

ANOTHER BRIDGE TOO FAR

March 1943 and my first travel warrant was to Kings Cross and thence to St. Johns Wood and Lords Cricket Ground. This in itself was an experience; I don't think I had ever been further than Southport in my life.

I was there only just long enough to receive my inoculations and vaccinations, which put me in Abbey Lodge Hospital with Vaccine Fever and Hospital Blue.

I was then posted to Cranwell to further my education. This was as a result of some string pulling by my Bingley A.T.C. C/O who had been a pilot in the 1914-1918 war and subsequently attained Air Rank. Whilst there, I did some 10 hours on Tiger Moths (solo'd in 8) and scrounged rides in various other a/c including Ansons, Oxfords, Proctors etc. However it was eventually discovered that I had never been to initial training wing so in September 1943 I was posted to No 21 I.T.W. Torquay to be knocked into shape.

After 12 weeks I was given my first leave some nine months after joining. I was then posted to No.4. School of Technical Training, St. Athan, S/Wales to learn my trade - Flight Engineer. I was selected to train on Sunderland Flying Boats - not a lot of time to spare here - although I did manage to get a ride in a Beaufighter on test from the M/U.

I also managed to hook up the ripcord of my parachute on exiting the a/c - cost me 2/6d.

In between classroom work I went on courses to Bristols at Filton to study the finer points of the Hercules and to Shorts at Rochester for hands-on training and my first flight in a Sunderland. On completion of my course at St. Athan I received my three stripes and my engineer's brevet and a posting to 9(0)AFU Penrhos N/Wales for the compulsory Gunnery Course. Technical training had taken just over 8 months. It was now early August 1944 and a posting to 1665 Heavy Conversion Unit Tilstock in Shropshire to be crewed up. A quick look at the map - NO WATER HERE. Sitting on the dispersal pads were scores of clapped out war weary Mk1 and 2 Short Stirlings.

Crewing up was a very casual affair. Crews were complete except for the F/Engineers. My new crew had completed half their tour on Albermarles with 295 Squadron based at Harwell, dropping arms to the Maquis in Southern France and supply drops to the S.O.E. The skipper, as did most others, found the conversion to Stirlings a bit daunting; twice the size of anything he had ever flown and with a vicious swing on take-off. However after only 8 hours 15 mins day and 7 hours night flying, we were considered ready to go. Back with 295 at Harwell, re-equipped with factory fresh Short Stirling Mk IV. We were kept busy glider towing, paratroop dropping and generally getting used to the job.

My first operation was on the night of 17th September. We were slightly annoyed that we had not been selected to tow gliders to Arnhem that morning. Take-off 21.00 hrs OPS Pistol III Southern France., Dijon area. 5 hours 40 mins.

On crossing the coast outbound, we encountered heavy flack and were hit amidship severing the hydraulic pipe lines to the rear gun turret - incidentally our only armament on Stirling IV. I managed to repair this with a few jubilee clips and some rubber tubing from my toolkit and the coffee from our Thermos flasks. I thought a D.F.M. at least. My engineer leader's recommendations fell on deaf ears. Instead I got a strip torn off by the C.T.O.

Three ops in quick succession to ARNHEM Market III (Paratroops) on the 19th September, followed by Market IV and VI re-supply on the 21st and 23rd.

In early November, some of my crew had finished their tour of ops and I was posted to 570 Sqd. Rivenhall on a temporary basis, until joining 299 Special Duties Squadron and Flight Commander Sqd. Leader Spear at Shepherds Grove, Suffolk. SOE ops followed, mostly low level, carried out individually on moonlight nights, as navigation was all D.R. and Map Reading, to Southern France, The Alps, Holland and Norway. The latter code-named DOOMSDAY.

By mid-January 1945 the requirement for SOE operations on the continent was beginning to ease off and operations to Norway were hampered by severe weather conditions. The airborne assault on the Rhine was some way off. We were kicking our heels and Group then had the bright idea that with our experience on accurate low level work and the fact that the Stirling was by far the most highly manoeuvrable of the heavy bombers, we could be usefully employed on close support and special low level bombing operations.

21st February 1945 - my 27th op. Briefing 1400 hours Target 'Rees' in the Ruhr valley - a busy river crossing point, 3 bridges, barge traffic and major railway marshalling yards. T/O time 18.30. Six a/c were detailed, each carrying 24 - 500 lb G/P bombs to be released at half second intervals. A/c to be over target at 5 minute intervals at 7000 ft This wasn't low level? (Would be a piece of cake- a picnic - we were told) We were to be the first away with 5G-C Charlie, a converted MkIII which we had never flown before. Our own A/c 5G-G George went u/s on air test the previous day. It was squadron procedure to conduct an air test prior to an operation and as C-Charlie had not been air tested, the skipper suggested that we should all go out to the a/c earlier than we would normally do to

give her a very thorough going-over. He also insisted that we should all exchange our parachutes, despite our protests that we had done so only two weeks earlier and we didn't have all that much time to spare. The procedure was to pull the ripcord on handing it over to the WAAF Packer in the parachute section. The navigator's didn't work.

We took off on time - visibility was near perfect - climbing steadily we crossed the coast at Orford Ness and droned our way across the North Sea to Schouwen Island and the Dutch coast. We were dead on course, engines were running sweetly, the familiar patchwork of Holland sliding below in the moonlight as we made our way to Eindhoven. Here we altered course to the north to bring us towards the target area with 45 miles to run and 16 minutes to target. At this point the skipper asked for 2400rpm + 2 boost, pitch levers fully up fine, mixture normal, this gave more control response. I also at this stage selected main fuel tanks to all four engines in case we should have to take evasive action. Our IAS was 155 MPH. On intercom "Navigator to Skipper- 5 minutes to enemy lines."

"Skipper to crew -keep a good look out, seems unusually quiet, could be fighters about."

"Navigator to skipper-alter course 070 deg. 15 miles to run." At this time the Rhine was clearly visible in the moonlight like a big silver ribbon. Some light anti-aircraft fire and

the odd searchlight was also visible, but well to the north of us. Gabby Allen, our Aussie bomb aimer who had been down in his position for quite some time map reading and readying his equipment, requested bomb doors open. I flicked the switch and the green light came on. Almost immediately, light and medium anti-aircraft shells were bursting around us. The skipper took evasive action. However evasive action doesn't stop you flying into a shell burst, which we did. The port outer first poured black smoke, then flames, I shut off the fuel cock and closed the throttle whilst the skipper pressed the fire extinguisher button. I then feathered the prop. The fire went out but by this time, half the cowling had gone. We managed to escape the immediate area and the skipper asked for a damage report. Apart from a few shrapnel holes everything seemed to check out. The controls were OK and no-one seemed to be injured. I took this opportunity to clip on my parachute. We came round again, quite tight this time with the intention of dropping our bombs and then diving down to come out on the deck. As we approached the target for the second time, a blue radar controlled master searchlight beam latched on to us. Geordie, our gunner, opened fire and the blue beam slowly faded away but not before we were coned by 4 or 5 white searchlights (we were very vulnerable at this height). The target was dead ahead and we had to keep straight and level. A shell burst immediately under us. The aircraft reared like a bucking bronco. The skipper immediately pulled the bomb jettison toggle - I turned to look over my shoulder and could see just a flicker of flame in the centre section, but before I had even time to get out of my seat I could see the extent of the damage. We must have taken a direct hit. A couple of bombs still in the racks, had punched a hole clean through the floor. The starboard inner engine was on fire and the fuel balance pipes in the centre section were pouring burning 100 octane fuel. The whole cockpit was bathed in an eerie red glow, reflected back from the windscreens. I was still on the intercom and the skipper, who was desperately trying to maintain control, gave the order to abandon a/c. It was obvious it was becoming impossible. He shouted at me to go- "get out". I wasted no time descending the two steps into the nose section where the front escape hatch was located. The wireless operator and navigator were already down there, both miraculously unscathed. The bomb aimer was very badly wounded and whilst he was getting attention I kicked open the hatch catch bar to release the hatch. The noise and the debris took us all by surprise. All three of us then eased the bomb aimer through the escape hatch and out into the night. My turn next- someone gave me a push- when I hit the slipstream it was like being hit by an express train. I felt like my whole body was being torn apart. Then oblivion. My next recollection was gently swinging under the open canopy, the ripcord still in my hand. Apart from the occasional flash and muffled explosion of some distant flack shell, there was an eerie uneasy silence. The heavily wooded snow covered ground silhouetted in the bright moonlight which for most of the descent had appeared stationery, suddenly rushed up to meet me, and I hit with a force which knocked the breath out of me. After what appeared to be ages, but was probably only minutes, I had recovered sufficiently to remove my chute and harness, which I then hid in a nearby hedge bottom. There was no sound of life anywhere, so I set off to put as much distance as possible between myself and the immediate area. Almost at once I realised I had badly sprained or broken my ankle. Eventually, tired, hungry and very cold, I decided to find somewhere to hide. Fog was beginning to form when I took shelter in a small thicket. It was just past midnight. I ate some chocolate and raisins and smoked a cigarette, then

settled down for the night. At first light, still shrouded in fog, I ventured out but it wasn't until around 11 o'clock when the fog began to lift that I was able to get a clearer picture of my surroundings; with these visual observations together with the map and compass from my escape kit, I decided my most likely position was in the triangle formed by Emerick in the north, Wesel in the south, and Bocholt further to the east. As the day wore on I was becoming increasingly restless, but I knew I had to wait until dark before moving on.

I set off in what I thought was the direction of the Rhine. I had been walking for well over an hour and beginning to think the original estimate of my position was wrong, when there, only 100 or so yards away, was the railway line I was hoping for. I was only a few straight miles from the Rhine which I was anxious to cross as soon as possible. After heading west down the track for approximately a couple of miles, I was beginning to feel rather conspicuous in the open countryside, so I left the railway and picked up a dirt road going in the same direction. The going here was easier and I walked well into the night, only stopping occasionally to rest my ankle. Eventually the road veered to the right, away from the railway, and not wishing to lose it I climbed back up the embankment and continued walking along the track. After only a very short time as my eyes focused in the dark, I could make out the shape of a bridge. By this time, my legs were beginning to give way under me and it took all my energy to slide down the embankment where I curled up under some bushes. It was almost 3 o'clock and I had been walking for nearly nine hours; cold and exhausted. I dozed off. I awoke before dawn, stiff and cold. It had begun to rain and was thick in fog. It was obvious I must find somewhere better to shelter. I remembered I had passed a rail worker's cabin a short distance down the line.

It was getting daylight by this time but shrouded by the fog I made my way back. Once inside out of the rain I settled down for the day in comparative comfort. I ate what was left of my chocolate and raisins and took some painkillers from my escape kit. The fog lifted a little but it rained hard all day. I was very reluctant to leave when darkness fell. Walking was a little easier as I had found a shovel handle in the cabin which made an ideal walking stick. The rain stopped and I retraced my track towards the river bridge. As I approached, I could hear a great deal of vehicular activity and noise. I had no alternative but to turn north across open country. The fields were pockmarked with hundreds of deep potholes. Everywhere mud and slush. I skirted a small town to my left and soon afterwards came to the remnants of what must have been part of a major rail network. I followed the remains of a main road leading off to the left, hoping it would lead me to the river. At last, there in front of me was the skeleton of a once massive bridge. It was a zone of concentrated destruction. The river was wider than I had expected and looked black, deep and very cold. Around the base of the bridge tower was a substantial concrete and steel fender tapering off to the left to a large paved yard, and what appeared to be a maintenance depot. Protruding at an angle from this were a number of moles. It was against one of these that I found a small flat bottomed boat - just what was needed to propel myself around the base of the bridge tower and along the lee side of the heavy steel beams, some of which still protruded above the water. Almost halfway across the river with the current continually pounding the boat against the beams, I was completely exhausted. The boat out of control went swinging and swirling with the current. Eventually the river swung away to the right and by some miracle I found myself drifting

towards a breakwater, lying in the mud shivering, battered, bruised, and soaked to the skin.

I was on the other side. I was very relieved - it would have been an anti-climax to drown. It was quite some time before I had the strength to climb the steep muddy bank. This done I walked long into the night before seeking shelter in a wood. I don't remember dozing off - must have been all-in. It was broad daylight when I awoke. It was raining steadily and I was stiff and cold, and my watch had stopped. I ate some concentrated chocolate and some Horlicks tablets from my kit, although I didn't feel very hungry - I would much sooner have had a smoke but my cigarettes and matches were soaking wet. In all, I spent a very miserable day. It was still raining when I moved off. Having previously studied my map I decided to head south west. I had not long been out of the wood when I encountered a railway and canal running parallel to each other, and I was fortunate in soon finding a place to cross. It was still raining and by now most of the low lying fields were flooded. Plodding through the mud was playing havoc with my ankle and it was a struggle to make any sort of headway. I found a reasonably dry place to hide in a dark wood. It was probably around midnight. I didn't sleep that night - the continuous soaking was beginning to take effect. I ate some more Horlicks tablets - not because I was hungry but to pass the time away. It seemed the night would never end - morning at last - it had stopped raining. The dank misty stillness was almost frightening. This was the Reichswald Forest, a vast area of pine trees. I decided to move on as I could see no point in waiting until darkness. The pine trees were so dense, the daylight hardly seemed to penetrate. I made reasonably good progress - the thick layer of pine needles were much kinder to my ankle than the sticky mud of the past couple of nights. It was probably around noon when I first heard gunfire somewhere in the distance, spasmodic at first, then gradually getting nearer and becoming more intense. I didn't move for some time, then even nearer still, I could hear the unmistakable clanking and screeching of tanks coming in my direction. I took cover in some dense undergrowth. Within a very short time, scores of German light tanks and armoured vehicles were in full retreat some 200 yards away on a roadway of which I had been unaware. As the afternoon wore on, vehicles gave way to groups of dishevelled infantrymen. During the night the barrage started again, shells and tracer screaming overhead in a continuous onslaught. By dawn, vehicles were again driving down the road, but this time with a big white star on the side. I made my way to the roadside - hands above my head - shouting "R.A.F." "R.A.F." Eventually a Jeep slowed down and a big burly Canadian hoisted me over the side.

He didn't say a great deal during the very bumpy ride into Goch. Here I was taken to the 1st Canadian Army Command Post in the cellar of a ruined house. The lieutenant who interviewed me was not very impressed when I gave him only my No. Rank and Name. When I showed him the route I had taken he told me I had just walked through a minefield! After a mug of tea and a cigarette, and a thorough warming, it was off to a field hospital where it was decided to stretcher me the 45 miles to Eindhoven. Three days later I was put on a Dakota to Wroughton in Wiltshire for further treatment. From here it was back to Shepherds Grove and 299 Sqd. and a spot of leave. Of the six aircraft participating, five were shot down over or near the target area. The sixth was shot down by an intruder when coming in to land back at base with the loss of the air gunner.

OF MY CREW

Pilot - Squadron Leader Spear D.F.C. D.F.M. A.F.C. Killed.

Gunner - Flight Sergeant Geordie Wilson. Killed.

Bomb Aimer - Flying Officer Gabbie Allen. Taken prisoner.

Wireless Operator - Flight Lieutenant Jock Henderson. Taken prisoner.

Navigator - Flying Officer Dave Saunders Evaded capture.

Flight Engineer - Flight Sergeant Tom Toll. Evaded capture.

Sqd.Ldr.Spear and F/S Wilson are both buried in Reichswald War Cemetery, Kleve, Germany.

I was on leave when on the 24th March 1945 it was announced on the B.B.C. News Bulletin that Operation Varsity, the airborne assault on the Rhine, had taken place involving 2,931 aircraft and gliders (I had already been there) .

Back from leave and a new crew. First flight 31st March. Not allowed on Ops. It was transport work and testing only. As soon as the war in Europe was over, we flew regular flights to Oslo, Prague and Germany on a regular schedule (Mail runs) By the end of August 1945 we had converted to the ultimate version of the Stirling, the Mk.V. a civil freight/passenger variant, 40 passengers plus freight, operating regular scheduled flights to India.

My final flight in the R.A.F. was on the 19th February 1946.

T.Toll.

Tom Toll

EPILOGUE

Over the past 60 years the role of THE ROYAL AIRFORCE has been repeatedly analysed and questioned on moral grounds by a generation who were probably not even born until after 1945.

When the fighting was over as well as cruel and uncaring the world men returned to seemed harshly ungrateful, what they had done did not seem to matter. Whilst the powers that be decided that aircrew ranks were for wartime protection only and that flying was not considered to be a trade and that for those who were to be allowed to stay in the R.A.F.had to take a drastic cut in status.

The coldly bureaucratic demotion of men who had served their country was a shabby chapter in the history of the R.A.F.

The psychological effect of switching from flying in an offensive which was vital to victory, to being down graded so that one could be ordered to do this and that by a corporal who had never flown in his life, was devastating and humiliating.

A leading Barister who flew as a navigator on operations said in court I could not now ever recommend anyone to volunteer for dangerous duties in the service of Great Britain without warning him that once his usefulness was over, he must expect to be treated as surplus to requirements On the scrap heap.

I LEAVE YOU TO FORM YOUR OWN CONCLUSIONS.

IT WAS A STRANGE WAY OF LIFE TO PROTECT A WAY OF LIVING

However after saying all this I have no regrets I was just grateful to have survived I was one of the lucky ones.