

# THE AIRBORNE YEARS

A personal account of wartime flying in the Royal  
Canadian Air Force



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MID-UPPER GUNNER IN 463 SQUADRON, RAAF, AND 61 SQUADRON, RAF

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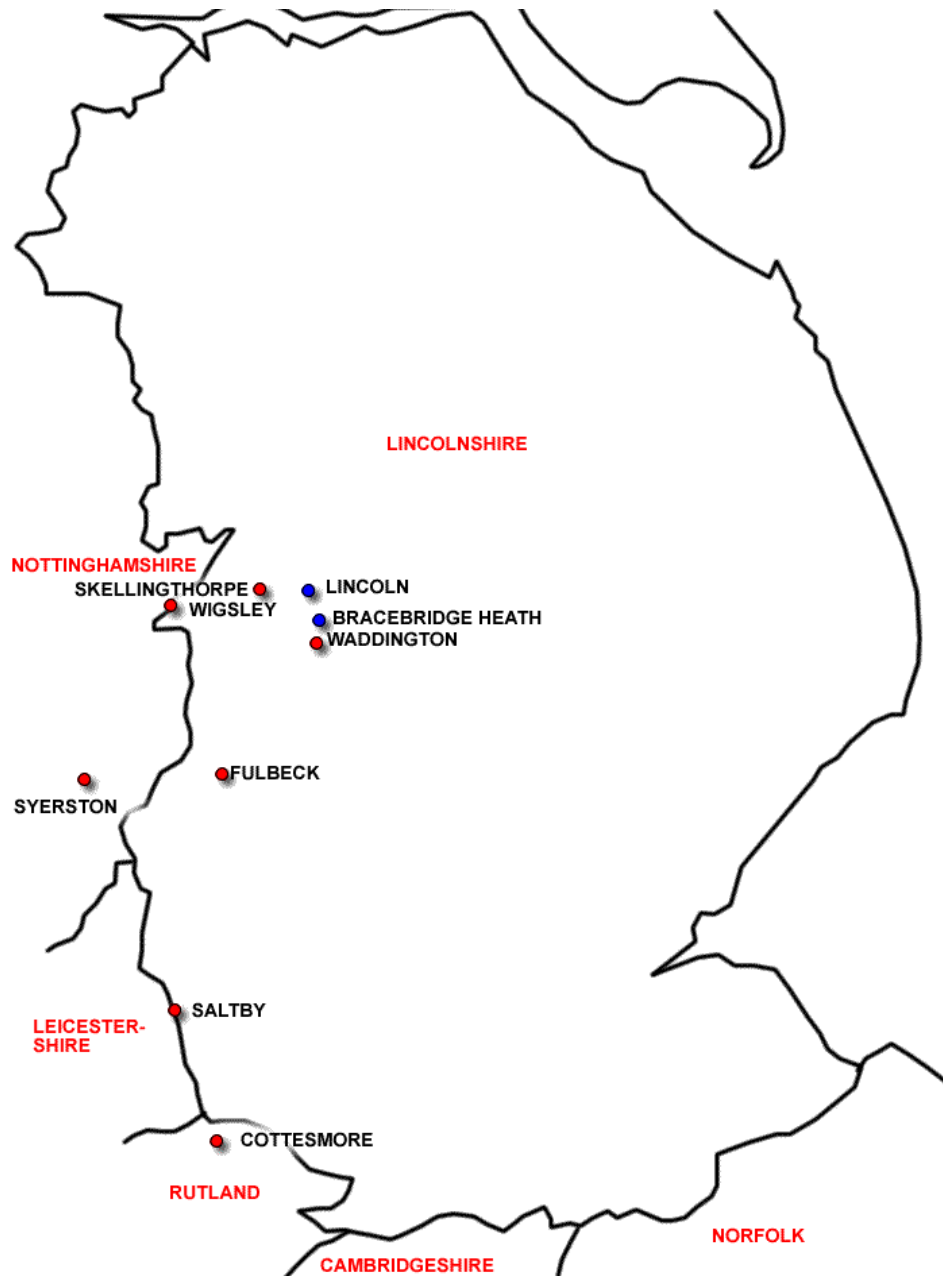
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## INTRODUCTION

This story is a personal one, of my time spent flying with the RCAF, RAF and RAAF during the years of 1942 through to 1944, on training, operational and instructional duties. It is by no means a history, as the writing has been done more from memory than record. There is no fiction involved, although places, dates and names may not be completely accurate. The story was written because, in this year of 1984, a great deal of historical interest has been generated with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D-Day landings. I realized that after these many years, the happenings laid down here could be of interest to people who had shared the experiences, as well as those who had to stay at home and keep track of many of the events through newspapers and radio reports. Even the following generation, I hope, will find the text interesting and understand why their elders have such vivid memories of those times.

I also want to add that I still support the Bomber Command tactics, which were in effect during this period, which were used to end the war as soon as possible. In hindsight, many of these actions may seem barbaric, but the enemy had arbitrarily laid down the rules, and we played by them. The names of my friends and acquaintances have been used without their permission, and hopefully nothing I have written will cause pain to any one of them.

~ *ONE* ~

A RECRUIT —

SCHOOL IN HAMILTON —

NO. 1 MANNING DEPOT, TORONTO —

NO. 1 INITIAL TRAINING SCHOOL, TORONTO —

NO. 9 ELEMENTARY FLYING TRAINING SCHOOL, ST.  
CATHARINES —

COMPOSITE TRAINING SCHOOL, TRENTON —

THE WAY WEST —

It was a cool day in November 1941, and wispy grey clouds were moving across a somber sky. High from the west came an unfamiliar droning, and there appeared a four-engine aircraft with twin tail fins and narrow knifelike wings. No mistaking it, it was a Consolidated B-24 — a “Liberator.” I’d seen pictures of these aircraft during the summer, and suddenly there was one overhead. I watched, fascinated, as it disappeared into the eastern sky. I mused at its size and grace, and it was at that moment I decided the time had come to stop thinking about joining the Air Force and take some action.

Ah, the blue uniform with the brass looked smart, and besides, I had turned eighteen the past summer. The war news was a little more encouraging than it had been the disastrous year of 1940, and aside from terrible shipping losses things seemed a bit more contained and stable, with Germany very much occupied on the Eastern Front. The newer Air Force training aircraft flying over our district were indeed intriguing, but my basic desire was to be a turret gunner on a heavy bomber. How to get there? Just volunteer, I guessed. A couple of days later I departed for the RCAF recruiting establishment in Toronto.

Down on lower Bay Street, the neon sign “RCAF Recruiting Centre” was quite impressive. I walked in and said to a blue-clad type behind the wicket, “Where do I sign up?” Well, I was told that there were a number of things to do first, and it would be a time before I’d find myself resplendent in that blue uniform. First, fill out an application and put it on the table. Every now and then an airman would come out a door, grab a few of these filled-out application forms and disappear back into the office after calling out the names on the forms. There were fifteen or twenty of us sitting in the room, so naturally we started sorting through the pile of applications and putting our own on, or near, the top. The next time the airman emerged to pick up the completed forms, he took them from the bottom of the pile, so that was a lost cause.

We eventually all got through the first room and were all seated in a second room. From there we were taken and given the IQ test — you know,

“this is to this as that is to that” — four pages, but I think everyone passed without much difficulty. Then we seemed to be called in a particular order to see an interviewing Officer. It occurred to me that I was kept waiting rather a long time. I was told I could go for lunch and wouldn’t lose my place in the waiting room. I finally got to the interviewer at about three o’clock, and he informed me that they regretted keeping some of us waiting so long, but they had to rush a bunch of recruits through whose army draught notices would be effective the following day! So be it.

Now, the air gunner trade? Ah, no. One had to enlist as a wireless operator-gunner, and at present that category wasn’t accepting trainees. Next choice: general duties, non-aircrew trade. One my negative response to that, there was a suggestion: would I be interested in enlisting as a pilot or observer? I knew that these trades required a full Junior Matriculation, which I lacked. When the interviewer heard this, he said that this problem could be overcome — they could send me to pre-enlistment school in Hamilton where I could pick up the necessary subjects on a special three-month course. I was a bit taken aback — but what the heck — maybe I could be a pilot after all. So I signed the form and had the initial medical examination.

The young Air Force doctor informed me that I had half the farm in my ears. I didn’t really believe him, and thought that the real reason he said it was because when he looked in the one ear he couldn’t see out the other....

With the medical complete and a piece of paper in hand to show on my arrival in Hamilton, I left with the message: Don’t worry, we’ll pay you and there is good room and board available... he didn’t say how much pay.

I was also instructed to “report to room 502 East Block Parliament Buildings at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Now what could that be for? I wondered as I started my long trek home on the streetcars. Must be something really important. My God, I’ll have to get up early in the morning to walk to town, catch the streetcars and be at the Parliament Buildings by nine. Got to be prompt! Air Force business, y’know.

Back home, everyone was interested to hear of my adventures and, I think, a little surprised that I wasn’t dressed in blue. I explained as best I could,

and told them that I wouldn't be a real "pigeon" until completion of the Hamilton course.

I was roused very early the next morning and rushed around, walked to town, caught the early suburban car, changed at North Toronto and arrived at room 502 just as the staff were opening the door. A rather mousy-looking girl let me in — I was sure she'd never paid attention to the deodorant ads because the overheated office was having a very negative effect on her sweater.

I presented myself to a man at a desk and showed him the paper. He looked it over, reached in a drawer and pulled out a one-way coach class ticket to Hamilton — value, one dollar and twenty-five cents. I stood there, shocked. For this I had risen at about four-thirty in the morning, and traveled all these miles — just for this?

For just that. And go down to Hamilton any time you're ready.

I was back home by noon, rather disgusted, because I had spent nearly as much on carfare as the value of the train ticket. I got an old suitcase and some odds and ends of clothing and other gear together, and the next day got a ride to the city with my friend Sid Lepard, from Richmond Hill.

We had lunch together, and later Sid saw me off at Union Station. About an hour-and-a-half later I arrived at the TH&B station in Hamilton, and after getting a few directions I found my way to the former technical school on Barton Street which was now the RCAF pre-enlistment cram school.

I was soon enrolled, and was informed that pay would be ten dollars a week. They gave me more directions to the men's boarding hostel down by the harbour on Burlington Street.

The afternoon was pleasant enough, so I walked down with another chap who had just arrived from London, Ontario. We thought we might as well see how long it would take us to walk to school. Actually, it was about a mile and a half — past Westinghouse, a couple of meatpacking plants and down by the International Harvester factories.

The hostel, known as Wartime Housing Ltd., was really a fine place, and very new, built for single men, most of who were working in the Hamilton war plants. Room and board was \$9.50 a week, in advance. This presented a small



problem. I only had about four dollars, all my worldly cash. That night I had to spend a quarter, and call home for an emergency ten-dollar bill. This arrived during the week, and I was able to settle up at the desk. I could envision some lean weeks ahead — Fifty cents was not a lot for riotous living and other luxuries.

After the next payday, for some unknown reason, our room and board was lowered to \$8.50 a week. Now, with carfare a dime, movies about 35 cents and cokes and chocolate bars 6 cents, things looked much better. Even beer was just 20 cents a bottle, or 10 cents for a draught. With a little astute budgeting I'd perhaps be able to save train fare home for Christmas!

The school was filling up — new classes about every two weeks, and quite a lot of American boys. December 7<sup>th</sup>, and the beginning of the Far East War came as an expected shock, and a number of the Americans returned home to join their own forces. Surprisingly, quite a few of them stayed on. They had heard that training was faster here, with not quite as much bullshit. With the new Far Eastern war less than a week old, disaster seemed to follow disaster.

On December 11<sup>th</sup>, there came a particularly black day, the newest British battleships, “Prince of Wales” and “Repulse,” were both sunk in one day by small Japanese carrier-based torpedo bombing planes. This was one of the first major victories of aircraft over fully armed and armoured fighting ships at sea, and we all thought it significant. This and other lightening-like moves by the enemy in the Pacific shocked us all, and we buckled down to school and homework.

The course at the school was quite interesting, and we had good teachers. One got the feeling that probably there would be few failures — it was simple and straightforward.

At the hostel, we were called at 6:30 a.m., so had plenty of time for a good breakfast and then the walk to school for 8:30. We also had time to walk back to the hostel for lunch. Not many of us missed this, because it was a very good, hot meal, and if one stepped lively there was ample time.

I started chumming with a couple of lads — Ross McFarlane from Carleton Place and Vince Whelton from Bathurst, New Brunswick (or “Bathurst” as he pronounced it).

One morning we were approaching one of the meatpacking plants on our way to school. A carload of veal calves was standing on a siding door near the entrance to the killing floor, and the noise coming from that boxcar was pitiful. The calves, which had probably been removed from their mothers about two days before, were all bawling as the smell of blood and meat processing wafted out from inside the plant. It was depressing, and I was glad that the car was gone when we returned at noon.

On another day, Ross and I were walking in toward the hostel from Burlington Street. The area between the street and the hostel had been newly sown with grass, and a tinge of green was showing through the bright red clay. A railway spur crossed this grass and our front walk, and was quite well used between two International Harvester plants. As we approached, a switching engine came wheezing along with a couple of boxcars. Ross squinted at it and said: “Will you get your God-damned train off our lawn?” At the time, that remark sounded hilarious.

We were all given the week off around Christmas, and departed for our various home districts. I really enjoyed being with the family — this being the first time I’d been away from home for more than a few days. My brother Bill was up from the East Coast, where he was on duty with the Toronto Irish Regiment. We all had quite a ball, and I have hazy recollections of overindulging in beer with a group down at the North York Veterans’ Club.

On about the 29<sup>th</sup> of December it was back to Hamilton, and on with our studies.

The course finished up in mid-March, and all passed except about five of the thirty-odd. I took a couple of weeks off at home, then back to Hamilton and the Enlistment Centre. Here we had a more extensive medical, then were sworn in, and then it was off to No. 1 Manning Depot in Toronto as a real AC2 (aircraftsman, class 2). The Depot was in the Coliseum complex at the C.N.E. grounds, and was divided into units dubbed “The Bull Pen,” “The Sheep Pen,”

“The Blue Room,” and “The Chicken Coop,” as well as the Officers’ and NCOs’ quarters. Total strength of the reception, training, holding and staff wings was about 8,000 men — a real sea of blue and brass.

We had to slouch around in our “civvies” for about a week until we were fitted out with uniforms. Someone admired an old sport coat I was wearing in the beer canteen one evening, so we struck a deal and I was less one coat, but richer by six dollars.

My financial situation was now very good, chiefly because while home for Christmas, Bill had kindly remedied it. Before I left to return to Hamilton, he gave me ten dollars, and made me a man of means. This allowed me to settle all outstanding debts, and now with a little payday twice a month and everything found, all was well.

After going through the reception wing and getting a uniform, kit, immunizations, I.D. cards and all, we were given Sundays off, so I was able to go home and display all my Air Force blue and shiny new brass.

Travel also became a breeze on the main roads, as there still seemed to be ample traffic despite gasoline and tire rationing, and not many people would pass a hitchhiking serviceman. After reception came the training wing, where we did thirty days of marching and foot drill. The spring weather was warming up and Exhibition Park was a beautiful place for us to strut our stuff. After the thirty days, we passed our “drill test” and were given a seventy-two hour pass as a reward.

I was able to go home and crank up my old motorcycle, and fly about on the dusty roads.

After this welcome break, it was back to the holding wing, and we were separated into a new flight of all potential aircrew. We took a ten-day rifle drill course, using the old Ross rifle with the long bayonet. We also did some shooting at Long Branch using American Eddystone rifles. Following this, we did sentry duties, door guarding, kitchen fatigue chores, sweeping and maintenance.

We were becoming a little bored with odd jobs, so one day a bunch of us took off from a parade and didn’t show up for the afternoon. Of course we were

caught, and I was the only one too naïve to lie my way out of it. I was placed under open arrest, paraded before our C.O., found guilty, and given five nights on “defaulters.” The first night I spent three hours in the “pot room,” washing huge, greasy cauldrons along with some French lads who couldn’t speak any English. I realized then that one had to protect oneself or take all the shit, so I arranged easier tasks each night until the final night when three of us washed and polished two cars in three hours in the transport section — a lesson well learned.

The pleasant summer days slipped by, and one particular Sunday the training and holding wings paraded to Timothy Eaton Memorial Church to show our Colours. Lady Eaton received us after keeping us waiting in the parade square for an hour. In her little address to us she explained that she had a special interest in the Air Force because Billy Bishop was related to her by marriage. We were all suitably impressed, of course. We returned down Bathurst Street on a flock of chartered streetcars. We continued with our sentry duties until mid-July, when postings came up for Initial Training Schools.

Our group went to No. 1 I.T.S., at the old Eglinton Hunt Club on Avenue Road, in north Toronto. We were pleased, as we were out of the city centre, and our new station adjoined a large and beautiful park. Also, hitchhiking prospects were good in all directions.

The old Hunt Club property made a rather unusual Air Force station. The stables, naturally, had been converted into barracks for the trainees. There was still a fairly strong odour of the former occupants during the warm summer days. There had been a spruce floor laid over the old stable floor, and it was a mess of splinters — it had to be waxed daily by those assigned to barrack-warden duties. The washing facilities were a tin-topped table affair with basins to match. These had to be polished and waxed for inspection daily, and if one drop of water got on them before inspection, they could rust in five minutes flat.

The former riding arena was our drill and parade hall, where we formed up for inspection each morning, and re-formed for more classes in the afternoon. The mess hall was upstairs from the arena, and a bugler called us to parades and meals from a landing that overlooked the arena floor.

Our meals, although simple, were first class. All in all, discipline was very strict, but the place had a great atmosphere to it, and made one want to do one's best. We did a six-day workweek, with most Sundays off, and we could step out onto Avenue Road and get a ride in minutes. I was usually able to make it home in about an hour, and often took a friend for a family visit and home-cooked meal.

The course at No. 1 I.T.S. was a toughie — lots of mathematics, navigational plotting, foot drill, rifle drill, a lot of physical training and an introduction to aircraft study with a little bit of “Link” training, the “Link” being a simulated aircraft which responded to controls exactly like a real aircraft.

We also had a very extensive aircrew medical, which weeded out a few more of our number. We wound up the course in early October, and received two weeks leave, after being categorized.

I was in the pilot category. We also became Leading Aircraftsmen (LACs) with a pay raise I think of about thirty cents a day. We finished it all off with a wing-ding at the Royal York Hotel, and the best part of that party was when we caught two of the hotel busboys trying to sneak out from our dining area with about four cases of our bought-and-paid-for beer. At this gathering, I said goodbye to a number of my friends who were being posted in other categories. I was to meet some of them much later in far away places. Others had their names appear on casualty lists later on.

After the leave, we “pilots” came back into holding wing for a bit, and were given odd jobs. My friend Harry Caine and I worked in the pay section (our chief task was rolling coins). We drew our new flying gear, and in a few days a group of us was posted down to No. 9 Elementary Flying Training School at St. Catharines.

The school was an odd setup. It was civilian-run, but on an Air Force station. There were more fancy uniforms and silver wings around — even the janitorial staff looked like a bunch of fighter pilots — and the instructors all had to be addressed at “Mr.” and “Sir.” The quarters were quite good, and an

introduction to the famous “H” hut. The mess hall had a lot of good food — but one problem, it was all unbelievably overcooked.

Shortly after our arrival at 9 E.F.T.S., there were a lot of uncomplimentary rumours going around about the Commanding Officer and his Adjutant. We didn’t really know much about either one of them, although the CO had a lot of lipstick stains on his collar, which seemed a bit odd.

One afternoon all the trainees were paraded, and I guess the CO had decided it was time for a confrontation. He addressed us all, and gave us a good talking down for whatever reason. I can recall his final remarks: “I just want you to remember that both the Adjutant and myself are damned fine chaps, and that’s all there is to it.” He was right — that’s all there was to it, and we never did find out what all the furor was about.

The city of St. Catharines was a pretty, quiet town, and we used to take a bus or a taxi in on an evening off, and swim and exercise at the Y.M.C.A.

In the town there was an “Air Force Canteen” run by a kindly group of ladies and their pretty daughters — most of them high school girls. All facilities at the canteen were well maintained, and we were certainly made to feel at home.

The aircraft at the training school were DH 82s, or “Tiger Moths.” Our instructors soon had us in the air doing simple maneuvers, and a few of us had our first experience with airsickness. There was no electrical system in the Tiger Moths, and the instructor had to yell through a speaking tube affair that hooked up to our flying helmet with a pair of small rubber hoses leading to the earpieces. It was not a good way of communication, and I would venture to say that it had quite a bit to do with misunderstandings on the part of the trainees.

Everyone progressed at their own speed, and the really keen flyers were soloing after about seven hours of dual. During this time, they had been taught basic flying, the rules of the circuit and emergency procedures such as forced landings and recovery from spins.

The ground school was great, but I soon found out that I was really not comfortable with piloting. I had problems with my approaches and landings — I was inclined to lose height too fast. I also had an incident in which both

wingtips of aircraft 9655 brushed the tarmac, a double “ground loop,” which damaged the fabric, and put the aircraft U/S for the rest of the day.

My instructor was unperturbed about this, and we simply went and got another aircraft, and proceeded with the exercise. He also told me to remember that anyone could be taught to fly, but basically the aircraft in our case would eventually be no more than a maneuverable gun-platform, so fast skills were imperative.

I changed instructors, but to no avail, and my confidence was not improving. Finally, after about eleven hours of dual, the Chief Instructor came up with me and observed as I took off, made a circuit, landed, and taxied back to the hangar.

He told me I was not ready to go solo, and that they were unable to give me any more time. I felt a bit devastated, but of course, he was quite right, and knew that I was not at ease with the job.

The early winter weather was upon us now, as I packed my gear, said my goodbyes to my friends and left for the big re-mustering depot at Trenton, Ontario.

On the train to Toronto, I sat with an attractive young lady whose husband was in the Navy in Halifax. I bent her ear with my troubles, and appreciated her words of encouragement, and as I caught the train for Trenton, I was in much better spirits.

As the train clattered and swayed through the cold night, I planned on my re-mustering to straight air gunner. Things didn't seem half bad as I realized that had been my original desire. Better to have ceased training early, rather than limping along and getting the axe in a more advanced stage of training. At Trenton railway station an Air Force transport was waiting, and we were at the base in a short time. By now, it was about 2 a.m., and after entering the gate, a group of us hunted up the Orderly Sergeant to find out about quarters. The OS was a young RAF Sgt. Pilot, and he had no idea of his job—he'd not he vaguest notion where there were available quarters, and didn't know who to call to find out. We grabbed our kits and struck out toward a group of darkened H huts. We blundered in, and were halfway down a corridor

when we found that it was student officer digs. We were all dragging kit bags, and as we turned to leave, somehow we knocked two fire extinguishers, which started to spew their contents all over the place. We beat a hasty exit, and headed for a likely looking barrack block. We found rooms, but the bunks therein had no mattresses — but by this time we were tired and disgusted, so took our blankets from our kit bags and crashed on the bare springs. I was asleep in a few minutes, and didn't awake until about 8 a.m. It was now too late to get breakfast, so I got cleaned up and went hunting my new section. When I found it, I received a dressing down from a very seedy looking RAF corporal. At this point, I couldn't have cared less, and after he blew himself out I got with a CT (ceased training) aircrew group, and got settled in proper quarters. Next, we were marched over to the Medical Inspection room for the ritual always carried out with a change of station — the “short-arm inspection.” We were lined up by the seedy corporal and were told to drop our trousers so the medical officer could inspect us. Of course, for this occasion, the MO was always about fifteen minutes late, and we all stood there with trousers around our ankles, while the chill air coming down the corridor had its negative effect on the whole varied display. Finally, the red-eyed MO, smelling strongly of whiskey, appeared and passed by us as the corporal said, “Alright now lads, hold ‘em up.” It was now approaching noon, and we all returned to quarters, and then headed for the first sitting in the mess hall.

After a much-appreciated lunch, we reported to the Composite Training School drill hall, down by the lakeshore. This was indeed quite a parade — all CT aircrew — RCAF, RAF, RAAF and RNZAF. Most of them, like myself, had ceased training as pilots for various reasons. A number were feeling quite bitter, and no doubt, there was some injustice about. I met at least four of my ITS compatriots who had beaten me to Trenton. We were really quite a rag-tag lot — there must have been about two hundred men waiting for re-mustering to the new trades of navigator and bomb aimer, as well as to signals operator and gunner. Interviews came up, and I talked to a fine young Flying Officer pilot, wearing a DFC ribbon beneath his wings. I had a good chat with him, and he put me in the gunner category at my request. Now it was a matter of hanging



about until a new course was open at one of the two gunnery schools at Macdonald, Manitoba or Mont Joli, Quebec.

Our days were spent studying aircraft recognition, listening to lectures we had all heard before and familiarization with the .303 Browning machine gun, which would be the main weapon we'd be using. Occasionally our NCO superiors would get sick of trying to keep us busy, so they'd haul out an old projector and show us an ancient movie — I often wondered where they'd obtained them. For this, we'd all crowd into the main lecture theatre in the complex — and that was good for a couple of hours, which pretty well killed the afternoon. The limited facilities available for our trade led to a lot of repeat activities. We were always kept busy in the mornings with parading and P.T. — the afternoons were the problem. There was a large Airmen's Lounge over in the Recreation building where there were always numbers of staff lads off duty, and if a person could lose himself in this crowd he was okay for the afternoon. The trick was to get there. One day, after the one o'clock parade, we were broken up into small groups (about twelve men per) to attend repeat lectures or whatever. A little corporal with coke-bottle glasses was in charge of us, and of course, there was no roll because our flight had been split up. He marched us to a building and told us to wait while he went inside to see if there was a room available. As soon as he disappeared in the door, I stepped out in front of the group, called them to attention, right-turned them, and marched them off until another building hid us. Then we all dispersed like a bunch of rabbits, most of us to the lounge. We regretted not being able to witness the corporal coming out of the building to fetch his group! In hindsight, I have often thought that the Composite Training School might have been more aptly named Trenton Goldbricking School.

Christmas came, and we were well wined, dined and entertained. I got a few days leave at New Year's, and had a happy visit with the family, and had a couple of nights on the town with some of my old pals. More and more of them were enlisting, and being posted to the far ends of the country. Of the few that were left, most had medical problems, and were getting jobs in the war plants in Toronto.

By about January 10<sup>th</sup>, rumours were flying that postings were imminent, and shortly after we were given a choice of which school — Macdonald or Mont Joli. I chose Macdonald because my middle sister, Nora, had recently married, and was living in Winnipeg with her husband, Hank. I thought this would be a good chance for a visit. This decision had far-reaching effects on my life in post-war years.

The draught day for Macdonald came up, and about twenty of us got bussed to the Trenton CP station with all our kit. It was a cold, sunny afternoon, and we arrived in Toronto at about 4 p.m. The CPR train to Winnipeg didn't leave until 10 p.m., so I went home to Richmond Hill and had supper and a short visit with the family. It had started to snow quite heavily, and the temperature was falling as I made my way back to the city. I got to Union Station at about 9:30 p.m., and found that the train was delayed due to the snow, cold and late connections. We finally got underway at 2 a.m., in a howling blizzard. By breakfast time, we were near Timmins, and then the delays worsened as the storm continued unabated. We made slow progress all day, and by the following morning we were at Dryden, deep in the heart of northern Ontario, and the locomotive had a broken main connecting rod. We hung about for most of the day while a replacement engine was sent from Fort William. We were thirty-six hours late into Winnipeg — and by that time the coach batteries had failed, and the heat was not functioning properly. The train was re-made up in Winnipeg, and the trip to Portage la Prairie was made in regular time as the storm raged on. Temperature was about -35F when we detrained at the CPR station at Portage at about 4 a.m. No transport was there, so we called the Air Force station at Macdonald, and they sent a stack truck to pick us up. Thank the Lord it had a tarpaulin on it, but the wind howled through the racks on the ten-mile trip to the air station.

*~Two ~*

THE WEST —

NO.3 BOMBING AND GUNNERY SCHOOL, MACDONALD,  
MANITOBA —

WINNIPEG WEEKENDS —

EMBARKATION LEAVE —

RCAF “Y” DEPOT, HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA

NEW YORK – THE “QUEEN ELIZABETH” —

TRANS-ATLANTIC —

GREENOCK, SCOTLAND —

SOUTHWARD BY RAIL —

RCAF DISEMBARKATION DEPOT, BOURNEMOUTH —

FIRST TRIP TO LONDON —

BOURNEMOUTH UNDER ATTACK —

The airbase at Macdonald was quite a sight through the blowing snow. It was located on flat prairie, and every building and H hut had tin chimneys belching white smoke, which was streaming away on the northwest wind. Our first stop was the cookhouse, and that hot breakfast was very welcome. The day was spent getting quartered and organized. I felt sorry for the Australians in our group — their uniforms and greatcoats were not adequate for such conditions, and they were really suffering with the cold. Eventually they were issued with some warmer clothing. The H hut that we were quartered in was quite crowded, and I ended up in a wing with a mixed bunch of RAF types. After depositing my kit on the bunk, I had to leave on another errand. When I returned, the newly drawn sheets and pillowslip were missing from my kit. Of course, no one knew anything about it, but someone's mother in England was going to be the recipient of a pair of RCAF sheets and a pillowslip — and by the general look of the RAF types, she probably needed them.

Of course, I was obliged to pay for the missing set when we eventually left Macdonald. I got to know the RAF group quite well. Most of them were direct-entry gunner trainees from England, and rather uneducated. A number of them were labour-type agitators, and grumbled that they intended to make use of their pending knowledge of guns to improve their lot after the war. A couple of weeks later I was glad of a bed vacancy in the other wing with my own group, and I moved my kit over.

The day following our arrival at 3 B&G, another mixed group in from Calgary joined us. We were put together as Course 49, and commenced our training immediately. The course was really rather basic — our main subject, naturally was the operation and maintenance of our main weapon, the .303 Browning. This was a fast-firing, quite complicated but very reliable machine gun. The rate of fire was twelve hundred rounds per minute, belt fed. We also used and studied the .303 Vickers Gas Operated (VGO). This also was a drum-fed machine gun, firing at seven hundred and fifty rounds per minute. This was

the weapon we were to use for our air-firing exercises at Macdonald. The remainder of ground school time was taken up with aircraft recognition, range estimation, gun cleaning and airmanship, which covered many and varied subjects.

We also learned basic Morse, taken from an Aldis lamp. The ground school continued through January and February, and weather had been so bad in late-January that all flying training had been cancelled for about three weeks. Early in February, the weather settled down — no more snow — just continuing cold, about – 40 F quite often. Now we started to get Sundays off, and with a bit of rushing around, we were able to catch the evening train from Portage to Winnipeg on Saturdays.

I had called sister Nora, and was invited to their apartment for Saturday night and Sunday. I took along a friend, Maurice McBride, from St. John, New Brunswick, and we were well looked after. From that weekend on, Nora and Hank's apartment was our Winnipeg headquarters. We found Winnipeg a pleasant, spacious city — the legislative buildings and civic auditorium were in a beautiful park. The main streets at night were ablaze with neon signs, there being no shortage of electricity in this part of the country. There were lots of small restaurants (or "grills" as they were called in our time). There were also the "parlours," or beverage rooms — for men only, as the ladies of Manitoba were not allowed to drink in public then. We returned to Macdonald on Sunday night, after a very pleasant break. On the train I met one of my former classmates from 9 EFTS. He was at a Service Flying School further west.

We were now getting into the flying part of our training, which everyone had been looking forward to. There were a variety of aircraft at the school, and we had a familiarization flight in a Noordyn Norseman — a single-engined bush-type airplane long since gone the way of the Dodo bird. The aircraft used for our flying gunnery exercises was the Fairey Battle. These had been a frontline light bomber in the Royal Air Force, until tested under fire during the Battle of France, and found to be totally inadequate, and very vulnerable. They were rather a graceful-looking single-engine job, powered — or should I say underpowered — by an early model of the Rolls Royce Merlin

engine. After the British withdrawal from Dunkirk, most of them had been shipped over here for training purposes. They were pretty well worn out, and on the station there were perhaps fifty aircraft, with about fifteen serviceable at any one time. The rest were being used as spares and for replacement parts. Some of them were “drogue ships,” they dragged a sleeve target, or drogue, a bit like a windsock on a long cable, while the armed aircraft made approaches and passes for the gunner to pepper the drogue with fire from the Vickers gun. These guns were on a free mount, and one had to take care not to shoot-up one’s tail section.

A few old Battles had been fitted with Bristol hydraulic turrets, so we could get the feel of turret operation. These were also armed with a single VGO.

We flew two trainees to an aircraft, and each student gunner carried his own ammo drums. The bullets had dye on them — each batch a different colour, so the holes in the drogue told their story according to colour. We also flew up to the air-to-ground range on Lake Manitoba. There were bunches of spruce trees fastened to the ice, and we’d make passes over them, and fire with the Vickers using tracer ammunition. One could see the odd arcing effect caused by the forward movement of the aircraft, and this was our introduction to deflection shooting.

March seemed an endless succession of brilliant, sunny days, and no more snow. It was still cold, but the sun was burning through to patches of plowed fields over the surrounding flat lands. Innumerable straw-stacks were now visible from the previous fall’s harvest. We continued our flying, and now we were also doing a lot of skeet shooting in a special “skeet” hangar.

We were also engaged in “turret manipulation” with mounted, hydraulically operated turrets. These were operational Fraser-Nash and Boulton-Paul turrets, and we operated them using simulated moving targets. We also had two trips to the six hundred yard range on the shore of Lake Manitoba. Here we also used the operational type turrets mounted in an open-fronted shed, firing at mock-up head on views of enemy aircraft. The Fraser-Nash turrets were identical to those on the tail position of the operational

Wellingtons, Stirlings and Lancasters, and mounted four Browning guns. These four guns made a beautiful burping roar when firing, and pieces of wood flew from the mock-up targets in all directions. Total rate of fire from one of these turrets was forty-eight-hundred-rounds per minute, or eighty rounds per second. The night trip to the six hundred yard range was quite exciting, as we used the tracer ammunition on the dimly lit targets. The streams of red trace lit up the snow with an eerie glow and a number would bounce off the target and shoot skyward. We experienced breakdowns and stoppages with the guns, and learned what immediate actions to take.

In the meantime, we were going to Winnipeg every other weekend, and had found a little hotel not far from the CP station. We used to hurry there from the train, and order a whole bunch of draught to drink at our leisure, as it was usually close to closing time. One night we asked Ted, our waiter, if he knew of a dance being held. He said sure, he was going to one right after work and if we'd wait, he'd take us with him. He also said he was meeting his girlfriend, and she was going to have her younger sister with her. We agreed and continued tossing back our draught until Ted joined us. We went along to the Oddfellows' Hall, and it was smoky and crowded. McBride and I each had a mickey of cheap rye, and we'd pop outside every now and then for a swig. Ted introduced us to his girlfriend Mae and her sister Laura — a pretty, dark-haired girl with sparkling eyes. After the dance, we dined over in Chinatown, with McBride putting on a display of tomfoolery for us. Then I escorted Laura home. She was an office worker at one of the hospitals, and informed me that she was joining the "Wrens" (Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service) in a few weeks. McBride and I showed up at Nora's apartment quite late, spent a quiet Sunday, and then back to Macdonald.

The flying continued, and there were some problems with unserviceable aircraft. We were warned to pay sharp attention to any orders the pilots might give us, and if they said "jump" there was to be no hesitation as the heavy, underpowered aircraft would lose height quickly. One of our boys confused "be prepared to jump" with "jump" or maybe he just heard the last word. Consequently, he bailed out about twelve miles northwest of the station, and in

doing so, his flying boots came off, and he landed in his sock feet. The temperature was about -10 F, and luckily a farm family saw him coming down and hustled out to the rescue. He was a guest at their dinner table while waiting for a transport back to the airbase. Incidentally, the emergency the pilot thought he was encountering was not serious and he flew back and landed at the station safely.

On another occasion, a fellow student, George Chappel and I were flying with pilot P/O McDougal on a camera-gun exercise. We were about six miles south of the station at about eight hundred feet — too low for jumping — when the engine started belching black smoke. P/O McDougal told us to prepare for a forced landing, but said he'd keep going for a bit. The smoke lessened, and he flew directly onto the runway, and wheeled it down to the end. We made a hasty exit as the old Battle sat there smoking, but luckily for us it didn't catch fire. A fire truck came out, and after checking the aircraft, gave us a lift back to the hangar.

Messing facilities at Macdonald were so-so. We were getting far too many eggs served to us, and sometimes in three forms in one day. I found this no hardship, as I was very fond of eggs, but I also knew that this was not right. One evening when the Orderly Officer and Orderly Sergeant appeared in the mess hall and asked if there were any complaints, we laid some on them — particularly about the eggs. They were astounded — not about the eggs, but just the fact that we complained. We also told them about the old civvy dishwashers who were chewing tobacco and spitting under the steam tables. They left, with no further remarks. About a week later, a Women's Division Section Officer was put in charge of the mess. She had, as her subordinate, a French Canadian Sergeant. One morning soon after this change, I was at breakfast and noticed the new Sergeant going through piles of plates and picking out the cracked ones. He took a stack of about twenty, walked to the middle of the cement kitchen floor, and threw them down. Then he turned to the wide-eyed kitchen girls and said, "Okay, now clean dem up!" From that day on there was no more cracked crockery, no more tobacco chewers and the meals improved to as good as any I ever struck on in an Air Force station again.



Our Winnipeg weekends continued, and McBride and I took another chum along to Nora's apartment, Harold Queen, from Windsor, Ontario (there was lots of room on the floor). Saturday night I took Laura to a dance at the auditorium, and I told Queen that I'd meet him at a certain drug store at 1:30 a.m., and we'd walk to Nora's. I was delayed leaving Laura's apartment, and, truthfully, forgot about Queenie. At nearly 3 a.m. I remembered and hustled down to the drugstore on Main Street. I felt pretty mean, as the temperature was about ten below. When I reached the store, there was poor old Queenie — he was almost speechless with cold, and much to my surprise, he wasn't even mad. We hurried along to Nora's, and she made us some hot chocolate, and we got Queenie thawed out and bedded down on the floor. McBride never did show up until about 8 a.m. He'd had other fish to fry.

We were now into April, and the brilliant sunshine had burned away all but the largest snowdrifts. The airbase itself had caught a lot of huge drifts, and the snow water was backing up and flooding some of the sections. Fortunately, quarters and cookhouse were not affected. Our flying exercises were nearly all finished, and we were preparing for our passing out parade on April 16<sup>th</sup>. Shortly before this, a New Zealander called Chatfield, a fellow pupil and I were up on an air-firing exercise. After we'd done a little firing, the Vickers gun failed, and we had to return. We got a replacement gun and went through the whole procedure again. Once more, the gun failed, and we returned. We got another gun, and believe it or not, it too failed. We knew we'd have to come up again if we brought any ammo back, and our bags still contained six drums. It was now nearing 5:30 p.m., so Chatty passed the full drums of our remaining ammo down to me at the entrance hatchway. I knocked the retaining lips on the side of the hatchway and sent the contents of the drums spewing down toward the prairie. Then we reported to the pilot that our ammo was all used, and the exercise complete. No one asked any questions, and the next day we drew a gun that worked.

The last flight we had at Macdonald was a cross-country map reading exercise. This was a change — we flew in an Avro Anson, the faithful old type that was used in navigation schools, and the Service Flying Schools for multi-

engine pilot trainees. About six of us went in each Anson, and we had a great time trying to keep a log and to identify towns and villages.

Passing out parade day, April 16<sup>th</sup>, finally arrived, and some parents, friends and relatives showed up at the ceremony, which was held in one of the drill halls. We were all well pressed and shined to receive our wings from the Chief Instructor, Squadron Leader Ross. We were all promoted to Sergeants — that came along with the successful completion of the course. The next day, we were given our travel warrants and passes, and orders to report in Halifax on May 1<sup>st</sup>. Off we went with our brand-new wings and Sergeant's stripes, to get the afternoon train from Portage. The lads from the Pacific coast had a long, long journey to and from their homes, until we'd see them again in Halifax.

Our small section under Sergeant Instructor "Pappy" Hays had a farewell and graduation party at his apartment in Winnipeg — and a real blast that was, too. McBride and I found our way back to Nora's place rather late and a little inebriated. Next day, after goodbyes to Nora and Hank, McBride, Queen and I took the CPR eastbound, and regretfully watched Winnipeg disappear into the west as the train headed for the bush of northern Ontario.

Laura had left the previous week to report in at the WRCNS training establishment at Galt, Ontario. I had about eight days leave to make the most of — the weather was fairly good, so I traveled around on my old Henderson motorcycle, and visited friends and relatives to say goodbye. One dear old neighbour lady burst into tears as I left, and I suddenly realized that she didn't expect to see me again! Everyone wished me luck, and I guess it didn't help much when I said: "Thanks, I'll need it." I also went down to Galt to see Laura. She was getting settled in to the new naval terms and routines of basic training. It was Easter weekend, and at that time we made sort of an unspoken commitment to each other.

My family came down to Union Station with me, where we met other members of our group heading for Halifax. Queenie was there with his brand-new, pretty little wife Betty, who was bravely trying to hold back her tears. Earlier that evening, before we'd left home I had a touching farewell from my mother. While we were getting ready, I was making a final trip upstairs to

gather up the last of my kit. As I walked along the hallway, Mother came out of her room, and instead of passing me, she suddenly flung her arms around my neck and said: "Say goodbye to Momma, now." I was touched, and realized what she must have been feeling. Later, at the station, she was all smiles and never shed a tear. After rather awkward goodbyes to Mother, brother Bob and sister Betty, we left on the CP train for Montreal and Halifax. There was a half-day wait in Montreal for the maritime train, which eventually took us down through the state of Maine to New Brunswick and the port of St. John. Here we picked up Maurice McBride, as St. John was his hometown. We crossed the Bay of Fundy on the pitching, rolling little old "Lady Helen." Two RCN corvettes accompanied us, as the Bay was a favourite hunting ground for German subs.

We soon docked at Digby, Nova Scotia, and entrained on the quaint little Dominion Atlantic Railway for Halifax. We arrived at Halifax late in the afternoon of May 1<sup>st</sup>, having traveled up the beautiful Annapolis Valley. I was a bit disappointed that none of the blossoms were yet evident.

At the RCAF "Y" (embarkation) Depot, we were supplied with overseas gear (tin hat, webbing, gas cape and respirator) and the following evening, having changed our Dollars for Stirling, climbed into trucks and headed downtown. We were all sure we were going onto a ship — but no, we entrained again, this time at the CN station. Rumours were about that New York was our destination, and that was correct. We were back in St. John by morning, then over into Maine and New York the following morning.

This was a real troop train, with wooden seats and a filthy commissary kitchen car, which served us a sort of breakfast. The trip through the suburbs of New York seemed endless, but we finally arrived at the docking area and went aboard a ferry. The ferry took us down harbour, past rows of deep-sea docks. We passed the "Normandie," the second-largest ship in the world, lying on her side at her berth. The U.S. Army had been converting this French luxury liner into a troop ship, and there had been an accidental fire (or so it was said) and she was now a burnt-out hulk lying in the mud. An inglorious end for a proud ship. Two piers further along we could see two huge smokestacks — it could only be one ship. It was the Queen Elizabeth, all eighty-three thousand tons of

her, completely covered in battleship grey paint. We were happy and proud to be going aboard the largest, and probably fastest, ship in the world.

We went onboard the *Queen Elizabeth* at about 11 a.m., and were assigned small rooms well below the porthole lines. The loading process must have been going on all the previous day, as we seemed to be about the last passengers to embark, and the decks were a solid mass of American Army khaki. The U.S. Army boys were puzzled by our blue dress. To many of them, Canada was a remote country somewhere to the north. The size of the ship was astounding, and from the upper decks, a view down the side was like looking over a cliff. All through the afternoon, we familiarized ourselves with the layout of the ship, and took care to find our correct lifeboat stations.

We were also served a surprisingly good meal, but there were no eating utensils provided and each man had his own mess kit to use and keep clean. During this first meal, there was a U.S. Army chap sort of in charge of the tables. He stood up at the head of the table and wisecracked while we were eating. Among other things, he said: “Now hear this: there are four meals a day on this boat — two down and two up.”

Late in the afternoon, our group of about forty was rounded up and assigned military police duties by an American officer. He said: “Now, we’re here to help yuh.”

Our chef task was a twenty-four-hour guard on freshwater outlets, and issuing drinking water to the troops during certain hours. Reliable sources told us there were eighteen thousand men aboard when we cast off. Late that night, we could feel the vibrations of the engines, and when we went on deck in the morning, we were a hundred-or-so miles at sea, on a bright, sunny day.

Two U.S. Navy blimps accompanied us, a quite common in-shore escort at that time. Before noon, we could see Aldis lamp signals coming from one of the blimps, and they shortly turned about, and disappeared into the west.

The *Queen Elizabeth*, being such a fast ship, traveled without escort. She could out-run any surface ship or undersea vessel, with the exception, I suppose, of a destroyer. She made a course-change every ten minutes, and left a white, zigzag trail behind her. The upper decks were bristling with all kinds of light

anti-aircraft weapons, and there were a couple of six-inch naval guns mounted to fire astern. Once a day, all personnel had to take cover inside while the anti-aircraft guns were tested. The noise was deafening, and the whole ship vibrated with the cannonading.

On the second day out, the air temperature turned decidedly warmer — a result of us approaching the Gulf Stream. Balmy conditions continued the third and fourth days, and we spent most of our off time out on the decks. Another pastime was standing in line to buy American cigarettes. One could buy only two packs at a time, but at a nickel a pack, some of the boys spent the whole day queuing and re-queuing. On the fifth day, the more familiar chill of the north Atlantic became noticeable again. The morning of the sixth day found us off the north coast of Ireland, escorted by a British cruiser, and Coastal Command aircraft were seen. The next morning, we were steaming slowly up the Clyde River, approaching Greenock, the port of Glasgow, in Scotland. There were no docking facilities here for such a huge ship, so she stood off in the wide river channel, while passengers and cargo were taken ashore by lighter. Our train was standing almost at dockside, and we marched directly from the lighter to the train. The bright green of the hills behind the town was a welcome sight as we got underway.

We were all amazed at the speed of the train, the high, shrill whistle and the different duh-duh-duh-dut as the eight-wheeled coaches clacked over the unstaggered rail joints. The countryside was beautiful — quaint hedges and stone walls everywhere. Some of the higher hills still had their summits capped with snow. As we glided along through the rich green, hilly country, I remarked to McBride that we should see a kilted piper before we left Scotland. There must have been some ESP involved at this time, because moments later, as we rounded a gentle curve, there stood a piper in a field no more than fifty feet from the track. He was completely rigged out, but of course we were unable to hear his pipes. Nevertheless, we were thrilled to see him there in all his finery. The afternoon drifted into evening as we journeyed southward, and we found that our destination was the RCAF disembarkation depot in Bournemouth, on the south coast of England. We spent a fitful night, and the

morning found us south of Nottingham. Bournemouth was reached at about noon and the day was sunny and pleasant. We formed up at the station, and marched down through the town to our reception section. Here we were assigned quarters, which were in shore-side boarding hotels leased by the RCAF. We had our mess hall in a converted bowling green building beside a beautiful park, ablaze with rhododendrons and other unfamiliar flowering shrubs. It was really a beautiful spot — a resort area around a pretty little town centre.

There was really nothing much to do at Bournemouth. Our groups paraded at 8:30 a.m., were dismissed shortly after, and then the same procedure in the afternoon. The rest of the time was our own. After about our fourth day, we were given five days disembarkation leave, so most of us trooped off to London by train — that seemed like the number one thing to do.

In London, the Canadian servicemen's club, the Beaver Club, looked after us well and directed us to lodgings run by the Canadian Knights of Columbus. We were sent to a little hotel at Lancaster Gate, by the side of Hyde Park. The cost — two shillings and sixpence per day, bed and breakfast — equaled about sixty cents. For this we got a cot in sort of a dormitory, bathroom down the hall, and quite a decent breakfast. It was a very good deal and I will always admire the Knights of Columbus for supplying us with such a service.

We spent the days in London exploring and sightseeing. We found out all about the wonderful and friendly British pubs, the marvelous Underground system, London's Tower Bridge, St. Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Houses of Parliament, and, of course, the Windmill Theatre, the famous burlesque house where the stage girls took most of it off.

Quite often during the day or night air-raid sirens would sound — but no one seemed to pay much attention. The bombing offensive by the Germans had been temporarily abandoned — their aircraft (bombers) were occupied on the Russian front. There was still the odd hit-and-run raid occurring, but these were done with small numbers of aircraft, and infrequently.

Our leave was soon done, and we headed back for Bournemouth. We left London on a morning train and were approaching Bournemouth around noon

when we heard sirens. The train came to an immediate stop outside the town. Suddenly there was a quick series of sharp explosions and grey-brown mushrooms of dust and smoke appeared toward the town centre. Now we could hear heavy machine-gun fire, and as we crowded to the train windows to see, a flight of Focke-Wulf 190s appeared, turned, and took another pass over the town centre. About one minute later several Spitfires shot overhead at treetop level, heading seaward.

The train began to move slowly into town as the all clear sounded. As we entered the station, we saw the platforms littered with broken glass blown out of the canopy windows.

As we walked back toward our quarters, we could see lots of smoke and could hear the ammunition exploding on a machine gun emplacement atop a burning building. We dumped our gear and went downtown to see what had happened.

In the time lapse of roughly four minutes a flight of about fifteen Focke-Wulf 190s had come in from the channel at nought feet, pulled up over the park and town centre, dropped a couple of bombs each, and then had shot up the noontime crowd in the park. There was considerable damage, and about twenty civilians — including several children — were killed, and many more were injured. It was amazing the way the emergency services took action. In a few days most of the mess had been cleaned up. This was a reminder to us that a real, indiscriminate shooting war was going on, and at any moment, almost, it could be directly on top of you.

\* Author's note, see final page

*~THREE~*

NO. 14 OPERATIONAL TRAINING UNIT, COTTESMORE —

RAF STATION, SALTBY —

“CREWING UP” —

FLYING WITH THE NEW CREW —

1654 HEAVY CONVERSION UNIT, WIGSLEY, LINCOLNSHIRE  
—

DISASTER AT FULBECK —

ADVANCED FLYING EXERCISES —

AN OPERATIONAL CREW —



Early in June our group was posted to No. 14 Operational Training Unit at RAF station Cottesmore, in county Rutland, up in the Midlands. The Midlands area contained the largest concentration of RAF Bomber Command training and operational bases. Lincoln, Nottingham, Newark was Five Group country, the RAF Bomber group we would be operating with when our training was completed. At this point, one may ask, “Whatever happened to the RCAF? Well, the Commonwealth Air Training Plan was a complex organization, and all the trained aircrew from Canada were streamed to where they were needed most, regardless of their country or air force of origin. As Canadians, we were still RCAF, with our own rates of pay etc. but were now said to be “attached RAF.” Probably, if one had really made a fuss, a transfer could have been made to Six Group, the RCAF Bomber group — but why bother? After all, this was an Empire war, and I think most of us liked the idea of working with lads from all over the British Empire.

Our first flying in our training aircraft, Wellington 1Cs, was done from a satellite of Cottesmore, a small station called RAF Saltby. Here we did some camera gun exercises and a lot of air firing. When returning from an air-firing session over the Wash one day, our pilots decided to give us a low-flying thrill over the Lincolnshire potato fields. These staff pilots liked to do something occasionally, as their job was a bit boring for them. They really took our two Wellingtons down to the deck, and below fifty feet. There were workers in the fields taking out early potatoes, and a few of them started throwing spuds at us. I actually saw one potato come up a bit higher than we were flying at the time.

We were now fully familiar with the Fraser-Nash turrets. The Wellington had two, nose and tail. The “Wimpy” as it was fondly dubbed, had been a mainstay of Bomber Command, but was being withdrawn from operations and replaced by the heavier four-engined types — Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters. The Cottesmore aerodrome was grass —no runways — and the flying strip was laid out for day or night flying with markers, or flare-path goosenecks. There was quite a noticeable dip in the flying field, and as an aircraft took off, it charged down the slope and only the tailfin was visible

as it went through the dip. This was indeed an odd sight, and I wondered if there were many aerodromes like this in Bomber Command. Actually, it turned out to be unique, and I saw no other base with such a dip. The Wimpey's rather snubby, fat, fuselage put me in mind of a giant black pig charging down the slope, roaring up the other side and becoming airborne. Another rather odd thing about the Wellington — it was the only fabric-covered aircraft in Bomber Command. I never heard a reason for this design, as the other, heavier, early operational types had all been metal skinned. I would imagine it was just another hangover from another era.

After completing our initial gunnery-flight exercises at Saltby, we returned to Cottesmore for the “crewing up” process. The crews formed up by personal choice of the pilot, who was Captain. Five members were already together — the pilot, navigator, bomb-aimer, signals operator and rear gunner. Lacking were mid-upper gunner and flight engineer. We all assembled in the station theatre — the Chief Instructor gave us a bit of a speech and requested that the Captains finish picking their crews. A rather serious-looking Australian pilot with a friendly smile was sitting in front of me — he turned and enquired if I had a crew as yet. When I replied in the negative, he asked if I would like to join his crew. I agreed, and that was my introduction to Flying Officer Alex Vowels, RAAF, from Brisbane, Australia. He also chose a flight engineer — Sergeant Ted Martin, RAF, from Croydon, Surrey. Other members were navigator Flight Sergeant Henry Mahon, RAAF; Parkes, New South Wales, Australia; bomb aimer Private Officer Dennis Bourke, Manchester; signals operator Sergeant Doug Broome, RAF, Norwich; and rear-gunner Sergeant Dennis Chalk, RAF, Enfield, Middlesex. We proceeded to get acquainted and everyone was sort of eying us up. At this point, the old bunch from Macdonald started to drift apart, as we were all involved with our new crewmembers. We had already lost McBride, as he had been hospitalized with a mouth infection, and had to drop back. We still had Queenie in our group. Our crew began flying together now. Our first trip in the Wellington was a “fighter affiliation” exercise using camera-gun on a single engined chase aircraft. I was in the rear turret

when we landed, and a hydraulic line burst and saturated my trousers with red fluid — what a mess!

We had now started cross-country flights of longer duration — perhaps five or more hours flying over the uneven countryside of England. No more north and south lines like Manitoba — just helter-skelter shapes and sizes of fields, towns and winding roads.

During our flights in the Wellington I occupied the nose turret, as there was no mid-upper position such as I would have in the Lancaster. It was quite a feeling out there watching the scene unfold, also a bit chilly if we had any altitude to speak of. On one trip I watched white ice building up on the leading edge of the wing as we passed through a weather disturbance. At night, the exhaust manifolds of the radial Pegasus engines glowed a dull cherry red.

We were beginning to feel more comfortable with each other, and getting to know what to expect from one another. Our nearest village was Oakham, not all that large — it only had eleven pubs! Ground school activities continued between flying exercises or during inclement weather. We had lectures by tour-expired people from the various trades, and occasionally from someone who had escaped from a prison camp, or a person who had parachuted and found his way back with the aid of the resistance movement in Europe. Our training at No. 14 OTU was now finished, and before our posting to 1654 Heavy Conversion Unit at Wigsley, Lincolnshire, we were sent off on a five-day leave.

For this leave at our training break, London was our choice again, as we had enjoyed ourselves so thoroughly in late May. The weather was great — hot and dry — and we were anxious to see our haunts out by Hyde Park. We managed to find McBride again, and another young chap from Hamilton, Harold Suthers. Queen and myself made up the foursome, and we got lodgings at the same little K of C hotel at Lancaster Gate, beside the park.

We got to know the “regulars” at the Swan, the nearest pub, learned to play darts there as well. We saw Buckingham Palace, and attended a concert in Albert Hall. We also had a taxi man take us on a tour of the worst bombed-out areas of the city, which were centered in the region of the docks along the

Thames. Surprisingly enough, there were vast areas, which had suffered only superficial damage, although there had been damage, which had been cleaned up enough so to be hardly noticeable. There were many low, brick constructed air raid shelters in the streets — they were windowless, had reinforced concrete roofs and open doors at either end. They all smelled strongly of urine, as this was their chief use when the pubs closed. During the severe bombings of 1941 – 1942, the Underground stations had been utilized as shelters, as many of them were so deep that no bomb could penetrate. They still had emergency bunks fitted along the walls and there were a few older people and children who seemed to live there permanently. I would guess probably grandparents looking after grandchildren. The restaurants in London were quite good — most of them, at least. We were once in one supposedly high-toned place off Piccadilly Circus called the “Monica,” and when our meal came it looked very attractive. However, for some reason I turned my piece of meat over, and wondered why the underside had bits of white rice clinging to it. On closer examination, the “rice” proved to be maggots. We all threw our cutlery down, and showed the dish to the waiter, who at once offered us alternate choices. We declined and left at once for the nearest pub for a liquid lunch. Such a situation was uncommon, and it was usually amazing what restaurants could do with their limited supplies of meat, sugar and dairy products.

I spent my twentieth birthday in the Swan with my friends, old and new, and felt quite happy to leave my teenage years behind. On that evening I struck up a conversation with a British Captain (army) at the bar, and had a fine time. He was rather an intellectual type, and had just returned from North Africa, where the British and American forces were dealing the Afrika Corps a thorough trouncing. He told me of the shock the green American troops received when they first encountered the desert-hardened Germans. The five-day leave, as usual, went by too quickly, and we left London for Cottesmore, and our posting to the Con. Unit at Wigsley.

On arrival back at the Sergeants’ Mess at Cottesmore, I was delighted to find my first batch of mail from Canada waiting for me — a small pack of letters and a carton of 300 Sweet Caps. Laura had been posted from Galt to Kingston,

and was traveling around towns in Eastern Ontario with a naval recruiting unit. News from home was most welcome, telling of activities on the farm with some pictures. There was one of my friend Geoff helping brother Bob to load a wagon with green pea vines for the processing plant in Richmond Hill. A letter from my mother also told me that brother Bill was on his way overseas with his new unit of Royal Canadian Ordinance Corps. I spent the evening reading and rereading the letters.

The Heavy Conversion Unit at RAF station Wigsley was a truly dispersed base — we even passed through a small village on our walks to and from the “flights.” I would explain here that the Flights were the office and crew rooms of the squadron or training unit. Here were classrooms, parachute section and changing rooms. Transport to the aircraft dispersal points always left from here, and brought the crews back after flying duties. There were fields of ripening grain all about the Sergeants’ Mess and our quarters. The weather was continuing, hot and dry, and was so for the five weeks we were at Wigsley. We were at last going to start flying in the Lancaster, the aircraft Five Group was equipped with, and which we would ultimately be using operationally. During the initial days at Wigsley, we were engaged in ground school activities. Our quarters and mess were an easy walk from the Flights, and one day at noon we were hiking to the mess and skirting the upwind end of the runway in use. We saw an aircraft making its approach, which appeared to be a Lancaster, but somehow looked and sounded different. As it came toward us with wheels and flaps lowered, we could see that it had large radial engines instead of the usual inline Merlins. It was a Hercules-powered Lancaster from the Canadian Six Group. This was the Mark II and a few squadrons had been equipped with them. They were an extremely handsome and powerful-looking aircraft, and the big Herc engines were much quieter than the shattering roar produced by the Merlin power plants.

The Lanc IIs unfortunately lacked the altitude capabilities of the Is, IIIs and Xs. The Lanc was the newest and best of the heavy aircraft of Bomber Command — Halifaxes and Stirlings were the other two four-engined types in the squadrons. The Stirling was gradually being withdrawn from Main Force

activities. She carried the heaviest payloads, but her design made it impossible to reach the current operational heights. ‘The Halifax compared more with the Lancaster, although she had gone through a number of modifications. I have no doubt whatsoever there would be crew members who flew in the Stirlings and Halifaxes who would argue that they were the best aircraft that ever flew, and, to be sure, each type had some advantage over the other. Even the Lancaster had been developed from an unsuccessful twin-engined aircraft, the Manchester. The Manchester had been powered by two huge twenty-four cylinder engines, Rolls Royce Vultures, which were a pack of trouble from the word go. Before having our first flight in the Lancaster, all the gunners from our course were posted out to a special gunnery flight aerodrome, Fulbeck, for a special training session.

In aerial gunnery, deflection shooting was the name of the game, and absolutely essential because of the movement of the target as well as that of the aircraft firing. Point blank shots would only come at extremely close range, so deflection had to be applied and accurately, Five Group had developed a new evasive action for their aircraft to take when under attack, which would make it very difficult for an enemy fighter to get his fixed guns to bear.

We were now going to learn about this “Five Group corkscrew” as the evasive action was called, and the deflection to be applied during the action. All the gunners were sent out to the special Group Training Unit at Fulbeck. We were temporarily quartered at the Unit, and our four-day stay was to be spent using camera gun during simulated fighter attacks and evasive action. The second morning, our group of about six gunners went up in a Wellington piloted by a Canadian, Private Officer Oldham. This was a straight and level exercise for familiarization, with a single engined advanced trainer, a Miles Martinet, as the target aircraft. We were slated for a further flight at 1300 hours, same aircraft and pilot, using the corkscrew. Our films would be shown to us so we’d be able to see if our deflection was correct. We reported to the Flights for the one o’clock exercise, and were told that it was cancelled because of group of senior officers were coming from Group to see what this course was all about. They would be flying in the aircraft we’d have been using —

Wellington BK235s. We returned to the barrack hut, and I took advantage of the time to write letters. At about 2:30, Dennis, my rear-gunner decided to walk up to the Flights to see what was doing. In about half an hour he was back. He rushed to the door, his face about the colour of plaster, and told me that during the corkscrew action, the Wellington "S" with the senior officers had broken up and gone straight in from about 2000 feet. No one had got out, and all had been killed. I quote from the RAF Historical Branch records:

"Wellington BK235 was engaged in a corkscrew fighter affiliation exercise on the 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1943 with Martinet HN877 piloted by F/O Jordan. Both aircraft operated with 1485 BG Flight. When F/O Jordan was about 200 yards astern of the Wellington he saw the starboard wing of the aircraft break completely off at the outboard of the starboard engine. The Wellington at once went into a dive, and crashed 1 ½ miles south of Appleby, Lincolnshire, killing the six crew members. The crew details: Pilot – W/O Heard; Instructor – Sgt. Breslin; students on Senior Officer's Gunnery Course – Group Captain Low; Group Captain Odbert; Wing Commander Matheson; and Squadron Leader Brandon-Trye."

At Fulbeck that day in July, those RAF senior officers had died in our stead. Now all flying in the Wellingtons was cancelled for them to undergo a major inspection. We returned to Wigsley on the following day, where we'd learn about the corkscrew in our own type of aircraft. Total flying time at Fulbeck: One hour and twenty-five minutes.

The Lancaster was nearly twice the size and weight of the Wellington. Her length was sixty-eight feet, and wingspan one hundred and two feet. All the aircraft at Wigsley had seen squadron service — they were the Mark I Lincs, and had been replaced by the Mark III in most instances. Outwardly there appeared no difference, but the IIIs had slight refinements in engines, equipment and airframe. Armament consisted of four Browning .303 MGs in the rear turret, two in the middle turret or dorsal, and two in the nose turret. The nose turret was operated by the bomb aimer as necessary, while the two gunners stayed in the mid-upper and rear turrets at all times. The rear and front had a turning capability of 180 degrees, while the mid-upper had a full

360. Controls were a combination of hydraulic and electric. Gun sights were of the reflector graticule type, with adjustable brightness for day and night use. I was pleased to finally get into my proper position in the mid-upper. This allowed me a view of the whole upper surface of the aircraft. The guns had an automatic fire-interrupter system, which made it impossible to shoot off the twin tailfins or the tail plane. The bomb load and petrol load were adjusted according to type and distance of the target, and as a general rule, the all-up weight at operational takeoff would be about thirty-two and a half tonnes. There was a radar navigational device called "Gee" which gave pinpoint locations when read out by the navigator. It was effective all over the United Kingdom, and a good deal further, but faded out as distance from the signal stations increased and could not be used too far into the Continent. The flying exercises at Wigsley became more complicated and longer, and simulated the operational conditions as much as possible. There were day and night trips to the bombing range, and more fighter affiliation exercises utilizing the "Five Group corkscrew." Night cross-country trips to test the navigator's skills became much longer, although we were not flying at extreme operational heights. The aircraft were not in tip-top form, being hand-me-downs from the squadrons and consequently there were holdups and delays. I recall one night our crew was attempting to get in a required number of circuits and landings. Each time round we had to stop by the watch office while a ground staff person checked for leaks. Three times we had to return to the dispersal point while a mechanic searched for a leak in the starboard outer coolant system. It was a long and frustrating night.

Aircraft from our course flew a medium duration cross-country exercise on another occasion when there was a half moon. Arrangements had been made with a force of Mosquito night fighters to add a bit of realism to the proceedings. The Mosquito pilots were going to switch on the white light in the bulbous, clear plastic nose of their aircraft if they considered that they had made a successful pass. We got a sighting of a Mosquito making his attack and Dennis, the rear-gunner, gave the order to corkscrew. The shadowy aircraft immediately disappeared as Alex pushed the Lanc into the maneuver. I was



completely disoriented, and suddenly a bulbous white light appeared beside us. I was just about to report the fighter's success to Alex when I realized I was looking at the half moon! I thought it better to make no comment other than that we had shaken off the "enemy." We would not have many operational trips longer than this nearly eight-hour flight, and we were now ready for operations.

*~FOUR~*

61 SQUADRON, RAF SYERSTON, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE —

61 SQUADRON, RAF SKELLINGTHORPE, LINCOLNSHIRE —

463 SQUADRON, RAAF WADDINGTON, LINCOLNSHIRE —

THE ATTACK ON GERMANY —

SWITCH TO NW EUROPE, APRIL-JULY 1944 —

THE FLYING BOMBS —

OUR TOUR COMPLETED —

POSTINGS TO THE OTUs —

On about the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, we were posted as an operational crew to 61 Squadron RAF Syerston (sign letters – QR) in Nottinghamshire. Another squadron was also based there, RAF No. 106, (sign letters – ZN). About eight crews from our course at Wigsley were posted in — some to each squadron.

The rest of the course crews were sent to squadrons on other Five Group bases in the area. I had now lost contact with the last of my old friends from Macdonald, but was able to hear of their activities through news passed between the bases from time to time. Bomber Command casualty lists were also posted in the sections after each operation, and within a few days familiar names started to appear. We were in “B” Flight, and our OC was Squadron Leader B. Cousins, RAF. The commander of the squadron was Wing Commander W. Penman, RAF. We finished out the last few days of August familiarizing ourselves with our new sections. We heard about one of our squadron aircraft, which had received battle damage, so Dennis and I went up to the maintenance hangar to have a look. The tailplane and elevator surfaces were pretty well destroyed on one side, and the rear turret was a shambles. The rear gunner’s life had been saved by a piece of 3/8 inch armour plate which slid up and down when he elevated or depressed his guns (later this armour plate was removed from all the Five Group aircraft because it interfered with the gunner’s vision).

WE had a very good gunnery leader — I am unable to recall his last name, but he was a RAF Flight Lieutenant, first name Charles, and he had a DFM (distinguished flying medal) from his first tour of operations. He was an older man, approaching forty years, and did not fly with a regular crew, but filled in from time to time if a gunner was unfit for flying duties through sickness. We did a few more training flights, and were assigned an aircraft to share with another crew — QR “V.” On September 2<sup>nd</sup> we received our first operational assignments — a mining “stooge” (code name “Gardening”) in enemy shipping lanes off the Friesian Islands. We carried six 1,500-pound sea mines (parachute) and Henry, the navigator, was able to use Gee to pinpoint the

dropping position. We were about four miles offshore and all we could see was a number of searchlights probing about the enemy sky. Trip duration was just two hours and fifty minutes — like another cross-country, almost.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup>, operations were scheduled — we were informed usually sometime during the morning, and at about noon the “Battle Order” would be posted with crews named to operate. Our Captains would inform us of this personally. Our crew was not on the Battle Order for Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>, but in mid-afternoon, Charles sent for me. He told me I could refuse if I wanted to, but there was a mid-upper gunner in F/O Woods’ crew sick, and would I fly in his stead? Well, what in Hell is a person supposed to do when a request like that is put to him? I agreed to fly with the Woods crew. We were now checking the casualty lists after each operation, and it was uncanny the number of crews failing to return from their first or second trips. My friend Harold Queen from Windsor was missing on his second trip, as were a couple of others from our course at Wigsley.

The crews on the Battle Order gathered for the main briefing. I entered the briefing theatre with the Woods crew, and the route marking tapes were in place on a huge wall map. It was a straight-in route to Berlin, with few feints or diversions. The strike force was going to be only half the usual size — 375 aircraft, all Lancasters. I thought to myself: a lively introduction, I should see plenty tonight. Only the operating crews had target details, so I was unable to tell my own crew anything. The route in was almost straight, but the way back was the opposite. From the target we were to fly straight north over the Baltic and into Sweden, turn port at a lake landmark, cross Denmark, the North Sea and back to base. Tactics were to confuse the enemy, and this was going to be a classic.

I took transport with the Woods crew to the aircraft dispersal point just as dusk was falling. The aircraft was QR “Oboe”, and this was my first sight of a fully bombed-up Lancaster. The bomb doors were open, and the load was hanging in view. One 4,000-pound blast bomb was in mid-bay position. This was shaped like an elongated oil drum, and had a hollow rear end, which acted as the tail. Three vane fuses were on the front end. The remainder of the load

was made up of four-pound incendiaries, which were fastened into oblong containers or “cans” by small metal release bars. There were fourteen cans, each holding 100 bombs. When the bombs were released at target, the holding bars fell away and the four-pounders cascaded out.

Woods checked his aircraft outwardly, and mentioned to the Flight Sergeant (the NCO I/C ground crew) that the undercarriage oleo legs appeared unbalanced. The flight sergeant pointed out to him that the dispersal pad was not deal level, and the aircraft was leaning slightly. This satisfied F/O Woods, and we went aboard to start up and prepare for take off.

The crew entered the aircraft by climbing a short ladder and stepping through a door in the starboard side between the mainplane and the tailplane. The rear gunner, dressed in his flying gear, including an electrically heated inner suit, gloves and boot liners turned left and entered his turret feet first, sliding over the tailplane spar. The mid-upper gunner, similarly dressed, climbed up into his turret by pulling down a moveable step, rising into the turret, and pulling up a drop seat and securing it beneath himself. Both gunners had to stow their parachutes outside the turrets because of lack of room. The remainder of the crew proceeded forward up the bomb bay steps, and closed an armoured bulkhead door behind them as they clambered over the mainplane spar and entered the heated portion of the fuselage. Of course, there was no pressurization, and all crewmen wore oxygen masks combined with intercom mics. The signals operator’s position was next on the left side. Forward from this was the navigator’s position, which could be curtained off, as he had to work on his charts with a bright light. Forward again as the flight deck and the pilot’s seat and controls were on the left. In front of him were a myriad of instruments and controls. The flight engineer had a moveable seat by the pilot, but many of them didn’t use it and spent their time standing on the flight deck where they could watch all gauges, and perform their other tasks. The bomb aimer proceeded down a small passageway into the nose, where he spent most of his time in a prone position. His bomb site was right in front of him and his release controls and other instruments were at his right-hand side. The front turret, which he operated as necessary, he just stood up in — it had no seat. All

the crewmembers forward of the bulkhead door stored their chutes close at hand. The bomb aimer lay on the escape hatch, and in an emergency was normally out first, while his companions followed as best they could. The rear gunner could open his turret doors, get his chute from the stowage, put it on, find his way to the door and tumble out, taking care not to leave his brains on the tailplane as he did so. As anyone could understand, this could be some operation if the aircraft was anything but upright at the time. One could only hope that the situation would not arise. The forward crewmembers did not have to wear electrically heated clothing, as their positions were at least above the freezing point.

F/O Woods and his flight engineer proceeded with the start-up: starboard outer; starboard inner; port inner; port outer. This put life in all the hydraulic systems, and gunners tested the turret rotation and gun-laying controls. Crewmen also tested intercom connections and oxygen supplies. At taxi out time the fully laden aircraft moved sluggishly out from its dispersal pad and took its place in the lineup on the perimeter track, as the line moved slowly toward the end of the runway in use. Each awaited the green Aldis signal from the control van at the runway end, before turning on to the run-up spot. The procedure was quite rapid and we were soon turning onto the end. Brakes held fast, and roaring, straining engines — then release and a surge ahead as the pilot's hand on the four throttle levers applies full power. The aircraft rapidly gains speed as it charges down the flare path, the pilot compensating for torque swing with throttle. The wheels skip a few times as the tail rises, and the runway lights suddenly slow up and draw away as we are airborne. Soon a shallow climbing turn to port, and the circuit lights show up in their huge uneven circle. The flight engineer, on the pilots order has pulled up the landing gear and a short time later draws up the flaps slowly as we start our long climb towards operational height.

The takeoff was just after dusk in QR-O with no moon, good conditions. After what seemed as short time climbing in the Midlands area, the navigator gave the pilot a course that would take us over our coast-crossing point, Mablethorpe, at the appropriate time. Woods turned onto the course, and

continued climbing on track. The time raced by. We continued climbing over the North Sea, and were soon heading in over the Low Countries at operational height of 20,000 feet. There was a lot of low cloud over enemy territory, and the searchlights shining from beneath made it quite bright. We could faintly see other Lancasters silhouetted on the cloud. There were a few air-to-air attacks going on about us, and about five aircraft were seen going down in flames along the route. The straight-in track confused defenses — they couldn't believe the force would do that. It also made for a speedy trip to the target. Conditions at the target were unexpected — the cloud cover had broken, and Berlin lay clear and exposed beneath us. The target indicators were cascading down, the ground was sparkling from heavy flack batteries and the air seemed filled with exploding shells. The concentration of aircraft over the target was extreme, and we were almost hit by a Lancaster directly above us losing height rapidly. Woods pushed into a sudden dive and avoided it. In a few seconds the bomb aimer had released the load on a group of indicators, and the ship gave a lurching jump as the bombs left her belly. The navigator called a new course for the pilot and we turned port to make our north leg into Sweden.

The concentration of high explosive bombs and incendiaries was terrific; on all operations I flew afterward, I never again saw such fires. We flew on a straight leg north across the Baltic and into Sweden. The Swedes greeted us with a display of high altitude tracer flak, rising to about 22,000 feet. I don't think they hit anyone, at least not in my view from the mid-upper turret. The fires of Berlin were still visible from 300 miles north as we made our turn westward and onto the leg over Denmark and the North Sea. This was a long tedious leg. We could see nothing but occasionally could feel the rough slipstream of an aircraft in front of us.

As mentioned previously, the bomb load and fuel load were balanced according to the distance and target. We had carried a heavy payload and our petrol consumption had been excessive. The flight engineer realized this as he watched his gauges, and informed Woods, who decided to make the earliest landing he could as we headed in over Yorkshire. When he saw a likely looking circuit pattern he called for landing permission, "Hello Control, this is Lingers

Oboe. I request a landing, over.” A controller with a Canadian accent replied, “Hello Lingers aircraft, this is Linton. You have permission to pancake, over.” We landed at the Six Group Canadian base of Linton-on-Ouse in Yorkshire. We were interrogated, had breakfast and were refueled. There was a problem — when we landed no signal was sent down to Syerston for about an hour, so we were missing! Poor Jack, on just his second trip, too. However, we did get back to Syerston in time for lunch, and I was greeted by my own crewmembers, all wearing broad smiles. I went to bed at about 2 p.m. completely exhausted. At about 6 p.m. Henry tried to wake me up to come into Nottingham with him, but I don’t think I’d have woken up if he’d offered me Betty Grable on a platter!

Syerston was an older base, and well laid out with permanent type brick buildings. The Sergeants’ Mess had the trappings of pre-war comforts, a fine lounge and bar. The actual messing facilities had been moved to a dining hall in another building, because the original mess was too small for such an influx of NCO aircrew. There was a library and a theatre, which had a change of movies three times a week. There was a little town called Bingham about six miles away, which was our nearest railway station, but when we went to “town” it was to Nottingham, about twenty miles to the west. There was also a late afternoon bus in, and one returning at 11:30 p.m. Also there was an early morning workmen’s’ bus from Nottingham to Syerston which one could catch in a real emergency. Our route to town took us through a sugar beet growing area near Radcliffe-on-Trent. Nearby there was a prisoner-of-war camp for Italians captured in North Africa — they were only too glad for the safety and comfort of the beet fields and their camp facilities. It was amusing when we went by the fields on the bus; all the workers would stop their labour and watch the bus go by. They looked like a bunch of gophers popping up and down.

Nottingham was Fun City for us. There were good hotels and a live theatre with a weekly change of good variety shows. There was also the Palais de Dance, a large dancehall with a restaurant on the balcony overlooking the floor, and a bar and lounge downstairs from the dance area. Good bands played, and there was even a revolving bandstand to change bands. Nottingham, being a centre for tobacco manufacturing and textiles, meant there were plenty of



pretty girls, as these industries had mainly female employees. If we were in town on a night off, as darkness fell the skies over Nottingham were filled with Bomber Command aircraft rumbling southward from the bases in Yorkshire, while the aircraft of Five Group were rising to join them. Most of my trips into Nottingham I was accompanied by my new Australian friend, Henry Mahon, our navigator. He was a cheerful, likeable sort, and a good companion. Henry had one problem: cooped up in his little navigator's position, he at times suffered from bouts of airsickness, which made things extremely difficult for him. He didn't complain, but it was a bad situation.

We did not wait long for a real operational trip as complete crew. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September we were briefed for an attack on Mannheim, and industrial centre on the upper Rhine River. Most of the route in was over France, and approaching the target from the south and departing to the west. It was a "maximum effort," that is, the full force of Lancasters and Halifaxes took part — about 750 aircraft. There was heavy opposition in the target area and on the way out, but things quieted down while we were returning over France. We got back to base with no problems, and we all felt a sense of relief to have the first trip over in our shared aircraft, QR "Victor." At the debriefing, I was buttonholed by a Canadian war correspondent, and he interviewed me at some length. He told me the report would be in the Toronto *Globe and Mail* the next day. My family saw it and they were happy to have such up-to-date news of our activities.

The trip was nearly seven hours duration, and we carried the usual load of one 4,000-pound "Cookie" and the remainder made up of 4 and 30-pound incendiaries.

The following night we were again on the battle order. This was to be a longer trip to the heart of Nazism — Munich, in the extreme south of Germany. There was a slightly lighter bomb load because of extra fuel required. On the approach, we swung along the north slope of the Alps near the Swiss border, and we could see the glimmering lights of un-blackened towns in Switzerland. It was another well-concentrated attack on a clear target. There were more night fighters engaging us, and we saw about ten aircraft going down in flames.

The trip duration was nearly eight hours, and we were back to base again with no problems. Alex was pretty tired looking, and as pilot and Captain, I'm sure he was under a great deal more strain than the rest of us. He was a good operational pilot, and kept a cool head. His take offs and flying were excellent, but his landings at times were a bit rough. He seemed to be out to prove that the Lancaster had a very rugged undercarriage!

During our period of training, short leaves, as a rule, came in the intervals between various levels of our training program. Now that we were operational, a more regular schedule for the crews was in effect. Every day was a working day, at last until about noon when we'd be informed about operations. In other words, we were on call seven days a week. If we were not operating or flying for some other reason, we were able to take part of the afternoon or evening for a trip to town or whatever. The regular leaves schedule was nine days every six weeks, and we were given this as a crew. The four RAD members usually went straight to their homes. Up until this time I had traveled with my old friends from the original draught from Canada, but those times were now behind us, as it would be too difficult to find our leaves coinciding.

Our last leave had been between Cottesmore and Wigsley, and now we had a welcome nine-day period coming up. Henry, my high-stepping Australian friend and I decided to spend our leave in London, and points south. We went to London for a couple of nights, one of which was spent partying at a midtown pub where we had arranged to meet Alex, Dennis Chalk, George Harvey (another pilot) and part of George's crew. Needless to say, a high time was had by all. As the evening wore on, the songs got louder and longer and the publican kept trying to quiet us down because he said he would lose his license because of the racket.

From London, Henry and I went off in search of my brother Bill. I had got instructions over the telephone from his as to their location on the south coast, and we found his unit without undue difficulty near a little place called Barton-on-Sea. We arrived at Bill's unit of the Royal Canadian Ordnance Corps just before dark, and they gave us a big welcome. I guess we flyboys were kind

of a novelty to them. Bill had come to England in early summer, and had already paid me a visit while we were at Wigsley. He had been commissioned between his service with the Toronto Irish Regiment and his transfer to the Ordnance Corps, so we were wined, dined and quartered in their Officers' mess. We went out on a pub-crawl that night in the local village with Bill and some of his friends, and we had a fine time swapping yarns with them. We stayed the night, and after breakfast and goodbyes we took a bus for Bournemouth. The damages from the air raid of May had been so thoroughly cleaned up as to be hardly noticeable. We met a few acquaintances there and attended a dance. Next day, we took the train to Torquay, a resort on the south coast, east of Plymouth. The holiday season was passed and the place was very quiet, except for a lot of American officers on leave. Next day, on to Plymouth, and I was anxious to see just where Sir Francis Drake had been rolling those bowls on Plymouth Hoe while waiting for the Spaniards (actually the people of Plymouth were rather vague about the whole affair). Bombing from the previous year had heavily damaged the town, and whole areas were completely laid waste with just heaps of brick and stone left. From there we took the train up through Bristol to Birmingham, where we spent the night, and then on to Nottingham next day. Here we spent our last two days around our familiar haunts, and then back to Syerston. It had been a most welcome time off.

Action came again for us on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September, in the form of an attack on Hanover, centrally located about halfway to Berlin. This was a vital industrial and communications centre, and tactics this trip were again to confuse. We flew an almost direct route toward Berlin, then made an almost 90 degree turn onto the target. Cloud cover was heavy over Hanover, and bombing was done on indicators suspended over the cloud base. The indicators were laid down by aircraft of the Pathfinder Force (PFF) using a radar device known as H2S. This instrument gave an image of ground detail on a screen for the Pathfinder navigator, and parachute indicator flares were dropped according to the image reading. It was not a foolproof device, but usually quite accurate. One problem with the bombing on cloud cover was the bright effect of fires and searchlights shining from beneath. The aircraft on their bombing runs had to

hold straight and level, and were more vulnerable to the night fighters attacking from above.

The time into and out of the bright zone was not long, perhaps ten minutes, but it seemed longer. We were also using another device to confuse radar controlling fighters, flak, and searchlight batteries; these were strips of paper-backed foil dropped by the bomb aimer through a special chute. These bundles, known as “Window” would fly apart in the slipstream like chaff, and give a false reading to the enemy radar. They were thrown at intervals in the danger areas and worked well. We still had, had no contact with enemy fighters, but were seeing plenty of air-to-air combats, the majority of which ended with a burning aircraft disappearing through the clouds — and then a large flash and fire as it hit the ground. The casualty lists continued with more familiar names appearing. We were also losing some of our own squadron members, including the squadron commander, wing commander Penman. We lost Charles, our popular gunnery leader as well, which shook up the section members considerably.

Our next trip, on September 29<sup>th</sup>, was to the smaller industrial city of Bochum, in the Ruhr Valley, between Dortmund and Essen. This was a very successful attack on a clear target. After leaving the area, and when about fifty miles west of the target, we saw the largest explosion on the ground we had ever seen. It rose in a great red globe shaped like a rising sun. It was assumed that it was probably a gasworks blowing up. This was a relatively short trip of just five hours.

Bomber Command casualties as we read them each morning were running at about five to six percent. In other words, under the usual operating conditions, you send out 700 aircraft and losses would be 35 to 40. If they were much less, there was reason. Either our feints and diversions had worked extra well, or weather was bad on the enemy night fighter bases. Still, five percent didn’t sound too bad... until one started calculating the ratio on the standard tour of 30 trips. Let me see: 5 times 30 equals 150 – hmmm. This was when skills were combined with a great deal of luck, a game of chance, which crews were referring to as “Dicing with Death.”

On October 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, our crew was involved in operations against Hagen, Kassel Frankfurt and Stuttgart. I must confess that having kept no diary (unfortunately) it is quite impossible to give an account of these raids. Things were happening too fast, and one experience seems to blend into another. All of these targets being in the western district, opposition seemed to stiffen on each attack.

I can recall a few interesting incidents. On the trip to Kassel, Henry was using the navigational device Gee, to check his “in” course across the Ruhr Valley. The Gee was not reliable very far into the Continent, and there were many factors that could interfere with the course — cross winds, evasive action to name a couple. Somehow we were well south of track. Henry’s calculations suddenly made him realize this, and he shouted a warning to Alex that we were heading in over Dortmund. This of course, would give radar controllers on the ground exactly what they watched for — a single image. Cloud cover was heavy and searchlight batteries were probing. Suddenly there was a shattering explosion, and four heavy flak bursts flashed all around us. Alex pushed over to port and down, just as four more bursts flashed a little above us to the starboard. That was the end of the flak as the gunners on the batteries failed to adjust in time. That was a real scare for all of us. We had sustained no damage as far as we could tell, and Alex was soon back on track and into our bomber stream. The attack on Kassel proceeded normally with the usual amount of opposition. On the return leg the enemy a new tactic for us. This was dropping high-powered parachute flares along our track. They were dropped at intervals of about five miles, and they looked like an endless row of powerful streetlights. This was a bit unnerving, but I don’t think really effective, as the enemy abandoned this tactic as the winter came on. They were ready to try anything, not surprisingly as their cities were being devastated. We proceeded back to base with no further incidents, landed and taxied back to our dispersal point. Here the ground crew of QR-V met us, and the first enquiry they made as they shone their flashlights along the wings and fuselage was about the “holes.” We made a more detailed examination of “V” and finally a count of fifty-six holes

was made — luckily all superficial. At daybreak, Victor was rolled to the maintenance hangar for a patching job.

The October 7<sup>th</sup> attack on Stuttgart in the south of Germany had a number of complications. The longest approaching leg was over eastern France, a run into the target from the south, then an exit to the northwest back into France. Opposition had been getting heavier during this series of attacks on western Germany, and the Stuttgart raid was very rough. I observed at least seventeen aircraft shot down on our approaching leg. The enemy had obviously moved up more night fighters from northeastern bases. We had no contacts, but were fully expectant of an attack. We flew seemingly endless miles with at least one burning wreck on the ground visible. The strike was fairly concentrated on a partially cloud-covered target. The air-to-air combats let up as we headed back over France, and we hoped the fighters had used up their fuel and required fuel-up landings. I'm sure many of them had used up their ammunition as well.

Henry was having a bout of airsickness, and neglected to give Alex a new course for our northward leg out of France. Consequently, we ended up nearly a hundred miles west off track. When we finally got straightened away into our northward leg, Dennis's rear turret hydraulic system failed, and now another complication: I saw the glowing exhaust stubbs of a twin engined aircraft about 500 feet below us. We prepared ourselves for an attack as best we could, but without the rear turret it would be a poor contest. I kept a commentary going to Alex, as to the aircraft's position. Alex would weave over to starboard, and the aircraft would move over under us again. Then, the same procedure to port. This went on for nearly half an hour, but the unidentified aircraft never attempted to close. He knew we were watching him. When he did not know was that the rear turret was out of action, and I was unable to depress my guns enough to bring them to bear. We had a theory about this incident afterward. Perhaps it was a pupil of an enemy training unit, and they were not game to close. Who'd ever know?

A peculiar thing about Henry's airsickness — he was never bothered by it until we had left the target area. Perhaps it was that odd feeling of “mission accomplished” that touched it off. On the other hand, some trips didn't bother

him at all. Anyone who has not experienced real motion sickness has no idea how awful it can be. Getting so far west of track used up extra fuel, and we were obliged to come down at RAF station Hurn, in southern England. We were debriefed, refueled, had breakfast and then returned to Syerston. That was the last trip for us in QR-V. The next operational trip we didn't fly. Our sharing crew took her, and never returned.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of October, we made our second and last trip to Hanover. Again, we were operating with heavy cloud cover over the target, so were unable to observe proceedings. Fires and searchlights made the cloud exceedingly bright, and I believe this was the first time we encountered the "Scarecrow." This was some type of shell or whatever the enemy fired up, or dropped, in the target area. It burst into a huge, boiling red ball, and was supposed to look like an exploding aircraft. It certainly did, but there was no falling debris afterwards, and it subsided into a trail of sparks, as fireworks do. We had seen aircraft get direct hits from flak, and the results were different — there would be large pieces of burning wreckage falling. As a matter of fact, a mid-upper gunner in another crew had seen a very odd sight. He witnessed a direct hit on a Lancaster above and astern of his aircraft, and saw a single engine thrown out from the explosion, sailing by with the propeller still turning at speed.

\*\* Author's note, see final page

While we were returning from Hanover, we came upon a broken cloud cover, and a few searchlights were probing about. Suddenly, one hit us directly, and at once about six more snapped on. Alex was good in such a situation. He glued his eyes to his instruments and pushed into a turning dive. In a few moments we were out of them, and sliding away into the cover of darkness. It was a sad sight and torturous fate to be caught in a real searchlight cone. We had seen this happen, usually to an aircraft off track for some reason or other. As many as 30 searchlight beams would converge on a lone aircraft, and he was helpless. One could sense the desperation of the crew as the pilot tried to escape the cone by weaving and diving. But there was seldom escape — they were

driven down to the light flak batteries, which would cut them to pieces. Strangely enough, considering the number of aircraft in the stream, there were very few “coned.” We returned to Syerston without further incident.

Squadron Leader Cousins, the OC “B” Flight had gone missing, and was replaced by S/L E. Moss. Wing Commander Penman had been replaced by W/C R. Stidolph, who had recently returned from the Far East, where he had been flying against the Japanese in Burma. A quiet chap, he was very nervous. I noticed one morning while we were on the skeet range; he jumped and blinked at each firing of the shotguns. Wing Commander Stidolph was only with the squadron for about a month, until he went missing in early November.

The 20<sup>th</sup> of October was a miserable day with low cloud and cold showers. We were briefed for a long trip — to Leipzig, deep in eastern Germany. The whole affair seemed a screw-up from the word go, and we were hoping it would be scrubbed, as it had been previously. Such was not the case. We took off at dusk, and had to fly under low cloud out to the North Sea because of icing conditions, and then climb on track. The cloud cover was complete over the Continent. We made a feint toward Berlin where a small force of Mosquitoes was dropping some indicators and a few bombs, and then turned south for Leipzig.

Everything went wrong. The Pathfinders with their special equipment had suffered heavy losses, and the deep cloud obliterated the target indicators that were dropped. The Main Force had no alternative except to drop the bombs on ETA (estimated time of arrival). We must have sent incendiaries into most of the haystacks in the area, as numerous fires reflected on the cloud, but reconnaissance a few days later reported “no visible damage to Leipzig.” We had problems with excessive fuel usage again, and as we approached the east coast of England, Ted informed Alex that we should land with no delay. We knew we were approaching U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force country, so Alex called a landing request to the first circuit light system that came into view. It proved to be Bungay Norfolk, a U.S. flying Fortress base (B17s). The landing request was acknowledged by a voice with a Texas accent, and Alex joined the circuit on the crosswind leg. As he turned onto the downwind leg, Ted informed him that the



fuel gauges were reading so low that he doubted there would be enough for an overshoot (it took a minimum of 50 gallons for an overshoot). Alex grunted a reply and continued to lose height as he turned port to make his approach to the funnels. As he got lined up on the winking glide-path indicators, he called to Ted — “Full flap twenty-eight fifty” for his powered approach. I turned the turret forward to see those indicators flashing their welcome green, and then turned astern for landing position. Alex called for Henry to read the reducing speeds from his repeater air-speed indicator, as the wheels gave a shuddering screech and cloud of smoke as they touched the runway at about 100mph. The tail wheel made contact an instant later, and we rolled with engines cut to a muttering drone, to the end of the runway.

After landing, Alex taxied on orders up to and shut down in front of the control tower. We were debriefed by a very nice American Captain, and then we NCOs were taken to the “enlisted men’s” mess and had a sandwich. We also had black coffee with a shot of gin in it (not a good combination, but much appreciated). Then we were taken by jeep to quarters for a rest. After we’d had a couple of hours rest, a young soldier came back with the jeep, and took us over to the Officer’s mess, where we had been invited by the Captain from the control tower. We met Alex and Dennis Bourke our bomb aimer, who was also an officer. We all walked into the dining room. There were a bunch of colonels, majors and junior officers sitting eating breakfast and when they saw we NCOs, they all jumped up from the tables and left. We were quite stunned by such a display of bad manners, or class-consciousness — whichever. Our Captain friend apologized for his fellow officers, and we enjoyed a good breakfast. We left the mess a short time later, and the jeep took us back to our aircraft. Alex had opened the bomb doors, the usual procedure at shutdown, and about twenty American lads were standing under the massive bay, and marveling at its size. One of them told me the new B-29, which was going to be used against the Japanese “was so large that a B-17 would fit in the bomb-bay.” He was exaggerating a little, but it sounded good. I strolled over to a B-17 parked nearby. It was fully bombed-up and had twelve 500-pounders on board. That was a full load. The B-17s were heavily armed — with all 50 cal. (1/2”)

Browning guns. Two in the chin turret in the nose; two in the top turret; two in the ball turret beneath; two in the tail position; and one in each waist position. Due to such armament and a crew of ten, there was not the room for a very heavy bomb load. Our Lancasters carried sixteen 1,000-pounders on a short haul.

There had been a continual argument about armament. We were supposedly under-gunned, but I would venture to say if we'd had as much armament as the U.S. heavies, and had still been operating using nighttime tactics, our losses would have been no less. It was a matter of close in shooting, or not at all, and our guns had a more rapid rate of fire. Some of our aircraft were even fitted with a single 50 caliber Browning firing through a hatchway in the floor to cover up our blind spot, but this idea was soon abandoned. In the earlier days of the Lancaster, there had been a prism-sighted two-gun turret at this position, before Bomber Command had given up the idea of unescorted daylight operations. Now a nacelle built to house H2S antenna was utilizing the position. The U.S. tactics were: daylight visual precision bombing, flying in tight orderly formation, while defending themselves with their heavy firepower. This had been quite unsuccessful on short-range sorties over France and the Low Countries on attacks on airfields, industrial complexes, and harbour installations. There had usually been fighter cover for these operations, which had helped keep the defenders at a standoff. The heavy firepower of the B-17 and B-24 formations led the Commanders of the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force to believe that they could penetrate deep into enemy territory in daylight without fighter escort. On October 14<sup>th</sup>, 1943, they were involved in a strike that led to a change of thought.

Two hundred and ninety-one B-17s were sent on a mission to Schweinfurt, a ball-bearing manufacturing centre on the main river in northwest Bavaria. As the formations made their way into the Continent the enemy day-fighters rose to engage them in large numbers, and inflicted extremely heavy casualties. Sixty B-17s were shot down (600 men lost) and many more were severely damaged but managed to limp back, many of them carrying dead and wounded crewmen. No force could stand such losses, and the

in-depth penetrations were ceased until new long-range fighter escort was perfected.

October ended, and our leave schedule came up again. The six-week period had passed quite quickly, and we had now completed twelve operational trips. Poor Ted, our flight engineer had some kind of a skin outbreak on his hands and arms. Treatment from our sick bay was ineffective, so he said he was going to visit his old “Doc” at his home in Croydon. Henry and I decided not to travel, but just go down to London. Alex was going to visit Dennis Ghalk’s home at Enfield, and we made arrangements to gather at Dennis’s local pub, the “Nag’s Head” out in Enfield. This was well outside London, and it was quite a long journey on the Underground and bus, but we eventually found the place and Alex and Dennis were ensconced in the lounge. We had a great evening of drinking, singing and nonsense. I can recall one of the songs we used to sing:

*Betrayed by the country that bore use,  
Betrayed by the country we find  
All the best men have gone before us,  
And only the dull left behind.  
Stand by your glasses steady —  
This world is so full of lies,  
Here’s to the dead already,  
And here’s to the next man to die.*

\*Sung in the old movie *Dawn Patrol* back in the thirties (adapted from a poem entitled "Revel, East India" by Bartholomew Dowling.)

Henry’s bout of airsickness had weakened his stomach to such an extent that he was unable to handle much drinking, and he often became ill with just normal partying. At the Nag’s Head he had imbibed just a little too much, and he got sick on the way back to London on the Underground. He and I took up a position at a set of sliding doors. Each time the train stopped, I’d grab Henry by the collar and shove his head out, and pull it back in just as the doors slid shut. It seemed an endless trip back to the Strand station. He was still in bad shape in

the morning, but after forcing himself to eat breakfast he made a rapid recovery. We were living in style at the “Strand Palace” hotel, quite a difference from the little place out by Hyde Park. The following day we all met and went to the White City dog-racing track — that was a new experience. We each won a few, but of course lost it all in the end. We had dinner that night in a pub and spent the rest of the evening in the lounge. The next morning we picked up a newspaper in the foyer of the Strand Palace, and the headline caught our eye. It said, “RAF Pilots is Awarded Immediate Victoria Cross”. This required further reading, and we were astounded to find that the pilot was one of our 61 Squadron compatriots, Flt. Lieut. William “Jock” Reid. On the night of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, Jock and his crew were on an operation to Dusseldorf when they were shot up shortly after crossing the Dutch coast. The aircraft was damaged and Jock was wounded. He ascertained that his crew was okay and decided to carry on — saying nothing about his own injuries. A short time later they were under attack again. This time the aircraft sustained further damage, including a compass and intercom system. During the attacks the gunners had succeeded in driving the attackers off, but in the hail of fire of the second attack the navigator was killed; the wireless operator severely wounded and Jock was again hit. He still had control, and assumed that the rest of the crew were intact, and so carried on. He more or less flew by stars, and reached and bombed the target. It was not until they were on the way back that the extent of casualties became known. The flight engineer, who was also injured and the bomb-aimer helped as best they could. By this time Jock was suffering from loss of blood, and lapsed into unconsciousness from time to time. The flight engineer with help from the bomb-aimer kept the aircraft on a course for England, and encountered severe anti-aircraft fire while re-crossing the Dutch coast. The North Sea crossing was accomplished and Jock revived in time to make a safe landing at a U.S. Air Force base, although one undercarriage leg collapsed when the load came on.

Jock was awarded the V.C., the flight engineer got the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal; the bomb-aimer received the Distinguished Flying Cross; and the mid-upper and rear gunners each were awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. The navigator was killed outright in the second attack, and the signals

operator, sadly, died the following day. These full details, of course, were not in the newspaper, but were learned by us when we returned from leave.

We spent about four days around London, and then Henry and I went back to Nottingham. We stayed at a small hotel up from the town square called the “Lion” owned by old George Lucas. We got quite friendly with George — so friendly that he used to lock the main front door at afternoon closing time, and then reopen the bar for us. On one occasion there were about ten of us in on one of these parties. At the time Henry and I had a room on the fourth floor equipped with a very old and unused looking rope fire escape seat. Henry was always threatening to test the contraption, and finally as the party was about half over, he grabbed my arm and insisted that the time had come.

We went up to the room, where Henry draped himself into the loop and I dispatched him out the window. A small crowd including a Bobby was soon watching from the street, as Henry made his slow and graceful descent. I was playing out the rope and watching from above, as Henry waved to the crowd. Then I saw the casement window on the second floor dining room open, and George’s comely daughter Daphne reached out, got Henry’s dangling feet and pulled him in the window. The bobby was soon knocking rather loudly at the front door, and we explained to him about the necessity of testing equipment. He had to agree and left, while the party continued. We all arrived back at Syerston on the ninth day, and Ted’s skin rash had completely disappeared. He was a very highly-strung fellow and treatment from his own family doctor had settled his nerves. This happened regularly after, and then the rash would return in about a week.

The weather in the first part of November was terrible, and flying was almost impossible. As a matter of fact, we didn’t fly again until the sixteenth. This was a flight none of us wanted to take. Our 61 Squadron was being moved from Syerston to a new dispersed base at Skellingthorpe, about six miles west of Lincoln, and we were going to share this base with 50 Squadron, code letters “VN”. We regretfully packed our gear and piled it into a brand new aircraft — the replacement for QR-“V”. She didn’t even have the new letters painted on her yet.

Skellingthorpe was a mess of mud and Nissen huts, and spread all over the place. It was about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the mess from our quarters, and the mess was small and crowded. Ablutions were also a couple of hundred yards from quarters, and water was sometimes hot, but more often cold. Shaving in cold water is a bit of a trial. Our Nissen hut was heated by a little coke-burning stove. There were about twenty of us in the hut, and we decided when we got a good fire going we'd never let it out, but of course, by about 3 a.m. it had expired, and the metal building was completely chilled. After all, the stove was not much bigger than a bulge in the smoke pipe. Mind you, I know this sounds like a lot of complaining, but the change from Syerston was so vast that we felt a bit depressed. Actually there were far worse places, and when we considered what an army in action had to content with, we had heavenly conditions.

The letters "QR-V" were soon painted on our new aircraft, and the first real trip we took from Skellingthorpe was a "dinghy search" on the North Sea, and down toward the Friesian Islands. An American aircraft had been forced down at sea, and the last position the disabled ship had sent was the area we were going to search. Visibility was not good. We had to fly about 500 feet above the rough, grey water, and the two 61 Squadron aircraft were to make a systematic grid search, flying within easy sight of each other. We conducted the search from about 3 p.m. until 8 p.m., with no results. All we saw was a group of British fishing travelers riding up and down on the 15-foot waves. These ships were within easy reach of enemy aircraft, but they just went on about their fishing and they did daily. Evening faded into darkness and we kept up the search hoping perhaps to see a light signal. We wondered about the people in the dinghy, and if they were still afloat. We saw nothing, and returned to base.

On the afternoon of November 22<sup>nd</sup> we were briefed for an attack on Berlin. Conditions for this raid were going to be different. Intelligence had reported a thick and deep cloud cover all over the Continent — so heavy as to cause severe icing conditions at lower levels, and enough to curtail the effectiveness of most of the enemy night-fighters. A massive effort would be mounted on a fairly straight in-and-out route. All three types of heavies would be used, Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters for a total of almost 900 aircraft.

This was the first Berlin attack for the rest of my crew, and they were anxious to get it over with. Briefing information had discounted fighter activity because of bad ground conditions on their bases, but that, of course, would not affect their flak defenses. We were informed that Berlin's main ground defenses were 400 heavy guns, 400 light guns, and about 200 searchlights. It sounded like a milk run with everyone taking their chances running through the flak barrage. If the Force was well concentrated the defenses would have to fire randomly at the stream, as their radar readings would be snowed under. We knew that there would be nothing to see at the target except reflecting searchlights and fires on the cloud. Sure enough, all the predictions were true for a change, and no one in either of our two squadrons saw a fighter, although our search was just as intense as always.

Our assigned heights were from nineteen to twenty-one thousand feet. The Pathfinders laid cloud markers, and the bomb-loads were sent down through a heavy flak barrage. We saw a tremendous explosion over the target which must have been a direct flak-hit on a fully-loaded bomber. The sparse air stank with the acrid smell of shell bursts as we bumped through the slipstream and flak roughened target area. Fires shone brilliantly on the cloud-base, and made an almost daylight-like brightness. The trip back was uneventful, with our squadrons suffering no losses. Total losses due to the unusual conditions were twelve aircraft of all types.

This was the last attack on Germany where the Stirling squadrons were used. The losses among their brave numbers had become too heavy to sustain, chiefly because of their inability to attain higher altitudes. Obviously, from this point, altitude made for slightly safer operating conditions — but some people were carried away by the idea. Often as we flew in toward the enemy coast from the North Sea on an in-depth attack, we'd see large flashes in the sea. These, we were informed by intelligence, were 4,000-pounders being jettisoned by crews who had decided that they wanted more altitude. One can understand this being done on a rare occasion as a necessity, but not as a habit. When I was instructing down at an OTU after the completion of my tour, I was told by one of our staff pilots who had done his tour on Halifaxes: "If I can't get the altitude

I want — Fuck it — out go my wing bombs”. The Halifax usually carried two 500-pounders in each of two small wing-bomb bays. Our next Berlin trip would prove to be a completely different experience.

If we could just pause here in the sequence of events, I’d like to relate an experience that took place nearly six-weeks previously. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September the Italian Government had signed an armistice with the Allied Powers. Everyone sort of reckoned that this would mean the collapse of the defenses of Italy, and that the Allied armies would make a fairly rapid advance up the “boot” of Italy as the German forces withdrew. Of course, this didn’t happen, and the Germans sent in large reinforcement units, and were determined to hold onto Italy, and to keep large Allied forces tied up at all costs. At this time we were treated to a bit of a personal viewpoint of a typical RAF senior officer. On the morning of September 5<sup>th</sup>, the Syerston Station Commander, Group Captain Evans-Evans, called a special station parade. All personnel were to be involved, and we all wondered what it could be for. After much shuffling around the parade was finally formed up on the square, and Group Captain Evans-Evans inspected us, and made a few rude remarks about the length of some of our haircuts. Then he mounted the dais he’d placed before the square. He proceeded to make a speech congratulating us on our good work and stating that “this was the first time in history that a country had been defeated by bombing alone” — which we all knew was bullshit. The Italians were trying to salvage what was left of a bad bet. They had backed the wrong horse. At this time we wondered what the reaction would have been if Group Captain Evans-Evans had made his speech to units of the British, American and Canadian armies who were involved in the Italian campaign.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of November we were again briefed for a Berlin attack. Rumours were now rampant that Berlin was going to be subjected to an all-out series of attacks by our Main Force. Weather continued typically November, with frost and ground fog at our bases, and cloud over the Continent. The route in was over the North Sea, down into a cloud-covered Europe, and with feints on various German towns by small groups of Mosquito bombers. The total cloud cover over the target led to the unusual bright conditions, and the aircraft



concentration was high. As we were preparing for the bomb-drop on a straight and level run, suddenly another Lancaster appeared about 300-feet just above us. I could look up into the bomb bay and could see a load of bombs ready for release. A warning to Alex, and he made a slight alteration of course to starboard, just as I saw the bomb-load start to tumble out the open doors. The bombs slid by our port side, and I could see the yellow lettering on the side of the green 4,000-pounder, surrounded by hundreds of 4-pound incendiaries. I could swear that some of the 4-pounders went between our port wing and tail-plane, but in reality they were probably about thirty feet off our port wingtip. This put a crimp in Dennis's bombing run, but he still got a fair group of indicators in his photoflash picture. The route out was quite long over Germany, and the night fighter bases were certainly not fogged-in. As we left the target brightness, I saw the unmistakable silhouette, a tail fin of a Junkers 88 as he broke away to starboard. He was probably stalking another silhouetted Lancaster. A moment later a Me110 flashed across, above us, a scant 100 feet away. It moved from port beam to starboard beam in an instant, before I could rotate the Turret and bring guns to bear.

The homeward leg took the stream between Hamburg and Bremen, and there were some cloud layers reaching to about 3,000 feet below us. I observed an attack on a Lancaster about 500 feet below us on the port beam. The streams of bright green trace from the German fighter caused a shower of sparks to erupt from the bomber, which continued on course, but started to veer starboard. As it did so, fire broke out and started to stream backward as the Lancaster passed beneath us. It disappeared into the cloud layer, and the enlarging fire flickered and shone from beneath. A few minutes later a large flash signaled the impact. The rest of the route took us over the Netherlands, toward landfall on the coast of East Anglia.

As we crossed the English coast, Doug received a message from our base, ordering a diversion as the aerodrome was fogged in. Henry obtained a Gee fix, and gave Alex a course for Catfoss, an OTU for Bristol Beaufighters in Yorkshire. Our aircraft were soon in the Catfoss circuit, and calling for landing turn. We heard Wally Einerson's Canadian accent asking for priority because

he had lost about seven feet off his starboard wing in a mid-air collision. We all got down without incident, and Einerson's wing was a mess. He was lucky again, having done every Berlin trip so far.

Catfoss was a rain-soaked, bleak training base, ill prepared for such a sudden influx of aircrew. We were de-briefed, but there was no food or refreshment for us at the cookhouse, so we retired to unheated barrack huts for a few hours of rest. Some of the lads went and tried the cookhouse again at daybreak. They still had no luck, but brought back the welcome news that the staff would have a special meal for us at noon. When the hour arrived, we were all waiting at the cookhouse door. As long as I live, or wherever or whatever I may eat, there will never be another meal more enjoyed or as appreciated. I truthfully cannot remember what it consisted of, certainly nothing out of the ordinary, but it was hot, and good, and ample.

Our aircraft were refueled and we prepared for a return to base. Nature interfered and the fog settled in. We hung around all day, and that evening we took the bus into Hull to check out the pubs. We surely must have looked a disreputable lot, unshaven in our sloppy blue battledress, flying boots and most of us with no hats. The following day was a repeat for fog conditions. Predictions were for the overcast to lift in the evening, and we were at our aircraft, ready to start up for take-off. The fog had lifted, but the lead aircraft on the perimeter-track had developed dead batteries, so another delay while replacements were brought out. Night flying with students in the Beaufighters was in progress, and as Henry and I stood outside QR-V, we observed an aircraft in the circuit with an engine afire. It was a Beaufighter and he required an immediate landing. The person in the control van at the runway's end tried to direct him to a grass landing beside the runway, but he seemed confused, banked quite sharply to port and now was coming directly toward our line of aircraft, with sparks and flame shooting from his starboard engine.

Henry and I were almost transfixed to our spots as we yelled, "He's going to hit!" and we watched, helpless, as the Beaufighter roared straight into George Harvey's aircraft QR-S, about fifty feet behind us. With a sickening, tearing crash the Beaufighter's undercarriage wheels straddled the mid-upper

turret, as propeller blades chopped through the fuselage on the Lancaster. The bomber, her back broken, pointed her nose skyward like some great wounded beast, as sparks and shapeless pieces of junk flew in all directions. The fighter struck the ground seconds later and started a slide across the grass, with seemingly endless bumps and crashes. The force of the impact had blown out the fire.

We ran to George's wrecked ship, and by some miracle the crewmembers had all been in the front end and were unhurt. After a headcount we all started to run across the dark field on the trail of the fighter. We found the wheels and propeller near the point of impact, and both engines smoking on the grass at different spots farther along. We arrived at the wreck just moments after the fire trucks and ambulance. The pilot, whom we were sure we'd find dead, had already climbed out of the cockpit, unhurt and unaided, walked to the ambulance, got in and lit a cigarette as the fire trucks laid foam on petrol pouring from the ruptured fuel tanks.

This episode cancelled our flying for another night, and we quietly rode back to the flights reflecting on what had happened. The next morning the fog had lifted again, enabling the squadron to return to Skellingthorpe before noon. We took along George's crew as passengers, and Don Thomas, the Canadian mid-upper gunner brought one of the control handles of his wrecked turret on the QR-S. This was our last flight with 61 Squadron, and our fifteenth trip.

On the permanent pre-war base of Waddington, near Lincoln, a new Australian squadron, 463, was being formed from "C" Flight of 467 Squadron, RAAF. Alex had the opportunity to transfer us over to the new squadron, and happily for all of us he took it. We packed up our gear and took transport over to Waddington, and warm barrack-blocks with a fine Sergeants' Mess building a few steps away. Our new location was within walking distance of three good pubs, a fish and chip shop, a bakery and only about three miles from Lincoln town. Our first "task" after we got settled in our new quarters was to go on leave again — another six weeks had passed.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December we prepared for our leave. As usual our British crewmembers were going to their homes for a pre-Christmas visit with their

families and friends. There would be no chance for a Christmas visit later. Henry and I made plans for a trip to Scotland and had our travel warrants made out for Aberdeen. We left Lincoln on the London, Midland & Scottish railway and spent the first night in Carlisle, just below the Scottish border. While travelling through the northern English county of Cumberland, we were totally fascinated by the maze of stone walls dividing the hilly landscape into tiny fields, a collection of odd shapes and sizes. We wondered at the origin on these miles and miles of low stone walls, all enclosing small sod fields. The next day we were onto Perth, where we spent the night. We usually found a dance or pub-crawled during the evenings. Next day to Aberdeen, which turned out to be a quiet sort of place. Our hotel, the Queen's, was too cold to sit around in, so we went to the lounge of another hotel and spent the evening there. There was quite a good chamber music group playing there, something we had never struck before. The piano player made a good start into "Moonlight Sonata" but disappointed the entire room when he stopped and had to admit he didn't know the whole thing. The next morning we were walking along the high street when we saw a sign reading, "Servicemen's' Canteen". We dropped in, were greeted very hospitably and were served delicious cakes, scones and tarts, along with a large pot of tea. As we prepared to leave later, we looked for the place to pay and were told "no charges". This was all free for servicemen. We were, of course, grateful, and this was the only totally free canteen I came across in all my travels during the airborne years.

Next day we started southward again, and went to Edinburgh, which was shrouded in fog. Our train approached the town, and crossed the Firth of Forth over the famous Forth high-level railway bridge. A gentleman in our compartment started giving us a little information on points of interest, including the bridge. He told us of bodies of the original bridge-builders which were down inside the huge tubular girders, where they had fallen during construction. He also pointed down to the hull of a large ship, lying in a shipbreaking yard. She was the Mauretania, sister to the other "Four Stackers", which had reached the end of her career.

We stayed at the Caledonian hotel, and next morning the fog was so dense there was no traffic moving, not even the trams. By about 10 a.m. it had thinned out enough for vehicles on the streets to move again. We went to the famous Castle, and along Princess Street in this ancient city of monuments. We also appreciated the good Scotch ale — Younger's — on draught in the pubs. Next day, southward again to the town of Leeds in Yorkshire, where we spent a pleasant but uneventful evening in the lounge of the Queen's Hotel. This was a rather modern place, and a change from most of the hotels we had stayed in. The lounge was warm and comfortable, and was filled by many spiffy-looking officers from the big RAF Officers' School at nearby Harrogate. Next day we took the train down to Nottingham where we spent the last two days, then back to our new abode at Waddington.

Moon-phase and fog-bound bases kept flying and operations to a minimum in the first half of December. Also, the new 463 Squadron was acquiring aircraft with the squadron letters "JO". On one of their first operational trips before our arrival, only three aircraft had been put up. On December 20<sup>th</sup> we were briefed for an attack on Frankfurt, in the upper Rhine valley. This was our second trip to this heavy industry centre, the first having been in October. Details of this trip are hazy in my mind — nothing out of the ordinary could have taken place. The aircraft we flew in was JO-F, and total time lapse was six hours and twenty minutes.

Christmas eve was spent in Lincoln Town, a new place for us. Lincoln was very different from Nottingham, and was rather a grubby, smoky, small industry centre. It lacked the facilities of Nottingham, but as time went by we did find interesting pubs and small restaurants. There was no "Palais" and we still had to undertake a trip to Nottingham for that. Christmas day was spent on the base. A number of us went to the Airmen's Mess at noon where we waited on tables, as had been done for my old gang back home at Trenton the previous year.

In mid-morning, operations were scheduled, but the Lord in His wisdom, laid a blanket of fog over Bomber Command bases, and we carried on with our Christmas celebrations. We had dinner in our Sergeants' Mess late in the

afternoon. It was roast pork, which served with a spicy dressing, was every bit as good as fowl. There was no operational work for us during the following week, and we had a good time in Lincoln on New Year's Eve, and in the Saracen's Head hotel I tasted the most watered-down rum ever served to the public. Our questions about it were answered with, "That's what they sent us, my dears." Later I met one of the lads from Macdonald, who filled me in on the whereabouts of some of our numbers. About three of our old course at No. 3 B&G were now in German prison camps, but no word on my two missing friends Harold Queen or Harold Suthers. The chap I spoke to was wearing a crown over his Sergeant's hooks — promotions to Flight Sergeant were coming through, effective for October. I was happy to know that on our next leave, I'd probably go down to RCAF HQ in London to collect back-pay.

Our aircraft had now been fitted with a new device, code-named "Monica." This was a small audio-radar set, with the antenna at the rearmost position on the aircraft, just below the rear turret. This sent out an electronic pulse, which echoed back into the intercom system if it struck an object within 600 yards. The beeps on the intercom became closer together as the distance between the object and the antenna closed. We found it a bit useful in as much as there was an audible alert when an object was in our most vulnerable quarters, and preparations for evasive action could be made. All contacts we had were from our own bomber stream, with an aircraft moving across from one side to the other. We also found that the "window" bundles produced an audible beep. This audio "Monica" was soon replaced with a visual one, again radar, but now the signals operator had a small cathode-ray set at his position that he had to watch. The radar echo would show on the tube-screen, and Doug could call "contact port, 600 yards and closing." The blip on the screen would move as the object closed, and he could give a quite accurate range reading. Now we could give our attention to one particular spot. Again all our contacts were our own aircraft. Some gunners fired in the general direction of the reading. This might spoil the stalking of an enemy, but it might also endanger one of our own aircraft. Alex's action was to turn into a contact on whichever quarter-port or

starboard and lose it. It was best to have distance from whatever type of aircraft it was.

On January 1<sup>st</sup> we were briefed for another attack on Berlin — nothing like starting the New Year right. Again, I cannot say much about this trip, although I recall cloud conditions over the Continent were heavy again, and the marking had to be done by suspended flares as before. I did cause a bit of a panic on board as we were on our return trip. I discovered that my intercom (mike part) had failed. This was a bad situation and I had to remedy it at once if at all possible. Each of us had a small white signal light at our positions with all the positions connected. I decided to tap out “M-U” (mid-upper) on the light to alert my crewmembers to my problem. Right away a big shout went up, “Who in hell touched that God-damned light?” I waited until things quieted down, and then repeated the signal. Another shout — and then Alex realized something was amiss, so he started calling each position in turn (I could hear all this, but I could not speak). Finally, when he got no response from me, he knew. There was immediate speculation — Jack was out of oxygen, he was sick, he was injured, or maybe his mike was U/S. Alex sent Doug back to see. Doug grabbed my ankle, and I gave him a kick in the shoulder. He shone his flashlight up in my face, and I pointed to my mike. First he gave me a spare mike, and when that didn’t remedy it, he went and got an extension cord — that worked. The trouble was in the rotating service joint of the turret. All was now in order; except I had to remember not to do a full rotation or I could break the extension. This was a fairly long trip; eight hours and ten minutes flying in JO-J, and return to base was made with no further incident.

Our squadron commander on 463 was Wing Commander Rolo Kingsford-Smith, the nephew of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith, and Australian aviation pioneer. Our commander in “A” Flight was Squadron Leader Bobby Locke. Weather had cleared up by the 5<sup>th</sup> of January when we were once again on the Battle Order for an attack on the city of Stettin, on the estuary of the Oder river, where it empties into the Baltic Sea. I am able to recall this trip with a good deal more detail. The briefing was late, as take-off was to be late. There was almost a half-moon in its waxing stage, but it would be set before we were

in enemy territory. The previous night there had been Bomber Command activities in south Germany, and it was expected the bulk of the night fighter forces would still be there. We took off and headed in a northeasterly direction over the North Sea toward Denmark. This night we were carrying a “second dickie” or pilot. He was Squadron Leader Billy Brill, DFC, and Australian coming back to the squadron on a second tour of operations.

As we flew over the North Sea the moon descended, and was set shortly after we had reached the Danish coast. We proceeded across Denmark the southeast down into Germany for a bombing run into Stettin from the west. It was perfectly clear, with a minimum of flak and searchlights. There was plenty of ground detail being revealed by the photoflashes, and the attack was well concentrated on this northern town, which had escaped heavy attack up until this time. Again we were obliged to move out from under a Halifax with bomb-doors open. I saw the load go by again, this time they appeared to be 1,000-pounders — green with yellow printing on them. We saw only one air-to-air combat, with the bomber the loser.

We turned port off the bombing-run, and then back over the Baltic, Denmark and the North Sea. On the trip toward the target I had experienced a burning sensation on the sole of my right foot. Now it was getting unbearable. I undid my flying boot and disconnected the slipper of my electronically heated inner suit. Alex would start a gradual descent now and we would soon be down to warmer air layers, so I knew my foot would not freeze. I could now let my foot go flat in my shoe instead of holding it up in an arched position. As we made our way westward, Alex and S/L Brill decided to change positions (Billy was going to pilot while Alex rode second). During the changing of positions they let JO-E veer to starboard, and quite suddenly we saw these huge dark shapes go hurtling by. We were going to get rammed by flying at 90 degrees to the stream! They got into their seats, put her into a short turn to port and rejoined the stream properly. Dawn broke as we were about halfway to Yorkshire coast, and we had let down to about 6,000 feet.

Shortly, it was quite bright, and we spotted another aircraft dead astern. It was overtaking us, and proved to be just one of our own Lancasters. We



dropped down to about 500 feet, and Dennis and I got some air-to-sea firing in just before we made landfall. I never found out why JO-E was so slow, but we were the last aircraft in the group to land. Duration of the trip was nine hours and forty-five minutes. While removing my flying boot and electric slipper back at the Flights, I found a hole about an inch in diameter burned into the slipper, through the sock and a large burn and blister on the sole of my foot. Gremlins, no doubt.

On the first of October, while we were still with 61 Squadron, Alex had been promoted from flying officer to flight lieutenant. Now in January, Henry had been commissioned, and we were sorry to see him move from the Sergeants' Mess to the Officers' Mess. Henry had acquired a rather serious girl in Nottingham who took up a good deal of his spare time, so now we four remaining NCOs spent a lot of our off hours together.

Lincoln had the Theatre Royal, not a very pretentious place, but with a new variety show every week and this was a regular thing for us. Also we attended the "Crown" just across the street; the Saracen's Head in the centre of town, and a little pub down by the canal called the Brickmakers' Arms. Lincoln was within a fairly easy walk, but in this winter weather we usually went in by bus, which went through Waddington village. We used to visit an interesting restaurant in Lincoln — the Highbridge Café. Just simple meals, served in dining rooms on three floors. I used to marvel at the garbage disposal system. The Café was built right on the canal bridge, and the garbage went straight out the second-floor kitchen window and into the canal. There were several rather grubby-looking swans that parked themselves under the bridge and picked out the choice bits.

After our long trip to Stettin, operations for the Main Force were curtailed for a bit, as the moon passed through its fullest stages. On the 20<sup>th</sup> of January we were again briefed for a Berlin attack. At this time, I might say that our crew was not going on all the Berlin operations. During the period of November to March there were sixteen major attacks launched. We were involved in five of these, and I had one extra — the preliminary raid in September when I flew with the Woods crew on 61 Squadron. Conditions on

this 20<sup>th</sup> January trip were again shrouded in cloud cover. The night fighters were active, and were certainly not having weather problems on their bases. Our losses were rather static and held at about six percent. The trip time was seven hours and five minutes, and was flown in our new shared aircraft, JO-H.

Quite often, when we were not on the battle-orders we'd join the group at the end of the runway in use, and give the departing crews a wave as they started their takeoff runs. On one occasion we had watched the departure of one of our aircraft, and as it was about  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way down the runway, a sharp swing to port developed — the pilot had not compensated with enough throttle to control the torque effect. The swing seemed to be taking the fully-loaded bomber in the general direction of the Control Tower, and it was too late to stop. The pilot managed to hold it straight at last and they continued across the grass and cleared all obstacles and were safely airborne. For a few moments we thought we were going to witness one of the tragedies that sometimes happened, and we were relieved to see the Lancaster making its climbing turn to port against the darkening western sky.

As the winter dragged on with the grey depressing weather, the crews were glad to take off to town at any opportunity, and quite often an over-indulgence at the pubs and bars took place. Also, there was quite a lack of discipline amongst some of the lads, and they were sometimes inclined to run off a bit at the mouth, often to their superiors. This was tolerated up to a point, but if the slackness appeared too often, there was a remedy at hand, and everyone knew about it. There was a special aircrew station near Sheffield, and if a person got sent down to this establishment, he'd return with his attitudes somewhat improved. It was not exactly a "glass house", just a very strictly run place for aircrew that had got a little out of hand, and needed to straighten up (it had nothing to do with flying attitudes or abilities). When people returned from Sheffield, they were usually much improved and many said the place wasn't half-bad — they had forgotten that discipline and strict routine made one feel pretty good. I had one friend who had two trips down. He was resentful about the first time, but the second session he admitted he really deserved, and he had no more problems.

Our six-week working period had passed safely once more, and here we were getting prepared for another nine-day leave. Henry and I had made vague plans for a trip to Ireland, but in the interim, Britain had sealed the border between Ulster and the Irish Free State, and suspended all travel. Security leaks were feared for the impending invasion of the Continent. Therefore, any plans, vague or otherwise, were down the drain. Some of my friends had gone to Dublin on leave and had a marvelous time, so we were a bit disappointed — we should have done it sooner. Henry, of course, was so busy with his girlfriend in Nottingham that he wasn't too keen to travel at all. At this time Doug invited me to his parents' place out in Norfolk, oddly enough, not far from the U.S. airbase where we had landed on our return from Leipzig. But first, a side trip to London so I could pick up my Flight Sergeant's back pay.

Doug came down with me and we stayed at the K of C hotel out by Hyde Park, and next day went to RCAF HQ and collected a fistful of crisp new pound notes. That afternoon we took the London & Northeastern Railway train to Norwich, and then the Bungay bus down to the little village of Brook, where Doug's parents lived.

Doug's father was a farm manager for the MacIntosh family of MacIntosh-Caley, the candy and biscuit people. The big manor house had been loaned to the War Department and was in use as a convalescent hospital for wounded army personnel, and Doug's parents lived in a very handsome (and cold) house near the entrance to the estate.

Brook was not much more than a crossroads — only two pubs: the King's Head and the Red Lion. The King's Head was the place for the toffs, and the Red Lion was strictly for the farmers. We, of course, gave both places a share of our business. We rode around the countryside on bicycles, as the weather was quite good for the end of January. We just sort of slobbered around for about six days. The only head in the Broome's house was a little coal-burning fireplace in the kitchen, where a big black tea kettle sat singing "at the ready" at all times. There was also a certain amount of heat that came from the electric stove as Mrs. Broome cooked and baked for us. Her homemade bread was a treat. Rather than sit around the kitchen all the time, we frequented the

King's Head, where there was a large fireplace, and certainly the customers supplied a little body heat. It was quite cozy. We went back to Nottingham for our last day and night. We had found a particularly good restaurant there called the Beaufort Club, where they served steak. It was a bit tough, but good. No one questioned its origin, but we watched for horseshoe nails. They also served the best plaice I ever tasted. We were back at Waddington by the 4<sup>th</sup> of February.

During the first week of February we flew on a few training exercises as the bright moon-phase passed. Some of these were low-level air-to-sea firing, where we would drip an aluminum powder Sea Marker. This would put a bright patch on the water about twenty feet in diameter. We really enjoyed this, as Alex made full-powered fly-pasts on the target while we fired on it. This was also a good illustration of deflection. If it was not laid on correctly according to speed and height, the concentration of fire wouldn't come anywhere near the target.

The moon was suitable again by the 15<sup>th</sup> of February, and we were going again to the "Big City" — Berlin. There was always a good bit of excitement just before we'd enter the Main Briefing Theatre, as here the route and tactics would be revealed to us. Nearly everyone suffered from a bit of "ring twitter" and most of the lads were rather fatalistic about the whole thing, especially if they were well into their tours. One older chap, a gunner whose age must have been nearing forty, had a severe attack just after the briefing. He was shaking, pale and short of breath. We thought he was in the first stages of a heart attack. He had to be taken off operations and was given another job. Really, the job was not fit for the average man if he was forty or more, but quite a number of them kept volunteering from other trades to have a go at operational flying.

This trip was again seven hours and five minutes, oddly enough as the route taken was not similar to the previous one. Again the target was under cloud. Dennis Bourke, our bomb-aimer, was not satisfied with the grouping of the target indicators, and after a straight and level approach through the flak barrage, he called for a dummy run. In other words, he was asking Alex to come about and make another run. Against our bomber stream? He had to be crazy!

Alex told him to get rid of the load in no uncertain terms, and I think Alex's estimation of Dennis's judgment took a big drop at that time. Dennis was very quiet on the trip back to base. As we crossed the Channel, Doug received a message from base — there were “bandits” — enemy night fighter intruders in the Five Group area. As we reached the vicinity of the base there was a minimum of aerodrome lighting visible, but landing procedures were going on. There was a shoot-up incident at one of Waddington's satellite aerodromes, but the Lancaster was not severely damaged and no one was hurt. This would be our last trip to Berlin.

On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February we were again briefed for an attack on Leipzig — hopefully with better results than the previous balls-up on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October. Conditions were better for a more concentrated strike, and a full maximum effort was being mounted. The route was fairly straight, with feints or “spoofs” on various other cities — usually done by high-flying fast Mosquito bombers. A number of them had been fitted with a special bulging fuselage and could carry a 4,000-pound “cookie”. Twenty or thirty would be sent on a spoof with target indicators and 4,000-pounders to attract the attention of the defenders. The spoofs on the way in broke up the fighter concentration on the Main Force, but there was still a lot of action. We were surprised to find heavy snow cover on northwest Germany, which made a reflector for air-to-air combats and burning aircraft. I remember one in particular — the bomber was attacked and set afire at about our height, and roughly a mile to starboard. It made a rather gradual descent as the fire enlarged, and as it approached the ground, it went into a spiral dive, and then straight down. During the last few moments of its death-dive, the trailing fire cast a shadow of the spinning aircraft into the snow, then impact and a tremendous explosion of bombs and fuel.

The scene was typical, but the snow cover on the ground produced a cinema effect. As we made our approach we could see that Leipzig was under partial cloud-cover, but not the total situation of our October raid, when our loads were wasted on the open countryside. PFF was on the job with the right markers, and the concentration was good with large overlapping fires starting. Opposition on the return trip was stiff, as the defending forces concentrated on

the Main Force stream after the spoofs. We made our return to base with no incidents, and a time-lapse of seven hours and thirty minutes.

On this trip, George Pike, a rear gunner from our section, shot down an enemy fighter. George was a bit older than most of us in the section. He was married, had children, and had been a dockworker in Liverpool. He was a conscientious fellow, and was very accurate in his instructions to his pilot as the fighter tried to close in for a dead shot. As he did so, he ran into devastating fire from George's four Brownings, was almost cut in half, and fell away in flames. The next day, some wise guy in the section asked Pikey if it didn't bother him that he had probably made some frauleine a widow, and orphaned her children. Pikey's reply was, "He didn't bloody enquire about my family, did he?" Pikey was awarded an immediate DFM. Losses were heavy on this Leipzig operation. Over fifty aircraft failed to return.

News of the development in long-range escorts for the heavies of the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force was encouraging. Republic Thunderbolts-P47s; Lockheed Lightning-P38s; and North American Mustang-P51s were being fitted with overload wing-tanks. These tanks would carry them deep into enemy territory — then the tanks were jettisoned and the fighters were combat-ready with their main tanks untouched. This almost doubled their effective range, and the B17s and B24s were now ready again for in-depth attacks. They had been well occupied the last few months pounding airfields and rail-centres in northwest Europe with good results, when weather conditions were clear enough for their precision bombing, which had to be carried out visually.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, a maximum effort was planned for an attack on Stuttgart, and we were on the battle order again — second night running. This entailed a long leg over France, and coming back as well. The trip in, as before, was fairly quiet until we started our final leg into southern Germany. We arrived a little early for unknown reasons and had to do a dog-leg southeast of the target until the TIs went down. WE were actually heading away from the target when I saw a group of TIs descending. I immediately informed Alex, and he pulled around and back into the stream for his run-in. There was plenty of flak, and the night-fighters were making contact. I saw a profusion of red trace,

and a smaller burning aircraft. One of our Main Force gunners had struck pay dirt. There were other combats, with the greenish trace of the enemy 20mm cannon taking their toll again. The night-fighter opposition cooled down as we went further out on our leg back over France. Henry was having an attack of airsickness again, and was unsure of our position when we crossed the south coast of England. To top it all off, his Gee box had ceased to function. Alex decided to try the emergency course-finding procedure — ask the Royal Observer Corps — call sign “Darky”. He called, “Hello Darky, this is Stugas How. Can you give me a course for Waddington?” After acknowledgement from Darky, searchlights all over the area came on vertically; then as one they all dropped their beams in the direction of Waddington. Now all Alex had to do was line up on one of the beams and read his compass-course. He did so and informed Darky. Immediately all the searchlights went out. It was an amazing and dramatic sight.

Our A-Flight Commander had gone missing, and Alex being deputy and senior Flight Lieutenant had to assume the duties of Acting Flight Commander. Wing Commander Kingsford-Smith was still the Squadron Commander. Our Gunnery Leader was F/L Brian Moorehead, DFM RAAF, a second tour man. He was a popular fellow and a no-nonsense Aussie. We asked him what he did in civvy-street, and he told us he was a “jackaroo”. That didn’t mean much to us, and his further explanation revealed that it was “the lowest form of human life on a Sheep Station.” Brian didn’t fly with a regular crew, as was the case of most Section Leaders. The DFM he held from his first tour was the result of an experience a bit like George Pike’s, except he said, “When I fired, you should have seen the shower of shit that went just under my turret!” The enemy fighter pilot had delayed about two seconds too long. We also had another Australian Flight Lieutenant who had recently joined the section and also a second-tour man. He’d done his first tour in North Africa, and he was the opposite type to Moorehead — the worst type of bullshitting loudmouth, and coveted Brian’s job. He actually wanted us all to address him by his rank, which no one did of course. The idea of him taking over the section when Brian finished his tour didn’t go down well with anyone. Actually, at this time he was not even Deputy

— that position was held by F/O DaiRaw-Reese, a very personable Welshman, with a very large red RAF moustache. However he was unfortunately outranked by the Australian.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of February we were briefed for an attack on the German centre for ball-bearing manufacturing — Schweinfurt. This city was not large, so a good concentration was critical. This was the target where Americans had been so badly cut-up on their unescorted daylight attack of October 14<sup>th</sup>. We were glad to be going there for that reason, and when at the briefing we were informed that the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> had been there again that afternoon, everyone was keen. We were also told that their bomber force had used the long-range escorts, but the results were not given to us. We took off and we carried a different type of bomb. A single 4,000-pounder, but not a conventional “cookie” was the main part of the load. This bomb was the streamlined, elongated type, and it had a thirty-six hour delay fuse. Its purpose was to cause trouble in the post air-raid cleanup, and it would penetrate deeply. The remainder of the load was made up of cans of incendiaries.

We took the straight south route, and over the channel into France. We flew between Frankfurt and Mannheim on the eastward leg into Germany, and we could notice what seemed to be a trail of fires on a target still burning brightly from the American’s daylight strike. The target was clear, and the concentration excellent. Flak was moderate to heavy, and a good number of searchlights were in use, but we didn’t see anyone get coned. The route out took us between Mannheim and Stuttgart. There was fighter activity in and out, and we saw about eight aircraft going down in flames. Back over France the activity dropped off, and we made our return to base without incident.

At our interrogation we were told of the success of the long-range escorts. Most of the fires we had seen burning along our route were the remains of enemy day fighters. The modern and powerful escorts, flown by well-trained, skillful pilots, had succeeded in keeping most of the enemy fighters away from the bomber formations, and had inflicted extremely heavy casualties. This was retribution, and sounded the death knell of the German day fighters, as the tremendous production facilities of the U.S. sent bombers and escort fighters in



an ever-increasing stream to their 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force squadrons. RAF Bomber Command would continue its nighttime attacks as before. It would be quite sometime before our heavies would fly into Germany on escorted daylight operations. Schweinfurt had been our twenty-second trip, and we were getting to be the “old-timers” on the squadron.

The Schweinfurt trip was our last for February. There was an operation laid on near the end of the month and we were not included so we hiked it off to Lincoln late in the afternoon. We went to another little restaurant we’d found where their specialty was stewed rabbit, and it was a change from our usual fare. We were sitting having a beer and waiting for our order to come when suddenly there was a loud rumbling explosion, and we knew it had to be at our base where bombing-up operations were in progress. When we got back later that evening we heard the details. A WAAF tractor driver was dragging a string of loaded bomb trolleys along the perimeter track. One must have had a faulty fuse, and the load went up. The poor girl was blown to pieces, and spread all over the remains of the tractor. No one else was near, and the damage to the perimeter track was immediately repaired, and operations continued as scheduled.

One of evening of March 2<sup>nd</sup>, there was a bad weather forecast with hints of snow. Next morning, all was white and we’d had about four inches. It continued all day, and by nightfall there was a foot on the ground, which was stalling all traffic including the railways out of Lincoln. There were a few snowplows available, but the operators lacked experience handling them in the wet, sticky snow. By the morning of the 4<sup>th</sup> the plow operators were getting the hang of it and had traffic moving, also the railway had been re-opened. Operations were scheduled and the plows were trying to clear the runways. Snow shovellers were called for, and more volunteered than there were shovels. We worked all day using any kind of tool that resembled a shovel, but gave it up at about 6 p.m. when the operation was called off. Next morning we went on an unexpected leave — seven days rather than nine, as we’d been away only a month previously.



RAAF Official Picture, Waddington Lines, Early March, 1944, 463 and 467 Lancasters,  
A very unusual late snowfall- the only snow in 1944

Doug and I left for Norwich and Brooke at about noon on the 5<sup>th</sup>. The weather had cleared and the snow was melting in profusion. Henry was going to Nottingham for a couple of days and Doug invited him to come down and join us at Brooke later. We were out of the snow area before we changed at Peterborough for the Norwich train. There was rather a funny incident here. Doug and I had third class travel warrants, but we always tried to get into a first class carriage. After all, why not? We got into the first class coach compartment at Peterborough, and just at the moment of departure, a Royal Navy Captain entered. He gave us a dark and haughty look and settled himself at the opposite end with a book. He did not speak a word to us all the way to Norwich. Some of the first class coaches were peculiar – there was no corridor, and the compartments ran right across the coach — they were really short-run coaches and had no washrooms available. Also the doors were opened with a key device when the train pulled into the station, this duty being performed by the platform guard. When we arrived at the Norwich station there was no

guard on hand to open the door right away, so rather than wait Doug and I departed out the window with a display of some agility. Our dignified RN Captain was not prepared to do this, and we left him purple-faced and hanging out the window for the “blithering idiot” of a guard. Now if he’d only been friendly, we’d have got that key and opened the door for him.

Norwich was a sea of U.S. khaki; the bases of the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force were mainly in East Anglia and Norwich was one of the chief towns. We took the bus down to Brooke, and signs of real spring were everywhere — green grass and budding trees, also a few early blossoms. The second day there, Doug’s mother served us fresh cauliflower, which had been growing in a cold frame all winter. That was a most welcome treat. We would turn our ration coupons over to her and she would hike it down to the grocer’s — there certainly wasn’t a lot, but it helped her out. Mrs. Broome also introduced me to real Yorkshire pudding — quite different to what I had tasted. She’d had a Canadian boyfriend during the First World War, and still had a brooch made from an old large Canadian one-cent piece. I was really lucky, because she treated me like another son.

The weather was fine for cycling now, and we started cruising around the district and stopping in at the pubs. There was one quite nifty one called the “Peacock” a few miles from Brooke, and another in the nearby crossroads of Poringland called the “Green Man” which was so rural it had kerosene lamps, and a very fat English bulldog that drank beer from his own dish at the foot of the bar. There was another dog, a Border Collie belonging to another customer at the Green Man. This little fellow would go around nuzzling everyone’s hands until someone would give him a penny. Then he’d beg someone to toss it for him. The penny would make a loud ringing when it dropped on the red flagstone floor. This was what the dog wanted. He would chase the coin around amongst the chairs and tables in the dimly lit room, then bring it back to be thrown again. It was cute.

Henry found his way down to Brooke in a couple of days. Doug had thought he could perhaps fix him up with the widow who ran the King’s Head. Henry took one look and decided that things were a lot better in Nottingham,

and departed for that fair city the following afternoon. Our seven days were soon over, and we were all back at Waddington by the 12<sup>th</sup>.

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of March we took JO-H on a test flight. It had been fitted with the new visual “Monica” mentioned previously, and this was our first demonstration. One of our base Hawker-Hurricanes came with us, and made feint attacks while Doug read off the position on his set-screen. It was really quite accurate.

At this time I would like to mention the other crew from 467 Squadron, which shared our barrack room. They were a decent bunch — the pilot and mid-upper gunner were Australians and the rest were British. They had a navigator, a good one whose first name was Wally. Wally got married to a rather pretty, but sad-eyed WAAF girl on the base, and they moved into a married quarters flat. Right away she started pressuring him to give up flying, because she could not stand the thought of losing him. He eventually succumbed to this pleading, and he was replaced on the crew. He was removed from aircrew and sent down to a remustering unit, and lost his rank, of course. The irony of the whole thing was that this crew finished out the rest of their tour with no real problems. This was a rare happening. Everyone was apprehensive at times, but most didn’t want to show it. We had another case of a rear-gunner raking all of his training up to the end of Heavy Conversion Unit, going on leave, and bringing a letter back from his mother saying he just had to be taken off flying, which he was, right away. The odd part was that it didn’t phase him one bit that he had wasted so much time with his training.

Rooms in the Sergeants’ Mess building were allotted on a seniority basis, and we were getting to be seniors. A crew went missing and we were next on the list for two double rooms. This was a big step up from the noisy barrack-block room. Dennis and I got one, and Doug and Ted took the room across the corridor. Now all we had to do was walk down the hallway, turn right, pass the poolroom, and into the foyer. The bar and lounge were straight ahead, and the dining hall to our left. Such luxury — our mail was set in a rack in the foyer. One of our section members got a strange looking card from a buddy of his on another squadron. We knew this chap had just recently gone missing — the

card had been sent from a German prison camp. It didn't say much except to let us know that the whole crew got out safely. The time of this chap's going missing until his card was picked out of the mail rack was exactly two weeks. The card had been sent via international Red Cross through Switzerland, and had struck everything exactly right. It was not uncommon for a lapse of two months or more before word would be received from survivors.

Dennis and I really started cracking on that room. We scrubbed it top to bottom, then we stole linoleum from the mortuary (they didn't mind) and had it laid in jig-time. Then we got some floor wax and had the place gleaming like a hound's tooth. My family had sent me a huge calendar from "Brantford Binder Twine" which was now resplendent on one wall, and a map of Europe from the Map Section on the other. We also had family and lady-friend's pictures on our dressers, and were pleased with our little bit of home.

On March 15<sup>th</sup> our crew was back on the Battle Order, and the briefing was for another strike on Stuttgart, our third trip to this southern German city. The fogs of winter were behind us now, other than early morning mists, and routes and targets were expected to be clear. One this trip we were taking along another "second dickie" a young Australian flight sergeant — a recent arrival on the squadron with his crew. He was quite a cool-headed chap, and got a good look at proceedings. The night was clear over the Continent and there was a bit of activity on the long leg down over France. Most of our night fighter opposition came after we'd crossed into Germany now. The Luftwaffe was drawing the main fighter defense strength back over the homeland, where most of the heavy industry was located. We observed another Pathfinder aircraft attacked and shot down near the German border with a great flash of bombs, fuel and coloured indicator markers. Concentration of bombs on target was good despite an extremely heavy flak barrage in the early part of the attack. We observed nine aircraft going down in flames, and a couple of parachutes going down in the target area. One wondered about the fate of those jumpers. The trip back was fairly quiet, and time airborne was seven hours and forty minutes.

Lincoln being a mill and industrial town, there was a profusion of labourers from the Irish Free State working there. I had to go into town on the

afternoon of the 17<sup>th</sup>, and the streets were crowded with these lads all dolled up in baggy suits, wearing green ribbons, and most of them drunk. It must have been a rare night when they all started fighting with the British servicemen. However, we couldn't stay to see this because we were on the Battle Order again.

The target for the 17<sup>th</sup> of March was Frankfurt, our third trip to this centre north of Stuttgart. The new crew, whose pilot had been our "second dickie" on the 15<sup>th</sup>, would be flying on their first operational trip. We wished them well as we all left the Flights. The trip was basically the same as the one on the 15<sup>th</sup> — clear conditions all the way, and fighter opposition just a bit heavier. There were many night fighter bases either side of the Rhine. We carried out our attack with a good run on a clear and well-marked target. There were no unusual incidents on the trip back, and we crossed the channel and flew upcountry as before. As we approached the midlands and our base area, a medium cloud layer was hanging at about 1500-feet. Just before Alex called for landing turn we heard the young Flight sergeant calling in, and we all felt good that they had made it back safely. He was given a height in the circuit just below the cloud layer, and as we joined the circuit slightly above the cloud layer, suddenly there was a flash, a flickering, and then two more flashes and a reflection of red fire on the cloud. Alex was given a new height and descended through the cloud. Below us were the burning wrecks of two aircraft, about a quarter of a mile apart. On landing we were informed that one of the aircraft belonged to our base. Back at the debriefing we found out that it was the young Australian and his crew. Another Lancaster from a group farther north had crossed through our circuit, and the two had collided just below the cloud layer. There were no survivors.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March our briefing was for a strike on Essen, in the heart of the heavily defended Ruhr Valley. At this time I would like to mention the activities of 100 Group. This specialist group had been recently formed, and with their airborne electronic devices gave a partial curtain of protection to the Main Force as it formed over England. The jamming procedures that they carried out left the enemy with mostly blanked out radar until the Main Force

was ready to break through to the continent. This would keep enemy defenses unsure of where the breakthrough would be made, and as a result their night fighter forces would be more dispersed. When the breakthrough came, the sheer weight of numbers carried the Main Force. It occupied an airspace on a maximum effort approximately sixty-five miles long, ten miles wide, and a mile deep. The bomber stream, if kept concentrated, minimized the effectiveness of ground-controlled enemy radar.

Essen was not a long trip, and the more or less direct route required the Main Force to attain most of its altitude over England, and behind the curtain of 100 Group. We had been airborne for about fifty minutes, and had most of our required height. Suddenly the hydraulic power to my turrets failed, and I at once informed Alex, as this was cause for early return to base, or “boomerang” as it was popularly called. He considered for a moment, and then asked me if I wanted to turn back. I told him that my electrically fired guns were still serviceable, and I could rotate my turret to dead astern and attempt to backup Dennis on a possible attack from the rear. I think that was what Alex wanted to hear, and the rest of the crew agreed with it, so we carried on and crossed the coast at our allotted time and height. The trip in over enemy territory was quick, and the attack was pressed home with a good concentration. There were no incidents for our crew, but five aircraft were seen going down in flames. We landed back at base after an airborne time of only five hours and fifteen minutes; our shortest time for a German target. This operation had been flown in Jo-K. Our shared aircraft, JO-H had been lost on another operation on Berlin on March 24<sup>th</sup>, when seventy-two of our aircraft failed to return. Essen would be our last target in Germany, and our twenty-fifth trip.

The crew which had been sharing JO-H with us sometimes was required to fly on the same operations as we were on. They operated on the trip to Frankfurt in JO-K and returned safely. Now the subject of mascots and lucky pieces comes up. The rear gunner on this crew, an Australian, had as his lucky piece a toy kookaburra, about ten inches tall. This he used to tuck up under a bulkhead before he entered his turret. When they returned from Frankfurt, he forgot to remove the kookaburra. They took JO-H on their next trip and failed

to come back. When we went to do our pre-flight inspection on JO-K before our trip to Essen we found the lucky piece stuffed in behind the bulkhead. We left it there and gave it to the personal effects people when we returned from Essen. I don't think anyone was really superstitious, but I didn't think it appropriate to remove that toy kookaburra until we got back.

This was Henry Mahon's last trip with us. He had suffered repeated bouts of airsickness and carried on despite it. Personally, I think he should have been replaced sooner, because his sickness was a hazard at times to all of us. His early removal from operational flying was not unexpected, and his dogged determination and guts had earned him a DFC. We were all happy for him, and had a bit of a celebration with him before he was posted away to instruct at an OTU.

At this time we had no idea that Essen would be our last German target. The next operation we did not fly because Alex had to act as OC Night Flying. This turned out to be an operation where Bomber Command suffered record losses. After the heavy losses on the Berlin trip of March 24<sup>th</sup>, it was rather surprising that the Main Force was sent out under the prevailing conditions, and there were many conflicting views amongst the squadron commanders. The moon-phase, the general route and the length of the various legs on the route were all questioned, but the High Command prevailed and the plan was completed.

On the afternoon of March 30<sup>th</sup> crews were briefed for an attack on Nuremburg, deep in Germany's heartland, about 100 miles north of Munich. There were hints of scrub because of changing weather conditions over the Continent, but this did not come about, and nearly 900 bombers were dispatched. Fighter opposition was deadly as soon as the Belgian coast was crossed, and crews reported having never seen so many fighters in the Main Force stream. It was as if the defenses were pre-alerted, and had been lying in wait. The leg in from Belgium took them across the Ruhr Valley and north of Frankfurt to their turning point at the small town of Fulda, and then on a straight leg southeast to Nuremburg. Unexpected wind conditions caused a scattering of the stream, also an almost half moon lit up group cloud layers, and



made the bombers quite visible and vulnerable. To top it all, the Main Force aircraft were nearly all leaving condensation trails, which also were being made luminous by the moonlight. The target had an unexpected deep cloud cover, and the attack had little success as most of the target indicators were of the wrong type. Night fighter attacks were devastating — one pilot saw more than thirty-five aircraft falling in flames. When the exhausted crews returned to England, the airwaves were filled with Mayday signals from damaged and disabled aircraft. In all, a total of ninety-four failed to return, and a further fifty to sixty suffered battle-damage.

When our crews came in they were upset and bitter about conditions and tactics. They were certain that plans for the operation had been leaked to the enemy in some way, because never before had the Main Force been in such an ambush. Our base lost five aircraft from the two squadrons. Controversy still goes on over the tactics for the raid — and questions remain unanswered, and probably never will be. Who knows, perhaps the truth will come out one day when all those who were involved are dead and gone.

The following day we flew a couple of mechanics up to an emergency aerodrome in Yorkshire where one of our aircraft had come down with mechanical problems on the return from Nuremburg. This was indeed the greatest loss suffered by Bomber Command, and now operations were going to be switched, in part, to targets in northwest Europe ports, railways, airfields and mysterious “rocket-launching sites”. This was in preparation for the impending invasion of the Continent — Fortress Europe.

April in England is a delightful time of year. The spring is a long drawn out affair, but by April leaves are bursting, and the early shrubbery is coming into bloom. Morning mists are pushed aside by bright sunshine, and the roadsides and meadows are a rich dark green. We were thoroughly enjoying our surroundings at RAF station Waddington. On one of the main roads between Waddington and Lincoln there was a delightful little village called Bracebridge Heath. Here we had two pubs, the Crown and the John Bull. The Crown had a piano and a “singing license” and consequently, this was the place we patronized.

Ted Martin, our flight engineer, was a person who really liked to sing, and I think he knew every off-colour song in the RAF — the kind that Vera Lynn would never dream of singing. I think he had learned most of his songs when he was a mechanic on Wellingtons at OTU in Northern Ireland. One was:

*Just an old-fashioned Wimpy  
With old-fashioned wings,  
And a fuselage tattered and torn –  
Two ropey engines that grumble and groan  
Like a gramophone run-down and worn.  
Though she drinks bags of petrol and eats castor oil,  
There's something about her, divine –  
She's so safe and sound, 'cause she won't leave the ground,  
That old-fashioned Wimpy of mine.*

Also:

*And then there came the CO's wife,  
And she was dressed in blue, sir  
And in the corner of her drawers  
She had the SMU\* sir.  
She had the SMU my lads  
The hangar and the doors,  
And in the other corner there  
Was "B" Flight forming fours  
(\*Station Maintenance Unit)*

And "Salome":

*Salome. Salome – You should see Salome  
Standing there with her ass all bare,  
Every little wiggle  
Makes the boys all stare –  
(The rest of this RAF favourite is a bit crude)*

Another favourite coming-home-from-the-pub selection:

*Down our street we had a merry party,*

*Everyone there was oh so hale and hearty.*

*Talk about a treat – plenty there to eat*

*We drank all the beer from the boozier down the street.*

*There was old mother Riley...*

*And little sonny Jim...*

(Also the ultimate in crudeness)

These were the sorts of “walking along” songs and were not normally sung in the pubs, unless it was about one minute to closing time. Everyone joined in on the pub songs, which were usually the Vera Lynn type.

On the way back from the Crown was a little fish & chip shop. It was a Mom and Pop place, had a coal-fired cooker, and was lit by a kerosene lamp — but the fish and chips were the best. For some reason during this spring everyone started drinking Guinness stout. It tasted slightly like burdock root — maybe it was supposed to be the spring cleanser — I don’t know, but we used to pick up fish and chips after drinking a quantity of this stuff, and eat them as we trudged along the road back to our digs. This was when Ted entertained us with his unending repertoire of songs.

The pub-hotel at Waddington Village was the Horse and Jockey. It was a bit more elaborate with a downstairs lounge and an upstairs dining room. The Publican was one Albert Titmarsh, but his wife was the real boss. She wanted to be called “Mrs. Marsh” but was called everything from “Mrs. Titmouse” to “Mrs. Tomtit” or sometimes, just plain “Mrs. Tits,” which she was not fond of at all.

Just down the street in the village was a little bakeshop where the proprietor looked exactly like the brush-cut one of the Three Stooges, and acted about the same. However, there was nothing comic about his hot buns and jam tarts.

The in-depth attacks against Germany were curtailed considerably after the Nuremberg disaster, and the Main Force was split up into much smaller units for operations against tactical targets. The in-depth trips were resumed later, but it was not a continuous assault as had been the case during the winter. Attacks on Germany would be referred to as “majors.” The remainder of our tour would consist of these tactical operations on targets in France.

Our next trip, on April 5<sup>th</sup> in JO-J was to the southern French town of Toulouse, where our target was an airfield and railway yards. These attacks were mostly carried out with conventional 500 or 1,000- pound bombs, and no more incendiaries. Conditions were quite different — we seldom operated at more than 8,000 feet, and in a much smaller force, usually under one hundred aircraft — sometimes two squadrons, and sometimes just one. The operation on Toulouse was successful. Some of our aircraft dropped anti-personnel bombs on the airfield, along with the HEs, and others dropped HEs on the railway yards. No incidents, and an airborne time of seven hours and fifty-five minutes. Again we had fuel problems, and had to land at RAF Station Silverstone in southern England for debriefing.

On April 10<sup>th</sup>, there was a new JO-H available for us and our target was the town of Tours, a railway centre halfway between Paris and the Bay of Biscay. A screw-up developed here — we had a partial moonlit night and there were enemy night fighters about, and a few casualties. The Pathfinder aircraft was lost, and something happened to his backup and consequently no target indicators. Our small force orbited south of the target waiting for instructions. A voice was heard over the RT saying, “Get your finger out!” and an abrupt reply came from Wing Commander Billy Brill, “Shut your bloody mouth!” After about fifteen minutes wait it was clear there were no markers, so each aircraft had to bomb visually, using the moonlight shining on the river and rail lines into the junction. As the attack progressed there was more confusion, and many bombs were going straight into the town. The rail lines were knocked out, but damage to the town was extensive. The next day there was a meeting with Intelligence where we were informed of the high casualties among the French civilians and asked for more caution.

On April 18<sup>th</sup> our target was the Juvisy railway marshalling yard near Paris. We carried sixteen 1,000-pound HE bombs in JO-H. Our route took us west and south of Paris, and a bombing-run on a northerly heading. Night-fighter activities were starting to increase as the enemy moved forces back out from the German heartland to combat attacks on the rail system that would be so vital to them when the invasion started. We saw a couple of combats and aircraft going down during this strike. The bombing was well concentrated and the following day reconnaissance photographs showed the marshalling yards completely obliterated. Airborne time for the Juvisy operation was four hours and fifty minutes.

In mid-April my promotion to WO II came along on schedule, and no trip to RCAF HQ was necessary to collect back pay this time. My uniform was getting a bit threadbare, so I drew a new set of RAF blues. What a difference in the cut — but no bother, it fit right in with the scenery. I got out my sewing kit and transferred the AG wing, Canada flashes and sewed the blue cloth crowns on the lower sleeves. Brian Moorhead started calling me “his WO.” While I was down at the clothing stores I mentioned that my outer flying suit was developing holes in the elbows. They told me to bring it right down and change it, which I did. They were only too pleased to oblige. They said they very rarely had to issue a replacement flying suit!

The following day Doug and I were walking down one of the shopping streets in Lincoln. I saw a display of gold signet rings in a shop window, so decided to buy one and send it to Laura, who was now stationed in Halifax. I had her initials engraved, and sent it off in the mail. She was surprised and said other girls in the office were trying to find out if it was an engagement ring. --- What a bunch of speculators.

On April 20 our target was a bridge and rail lines at La Chappelle in the Brest peninsula. Our route down and back across the channel took us near the Channel Islands. These British islands were German occupied, as they are much closer to France than to England. There were a number of heavy flak batteries on these islands, and we had to skirt around them. They popped off anyway, but did not hit anyone. The same bomb-load was carried in JO-H, sixteen 1,000-

pounders. Flying time was four hours and twenty minutes, with no incidents. Our new navigator, who replaced Henry, was an RAF Flight Lieutenant — Alf Williams. He was on a second tour and had a DFM from his first tour when he'd been an NCO. He was a methodical type, and completely at home and competent in his little curtained office. This ended our April activities, and we prepared to leave again in early May.

The leave schedules were changing now, with not the regular nine days every six weeks. Operational changes were the chief reason, with the uncertainty of timing for the invasion, which everyone was expecting to commence at any time. Flying over, or travelling through the English countryside the sight of the buildup of ordnance and supplies was astounding. Roadsides and fields were storage areas for thousands of tanks, vehicles and artillery, while many airfields had hundreds of gliders and towing aircraft parked row on row. Also glider exercises were overheard at almost any time during fit weather. At this time we also saw the first nighttime formation flying of glider-towing aircraft. Most of the towing aircraft were the DC3 or Douglas Dakotas, although there were large numbers of Halifaxes being readied for this duty as well. There was the noise of aircraft twenty-four hours a day.

We had now, near Waddington an American Ground Control Unit for homing their long-distance escort fighters, and the P51 Mustangs used to flash overhead. The American Sergeant in charge made use of our messing facilities, and this solitary khaki uniform stood out amongst all the blue.

Doug and I went to Nottingham for a couple of days, and then on to Norwich and Brooke. The weather was perfect, and we took a long bicycle trip while at Brooke, to the coastal town of Lowestoft, where Doug's uncle and aunt lived. It was about a twenty-five mile trip one way. We went through the flat tidal lands, and the Norfolk Broads —rather canal-like rivers complete with the Dutch style of windmills pumping water from the flatland drains. We had to cross one of the Broads via ferry. The old man in charge took us and our bikes across in a big old rowboat. At the other side there was a small pub called “the Ferry” — what else? Here we tasted the best cider we had ever found. Doug's

uncle was a gamekeeper on a big estate near Lowestoft, and we had an early supper with he and his family before starting our journey back.

On our return trip, we helped the old man crank the hand-powered ferry back across the Broad, but were not rewarded with a lesser fare. As we cycled westward toward Brooke, we saw a runaway barrage balloon sailing along on the wind dragging about 400 feet of steel mooring cable. We stopped to watch its progress and saw a great flash as the cable was dragged across a high-voltage transmission line. We expected the balloon to catch fire, but it did not, instead disappearing over the horizon. We spent the rest of our leave cycling around the Brooke area, visiting the pubs, playing darts, and thoroughly enjoying the green and flowering countryside. We were back at Waddington by the 12<sup>th</sup> of May.

Back at our base our aircraft JO-H had failed to return again. That made one Victor from 61 Squadron and two Hows from 463 Squadron that three of our sharing crews had gone missing in. We now switched to JO-A but no longer thought of it as “our” aircraft.

The month of May was taken up by a lot of flying exercises, practice bombing and photography. I have a very clear recollection of one of these exercises. Our squadron commander, Wing Commander Kingsford-Smith took a group of gunners on a flight for a session of the “Five Group Corkscrew” utilizing a camera-gun, and with one of our resident Hurricanes as a target. We were all using the rear turret which had the camera-gun mounted, and had to take turns. I was among the first to do the exercise, and after finishing was obliged to sit inside the fuselage with no view out while W/C Kingsford-Smith put the aircraft through the violent evasive action. After about ten minutes in the hot and oil-smelling fuselage I got a queasy feeling, and knew I was getting motion sickness. I made my way up to Elsen, a chemical toilet in front of the tail-plane spar, and started to get violently ill. Now I realized what poor Henry had been contending with. A feeling of total misery came and stayed. Frankly, if someone had told me that aircraft was going to crash, I’d have been glad of the end to it all. This continued until we landed and taxied back to dispersal point about an hour later. As soon as I clambered down the ladder and my feet

touched the ground, I was OK. It was just as if someone had turned off a switch — all of the misery was gone. I felt dehydrated and a bit exhausted, but otherwise fine. That evening, Doug, Ted, Dennis and I went to the Crown at Bracebridge Heath, where my fellow crewmembers saw to it that I was thoroughly hydrated again.

On May 24<sup>th</sup> our operational strike would take us to Eindhoven, a town in south-central Holland. This was to be a small target: the Phillips Radio Valve factory. We were assured that there would be no cloud, and good visual bombing was imperative on such a small aiming point. We flew straight east out over the North Sea, and southward and in over the Dutch coast. We were surprised to find the Continent cloud-covered, and when we reached the vicinity of Eindhoven about twenty minutes later, we found the whole area blanketed by cloud. Orders were for visual bombing, so after making a couple of orbits, we turned back toward the sea and proceeded back to base, where we landed still fully bombed-up. This was termed an abortive operation and airborne time was three hours and twenty minutes in JO-A.

The abortive trip to Eindhoven had been operation number thirty, a full operational tour. Alex had been promoted to Squadron Leader in mid-May, and was now “A” Flight Commander. He called us to a meeting in his office, and told us our tour was now finished, and we could step down if we liked, but he was going to stay on as Flight Commander for a bit, and could we stay on as a crew with him. We had anticipated such a request, and had more or less decided to call it quits. Alex asked us in individually — first Doug. The rest of us were a little surprised when Doug answered without any hesitation “I’ll stick.” We thought now that the trend had been set we may as well follow suit, except Dennis Bourke, our bomb-aimer. He was an only son and his mother was a widow, so he chose not to continue. We NCOs well understood, and didn’t blame him one bit. Alex, who had never really liked Bourke, said afterwards, “I’m glad that we’re rid of that bloody Bourke!” We felt a bit sorry for Dennis, because the parting was not really pleasant. F/O Jack Kennedy, a rather brash Australian, replaced Dennis. Kennedy knew his job well, so we were now ready to start our tour extension, the length of which was uncertain. Before we left



the office, Alex told us he wanted us to all make applications for Commissions, and handed us the first forms to fill out. This was something none of the four of us had thought seriously about previously.

Our first trip with our new bomb-aimer was on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, and it was a short one, to Cherbourg and rail-lines again. There was an enemy operational airfield near the town, and it was uncertain whether a force of JU88 night-fighters was based there. Before we took off, Kennedy was impressing upon Doug and myself how these could do us a lot of harm if they got amongst us. We were quite aware of the danger and assured him our eyes would be skinned as usual. I suppose he was just trying to be keen. As we flew directly south from our base area, our stream of aircraft met a small force of enemy bombers heading up toward the Midlands. It was really made up of single-engine aircraft each carrying a couple of 250-pounders, actually a nuisance raid. The ground defenses let them pass through our stream before they set up the barrage. We didn't see them hit any of the enemy force as they were so few and so scattered, but the ack-ack batteries were using some sort of a multi-headed rocket anti-aircraft weapon that burst in a very lethal looking cluster. We heard later that most of the enemy force was tracked down and destroyed before they could make it far out to sea. The Mosquito night-fighters had such a speed and radar that they could overtake and track down anything. The cross-channel trip and bombing was done without incident — we assumed after that the JU88s had been moved to where they were considered more necessary. On the return trip we ran into a summer thunderstorm, and I saw a very unusual sight. We must have passed through a heavily charged cloud, because St. Elmo's fire enveloped us briefly. My position gave me a view of all top parts of the aircraft. First I noticed the propeller discs were glowing luminous green. Then the two aerials that ran from the astrodome to each tail fin became about four inches in diameter and glowed green. As I rotated my turret around, my two gun-barrels were a luminous green, and green flames were blowing back from the muzzles. It was a very strange sight, and was gone before I could call anyone's attention to it. We were back at base with an airborne time of three hours and fifty-five minutes in JO-A.

After Alex handed us the Commission forms, we had to make up our minds what we were going to do about it. None of the four of us was particularly interested in leaving the Sergeants' Mess, and moving across the road with the Toffs. On the other hand, the war for us was winding down, and who would know, perhaps a Commission would give us a chance to pick up some knowledge that might be of use later. I don't think any one of us was giving much thought to post-war service, as we had volunteered for "The Duration" or "His Majesty's Pleasure." We filled in the applications, and gave them back to Alex.

A short while later the series of individual interviews commenced. First, with W/C Kingsford-Smith. This was not a long interview, as he knew each of us quite well. He was rather interested in my previous training on the Tiger Moths at St. Catharines. A few days later I had an appointment with the Station Commander, Group Captain Bonham-Carter. This was longer and quite different. His chief interest seemed to be in what kind of social contacts I had made and how I had gone about doing that. Club memberships were important to him, so I gave him a big line about belonging to the Toronto Ski Club. He was a bit impressed because he didn't know anything about it. Really, he was an interesting old duck. He had been in the RAF all his adult life, must have been over forty years old, was short, stout, and wore a hearing aid. He was also a good active pilot, and every now and then took an aircraft and a crew of spare bods on an operational trip. Otherwise he was always present at briefing, take-off and debriefing. He had some rather odd-looking ribbons on his uniform, and when I asked him what they represented, he said that they were from operations in Iraq in the thirties during some sort of disturbance there. He said that they had been presented to help maintain the price of dates! Of course, in those days no one knew that the Middle East was floating on an ocean of oil.

The final interview was with the Base Commander (the base consisting of Waddington and its satellite aerodromes) Air Commodore Hesketh. He had a splendid office in the Base Headquarters building, or Bullshit Castle, as the troops called it. He was a down-to-earth fellow, and I suppose his seemingly casual questions and conversation told him all he wanted to know. His WAAF

secretary served us tea during the interview, and I found him a great deal more comfortable to be with than Group Captain Bonham-Carter.

A week or so after the final interviews, we were required to do a test of foot-drill commands. There was a flight of very keen young Air Cadets doing their summer training on the base, and they were only too glad to be of help. Most of us were a bit rusty with our foot-drill, so these lads with their Cadet Officer would show up for us a few evenings during the week, and we would brush up on our commands. This was soon finished, including the test, and we just sort of forgot about it all, and concentrated on our normal working activities.

On the morning of June 6<sup>th</sup> the news came on the BBC that everyone had been anticipating — the invasion of enemy-held Europe was at last underway. In the late afternoon we were called to a briefing, and the target for our single squadron was a concentration of troop trains at the French town of Argentan, about forty miles south of the beachhead area. In June, daylight did not fade until almost midnight because of the two-hour clock advance known as Double British Summer Time, and as we crossed the channel toward the French coast, we could faintly see a line of about six destroyers heading westward, steaming abreast. They all fired on us as we crossed their line at about 6,000 feet. They even managed to shoot someone down in a small force flying about eight miles behind us. Those Navy gunners didn't believe in asking any questions, and I doubt they gave a damn about whom they were shooting at.

We were flying in the JO-F, and W/C Kingsford-Smith was leading the strike and carrying the target indicators. As we flew over the beachhead area, there was nothing visible with the exception of a small fire here and there, probably the remains of burning vehicles. It was a short trip from the coast to Argentan, and we could see small flashes and sparkles on the ground as enemy troops popped off at us with their small arms. The Wing Co. had us orbit southeast of the target while he dropped his first T.I. He then told us to stand by while he took a low pass to assess it. He was quite satisfied, or perhaps I should say almost satisfied, because after he had a look he called, "Right-O Main Force, bomb twenty yards to the right of the red T.I." Each of the eighteen

aircraft ran through and dropped its load of sixteen 1,000-pounders on the railway yards. All returned to base without incident with a time lapse of four hours and forty-five minutes. All Bomber Command aircraft were active on this night, most operating in small strike forces on similar types of targets.

On June 12<sup>th</sup> our briefing was for a railway marshalling yard in the French south-central city of Poitiers. This again was southward across the channel and almost 200 miles straight down into France. The target was well marked again, and a good concentration was put down on the rail yards. Enemy night-fighters were getting more active now, as they moved out from Germany to waylay the scattered groups operating on these small targets. Brian Moorhead, our popular Gunnery Leader failed to return from one of these operations. We all felt sick about it, as he had almost finished his second tour of missions. We were also not looking forward to the Section being taken over by the other Aussie Flight Lieutenant, who was all full of big ideas about how he was going to change things around from the casual way Moorhead had led us. On June 13<sup>th</sup> there came another expected development. The first of the enemy “V” weapons was launched against England — a small jet-propelled, pilotless aircraft — a flying bomb. This caused a big stir. The populace had known something was pending, because of the continuous attacks on the mysterious Launching Sites in northwest Europe.

On June 20<sup>th</sup>, we were given a five-day leave. I left for London immediately as I wanted to see what the flying bombs were doing. I also intended going down into Kent where Bill’s Ordnance Unit was operating near East Grinstead. The flying bombs were getting through London in some numbers, as the defense systems had not been coordinated in such a short time. I stayed in London the first night, and got used to the horrible echoing roar the ramjet engines on the bombs made. While I was at the Swan out at Lancaster Gate, a dear old lady said how she hated the flying bombs, and that, “the old bombs had been much nicer.” One could hear the engine cut out, then a swishing sort of sound during the steep descent before the impact. They were timed to fall in the general area of London, which presented an extremely large target. The people were very upset, and once again all the Underground

stations were being utilized as shelters. The whole floor area would be covered with reclining and sleeping forms, with just about a four-foot strip of platform left for the transit users. The trains were all running as usual.

The following day I went down to Tunbridge Wells, where Bill had got me a hotel room. I stayed for a couple of days — he was busy loading railcars with ordnance supplies for dispatch to south coast ports. One afternoon Bill and I were walking along a country road when we heard a low-flying bomb coming. It was being pursued by two U.S.A.F. P47 Thunderbolts, which overtook it and managed to shoot the motor out. The bomb came straight down into a field about 300 yards away and blew a hole about 30 feet in diameter and ten feet deep. There was no damage, but when this kind of blast occurred in a built up area damage was severe, and there were heavy casualties in London. I went back to London in the evening, and the alert was continuous with a terrific cannonading of “ack ack”. Later defense forces moved the guns down toward the coast, as it was pointless to shoot bombs down onto the city. Barrage balloon units were also being moved down toward the coast to make a sort of fence, and fighter aircraft were patrolling at sea to intercept. The flying bombs, of course, were completely indiscriminate like the rest of the German strategic air war. This is what had led to our Bomber Command area attacks, although such strategy has had to bear a lot of hindsight criticism in later years. We were all back at Waddington by the 26<sup>th</sup>.

Operational activities were going on every night the weather was fit, and this was the season of good weather. Casualties were not heavy on most of the trips to tactical target, but were still quite high on many of the “majors” into Germany. The heavy twin-engined night-fighters were not sent up to face the American daylight escort fighters, because they were not match in speed or maneuverability. They were kept sheltered during the day, and ranged out at night seeking our heavies, in great numbers and would remain a menace for many months to come. The enemy flak defenses over their homeland had if anything, improved. Most of the losses suffered by the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> were now flak-inflicted.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of June we were briefed for a strike on a railway yard in the town of Vitry-le-Francois, about 100 miles southeast of Paris. We were given a round about route in and out because of increasing night-fighter activities. The approach was from west and south of Paris, and it was again a concentrated attack on a small target. The return took us out over western France and northward toward the channel. Ted noticed a power drop in the starboard outer engine, and soon it conked out altogether and was wind milling. The propeller had to be feathered, which didn't seem to make a lot of difference to the performance of the aircraft. This was the single time there had been any power failure — an endorsement for the Rolls Royce Company. Most of these engines were now coming from the U.S. where the Packard Motor Company was manufacturing them. Our maintenance hangar had large quantities of these engines packed in their wooden packing cases and stacked up in one corner of the building. The maintenance crews always had a number completely at the ready, and the aircraft were pulled in for an engine-change whenever there was a serious snag involved. This could be done in a matter of a few hours. Airborne time for operational trip number thirty-five: eight hours and five minutes in JO-F.

The commissions for we four NCOs came through in mid-July. Mine was POR'd oddly enough on July 11<sup>th</sup>, my twenty-first birthday. We were all in a mild state of shock to realize that we were suddenly officers. There was a lot of rushing around Lincoln to get our new gear after we'd collected our clothing allowance money. It was with mixed feelings that I turned my WO's uniform back in at the clothing stores. Then came the big move — over across the road to the Officer's Mess. It was rather a grand place with a beautiful lounge and dining room. What the chef could do with ordinary powdered eggs was amazing, and at my first breakfast there I was sure the omelet had been made with fresh eggs. I could never get used to the WAAF Batwoman brining in a cup of tea to our room at wake-up time. I didn't like that at all so used to rise a half hour or so early and get on with my ablutions. We wore our rank on our battle dress with just a little loop of braid over the shoulder epaulettes, and this

could be slipped off quite easily so for about a week we spend about half our time back at the Sergeants' Mess. A gradual withdrawal, so to speak.

Late in the evening of July 17<sup>th</sup>, we were given notice of an early morning operation. Briefing was at about 2 a.m. and the target was the enemy strongpoint at Mondville, just south of Caen where the forces in the British and Canadian sector of the beachhead had been held up for nearly a month. It was to be a massive strike, and just at daybreak. There would be almost 900 of Bomber Command's heavies involved. As we crossed the channel we met twin engined light bombers of the Tactical Air Force and the U.S. 14<sup>th</sup> on their way back. They had already dropped their loads on other dawn targets. It was a crowded situation as we approached the beachhead and flew toward the target, but was not semi-daylight so the aircraft could fly quite close together with no danger of collision. The Master Bomber's voice came on the RT, "Weightlift One to Tonnage, Weightlift One to Tonnage. Bomb the red T.I.s" as a large cluster of target indicators splashed down into the smoke and dust. The first wave of the Force sorted itself out and proceeded over the aiming point. A Halifax off our starboard beam opened bomb doors and a long string of 500-pounders plummeted down. Two more Lancasters on our port beam were spewing more 1,000-pounders. The target area was a mass of smoke and red flashes, and as we turned to starboard after our run-through I looked down at the beachhead area. There was a curious sparkling effect coming from everywhere on the ground, like someone shaking flakes of gunpowder on a hot stove. I suddenly realized that this was from Allied artillery firing into the same general area that our force was bombing. The T.I.s were being backed up constantly as the bombs were obliterating them, still pouring down from succeeding waves of our Main Force. A glance upward, and formations of our single-engined escorts were wheeling about, a thousand or so feet above us. This attack was to dislodge a very strong fortified area where the enemy had successfully been holding up Montgomery's British and Canadian Armies. One would think that nothing could survive a bombardment of this magnitude, but when Montgomery's forces advanced there was still stiff resistance from the deeply dug in enemy. However, this was the attack that weakened the strong point and started the roll toward

Falaise. WE wheeled out over the channel and proceeded up country towards our base area on a fine summer morning. The end of trip thirty-six and airborne time of three hours and forth minutes in JO-D

ON about the 21<sup>st</sup> of July we were given six days leave. Doug, Dennis and Ted went to their homes resplendent in their brand new uniforms. They were really proud of themselves, and I didn't blame them one bit. Dough had got a very touching letter from his father, who said that he hoped Doug would use his new authority wisely. Doug appreciated the contents of the letter enough to show it to me. His father was a real rough-diamond countryman, and that letter was one of the best I'd ever read. I hiked it off to London for a few days and set up at the Strand Palace. The days of the little K and C hotel at Lancaster Gate were now over, as it was for "other ranks" only. Somehow I thought I was missing out on something. When we went on leave we were given some ration coupons and these need not be surrendered to a hotel unless the stay was for more than four days. As I was checking out after my three-day stay at the Strand Palace, the lobby was crowded with American Officers. One of the women at the desk was giving the American officer in front of me a hard time, and he was doing his utmost to be polite. One could tell that he hadn't been in England for long. This made me a bit angry to see this woman getting away with her abusive manner. When my turn at the desk came I paid my account and then she asked for my ration coupons. I asked her if she was not aware that there was no need to surrender the coupons if the stay was four days or less. This really sent her, and I took a rather sadistic delight in refusing to hand them over. I suggested to her that she was probably keeping them for herself, and that I had a much better use for them. I went to the hotel writing room, got free stationary, and mailed the coupons to Doug's mother. We were all back at base by the 27<sup>th</sup>.

We were unsure of just what was going to happen now, until we were called into Alex's office and he informed us that our tours were now over and we were entitled to a further seven days of "tour expiration" leave. After this we were to come back to Waddington and await postings to OTUs for instructional duties. Doug and I had agreed that the first Sunday after our tour



was complete, and we were on leave in Brooke, we'd attend the little stone Church of England there. Off we went to Brooke, and our bike riding around the country pubs. Doug's parents were very happy to have us finished operation flying for now. I had already sent a cable from Lincoln to my family telling them that the operational tour was completed. The church at Brooke was a beautiful little place. It had a round Norman tower rather the shape of a short stone lighthouse, and was very old. We hiked it down the road to the churn on a pleasant Sunday morning, but it was not quite as expected. The Vicar was a real oddball — he rode a bike around the village and never spoke to anyone. There were only about ten of the faithful flock there, so you can imagine the service — no organ or other instrument, and a few quavering voices rendering a couple of dead slow hymns. The Vicar gave some sort of a nondescript sermon and then disappeared out into the back. That was it. He never came out to meet or greet anybody. Doug and I went straight to the King's Head — a far better place to give thanks for our good luck. Mr. and Mrs. MacIntosh of MacIntosh-Caley had come up to the estate for a few days. They had come over to Doug's parents' house and brought some beer. As we sat around sipping and chatting, they invited us to use their swimming pool. We gladly accepted, although the weather had not been all that warm. We did make use of it, and the lying in the sun bit was better than the icy-cold swimming in the water bit. We were back at Waddington on August 6<sup>th</sup> to await our fate.

There were no posting for us when we got back to base, but there was a bit of a surprise. Some awards had come through. Alex had got the DFC, and Ted and Doug had each received the DFM. Dennis and I were not on the receiving end. Award presentations were changing, and there were more and more being given out for a job well done. We had seen this a month or two previously when Wing Commander Billy Brill had been awarded the Distinguished Service Order for no reason that was apparent to the troops. Awards now didn't seem to require the outstanding incidents that had been called for in earlier times. Ted remarked to me that he couldn't see why he and Doug had got them while Dennis and I did not. I replied that he and Doug had been able to display their skills whereas Dennis and I had never had the

opportunity of firing our guns in combat. Ted said, "You don't half make us feel like a pair of bastards." We hastened to assure him that was not the case, and we congratulated them because we knew that they really had done a good job.

Actually, if we had been given some sort of awards at the time, I'd have found it embarrassing to explain, short of fabricating some sort of story. A gunner pretty well had to shoot down, or share a successful combat with an enemy aircraft to win DFC or DFM. We were well satisfied with our completed job at this time. We'd had no early returns, and the bombs had always gone onto, or very close to the target if the conditions were anywhere near normal. We were thankful for our good luck in this game of chance. Our weapons were always at the ready, but if they remained unused I didn't care.

Group Captain Bonham-Carter had said it was not good luck, but disappointing luck, never to have had a combat, but I would never agree. WE had been told that report intercepted from the Luftwaffe stated, "seventy percent of British heavy bombers are not aware of imminent attack, and ninety percent never answer the fire of the attacking fighter." This showed the difficulty of the night search of the gunners. As we said before, "dicing with death." And we had won.

On return from this last leave there was a letter from home waiting. My mother wrote me the shocking news that she had been diagnosed as having terminal leukemia — a disease I had never heard of. She had been told she had about six months to live, and she wanted me to come home if I possibly could. I wrote her saying that chances were slim at the time, but I would see what I could do. It was ——— news from a person who had never been seriously ill. When I'd said farewell to the family at Union Station in Toronto sixteen months before, I truthfully thought it a one-way trip. Now it seemed the situation between my mother and myself was reversed.

We filled our time in around our Sections as best we could while awaiting postings. We helped with new crews coming in, and it was plain to see that the shortage of aircrew was getting to be a thing of the past. Also, the Bomber Command squadrons were all back up to strength after the heavy losses of late winter and early spring. We tootled off to town often, and always took in

the new shows at the Theatre Royal. We were there the night the attempt was made on Hitler's life and the show was stopped while the announcement was made. Of course, everyone cheered and clapped. The flying –bomb situation in the southern countries and London was well under control, and by the end of August only one in seven was getting through the combination of defenses. Both Ted's and Dennis's homes in the London area had suffered damage, but by mid-September the majority of the launching sites had been overrun by the Allied advance, and the second Battle of London was over.

*~FIVE~*

NO. 22 OUT RAF WELLESBOURNE-MOUNTFORD —

FLYING AGAIN IN THE WIMPEYS —

MEETING THE CHIEF-HONCHO PADRE —

BACK TO WORK —

“YOU’RE GOING HOME” —

RCAF REPAT DEPOT, WARRINGTON, LANCASHIRE —

GREENOCK, SCOTLAND —

THE LAST OF THE FOUR STACKERS —

WESTWARD ON THE ATLANTIC —

NEW YORK —

ROCKCLIFFE, OTTAWA —

TORONTO UNION STATION —

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August a signal for my posting was sent through. I was going to No. 22 OTU at RAF Station Wellesbourne-Mountford, not far from Leamington and Stratford. After farewells to my crewmembers whose postings had not been confirmed, I gathered my gear together and left Waddington on the morning of the 25<sup>th</sup>. I was rather reluctant to leave the Lincoln area and my crew, as we had developed a sort of brotherly attitude toward one another. I took the train to Birmingham, then to Stratford and a bus to Wellesbourne. I rode the bus in from Stratford with another Canadian, Dick Murray, who was a tour-completed staff pilot. He filled me in on the situation, and helped me get fixed up with quarters. Wellesbourne OTU had all Canadian trainees and most of the instructors were also Canadian. The executive officers (brass) were RAF types, and there were some dandies. The CO was a Group Captain — tall with a big hook nose and a chest full of ribbons. The Squadron Leader Administration was a WWI pilot with the DFC and the DSO with two bars. The Flight Lieutenant Adjutant wore thick glasses with horn rims, and could have passed for Phil Silvers' double. The station was semi-dispersed and quarters were about ten minutes walk from the mess. All in all it didn't look like a bad deal. Dick Murray was at the mess later that evening and introduced me to a few of the bods. The mess wasn't a patch on the Sergeants' Mess at Waddington, but had not a bad little lounge and bar for a non-permanent type of station.

Next morning I was up early, had breakfast and went prowling around the hangars to see what types of aircraft were in use. I was glad to see the old Wellingtons again. These were a much later model than the 1Cs we had used at 14 OTU. They were the Mark X with the four-gun Fraser-Nash turret in the rear position. The nose turret was the same two-gun job as on the 1Cs. Engines were much larger and more powerful, the Bristol Hercules which was also used on Beaufighters, Stirlings, Halifax III and Lancaster II. It was also used on the big Coastal Command flying boats — the Short Sunderlands. The Wellington X was still being used in the Middle East and on Coastal Command operational flying.

As I walked along the hangar road I saw a sign, "E Flight Gunnery" and this looked like the section for me. F/O Reg Prebble and P/O George Mitchell were in charge, and some of the other instructors were P/O Jack Gilliland, P/O John Francis, W/O Ernie Plunkett and W/O Jim Mason. Our job was taking the gunners from each course on air-firing and camera-gun exercises. We had about five Wimpys with staff pilots and signals operators available to us, and it seemed a far better setup than we had when we were OTU trainees. Mitchell and I went over to the canteen and he told me our basic duties as we had a coffee. I flew that afternoon with a group of pupils and instructor John Francis on an air-firing exercise, and familiarization for me.

It was certainly not a difficult job — just getting the gunners into the turrets and helping them with stoppages or other problems they might have. On the air-firing exercise, two Wellingtons flew together. Each carried five pupil gunners and an instructor, and each was fitted with a drogue towing cable and winch. First, one would let a drogue out, and the gunners from the other ship would fire in turn using the same type of dye-marked ammunition that we had used at Macdonald. Occasionally a drogue would get shot off, so we carried a spare. When the trainees in the first aircraft had finished their firing, then that aircraft would act as drogue-ship for the second. An air-firing exercise usually took about an hour and a half, providing everything was working. Sometimes we had gun problems, but these could be often dealt with without having to return to base.

The camera-gun exercises were carried out using the rear turret only. Dick Murray flew as target-attacker using a Miles Martinet. We also had a little snout-nosed RAF P/O flying Martinet. He had just made it as a pilot and it was easy to see he would never be capable of operational flying. During the exercise, each gunner took his turn in the turret, loading the films he had been issued with and unloading the camera-gun when finished. The instructors would stand up in the astrodome of the Wellington for an unobstructed view, and call the fighter in on the RT when the change of gunners was complete. Later the same day the films would be developed, and were ready for assessment the next morning. The group of trainees would watch the films

together and listen to commentary by the assessor. It was amazing how many would lay the deflection on the wrong side, despite all they had been taught. This film viewing in front of their buddies made them remember for the next time. I flew six times in the last five days of August, and felt that this was as good a way of filling in time as any. The weather remained good from August into September with flying nearly every day.

About the 10<sup>th</sup> of September I received another letter from my mother. Her condition was deteriorating, and there was another piece of shocking news. My brother Bob had lost his wife and infant daughter in childbirth, and things at home were in a real turmoil. I told our Flight Commander, F/L “Torchy” Peden, and he suggested that I see the padre at once. The Canadian padre, Squadron Leader Minto-Swan listened with interest, and said that he would fix up an appointment for me with the Chief Padre at RCAF Headquarters in London. I carried on with my flying duties and he set up a date and time for me. I went down to London on the 24<sup>th</sup> and stayed at Bailey’s Hotel, as the Strand Palace was all booked up. I was pleased with Bailey’s. It was a little cheaper than the Strand, and much smaller. Despite all the personnel involved in the invasion forces on the Continent, the hotels were still filled with people from the Military. I had my meeting with the Group Captain Chief Padre on the 25<sup>th</sup>. The meeting was not long. He said that he would put in the application for a return to Canada for me, but he held little hope of it being approved. At that time I felt that he did not really intend to make much of a recommendation. I suppose he listened to an awful lot of requests, and had a hard time sorting them out. After all, despite the grand sound of his rank, it was an honorary one, and he was in reality just a minister trying to satisfy everyone.

Later that night at the hotel I had just retired when without warning there was a terrific explosion some distance away. I went to my second floor window and took a look outside. Everything was still except a few people moving about in the blackout. A bobby was on the sidewalk below, so I called down to him and asked if he knew anything about the explosion. He replied that he thought a gas main had blown up about a mile away, as one had done a few nights before. Earlier that evening I had gone to the lounge of the Strand

Palace to check it out for familiar faces and had found two of my former classmates from the Hamilton Technical School. This pair had become friends at Hamilton, and the last time I had seen them was at No. 1 Manning Depot at Toronto almost 2 ½ years before. I had quite a chat with them. Unbelievably they had managed to stick together all through their training and staff-piloting duties in Canada. They had just recently arrived in England and were a bit envious of my having finished my tour. The previous time I'd been at the Strand Palace I had met a former guard-duty compatriot from the Manning Depot in Toronto. This hotel was certainly a popular spot with Canadian Air force personnel. On the 26<sup>th</sup> I took the train back to Stratford and RAF Station Wellesbourne-Mountford. I wrote my mother telling her that I hoped to see her soon, but in reality after going to HQ in London, my hopes were slim. Later that evening I saw S/L Minto-Swan in the Mess and thanked him for his help.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> it was flying as usual and I did four flights that day. My single flight the next day finished my September flying and a total of 23 trips for the month. The October weather was almost as good as September, and we carried on with the new courses. Quite a number of these trainees were French Canadian. They had received basic English schooling, but it was very difficult to be certain that they understood all that we told them. There were a couple of squadrons up in the Canadian Six Group where their working language was French, and that would have been where these lads would be sent. WE also heard rumours of a back-up of aircrew developing. Losses were way down, and as a result not nearly as many replacements were required. The new crews had to wait for openings on the squadrons now. Training had finally caught up with losses and attrition, and one of the main contributors to this fact was the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> and their long-range delay escorts. They were laying waste to the Luftwaffe and its bases. In one of the London papers that I picked up in the Mess one evening, there was a picture taken from Allied occupied territory toward Belgium. There were seven columns of black smoke — the remains of seven Luftwaffe bases over the horizon in Belgium. RCAF and RAF fighter and fighter-bomber bases were also following and locating behind the advancing front, and these units would soon be joining in on daylight escort duties for



Bomber Command. As yet, night tactics were in effect for in-depth operation, and daylight strikes were not far in advance of the front.

The Padre at Wellesbourne, S/L Minto-Swan was a good man and a real sort of buddy to our boys. On Thanksgiving Day he organized a real Canadian-style dinner for us (there was no Thanksgiving holiday in England). Somehow he procured chicken. It was rather tough, but nonetheless it was real chicken with dressing. WE all thoroughly enjoyed it, and had a wingding in the lounge after. It developed into a singsong, and after the Padre, the CO and the Adj. had left the real songs started. We got going on the limericks with everyone taking his turn. They got worse and worse, and even made the toughie barmaid leave. Our old Squadron Leader Admin. (He of the DSO and two bars) had never heard these versions before and I thought he was going to have a seizure, such was his mirth and delight. Ah, yes, it was a great evening, and as I wended my way back to quarters through an autumn fog, I was startled by a loud hoot just over my head. I shone the flashlight into an overhanging branch of a tree and there sat a large brown owl, adding his remarks to the end of a Thanksgiving celebration.

We had a fellow in our section that had just received a "Dear John" letter from his fiancé in Canada. He was lamenting the facts to us in the mess later, and Reg Prebble asked him if he had a picture of her that we could give a look at. He pulled one from his wallet and passed it around. She was ugly, but really! We all told him what a lucky guy he was. Shortly after that he started taking this babe from the MT (motor transport) section out. Strange thing, but most of the girls from transport were very good looking and she was no exception. I think our friend was a bit keener than she was because within a few days he was talking serious, the exact opposite to most WAAF-Canadian relationships. He took her to the Station movie one night, and right after she volunteered to go back to her quarters because she didn't feel well. There was a dance that night at the NAAFI (navy, army, air force institute) canteen in the village, and who should show up but this girl. Our friend was back at his quarters writing letters. He felt pretty badly about it when he heard about it the next day. He had done

his tour with the Pathfinders, but it took and MT Section WAAF to shoot him down.

October was slipping by — no frosts yet, but the nights were damp. Our quarters, a hut with about twelve occupants with a bit better than the Quonset hut at Skellingthorpe, but still heated with just one small stove, and I was not looking forward to the real winter. The ablutions were really primitive, an unheated wash house with a big tub a bit like a maple syrup kettle over a brick fire box. This was supposed to be kept fired up by the Batmen but often the fire went out before the water was properly heated. For a bath, we had to go up to another building near the mess, but here at least the water was always hot. The dining room in the mess was not large, and one day when we came in to lunch, signs had appeared on the first three tables, “F/Ls and above.” One can imagine how well that went over with the F/O and P/O staff members. The three tables were immediately filled with junior officers. The signs soon disappeared. The English cookhouse staff never bothered to enquire about what kind of dishes Canadians might like. They used to serve us some kind of macaroni pudding for dessert, and as each man came along the steam table he thought it his duty to inform the cooks what a crazy way that was to serve macaroni, and that the ONLY way to serve macaroni was with cheese. However, this did not change the cooks’ habits at all.

October continued with pleasant autumn weather and almost daily flying in our section. The new crews were being assembled here, as was the case when we had been trainees at 14 OTU. It was an event for the crews when they made their first flight with no type of instructor along. We had just taken off on an exercise at one time when we overheard the remarks of a crew who were airborne on their own for the first time. The pilot had inadvertently left the RT on “transmit”. He proceeded to render in a raucous tenor, one of the filthiest songs ever sang by an Airforce man. Suddenly, there was a, “this bloody thing is on transmit!” and then a click. Of course, the broadcast was being heard loud and clear by all the WAAFs in the control tower.

During this month I met another of my old mates from No. 1 ITS in Toronto — Bob Chambers, who I had not seen since October 1942. He had

been a staff pilot for some time in England and had finally got to OTU and was gathering a crew. Also, a New Zealander came into the mess one day. He had been Jack Gilliland's rear gunner, and he turned out to be "Chatty" Chatterfield who had been in our small flying section at Macdonald. I reminded Chatty of the day at Macdonald when he and I jettisoned all our ammunition because we had been on our third flight that day with a U/S Vickers gun and didn't want to go up again. It was amusing how these chance meetings kept popping up. I finished out October with a total of twenty-one flights.

As the month of November started we had a diversion early one morning, of a number of Six Group Lancasters to our base. Many of the Six Group squadrons were converting from Halifaxes to Canadian-build Lancasters, which were being constructed at Malton, Ontario. The talk among these crews was about how many more "majors" or lesser operations they were required to do, and one got more and more the impression that there was a backup of partially trained aircrew developing, especially gunners. I had heard nothing from RCAF HQ so had pretty well put a posting back home out of my mind. Another interesting revelation had just been made on the BBC and in the papers. The mysterious "gas-main explosions" in the London area were in reality the V2s, a new enemy rocket-propelled missile. It was ground-launched and approached its destination on a steep trajectory at many times the speed of sound, hence absolutely no warning, and totally indiscriminate as to targeting. The first one had fallen on September 8<sup>th</sup>, and that was what I'd heard in London on the night of September 25<sup>th</sup>.

There was a U.S. presidential election in the autumn of 1944, and there was much political talk amongst the few American RCAF chaps we had, as to whether Roosevelt should be reelected. The American people knew best and he was put in for a fourth term. WE were pleased because he worked so well with Churchill, and it seemed like a poor time to change the team now that the end of the tunnel was almost in sight. The U.S. Navy had delivered a decisive blow to the Japanese Imperial Navy at the battle of Leyte Gulf in the Philippines during late October, and the Japanese Navy was no longer an effective striking force. Bits and pieces of information about the new U.S.AF b29s were floating about,

and now with the defeat of the Japanese fleet, speculation was that the Americans would soon be seizing islands nearer the homeland to base these new super bombers for the attack on Japan proper. We wondered where we would fit into this plan, which was largely an American show, gaining momentum with every passing week.

On the morning of November 8<sup>th</sup> I got a phone call at the section. The Adj. wanted to see me so I hiked right over as soon as I had brought a group of trainees back from camera-gun exercises. He greeted me with, “Campbell, you’re going home.” That was indeed welcome news, and I was posted to the RCAF Repatriation Depot in Warrington, Lancashire, effective November 12<sup>th</sup>. Right away I went to the village post office and sent a cable to my family. They would tell mother, who was now hospitalized at London, Ontario. The next few days were taken up with getting clearances, and socializing in the mess with my friends. One of our staff pilots, Bill Blamey from Hamilton, was also going home. He had completed two tours of operations, plus the stints of staff piloting at the OTUs.

On November 12<sup>th</sup> we gathered our gear together and got transport to the station at Stratford. We entrained shortly after noon for Warrington, about 100 miles to the north. We were at the RCAF Depot by late afternoon and found the place crowded with people waiting to go back to Canada for various reasons. One group of gunners I spoke to had only been in England for two weeks and now was being sent back. The rumours we had heard were all true and the system was backed right up, which of course was a good thing.

Warrington was rather a helter-skelter place with a parade each morning — really not much for than a roll call. At the first morning parade I met one of our original group from 14 OTU — Malcolm Price from Toronto. He had also been commissioned, and had been awarded the DFM for a successful combat on his tour of the Ops. Price and I hadn’t really known each other all that well, as he’d been one of the class receiving their training at Mont Joli Quebec while we were at Macdonald. They had joined us at the time of our overseas draught. It was good to see a familiar face, and we started chumming around together. Warrington Repatriation Depot had Group Caption Denton Massey as the

Commanding Officer. He was almost as theatrical as his brother Raymond, and used to sweep around in his long greatcoat with much grandeur, swinging a silver-headed swagger stick. He was the only RCAF officer I had ever seen carry any kind of swagger stick.

The quarters at the Depot were quite comfortable, and at least warm, but the meals were the worst by far that we'd struck in all England or Canada. I guess it was the people in charge as the rations on all stations were basic, and the end result was up to the planners and cooks. The Warrington kitchen scraps would have been a bonanza for a swine-feeding contractor, because there surely were a lot of full barrels after each meal. Price and I completely gave up on meals there, except for some toast and coffee in the morning. We were slated for a draught to a ship for about the 20<sup>th</sup>, but Group Captain Massey called us all into the theatre on the 17<sup>th</sup> and informed us that the ship was going to be used to transport wounded back to Canada. Our Army was having a struggle working its way along the coast of the Low Countries, and the casualties were high. We settled down for another waiting period as the November rain and fog enveloped the industrial Lancashire countryside.

One foggy evening Price and I wandered through the drizzle in search of a fish and chip shop we had heard about. We eventually found it after tramping through every kind of terrain including a manure-filled barnyard. It was worth every step, and we trudged back eating our supper out of the newspaper wrappings.

We also spend a bit of our time in Manchester, which was about 30 miles distant. There was a fairly good Officer's Club where a bed could be had reasonably. There was a big pub called The Long Bar and really, one could hardly see the far end for the distance, and people bellied up to it. We met an interesting chap there — he was having a pint by himself, and we noticed that the palms of his hands had on them what looked like plantar warts, except completely covered. After a bit I struck up a conversation with him, and he was such a pleasant fellow I chanced asking him if he would mind telling us the problem with his hands. He was quite pleased to tell us that he'd had the condition develop slowly over a period of about ten years, and there was

nothing to be done for it. He had lost his job as a machinist because his fingers were now too clumsy to hold small tools. Our visit with him made us feel fortunate, and also it got us an invitation for Christmas dinner at his home if we were still in England at the time.

Back at Warrington a draught was being made up, as there was space on a ship now lying at Greenock on the Clyde. WE entrained late in the evening and were at Greenock, the port of Glasgow early the next morning. The train rolled down to river's edge at the same place we'd come ashore eighteen months before. Out in the river channel lay our ship — the Aquitania, the last of the "Four Stackers". This majestic old lady had been on the go since about 1912, and was a sister to the Lusitania, the sinking of which in 1915 was almost instrumental in bringing the U.S. into the war. The other sisters were the Titanic; and the Mauretania, which I'd seen in the ship breakers' yard near Edinburgh. We embarked on the lighter and were on board before noon. The Aquitania got underway late in the evening, and next morning we were out into the misty, grey Atlantic southwest of Ireland, with a pair of British destroyers escorting.

This ship, although not nearly as large as the "Queens" dropped her escort after the first day out. Her speed was still sufficient to outrun any submarine and enemy surface vessels were a thing of the past. Shipping losses had fallen dramatically as the combined British, U.S. and Canadian Navies had decimated the U-Boat fleet. Quarters on board were quite comfortable, and we were not so deep down in the hold as on the Queen Elizabeth. We were bunked in sort of a dormitory affair close to the outer hull of the ship, and when she rolled on the swell her ribs cracked and groaned, as she was all rivets and no welded seams. She had much oak paneling on her stairways, in the corridors, the lounges and in the dining rooms. Our first class dining room gave us strictly white linen service — no more mess tins required. WE had a fair bit of entertainment; a movie each day in the lounge and there was a good U.S.O. show where an attractive blonde sang a group of songs we had never heard, from Oklahoma. These great songs that all the American passengers were

familiar with puzzled us. None of the music had been released in Britain up to this time.

WE were lucky having a reasonably calm passage for the time of year it was, and some of the ship's crew were busy with pneumatic chisels chipping away thirty-two years worth of paint. One could pick up a thick chunk of hard paint and count all the layers. There were about four coats of pre-WWI white for the twenties and thirties, and more recent layers of WWII battleship grey. They were readying her for the spanking new white they expected to apply before many months.

On the morning of December 3<sup>rd</sup> we came on deck to see the New York skyline, and what a welcome sight it was. We had our last dinner on board at dockside, then disembarked early in the afternoon, and boarded a Central Vermont train, which was standing almost at dockside. Kindly American Red Cross ladies served us coffee and real donuts before we left — we had to jump off the train to take advantage of their hospitality.

We got underway just as the school children were heading home from their classes, and they were a sight — all the colourful snowsuits and parkas against the new snow. The CN coaches on the train seemed strangely large and roomy after the smaller but neat trains of England. They had a homey feeling — things familiar again. As we passed through the outskirts of New York, the flashing wigwags and warning bells at the level crossings were another familiar sight and sound. Also, the lines of stopped traffic, with clouds of exhaust vapours drifting away on the crisp breeze. Faintly we could hear the throaty chime whistle of the big CV locomotive as it picked up speed heading northward and into the wooded hills of New England. Later that evening we enjoyed a splendid dinner in true railway fashion as the sparkling unblackened-out towns and villages swept by.

An overnight journey found us at Union Station in Ottawa, with quite a large crowd there to meet the “repats”, and more coffee and donuts from pretty young Red Cross girls. Transport took us to the RCAF station at Rockcliffe, where we got our gear straightened out and relabeled for our hometowns. We went back to the city centre for lunch and a few beers at the Chateau, and at the

same time checked the Toronto train times. I sent a telegram to my family saying that I hoped to see them at Toronto Union Station at 7 a.m. on December 5<sup>th</sup>.

We entrained late in the evening and bedded down in comfortable berths as the outdoor temperature hovered at near zero degrees F. Excitement kept me awake as we rolled out from the Ottawa station, and it was hard to realize that we were on our final leg of this long journey. The train was soon into her stride heading for Smith's Falls and Toronto, as I lay in the berth listening to the even rhythm of the wheels, and the beautiful moaning call of the chime-whistle as we flew over the level crossings and through the whitened countryside. I raised myself on one elbow and slip up the window blind to view with winter night.

The endless parade of telegraph poles flashed by amid the swirling snow, and across the bleak fields the lights of the farms of Eastern Ontario drifted. What were these dim lights, I wondered. Perhaps a farmer's wife poring over the pages of a mail order catalogue in a lamp-lit kitchen, while the kettle sang on a wood-burning range. Or maybe a farmer with a stable lantern doing late chores or tending a sick animal. It didn't matter, I felt as if I could walk into any one of those farms and feel at home. Could I be so near my own home? It hardly seemed possible, but as I dropped off to sleep, I new I would soon feel the porter's hand shaking me awake.

Right on time we rolled into Union Station. We had arisen early and had finished our morning routine as the first lights on the outskirts of Toronto were becoming visible. The train slowed as we crossed the dozens of switch points leading into the station, and the final little squeal of brakes sent a shiver down my spine. The sounds the journey had ceased, after a ten-day period of wheel clacking and the thumping vibrations of the engines on the Aquitania.

When we arrived at the incoming passengers area, there were soon a lot of touching and tearful reunions going on. Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters — many damp-eyed, smiling and greeting the home comers. Then there were the young couples, united at last. Some were facing each other, almost shyly holding hands, and others were sitting on the benches exchanging hugs and kisses in profusion in their joys of reunion.



I looked around carefully. No family. I telephoned home. No answer. And when I stepped out of the phone booth, there they were, searching the crowd for me. I had forgotten how early they would have had to leave home to arrive at the Station by seven in the morning! It was a joyous but sad occasion for our family — everyone was smiling, and there was an extra bonus. My youngest sister Molly had her beautiful, new little bright-eyed daughter there, staring with puzzled interest at this new uncle.

So here it all was, right back to the place it had started on that afternoon in December 1941, when my friend Sid had seen me off on that train to Hamilton. Such a lot had happened — some expected, and a whole lot unexpected. We had all changed, and the world was rapidly changing. Our hellos were almost as awkward as our goodbyes had been, and we walked, hardly knowing what to say to each other, out into the crispy-cold morning where the car stood at the curb on Front Street — pointing toward home.

THE END

QUOTE FROM A FLIGHT COMMANDER OF 101 SQUADRON —

*“People of the younger generation can get the impression that Bomber Command was one big happy band of brothers. This was not so. Squadrons were very much individual entities – we didn’t mix much with other squadrons – and they assumed the character and charisma of the people who were on the Squadron at that time. As a result, few outsiders will ever appreciate what it was really like to serve on a bomber squadron.”*

QUOTE FROM AN AIRCREW FLIGHT SERGEANT –

*“Is it any wonder that I avoid memorial services? For I cry very easily, and the sound of The Air force March Past brings memories flooding back. Men are not supposed to cry, but this one does, and mostly in private, for how many are there who can even begin to understand?”*

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REQUIEM FOR A MISSING AIRCREW MEMBER,

By: (Air Gunner) R.W. Gilbert.

*My brief sweet life is over  
My eyes no longer see,  
No summer walks, no Christmas trees –  
No pretty girls for me.  
I’ve got the chop; I’ve had it –  
My nightly ops are done.  
Yet, in another hundred years  
I’ll still be twenty-one.*

As a final page, I would like to include some personal credits to my fellow crewmembers:

Alex, our Pilot: A cool-headed, no-nonsense captain, well respected by us all. A quote from him, "I went by the book" says it well. No races or short cuts to be the first back to base, and a healthy distance between he and the rest of the crew. His word was law, and we totally respected and admired his authority.

Henry, our Navigator: He suffered repeatedly from airsickness, but doggedly carried on despite his agonizing attacks. He was popular with all ranks in the Squadron, with a wry sense of humour. He did not carry his liquor well, but that only happened, of course, when we were off duty.

Alf Williams, our Navigator after Henry's screening, and a DFM holder from his first tour: A quiet and skillful professional person, whom I'm sure knew where we were within a mile or two any time we were airborne.

Dennis Bourke, our Bomb Aimer: A bit of an enigma – cheerful, but during training exercises sometimes showing a lack of skill in his trade. On the positive side, cool and collected in the nerve wracking bombing runs. Not outwardly conscientious in his daily attitudes. Got his share of aiming point pictures.

Jack Kennedy, our Bomb Aimer for our tour extension: Holder of a DFM from his first tour. A rather brash young man, but with a lot of skills and competence.

Ted Martin, our Flight Engineer: Ted knew his job to a T. Totally conscientious, continually watching his bank of gauges concerning fuel, oil and engine temps and power. When he reported fuel getting low, Alex did not hesitate to pick a landing spot. Ted was probably the most nervous crewmember, but never dithered.

Doug Broome, our Wireless Operator (signals): He listened with diligence to any signals that might be relayed from base, and reported them to Alex immediately. At the same time he was watching the visual “Monica” screen (radar device) and calling the port or starboard echoes from invisible aircraft. These readings in our case turned out to be friendly. Dennis and I did not fire at an unidentified image. Some trigger-happy gunners did. In their own thoughts, this was probably a good thing, but there were numbers of aircraft returning with .303 holes in them. Doug also had a wry sense of humour, often displayed during trying moments. He was as good a signals operator as could be found on any squadron.

Dennis Chalk, our Rear Gunner: Dennis manned the remote rear turret, in a position that seemed detached from the rest of the aircraft. The open front of the turret put him in the coldest spot, but he never complained, and was always alert and cheerful. He had, perhaps, a bit of a superior, selfish attitude at times, that I’m sorry to say caused us (Doug, Ted and myself) to shun him socially during the first five months of our tour. Fortunately, during that fateful winter of ’44, his, and possibly our attitudes changed to some extent, and we became a staunch group of four NCOs socially.

God bless every one of them, wherever they may be.

## REMEMBRANCE DAY – NOVEMBER 11, 1997

Received an answer today for a letter sent to Vibank, Sask., in an attempt to contact the Leboldus family, which lost three sons in action while operating with RAF Bomber Command. This included son, John Anthony, who was on the same Gunnery course as myself at No. 3 Bombing and Gunnery School at Macdonald, Manitoba, during January – April, 1943.

The answer came in a lengthy and interesting telephone call from Father Burney Leboldus, of Regina, Saskatchewan, the youngest member of the family of twelve – six girls and six boys. This letter had reached Father Leboldus in a roundabout way, as the post office at Vibank is now closed, and there are no family members now living there.

Information on the three brothers – John, Martin and Peter, is contained in the RCAF Memorial Book – *They Shall Not Grow Old*, page 414. (One piece of information is wrong, Martin's age given as thirty-one, when he was actually twenty-three.)

John Anthony – 142 Squadron F/S Gunner, flying in Wellingtons from North Africa, KIA during an attack on Turin, Italy, Nov. 24, 1943. Buried at Genoa, Italy.

Martin Benedict – 419 Squadron Sergeant F/E, flying in Halifaxes from England, KIA during an attack on Leipzig, Feb. 24, 1943. He has no known grave. His name is inscribed on the Runnymede War Memorial for Missing Aircrew, Surrey, England.

Peter John – 418 City of Edmonton Squadron, flying in Boston A/C. KIA Feb. 13, 1943 during night operations over France. He is buried at Grandcourt Cemetery, Grandcourt, France.

Mrs. Leboldus, their mother, was chosen as Silver Cross Mother for the Remembrance Day Ceremonies at Ottawa in 1972. She and her husband were flown there for the occasion.

This list is made up of friends and acquaintances from Air Force years – fellow trainees, schoolmates, squadron members and such. All were killed in action while serving with Bomber Command. Some have no known grave. The rest are buried in various war cemeteries across Europe and the Middle East.

**Flying Officer Bert Cudney**, Fergus, Ontario. Bomb Aimer, 23.

**Flight Sergeant Chas O’Conner**, Windsor, Ontario. Bomb Aimer, 23.

**Sergeant Harold Queen**, Windsor, Ontario. Air Gunner, 22.

**Pilot Officer Don Charles**, Toronto, Ontario. Navigator, 27.

**Flight Sergeant Harold Suthers**, Hamilton, Ontario. Air Gunner, 21.

**Warrant Officer Eric Wilson**, Richmond Hill, Ontario. Pilot, 22.

**Flying Officer Fred Carter**, Richmond Hill, Ontario. Navigator, 26.

**Flying Officer Gordon Lawson**, Grandview, Manitoba. Pilot, 24.

**Flight Sergeant Brian Varey**, Toronto, Ontario. Air Gunner, 26.

**Pilot Officer Harold Barrons**, Westmount, Quebec. Air Gunner, 21.

**Flight Sergeant John Leboldus**, Vibank, Saskatchewan. Air Gunner,  
22.

**Sergeant Ernie Cannon**, Toronto, Ontario. Air Gunner, 20.

**Flight Lieutenant Wally Einerson**, DFC, DFM, Wynard, Sask. Pilot,  
23.

**Flight Lieutenant Jack Davidson**, Toronto, Ontario. Pilot, 21.

**Sergeant William Hogarth**, Cochrane, Ontario. Air Gunner, 21.

**Flight Sergeant Millard Nesvold**, Camrose, Alberta. Air Gunner, 28.

**Flight Sergeant Mellville Price**, Toronto, Ontario. Air Gunner, 30.

**Sergeant Percy Hollyer**, Weston, Ontario. Air Gunner, 20.

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All were volunteer members of the RCAF

## POEMS FROM “LANCASTER AT WAR III”

### WHERE PULSE THE ARTERIES OF WAR —

*The nervous conversation dies,  
The curtains part,  
Eliciting a gasp of shocked surprise  
As, reaching out across the sprawling chart,  
The crazy zigzag of the tortuous thread  
Squeezing between the fighters and the flack,  
Marks out the fire-torn route ahead  
That we must follow out;  
And, given luck, trace back.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

### SOON THE TAKE OFF, SOON THE WAR —

*We bustle urgently between dispersals;  
One by one the aircrews disembark  
And slouch with studied negligence  
To waiting Lancs, monstrous in the growling dark.  
We, the last to go, mutter our farewells,  
Stretch our legs in new-made space, and trundle on  
To our more distant rendezvous;  
Our eagerness to be away and gone  
Diminished by awareness that not all of us  
Who scramble noisily aboard tonight  
Will share the thankful journey back  
From darkness into light.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

### WHILE OTHER MORTALS SLEEP —

*Behind us lies the land we know,  
Before, the hostile sea,  
Thank God that man cannot foretell  
Calamities to be.  
Beneath our wings he slumbers on,  
The unsuspecting foe;  
He does not heed us as we come,  
Lord help us when we go!*

*Astern we leave the flames of hell,  
The North Sea lies ahead,  
A battered ship, a tired crew,  
Oh! For base and bed!  
English soil,  
But don't relax,  
Remember Sergeant Brown,  
Almost on the runway  
When intruders shot him down.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

THROUGH ENDLESS SEAS OF CLOUD –

*Astern the straggling line of Lancs  
Recedes to the horizon;  
Below, the rolling fleece of cloud  
Beguiles in its freshness;  
But soon, as the bombs tumble  
And smoke rises,  
To smudge the whiteness,  
The image dissolves and  
We turn for home,  
Uneasily aware of unseen destruction.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

ANYWHERE BUT WHERE I AM –

*The drone of engines irritates  
Dry mouthed and taught the crew awaits  
The climax, each in his own way.  
The gunners wet their lips and peer  
Nervously into the night, while fear  
Creeps up behind like a ghost.*

*We cannot help ourselves, we are  
As leaves in autumn: modern war  
Has little room for private fears.  
Impersonal, no God of wrath  
Compels us, sirens mask our path  
And trembling cellars curse and pray.  
The tension cracks, a bright cascade  
Of colours bursts the night. Afraid?  
No, more than that, much more than that.*



*The night becomes a madman's mass  
Of noise and colour; seconds pass  
Like hours. We lurch and help increase  
The chaos down below, then leave  
All dignity behind and weave  
Hurriedly from that horrid place.  
The clouds reflect the distant glow  
Of shattered houses, streets that flow  
With molten tar and frenzied flames.*

*Relax – they cannot reach us now  
A furtive moon creeps up below  
And fills the night with shadows.  
Young eyes are dull and purple patched,  
With faces drawn old age is matched  
By great fatigue and weariness.*

*At last the engine's final roar  
And fumbling fingers seek the door;  
The night still surges in our ears;  
The night is gone.  
Scarlet the East that sets the skies aflame  
In angry dawn;  
Or does the night withdraw from us in shame?*

- Anonymous

#### ONCE MORE TO FIGHT AND FLY –

*We have come home,  
Dropping gratefully through friendly skies;  
And though in tired brains the engines thunder on,  
And images of Death remain in reddened eyes,  
Though nostrils sniff the legacy of oil and sweat,  
And legs must learn to cope with solid ground,  
We have come home and are at least alive  
To mourn our friends, indifferent now to sight,  
Or smells, or sound.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

#### FACES GLIMPSED AND NEVER SEEN AGAIN –

*Boys in the company of boys,*

*They died before they had lived;  
Shot, blown apart, consumed in fire,  
Broken in shattered wreckage;  
Dispatched with indignity  
And without preparation.  
I mourned them then,  
But now, surviving in a world  
Indifferent to their hopes and dreams,  
I grieve more for the living.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

LANCASTER SUNSET –

*Once, those roaring Merlins lifted her,  
Laden and eager across sullen seas  
And alien skies into agonies of  
Fire and conflict; brought her safely  
Through a hundred weary homecomings  
And anxious touchdowns to survival and peace.*

*Now, forty years on, the purpose blunted,  
Anger purged, she hauls her ageing  
Bones off the ground, flies gentle  
Circuits to please the curious and the  
Nostalgic, and taxis sedately to  
Her lone dispersal; there the  
Old Eagle, tamed and hooded, to  
Await darkness and to dream  
Of other far off, less untroubled nights.*

- Philip A. Nicholson

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\* Regarding the Bournemouth Raid

Many years after having written this text, I had reason to believe something had been covered up concerning this raid. I had read in a letter in a Toronto paper, “the RCAF had paid dearly for having their disembarkation depot in such an exposed seaside port.” I did not believe this, so I wrote to the RAF Historical Branch, who in turn forwarded my enquiry to Records of Air Raids in the UK. The reply I received was indeed a shocker. On the date of that raid in Bournemouth, according to their records in excess of 120 RCAF personnel had lost their lives through enemy action. My group knew nothing of this, and the trust was kept hidden in an almost unbelievable way. We were posted to a Bomber Command training unit within a couple of days, and carried on with our training quite ignorant of what had actually taken place. Our five days leave in London, and the timing of our train had undoubtedly saved some of our lives.

\*\* Scarecrows

Happenings observed by many Bomber Command crews – most viewed at twenty thousand feet, could possibly build a mistaken sighting into fact. A case in point was the existence of the “Scarecrow” referred to in this text. These phenomena were, as a rule observed in the target area only, and really, when one considers these as a pyrotechnic display, would a defense force go to so much trouble to maybe upset bombing runs? There was no record of any such “weapon” found when files of German Air Defense were examined, nor did interrogation yield any information. Therefore, it is to be assumed that these tremendous, vivid explosions were actually direct flack hits on bomb-laden aircraft, when the whole load, aircraft, fuel and crew blew up in a huge boiling red ball. The whole took place in about an eight second time lapse after a direct hit on a particularly vulnerable spot. Hence so many casualties recorded as “No known grave.”