircraft crash, Land Army girls working in the fields; they always gave us a wave. Ships' gathering in the Bristol Channel and their progress, was always of interest. We would go and find them on our next trip and report progress. I made it a point on my first daily trip to visit the Observer Corps on the Malvern Hills, and give them a waggle of my wings. They seemed to look out for me and I always got a wave from them.

I took the opportunity to bring my wife there and we had lodgings in a local farmhouse. This was our first experience of married life and, for all we knew, it might well have been our last.
The area was very rural, and our lodging consisted of two rooms. One was in the parlour (the front room) of the farmhouse the other an upstairs bedroom.
There was no running water; we drew it from a pump in the big stone-floor kitchen. The lavatory was outside, by a pond. Of course there was no bathroom but my wife managed by using a big tub in the parlour. We had to supply the hot water boiled in large pans on the convenient parlour fire. I could always use the showers at the camp.

Electricity? That would be too modern, we used oil for lamps and had the use of an oil-fired oven, which gave the food an unpleasant oily taste. We gave that up after a couple of attempts and did all the cooking in the grate of the parlour fire having got the local blacksmith to make a trivet for us. For this fire we used wood that we collected daily from the plentiful supply in the local hedges and woods. I remember a little story told by one of the other pilots who boarded out with his wife. He asked his landlady, an elderly single lady who let rooms in her tiny cottage, what to do about a bath. She said that his wife could have the use of a tub by the fire in their room any time that he was not at home!

There was a butcher's shop in the village where we could buy things off ration such as rabbits and offal. Our landlord also helped with some dairy produce, but my wife had to have a ration book for a number of things such as tea, sugar, butter, meat etc. also oil for our lamps and coal if we could get anyone to deliver any. For this we had to register at the local centre, which was 10 miles away. Cycling was our only means of transport. There was a bus service to Hereford twice a week. My wife also had to register at the employment exchange there.

There was no industry to which she could be directed but was told to look for a job and report to the Labour Exchange if she found any work! She managed to find a job in the accounts department of a Jam Factory that abutted the airfield. This suited us very well. I could eat lunch in the Mess at the camp. There were very few cars as petrol was strictly rationed. The majority of people walked or cycled everywhere. My wife and I used to cycle to the camp to visit the cinema or see a play put on by "ENSA" - Entertainment National Service Association, a Government sponsored theatre group for entertaining the Troops all over the world. I thought them very brave to face such a critical audience, but they did very well.

I had just completed about 400 hours flying when a posting came through for two "experienced twin engine pilots" and I was one of them. This was it at last! - No, "hurry up and wait" - it was just to another radio school using twin engined aircraft.
My wife went back to London and I went to Hooton Park, near Manchester but, as the weather was very bad, I did not do any flying in the three weeks that I was there. After a lot more of "Hurry up and wait", in December 1943, I was sent to Shawbury on a B.A.T course - Blind Approach Training. This consisted of a V shaped beam in the form of a continuous note transmitted from a small mast on the airfield in the direction of the runway approach and beyond for a considerable distance. The transmission used the Morse code. As long as you flew down that beam you would get to the airfield. Should you be to the port the note would become an "A", that is dot dash or "dit dah" as it was called, but to the starboard, it would become an "N" or "dah dit". This signal was transmitted towards the direction of take off - known as the front beam similar to the direction of take off, usually to the west, the direction of the prevailing wind, as well as on the approach side, known as the back beam.

There was a bleeping sound at 600 ft indicating the point at which to commence the descent at 100 ft per minute. Another faster bleeping at 100 ft on the perimeter of the airfield indicated that you should be at that height and ready to land. All this had to be done blind - under a hood using instruments only. There was a lot to learn about procedure for taking off, flying around then, finding the airfield again, measuring the beam to ascertain whether you were East or West of it, and landing.

The passing out test was to take off blind, find another airfield, measure the direction of its beam and locate your position in relation to it and land. Then take off and return to base. I had been on this course before and did not do too well as I found it very exacting over long periods, keeping to the "A"s - dot dash in Morse code - indicating the port side and "N"s - dash dots for starboard with a continuous note indicating the beam. It worried me so much that I would hear them in my sleep and wake up quite alarmed. I completed the course but got a low mark, so this was now a refresher.

The remarkable thing was that this time, knowing what was to come; I took to it like the proverbial duck to water and really enjoyed it and although only passed out as "Average" the assessment added "Very Keen".
I also did a lot of practice on the "Link Trainer", a dummy cockpit set up in a hangar. It could give various effects of "blind flying", especially that of cross wind and rough air.

OPERATIONAL TRAINING UNIT.

I returned to Hooton Park where, after more "Hurry up and wait", I was posted to 16 O.T.U (Operational Training Unit) at Barford St John, in February 1944, No 76 Course. Here I found an interesting situation. There were sections of Pilots, Navigators, W/Ops, Bomb Aimers, and Gunners. All trained men rearing to go.

We gathered in a hanger and were addressed by the CO. The outcome was that we would have a few days to settle in and form a crew by mutual agreement. There were sixteen pilots, six of whom were New Zealanders, a fine bunch of men who were the life and soul of the course and entered into everything with great gusto, especially when we did competitive dinghy drill and practice bail out procedure. Twelve crews eventually became operational in Bomber Command, 7 of whom "Failed to return from ops" and one did not complete a tour. For the next day or so we were all eyeing each other up and making assessments.

I was a little older than many and generally looked for the more mature and steady ones. Strange to say, a bomb aimer, who was quite young, first approached me and asked to join my crew. This suited me as I had already sized him up as a keen type. I then selected the others from

the older types. My mid upper gunner was a very solid steady type so different from most of them, whilst my rear gunner who was perhaps the oldest man amongst us was commissioned. We, my crew of five and I were then introduced to the Wellington. A lovely aircraft that I took to right away and, having twin-engine experience, soloed on our first day. Each of my crew took up his respective position and did exercises whilst I was getting the initiation instruction that has to be done when flying a new type of aircraft. We then worked as a crew on bombing practice, cross country flights, combat manoeuvres with a fighter, air firing and formation flying. The only difficulty was that the Wellington was not equipped with a mid upper turret, but our mid upper flew with us, got air experience and swapped with the rear gunner occasionally.

We all got on well together and really melded as a crew. So we passed out from O.T.U, but being posted away as a crew, proved to be a bit of a snag when I had to give the crew names to the recording officer. He, a non-flying type, thought that a Flight sergeant, as I then was, should not have a commissioned man in the crew. I tried to talk my way through this as having been crewed up before, when there was no such objection etc. This was, in a way true as we had been together for about two months. When asked where, I mumbled a name which he thought was Bermuda and seemed to accept it as we were somewhat older and some men were crewing up for a 2nd tour. Good job he didn't take it further. I suppose he wanted his lunch as much as I did!

All this time the crew was getting to know one another, also to learn about our respective families. Several of us were already married and two were to embrace that state during our tour of ops. We were all very keen and I found the others to be very good at their jobs. I really wondered if I was good enough for them. There was a peculiar thing that occurred with most crews when crewing up. We each gave our first name as that by which we were usually known i.e., a nickname. Although my first name is Leslie, from schooldays onward, I was always known as "Will" Hay after the well-known comedian and astronomer "Will Hay" of the 1930s era. My crew consisted of "Will", "Charlie", "Bill", "Mac", "Harry" and "John" the last two were the only correct ones. These names whatever our ranks, were only used when not flying. In the aircraft over the intercom, it was always "Pilot to Navigator or Mid Upper", or Bomb aimer to Navigator" etc. The reason being that, should one of us be replaced in the aircraft at any time, the stand in would know the position of the man who was speaking. This proved very useful on ops. I did not know the first names of my mid upper gunner until I attended his wedding during a leave period from

ops in 1944, and never discovered my Navigator's first name until I met his wife post war. This seems to have been general throughout the Command.

We were now ready for four-engined aircraft training and the second front had not yet opened. We would get on ops at last. We should have known better - "Hurry up and wait". The 2nd Front opened just as we arrived at 1660 Heavy Conversion Unit, Swinderby. Here we encountered a strange procedure for which I never fathomed the reason. We were given a Flight Engineer who had done one operation with a Squadron, then came to the Conversion Unit to be allotted to a crew in training to get flying experience. He would then go to another squadron and fly with a crew that had just commenced operating.
We liked the one who was allotted to us very much and he fitted in well with my crew.
We heard that after leaving us he was missing on his first or second operation.

At the HCU I encountered the Short Stirling. A lovely aircraft to fly but I did not take to it right away. After the Wellington, which was a low - wing aircraft, the Stirling was high - wing with the pilot sitting some three times higher than in the Wellington. I took some time to adjust to the change of height on approach to land and I nearly drove my instructor crazy as I was thinking so much about my approach height, I sometimes forgot circuit procedure. My crew must have thought that I would never make it. However, when I went solo I had no difficulty and took to the Stirling from then on. The final training posting was to No 5 Lancaster Finishing School at Syerston, where I encountered the famous Avro Lancaster. I cannot speak too highly of it. It was wonderful to fly even on one engine. It took a lot of punishment from flak and cannon shells and still kept flying. It had the best bomb and fuel load and, at a pinch, an endurance of nearly 11 hours. The most that I did was 10 hours 40 minutes. After flying a total experience time of 15 hours with the Lancaster and my crew, I was posted to No 5 Group, Bomber Command, which was a specialised Group of some 14 Squadrons that usually operated separately of the other Groups and was often referred to as "The Independent Air Force". We had our own Pathfinders with a special low level marking technique. So, after three years of "Hurry up and wait", I arrived on 49 Squadron at Fiskerton in Lincolnshire - "Bomber County"!

OPERATIONS

I thought that 15 hours experience on flying the Lancaster was not sufficient, and considered that I should be able to cope better under operational conditions with more experience on that aircraft and would welcome any flying they gave me, but I got some sooner than I bargained for. I was now commissioned as a Flying Officer, so after reporting to the Admin Office where we were allotted huts, I was in the same one as my rear gunner.

We had just deposited our kit there when a tannoy message called for the new crew to report to Flying Control immediately. I thought, "Crumbs, this is it". We did not waste time, we left our bags unopened and reported as directed. We were introduced to our Flight Commander a S/Ldr on his 2nd tour who immediately briefed us for a cross country flight and practice bombing exercise.
We grabbed something to eat and were in the air as soon as possible. I welcomed the introduction to a Squadron aircraft and felt that we were really getting somewhere. At least it was a start. We did our cross-country flight and went to Wainfleet, our practice bombing range in The Wash, where we dropped a number of 11 lb practice bombs. A bombing assessment from the range would be sent to the Squadron.

On return, although the weather was clear, as we neared the airfield, I saw a huge red glow in the SKY and realised that "FIDO" - Fog Investigation Dispersal Operation, had been put on. FIDO, which was a device for clearing fog from a runway, consisted of a double line of pipes running parallel with the runway. Pipes sprayed petrol which, when ignited gave off a great heat, causing the air over the runway to rise and so lift the fog. We did not know it then but I understand that when it was first used, the local fire brigade attended. Their frustration at not being of any use was lessened by a visit to our Bar in the Mess.

On this occasion, my only concern was to get down. I hadn't landed on FIDO before and it was a new experience. To land, one made the usual approach but, on reaching the airfield, the whole situation suddenly changed because the heat caused the aircraft to lift. I kept reducing the use of throttle but the aircraft kept drifting and I wondered if we were ever going to get down. However, just before I decided to open up and make another circuit, we touched down about half way down the runway. I had all my work cut out to stop before reaching the end of the runway. It was an interesting experience from which I benefited. So we taxied in and went off to bed.

(Any reader interested in Fido would do well to read an excellent book "Flying through fire" by Geoffrey Williams. It deals with the whole subject in detail and describes the use made of it at each of about 20 airfields where it was installed.)

The next day we did another cross-country flight. On return, the weather was bad. I looked for a hole in the cloud and saw one with some airfield lights below and, as our navigator had told me that we were within a few miles of base, I called them up. They gave me instructions to land and, like a fool, I did, only to find that it was our neighbouring airfield. We stayed there the night and flew to base next morning. I had to account to the Flight Commander for landing away and explained that I descended through a hole in the cloud rather than risk flying through cloud in the vicinity of the Cathedral which was 750ft high, when it wasn't necessary.
I think that he regarded me as being too cautious and I later learnt that he had a bet with the Squadron Commander that I wouldn't last five ops. One of them lost his five bob!

The following day, 1st August 44, to my amazement, My name was on the battle order; a daylight op. I hadn't done a "2nd Dickey"! Pilots usually did one operation as second pilot with a more experienced crew to learn the ropes. It was quite a surprise. A meal and briefing time was given. Rumours were always rife as, after this the petrol and bombing load could always be checked with the ground staff. There was then always speculation. When it was "Full petrol load", depression! I was too new to appreciate these fine points at that stage! So off I duly went with my crew to the Briefing Room, where we all gathered before a platform. A curtain covered a map of Europe on the wall behind.

When all the crews were present, the doors were secured, curtains drawn and Service Police stood guard outside. All rose to their feet as the Squadron Commander and Section Leaders entered and we received the order to be seated. The curtain was then drawn back to reveal the route to the target, which, in this case was La Breteque, a flying bomb site in the Pas de Calais. Flying bombs were causing great concern as many were falling all over South East England, including London. The sites were minute targets, transportable and difficult to find. The briefing was quite complicated and a "Pilots map" was provided on which I could draw the route showing various the various turning points and make notes etc. The CO then addressed us generally about arrival at the target; take off time and signal for delay

or cancellation, also height, which varied throughout, joining the other squadrons in 5 Group at position "A" which was usually Reading, unless we were to fly over the North Sea to the Baltic area, the disposition of enemy fighters etc. but in this case we were to have a large fighter escort which would be sweeping ahead of us.

After the CO, the "Met Officer", often referred to as the "Duff gen man", gave information. He would first give the Group forecast then say "However I think - and give his own version with any little tips such as how certain difficulties might best be overcome. Later on I found his tips very useful, and came to rely on him. Meteorology is a difficult science; even today with all the advanced technology from orbiting satellites, information is not always correct.

The leaders of the various sections then gave their information, after which, the crews went to separate tables, discussed the situation and put the contents of our pockets into a bag, which was sealed and marked. This was a check that no useful information could get into the hands of the enemy should we be taken prisoner. We were also issued with an "Escape Kit" - silk map, minute compass or device that would indicate a direction, razor, and money in the form of currency for the area in which we might find ourselves, tablets for purifying water, Benzidrene tablets, known as "Wakey Wakey" tablets that gave a boost to a flagging body, and iron rations. We also carried a photograph, taken in civilian clothes, for use by Resistance Organisations as they had difficulty in obtaining film for false identity cards.

We all then went to the locker rooms to "kit up" and collect parachutes. Outside, a Waaf driver would be waiting with a bus or lorry and crews would pile in. She knew which aircraft they wanted, but of course I had to tell the one to which I was allotted. I did not get a regular one until I had done a few ops.

On arrival at the "frying pan" - dispersal, I checked the outside with my Flight Engineer - pitot head cover off; (the pitot head was a static vent over which air passed and kept the instrument panel at constant pressure). Also checks were made for loose rivets, tyres for creep, oleo legs for correct fluid level, elevators for movement etc. We then, climbed aboard and checked the entire interior including things such as the master compass, oxygen system, fire extinguishers, axes and stowage of items all the way up to the cockpit.

The next check was the engines; each was started in conjunction with the ground crew who would plug us into a starting trolley. Intercom, communication with the crew, would then be checked followed by the running up and testing of each engine. When everything was in order and running to our satisfaction, bomb doors were closed, the engines would be shut down and we disembarked. I then signed the form presented by "Chiefy" the Ground Staff F/Sgt, acknowledging that everything was satisfactory. The aircraft was now my responsibility.

Knowing how the Service works, it amused me to think, "What would happen if I didn't bring it back? Would I have to leave a report and would it be put on my mess bill!"

The period of inactivity whilst waiting for a green flare that went up from the Control Tower, indicating time to start up and move out, was always a tense one. Each man kept his thoughts to himself. Crews were usually quiet or had forced conversation. The Wing Commander or, if he was flying, the Station Commander, usually accompanied by the Padre visited each crew to find out if all was well and wish us luck. I always thought that the latter came to administer the Last Rites! I am sure that he said a little silent prayer.

When the green flare went up from the control tower, the atmosphere all round the airfield immediately changed; you could feel it; it was vibrant. Crews eagerly climbed aboard, secured themselves, made final checks and engines all round roared into life, 76 of them from 19 aircraft. The airfield, only a mile away from the little village of Fiskerton, informed the residents that we were going out. Lincoln and all the villages around also got the message proclaimed by 1540 Rolls Royce Merlin engines from 14 Squadrons of 5 Group Bomber Command. I might perhaps mention here that this could happen at any time of the day or night, not only from 5 Group. On quite a number of occasions the whole of Bomber Command, which at this period of the war comprised a total of seven Groups, over 1500 aircraft, from Yorkshire to Cambridgeshire, could be out at one time. The East of England would, on most of these occasions be well aware of the fact!

I often thought that it would be impossible to keep this secret from the enemy.
It was quite a sight when we moved out from our dispersal to drop into a space in the line of Lancasters all moving on the perimeter track towards the take off point. I became aware of the weight of the load that I was carrying. Mention might be made here that taxiing to the take

off point was often not always straightforward. For a variety of reasons the flow of aircraft leaving the runway became interrupted. A problem then arose. The engines of stationary aircraft waiting to take off would quickly overheat, and alarmed flight engineers would be pointing to the temperature gauges where the needle was getting too close to the red section. Unnecessary really as the pilot was well aware of the fact but did not want to reveal any apprehension as it could spread through the crew. One couldn't blame the engineers; they were like a mother with a newly born child. The answer was to turn into wind, which if sufficient, could have a cooling effect. It was a tricky business turning a line of aircraft, with a wingspan of 102 feet. On this occasion all went well and the other aircraft became airborne quite quickly. My turn came when the one in front of me set off down the runway.

I moved on using every inch of tarmac at the commencement point, did my final checks, which included 20 degrees of flap for better lift initially, whilst waiting for the green light from the control van. Then it came. Brakes full on, I opened the throttles until the tail began to lift and released the brakes. This gave as fast a take off as possible. As we increased speed, with my left thumb I advanced the port engine throttle ahead of the other three to counteract the torque of the engines and prevent swinging to port, then gave full throttle and "through the gate". The gate was a device to prevent engines being used beyond their capacity but, this was war time and chances had to be taken.

The maximum revolutions allowed could be exceeded for some three minutes. This could be vital to prevent stalling with a full bomb load. The gate could be bypassed which, on these occasions was the usual practice. The end of the 2,000 yards runway was fast approaching but at 98 mph the aircraft began to lift. 'Wheels up' as soon as possible was my motto as they increased the drag when down. I was very aware of the weight of the aircraft not having experienced taking off with a full bomb load before. It felt slow and sluggish. My engineer brought up the flaps on my order as in the drill procedure. I immediately noticed that the angle of flight was slower to respond due to the heavy load. It was the usual drill for the engineer to "milk" the flaps up but I could see that with a full bomb load they should be raised more slowly to give me a chance to appreciate the differing angle. I later, with the engineer used a drill that the flap should only be brought up by four lots of 5 degrees, each on my order instead of raising them by a number of quick jerks. I later found that at night, this was a good system as on leaving a lit runway, especially at twilight, it took quite a time to adjust one's eyes to the fluorescent instruments in the cockpit.

On this occasion, I flew to our flight plan on the directions of the navigator. There were many aircraft around but, as we approached position, "A" which was Reading, where some 14 squadrons had to slot into a box formation, we got closer together. My navigator brought us in on our briefed time and we dropped into position. I soon became aware of those in front of me as their slipstream caught my wings and caused a loss of lift. I had to be quick to prevent slipping sideways as you could lose height and sideslip into another aircraft. I had yet to experience it at night!

This route and procedure was to be typical of many ops. Position "A" to cross the coast at Beachy Head, position B on or near the French coast then to various positions according to our target. On crossing the coast we always got a "fix", either visually or on H2S, which came from a scanner fitted under the aircraft; it would be confirmed by Gee used by the navigator or bomb aimer when he was not in the bomb bay. Gee was a system whereby beams were transmitted from this country and would show up in the form of blips. These were interpreted in the form of lines and where they crossed was our position i.e. "a fix". At the coast, guns were placed "on fire" i.e. safety catches off and the bombs fused. i.e. made live.

Soon I saw my first flak from the air. I had seen plenty over London but these were just black puffs coming from St Valéry and Fécamp. They did not come too close to us and I just flew on. Throughout my tour of ops, I got used to flak from there as well as from other places, and used them as track marks. I presume that someone must have strayed too near them causing the flak to open up.

I never saw our fighter escort, they must have been sweeping a long way ahead, but we got no trouble from enemy fighters. As we neared our target, low cloud began to cover the ground. Navigators were bringing us in and the aircraft got closer. We began the "run up" towards our aiming point, and bomb doors were opened. In the aircraft ahead I could see the bombs, which looked as though they were about to fall into my path. It was most alarming. They must hit us. Our pathfinders were unable to mark the target visually as cloud covered the ground; with French houses close to such a small site, the area could not be bombed! At last we received instructions from Controller ordering, "abandon" Bomb doors were closed, much to my relief and we turned for home. Whilst being bitterly disappointed we fully

understood that you can't drop bombs "ad lib" over French territory. The civilians had to be considered. It was bad enough when later; we had to do it but not to imperil them now unnecessarily.

At briefing we had been instructed that, in the event of there being no bombing, on return we were to fly to 3 degrees east and dispose of the bombs in the North Sea, as our load would be too heavy for landing. This we did. I was surprised by the sound which I knew to be the release mechanism as it gave a muffled thud as each bomb left it's housing. However, I was not prepared for the sudden rise in height without the weight of the bomb load. We went up like a lift, a thing to which it was hard to reconcile for many ops to come.

The trip to the North Sea meant that we were late back at base as all the others had disposed of theirs in some other way and I think that I was the only one who took them to he briefed position. I was called to the Flight Commander's Office where he demanded an explanation for my "late" return. I said that I had conformed to the briefing, but he pointed out that all the others had returned long ago. I replied that they could not have adhered to the briefing instructions as I had, which could be confirmed by my navigator's chart. I was then dismissed and heard no more of it. I believe that the betting against my completing a tour became heavier.

I know that it got around that "The new pilot insisted that he was right and everybody else was wrong" but I stuck to my guns and felt that it did not do me any harm. I later learned that the others had various ways of disposing of bombs without making a long detour to the North Sea.

On returning to our huts, which were some distance from the airfield, we found that some of a new crew was sharing our hut. We immediately took to them and got to know them well. We became great friends - and rivals, as we were one trip ahead of them. After our second trip, we said, "Of course when you are as experienced as we are, you'll know what to do. Anything you want to know?" We never let them forget that we were one op up on them, but disaster was pending!

Next day, 2nd August, I was again on the battle order, the target was Trossy St Maxim, another flying bomb site. It followed the same procedure and I knew what to expect. This time the target was clear and our pathfinders had marked our aiming point. I was again very

conscious of the open bomb bays of the aircraft ahead and some 50 ft higher; it was an awe-inspiring sight. Our bomb aimer ran me up on the correct heading and I was flying as accurately as I could which kept my attention off the aircraft ahead until I saw their bombs drop. I felt like turning my aircraft on its side to present a smaller target. However, I concentrated on the run in and the bomb aimer called "Bombs gone" and I again experienced the lift effect as of the day before.

I remember one occasion when a stick of bombs fell between our wing and the tail plane, which gives an idea of how close they could be. No, they could be closer!
There is a squadron photograph of a bomb that landed between the navigator and the pilot, but they made their bombing run, brought the aircraft home and landed with it. I don't know where the photograph is now, but I have another of a damaged wing with the imprint of a bomb on it! The trip back was uneventful and I flew as per our flight plan. I was to discover that some crews, after crossing the channel opened up their throttles and got back as soon as they could. It seemed to me throughout my tour that they thought "First back" was a triumph.

After a little experience, I did not subscribe to this view as it used more fuel that might be required later such as landing away because of an accident on the runway or fog etc. Their object in getting back early was that they avoided a lot of the circuit procedure with which later crews had to comply. They would also avoid queuing for debriefing and subsequent meal, hoping to get to bed earlier.

Circuit procedure, which was anti clockwise was disciplined accurate flying especially at night. On reaching the airfield you identified it and yourself in that order by code name. In mid 1944 the airfield was "oil grease" and the aircraft was "Aloft" with the addition of the aircraft letter. This was done from 1,000 ft at right angles to the runway in use at the approach end. I would call up "Oil grease from Aloft "U Uncle". The WAAF at flying control would immediately reply acknowledging contact and giving me the runway in use and my position in which to land; this depended upon the number of aircraft already on the circuit e.g. she might reply "Uncle number 3" which I would acknowledge "Uncle No 3" and change frequency in order not to clog the channel for those behind me. The new channel connected aircraft on the circuit with flying control and each other.

I would then be able to hear each pilot giving his position at a certain point. These were places on our anticlockwise circuit - "upwind" called

out at a quarter past, "crosswind" at the hour, "Wheels" at a quarter to the hour - it would also remind the pilot that the undercarriage must go down! "Funnels" on turning onto the runway and "Clear" as the runway was vacated. Each pilot would give the letter of the aircraft concerned. Thus, on calling up and being given No 3, I would know that there were 2 aircraft ahead. I would change frequency and listen for their respective positional calls from which I would know my position in relation to them, also that of anyone arriving after me. We would of course know which crew it was by his aircraft number. It was always a matter of interest.

It might seem complicated but was really very easy and effective. However, should there already be four on the circuit when you arrived you might be given a "Plus a half" which extended the circuit by time. If there was trouble you might be given a height of 1,000 ft or over - known as stacking, until called in. These girls did an excellent job, which could become quite tricky when a number returned at almost the same time or, which was worse when these was a crash on the runway or it became blocked. They had to keep a careful record of who was stacked at what height and bring them down.

3rd August, I was again on the battle order. Three ops in three days! We would finish within a month at this rate. I knew that was optimistic but it was a nice thought. The target was again Trossy St Maxim but this time it was the flying bomb stores. Our rival crew was also briefed and the banter that was to exist throughout our time commenced. I said, "Stick close to me you can't go wrong"!

We remained one op ahead of them for a long time and never let them forget it.

The squadron did not operate next day and we were sent on high-level practice bombing.
Practice bombing?
We were operational! However, we still had to do it. It gave me more experience inside the aircraft, which is what I wanted; it was in my mind that at night in the case of a fighter attack or another emergency, I needed to put my hand on anything without looking for it.
There was also an assessment record kept on the proficiency of each crew.

Our Bomb aimer was dead keen and reckoned that he could get a better result if the bombs were polished. He managed to "obtain" some

polish and cloths from stores and got us down to the bomb dump where we polished the 11 lb practice bombs to his satisfaction, much to the amusement of the ground staff and a great deal of ribbing from the crew. We worked together helping each to do his job as he thought it best.

On 7th August I was briefed to go on a night operation as "2nd Dickey" to a more experienced pilot. I was a bit, as we used to say, cheesed off at this. Here was I with 3 ops behind me having to go on a "2nd Dickey" trip!
Little did I realise how different a night operation was going to be - and a very different proposition from that which I had experienced so far.

We went through the usual briefing; more complicated than for daylight with many changes of course to fox the German night fighter controller. These were followed by an involved system of target marking which, for Five Group in general was, as follows: -

"H" Hour was bombing time. On approaching any defended target, at "H" minus 11minutes, "Oboe" a green target indicator, would go down within a mile of the target. Master Bomber, having checked that his team had all got there, would call for "lights", whereupon a cascade of white flares would go down at H - 10 and H - 9, illuminating the whole area. A Red Spot Fire would be placed on the aiming point, then be assessed by Master Bomber who, if satisfied, would call for it to be backed up with the marking code colours for that night or, order it to be cancelled and another would be placed as he directed. Placing a line of yellow flares across the inaccurate marker indicated a cancellation.

Also shown on the map were fighter and flak areas, which we marked as well as those where "Window" was to be used. Window was of different types for each of these and the rate at which it was to be dropped. This was followed by the weather forecast, time at the target and our heading for running up and time for bombing.

The use of "window" is well documented, but I will mention that it was in the form of aluminium-backed paper strips that would interfere with the many types of enemy radar namely Freya and Würtzburg which were ground tracking devices; We also carried a second type that would block variety of types of scanners fitted to enemy aircraft to enable the pilot to home onto a bomber.

My pilot took all this in his stride and didn't appear to worry too much but I wondered what his inner feelings were. At the aircraft I did the usual checks with him but, when I sat beside him in the flight engineer's place I found it very cramped as bundles of window were stacked from the floor to window height close to where I sat. What a hazard in the event of fire or having to bale out!

So, off we went. What a difference it was. In the darkness you could feel the slipstream of the aircraft ahead especially over Reading where we formed into a compact group to rush the enemy defences that ran from the tip of Denmark to southern France.
At the French coast, the flak was heavier with bursts lighting up the sky. At night any light over a blacked out Europe is easily visible and, at the target the scene was really frightening. There was a terrific barrage of flak put up by the enemy; this, together with our flares, target markers, searchlights and exploding bombs and camera flashes seemed like hell let loose and was a real shaker.

I was not sorry to have done that 2nd Dickey trip and when I got back to the hut those of my crew who were there woke up. I sat on the edge of my bed and told them about it; a very different thing from anything that we had experienced so far.

Two nights later, 9th we were briefed to go to Châtellerault to attack an oil storage dump. It was our first night trip, which took 6 hours 25 minutes and went quite well. We found it fairly complicated as there was so much to think about, but it kept us busy. At the target I found that all the flashes made accurate flying difficult as they blinded me and I thought it best not to look out and decided on a policy that we used for the rest of our tour namely:

Unless one was in the first wave, this was the chaotic scene that presented itself on approach to a target. The Navigator ran us up to a point where we turned into the target when the Bomb Aimer took over on a more detailed approach, endeavouring to get me onto the exact heading for the aiming point. My policy at this stage was to concentrate on accurate flying by using the gyro on the instrument panel, as any alteration showed up on it immediately, whereas the compass took longer to adjust. Although I reset the gyro every 10 minutes throughout a flight because of precession, I always reset it to coincide with the compass, just before turning into the target. The object was to achieve the correct heading, height and speed, at the same time keeping the aircraft flying straight and level and comply with the slight deviations

called for by the bomb aimer. I had to leave the sighting of fighters to the Gunners and Flight Engineer who was also doing the windowing at a prescribed rate. We bombed and returned in due course. This op gave us the experience that we needed and we knew that luck had been with us so far.

Throughout our tour, when approaching a heavily defended target and the enemy put up a concentrated barrage of flak, I always thought - we'll never get through that - but we had no option other than to take what comes. Perhaps we'll be lucky again!
I learnt that the sky is a big place and we had a very true saying "death depends upon what part of the sky you are in". I now know from my records that on returning from an op, some crews reported being hit by flak, set on fire, attacked by fighters and damaged, injuries, coned by searchlights etc. Another crew would report "No trouble, quiet trip"!

Just as we thought that we were getting our ops in nicely, a snag occurred. The Squadron aircraft were to be fitted with "Village Inn" - the code name for A.G.L.T, the Automatic Gun Laying Turret. It was a radar-controlled device fitted to the rear turret in the form of a scanner that would reflect the presence of another aircraft onto a small glass screen that had target rings, which could be adjusted by foot pedals to fit the size of an oncoming aircraft. This device was mounted on the guns and, theoretically enabled the gunner, in conjunction with the pilot, and wireless operator who was working on "Fishpond", a radar scanner, to track an interceptor closing in on his aircraft. An infra red code signalling device was fitted to the front turret of all Bomber Command aircraft so that an A.G.L.T rear gunner could pick it up on an infra red telescope, also fitted to his guns, to prevent him shooting down one of our own aircraft in the bomber stream.

This system required a great deal of practice and half the Squadron was stood down for this purpose. I was in the first batch, which commenced with ground instruction for the pilot, gunners and wireless operator. I had to use this device in order to understand the rear gunner's job and know his situation whilst I was flying the aircraft. It took a bit of getting used to, but I knew what it was all about.

Following ground instruction, we flew with it and, using the same system for practice fighter attack as we did in our usual training times for "fighter affiliation". We would fly to a fighter airfield; call up control, ask for a "playmate" and up would come a fighter and proceed to attack us. The fighter pilot had been advised that it was not the normal

practice and we adopted a set pattern of exercises. Both aircraft were fitted with cameras so that we could afterwards view the effect of our actions.

The drill was for the rear gunner to pick up an aircraft in conjunction with the wireless operator who could detect it at 2,000 yards. The pilot could of course, hear all of this over the intercom. When the aircraft came in to attack the Wop would read off the ranges and at 1,500 yards the rear scanner would "bleep" and it would appear on the rear gunner's glass screen.
As it closed in, the bleeps got faster and the Wop continued to read the ranges. At 700 yards the gunner would call "Go, port or starboard", depending on the direction of attack. The pilot would then go into our "corkscrew" manoeuvre by diving into the direction of attack thus exposing the attacking pilot to the guns of the mid upper gunner and making the deflection allowed by the attacking pilot more difficult.

The pilot would then call out his position to the rear gunner who, strange to say had no idea of the position of the aircraft in the air unless he could see the sky or the ground. These manoeuvres were done at pre-calculated speeds and positions and the gunner would know how much deflection to make. e. g. "Down port, rolling, up starboard, rolling etc. The gunner would open fire at some 500 yards. On return, we would view our efforts as shown by the cameras. Needless to say, the mid upper gunner took the opportunity to practice his sightings. The training was done in daylight so, after the couple of days, the rear turret was blacked out to simulate night conditions for the rear gunner.

15th August, to our surprise, another daylight "maximum effort" was ordered by Command. It appears that the lads doing the night bombing were getting a bit of a pasting from fighters, so each squadron was to bomb a fighter airfield and we were taken off A.G.L.T. training for it. I didn't fancy it too much, I thought that we might be stirring up a hornet's nest as our target was Deelen in Holland, the headquarters of the Luftwaffe. We had to plaster the runways. A large fighter escort swept ahead whilst some herded us like sheep. They perhaps didn't realise that some, who were outside the stream, may be having trouble and were reluctant to hinder the other bombers. There were over a thousand aircraft going to 9 airfields, whilst Mosquitoes attacked Berlin and other targets. A further ground invasion was taking place in southern France whilst the allied troops, who had been pinned down at the beachheads commenced their breakout from Normandy. What a

headache for the German fighter controller! We didn't get any interference from the enemy. What a sight the airfield was. We pasted the runways very effectively. However, with the astonishing German ability to recover from such devastating attacks and repair the damage, it proved to be only a temporary relief.

There is a little story that was told to me post war by one of our ground staff, namely, that as the "Village Inn" aircraft had blacked out turrets and it was a "maximum effort", the turrets had to be "un-blacked" to make the aircraft available for night use, but there was a snag; they couldn't get the black paint off without damaging the turret and it was a long time before a solvent could be found that would do it.

Next day, 16th August, instead of returning to our Village Inn training, it was another "maximum effort" and we were briefed for Stettin, an important inland port on the Baltic Sea. Our target was the port and factory area, which was very heavily defended. The trip took 7 hours and 45 minutes.1, 200 aircraft went out that night to various targets that ranged from mining in the Baltic, Kiel Bay and the river Gironde in France with feint attacks being made by the training units which would break through our radar screen, to deceive the German Night Controller, then turn back for home. For me, it was a long way, the longest trip that I had done so far, 7 hours and 45 minutes.

Our good fortune in getting on with ops did not last as we returned to training on "Village Inn" and the rear turrets had again to be blacked out. Poor old hard pressed ground crew!

Training was a long hot tedious business as it was mid summer; I often flew stripped to the waist as the cockpit area was all Perspex. It felt like being in a greenhouse. We then combined this training with cross-country exercises during which we would do some high level bombing at our practice range at Wainfleet; also fighter affiliation. I completed my "Village Inn" training on 9th September.

On the 10th September, another daylight op was called for, as well dug in Panzer forces were bogging down our troops in the area of Normandy, and had to be dislodged. Low cloud had prevented two previous attempts to do this, but on this occasion, the weather was clear and some 1,000 aircraft attacked 8 different strong points without

loss. Although it was a short trip that took me 3 ½ hours, it was a nail biting one, as we had to bomb 200 yards ahead of the British troops. My Navigator and Bomb Aimer were more than anxious, as indeed was I. The army placed yellow smoke along the British lines and we bombed.

Further support was given the next day and the enemy surrendered the port. I understand that Field Marshall Montgomery sent a message to the Command congratulating them on their efforts.
On 11th September, the target was Darmstadt. It was a clear night and 5 Group marking was excellent. The bombing was concentrated and accurate. The German report called it "terror bombing" because of the absence of major industries. There is no doubt that it was a railway communications centre. However, one has to consider my experience in London, namely, the destruction or damage to small industries that were undoubtedly important.

For me, however, it had an additional meaning, as it was an occasion on which Command decided to test the effectiveness of Village Inn. Briefing was therefore very exacting. We were to fly at the rear of the bomber stream, stacked in echelon upwards as if we were late and trying to catch up. We were given individual heights to fly and I was right at the back, the uppermost aircraft. I must say that I was not too keen on being in that position as it seemed too much like being a staked out goat waiting for the tiger and would probably be the first to get picked up.

There was always the possibility that there would be some other latecomers, there generally were, and their infrared identification or "Z" equipment as it was called, might not be working. To overcome this, we were briefed not to open fire this side of 3 degrees east (the other side of Paris) unless we identified the aircraft visually as an enemy one. We had to be absolutely certain that we were not shooting down one of our own bombers. To me, it was a bit hair raising as it seemed that we had to leave so much to chance before we could get to grips with anything that might come up. We could only wait and see what happened.

We took off as usual, but later than the other squadrons, trailing behind and working on a time basis, to Reading, then to the coast. Guns tested, bombs fused. Here we go!

We had hardly crossed the French coast when our wireless operator reported that his radar screen - fishpond - showed two aircraft at 2,000

yards and had been there a little while. The rear gunner was unable to pick them up at that range so we just waited. We had not expected two aircraft together and I was apprehensive; so after telling the navigator that I was going to climb 1,000 ft, I did so. The two aircraft followed. I then did the standard procedure for an aircraft that was running early, namely, I altered course 30 degrees for one minute. They followed; then with a 60-degree alteration of course followed by a turn onto our correct route.
Throughout each alteration, the Wop was saying "they're still with us". They must be enemy, but we had no visual identification as per briefing and it seemed to me that we must wait, take the first attack and try avoiding action.

It was my opinion that we had the advantage. They knew that we were there and we knew that they were there, but they did not know that we knew they were there! It was not long before the wop said they're moving in astern and the rear gunner positioned his turret accordingly. Soon came the pip, pip, pip of our beam being reflected from their aircraft at 1,500 yards. Rear gunner "nothing on infra red". Wop, "They've drawn apart port & starboard". This was difficult - which was going to come in first? In the event of my turning into his direction of attack I was meat for the other one! The one on our starboard moved in first and the pips became faster and the Wop read off the ranges - 12 hundred. 11 hundred, one thousand, 9 hundred, 8 hundred, 7 hundred, I turned into the oncoming aircraft and dived. A few moments later the mid upper said "I've got him; he's a JU 88, just gone over the top of us". We breathed again now we had confirmed that they were enemy and we were ready for them. I resumed straight and level flight.

No time was lost. Our Wop reported that the other aircraft was coming in from astern - 1,000, 900, 800, 700, I dived to port and the rear gunner opened fire. Almost immediately the enemy dropped back, it seemed to me like the proverbial scalded cat! He never got near us, certainly not within 600 yards and was obviously hit.

The two aircraft then flew behind us, close together. It was interesting to think how they were able to locate each other so quickly, presumably using us as a reference point. I assumed that their R.T was red hot. How I wished that I could hear their conversation! However, after a short time, they were joined by a third aircraft and flew in a triangle. The Wop who all the time was working on his radar screen, "Fishpond", was giving the details. We had only ever practised with one fighter. Two was bad enough but three was real trouble!

They then spread out and proceeded to make a series of attacks on us. The wireless operator kept reporting all their movements, I was working a continuous corkscrew and the rear gunner beat off every attack. It was just as we had practised so many, many times, over the friendly flat fields of Lincolnshire.

They attacked again and again; the rear guns were almost out of ammunition. I told the bomb aimer to take the ammunition from the front guns to the rear, which he tried to do, but, not being on intercom whilst doing so, he could not hear my commentary and, although the corkscrew is a smooth movement, he had difficulty moving through the aircraft. He reached the rear turret just as the fighters, after making an attack broke off at 450 yards and abandoned the engagement. They were probably getting low on fuel.

We assessed the situation. No damage as far as we knew, no injuries and the guns were reloaded. We were however, disappointed. Why had we not shot any down?

The navigator reported that there had been 10 attacks in 29 minutes and immediately gave me a new course for the target. It has always been a mystery to me, not only on this but on many other occasions after such difficulties, he was always able to give me a new course. On occasions such as this, he must have hung on by his eyebrows, as he had to use his hands to hold onto his chart, maps, setsquares, rulers and pencils etc as well as to hang on. I said before that I had a good crew! Now you know what I mean. Even the engineer didn't complain about the amount of his precious fuel that I was using! We settled down to our flight to the target each busy with his thoughts and certainly with mixed feelings. I felt elated; with a crew like this I knew that we had a chance!

Due to the expertise of our navigator, Darmstadt was reached on time. The raid was very concentrated. Being last in, the barrage put up was murderous. The enemy knew our track in and it looked as if nothing could get through. This was always quite frightening and, every time I thought the same thing - impossible to get through it. The only consolation being - we did it before; perhaps we shall be lucky again. After each trip we noted the shrapnel holes in the aircraft and wondered how long it would be before one of us would get a piece or a vital part of the aircraft would be hit.

The raid was very successful and, on our way back, the rear gunner could see the fires from 150 miles away. Not surprising really; this might seem a long way, but when the whole of Europe was blacked out, any light was visible from miles away.

Back at base, we were greeted by an eager group of radar mechanics and, although we were elated as we knew that Village Inn worked, we were puzzled as to why we had not shot any aircraft down. It was the next day, when we tested the aircraft with the Village Inn radar team, it was decided that the probable cause was the ranges sticking due to humidity, which meant that the cone of fire did not centre on the enemy aircraft. It is now a matter of record that after the war, A.G.L.T was abandoned as "not being very effective". I doubt the accuracy of that, and suggest that if they had tested it in actual combat, they might have thought otherwise.

12th September was my next op, which was to Stuttgart. My only memory of it is that it was a well-defended target where the barrage of flak put up was most disconcerting, there was no alternative, we just had to fly into it and hope.

17th September was for me a daylight op to Boulogne, when over 700 aircraft attacked German positions in preparation for an allied attack. It is reported that the garrison surrendered soon afterwards.

On18th September, Bremerhaven, a port on the North Sea just south of Denmark was our target. It was on this occasion that I flew PB 504 "U" - Uncle for the first time. It was fitted with Village Inn, and was to become my aircraft. I flew it until November when it was badly damaged which resulted in my having to use a spare one.

This was the first occasion that I saw the flak from the Naval base at Heligoland. It was murderous! It was worth noting, as on subsequent ops to northern Germany we often flew down the river Weser and at night particularly, one could get a good idea of position from the flak going up from Bremerhaven on the starboard side and Wilhelmshaven on the port followed by the flak from Heligoland ahead. I always reckoned that the latter was aimed at an aircraft that had overshot the turning point and strayed over the naval base. Perhaps the crew liked a bit of excitement! The trip took nearly 7 hours.

About this time I saw dummy targets built by Jerry in the vicinity of the real target, but the flashes were too regular in pattern to be bomb flashes. However, they attracted some bombs from inexperienced crews. Some targets with very distinctive features such as a lake or particular shape of river would be camouflaged by netting to give it a different appearance.

Another little device used by Jerry was using an English voice giving false instructions - "Alright chaps, that's it. Save your bombs, go home, go home". Or "They've had it. Cease bombing." I never knew him to get the Master Bomber's code name with which he preceded his instructions. It was changed nightly.

On the 19th of September, the target was the twin towns of München

Gladbach and Rheydt and is memorable for me. There was a lot of radio interference, presumably jamming. The instructions of the bombing leader, Guy Gibson in a Mosquito, were difficult to hear but it seemed to me from what I heard, that he was flying very low and I thought, "You're taking a chance mate". He failed to return! His navigator, S/Ldr J. B. Warwick was also killed. He was on his 2nd tour having completed a tour with 49 Squadron earlier in the year.

26th September was a raid on Karlsruhe. I have no particular memory of this one, but our next one, on the 27th was on Kaiserslautern, which is another memorable one. The city was situated on high ground; we carried only incendiaries and were to go in low. We often flew out low over the Channel to get under the enemy radar then climb to 1,000ft on reaching the enemy coast, thence to target height. The approach to the city revealed a "fairyland" of light flak of several colours. It was a beautiful sight, all hose-piping up lazily; added to this were the "flaming onions", that is, little balls of light that came up looking for all the world like a string of French onions. It was a good name for them and probably came about because in pre war days, it was a common sight to see Frenchmen who travelled southern England on bicycles selling strings of onions that they carried on their handlebars.

This type of flak was fascinating; as it seemed to come up so slowly, but I believe that only one shell in five was tracer. It was almost mesmerising, that is if you didn't do something about it, as it would suddenly, if you were lucky, whiz past alarmingly.

It was a matter of working our way through the streams of flak to drop our load. However, I had to go in as briefed at 1,000 ft. The city was on fire and I could see the main street quite clearly; it was like being in London during the blitz. This was the only occasion that my wireless operator decided to draw back his curtain and look out. He said that he could see right through the belfry of a church! So he quickly drew his curtain across and never looked out again. He said, "That was enough for me, I'd sooner not look".

The German report on this raid says that the town was not a military objective and lists a number of public buildings and churches that were destroyed or damaged but included what it termed as a number of small factories. This bears out my experience in London, that bombs caused damage to unknown factories as well as gas, water and electricity supplies as well as the railway system. This would hinder production as well as cause disruption to the war effort.

5th October. Wilhelmshaven - A daylight op. This was I felt, a bit of a dog's dinner as most crews reported great difficulty. The whole area was covered by thick cloud encountered before the coast was reached. 12 of 49 Squadron aircraft, including mine bombed on H2S. My navigator obtained a good picture on the radar screen and the bomb aimer was satisfied with the result. I was not happy with it.

My crew was now due for some leave. The snag however was that the Squadron had to move to Fulbeck, just south west of Lincoln as well as to keep operating whilst I was away. The Americans had used Fulbeck as a glider base for "D" Day - the invasion of Europe. Our leave was granted but the difficulty on returning was to find the entrance to the airfield, in the blackout. I must have walked miles round it but I got there at about 11pm, then had to find out where I was billeted and get to my hut. I just hoped that we were not operating the next night. My bomb aimer was late back and had to report to the CO the next day to provide an explanation!

Our rival crew took the opportunity to get at me over these problems, but we were still the "senior crew" being one op ahead of them.

Two more of our crews had "failed to return" whilst I was away, but these things were inevitable. We just dismissed the fact; we were not callous, but it was the only way to look at the situation.

At this time both my gunners were having periods of sickness and I carried replacements and always got on well with them as they soon became used to my way of doing things. This might be a good place to mention the importance of the job done by air gunners. What a monotonous one it was! They sat hour after hour sometimes for over 10 hours, just staring into the blackness, searching, searching, and searching! Yet the crew depended so much upon them. I could never have done it. Could you dear reader?
Try sitting in the darkness in an uncomfortable position, concentrating for just 5 minutes. It was little wonder that so many of them were unwell.

On 14th October, Brunswick was our target. 5 Group with 240 aircraft made a night attack to such an effect that it was not again attacked in any strength. The German report said that 1,000 bombers attacked the city. I remember that there seemed to be chaos in the air as I went in. My rear gunner did not have time to call out an attack as an ME 109 came down vertically on us. The first I knew was that he opened fire as the 109 flashed by. I got the impression that we were not the target, it was probably one of those round us, but in a mix up of flak, searchlights, flares, fires, incendiaries, bomb and photoflashes, target indicators etc. who can tell? It was over in about three seconds. To say the least their pilots were courageous men.

On 27th October a somewhat unusual event occurred and although I was there at the time I never knew anything about it until 2003! It appears that a Mosquito aircraft landed at Fulbeck just before the pilot was to do some "Village Inn" fighter affiliation with a Lancaster from 49 Squadron. The Mossie pilot went into the crew room where there were a number of flight engineers and said to one of them, "Like a trip in a Mossie?" but the engineer said, "No thanks, I've only one more op to do and I want to do it. Another engineer, Bert Ashcroft, said, "Yes, I'll go" and up they went. They rendezvoused with the Lancaster and went through the usual attack and counter manoeuvre procedure. Unfortunately, 20 minutes after take off, on one movement; the Mosquito was unable to pull out of the dive and plunged into Stapleford Woods, Near Coddington, and 2 miles East North East of Newark. The pilot and the 49 Sq flight engineer were both killed.

Apart from the tragedy, The Station Commander G/C Weir, was presented with the problem of an engineer being killed on an unauthorised flight in an aircraft from another Squadron. The Group Captain first wanted to view the scene from the air and one of our flight

engineers, Geoff: Brunton flew with him, flying around the crash site several times. The C.O. and Adjutant of the Mosquito Squadron flew to Fulbeck to clear up some of the technical and administrative details consequent upon the death of the two men. I can only surmise that they recorded Ashcroft as being on a temporary posting to the Mosquito Squadron as the accident is shown in their records, but not in those of 49.

A funeral service was held at St John the Baptist Church, Wolverley, where Ashcoft is buried at the far west end of the churchyard. There is no military headstone, but the grave is marked and very well maintained. He is also remembered on the WW2 War Memorial adjacent to St Mary' Church, Kidderminster.

This is perhaps the place to say more about Group Captain Weir of whom I have a good memory. He was posted to Fiskerton in the second half of 1944 as Group Captain in charge of the Station. He was soon known as "Groupie Weir" or, because of the colour of his hair "Ginger" Weir, but not of course to his face.

I believe that he had a lot of experience and was well versed in the engineering line. Although a Group Captain, he was a good mixer and probed all aspects of Squadron life. Most Station Commanders did an operation understand the difficulties experienced by operational crews. Here, he was the exception and took a crew on several operations rather than be office bound.

When operations were on he probed all aspects of the trip and often replaced the Squadron Commander by visiting each crew, as they were standing by their aircraft ready for the signal to "move out", to know if everything was O. K.

I well remember an occasion when I was using an aircraft that was on loan; I can't remember why, but mine was probably in for a maintenance check. On getting to the aircraft, "Chiefy" i.e. the Flt Sgt i/c ground crew, said that the 4,000 lb bomb would not fit into the aircraft, so it was only loaded with incendiaries. I ran up the engines and checked the aircraft and, as everything else was satisfactory, shut down and awaited the "move out" signal.

"Groupie Weir" arrived to wish us luck and I mentioned the difficulty to him. He consulted the armourers, had the bomb bay opened and climbed in and made an inspection. On descending, he called for a

hack saw, took off his coat, climbed up again and, to the horror of all of us, began sawing away part of the interior. Then he called for the 4,000 lb bomb to be brought under, turned to me and said, "If I can get this up inside, will you take it?" My Bomb Aimer was aghast. I really had no option but to agree, whereupon he worked with the armourers and hoisted it up. He attached it with stout wire, which he connected to the release mechanism.
On descending he turned to me with a grin on his face and, using my nickname said, "Ok Uncle?" Tongue in cheek, I said "Yes Sir," and off he went happily on his rounds.

My crew didn't exactly complain but from the look on their faces I knew that they were sure that I had stuck my neck out too far. I well remember how our hair bristled as we held our breath and taxied out as gently as possible seemingly on tiptoe, then made the usual bumpy run down the flare path before we became airborne.

Suffice to say everything worked and all bombs went down on the target and the 49 Squadron aircraft, which failed to return that night was not mine!

I never heard any more of this incident but was glad of the backing of a Group Captain when the aircraft was returned to the place from which it came. Such was the character of this man he was a real "goer". One operation was not enough for him. He went on three more and I well remember his last one, to which I shall refer in the sequence of events.

On 28th of October, our target was shipping in the harbour at Bergen in Norway. The weather was now not very good and on 4 previous occasions we were briefed for ops that were cancelled, often at the last minute and even then after a delayed take off time. This was the start of a very bad winter when flying was at its worst.

The flight across the North Sea was very dull; mostly cloud with a thick mist; it was very cold. As we approached the coast, the controller said, "Try to get below 5,000 ft". I got down to about 2,000 ft but the bomb aimer could not see anything then, the Controller called "Abort ". Tricky, as well over 200 aircraft had to turn for home and the danger of collision was imminent. All went well and when we were safely over the North Sea we dropped our bombs, as they would have exceeded our maximum landing weight. We did not know it then but when our bomb aimer checked, his bomb panel told him that all bombs had gone. Although he always made a visual check through an inspection panel

in the bomb bay, due to the murky darkness, he could not see that one had not gone even though he used a hand torch.

On return, Fulbeck was completely in cloud and returning aircraft were diverted to a number of other airfields where we might get in. I was given Driffield, but on arrival there we found that an aircraft had crashed on the runway and we were diverted to Rufforth, where we landed. This is where economy in fuel had proved useful. It was 5.25am so we found a bed but it was not long before the Service Police, who had been guarding the aircraft, came round calling for the crew of "U" Uncle. It appears that one of them had heard a thud and, on investigation, saw a bomb sticking through our bomb bay doors. What was worse was that it was a delayed action bomb. What had happened was that it had frozen to its catch and, only after landing did the ice melt sufficiently to release it.

The ground crew and armourers did an absolutely magnificent job working against time. They put a large padding on a trestle under the bomb and gradually opened the doors thus lowering the bomb onto the padded trestle, and got it away to safety. This is one example of the excellent way ground crews, throughout the war did their work and did it so very well. I shall say more about them later.

The bomb aimer and I decided that instead of trying to check the bomb bay with a small torch, in the darkness and, in this case cloud, we would wait until we were well away from the target and shine the Aldis (signalling lamp) through the inspection panel even at the risk of showing a light that could be seen by night fighters, and a better check that the bomb bay was clear.

By now we had done 18 ops and regarded ourselves as fairly experienced, although there were always the unusual situations, such as the last one that could arise, and did! Certainly we wondered how much longer our luck would hold out, as the dangers seemed to be greater with the increasing number of ops. I think that the spirit of the squadron kept us going. A missing crew was made light of, "Got the Chop" - "Went for a Burton" - "Poor old so and so bought it last night"! That seemed to be the general attitude, but I believe that it was felt deeply especially if you knew the crew well as I was to find out later. However, you couldn't afford to get morose about that sort of thing. So

we progressed. It will be seen that the weather had now begun to turn against us and I feel should be of special mention.

Winter weather was now setting in, and what a winter it was to be with all the difficulties and frustrations that it caused.

From my point of view flying in bad weather was one of our biggest enemies and made me very apprehensive. In November alone, there were 13 days when the Squadron was on "Stand down" as conditions over Europe were unsuitable, and 8 occasions when ops were laid on only to be cancelled, sometimes when we had run up and were awaiting the "move out" signal.

I considered that weather was on a par with night fighters for danger. Particularly the bad times that came when we had to fly through weather fronts over Europe. I know that we, Bomber Command, lost quite a number of aircraft on such occasions. I remember taking off with a full petrol and bomb load for Munich at dusk when cloud base was some 400 feet. I had just gone into cloud when I saw that the aircraft ahead of me had crashed. The one behind me also crashed. Two lost before we left the vicinity of the airfield! Taking off was always a chancy business as ones eyes had to become quickly adjusted from the lights of the runway to read the fluorescent glow of the instruments.

There were occasions when trying to climb to bombing height in a weather front resulted in St Elmo's fire dancing along the wings. The propellers were edged with yellow rings with the boss as a yellow protrusion. Sparks danced all over the windshield. All very pretty, but worrying especially with all the fuel that we were carrying. Then the ice could be seen building up quickly on the wings, handling became sluggish and more power had to be used to keep height, let alone climb. The engineer complained bitterly about the amount of his precious fuel that I was using. The navigator called for more speed as we were getting behind time. What did they expect me to do, get out and push?

We had to get to the target on time and we had to watch the fuel in case of diversions etc, but each man was only doing his job so I could say nothing. The gunners reported that their turrets were frozen over, but as far as I can remember, the W/Op made no complaint; his little cubicle was one of the warmest places in the aircraft. I suspected that the Bomb Aimer, who had his own way of doing things, was trying to keep his bombsight from freezing up. I thought on these occasions, "If

there are any fighters up here, good luck to them, we're all in the same boat!"

Not only did we have to get to the target on time, but also to achieve the bombing height. I usually climbed until the aircraft wallowed and was in danger of stalling, then dropped height slowly and try to find a layer of cloud free space. They sometimes existed and our Met man, who was pretty good, often gave us a height where such conditions might he found. Occasionally I was successful.

Another very anxious time was landing back in the U. K when the mists or cloud lay low on all of Eastern England. Often hundreds of Bomber Command aircraft operated at night as well as the USA by day. They all had to get back and land somewhere. Diversions were frequent; bombers landed all over the place and had, if possible, to get back to their bases next day.

I remember returning in the early hours one cold frosty morning when something had gone wrong on the runway. A number of us were stacked at various heights waiting to be called in, but instead we were told, "Hold, still old, and continue to Hold". One of the pilots, contrary to all landing procedure, sang a complete verse of "Here we go round the mulberry bush". We did not know it but the Base Commander, who was paying a visit happened to be in the control Tower (in the warm of course), heard it. On landing, the pilots were ordered to attend before him and called to account for the breach of regulations. Of course nobody had heard it and had no idea what he was talking about. A suggestion that it might have been radio interference nearly brought a charge of insolence. There followed a general admonition and we were icily dismissed from the room, in keeping with the cold and frosty morning! He had to maintain discipline but I expect that he had a smile when we left. He flew on ops himself once and knew what was what.

I recognised the voice of the perpetrator, and he is still alive today - February 2004!

Diversions were not popular with the Command when, on the next night another large "op" was laid on. Ground crews kicked their heels whilst awaiting the return of their particular aircraft or of more concern, was it missing! A ground staff man told me after the war that when his charge failed to return he worried himself sick about whether or not he

had missed anything in his checks. When a week or so later he was summoned to the office of his F/Sgt Engineer or "Chiefy' as he was known, and told that the aircraft has been shot down and the crew taken as POWs, it took a load off his mind.

This conscientiousness reveals an aspect of Service life not generally known or thought about. Each of the ground staff, whatever their capacity, was as vital as the aircrews. They worked conscientiously at all hours on bitterly cold airfields. No aircrew could operate without them. When their aircraft did return, the Ground Staff had to go to work again at full speed checking engines, framework, fuelling, armouring, repairing flak damage etc. The next op was often a "maximum effort" order to keep up the pressure on the enemy and the ground crews were pushed hard to make every aircraft serviceable. The poor old "erk", as he was known, received the full weight of the pressure from Harris down to Groups, Stations, Squadrons, Flights, and Sections down to the "Chiefy" to have an aircraft ready for take off.

It is also important that at these times we should not overlook the work done by the other ground staff - flying control, caterers, parachute section, stores and administration. All played a vital part in the life of a Bomber Squadron. The flying personnel relied so much upon them and upon them for so much!

On 1st November, we were briefed for Homberg to attack the Meerbeck synthetic oil plant. It was a half daylight affair and we arrived at the target just after darkness fell and cloud covered the whole area. These oil refineries were very small targets and in this case no instructions could be received on W/T or VHF. A Wanganui type attack was commenced. This was the code name for target marking when there was 10/10ths cloud over it so that the markers could not be placed visually on the target. The Master Bomber made a calculation and a red marker, on a parachute, was hung in the sky. The order to bomb was "Sky, Sky, Sky" and the bomb aimers would aim their bombs at that red marker. The trajectory should bring them onto the target.

There was a lot of milling about and uncertainty over the target and the flares came down all around at my height, I couldn't see a thing, nor could the bomb aimer so I decided to go for the alternative. It looked as if I was not the only one as there was an attack going on there and the flak was heavy. I went in and we bombed, but as we were coming away, flak hit our starboard outer engine, which caught fire. The flight engineer, using the automatic fire extinguisher, put out the fire whilst I

feathered the engine, and flew on the other three. The crew reported that they were O. K and that there was no damage in their section.

It was not long before the mid upper gunner called up to say that he could see liquid coming from the starboard inner engine. This meant that we had also been holed in the fuel tank there. I didn't need to tell the flight engineer as he instantly switched the two remaining good engines on the port side to fly on the leaking tank; thus using as much of the fuel as possible before it drained away. I also increased the speed to use more fuel and get us nearer home. We knew that this engine would probably give more trouble, which it did as the temperature began to rise. Our engineer was like a cat with kittens and kept drawing attention to the slowly rising needle on the temperature gauge. I was aware of it just as much as he was, but didn't want to cause apprehension in the crew.

We got back nearly Lincolnshire when the needle went into the red section, which meant danger of fire; I held it as long as I dared then said "Shut down" which the engineer did very promptly and doubtless with much relief, and we flew on the two port engines. "What an aircraft, good old Lancaster". We were now nearly on the circuit and on up calling Flying Control, was given a priority landing and went straight in and turned off the runway onto the grass as I couldn't taxi with 2 engines on one side. Just as well as my ground crew was not going to be too pleased with me! I couldn't face them! Next day, our good old reliable "U" Uncle for which we had a great affection, looked a sorry sight. Down on one side as the tyre had gone down over night - we didn't know that it had been damaged! Fuel was dripping from the damaged tank. We counted 34 holes in the wings and fuselage and bullet holes in the engine that had overheated. This was quite a surprise as they were small holes and I thought possibly from another Lancaster firing in combat. It was not the cannon shell from a fighter.

All my ground crew were quite good about it. I suppose they knew it would have to go to a Maintenance Unit for repair and accepted the position. It wasn't going to be a job for them.

2nd November, the target was Düsseldorf, and I was again on the battle order. I was given a Lancaster "D" Dog from a new Squadron that was just forming up at Fulbeck prior to getting an airfield of their own. It was to be a memorable trip as it was trouble for us. Over Germany, the Rhineland lay clear before us with the Rhine a beautiful winding silver river. It was a cold clear night with a heavy frost and a

full moon. What a night for fighters! It was not long before the bomber stream was intercepted. We saw combats going on all round.
Some aircraft were blown out of the sky; others were spiralling down in flames only to hit the ground with a massive explosion. I informed the navigator of the approximate position so that he could log it. All this information would be of use to intelligence section. However, aircraft were going down so fast that he could not log then and keep his chart going.

We windowed heavily and were not attacked but, to add to my worries, over Düsseldorf the Master Searchlight got me. This master searchlight, which was blue, was worked blind, that is without showing a light and was controlled by a radar-scanning device, the Würtzburg. When it had the details of an aircraft's height, speed, heading and distance, the information would be given to the gun batteries that worked in conjunction with it. When the operators were ready, they switched on and the blue searchlight flashed straight onto the aircraft. Instantly, a number of searchlights, obviously forewarned, would hold the aircraft in a cone, whereupon the gun teams would concentrate on it whilst the hapless pilot, in this case me, performed almost impossible feats in an endeavour to escape. He knew that if the flak didn't get him, the fighters would be at full power towards the place where he might emerge.

The Master light was extinguished and searched elsewhere. I had practised for such an occasion as this, as I couldn't look out, as the searchlights would blind me. I lowered my seat and flew on instruments to take avoiding action.

I was now like many others I had seen in the same situation on other raids and felt like an actor on a stage. I knew that most of the 900 + aircraft crews that were on the attack, would sympathise and be glad that it wasn't them. I had a full bomb load and it was hard heavy work doing aerobatics in a Lanc, but at least it was a way of combating predicted flak, as the gun batteries seemed to be having a field day. My concern was any fighter having seen me coned would be at full throttle to be at the escape point. It took some 3 to 5 minutes to escape but it seemed like hours. We never knew why we were not attacked, lucky again?

Again, my navigator could immediately come up with a new course for our objective. This had been a more difficult time for my navigator than

the time when the three fighters attacked. I was then doing a controlled corkscrew, but on this occasion, it was much more violent.
He had not only to hang on to his charts and equipment, he also had to hold on to his seat, and certainly couldn't keep a plot going; however, he quickly gave me a course and speed to fly! I was sweating profusely, but got quite cold as we flew on and got back into the bomber stream. We reached the aiming point on time, bombed and returned to base somewhat relieved.

The reports show that this raid was a very heavy one and was the last major raid on that city. To my surprise, only 19 aircraft failed to return. I reckon that I must have seen all of them go down! Our rival crew capitalised on this one with caustic comments about getting into such a predicament; where was all the experience of which we boasted? We, of course made light of it; we had done the job and got back.

I hope that I am not giving the wrong impression, but these things are uppermost in my mind. It was not like this all the time, we had good times as well. On Bomber Command "stand down days" of which there were few, we went to Lincoln or Newark. This, on those occasions, bulged with 5 Group Squadrons indulging in their desire to experience the variety of ways to let their hair down.

I was not a drinking man - I thought that it not go with flying. We would visit the cinema or just looked round generally. On several of these occasions, Montgomery requested urgent bomber support. Notices were flashed on cinema screens "All RAF personnel report to their Stations immediately". We knew that there was, to use the current expression, "a flap on". RAF trucks toured the streets collecting aircrew. Service Police toured the City winkling crewmen from all those places where they found "entertainment" and they knew where to go. It reminded me of the tales of the old "Press Gangs". Although it was some hours before we took off, I am sure that some of the aircraft went waltzing down the runway!

There were mess parties often of a somewhat boisterous nature. We played our rivals at snooker and table tennis etc. often goading them about their lack of experience generally, but these were the things that gave us the break we needed.

On the 6th November, 5 Group resumed its attacks on the Dortmund Ems Canal at Gravenhorst where it joins the Mittelland Canal. This was my first visit to what was to prove a very testing target, and I was to

visit it 5 more times, as it was so essential to the German war effort. There was always was a hot reception at the Canals.
Jerry knew that one of them must be a target as the barges with vital supplies were ready to be rushed through at the earliest possible moment when there was enough water to take them. He would be specially prepared. I believe that he had mobile guns on railway lines and could quickly bring them to readiness in a required area, but I have no facts about this. As soon as his Würzburg radars revealed our heading into a target, although he knew it from previous attacks, a wall of flak was placed in our path. There was no getting round it as we had to fly into it on the heading given, otherwise there would be more crashes than there were. Usually, over 200 "Lancs" had to bomb a narrow target in 15-20 minutes.

Perhaps you can imagine a magnificent firework display in a particular area like Sydney Harbour Bridge on Millennium night; flak bursts were not just pretty displays but deadly shell bursts into which one had to fly and take what came. It looked so thick that penetration seemed almost impossible. However, one learnt that the sky was a big place and we just hoped for the best.

The target marking system for Five Group in general was, as follows: -

"H" Hour was bombing time. On approaching any defended target, at "H" - 11minutes, "Oboe" a green target indicator, would go down within a mile of the target. Master Bomber, having checked that his team had all got there, would call for "lights", whereupon a cascade of white flares would go down at H - 10 and H - 9, illuminating the whole area. A Red Spot Fire would be placed on the aiming point, then be assessed by Master Bomber who, if satisfied, would call for it to be backed up with the marking code colours for that night or, order it to be cancelled and another would be placed as he directed. Placing a line of yellow flares across the inaccurate marker indicated a cancellation. Our Pathfinders' flares would go down at regular intervals. Green markers would back up target markers, which were usually huge red spot fires, perhaps some cancellation flares across any markers that were not correct. There were bomb bursts, photoflashes each of several million-candle power, dropped from all aircraft to enable each to get a bombing photograph. Window, usually anti-Würzburg type at the target, was dropped from most aircraft. There were combats, aircraft exploding or going down in flames. That was the scene that generally presented itself to us on arrival. On this occasion, there was very low-

lying cloud completely covering the target and the Controller gave the order to abort, which we did, and set a return course.
It was not long before a message was received from Base ordering the Squadron to land at Horsham-St-Faith in Norfolk, an American Airfield, and we took a more northerly route than the one for which we were briefed. Returning over Holland, we ran into a very bad weather front.

When we neared the English coast, the weather worsened and controlling the aircraft became very difficult as we ran into the weather front. How my Navigator managed to guide me up to the airfield I don't know, but he did. Over Norfolk I could barely keep the aircraft from turning completely over. I could hardly see as the rain just poured in sheets over the windshield. I called up the Station code and an American voice gave landing instructions. My Navigator guided me to the runway but as I turned in, it was jumping everywhere except straight ahead. I decided that to land would be a miracle; I had no alternative but to try. I remember thinking that anyone who succeeded would earn the VC!

How I managed it I shall never know but what a relief when I touched down. I wondered what had happened to the rest of the Squadron. I was certain that none would be able to get in there. I reached the end of the runway where a jeep suddenly appeared with an illuminated sign on the back "FOLLOW ME". It was an American airfield all right. The jeep, which was just a blur with a light on the back, guided me through the teeming rain to a bay where I parked. We boarded the Jeep that whisked us off to a hanger and, on entering; I found most of the other crews standing around drinking coffee! My ego has never been so deflated!

Our rival crew, already there said, "We nearly came to look for you as we thought you might need help"! I made a suitable bragging reply, which I won't repeat!

The experience didn't end there. The amusing bit is that in the mess, a dinner was immediately laid for us consisting of food that we had not seen for years. I happened to be sitting next to the Colonel, an all-powerful man on a U.S base. He was a big man with a terrific South American drawl, probably a Texan.

During the meal he said with a slow drawl, (to be read with an accent of the deep south), "Mah boys hey bin praactisin some niight flyin. They caame daan an tol mee it was a a a a b s o 1 o o t I y impassable to fly. So ah grounded em! Theen you British boys come all the waay from Gurmany with a full loada live bombs 'n land on mah aerfield. Ah said to mah boys "You git raight back up in that skai"!!!

I thought, how not to make friends! Incidentally, I note that I took my first 2nd Dicky pilot on his experience trip that night. I wonder what he thought! Next day, we flew back to base.

11th November, the target was an oil refinery at Harburg. I don't think that there was anything special here except that on return, the weather was atrocious and we were diverted to Carnaby, an emergency airfield in Yorkshire where we lingered for a couple of days and returned to base when the weather had cleared. The emergency airfield was interesting. The runway was much longer than any that I had seen to enable them to take aircraft with brake failure. It was also much wider so that a crashing aircraft could be bulldozed aside and still leave room for another aircraft to land. It also has an area to take an aircraft that had to land wheels up.

On return I found that my Flight Commander, S/Ldr Gorton and crew had failed to return from the op. A strange story arose from this when, 58 years later, the lady who came to live next door to me, mentioned that she had a brother in the R. A. F, who was an air gunner and had been killed. The only identification that she had was of course his name and strangely, his service number. On consulting my records, I found that he was in 49 Squadron and a member of S/Ldr Gorton's crew!

The 21st November was another op that I well remember for 2 reasons, the first being the raid itself, the second being the loss of Group Captain Weir.
On this raid, 5 Group split its force into two joint raids. 138 aircraft flew to the Mitteland Canal near Gravenhorst, and 123 aircraft to the Dortmund Ems Canal near Ladbergen. 49 Squadron was on the former.

I should mention that this canal was vital to the enemy as it was at that time the only way that he could get his supplies to and from the industrial Ruhr.

The German Armaments Minister, Albert Speer said, post war, that the draining of this canal was one of the biggest hindrances to their war effort. We had to keep it drained. It was so vital to the enemy that with his tremendous "slave labour" force and admirable expertise, he usually managed to repair it within a month or so and knew that we would come as soon at was ready. It goes without saying that he knew the target to within 1,500 yards; also the night when we would come, that is when the weather was suitable and our photographic recognizance aircraft would reveal that his barges were queuing up to rush through as soon as it could be opened. He always provided a suitable reception.

The run in to the target was very difficult as was the weather situation, and I quote from the 49 Squadron Operations Record Book: -

"At 20.40, the Controller ordered both forces to stay at bombing height and at 20.58 ordered the main force to attack from below cloud, giving the cloud base as 4,000 ft. The instructions, coupled with severe jamming of W/T caused some confusion. He next ordered the crews to bomb the southern red T.I.s as planned. Consequently some crews bombed through cloud and others below cloud. The markers were visible through gaps in the cloud layer. Bombing was reported as concentrated in relation to the southern T.I.s. A few crews obtained visual identification in the light of photoflashes. It was a very successful attack".

I well remember that, as we ran in towards the target, it seemed that we were again flying into hell - the fierce red glow of the markers on the cloud, photo flashes, the flak and bomb bursts. Just as we were moving up to start on our bombing run a "Lanc" came diving in from the starboard! I'll never know how, but I just had time to pull the nose up and he slid underneath us so close that the bomb aimer in the nose nearly turned grey with fright. He swore that he could read the navigator's chart in the other aircraft! When I related this back in the mess, a navigator said sarcastically, "Oh yes, I suppose he said that the chart was incorrect"!! Joking apart, the incident really shook me; my mid upper gunner made no comment but I suspect that he felt as I did. It was so sudden that we could not understand why he came in like that, but there could be a number of reasons such as hit by flak, pilot killed or injured, evading a fighter attack; who knows!

I stayed at 8,000 ft where there were gaps in the cloud and my bomb aimer ran me in on the most southerly of three T. Is. The straight and level run made to obtain our photograph seemed to take hours! The one taken later by Photographic Recognizance Unit showed that a 30-mile stretch of water was drained and that 59 barges were stranded in one small section!

49 Sq. lost two aircraft; in one the average age of the crew was 20! They were all killed. The other crew was older, most with a lot of experience having done a tour previously. Their aircraft was PB 300 "K" flown by Group Captain Weir. He was the only survivor from that crew; the others were initially buried near the crash site in the woods at Hörstel Gravenhorst but later moved to Reichswald Forest War Cemetery.

We later learned that "Ginger" was a POW. I met him at a reunion after the war and asked him about the raid. He related the following interesting account: -

"I was running in to the target when suddenly, there was a blinding flash. The next I knew was when I came to in the Canal, which fortunately, had been drained. I had a few cuts and bruises together with a broken ankle. I then crawled hoping that I could make the Dutch frontier. After three days, I was trying to cross a bridge when a German sentry caught me. I was well treated and was eventually taken to an Interrogation Centre. I was given cigarettes (he was an avid smoker) and questioned but only supplied my name, rank and Service Number. I was then placed in a cell alone for a few days with little food, brought up again and supplied with cigarettes, for which by this time, I craved. From their questions I knew that they did not associate me, a Group Captain, with the raid three days before I was captured. They thought that I was from a photographic reconnaissance unit. I stuck to the "name and number" routine and was returned to the cell. No cigarettes and little food. The cell was over heated especially at night.

After a week, when I was quite exhausted, I was taken back to the interrogation room and sat at the table with my interrogator opposite. He said "Well Group Captain Weir, since you won't tell us, we'll tell you. You are the Station Commander at Fulbeck in Lincolnshire. (The Squadron had moved there from Fiskerton in October). He opened a large sheet showing the diagram of an airfield around which were photographs of aircrew whom I recognised, saying, 'this is your airfield and these are your aircrews.

These, (pointing to buildings) are your hangers and here is a list of their contents. We shall hold you personally responsible for any missing items when we take over".

He must have seen by my face that he was right. I felt that there was nothing that I could tell him'. I was then sent to a POW Camp".

These interrogation tactics were no doubt, a very good bluff. Their treatment of a prisoner weakened resistance. The "map" that they produced of the airfield could have been any airfield; they were of a standard pattern. All hangers, U.K and German have similar contents and a list of the usual items could be easily compiled. Inserting the 'escape photograph' into a flying suit by a good photographer could easily produce the aircrew photographs and they had plenty of 49 Squadron crews in captivity.

I know of another 49er who was brought back from the P. O. W camp to the interrogation centre, told that the squadron had a new Wing Commander, which was true, given cigarettes and good food then shown photographs, hoping to draw comment in exactly the same way. However, I must continue with my story.

Most of my raids had been of 4 to 7 hours actual flying, but the next was to be a long one. 9 hours 20 minutes, to which has to be added the pre op meal, briefing, checking of aircraft etc. and waiting for the take off signal. Afterwards, debriefing, meal and bed. It was a long, very tiring trip especially on the return trip at the time of anti climax. You couldn't afford to risk falling asleep and had to force yourself to keep awake as well as your crew. There was the ever present thought - was there a prowling fighter looking for just such a target as a sleepy crew that was not alert! There must have been many.

So on 26th November it was Munich - A sector bombing attack namely, that each crew was given a heading 2 degrees different from that of the next aircraft.

It was a dull dark dank winter day with a cloud base of some 3-400 ft and was no better as the day progressed. Our load was 1 x 4,000 lb bomb and incendiaries. It was a late take off. I was airborne at 2346 and went into cloud almost immediately and saw that the aircraft, which had taken off before me, had crashed and burst into flames. I could only give the passing tribute of a sigh.

We learnt, on return that the aircraft that took off behind me also crashed not far away. Two gone before we had left the vicinity of the airfield!

We were briefed to fly low on a southerly route to France to keep under enemy radar, which was possible whilst over the Channel, but we had to lift a bit over land because of cloud. I remember that in central southern France, the cloud cleared. We could see the distant Alps in the clear moonlight. As briefed, we flew south of them heading for Italy in the hope that the German Controller would estimate that we were going to attack a target there. We were also, we hoped, sheltered from enemy radar. I well remember seeing the beautiful Mont Blanc 1,506 feet, glistening in the moonlight slightly above my port wing. Shortly, after passing over lake Como, we turned northwards over the Alps and in to attack Munich.

It was an amazing sight. The attack had commenced and there was the usual seemingly impenetrable curtain of flak. The city with its bridges over the river Isar looked rather like London with the Thames flowing through it. There was however, an unusual searchlight situation. There were two huge cones on either side with a gap between them. The temptation was, of course, to fly through the gap only to find "The Reaper" waiting on the other side. Our briefing was again for sector bombing giving a cartwheel effect. Our navigator brought us round to our allotted heading and we went in and bombed, surprisingly without getting into trouble.

Subsequent reports show that there was a great deal of damage to the railway system, which was the centre of our aiming point. Returning after over nine hours flying we were very tired, but again still had to combat the English weather, which was again bad. We couldn't get into our airfield and were diverted to Syerston.

I think it was on this trip that I had a silly little incident but it has always stuck in my mind. On many trips we carried leaflets, which fell over the target area when the bombs doors were opened. They came to the aircraft in bundles tied up with string, but were not put in until I had checked the aircraft, run up the engines and closed the bomb doors. The leaflets were then cut loose and put into the bomb bay through the inspection panel. The crew often did this job to help the ground staff who had better things to do. I used my penknife to cut the string and, whist inserting the bundle into the small inspection panel; my treasured penknife went in with the leaflets.

There was no way of retrieving it. It had to fall out over the target. I have since wondered if a body with a knife in its back, was ever the subject of an investigation!

December was a month of 9 cancelled ops; a number of "Stand downs" as fog persisted all day. I think that I must have had some leave as I did not operate for a while, during which time our rival crew drew level with us in the number of ops completed We had to keep a bit quiet and hope.

18th December was my next op. The target was Gdynia, a port on the Baltic Sea where we were to attack naval shipping that was sheltering in the harbour. However, two of the more experienced crews were to break away from the bomber stream and attack the battle cruiser, "Lüzow" that was moored against a jetty ready to move out into the Atlantic, no doubt to attack our convoys. Mine was one of the two crews and I was to take another freshman on his 2nd Dickey op. With my navigator and bomb aimer, I had separate briefing.

This was going to be difficult; we had no hope of sinking this type of ship even with our armour piercing 1,000 lb bombs, but the idea was to damage the ship to prevent her getting out into the Atlantic to attack our Arctic convoys. It was going to be a long flight.

I cannot remember our route, but it was probably one of the occasions that, when attacking distant targets in northern Germany, we flew across Denmark or sometimes Norway then across Sweden, into the Baltic Sea and down into Germany to wherever our target was. On this I occasion I think that we flew to Norway where we encountered enemy flak. Then we crossed Sweden where they always put up flak, which we were told was "token" flak as we were passing over the airspace of neutral country; I did however, note that it was fired in our direction, but none came near my height. I used to wonder because Germany was getting iron ore and other supplies from Sweden. Having crossed Sweden we would fly further south, into the Baltic, around the island of Bornholme, thence into Northern Germany.

There was a dual purpose in this. (1). It was out of range of the enemy fighters but the German night controller would have to keep them ready for our attack where ever it came. (2) It would also expose us to less enemy ground defences thus presenting him with another problem.

Over Sweden, where by now the enemy would be well aware of our presence, the navigator switched on his radar. Through some electrical fault in the equipment, a fire broke out. With great presence of mind he reported it, grabbed his charts etc. and went and sat on the Elsan, a portable lavatory, at the rear to continue plotting as best as he could.

I gave the order to put on parachutes and allotted available crewmembers to see what they could do with the fire extinguishers and axes also, to open all vents as the extinguishers gave off phosgene, a poisonous gas. I glanced over my shoulder & saw a merry little blaze going but the engineer and 2nd Dickey were able to bring it under control. The navigator returned to find that his compartment was burnt out, but quickly established our position and gave me a course for the target. From there on he had no navigational aid but got us to the target on dead reckoning and any help the bomb aimer could give visually. Soon after dropping into Germany, we separated from the main force as per our orders and flew towards our target, which was a very good show to say the least, what a navigator! When the flares went down, it was up to the bomb aimer to find the ship and direct us in.

A wall protected the entrance to the huge harbour, with a small entrance probably with a boom across it. Much like Dover though on a very much larger scale. It stood out, as there was snow on the ground and identification was therefore not too difficult. As we made our approach, the bomb aimer reported that a smoke screen had been put down, covering the sea. He was then unable to distinguish between land and sea or pick up any point of identification. We continued across the harbour hoping for a break in the smoke screen. Suddenly, the blue master searchlight shot out directly onto us. I took immediate evasive action but, the searchlight and gun crews were not as experienced here as they were in the Ruhr, I got away before we were coned. By now, however, we had overrun the aiming point even if we could have seen it.

We made a wide sweep round and went in again. The 2nd pilot was windowing heavily to upset the German radar. Bomb doors open - just in case we got a glimpse, but no luck. Round we went again but still no luck. I was getting worried by now, we were using precious fuel and there was a long way to home without any navigational aids; also that we might be the only ones left over the target.

I told the navigator and bomb aimer that I would make one more attempt. I could almost feel the tension of the other crewmembers; we were all a bit "worked up" and I was sure they would think I was taking too many chances, but we had a job to do and I thought of our merchant seamen in the North Atlantic convoys.

On the run in the bomb aimer reported that the smoke screen was clearing and a few moments later called out "I see her", a joyful excited shout, she's against the North wall, not the South, and guided us in on a fairly steady run with bomb doors open. His final directions in the last minute of the run in to the ship betrayed for the first time in our experience, excitement. Almost in a whisper as if he was stalking an animal and in a shaking voice said, "steady, steady, steady (the crew, all thinking 'for Pete's sake Mac, drop em'), steady, steady, left - steady. BOMBS GONE". What a relief, he made us all nervous wrecks, but I had to fly straight and level to get our photograph. Bomb doors closed and away. Very satisfactory!

Now, if possible, to get home! Our navigator took us back across the Baltic, Sweden, Norway, and over the North Sea with the assistance of the wireless operator who was getting loop bearings, and the bomb aimer visual land fixes from his hatch. There was nothing between Norway and the Norfolk coast. It was hours of flying for a very tired crew in a state of anti climax in the early hours of the morning, all too easy to relax vigilance and go to sleep. We got a fix on the east coast of Norfolk, which was our briefed route and in due course landed at base. Ten hours all but five minutes actual flying time!

Next morning, our photograph showed the harbour and outer wall well in the picture with our aiming point right in the centre.

21st December we were briefed to attack a synthetic oil plant at Politz, near Stettin in Northern Germany. These oil plants were usually small isolated targets, difficult to find, particularly in bad weather. Often we had to cross the Dutch or Danish coasts where the defences of rocket ships put the fear of the devil into any crew that had to cross them. However, on this occasion, we were to use a similar route as we did to Gdynia. Again, the known hazard was that the weather would be bad on our return.

After our experience the night before, we anticipated that our radar might give trouble again when we switched on over Sweden; we were not wrong. This time we were prepared and the flight engineer was standing by with the fire extinguisher when the fire began. It never had a chance, but the navigator still had to resort to dead reckoning. All went well and we bombed as directed.

Our route back was to fly up Denmark to Aalborg where we would turn Westward for base. A message was received "Divert to Wick or Dyce when directed". My bomb aimer was excited as his parents' house backed onto Wick airfield. However, it was not to be, the message subsequently received was "Land at Dyce". We knew that fuel was going to be the problem and I was worried. The engineer was even more than worried and was continually balancing his fuel tanks to give the best results. I was mentally calculating the minimum line of descent to coincide with the most economical rate of fuel consumption. Generally known as "Flying on your reputation"! We made it but, when I called for permission to land, they gave the O. K but, because of the surrounding hills, circuit height 1,500 ft and advised that the runway length was 1400 yards - the minimum for a Lanc!

We made it. 10 hours 25 minutes, and were we tired. The Group losses at the target were only three, but five more crashed in England! Dyce was a fighter airfield for Spitfires.

Bad weather had set in across the whole of the British Isles, with the exception of northeast Scotland there was a complete clamp. So we were stuck there for Christmas. I'm afraid that dozens of bombers landing out of the blue or perhaps, more correctly out of the black, on a fighter airfield for the Festive Season, rather put their noses out of joint. They had to house, feed and cope generally with an extra 135 men at very short notice, as well as service our aircraft with petrol and oil etc. but they proved up to the job and we had a good time.

I must say that I had mixed feelings. Christmas, which is a time when we say "Peace on earth, good will towards men". On one of those nights that glorious oratorio Handel's "Messiah" was on the wireless, yet here were we with our ever increasing technology and weapons of war, poised to strike the most devastating blows at an enemy that our Armies were driving back from devastated lands towards his own country; yet it had to be.
Little did I know it then, but I was about to come face to face with the enemy sooner that I expected!

There was still a clamp over Lincolnshire that prevented us from returning to our base there. Although we had a good break, we were still somewhat keyed up and, strange to say, all of us wanted to get back to base & finish our ops. The best thing we could do was to fly. The weather there was beautiful; what better could we do than take our aircraft up for a "check"? This we did and flew round the beautiful peaceful looking Scottish countryside. We came down and parked our aircraft on the grass at the side of the runway with our rear turrets facing it, and waited for transport to take us back to the main buildings. Suddenly, my Mid Upper gunner said, in his Cockney accent, "Cor! Don't that look like a 109". I looked up & said "Bill, it is a 109". The pilot waggled his wings; "I'm going to land", lowered his undercarriage and turned in towards the runway where we were all lined up. We all watched fascinated as he came in, touched down, bounced, touched down again and bounced, then touched down and the aircraft somersaulted onto it's back on the runway, close to where we were!

Without hesitation, all the waiting crews rushed over, lifted the wings and raised the fuselage sufficiently to let the pilot, who seemed unhurt, get out. He loosened his straps, lowered himself onto the runway and we pulled him out. You'll never believe this, but the first thing he did was to take out his comb, look in his mirror and comb his blonde wavy hair! There were handshakes all round.

Had we encountered this man and his aircraft in the air either of us would have opened fire to kill the other but this was different. Here was a case of airmen seeing a fellow airman in distress on the ground. Regardless of the fact that the 109 might blow up or burst into flames, a situation in which any of us might be at any time, our only thought was for the pilot. He then took a parcel from a panel in the fuselage and we detained him until the Service police and ambulance came and took him to headquarters.

A few minutes later, over the Tannoy loudspeaker system came a voice "This is the Station Commander speaking. In view of a certain incident that may have occurred on this Station, absolute secrecy is to be maintained.

Soon after this, the local air raid warnings sounded, much our amusement and cheers. The following is now on record: -

"Unteroffizier Willi Drude took off from Aalborg at approximately 13.50 hours in ME 109 G-14 on 26.12.1944, on a flight to Stavanger. Drude had starting problems and delayed take off. Then the engine started, instead of following the formation, he took the opportunity to defect. Flying initially at 1,000 metres in a NW direction, he used the T/T to inform his base that he was ditching; he then descended to 25 metres and headed due west to Dyce. At 15.20 hours, on approaching the airfield he climbed to 200 metres and waggled his wings indicating that he was about to land. The aircraft touched down, bounced violently several times and turned over on its back".

NB. I have amended the above record as it shows that the 109 "touched down on boggy ground". There were a large number of witnesses to say that this account is not correct. It shows how official records can be wrong!

So ended our little trip to Dyce as, on 29th December, we returned to base but as we left, we gave the airfield a good "beat up" in which I must say I was as guilty as anyone else. We wanted to show the fighter boys what a Lanc: could do. It was rumoured that the Station Commander there sent the bill to our Squadron for crockery broken from the vibration from our aircraft!

That same day at 1800 hours, we were on the Battle Order again for the following day and once more our stomachs turned over.

30th December at 1115 hours, the op was cancelled; but was laid on again at 1400 hours for early the next day at the request of Montgomery, to support the army by bombing the German supply lines at the Falaise Gap, which the Army was trying to close. I took off at 0240. The weather was bad and our Gee navigation aid became unserviceable. It was a pre dawn attack with the British troops waiting close by to move in. At the target there was almost complete cloud cover and the markers were only a faint glow through them. Without the aid of "Gee" we could not afford to take a chance when our troops were so close, we abandoned the sortie and returned with our bombs. It was always tricky landing with a bomb load, but they had to be saved if possible as they were in short supply when well over a thousand bombers were out nearly every night.

That reminds me of another little less well-known incident. The armourers were having difficulty in coping with the amount of work to be done, so the crews were sent to the bomb stores to help load and pack the incendiaries: these were 4 lb bombs with a safety pin that had to be compressed and loaded separately into the canister with the pin compressed against the side of the container or the next bomb. This was done under the watchful eye of "Chiefy", the Flight Sgt in charge of that section. He could be most expressive in his language about anyone, no matter what his rank, who made a mistake in loading. The crews' remarks were also quite amusing.

On 7th January, I was briefed for Munich, our 28th op. We had been there before and knew that it would be a long one. I had a 2nd Dickey again. My aircraft was probably in for maintenance and I took "R". Although every aircraft has the same layout, we didn't like it and to me, it didn't feel the same. We were over the city on a sector bombing, running up to the aiming point, bomb doors open and the usual directions were being given by the bomb aimer - "Left, steady, steady, left, steady, bombs gone - NO THEY HAVEN'T! He quickly operated his emergency release and I pulled my ejection toggles, but still nothing happened.

By that time we were too far across the city so I said, "We'll go round again" much to the crew's anxiety as it meant another lot of flak etc. I selected "bomb doors closed" and banked to port whereupon, the bombs suddenly went down taking the bomb doors with them! What had happened was that the aircraft was wired electrically for bombing from the navigator's position on Gee and H2S. Our navigator on looking round the radar bombing gear, which we were not using, was puzzled by a switch in the "off" position, tried it and completed the circuit thus releasing the bombs because the emergency release had been put into operation. Our bomb aimer estimated that the bombs fell in the northern part of the city. As in London, I bet some German could always point to some works and say, "That's what they were going for".

That was a nine-hour flight. Next day, our rival crew made the most of this incident! However, we were getting very near our 30th and final op. To say the least we wondered if our luck would hold.

We had only two more to go but, for our engineer who had done one more op than we had, it was to be his 30th and he would be finished. The weather at this time was very bad and the airfield was covered in snow. It was to be some days before our next op.

13th January. We were again briefed for Pölitz, the synthetic oil plant in Northern Germany, which was now working again after recovering from our previous attack, demonstrating how important it was to the Germans; also their ability to recover from these blows. The route out, with its diversions, was a long one and, as the weather was going to be bad on return, we were briefed to fly on return to Aalborg in northern Denmark and reach it on time to send back a wind as we had done previously. Not only the weather but fuel consumption was going to be a problem as the route was difficult. It was a regular practice for such flights as these, for the ground crews, after we had run up and checked the engines, to top up the tanks. I think they took about 3 gallons each, which, as I did about 1.4 miles per gallon per engine, could make all the difference between making the runway and falling short of it on return.

The flight out was no more eventful than usual but the weather gave a lot of problems and I felt that my flight engineer, on his last op was even more worried about the fuel consumption than usual. I have no special recollections of this attack but our report shows that we saw several big explosions with dark red flames rising to 1,000 ft. Records show that it was very successful, although it had to be attacked once more.

The return journey was a different matter. As we flew up Denmark to reach Aalborg from where we had to send back a wind to Group, our navigator said, "Instead of the tail wind of 30 mph we had at briefing, we've got a 70 mph head wind. You'll have to give me another 10 mph". I did as requested by increasing the engine revs. It was not long before the engineer with his Geordie accent said, "If you keep up these revs and boost, we wont make base". I decided to leave it for a bit and see how things went.

After a while the engineer said "You'll never do it skip, not with these revs". He was a real Job's comforter, "You'll never do it, you'll never do it". I could appreciate his worry, not only were they his engines, he was on his last op! I was doing mental calculations and reckoned that after we sent back the vital change of wind, for Group to advise a mean wind, which could be vital to the force, I would use my well practised economical flying which would just about take me to the Norfolk coast. My real worry was, having to ditch. The North Sea in midwinter was no place for bathing and, if we had to do so, what about the minefield that

at 3 degrees east ran down the English coast. If we could get over that we might see a ship. I admit that I was worried.

At Aalborg, our W/op sent the navigator's wind in code to Group. I immediately flew as economically as possible, just as we did on the previous Politz op. My expression for it was "Flying on tip toe". The North Sea is a big place and we were mostly in cloud. I reduced the engine revs and boost and from 17,000 feet made a long shallow descent aiming to reach our coast at some 1,000 feet. We had no charts of the exact position of the minefield and our fuel gauges were getting lower and lower, as were the engineer's spirits. When our navigator reckoned that we had crossed the minefield, the engineer was still saying, "You'll never do it". There seemed no end to the sea. The worry of which side to try to ditch while we had a bit of fuel to do so was one problem over and soon we got below cloud. My bomb aimer was in the nose looking for land and soon said that he could see it. I did also and it looked to me like the huge round of the Norfolk coastline. Good old navigator, he had done it again!

Fuel was now the only problem, the Engineer said that there was insufficient to make base, but I reckoned that we could. At the coast, it was essential to get a fix so I did an orbit so that the bomb aimer could get one, which he did. I then calculated that we might just have enough fuel to get back to base but what if someone ahead had crashed on the runway as had happened before! We could never make a diversion. Then something happened that made up my mind for me.

The emergency procedure for an aircraft in trouble was to orbit twice and the ground tracking stations, would call them up with a code to which the pilot would give a code name reply and the difficulty could be explained. However, the listening service, always on the ball looking for customers and dying to go into action, didn't wait for a second orbit and called up with the code "Hello Nemo, Hello Nemo, do you want assistance?"

What a relief! After hours of worrying, to hear the voice of an English girl, eager to help, although I didn't ask for it, was magnificent, my heart went out to her. Our troubles were over. Using the code name, I asked "Darkie" if they could take a 4 engine aircraft and if so, the length of the runway. They could, 1400 yards. I wasn't going to try to get back to base unnecessarily and said "Lights please". Immediately, a runway on our port side lit for us. What a wonderful sight! Better than all the illuminations ever produced. Actually, it wasn't

a good runway; it was a wire mesh one used by a Polish fighter squadron but, to us it was heaven and we landed there, somewhat tired. 10 hours and 40 minutes flying.

It was rather amusing next day showing the fighter boys over an aircraft with 4 engines. To them it was like flying four single engine fighters at once. We took our time and in due course flew back to base and my flight engineer went on tour expired leave. He said after landing, that we had only the smell of petrol left! I never saw him again, but we are still in touch. We are the only two of my crew still alive.

I had, of course to account to the Wing/Co for landing away. He wasn't too pleased, but we had a good reason and were on our 29th op, he understood that I wasn't taking any more chances with only one trip to do. I later discovered that three others had landed away as well.

This might be a suitable point to mention the logistics concerning petrol supplies. All fuel came from America in tanker ships. What a wonderful job was done by our Merchant fleet under the auspices of the Royal Navy! At this time of the war, often Bomber Command alone sent to the continent over 1500 four engine aircraft each engine using about 1.5 gallons of fuel per mile. Added to this was the fuel used by training aircraft day and night. The Merchant Navy brought the fuel to the West coast ports. It then had to be processed and transported by rail and subsequently tanker to airfields in very inaccessible places through the country! What a headache.

A very full account of the fuel supply system, written by Steve Vessey for "Air Link", the News Letter of the Lincolnshire Aviation Society.

About this time a dreadful thing occurred. Our rival crew was briefed for an op, which took them one ahead of me! That night I got little sleep, as I knew what would happen and it did. We had asked for it and we got it. About 4 am, the door of our hut burst open - the new "GEN" crew returned, fire buckets were emptied, water was thrown at us, and beds were overturned. We had asked for it and had to live with it. They completed their 30 ops in January 1945 and were posted out. However, it turned out well for us, because in 1947 the Squadron had its first reunion. Now was our chance to crow over our rivals.

We said, "Bomber Harris" had specially stated that only the best crews could be kept on"!! Didn't they know that he specially asked for us?

So it continued annually for over 55 years until unfortunately, all have gone except their rear gunner, my flight engineer and me.

It was around this time that the group was bombing so accurately that the markers were being destroyed before the raid was half over. It was a dicey business to replace the one that had been extinguished whilst the bombing was in progress so, to avoid this, markers were put down at a different point and a timed run was made from them to the target. Another scheme was to place the markers away from the aiming point and use an offset wind on the bombsite to carry the bombs to the target.

Marking was done at "H" hour, usually 11 minutes before bombing time. It was during this that the defences had a better chance to find the Pathfinder Force on their radar screens. To avoid this, about once a month, it fell to the lot of each squadron to arrive with PFF and fly around to draw the flak until marking was complete. We did not waste that time but flew in a triangle on the navigator's directions so that he could obtain a target wind, which the w/op would send back to base. A mean wind would then be sent to the bomber force.

It was dicey business, never mind, forget all those troubles, we had only one more to do, our 30th.

On 16th January 1945, we were briefed for Brux, a synthetic oil factory in western Czechoslovakia, which meant another long flight across Europe. We now had a replacement engineer, the Wing Commander's whom we knew well and were happy to have him. There followed the usual procedure from meal to briefing, to the aircraft, running up. Shut down, top up the fuel tanks, shut down and wait for the signal to move out. We were all keyed up and little was said; each was busy with his thoughts. Then the engineer said, "What's that?" and listened, as we all did. From one of the engines came a drip, drip, drip. The ground crew hurriedly brought up a scaffold & whipped off the engine cover only to discover a glycol leak. Stores did not have a spare and none of the surrounding airfields could get one to us. We had to cancel our last op! The crew was, to say the least, devastated! We were due to go on tour expired leave on return. So, we went on leave with the thought - only one more when we get back.

My wife who knew that this leave was going to be an "end of tour" one, was quite upset when I arrived and told her that I had one more to do,

but we made the best of it and when she saw me off at Kings Cross on my return we exchanged meaningful glances.

Only one more op to do! Not so, I had not even reached Lincoln before I met other crews who took sadistic pleasure in telling me that a tour had been put up to 36 ops! My thoughts that they were stringing me along were soon dispelled when I arrived at Fulbeck. It was true and a hard blow for me. My crew was really upset so I had to put on a brave face and do my best to bolster them up. I reminded them of how we had coped so far with those occasions when we had overcome great difficulties; I'm afraid that I could not change their feelings very much but they accepted the inevitable with a better attitude. I knew they would still give me their support. The weather was now at its worst and all Lincolnshire covered in snow for days. Some local flying was done, but I did not operate for a while.

On 7th February, the target was Ladbergen. That dreaded canal again on our 30th op, which should haven our end of tour. I can't remember what this one was like as we had been there so many times. We carried delayed action bombs. Nearly all the crews all reported that the target was cloud covered and little could be seen in the way of marking. It is known that the banks of the canal were not breached. However, all the unexploded bombs must have made difficulties for the enemy.

The next night was not one for my crew, but it was a bad one for us. We had lost another crew with whom we were quite friendly; they were on their 25th and were experienced; it could happen to anybody! The pilot's fiancée, whom I did not know, wrote to me as "Uncle Will". Officers' Mess, Fulbeck. The poor girl only knew my nickname as her fiancé had spoken of me in that vein. Could I help her with any news? What could I say? Even if I knew, security would have prevented me from saying anything. I did my best to give her some comfort in the fact that he might become a P.O.W. I now know that he and six of his crew rest in Poznan Cemetery, Poland.

It was a mistake to be so friendly with another crew as, had one not returned, it would have hit the remaining crew very hard. One learnt to write off a missing crew, they had just "Got the chop" - "Bought it" - "The Reaper got them".

13th February, our target was Dresden. I know that, at briefing, when I saw the target map my heart sank. This meant another long trip across

Europe where the enemy was withdrawing his forces, which meant that there would be more concentration of defences. 5 Group was to make the initial raid with 1 X 4,000 bomb and incendiaries. This would be followed some 2 - 3 hours later by the main force with high explosive bombs.

It was to be another sector attack, each aircraft being on a heading 2 degrees different from the same point, a football pitch, where the red spot fire would be place by the marker aircraft.

I well remember the briefing because it seemed unusual. The Germans were moving an enormous amount of equipment through the huge marshalling yards to meet the impending Russian spring offensive. Intelligence said that little was known of any industry there, as the Germans considered it to be a "Safe City" and much of the civil and military administration had been moved there.

Pre war, the city was well known in this country as a beautiful one. Dresden china was world famous. I wondered to what war time purpose those works had now been put, as we had done in this country. I also considered that, if they thought it a safe city, what an excellent place to develop their flying bombs and rockets that were falling on London, as well as any new devices. The object of the attack was to make the city useless for these purposes.

The "Met" man gave the Group forecast, which was for 10/10ths cloud all the way to the target with the possibility of a break when we got there. He then, as he usually did, gave his own forecast upon which I had come to rely. It was for cloud all the way but with a possible break some 10 to 15 miles from Dresden. The route back through southern Germany would be reasonably clear.

The flight plan was in our usual format, but this had to be done in cloud, which meant very accurate flying. Take off 6.15 pm, fly at a given height to Reading where the 240 or so aircraft of the Group would slot into their place and at a given time set course. Then with various alterations of course eventually, reach the target.

There, the usual H hour minus 11 minutes, which was in this case 10pm, when Oboe, a green flare, operated by a crossbeam from this country was released from a Pathfinder aircraft within a mile of the

target. Flares would go down and a red spot fire placed on a football pitch. After assessment, the bomber force would be called in unless the marker was unsatisfactory, in which case, yellow flares would cancel it and a fresh one put down, assessed and if satisfactory, the bomber force would be called in.

It was going to be difficult. On that dark dank cold misty late afternoon, I took off at 6.18pm and flew into thicker mist, then cloud. On nearing 500 ft. My navigator gave the course and speed for Reading. I could not see anything but knew that other aircraft were around as I felt their slipstreams which disrupted the airflow from the wings causing the aircraft to sideslip. Very disturbing as you could hit another aircraft or one could hit you. Constant vigil was needed to counter it quickly. Over Reading we slipped into our place in the stream, hoping that the other navigators and pilots were doing the same. This hazard continued all the way to the target.

Our route was to cross the coast at Beachy Head, then the Channel, France at the mouth of the Somme and on to 2 degrees east; then fly due east heading for Frankfurt. About half way across France was a Mandrel (radar jamming) screen being operated by 100 Group. I suspect that the German night controller was receiving information from other sources and would be aware of our alteration of course. He would heed it but, knowing bomber command tactics, would expect another change was coming. The Controller also knew the targets that we were likely to attack because of their importance and accessibility.

At 5 degrees east, we turned northeast, heading for the Ruhr, a likely target. Should he raise his fighters or alert them. He would undoubtedly have brought them to readiness; he would also know that it would not be the Dortmund Ems Canal as it was not ready for use after our last attack. After about 20 minutes, we turned eastward towards Kassel or even further and another likely target Leipzig then, after a further 20 minutes a slight variation northward to Magdeburg or Berlin. The controller must now alert the warning systems over a very wide area. We were still flying in 10/10ths cloud and fairly close as the slipstreams were still troublesome. To add to the Controller's worries he would know of other impending attacks; if he raised his fighters in this weather, where should he send them?
At 9.36pm we turned southeast towards Leipzig or even Chemnitz but after about 25 minutes we turned towards Dresden.

It was about here that suddenly the cloud began to clear. I thought, "Good old met man, he was right". On either side of me, almost as it they were in formation were the other squadron aircraft. What accurate navigating and flying after nearly four hours in cloud! The green "Oboe" marker went down ahead to our starboard followed shortly by flares, and I could see the city. The usual target procedure took place and seemed to go smoothly. Our bomb aimer was already in his front compartment when the Master bomber, having assessed the red spot fire that had been put down on the football pitch, called in the bomber force.

It was about 2 minutes early, and my navigator, who had been working to turn us into the target exactly in time for the run up to bomb said, "hold your course for 30 seconds" then, "Turn now", the other aircraft turned with me and we ran up on our respective headings. As we did so, the cloud again began to cover the target, so it was now up to the bomb aimer. I was working on instruments to fly as accurately as possible under his directions. He was in charge now. After the usual directions he called "Bombs gone"! I felt the thud, thud, thud as they left their mountings and the aircraft rose. Then, "bomb doors closed" and we were away.

The route back took us far down to southern Germany round Stuttgart and Strasburg, to avoid other aircraft making their way into other targets, and not interfere with the Mandrel screen across Europe. After a turn slightly north of west, we held the course for nearly 30 minutes to turn northwest from a point 40 degrees north, 5 degrees east. Then across France, Belgium, North Sea, the Suffolk coast to base. 9 hours 40 minutes. Quite a trip! De briefing, meal, seven tired men went to bed about 5.30am with 5 more ops to do.

The squadron was due to be airborne again that same night, for a synthetic oil plant not far from Dresden. Fortunately I was not on that raid.

There was a great deal of criticism about the raid on Dresden, much of it uninformed as it was on the lines of the propaganda put out by Goebbls, the German propaganda Minister. Churchmen and officials in Sweden and other places made protests to this country.

Certainly a great many people were killed there and a firestorm is a terrible thing. It had occurred before, but Dresden was singled out. The

Germans said nothing about the armament factories that were destroyed there. It was not policy.

I cannot comment on what was destroyed, as I have no personal knowledge of it. I would however, direct a reader to some of the books published about it. I would recommend that of "Dresden" by Alan Taylor. Pages 355- 359 are a revelation of the war industry that was in this "Safe" city. Alan Cooper also gives interesting accounts whilst David Irving's "The Destruction of Dresden", admittedly written much earlier, is entirely contradictory. Judge for yourselves.

The following account is interesting: -

An American P.O.W, Harold Cook who, with hundreds of others was being brought away from the Russian Front reveals the vital communications system that passed through Dresden. The night before the raid, their train was shunted into the marshalling yards at Dresden. There for 12 hours, German troops and equipment passed through. Thousands of German troops, tanks and artillery and mile upon mile of freight cars transporting soldiers and their supplies to the East to meet the Russian advance.

At the time I wondered why the Germans continued the war against the advice of their military leaders who had failed in their coup to kill Hitler only 7 months earlier? It shows the hold that this man and his Gestapo had over the country.

On the 19th February Bohlan, the synthetic oil plant was our target. I seem to remember that I thought this an unsatisfactory one, as the target was cloud covered and, due to the Master Bomber being shot down over the target, lacked coordination. It was a trip that took us just over 8 hours flying time.

The next day, 20th, we were on the battle order again. The target was Gravenhorst. The Canal again! I thought this to be another "Dog's dinner"! Once more weather defeated our attempts on this vital target. Low cloud made it impossible for us to bomb, as well as getting there and back. The Master Bomber ordered "Abort" which we gladly did as milling around a target in cloud was a dicey business. It was even more so back in the U. K. Although we were only some 150 aircraft attacking the canal, over 1,000 more were attacking other targets. Little wonder eastern England was crowded when we returned; we were diverted to Lyneham in Wiltshire. It was an airfield used by

Transport Command. Most airfields at this time were now fitted with 'Glide path indicators'; these were seen by a pilot on the approach to land, as green, amber & red lights. When in the green sector it was O. K, the amber - getting low and red, too low.

There had been a sudden change in wind. Instead of landing into it, there seemed to be a bit of a tail wind & we found the glide path indicators a little high. I had not a lot of fuel left and was anxious to get down. It had the same effect as landing on Fido, we seemed to float on and on. I touched down at rather a high speed and was anxious about being able to stop. I saw a turn off track near the runway end and took it at quite a speed. One wheel did run off the perimeter track and the mud slowed us down sufficiently to reduce the speed to be able to taxi. We returned to base next day. I made my apologies to the ground crew and asked them to check the undercarriage for strain. They found it to be O. K. Good old Lanc! It took enough punishment as it was without me adding to it!

It was at this time whilst my aircraft was being serviced, that there was another raid on the Canal. Of the two that failed to return to base, one was the crew ahead of mine in the number of ops completed. They were on their 35th with only one more to go! It shook us rigid. Experience did not always count. Post war, we learnt that the crew, with the exception of one who was killed, all became P.O.Ws. It was doubly unfortunate that the bomb aimer of that crew was the brother of the pilot who crashed on takeoff for Munich on 26th November. We had three more to do so let's get on with it.

The 23rd of February, our 34th op was to Horten, a port in the Oslo Fjord. There was considerable activity there and some Norwegians had to work within the base. As a result they were able to provide information useful to our intelligence. I note that I bombed from 8,200 ft and saw a huge explosion half a minute later. There were several huge fires going. I have no particular memory of it, except that it was a long uninteresting flight across the North Sea and back, but it appears that we did a good job there. We know post war, that the whole dockyard was set alight and Norwegians went onto the surrounding hills to watch it.

One of them, who worked in the base made a map plotting every bomb that fell and, after the war sent us a copy with the comment: -

"Here in Horten the people are very proud of having received the finest precision bombing during the war! Not a single Norwegian was killed but many Germans are still wondering what hit them".

The 3/4th March saw me attacking the Ladbergen aqueduct again. 212 Lancs of 5 Group attacked and breached the canal in two places.

I well remember this night, not because of the actual attack, which was nothing special. It was just another one on the canal where we went ahead with the pathfinders and orbited the target to draw the flak from the marking force. We usually flew in a triangle so that the Navigator could measure the wind at the target, which would then be sent back to base. From this, a bombsite wind would be transmitted to the oncoming squadrons to feed into their bombsites. The only problem here was turning back into the oncoming bomber force of some 200 aircraft. Rather like turning from a side road onto a very busy motorway. The oncoming stream came from the dark part of the sky and the difficulty was that there were no "halt lines" and stopping hadn't been invented for flying!

There were quite a number of impacts. The raid was nothing special other than the fact that the Germans laid a smoke screen, but my bomb aimer did not have much difficulty this time. I note that I bombed at 2205hrs. The whole Group would have bombed within twenty minutes and we lost seven aircraft.

The main thing, which I shall never forget was that, on approaching the Dutch coast on return I saw a double fighter beacon on the shoreline. Fighter beacons usually appeared anywhere for their aircraft to orbit to wait their turn for being vectored into the bomber steam or onto a particular aircraft, but this was a double one and new to me. I decided that intruders would be flying back with us and therefore dropped to sea level (much to protests from my bomb aimer about ear trouble) and flew just above the waves. I was determined that fighters were not going to get underneath me. Over England I flew as low as I dared with the bomb aimer in the nose trying to see obstacles.

No sooner had I landed at our airfield and parked, than the runway lights went out and a fighter flew across strafing the airfield with cannon fire. The aircraft behind me had just turned off the runway but was not hit. Our last aircraft landed at about 90 minutes later. He must

have seen the trouble and kept away. We knew that on a number of occasions German fighters were coming back with the bomber stream. However, this was the big one! Jerry had been planning this major operation, which he named Unternehmen Gisela. My guess had been correct as some 170 to 200 Ju88s flew back with our stream to catch us landing on our airfields. They lost about twelve aircraft and probably some crash-landed back at their base. We lost seven on the canals; five in the U K and 19 or 20 operational aircraft were shot down. We could see fires on other airfields and guessed that Jerry had had some success there. About 25 German aircraft were either shot down or crashed on return.

I still wonder whether I should have broken radio silence and sent a message to Base. I decided against it as I thought "they can see the double beacon as well as I can" and Jerry was in the habit of homing in on any such messages.

Thus ended our 35th op. One to go! We said nothing to each other, but we thought a lot.

5th March we were briefed for the synthetic oil refinery at Bohlen. Ironic that this was the target for our cancelled 30th, which would have completed our tour. It was a long flight to Czechoslovakia. The weather was bad, it was mostly cloud flying but the pathfinders were able to mark and we bombed without incident. On arrival back at base, I called up for a landing position but got no reply. I repeated the call, received a landing number and switched my R/T to the circuit channel. Other crews on the circuit broke regulations to say "Good show" & "Well done Uncle". It was very nice and the start of an attitude that I didn't know existed but was soon about to reveal itself.

I later discovered that the girls in Flying Control kept a list of the trips done by each crew and, as it was quite a while since anyone managed to complete a tour, they were quite excited by our return and were so busy doing a little dance in the control tower that they omitted to answer my first call!

Now all we had to do was to get down in one piece. I suppose that I must have taken more care than usual, as I didn't feel the wheels touch the ground. Rather different from the usual when I was so tired that I just dropped her in. There was an expression "Any landing you walk

away from was a good one". We were very elated and I remember the bomb aimer kissing the ground when we got out at our dispersal.

Back at de-briefing, everybody was coming up and shaking hands - but it did not end there. I discovered that nearly every section, ground crew, armourers, transport, parachute, mess staff and stores all, like the girls in flying control kept a record of each crew's trips and for days afterwards, many personnel who were strangers to me would stop me and offer their congratulations. It was embarrassing and certainly very touching but was a great revelation as it showed how everyone, however humble his rank and job really felt part of the Squadron of which we, the flying personnel, were perhaps the image. They had all contributed to the effort in their own way and did it so very well.

We then went on end of tour leave after which I returned to the Squadron only to find that my crew had been posted. We had not even had a celebration with our ground crew. I had a job to try to fix it up as it had to be when ops were not on & even then not all the ground were available at once. Eventually I was able to contact my crew and we did the best we could, but it was not the occasion that I had envisaged.

AFTERTHOUGHTS.

Another thing that crosses my mind is my thoughts when, on occasions, leaving the English coast to cross the Channel the moon sometimes lighted it.

Shakespeare's Richard II came to mind.

"This precious stone set in a silver sea which serves it in the office of a wall or as a moat defensive to a house against the envy of less happier lands".

I visualised those people, the French and the Dutch on the other side who were living in what Mr Churchill called "the abyss of new Dark Age". A number have since said to me "We knew that you were still

fighting" and, "We knelt and prayed for you". It is dreadful to think that some of them were going to be killed by our bombing. Take only one example, after our invasion in 1944, Field Marshall Montgomery's troops could not advance because the German guns on the island of Walcheren prevented our ships from bringing supplies to the port of Antwerp. The Field Marshall asked for the island to be "sunk". This Bomber Command did on the orders of the Supreme Command. Although my Squadron was on these raids and the crews were not happy about it, I am glad that it did not fall to my lot to be on them.

Even so, a Hollander, Paul Crucq who now lives on Walcheren, wrote a very detailed account in a book that he named "We never blamed the crews"; also "Aiming Point Walcheren" which deals with the gun battles of our invading forces". They are excellent detailed accounts, not only by participants but civilians as well.

Going back yearly to our airfields in Lincolnshire there is an indescribable feeling, a presence, that overcomes us all. Do those ghosts still throng the plain - are we in touch with them?

On a stone by the Memorial at our old airfield at Fiskerton, there is a poem by Victor Cavendish. It speaks volumes to all airmen who pause on their journey through Lincolnshire - the flat Bomber County dominated by the three towers of Lincoln Cathedral. The poem is also on page 526 of our book "Beware Of The Dog At War", an anecdotal history of the Squadron 1916 - 1945 by John Ward.

There is a wonderful poem called "Stand Those Three Towers" by Victor Cavendish, which really brings a lump to the throat of many a man who served in Lincolnshire. There is a copy of it in our Book "Beware Of The Dog At War", by John Ward which is an anecdotal history of 49 Squadron and is worth reading.

There is another poem, by an unknown author, that is on a stone the entrance to East Kirkby airfield: -

The old airfield

I lie here beside the hill,
Abandoned long to nature's will,
My buildings down, my people gone,
My only sounds the wild birds song.
But my mighty birds will rise no more,
No more I hear the Merlins roar,
And never now my bosom feels,
The pounding of their giant wheels.
From ageless hill their voices cast,
Thunderous echoes from the past,
And still in lonely reverie,
Their great dark shapes sweep down on me.
Laughter, sorrow, hope and pain,
I shall never know these things again,
Emotions that I came to know,
Of strange young men so long ago.
Who knows, as evening shadows meet,
Are they still with me a phantom fleet?
And do my ghosts still ride unseen,
Across my face so wide and green?
And in the future should structures tall,
Bury me beyond recall,
I shall still remember them,
...en.
...e sky.

T... ...ow

Leslie Hay, “Uncle Will” in August 2003