Part Two - The Crews

Introduction to Biographical Section

All told, 111 Blenheim aircrew took part in the 2 Group raid on Rotterdam docks on 16th July 1941. Miraculously, some of them lived to see the end of the war, often by surviving hairy crash-landings or ditchings to become prisoners of war for the duration. To be able to interview many of the participants of this raid was a great privilege. I was lucky to have commenced my research in time for these first-hand accounts: any later, and I would have fallen into the same category as an historian writing about, say, the Battle of Hastings.

Here was a real link with history. Here was a chance to bring alive just one isolated example of the courage that Blenheim aircrew needed in their battle for survival. More to the point, it is possible to portray the personalities and life stories of most of the aircrew on this raid: not only possible, but, to my mind, mandatory that such a record should be made, lest we forget...The approach that I have tried to adopt for this section of the book may be familiar to service personnel. When someone was 'dined out' at the end of his tour of duty, of maybe 2½ years, the nets would be cast wide for snippets of information to be assembled for the after-dinner speech delivered by the President of the Mess Committee. Skeletons would be raided from their cupboards in an effort to paint as comprehensive a picture as possible of the departing individual. The wealth of material accumulated would then be reduced to the bare minimum which, with luck, would normally be fair and often highly entertaining.

My intention has been just that. In many cases, my task would have proved far simpler to have written a complete book about some of the extraordinary people involved in this raid - e.g. Wg Cdr Tom Jefferson!

It is no exaggeration to say that Blenheim crews could live a lifetime in just three weeks on operations - if they lasted that long. (*Experience is as to intensity and not as to duration* - Thomas Hardy). The lifestyle must have prompted most of them to take a deep look inside their souls to establish some sort of rhythm and driving force. No one wants to die prematurely, at least, no normal person in his late 'teens or early twenties. A strong faith in God and a belief in the after-life may have helped some of these stalwarts, but the confidence of youth probably propelled the rest.

The aircrew depicted here, in common with all other aircrew, were volunteers. Their biographies show differences in character as varied as chalk and cheese, except for one aspect - courage. That quality was in great abundance, and this part of the book is respectfully and gratefully dedicated to this bunch of wonderful people.

What follows is a brief word-picture of a *selection* of the participants of the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941. This is their 'dining-out' tribute. Space prevents me from writing about *all* the aircrew on this raid, but the Appendices are fairly comprehensive.

These biographies are as scrupulously accurate as I could make them. If any surviving individuals (I fear there are none left now) are embarrassed that I have made them into heroes, then I offer them my sincere apologies. All I can say in my defence is that, again, I have simply recorded the truth to the best of my ability.

AIRCREW ON ROTTERDAM RAID 16/7/41 COVERED IN THIS SECTION

(Listed with last known ranks and decorations)

21 SQUADRON

Wg Cdr P.F. Webster DSO DFC & Bar
Sqn Ldr J.B. Robertson MBE DFM
Sqn Ldr R.E. Hunter DFM

Sgt J.E.S. Bevan
Plt Off R.M. Slade
Sgt L.R. Mynott

Sqn Ldr D. Graham-Hogg
Flt Sgt D.W. Wyatt
W/O J. Marsden

Fg Off J.H. Wotherspoon
Fg Off C.H. Buchanan
Fg Off A.J. Derrick

Plt Off P.B. Ashby
Flt Lt G.F. Lowes
Plt Off G.H. Seeley

Plt Off F.K. Orme RCAF
Plt Off S.F.M. Gunnis
Plt Off A.H. Collins

Flt Lt F.A. Reiss
Sqn Ldr E.M. Shewell
Sqn Ldr A.B.C. Nunn

226 SQUADRON

Wg Cdr J.O.C. Kercher DSO
Plt Off B.G. Evans DFM
Flt Lt R.O.C. Carey

Sqn Ldr J. Onions DFM & Bar
Fg Off H.P. Warmington
Flt Lt J.F.L. Morton

Fg Off N.J.A. Paton DFM (pilot)
Flt Lt J.G.A. Maguire DFC (observer)

Sqn Ldr F.L. Campbell-Rogers
W/O D.E. Bingham
Sgt J.P. Sullivan

Gp Capt J.S. Kennedy DFC & Bar AE
Sqn Ldr H.A. Asker DFC DFM
Fg Off E.J. Brett

18 SQUADRON

Wg Cdr T.N. Partridge DFC
Sgt G.A. Dvorjetz
Flt Sgt J.O.N. Smith DFM

Wg Cdr D.C. Smythe DSO GM
Sqn Ldr A.S. Aldridge DFC
Wg Cdr J. Welch DFC

Sgt A.C. Cutler (WOp/AG to Plt Off M. Walkden)

Wg Cdr T.G. Jefferson DSO AFC AE
Flt Lt R.F. Millns
Flt Lt M.S. Scotney AE

Sgt R.J.B. Rost RAAF
Sgt J. Hughes
Sgt S.W. Winter

Flt Lt A.C. Powner MBE
Flt Lt J.B. Sands
W/O F. Daniels

139 SQUADRON

Sqn Ldr E. Sydney Smith DFC
Flt Lt R.A. White
W/O E.G. Caban DFM

Sgt R. Hatton
Sgt J. Holroyd
W/O R.C.H. Bennett

105 SQUADRON

Sqn Ldr B.W. Smithers DFC
Fg Off C.F. James
Flt Lt J. Fisher

Flt Lt A.B. Broadley DFC
Plt Off A.S. Ramsay DFC
W/O V.R. Marsh DFM

Fg Off J.G. Bruce DFM
W/O A.H. Flett DFM
W/O H. Gibson DFM

Sgt R.J. Scott
Sgt W.B. Healey
Sgt S.G, Bastin

Sqn Ldr G.E. Goode DFC
Flt Lt F.A. Harbord DFM
Flt Lt E.W. Applebee DFM

21 SQUADRON

WG CDR P.F. WEBSTER DSO DFC & BAR

Wg Cdr Peter Fitzgerald 'Tom' Webster made a lasting impression on anyone lucky enough to have made his acquaintance. Without exception, he was described in terms ranging from utmost admiration, through deepest affection, to outright hero-worship. He was a natural leader of the same calibre as Sir Basil Embry and the Earl of Bandon: all could easily coax the best out of their aircrew by sheer personality and fine example. What a pity so few such mortals grace our shores.

Air Vice-Marshal Sir Laurence Sinclair GC KCB CBE DSO considered Tom Webster to be one of the finest commanders in the history of 2 Group. He was not alone in his assessment. Typical of the high esteem in which the wing commander was held by those he commanded are the comments made by Gilbert Lowes, an observer on 21 Squadron. Though the facts are not quite right, the sentiments certainly are.

'He had a fabulous career', Gilbert enthused. 'Short Service Commission - not good enough to be an officer permanently. Then, down on their hands and knees. Would he be a group captain? Would he be an air vice-marshal? And they wouldn't let him fly, and all that sort of thing. So he began making his own conditions before they promoted him to air vice-marshal. We'd heard that he'd been promoted to group captain and AVM, and they had to arrange to give him special permission to fly. We'd heard that he was testing this aircraft [Fairey Firefly] for another crew - this is hearsay, of course. He was a splendid commander: a great gentleman - the soul of courtesy - and incredibly considerate in doing things for you. You'd never see him hurry, or anything like that. At one time, the group captain at Watton [Laurie Sinclair] was away, getting married, I believe, and Webster was acting-group captain for the station. He was in charge of the station, and he went round doing all this briefing

himself. And another time, he called the three of us in, and said that Philip Ashby [Gilbert's pilot] had to go for a more detailed medical examination for his ear, or something, at Halton, and he sent us on leave. And if we would go to his adjutant, he would have all our passes...He would do that himself. He was a wonderful gentleman - he really was. His authority, I think, was never questioned. He'd come into the mess, and speak to you easily and friendly: you're off duty, and all that sort of thing. But he was always the number one somehow - I think from the sheer respect he commanded, rather than laying down the law. He was worshipped by everybody.'

Tom's observer, Robbie Robertson, remembers the impact that his pilot had on the formations which he led: 'On some raids, in particular the high-level raids, when we went over to France, he was very good. Yes, we *did* have R/T, and he spoke quite clearly and was able to, you know, have a calming influence on people. Particularly when we had young pilot officers and were getting new boys with us in formation. Yes, he was very good.'

In an article written for the *Sunday Express* published on 1st July 1973, Bill Edrich, famous cricketer and Blenheim veteran, described Tom Webster as 'a powerful personality who inspired tremendous confidence'.

A Welshman, Tom was born in Merthyr Tydfil on 30th July 1914. He was educated at Warren Hill, Eastbourne, Clifton College and the Technical College, Cardiff. His initiation into the flying world was by way of the Civil Flying School at Prestwick, from where he graduated with a mark of 85%. As is often the case, this outstanding pilot of later years got off to a fairly slow start, earning the following comments: 'Average pilot, but his flying should be carefully watched'. His assessors did, however, sugar the pill with the additional remark that he was 'keen and intelligent'. Graduation brought promotion, or rather a change of status, to Acting Pilot Officer on Probation in April 1936.

In June 1937, Tom Webster took over the duties of Squadron Adjutant, XV Squadron Abingdon, from Fg Off S.C. Elworthy (later MRAF The Lord Elworthy KG GCB CBE DSO LVO DFC AFC MA).

The day before Britain declared war on Germany, Fg Off Webster flew Fairey Battle, K9303, from Abingdon to Bétheniville in France, as part of the Advanced Air Striking Force.

By 25th September 1939, Tom Webster, now at Condé-Vraux, collected another secondary duty: Officer i/c Transport, a task which grew rapidly in importance during the hasty retreat in May 1940.

In November 1939, Flt Lt Webster flew a Battle in which a Vickers Gas-Operated gun was successfully fired through the bombing hatch, with a Sgt Hopkins at the trigger.

Of five flights of Battles returning to England on 9th December, only one managed to cope with the foul weather and reach the destination airfield, Wyton. It was led, of course, by Tom Webster. By the end of the year, Tom had collected yet another squadron secondary duty, as an essential part of a General Duties officer's career structure. This time it was Officer i/c Armoury, and probably earned as a result of his prowess with the Vickers GO gun the previous month.

On that fateful day, 10th May 1940, Tom flew a kind of dress rehearsal for the raid which is the subject of this book. On this occasion, the orders were to bomb the airfield of Waalhaven, rather than the dock, the former being held by parachute troops. Of the nine Blenheims despatched from Alconbury, Tom led a section of three. Although all aircraft returned safely and without injury to personnel, several of the machines were quite seriously damaged.

Having survived this raid, which almost annihilated No 600 (City of London) Squadron, Tom was then earmarked for 'the big one' - the bridges over the Albert Canal at Maastricht on 12th May. Six of the twelve aircraft despatched were shot out of the skies. The remainder, looking like colanders, limped back to Wyton. Tom's luck held: although receiving a bullet wound in each foot, the damage was only superficial.

Back in the air again on 21st May, Tom's crew, which included LAC Hunter - his faithful and long-serving WOp/AG - were tasked with impeding the progress of AFVs (Armoured Fighting Vehicles) near Montreuil. The Squadron ORB states that Flt Lt Webster failed to return from this sortie: quite correct, in the accepted meaning of the term, but he returned eventually. There is a parallel here with Sir Basil Embry, with whom I compared Tom earlier. Mike Bowyer lucidly describes Tom's belated RTB in his *2 Group R.A.F.* (pp 95,96).

You cannot keep a good man down, and Tom was back at the controls again on 30th May, having been rewarded one week earlier with promotion to squadron leader, taking over as OC 'B' Flight. During this phase of operations, Tom had a close call with a former chairman of the Blenheim Society, the late Wg Cdr Hugh George DFC. Hugh remembers Tom Webster flashing across his path so close that he could see the whites of his eyes! Post-flight discussion revealed that Tom had not even seen Hugh!

Tom's luck held out throughout and beyond the Battle of France. His exceptional skill was recognised on 9th July by the award of his first DFC. One incident, typical of this great man, is recorded in the XV Squadron ORB for the night of 25th July 1940. On what was to prove his last sortie on the squadron, Sqn Ldr Webster was tasked with bombing aerodromes in northern Germany, near Wilhelmshaven. Owing to bad weather, it was impossible to identify the land from the sea, and a course was set for the alternative target at Leeuwarden. A flare was dropped on ETA over the target. In the words of the ORB: 'Immediately five small lights appeared on the ground. The flare did not illuminate the ground, being dropped from 9,000 feet, and while debating whether or not it would be ethical to bomb the lights, they were extinguished, and numerous *flaming onions* drifted up on the port bow, about 4,000 feet below them. If meant to be fired at [that particular] aircraft, they were hopelessly inaccurate and Sqn Ldr Webster banked his machine to watch the firework display!'

Then followed a spell as CO of No 17 OTU Upwood. Tom 'Jeff' Jefferson recalls that time: 'One day, Webster was going on a short trip and asked if I'd like to go along. So I went with him, and there was a front coming along. And he flew into this front for so long and turned round and came back out of it, telling me all about clouds and fronts and things, and how you knew, and what the effect was of going towards lower pressure and going toward higher pressure, and so on. This was very interesting. He was just a helluva nice chap, being unusually helpful to some miserable sprog sergeant.'

On 2nd May 1941, Wg Cdr Webster took command of No 21 Squadron Watton. Back in his element Tom skated through the perils of numerous anti-shipping strikes and *Circus* bombing raids on Continental 'fringe' targets. During this month he was awarded a Bar to his DFC. On 2nd July, he had to go cap in hand to 226 Squadron Wattisham and 'borrow' Sgt Jack Onions DFM. Jack bombed Merville aerodrome and his logbook reflects a warm reception from fighters and flak. Tom attacked the nearby power station at Lille. Although no mention is made of it in the 21 Squadron ORB (not surprisingly), Tom's Blenheim - V6360 (YH:K) - was photographed after returning from this raid. The photo of the badly shot-up Blenheim, in the 21 Squadron

Scrapbook, is further evidence of Wg Cdr Webster's incredible combination of skill and luck.

For his leadership of the Rotterdam raid on 16th July 1941, Wg Cdr Webster deservedly received the award of the DSO, to add to the two DFCs already won.

Over at Polebrook (3½ miles E/S/E of Oundle, Northants), 90 Squadron were having real problems with the American Boeing Flying Fortress B17C (known in the RAF as the Fortress Mk I), part of the vital lend-lease agreement. At short notice, and only one week after the Rotterdam raid, Tom Webster was suddenly offered this can of worms. The teething troubles of this new aircraft, the forerunner of its illustrious successors, the B17E, F and G, were destined to be overcome, not by the powers of leadership of the new CO, but by the technical skills of the aircraft designers. There is no doubting that Wg Cdr Webster would have relished the challenge, but the high-altitude unpressurised flying was not at all to his liking. I learned this as late as the Blenheim Society's AGM on 9th March 1991, when I had the pleasure of meeting John W. 'Bunny' Moffat for the first time. He told me that Tom suffered quite badly from the physiological effects of the high-altitude work, and that this inevitably led to his early posting.

The 6th October 1941 was a memorable day for the CO of 90 Squadron. On that day he returned to Watton for an audience with their Majesties King George VI and Queen Elizabeth.

Four months after joining 90 Squadron, Tom Webster was to spend a similar period at HQ No 2 Group, as Deputy SASO, before rejoining 21 Squadron as squadron commander. Tom must have experienced a strong *déjà vu* feeling when told that his squadron would pioneer the introduction of a new American aircraft: but this time it was the Lockheed Ventura. Sadly, this cousin of the much more successful Hudson never achieved Gold Star status, and it too had more than its fair share of teething troubles. Fortunately, before the 'pig' became operational, the Powers-That-Be decided that they needed a dynamic CO for their newly-formed Bomber Development Unit, and who better to fill this important post than Wg Cdr Webster?

Incorporating 1418 Flight, the BDU operated Stirlings, Halifaxes and Wellingtons. The variety of the aircraft flown and the complexity of the associated tasks could lead Tom Webster in only one direction - the newly-formed Empire Test Pilots' School at Boscombe Down, where he enrolled on No 1 Course in June 1943.

Any service pilot worth his salt should try to get onto such a course. Very few are good enough to be selected. Tom's progress on No 1 Course can best be judged by his non-appearance in a photograph taken of the course during its visit to Filton. The reason given was that he was 'absent flying', in other words, taking full advantage of the visit to fly any new type that he could lay his hands on.

No 1 ETPS Course finished on the last day of February 1944. The very next day, Wg Cdr Webster climbed into a Fairey Firefly Mk I - Z1839 - to conduct a spring-tab aileron check. Tom's phenomenal run of luck was at last to come to an abrupt end, and this gallant gentleman, who had survived all that the enemy had to throw against him, ended his days in the Hampshire countryside. I am indebted to Terry Heffernan of A&AEE (Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment) Boscombe Down for the following detailed account of the background to this tragedy:

'At that time the flying side of A&AEE consisted of Armament and Performance Testing Squadrons (Arm T and Per T for short), each split into flights: A for fighters, B for bombers, C mainly naval but some twins, and D for aircraft flown in support of specific operations. Wg Cdr Webster was OC 'D' Per T.

Firefly Z1839 arrived at A&AEE on 20.10.43 for handling tests with spring tabs fitted to the ailerons and rudder. The handling characteristics of the Firefly had not been entirely satisfactory and the spring tabs were the latest in a line of changes to the control surfaces. A spring was incorporated in the circuit and arranged so that for small movements of the appropriate control in the cockpit the control surface was moved directly. For larger movements the tab deflected in the balance sense to reduce the force required compared with that for the standard control surface. The aircraft was in A Per T and a general handling programme was undertaken. Instrumentation was then fitted in the rear cockpit for a specific investigation of rolling performance (in effect a research programme) which was started at the end of February 1944, the aircraft remaining in A Per T but being flown by D Per T.

The crash occurred while Wg Cdr Webster was flying on the rolling performance programme. My copy of the F540 gives the time as 1834 and the location as Goodworth Clatford, which is two miles south of Andover and a mile south of Bury Hill. It would still have been light at the time even if 1834 was GMT and not GMT plus 1 hour (we had double summer time in 1944). The F540 also refers to Appendix 10. There were appendices for each accident numbered consecutively for each year. They do not exist at A&AEE but are in the PRO, I think under AIR 29 [AIR 29/896]. I remember that the day after the crash the Scientific Officer running the trial, Alec Wilson, described the wreckage as showing little forward speed at impact and it was assumed that the aircraft had spun. Copies of all our Firefly reports are in the PRO under AVIA 18/731, the results of the tests on Z1839 being in the 41st and 46th parts of Report AAEE/780.'

In August 1983, I visited the village of Goodworth Clatford. Memories were vague. Yes, an aircraft had crashed there during the war: a garden or allotment had suffered from oil contamination over a protracted period. And, more poignantly, a letter had been found nearby which was presumed to have been addressed to the dead pilot's parents.

Some miles further west, and almost within hailing distance of Stonehenge, lies Durrington Cemetery. With not too much difficulty I managed to locate the grave I was seeking. On the headstone was the simple epitaph:

Wing Commander
P.F. Webster DSO DFC
Pilot
Royal Air Force
1st March 1944 Age 29

As a measure of the esteem in which Wg Cdr Webster was and still is held, I can do no better than quote the following extract from a letter from Mr M.J. Mochan: 'When the RAFA Branch in Merthyr Tydfil was formed, we bought his old home and converted it into a club. Since those days, we have gone forward to a rather larger club, and have named it after him, *Webster House*.'

SQN LDR J.B. ROBERTSON MBE DFM
(OBSERVER IN WEBSTER CREW)

Behind every good pilot sits a good navigator, and Tom Webster had a truly professional one in the form of 'Robbie' Robertson. As Navigation Leader on 21 Squadron, Robbie earned nothing but praise from the other observers, as they were then termed. Typical of the comments were those expressed by Gilbert Lowes: 'He planned it all out, and we followed him. And he had the most intricate map prepared with different tracks, according to where we picked up a landmark. He taught us a lot of that sort of thing, beyond what you learned at Nav School and OTU: applying it in practice - low-level map-reading, high-speed stuff.' Gilbert's comments about the meticulous briefing that Robbie gave on the Rotterdam raid have already been recorded.

Aged 31 at the time of the raid, Robbie would have been considered one of the geriatrics of 2 Group, though Gilbert Lowes's WOp/AG, Gerald Seeley, at 38 years of age, probably made Robbie feel relatively young!

Enlisting as an Aircraft Apprentice, Robbie joined the Royal Air Force in January 1926, less than eight years after it had been formed. After remustering as a Wireless Operator Mechanic, he spent some 16 months attached to the Royal Navy, serving on Swordfish aircraft aboard HMS *Courageous*. Robbie admits that for a good deal of that time he was in charge of the radio and electrical department, and hence did not fly that much. However, the air experience proved sufficient stimulus for him to want to try his hand at poling (for you Old-Timers this is a modern term used to cover

handling of the control column/stick/pole), and in January 1932 he joined No 2 FTS as a u/t pilot. It was not to be, and a crest-fallen would-be pilot reverted to his previous category of WOM.

As such, Robbie then served on 18 Squadron for a year and a half before deciding that he would have a go at another category of aircrew - air-gunner. After graduating from the Air Armaments School, Robbie was accredited a new title - WOM (Air-Gunner) Group 1 - from January 1934. Just one year later, an observant superior recognised Robbie's potential in the RAF and allowed him to stitch a pair of chevrons on each arm. From that point, there was no looking back, and Robbie, overwhelmed by the sudden vote of confidence, signed on for a full 24 years.

By March 1935, the lure of the sea had yet again tempted Robbie and he served on 825 Squadron, Mediterranean Command and HMS *Glorious* for 2½ years. Back on terra firma, Robbie was sent to school, or two schools to be precise: No 2 Air Armaments School and No 1 Air Observers' School. He was consequently remustered as Air Observer/Wireless Operator Mechanic, the Air-Gunner ingredient becoming surplus to requirements. More importantly, in June 1938, he was confirmed in the rank of sergeant.

Robbie had by now joined 101 (Bomber) Squadron at Bicester, operating Blenheims, moving to West Raynham one year later. This time of his career was certainly not one of the highlights. Robbie explains: 'I was put on instructing, which I hated. Teaching gunners of all things, because I had been a gunner. I got very fed up with it. And when Paddy Bandon lost eleven out of twelve of his aircraft, and was determined to keep his squadron going, he looked around to see who he could get; and I was one of the volunteers that went as a replacement crew: to 82 Squadron, as it was then.'

So, on 15th July 1940, Robbie, by now a Temporary Warrant Officer, in the aircrew category of observer, joined 82 Blenheim Squadron. Robbie continues: 'So to begin with, I just flew as an odd man with anyone who wanted a navigator, and then I was crewed up with the wing commander. From then on, I never flew with anyone else: I always flew with the squadron commander from then on.'

By mid-September 1940, at the peak of the Battle of Britain, Robbie's courage, expertise and leadership qualities were recognised by the award of the DFM and an appointment to a commission as a pilot officer.

To have survived the length of time Robbie spent on Blenheims is hard to believe. Statistically, the chances were virtually nil, and squadron commanders counted themselves lucky to have retained their crews for more than three weeks. Perhaps part of the answer lay in the fact that Robbie's pilots were normally very experienced; but even then, flak did not always differentiate in this way, and many Blenheim squadrons experienced rapid changes of commanding officers. One would have thought that such prolonged near-death experiences would have left a lasting impression on the nervous system of any normal person. Not so with Robbie: his philosophy seems as calm as Tom Webster's. 'Life in those days', he recalls, 'was either sitting in the sun and waiting for instructions, or whatever, going off on a trip, coming back, sitting back in the sun, going out at night, and going and having a hectic time of it.'

When I asked Robbie if he ever woke up in the morning and wondered if that day might be his last, he replied: 'Well, occasionally, that sort of thing cropped up, but it was so fleeting to *my* mind anyway, that it didn't bother me. It was only when you got two or three chaps suddenly missing all at once, you know, that it came home to you

that things were a bit hectic and you were losing people right, left and centre. Now *that* put a bit of a damper on things for a time.'

Still pressing the point home, I asked Robbie if he personally felt that he would ever get the chop. His reply: 'Never occurred really. Never thought about it seriously. It's funny, you never thought, at least *I* personally never thought, that I could be one of the ones that was going to go! Or anyone in my crew, you know.'

I felt that Robbie's philosophy might not have been entirely representative of all Blenheim operators, and asked him if there were those to his knowledge who had to really steel themselves before facing the hazards of each day.

'Oh, there were, yes', he replied. 'Quite a number. And there were people who were literally shivering in their shoes, you know, who couldn't cope at all: particularly in the days of Tom Webster, when he was the squadron commander. He was able to cheer them up and buck them up quite amazingly: he was that sort of chap, able to influence people.'

On 2nd May 1941, Fg Off Robertson was posted to 21 Squadron Watton. Hardly given the time to unpack, he was sent on yet another course, No 21 Bombing Leaders'. Back on operations, as Wg Cdr Webster's observer, Robbie describes the summer of 1941 at Watton, flying Blenheims, as probably the most exciting time of his career.

Accompanying his pilot on the ill-fated Fortress venture, Robbie then put in some special guest appearances as Station Navigation Officer at Watton and Tactics Officer at HQ No 1 Group, before rejoining 21 Squadron as Flt Lt Air Observer Bombing Leader in March 1942.

Shortly after Tom Webster departed for the Bomber Development Unit, Robbie was promoted to squadron leader and ensnared by HQ 2 Group, where he remained until the end of the war. A cushy number? Not under an AOC like AVM Basil Embry, who was very keen that all his staff should continue flying, particularly himself! Robbie remembers his time on Mosquitoes as 'all so safe and mundane. At the end of the war, we had only lost about two or three aircraft altogether, and we had sixty squadrons actually. As I say, we used to borrow an aircraft from the squadron at Benson, and then do a trip with it and then come back.'

The excitement of this 'ground tour' was enhanced when Robbie met his charming wife Margaret. She recalls: 'Oh, I saw Robbie first; and, as I say, I was really commissioned in photographic interpretation. I did some courses, and I was posted to 2 Group as an interpreter, I think, but no one knew why! And they looked upon me as something that the cat had brought, you know, and they just thought that I might be useful as an extra duty intelligence officer. And that's what I did in 2 Group HQ.'

The RAF is a small world. Margaret vividly remembers seeing Wg Cdr 'Cowboy' Blatchford when they were both stationed at Digby. The wing commander led the fighter escort for the Rotterdam raid, and Margaret's future husband led the bombers.

What the artist Eric Kennington did for the RAF as a whole, an intelligence officer called Bill Lord specialised in for HQ 2 Group. Bill's caricatures are immortalised in just a few books, owned by such lucky people as Robbie and Edwin Houghton. The three-way conversation which developed on reaching Robbie's page is worth recording:

(SELF) Who is this chap, 'F/L Robertson, nav - Battle Dress No 1'?
(ROBBIE) [Laughing].
(SELF) Is that supposed to be you then? [Long legs, rear view].
(MARGARET) We don't come out very well in this book, do we?

(SELF) Are you in this as well?
(MARGARET) Yes, I think I am, somewhere. You probably won't recognise me. [Correct].
(SELF) What's the 'HURRY, HURRY!' for [in Robbie's sketch] - is that a private joke?
(MARGARET) Oh, he was always saying 'Hurry, hurry!'
(ROBBIE) Was I?
(MARGARET) Um, I think so!
(ROBBIE) Or so Bill Lord thought, anyway.
(SELF) And, did you smoke then?
(ROBBIE) Yes. I always had a long cigarette holder in those days.

I liked Robbie's explanation of his award of the MBE at the end of the war. Replying to my assumption that it was in recognition of his staff work, Robbie agreed on the whole, but added that it was also because of his being navigator to various chair-bound out-of-practice staff personnel who were propelled into the air by Basil Embry. Truly, this predicament was far more dangerous than merely running the gauntlet of German flak, and consequently deserved a medal which took precedence over the DFM.

Robbie served mainly as a fighter controller after the war, twice stationed in Germany, before retiring from the RAF in November 1959.

Now over 80 years of age, Robbie still has that spark of enthusiasm which kept him alight during those far off Blenheim days. It has been my pleasure to meet him on several occasions, and his contribution to this book has been priceless.

There is an interesting postscript of concern to aviation historians. Robbie's letter was in response to my poor assessment of the 21 Squadron ORB, which, among other things, did not record the demise of my cousin and his crew. Robbie explains:

'I can understand your doubts about the wartime 540s. You may be interested to know that there were complaints at the time about the compilation of these. The Squadron 540 Officer had recently been killed and a temporary officer was doing the job. Wg Cdr Webster asked me to take over this chore about that time, and I was appalled by what I found. I studied some of the 540s from the First World War (RFC) and realised how little information they contained and how much more interesting they could have been. Of course, I could not judge their accuracy. I began by spending some time preparing *Notes for Officers Compiling Forms 540* because there seemed to be no instructions regarding the contents of 540s - except that (I seem to remember) the local weather at the airfield had to be included every day. My notes were subsequently issued by HQ 2 Group and later a more detailed issue was circulated by HQ Bomber Command.'

SQN LDR R.E. HUNTER DFM
(WOp/AG IN WEBSTER CREW)

Wartime crews often stuck together through various postings. Mostly, it was because they liked and respected each other; often, superstition was a factor, and to break up a crew could well court disaster. From all accounts, Tom Webster and Bob Hunter got on like a house on fire, and their partnership was to last from September 1939 until November 1941, from Battles on XV Squadron through Blenheims on 21 Squadron and finally Fortresses on 90 Squadron.

Employed as an electrician before enlisting in November 1936, Bob Hunter naturally slotted in as a wireless operator. Promotion in this aircrew category, even with the added bonus of 'air-gunner', was dreadfully slow, and Bob braved the ordeal of the Maastricht bridges on 12th May 1940 as a mere LAC. Recognition was soon forthcoming, however, and by the end of the month Bob was a 'temporary' sergeant and received the award of the coveted DFM some eight weeks later, on 9th July (the same day that Wg Cdr Webster received his first DFC).

The scoop by Mike Bowyer, in his *2 Group R.A.F.*, which relates Bob's crash-landing and subsequent return to the UK, has already been referred to in Tom Webster's biography.

On 21 Squadron at Watton, Robbie remembers seeing Bob Hunter only when they were due to fly together. He describes him as 'Nice, reliable and capable: medium build, reddish face, slightly dark, slightly stocky.'

Fellow WOp/AG, Jim Marsden, contributes the following: 'He was a regular. He was a quiet unassuming fellow. His wildest outburst I ever heard was over France, where a spent bullet hit him. You know, do you remember, there was a period in the lives of people when they wore, or they had, chrome mirrors - a piece of chrome *that* high - that you could look at yourself in and comb your hair. They had one in their tunic pocket *there*. And over France, and over the intercom, he said: "I've been hit - right over the heart!" And when he undid his tunic when he came back - I was with him - the bullet fell down! It had hit this mirror, and dented it: bruised his chest, and he thought it was serious, and he sweated blood. But it wasn't. It must have been spent or it would have...yeah! But that was quite something. He was a serious-minded sort: nothing else I can say about him, really.'

Commissioned in November 1941, Bob paid a fleeting visit to 82 Squadron, followed by a few months as Gunnery Leader on 139 Squadron, before being nabbed for instructional duties at No 1 Air Gunnery School. In October 1942, Bob's gunnery skills and instructional talents were required in India, where he spent the remainder of the war on various squadrons and units.

Sqn Ldr Bob Hunter saw the cessation of hostilities in the Far East, and following staff and training duties back in UK, he finally left the service in February 1948.

In this strange world of coincidences, my letter to Sqn Ldr R.E. Hunter proved no exception. Not for the first time did the recipient of one of my hopeful letters have to apologise for not being the correct person! Roger Hunter had been a pilot, and had won the DFC. Disappointed at having failed yet again, I was intrigued to read from Roger's letter that he was connected through marriage with the sister of Flt Lt Charles Tunks, the Intelligence Officer at Watton at the time of the Rotterdam raid. And could he have a photograph of that debriefing... Furthermore, Roger's favourite pub was the *Baker's Arms* in Winchester, which at that time was run by my sister-in-law!

SGT J.E.S. BEVAN

What sort of person was my cousin's pilot? To find the answer to that question, I felt that the best plan was to try and contact his next of kin. My letter for redirection by MOD Gloucester was delivered to the family's wartime holiday home in Lustleigh, Devon, a charming village well known to me. By an extraordinary piece of good luck, the little wooden cottage was still owned by the family, and Eric Bevan's sister, Maurine, was more than a little surprised to find, on her next visit, my letter lying on the floor.

'I must admit', she wrote to me, 'it gave me quite a jolt to see my brother's name on the envelope. Eric and I were very close and I somehow knew on the 16th [July 1941] that something had gone wrong, but I always felt that he didn't actually die until the Sunday [four days later]. I have nothing to substantiate this. He was academically very clever and the sad thing was that his exemption papers in order to attend university came after his death.'

Maurine put me in touch with her other brother, Professor Stan Bevan. In no time at all, Len's pilot began to take on an identity.

Now here was another coincidence. My cousin Len was a Londoner, but somehow he teamed up with a pilot who had attended the same school as I had - Torquay Grammar School! Stan Bevan had likewise been a pupil there. 'Although our school dates are different', he wrote, 'we probably shared friendly acquaintance with several members of the staff there. [It is highly likely that one of them would have been Arnold Ridley, who played the part of Private Godfrey in *Dad's Army*. What a privilege to have been taught by this First World War hero and wonderful actor of arguably the most successful comedy series in history!] I enjoyed my TGS days very much. One of the little things I remember about the time when both Eric and I were at TGS together - between 1932 and 1934, that is - is that of finding one day that Eric, in one of the junior forms, probably 2A, had inscribed his ruler "J.E.S. Bevan, brother of S.C. Bevan, Prefect"! Eric and I were very good friends, as well as brothers, and July 16th is a very black day in my calendar. Eric was a really splendid chap, mentally and spiritually as well as physically, and he realised what it was that he was fighting for and fighting against.'

When the family moved from Paignton to Exeter, Eric went to Hele's School (what a formidable rugby team they fielded in my day!). Enlisting straight from school in June 1940, just ten days after I entered the world, Eric completed five months of initial training and basic flying training before presenting himself at the mighty RAF College at Cranwell.

Eric's brother, Stan, has some treasured mementoes of this time. Contrary to popular belief that the RAF never takes a blind bit of notice of preferences for postings, I have detected the odd occasion when a kindly soul must have penetrated the impersonal empire and granted a wish or two. Eric was born in Burry Port, Carmarthenshire. Was it an accident that he completed his initial training at No 6 ITW Aberystwyth? Stan recalls: 'I have a little gift he sent me from there - a comb in a leather case embossed with a picture of a Welsh lady in national costume.'

Another cherished possession emanates from Eric's Cranwell days. 'With regard to the period November and December 1940 and January 1941', Stan recalls, 'I have Eric's laundry book headed "LAC Bevan, RAF College, in account with West Bridgford Laundry and Lady Bay Dye Works, Nottingham".'

On 8th March 1941, Eric was awarded his pilot's wings and promoted to the rank of sergeant. One week later, he had joined the course at No 17 OTU Upwood for training on Blenheims. Here he crew up with Len Mynott, to be joined at a later date by his combat-experienced observer, Ralph Slade.

Gilbert Lowes, who arrived at Upwood the same day as Eric, remembers him well. 'Stocky, fairly broad, dark', he recalls. 'Pleasant sort of face, and he always flew in what I called a golf jacket with a brevet on it'. Questioned as to what the authorities thought about this, Gilbert replied: 'No one ever said anything about it. I think they insisted on badges of rank and uniform, but if you wanted to wear a roll-neck sweater etc, you could do that. And I think they took it like that; I mean, he had blue pants on, and badges with sergeant's stripes. He just liked this thing - it was comfortable - no one was likely to say nay for that. But he was a good type: a sensible chap. I spoke to him quite a bit, because I might have been his observer.'

Jim Marsden remembers Eric and Len arriving on 21 Squadron Watton on 4th July 1941. 'I remember talking to them, as we are talking now in the bar', he said, 'in the Mess, when they came, for about half an hour, and like all newcomers they asked lots of things. Nobody ever tells anybody - they let them find out, I think'. Jim recalls Eric owning a car, and seems to remember a blonde young lady coming for him...All too brief.

On 8th July, Eric, now with a fully constituted crew, took part in his first operation - a search for a missing Wellington crew off the Dutch coast. Two days later, he was involved in an attack on shipping in the docks at Cherbourg. On 12th and 14th July, he formed part of the bait in high-level *Circus* operations against Hazebrouck Marshalling Yards.

The first hurdle was over: Eric had survived one full week of daylight Blenheim operations, and was well on the way to becoming a 2 Group veteran. On 16th July, flakship *Vp 1107* snuffed out his young life, together with those of his crew. Eric's age was just 19 years and one month.

In 1962, Maurine took her mother and daughter to Rotterdam to see Eric's grave. 'I was very puzzled', she wrote to me, ' not to find Lenny's there too. Now you have given me the answer.'

Maurine recalls that one of the highlights of Eric's life was when he met his hero, Douglas Bader, whom he considered charming and very modest.

One item of interest concerning Eric proved impossible to cross-check: Maurine clearly remembers Eric operating from Lossiemouth for a short period, during which time a bullet grazed his neck and hand. Nowhere in Eric's Record of Service, Casualty Report or any of the ORBs could I find any reference to this. Was Eric filling in time between postings by gaining some buckshee combat experience? Perhaps he scrounged a lift on a 21 Squadron Blenheim during his basic flying training between September and November 1940? Highly illegal things happened regularly in wartime - that is a fact. Perhaps there was a giant cover-up - always a good way out! We may never know.

What we do know is that Eric enjoyed his short life to the full. In the thirties, Alan Cobham's visits to an airfield near Exeter (Haldon?) caused a change in direction for a would-be chemist. And just one day before war broke out, Eric was on holiday in Freiburg, in the Black Forest - now that's cutting it fine!

In May 1988, Stan wrote me a sad letter. His sister Maurine had unexpectedly passed away, aged 69, from a massive stroke. He had only just moved house to be close to her. Maurine's husband was a wartime RAF navigator: Sqn Ldr Brian Dutton DFC.

PLT OFF R.M. SLADE
(OBSERVER IN BEVAN CREW)

The 4th July 1941 was quite a day for personnel stationed at RAF Watton. The Press had arrived to cover not only the visit of General Bilbao and South American officers but also a day in the life of American-born Sgt Lawrence Maguire: his spectacular crash-landing on returning from an operation made a good story, and *Illustrated* Magazine published some fine photographs of the event.

On that very same day, Sgts Bevan and Mynott arrived from 17 OTU Upwood and were joined by Plt Off Ralph Slade from 114 Squadron Leuchars. A convenient posting to form a constituted crew? Not according to Ralph's sister-in-law, Mrs Margaret Athmer. Margaret informed me that Ralph had clashed with his CO over his getting married on 1st July. Apparently, the wing commander - a well-known character in 2 Group, who shall remain nameless - had taken a shine to Ralph's wife, Barbara, and had made a pass at her. Whether the posting 48 hours after the wedding was due to non-approval of marriage per se, unrequited love, or the fact that Ralph was unafraid of his younger CO and told him a few home truths, is open to speculation.

At thirty years of age, Ralph was one of the oldest aircrew on the Rotterdam raid. More to the point, he had over two months operational experience on Blenheims - totalling some 50 hours - and Eric Bevan must have been more than grateful to get such a veteran as his observer.

Margaret remembers her brother-in-law well: 'He was very good looking', she recalls. 'A real gentleman.. He had an Oxford English voice: we used to pull his leg about the way he talked to our dog! Ralph's father was killed in the First World War. His mother was a well-known actress - Olive Temple was her stage name - and she appeared in Broadway and Hollywood. She took Ralph with her but had to bring him back when she realised that he thought the American flag was his own!'

Perhaps Ralph considered the date of his arrival on his new squadron, American Independence day, to be a good omen. It was not to be: just two weeks after he was married, Ralph was dead. I was told a sad tale concerning the method by which Barbara Slade heard of her husband's death. Apparently, Lord Haw-Haw made the following broadcast via Radio Bremen: 'If Mrs Barbara Slade, wife of Plt Off Ralph Slade, is listening, she will not see her husband again as we buried him today.'

Both Eric and Ralph are buried in Crooswijk Cemetery, Rotterdam. After the war, Ralph's watch was kindly returned by one of the dockers, one of many instances

where such mementoes were carefully held in trust and returned by a grateful Dutch people.

Margaret remembers that her sister took a year to get over Ralph's death. Barbara then joined FANNY and went to India, with the task of encoding/deciphering for agents behind Japanese lines. After the war, about 1946, Barbara asked Margaret which of the three suitors she should marry. 'None!' was the emphatic reply. She went ahead, nevertheless, and married an RAF pilot. The marriage was not a happy one. In 1977, Barbara finally succumbed to leukaemia and rejoined her first husband.

Margaret recalls that Barbara had thought about Ralph at the exact moment of his death - a not too uncommon occurrence when people are spiritually close to each other.

Margaret did not survive the war unscathed. Her talented brothers were killed in action. One died whilst flying a Swordfish aircraft from HMS *Illustrious* in 1941. He ran out of fuel during a period when no wireless contact was allowed. Margaret still felt bitter about this: 'No search', she recalls. 'Expendable.' Her husband, a Dutchman, was pushed into forced labour for Germany during the war, in a meat canning factory, but managed to help the Allied cause by passing on information on *Luftwaffe* A/A sites to the Underground. He was also involved in various fiddles, such as blank papers to get jobs and purloining food coupons from the locals.

Ralph Slade, my cousin's observer. 'He was very good looking: a real gentleman. He had an Oxford English voice.' (Mrs Margaret Athmer)

SGT L.R. MYNOTT
(WOp/AG IN BEVAN CREW)

For many years, my cousin Len was the more severe-looking of the Mynott brothers staring at me from a photograph mounted on a table in our living room in Kingskerswell, Devon. Such was the esteem in which Len was held by my parents, that in my formative years I was much in awe of him and fervently hoped that, perhaps, I might somehow be able to follow his example. I cannot be the judge of that. But what I can say is that now I am over three times the age at which Len met his death, I feel that I am at last in a position to attempt a reasonably objective assessment of my cousin.

George Mynott and his brother Len. The photo on our living room table.

In the words of my horse-loving father, Len was a true thoroughbred. My mother was no less succinct in saying that Len had 'scruples'. In summary, he was the perfect English gentleman, the like of which I have very rarely, if ever, encountered in my lifetime. One thing is for certain: had he survived the war we would have been the greatest of friends, and I now feel his loss as keenly as my parents did.

As I have already stated, the original objective was to try and trace Len's grave, if any, and the actual raid was a mere spin-off. I feel now, that I owe it not only to him but also to his many brave colleagues to try and record as faithfully as possible their part in the war effort.

Len was born on 3rd September 1916, just a few days after one of my favourite composers, Lt George Butterworth MC, was killed in action near Pozières during the Battle of the Somme. A Londoner, Len's early life was turbulent. His mother, no longer willing to be beaten up every time her drunkard husband returned from the pub, left home in 1924 and took up residence with her French man friend in Orléans.

Len's elder brother, George, who had moved to Australia after the war, was able to supply some details of Len's childhood, but regretted the paucity as he had joined the army at the age of sixteen. 'He went to primary school at Broadwater Road, Tooting', George wrote, 'then I believe to Ensham Central in Franciscan Road, Tooting (but I am not too sure of that one as I was away). He worked for Levers, the soaps etc mob, at their HQ at Blackfriars. [In *Flying Colours* (Hutchinson 1981) Laddie Lucas describes how Douglas Bader very nearly took employment at Unilever House in midsummer 1933]. They have his name entered on the Roll of Honour at the front entrance and also in the Book of Honour which listed the world-wide casualties of the firm. The actual title of his firm or branch was United Exporters Ltd.

He came to our wedding on 7th December 1940 and I saw him once after that when I was stationed at St Albans and he and Joan [George's wife] and I spent a weekend together. We were on manoeuvres around Watton about that time, so it is quite possible we saw him take off as the squadrons seemed to be taking off all day'.

My parents' memories of Len are vivid, ranging from happy, carefree and humorous to utterly poignant. My mother recalls his shy days of youth, when just before he was about to leave her house on one occasion she said: 'Kiss Aunty Vera then!' Len blurted out a quick 'No!' and fled! 'He was a lovely little boy', my mother added. 'Cheeky little face he had'.

The days spent in my paternal grandmother's house in Eswyn Road, Tooting were hilarious. The innocence of that time would probably now, in this 'enlightened' age, be misinterpreted. I asked my mother to recall that very cold winter in the mid-thirties. 'That was near Christmas time', she replied. 'And there was George [Len's brother], and Dick [my father] and Bill [another relative] and Len: and they all had to get into this one big bed! And poor old Len had the edge, and he didn't get so many bedclothes. So he said: "Cor, I'm bloody cold! I'm going to do something about this!" And he got up, got dressed - put all his clothes on - and got back to bed again!'

Another vivid memory of those bed-sharing days concerns the rendering, in the still of the night, of a loose adaptation from *Oliver Twist*. All were awoken to the sound of: 'Ere, Bill - supposin' Nance was to talk?'!

On yet another occasion, the night tranquillity of Eswyn Road was shattered when 'somebody came clonking along with his boots'. My mother continues: 'And old George got up, opened the window, and shouted out in his sergeant major voice: "Take those bloody boots off!" Woke the whole neighbourhood up! Oh, they had some laughs...'

Just after my parents were married, in 1936, and living in Stoneleigh, Surrey, they invited Len and his girlfriend to come for a meal. My mother recalls: 'And when it was time for bed we said: "You needn't rush home. Sit there and talk 'til morning if you want to." ' What progressive broad-minded parents I had! In the morning, when they were alone together, my father tentatively asked Len how he got on. Len replied: 'Oh, well, we talked!' My father explained: 'He sat in one chair, and she sat in another. And that's as far as they got!' My mother added: 'He was so shy that he didn't know how to approach a girl. He never seemed to get to the point. He was reticent somehow.'

When my parents moved to Kingskerswell in South Devon in 1938, Len was a regular visitor. In those early days, the furniture situation was somewhat sparse, and the front bedroom - where I was born two years later - was graced merely by the bed. Just before Len went to bed on one occasion, my father took a piece of chalk and marked out the missing items on the bare floor, annotating them *Len's wardrobe*, *Len's mirror*, and *Len's pot*. My cousin could not stop laughing!

Another recollection never ceases to amaze me, whenever I think about it. 'There was a time when he stayed', my mother told me, 'when he had cold baths. Winter, just the same, he'd come down the stairs: bare of carpet - we hadn't got any carpet then. I used to shiver just to look at him. "You haven't had a cold bath have you, Len?" "Oh, yes!", he replied. "What's wrong with that?" I said: "I don't know - you're wonderful!" "Not at all!", he said. "I've always had a cold bath!"'

My parents had strange ideas about the airing of beds. On one occasion, they considered that the visitor's bed did not meet the minimum safety requirements. I find it hard to reconcile the following hilarious episode with the shy person I have visualised. 'And there was a time', my mother recalls, 'when the beds weren't aired and Len came to see us; and he slept in our bed - the bottom of the bed! Oh gosh! I had you in bed with me, on my side, and Dick there, and Len's legs came up there. Did we laugh! Three men in bed with me!'

Len never elaborated on the dangers of Blenheim operations. However, in a philosophical moment, he hinted to my parents that he had given the situation some thought. 'He said that if ever he was shot down, or anything happened', my mother explained, 'he hoped he would be killed outright. He said he wouldn't like to have been left half and half. He didn't want to be wounded, lying in pain and agony, waiting to be picked up.' My research into what exactly happened after V6240 crashed into Waalhaven left me feeling distinctly uneasy after hearing these sentiments. I asked my mother if Len had had any premonitions or misgivings. She replied: 'No, never. Never said anything. I think he was quite keen on his job. He wasn't frightened or scared, or anything.'

One black day, in July 1941, one of my father's sisters sent him a telegram. 'The gist was that Len had been shot down on the 16th', my mother explained, with emotion in her voice. 'And we nearly collapsed: couldn't believe it. Shook us to the core. Never forget that - just couldn't believe it. A young lad like that.'

Len enlisted on 17th July 1940. The following extract from his letter to my parents from 100 High Street, Blackpool, and dated 5th August 1940, describes his days at No 9 Recruit Centre. He wrote:

'Here we are working like blazes. Our daily radio school nearly drives one crazy mentally, and the drill etc floors one physically. Today we had rifle drill, and of course the majority had never handled one before. Fortunately, I had some tuition from George, and so I knew a bit about it. Our NCOs nearly went mad and threatened

to crown some of the chaps with a rifle butt, but finally all turned out well. However, the drill takes the skin off your fingers and so tonight I ache both bodily and after school mentally as well.

We had another test today [the examination room was above *Burtons* the tailors], making the second we have had, and I received another grade 'A', and so I am not doing too badly so far. I often think of you down in Devon, and after a hard day, wish like blazes that I were there.

The paying of money to us is a washout. We have only received 10/- [50p] ever since we have ever been here. We are told always that tomorrow will be pay day, but it never is. However, I think we shall be paid this week for certain...Our digs down here are alright but occasionally we have trouble when we come in late. Mrs Todd goes mad, but she is getting used to it now.

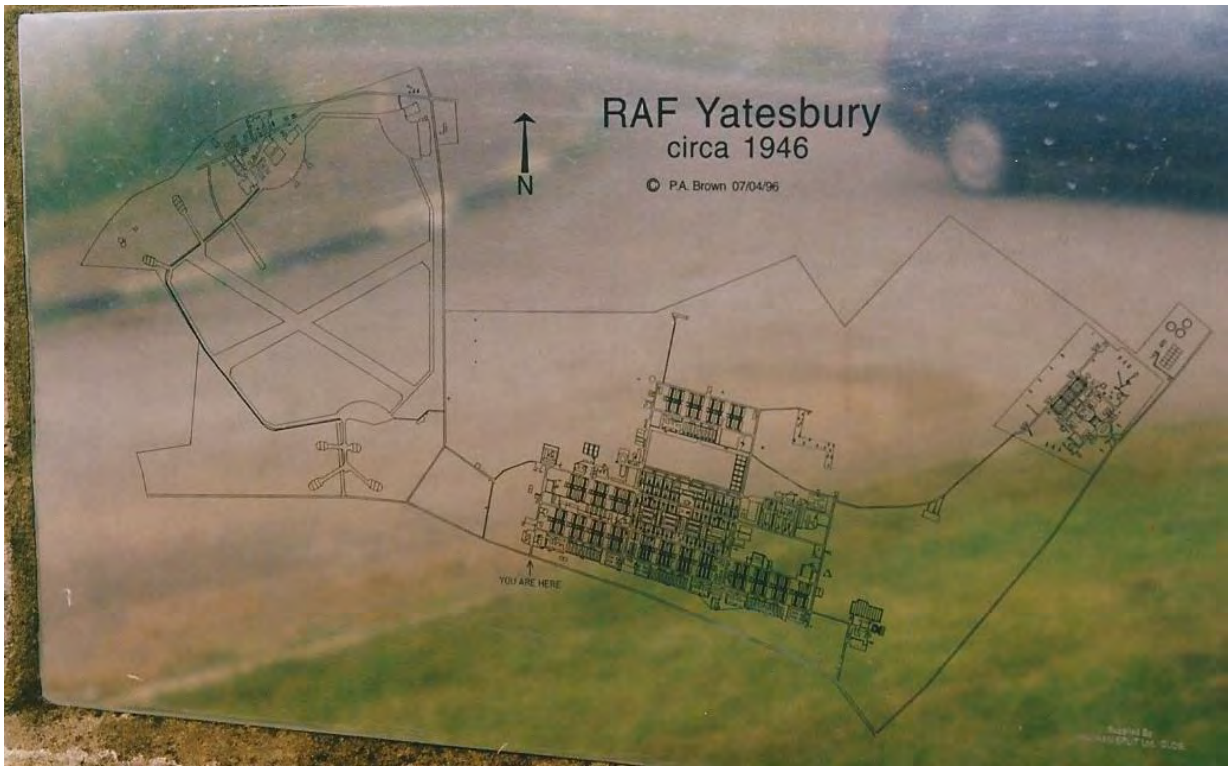
The girls up here are very very easy, in fact so easy that one scorns to take them out. But we have some pretty good times on the beach.

We are supposed to be home by eleven. After that the police can get us, and so we creep home round all the back turnings on tip toe, so that no stray policeman will hear our boots and come after us.

The chaps here are all very decent and we have a devil of a lot of fun. If we are drilling, and some girls come along, our corporal always invites them to join us. He is a boy in many ways, but a so-and-so in many other ways. We get large crowds watching us every day, as we drill etc on the promenade, and do P.T. on the sands. We are sometimes most upset when the crowd does not applaud our good drilling'.

Len Mynott (centre) strolling down the Blackpool promenade, Autumn 1940

No 9 Recruit Centre, Blackpool, 7th August 1940. Len is 4th from the left, 2nd row (via Richard Russell)



The current guide outside the former RAF Station at Yatesbury, Wiltshire, depicting the layout as it was circa 1946: designed by P.A. Brown 7/4/96. Three of my family were stationed here: my cousin Len, my father Richard and my brother Malcolm (Author's photo)

In October 1940, Len was posted to No 4 Wing, No 2 Signals School. RAF Yatesbury in Wiltshire. On 27th November, he wrote again to my parents, from Hut No 23, B Squadron:

'Hello folks. Here's your favourite nephew again, thanking you for the weekend. It was great, and Vera, your cooking is as marvellous as ever - you quite spoilt me for the dinners here.

I had a grand time coming back. I got to the station alright, and caught the train - the blighter left on time, and for a little while all was well. However, near Bristol, she was continually slowing down and stopping, and finally arrived hours late. When we got there, I found out the reason. The Germans gave Bristol a hell of a pasting on Sunday night, and it was in quite a state on Monday morning. Factories were on fire and demolished, and the station had a direct hit. What a mess! Glass and debris all over the place and smoke all over the city. Firemen were still working on the fires. Nobody knew much about the trains and so I climbed through some debris and got a signature on my pass, and after that it didn't matter how late I was. Finally the London train got started. It was packed to the roof, and off we went crawling out of Bristol. All the signals were destroyed, and men had to flag the trains in and out. The track was up in several parts, but we got out. The way the railways carry on is grand. Finally we got "home" at 3.30pm and were immediately put on flying, and funnily enough we flew over Bristol - it looked all quiet then.

Today we have been flying again, and quite enjoyed it, but the pilot scared us on the way back. He put the plane into a power dive - my goodness, I thought my last moment had come. My heart and stomach shot into my mouth, and we absolutely roared towards the earth. Finally, he pulled out, and that sensation is the greatest thrill of all - one can feel the plane trembling under the strain on the wings. We felt great afterwards and wanted more stunts but he wouldn't give us any more. Incidentally, yesterday we had an air raid warning on the radio while we were over Bristol, and we buzzed off quickly. We heard later that Jerry had been over again. A good thing our trainer plane [Dragon Rapide/Dominie or Botha] got out of the way for it is slow compared to active service machines, and we would be very easy meat for a Jerry machine...

I am having one of my final exams tomorrow and the other next week. I hope they go alright, but I don't feel too good about the one tomorrow.'

Before closing, he added the following sentiments with regard to my brother and me, which were no doubt felt universally at that time:

'I hope this darn war ends soon so that they can start life in proper perspective.'

A social gathering: my cousin Len is in the centre of the picture

In December 1940, Len was posted to RAF Swanton Morley in Norfolk. Two months later, he was a fully qualified WOp/AG with the rank of sergeant. Len's next posting, to Port Ellen, really baffled me. First of all, I had to find its location; and then, what was my cousin doing on the Isle of Islay, Hebrides, Scotland for three weeks? No 48 (Reconnaissance) Squadron, Coastal Command, operated a detachment up there with Avro Ansons, but I could find nothing that Len might have been involved in. I asked my parents if they could throw any light on this mystery. They told me that Len loved the mountains, and had always wanted to go to Scotland. With three weeks to kill before his OTU course commenced, Len had obviously used his charm to achieve the near-impossible - a posting of his own choice! There would have been one stipulation: to keep quiet about it in case everybody wanted to go...

On 5th March 1941, Len enrolled on the Blenheim course at No 17 OTU, RAF Upwood, Huntingdonshire. At the end of the month, he again wrote to my parents. The leave he refers to must have been the initial week, as Eric Bevan did not arrive until 15th March.:

'How are you keeping these days? Many thanks for your letter. I am sorry that I have not written earlier, but they gave me a week's leave, and as George is near town I spent it in London. Joan [George's wife] was there and so I acted as escort for her, part of the time.

You will be interested to know that I am in hospital here. My foot gave me trouble last week, and this morning I reported sick. They are apparently going to slice my foot open this afternoon - I am a lucky chap. Still, I feel great and it should be a nice few days in bed for me.

George was up in town for the afternoon yesterday - he is stationed at St Albans - but I had to leave two hours after he arrived. He is as hale and hearty as ever.'

The remainder of the letter is of a purely personal nature, with no reference, unfortunately, to his Blenheim training.

Len arrived on 21 Squadron, RAF Watton, Norfolk, on 4th July. In his last letter to my parents, just ten days before he was shot down, he wrote:

'This is a jolly good place with good quarters and excellent food. The only trouble is that we have no beautiful maids to call us in the mornings.'

The end of his letter reflected a nostalgia for the more peaceful days of yesteryear:

'Well, Vera, what is Devon looking like now? It must be great, and I suppose you are taking the children for bags of walks. You lucky people.'

He signed off with:

'Cheerio for the present, love, Len.'

Bob Bennett, a WOp/AG on 139 Squadron, added the following: 'I do remember your cousin, Len Mynott, as we were on the same course at Upwood, as you know. We were also in the same barrack block and I got to know him, very well. We had a few nights out in the town (Peterborough), on the few occasions when we had a few hours freedom. The training schedule was quite intensive and we were airborne a lot, on cross-country exercises etc. He was a great chap and I was very sorry to learn after all this time that he had been shot down on the Rotterdam raid. After leaving Upwood we were posted to different squadrons and never managed to meet again. I hope you will be able to discover some new evidence as to his ultimate fate.' Now *that* is a sentiment with which I heartily agree!

On 4th August 1991, I had the great pleasure of meeting Len's brother, George. He and his wife, Joan, had been given a delightful golden wedding anniversary present by their children - a six month holiday in the UK! Inevitably, the meeting added yet more aspects of Len's life which this biography would be the poorer for their omission.

The first recollection staggered me. It concerns the pre-war years when Sir Oswald Mosley and his blackshirted thugs were attempting to convince the British population that their salvation lay in Adolf Hitler. True-blue Leonard Mynott thought that he should take up the cudgel on this, and, accompanied by a few friends of similar sentiment, would set off for a confrontation in Hyde Park. George explained that his brother had expensive tastes in clothes and would wear his best for these affrays. When Len came home, his clothes would be in tatters, but he would say to his brother: 'We had a grand time!'

Joan told me that when Len was promoted to sergeant he wrote to George advising him, that they were now the same rank. George replied: ' Sorry old chap - I've just been made up to Warrant Officer!' Joan was made privy to Len's response: 'Don't you dare tell your husband, but I'm going for a commission!' Fate would dictate otherwise.

Joan clearly remembers Len's very last words to her: 'Don't worry, Joan: at least *George* will come back home after the war.' Not, perhaps, a flash of clairvoyance but a simple fact of life - if you happened to be posted onto a Blenheim squadron in 2 Group.

My cousin Len Mynott in December 1940

SQN LDR D. GRAHAM-HOGG

Somewhere in Sri Lanka, an immensely popular ex-Blenheim pilot is probably sipping the occasional gin and tonic in his tea plantation, and reminiscing about the hazardous yet incredibly lucky days of his youth.

Born in Kandy, Ceylon, of parents who were tea planters, Denis Graham-Hogg clearly yearned to return there after the war. His love of his birthplace is reflected in the name of his house - *Kandy Lodge* in Hampton-on-Thames - where all my variously addressed letters eventually arrived, to the consternation of the present owner!

Robbie Robertson describes Denis as 'young, very nice; capable pilot; merry and happy, kindly; fair, medium to slim build.'

Gilbert Lowes remembers him as 'an extrovert person: not mad or wild, but I think he would have made a very good regular officer.'

In his article for the *Sunday Express* dated 1st July 1973, Bill Edrich describes his old friend from training days as 'tall, slim, fair, and of a wonderfully gay temperament. He was a good talker and a good mixer, and he loved flying. His presence alone made me feel at home.'

Denis's WOp/AG, Jim Marsden, obviously has the clearest memories of his pilot. 'He was a very nice character', Jim informed me, 'and theatrical in his own right. He was in the officer compound, which at one time was next to me. We were both at Stalag Luft III: it was built for the RAF - they were the most troublesome prisoners, I believe. Anyway, he was in the next compound, and he took part in one or two theatricals, dressed as a woman. He liked taking the part and he did it very well!'

So well, in fact, that Denis applied for membership of the British Actors Equity Association in December 1945. Exactly how his acting career progressed thereafter was difficult to establish from *Equity*. However, Frank Campbell-Rogers filled in some of the details:

'The only person I got to know [on 21 Squadron] was F/Lt Graham-Hogg. He was a Squadron Leader at the time he was shot down and became a POW. I do not know anything of his operations though we were together at Stalag Luft III, near Frankfurt

[actually Sagan, 100 miles southeast of Berlin!] as well as other POW camps. I believe two or was it three of his brothers lost their lives during the war. He impressed me as being capable of being a good leader. A very likeable chap. He played his part in tunnelling escape operations; he assisted in designing stage settings for the POW theatre. He also took part in some stage plays. After the war, I received a letter from a POW friend of mine who informed me that Graham-Hogg was attached to a theatre company in England and was very much interested in this line of work. F/Lt H.A.R. (Keith) Prowse, a Spitfire pilot friend, in a letter of 14th July 1946 writes: "I almost forgot to mention the bit of news I have about Graham-Hogg. He is appearing in a show called *Follow the Boys* [*Here Come The Boys*?] with Jack Hulbert and Bobby Howes. That isn't all though: he is also chief set designer and has made a good job of work in this particular show. He doesn't look at all well and in my opinion is working much too hard. I saw him after the show for a few minutes and also met his wife. A very charming girl!"'

In my travels I came across a programme for the musical *Here Come The Boys*, starring Jack Hulbert and Bobby Howes, and shown at the *Saville Theatre* in London in 1946. Disappointedly, I could find no reference to Denis Graham-Hogg, while other lines of enquiry proved equally fruitless. There could be only one assumption - that he had returned fairly quickly to his country of origin.

Adrian White, who became a POW just two days before Denis, recalls getting an invitation to his wedding during OTU/training days, adding that he thought that the whole squadron had been invited!

The vivid account of Denis Graham-Hogg's last flight of the war is contributed by his WOp/AG, Jim Marsden. Episodes such as this occurred with frightening regularity to Blenheim aircrew on daylight low-level operations, and the narrative is reproduced *in toto* as a mark of respect for those, including in this case his observer David Wyatt, who lost their lives. Jim recalls:

'1941 summer was exceedingly good, and the 18th July was a very bright and hot day. 21 Squadron was stationed at Manston; each flight stood by their aircraft on a four hour stand-by, in preparation to attack shipping in the Channel at about 11am. Our flight was ordered to attack this convoy. We had 12 Spitfire escort. Our course was set and we flew low, our escort at approximately 100 feet above. Sgt Kemp to starboard, Sgt Maguire to port, the first sign of the convoy being smoke on the horizon, the flight climbed a few feet higher making a better view of the ship chosen for attack, increasing our flying speed. If my memory is correct, the convoy consisted of 12 ships, of which three or four were flakships. As we closed, the anti-aircraft fire became intense; the fighters had already climbed up into the sun where the 109s flew constantly.

As the Blenheims closed with the ships, our evasive action became more violent. Sgt Kemp's aircraft was trailing flames from both wings before he passed over the foremost ship. I had turned the turret and aimed the guns over the starboard wing, firing whenever the evasive action permitted. The bombs were released as the nose was pulled up to go over the ship. At this point in time, machine-gun fire damaged the intercom, putting it out of action; we turned, going west between ships and shore with flak everywhere. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a water spout rise up at the stern of the ship. Sgt Kemp's aircraft hit the beach and turned tail over nose, one mass of flames [the crew survived to become POWs]. At the same time, a German fighter flew over the burning Blenheim heading directly at us. As Sgt Maguire is going east, in the

opposite direction to us, one leg of his undercarriage down [he staggered back to base], the fighter is behind us at four hundred yards, right down on the sea - at our level - closing (no intercom). I fire and he rises some 50 feet and fires everything; I can feel cannon shells explode; the armour plate to the rear of the turret just above knee high and the wireless is smashed to pieces; the port ammunition chute is hit and buckled; the blinding flash of a cannon shell as it hit the cupola. The Infantry man's helmet without the inner cage and brim possibly saved my life, as a bullet hit the helmet, pierced it and a part of the bullet is still in my skull. This I only became aware of some 6 years ago after having a head X-ray. Our aircraft suffered major damage: on fire in both wings, rudder and stabilizer out of use, ailerons damaged.

No question of anything other than putting down on the sea now, a few feet below. For my part, I did everything that should not be done - unbuckled the seat belt, got out of the turret, placed the flying helmet on the seat, opened the upper hatch, quickly went down the fuselage to the bomb well, took the dinghy. On looking in the front of the aircraft, Charles [sic] Wyatt was standing up having as I thought opened the front hatch by sliding it to the rear. For a moment we looked at each other, a look which said "That's it". I went back down the fuselage, pushed the dinghy up through the hatch, and stood on the first step of the ladder, holding the dinghy at the ready. Flames wafted inboard from the burning wings, scorching my face: of course, the only place to be with any chance to survive is head and shoulders out of that hatch, otherwise one is down in the bomb well, with the tail in the air and the nose and engines under water. We hit the sea once and stayed down. Denis Graham-Hogg said sometime after that our speed on touching down was 180mph. The braking effect of water is strong: the force applied to my body bent me sideways. As the speed diminished and the tail went up, I was flung out and up. In falling, I struck the side of the fuselage head-first, and unconscious or semi-conscious found myself holding the underside port wing, now at right angles to the sea.

Being dazed, I looked around for the dinghy, which was not to be seen: the sea had a large swell on. The aircraft sank lower and lower in jerks. Holding on to the wing by one of the many of the jagged holes, I realised that the fuel was burning on the surface of the sea. I blew down the tube of my *Mae West*, or life-jacket, for some time, only to realise the air escaped via the many holes. Presumably shrapnel holes. Looking out over my shoulder, rising slowly on top of a wave, I saw the dinghy come into view. I set out to swim towards it, losing sight of it, and after what seemed ages again, I would see this small bundle on top of a rising wave. After a long swim and a great effort, I was holding on to the uninflated dinghy.

Eventually, after pulling on the chord, suddenly with much sound, I had an inflated dinghy, but the wrong side up - in something of an exhausted state wondering how to right the matter. A voice said: "I'll help you, Jimmy". Together, pulling on the ropes, we righted the dinghy; climbing on from either side, we just lay there face down - vomiting oily sea water, utterly spent. Slowly we recovered. My pilot's face was oily: two black eyes, a burst nose. When putting the aircraft on the sea, Denis placed both feet on the instrument panel, holding the stick hard back, and telling me that the force of impact flung him so far forward his face struck the instrument panel. Before leaving the pilot's position, with the front of the aircraft under water, he could not see Charles Wyatt or feel his body in the navigator's seat. The impact stove in the nose panels: very possibly, the force of the water would make it impossible for Wyatt to move.

Time passed, maybe an hour and a half, as we lifted up and down on the swell. We became aware of a sound: a clank and a clonk could be heard approaching our

position. After a while, the faint outline of a grey painted ship came into view through the sea mist, the sound being made by a paravane as the ship swept for mines. She stood by as members of her crew lined the rail, taking photographs. Two German sailors came down the ladder to help us, hitched a line to the dinghy and hauled it on deck. We stood there on the deck dripping water, our uniforms stained yellow from marker dye.

A sailor took us below to the ratings' messdeck. Our clothes were dried out in the engine room and we were given mint tea to drink. All in all, the German seamen treated us with chivalry, repeating their often-used expression "For you the war is over". The ship was a trawler, converted for minesweeping; the crew young, mainly cadets; the leading seaman was about 28 years of age and spoke fluent English.

I remember this man telling us he had served on British merchant ships before the war. His name was Ernest Heimer. He said more, saying that the German army would be in Moscow in 3 or 4 weeks, and then they would be coming to England. He suggested I gave him my home address, and if he found the opportunity, he would visit my parents, and, of course, Germany would have won the war. To this, I replied more in hope than anger that we could exchange addresses, and then see who would eventually win the war. And so we did.

Some 4 years later, I received a letter from Ernest Heimer, telling me that he had just returned home from America after being taken prisoner, when his ship was torpedoed not far off the Isle of Wight some six months after we had been captured on July 18th 1941.

The minesweeper sailed on eastwards down the Channel, close in shore, with frequent shouts of "Achtung! Spitfeuer!"; much firing of machine-guns as aircraft flew low over the ship. The minesweeper docked in the harbour of Ostend about 10 o'clock that night. Denis and I were locked up in separate rooms in a dockside concrete blockhouse to become some of the early few to invade Europe'.

FLT SGT D.W. WYATT
(OBSERVER IN GRAHAM-HOGG CREW)

By one of the cruel strokes of fate, veteran observer, Flt Sgt David Wyatt filled a slot on 21 Squadron which had been vacated by Graham-Hogg's original crewman. Jim Marsden explains: 'Sgt X was taken off flying duties, due to a severe nervous condition, which the RAF chose to call "Lack of Moral Fibre". What became of Sgt X I do not know, but it would seem that he may have had a premonition of death, should he have been with us that day.' Four days after joining 21 Squadron, David Wyatt was dead.

Enlisting way back in June 1930, David spent the first five years of his career as a humble AC2 Aircrafthand. How *did* the RAF manage to keep such good men with this kind of disgraceful treatment? In November 1935, David was posted, as an AC1, to 101 (Bomber) Squadron at Bicester, which had the rare distinction of being equipped with twin-engined bombers, in the form of Boulton-Paul Overstrands. These ancient-looking biplanes were hardly likely to have caused the leader of the Nazi Party to have sleepless nights. Remustering to ACH/Air-Gunner in October 1936, David then joined 10 (Bomber) Squadron, Boscombe Down, which were operating the no more frightening Handley Page Heyfords. One year later, he had 'graduated' to monoplane bombers, and wielded the inadequate armament of Fairey Battles, with which David's new squadron - 105 - had recently been equipped. Based at Harwell for two years, by the time the squadron had moved to France at the outbreak of war, David had remustered to air observer and had been promoted to sergeant.

Back in the UK after the fall of France, David converted onto Blenheims and flew operations from such bases as Honington, Watton and Swanton Morley. In January 1941, Flt Sgt David Wyatt received the inevitable summons to 17 OTU Upwood, from where he emerged on May Day. He spent just six months on his new squadron - 18 at Oulton - before joining his final squadron, 21 at Watton.

Such are the bones of David's Record of Service. The very human and deeply moving story hidden therein must be representative of what life was really like in those days, and I am grateful to Mrs Marie Green, David's widow, for painstakingly compiling this, at times harrowing, account. Her covering letter was poignant:

'I decided to sit with Annette [her granddaughter]. I told her all the things I could about that time in my life spent with my dear David. I did not think I would be so upset after all this time but it still hurts quite a lot. I could not write it myself. She did it for me.'

As a token of respect, I have not attempted to précis Marie's account:

'David William Wyatt born 23rd May 1912, 8 Harbour Avenue, Devonport. Son of George Walter Wyatt and Ada Wyatt, formerly O'Connell.

George Wyatt served in the Royal Navy until after the 14-18 war, when he left the navy and travelled round the world as a deep-sea diver.

In 1923, Ada Wyatt became ill with diabetes; as there was no insulin available, she died aged 36.

At this point, the family was split up and went to live with various relations. Because of this, I was unable to find out where David spent his school years. All the children (five in all - David, Norah, Bernard, Kitty and Betty) were christened Catholics.

In the late 20s - early 30s David went to work on a religious newspaper (Catholic), called the *Universe*. Later in the thirties, David's brother Bernard joined the navy, whilst David chose the RAF [in June 1930]. (1939, Bernard's ship, the *Ark Royal*, torpedoed; Bernard was in the water for 4 hours before rescue). [Probably the *Royal Oak* (14th October 1939): the *Ark Royal* was torpedoed on 13th November 1941].

Both brothers often went to spend their leave with an Aunt Lily who lived in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. She often told the story of the occasion when Bernard presented her with a little silver cup he had won at SPCA. David said jokingly that one day he'd bring home a bigger cup than Bernard's. On one of his next leaves, David came home in the early hours of the morning, and when Lily came downstairs later, she found a big silver cup placed in the ashes of the fire, filled with spring flowers. This cup was won for boxing. David also won a shield for boxing which bears the inscription "Winner. Novice. Henlow 1934. AC Wyatt." David was a keen sportsman and an excellent swimmer. He was a keen competitor. I remember at one sports meeting his team winning a dinghy race. David was stationed at RAF Harwell with 105 Bomber Squadron, the other squadrons there were 107 and 226.

In 1937 I met David at a dance. We became engaged Easter 1938 and got married later that year. I became pregnant and went to stay with my sister until the birth of my child. 1st day of spring, March 21st [1939], a baby girl, Ann Margaret Wyatt was born.

David Wyatt with daughter Ann Margaret, Spring 1939 (Mrs Marie Green)

We then returned to Harwell to live in married quarters. During that summer the squadron did a lot of night flying.

On the first of September, each married quarters was presented with a huge 5ft x 5ft wooden packing case, with orders from the CO that all married quarters had to be evacuated by midnight, as they were likely to become a military target. All airmen had to report for duty whilst their wives were left to pack these huge cases. These cases were so big that if you got into one, you couldn't get out. I ended up putting it on its side and walking into it.

The organisation was fairly brutal in its attitude towards the wives: they seemed to ignore the fact that the women and children had to find somewhere to go; they just didn't want to know.

David managed to get special permission from a Wing Commander to drive Ann and me home to Wales on the promise that he was back by morning. At this time [September 1939], I was pregnant again but didn't realise it. I didn't want to worry David with the news and decided to wait until his first leave at Christmas before telling him.

The last week of leave was spent at Cheshunt, where my sister came to look after me. In May 1940 a son, David William, was born. Two days after birth, he became ill and died a few days later. I overheard the doctor talking to my sister Millie in reference to sending for David. He said there was no point as they would all be home

soon [from France]. I thought he meant the war was ending, but he was actually talking about Dunkirk.

When David eventually got leave, I remember him saying: "When the war is over, we'll have another son". It was a very unhappy time for us, but such was our upbringing that you simply didn't show your feelings.

Soon after the air raids started, a landmine dropped not far from our house, blowing all the doors and windows out. David came home on compassionate leave because of the bombing. Aunt Lily offered me a room in her house, which David was anxious I accept, which I did.

Bernard came down to stay at Aunt Lily's after the torpedoing of his ship. He threw his gold St Christopher at David and said: "Here, you keep this: it didn't do much for me". I didn't want him to take it, but David said: "Well, it kept him alive for four hours in the water while men were dying around him."

In the beginning of 1941, I had the chance to go and stay with David as he was off operational flights for a while, instructing crews. I think it was at Upwood [correct], near Peterborough. While I was there, I had a wire to say that my father had died while serving with the Royal Artillery, at a hospital in Basingstoke. From Upwood, David was sent to RAF Watton in Norfolk.

Soon after, David came home for an appointment at the Ministry about receiving a commission. There was a foul-up with transport and he was late arriving for his appointment. When he returned home, he was very upset, because for some reason he had been turned down. To this day, I cannot understand why, and will probably never know the reason. David left for RAF Watton in the early hours of the morning. When he was half-way down the street, I ran after him to give him a last hug, not knowing that that would be the last time I ever saw him.

On one of his last leaves in '41, David was very tense: I remember him saying: "If anything happens to me, and some good man comes along, marry him so that he can look after you and Ann." I felt repulsed that he could even think such things, but he was so upset and worried about myself and Ann, and the possibility of getting killed each time he flew. He was under tremendous pressure, and in retrospect I see now that David had realised how little provision there was for the wives and children. There was no money as no one would even insure the flyers.

On July 18th I received a telegram to say that David was missing. Six weeks later the money stopped and I received 36 shillings [£1.80] a week for widow's pension.

When I received the telegram I was on my own. I remember Ann pointing to his picture, saying: "Daddy's not gone, there he is."

I received a letter from Wing Commander Key saying how sorry he was that David was missing. I felt a mixture of sadness and relief at the thought of his being "missing". I still had hope; he could have been a prisoner of war and at least wouldn't have to fly any more missions. I was determined to keep him alive; I had nothing to live for but hope.

After a while, when the buzz bombs started flying over, I remember holding Ann thinking: "I don't care if we get killed: at least we'll all be together again." But in moments of clear thinking, I still prayed and hoped that David was still alive.

Towards the end [of his life], David's mood had changed: from one of optimism to one of futile worry and despair, as the realisation of what the war was doing to ordinary people became more and more apparent. The futility of war is not worth one man's life.

I was never told exactly what had happened to David; nobody from the M of D got in touch. I should not have had to wait for 43 years to find out how he died.

After I had received the telegram and was trying to cope on what little money I had, I put Ann in a day nursery and found a job. It was the only way we could afford to live. I always felt in my heart that one day David would come back - I wanted to make sure he had something to come back to.

In 1944, I moved back to Wales and Cardiff. It was so nice to go to bed without the worry of overhead buzz bombs. I decided to stay.

Ann started in a convent school whilst I tried to make us a home. I was advised to go to the RAF Benevolent Fund to help furnish the flat I had found. They said I could have £30 for furniture, but not in cash: I had to send them all the receipts and then they would pay. I felt insulted by this proposal, as though I wasn't to be trusted with the money. In the end, I went and bought everything on HP [Hire Purchase] and paid for most of it myself. With help, in the form of a grant from the Ministry of Pensions, I was able to send Ann to a Private Catholic School, as I had promised David that any children would be brought up as good Catholics. I was determined not to break my promise.

In September 1951, I remarried; Frederick George Green, who did his war service in the Royal Navy. In 1953 (I think), I received tickets to go and see the unveiling at Runnymede of the RAF Memorial [correct - October 1953, by HM Queen Elizabeth]. Ann and myself went, but I couldn't relate any feelings towards it. There were so many people there, dancing and jigging, that it was more like a fiesta, and made a sham of what was for me a very sad occasion.

Fred and his family were marvellous, accepting Ann as though she were his own daughter. Ann is married now herself with three children, Anthony, Jane and Annette. She now has one grandson through Jane, named Robert, which makes me a great grandmother. Robert has the same colouring as David, fair skin and ginger hair.

For me, David lives on through Robert, as every time I look at Robert I see David.'

Jim Marsden was horrified to discover that Marie had received no further news about the death of her husband other than that provided by the initial telegram. He explains: 'As a POW, I had a letter via the International Red Cross from a Mrs Knight, the sister of David Wyatt, asking for information about how he was killed. So I would have thought my letter would have explained, and that eventually his wife would have known.'

In my opinion, it is unacceptable that a widow should have to wait over four decades for precise information as to the circumstances of her husband's death, and then only by pure chance.

I know Marie was extremely grateful to Jim Marsden for providing this information (via me). Her Christmas cards always expressed warmth and love. She proved to be my very last Rotterdam contact. On returning from a holiday in October 2014, there was a sad card awaiting me. It was from Marie's daughter, Ann:

'Dear Rusty and Carol. It is with sadness that I inform you my mother Marie died on 1st Oct. in Duffryn Ffrwd Nursing Home. Her funeral is at St Mary's Church Whitchurch on 16th Oct at 2.15pm.'

W/O J. MARSDEN
(WOp/AG IN GRAHAM-HOGG CREW)

What a valuable source of information Jim Marsden turned out to be! A mutually convenient rendezvous was Blackpool Airport in June 1986. By this time, I was accustomed to meeting veterans of the raid, who had succumbed more or less to the ravages of advancing years, so I was astonished when a dapper, youthful-looking gentleman introduced himself.

'The last time I was here', Jim opened, 'I came with Graham-Hogg. We came down in a Blenheim, landed here at Blackpool Squires Gate in 1941.' Jim's memories of those Blenheim days, particularly the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941, are understandably vivid: he had nearly four years as a POW to meditate upon them.

Enlisting in December 1939, Jim completed his training as a WOp/AG at 2 E&WS and 5 B&GS before joining the Blenheim OTU at Upwood one year later. Posted to 21 Squadron Watton in May 1941, he survived fifteen operations, mainly *Circus* and anti-shipping strikes (some during detachment to Lossiemouth), before his luck partially ran out on 18th July. At least promotion as a POW was faster than in the pre-war RAF, and Jim was a Temporary Warrant Officer by VE Day.

Jim decided not to make the RAF a career and left as soon as convenient. Perhaps the post-war prospects were disappointing, or Jim had decided enough was enough. The following extract from our interview shows that things were not always so. 'I fell in love with flying some time before the last war', Jim told me. 'And the Government had a scheme whereby Sir Alan Cobham had an Air Circus, and he went round all these provincial towns in an endeavour to get the British public air minded. I can remember going to see this thing in Blackburn, or somewhere near Blackburn, and my father and I went, and aeroplanes from then on have done something to me. And war or no war, I probably would have endeavoured to join the air force - something to do with flying. But, of course, the war came.

I didn't have much of an education. I left school at fifteen, and started to spend my time at motor-engineering: took machine-drawing and mathematics at the Technical College.

I then came under some call-up scheme, where you went for the medical, and they could call you later. You know, it was said on the radio at the time that if you wanted to go into the service of your own choice, you could volunteer sooner, and be sure of going into that service. So I volunteered, and really went into the VR.'

Jim wondered how some of his contemporaries were faring. I replied that mostly they were in good shape, with one or two rather frail. 'You won't lose me for a bit!' he responded. 'I've a very strong constitution: my father lived until he was 83 and my mother 91. My family background is long-living people. Personally, I've never been a big drinker [unusual for aircrew - but Sir Ivor Broom was teetotal during the war!] and I think drinking is the cause of a lot of problems.'

Jim hardly mentioned his life as a POW. His few comments reminded me of the sentiments expressed in Robert Kee's book *A Crowd Is Not Company* (Eyre & Spottiswoode Ltd 1947). 'In fact, the men I served time with as a prisoner of war', Jim mused, 'I've never seen *one* since! As a matter of fact, by disposition I'm pretty much a loner: I'm communicative, but I don't remember discussing people's intimate lives or much of what they did before the war.'

Papier-mâché model of a Blenheim Mk IV, presented to me by Jim Marsden

Apart from the wealth of information Jim provided for my project, he presented me with what is now a most treasured possession - a papier-mâché model of a Blenheim Mk IV, which was used for aircraft recognition during the war. 'When I came out of the air force', Jim explained, 'that was hanging in a big room with all these types of aircraft. And there were silhouettes painted black, and the lights were dimmed, and people would have to recognise so many of these - American, French, German, Italian, British. And after the war, a laddie said: "I'll paint that for you!" So I let him paint it.' I enquired if Jim knew its vintage. 'Well', he replied, 'they were around in the early part of the war: wherever you went as aircrew, there were these things hanging up in an identification room. So this would be either the start of the war, or pre-war.'

Jim Marsden at Blackpool Airport, June 1986 (Author's photo)

FG OFFS J.H. WOTHERSPOON, C.H. BUCHANAN & A.J. DERRICK

John Wotherspoon *Colin Buchanan*

And now to the crew that I would judge the most colourful of the raid, if not in the entire annals of 2 Group. Some people go through life hardly causing a ripple on the water; others, such as John Wotherspoon and his crew, leave behind them no less than a tidal wave.

The Wotherspoon crew's fearlessness and unquenchable thirst for danger has already been stated; but how were they judged by their colleagues on 21 Squadron? Assessments varied so wildly that I wondered if an element of confusion had crept in. Then I remembered the subjectiveness reflected in an Officer's Annual Confidential Report, and how a person's career can be severely set back, if not sunk without trace, if he does not speak the same language as his current CO. Obviously John Wotherspoon and crew impressed some, but left others with feelings of disdain. It is not for me to say where the truth lies: I did not know them. All I can do is record the sentiments expressed and let readers make their own decisions.

Robbie Robertson, the lead observer on the Rotterdam raid, is in no doubt whatsoever where he places the crew. 'They were just plumb stupid', Robbie told me. 'Both Wotherspoon and his navigator. They did some very silly things. Well, I did at times, but it stuck in my mind that they were flying the wrong way round on one occasion. They went off once to attack Flushing [Vlissingen, Netherlands], or thereabouts, and were hit by flak. In a flustered state, they flew north for thirty minutes, then went back over the same place again, completely lost. They then turned west and flew up the Thames Estuary. Still lost, and short of fuel, they crash-landed on the south bank. Thinking that they'd landed in Germany or France or somewhere, they burned their books etc and gave themselves up. They didn't know where they were: they got into a terrible state. And they were picked up by a Thames Police patrol. They were rather amazed!'

Robbie considered John Wotherspoon a poor pilot, and was detailed to investigate the navigational problems of the crew after this incident. The occurrence is well camouflaged in the 21 Squadron ORB which, considering the quality of the document

during this period, is hardly surprising. On the other hand, embarrassing incidents are not welcome in a squadron diary...

Could the entry in the ORB for 22nd July 1941 be a strong contender for the award of cover-up of the year? On this date, Wotherspoon and crew, operating from Manston, were detailed for a daylight attack on shipping near Gravelines (15 miles southwest of Dunkirk). The sortie was classed as a DNCO (Duty Not Carried Out) and Wotherspoon's Blenheim - Z7501 (YH:J) - was damaged by flak off Gravelines. The ORB records a successful wheels-up landing at Manston airfield; it also adds that the observer's hand received a bullet wound, and the whole crew were promptly sent on leave. They departed thereafter for the Middle East.

Gilbert Lowes remembers the crew vividly. His version of Wotherspoon's Uncertain of Position Procedure is interesting, compared with that of Robbie's. 'We were coming in to land at Manston', Gilbert recalls, 'a bit after the first move from Watton down to Manston. And there was a Blenheim folded up on the centre of the airfield: well, not quite the centre - a bit off to one side. It had done a bit of a belly-flop on the grass airfield. And we heard afterwards that Wotherspoon had not been paying attention, as usual, with his crew - unusually, because it was on ops, but quite usual for them to be casual about everything. And he thought he was flying over the north coast of Kent, when he was flying over the north coast of France! [This seems very odd as Albert Derrick's parents lived in North Deal, Kent at that time!] And they opened up at him. The machine was badly shot up, and there was only one casualty with them, and that was the navigator, who got shot through the palm of one hand - the bullet went up through the chart table. Otherwise, they went unscathed; though a bit shaken. He belly-landed, and I think he had no flaps. He was quite badly shot up, and it was a miracle that he got back.'

Gilbert had the impression that the whole crew were Irish, but only Colin Buchanan, the observer, hailed from the Emerald Isle. 'Wotherspoon - mad as a hatter!', Gilbert continues. 'Brilliant pilot. If anybody wanted to know anything about flying a Blenheim, or the wireless of the Blenheim, they went to those two sergeants, Wotherspoon and his air-gunner. And they got everything worked out together. If a routine came out, with this difficult part of changing valves, which I never did know precisely in detail, he would say it was better done this way or that way. I remember once hearing Wotherspoon say: "Oh, I've been doing that for months - I sorted that out for myself!" So someone said: "For God's sake, why didn't you tell us, if it's so much better?" He replied: "Oh, I didn't think it was interesting!"

He and his crew were always breaking the rules: they were always in trouble. If they had a late pass until midnight, they would come in at about quarter past midnight, sometimes for absolute devilment, to the great embarrassment of the bod on the gate, who would wink an eye at them, generally speaking. At other times they'd get the Sergeant of the Guard to say what's to be done. He was once hauled over the coals for his leniency by the Station Adjutant. In his defence he said: "How can you take it out of three sergeants coming in, with decorations, and the records they've got, sir? And they come in half an hour late, and they're on rest the next day? I can't do it!" That was the sort of petty trouble they were in.

And another time, when they were on leave, there was a call from the Irish police to say that these three claimed that they were operational aircrew in the RAF, and that they had to be back on a certain date. "We've told you all this, because we've picked them up for poaching!", the police said. They got them out in time to come back. We told them that they were valued members of the squadron, and if they could release them, we would be very grateful. You couldn't do much about it in Southern Ireland,

other than that. And they were rated for this, so they said: "Well, sir, we were on leave: there were no operations, so we had to get some excitement!" This was the answer they *always* gave on these occasions.

And Webster also got hold of Wotherspoon one day, and said: "Wotherspoon, that air-gunner of yours - he's quite the scruffiest man on the squadron! Can't you do something about it? I know he's an awfully good air-gunner and wireless operator, but can't you tidy him up a bit?"'

When I asked Gilbert by what Christian names the crew were known, he replied: 'It was always "Wotherspoon", or "Sgt Wotherspoon" or "Wotherspoon's crew". They always moved as a trio, his crew: did everything together.'

Gilbert remembered Wotherspoon's return from the Rotterdam raid: 'Yes, I did know that he was the one who went through the crane cable. His cheese cutter! It went between the tip of his airscrew and his left, here. [*That* close! Compare the strength of the inner wing here with the outer four feet torn off my cousin's aircraft.] He got telephone wires and hay in the tailwheel, but I'm not sure that he collected the bricks! He grazed the top of a chimney. But his flying was absolute precision. They were very, very good: mad as hatters, difficult in a way, and as Irish as they come. But not irresponsible: not mad in that sense - certainly not on duty. Yes, I'm sure they enjoyed operations.'

Another Wotherspoon fan was Jim Marsden. 'He could handle it', Jim emphasised. 'He was an expert at low flying.'

Considering that the crew flew their first operation on 16th April 1941, and hence survived over three months of Blenheim low-level daylight sorties on 21 Squadron, they needed an extra ingredient. Was it skill, or just the luck of the Irish (Buchanan's)? The final tally of their Blenheim tour was that Wotherspoon had been wounded (on 24th May) and Buchanan also (on 22nd July). Derrick appears to have emerged unscathed.

Spare a thought for the compiler of the Annual Confidential Reports for these three! How could he start to assess this incredible crew? Yet the Wotherspoon aura triumphed again, and in 1942 all three were commissioned!

The next unit to be favoured by Wotherspoon & Co was 70 (Blenheim) OTU Nakuru, Kenya. Also stationed there at the time was Ben Nunn, a 21 Squadron WOp/AG on the Rotterdam raid. It would appear that by then the wayward crew had decided to keep their heads down as Ben's only memories concern the time they spent together on 21 Squadron. 'Oh, Johnnie Wotherspoon - I knew him well. He was an absolute character', Ben told me. 'I remember he was always the comedian in a party, when we went out anywhere. And we used to go into Norwich quite often, I remember. We had a very good time on the squadron - there's no doubt about that. Old Freddie Reiss, my pilot, I'll always remember: he had this lovely white Packard, and he used to take us out in this. And we went off to the *Samson and Hercules* [Dance hall. When I last visited the place it was *Ritzy's Night Club*. The famous statues were still guarding the entrance.] We used to motor in there, and spend our evenings there. And Johnnie Wotherspoon was always with us.'

The 'Samson and Hercules' Dance Hall, in Norwich, where many Blenheim aircrew spent their evenings in the company of delightful young ladies (George Plunkett)

The Ballroom of the 'Samson and Hercules' (The Blenheim Society)

The 'Samson and Hercules' Dance Hall entrance (George Plunkett)

On 25th July 1943, Fg Offs Wotherspoon, Buchanan and Derrick took off from Luqa, Malta, in Baltimore Mk III, FA 305 ('F') on their first operational sortie with 55 Squadron. The luck of the Irish was at last to come to an abrupt end, but the controversy lingered on. The Squadron ORB poignantly records the day as follows:

'Space must be given here to a most regrettable and to me at present inexplicable accident which occurred today. In a sortie against Novara [di Sicilia], aircraft 'F' of 'A' Flight, piloted by Fg Off Wotherspoon, and flying in number 6 position in the first box of our 12 aircraft, was seen to explode, fall to pieces in flames and hit the ground whilst over the target area. Two parachutes were seen to open but nothing definite can be construed from this. This was the crew's first operation with the squadron, although the beginning of the second tour of the pilot, navigator and WOp/AG. Also, as a result of the explosion, two other aircraft were hit by flying fragments: W/O Watkins, the 'vic' leader, No 4 and Sgt Hayes No 5, flying 'C' and 'K' respectively. W/O Watkins force-landed safely at Cassabile [Cassibile], Sicily with a dead port engine which he was unable to feather. He returned to us safely with crew by Dakota aircraft later this day. Sgt Hayes landed safely at base (Luqa) with his two A/Gs as casualties. The whole squadron feels the loss of 'F' keenly, with the relief at the time that the other two crews are back with us.'

Oddly, the Appendix states that '*one* parachute was seen to open'. There were no survivors, however: all were killed, including the A/G, Sgt D.W.F. Cottrell (son of Brigadier A.F.B. Cottrell DSO OBE).

W/O Watkins's A/G, Ralph Ryder, remembers the day well. 'My recollection of the incident, sitting in the turret', he wrote to me, 'was of a blinding flash of light and a large bang. The WOp/AG at the lower hatch said that all he could see was a tail unit fluttering towards the ground like a leaf. The aircraft just disintegrated.'

The inseparable Wotherspoon crew remained united in death, and were all buried in a collective grave in Catania War Cemetery, Sicily.

Colin Buchanan (Belfast Telegraph 4th August 1943)

PLT OFF P.B. ASHBY, FLT LT G.F. LOWES & PLT OFF G.H. SEELEY

L to R: Gerald Seeley, Gilbert Lowes and Philip Ashby

The overriding impression I gained after meeting Gilbert Lowes in his lovely East Anglian cottage was that here was a man who could easily have played the part of the knife-thrower in the film *The Magnificent Seven*, had James Coburn not been available. Gilbert struck me as cool, matter-of-fact and well balanced. For him, the Rotterdam raid resurrected wistful memories of pretty girls waving from windows, rather than any fear of being shot out of the skies.

Like many other observers, Gilbert first tried his hand at poling, but did not quite make the grade. Arriving from 17 OTU Upwood, Gilbert joined 21 Squadron at Watton on 8th July 1941. Two weeks later, he was the sole survivor of his crew, after the flight of Blenheim V6035 (YH:O) was brought to an abrupt end during an attack on shipping off Ostend.

I asked Gilbert how he felt about operational flying. 'A sort of excitement about it', he replied, 'and a wonderful feeling when you got back. When you'd done it the first time, and the next day you were off duty most of the time - not all the time - you'd go swimming, or something like that. It was quite wonderful; life was fine. If you hadn't got some sort of approach like that, you would never have lasted the course. Yes, of course, we were all scared; but when nothing happened the first time, you developed the feeling that "it won't happen to me". I had a feeling that I wasn't going to be killed, from the first of my flying days, but I had a feeling that I wasn't going to finish the war. It was that I might be wounded, or become a POW - as indeed I was - but not that I might be killed. If I had any premonition, that was it. If you hadn't taken a seemingly casual view to casualties, you would have succumbed from sheer mental stress. There was no glorification in your attitude, I don't think, and I think that this is fairly universal too. King and country, and all this sort of thing. It was a high adventure for some, and a relief from a routine existence for others, and a superb opportunity for yet others. And tails were well up as a result of these different points of view. But when one of your friends did FTR, then you were pretty casual about it:

poor so-and-so, and generally not to think about it any longer. All these things about empty places in Messes etc is utter bullshit! Because I don't think the authorities wanted to harp on it - perhaps in 2 Group more than anywhere else, because the casualties were viciously high.'

I asked Gilbert if he put the blame for this high casualty rate on the AOC, AVM Stevenson, who had been dubbed "Butcher" by his 2 Group subordinates. 'No!', was his firm reply. 'If anything was blamed at all, it was the attitude of the county for not arming sooner. The Blenheim was a fine aircraft, but for all intents and purposes obsolescent. Pity we had to fly them, but there was nothing better, so we'd best get on with it: as easy-going as that. When you heard you were going to 2 Group, you didn't clap your hands.' 'You didn't volunteer, then?' I asked. 'Oh, no!' he retorted, 'you were posted to a squadron from the OTU - a list was put up like a Battle Order - and you went and got on with it. But you knew that it was a dicey, exciting life...'

Gilbert's account of his last sortie is dedicated to the Blenheim aircrew, which include his own pilot and WOp/AG, who did not survive to tell such a horrific tale:

'Shipping raid, low-level [*Channel Stop* 23 Jul 41, in V6035, YH:O]. Tight formation, and we were attacking a ship at mast height. It was escorted by flakships. The vic I was in was led by Freddie Reiss. He turned too tightly towards us - we were flying on his port side - and Philip [Ashby] couldn't turn, so we went over; and in doing so, we were just at the end of the vic, the last in the formation. As we attacked the ship, we had gone out a bit - a matter of hundreds of yards. We went in and attacked on our own, only just behind the others. And then later on, a couple of fighters came out of the blue and had us all to themselves. So we were shot down by fighters, with the squadron just ahead of us! You know, if you weren't together, you'd had your chips, and that's how we had it. Me109s - a couple. One of them sort of stood guard, and the other came in. They were standing off with their 20mm things, and we had nothing but that Daimler turret, with a couple of 303s in it, which whipped rather, and spread the shot. Gerald [Seeley] certainly had a go at them, and called out all the usual things, like "Turn this way, turn that way, they're coming in from so-and-so", and mainly put up a pretty fair show. I think in the process of the attack, Philip was hit, as I saw him grit his teeth: at the same time, I didn't see any blood or anything, or if it was a big effort from him on the controls - he wasn't a big man: he was fairly strongly made, but not a big man: he wasn't tall as I am.

And looking over there, we were in the sea, suddenly. The port wing went in. We were flat out, at fifty or thirty feet, or forty feet, or whatever it was, and [plus] nine boost, and turned in. And the whole lot - I think the airscrews bit once or twice - and dragged it under. And the hatch was closed, and all the Perspex had gone - except in the hatch. And somehow, I got hold of Philip but I couldn't open the hatch. Then suddenly, I threw it back and reached back. I then found myself arse-upwards against the struts of the roof, with the Mae West beginning to inflate. At this time, we were definitely under water, and I was holding my breath almost instinctively. And then my helmet got caught up, but I managed to get that off, and all the gear came off with it. I was half floating out of the thing, and more or less couldn't get off the roof to help him at all. I got his straps undone - I know that - but I couldn't move him, and he didn't make any effort; and most of the time I was floating away from him.

By this time, I couldn't do anything but start swimming to the surface; and then a little bit of light appeared, and up I went. I broke the surface and I was sick. I only saw two or three things - the dinghy, a few yards away, a parachute pack floating with flat side uppermost, and one of Gerald's gloves. I never got onto the dinghy; I grabbed

it, looked out for the others - must hang on in case they come up - and passed out with my elbow through one of the ratlin things.

And the next thing I knew, there was a terrific shout behind me, and a rubber dinghy was being rowed by some German sailors in white uniforms; and I was taken onto one of the flakships, where I was violently sick again. And my first German words I heard were something like "Seewasser" (sea-water), because I'd got a certain amount of oil and petrol inside me, and it wasn't very comfortable. Later on, they'd found that I'd got some superficial injuries on my hands and face, but more in this ankle. I think I was terribly lucky, because I think a couple of explosive shots went across it, just after or before they exploded. It turned the ankle inside out, but it didn't break it - most fortunate. I'd got caught up with the armour-plating, and those three controls we had for the hydraulics - between the two seats, on the right of the pilot - one for the undercarriage, one for the flaps, and one to take power to the turret. I certainly got caught up in those getting out. The armour-plating came down there too. Anyhow, I had a very bad ankle, and they were three months repairing that: I was very fortunate - the Germans did a good job there.'

I enquired as to the location of the hospital. Gilbert replied:

'I was in a little forward dressing station, which had been a children's hospital in Westende, a small place the other side of Ostend. A naval surgeon had a terrific argument with some cute type from the *Luftwaffe* about moving me: he said that I wasn't to be moved. I think that it was as much out of pique that he said it - I think that they tried to tell him his job, or something. He was a dandy: very smartly dressed. Later on, I was put in an ambulance; they pinched most of my clothes, but they gave me some: home-made shoes - they pinched my shoes, or I'd lost them: no, I'm sure they pinched them. And I was taken in this ambulance to a place in Brussels, where I had very special treatment. I had a masseuse, and gymnasium, and that sort of thing. And then, the usual thing, off to *Dulag Luft*, the holding/transit camp. Well, I'd been down a long time, so they gave up most of the questioning.'

Gilbert's passage through the POW camps, including *Stalag Luft III* at Sagan, was the hard slog no doubt familiar to most readers. One incident which sticks in his mind concerns the time when he was a case for an appendectomy in a camp in Poland. The surgeon was highly qualified, and believed to have been a professor of surgery at Heidelberg, but: 'He had a bitch of an assistant', Gilbert added, with feeling. 'She'd lost her boyfriend, they said, on the Eastern Front. She didn't go for prisoners much, and she was a bit of a sadist: she tried to take out clips with ordinary forceps, instead of special ones...'

Eventually, just south of Berlin, Gilbert was released by the Russians. Gilbert continues:

'They took us in a convoy of trucks to the pontoon bridge at Magdeburg. The Americans took us from the other side, held us in the camp for a bit; and because I'd been doing a job of work for the Russians and with them, I happened to be one of the first to be flown out. I was with an empty aircraft that came in delivering something or other, and landed at Dunsfold, near Guildford, so you can imagine the excitement! Then, after a bit of leave, I became assistant adjutant for the HQ Unit of Kirkham [Lancashire]. I did that for a time, then was demobbed, and then went back in the

bank. I suppose it was normal: I didn't stay at the bottom, and didn't quite get to the top!'

I asked Gilbert how he felt about his POW days, and did he have a constant yearning for food. 'It was vastly unpleasant, yes', he replied. 'The Red Cross, of course, were wonderful: the stuff they used to get through to us growing young people. We were bloody cold, and permanently hungry, yes!'

Gilbert explains how the crew teamed up at 17 OTU Upwood:

'They were looking at me, and perhaps thinking this is the man for us. And Philip Ashby and Gerald Seeley had got together, and suddenly they came to me, and said: "We'd like you to fly with us!"'

Describing his crew, Gilbert continues:

'I don't know if you know, but Gerald Seeley was at Eton'.

This was news to me, but I chanced upon Gerald's earlier education when I purchased a little pamphlet, from a second-hand bookshop, entitled *Marlborough College: Roll of Honour 1939-1946*. Gerald was a pupil at this famous school from 1916-1921. Gilbert continues:

'He [Gerald] joined up as one of these officer air-gunners, that were going to coordinate fire in the early part of the war: it fell through because it was non -viable. He was a very fine sportsman, and a little man called Eric Seidelin [21 Squadron observer on the Rotterdam raid] was with us at this time - now he was a good squash player. Seidelin and Seeley were the only ones who could really give a game of squash to Philip Ashby, because he was good, and *he* had played at Wimbledon: I don't know if it was Junior Wimbledon or not. Wealthy parents. Philip was a slightly affected young man: he loved to be seen in a royal blue dressing gown, and had lots of airs like this - but quite harmless. He did play a very fine game of tennis: I saw him play once, and there was no doubt about it, he was in the upper echelons.

Gerald had always had a rougher time: in and out of this sort of job and that sort of job. He had a brother that I met in Benghazi afterwards: he was in the artillery. Not exactly wastrels, or ne'er-do-wells, but they never seemed to settle to anything, to live off their wits; and I'm not saying anything against them, but they were sort of unconventional. They were always hard up: their greatest achievement was getting an extra fiver out of the bank manager, and going on a binge. They all boozed a great deal more than us, and they were all older than I was. One in the Navy, one in the Army, and one in the RAF. The oldest of the three - they used to call him "The Admiral" - he was in the Navy, on minesweepers, or something: he was a very drunken type - I met him at a party once. Then there was Gerald [aged 40 when he was shot down]. Then, I think, there was this younger one who was in the Army; and he was in the Royal Artillery. And when I met him in Benghazi after the war, he had a much broader, plumper face than when he was a young man. When somebody said "Seeley", I went up to him and said: "Did you have a brother in the Air Force, and was your father at one time Bishop of Rangoon?" He said: "Yes! How do you know?"'

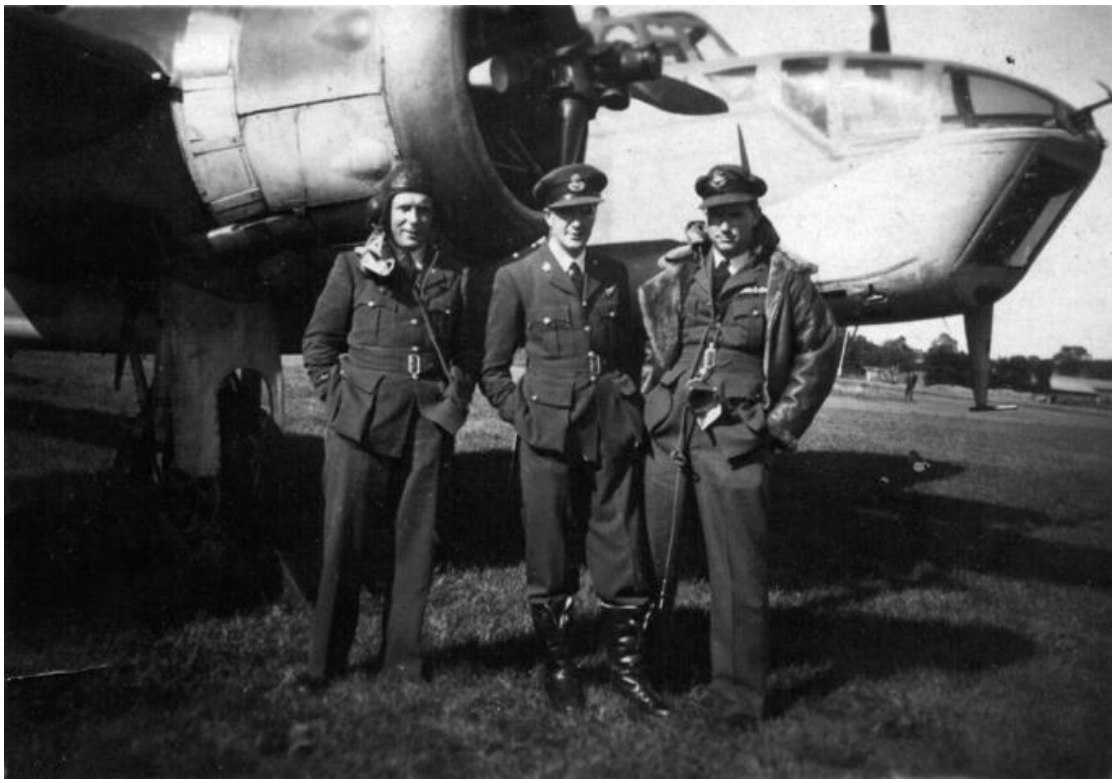
A caricature of Gerald Seeley (oldest person on the Rotterdam raid) by 'Carlos', 1940, inscribed: 'To my Vigilant Observer from his Virgin Woag! 1941 June' (via Gilbert Lowes)

Both Philip Ashby and Gerald Seeley are buried in Ostend New Communal Cemetery.

The family of Sqn Ldr George Henry Seeley received a severe shock in July 1941, when a telegram arrived reporting George as 'Missing: Believed Killed In Action' in a Blenheim operation off Ostend. George wrote to me, in explanation:

'I was serving in the Middle East with a Wellington Group as S.Eng.O. Before proceeding to Egypt, my home station was Silloth, where I lived with my family. As my family knew that I was serving in Egypt, they requested OC Silloth to verify this with the Air Ministry, who stated that I, George Henry Seeley, did not take part in the raid, but Plt Off Gerald Henry Seeley was one of the crew of Blenheim V6035 (O). The Air Ministry apologised for the mistake which had caused shock to my wife.'

PLT OFF F.K.ORME, PLT OFF S.F.M. GUNNIS & FG OFF A.H. COLLINS



L to R: Albert Collins, Stan Gunnis and Frank Orme

For Canadian Frank Orme and his crew, the docks at Rotterdam were to prove the highlights of their short operational career. Frank's spectacular bombing run on 16th July 1941 has already been mentioned. One would be forgiven for assuming that this was the skill acquired from many previous such sorties. Not so: this was Frank's first operation. Six weeks later, on 28th August, the crew attacked the docks for a second time, as part of 2 Group's strategy of repeating highly successful operations. On this occasion, the enemy defences including the *Luftwaffe* were more than ready, and this gallant trio were hacked out of the skies near Maasluis. As in other cases of horrendous crashes, identification proved impossible and Frank and his crew were buried in a collective grave at Hook of Holland.

Back in Canada, Frank's family clung desperately to the official report of 'Missing'. The tragedy was far-reaching, as Frank's sister, Elizabeth, married the brother of observer Stan Gunnis.

A keen sportsman, Ottawa-born Frank Orme relinquished his job as an accountant in New York and trained to be a pilot. Enlisting in the RCAF on 18th May 1940, he attended an elementary training school at Windsor Mills, Quebec. Although he became seriously ill during this time, undeterred he continued with his training and finally graduated from 2 SFTS at Uplands Airport in January 1941, passing out top of the class.

The highly acclaimed series *Family at War*, first shown on ITV in the sixties, must have had many parallels in reality. The Gunnis family could justifiably claim to be among the front runners in this aspect. One of six brothers, Glaswegian Stan Gunnis did not wait for his call-up papers, and joined the RAFVR on 12th June 1939. His dreams of becoming a pilot were not to be fulfilled, and Stan was eventually

commissioned as an observer on 9th March 1941. After training on Blenheims at 17 OTU Upwood, Stan joined 21 Squadron Watton just four days before the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941.

Not far away, at Bircham Newton, Stan's elder brother, Herbert, was piloting Blenheims for 500 Squadron, Coastal Command. 'During this time', brother Matthew informed me, 'they were always in touch with each other.' It was Herbert who married Frank Orme's sister, Elizabeth. Matthew continues:

'[The youngest brother, Richard] was only sixteen years old when the war started, but was not going to stay at home. He went off and joined the RAF as a pilot, giving his age as seventeen. He was sent home to await training vacancies, but instead of going home he, with another friend, went to Liverpool and joined a ship as a cabin boy. The ship was sunk with all hands two days out of Liverpool.'

The other brothers, Jack, George and Matthew, all joined the RAF in ground trades.

Gilbert Lowes remembers Stan well:

'He was a pleasant, friendly bloke; very dark; very broad Scottish accent, which came out when he was a bit excited. Very good type.'

Tony Powner was great friends with Stan when they were at Upwood together. Happy memories are evoked when looking at snaps taken of the Orme and Walkden crews sitting in his little Standard 8 car.

Frank Orme and Stan Gunnis in Tony Powner's Standard 8 car at No 17 OTU Upwood (Tony Powner)

The crew's WOp/AG, Albert Collins, brought the stability of age to his two colleagues. At 34, and commissioned, he was no doubt destined to conduct the highly-optimistic fire control of Blenheim formations' inadequate armament. Gilbert Lowes remembers Albert as 'on the slightly-built side, quiet and reserved.'

Two rare wartime colour photographs of the Blenheim are featured in Roger A. Freeman's book *The Royal Air Force of World War Two in Colour* (Arms & Armour Press 1993). They show Frank Orme and his crew at Watton on 18th August 1941 with their Blenheim of destiny, V6436 (YH:L). These were reproduced in Graham Warner's mammoth tome *The Bristol BLENHEIM: A complete history* (Crécy Publishing Limited, 2002). Graham adds that these were the only wartime colour photographs (of the Bristol Blenheim) that he could trace. Unfortunately he missed the magnificent photos taken by the celebrated photographer, Robert Capa, at RAF Watton on 4th July 1941. These two colour photos of Frank Orme and his crew are included below. The Robert Capa selection appears elsewhere in this book. There is an excellent article on the website of the *Aircrew Remembrance Society*, which not only includes these two colour photos but also a photo of Stan Gunnis and details of the crew and their demise at Rotterdam on 28th August 1941.

Frank Orme and his crew, having returned to Watton after an attack on shipping off the Dutch coast, under Ops 387, on 18th August 1941. The crew, all wearing Mae Wests, are, L to R, Frank Orme, Stan Gunnis and Albert Collins. Their Blenheim is V6436 (YH:L) of No 21 Squadron,, in which they all tragically lost their lives just ten days later on the subsequent attack on Rotterdam Docks (L. Gover)

Frank Orme and his crew a few moments later, having almost vacated V6436 (YH:L). The dedicated groundcrew were always delighted when their aircrew returned unscathed from these highly-dangerous shipping attacks. On the left of the airman with braces is observer Stan Gunnis and on his right is pilot Frank Orme. WOp/AG Albert Collins is just climbing down from the entrance to his 'office'. The giant airman is Paddy Woods, who lived all his life near Watton, and was a very good gunsmith (© Hulton Archive/Getty Images).

Stan Gunnis, Frank Orme and Malcolm Walkden with Tony Powner's Standard 8 car at No 17 OTU Upwood (Tony Powner)

Tony Powner and Frank Orme in Tony's Standard 8 car at No 17 OTU Upwood (Tony Powner)

FLT LT F.A. REISS, SQN LDR E.M. SHEWELL & SQN LDR A.B.C. NUNN

Edmund Shewell

Ben Nunn

I should have met Ben Nunn at the very start of my research, rather than at the end, and all because of a slip-up with his rank at the time of the Rotterdam raid. On our first visit to the Public Record Office at Kew, my wife had correctly copied down Ben's rank - sergeant - from the 21 Squadron ORB. When I transcribed her notes into my records, I must have assumed that it was an all-officer crew and 'promoted' Ben to pilot officer several months earlier than the notification appeared in the *London Gazette*!

As Ben was obviously not in the *Air Force List* in July 1941, I assumed that he was a Commonwealth officer; naturally, all my enquiries in this direction came to nought. The years passed by, and I reluctantly conceded that he would be one of the very few participants of the Rotterdam raid who would remain unidentified.

The breakthrough came in early 1990, when I was perusing my wife's original notes. I could hardly believe my eyes when I read '*Sgt* Nunn'. It was too late for recriminations: action was required, and fast. Armed with information gleaned from *London Gazettes* (dates of commissioning), *Air Force Lists* (category of WOp/AG), and the 21 Squadron ORB (approximate dates of arrival and departure), I drew up a short list of highly probables, placing A.B.C. Nunn at the top. I wrote to the Records Office at Gloucester: were any of these gentlemen on 21 Squadron on 16th July 1941?

Rules, regulations and red tape made this task harder and longer than I would have hoped; but my patience was rewarded, and after several; frustrating replies, it was finally confirmed in November of that year that A.B.C. Nunn was, in fact, my man. Hallelujah!

The same day, I visited the Bodleian Library and settled down for a marathon session with the entire collection of telephone directories for the British Isles. Just three volumes from the end, and by then somewhat deflated, I found the entry I was looking for. Even better, the address was only in the next county!

A surprised Ben Nunn received a phone call from me that night, and, wasting no time, we agreed to meet just two days later - on Sunday 18th November. It was a good omen, being the 30th anniversary of my being awarded my RAF wings.

I met Ben in his delightful Gloucestershire home. Knowing that he was 76 years of age, and that he had retired from the RAF on medical grounds, I was somewhat bowled over by the sprightly, youthful gentleman who greeted me at the door. The long-overdue interview was at last to begin...

Many of the biographies, which it has been my privilege to compile, have left me feeling sad. Ben's is not in this category: he freely admits that he is one of the luckiest to have emerged from the Second World War. Ben's three brothers all served in the Forces and survived; his five sisters all had husbands who served in the Forces, and they too survived. Almost unique, I would think.

Ben was born in Aldershot on 24th May 1914, while his father was serving there. His early school years were spent at a little private school in Aldershot, after which he attended an elementary school in Queens Road, Farnborough. Ben was obliged to terminate his education at the age of 14; with his father dying at the young age of 46, he and his elder brother were suddenly needed to earn money for the large family.

Ben's first job was as a warehouseman for the military printers, Gale & Polden, in Aldershot (Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee GBE CB was a customer of this firm in 1933. Then a pilot officer, he ordered 100 visiting cards - *Never Stop the Engine when it's Hot*: Thomas Harmsworth Publishing, 1983: David Lee). But low wages forced him to leave. His next employment was as a milkman. The rumblings of war were gathering momentum, and Ben pleaded with his mother as soon as he was of age, and again, with feeling, after Chamberlain's Munich visit, to be allowed to join up. He reasoned that by doing so, he would get the service of his choice - the RAF - and thus avoid the possibility of being allocated elsewhere. His request could not be granted: the role of 'bread-winner' could not be relinquished until a younger brother was in a position to take over.

Membership of the Territorial Army, however, was permitted, and Ben joined the West Surreys at the age of 17, saying that he was one year older. His four years as a signaller in the TA meant that he was well versed in the Morse code before joining the RAF. Finally, on 21st July 1939, Ben was released from his family commitments and enlisted in the RAF. With his signalling background, the Air Ministry naturally put him into the wireless trade (ground). Ben recalls:

'I didn't even think of being aircrew at that time. So we were packed off to West Drayton; we were given our shilling [5p] - our signing-on shilling - and then we went off to Cardington. While at Cardington, war was declared, and it was then that I decided that I would like to be aircrew; as a result, I was posted to Yatesbury.'

Ben completed the WOp's course at No 2 E&WS at the end of April 1940, and was then posted to RAF Station Odiham. 'I was there', Ben explains, 'just bashing a key on a beacon, until the course came up at Jurby.'

After four weeks at No 5 B&GS Jurby, Isle of Man, Ben was the proud possessor of not only the wireless badge but also the air-gunner's brevet. But no stripes yet: they would come later when he was stationed at Upwood.

Ben found himself, due to circumstances outside his control, on the 'long course' at 17 OTU, Upwood, and was there for nearly a full year. The problem was that every time he landed from a flight, he had suffered a painful nose-bleed. Ben was understandably fearful that this condition might mean the end of his flying career, but the RAF were not prepared to lose aircrew that easily and promptly despatched him to Ely Hospital for an operation at the end of February 1941. The operation was a gory one, and not for the faint-hearted. The sinus area was attacked with an instrument

passed up Ben's nose, and his antrums were punctured. 'You just hear the crack', Ben recalls, 'and they drill it, and I was fine after that!' Oo-er!

Nearly two months later, he was back on the flying programme at Upwood. On 4th May he crewed up with Freddie Reiss and Edmund Shewell. Leave was booked for ten days commencing 10th May, so that he could get married: the wedding arrangements had had to be brought forward a week due to 'contingences of the service'. But there was more to come, as Ben recalls:

'I said to Vera that I would be home at a certain time on 9th May, and we were flying right up until 8 or 9 o'clock of that night, which I wasn't expecting, but had to go. I was just going out of the gate, and I was called back to the guardroom; and they said: "You've got 48 hours! Your ten days leave is cancelled!"

I got down to London very late, and had to spend the night on a seat on Waterloo Station, and catch the next morning's milk train down to Farnborough.'

That night, London was bombed yet again. Vera continues the saga:

'We were getting married the next day - a Saturday - and in the early hours of that day there was a knock at the door (my parents' house). And it was a policeman, who said: "Are you friends of Sergeant Nunn?" I said: "Yes!" He said: "Well, he's been delayed, but he *hopes* to get down in the morning". All I could do was hope the bridegroom arrived in time!'

Ben and his crew were no doubt urgently required in 2 Group to replace the horrendous losses of that period, hence the RAF's seemingly callous attitude. The crew joined 21 Squadron, during their detachment to Lossiemouth, on 9th June. It was a warm-up period, and their first operation, on 16th June, was completed after the squadron had returned to Watton. As so often happened, it was a case of being thrown in at the deep end. Ben's entry in his logbook reads: 'Sweep off Nordeney. Attacked ship ("Nautilus"). Near miss. Attacked by two Me 109F for 30 mins. Damaged one. Crash landed S. Bridge. (Day) 4.50'. On the page is pasted the photograph of Sgt Leavers's last moments after he had lost a chunk of wing on the mast of the target vessel, and at the instant of passing 90º of bank before crashing. Ben's observer, Edmund Shewell, took this photograph, which was used for propaganda purposes minus the evidence of Sgt Leavers's demise.

Understandably, the day made an impression on Ben. He recalls:

'I shall never forget my first raid. When we were attacked on the way back by two 109s for about 30 minutes, we were hit; and, in fact, Vera has still got one of the bullets that I took out of the TR9 set...It was quiet on the way back, all low level as you know; we were flying only a few feet from the sea. I got stuck into my rations, which included chocolate, when suddenly I saw a shower of bullets hitting the water; then I saw this 109 flash past and up in a steep climb. Quickly getting back onto the guns, I was able to fire only a few rounds before my guns jammed; so all I could do was point my guns at these 109s as they came down. One of them realised my predicament and brazenly flew alongside: we just looked at each other! We didn't know, of course, that our hydraulics had been damaged, and we had to belly-flop at Sutton Bridge. Looking back on this day, I clearly recall what a sticky mess can result when one's attention is on more-pressing matters than eating a bar of chocolate: it seemed to get everywhere.'

Sqn Ldr Tim Partridge landed at Sutton Bridge shortly afterwards to collect the crew, and flew them back to Watton in V6240 (my cousin's aircraft on the Rotterdam raid).

Then began the familiar round of anti-shipping 'beats', high-level *Circus* operations against continental 'fringe' targets, all interspersed with bombing and formation practice.

On 10th July, Ben's logbook reads: 'Attacked shipping in docks at Cherbourg at low level. Tail unit damaged by hitting a breakwater...' On the Rotterdam raid of 16th July, Ben gave his Leica camera to his observer, who had already established a reputation as a photographer, and opted to give his full attention to his twin Brownings, machine-gunning ships alongside the 6,000-tonner his pilot, Freddie Reiss, attacked with 4 x 250-pounders. His memories of this raid include seeing a Blenheim (my cousin's aircraft) crashing into Waalhaven and a crane hawser that had been cut by the wing of another Blenheim, following which a suspended vehicle had dropped onto the deck of the ship! This was clearly the work of Sgt Wotherspoon (see his biography). On 23rd July, during an attack on shipping off Ostend, the crew were attacked by a Bf 109 for ten minutes. 'Hits scored: believed a probable', Ben recorded. (See Gilbert Lowes's account of his last flight on this day). The Intelligence Officer confirmed that Ben was the only NCO to return from this costly raid.

'How did you feel about the anti-shipping campaign of the Blenheim?', I asked Ben. 'Did you enjoy it?' 'No! I don't think so!', he replied, laughing. 'I was scared stiff each time! I shall never forget one chap, who was on our squadron, an air-gunner; we were all getting ready to go off, and were testing out guns - firing then into the ground. And I noticed him getting out of the aircraft and he went back to the crewroom and said: "I've had enough!" You just couldn't blame anybody for that, really. You didn't know whether you were going to come back or what was going to happen. And there were many of them like that...'

Ben mentioned a couple of modifications to the Blenheim of which I was unaware. The first concerns a 'screamer' device. He explains:

'Our squadron was used for testing out things. I remember particularly the "screamer", you know, the whistle that you blow and it spins, and makes a screeching noise [a tit-for-tat vis-à-vis the Ju.87 Stuka?]. We had *those* actually fitted to try them out; about *that* size [two feet or so in diameter]. I don't think that they were persevered with for very long.'

The other mod may have been set in motion by Ben. After a bullet had put the TR9 intercom out of action on his first operation, Ben said to Freddie Reiss:

'What we want, because we don't want to be in that position again, is a couple of flashlights or bulbs in front of you, one red and one green; and then, if the intercom goes, I've only got to press a button for starboard or port, for you to take evasive action.' It was incorporated.

On 23rd August 1941, Ben and his crew set off for Portreath, in Cornwall, on the first stage of their posting to Nakuru, Kenya. Four days later, the 7½-hour slog to Gibraltar was completed. '9 Me 109F machines sighted off French coast. No trouble', Ben recorded in his logbook. But Gibraltar to Malta proved a stumbling block. The first attempt, on 28th August, had to be thrown away after an hour, due to magneto

trouble. The next attempt, two days later, was aborted for a different reason; Ben's logbook records: 'Sole accompanying machine crashed into sea owing to engine failure. Sent SOS message to Gib. Crew rescued by Catalina and corvette. Flight abandoned. Returned to Gib'. The next day, a further attempt was made, and again aborted, this time because of petrol tank trouble. Finally, on 2nd September, the marathon 8¼-hour sortie was successfully completed; an Italian seaplane was sighted near Pantelleria Island, but it caused no trouble.

For a Blenheim crew in transit to the Middle East, or Africa, the most dangerous part of the journey was the stop-over at Malta. The AOC, AVM Hugh Pugh Lloyd, had a habit of using such crews to replenish his rapidly depleting stocks, and the name of the game was to shoot through the island as quickly as possible. This very month, September 1941, witnessed the *hijacking* of Sgt Ivor Broom (later Air Marshal Sir Ivor Broom KCB CBE DSO DFC & 2 Bars AFC). I have adopted the word preferred by Sir Ivor Broom. In *Briefed To Attack* (Hodder & Stoughton 1949) Air Marshal Sir Hugh Lloyd admits to *wangling*, conceding that 'this sharp practice gave Malta a bad name in the Middle East'!

Ben very nearly condemned his crew to a short career attacking Rommel's convoys. He explains:

'When I woke up in the morning, having stayed the night, I couldn't open my eyes. I'd been bitten by sandflies. I didn't even know what the time was, or anything. I just called out to somebody to lead me off to sick bay, to see if they could do anything. And they *just* got my eyes enough open to be able to see a little bit. And Freddie Reiss came in and said: "We're not stopping here, Ben! We're off!" Of course, we went! And having got up to about, I suppose, 20,000 feet, it was cool, and the swelling went down. I was all right by the time I got to Cairo.'

The crew handed over their Blenheim and flew by *Imperial Airways* Sunderland flying boat down to Nakuru, to join the staff of the newly-formed No 70 OTU.

On the last day of the year, Ben was commissioned. In April 1942, he was posted to 244 Squadron, Sharjah, arriving in an aircraft which did not impress him too much - a Vickers Valentia. He recalls:

'We had to go down to Sharjah and pitch tents, and start a camp going, and try and stop enemy subs entering the [Persian] Gulf. [A theatre of war which is topical at the time of writing]. We also had a net across the Gulf underwater to stop these submarines...Awful nights there, you know, because you couldn't sleep: it was so humid. And the aircraft used to get terribly hot. Our sole operations were concentrated on trying to stop the subs getting into the Gulf by using depth charges.'

Sharjah evokes a host of memories for Ben. First and foremost is the six-month tour which stretched into a year; then there was the time that a Japanese submarine sank the ship which was carrying the entire supply of beer and other essentials for the base; and a Medical Officer who was 'as mad as a hatter' who, amongst other things, would jokingly test the engines of the Blenheims with his stethoscope; and the inevitable meal as the guest of the Sheikh of Sharjah. Ben, who was at this time the WOp/AG to the CO - Wg Cdr Gyll-Murray - relates the tale:

'I remember the CO and I were sitting next to each other, cross-legged on the floor, with a mountain of rice in front of us - the main dish being goat. It is customary for

the host to eat one eye of the goat, and the chief guest the other. The CO said he didn't know how he was going to do this, so I suggested he surround the eye with rice and swallow it. This he did.'

On 23rd August 1942, Ben's pilot of 21 Squadron days, Freddie Reiss, who was still at No 70 OTU Nakuru, had a fatal motoring accident. Freddie had hit a tree, and was rushed to No 2 General Hospital but died later that day as result of his injuries. He was buried in Forest Road Cemetery, Nairobi.

At the end of March 1943, Ben returned to Egypt, this time to join the staff of No 75 OTU, Gianaclis (Alexandria). Ben described this place as a sort of transit camp. Ten months later, he made a three-week guest appearance with 55 Squadron, Kabrit (later Kibrit, 20 miles north of Suez), before returning by boat to the UK, docking at Liverpool. After three weeks disembarkation leave, Ben was posted to No 1 Radio School, Cranwell, for a W/T refresher course, arriving on 14th April 1944. This holding manoeuvre lasted five weeks, after which Ben was posted onto Wellingtons at No 105 OTU, Bramcote, Warwickshire. 'They were selecting certain crews to form Transport Command', Ben explains, 'and our job was to keep the airways open for British airlines.'

In January 1945, Ben joined No 11 Ferry Unit, Talbenny, Pembrokeshire. Shortly after his arrival, he converted from Wellingtons to the ubiquitous Dakotas. Ben was by now the proud possessor of a certificate to say that he was qualified to be a wireless operator on any civil aircraft; 'Not that I took it up', he added.

After the passing of VE Day, Ben then went to No 108 (T) OTU, Wymeswold, before joining 187 Squadron at Membury, near Hungerford, One of his jobs on the squadron was to fly troops back from India on what they called 'python leave'.

In May 1947, Ben was posted to the East African Communications Flight, Nairobi, for VIP duties: a tour which he described as the most pleasant of his RAF career, though hastening to add that he enjoyed it all. Life is never without problems. Whilst there, Ben was promoted to squadron leader, and because he now outranked his pilot it was considered bad form, and he was told that he would have to return to the UK. With Vera and young daughter Jenny already on the boat to join him, Ben was none too happy. Help came in the nick of time, when Montgomery arranged a visit to the East African troops, and Ben was given a last-minute reprieve. Ben warmly recalls:

'Our main job on that VIP crew was to fly the AOC, the GOC and the Governor of Kenya; they were the only three that we used to fly around. A lovely job because wherever we went, we were invited wherever *they* were going!'

It was not all a bed of roses, however: the first time that they flew the GOC (Maj-Gen William Alfred Dimoline CB CMG CBE DSO MC), in a Dakota on a visit to Madagascar, was one of those sorties that the crew would have liked to forget, as Ben confesses:

'I'll tell you what happened. We were showing the flag to commemorate the Battle of Britain; there were visiting Spitfires and we had a Guard of Honour, which I was in charge of, each time we landed. And at Madagascar we came in a bit too low, and I felt the bump: the undercarriage was obviously fractured. As soon as we sat down, we *really* sat down, and the whole thing collapsed. We slithered along the runway - how embarrassing! We were all supposed to be pretty hot stuff in each category of pilot, navigator and wireless operator, you see, as Transport Command. I remember looking

back, and there was poor old "Dimmie", covered in suitcases up to here - and he was grinning! He was a wonderful man, he really was.'

Many years later, by one of life's strange coincidences, daughter Jenny was recommended to school the horse belonging to none other than Dimmie's brother, Brigadier Harry Kenneth Dimoline CBE MBE DSO TD CPM. Naturally a reunion was swiftly arranged. The GOC had a good memory, and immediately reminded Ben that he had pranged him on his first trip!

The VIP crew were occasionally required to carry visiting dignitaries, such as MRAF Sir John Salmond GCB KCB CMG CVO DSO & Bar on 19th September 1947. All good things come to an end, and by the close of the year, Ben and his family were homeward bound on SS *Matiana*.

The start of a dull life? Not quite. Ben soon found himself in the hot seat of SATCO at Gatow Airport during the Berlin Air Lift. This post brought him into contact with AVM Don Bennett CB CBE DSO. The retired Pathfinder boss was none too pleased when Ben was forced to close the airfield on one occasion, due to fog - it was costing him a lot of money to have his Tudors grounded! Strangely enough, their paths were to cross yet again, some years later, when Don Bennett wished to extend Blackbushe Airport over some adjacent common land. A conflict of interests arose on account of the fact that the land had long been in use by equestrians, including Jenny, for the exercise of their horses...(For further Don Bennett memories, see Tom Jefferson's biography).

After Gatow, where Ben's next door neighbour was Rudolph Hess (he never met him), it was back to the UK again. Signals Leader posts at HQ 3 Group, Bomber Command, Bawtry Hall, and then HQ Transport Command, Bushey Park took care of the next two years.

Two entries, as a passenger, in Ben's logbook clearly reveal the arduous tasks he was required to perform during his sojourn with Transport Command:

'15th October 1950: BOAC Argonaut: To Singapore with team of officers from Transport Command and Air Ministry to prove route (radio facilities) for Vampires: London - Cyprus - Bahrain (Persian Gulf) - Bombay - Colombo - Tengah. Total: 35.00.

24th October 1950: Dakota: Changi - Butterworth (Malaya) - Bangkok (Siam) - Rangoon (Burma) - Calcutta - Delhi - Karachi - Sharjah (Arabia) - Bahrain (Persian Gulf) - Habbaniya (Iraq) - Mafraq (Trans-Jordan) - Fayid (Egypt) - El Adem - Malta - Istres - Oakington 7th November 1950. Total: 56.00'. Can't be bad!

At the end of the year, Ben was posted to No 3 RS at Compton Bassett to command a signallers' wing, tasked with the training of national servicemen. Just over 2½ years later, he was on the move again; this time, to No 2 ASS (Air Signals School) Halfpenny Green, in the capacity of CGI for signals. Eight months later, Ben commenced what was to prove his last posting in the RAF, that of Chief Air Instructor (Signals) at No 1 ASS, Swanton Morley. His last recorded entry in his logbook is for 29th June 1953, in an Avro Anson, tasked with 'Air Signaller Cadet Training'. One year later, Ben's first biographer - at that time, a fresh-faced ATC cadet - excitedly climbed aboard an Avro Anson for his very first flight.

Ben was invalided out of the RAF on Christmas day 1954, owing to a perforated eardrum. Following a three-month resettlement course at Balham and Tooting College of Commerce, he chose another radio-orientated job, and took employment with

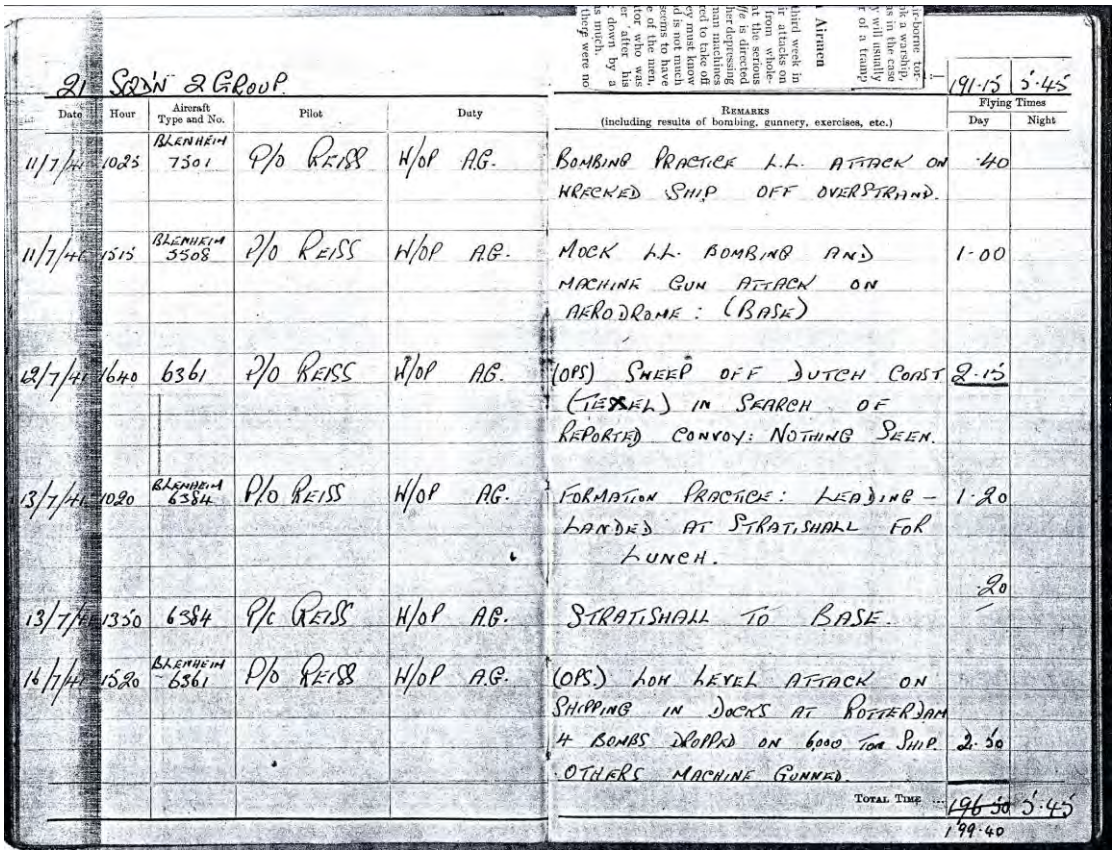
McMichael Radio of Slough on MOD contract work. Nineteen years later, Ben had become assistant to the works director and opted for retirement at the age of 60. He was released one year later, after a suitable replacement had been found, and has enjoyed retirement ever since. He is a keen bird-watcher (RSPB member) and a dedicated bowls enthusiast, with dual allegiance to the Cirencester Bowling Club (Life Member) and the élite Cotswold Strollers Bowling Club.

A modest man, Ben declared that he only reached officer rank 'because people were being bumped off so quickly'. He does concede, however, that he has probably not done too badly considering his foreshortened elementary school education. Thumbing through Ben's logbooks, with 'Above the Average' and 'A' Category assessments, I would tend to agree with that!

I asked Ben if he could provide me with a few more details concerning his 'Rotterdam' crew. 'Freddie Reiss was from a very wealthy family in Argentina', he replied, 'and must have been in cattle farming.' And he remembers well those happy days visiting the *Samson and Hercules* dance hall (later *Ritzy's Night Club*) in Norwich, in Freddie's lovely white Packard.

Ben was pleased to hear that Edmund Shewell had also survived the war, as a squadron leader. 'He was rather quiet', Ben recalls, 'and studious, I would say. Not one for parties, or anything like that. He was my height (5'8"), I should say, and had fairish hair.'

Our long-overdue interview had been well worth waiting for. But I had just one complaint, concerning Ben's membership of the Royal Air Forces Association. 'Why ever didn't you place an advert in our magazine, *Air Mail*. Rusty?' Ben asked me. I did - in the *Help* section of the Winter 1981 issue...



21 SQDN 2 GROUP

Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty	Remarks (including results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.)	Flying Times Day	Flying Times Night
						191·15	5·45
11/7/41	1025	BLENHEIM 7501	P/O REISS	H/OP AG.	BOMBING PRACTICE L.L. ATTACK ON WRECKED SHIP OFF OVERSTRAND.	·40	
11/7/41	1515	BLENHEIM 3508	P/O REISS	H/OP AG.	MOCK L.L. BOMBING AND MACHINE GUN ATTACK ON AERODROME: (BASE)	1·00	
12/7/41	1640	6361	P/O REISS	H/OP AG.	(OPS) SWEEP OFF DUTCH COAST (TEXEL) IN SEARCH OF REPORTED CONVOY: NOTHING SEEN.	2·15	
13/7/41	1020	BLENHEIM 6384	P/O REISS	H/OP AG.	FORMATION PRACTICE: LEADING — LANDED AT STRATISHALL FOR LUNCH.	1·20	
13/7/41	1350	6384	P/O REISS	H/OP AG.	STRATISHALL TO BASE.	·20	
16/7/41	1520	BLENHEIM 6361	P/O REISS	H/OP AG.	(OPS) LOW LEVEL ATTACK ON SHIPPING IN DOCKS AT ROTTERDAM 4 BOMBS DROPPED ON 6000 TON SHIP. OTHERS MACHINE GUNNED.	2·30	
					TOTAL TIME ...	196·50	5·45
						199·40	

Ben Nunn's logbook page for 16th July 1941 (Ben Nunn)

226 SQUADRON

WG CDR J.O.C. KERCHER DSO

In an article for the *Sunday Express*, published on 1st July 1973, I came across my first reference to Wg Cdr Kercher. The author, famous cricketer and ex-Blenheim pilot Bill Edrich, wrote: 'I never got very close to Kercher'. I deduced from this that the wing commander was probably made of granite or some similar substance. How wrong I was! Subsequent investigation revealed an entirely different personality: one with a warm heart and a wonderful sense of humour. All those I interviewed spoke very highly of him.

But in December 1982, the only information I had, other than the newspaper article, was a last-known address. As this happened to be in Ashburton, Devon, not many miles from where I was born, and I was staying with my parents at the time, a visit seemed well worthwhile. And so it turned out. The proprietor of the *Dartmoor Bookshop*, the local vicar, and the Kerchers' home help all kindly helped to build up a picture of the wing commander's life in Devon. A sad story emerged. Married before

the end of the war, the Kerchers lost a baby girl, their only child. Tragically, Owen's wife, Gwenda, died in 1961, after which he lived with his mother. During this time, his health gradually deteriorated, and after a long fight against an incurable illness, he died in July 1969. By a stroke of bad luck, I just missed the opportunity of meeting Owen's mother, Muriel, who died in a nursing home in Stevenage in December 1981. I traced the combined grave of Owen and Gwenda in Hitchin Cemetery. The inscription at the foot of the gravestone reads: *A hero to the end*. I wanted to know more, much more, about this gallant gentleman. Lady Luck did not desert me this time: I managed to trace an aunt of Owen's, living in South Africa, who kindly gave me permission to obtain her nephew's Record of Service. The 226 Squadron survivors were more than helpful, filling in many details: none more so than Owen's old WOp/AG, Canadian-born Bob Carey, then resident in Switzerland. Bob's contribution was priceless.

Wg Cdr John Owen Cecil Kercher, 'Daddy' to his RAF colleagues, was born in Brandfort, near Bloemfontein, South Africa, on 26th September 1916 - just three weeks after my cousin Len. Attending school initially at Queens College, Queenstown, and then later at Selborne College, East London, Owen tried a variety of jobs before deciding to come to England and join the RAF.

Acting Pilot Officer Kercher was granted a short-service commission, for four years, with effect from 29th November 1937. Pilot training was commenced at the Civil Flying School at Yatesbury, followed by periods at No 7 FTS (Waddington?) and No 2 SFTS (Brize Norton?). Owen's first two squadrons, 207 (Cottesmore?) and 98 (Scampton?), both operating Fairey Battles, were essentially training squadrons doing the work of OTUs. In April 1940, 98 Squadron moved to Nantes. Still in the training role, Owen may have looked into his crystal ball before requesting and obtaining a posting to 226 Squadron - a fully-operational squadron of the AASF - just six days before Hitler invaded the Low Countries.

Johnnie Brett recalls this hectic period of the war:

'I first knew [Owen] as a flying officer early in 1940 in France, on the banks of the River Loire. We were using an old wheat field as a landing field, and I remember him swimming in the river, wearing his No 1 hat and smoking as he was swimming!'

After the *Blitzkrieg* swept the AASF out of France, Owen continued the war, still flying Battles, but now operating from Belfast/Sydenham on anti-submarine patrols. Arthur Asker vividly recalls one particular sortie during this period:

'I remember one day when we were in Belfast flying Battles on the dawn or dusk anti-submarine patrol. [Owen] had the engine running when I joined the aircraft, after I'd done a bit of briefing. There was a strange-looking gunner sitting in the back seat, which I had to climb over: turned out to be one of his girlfriends! So she actually went on an operational trip! I was sworn to secrecy - you're the first person I've ever told this story to!'

The comparative rest-cure in Northern Ireland was rudely interrupted when 226 Squadron joined the 2 Group anti-shipping campaign in May 1941, moving to Wattisham and converting to Blenheim Mk IVs. Bob Carey recalls the briefing for one such raid:

'With his handlebar moustache (which gave him an undeserved look of severity), and receding hairline, [Wg Cdr Kercher] resembled the Russian, Marshal Budyonny. During the briefing for the low-level sweep against enemy wireless ships ['Squealers'] off the Dutch coast, 23rd June 1941, we were gathered around the briefing table when W/C Kercher entered. We came to attention, as he proceeded directly to the operations bulletin board and removed the "Battle Order", revealing a newspaper clipping of the famous general/marshal pinned underneath. Written across the top in red grease pencil was "GUESS WHO?" Without hesitation W/C Kercher turned and said very sternly: "Sgt Jones!" "Sir!", spluttered Sgt Jones. "Do you think that is a reasonable likeness of me?" A few seconds elapsed, and the culprit weakly mumbled: "Yes, sir!" "Good lad, Jones!" The tension was broken'.

On 23rd July 1941, Owen took over as CO of 21 Squadron from Tom Webster. He had progressed from flying officer to wing commander in just seven weeks: an achievement not uncommon amongst the carnage of 2 Group.

On 12th August 1941, Wg Cdr Kercher led the famous low-level attack on the Quadrath power station, Cologne, for which he was awarded the DSO. Bob Carey has vivid memories of this sortie:

'On one occasion, returning to the UK from the low-level attack on the power stations near Cologne, as we reached the open sea with the starboard engine smoking from a flak hit, I had reason to crawl forward over the bomb-well to the front of the aircraft. W/C Kercher noticed me and I shouted: "Everything OK, sir?" He grinned, gave a thumbs-up, and shouted back: "Splendid!" I pointed to two small holes (probably 9mm) in the Perspex directly above his head. He regarded the holes, looked at Evans [the observer] and back to me and shouted some retort about "people mucking up his aeroplane", and immediately asked if it was all right "back there".'

Towards the end of September 1941, Owen left 21 Squadron, and after a variety of staff jobs, joined 102 Squadron at Pocklington, Yorkshire, on 30th November 1943. Now part of the Strategic Bomber Offensive, Owen flew Halifax Mk IIs, then later Mk IIIs, before his posting in July 1944. Further staff work and assorted detachments completed Wg Cdr Kercher's war service. A period serving in the Royal Air Force Reserve of Officers was finally terminated when Owen relinquished his commission in November 1959.

In November 1956, Bob Carey payed a visit on the Kerchers at their home in Hitchin. He knocked on the door: Owen's attractive wife Gwenda appeared. 'I'd like to see the wing commander, please!', Bob requested. 'Who wants to see him?', Gwenda asked. 'Flt Lt Carey', Bob replied. 'I'll just go and fetch him', Gwenda said. Wg Cdr Kercher was overwhelmed at seeing Bob again. He took him over to the local pub, where all his old cronies were gathered. Owen, attracting their attention, asked Bob to stand on the table, and proudly exclaimed: 'This is my old WOp/AG in the Blenheim days!' Bob was plied with drink by all and sundry and left the pub in a drunken haze.

It was a nostalgic time for both of them. On one occasion, Owen turned round to Bob and asked him: 'How did you feel sitting in the back? I don't know how you did it! Weren't you scared to death?' Bob truthfully replied: 'No - I had great confidence in you.'

Bob has a priceless piece of 8mm film which he shot during this visit. Owen had changed quite a lot in appearance since the war years: he was wearing dark glasses

now, and still had a moustache, but it was no longer handlebar. Owen is seen standing with Gwenda, and holding Bob's daughter, Chris, whom he liked very much.

What did the 'chaps' feel about the wing commander? Arthur Asker: 'Steady chap; good pilot; always OK with me; very fair.' 'Warmy' Warmington: 'He was *very* well liked.' Bob Carey: 'Wg Cdr Kercher was one of the finest officers and gentlemen it has been my privilege to know. In the air and on the ground, his manner was always quiet, decisive and considerate. He was always absolutely calm.' John Castle: 'I remember with great affection John Kercher: a most likeable extrovert, slightly oversize man with a great moustache and a great sense of humour.'

Many years after these interviews, I was reading the *Blenheim Society's* Journal "*Bristol*" *BLENHEIM*, Issue 7, dated July 2012, when my eyes fell upon a request posted on page 13. It reads:

'*Our Ron Scott* [treasurer] *received the following from Michael George.*

Julian Horn suggested that I get in touch with you regarding my research into the life of **W/C John Owen Cecil Kercher DSO RAF** who married a cousin of mine. I am trying to find a photograph of him as I do not know what he looked like. Owen as he was known, was born in Brandfort, Bloemfontein, South Africa, in 1916. His father died in 1937 and he came to live in England with his mother.

In 1938 he joined the RAF as an acting Pilot Officer. He served with 98 and 266 [actually 226] Squadrons flying Fairey Battles in support of the BEF in France. On July 23, 1941 he was made acting Wing Commander and joined 21 Squadron at Watton as their CO. During his time at Watton he took part in Operation 77 (a raid on "Knapsack" and "Quadrath" Power Stations near Cologne on August 12 1941. He led the raid on Quadrath which earned him his DSO. He was still only 24 years of age at this time.

After 21 Squadron he had a spell in HQ 2 Group and HQ Bomber Command before taking a trip to the Far East where he narrowly missed being taken prisoner by Japanese forces. He joined 102 Squadron flying Halifaxes and in June 1944 whilst landing in bad weather at Pocklington, Yorkshire after a raid on a V1 launch site, he overshot and wrote the aircraft off. However, all the crew escaped unscathed.

I am learning more and more about Owen as time goes by; but I don't as yet have a photograph of him. Julian thought that you or your readers may be able to help with my request for a photograph or more information.

Regards,

Michael B. George.'

On 17th August 2012, I sent Michael two photographs of Wg Cdr Kercher, by email. He was most grateful, especially after I added Owen's biography. I thanked him for his information on Owen's 'prang' at Pocklington, and his short tour in Singapore, both of which were news to me. We then exchanged a series of mutually interesting emails, which included the following snippets. Michael mentioned a book by Gerry R. Rubin - *Durban 1942. A British Troopship Revolt* - which states that Owen was in charge of an RAF contingent en route to Singapore just before the Japanese got there. Referring to Owen's wife, Gwenda, he added that her parents were master and matron of Hitchin Workhouse, so she was probably born there! Not the nicest thing to appear on one's Birth Certificate!

The next issue of the Blenheim Society Journal (Issue 74, dated November 2012) contained the following entry on Page 8:

'**Thank You Rusty Russell**

A while ago you were kind enough to put a help wanted ad in the Society Journal for me. I am researching W/C John "Owen" Cecil Kercher.

In answer to my ad I received an email from Lionel "Rusty" Russell; one of your members. Rusty was able to supply me with lots of information regarding the Wing Commander and also supply two photographs. I will forever be in his debt for this, and would ask you to put a "thank you" in your journal regarding this. Thanks to the Blenheim Society my research has taken yet another giant leap forward..
Thank you again.
Regards
Michael B George.
(*Thanks Rusty, Ian* [Editor]*)*'

PLT OFF B.G. EVANS DFM
(OBSERVER IN KERCHER CREW)

'Daddy' Kercher's observer before Bryn Evans, veteran 'Ginger' Morgan, was the victim of his pilot's generosity and sense of fair play. Bryn, who had flown four operational sorties with Daddy Kercher on Battles when based in Belfast, must have given more than a passing thought to how fate could have dealt him the wild card instead of Ginger. This story, related by Bob Carey, must be typical of many such tragedies of that period:

'During the briefing for the shipping attack off Nordeney on 6th July 1941, in which ten ships were attacked, W/C Kercher asked Sgt Morgan if he would mind flying with a P/O Stickney, as Stickney's navigator was ill. Stickney was a seconded army co-op pilot and inexperienced (his first operation on Blenheims). As Kercher considered this operation not to be too difficult, he authorised the loan. Morgan sensed the end. We had both flown on practice low-level bombing exercises with Stickney and had had some "hairy do's". During the entire North Sea crossing to the convoy (they were flying our No 2) and at the target, Stickney's lack of experience was manifest. It was tragic to watch the death of a veteran navigator under these circumstances. It was not until we were on a return course, reassembled and flying straight and level, that I informed Kercher. The shock to Kercher could be felt over the intercom.'

Welsh-born Bryn Evans was a pre-war regular, enlisting one year before Britain declared war on Germany. Five months later, he joined 226 Squadron at Harwell, in which he continuously served until transferring to 21 Squadron Watton with Wg Cdr Kercher after the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941.

Bryn's time with Daddy Kercher was a memorable one. On the Rotterdam raid, it will be recalled, he received two lovely black eyes when a seagull smashed the Perspex in the nose of his Blenheim. For his excellent navigation in leading the force which attacked the Quadrath power station, Cologne, on 12th August 1941, he was awarded the DFM.

Bob Carey knew Bryn as well as anybody. He recalls:

'Bryn Evans was a quiet unassuming chap and a top-notch navigator. Although we roomed together at Wattisham and later at 17 OTU Upwood, I remember little about him, other than he was a well-liked, steady, sober, home-loving man.'

Bryn Evans posing in front of a Fairey Battle (Warmy Warmington)

Bryn's low profile was evident when he was commissioned in October 1942. Following a ten month stint on the staff of 17 OTU Upwood, Bryn had just joined the newly-formed 180 Squadron. Immaculate in his new livery, Bryn left the wilds of north Norfolk to pay a visit to his old mate Bob Carey - still at Upwood, and an officer of some eleven months seniority. Bob recalls that Bryn was very shy about entering the Officers' Mess. He stayed outside, waiting for the all-clear, while Bob

asked the Mess Steward to get him a packet of cigarettes. During the steward's absence, Bob rushed back and bundled Bryn, panting, into his room!

Operating Mitchell Mk IIs now, from Foulsham, 180 Squadron flew its first operation in January 1943, as a medium bomber unit in 2 Group. Following the loss of two aircraft out of six, further operations were shelved until mid-May. Bryn completed three operational sorties that month as Sqn Ldr J.T. Hanafi's navigator before the fateful day arrived - 25th May 1943.

At 0940 hours, Sqn Ldr Hanafi took off in Mitchell Mk II, FL 175, leading a box of six aircraft to bomb the aerodrome at Abbeville, as part of a *Circus* operation. Heavy and accurate flak was encountered in the target area; and during the bombing run, Bryn's aircraft received a direct hit from flak, causing it to disintegrate. Bryn is buried in the cemetery at Abbeville.

How do his other colleagues remember him? Arthur Asker recalls: 'Bryn was a close friend of mine. Short, chunky, very good rugby player, non-smoker. Used to get drunk just like the rest of us, quite normally!' And Warmy Warmington: 'Bryn was a great friend of mine - we joined up together.' Warmy's extensive wartime photograph album contains several shots of his good friend.

Bryn Evans and Warmy Warmington, No 226 Sqn Wattisham (Warmy Warmington)

FLT LT R.O.C. CAREY RCAF
(WOp/AG IN KERCHER CREW)

In March 1984, a letter from Switzerland was pushed through my letterbox. Full of curiosity, I opened it. To my surprise and delight, it was from Canadian-born Bob Carey, who had found the lifestyle and culture of the European continent vastly preferable to that of the continent of his origins. Frank Campbell-Rogers had kindly informed Bob of my research project.

Bob was to prove not only a valuable source of information for this book, but also a very good friend. The writing of his biography is not so much a search for information but more a question of how best to précis the wealth of information available to me, yet still portray the essence of my friend.

Bob's contribution to this book will have already been noted; but what sort of life has he led? To have survived any length of time on Battles in the AASF and Blenheims in 2 Group, there is only one answer - lucky!

Born in Goderich, Ontario, in December 1921, Bob realised that if it was adventure he wanted, the last place to be in 1938 was the wrong side of the Atlantic. Accordingly, he joined the RAF as a Boy Entrant u/t Wireless Operator in September of that year. After training at No 1 E&WS, Cranwell, Bob was posted as a wireless

operator to the Sector Operations Centre at RAF Turnhouse in Scotland (now Edinburgh Airport), just in time for the outbreak of war. Curiously, Bob described his work as a sector controller as the most interesting part of his RAF service, as he was in constant touch with the fighter pilots as they were vectored onto any bomber in the vicinity. Curious, because everybody knows how boring fighter pilots can be, and no one else that I have ever met has enthused about being 'sent down the hole'.

By the end of the year, Bob was experiencing that well-known urge, and remustered to aircrew. After a course at No 9 B&GS, Penrhos in Wales, Bob joined No 12 OTU, Benson, as a fully qualified WOp/AG in April 1940. On 1st June, Bob was posted to 226 Squadron in France, at a hectic time for the AASF.

Memory is strange: it seems to hold on to the good and hilarious times and discard the poignant. Bob's is no exception. He vividly recalls an incident during the dark days of the war:

'The rate of exchange in France in 1940 for the £ Sterling was 240F to the pound. As young AC1 WOp/AGs, our basic pay was ten bob [50p] a week plus one and six [7½p] per day risk allowance - about £1 a week or 240 French Francs. I mention this to illustrate the discrepancy between the pay of the French soldiers (14F per week) and ourselves; consequently, we were somewhat in the position of the Yanks in the UK in '43 versus the RAF, paywise.

The commandeered farmers' fields we were using as an advanced airfield in May and June of '40 were near the single street village of Suzé, a village that boasted two or three earthen-floored wine cellars, generally equipped with long tables and benches. Off duty we would frequent one or all of these Bistros.

On the afternoon in question, I was with Bob Beal [Jock Paton's WOp/AG on the Rotterdam raid]; wearing our 38s etc, we occupied the only two-place table in the Bistro. When we realised that a bottle of Champagne cost *only* 14/15 Francs (a week's pay for the *Poilus*), we ordered a bottle each and began (under the bemused stares of 20/25 *Poilus* sitting at the long tables and drinking 20/30-centime glasses of *vin du pays*) with a disgusting display of bravado, wealth, and tactlessness (the French army was in full retreat) to consume both bottles.

An hour or so later, the peace was shattered by a low-flying, machine-gunning Dornier 17, the first of five or six passing over the village to bomb the dispersed Fairey Battles. (This happened two or three times a week). The half-inebriated RAF types rushed outside and began firing their 38s at the Dorniers, which were making repeated passes, and at the local building chimney pots. I don't know where Bob Beal got to, but I nipped around the corner of the Bistro, and with drawn revolver, Champagne and glass, ran up a ladder, whose end protruded several feet over the apex of the roof of a nearby barn. A Do was passing 50/60 feet directly overhead. I could clearly see the air-gunners, so I fired away as it passed on to the airfield. Suddenly, I heard and felt, almost simultaneously, the roar of a Do's engines, machine guns, and bullets striking the barn just to the right of the ladder. I remember vaguely gripping the sides of the ladder with my elbows, removing feet from the rung, and making a rapid and more or less controlled descent. Landing on my back, and with gun, Champagne and glass intact, I was almost instantly grabbed by the ankles and dragged, dazed and bruised, across the yard and down the steps leading to the cave of the Bistro, by a young engine mechanic (whom I knew), who had taken shelter there. We finished the bottle together.'

By mid-June, the squadron had begun the hasty retreat from France. Ground personnel did a swift exit-stage-left towards Rennes, vividly recorded in the squadron ORB, while the fly-boys pointed their machines in the general direction of England. Bob's Battle made a slight detour by way of the island of Guernsey, for understandable reasons.

It all started in August 1939, when Bob took some leave to visit Guernsey, where his grandfather had lived before emigrating to Canada in 1850. There, Bob met and fell in love with Georgette Rufenacht, a young lady born in Belgium of Swiss parentage, and domiciled in Guernsey for some three years. Bob clearly remembers the feeling of anguish as he overflew his fiancée, with a strong temptation to bale out and go to her assistance. But Georgy was made of the right stuff and managed to leave on the last boat out of Guernsey before the Nazi occupation at the end of the month. Bob added:

'One amusing coincidence [was that] my aunt in Victoria B.C. met an old friend in downtown Victoria (in the summer of 1940) whose husband was the Belgian Consul in Victoria, and during the ensuing conversation, mentioned that her nephew was in France, that they were worried and had not had news for some time. Mrs Gekman commiserated, and said that her husband's sister's daughter had managed to escape on the last boat from Guernsey to England, and that they too were concerned. Was her name by any chance Georgette Rufenacht? A small world!'

Meanwhile, the situation aboard Bob's battle was critical. With no navigational equipment, no ammunition, and very little fuel (not helped by the detour!), the Battle crossed the Channel at wave-top height, just reaching Brighton before having to force-land. The crew's appearance was so dishevelled that they were assumed to be deserters, and incarcerated in jail overnight. The next day, after identification, the famous British hospitality was restored.

Now based in Belfast and carrying out anti-submarine patrols - perhaps the safest employment for the obsolete Battles - Bob took the plunge, and married Georgy in London in January 1941.

Bob well remembers one particular incident during his last days on Battles, which nearly caused a curtailment of his career. Bob, in fact, owes his life to Ginger Morgan, Daddy Kercher's observer before he loaned him with tragic consequences. What happened was that Daddy Kercher bunted the aircraft, normally a safe enough manoeuvre if the chain from the floor of the Battle is attached to a clip near the crotch of the air-gunner's harness. But Bob's was not attached, and the ensuing negative 'g' caused him to leave the aircraft, minus parachute! Ginger just caught Bob by the ankles and prevented him from going any further.

In June 1941, Bob was in 2 Group, based at Wattisham, operating Blenheims. As if there was not enough carnage on operations, Bob remembers several horrific accidents when the Blenheims were on training flights. One such occurrence took place after Bob had been posted to 21 Squadron (23rd July 1941). Wg Cdr Kercher was leading a vic of three, when his No 2 suffered an engine failure on take-off, rolling over onto its back and hitting the No 3, crashing together. Wg Cdr Kercher hurriedly came round, slapping his Blenheim onto the ground and causing his port undercarriage to collapse. He and his crew rushed over to try and render assistance, but both aircraft were ablaze by then and the crew were beaten back by the flames. To make matters worse, the fire-tender arrived and when the valve was turned on, no foam emerged. One of the air-gunners had been a good friend of Bob's, and the

suffering of those poor crews is something that he can never forget. Fate is not discerning - both crews were very experienced. Referring to W.R. Chorley's *Royal Air Force BOMBER COMMAND LOSSES of the Second World War 1941*, this would appear to be the collision that occurred on 28th July 1941, at Swanton Morley, between 21 Sqn's Blenheim Mk IV, P6954, and 88 Sqn's Blenheim Mk I, L1342.

For his contribution to the raid on the Fortuna Power Station at Quadrath, Cologne, on 12th August 1941, Wg Cdr Kercher recommended Bob for the award of the DFM. Due to an administrative cock-up, Bob never received his 'gong'. When Bob visited the Kerchers in Hitchin after the war, the wing commander confessed that he was sorry to this day that he had never followed it up. Such are the fortunes of war and their rewards.

During a detachment to Lossiemouth in September 1941, Bob had two memorable experiences. The first occurred after an evening out at Elgin, when Bob was trying to make his way back to Lossiemouth. When he was about five miles from Elgin, he saw an aircraft coming in to land, and then he spotted a parked Wellington and a sentry. The sentry-box had a rifle and bayonet propped up outside it, while the sentry was having a pee. Bob picked up the rifle and went over to the sentry and said: 'Excuse me, but is this yours?' The sentry was grateful. Bob continued: 'Do you know where the Blenheims are parked?' The sentry disconcertedly replied: 'What Blenheims?' Bob said: 'Oh my God, isn't this Lossiemouth?' 'No!' was the reply, 'It's Kinloss - you're the wrong side of Elgin: you've got another ten miles to go!' So poor old Bob hiked back to Elgin, and having had just about enough by the time he got there, sat down on the steps of a building. The sound of heavy footsteps approaching, stopping, and then mounting the steps: it was a policeman. Bob explained his predicament. The policeman replied: 'Look, if you keep quiet, I'll put you in a cell, but I've got to lock it up if you don't mind. Don't tell the Sergeant or I'll really be in it!' Bob was quite happy with the arrangements. In the morning, when he was 'released', he was taken to Lossiemouth and was at briefing before anyone else.

The other memorable experience followed a session when Bob was trying to clear his guns of stoppages, of the worst kind - when one shell is pushed up the case of another. Using a special tool to bore them out, Bob was getting absolutely filthy, when Bryn Evans suddenly shouted to him: 'Hey! The AOC's coming with the Station Commander!' They informed Wg Cdr Kercher, and the three of them, all filthy, came smartly to attention outside their aircraft. The AOC said: 'Sergeant Carey?' 'Sah!', Bob fired back. AOC: 'Have you just been on operations?' Bob: 'Yes, sir!' AOC: 'See any enemy aircraft?' Bob: 'Yes, sir!' AOC: 'Did you have any hits?' Bob: 'Don't know, sir!' The AOC turned round to the Station Commander and said, in a leg-pulling tone of voice: 'What sort of air-gunners have you got, who don't know if they've hit enemy aircraft?' Then, out of the blue, he said to Bob: 'Well, Sergeant Carey, how would you like your commission?' Bob, dumbfounded, did not know what to say. Wg Cdr Kercher, for the only time in his life, got annoyed, and said to Bob: 'Sergeant Carey - answer the AOC!' Bob meekly replied: 'Er, thank you sir!' About two months later, the commission came through.

Not all encounters with German fighters were unpleasant. Bob remembers a time when they were attacking a target in two vics of three Blenheims apiece, and they passed six Messerschmitt Bf 110s going in the opposite direction, but about 800 yards away and just outside effective gun range. Neither of the formations fired: they just looked at each other. They were both on their way to their respective targets. After the war, Bob actually met one of the Bf 110 pilots: they compared their logbooks and realised that they had passed each other!

The start of his commissioned service coincided with the end of Bob's operational flying. A succession of instructional tours at various gunnery and armament schools and OTUs must have nearly finished him off by the time the end of the war loomed up. In March 1945, on a whim, he transferred to the RCAF; a decision, he candidly admits, he has regretted ever since, wishing that he had stayed in the RAF.

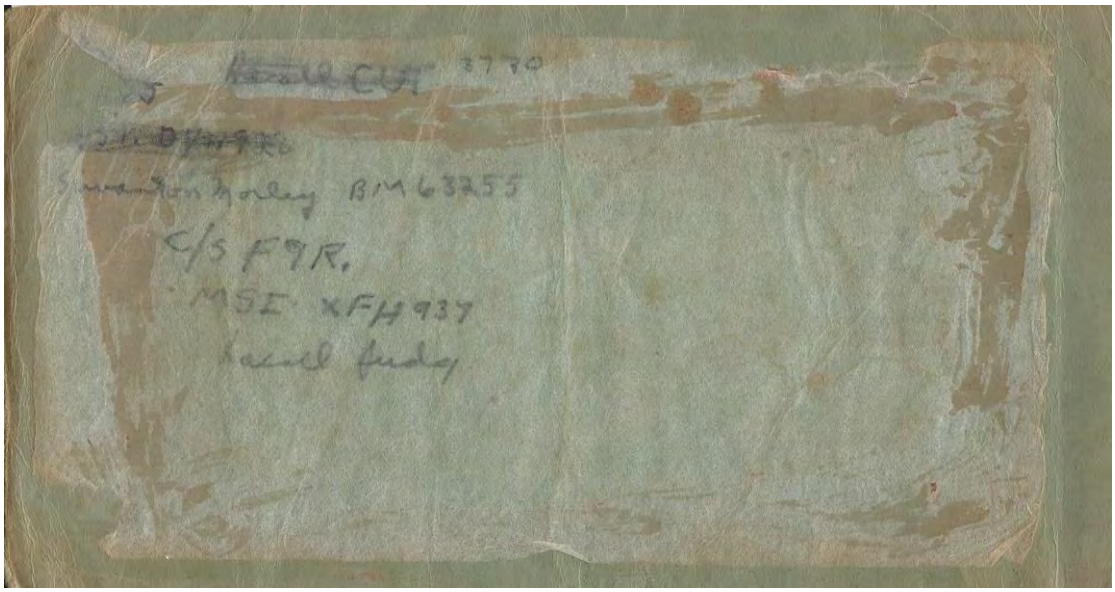
For much of Bob's RCAF service he was concerned with the development of ECM, and was once again employed as an instructor. In 1963, the RCAF dangled the usual carrot in front of him: 'If you stay in, you'll get Squadron Leader!' Bob elected, instead, to accept their offer to stay on in a civilian capacity in Metz, retiring to Switzerland one year later.

Since then, Bob has managed a caravan site near his home, and his wife Georgy has run a small boutique.

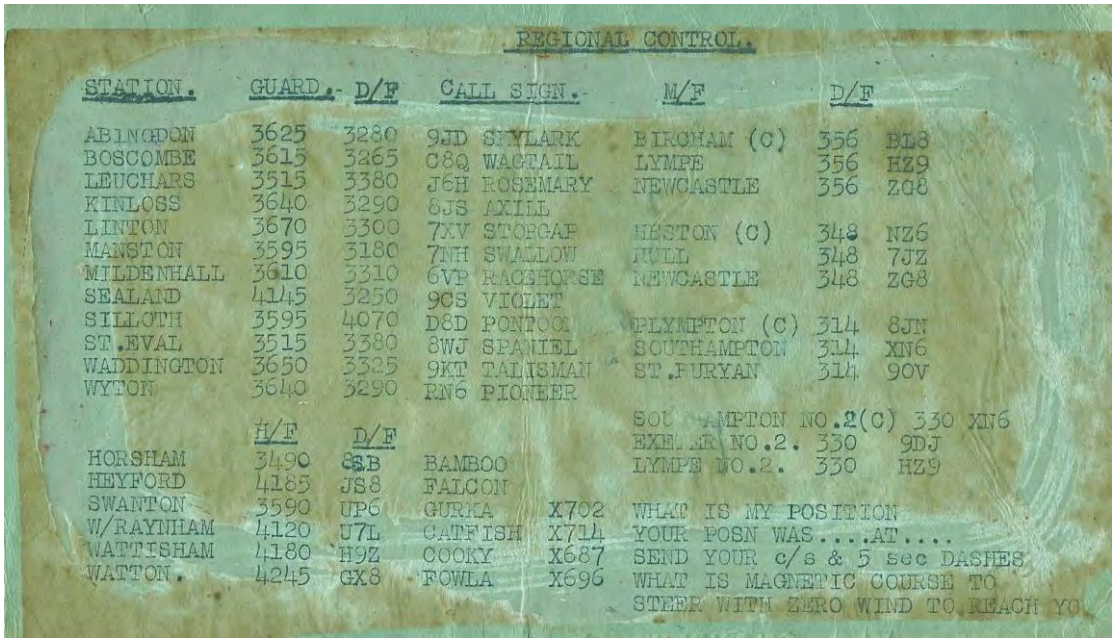
The hospitality lavished upon us by the Careys, when my wife and I met them at their charming home in Switzerland, in October 1984, was overwhelming. It was also a memorable experience in other ways. Evenings often stretched into the early hours of the morning to the strains of German marching songs, and Bob's no mean rendering on his harmonica. To be honest, we were somewhat surprised at Bob's obsessional admiration for the German war effort, particularly concerning the *Waffen SS*. Great fighters, certainly, but Bob seems to have forgotten Oradour-sur-Glane and the dreadful extermination camps.

One understandable legacy of the war years, which we discovered from his daughter Chris, is that Bob will not go near an aircraft now, and will not allow any of his family to fly either.

At the end of our stay, Bob presented me with his signals book. On the left-hand page, composed of rice-paper, would be written the latest orders: this has the recall codeword *JUDY* inscribed. Bob reckons that he still had possession of it because the authorities forgot to collect them after the recall. Bob also gave me his *AIR PUBLICATION 982: AIRCRAFT W/T OPERATING SIGNALS 1939.* Perusing the list of X Codes, I would guess that X703 (*What is my D/F bearing from you? Request bearings every ..... minutes for homing purposes*) would be the most popular, with X707 (*What is the true course to steer with zero wind to reach you?*) coming a close second! These books are some of my most treasured possessions.



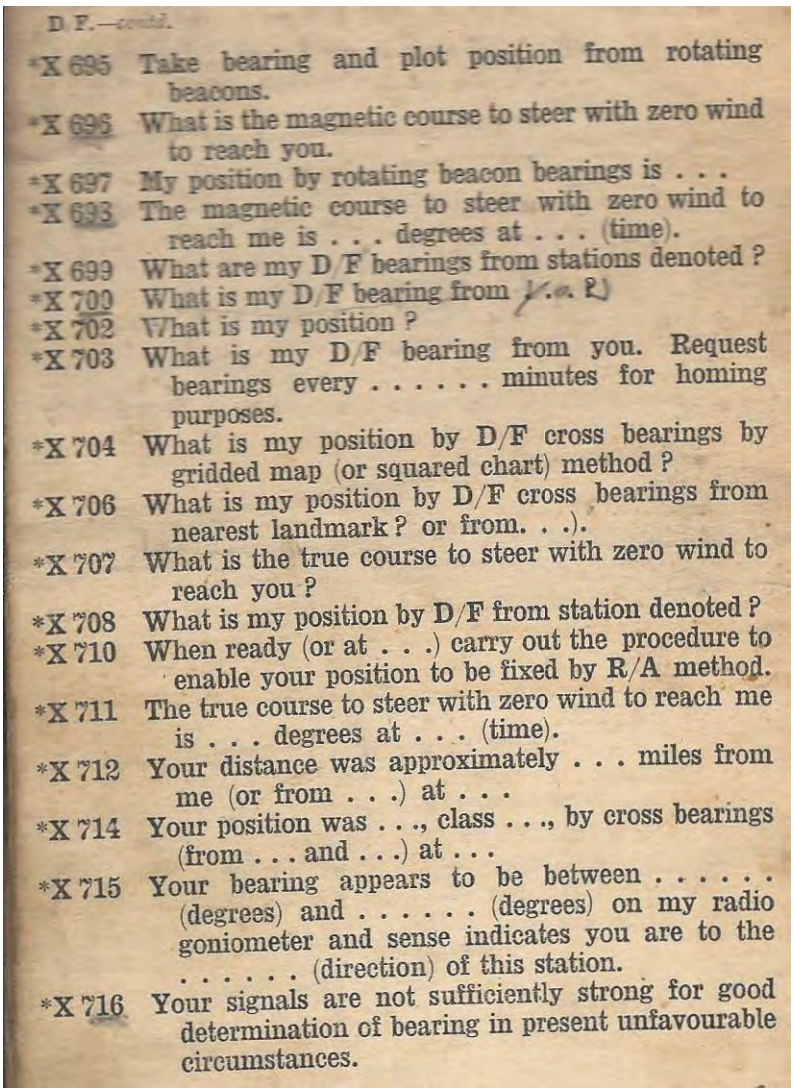
Bob Carey's signals book, left hand side, with recall codeword 'Judy' (Bob Carey)



REGIONAL CONTROL.

STATION.	GUARD.	D/F	CALL SIGN.		M/F		D/F
ABINGDON	3625	3280	9JD	SKYLARK	BIRCHAM (C)	356	BL8
BOSCOMBE	3615	3265	C8Q	WAGTAIL	LYMPE	356	HZ9
LEUCHARS	3515	3380	J6H	ROSEMARY	NEWCASTLE	356	ZG8
KINLOSS	3640	3290	8JS	AXILL			
LINTON	3670	3300	7XV	STOPGAP	HESTON (C)	348	NZ6
MANSTON	3595	3180	7NH	SWALLOW	HULL	348	7JZ
MILDENHALL	3610	3310	6VP	RACEHORSE	NEWCASTLE	348	ZG8
SEALAND	4145	3250	9CS	VIOLET			
SILLOTH	3595	4070	D8D	PONTOON	PLYMPTON (C)	314	8JN
ST.EVAL	3515	3380	8WJ	SPANIEL	SOUTHAMPTON	314	XN6
WADDINGTON	3650	3325	9KT	TALISMAN	ST.FURYAN	314	9OV
WYTON	3640	3290	RN6	PIONEER			
					SOUTHAMPTON NO.2(C)	330	XN6
	H/F	D/F			EXELSIOR NO.2.	330	9DJ
HORSHAM	3490	SB	BAMBOO		LYMPE NO.2.	330	HZ9
HEYFORD	4185	JS8	FALCON				
SWANTON	3590	UP6	GURKA	X702	WHAT IS MY POSITION		
W/RAYNHAM	4120	U7L	CATFISH	X714	YOUR POSN WAS....AT....		
WATTISHAM	4180	H9Z	COOKY	X687	SEND YOUR c/s & 5 sec DASHES		
WATTON.	4245	GX8	FOWLA	X696	WHAT IS MAGNETIC COURSE TO STEER WITH ZERO WIND TO REACH YO		

Bob Carey's signals book, right hand side, with Regional Control (Bob Carey)



D.F.—contd.

*X 695 Take bearing and plot position from rotating beacons.

*X 696 What is the magnetic course to steer with zero wind to reach you.

*X 697 My position by rotating beacon bearings is . . .

*X 698 The magnetic course to steer with zero wind to reach me is . . . degrees at . . . (time).

*X 699 What are my D/F bearings from stations denoted ?

*X 700 What is my D/F bearing from [illegible]

*X 702 What is my position ?

*X 703 What is my D/F bearing from you. Request bearings every . . . . . minutes for homing purposes.

*X 704 What is my position by D/F cross bearings by gridded map (or squared chart) method ?

*X 706 What is my position by D/F cross bearings from nearest landmark ? or from. . .).

*X 707 What is the true course to steer with zero wind to reach you ?

*X 708 What is my position by D/F from station denoted ?

*X 710 When ready (or at . . .) carry out the procedure to enable your position to be fixed by R/A method.

*X 711 The true course to steer with zero wind to reach me is . . . degrees at . . . (time).

*X 712 Your distance was approximately . . . miles from me (or from . . .) at . . .

*X 714 Your position was . . ., class . . ., by cross bearings (from . . . and . . .) at . . .

*X 715 Your bearing appears to be between . . . . . (degrees) and . . . . . (degrees) on my radio goniometer and sense indicates you are to the . . . . . (direction) of this station.

*X 716 Your signals are not sufficiently strong for good determination of bearing in present unfavourable circumstances.

Bob Carey's AP 982: Aircraft W/T Operating Signals 1939 (Bob Carey)

SQN LDR J. ONIONS DFM & BAR

No 2 Group was graced with a plenitude of dynamic personalities such as Sir Basil Embry and the Earl of Bandon. Jack Onions was certainly another. That he did not reach the highest echelons in the RAF was that service's great loss, and another example of how promotion can depend on whether one's face fits with the Establishment or it does not. I shall attempt to explain why Jack Onions fell in the latter category.

Tracing Jack was relatively easy. Still featuring in a recent RAF Retired List, Sqn Ldr J. Onions DFM & Bar could be none other than the man I very much wanted to contact. MOD kindly forwarded my letter to him.

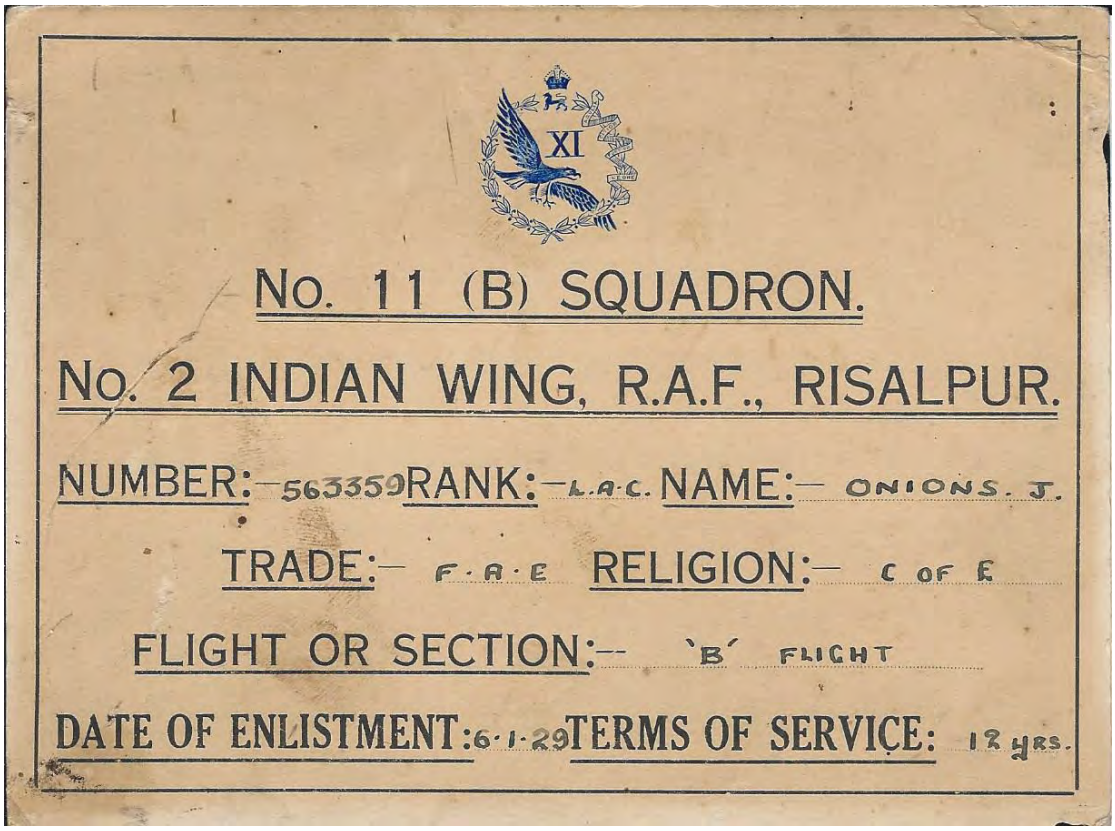
In due course, a letter with a Middlesbrough postmark was delivered to my house, and, to my delight, turned out to be from Jack. 'Your letter of 12th March 1982', he wrote, 'arrived from the MOD this morning. I was somewhat relieved on opening it that my services are not required in the South Atlantic at present...' [The Falklands War]. Jack then went on to describe his contretemps with the Station Warrant Officer at Watton on the day of the Rotterdam raid., when the 226 Sqn contingent had been refused permission to eat until 21 Sqn had finished. I realised that here was a man who was not afraid to stick up for his rights, and looked forward to meeting him.

The opportunity presented itself a few weeks later, when my wife and I were on holiday in the Lake District. A short drive across the Pennines and we were there.

The day was an historian's dream. My only regret is that I had not then had the foresight to invest in a portable tape-recorder. The notes I made were extensive, but no substitute for the spoken word, and no permanent record of Jack's voice. Life is full of missed opportunities, and Fate can be very unforgiving; I never had another chance to redeem this error.

Jack seemed to have been in the RAF forever and a day. Indeed, he was the longest serving participant of the Rotterdam raid, bar one - Robbie Robertson, who had signed up three full years before Jack. I felt privileged to have made Jack's acquaintance, and formed the impression, quite correctly, that his biography would be pure dynamite and a joy to write.

Shortly after our meeting, Jack wrote to me: 'We thoroughly enjoyed your visit - a full day of monumental line-shooting: does the old ego a power of good.' Not a bit of it! I can recognise a line-shooter from a hundred paces and, if anything, Jack was holding back on the many experiences I was to learn about from other sources.



Jack Onions' ID Card as a humble LAC on No 11 (B) Sqn, Risalpur, Northwest Frontier in October 1934 (Jack Onions)

Jack Onions (nearest), preparing to board a Vickers Virginia of the Parachute Test Flight, Henlow, in the early 1930s (Jack Onions)

Hawker Hart K2098 over the Kabul River, Northwest Frontier. 'I was an unpaid volunteer air-gunner' Jack Onions recalled. (Jack Onions)

Jack Onions and pilot 'Red' ready for a 'recco' in Hawker Hart K2103 (Jack Onions)

Jack enlisted at Halton as a Boy Service Aircraft Apprentice in January 1929, becoming a fully qualified Fitter Aero Engines three years later. In October 1934, after nearly three years on the Parachute Test Flight at Henlow, LAC Onions leaped at the chance of some action and embarked for India. To form some idea of what life was like at that time, in this particular theatre of the British Empire, I can do no better than recommend two excellent books: *The Luck of the Devil* by Air Vice-Marshal A.G Dudgeon and *Never Stop the Engine When it's Hot* by Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee. Jack Onions and Tony Dudgeon served on No 11 (B) Sqn, Risalpur, at the same time. The main difference is that Tony was an officer and a pilot, whereas Jack was a lowly LAC and, in his own words, 'an unpaid volunteer air-gunner.' Jack recalled: 'You had to take turns: if there were more than twelve gunners on the unit, you never got paid.' However, this willingness to volunteer for hazardous operational flying in single-engined Hawker Hart aircraft over the Northwest Frontier, with no remuneration, did not go unnoticed when Jack applied later for a pilot's course.

Jack clearly remembered the 'goolie-chit' system in operation at that time. The return of 'intact' aircrew by rebel tribesmen would be rewarded by the princely sum of £100 for a pilot, but only half that amount for a gunner! More often than not, Jack recalled, the exchange would be completed with naked prisoners, presumably for ease of inspection of the quality of the merchandise.

Promotion was painfully slow during this time. Jack's explanation: 'I never took my promotion exams!'

On 23rd September 1936, Fg Off Barber gave Jack his first flying lesson, covering 'Taxiing, Controls and Level Flying' . The aircraft was a Blackburn B2, registration G-ADZM (I can't remember this type on my fag-packet cards!). The location was Blackburn's Flying School, Brough, Yorkshire. When the course was completed at the end of November, Jack had amassed the grand total of 50 hours flying as a pilot.

The next month, Jack was on his way out to the East again, aboard the SS *Oronsay*, destined this time for Egypt, namely No 4 FTS Abu Sueir. Three and a half years would elapse before Jack was posted back to Blighty.

Advanced flying instruction commenced in January 1937 on the Hawker Hart - a type that Jack had got to know well on the Northwest Frontier. Training was also carried out in the Hawker Audax and Avro Tutor, the latter being used solely for instrument flying instruction. That July, Sgt Jack Onions was attached to No 216 (Bomber-Transport) Squadron, for training on the Vickers Valentia. Some pilots are destined to be 'truckies' and others are not: Jack was not and returned to No 4FTS in September for a quick refresher course before joining No 6 (B) Sqn at Ismailia, Egypt, again operating the Hawker Hart.

In December, the historical enmity between Arabs and Jews erupted in Palestine, and No 6 Sqn was called upon to render assistance to the police and army. Operating from bases at Ramleh, Samakh and Haifa, and alternating between Harts and Hardys, this proved to be a significant time in Jack's career. Three certificates, honouring his 'distinguished conduct in action' were presented to Jack, in recognition of his operations at Attil on 26th August 1938, Al Bira on 1st October 1938 and Bani Na'im on 18th December 1938.

Some idea of what Jack was up against is apparent in his Formal Official letter to the OC No 6 (Bomber) Squadron, dated 3rd October 1938, regarding the 'Flying Accident involving the loss of Hardy K4064.' It reads:

Sir,

I have the honour to submit the following report on the above mentioned accident.

At 1540 hours on 1st October 1938, I was detailed to take part in an action against armed Arab Bands near AL BIRA, Palestine. I took air action there, and having expended most of my ammunition and as daylight was beginning to fade, I decided to set course for Ramleh but was again fired on from a nearby area. I again took air action during which my aircraft was hit by enemy rifle fire.

As far as I could ascertain, the aircraft was hit in the radiator and main petrol tank. Petrol, water and thick black smoke immediately poured out from the engine so I headed for Ramleh and gained as much height as possible.

About five minutes afterwards, during which time the engine had boiled, the oil pressure had dropped and the engine was losing power rapidly, I warned my air gunner to stand by to evacuate the aircraft.

Due to the rapidly failing light, the hilly nature of the country and the fact that my vision was obscured due to the burning nature of the engine, I ordered my air gunner to leave the aircraft. I watched his parachute open safely and then, as the engine had seized and was pouring forth masses of black smoke, I decided to abandon the aircraft.

The air gunner and myself landed safely about three miles north of LATRUN and the aircraft crashed about 300 yards to the South West. After landing, owing to the hostile nature of the country, we immediately sought cover near the road. Another aircraft remained over us until darkness and then flew away towards Ramleh. On the departure of the aircraft we dug a hole in the ground as an aid to our protection.

Whilst we were hiding the enemy commenced firing at the aircraft and parachutes which we had been forced to leave where we landed. The enemy came from the surrounding villages and set fire to the aircraft wreckage.

About 1½ hours later, we were still surrounded by Arabs who were sniping the aircraft covering the area, but were rescued by an armoured car escort which had

been sent out from Ramleh following the report of the pilot who had covered our descent.

The party returned to Ramleh arriving there at approximately 2015 hours.

I am Sir,
Your obedient Servant,
(Signed) J. Onions. Sgt.
563359

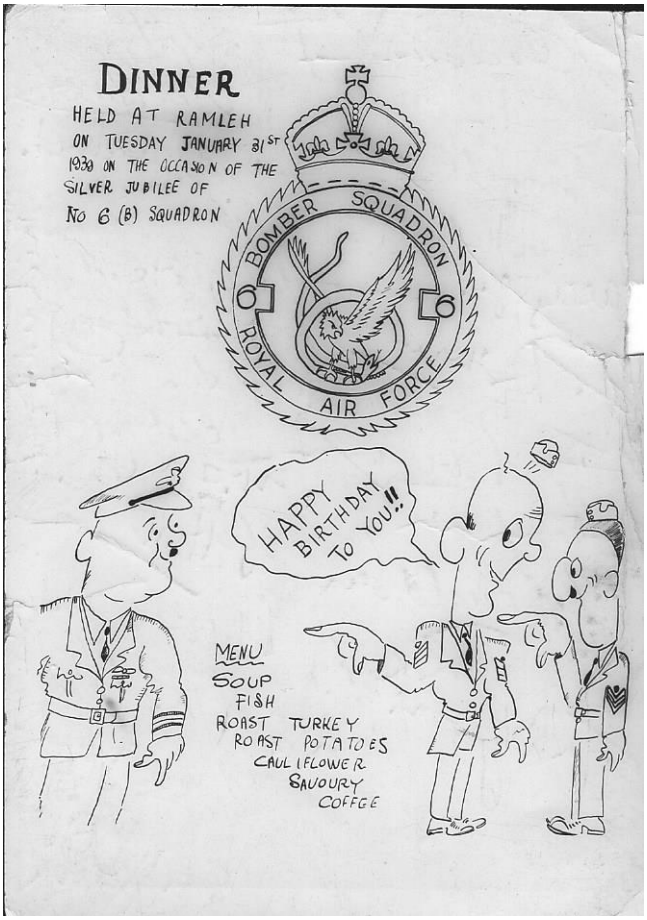
At the end of the year, Jack received a letter from HQ, RAF Palestine and Trans-Jordan, Jerusalem, dated 28th December 1938. It reads
:

My Dear Onions,

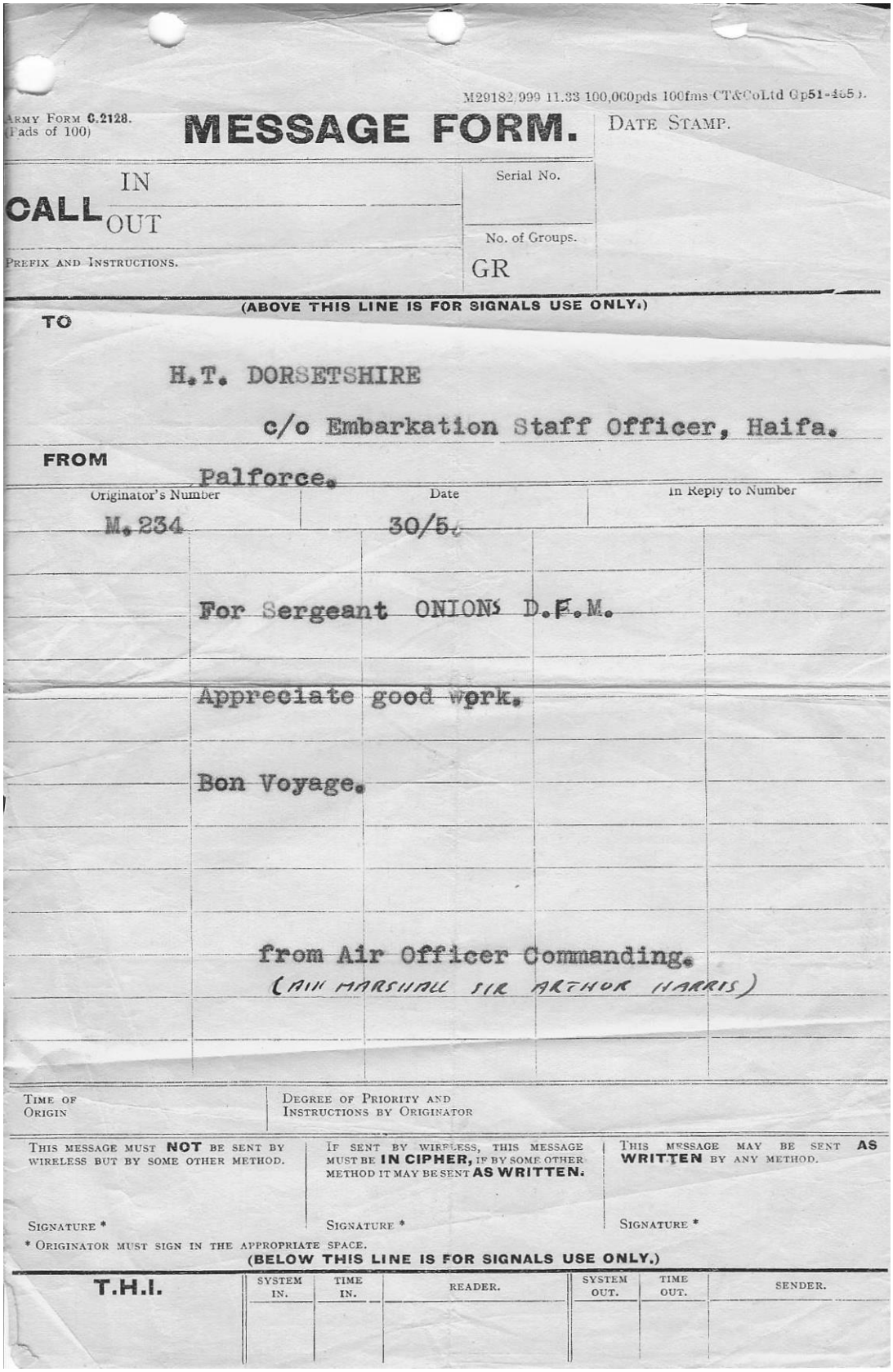
My best congratulations on the award of the DFM, which you have so very well earned.

The signal promulgating the award seems to have gone astray in this Headquarters, otherwise I should have written sooner. It was, in fact, only when I was about to ask the Air Ministry by signal what had happened to the recommendation I had submitted that I found that the award had already been made. Yours sincerely,
(signed) A.T. HARRIS

Jack Onions after being presented with his first DFM in Palestine (Jack Onions)



No 6 (B) Sqn, Ramleh, Palestine - Dinner on 31st January 1939 to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of the formation of the Squadron (Jack Onions)



M29182/999 11.33 100,000pds 100fms CT&CoLtd Gp51-465).

ARMY FORM C.2128. (Pads of 100)

MESSAGE FORM.

DATE STAMP.

CALL IN / OUT

Serial No.

No. of Groups. GR

PREFIX AND INSTRUCTIONS.

(ABOVE THIS LINE IS FOR SIGNALS USE ONLY.)

TO

H.T. DORSETSHIRE

c/o Embarkation Staff Officer, Haifa.

FROM Palforce.

Originator's Number	Date	In Reply to Number
M.234	30/5.	

For Sergeant ONIONS D.F.M.

Appreciate good work.

Bon Voyage.

from Air Officer Commanding.
(AIR MARSHALL SIR ARTHUR HARRIS)

TIME OF ORIGIN

DEGREE OF PRIORITY AND INSTRUCTIONS BY ORIGINATOR

THIS MESSAGE MUST **NOT** BE SENT BY WIRELESS BUT BY SOME OTHER METHOD.

IF SENT BY WIRELESS, THIS MESSAGE MUST BE **IN CIPHER,** IF BY SOME OTHER METHOD IT MAY BE SENT **AS WRITTEN.**

THIS MESSAGE MAY BE SENT **AS WRITTEN** BY ANY METHOD.

SIGNATURE *

SIGNATURE *

SIGNATURE *

* ORIGINATOR MUST SIGN IN THE APPROPRIATE SPACE.

(BELOW THIS LINE IS FOR SIGNALS USE ONLY.)

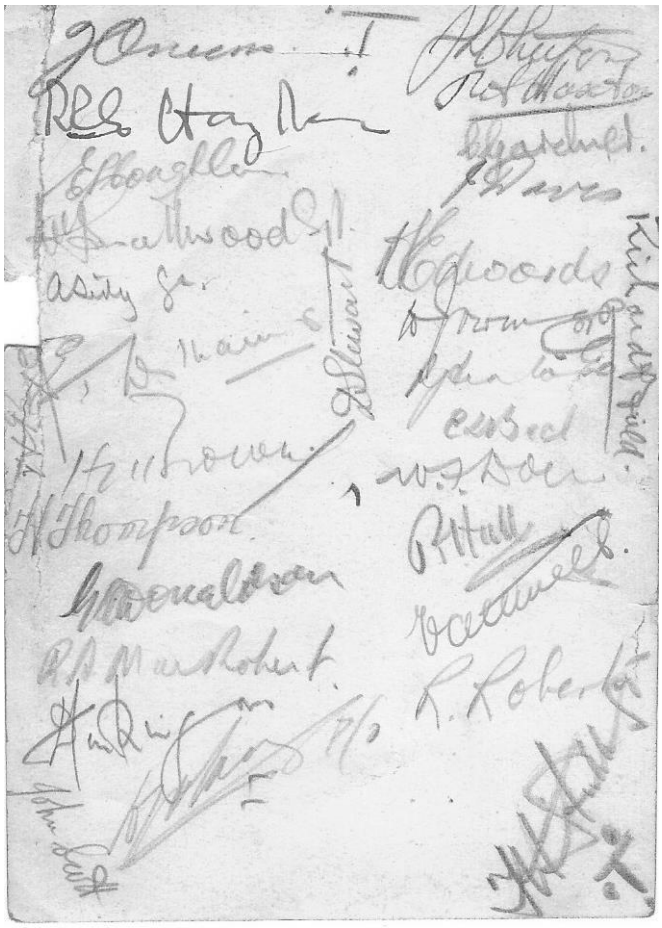
T.H.I.	SYSTEM IN.	TIME IN.	READER.	SYSTEM OUT.	TIME OUT.	SENDER.

Personal message from 'Bomber' Harris to Jack Onions before his embarkation on the 'Dorsetshire' (Jack Onions)

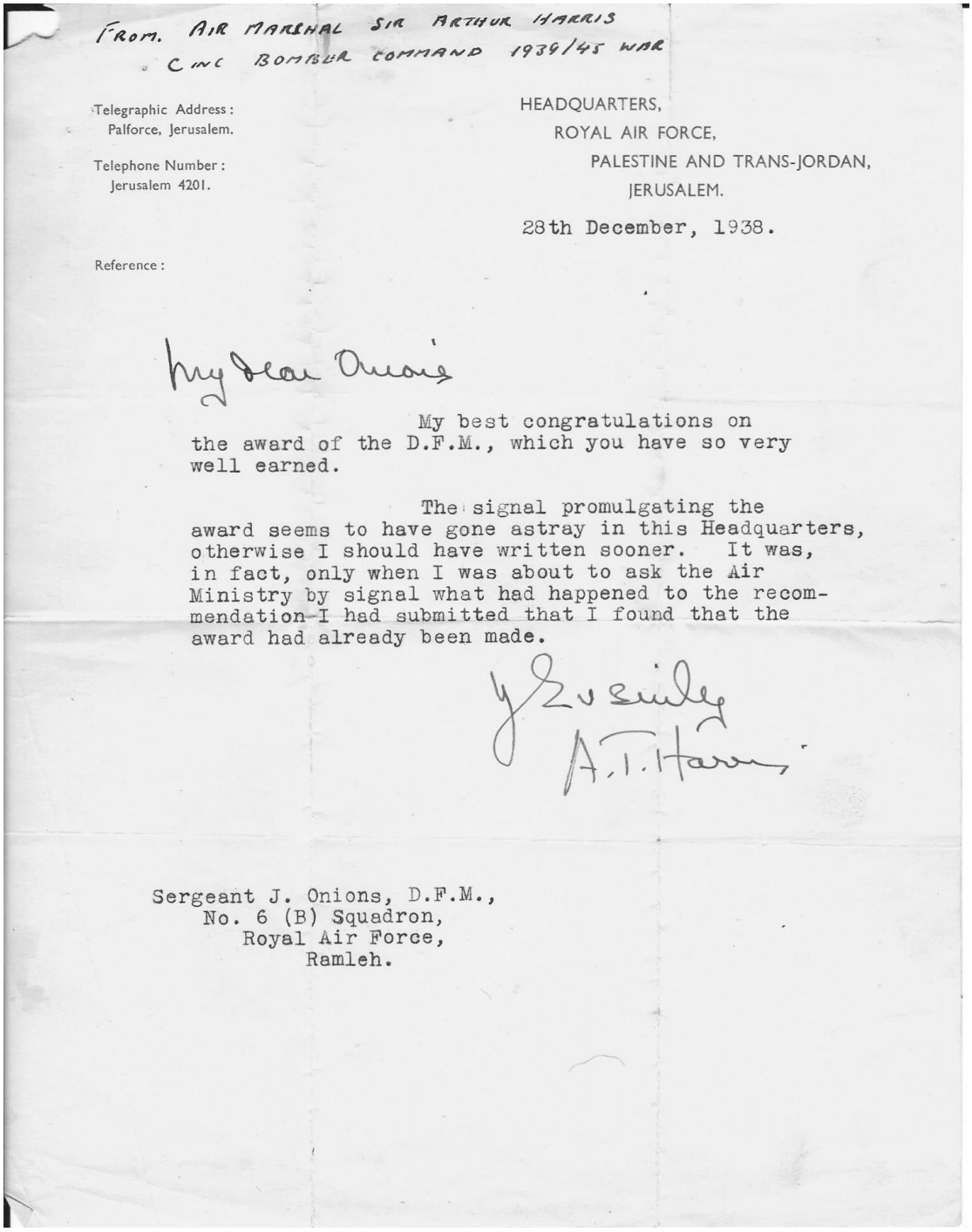
By the end of May 1939, Jack had completed 154 operational sorties as a pilot, no mean effort considering that Britain had not yet declared war on Germany. As a Light Bomber pilot, Jack was assessed as 'Above the Average'. Typically, the one thing that stands out in Jack's memory for this period is the operation, or rather the non-operation, of the 'goolie-chit' system: 'They just killed you!', he said.

Returning to the UK aboard MV *Dorsetshire*, it was not long before Jack's skills were required as an instructor. Two stints on Oxfords at Drem and Lossiemouth were more than enough to convince Jack that it was time to return to the relative tranquillity of operational flying. Conversion onto the Fairey Battle began in March 1940 and terminated on 13th May, when Jack was posted to No 98 Sqn, based at Nantes. One can guess his feelings when he realised that the squadron's role was similar to an OTU, and that the action was somewhere else.

On 13th June, as part of the grand exodus, Jack flew back to the UK. He recalled that RHIP (Rank Hath Its Privileges) was used for the occasion: 'Officers pinched the Battles and left the NCOs behind!', he said. Undaunted, Jack and his crew climbed into an unserviceable Battle, which had been 'snagged' on account of a huge magneto-drop, climbed to height overhead the airfield, before setting course for the Channel Islands and then the UK. Many of Jack's ground-based colleagues regrettably lost their lives when the *Lancastria* was sunk off St Nazaire. Volumes of personal kit, including Jack's, were similarly assigned to a watery grave.



No 6 (B) Sqn Dinner at Ramleh, Palestine, on 31st January 1939, reverse side signatures (Jack Onions)



FROM. AIR MARSHAL SIR ARTHUR HARRIS
C IN C BOMBER COMMAND 1939/45 WAR

Telegraphic Address :
Palforce, Jerusalem.

Telephone Number :
Jerusalem 4201.

HEADQUARTERS,
ROYAL AIR FORCE,
PALESTINE AND TRANS-JORDAN,
JERUSALEM.

28th December, 1938.

Reference :

My dear Onions

My best congratulations on the award of the D.F.M., which you have so very well earned.

The signal promulgating the award seems to have gone astray in this Headquarters, otherwise I should have written sooner. It was, in fact, only when I was about to ask the Air Ministry by signal what had happened to the recommendation I had submitted that I found that the award had already been made.

Yours sincerely
A. T. Harris

Sergeant J. Onions, D.F.M.,
No. 6 (B) Squadron,
Royal Air Force,
Ramleh.

The letter Jack Onions received from the future 'Bomber' Harris, dated 28th December 1938, congratulating him on the award of his DFM. (Jack Onions)

Initially, Jack found himself with time on his hands, sitting in a much quieter Gatwick Control Tower. Here he wrote a thesis about 'The AASF cock-up', as he called it. He was quite certain that he would have been court-martialled had it been published! Regrettably for historians, it is destroyed now.

After a gypsy-like existence flitting through Newton and then Wick, No 98 Sqn was suddenly required in Iceland by Coastal Command. Accordingly, on 27th August, Jack set off in Battle L5554, as part of a nine-strong formation destined for

Kaldadarnes. Some comfort was gained from being allocated a Sunderland escort, but there was very little margin for error. Jack remembered that they had to wait for a favourable wind, and even using overload tanks they only just made it.

Jack Onions, No 98 Squadron, Iceland, Summer 1939. Jack is standing in the row next to the back row, on the far left. The plaque held in the centre reads 'THE ICELAND ARMS' (Jack Onions)

Iceland was not to prove one of Jack's favourite postings. On 4th September, following the receipt of a signal stating that the Germans were about to invade Iceland, Jack took off on his own initiative, with the intention of attacking them. Owing to very poor visibility, he reluctantly had to abandon the sortie, returning to base after some 15 minutes flying. After Jack landed, the squadron leader put him on a charge. The flight lieutenant who handled the charge, did not know what to do, and consulted the warrant officer standing behind him, who had also run out of ideas. Finally, the charge was referred to higher authority. The wing commander responded by tearing a strip off the squadron leader, calling him many un-officer like names in the process. The affair was settled after Jack complained to the MO that, having just returned from the desert, his blood was very thin! He won his case, but all concerned thought it prudent that Sgt J. Onions DFM should be posted.

'Warmy' Warmington, Jack's observer on No 226 Sqn, throws some more light on this period: 'They thought - and I think this is perfectly genuine - they'd been rather badly treated in Iceland; you know, conditions were poor anyhow - they were living in hutted camps in Iceland in the winter, and they were very badly treated. They were turned into Mess waiters, some of the flying crew - this is what they said - NCO flying crew. Onions refused to do it... And the whole lot of them, without exception, were very bitter.'

October 1940 to May 1941 was a quiet time for Jack. His new squadron, No 226, was a happy outfit, and the routine dawn and dusk patrols from Belfast rarely encountered anything of interest, let alone enemy submarines. The only bone of contention, Jack recalled, was the attitude of the South, who appeared to favour the Nazis: Allied aircrew would be interned, whereas Germans would be repatriated. So incensed were the people of Northern Ireland that they considered invading their

southern neighbours. At least, that is what Jack thought, and I am certain that he would have been in the first wave!

Jack Onions during his time on Fairey Battles - date and place unknown. Jack is fifth from the left (standing) in the back row (Jack Onions)

After 226 Sqn joined No 2 Group at Wattisham in May 1941, Jack was back in his element. But before launching on operations, the squadron sensibly embarked on an intense period of training on their new type of aircraft, the Bristol Blenheim Mk IV. It was not until 23rd June that Jack completed his first operation in No 2 Group - a 'squealer' [a trawler which passed back aircraft sightings] sweep off Den Helder, during which nothing was seen. Two days later, Jack must have been surprised when, during this frightful time for the Group, he was sent on a Blind Approach Course at Horsham St Faith; but it was only to last four days.

Jack's second operation on Blenheims took place on 2nd July: it was a Special Guest Appearance on my cousin's squadron, No 21 at Watton, just two days before Len arrived. Jack's recollection of this day is interesting. 'On July 2nd', he wrote, 'I was detailed to go to Watton to reinforce the squadron for a high-level operation over France. On arrival I could not find anyone in the crew room or Flight Offices. I eventually found a lone Sgt Pilot and asked him where everyone was. He said that he had only joined the squadron some days ago, and there was only the CO [Wg Cdr Webster] and himself left. I flew as No 2 and this young lad was on his first operation as No 3 - the entire squadron.'

Though this state of affairs was not uncommon in No 2 Group, on this particular occasion No 21 Squadron actually scraped together a total of five crews to accompany Jack. One of these crews comprised Flt Sgt J.W. Stanley, Sgt D.A. Huntley and Sgt L.H.W. Smith, also on special guest appearance from 226 Squadron. Regrettably they were all killed, near Melville (Nord). Note the discrepancy, once again, in the 21 Squadron ORB. The crew are placed in V6388 (YH:R), which lived to fly another day, but sadly they were lost in Z7440 (MQ:?), which did not. The other four crews, all from 21 Squadron and 'Rotterdam' participants on 16th July, were those of Wg Cdr

Webster, Flt Lt Graham-Hogg, Sgt Wotherspoon and Sgt Taylor - all veterans, so the 'lone Sgt Pilot' on his first operation is difficult to name! Jack's logbook entry for this sortie says it all: '12 Blenheims with fighter escort: bombed Merville (N. France) aerodrome. 4/250, 4/40lb bombs. Intercepted by enemy fighters. Engagement lasting 15 mins. Two bombers lost [both from Jack's squadron, the other crew being Flt Sgt A.R. Carvell (POW), Sgt A.R. Blatch and Sgt J.T. Melvin (both killed near Merville Nord)] . Light flak at target (heavy twitters).'

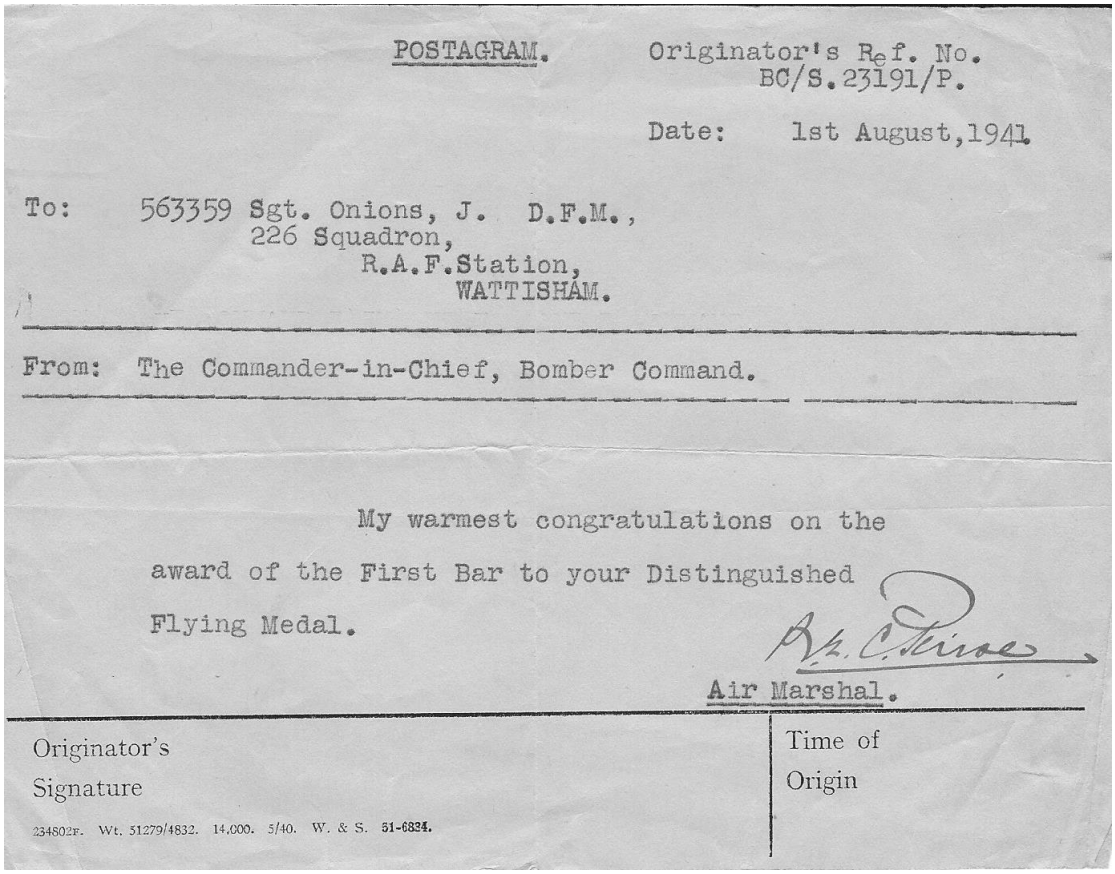
So there was a chink in Jack's armour after all! Two days later, during a raid on the chemical works at Béthune, Jack's aircraft received damage from machine-gun and cannon fire. He wrote in his logbook, not surprisingly: 'More twitters'.

Four shipping sweeps later, punctuated by days of practice bombing, Jack paid Watton another visit, this time for the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941. His clash with the SWO, being placed under and removed from Open Arrest has already been recorded. Forty-one years later, Jack was interested to learn the name of the vessel that he had bombed that day - the MV *Baloeran*. The concluding comments in his logbook for this raid were: 'A successful party'.

Jack's next sortie, on 19th July, was to prove one of the most memorable of his career, and earned him a bar to his DFM. The entry in his logbook reads:

'Operations: low level attack on convoy off Nordeney (Frisian Islands): attacked ship of 2,500 tons with 4/250 S.A.P. bombs, front and rear guns. Ship last seen with white smoke coming from it. Very heavy flak from escort vessels. Aircraft hit with Pom-Pom in front cockpit and inboard plane. Air gunner wounded. Hydraulics shot away. Belly landing on return to base.'

The citation for this second DFM added that two of Jack's crew received injuries, and that the navigational instruments and maps were wrecked. Despite this, Jack led the formation safely back to base. It concluded with the comment: 'He has at all times displayed high courage and determination.' The recollections of Jack's crew are recorded under their respective biographies.



POSTAGRAM. Originator's Ref. No. BC/S.23191/P.

Date: 1st August, 1941.

To: 563359 Sgt. Onions, J. D.F.M.,
226 Squadron,
R.A.F.Station,
WATTISHAM.

From: The Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command.

My warmest congratulations on the award of the First Bar to your Distinguished Flying Medal.

R. C. Peirse

Air Marshal.

Originator's Signature

Time of Origin

234802F. Wt. 51279/4832. 14,000. 5/40. W. & S. 51-6834.

Congratulatory telegram from the C-in-C Bomber Command, Air Marshal Sir Richard Peirse, on the occasion of the award of a 'First Bar' to Jack Onions's DFM (Jack Onions)

In 1982, the incident was recalled in typically low-key fashion. Jack remembered that a cannon shell came through the left window of the nose and impaled his sandwiches on the top right-hand side of the cabin. 'Ugh! Fatty meat again!' Jack exclaimed. He remembered the crash-landing well, as the aircraft seemed to skate over the dry ground with the propellers acting like skis.

With two DFMs under his belt, Jack was at last considered worthy of promotion from sergeant, a rank he had held since July 1937. Surely this must be a record for an operational pilot? As an apology, perhaps, Jack's seniority as a 'Temporary Flight Sergeant' was backdated to 1st April 1941 (meaningful?). But worst of all, Jack discovered that his original commissioning papers had been lost on the *Lancastria* in June 1940. Such is life.

Several operations and army-cooperation exercises later, Plt Off J. Onions presented himself at Upavon for No 29 CFS Course, commencing on 27th September. Jack's rehabilitation was complete.

Less than three weeks later (not so much 'patter' in those days?) Jack was a QFI. His reward for this endurance test was a swift posting to No 13 OTU, Bicester, where his expertise on the Blenheim must have been relished. During most of 1942, Jack instructed on Blenheim Is, breaking the monotony with the occasional trip in a Defiant or Albemarle. By the end of the year, Jack felt the urge to try his hand at a few more types and transferred to the Operational Test Flight. Test and other flying duties were conducted on Hurricane, Anson, Leopard Moth, Martinet, Mitchell, Mosquito, Albemarle, Blenheim I and IV aircraft, before Jack returned to his original

instructor role in August 1943. But not for long: Jack was on the move. In mid-October, Sqn Ldr J. Onions became the Chief Ground Instructor at No 13 OTU. To some people, this may sound like a ground tour, but Jack predictably kept his hand in during this time, adding Spitfire and Proctor aircraft to his already impressive list. Perhaps Jack could foresee his inevitable posting to Air Ministry? He entered this venerable establishment as T.O. 3 (Directorate of Training Operation) and hated every minute of his tour here.

The end of the line? Not at all. Fresh air was inhaled through the cold air vents of Proctor, Dakota, Auster and Dominie aircraft and even Sikorsky R4 helicopters. Suddenly the war was over.

Jack continued to fly the occasional communication flight in Proctors and Oxfords, adding a Mosquito 'jolly' to Gutersloh in March 1946; there Jack toured the Ruhr (not a pretty sight in those days) and practised some air/ground firing, but not in the same place I hasten to add!

All this was performed under the cloak of Jack's post-war Air Ministry appointment on the staff of the Directorate of Prevention of Accidents.

Strings are for pulling, and Jack entered the Jet Age when he fixed himself a slot on No 22 Short Course, No 1335 (Meteor) Conversion Unit, Molesworth commencing 7th May 1946. With no dual - the Meteor Mk 3A was a single-seater - Jack shot through a week of familiarisation flying, including single-engine work, a personal height record of 25,000 feet (needing oxygen in those unpressurised cockpits), low flying, aerobatics, and formation flying. All of that in only 4 hours 40 minutes flying - phew!

More communications work on Mosquitoes, Oxfords and Proctors, a dual flight in a Lancaster, and the logbook finally ends on 31st October 1946 with a sortie in Proctor LZ 637, Little Rissington to Hendon.

The peacetime RAF finally recognised the severity of a painful stomach ulcer which Jack had been carrying for some time, and an operation was later required to remove it. Jack was now granted a Permanent Commission in the Secretarial Branch.

In December 1946, a golden opportunity presented itself, or rather was manoeuvred into: Jack joined No 1 MREU (Missing Research and Enquiry Unit), BAFO (British Air Forces of Occupation) in Germany. This unit had the important task of investigating the countless numbers of Allied graves scattered throughout Europe, where the identity of the interred was not known. The unit was responsible for establishing the identities of many airmen who had hitherto been classed as 'Missing: Believed Killed in Action'. With luck, bereaved relatives would have a grave to visit after the unit had done its work. No 1 MREU received the full cooperation of each district Burgomaster, after it was explained that any holding back of information would result in their being charged with murder.

Jack's interest in the unit was a most poignant one: his cousin, Flt Sgt W. Onions, had been the captain of a Wellington , and was killed on the first One Thousand Bomber Raid, on Cologne, on 30th May 1942. Five years later, he was still classed as 'Missing', as were the entire crew, except for the air-gunner, Sgt N.W. Sansom, who was 'Missing: Believed Killed in Action'. The MREU visited a location at Waltrop/Mengede, where the aircraft had crashed, and investigated the graves of an unknown crew of six, the same number as in Jack's cousin's crew. The 'Result of Investigation and Findings' clearly shows how cautious were the MREU officers, and even when, as in this case, the circumstantial evidence was overwhelming, their language is still hesitant. (Of course, modern DNA tests would have been conclusive):

'The members of the above crew were exhumed on 25.4.47. The enclosed reports show very little positive identification but the presence of six bodies was established. It is the considered opinion of the investigating officer in conjunction with the officers exhuming that the whole crew is accounted for.'

After the war, Jack remembered some of his relatives discussing his cousin's death, and then pointedly asking him the question: 'Why did *you* survive, Jack?'

After two and a half years in the BAFO, Jack took an Accountancy Course at RAF Bircham Newton, Norfolk, before serving for a few months at RAF Padgate, Warrington, Cheshire. His next post, that of Area Superintendent of the Newcastle Recruiting Centre, sounds acceptable for a 'Geordie'.

Then followed stints as Senior Admin Officer at units in Maintenance Command, when in October 1956, Jack was posted off to the Far East for secretarial duties at Negombo (Ceylon, now Sri Lanka).

In November 1957, Jack took up his last post in the RAF, that of Senior Admin Officer at Linton-on-Ouse. On 31st May 1958, he was placed on the Retired List, having served continuously for some 29½ years.

Jack's last employment before civilian retirement was as Airport Manager at Middleton St George/Teesside Airport, not a stone's throw from where he was born, viz. Middlesbrough. He clearly remembers the night that HRH Princess Alexandra dropped in unexpectedly...

In mid-November 1984 came the bombshell. The letter was from Jack's charming wife, Blanche. It began: 'I am writing to let you know that my beloved husband passed away two weeks ago. He hadn't been well for a few weeks and then Diabetes was diagnosed. He responded very well to the treatment, but later developed a blood condition and died quite quickly.'

What did Jack's colleagues think of him? Arthur Asker recalls: 'A right tearaway that boy! Typical Geordie - not afraid of anyone. He'd been flying longer than anyone else on the squadron. He'd seen COs come and go. Two pilot officers would arrive on the squadron one night, and toss up as to who would be the Flight Commander! Jack, who had been tanking along all those years, had to sit arse-end to one of these new boys (not being commissioned!). In the end, they actually let him lead it!'

Bob Carey was struck by Jack's profile: 'He reminded me of an eagle', Bob recalls. 'Very much so. You can imagine that face with a leather helmet - a tight-fitting leather helmet.'

In a similar vein, a portrait photograph of Jack (see the beginning of this biography) produced some good mileage. Jane Kennedy (Shaw's widow), exclaimed with feeling: 'I wouldn't mind a picture of him! He was fantastic!' Questioned by her daughter as to what was fantastic about him, Jane replied: 'His personality. He was just honest: you don't get many like that. And we both have the same opinion about two different people: Basil Embry and Jackie were the same. Neither would stand for any nonsense: they couldn't be bought.'

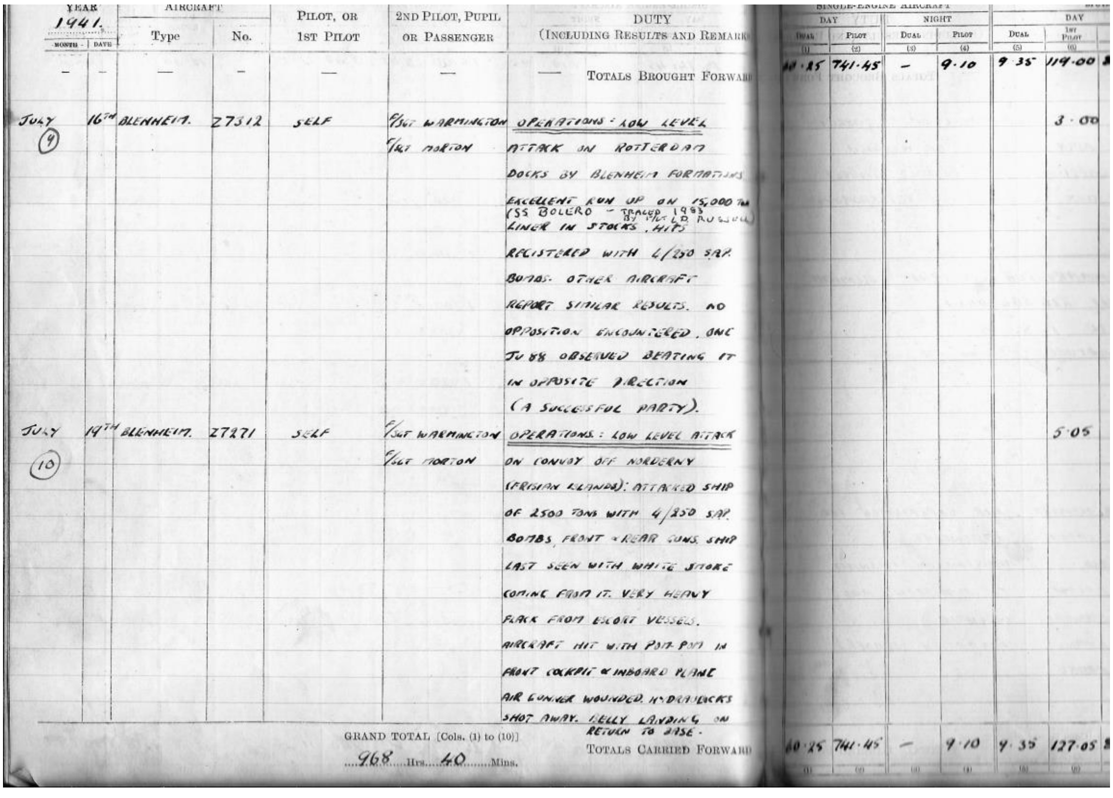
After I met Jack in 1982, I returned the portrait photo, which I had copied, adding: 'Handsome chap, Carol [my wife] says.' Back came the reply: 'Thank Carol for her kind comments regarding handsome features on the photo. The regret is it's taken forty years for someone to admit the truth. That's life!'

Wg Cdr John Castle DFC recalls: 'Jack Onions was a great regular pilot with hair-raising and hilarious tales of service in the Middle East and the N.W. Frontier...He gained great renown later on [after the Rotterdam raid] for his running commentary on a low-level shipping strike to a recording of the Thunder And Lightning Polka [Johann Strauss II]. Tall, lean, very much older than the rest of us.'

George Casey (Shaw Kennedy's WOp/AG after the Rotterdam raid) adds another dimension: 'Jackie Onions I knew, but more by reputation than by association.. He left the squadron [226] about the time I arrived but the stories about him remained long afterwards.'

Finally, the recollections of 'Warmy' Warmington, Jack's observer on Battles and Blenheims: 'A great character, good or bad. He was very bolshy. I never quite understood why, really. He had a tremendous chip on his shoulder...He was really bloody-minded. Don't feel I'm knocking him - he'd be the first to admit it. I had great confidence in him, but he was very bad for morale, really, because he was always ticking. Something was always wrong. Everybody liked him except the officers: they didn't like him because he didn't give a damn for officers - he always spoke his mind. He was a first-rate pilot - there was no doubt about that - and everybody acknowledged it. [Referring to the portrait photo] This handsome man: I can't get over that - unless it's a fake!'

Here, then, is one of the RAF's greatest characters. Spare a thought, dear reader, for the officers who were faced with the daunting task of compiling Jack's Annual Confidential Report!



Year 1941. Month	Date	Aircraft Type	Aircraft No.	Pilot, or 1st Pilot	2nd Pilot, Pupil or Passenger	Duty (Including Results and Remarks)	Single-Engine Aircraft Day Dual (1)	Day Pilot (2)	Night Dual (3)	Night Pilot (4)	Dual (5)	Day 1st Pilot (6)
—	—	—	—	—	—	— Totals Brought Forward	·25	741·45	–	9·10	9·35	119·00
July (9)	16th	Blenheim.	Z7312	Self	F/Sgt Warmington F/Sgt Morton	Operations: Low level attack on Rotterdam docks by Blenheim formations. Excellent run up on 15,000 ton (SS Bolero – traced 1983 by Flt Lt D. Russell) liner in stocks, hits registered with 4/250 SAP. bombs. Other aircraft report similar results. No opposition encountered. One Ju 88 observed beating it in opposite direction (A successful party).						3·00
July (10)	19th	Blenheim.	Z7271	Self	F/Sgt Warmington F/Sgt Morton	Operations: Low level attack on convoy off Norderny (Frisian Islands): attacked ship of 2500 tons with 4/250 SAP. bombs, front & rear guns. Ship last seen with white smoke coming from it. Very heavy flack from escort vessels. Aircraft hit with pom-pom in front cockpit & inboard plane. Air gunner wounded. Hydraulicks shot away. Belly landing on return to base.						5·05
				Grand Total [Cols. (1) to (10)] 968 Hrs. 40 Mins.		Totals Carried Forward	60·25	741·45	–	9·10	9·35	127·05

Jack Onions - logbook page covering the Rotterdam raid of 16 Jul 41 (Jack Onions)

Jack Onions (left) enjoying the sunshine on the 'S.S. Maloja' (Belfast). Odd, as 'S.S. Maloja' was sunk in 1916, and replaced by 'R.M.S. Maloja' - an armed merchant vessel requisitioned by the Admiralty in World War Two (Jack Onions)

FG OFF H.P. WARMINGTON
(OBSERVER IN ONIONS CREW)

As my wife and I drove through the archway at the beginning of the drive leading to the Warmingtons' impressive manor house in the Quantock Hills, neither of us sensed the gruesome history of this graceful piece of architecture. Three hundred years ago, two members of the losing side in Monmouth's Rebellion were hanged from this archway, by order of the infamous Judge Jeffreys. Almost as a relief, we learned that Elizabeth Warmington was a relative of the poet Shelley, who would no doubt have graced the manor with his presence.

In spite of being a self-confessed loner, and not very fond of people, Philip 'Warmy' Warmington gave a different impression. In a frank and forthcoming interview, it was obvious that here was a man who had led a very full and adventurous life. This again seemed at odds with Philip's admission that he was 'lazy by temperament'.

Reasons for pre-war enlistments are usually intriguing; Philip's was no exception, as he relates:

'I was working in a shipping office in Cardiff. I was quite happy there. I wasn't so much looking for a job, but I wanted to do something different. I wanted to do something exciting. I think, looking back, that I wanted to go to India: I wanted to go and join the Indian Police - I think that was my motive. And they really wanted someone with the right background, which I didn't have. And I thought that if I got

into the Air Force, it would be a step in the right direction. After four years, when I was still only 22 or 23, I'd make another stab at it.'

After further prompting from me, Philip continued:

'It was *partly* to fly, but I wanted to get abroad actually: I think that was the principal reason. I found life in South Wales very restrictive before the war - it was a very narrow outlook on life - and I thought it was a means of getting away, of flying the roost. And I remember the day I joined: I felt a tremendous sense of relief, so my motives weren't all that high, and I won't pretend they were. But genuine, and understandable perhaps. I'd been interested in the services, and I thought a service life would suit me.'

So, in September 1938, AC2 H.P. Warmington, u/t Air Observer, embarked upon his career in the RAF. Training was completed at No 2 Air Observers School, Acklington, on Hawker Hinds, at the end of which, in February 1939, Philip was promoted to acting Sergeant. His recollection of that period is mainly the severe weather conditions: 'We closed down: everything froze solid that winter.'

Philip was posted to 226 (Bomber) Squadron, Harwell, which was equipped with Fairey Battles. He confesses:

'We never flew enough for starters! Before the war, it was more like a flying club. We loved it: it was great. We didn't *train* hard enough - not like they do today.'

When war was declared, Philip moved to France as part of the AASF, tasked mainly with photographing enemy territory. As luck would have it, just four days before the *Blitzkrieg* on the Low Countries began, he was sent back to the UK on armament training duties. He eventually caught up with the remnants of his old squadron when they reformed in Belfast in June 1940.

Philip threw new light on the period 226 Squadron spent at Sydenham. I had hitherto formed the impression that it amounted to a rest-cure. Philip clarifies:

'We were looking for *anything*. Not just submarines. We were wary of the Royal Navy, as anything that moved, they shot at. We were living dangerously...'

The period after 226 Squadron had moved to Wattisham, in June 1941, was a memorable one for Philip. Now re-equipped with Blenheim Mk IVs, and part of 2 Group, they found that everything took on a different complexion. Running concurrently with the adrenalin-stirring anti-shipping strikes and *Circus* operations, when it seemed to Philip that they were just flak-bait, he recalls another aspect of the war:

'Before you took off, you'd go out to your aircraft in dispersal, and there would be a stone wall and a farmyard just the other side. And you would go out early in the morning; and there they would be, getting the cows in, in a tremendous air of normality. It was awfully difficult to realise what the hell was going on. You know, people were living under tremendous strain of course. I often thought to myself of these two contra forces: one of peace and normality, and then suddenly being thrown into what could be bloody hell! Which I don't suppose the other services had to the

same extent: they were in it all the time.' (See Tom Jefferson's biography for similar such sentiments).

Warmy Warmington, 226 Sqn Wattisham (Warmy Warmington)

Philip continues:

'On the plus side, there was a marvellous feeling of camaraderie, which is *impossible* to describe. It was pretty strong in wartime - it had to be: one feels the strength of it; there's no doubt about it. You could get away from pressures of an evening: there was nothing more peaceful than an aerodrome at night when everything was finished, and you just wander around with the aeroplanes sleeping out there. There was a tremendous fascination.'

One incident that Philip related to me, which, though not entirely unique in the history of aerial warfare, was nevertheless memorable for him:

'I remember on a daylight raid, when we were intercepted by one of the famous fighter squadrons - the *Schumacher* Squadron. And a Messerschmitt flew right alongside us: he must have been throttled way back, with flaps down. He looked out, and there we were looking at each other: it's just incredible. I suppose he must have run out of ammunition. He was too far forward for the rear gunner to get at - I was the only one who saw him. He was on the starboard side. And I looked up, and he had a yellow boss and a yellow streak down the side; and I had a yellow streak down the

middle of my back! And this Messerschmitt followed me for ages before it finally zoomed away.'

I am still uncertain how to interpret such incidents: were they acts of chivalry, bravado or just pure arrogance?

Perhaps the most memorable day of Philip's career was 19th July 1941. The target was a convoy of seven M/Vs, escorted by flakships, and Z7271 (MQ:K) was one of eight Blenheims tasked with this operation. Philip explains:

'As I say, these convoys were pretty well defended, and there was an awful amount of bloody flak which used to fly around. And once again it had a strange fascination until it hit you, and then it wasn't so funny. On this occasion, we were hit by a shell or something. There was a hell of a bang - it blinded me. We had the front of the aircraft blown right off - the navigator's department in the front of the Blenheim. It just disappeared! There was a hell of a rush of air coming in! All my navigation charts disappeared; but it was pretty simple in those days - I could look at the map, and I had it there. The course etc was all in my head, so it didn't matter. All you had to do was go home, to get out of the way of the fighters coming up from Germany. I took one hell of a bite; you know, you'd fly north in the hope that you would escape the fighters, and then head west. If you landed somewhere else, it didn't matter awfully. You'd pick up somewhere if you were lucky, anyhow. Just getting back was the aim of the game...The hydraulics had gone, and the instruments had gone Jack [Onions] did a marvellous job: I mean, the air-gunner couldn't do anything - he had no hydraulics - he couldn't move his turret...That was just common, I suppose: it wasn't infrequent for aircraft to lose their hydraulics, and you'd have to do a wheels-up landing - which wasn't all that difficult. But if the pitot tube had gone, and you had no airspeed indicator, you came in pretty fast. We came in *bloody* fast, naturally, to be on the safe side - you can't afford to stall. So he did a marvellous job. We hit with a hell of a crash, but walked away from it.' (See Jack Onions's biography).

Philip's operational flying literally ended with a bang; after his release from hospital, his expertise was inevitably required in the training environment. During his tours as a navigation instructor, Philip received the stamp of approval, and was granted a commission in May 1943. For the last two years of the war he served on the staff of Leeds University Air Squadron.

Training and adjutant duties at the West Country airfields of Dunkeswell and St Mawgan took Philip into 1947 before he finally retired from the RAF. Dunkeswell, apart from being close to the Warmingtons' home, is remembered for its American connections. Philip recalls:

'There was a liaison officer with the Americans, a flight lieutenant, and when they moved out, and we moved in, this liaison chap stayed on with us. And he told us some amazing stories, by *our* standards, about maintenance: the Americans reckoned it just wasn't cost-effective! They said *our* aircraft spent most of their time being serviced. I suppose we didn't have the amount of material coming through that would warrant it - we *had* to make it good.'

By 1947, the situation in India had radically changed. Undaunted, Philip decided instead to join the Kenya Police Force. When *Uhuru* (freedom, from British rule) came, Philip had completed a total of seventeen years service and had reached the

rank of Senior Superintendent. During the *Mau Mau* crisis, he commanded a General Service Unit, which was a strike force for the police in an emergency. He recalls:

'I've had a lot of hairy episodes in the Kenya Police. But at the time, it's amazing how detached and calm one is! But later on, particularly if you've got any imagination, it's a different thing. I've often wondered if I was thick...'

How did Philip's contemporaries remember him? Arthur Asker: 'Tall, always very smart - an impressive looking man. Very good rugby player. Non-smoker. Drank quite a lot.'

After several years of managing their delightful Quantock Hills manor house complex, the Warmingtons have now retired. Monmouth's Rebellion, the Second World War, and the *Mau Mau* Emergency are now history.

FLT LT J.F.L. MORTON
(WOp/AG IN ONIONS CREW)

I never did find out how 'Butch' Morton acquired his famous nickname. When I first contacted him, he admitted that it had not been used for many years, but did not elucidate further. Perhaps the answer lies simply in Arthur Asker's description of him: 'An ebullient, outgoing character'.

Butch was no stranger to guns when he enlisted in the RAF in January 1938. He had just completed one year's service as a sapper in the 26th Battalion RE (Territorial Army). After seven months training at an E&W School, Butch joined Hurricane-equipped 111 (F) Squadron at Northolt as a fully-fledged WOp. Looking for airborne service, he transferred to 226 (B) Squadron at Harwell just a few weeks later, operating Fairey Battles.

Granted that promotion for WOp/AGs was rather slow in those days, it would appear somewhat unusual that when war was declared Butch had still not upgraded from AC2. Several reconnaissance sorties of enemy territory were flown from Reims, with an officer pilot and a sergeant observer. In November 1939, Butch was finally upgraded to AC1, holding this rank steadfastly until the retreat from Dunkirk, when he rocketed to Temporary Sergeant (in common with all other qualified WOp/AGs).

When the *Blitzkrieg* came in the west, Butch was attached to an armament training station, and did not catch up with his old squadron until they had reached Belfast. The first time that the Onions/Warmington/Morton crew were fully constituted was not until November 1940.

The most dangerous moment during this period of anti-submarine patrolling seems to have occurred on 3rd March 1941, when Jack Onions and Daddy Kercher encountered two Royal Navy destroyers southwest of the Mull of Kintyre. The aircraft challenged the destroyers, which replied with 'RRR' instead of the usual barrage...

June 1941, and Butch was a Blenheim WOp/AG in 2 Group, Bomber Command. The highlights of this hair-raising interlude include the attack on Cherbourg on 14th July, when Butch machine-gunned the railway station and some warehouses; the attack on Rotterdam docks two days later, when he obtained photographic evidence of his pilot (Jack Onions) bombing a hospital ship; and an attack on a heavily-defended convoy on 19th July, when he was wounded in the foot. On the latter sortie, it is interesting to note that Butch managed to fire off 480 rounds of ammunition before the loss of hydraulics put his turret out of action. (See the biographies of Jack Onions and Warmy Warmington).

Jack Onions takes up the story from here:

'"Butch" Morton, the air-gunner, went to Upwood (17 OTU) on recovering from his wounds. Some months later, he wrote to me at Bicester saying he had been invited and accepted the offer of crewing up with a Wing Commander Hull - a better chance of survival he thought, and he was operating that night. By the time I received the letter Butch was in *Dulag Luft* and he finished the war in *Stalag Luft III*.'

Discussing this with Butch, he disagreed with his old pilot on the niceties of the crewing-up: he was *ordered* to, he told me. At least Butch had been commissioned by the time he became a POW!

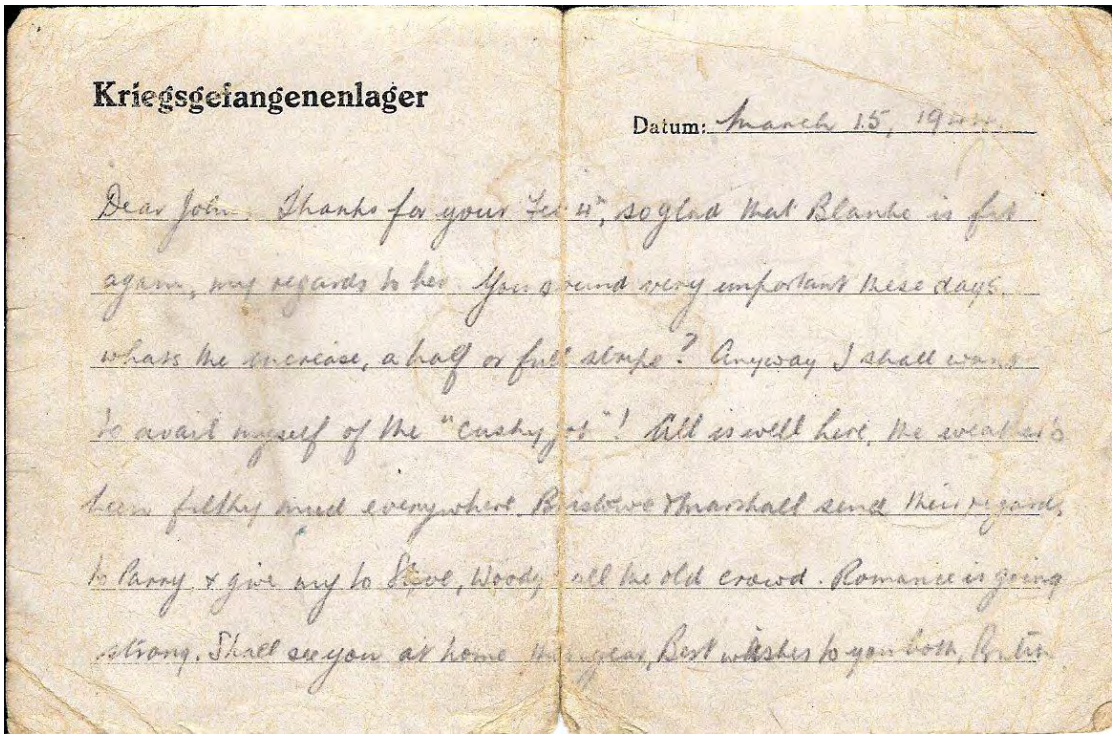
A *Kriegie Postkarte* from *Stalag Luft III* addressed to Jack, and dated 15th March 1944, generally avoids censorship with harmless remarks about the foul weather and

suchlike, but the punch-line managed to get through: 'Shall see you at home this year'. The censors most probably interpreted this as an earnest wish that the war would soon be over - a sentiment with which they would wholeheartedly agree; but the 'Great Escape' from *Stalag Luft III* took place just nine days after the card was posted...

Soon after the war, Butch, and many other ex-members of 2 Group including Richard Passmore (*Blenheim Boy*), were saddened by the death of Wg Cdr 'Bok' Hull, killed in a Mosquito near Melton Mowbray, on a training sortie from Cottesmore on 17th May 1946 (see Tom Jefferson's biography).

Butch now lives on the south coast of England. His biography would be incomplete without the following amusing anecdotes contributed by his old pilot, Jack Onions. Jack recalls the occasion when Butch informed him of a pair of Ju.88s which were catching them up fast. Jack responded by applying full throttle and then - the ultimate resort - operating the 'plus 9 boost' lever. But the Ju.88s could not be shaken off that easily and doggedly hung in. Almost casually, Butch remarked on how closely Ju.88s resembled Blenheims. Jack replied: 'Are you *sure* they are not Blenheims?' They were, of course - two sprog pilots on their first operation!

The other incident concerns the time when Butch had had his back peppered by flak. Jack asked him if he would like to land at Swanton Morley instead of Wattisham. 'Hell, no!', Butch replied. 'I've got a date with ****!'



Kriegsgefangenenlager

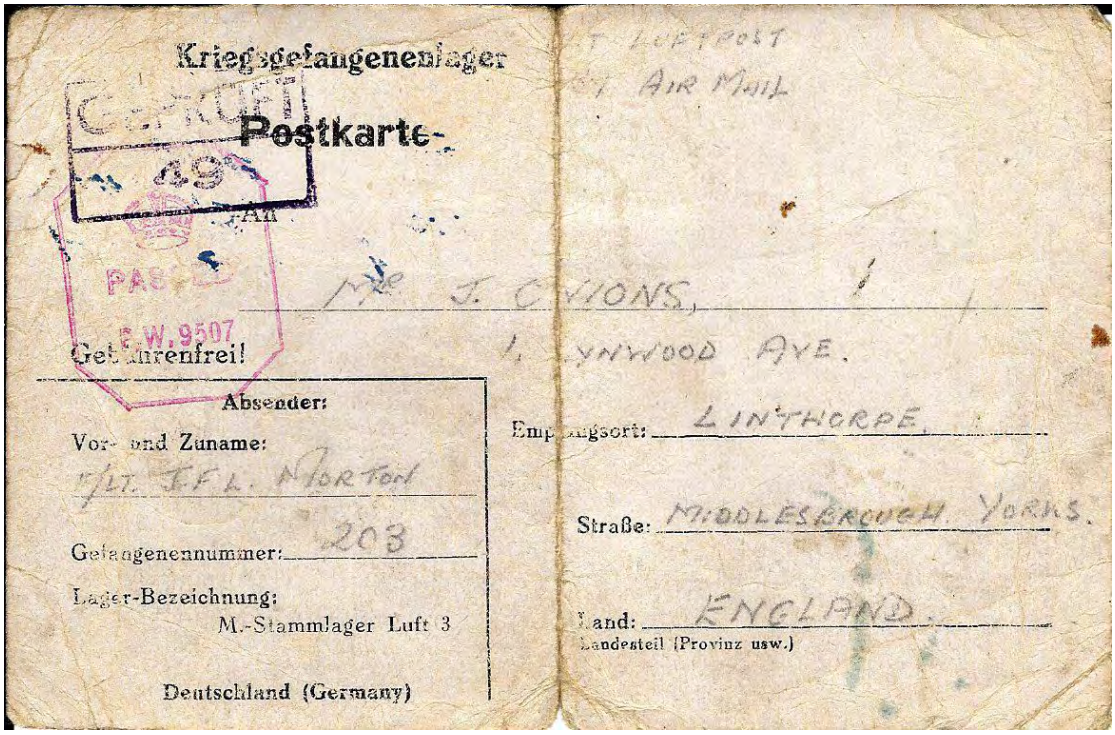
Datum: March 15, 1944

Dear John. Thanks for your Feb 4th, so glad that Blanche is fit again, my regards to her. You sound very important these days. What's the increase, a half or full stripe? Anyway I shall want to avail myself of the "cushy job"! All is well here, the weather's been filthy mud everywhere. Bristowe Marshall send their regards to Larry & give my to Steve, Woody all the old crowd. Romance is going strong. Shall see you at home this year, Best wishes to you both, Butch

Kriegsgefangenenlager Postkarte (POW postcard) from Butch Morton to Jack Onions, dated 15th March 1944 (Stalag Luft III). The 'Great Escape' took place just nine days after the postcard was posted. It reads:

Dear John, Thanks for your Feb 4th, so glad that Blanche [John's wife]is fit again, my regards to her. You sound very important these days. What's the increase, a half or a full stripe? Anyway I shall want to avail myself of the "cushy job"! All is well here, the weather's been filthy mud everywhere. Bristow [?] & Marshall send their

regards to Parry & give my to Steve, Woody & all the old crowd. Romance is going strong. Shall see you at home this year. Best wishes to you both, Butch (Jack Onions)



The reverse side of Butch Morton's POW postcard to Jack Onions (Jack Onions)

FG OFF N.J.A. PATON DFM

Yet another crew which teamed up again after intervening postings was the Paton/Maguire combination. As with the Wotherspoon crew, they were to fall at the first fence, second time around. 'Paddy' Maguire's widow, Mary, poignantly sums it up: '[Paddy's] pilot Norman was a great friend of ours - in fact they were more like brothers and in a way it was fitting that they died together.'

'Jock' Paton's formative years are impressive. At Cambusdoon, Ayr, he was already making his mark as a scholar and sportsman. After transferring to Newstead, Doune, in Perthshire, it seemed that the sky was the limit. Jock's scholastic achievements included the taking of the Cambridge Certificate. In sport, he was unbeatable, winning the Victor Ludorum cup, and excelling at jumping, running and swimming; he was also captain of the rugby team, and regarded as an accomplished mountaineer. The latter skill is not surprising because as a boy he travelled with his mother to the Isle of Skye, where Mrs Paton took part, assisted by her bloodhounds, in a search for lost mountaineers.

On leaving Newstead, Jock became a student at the Veterinary College, Glasgow, during which time he joined the RAFVR. His studies were abruptly terminated by the outbreak of war.

By way of No 3 ITW and an EFTS under the cloak of 'HQ Reserve Command Pool', Sgt Paton presented himself at No 8 FTS for advanced flying training one month before the *Blitzkrieg* on the Low Countries. Three months later he was a fully qualified pilot. After a further two months, on Fairey Battles at No 12 OTU, Jock joined 226 Squadron at Belfast/Sydenham. From October 1940 until June 1941, Jock flew anti-submarine patrols - north and south, dawn and dusk. On 21st December 1940, the Paton/Maguire/Beal team first took to the air as a constituted crew. When Jock swapped the obsolete Battle for the obsolescent Blenheim at Wattisham in June 1941, he had flown 27 operational sorties on the former aircraft - virtually a full tour.

Fourteen daylight bombing sorties later, under the adrenalin-productive conditions of 2 Group, and Jock was the proud recipient of a DFM. It is always a salutary lesson to investigate what was necessary to earn this coveted award.

The first noteworthy sortie, not quoted in the citation, appears to be the attack on Cherbourg railway station and warehouses on 14th July 1941. Jack Onions described Jock's performance as an 'impressive trip'.

The Rotterdam sortie two days later earned Jock's first official commendation, when the crew claimed the destruction of an 1,800-tonner.

On 19th July, during the raid in which the nose of Jack Onions's Blenheim was removed, Jock was credited with direct hits on a ship of 5,000 tons (the 226 Squadron ORB doubles the tonnage of this tanker!).

A raid on industrial works in Lille on 18th August is the next cited. Intense and accurate heavy flak caught Jock's aircraft in the nose and fuselage, wounding Paddy Maguire. The aircraft was coaxed safely back to base.

On 26th August, the squadron took on a convoy of twelve M/Vs escorted by six flakships. In spite of the escort, Jock left a 2,000-tonner enveloped in flames. The citation states that Sgt Paton's aircraft received a direct hit from a cannon shell, which wounded the observer (Flt Sgt Stephenson) and wrecked the instruments. Oddly enough, the 226 Squadron ORB makes no mention of this, but it does add that a flakship was machine-gunned by the crew (revenge is sweet?). Again, Jock flew his aircraft safely back to base.

The punch-line of the DFM citation says it all: 'He is an excellent leader, whose skill and coolness in the face of the enemy are of the highest order.'

Recognition came fast as the RAF began to realise the quality of Sgt Paton. Jock was commissioned in September 1941, and on 6th October, he and his crew travelled by road to Watton to be presented to Their Majesties the King and Queen. Oddly, Jock was not presented with his DFM on this occasion, but much later, at Buckingham Palace in March 1942.

In November 1941, the Paton/Maguire team was split by the postings branch, Jock being sent to No 2 FTS Cranwell and Paddy to No 13 OTU Bicester.

Mary Maguire recalls this difficult time for Jock. Apparently, when he was at Little Rissington, he pestered the Station Commander mercilessly, and was told that if he asked once more to go back to 226 Squadron (at Swanton Morley), he would be posted to Canada! Jock's persistence, however, was eventually rewarded, when he rejoined his old squadron from No 6 PAFU (Pilots' Advanced Flying Unit, Little Rissington) in November 1942.

On 6th December 1942, Jock and Paddy took of on their first operation together after the long break. The target was the Philips Valve and Radio Factory at Eindhoven. Of the twelve aircraft detailed from 226 Squadron, only one failed to return: Boston Mk III, Z2266 (MQ:S). The crew comprised:

Fg Off N.J.A. Paton DFM
Flt Lt J.G.A. Maguire DFC
Plt Off J.L. Fletcher (Canadian WOp/AG)

Small consolation for the loss of this gallant crew was the fact that this most successful raid was the biggest daylight raid of the war so far, with 36 Bostons, 12 Mosquitoes, and 36 Venturas taking part. The shock of the deaths of this talented and popular crew was keenly felt throughout the squadron.

What had happened to 'S' for Sugar? The 2 Group casualty records state that the aircraft was shot down by a Fw 190, and crashed into the sea off Renesse (Netherlands); they also state that the crew was from 107 Squadron. As no bodies were recovered, the names of the crew are inscribed on the panels of the Runnymede Memorial.

Forty-two years later, Tom McKee wrote to me, with the following recollection of the raid:

'I do remember seeing Paddy Maguire's aircraft with bomb doors open, dodging flak when we left Den Helder, but as we were all at full throttle, Paddy could not keep up and I think the fighters closed in.'

The accolades from Jock's contemporaries can be neatly summarised by the description Warmy Warmington gave of him: 'Terribly nice chap', he said.

To add authenticity to this otherwise faultless biography, I must include the following snippets. The first was related to me by Jane Kennedy (Shaw's widow): 'I remember one night at Sydenham when they came back from a raid, and they'd done very, very well, and my sister-in-law, Rita, and her husband, gave a party for them in the *Grand Central Hotel*. And they took an exception to her husband - he was a big horrible chap and smoking a cigar. And Maguire and Paton took umbrage and sprayed him with a syphon!'

The second incident was confessed to me by Mary Maguire. She admitted that her husband had once dropped a practice bomb onto someone's lawn in Norwich. But the buck must always rest with the captain of the aircraft...

FLT LT J.G.A. MAGUIRE DFC
(OBSERVER IN PATON CREW)

At the outbreak of World War Two, Sgt 'Paddy' Maguire had qualified as an armourer, an air-gunner and an air-observer. He had also served in the RAF for some 4½ years. It is no exaggeration to state that people such as he formed the backbone of the service, at a time when they were desperately needed.

Paddy's pre-war years were split fairly evenly between short bursts at such evocative places as Calshot, Mount Batten and Old Sarum and a full two years on 57 (Bomber) Squadron, Upper Heyford. During the latter period, his widow recalls, Paddy played rugby quite regularly for the station. 'He was a keen sportsman', she wrote, 'rugger being his first choice until he decided at 28 [1941] that he was too old for that and switched to hockey.'

After a short course at No 4 Air Observers School, West Freugh, near Stranraer, Paddy learned the operational skills of a Fairey Battle observer on the training squadrons of 207 (Cottesmore) and 98 (Hucknall). He joined what was to prove his ultimate squadron - 226 - in November 1939, in the Champagne town of Reims.

The hectic time of the Battle of France left Paddy relatively unscathed. The nearest he came to injury was on 28th May 1940, when his air-gunner, AC Lewis, was wounded in the leg.

After the mass exodus from France, Paddy continued the war from Sydenham, Belfast, tasked with anti-submarine patrols. He teamed up with his 'Rotterdam WOp/AG', Sgt A.H. 'Bob' Beal, in August 1940, four months before they were joined by Jock Paton.

In April 1941, Paddy was promoted to Flt Sgt, and joined 2 Group when the squadron moved to Wattisham in June.

Paddy received no decorations for his sterling work as a Blenheim observer, not even the second prize of a 'Mentioned in Despatches'. However, he must have been delighted to travel to Watton on 6th October, when he and his crew were presented to Their Majesties the King and Queen.

Paddy did not emerge unscathed, however, from this period of the war. He was wounded during an attack on the industrial works at Lille on 18th August, which kept him off the Battle Order for nearly six weeks.

At the end of November, Paddy and Jock were separated, and Plt Off (of one month's seniority) Maguire joined the staff of No 13 OTU Bicester. One can guess Paddy's feelings about this appointment, as less than two months later he was on a course at No 1 Air Armaments School, and rejoined 226 Squadron in March 1942. It would appear that Paddy and Jock hatched a combined plot to return to the old squadron, and that Paddy, with the luck of the Irish, pulled it off much earlier. Better still, the squadron was now equipped with a modern fighting machine - the Boston Mk III.

In his new squadron role of Navigation/Bombing Leader, Paddy at last received just reward for his efforts. A Mentioned in Despatches on 11th June 1942 was followed two months later by the award of a DFC.

During this period the famous 4th July raid was flown, in which six of the twelve Bostons taking part were manned by aircrew of the American Army Air Corps: this was officially recognised as the first raid by American crews on enemy-occupied territory. Mary Maguire remembers it well: 'You can imagine what a party we had in the Mess that night!'

The Maguires were a very sociable couple. Mary continues:

'I did meet most of the fellows in 226 as we had a flat in Dereham and were able to entertain a lot of them! We used to play cut-throat "Uckers" (Ludo) which doubtless you will have come across, and many of them liked to get away from the Mess for a few hours when possible.'

The fact that 'Uckers' had been invented way back in the war years came as a considerable surprise to me. On further investigation I learned that it is a long-standing tradition in the Royal Navy. I wonder if they used the same uncouth and mind-boggling expressions as we did, viz: 'Suck him out!' and 'Blow him out!' and 'Siff on his donk!'?

As an example of the quality of comradeship and loyalty Paddy and Jock held for each other, the following takes some beating. Mary told me that 'Mag' (as she and a few others called him) gave up the chance of going on a course where he would have been promoted to squadron leader. She said that they agreed that he could hardly leave now that Jock had moved heaven and earth to get back.

The beginning of December 1942 is indelibly imprinted on Mary Maguire's memory. The Eindhoven raid was supposed to go on the Wednesday, she said, but owing to bad weather it was postponed until the Sunday, during which time Paddy was confined to camp. Mary went to the Mess to have dinner with him on the Friday, and that was the last time that she saw him. She recalls:

'We were due to go to Buckingham Palace for his DFC on the Tuesday after he was lost on the Sunday. I have the cross of course, but I would rather have him back without any "gongs".'

Mary was not given any details concerning the locality of her husband's crash, which is not altogether surprising as no bodies were recovered. As in so many other cases such as this, the final moments of Z2266 'S' for Sugar are shrouded in controversy.

The entry in a hand-written 2 Group ORB (AIR 37/21 in the PRO) states that P/O Paton and crew in 'S' were shot down into the sea off the coast at Renesse by a Fw 190 (Renesse is on the western tip of the island of Schouwen, and about 25 miles southwest of Hook of Holland). A footnote states that the missing crew were presumed dead on 5/8/43.

In the write-up for Jock Paton, I quoted Tom McKee as saying that he remembered seeing Paddy Maguire's aircraft dodging flak off Den Helder, and believing that the fighters closed in on him. Den Helder is some 65 miles to the east of north of Hook of Holland.

The enemy coast-out point of the raid, for the 226 Squadron contingent, is quoted in the Squadron ORB as Hook of Holland, a mistake which cost the returning Bostons no little attention from the shore batteries. Tantalisingly, the entry states that only eleven aircraft crossed the coast at this point, not specifying what happened to 'S' for Sugar.

To complete the picture, Mike Bowyer's sketch map of the raid (Map 13 in *2 Group R.A.F.*) puts Z2266 (S) as crashing off the coast near Hook of Holland, a victim of flak.

Wherever the crash occurred, the bodies were either not recovered, or recovered and not identified, a situation all too familiar to me in the context of my research into my cousin's final resting place.

Mary Maguire's feelings are typical of next-of-kin who have had to contend with the 'Missing' classification: 'And alas - so many of their names are recorded at Runnymede - a very beautiful place, where I gather your cousin's name is also listed. It was very sad not knowing what really happened and you and your family must have experienced this also.'

Arthur Asker recalls that for some time after the crash, Mary Maguire hoped that her husband would turn up with loss of memory.

After the war, Mary informs me, Jack Onions took full advantage of his position on No 1 MREU, and did his best to try and find some concrete evidence about her husband, but without success.

Paddy was obviously immensely popular on the squadron, but perhaps his greatest accolade comes from the pen of his widow: 'My family, mother and two brothers liked him a lot, which speaks for itself.'

Mary's general comments about the war are not untypical, and are entirely understandable:

'It is all so long ago, that some names have eluded me, but on the whole I can now remember with gratitude and affection so many young men that I was proud to call my friends. Perhaps they were spared much, although it still seems a terrible waste of young lives. When I look around today, what I see does not seem worth any of them. There speaks crabbed old age!'

SQN LDR F.L. CAMPBELL-ROGERS RCAF

In January 1984, I received a dramatic telegram from Ottawa. It read: 'YOU HAVE FOUND ME (STOP) WHAT CAN I DO FOR YOU (STOP) ADVISE (STOP)'. It was from Sqn Ldr Frank Landseer Campbell-Rogers, who had been tracked down following an advert I had placed in the Canadian Forces Veterans Organisation magazine *The Legion*.

Naturally delighted that I had made contact with him, I quickly despatched a reply asking him for everything under the sun, and a bit more. Back came another telegram: 'COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED (STOP) WORKING ON PROJECT (STOP) STAND BY (STOP)'.

Frank did me proud. The material he sent me was most comprehensive, and will no doubt one day prove a valuable archive source of information relating to this era. My only worry is whether I can précis it into a mini-biography without losing too much of its essential flavour.

By an odd coincidence, I am writing this on the 49th anniversary of Frank's ditching off Ostend and his first day as a POW (the 49th parallel divides the USA and Canada:

the numbers game...) It would seem appropriate to first cover the events of this memorable day.

Frank Campbell-Rogers, No 226 Sqn Wattisham (Frank Campbell-Rogers)

The 226 Squadron ORB states that Frank was posted to 21 Squadron, in the rank of acting squadron leader, on 21st July 1941. This would appear to be a flight commander's post replacing Denis Graham-Hogg, who had been shot down three days earlier. Frank thought that he had been posted as the new squadron commander, but as that position was currently held by a wing commander, and Wg Cdr Webster handed over to Wg Cdr Kercher on 23rd July, it would seem unlikely. I have not dismissed it out of hand, as loss rates were so high that rapid promotions and changes of appointment were quite commonplace.

Frank recalls that fateful day:

'To the best of my memory, my arrival at 21 Squadron as squadron commander was 23rd July 1941 - the same day as my final operation...Ops briefing was in progress when John, David and I flew into Manston. After the briefing I was asked whether I wished to lead the squadron. I was there for that purpose and so took over. It was my first and last operation with 21 Squadron.

The target was an oil tanker with four flakships in convoy, each ship a deadly arsenal of anti-aircraft gun batteries, at the entrance to Ostend Harbour, Belgium.

Six Blenheim aircraft of 21 Squadron Watton took part in this raid, and other Blenheim squadrons joined us at Manston for this Op. We set out from Manston with an umbrella heavy fighter escort. We had settled on heading flying almost at sea level with our props fanning a wake in the sea. Apparently the fighter escort had received an R/T recall and the Fighter Leader dived over my aircraft and rose waggling his wings. I did not see the first warning and on a second try I realised something was

wrong and turned the squadron back to base. It was confirmed that the fighter boys had received a recall. Apparently Intelligence reported that the convoy had left Ostend and was steaming northward.

After some NAAFI tea we set out again, this time flying to a hypothetical point at sea, north of Ostend. On ETA I failed to spot the convoy and headed the squadrons and fighter escort to Ostend. The convoy was at the entrance to Ostend Harbour. The surprise element of our arrival was vitiated by the easy observation of the fighters above us. I was the first over the target. Sneaking below deck height I rose over the convoy, dropping my bomb load. I was in a weak tactical position. Distancing the flakships behind me placed me within range of the coastal batteries. During my attack on the oil tanker I was hit by flak from one of the flakships and attacked by Messerschmitt Me 109s while banking on a heading for "home". The Perspex in front of my face was blown away, both engines were on fire and I was forced to ditch in the North Sea before the aircraft [Z7438, YH:D] would blow up.

My rear-gunner, Sgt John Sullivan, was killed in action, probably by the Me 109 which attacked us from astern. The rear-gunner compartment and gun-turret is in a highly exposed position and all too vulnerable. I am afraid our Daylight Low-Level Operations were almost in the category of suicidal. Our toll of aircraft and young men was a heavy sacrifice.

On landing on the sea, the aircraft sank immediately. David Bingham was the first out. I followed by the forward hatch. John's escaped hatch was just forward of his gun-turret position, near the rear of the aircraft, but I believe he was killed during the Me 109 attack and so went down with the aircraft.

David and I were swimming in the sea and after the air battle a German seaplane rescued us. We were frozen in the frigid water. We became prisoners of war 23 July 1941.'

I shall return later to Frank's nearly four years as a POW. In the meantime, his earlier life will be examined. Frank informs me:

'I was born of British parents in India. I attended British schools there and at 12 years of age sailed for England. I attended Wellington School, Somerset until I was 18 years old and then went to Canada to find my way in the world. I joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police from 1935 to 1938, and during August 1938 I left to join the RAF. (I had broken my right arm and while on convalescent leave took up private flying. My love of flying was too great and prompted me to join the RAF). I received ab initio training on Tiger Moths while at White Waltham. I was senior pupil. I was then sent to a Service Flying School [8 FTS] at Montrose, Scotland.'

In June 1939, Plt Off Campbell-Rogers joined 57 Squadron, Upper Heyford, operating Blenheim Mk Is. Before the squadron moved to France, in September 1939, Frank was privileged to have as his CO 'Wings' Day. Then he drew the short straw; Frank explains:

'As the newest member of 57 Squadron, Upper Heyford, Oxford I was left behind in charge of a technical aircraft maintenance inventory when my squadron immediately departed for France. A Hampden aircraft training squadron took over our deserted station. Acting on initiative I phoned Air Ministry to explain my position and request a transfer to a squadron. I was posted to 90 Squadron for training operations on

Bristol Blenheim aircraft on 5 October 1939, and subsequently to 101 Squadron at West Raynham on 17 November 1939.

The RAF needed pilot navigation instructors and I was posted to a Navigation School [the School of Air Navigation] at St Athan, Wales. I returned to 101 Squadron, West Raynham, a certified pilot navigator. Shortly after my return I was posted to Cranfield Flying Training School, 14 SFTS, on the 23 April 1940 as a pilot navigation instructor. I also assisted in checking out pilot trainees in night flying and carried out an occasional ferry flight. I insisted that all flying students should be given a cross-country navigation test by me. I also had to give lectures in meteorology, and proclaimed to the class on my first lecture that "In the Country of the Blind the One-Eyed Man is King" [H.G. Wells]. On one occasion a student pilot got badly lost and I gave him 25 lines to the effect: "I must fly an accurate heading, maintain a level attitude and a steady Air Speed". It was an amusing assignment.

On the 15th September 1940, I was posted to No 3 Flying Training School at South Cerney (Cirencester) in the same capacity. Events were moving fast for me. Air Ministry ordained I should have the advanced navigation course and consequently I was sent to the School of Navigation at Port Albert, Ontario, Canada to obtain a 1st Class navigation certificate. On completion of the course, I hung around Dorval, Quebec, aerodrome for a flight back to England. Eventually I was teamed up with Ross of Imperial Airways in the role of 2nd pilot and navigator. We were the sole crew to ferry a Liberator B24 (four engines) across the Atlantic by night, using my recently acquired skill of astro navigation. We landed at Prestwick, Scotland (1780 n.m.). [By my calculations, this is over 690 nm short, and rather outside limits even by pilot-navigation standards!]

I wasted little time boarding a train for London and Air Ministry where I made a strong case to get into flying operations. I was posted to 226 Squadron, Wattisham, on 10th June 1941. During my brief period on operations I quickly rose in rank from Flying Officer to Flight Lieutenant and then to Squadron Leader. This rapid rise in rank is attributed to the heavy losses of Blenheim aircraft crews.'

Frank joined operational flying at the deep end - at the height of 2 Group's battle for survival. Though he completed only six operational sorties on 226 Squadron, commencing on 1st July 1941, some of these were to prove quite memorable. The flights on 12th and 14th July are worth retelling in detail. Frank recalls:

'On the 12th July 1941, S/Ldr Kercher in command of 226 Squadron, Wattisham, set out for an operational target at Vlissingen, Netherlands. Six aircraft headed out across the North Sea in close formation. To avoid coastal radar detection we flew just above the waves, causing a wake in the water from our props. A heavy fog hung over the sea and there was no horizon to fly by. The element of danger, flying in these conditions, was obvious and S/Ldr Kercher rightly abandoned the op. and turned the squadron back to base. I returned with the squadron back to the coast, picked up my position, and then impulsively decided to continue the operation. My No 2 aircraft formating on me stuck, and we continued together. On approaching the target I called to F/Sgt Bingham, my navigator, to hand me my steel helmet (used in these ops. at ground level). Apparently the R/T [intercom?] had packed up and he failed to understand me. On a repeated request he came beside me, bent down and reached for my helmet. At this time my gaze was transfixed on my instrument panel. Both RPM needles descended simultaneously to zero. I swiftly gained some height from sea level and scanned all instruments. The fuel cock levers slightly to the rear of my right side

seemed engaged. Air speed was dropping off and I nosed downward towards the sea continuing to discover the cause of my predicament. I nosed the aircraft upward again and failed to find the reason for the zero RPMs and diminishing airspeed. I was headed for the "drink" (North Sea) again. Finally, acting on impulse, I smacked hard on the fuel cock levers and my engines roared to life. Bingham's parachute harness had caught in the fuel cock levers and indiscernibly disengaged them. My rear-gunner, Moss, was hopping from side to side of his gun-turret to discover why I appeared to be taking evasive action.

We settled down and crossed the coast, my number two aircraft faithfully following. The countryside was enveloped in fog and I do not remember now whether we located the target. I headed for the North Sea crossing to base. Ominously looming out of the fog was a flakship ahead with its arsenal of flak batteries. I encountered heavy point-blank fire. I snaked up to it, zigzagging at sea level and well below deck height. At the last possible moment I yanked hard back on the control column. My aircraft rose rapidly as I dropped my bombs (a task David left for me, he being too exposed in the Perspex nose of the aircraft) - the bombs overshot the ship. We were ascending in an almost vertical attitude and I barely swung over the superstructure and mast. My engines cut out as my aircraft imperceptibly slid back on its tail. I forcibly pushed the control column (stick) forward and we descended at a rapid rate, plunging downward toward the deck of the ship. It seemed everyone on board ran for cover. I gained control of the aircraft and headed out to sea with flak chasing me.

Bingham gave me a course to steer for base and either I mistook the heading or I was given the wrong one - let's call it a pilot mental aberration. At all events I crossed the coast and fired the Very pistol signal of the day. To my consternation I was met with a heavy barrage of flak. My aircraft was struck four times. I dived for the deck (ground level) once more, hopping over trees and headed for the "friendly" sea. We had crossed the coast at Ostend. Bingham picked up QDMs and we returned safely to base. I was, of course, reproached by the CO of the station for my over-zeal and brashness. Later that morning, Lord Trenchard, Marshal of the RAF, visited our station and I was asked by our CO to relate the events of my adventure. He listened attentively and then guffawed and roared with laughter. This was truly an initiation into operational, flying for me.'

I wonder if all these wrong courses (see Wotherspoon) were due to failure to re-synchronise the gyros after they had been toppled following such aerobatic manoeuvres...Then on 14th July; Frank elucidates:

'This day we were on a shipping raid at Cherbourg. Our aircraft carried four 250lb bombs with 11-sec time delay. One of my bombs struck the jetty of the docks, two scored a hit on warehouses, the remaining bomb was aimed at railway and tunnel. I do not know what damage was caused. Flak from an anti-aircraft battery emplacement on the tunnel embankment struck my aircraft. Sgt Moss, my rear gunner, was seriously wounded in both legs and the gunner's seat was blown away from under him. This may have occurred at the embankment or at the docks. All six aircraft returned safely. Of our fighter escort, one was damaged though the pilot was safe. Part of my aircraft trailing-edge was shot away. I landed independently at the nearest airfield, Warmwell, and left my rear-gunner, George Moss, in hospital. His left leg was amputated. Moss is a brave and courageous airman and it was a privilege to me to have known him.'

George Moss wrote to his pilot and observer from a hospital in Bovington, Dorset, on 18th July 1941:

'Just a line to let you know I am still alive after our little episode over Cherbourg. But above all I must thank you two for saving my life, although I have lost my left leg. I should like to meet you two gentlemen again, and find out what actually happened. I remember the seat being blown from under me, and remember firing until I collapsed. That's all there is to it. Could you get down here and see me if you can get hold of a machine. It would cheer me up no end.

Please remember me to the boys, and wish them all the best from me - especially Sgt Carey. Excuse short letter and bad writing but you'll understand why. P.S. I'm getting on fine with the nurses. Especially ****'

Later, in September 1941, he wrote to a Mrs Hessling, an aunt of Frank's. Now in the care of the Wingfield-Morris Orthopaedic Hospital, Headington, Oxford, he glossed over his amputations and other operations. Referring to his crew, he wrote:

'He was a very good pilot, and when I was wounded on 14-7-41, Squadron Leader Rogers and F/Sgt Bingham saved my life. The former by skilful and daring flying, and the latter by the marvellous First Aid he gave me. Of course one would have been no use without the other, and so I owe them both a very great debt, and will certainly drop them a line without any delay...I don't expect that they will let me fly again although I'm still game...All the same, I don't think that I would like to fly with anyone else except S/L C-Rogers and F/Sgt Bingham, as I had absolute confidence in both of them, and that makes a big difference in this flying game.'

After dropping George Moss at Warmwell, Frank had some personal business to attend to. He explains:

'Before returning to base, I flew from Warmwell to Harwell to find out news of my young brother, Leonard, with the RCAF, reported missing from an operation in a Wellington aircraft, which was forced to ditch in the Mediterranean Sea between Malta and Gibraltar; and the pilot, Larry Butler, and five other crew members were adrift in a rubber dinghy for eleven days in the broiling sun, suffering from exposure and hunger. My brother, a pilot officer, and Sgt Craig set out to swim for help but were never seen again. The remaining crew (four) were picked up soon after. Officially my brother and Craig were reported missing 17 June 1941.'

On 16th July, Frank set off for Rotterdam with his new WOp/AG, John Sullivan. Encountering the pilot's worst enemy - drag - in the form of a half-trailing undercarriage, he reluctantly had to return to base.

Frank's next operation, on 21 Squadron's detachment to Manston, was his last. The inevitable happened following his ditching in the North Sea: telegrams were despatched to his parents in Canada and to his aunt in England reporting him as missing. More chilling was the following letter from Fg Off J.G.B. Draper, Adjutant to 21 Squadron (and the compiler of the ORB?). It read:

'It is feared that S/Ldr Rogers and his crew were all killed in making their attack...Officially, the Air Ministry presumes that this crew is Missing. We cannot say for certain that they are dead, because there is always the chance that they might have

been able to get out of the aircraft before it sank. I'm afraid the prospect of this actually occurring seems to me to be rather of the nature of wishful thinking. I have flown these aircraft and must say that they are not easy to get out of in a hurry.'

Luckily the Germans came to the rescue, and it was announced on their radio that Frank was a POW, and this news was picked up by the British press and relayed by Frank's aunt to his parents on 30th July. On 8th August, the Air Ministry sent a cable to Frank's parents confirming the German announcement.

But bad news spreads much faster than good news, as Frank explains:

'My squadron assumed that I was killed in action. This news reached Canada, and as I was an ex-member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, my obituary was published in the RCMP Quarterly magazine dated October 1941. After the war, I transferred to the RCAF. In 1952, I was stationed in Gimli, Manitoba (about 60 miles north of Winnipeg) when I met Sgt MacRae of the RCMP. We had been in the same Detachment together at Brandon, Manitoba. On his return to Winnipeg, he sent me the Quarterly containing my obituary. It was the first I knew about it and I was somewhat surprised, and wrote to thank him and to say that I too, like Mark Twain, feel "the news of my death is greatly exaggerated". ["The report of my death was an exaggeration"].

I retired from the RCAF in 1960. This same year I purchased a house on Thorne Avenue, Ottawa, and it was circumstantial that I related the story of my obituary...to Superintendent Hansen of the RCMP who resided close by. In October 1960, with the Editor's compliments, I received a RCMP Quarterly which graciously retracted the 1941 obituary, proclaiming it premature - 19 years later. I am still in good health and happy to say still very much alive.'

Before relating Frank's life as a *Kriegie*, there is one last 226 Squadron tale to tell. In Franks words:

'I do, however, remember Sgt Onions. He professed he could foretell which pilots wouldn't make it. When he confronted me he said he wasn't certain, he didn't know.'

With nearly four years as a POW, Frank understandably admitted that it would need a small volume to recount this period of his life. In the event, he managed to limit his contribution to just seventeen pages of foolscap. The essence of his account will be familiar to anyone who has read the classic POW books.

Frank's life as a POW began, he states, with 'camps at Düsseldorf; and successively at Lübeck XC on the Baltic; Warburg [*Oflag*] *VIB* near Frankfurt; Schubin, Poland; *Stalag Luft III* East Compound (there were also North, South and West Camps), southeast of Berlin; and *Marlag* and *Milag Nord* (*Oflag L*), near Bremen.' Here, then is Frank's pictorial description of his four years incarceration:

'At the *Oflag VIB* camp, near Frankfurt, there were 3000 prisoners, including Army, which must have numbered 2000 at least, RAF, RCAF, Fleet Air Arm of the Navy. It was a highly organised camp for POWs, including Symphony Orchestra, Theatre, Soccer and Rugby games. Rivalry between the Armed Forces was at pitch on the sports/parade ground. Even International matches took place, England vs. Wales or Scotland.

It was said, perhaps fatuously, that throughout the summer season 300 escaped tunnels were dug. Special German guards known as "ferrets" were continually digging under huts, searching for tunnels. When discovered they would often fill in the tunnels with "abort" or latrine excrement - a nauseous reprisal measure. This never discouraged continuing attempts to escape. I did not consider I had much chance in this line of action. I could speak neither German or French so I was of the majority who played little or no part in this enterprise. However, I was involved on one occasion, but the "look outs" failed to communicate the warning in time. I had been digging away at the face of the tunnel, which was well advanced, with devices for carrying away the earth, bellows to pump air, and shoring. I was summoned to the entrance by a shouting "goon" (German) and found myself looking up into a barrel of a rifle with another lad. We were still in our digging apparel, the "Long John" underwear, when we were led onto the parade ground to face our 3000 comrades on evening "appel". The German staff thought to humiliate us, but we received a great ovation of applause, and the Germans were laughed to scorn. The solitary cells were always full, and my detention was delayed until the RAF contingent moved to Poznan, Poland. My isolation in a prison cell 4ft x 8ft took place over Christmas 1942. Those not involved in tunnel operations served a small role in "watch" duty, recording and relaying German movements in the camp. The "ferret" known as "Charlie" amusingly would report himself in. Another role played was in assisting in dispersing earth from a tunnel.

On one occasion, it was discovered that the perimeter lights of the *Oflag VIB* camp could be short-circuited from a small hut used for shoe repairs. A scheme was devised which entailed construction of five ladders of sufficient length to place against the perimeter barbed-wire fence (about 12ft high) with an extension to span the gap between the inside and outer fence. Teams of ten officers each were selected: three Army, one Naval and one RAF. A moonless night was chosen for the escape. Perimeter lights were short-circuited, plunging the camp into darkness. The Germans thought an Air Raid must be approaching. Fifty officers scrambled up their respective ladders within the space of one minute and disappeared into neighbouring fields and beyond. The guards failed to realise what was happening until too late. The "Kriegies" were scattered over the landscape equipped with maps, Reichsmarks, forged railway passes and identity papers. The nuisance element for the Germans was considerable, causing disruption of train schedules, and involved Police cordons called into action. Ultimately all but two POWs were rounded up. The two escaped to Switzerland. It was said that the solitary confinement prison cells contained the "House of Lords" as many of the escapees were sons of England's nobility.

German rations were always frugal and comprised mainly thin turnip soup as salty as brine, turnip jam and ersatz coffee or mint tea. Sometimes we received potatoes, often rotten, and about 1/5 loaf of bread per week. This food was supplemented by Red Cross parcels, when available - ½ or 1 parcel per week. These parcels, with some variation, generally contained: instant coffee powder, Klim (powdered skim milk), butter or margarine, cheese, sardines or Spam or corned beef, prunes, jam and a bar of chocolate (our favourite ingredient); tablet of toothpaste and bar of soap. Breakfast and lunch was mostly a "brew" - coffee or tea and a wafer-thin slice of bread with butter or marg. and thin smear of jam. Lunch was supplemented by a German ration of turnip or potato soup. For the evening we saved our best meal, made from RC food parcels.

Another equally large scale escape took place from the Schubin, *Oflag XXIB* British and American camp. The "abort" or latrine was situated at one end of the camp, close

to the perimeter wire. One of the non-flushing toilets was declared off bounds by the Escape Committee and a tunnel was constructed. Close to 40 escaped through this tunnel and all but two were eventually captured. They were trying to reach Sweden and freedom. The body of one of them, a Danish RAF lad, was found in the sea, and the other, Buckley, was not heard of again. The Germans were indignant that officers would stoop so low as to use an abort. On this escape, one young officer almost got himself electrocuted in trying to short-circuit the perimeter lights. Flashes and sparks were crackling loudly and he had to abandon the attempt. He looked a bit frightened but had a broad grin.

The wooden horse escape took place at our East camp of *Stalag Luft III*. The story has been written. Two Ps of W escaped via Sweden and returned to England. One had borrowed a watch and returned it by post to communicate his success. ("The Wooden Horse" by Eric Williams).

Then there was the famed Great Escape from the North camp of *Stalag Luft III* on the 24th March 1944, which terminated in the mass murder of 50 Air Force officers...some of them a year or two out of school. Of the 76 escapees, 50 were killed and 15 returned to camp. Eleven were unaccounted for. Of this number, three succeeded in returning to England. The story of the remaining eight was learned after the war. Three were in Czech concentration camps, and five held at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, north of Berlin, from where they escaped and were again captured, and returned to Sachsenhausen. "Wings" Day was one of these: he was CO of 57 Squadron, Upper Heyford, when I was a member of the squadron...The story is well told in Paul Brickhill's book titled "The Great Escape".

On first becoming Ps of W, we were held at Düsseldorf, a holding and interrogation camp. Rank, Name and Number were all the information they got from us. Our first real camp was Lübeck. The camp was occupied by Army officers only, mostly from the Italian theatre of Operations. Morale rose significantly when our party of 22 RAF joined them. The RAF contingent grew as other POWs entered our camp.

One night, a Wellington aircraft with a stuttering engine limping homeward dropped some incendiaries. Some landed in our camp. One army officer suffered wounds to his leg. Most incendiaries landed on the German Officers' Mess and the building was set on fire. Firemen arrived from Lübeck. A German officer strode through our hut and demanded in vain our assistance. Flushed and purple with rage he stalked out and tackled the British Army. They willingly joined the Fire Brigade, but a tug-of-war ensued, with the Lübeck firemen howling and shouting, hauling on one end of the hose, and the British hauling in the opposite direction. The German Mess was demolished to ashes.

When the first RC parcels arrived, the Germans refused to distribute them, claiming there was no storage for them. Consequently, we lived on a steady starvation diet of meagre German rations. We were wobbly at the knees and spent a considerable time on our bunks. We were glad to depart this camp for one under the Luftwaffe.

To digress back to our first arrival at Lübeck, our party of 22 were given a delousing shower, and we hung around for about three hours without clothes while our uniforms and apparel were searched and deloused. Watches and other valuables were taken from us by a "goon", saying they would be returned at the end of the war. Fat chance. The *Luftwaffe* in this respect were more principled, but we were under the army at this camp.

At the Lübeck camp, 1941, ex-POWs will remember the blaring loud-speakers broadcasting news of the war. William Joyce, known to the British as "Lord Haw Haw", in truculent, strident and raucous voice would try and destroy the morale of the

British by his obvious propaganda claims. He was treated as a joke, though we were in no mood to listen to over-loud broadcasts of this sort.

I remember one incident which took place while entrained in transit between camps. When the train slowed, F/L Pat Shaughnessy of the RAF jumped the train. Machine-guns mounted on the train were blazing away at him. I could detect the unmistakeable sign of fear in the tail of his eye, when he looked over his shoulder as bullets sprayed around him. He ran for the thin cover of the woods. The train was quickly brought to a halt and a Luftwaffe officer, revolver in hand, shouted a warning to him. Realising the hopelessness of his position, Shaughnessy had to surrender or be shot. A courageous POW.

The limitation of our camp confines and the sparingness of meals, the heavy pall of cigarette smoke, causing eyes to smart, each evening after curfew when boarded shutters covered the windows, preventing ventilation and entrance of fresh air, shut into crowded small rooms and close quarters living - inevitably and gradually stamped its mark noticeably on *Kriegies* "in the bag" for over three years. There was a striking contrast between older *Kriegies* and the freshness of young lads recently shot down.

The Swiss authorities played a good part in holding the Germans, as far as possible, to the Geneva Convention concerning POWs.

There was a great difference in the treatment of British POWs and Russian. The Germans felt over-confident in believing it was only a question of time before Russia would be overrun and conquered. I believe Napoleon was equally deceived. In true German character, they had no respect for Russia or any other country they had subjugated. Consequently, there was no distinction made between soldiers and officers. They were subjected to forced labour, and it was a sorry sight to see them looking like skeletons or the "walking dead", listlessly on their way to outdoor work. They were on starvation rations and terribly undernourished. Their once proud uniforms in rags. They suffered from cold, hunger and frostbite. I do not know how many countless numbers died under these conditions. On occasions when Russians entered our camp for delousing showers, their skeleton-like arms would hang out of the shower window, their faces imploring. We smuggled a few cigarettes and chocolate bars and other food items to them, before shouting armed guards intervened, threatening to shoot, and prevented further gifts.'

Frank's treatise entitled *The Trek Across Germany* is not only absorbing reading but an accurate record of what many - perhaps the majority - of Allied POWs had to endure during the closing stages of the war in Europe. Frank had the presence of mind to jot down all the events, times and places on the Trek in an exercise book, just 4" x 6½". So did Robert Buckham, whose book *Forced March to Freedom* (Canada's Wings 1984 and McGraw-Hill Ryerson Limited 1990) should be read in conjunction with this account. Frank's account relies heavily on these notes. I make no apology for reproducing it in toto:

'Time is a great healer, and past experiences of hardships dim and lose a lot of their unpleasantness with the advance of time. It is now thirty-eight years in the limbo of the past.

The Trek across Germany took place during the last few months prior to my final liberation as a prisoner of war for three years and nine months, on 5th [2nd] May 1945, just after [before] the surrender of Germany to the British, American and Russian Allies - terminating the Second World War on the European stage, which began on 3rd September 1939.

The Russian troops were now only 47kms to the east of us at *Stalag Luft III*. On the 27th January 1945, we were warned that our camp would be evacuating at 2300 hours. This gave us little over an hour in which to pack food and clothes. Naturally, only what could be reasonably carried could be taken. With twelve Air Force officers in a small room chaos ensued. Food and cooking utensils were divided between us. Sleds were improvised from wooden slats from our beds. A cold and uncomfortable night was spent on the floor.

I decided that a sled would be the most satisfactory means of toting my gear (food, clothes and blanket). I hurriedly assembled a sled and this proved a tremendous asset. After many changing and uncertain orders, our Camp contingent assembled into squadrons at 0600 hours, 28th January 1945, and after the "appel" or count (I believe they count the feet and divide by two) numbering 2000 Air Force officers to the best of my memory, we marched out of the Camp main gate and into the *Vorlager*, where we collected one Red Cross food parcel each. Many could not manage the weight and bulk of the extra parcel, and cans of food were abandoned and liberally scattered over the snow-covered ground.

The Trek started at 0700 hours. The snow was a bit on the soft side but on the whole satisfactory for sledging. We were cheerful enough; I suppose being away from barbed-wire and the limited sphere of our confines accounted for this, although some of us would have preferred remaining at the Sagan Camp with the probability of being freed by the Russians, now at Salino, 47 kms to the east.

Generally we were supposed to be allowed 10 minutes rest each hour of hiking. About 1100 hours we stopped at Freiwaldau for about half an hour to unpack and get a snack for lunch. It was cold and windy hanging around in the open. We only covered 16 kms this first day and stopped at Halbau at 1500 hours, where we waited until accommodation of sorts was being found for us. The American POWs who had preceded us were already billeted at Halbau, and made it difficult to obtain accommodation at this hamlet or small village. There was a sharp wind blowing and we felt frozen hanging around. A few villagers in sympathy gave out jugs of lukewarm coffee - the *ersatz* variety (made from acorns I believe), unsweetened and black. After a sip the cup was passed on to others.

At 1930 hours, after four and a half hours of wind and cold, our contingent was divided: one party was sheltered in the church and the other put up in a school. Hundreds of airmen (officers) crowded into the school, each trying to secure a small portion of bare floor, already trampled on, wet and muddy - but a harbour from the cold night wind.

Everyone was glad to get indoors and each had found some space to bed down, either in the school rooms or in corridors or on the steps. A crowded and cramped scene. We had a meagre meal from the Red Cross food we had saved and which was to last an uncertain number of days and perhaps to our final destination.

29 January turned out to be blustery and cold, and there was great activity during the day sled making, for everyone had realised the value of a sled. Some were fortunate in procuring sleds from civilians in exchange for cigarettes. By the day's end, most POWs were fitted out with a sled.

Those in the party who had spent an uncomfortable and cold night sitting up in church pews now joined us in the school and our crowdedness became a jam. For instance, a room measuring 30 ft x 20 ft was made to accommodate 80 men plus packs, Red Cross boxes and other gear.

This day spent at Halbau was to enable the Americans to gain a day's march ahead of us so that the difficulty of finding accommodation could be easier resolved at our next stop.

30 January - up at 0430 hours and the Trek continued at 0700 hours. After covering 18 kms this day we arrived at Lieppa. On the outskirts of the town we passed our American allies, who were staying in barns and were supposed to have gained a day's march on us. We marched on and then stopped outside the town. Here we waited on an open road for three hours. All of us were suffering from cold and exposure. These halts are perhaps the worst part of the "march", or perhaps I should say "straggle".

Finally, we were taken into a church at 1630 hours. There were 700 of us with baggage in packs and cardboard boxes swarming into the church. Eventually, among the last to enter, I saw a hopeless muddle of men and their gear struggling to secure a place. I was assisted by the kind help of W/Cdr Moore. There were two galleries and I found a place in one, and from there saw an unruly and grim pageantry. Men tightly packed side by side on the pews; other officers sprawled on the floor. One impiously had taken control of the pulpit, from where he was able to hang his sodden footwear and socks to dry from the canopy; and another desecrated the altar with his presence lying on it.

We were given no rations of any kind by the Germans, but were able to send out water-carrying parties and bring back warm water for brews (tea or coffee). Most of us, during the confusion and mêlée of disorganised departure from Sagan, had salvaged one blanket and so we bedded down, sharing our blankets to keep warm.

31 January. Up at 0400 hours and trekked at 0600 hours. The travel was difficult for sleds since the weather was mild, the ground rutty and the snow soft. We encountered a lot of uphill climbing and the downhill gradients hardly compensated for the uphill work.

We arrived at Moskau at 1530 hours and stood around for two hours. Accommodation was found in a glass factory, which was vacated by our American friends from the West compound of Sagan (*Stalag Luft III*). Our best accommodation provided so far. This part of the building we were in had a tap among 200 of us. We were able to get a good wash, and a number of us stripped and managed to get a bath in a wooden tub. We also had the run of the kitchen, and those in charge organised hot water for brews.

1 February. Story went the rounds that the Americans from the West and South camps were forced marched 50 kms without a stop for shelter, and that one American was shot through the leg and four died through exposure. On our Trek, many POWs dropped out along the roadside too exhausted to continue and were subsequently picked up by lorries or trucks. We finally received our first ration of food from the Germans. It consisted of half a loaf of bread per man and some turnip soup - given out at 1430 hours.

We were told that our next march would be to Spremberg, 28 kms away, and from Spremberg we would entrain to Nürnberg. Five hundred and eighty officers from our camp would have to join evacuees from the North Compound to make up a strength of 2000. The uncertain and somewhat confusing report was given that the "North Camp" may be at Moskau with us, or that we shall have to march 3 to 8 kms to join them.

2 February. Left the factory at Moskau at 2100 hours on first February, and after an hour's wait in the town, we set off at midnight. The night was cool and a fast thaw which had begun on our arrival at Moskau continued. It looked bad for sleds. For the first two hours, the going was mainly uphill, and it was laborious and fatiguing work

pulling a heavily-laden sled to the top of the hill. Many abandoned their sleds en route so that, as in a school paper-chase, abandoned sleds indicated the direction we had taken. After 1½ hours of persevering, I too discarded my sled and harnessed my load, leaving ole faithful by the roadside. As the night wore on, those less reluctant began ditching their sleds, so that finally there were perhaps one or two hardier and more persistent *Kriegies* holding out.

We joined the *Kriegies* from the North camp on the road and covered 20 kms this night to Glaudenstein, where we sheltered for two hours in a barn. We were cold and hungry and the barn was extremely draughty.

At 1030 hours we paraded on the road and after waiting around continued on our way at 1100 hours to Spremberg, a distance of 18 kms. The load on my back was pulling on my shoulders so that my arms became strained and paralysed. The march was laborious, fatiguing and seemingly endless. We stopped late in the afternoon and grounded ourselves in MT (Motor Transport) abandoned sheds. A liberal issue of turnip soup was given out. At 1600 hours we left the sheds for the railway siding. Our destination was changed to Bremen instead of Nürnberg, and the Americans are going to Nürnberg. The strain on my arms became almost unbearable. Eventually we arrived at the railway siding and waited in the dark for two hours, but it seemed an interminable time. It was cold and damp, but a relief to park our loads on the wet and slushy ground.

Laxity of control was the cause of the North Compound lads boarding more than their allotted number of railway boxcars, and this delightful situation had to be sorted out before we finally got into our trucks. The normal number per boxcar was forty men, but in the confusion we ended up with 45. It was pitch black in the railway car, and in the light of fast fading matches we discovered that our particular truck had been used for cement, as the entire floor was covered in ½ inch of cement dust. We got down to some sort of organising and sorting out procedure and produced two lights made with a wick standing in margarine, and by this dim light the space was distributed as evenly as possible among the 45 of us. Then we banged nails into the sides of the truck and hung up a number of the packs.

We were amazed and glad to hear that we were receiving one Red Cross parcel per man and this was certainly a godsend. From the V2 boxes which held the parcels we were able to partially cover the cement dust floor, and kit bags were placed on the uncovered places. Over this, blankets and greatcoats were spread, but the cement dust was everywhere and impregnated everything. In addition to the food parcel, we received an issue of bread from the Germans of about 3/5 loaf each.

Forty-five men in a boxcar 27ft x 15ft approximately, together with kit proved a challenge. I spent most of the night in a sitting position. All of us were thirsty, but though promised coffee by the Germans we received neither coffee nor water this night.

3 February. Organisation in a boxcar crowded as ours was difficult, and as far as possible each kept to his own space to prevent upsetting others. We ate quite well on the whole during this train journey, and most of us managed to save intact the Red Cross parcel for our destination camp, because it was unpredictable when and whether we would receive further parcels, and Reich rations alone meant going on a starvation diet. During the whole of this day we were not given any water to drink. The ensuing night, through over crampedness, proved onerous and oppressive.

4 February. Received our first drink of water early this morning. The water was warm and we managed to concoct a brew of sorts. We arrived at Tarmstedt, north-east of Bremen, and after a walk of 2 kms arrived at our new camp, *Marlag* and *Milag*

(*Oflag L*) at 2000 hours. The camp was framed with the usual barbed-wire 12 or 14ft fencing, and "goon" boxes (sentry posts) armed with the usual machine-guns and searchlights and trigger-happy goons (our nomenclature for Germans); and surrounding the camp were the inevitable perimeter lights, etching the camp in sharp contrast against the black night sky. We were all tired of the Trek and at least the camp would provide a roof, perhaps a fire and a bed.

We were brought into the *Vorlager* and exposed to the cold night while parties of 20 officers were taken into a building and searched. While awaiting our turn, our kit and packages were dumped on the wet and slushy ground. Three and a half hours later I was finally admitted into the building and submitted to the search, and then led off to a hutment already overcrowded. There was no light in the room in which I found myself, and after a thin supper, bedded down with some relief on wood shavings; nonetheless, the night was cold with a penetrating dampness. Each day was cold and miserable, for it had rained every day since our arrival until 11th February - our first fair weather day. Meals were very skimpy and it was not pleasant being cold and hungry all day.

The Trek was over and for the sake of brevity I must now leave out a great deal of detail of our *Kriegie* camp life; though perhaps I can backtrack to the Sagan camp to tell of one occasion I went outside the hutment after we were shut in for the night. Blackout was effected by boarding the windows with wooden shutters, secured in place by the guards on the outside placing wooden bars across. There was no ventilation in the room and the heavy pall of cigarette smoke smarted my eyes. I endured this for the entire captivity. As I went outside the hutment I was met by a hail of machine-gun fire, so narrowly missing me as to leave me transfixed for a terrified second. I speedily retreated.

On 9th March we received news that General Patton's army had crossed the Rhein at Remagen, about halfway between Bonn and Koblenz - at last. A great day in our lives. Also we are now quite accustomed to hearing aircraft overhead, night and day. Often our huts tremble with the vibrations caused by not too distant bombs, and we hear incessant firing of German flak batteries and see the searchlights trailing along the skies. Mosquito, Lightning and Superfortress aircraft are among the aircraft seen by day. At night we saw a wide area of fires caused by our aircraft in a suburb of Hamburg, and six aircraft were seen shot down in flames. Often we hear the deep booming of guns and the blasting of bombs raining from the sky and feel the trembling of our huts. This stage of our *Kriegie* existence is becoming more interesting and we are becoming very impatient. If our armies continue in the present strain I feel the war will be over within a couple of months.

The Russians are closing around Stettin; and Pomerania, along the Baltic, is almost all in Russian hands. In the west, Köln (Cologne) has about completely "had it". By 24th March, Montgomery is reported to have crossed the Rhein in four bridgeheads between Emmerich and Wesel to the south-east. The 51st Highland Division is clearing up Rees. Paratroops have landed at Bocholt and other places and are joined by land forces. This gives us six bridgeheads across the Rhein. Industrial centres are being bombed incessantly.

Every day we either see or hear our own aircraft and bombs. At night we can see German flak tracers in a variety of colours hose-piping up the sky trying to get the right bearing and altitude of our aircraft on a raid. We can hear German flak batteries responding to a raid over Bremen. The war is going so rapidly we all feel optimistic and expect the war to last six weeks at most.

A great deal of detail concerning camp affairs, frustrations of *Kriegsgefangenen*, hunger and cold, and disagreements between our Senior British Officer (SBO) and the German Kommandant must be left out for the sake of brevity.

9 April 1945. Heavy artillery fire sounds very close to our camp. Two Typhoon aircraft (RAF) are observed flying over our camp. We are ordered to move by 1830 hours. Our SBO is doing everything to forestall our move. The march is postponed until 2115, and it is rumoured that we are going to Lübeck and marching all the way. Red Cross parcels previously held back by the Germans on the excuse of lack of manpower, are now given out. We each received two RC food parcels and subsequently a further half-parcel. Some enterprising lads had used "goon" (German) toothpaste to print in large white letters across the camp ground: "SOS - RAF POWs RAF - FINGER OUT".

At 2200 hrs 9 April 1945, we marched out of the main gate. After halting continually we covered a distance of about 300 metres and waited ½ hour. In the distance, towards Bremen, we could hear the air-raid alarm, and it transpired that the reason for the hold-up was due to convoys using the road. The night mist was gathering thick and fast, and then, to our amazement, the German Camp Commandant decided that it was too dangerous a venture and we returned to the camp. Montgomery's troops were about five miles from Bremen and seventeen miles from us.

We were ordered to be prepared to leave at 0600 hrs the following morning. 10 April. Left Tarmstedt at 0940 hrs and marched 18 kms to Heeslingen, arriving at 1930 hrs.

11 April. Left 1130 hrs and walked 11 kms to Bokel, arriving at 1700 hrs. While on the road, we saw a RAF aircraft line up for a strafing attack, and with lightning reaction our marching column scattered for the fields just in time, as the aircraft roared by at tree height tearing up the road. [Presumably in the destructive, rather than speed, sense]. There were four casualties.

12 April. Left 0815 hrs and covered 13 kms, arriving 2 kms beyond Harsefeld at 1430 hrs. Stayed over on 13 April and continued 14 April, 0900 hrs. We walked 6 kms to Hedendorf arriving at 1230 hrs.

15 April. Set off at 0830 hrs for a distance of 15 kms to Cranz, on the bank of the Elbe, arriving at 1550 hrs.

16 April. Left 1230 hours - crossed the Elbe by ferry to Blankenese, and walked 5 kms to Sulldorf, arriving at 1730 hrs.

17 April. Started 0830 hours - 12 kms to Ellerbek, arriving at 1600 hrs and remained all day 18 April.

19 April. Started 0900 hrs - marched 9 kms to within 2 kms of Tangstedt, arriving 1500 hrs. Nights were spent in fields or in barns when available.

20 April. Started 0920 hrs - 15 kms to Elmenhorst arriving 1500 hrs. Here we slept in a field. It rained heavily through the night. I was soaking wet and sought refuge in a barn. On entering the barn, I saw German soldiers bedded down. I pushed one sleeping guard and his rifle over and made room for myself between two guards. In the dim light of a lantern I was mistaken for a German guard, and after a good night awoke early and left without being discovered. If I had been recognised as a POW, then it is possible that the guards knew that the war was near its end and adopted a more benign attitude.

22 April. Marched 17 kms to Grosse Barnitz arriving 1630 hrs. We slept in a barn hay-loft.

23 April. Left 1000 hrs; covered 10 kms arriving 1400 hrs. I traded a tin of coffee with a civilian for a loaf of bread.

We are now 12 kms south of Lübeck. I carried out another trade of ½ tin of coffee for 12 eggs (my first eggs in three years, nine months).

Our SBO paid a visit to Lübeck with the German Commandant. Better terms existed between them because the German Commandant realised that he had no control over us without our SBO. Lübeck was found to be already overcrowded and unfit; bugs and lice were prevalent and there was an outbreak of typhus.

We were left to our own resources to find accommodation in the open or in barns. We also received an American Red Cross food parcel. There was a lot of air activity through the night including flak and air-raid alarms. There was also much strafing of Reich autobahns.

25 April. Bright day. Slept under the stars. Beginning of the day I observed Tempest aircraft (RAF) strafing, and also saw rocket-firing Tempests which seemed to have stirred up a hormets' nest of flak batteries.

Russia is now holding one third Berlin, which is almost completely surrounded except for a 15 km gap. Potsdam is being shelled. There is a heavy bomber attack on Bad Osloe, a place we marched through two days ago.

26 April. Russian and American troops are linked up.

27 April. We left Hansfelde at 1000 hrs; arrived at Trenthorst at 1400 hrs. We were accommodated in a barn.

28 April. News that the British 2nd Army had established a bridgehead across the lower Elbe. Mussolini is in the hands of partisans, tried and executed. Himmler is trying to negotiate for peace.

29m April. Rumoured that Hitler was suffering from a cerebral haemorrhage. British are 27 miles away.

30th April. British are 13 miles away from our position. We had a road sign "British prisoners ahead".

1st May. Heard heavy artillery fire to south-east and south-west. We saw RAF aircraft patrolling and strafing pockets of German resistance. We managed to acquire a radio for our barn. Luftwaffe airmen were exchanging "gongs" (medals) for cigarettes.

2 May, 1945. An advanced party of two armoured cars arrived at our encampment at about 1230 hrs (about ½ hour after the German SS Panzer troops left us). A British officer emerging from the armoured car announced that we were liberated. We were liberated by Radcliffe and Allen of the Cheshire Regiment.

Group Captain Wray (RCAF), as SBO, called a parade in the village square. We gave three cheers for HM the King. We were advised not to loot. Wray informed us that he was in charge of the village and foreign workers. We had taken over our ration store - rations to foreign workers were increased immediately. We were told that if we see any German soldiers looking to surrender to take them to our Headquarters. Lt/Cdr Fanshaw assumed duty as adjutant.

A squadron leader liaison officer arrived in an armoured car and is reported to have said that we will be flown out in three or four days. It seems incredible that we may be in England by the weekend.

At the moment POW life goes on routinely. Lads are fishing, others preparing meals over smoky fires. In the late evening, three *Luftwaffe* aircraft encircled our village, bombing positions nearby, and our flak batteries opened up on them but without success - the aircraft seemed game and continued circling defiantly, dropping bombs. Weather has been uncooperative - raining the last few days at lunch and tea times.

I attended a party with officers of a British regiment and returned with a gift of a German Walther revolver, still in my possession. I also had use of an army jeep and was able to travel around the local area, and have a beer at a local pub served by a sullen unfriendly innkeeper. (Not paying for the beer may have accounted for his attitude).

5 May. We crossed the Elbe by trucks to Lüneburg, arriving at 0430 hours.

6 May. Our destination is Sulingen, arriving at 1730 hrs and then to Diepholz aerodrome.

7 May, 1945. About 1030 hrs I boarded a Dakota aircraft, airborne for Brussels, Belgium. Finally, with 29 other ex-POWs, we took off in Dakota aircraft V268840 DC3 and landed at Cosford, England - the end of a long road.'

Frank transferred to the RCAF post-war, but regretted that he did not stay on in the RAF. 'I am of the opinion that the RCAF should scrap 50% of its filing cabinets and double the aircraft strength', he wrote to me. 'Perhaps we would have a more operationally effective Air Force.'

Here is a brief résumé of Frank's RCAF service, in a written communication:

'I transferred to the RCAF post-war, and dropped a rank to Flight Lieutenant. I attended Instrument Flying School at Trenton, Ontario. We received 108 hrs training time on course, generally on Anson V aircraft with some time on Harvards and Beechcraft C45.

I flew Ansons on Staff at No 2 FTS Yorkton, Saskatchewan. December 1945, I was posted to 124 Ferry Squadron and flew Ansons, Harvards, Dakota DC3 and Cornell aircraft. We made many flights to the States, returning aircraft which had been on "lend-lease" to Canada during the war for training purposes. Many flight instrument were missing, as these 'planes were generally in poor condition and many "dicey" to fly.

I was posted to Station Summerside, Prince Edward Island [where he met up with his old 226 Squadron colleague, Bob Carey] and operated a Beechcraft C45 Squadron, flying Air Cadets throughout the summer of 1950. When we disbanded, I took over a flight flying NATO navigator trainees.

There was a lack of positions for senior pilots and I then served in administration capacities. I was Chief Admin Officer at Station Gimli, Manitoba from 1952-1955. W/Cdr CO RCAF Baffin Island from 1955-1956; it was an acting rank, and I dropped it on transfer to No 1 R & CS (Radio and Communication School) Clinton, Ontario as Camp Commandant. I retired in January 1960. There was literally no room in the RCAF for senior rank promotion - so for the most part of my service life in the RAF and RCAF I was a S/Ldr, and retired in this rank, aged 47 years.

I then tried Real Estate and was in this field of work for 20 years; ten of these years, I worked for other firms, and for the remaining ten years I operated a small Real Estate office of my own. I retired in September 1979.'

It was Frank who kindly traced Bob Carey for me. I still laugh at the closing paragraph of his letter of October 1984:

'Rusty, your letter of 5th July mentioned that you intend visiting Bob Carey in September - or is it Carey's [Swiss] chalet that attracts you? (A joke, son).'

In company with many others who, at one time or another, have led a hair-raising existence, Frank has opted out: 'I now live an uneventful and quiet life,' he wrote to me. 'Long walks, lots of playing on the piano and watching TV are my Highlights of the day. Dull, perhaps, but free from the tensions of earning a living.'

WARRANT OFFICER D.E. BINGHAM
(OBSERVER IN CAMPBELL-ROGERS CREW)

Scottish-born David Edward Bingham - 'Ted' to his wife, and 'Bing' to most of his cronies - was another pre-war airman. Enlisting in November 1938, he joined 226 Squadron at Harwell five months later, as a Sergeant Air Observer. Arthur Asker got to know him well during the training phase, when they were on the same observer course.

Bing's war started on time, when he accompanied the squadron to France at the outbreak of hostilities. During this so-called 'phoney' phase, Bing was hard at work navigating his Fairey Battle on reconnaissance and 'nickel'-dropping duties (the dropping of propaganda leaflets). The crew write-up for one such sortie, on 21st April 1940, makes interesting reading in comparison with what was to come just nineteen days later. The weather encountered on this night operation was perfect; no cloud and a full moon. A recce of the Rhine, and nickel-dropping were completed between 6-8000 feet, with only the occasional searchlight to dodge. No flak was experienced. The lull before the storm...

The storm, and lightning war, burst on 10th May 1940. and Bing was in the thick of it during the early evening. After a dive-bombing attack on a large convoy of heavy vehicles, the crew experienced intense A/A fire southwest of Luxembourg. Bing's pilot, Sgt Barron, with a hole blown through his left leg, brought his aircraft and crew safely back to base (Reims).

Doing his best to stem the German advance, Bing, in company with the remnants of the AASF, finally admitted that enough was enough and departed for Blighty in June.

Anti-submarine patrols - still in Fairey Battles - were flown from Sydenham, Belfast, during which time Bing was sandwiched between Sgt Snowball at the front and Sgt Moss at the rear.

As is evident in Frank Campbell-Rogers's biography, life for Bing on joining 2 Group in June 1941 was anything but dull. Frank recalls how they teamed up:

'When David first reported to me as navigator he said: "You are lucky to have me, sir!" He was welcomed aboard. I was lucky to have him and I do not think I proved worthy enough.'

The incident on 14th July, when George Moss, the WOp/AG, was wounded earned Bing a vote of thanks from all concerned. The 226 Squadron ORB records it thus:

'F/S Bingham commended by the medical staff at Bovington Military Hospital on the assistance he rendered to Sgt Moss, which in their opinion was responsible for saving his life.'

Nine days later, Bing was fished out of the North Sea to become a POW for the duration. In such well-known *Kriegie* domains as *Stalag 357* (Fallingbostel), *Stalag Luft VI* (Heydekrug) and *Stalag IIIE*, Bing was kept company by such Rotterdam veterans as Ted Caban, Jim Marsden and Fred Soal, to name but a few. Anyone interested in these camps could do no better than purchase a copy of *Moving Tent*, by Richard Passmore, who also trod this road.

Bing had sufficient strength of character to consider other people's predicament, when it would have been all too easy to have locked in on his own misfortunes. In this respect, I like his thoughtfulness in taking full advantage of the *Kriegsgefangenenpost* and sending postcards to George Moss, his ex-WOp/AG, and to Group Captain Singer DFC.

Whilst lying seriously ill in hospital (Halton), after an operation, George Moss was tremendously bucked to get a card from Bing explaining that his old crew members had escaped the clutches of the Grim Reaper.

More difficult was the card Bing sent to Gp Capt Singer at Wattisham, asking that John Sullivan's parents and lady-friend be informed that he was killed in action. Bing no doubt realised that the 'Missing' label is the most odious on the Casualty List.

Warrant Officer Bingham was back in the UK on 24th April 1945, and obtained his release from the RAF in March of the following year.

Along with many other 226 Squadron colleagues, Bing was a keen sportsman - hockey being his speciality (was 226 the fittest squadron in the RAF during this period?).

Other memories of Bing range from two references to his hair: 'Baldish - premature probably' and 'Blond, fair-haired chap' to the more detailed description offered by his old pilot, Frank Campbell-Rogers:

'He was easy-going. Quiet temperament. Self-confident and good presence of mind and a reliable navigator...David Bingham's calibre of courage and dedication to duty will always live in my memory. I have lost the pleasure it would have given me to have been in contact with him.'

The Aircrew Association came to my aid yet again, and traced Bing's widow Megan. J. Jones, Hon Sec of the Scottish Branch, kindly informed me of Mrs Bingham's address, but regretted that Bing had passed away just two years previously.

Megan Bingham wrote back explaining that:

'I am in the process of winding up Ted's Roofing Business in which I was also a Director, but accountants and lawyers - "they shall not be moved" quickly. Ted died on 10 May 1982.'

I again had cause to regret that I had not commenced my research earlier.

SGT J.P. SULLIVAN
(WOp/AG IN CAMPBELL-ROGERS CREW)

Frank Campbell-Rogers described his last WOp/AG as: 'A young English boy eager to do his part'. I was therefore somewhat surprised, on reading John Sullivan's Record of Service, to discover that he had enlisted way back in June 1936. Frank can be forgiven for using the all-embracing term 'English' when, in fact, John was born in Barry, Glamorgan.

John did not join Frank and Bing until the actual day of the Rotterdam raid, 16th July 1941, filling the gap left by George Moss, who by that time was creating havoc among the nurses in the Military Hospital at Bovington. No doubt John would have awarded his pilot full marks for airmanship when he turned back with complete hydraulic failure on their first sortie together. With the air-gunner's turret operated by hydraulic pressure, John must have felt like a sitting duck.

After that, events moved fast. Within a few days, John had followed his crew to a new squadron (21 at Watton/detached to Manston) and, on only his second operational sortie with them, had been killed in action.

Like my cousin, John's body was never recovered and he too is therefore commemorated on the Runnymede Memorial. As stated in his pilot's account of that fateful day, John was probably killed when the Bf 109 closed in and so went down with the aircraft when it sank.

Frank Campbell-Rogers described John's loss as 'a traumatic shock to me'. He received another shock in July 1984, when I sent him a photocopy of a letter written to me by John's sister, Nora. Explaining that she was now the only one left, her parents having passed away, she wrote: 'I always felt the pilot could have written to my parents after the war, and wished he had. At least now I know exactly what happened.'

Frank responded admirably, writing Nora a profuse apology and giving her full details of John's involvement in Blenheim operations of that period.

Frank sent me a copy, and wrote in his covering letter:

'I was taken by surprise to receive the enclosed photo of Sullivan which I was pleased to have; and I was shaken by the letter written by Sullivan's sister. It was somewhat of a dilemma to have to reply to her letter after all these years, particularly since emotions are strongly involved. You have earned a copy of my reply.'

In his letter to Nora, Frank wrote:

'A photocopy of your letter to Russell was forwarded by him to me. I had never realised how completely thoughtless and remiss I had been in neglecting to communicate with your parents concerning the loss of their son and your dear brother, John Patrick Sullivan. The memory of the loss of a member of my aircrew has lived with me all these years and I still feel the same mental numbness and sense of remorse at the loss of my Wireless-Operator and Rear-Gunner.

A strange set of circumstances and the irony of fate seem now to place me in a difficult position of facing up to the bitterness and censure for my incredible thoughtlessness in presuming that an official notice from the Squadron and Air Ministry would be sufficient. I am, though, extremely thankful that I am given this opportunity to relate to you a full account of this operation - before time runs out.'

After giving a full account of those traumatic times, Frank continued:

'These events, along with trying to re-orientate my life, seemed to have blocked my duty to your parents from my mind, and I was unwittingly neglectful and derelict in this duty - and I deeply regret it.'

John was killed just twelve days after his 23rd birthday. What kind of life had he packed into these all too few years?

The son of a police officer, John attended many schools in South Wales as his father moved around. Eventually he settled at Porth County School, then considered one of the best in the country, remaining there until his Matriculation.

He immediately enlisted in the RAF, with a few weeks to run before his 18th birthday. Attending the Electrical & Wireless School at Cranwell, he joined 226 Squadron at Harwell, in October 1937, as a fully qualified Wireless-Operator with the rank of AC2. In March 1938, John commenced training as an Air-Gunner, and by the outbreak of war had just been reclassified as AC1. The war soon changed a person's promotion prospects, especially if he were aircrew in 2 Group.

Nora informed me of a career decision that John had to face. She wrote:

'They wanted him to train as a navigator, and take his commission, but he declined because so many of the young officers without a private income could not keep up their Mess bills, in fact some borrowed from the Sgts.'

The day before Britain declared war on Germany, 226 Squadron departed for France. Before leaving Harwell on Saturday 2nd September 1939, John wrote a letter to his parents which they received two days later. It was their most treasured possession, Nora informed me. It is probably typical of many such letters written at that time. It reads:

'Well at last the time has come to say goodbye. Now do not get downhearted, because after all I'm only doing my share to crush a fiend. We are leaving the country for France this afternoon, but where to I do not know, but in any case when you write to me, you must address your letters to Harwell as per usual, exactly the same as you've always done, and they will be as soon as possible forwarded on to me.

I shall always think of you as the swellest folks any fellow ever could have wished for, and know that you will keep your chins up, and stick it out bravely, whatever happens to me. Now I must close. Give all my love to Nora, and best regards to all I know, and I'll write to you as soon as possible. Your loving son, John.'

John gave faithful service to 226 Squadron throughout its traumatic time as part of the AASF in France; this was then followed by somewhat less nerve-wracking anti-submarine patrols from Northern Ireland. Joining 2 Group in June 1941, he stayed with the squadron until virtually the last day of his life, when he departed for his first - and last - operation on 21 Squadron. Not many wartime aircrew served as long as three years and nine months continuously on one squadron.

WOp/AGs almost invariably received no recognition for their valuable services; John was no exception. However, he was promoted to Sergeant on 27th May 1940, after the RAF had realised that WOp/AGs were risking life and limb in the lower ranks for a mere pittance. Accordingly, John's pay rocketed up to no less than '7/9 per diem' (less than 40p a day!).

John's contribution to the sporting activities of 226 Squadron must have considerably enhanced their reputation as being arguably the fittest squadron in the RAF. Nora recalls:

'John was also a good athlete. He ran for the School and also for the RAF. I remember we had some newspaper photographs of him doing the hurdles at RAF Cranwell, but I cannot find them.'

When John was based at Belfast/Sydenham he played rugby for the 'A' team. An all-rounder, without question.

John naturally had other interests, as Nora elucidates:

'He was full of the joys of life, girls, dancing and loved going for a pint with Dadda. His church also meant a great deal to him, RC in fact. Whenever possible he would serve on the altar for the chaplain.'

Arthur Asker completes the picture of John Sullivan by describing him as 'Tallish, slim, popular with the rest of the chaps.'

After they received the bombshell in the form of the 'Missing' telegram, the Sullivans, like many others, must have held on to a faint hope that John could have survived. Bing Bingham, aware of this, despatched a *Kriegie* postcard from *Stalag IIIE*, dated 29th September 1941. Addressed to Gp Capt Singer DFC at the Air Ministry, London, it was forwarded to the group captain at Wattisham on 2nd December that same year. Dora explains the means by which the card finally arrived in South Wales:

'This card was brought to Penarth by an airman on leave named Bodham, 65 Windsor Road, Penarth, who acts as chauffeur to Group Captain Singer DFC , to whom the card is addressed.'

Bing's thoughtful postcard reads as follows:

'Dear Sir, I would appreciate your sending this card on to the parents of my Air-Gunner J. Sullivan of Cardiff, whose address you can get from F/Lt Elder. I would like to express my deepest regret in my informing you that J. Sullivan was killed in action on July 23rd over the Channel. Please also inform his lady-friend in Belfast.'

Nora sums up her feelings with the following poignant words:

'I too have been to Runnymede a few times, but what was it all for? They died before they started to live. Please God it will never happen to my son, who was named after my brother, and is now 27 years old.'

GP CAPT J.S. KENNEDY DFC & BAR AE

'The Lowest Flier in the RAF': a reputation of such evocation could not have been too dissimilar to 'The Fastest Gun in the West'. Many of Shaw Kennedy's rivals threw down strong challenges for the title in their bid to dethrone the king.

The Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941 probably had more than its fair share of would-be usurpers. Souvenirs of Holland plucked from returning aircraft afforded ample proof of the leadership contest. On other occasions, bent propellers resulting from contact with the sea must have scored a few promotion points, if not with the culprit's CO!

How, then, had Shaw Kennedy reached this elevated (perhaps the wrong word!) position? Jane Kennedy, Shaw's widow, recalls one interpretation:

'When the chaps used to joke about Shaw being the lowest flier in the Air Force, they used to say: "Yes, of course! He was the lowest type in the RAF!"'

Apart from the tree top that lodged in his engine nacelle on the Rotterdam raid, Shaw endured many more hair-raising experiences which contributed to his reputation. I think that the two I have selected - when Shaw was flying Bostons - take some beating.

The first occasion was as a direct result of necessary and violent low-level evasive action to avoid a flak emplacement ahead during a bombing run. Conscious of the puffs of black smoke, Shaw quickly let go three of his bombs, closed his bomb-doors, and applied a boot-full of rudder. He skidded round to the right, in the process dragging his wing along the ground, incredibly knocking a German soldier off his

bicycle with one of his machine guns. The German was propelled straight up into the air, while his bicycle carried on riderless.

The other incident took place on 19th July 1942. Following the successful bombing of a large textile factory on the northern outskirts of Lille, Shaw set course for base at tree-top height. Near Saint-Pol he was caught in a withering cross-fire between two German flak emplacements. Shaw's forward gun scattered the gunners of one battery, but a shell-burst in the Boston's port wing snuffed out the engine and considerably altered its aerodynamic qualities. Shaw's ground-hugging evasive action then forced him to fly under some high-tension cables, or rather through them, sustaining further damage to his aircraft. With navigator's bombing panel now smashed, a draughty course was set for the French coast at Berck-sur-Mer, and the Boston was safely brought back to base on the remaining engine.

Boston Mk III, AL 685 (MQ:Z) was examined for damage. The official report states that:

'The shell apparently burst on impact on underside of inner wing, adjacent to portside of fuselage. Shell fragments penetrated into the bomb compartment and slightly holed the fuselage stressed skin on the opposite side, also the oil cooler: this caused loss of oil to occur. The port propeller was then operated to the fully feathered position prior to the total loss of oil from damaged cooler, and subsequent engine seizure. The aircraft...hit and severed ¼" copper high-tension cables, which cut through the port wing-tip and caused indentations along leading edge [remarkable understatement this - the photographs show the outer three feet of wing leading-edge gaping wide open like a tramp's shoe!]; impressions of the high-tension cables occurring on the reduction-gear casing, port propeller, ignition harness, nose cowling, bomb-aimer's panels. Slight damage was also sustained to the starboard nose cowling and stressed skin of fin, adjacent to leading edge of port side. A portion of the high-tension cable was extracted from the engine, during the ground examination.'

Part of that cable was fashioned into a napkin ring for the Kennedys' golden-haired daughter, Jane, and remains a treasured possession of the family.

Shaw's observer, Arthur Asker, describes his pilot in glowing terms:

'Very popular. Crewed up in Northern Ireland, which was his home. One of a great bunch of people - the backbone of Belfast. His brother was a surgeon at the Royal Victoria Hospital. Another brother was the captain of a corvette, which used to ply in and out of Belfast, so we used to try and arrange it so that the time that the corvette was in Belfast, we used to go on board. The four Kennedy brothers - there was another, but I can't quite remember what he did - were renowned throughout Belfast. So he was well-known and well-liked. He had a couple of sisters who were right characters, and used to make us very welcome. When the squadron [226] went over to Belfast, which we used to from Wattisham, for army cooperation exercises - the first of the working-up of the army for combined ops - whenever we had a couple of weeks in Northern Ireland, you can bet your boots we mostly went to Ken's house. They would give us a whale of a time over there. He was absolutely popular: personality plus - a great leader. He led by example. He could consume more alcohol than anyone else I knew. He used to demand the bar open on returning from a mission: he got me going as well! Bright ginger hair. I called him "Ken", while his wife and friends called him "Shaw".'

In fact, Shaw was also known to some of his contemporaries as 'Ginger' and 'Joe'. Another character reference, this one relating to Shaw's childhood, clearly refers to a man destined for high places. A schoolmate for eight years (1920-1927) at the Malone National School wrote of Shaw: 'He was a good-looking strong, active lad. Ginger hair, nice smile, very intelligent, and at this time I sensed he would go far in any career he would take up.'

By achieving the substantive rank of Group Captain, Shaw Kennedy became the most outstanding career officer of the Rotterdam raid.

By the middle of 1942, the United States had been active participants in the Second World War for six months. The strategic bombing offensive of the 8th Air Force was yet to be born. In the meantime, our American allies were naturally keen on 'getting the show on the road' and at least be seen to be showing the flag in the air on this side of the Atlantic. What better than a token effort in American-built Boston aircraft on the greatest day in the American calendar - 4th July? Lacking real combat experience, these crews would need the leadership of one of the best officers that RAF Bomber Command had to offer. By the time most people in Britain were just finishing their breakfasts on 4th July 1942, Shaw Kennedy was leading a formation of twelve Boston IIIs back to base. Six of the aircraft were manned by personnel of the American Army Air Corps. The attack on enemy aerodromes in the Netherlands was thus registered as the first raid made by American bomber crews on enemy-held territory.

What the subsequent press coverage did not mention was that the account had already been opened. Just five days earlier, a formation of twelve Bostons from 226 Squadron bombed the marshalling yards at Hazebrouck. 'Crewed in the Boston formation', the squadron ORB states, 'was an all-American crew that thus became the first Americans to drop bombs on enemy-occupied territory on the continent.' The leader of the formation was Sqn Ldr J.S. Kennedy DFC. Either way, Shaw could claim the honours.

Shaw's Irish descent is well remembered by his wartime colleagues, as Wg Cdr John Castle DFC recalls:

'Shaw Kennedy and I were very close friends. He had a devastating sense of humour, and, being a Northern Irelander, was in a perpetual battle with MacClancy, the Southern Irelander in 226; needless to say they joined forces on any hint of a slight on the Irish.'

In a similar vein, Tom McKee recalls:

'An amusing memory comes to mind; when we really did hammer home a raid, one would hear over the R/T Shaw Kennedy singing: "The sash my father wore". This was usually followed by Bill O'Casey ('A' Flight) singing: "The Wearing of the Green". Shaw being a Protestant and Bill a Catholic - nothing has changed!'

For Shaw, one of the most important of the Principles of War was 'Maintenance of Morale'. He dealt with it as only a great wartime leader would. Tom McKee explains:

'Shaw made many friends, especially with those breweries in Belfast such as Guinness Ltd, who gave us all we could carry back in the bomb bay, all at cost price. This became a monthly trip for me and my crew! Like many other squadrons we suffered losses but Shaw's leadership was always to demonstrate to the new crews how to overcome the sad occasions by insisting 6.30pm - 7.30pm was the drinking

hour, when all complaints were heard. Somehow new crews soon got the message if they didn't follow the details of the Bar Briefing!'

Shaw also made new arrivals feel important by asking for their autographs after they had completed their first operation. The only problem was that the 'album' was actually the ceiling of the Ante Room in the Officers' Mess, well out of reach of mere mortals! Nothing daunted, Shaw would make sure his celebrities were thoroughly tanked up; he would then drag over a large table, pile loads of magazines on top, and then place a chair on these. I can find no reference in the 226 Squadron ORB concerning injuries caused by drunken revelry...

Apparently OTU training was not restricted to merely operating a fighting machine to the best of one's ability, as Peter Badcock (Flt Lt E.H. Badcock MBE DFC) recalls:

'I had known Shaw Kennedy in the summer of 1940, when we were Pilot Officers at Upwood, which was an Operational Training Unit, and we often went into Cambridge to paint the town red. Our mode of transport was an old Riley car owned by a New Zealander called "Rocky". The car had yellow Perspex side windows, by courtesy of the Station Equipment Officer, and through which nobody could see, and was inevitably full of empty beer bottles which moved around like shifting cargo in a ship in heavy seas. There are a few stories connected with this car, but I mustn't ramble.'

After Arthur Asker was commissioned, Shaw realised that he had at last met his match. Peter Badcock explains:

'I was the confidant of both him [Arthur] and Kennedy, when they thought the other was drinking too much in the Mess.'

Shaw's valiant service on Blenheims was recognised by the award of a DFC in September 1941. One year later, he added a Bar to his DFC for equally spectacular work on Bostons - in particular for leadership and courage in the laying of an effective smoke screen for the ill-fated Dieppe raid on 19th August 1942. Considerable flak was encountered, and Shaw's aircraft was continually hit. Reduced to flying on one engine, his air-gunner George Casey wounded in both thighs but pumping out lead regardless, his passenger Flt Lt McWilliam mortally wounded, Shaw led his formation long enough to successfully lay the smoke screen, before limping to Shoreham for a crash-landing.

The presentation of Shaw's second DFC was and still is a treasured memory for the Kennedy family. A carnation fell from the lapel of Her Majesty the Queen just as she was presenting Shaw with his 'gong'. As quick as a flash, he picked up the flower and asked if he could keep it as a memento. Her Majesty readily agreed. Shaw's widow, Jane, still has that carnation - framed in a photograph of the presentation. It hangs in pride of place in the hall of her present home.

Evoking somewhat different memories is a copy of an original portrait of Shaw by the artist Sir William Rothenstein. Completed in 1940, the portrait was offered to the Kennedys for the sum of £100 - a king's ransom in those days. Jane bitterly regrets that they were unable to afford to buy it, and the portrait was subsequently placed in the Royal Academy. Its present whereabouts is unknown.

In December 1942, Shaw was 'loaned to the Canadian Government'. as his Record of Service neatly puts it. Most operational pilots seemed to regard instructional tours with more trepidation than confronting the enemy. Whatever Shaw felt, he attacked

his post as Armament Chief Instructor, No 31 Bombing & Gunnery School, Picton, Ontario with his legendary enthusiasm and appeared reasonably compos mentis at the end of his two year stint.

The remaining months of the war saw the Kennedys in warmer climes, when Shaw was appointed CO of Khartoum.

After the war, Shaw commanded Turnhouse, Shepherd's Grove and Bentwaters, and was SASO for 65 Group, before becoming Air Attaché, Bucharest, Romania, in April 1954.

This near-three year tour behind the Iron Curtain appears to have had more than its fair share of excitement. It is now accepted common knowledge that diplomats of all sides are given orders to keep their eyes and ears open, at the very least, and as such are virtually espionage agents. It would appear that Shaw's appointment was no different. Tom McKee throws some light on this period: 'I understand the KGB abducted or kidnapped him', he recalls, 'and caused him great discomfort, but he managed to escape.'

In April 1959, Shaw was forced to retire from the RAF 'on account of medical unfitness for air force service'. On 17th November 1971, he passed away, just 57 years of age.

Jane Kennedy never remarried. That does not in the least surprise me: marriages of that calibre cannot be repeated. Now in her late seventies, Jane embodies all that is best in the Irish, namely openhearted friendliness. She now spends most of her time and energy looking after the needs of one of her four daughters, who became disabled after a car accident.

Jane has wonderful memories, tinged with not a little sadness for all the close friends she and Shaw lost during the war. Among her souvenirs are several priceless photograph albums, adorned with congratulatory letters, 2 Group Reunion Dinners and suchlike, bearing the signatures of such illustrious persons as Bert Harris and Basil Embry.

Shaw Kennedy, No 226 Sqn Wattisham (via Mrs Jane Kennedy)

Portrait of Shaw Kennedy by Sir William Rothenstein (via Mrs Jane Kennedy)

SQN LDR H.A. ASKER DFC DFM
(OBSERVER IN KENNEDY CREW)

Survivors from 2 Group left me in no doubt than an interview with 'Arthur' Asker was a 'must'. This was duly arranged, and I met Arthur for the first time outside a pub north of Bournemouth two days before Christmas 1982. The venue, I felt, was appropriate for a Blenheim veteran - they almost invariably confessed to being hard drinkers in those days - but I soon learned that such a place had serious drawbacks when it came to transcribing the taped interview. The crescendo of drunken voices and near-continuous 'gerdonk-gerdonk-gerdonk' of the adjacent fruit machine made the tape about as readable as a Blenheim TR9 intercom just after the 'plus 9' boost lever had been applied to the Mercury engines.

I knew at the time that the interview was a gem, and I somehow managed to decypher it later. Arthur's credentials were impeccable: I learned this more from his Record of Service than from his modest self. His contribution to the reconstruction of the Rotterdam raid was considerable.

Arthur did not wait for the war to enlist, and joined up in November 1938, just 18½ years of age. As a Sergeant Observer he joined 226 Squadron, then based at Harwell, in April 1939. His association with this famous squadron was to last more or less continuously for over 3½ years, well exceeding the average tour of duty. During this time, Arthur faced the might of the German military machine in Fairey Battles, then Bristol Blenheims and finally Douglas Bostons. How did he survive this prolonged sojourn in the AASF and 2 Group? 'Pure luck!', was Arthur's modest reply.

An incident which is indelibly imprinted on Arthur's memory helps illustrate the element of luck. He recalls:

'We were hit near Sedan on 13th June [1940], doing a low-level attack on a column; and we hit the ground, more or less shallow doing 160mph, and the old Battle just

ploughed on in. Our pilot - Flt Lt Frederick Oliver Barrett - was fairly badly hit, and chucked it on the ground; we bounced once, and the Battle ploughed to a halt on the flat ground. We got out. The rear-gunner - a chap called Herbie Kirk - he swears that he hit one of the three 109s that sat on us: he never objected to using some target practice.

Anyway, we made our way to a road. I remember putting a tourniquet on our pilot's arm: he was bleeding profusely, and his head was damaged, so we used one dressing for his head, and another for his arm, and then made off for a road that was north of us, which we'd seen before crashing. I'd stuck the map down by boots. We came across this road, and there was a column of French troops, with an ambulance run by the Friends/Quakers Ambulance Service. They had room for the three of us in this ambulance, so we got in. We were going very slowly along this road in a westerly direction, going away from the fighting, when we were halted by an armoured German column that had cut across us; and we were taken prisoner: the whole of this French column, the ambulance - the lot! We about turned, and were driven up towards St Quentin - that was where we were heading for - under the escort of motor-cycles with sidecars and machine-guns. And the road was blocked at one stage we came to: somebody had shelled or blown the road-junction up. A motor-cycle and sidecar rode up alongside our ambulance and yelled: "Turn round, turn round - go back again!" But instead of turning round and going back, we belted off on another road, and the motor-cycle and sidecar didn't know what to do - chase us, or stick with the main body of the other POW troops they had with them.

Anyway, they let us go, being an ambulance, and we roared off down this road at a very high rate of knots, and went more or less southeast then southwest then west, sort of where the main thrust had come through. And we arrived at Brest about three days later, having map-read our way across France. In the meantime, we had gone back to the original airfield we had started from: it was only a grass field alongside a stream, and it had been really flattened, by a raid I think, so we pressed on right to the coast at Brest. Fuel was a snag, but there were piles of fuel dumps alongside the road, anyway, which the British had left behind. And we just got near Brest when we met remnants of the BEF halfway along the road; and they turned round and chucked all their stuff into the sea. It was all over.

But I'd seen the German Air Force and I'd seen the German ground forces. At some stage or other, we were in convoy with this German Panzer column, and they sent in these trucks with racked-back seats, facing outwards; and I remember some poor character in a Battle came over having a quick strafe at 180mph. And the troops just crouched in their personnel-carriers, and fired straight up into the air with their Schmeissers - not even worried about one of our aircraft! I thought, well, this lot is invincible. We also saw a whole division: there must have been at least 13,000 French troops on an open area of ground. There were only about four motor-cyclists guarding us: there was no argument - no wish to fight anyway! The armour: we actually went through a Lager at one stage - a couple of hundred German tanks, all lined up neat and tidy - we went up straight through them; they were lined up on either side of the road. We just belted straight through them in our ambulance. There were two girls driving it, and I was navigating it. The Germans looked at us, and one of them attempted to put his hand up for us to halt, but we didn't take any notice of him. They did not shoot - I felt they might have. Then we got to Brest, and caught a coal-boat, which was absolutely weighed down with people. We pulled into Plymouth, and took our pilot to hospital, and the gunner and I went back over to Belfast. I don't know how we got directed there: someone must have said: "Ah! 226 Squadron - you'd better go to

Belfast!" But we couldn't go in just shirt and trousers, so we were fully kitted out again. That was June 1940!'

Life at Belfast/Sydenham sounds somewhat less hectic than the AASF retreat. Convoy-protection/anti-submarine patrols, usually at dawn or dusk, almost invariably produced the result: 'Nothing of interest to report'.

By June 1941, 226 Squadron was operating Blenheim Mk IVs, and was based at Wattisham as part of 2 Group. By the end of the year, Arthur's contribution to this vital and highly dangerous time of the war was recognised by the award of a DFM. Coincidentally, he was commissioned. In typically modest vein Arthur admits:

'If it hadn't been for the war, we'd never have made commissioned rank - never! The first thing we were told when the war was over, by the Air Secretary, was that we were lucky to have made commissioned rank - only the war had made that possible! We would be eased out to make room for the Cranwell regime: so we knew where we stood. I remember being assembled in the ante-room to be told this.'

Nevertheless, Arthur was promoted to substantive Squadron Leader after the war.

In April 1942, after short breaks on 21 and 88 Squadrons, the call of 226 brought Arthur back to a squadron now equipped with Boston aircraft. The Dieppe raid on 19th August, during which Arthur was the lead navigator of a formation which laid an effective smoke screen, and culminated with his badly shot-up aircraft crash-landing at Shoreham, earned him the award of a DFC.

At the beginning of 1943, Arthur at last saw the light, and successfully applied for pilot training. He recalls:

'They sent me to Canada, to train on Ansons. I was just about to come back to the UK when Kennedy sent for me. He was then in charge of a Bombing and Gunnery Station at Picton in Ontario. I joined him there. I stayed there for a year, as flight commander of the Navigation Flight. What they wanted to do was embody navigation into the bombing and gunnery: so he had the Bombing and Gunnery School at Picton, and he wanted me to run the navigation side. So we set that up. I stayed there until 1944, when I got an OTU on Mosquitoes in Nova Scotia. I came back to UK and waited for a squadron, for ages and ages. I eventually joined a squadron just as the war ended! I was all set to go to the Far East with 45 Squadron on Mosquitoes - we were all ready to roll - then the war was all over. So I didn't take any operational role as a pilot.

There was a surplus of pilots then: a lot of them were stoking boilers on trains, and one hundred other jobs. 1944/1945 - glut. I was lucky really to keep going on OTUs and holding units, to keep flying!

I went to 107 Squadron, Brussels on Mosquitoes in August '45: war over. Then Gutersloh. Then Central Gunnery School as an instructor on Mosquitoes, ground attack. Then back to Germany as Air 3 at Air HQ as the Gunnery and Bombing Training Officer. Stayed there. Lost my acting rank in 1947. Then CFS. Then Syerston, where I trained the Navy for a couple of years. Then appointed as regular adjutant to 605 (Vampire) Squadron - two years. Then CO of 118 Squadron in Germany, when it formed in 1951, as Squadron Leader. Stayed there until 1954. Came to CFE [Central Fighter Establishment] at [West]Raynham as Air Weapons and Gunnery Leader. 1956 - Malta as Air 1. Back in 1959: put down a hole at Neatishead! Then I had a letter from Air Sec that I would be employed on watch-keeping duties

for the rest of my life if I cared to hang on! I stayed at Neatishead for a couple of years, in charge of recovery. These were the days of scrambling many fighters - up to 120 - and then finding a hole for them to get down when the weather started to clamp. An interesting couple of years: quite hair-raising at times, especially one Sunday night, when I think we had something like 40-odd Javelins up - the weather closed and there was only one airfield open! The endurance of a Javelin was at best 1hr 20mins...After that, I applied to come out, and they were pleased to let me go!

I came out, and had to get a job quickly: not much cash. I got a job - the first thing I could find - with John Bull in Leicester, in their purchasing department. They were taken over by Dunlop. Then I found something close to home, Melton Mowbray, where I was living. So I got a job with this Auster firm at Rearsby. They were shut down. Then I got a job with the British Aircraft Corporation at Hurn and stayed there ever since. I retired in September 1982, taking an early retirement by a couple of years. So that's the story of my life!'

Arthur has now returned to 2 Group territory - East Anglia.

My standard interview question regarding how a person viewed his chances of survival elicited a non-standard reply from Arthur: it wasn't going to happen to the other person - it was going to happen to *him*! He felt that the odds were *very* close. How did he face this prospect? Arthur replied:

'With a sort of numbness, really. Waiting was the worst: once you were going and doing some work, it was not quite so bad. Flak? Terrible! Thump, bang, waiting. I can remember that summer of 1941: you were up one hour before it was light, if you were on Duty Squadron. So you were down in the hangar, in the crewroom, at something like 3 in the morning, *waiting* for somebody to sight something that you could go out on - for Group to send your target through. So you would wait from 3am until 3, 4 or 5 in the afternoon, and that's a long time to be waiting to go, as you know jolly well that you would go out on *something*! Waiting: 1% fright. 99% boredom.

Every trip we did, we got hammered more and more. At one stage, our morale took a nose-dive: mine got pretty puzzled - I didn't think we were making very good headway against this German mass across the road. We were on Blenheims at this time. I thought that if this was winning the war, we were going to be a long time doing it! There was no easy victory in sight. It wasn't going to be for another four years. The prospect of a long war was very depressing. I think one of the biggest grumbles was the fact that the politicians told us at the beginning of the war that the Germans only had cardboard tanks, and their aircraft weren't as good as ours. We were completely misled. Of course, the Fairey Battle wasn't the best of aeroplanes, and the Blenheim wasn't much better: we were sitting ducks. They burned well, though!'

Arthur's pilot on Blenheims - Shaw Kennedy - expressed a similar sentiment when he referred to this type as 'a flying coffin'.

Arthur Asker outside a pub near Bournemouth, Christmas 1982 (Author's photo)

FG OFF E.J. BRETT
(WOp/AG IN KENNEDY CREW)

Well-constituted crews tend to stick together, and usually reform if split up by intervening postings. So it was with the Kennedy crew. Johnnie Brett, WOp/AG, actually teamed up with Shaw Kennedy before Arthur Asker, in April 1941. The three of them were not to crew up until June 1941. After that, only the might of the Postings Branch could separate them, or try to.

Johnnie Brett would have derived much consolation from knowing that he was flying behind two of the best Blenheim operators in the business. When the inevitable posting came, to No 17 OTU in November 1941, Johnnie planned a campaign to rejoin the old firm - Kennedy & Co. He succeeded, and tracking them down to 88 Squadron, rejoined them in February 1942. Two months later, after the crew had made it fairly obvious that their loyalties were still firmly placed with 226 Squadron, they were allowed to return 'home'.

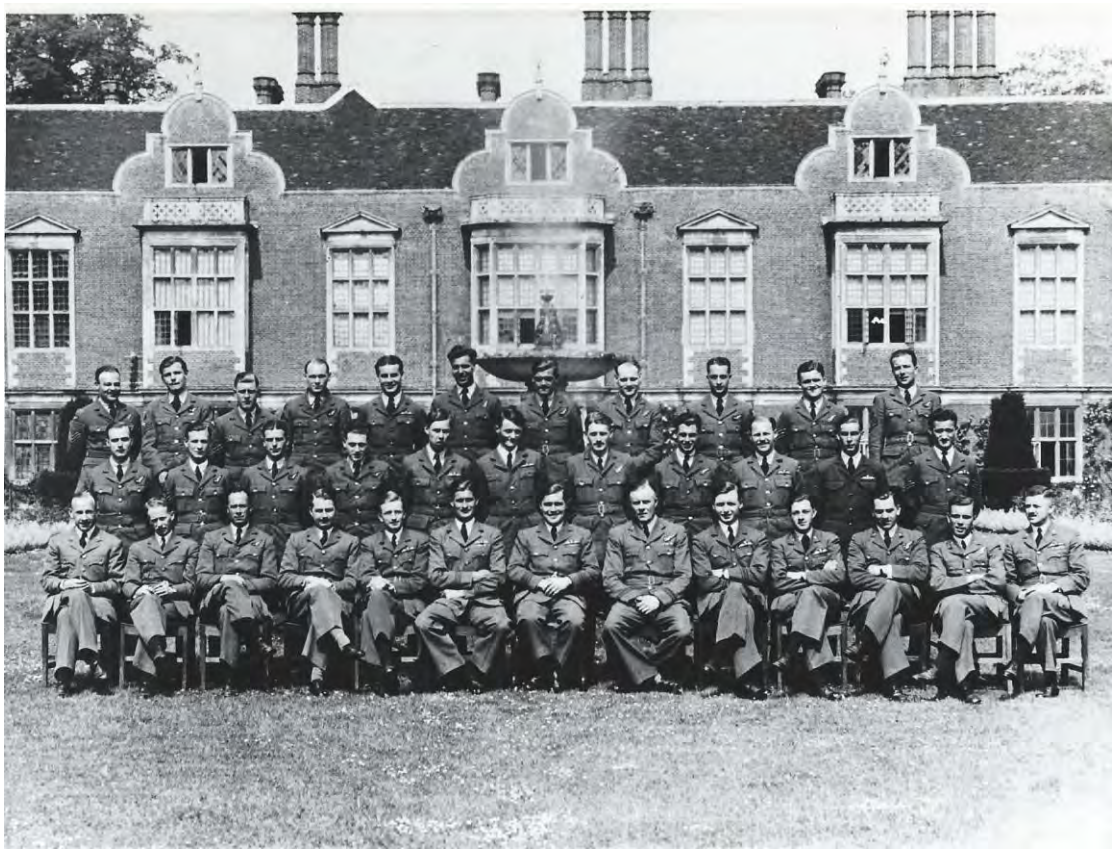
In June 1942, Johnnie was gazetted with a 'Mentioned in Despatches', tantalisingly close to a real 'gong'. Fate thwarted an almost certain DFM two months later, when Johnnie was posted from 226 Squadron just nine days before his old crew took part in the smoke-laying operation for the Dieppe landings. For this, the entire crew were awarded DFCs. The other side of the coin, of course, is that the new air-gunner, George Casey, was wounded.

Instructional tours kept Johnnie busy for the rest of the war. He was commissioned in March 1944.

Another pre-war volunteer, Johnnie emerged unscathed after serving on five squadrons, flying on many operations during the hairy days of Battles in AASF and Blenheims in 2 Group. Lady Luck had been kind to him.

Another lady who helped shape his fortunes was promptly proposed to and married just a few weeks after the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941. The best man? Arthur Asker.

18 SQUADRON



Sgt G.A. Dvorjetz	F/S J.O.N. Smith	?	?	?	?	?	?	Sgt A.C. Cutler	Sgt J. Hughes	?
Sgt S.W. Winter	Sgt M.S. Scotney	?	?	?	Sgt J.S. Wood	?	Sgt R.F. Millns	Sgt T.G. Jefferson	Sgt R.J.B. Rost RAAF	Sgt W.M.G. Dunham ?

Int. Off. ?	F/'L H. Thomas Eng.Off.	?	?	F/L H.J.C. Tudge ?	S/L S.J. Monroe Flt Cdr	W/C ?	?	?	P/O M.T.K. Walkden	P/O B.F.W. Matthews	?	?

No 18 Squadron, RAF Oulton, outside Blickling Hall in July 1941(between 3rd and 13th - probably 10th). This is based on the postings of those present. I am at a loss to identify the Wing Commander in the centre front row, as it should be the current CO of 18 Squadron - Wg Cdr Tim Partridge, who is also missing from the informal group photograph taken outside Blickling Hall at this time. (Via Tom Jefferson)

			?	?	?						
P/O B.F.W. Matthews	Sgt S.W. Winter		Sgt R.J.B. Rost			Sgt F. Daniels					
		Sgt G.A. Dvorjetz	?	?	Sgt J. Hughes			P/O A.C. Powner			
P/O M.T.K. Walkden	Sgt A.C. Cutler										
	Sgt M.S. Scotney	Sgt T.G. Jefferson	Sgt R.F. Millns	Gp Capt ?	?	Sgt W.M.G. Dunham ?	P/O J.B. Sands	Int. Off. ?	F/O C.G. Nairn		
Int. Off. ?								S/L D.J. Rose			

No 18 Squadron, RAF Oulton, outside Blickling Hall in July 1941 (probably 10th). Fg Off C.G. Nairn was the MO, Sqn Ldr D.J. Rose was a Flt Cdr and I was unable to trace the name of the Group Captain, presumably the Stn Cdr of Oulton. The CO of 18 Squadron, Wg Cdr Tim Partridge, is missing from this photo. (Via Tom Jefferson)

WG CDR T.N. PARTRIDGE DFC

I shall always be grateful to Mary, who was married to Tim Partridge for just eighteen months, before his death parted them on 16th July 1941. In October 1988, Mary was reunited with her beloved husband when she lost her battle against cancer. I was sad to lose her valued friendship, but had no doubt that her long-term wish had been fulfilled.

While I was just talking about writing this book, Mary sat down and wrote hers, in record time. It is a poignant love story, vividly portraying her all too short life with Tim. Entitled *And Women Must Weep*, it is an outstanding record of a wartime romance and, in particular, how it felt to be married to a 2 Group Blenheim pilot. It was rejected by the publishers.

When Mary wrote the chapters on Tim's operational flying, she relied heavily on an unpublished manuscript by Michael Scott, entitled *Blenheim on the Deck*. Michael's brother, Scotty (Sqn Ldr A.A.McD. Scott) was Tim's closest friend in the RAF, and the manuscript naturally includes many personal references to him. *Blenheim on the Deck* is compulsory reading for anyone interested in World War Two, particularly 2 Group. The publishers rejected it...

At this stage, I suffered a severe crisis of confidence. Both these manuscripts were far better than anything I was likely to produce, so what chance had I? I wrote to all interested parties, regretting that I was pulling out of my *magnum opus* project. At a later stage, I came to realise that, in honour of those brave souls of yesteryear, I had to put something down on paper and gamble that it would eventually be disseminated to a fairly wide audience.

To rely on just the testimonies of Tim's widow and the brother of his closest friend might have resulted in a somewhat biased biography. I need not have worried. The name of Tim Partridge was as well-known to his contemporaries as other such illustrious persons as Paddy Bandon, Basil Embry, Tom Webster, Hughie Edwards and Attie Atkinson. There was no dearth of information forthcoming.

Typical of the character references readily given was the one from the WOp/AG who took the last photographs of Tim's life. Montague 'Scotty' Scotney told me:

'Wg Cdr Partridge...was a chap who obviously impressed me, even at that tender age. What I remember of Partridge was that he was a tall, blond, fair-haired chap; a good leader - he inspired confidence. He was quiet but purposeful: I can only say the epitome of a leader - someone you looked up to, and not only respected but *liked*. Public school, I should think - I don't know: debonair type, but really likeable; a splendid commanding officer. I was sorry that he had to be killed - it was a great loss to the squadron.'

To distil the life of a great man into a few words of biography is a truly daunting task: I have enough information to fill an entire book. Tim's biography is the one that has given me the most qualms about writing. Here, then, is an honest attempt to portray one of the best-loved characters in 2 Group.

Thomas Noel Partridge was born in Finedon, Northants, on 17th December 1914. He was christened Thomas after his father and Noel due to the proximity of Christmas Day. In common with many other people, he was known for most of his life by a nickname - 'Tim' or 'Timothy'.

Educated at Wellingborough School, Tim excelled at sport, particularly tennis; in this respect he was fortunate enough to put in practice on the tennis court in his parents' garden. The Wellingborough Officers' Training Corps had in their ranks a certain Lance Corporal Partridge between 1929-1932: I wonder if anyone recognised Tim's true potential at this time.

He had always wanted to become a pilot and joined the RAF in November 1935. His flying training commenced at the Civilian Flying School at Desford (Leicester), after which he was posted to No 11 FTS, Wittering, in the rank of Acting Pilot Officer on probation.

In August 1936, Tim joined 40 (Bomber) Squadron at Abingdon, flying Hawker Hinds. Fourteen months later, he was a member of 90 (Bomber) Squadron, Bicester, and flying a revolutionary type of aircraft - the Bristol Blenheim Mk I. He soon established a reputation for polished formation flying, and was chosen as one of the pilots in a flypast for a visiting French President, as well as taking part in numerous air displays before the war.

In the summer of 1939, Tim took part in his last peacetime 'jolly'. He, and his good friend Scotty, and Sgt Jock Ferguson were tasked with delivering three Blenheim Mk Is to Heliopolis, Egypt. The experience gained on this 'ranger' contributed in no small way to Tim's selection as part of the first Blenheim detachment to Malta some two years later. The peacetime route was far less arduous than what was to come later.

Departing from Waddington, the refuelling stops were at Marseilles, Malta and Mersah Matruh.

The leg into Malta proved somewhat tricky. A thick fog developed and Tim started to get that uneasy feeling that they were going to get lost. The sophisticated navigational aids of modern aircraft were but a dream in those days; pilots had to rely on the flying of accurate compass headings, dead-reckoning navigation (what price the forecast winds then?) and the good old Mk I eyeball. Truly pioneer stuff this.

Initiative, intelligence or luck determined Tim's next course of action. When the fog cleared a little, he spotted a liner. Assuming that the vessel was heading for Malta, Tim aligned the formation on the same course; to his great relief, the island suddenly appeared out of the gloom, dead ahead.

Just by chance (?), Tim's sister Mary was living in Malta at that time, and he was able to spend a pleasant two days with her and his young nephew whom he had not seen before.

At Mersah Matruh, Tim was impressed by the beautiful blue lagoon and the knowledge that Cleopatra had built a summer palace there. It was here that he heard for the first time the song *Begin the Beguine*, and liked it so much that he played the record continuously. His departure, he felt, was greeted with a sigh of relief all round. With the Blenheims delivered at Heliopolis, the crews returned by sea having thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

Shortly after 90 Squadron had moved to West Raynham, Norfolk, in May 1939, Tim's skills were again called for. Richard Passmore, author of *Blenheim Boy*, had survived a forced-landing in an incredibly small field near Hunstanton. After the engineers had done their work on the Blenheim, and pronounced it fit to fly, someone had to attempt the near-impossible feat of getting it out of that field. 'Partridge luck was a squadron by-word', Richard wrote. The description of Tim's death-defying leap into the air is vividly described on pages 64-65 of *Blenheim Boy*.

The day after war was declared, 90 Squadron stood by in readiness to bomb the German fleet. The squadron was not called: its initial wartime task became the training of crews. After a fleeting visit to Weston-on-the-Green, the squadron settled at Upwood.

Tim had met Mary, an actress, when she was on tour with *Clitterhouse* at Oxford. The onset of war convinced them that it was high time that they cemented their romance, and they got married in St Ives: the reception was held at the *Ram Jam Inn* on the A1, a landmark probably familiar to anyone who has served in the RAF.

In April 1940, 90 Squadron merged with 35 Squadron to form 17 Operational Training Unit. Tim was well and truly in the clutches of the training environment. During the Battle of France, he was piling in several sorties of dual instruction every day, each trip being well over one hour's duration. Mary recalled that this was a time of great strain for Tim, a sentiment readily echoed by instructors on wartime OTUs. What is not generally realised is the incredibly high fatality rate at these establishments. The lack of comprehensive basis training meant that pilots arriving at OTUs were required to run before they could walk properly. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of OTU instructors yearned to escape to operational flying.

For Mary, of course, this was an idyllic time. Not for her the constant worry that her husband might fail to return from operations; only pleasant memories such as playing bridge in the Ladies Room at Upwood, a game in which Tim apparently became quite expert.

In January 1941, Scotty and 'another chap' visited 2 Group HQ requesting that they be posted to an operational squadron. Long after the war, Michael Scott told Mary

that he had no doubt that the other chap his brother had referred to in his letter was Tim Partridge. It came as a shock to Mary as Tim had made no mention of this decision at the time. The requests were duly granted: Tim was posted to 21 Squadron, Watton, in March to be joined shortly afterwards by Scotty.

Wg Cdr Tim Partridge, leader of the Second Wave on the attack on Rotterdam docks on 16th July 1941. An exceptional Squadron Commander (Mrs Mary Hurst)

For Mary, it was now a different ball game. The stress of trying to mix operational flying with a normal married life must have been intolerable to most couples. Tim and Mary were no exception and it was decided that under the circumstances it would be prudent for Mary to live with her mother in Ilfracombe. Though they were never again to live together as husband and wife, they did manage to snatch the odd day here and there, especially when Tim engineered a landing at nearby Chivenor.

Tim joined 21 Squadron just as the anti-shipping campaign began in earnest. With his modesty, his avoidance of 'line-shooting' and a very real desire not to worry Mary, Tim played down the dangers of operational flying. But a wife who is in tune with her husband cannot be fooled for too long. After Tim had completed ten operations, Mary realised that her husband no longer talked about their plans for the future.

Then began the nightmares. During their stolen hours together, Mary became alarmed by the frequency of Tim's nightmares and by his talking in his sleep. 'What is

the war doing to my gentle brave husband?', she pondered. During the last week in June 1941, Mary noticed that Tim had suddenly acquired an aged look: his face was lined and his eyes were deeply shadowed. The boyish look had vanished.

To survive as many operational sorties in 2 Group as Tim completed called for an extraordinary combination of skill and luck. The former is recorded under his logbook assessments:

'As a Medium-Bomber Pilot: Exceptional.
'As a Pilot/Navigator: Above the Average.'

Very few pilots ever reach this standard. The ingredient of luck has already been referred to, in Richard Passmore's *Blenheim Boy*. Regrettably, it would run out over Rotterdam on 16th July 1941.

Tim's operational flying began in earnest when, on 31st March 1941, he took part in what the over-enthusiastic compiler of 2 Group Summary of Operations described as: 'The first occasion on which low-level attacks have been made against military targets on land'. Tim attacked gun emplacements west of Hollum (Netherlands), his aircraft - V5580 (YH:X) - receiving hits from 20mm cannon shells (this aircraft led the Rotterdam raid on which Tim was killed). A damaged aircraft and two crews failing to return from this, Tim's first operation: an inauspicious start.

On 25th April, Tim was one of six 'trail-blazing' Blenheim crews detailed to investigate the possibilities of attacking enemy shipping in the Mediterranean at squadron strength. The detachment was led by Sqn Ldr 'Attie' Atkinson, and included Tim's friend Scotty. Staging from St Eval in Cornwall, through Gibraltar, the route was far more hazardous than Tim and Scotty had flown two years previously. Overload tanks removed after arrival at Luqa, Malta, Tim was soon in the thick of interrupting Rommel's oil supplies - a task admirably described by Ron Gillman in his book *The Shiphunters*. Somewhat surprisingly, all six crews came through unscathed, though Sgt Osborne's Blenheim was bombed in dispersal on the day of departure, 9th May, and he and his crew had to return by other means.

Staging back through Gibraltar and Portreath, Tim took the opportunity of letting Mary know of his safe return by approaching Ilfracombe harbour very low and then pulling up and doing a victory roll (aerobatics in a Blenheim?). A few more stolen hours later, and Tim was on his way back to Watton.

During Tim's short absence from the squadron, four more crews, including the CO (Wg Cdr Bartlett), had been shot down. The new CO - Wg Cdr Tom Webster - was an old friend from days at Upwood.

By the middle of May, Tim had been promoted to acting Squadron Leader, and had taken over 'A' Flight. He spent the first half of June on detachment to Lossiemouth, operating against shipping in Norwegian waters. The weather was foul, adding to the stress of navigating accurately on very long sea tracks at wave-top height, under the threat of enemy fighters and flakships. When Tim returned to Watton, he had already completed twenty operations.

His next operation, on 16th June, was against shipping off the East Frisian Islands. Sgt Leavers had the misfortune to hit the mast of the vessel that he and Tim were attacking, losing a large chunk of the starboard wing and crashing into the sea (the incident captured on photo by Edmund Shewell). Tim was shaken by the loss of his former pupil and fellow pilot on the recent Malta detachment. (Sgt Leavers was on his 30th operation, after which he would have been stood down from operations, and had planned to get married shortly afterwards. To Mary fell the thankless task of passing

the sad news, in person, to his fiancée. There is a photograph of Reg Leavers in the Blenheim Society Journal Issue 63, page 6). On the return leg, the formation was attacked by two Messerschmitt Bf 109s, as described in Ben Nunn's biography. It was Tim, of course, who kindly ferried the Reiss crew back to Watton after they crash-landed at Sutton Bridge in V6240 (my cousin's aircraft).

Three days later, when Tim was en route from Benson to Watton, he collided with a Tiger Moth: the biplane flew into the ground and caught fire, while Tim managed to limp home on his starboard engine.

His next four operations were all *Circus* attacks: against St Omer aerodrome, the chemical works at Chocques, Lille steel works and Commines power station.

The end of June saw the second abortive daylight raid on Bremen, code-named *Operation Wreckage*. The pressure on the crews to reach their target was considerable but thick fog intervened. The day is lucidly described in Mike Bowyer's book *2 Group RAF* (pp 176-178). Tim, along with many others, was forced to attack a secondary target - the marshalling yards at Oldenburg.

As is well known, the attack was eventually successful on 4th July, led by Wg Cdr Hughie Edwards. In a way, this contributed to Tim's demise, as will be seen.

On 1st July, Tim was promoted to acing Wing Commander and took command of 18 Squadron, then based at Oulton, north of Norwich. Mary, though delighted with the promotion, realised that her husband would not now be rested from operations after completing the magic total of 30.

7th July proved a fateful day. After completing a shipping beat, Tim flew down to Chivenor for what was to prove the last time he saw Mary. Off the Dutch coast, the body of his closest friend, Scotty, lay entombed in his Blenheim.

Three days later, Tim led an attack on the docks at Le Havre, for which he was recommended for the immediate award of a DFC. In the evening, the squadron threw a farewell party for the locals in the Officers' Mess - historic Blickling Hall - before reluctantly moving to nearby Horsham St Faith on 13th July.

Mary believed that the raid on Le Havre was the one Tim least expected to return from. She later found a poignant will enclosed in his logbook, dated 10/7/41. Written on a buff OHMS envelope were the words: 'Anything I have I leave to my wife. T.N. Partridge, W/Cdr'.

Tim wrote to Mary on Monday 14th July, expressing the intention of flying down to see her on the Thursday, and promising to confirm the arrangement on Wednesday evening. The call never came. At 8am the next morning, Mary opened the telegram reporting her husband as missing. For the first time in her life she fainted.

After every tragedy comes the inevitable scrutiny of how Fate played her part. Mary was quite certain that their good friend, Hughie Edwards (whom she called 'Eddie'), CO of 105 Squadron Swanton Morley, was originally earmarked to lead the second wave of the attack on Rotterdam docks. With the Bremen VC recommendation in the pipeline, Wg Cdr Edwards would appear to have been temporarily screened pending the citation, and Tim Partridge would have been detailed in his place.

The Rotterdam raid has already been covered at length. Tim's final moments of his 29th operation are somewhat controversial. Tony Aldridge's recollection of seeing whom he thought to be Tim Partridge, smoking a cigar before crashing in flames in Rotterdam, is bizarre to say the least. Mary's assurance that Tim never smoked cigars, only a pipe and an occasional cigarette, added further to the mystery. What is more, Tim's lighter was one of his possessions returned to Mary from the Officers' Mess, Horsham St Faith, i.e. he had not been carrying it on the raid.

The other point of contention emerged when Mary made contact with the Dutch author, Hans Onderwater, who was writing a chapter on the raid in his book *En Toen Was Het Stil*. Hans informed Mary of the reasons why the Dutch had erected a monument at the place where Tim had crashed on the Noordsingel canal. He stated that eye-witnesses had reported seeing Tim's aircraft, with the port engine on fire, trying to land in a park with a large playground. When it was realised that the park was full of children and many adults, the aircraft was pulled up over the rooftops before the Noordsingel canal presented itself. Regrettably, Tim's wingtip hit the Courthouse and the aircraft plunged into the bank of the canal. Hans assured Mary that the crew had all died instantly, but the vision of her husband controlling a burning aircraft over a prolonged period, and then being burned to ashes, was too much for Mary. She took an overdose, and washed it down with ¼ bottle of whisky: miraculously, she survived.

All I could add by way of comfort was that according to the reports of the crews nearest to Tim when he crashed, the end would have come very quickly, and his aircraft was seen to roll over and plunge into the canal bank.

The grief that Mary felt after the loss of her husband cannot be imagined by anyone who has not undergone such a bereavement. The confirmation of the award of Tim's DFC could not bring him back. Among the many words of comfort Mary received, I particularly like those spoken by an old lady of 85, who lived across the street from her in Ilfracombe. Leaning on her companion's arm, and in a quavering voice she said: 'I want to say something to you that may comfort you; as I'm sure your husband would have said: "I could not love thee, Dear, so much, Lov'd I not Honour more".' [Richard Lovelace].

Fg Off J.G. Draper, adjutant to 21 Squadron, wrote of Tim and Scotty:

'Both these men were the silent type. When they gave tongue they said something, which is more than can be said for many men. Neither Scotty nor Tim Partridge had much to say for themselves, but they had an almost uncanny knack of getting to the target when other men failed to do so.'

Immediately after the Germans departed Rotterdam, the Dutch erected a temporary wooden memorial to Tim and his crew, at the exact spot on the Noordsingel where they crashed. This was later superseded by the permanent stone memorial, whose inscription reads: 'In grateful memory of the men of the RAF who gave their lives for the freedom of the Netherlands'.

Mary remarried after the war, and in deference to her husband and son, she kept a low profile on Tim. The floodgates burst in 1976, when she felt an overwhelming urge to visit Tim's grave for the first time. Accompanied by her son, Christopher, she was unable to trace Tim's final resting place and settled for placing flowers on his monument. She would finally get to his grave some five years later, thanks to Hans Onderwater.

Mary's second marriage did not work out. It is not surprising: there was only one love in her life. When she talked about Tim, it was as though it had all happened yesterday: the sense of loss was still keenly felt after all those intervening years. I was left in no doubt that Tim's surviving colleagues were of the same sentiment.

Mary's letter to me, dated 3rd August 1983, was poignant and prophetic:

'A group captain I was talking to at the XC Squadron Reunion two years ago said of Tim: "He might have died of cancer, and you would have hated that wouldn't you?" Which indeed I would.'

I miss Mary and regret that I never had the pleasure of meeting Tim. I know that one day we will all meet and fervently hope these few words I have written will meet with their approval.

SGT G.A. DVORJETZ
(OBSERVER IN PARTRIDGE CREW)

George Dvorjetz was not Tim Partridge's original observer from 17 OTU: he replaced Plt Off Bull who was posted elsewhere. George's original pilot, Plt Off Ogilvie, had been shot down into the sea by a Messerschmitt Bf 109. Mary Partridge had asked Tim how he felt about losing his old observer and picking up a 'new boy'. Tim had reassured her with his reply: 'Dvorjetz is a very good chap, and very experienced.'

Indeed he was. George had been operational on Blenheims since joining 82 Squadron at Bodney in December 1940. In 2 Group terms he was a veteran. Posted to 21 Squadron at nearby Watton in April 1941, he did not team up with Tim Partridge until the end of May. He then stayed with Tim until the crew were killed in action on 16th July 1941.

Tom 'Jeff' Jefferson has a poignant story to tell:

'Dvorjetz was Polish or of Polish extraction. A very nice chap; he was fairly short and thick-set, with a bit of a moustache. Because he'd already done a tour he was made Station Navigation Officer. This meant that he could fly occasionally with the CO, Tim Partridge, but had to spend most of his time running the station. And on 16th July 1941 he was having a day off, and he'd gone over to that lake in the grounds of Blickling Hall, taking his fishing rods, intent on having a quiet day's fishing. He was called back and told to report for briefing, to fly with the CO on the Rotterdam raid.

Poor chap! It was dreadful seeing him struggling in the aircraft - that stuck in my mind for a long time.'

Born in Ealing on 31st March 1916, George took employment as a cinema manager after leaving school. He was also a member of the Civil Air Guard, completing 11 hours of dual and 9 hours of solo flying by the time he enlisted in the RAF in October 1939. Like many others, and despite his recent pilot experience, George was no doubt conned into training as an observer, with the promise of remustering later, when there were more vacancies for pilots...

George's reward for an early enlistment at the Reception Centre at Uxbridge was a request to come back in three months time. Similar periods spent at No 4 ITW Bexhill, and an air observer school, were followed by a posting to No 4 B&GS on 13th July 1940. After completion of the course, George was posted to No 17 OTU Upwood in September 1940.

George's remains lie in the Crooswijk Cemetery, Rotterdam, along with those of his crew. He was survived by a brother, Samuel, and a sister, Nora.

FLT SGT J.O.N. SMITH DFM
(WOp/AG IN PARTRIDGE CREW

Tim Partridge's regular WOp/AG, Sgt Idris 'Charlie' Davies, had been called away on compassionate leave just before the Rotterdam raid of 16th July 1941. (Davies is believed drowned in 1990, whilst fishing off South Wales). Flight Sergeant Oscar Smith readily stepped into the breach for what promised to be a spectacular day for 2 Group.

Oscar should not have been on the squadron in the first place, according to Mary Hurst (Partridge). He declined an instructional post in Canada to avoid missing the opportunity of going to Buckingham Palace to receive his DFM. I wonder if Tim Partridge was fully aware of the distinguished war record of his 'one-off' replacement WOp/AG. Apart from the award of the DFM - a rare achievement, indeed, for a WOp/AG - Oscar could claim to have dropped the first bomb of the war. He was the WOp/AG in Flt Lt K.C. Doran's crew on 4th September 1939.

Oscar was undoubtedly an asset to 18 Squadron. At a time when Blenheim crews were killed almost before they had time to unpack, here was a man who had survived on such aircraft from the very outbreak of the war. Not only that, but his calm air of confidence was infectious. Oscar's mother, Maud, made the following comment after receiving her son's letter describing the attack on the German fleet in the Schillig Roads:

'Oscar has always been like that. Always, in no matter what he undertakes, he has supreme confidence and, somehow, he instils that confidence into us. I am never afraid for Oscar.'

One of 'Scotty' Scotney's most vivid recollections of the Rotterdam raid is of Oscar lolling about on the grass verge outside the briefing room: 'I remember him being quite calm and reassuring', he added. Just the sort of chap to have around when the tension starts to build, as clearly illustrated by the comments of one Blenheim veteran I spoke to: 'Fear - adrenalin - we all had it. Some were even sick before they got into their aircraft.'

Fellow aircrew could be forgiven for assuming that Oscar was a man of advancing years, with that much experience tucked under his belt. But on the day of the Rotterdam raid, he was just 21. What had he packed into his short life?

Oscar was educated at Wolverhampton Grammar School. Always keen on the services, he enlisted straight from school, aged 16½, as a Boy Entrant in the RAF. As his civil occupation is recorded as 'publicity man', he must have filled in a small gap to earn some pocket money. Oscar signed on for nine years, with an initial grading of u/t WOp. After training at an E&W School, he was posted to 110 (Bomber) Squadron, Waddington, in September 1937. He would give faithful service to this squadron for almost three years.

The antiquated Hawker Hind was the front-line aircraft when Oscar arrived on the squadron, but this was replaced by the futuristic Blenheim Mk I in January 1938. Oscar took the opportunity to upgrade to full WOp/AG during this period. In May 1939, the squadron moved to Wattisham, re-equipping with the long-nosed Blenheim Mk IV the following month.

The day Britain declared war on Germany - 3rd September 1939 - Oscar was reclassified LAC. The next day he made history.

The account of the first bombing raid of the war has been well documented. It is always interesting to read a personal account of such an experience. In a letter to his mother, Oscar wrote:

'I was in the leading machine of ten which flew over the Kiel Canal. We had a rare scrap and I quite enjoyed it. We put a bomb clean through the middle of the Admiral Graf Spee, one of Germany's pocket battleships. I am sorry to say that we spoiled all the sailors' underpants which were hanging out on the deck. I was the first to bomb Germany in this war. When we returned we got a rousing reception from the lads when they heard we were the "Kiel Boys".'

The pocket battleship, I believe, was the *Admiral Scheer* and the bombs that hit her failed to explode - a problem not solved by the time of the Rotterdam raid. I have no doubt that Oscar's crew also spoiled the underpants that the sailors were wearing at the time.

By August 1940, the squadron had participated in the battles of Norway and France, and was currently in the process of reducing the number of potential invasion barges. For his sterling work during this period, Oscar was nominated for and later awarded the coveted DFM. He also received a posting as an instructor at No 13 OTU Bicester.

Nearly eight gruelling months later, Oscar was posted to 101 Squadron West Raynham. After three months on his new squadron, he was transferred to 18 at Oulton. What was the reason for this sudden change of plan? It could be that when Oscar arrived on 101, the squadron had just started to replace its Blenheims with Wellingtons, in preparation for joining the night bomber offensive. After more than

three years on the Blenheim, Oscar may have formed a deep personal relationship with the aircraft (a well-known aircrew phenomenon), or simply preferred a daylight role.

On 1st May 1941, when Flt Sgt Oscar Smith arrived, 18 Squadron was in the thick of the anti-shipping campaign. The prospect of sudden death seems to have made no impression upon Oscar's psyche. A sortie on 22nd June, when he was flying behind Sqn Ldr Johnnie Monroe and Frank Harbord (fighter escort observer on the Rotterdam raid), is reported in the squadron ORB as follows: 'One Me 109 probably destroyed, and one, which had been damaged by a fighter, shot down.'

And so to the Rotterdam raid of 16th July. No premonition for Oscar; just inner confidence and the prospect of flying with the Boss - one of the best pilots in 2 Group. Unbeatable. But Fate had other ideas.

Long after the war, in the early eighties, Mary Hurst (Partridge) phoned Karin Bell, Oscar's sister, then resident in Scotland. Mary was amazed to learn that Oscar's cigarette case and lighter had been kindly returned to Karin by courtesy of the Dutch resistance. (Could he have been the laid-back cigar smoker already referred to?). Mary was surprised because she had thought that everything had been reduced to ashes. As in so many Blenheim crashes, it would appear that the WOp/AG had been thrown clear of the aircraft, though regrettably Oscar was killed. The next piece of information was forthcoming after Mary had expressed regret that she had had no memento of Tim's crash. Karin had also been given a piece of Tim's Blenheim. Scratched in Dutch into the piece of metal, measuring about 24" x 18", was the date, 16th July 1941, and the time 5 o'clock. Would Mary like to have this?, Karin asked...

The emotions I felt when I held this piece of Blenheim in my hands are impossible to describe. I do hope that one day it might find a suitable home, such as the RAF Museum.

I was surprised and saddened to discover that Oscar had left behind a young widow.

WG CDR D.C. SMYTHE DSO GM

Just one month after I started my research on the Rotterdam raid, Wg Cdr Don Smythe lost his battle against cancer. I had missed the boat yet again by not commencing my project earlier.

However, I was more than grateful when I traced Don's widow Diana, and his two crew members of the Rotterdam raid, Tony Aldridge and John Welch. As if that were not enough, I then discovered some wartime newsreel footage in which Don, as CO of 18 Squadron, is giving a briefing before a typical 2 Group operation. Add to this the normal sources of research and I felt that I was beginning to know the character of Wg Cdr Smythe almost as well as my own family.

Born on 24th February 1917, Don (also known to his colleagues as 'Ginger'), in common with Wg Cdr Tim Partridge, held the lowly rank of Lance Corporal for three of his school years, as a member of King's College School Contingent. At the age of 18½, Don was granted a Short Service Commission in the RAF, and commenced flying training on the Blackburn B2 at the Reserve Civil Flying School at Brough. After ten months further training on Avro Tutors and Hawker Harts, at No 5 FTS Sealand, Don presented himself at Abingdon in June 1936, to join 104 (Bomber) Squadron. The bomber of the day was the Hawker Hind. Moving to Hucknall in August, Don was sent, the following January, down to Manston, to attend a course on Avro Ansons at the School of Air Navigation. His Record of Service, summarised by MOD Gloucester, states that one day later he rejoined 104 Squadron as a Staff Navigator. In deference to the Navigator's Union, this needed checking out; sure

enough, his course turned out to be of rather longer duration, namely two months. He was presented with Air Navigator's Certificate No 398, confirming his qualification as an Air Navigator Second Class.

In May 1938, the squadron moved to Bassingbourn and Don converted to a new, fast monoplane - the Bristol Blenheim Mk I. When war was declared, 104 Squadron was retained in the UK for training purposes; shortly afterwards it moved to Bicester and re-equipped with the long-nosed Blenheim Mk IV. In April 1940, the squadron merged with 108 Squadron to form No 13 OTU. Some seven months later, Flt Lt Don Smythe escaped the clutches of the training environment by joining 114 Squadron at Oulton, Norfolk. His first operations were mostly night attacks on the Channel invasion ports.

The night of 3/4th December 1940 was a memorable one. The squadron ORB summarises the incident as follows:

'One aircraft, T2278, Flt Lt Smythe, Plt Off Ryder and Sgt Welch, crashed during take-off, and the machine was completely destroyed by a fire caused through two containers of incendiary bombs exploding. The crew very fortunately were unhurt.'

The subsequent citations for the George Medal awards to Don Smythe and Gerard Ryder add more detail:

'On one night in December 1940, Flt Lt Smythe, Plt Off Ryder and a sergeant (!) comprised the crew of an aircraft which crashed and caught fire shortly after take off. Flt Lt Smythe and Plt Off Ryder managed to extricate themselves from the wreckage, but the sergeant was trapped in his cockpit. In spite of the fire and exploding incendiaries, and knowing that there were bombs which had not exploded, the two officers immediately re-entered the crashed aircraft and succeeded in extricating the trapped airman. Both these officers displayed great courage and complete disregard for their personal safety.'

In March 1941, the squadron moved to Thornaby in Yorkshire. Now under the jurisdiction of Coastal Command, Sqn Ldr Smythe's operations comprised North Sea recces, convoy escorts and anti-submarine patrols. With Wg Cdr 'Bok' Hull in the driving seat during this time, social life would not have been dull: now *there's* a biography that needs to be written! (See Tom Jefferson's biography for more information on 'Bok' Hull).

From June 1941, Don operated from Leuchars before joining 2 Group, in the form of 18 Squadron (just in the process of moving from his 'George Medal' airfield of Oulton to nearby Horsham St Faith) on 12th July. Four days later, he had successfully bombed the German merchant ship *Hermod* in the docks at Rotterdam. In typically modest style, his logbook remarks for the raid are recorded simply as 'Rotterdam O.K.'. After the tragic loss of Tim Partridge, Don now found himself promoted to acting Wing Commander and CO of the squadron.

Before he set off for Malta on 19th October, Don featured in two incidents of historical interest. On 19th August, he organised the dropping of Wg Cdr Douglas Bader's artificial leg over St Omer airfield, detailing Sgt Nickleson and crew for the task. In September, it is believed, he briefed for and cooperated in a *Visnews* newsreel report on a typical 2 Group Blenheim operation - some of the best footage of this type that I have seen.

Tony Aldridge, Don Smythe and 'Junior' Welch - No 18 Sqn Horsham St Faith (via John Welch)

From 14th October 1941 until 11th January 1942, Don led his Malta-based squadron in attacks on shipping and ports in the Mediterranean in an attempt to tip the scales against Rommel. His logbook records the occasional merchant vessel as 'damaged'.

In January 1942, the remnants of 18 Squadron detachment carried on the war from Egypt, operating from Helwan, Fuka and LG 05. By 21st March, enough was enough: the detachment disbanded and handed over its five surviving Blenheims to 108 MU.

Don was then posted to Advanced Air HQ, Western Desert (Libya). During his nine months on this unit, he kept his hand in on a variety of aircraft types, the best of which was the Hurricane.

In February 1943, Don was appointed Chief Instructor, No 72 OTU Nanyuki (Kenya). Some four months later, he was transferred to 'Special Duties', HQ Middle East. As Don never spoke of his wartime service to his family, and was parsimonious with his logbook entries (perhaps rightly so in this case), the duties can only be guessed at. The aircraft he flew during these three months were Spitfires and Hurricanes.

In August 1943, Don was posted to command 178 Squadron. Initially based at Hosc Raui, Libya, he flew Liberator aircraft against targets in North Africa, Italy and the Balkans, with an occasional supply-dropping sortie to partisans as far afield as Poland. He can be excused for bombing his Hungary-based future wife during this time, although Diana still sounded slightly indignant when she related this tale!

In March 1944, the squadron moved to Celone, Italy; in October, Don joined the Air Staff of the Mediterranean Air Force. His sterling work on 178 Squadron earned him the DSO.

Unlike the majority of his contemporaries, Don decided to stay in the RAF post-war. In November 1945, he was posted to HQ 3 Group, RAF Exning, Newmarket, where he met his 16-year-old bride-to-be, Diana. After five years of careful consideration and courtship, they were married, honeymooning at the *Red Lion Hotel*, Ashburton, Devon: odd how this little Dartmoor village attracted two wing commanders from the Rotterdam raid (see Wg Cdr Kercher's biography). Diana recalled that it rained and rained for their entire stay!

After 3 Group, Don attended the Joint Services Staff College at Bulstrode (Latimer) before joining the Air Staff of HQ Reserve Command. In June 1948, he was appointed CO of RAF Biggin Hill, during which time he joined the jet age by getting checked out on Meteors.

In October 1950, Don was posted to HQ British Air Forces of Occupation, a tour which spanned 2½ years. This was followed by a year-long course at the Flying College, Manby, where he flew Lincolns, Meteors, Canberras, Valettas and Athenas.

In April 1954, he entered the hallowed ground of the Air Ministry, in the guise of DD Ops (B). The following December offered a welcome break - an eleven day course at Oberammergau, Bavaria: skiing was one of Don's favourite pastimes.

In August 1957, he crossed the Atlantic and enrolled on the US Armed Forces Staff College Course; six months later he moved north of the border for a training role with the Canadian Air Staff. This 2½ year tour was Wg Cdr Smythe's last in the RAF, and December 1960 marked the end of his 25 years continuous service.

This fine record speaks for itself, but what sort of personality motivated this career officer? Unfortunately for his family, and historical record, Don was essentially modest. About all he would divulge came in the form of anecdotes about his colleagues, none of which, regrettably, could now be recalled. Another quality which the family well remembered was Don's very placid temperament: Diana said that they always made up after a slight disagreement, which the children found highly amusing.

Don's observer on Blenheims, Tony Aldridge, made some interesting comments about his former pilot. He recalls:

'A dedicated RAF officer, but he was very quiet - too quiet in fact. He never did talk much at all about anything...But always with Don Smythe, there was a cool business-like relationship. We didn't ever go out on social things together. We drank in the Mess together, of course; but in Norwich - wonderful city - we used to go into the *Samson and Hercules*, which was the local dance hall, and pick up the local totties: that's what it was all about - but Don Smythe wouldn't come out with us on those sorts of outings.'

This unusual trait at a time when aircrew lived for the day is amplified by Don's widow: 'He did *not* like women chasing him', Diana emphasised. 'A gorgeous WAAF tried, but that put him off.'

On one occasion, Don was the victim of a practical joke. Tony Aldridge explains:

'I remember some wild tricks we played on 18 Squadron: there was George Lerwill and Johnnie Monroe, who were practical japers all the time. And there is one I can tell you about concerning Don Smythe. We all used to go out onto the airfield - this was at Horsham, in front of the hangars - and we had single-barrelled 12-bore shotguns, with a clay pigeon trap. We used to have an unlimited amount of No 6 shot 12-bore cartridges, and the idea was to keep one's eye sharpened with a bit of skeet shooting: we all used to have a go at this. And I remember one time when Johnnie Monroe said to Don Smythe: "I don't think you could hit a bloody haystack if we threw it up!" So Don said that he was a better shot than they thought. Then Monroe said that he would throw up his hat - his RAF flat hat - just for a drink, a bit of fun, and "I bet you can't hit that!" The hat got the full bloody blast! We all collapsed on the grass, doubled up with laughter. Smythe didn't think this was at all funny, taking the water, you see [difficult to laugh when not privy to a joke?]. And when Johnnie Monroe could speak, he said: "You silly ass - that was your own hat!" It was in tatters, and they were very

expensive hats: we had to pay a fiver for them, which in those days was a lot of money.'

I presume that the CO was swiftly bought a new SD hat...Sqn Ldr S.J. 'Johnnie' Monroe was one of 2 Group's best-known characters. He spoke with a stutter, and walked with a limp from injuries received whilst serving on 82 squadron. When the Japanese entered the war he was promoted to wing commander and appointed CO of 62 Squadron in India. Regrettably, he was later killed in a flying accident. (See Tom Jefferson's biography for further information on Johnnie Monroe).

Tony Aldridge's assessment of his pilot's ability was forthright. He explains:

'An average pilot. Not brilliant. I came across some pilots who were absolutely brilliant: I had the luck to fly with Basil Embry and Stan Elworthy...Don Smythe tended to fly the aeroplane rather like driving his limousine about: he would never try to go into a slow roll or a loop.'

Again, aerobatics in a Blenheim? And how many pilots measured up to the exceptional standards set by Basil Embry and Stan Elworthy? Furthermore, Don Smythe's logbook assessments as a bomber pilot and pilot-navigator, from 1937 onwards, are all 'Above the Average'.

Don's WOp/AG on the night he won his George Medal, in December 1940, was John Welch, who later remustered to pilot and rose to the rank of Wing Commander. John's recall of this very close shave is understandably vivid and adds credence to his hypothesis on why he found himself trapped in a burning aircraft. He informed me:

'The crash was really Don Smythe's fault. Either he left his cowl flaps fully open, or he took off in coarse pitch.'

Whatever the reason, Don certainly earned his GM for his subsequent actions.

One ex-18 Squadron WOp/AG felt that his crew were detailed for operations far more frequently than Wg Cdr Smythe's crew, especially during the lethal Malta detachment. Easily explained. By late 1941, the loss rate of commanding officers had become so high that they were ordered to restrict their flying. Even so, Sir Ivor Broom recalls that he served under three Wing Commanders during his four months on Blenheims in Malta: two of his commanding officers were killed on operations.

During Christmas 1972, friends of the Smythes received a different kind of Yuletide greeting. In place of the normal card, the Smythes sent out a detailed résumé of their 'doings in the last year'. Briefly, it covered all their trials and tribulations in setting up a farm 1000 feet up in the mountains of Carmarthenshire. It is a tale not dissimilar to that told in Bruce Chatwin's book *On The Black Hill*.

Eventually, Don's worst fears were realised when he contracted the disease which had caused the deaths of both his parents, namely cancer. He was rushed to Carmarthen Hospital, where his body was found to be riddled with the complaint. Diana recalls that Don had the appearance of a dying man during his last few days. Finally, on 14th August 1981, after one last look at the glorious views he had come to love, Don died in the arms of a pretty nurse. At that exact moment, Diana experienced a violent pain in her stomach, which just as suddenly disappeared. Wg Cdr Don Smythe is buried in the local village cemetery.

In July 1983, when my wife and I visited Diana, we were impressed by her efforts in managing the farm virtually on her own. Who said that women were the weaker

sex? It was also quite obvious that Don's vibrations were still very much alive and clearly sustaining Diana through her period of enforced loneliness.

SQN LDR A.S. ALDRIDGE DFC
(OBSERVER IN SMYTHE CREW)

My admiration for the comperes of chat shows on television is boundless: conducting an interview whereby every salient point is skilfully brought out is no mean feat. In March 1983, when Tony Aldridge visited me in Oxford, I had the usual qualms about my ability to efficiently delve into a slice of recent history. I need not have worried: into my house stepped an interviewer's dream. Tony never stopped talking from the moment he arrived: six hours of tape recording, which transcribed into 35 typed foolscap sheets - a veritable Aladdin's cave of Blenheim gen.

I had already formed an impression of Tony some three weeks previously, when I had interviewed his old WOp/AG, John Welch. John had painted a picture of a lady-killer, a man enormously successful with the opposite sex. He added, however, that it would probably not do his morale much good if he were to meet Tony now! True enough, the years had inevitably taken their toll, but there was no doubting from the interview that Tony still held a deep affection for those carefree days, and ladies, of his youth, as he recalled, wistfully:

'I had an awful lot of affairs with very obliging girlfriends. This all helped, Got a lot of sympathy, you know, which is all worth it. This is important. Wherever they are now - bless them! They were all so very kind.'

Tony's service in the RAF spanned some 24 years. 'Basically, I had a wonderful career', he told me. 'Met the most wonderful people in my life.' Now that statement warrants an in-depth investigation.

Tony enlisted in June 1939, aged 19 years and four months. After initial training on Ansons at the Air Observer Navigation School at Yatesbury, Wiltshire, Tony then completed the course at No 10 Bombing and Gunnery School, Warmwell, Dorset. Amongst the motley selection of aircraft that the school had scrounged for its task was the Hawker Hind. He recalls:

'I went up one day, for a practice bombing mission in a Hawker Hind, with eight practice bombs to be dropped from 12,000 feet; and, in the Hind, it was a course-setting bombsight. There was a panel in the floor, which you slid open...and you wound the bombsight down through this hole in the floor. But the bombing position was with your head and shoulders underneath the pilot's seat. And to get into this position in the Hind, you undid your monkey-strap - that was a strap which fastened onto a D-ring parachute harness - drop down onto your knees, wriggle with your toes as far back into the rear of the fuselage as you could go, then you could wriggle underneath the seat and get to the bomb position. We were at 12,000 feet, and this happy sergeant-pilot I was flying with was throwing the thing all over the sky: his flying wasn't very steady at the best of times. I suppose one flies always with a little bit of fear or adrenalin, and it was bitterly cold at that height in an open-cockpit aeroplane - probably 20 degrees below zero. And I suddenly felt my legs were a bit numb. Strange. And then I realised I'd got a sort of tremor in my legs. So I thought, it's no good, I'll have to chicken out: I'll just have to give up, so I wriggled further and further back. But what I didn't realise was that there was like a camera hatch - a hole in the back of the aircraft - and my legs had gone through that! And I was out of the aeroplane, and wriggling my way out at 12,000 feet without a parachute on. I was out to my hips, and my legs were out in the slipstream: and this was the trouble - I was on my bloody way out! And it suddenly dawned on me; and I stopped in terror, of course, and got this business then of trying to wriggle forward. I was wearing a Sidcot suit, but I could feel my heels dashing into the fabric of the belly of the aeroplane: this was what the trouble was. I could have wriggled out of the bottom of the aeroplane and straight into space. I don't know how far I would have gone before the slipstream pulled me out.'

Acting Sergeant Aldridge then completed a four-week course at the School of Air Navigation, recently moved from Manston to St Athan for safety reasons.

In December 1939, Tony converted to Blenheims under the care of 108 Squadron Bicester, staying just long enough to see this training squadron merge with 104 to form No 13 OTU in April 1940. The previous month, Tony had accepted the kind offer by the Station Commander (he was impressed that the group captain had addressed him - a sergeant - by his Christian name) of service in the Finnish Air Force. In common with Richard Passmore (*Blenheim Boy*) he was deprived of the experience at the eleventh hour by the surrender of the Finns to the Russians on 12th March.

Tony's next posting, to 101 Squadron at West Raynham, Norfolk, holds bizarre memories, as he explains:

'It was a sort of halfway house. It *was* an operational squadron, but they normally didn't do any operations! [101 Squadron entered the war as a training squadron, and did not record its first bombing raid until 4th July 1940]. I was only there a month or two, but the CO of the squadron - I can't remember his name now [Wg Cdr 'Batchy' Hargreaves] - decided it was a good idea to do an operational sortie, and they thought perhaps that they would go and have a look at Bremen. So he took the Station Navigation Officer with him, who at that time was a warrant officer, I think. Anyway, they took off, and were never heard of again: that was the end of that. That was the only operation we did there.'

On 18th May 1940, Tony was posted to 21 Squadron, nominally based at Watton but operating from nearby Bodney. He recalls:

'That was a laugh a minute, I can tell you! You can hardly believe it when you think about it. Watton was a very nice station: Bodney was nothing - just a field, and not a very big field at that! We didn't have any huts at all. We used to be briefed at Watton, and go down in the mornings in a bus or open lorry - more often the lorry - to Bodney, where the aircraft were dispersed round the edges of this grass field, and in the trees whenever possible.'

This was the time of the Great Retreat via Dunkirk. Tony remembers this period well, as he explains:

'That was a most hairy time. Over Dunkirk during the withdrawal - it was a most spectacular thing to see, this sea full of boats. It was most incredible. It was wonderful weather, mid-summer, as you know; and there was something which turned out to be very fortunate for us: a big oil storage dump at the south side of Dunkirk; and very early in the evacuation, this was blown up and set on fire. And there was a pall of black smoke which spread - I think there were very light winds at the time - basically east/west along the coast, I think it was, but also up to the actual beaches of Dunkirk, where the boys were trying to get off. And this was a monster great black cloud, which went up to ten or twelve thousand feet, and just clear of the deck: it seemed to be about five or six hundred feet above the sea and the coastline, and about five miles away. This was our salvation, because we used to dive into this, you see, any time anybody nasty came round. There were an awful lot of 109s. And there was an occasion when we were due to rendezvous with some Morane-Saulniers. Our air-gunner, LAC Lightfoot, said: "I've spotted our escort!" So we said: "Good!" You see, they were approaching from St Valery, and we were meant to have twelve M/S, I think, to escort us; and he said that there seemed to be more than twelve. Then quite suddenly he said: "Jesus Christ - they're 109s!" And it was a terrible free-for-all, in all directions, I can tell you. We lost a lot of aircraft. But that's the sort of thing that went on, you see.

The last sort of ditch from there, on 21, was trying to blow up the invasion barges, which they seemed to have got all over the place - in streams and rivers and God knows where - and we spent one or two sorties on this. And then, when Dunkirk was complete, and France occupied, we went up to Lossiemouth, because we had another problem on our hands now - Norway.

So we operated from Lossiemouth, 21 Squadron. That was hairy, going the full width of the North Sea, usually going for shipping - troopships, they were mainly meant to be - hiding in these fjords. It was a very hairy operation navigationally, apart

from anything else. And we also had other problems like our own convoys, which ran very close to the east coast - up to Scotland and round the top - and we especially seemed to have a lot of bad weather around this time. So, if you didn't happen to spot our convoys quickly enough, then they'd fire with everything! We used to fire off the colour of the day, but they didn't give a damn. All they were interested in were that you were an aircraft, and they were not going to take any chances.'

About the time my cousin was doing his square-bashing at Blackpool, the sea front was fair game for some ultra-low-level flying, as Tony confessed to me:

'Anyway, when I was with Rod Armstrong, beating up the sea front at Blackpool, we completely scattered this one great rookies' parade on the esplanade: they ran in all directions. There were a lot of people on the beach; it was a lovely day, summer of '40, and the people were just throwing themselves flat on their faces in the sand. This gunner of ours in the back was writing little notes like: "Be in the Pavilion in one hour", and throwing them out of the bloody turret! Fluttering down... We didn't get any success, but it was a bloody scream, really!'

Rod Armstrong used to swap seats with Tony when airborne, to make sure his observer got some poling in 'purely as a safety measure'. As a result, no doubt, Tony suddenly found himself selected to go on an experimental conversion course to pilot Blenheims without any ab initio training. Naturally, a medical examination was called for. A mere formality, thought Tony, who felt fitter than at any other time in his life. Unfortunately, the tests showed that Tony had too much albumen in his urine. I felt obliged, after hearing his accounts of debauched lifestyle, to check that Tony had said albumen and not alcohol. He explained that the condition known as albuminuria normally indicates kidney trouble, and as a consequence he was sent to a hospital in Inverness, where he was subjected to a series of tests which proved nightmarish.

After blood tests, injections and X-rays had all produced negative results, it was decided to examine Tony's kidneys with 'a flexible sort of snake apparatus'. For this, a spinal anaesthetic was required... Tony recalls:

'When I came to after this, I was in such agony I couldn't believe it: I didn't know what was going on, when I came out of the morphine, I suppose. I peed blood, boiling water and broken glass for days; but my back was in such agony - I was partially paralysed. Apparently, they'd nipped the spinal chord, or something like this, and took a piece out of my lumber vertebrae; and I had a plaster box put on the middle of my back to try to keep the pressure off.

Anyway, this had gone on for weeks, and I wrote a letter to the squadron: the hospital didn't know anything about this at all. I wrote: "For Christ's sake, somebody somehow come and get me out of all this - they're trying to kill me!" The next thing that I knew was, this doctor - he was a terrible character: he was meant to be looking after me - said that he'd got instructions from the RAF for me to be discharged, and to go back to Lossiemouth. So they said: "You'd best get up and go for a walk!" But I was as weak as a kitten - I could hardly crawl. Next morning, I was meant to get up and catch a train. I got out of bed and just keeled over, and went crash on the deck. Anyway, I was sent to Lossiemouth, and went by train down to Wolverhampton - RAF Cosford hospital. They had me in there for about two days; and I told them what had happened, and they were horrified! They did some checks, and said there was nothing wrong with me: that I was perfectly normal. Meanwhile, of course, all this

business of doing the special course had fallen through, because they carried on without me. There were only six observers involved in this, and they didn't continue with the thing. Anyway, I went on leave for a few weeks and got back to normal.'

During Tony's hospitalisation (October 1940 - January 1941), the inevitable happened. Rod Armstrong had an engine failure during take-off, and ploughed off the end of the runway and through some trees. His observer was killed outright and Rod had his face badly smashed up on the instrument panel. Under the care of the incredible Archibald McIndoe, he received a new face.

In January 1941, Tony was posted to 114 Squadron, then based at Oulton, teaming up with Don Smythe and John Welch. After completing several *Circus* operations, Tony moved with the squadron to Thornaby, Yorkshire, operating under the auspices of Coastal Command. Tony explains:

'And then 114 started carrying out mostly shipping escorts on the east coast, which was a bit of a funny thing to do really. Fortunately, the Germans didn't have many effective long-range fighters: which is just as well! In addition to this escort duty, we also did jobs over the Low Countries and Norway.'

Tony remembers Thornaby as a very happy station. He also recalls one particular raid over Denmark:

'And then, on 16th April 1941, with Sqn Ldr Smythe, we had a most interesting Cook's tour: it was a leaflet raid. We took a civilian aboard, who insisted on going on this night operation. The idea was that we would deliver these leaflets more or less on the doorstep. This was all round Denmark: Hvalpsund, Varde, Fredericia, Vejle: it took 5hrs 45mins. It was a brilliant moonlit night, and we flew at a very, very low level, to wake up the people in the houses: this was the idea, and then scatter these leaflets. They were, in fact, an account bill to be delivered to the Germans for what they'd stolen from the Danes, like two million sides of bacon! I haven't got any left, unfortunately.'

Tony's last operation on 114 Squadron was a memorable one. Operating from Leuchars, on 4th July 1941, the target was a 3,000-ton ship in a Norwegian fjord. Tony recalls:

'And this was a very dicey fjord, with mountainsides coming up very steeply. It was a dodgy business, how to get out of that fjord!' [Shades of *633 Squadron*!]

Barely one week later, Tony was an acting Pilot Officer on probation and posted with his crew to 18 Squadron, which was in the throes of moving from Oulton to Horsham St Faith. After the Rotterdam raid of 16th July, in which Don Smythe's crew were one of the few to achieve a confirmable result, Tony was suddenly elevated to the status of CO's observer. Many pilots were and still are contemptuous of navigators; but not so in this crew: 'Don Smythe always did what I told him', Tony affirmed. 'He never questioned anything I said.' This speaks volumes for a crew who were responsible for the navigation of *Circus* operations comprising 100-plus aircraft.

Long-term memories can be fallible: Tony's was no exception. Though generally accurate, a far as I could detect, Tony was guilty of one extravagant claim: that he had personally dropped Douglas Bader's artificial leg over St Omer. Subsequent cross-

checking revealed that Tony did not fly on that day - 19th August 1941 - and that the strange package was delivered by Sgt Nickleson and crew (R3843, WV:F).

An explanation was requested. Tony wrote back:

'I have at last found my logbook. On 19th Aug 41, we were on detachment at Manston and I have no entry in my logbook for this day (one's memory over the years can indeed become very blurred. But one thing I can remember very sharply was boozing in a little pub - I think the 'Mucky Duck' [*Dog and Duck*?] at Plucks Gutter, which was near Manston - with then Sqn Ldr Bader, and having a very happy night out indeed.'

In October, it was 18 Squadron's turn for the dreaded Malta detachment. The transit was hairy in its own right. Tony well remembers the leg from Portreath to Gibraltar:

'We had a special briefing, that if anything went wrong, and we landed up in Spain, we were to destroy the aircraft by using the fire axe and putting a Very cartridge into it. But, if we landed in Portugal, under no circumstances were we to destroy the aircraft, but we were to try to get it down as near as possible in one piece. Apparently, there was a nice gentleman's agreement, that for a nominal £5, the Portuguese Air Force could buy a Blenheim in exchange for returning the aircrew without any questions asked!

The aircraft was loaded up inside with all its equipment: the bomb-racks, containers, boxes, all sorts of servicing equipment, tarpaulins, you name it, engine covers, boxes of tools - so it was really quite heavy. Because of this route, there was an additional 100-gallon tank, just like a great big lorry tank, which indeed it was. You're not going to believe this but it was put inside the fuselage, and had a hand-operated wobble pump, which I had to operate. And as soon as fuel was burnt out of the main (inner) tanks, fuel was transferred as soon as was humanly possible. It took hundreds and hundreds of strokes. One virtually sat on this tank of petrol, and I can remember that it was dripping out of the gland of the pump as we went along: into the aircraft, around your feet and everywhere else.'

I asked the obvious question. Tony replied:

'Don Smythe didn't mind me smoking, but we used to flick the ash down the relief tube - the pee tube under the front seat. [Early Blenheims did not have this luxury!] Anyway, it took us 7hrs 15 mins to get down there to Gibraltar; and, from memory, despite this extra tank, there was precious little fuel wafting in the bottom of the tanks when we landed. It was 800 yards from sea wall to sea wall; and to make matters worse, there was a nasty hummock in the middle of the runway, so that when you touched down it gave every impression that you were fresh out of runway within the next 50 yards. This was terrifying, and caused a lot of people to cut their losses and swing off one side or another, or lift the undercarriage. This caused mayhem, especially as the aircraft were parked on either sides of the runway: there was nowhere else to put them. It could cause quite a holocaust if someone made a boo-boo!'

Ron Gillman's book *The Shiphunters* is the definitive work on Blenheim operations from Malta. From Tony's point of view, there was one main aim:

'We were bombing and machine-gunning, trying to get tankers - water-tankers, petrol-tankers, road-tankers, any tankers. It was better to do that than to go for the personnel: much more effective.'

One of two sorties against merchant shipping in Tripoli harbour, during December 1941, had an interesting sequel for Tony. On the 19th of the month, Tony noticed that a British destroyer, which he believed was the *Kandahar*, had been hit by a mine just off Tripoli: 'They had got themselves into all sorts of trouble, Tony recalls. 'The whole stern of this *Kandahar* had been blown off, and it had turned over like a kid's tin toy.' Somehow, another destroyer managed to get a tow to the *Kandahar*, but evidently gave up, and HMS *Jaguar* sank her the following day.

The 19th was also memorable for Tony in a most painful way, when he stopped a .5 explosive shell in his right shoulder blade. 'That wasn't amusing', he recalls. 'Not a nice experience.'

Back in hospital again, this time in Malta, Tony found himself in a bed next to a young naval lieutenant with multiple injuries: a survivor from the *Kandahar*, The lieutenant was effusive with his thanks. Tony explains:

'His story was that there was some Italian naval force that was coming in to deliver the *coup de grâce* to them, and we appeared on the scene. And he said that it was just like a miracle as we flew over there. He said that as the aircraft flew over, the Italian naval task force just turned and veered of in the opposite direction! Into the night - gone! He said that we just appeared in the nick of time: I told him that that was just fortunate, as we were not looking for him. We were on a different job, and just happened to go over the top.'

In spite of the incessant air raids and the constant dicing with death, Tony left Malta with fond memories, as he recalls, wistfully:

'During the worst time in Malta, we still enjoyed ourselves! We had wonderful times: the girls were always good to us!'

Shortly after release from hospital, in early 1942, Tony was posted back to the UK, as Station Navigation Officer at West Raynham. It was a pleasant voyage home, by sea around the Cape of Good Hope, aboard the P & O luxury liner *Viceroy of India*. Tony enthused:

'It was a lovely ship. Took six weeks from Suez to Liverpool, around Africa. It was absolutely incredible: beautiful. Bearing in mind that she was a comparatively modest-sized ship - I think she was 26,000 tons [actually 19,627] - we got aboard her close on 5,000 souls! Thinking of the *Titanic*, we must have had boats for about 1/5 of that number. There were 2,500 Italian POWs in the holds, and I think they would have had a bad do if anything had gone wrong.' [Later that year, on 11th November, the *Viceroy of India* was torpedoed and sunk].

Tony had by now completed 82 operational sorties. The CO of his new station was none other than Gp Capt Paddy Bandon, whom Tony described as 'an excellent friend to me all the time there'. Tony had already made this great officer's acquaintance at Watton, when 21 Squadron had shared this airfield with 82 Squadron. It would not be their last meeting by any means.

Whilst stationed at West Raynham, Tony was detached to Ford in connection with the 2 Group contribution to the Dieppe fiasco in August 1942. Two recollections spring to mind during that period. It is fairly well known that the aircrew were billeted in a nearby girls' school, in which little enamel notices above the beds read something like: 'If you require a mistress during the night, ring the bell'! This was not one of Tony's success stories...

The other incident concerns Paddy Bandon, who was always in the thick of anything and everything, as Tony recalls:

'We had an Officers' Mess at Ford: it was part of a Nissen hut, or something similar; it had got wooden trusses about seven or eight feet up. We were having a wild party one night - this was during the Dieppe time - and somebody discovered a bit of horseplay where you could leap up, catch hold of the roof truss, and swing your legs through between your arms, do a somersault and drop down. So everybody was doing this, smashed with alcohol; and the Group Captain insisted on having a go, and leaped up and caught hold of this beam, and sort of dangled there transfixed. Everyone was cheering him and saying: "Well done, Groupie, well done!" It took a long time before they realised that, in fact, he'd impaled his hand on a nail, which had gone clean through the palm and out the back of his hand; and through all the cheers, he was yelling for a chair to be put underneath him. Eventually, someone did get the message, and a lot of people caught hold of him by the legs, and took the weight off, and somebody else got a chair to release the pressure of it. The squadron doctor, who was a flying officer, said: "Well, sir, we'll have to get you over to Sick Quarters and this has got to be done." So Paddy Bandon said: "Don't bloody do that: you just fetch your tools here - I'm not moving there." So a very sloshed Fg Off doctor had to go to Sick Quarters to get a needle and thread, and some antiseptic, and stitch it up, and put a dressing on; and the party carried on as though it had never stopped!'

On 17th August 1943, No 63 OTU was formed at Honiley, its speciality being the training of crews in the operation of Airborne Interception radar. On the same day, Tony became the new Station Navigation Officer. Just four months at this location, which now houses the world-famous VOR beacon, and Tony was on his way back to Bicester, to join the staff of No 13 OTU. It was not a happy time for him, and he and the Station Commander did not exactly see eye to eye. This state of affairs, usually reflected in an Annual Confidential Report, can make a nasty dent in an officer's promotion prospects...

In April 1944, a much-relieved Tony returned to Ford, maybe on the lookout for those elusive mistresses! From there he was involved in the D-Day preparations and subsequent support. As CO of No 425 Refuelling and Re-armament Unit, his task one day was to transport 'mobile workshops, mobile air traffic, mobile everything' across the Channel to Maldegem in Belgium. He explains, thumbing through his photo album:

'Got practically all of it onto LSTs. You can see all the vehicles. That was a fantastic crossing of the Channel, I can tell you. They were awful bloody things...This is Maldegem, and the local baker that I lived with at the tail-end of the war. Wonderful people: they looked after me marvellously.'

Tony had survived the war. What is more, he had so enjoyed the vast majority of his service in the RAF that he applied for and was granted a permanent commission.

Tony's post-war service could fill a book: here are the highlights, in the interests of brevity.

In August 1951, No 29 (All Weather/Night Fighter) Squadron replaced its Mosquitoes with shiny new Meteor N.F. 11s. It also re-equipped with a navigator flight commander: Tony was one of the first non-pilots to fill the post - if not the first. There was a bonus, as Tony explains:

'As deputy CO of the squadron, I was, in effect, the CO, because Peter Horsley [later Air Marshal Sir Peter Horsley KCB CBE MVO AFC] was CO, and he was equerry to the Queen, so he didn't spend much time on the squadron. It made it interesting, because Prince Philip used to come down and have lunch with us, at Tangmere: beautiful place - one of the original names of the RAF.'

As if that were not enough, the long-weekend each month was not wasted, as Tony explains:

'It used to be from after duty on Friday until first duty on Monday morning. I used to borrow an Anson from the flight, and we used to go up to Jersey, just the one-hour flight: and it was all hell let loose. We used to go midday on Friday - it used to be a flying exercise, of course! - and four or five of us in this Anson would fly off to Jersey. They didn't charge us any landing fees, and we used to screw the thing down ourselves. We had to take enough petrol to get back: we used to get the most appalling weather, but we didn't give a damn. There was a character down there who used to rent me a car: it was a dream - a 1927 Chrysler, red-topped open two-seater, and I used to terrorise the people in Jersey. All the girls were there waiting for us: it was incredible! When I met David Jones, they all knew about it, in the *Continental* and the *Ritz*: all the girls, a crowd of them all jumping up and down, and waiting for us to turn up. We had the most terrible weekend! Then take-off at 8am on Monday, and back for duty by 9am.'

With substantive Squadron Leader under his belt, Tony was 'quite suddenly' posted, in August 1953, to Fighter Command HQ as a staff officer. He describes his two years at Bentley Priory, in the capacity of 'Night Ops' as 'absolutely wonderful'. Then came another plum posting, to the Central Fighter Establishment at West Raynham, as Tony enthuses:

'It was incredible. We travelled worldwide: all over the States and Canada, down into Mexico, down into France...'

On a fact-finding mission around the United States, Tony dropped into Edwards Air Force Base, near Las Vegas. Propping up one of the bars in Las Vegas was someone Tony could not fail to recognise - Donald Campbell. Tony continues:

'We got into conversation, and got on very well together, chatting and drinking. He went into a lot of detail to tell me about his record-breaking speed attempts; and he explained the technical details, which was very interesting.'

Just two weeks later, on a record-breaking attempt at Coniston, the feared nose-up pitch occurred. The rest is history.

Towards the end of his time at CFE, Tony toured the Far East in a Canberra two-ship formation. The current AOC-in-C Far East Air Force was Air Marshal The Earl of Bandon (later Air Chief Marshal The Earl of Bandon GBE CB CVO DSO). 'It was so amazing', Tony recalls, 'He insisted that I stay in his house as his guest!'

On his return, he was devastated to find out that his new posting was as a controller in the Air Safety Centre of ATCC, Uxbridge. Not visualising himself constructing triangulation plots for a living, Tony activated the grapevine and soon found that he was summoned to Air Ministry. 'How would you like to take command of your own unit, as CO of Hanover [ATCC]?', they asked. Tony had fallen on his feet yet again, as he enthuses:

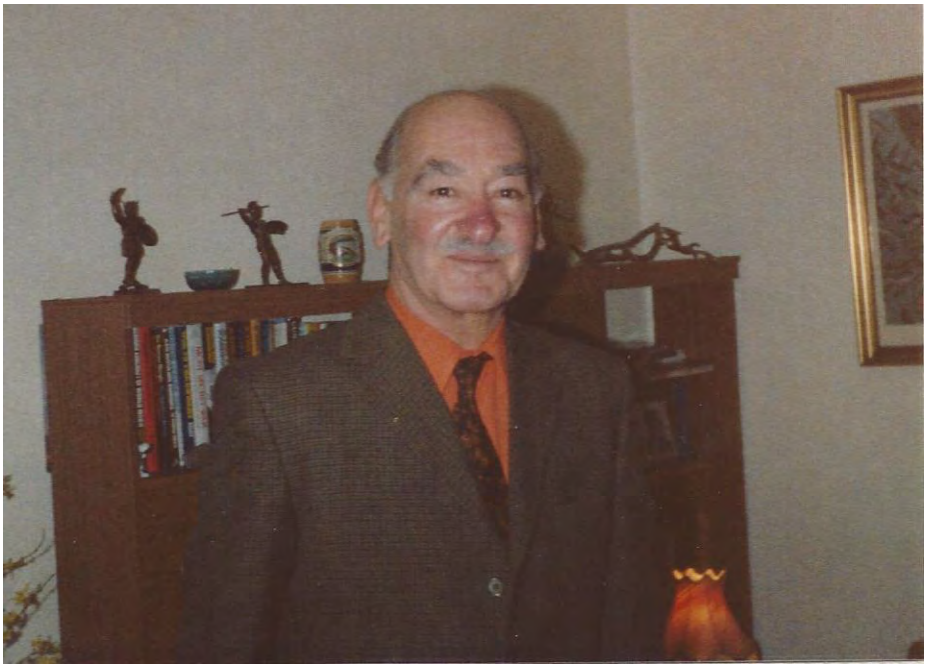
'I had the most fabulous time there. I was there for three and a half years: I was the king of Hanover! RAF Germany was 270 miles away, and no one ever came to see me! I was the senior British officer there, and had to look after everything. They gave me a luxury penthouse flat in Hanover, with a full-time housekeeper. It had two bathrooms, two garages - even they were centrally heated.'

On 1st February 1963, aged 43, Tony reluctantly had to retire. This happened just before the RAF changed to the '38/55' scheme. 'Very sad', Tony commented. He has never adjusted to coming out.

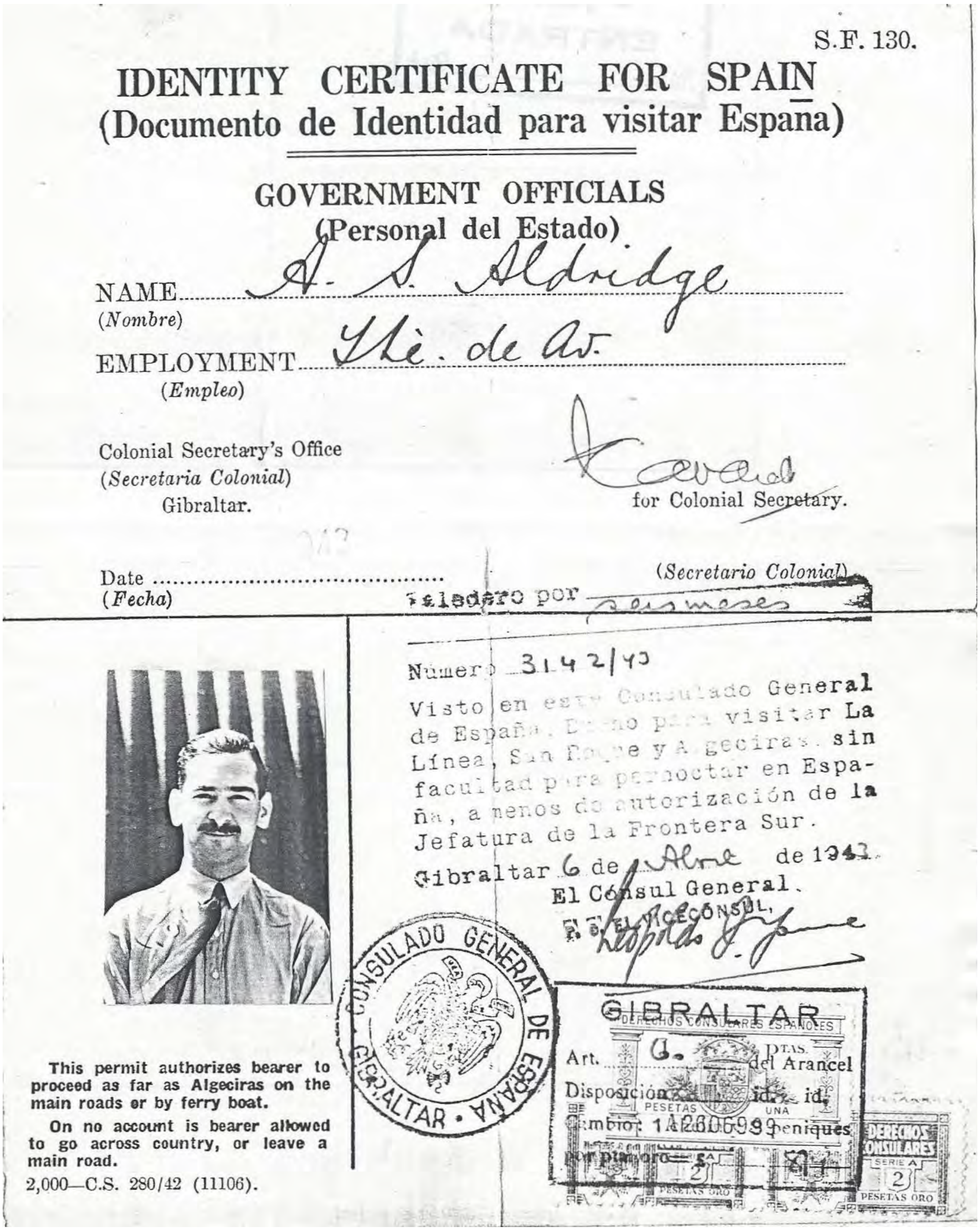
In June 1985, he wrote me the following:

'Had a serious setback last October, when I suffered a Myocardial Infarction (Coronary Thrombosis) and everything came to a jangling halt for about 6 months! Am pleased to tell you that I am once again fighting fit (albeit now an OAP) and facing the world with renewed vigour!'

Who can doubt that?



Tony Aldridge, March 1983 (Author's photo)



S.F. 130.

IDENTITY CERTIFICATE FOR SPAIN
(Documento de Identidad para visitar Espana)

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS
(Personal del Estado)

NAME A. S. Aldridge
(Nombre)

EMPLOYMENT
(Empleo)

Colonial Secretary's Office
(Secretaria Colonial)
Gibraltar.

for Colonial Secretary.
(Secretario Colonial)

Date ....
(Fecha)

Valedero por seis meses

Numero 3142/43
Visto en este Consulado General de España. Bueno para visitar La Línea, San Roque y Algeciras, sin facultad para pernoctar en España, a menos de autorización de la Jefatura de la Frontera Sur.
Gibraltar 6 de Abril de 1943.
El Cónsul General.
P. O. EL VICECÓNSUL,

CONSULADO GENERAL DE ESPAÑA · GIBRALTAR ·

GIBRALTAR
DERECHOS CONSULARES ESPAÑOLES
Art. ... PTAS. del Arancel
Disposición ... id. id.
Cambio: ... peniques
por pta. oro

DERECHOS CONSULARES SERIE A 2 PESETAS ORO

This permit authorizes bearer to proceed as far as Algeciras on the main roads or by ferry boat.

On no account is bearer allowed to go across country, or leave a main road.

2,000—C.S. 280/42 (11106).

Tony Aldridge's Identity Certificate for Spain, no doubt used to get acquainted with the señoritas! (Tony Aldridge)

WG CDR J. WELCH DFC
(WOp/AG IN SMYTHE CREW)

The distinguished, retired wing commander with whom I shared a pub lunch in March 1983 did not quite fit the description conjured up by his wartime nickname, 'Junior' Welch. The 'Salford man', who had made the broadcast *Mast High Over Rotterdam* immediately after the raid of 16th July 1941, had been difficult to trace. I had been searching the wrong end of the country. Referring to the BBC, John told me:

'They gave me an old-fashioned gramophone record of the broadcast, which has disappeared, possibly during one of my many moves since then.'

Nicknames are the rule rather than the exception in the RAF. Like many of his contemporaries, John had more than one. 'One-pan Welch' merited an explanation. Tony Aldridge gave it:

'When we originally had the Vickers Gas Operated Gun - a reliable gun, you know - one pan used to hold 100 rounds of ammunition. [The original pans of the Vickers "K" held 60 rounds; the larger pans were issued from 1936]. He only needed one pan to fix anything! He was a good shot, and a remarkable character...He was, at this time, very young and shy: happy, wonderful character to go around with. Not an extrovert at all. He's still like that. He was a devoted crew member.'

It is not surprising that John teamed up with Don Smythe - a man of similar temperament - way back in 1940, when they both served at No 13 OTU, Bicester. Extrovert Tony Aldridge joined the crew later, in January 1941.

In November 1940, John Welch and Don Smythe were posted to 114 Squadron, Oulton. The following month understandably sticks in John's memory. In the George

Medal citations, the officers were, of course, referred to by name, but the person they risked their lives for was merely 'a sergeant': John felt that this was somewhat below par. He recalls:

'We never got airborne. After we stopped, I tried to get out, but found that I was trapped by my feet, and being aware of the fire slowly creeping back towards me. I felt rather lonely and deserted at first, but the other two got the crash-axe and hacked away at the canopy. After I was pulled clear, I think our incendiaries went off. All I got out of it was a week's leave! The thing I remember most was the look of disappointment on the faces of the squadron when I appeared, as it was common practice to descend on a chap's kit the moment he was killed. No one minded, as it was just accepted. It took me weeks to retrieve all my kit!'

'Junior' Welch on the tailplane of a 114 Sqn Blenheim, probably V5875 (John Welch)

The first week in July 1941, newly-commissioned Plt Off Welch was posted with his crew to 18 Squadron. After the tragic loss of Tim Partridge on the Rotterdam raid, John was now the CO's WOp/AG.

When the squadron took over the demanding tasks of the Malta detachment in October 1941, John managed to keep his sense of humour, as Tom Jefferson recalls:

'He used to come out with the most comical French words and sayings. even though he didn't know any French at all! Everybody thought that this was terrific.'

Tony Aldridge adds:

'His standing joke was that there were special arrangements over Tripoli. This Macchi 202 was almost on a suicidal front quarter attack, coming straight at us, because he'd had a go at trying to get behind us and obviously couldn't: so he climbed up on the starboard side and then dived down. And Junior said that I asked Don Smythe to turn the aircraft so as to put myself between him and Don, so that they'd stop the bullets! It was a good story: Junior put that round the Mess quite a lot.'

Not quite so funny, from Tony's point of view, is the following anecdote, as Tony relates:

'The most hideous raid over there was on the major naval docks in Trapani harbour, Sicily, with Don Smythe. It was a bloody disaster! We were on our own, and it was meant to be a dawn raid; but Met. cocked it up, and we arrived at Trapani, at very low-level, and it was still dark! You couldn't see a bloody thing, so we had to circle for nearly twenty minutes around a little islet. Then it started getting lighter and we went in. We were looking for two big merchant ships in there, but they were all destroyers and flakships! And you've never seen anything like it: the flak was completely solid - same height, about fifty feet. We were absolutely riddled! But what amazed me was that one shell which must have been about the size of a Bofors 40mm went straight through the port roundel, and took the whole bloody roundel out! Bang - jagged metal! The tail fin, and the tailplane on the starboard side had got about ten or twelve bullet holes. One went through the turret, and must have missed poor old Junior Welch by about half an inch: it had gone straight in from low down on the starboard belly, and had come out through the port top. The one in the wing had taken off part of the flap and part of the aileron, but we still managed to keep flying - I don't know how. Of course, we didn't find the bloody ships, and we were lucky to get away with our lives. Fortunately, I suppose we'd caught the Italians more or less off balance at first, but they certainly gave us a hot reception when we got there. As we pulled away, I remember running down a narrow channel, with another little island offshore. And I said to Don Smythe: "Jesus Christ: keep down low - as low as we can! They'll surely be after us, and we've got miles to go to get back to Luqa". And that was the occasion, I think, when Junior did something completely out of context. In this early light, trying not to be spotted, Junior Welch said, in a very calm voice: "Our QDM to Luqa is...!" That meant to us that he's been using the W/T, and probably given away our position! That was the only lapse I can remember: it was probably the pressure on him, having just received this terrible beating in Trapani harbour. They must have thought we were raving maniacs, which of course we were!'

In June 1942, John returned to his old squadron - 114, now based at West Raynham - remaining there for only eleven weeks. He had applied for and had been accepted for training as a pilot. When he presented himself at No 13 ITW, Torquay, in September, he was wearing the ribbon of a well-deserved DFC.

After some basic training at No 3 EFTS, Shellingford, Oxfordshire, John completed his pilot's course in Canada. In the last three months of 1943, he flew Hurricanes at No 1 OTU, Bagotville, Quebec. The choice had been made: fighter not bomber pilot.

John's first operational tour as a pilot was with 229 Squadron, flying Spitfire IXs. Initially tasked with the air defence of Malta, the squadron moved on to Sicily in January 1944, before returning to the UK (Hornchurch) in April. During the invasion period, John's main task was as escort to day bombers. There then followed a move to Coltishall where the additional role of armed recce complemented the escort missions over the Low Countries. After re-equipping with Mk XVIs in December 1944, the squadron engaged in fighter-bomber sweeps, before being absorbed the following month by 603 Squadron - a complete reversal of what occurred in Takali, Malta, in 1942.

Now a member of 603 Squadron, John continued to fly fighter-bomber sweeps over the Netherlands until April 1945, when the squadron moved to Turnhouse for the last days of the war.

Remaining in Scotland, John joined 122 Squadron, and reverted to Spitfire IXs. On 1st January 1946, he was gazetted for a 'Mentioned in Despatches'.

On 1st April, John underwent yet another re-numbering operation when 122 Squadron was swallowed up by 41 Squadron, which was equipped with Spitfire XXIs. Two weeks later, he followed his 'new' squadron south from Dalcross to Wittering.

John then joined 11 Squadron, Iwakuni, Japan, which was part of the Commonwealth Occupation Forces. Still flying Spitfires - Mks XIV and XVIII - he saw the squadron disband at Miho in February 1948.

After a good run for his money, John completed the Staff College Course during 1949. His reward was an inevitable posting to Air Ministry, with promotion to substantive Squadron Leader midway through the tour.

Jet conversion followed in the form of Meteors and Vampires, and a return to the Far East in 1953 as CO of 28 Squadron, Hong Kong, which operated Vampire FB 9s. (His friend from the Blenheim era - Sir Ivor Broom - also commanded this squadron, when it was equipped with Spitfires).

In 1955, John was posted back to the Air Ministry, where he remained until his retirement from the RAF in December 1958, aged 39 years.

As an employee of Shell Mex and BP Ltd, John managed to keep his hand in with some light aircraft business and pleasure flying, a path followed earlier by Douglas Bader. He finally hung up his flying boots when he retired from Shell UK Ltd in 1979, marking the end of a long, eventful and quite outstanding career.

SGT A.C. CUTLER
(WOp/AG IN WALKDEN CREW)

L to R: Albert Cutler, Bernard Matthews and Malcolm Walkden

The daylight low-level raid on the Cologne power stations, on 12th August 1941, was 2 Group's most audacious effort to date. It was inevitably costly. One of the 'FTRs' was the crew of Plt Off Malcolm Walkden, Plt Off Bernard Matthews and Sgt Albert Cutler.

The category 'Missing' always holds out a certain degree of hope, thereby cushioning the blow of the official notification. For Tom and Maud Cutler, this was their natural reaction after receiving the following letter from the Record Office, Gloucester, dated 14th August 1941:

'Dear Sir, I regret to confirm that your son, No 941260 Sergeant Albert Charles CUTLER of No 18 Squadron Royal Air Force, is missing, the aircraft of which he was the wireless operator and air gunner having failed to return to its base on the 12th August 1941 after an operational flight. This does not necessarily mean that he is killed or wounded. I will communicate with you again immediately I have further

news and would be obliged if you, on your part, would write to me should you hear anything of your son from unofficial sources. May I assure you of the sympathy of the Royal Air Force with you in your anxiety.'

The signs were hopeful. No one had actually seen the crash. The relevant entry in the 18 Squadron ORB reads:

'[V6437] C - Charlie did not reach target area as the aircraft was damaged by a cable over the Dutch border, and last seen under control going back into Holland.'

On the basis of this, there must have been a good chance that Albert would soon be notified as a POW. Then followed an ominous silence.

On 13th October 1941, an article in *Life* magazine, which was condensed in *Reader's Digest*, gave an anonymous first-hand account of the raid on the Knapsack power station by Force 2, in which it was stated: 'One chap hit a high-tension wire and crashed'. If Mr and Mrs Cutler read this article at the time, they must have wondered where the truth lay.

Further confusion may have been caused by contemporary reports of a Blenheim in Force 1 (which attacked Quadrath power station) having also hit high-tension cables near the Dutch/German border. In his article for *The Sunday Express*, dated 1st July 1973, Bill Edrich explained what happened to the box of six which he was leading:

'Then came the first setback. Blue flashes were sparkling along a line of high tension cables stretching obliquely to our right and left. One of our pilots had failed to clear the cables. The scene changed again as we crossed the border into Germany itself.'

The pilot in Bill's box was Sgt G.J. Langston. In August 1981, Jim wrote me the following clarification of how he finished up flying through high-tension cables:

'Explosive and incendiary shells from behind set fire to the cabin and engines, blowing out the rear turret complete with Ken [Attew, his WOp/AG]. His body was found over ½ mile from where we finished up.'

The cables proved fortuitous in Jim's case as they smashed the Perspex in the nose, thereby lowering the scorching cockpit temperature enough to enable him to pull off a successful forced-landing.

The 21-years-old sergeant air-gunner who broadcast his recollections of the attack on the Knapsack power station (later printed in *We Speak from the Air* - HMSO 1942) naturally omitted any reference to the demise of C for Charlie.

The next letter which Albert Cutler's parents received from the Record Office, Gloucester, was despatched on 3rd November 1941. It added nothing new but was rather more ominous. It reads:

'Dear Sir, With reference to my letter of 14th August 1941, I regret to inform you that nothing further has been heard of your son No. 941260 Sergeant Albert Charles CUTLER of No. 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force, since he was reported missing. According to further information received, the aircraft took off from base, as one of a formation detailed to attack a target west of Cologne, on the afternoon of 12th August 1941. Before reaching the target, the aircraft appeared to hit some high tension cables

with the rudder; but continued flying for a few minutes still under control; the pilot then jettisoned his bombs in a field and started a gradual turn to the left. After that the aircraft was lost sight of, and nothing further has been heard of it or of any member of the crew. With renewed expressions of the sympathy of the Royal Air Force with you in your great anxiety.'

The crunch came just one week later. The letter reads:

'Dear Sir, With reference to my letter dated 14th August 1941, it is my painful duty to inform you that according to information received from the Dutch Red Cross Society, through the International Red Cross Society, your son No. 941260 Sergeant Albert Charles CUTLER, of No. 18 Squadron, Royal Air Force, previously reported as "missing", is now reported "missing believed killed in action". The report states that his body was found at sea on 12th August 1941 and buried in the North Cemetery, Flushing [Vlissingen]. In conveying this information to you may I assure you of the sympathy of the Royal Air Force with you in your anxiety.'

The Cutlers had lost their 23-years-old son for ever. The tragedy was a complete reversal of my cousin's crash. Malcolm Walkden, Bernard Matthews and their Blenheim had vanished without trace in the sea off Scheldemonding, near Flushing, while the body of their WOp/AG, Albert Cutler, had been recovered. It was by no means the only occasion that a Blenheim WOp/AG had been thrown clear during a crash, and added further fuel to my investigations into my cousin's disappearance.

Coventry-born Albert Cutler completed his schooling at the Technical College, where he excelled at sport. Initially employed at Francis & Son, a well-known store in Leamington Spa, he worked for Prudential Assurance during his last two years before enlisting in the RAF on 20th November 1939.

Albert motored through the normal training for a WOp/AG, including the inevitable delays in between courses. After leaving No 2 RAF Depot, Cardington, in January 1940, he joined No 2 E&WS at Yatesbury. Christmas 1940 was spent in the care of RAF Hendon, after which Albert proceeded north of the border to enrol at No 10 B&GS, Dumfries. At this stage, the careers of Albert Cutler and fellow 'Rotterdam WOp/AG' Fred Daniels were identical, and they became firm friends. On 2nd February 1941, Albert wrote a letter from 'Hut 28 A/4' to his grandparents. I could not help wondering how far the world has progressed since then, when I read his reference to gas, a topical subject as I write this in September 1990. (Mercifully, gas was not used in the ensuing Gulf Conflict, Operation *Desert Storm*). Here is his letter in full:

'I hope the shock of receiving a letter from me doesn't prove too much for you, but at last I really seem to be getting down to it and putting some flying hours in. If the weather holds good I should complete my flying hours and be posted to a squadron within 4 or 5 weeks. In the meantime I have had the shock of my life. Guess who came right up to Scotland to see me whilst on his leave? None other than JOCK HAY. You will remember him; the fellow George liked. He has also asked that when I finish this course I shall be posted to his squadron; he even went to the C.O. about it. If this comes off I should be in clover; it's a Squadron of Whitleys, night bombers. I have had my photograph taken whilst up here and am enclosing a few for yourself, Jess and Charlie, and George and hope that you will all like them; at least I do look like an Airman. Dumfries appears to be a wonderfully healthy place to be stationed at, and is

surrounded by marvellous scenery and is also, as you may know, the birthplace of Poet Robbie Burns so what more could one ask? Well I hope you are keeping well, and that the farm life is not going down too badly. Before I close I should like to mention about this invasion business of which the papers are so full; well according to the big people up here it is definitely expected at any moment and they are stressing the importance of knowing how to deal with GAS, so now you will know what to do, take your GAS MASK wherever you go. Well that's about all I can say, so until next time.'

Promoted to Temporary Sergeant in mid-March 1941, Albert proceeded to Upwood at the end of the month to start training on the Blenheim OTU. Night Whitleys were not to be.

On 1st July, Albert was posted to Norfolk, joining 18 Squadron for its last few days at Oulton. Immediately after the successful raid on the Le Havre docks on 10th July, he wrote to his parents. It is an interesting contemporary account of the action which earned the DFC for the Boss, Wg Cdr Tim Partridge. He wrote:

'Dear Maud & Tom, Just to let you know everything's fine and am keeping safe and well. Have done 2 trips, one on Monday morning, attacking shipping off the Norwegian coast [Probably, Shipping Beat 7 - East Frisian Islands]. You probably saw the report in Tuesday's paper and one this morning on Le Havre; according to the 9 o'clock news we were very successful. I thought myself we blasted hell out of the ships. It was an amazing do today; we absolutely straddled the docks and ships with bombs, and I was pumping bullets down at the decks of the boats as fast as I could. We were only about 50 to 70 ft off the floor and I could see quite plainly a bloke on the end of the ship trying to get a bead on us with his machine-gun; I don't think he'll do it again. When we got back our crew were photographed by the press and we had all kinds of questions asked us, so you will probably see my photo' in the papers later on in the week, and also in either the Gaumont British or Paramount News; don't take this for certain but they are going to let us know soon.'

The *Birmingham Gazette* of 12th July 1941 did a splendid coverage of the Le Havre raid. 'The Coventry gunner, formerly an insurance clerk' can be none other than Albert, and the article states that the 'young air-gunner made his will last night. A minute or two ago, he tore it to pieces under a barrage of laughter from his colleagues.' Albert's boss - Wg Cdr Tim Partridge - also wrote his will immediately prior to the raid on Le Havre. He did not destroy his.

On 13th July, Albert moved with the squadron to nearby Horsham St Faith. On the evening of Saturday 19th July, he wrote what was to prove his last letter. Tantalisingly, the promised 'full account of the Rotterdam do' never materialised. Nevertheless the letter is a poignant record of a plucky WOp/AG. He wrote:

'Dear Maud & Tom, I have not yet heard from you since I sent my letter some days ago. Perhaps this is because I changed my address so suddenly. You will be pleased to know that this new place is if anything more palatial than the last one, and the food is just as good. I have done 3 more trips since Le Havre and am still in one piece. The last one was Rotterdam [the other two were shipping beats], no doubt you have read of some of the results of this. We had a bit of hard luck here, being hit by A.A. fire; we got back safely but made a bit of a ropy landing, due to the effects of this, and I have been put in dock to get over it. I was thrown forward onto the central column of

the turret, and got a bit of a bump fairly low down; nothing to worry about, I shall be O.K. in a couple or three more days. It's a bit of a nuisance to lay down doing nothing, but the M.O. says that this is the only thing for it. But for this I am going on fine and should be back having another go at them in next to no time. I will give you a full account of the Rotterdam do in my next letter; did we Shake Them. P.S. I see a letter or parcel has arrived for me. I shall have it in the morning. I wouldn't go back to a training school for all the tea in China.'

I like that postscript: its succinct message and the preceding sentiments about getting back into action speak volumes about the character of Albert Cutler.

Fred Daniels, who had served with Albert virtually from enlistment, described his fellow WOp/AG as 'a very good friend of mine'. Oddly, he referred to him as 'Frank'; but, on second thoughts, how many aircrew had alterative names, then and now? 'It upset me about Frank Cutler', Fred told me, when referring to the Knapsack raid.

In 1986, a very frail Mrs Maud Cutler moved into an old people's home. I am indebted to Alec Hill, whose brother-in-law was a nephew of Albert, for making it possible to compile this biography.