

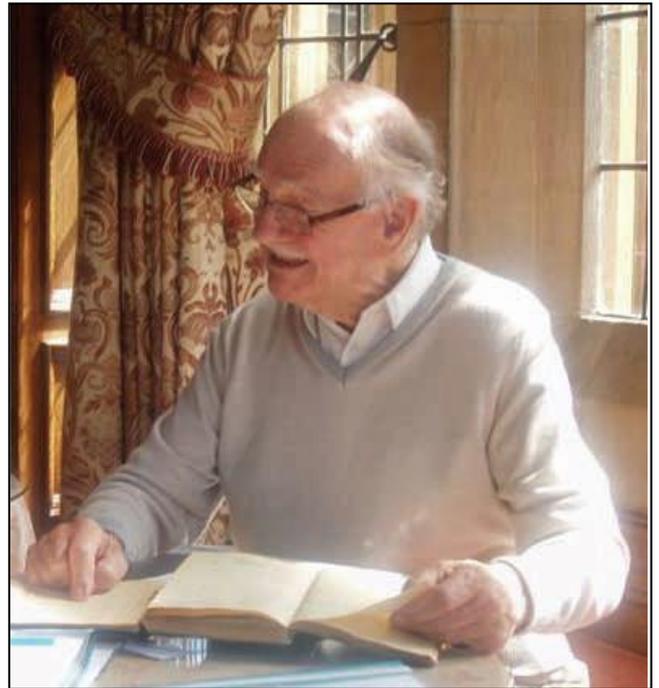
A Hampden Ditching by Reg (Jimmy) Woolgar

At 1800 hrs on the 14th February 1942, Hampden AE397 - G for George, took off from RAF Scampton for a bombing raid on Mannheim.

The four crew were:

Pilot P/O	RAP Allsebrook (Rafe)
Navigator	Sgt PT Stanbridge (Bob)
Wop/Ag	Sgt RLA Woolgar (Jimmy)
Rear Gunner	Sgt JW Wilkinson (Jack)

With the exception of Jack, the crew had all completed over 20 operations and this trip was regarded as something of a 'milk run' - a piece of cake!! The outward leg was uneventful, a full moon with partial cloud.



Reg Woolgar at the 49 Squadron Reunion

The cloud making the aiming point difficult to identify, but the bomb load was duly dropped on the target. A little flak was encountered and Rafe took some mild evasive action but just as they were leaving the target area the port engine cut and stopped. Unfortunately, it could not be feathered causing considerable drag to port.

A course was set for home but the aircraft lost height from about 18,000ft fairly rapidly. Soon efforts were being made to lighten the weight by jettisoning all equipment which could be dispensed with - including the bomb sight.

Unfortunately, when Bob opened the lower hatch to offload the bomb sight out went his navigation bag in which he had packed all his nav. gear for safe keeping, as well!! At 4,000ft all hatches were opened and parachutes clipped on in readiness to abandon the aircraft should searchlights or flak be encountered.

However, for some reason the aircraft levelled at that height so on they flew. After a while Rafe experienced severe cramp through holding opposite rudder as they flew on one engine and Bob attempted to secure the rudder bar with Rafe's scarf. When this didn't succeed Jimmy managed to tie it back and later recalled that for him these were the scariest moments of the episode, crawling back to under Rafe's seat, fumbling in the dark and without any intercom connection.

At this point Jimmy sent out a plain language message saying that the port engine was u/s and they might be baling out. Fuel began to run low and more height was lost until they crossed the coast and for some time, they flew fairly low over the sea.

Around 0230hrs, some five hours after leaving the target, the starboard engine ran out of fuel and Rafe made a very good landing on the sea.

The aircraft very quickly began to fill with water and the crew made the quickest ever exit, standing on the port wing expecting the self-inflating dinghy to pop out but there was great consternation when nothing happened.

Bob quickly broke open the engine nacelle covering with the heel of his flying boot, put his hand inside and pulled the emersion switch. Slowly the dinghy began to inflate - but not fully, and there was a frantic search for the top-up pump which was located, attached and hurriedly used.

Then, a long cord was seen attached to the dinghy and disappearing into the nacelle. Mindful that the emersion switch had not worked, and neither did a sharp tug, Rafe took out a pair of folding nail scissors from a small leather case in his tunic top pocket, hacked the cord free, folded the scissors, put them back into the leather case and restored it to his top pocket - before, as the last one, stepping into the dinghy.

The paddles were found, and hastily used, to get the dinghy clear of the aircraft which rapidly sank. All of this took place within about four to five minutes of the ditching. It was a cold night, and a long one, for the crew. In the early morning, with daylight, they could faintly see cliffs and some radar towers a long way off to their right.

This led to some speculation as to where they were. After some thought and discussion, they thought that they were probably somewhere of the Yorkshire coast having drifted too far north by over compensating for the port drag.

Although it was cold and the sea choppy, the sun came out and they took stock of what to do - apart from waiting. Quite soon the cliffs disappeared so they put out some yellow fluorescent sea markers and, with the aid of two paddles, attempted to paddle in their last direction.

This was not very successful however and before long they returned to the position of the sea markers. During the morning there was a little light relief when a school of porpoises appeared, lying about nearby until someone asked what would happen if one of them tried to surface from beneath the dinghy - which quickly prompted more hasty paddling to get out of harm's way. A little later an aircraft was spotted some distance away and a couple of distress flares were quickly let off - but to no obvious avail.

Then, not long after noon, another aircraft was heard, much closer, and into view came the most welcome sight of a Walrus amphibian aircraft leading to much waving and shouting. The Walrus flew over them and waggled its wings several times before flying off.

There was then a long wait of some two hours before there appeared on the horizon a motor boat heading towards them. This turned out to be a Royal Navy MASB (Motor Anti-submarine Boat), which quickly came along-side the dinghy and took the crew on board. They were very cold and wet but in high spirits at being rescued, which were made even higher by the very liberal hand out of rum rations by the Navy crew.

In reply to the first question they asked, "where are we?" the response was, "Off St Catherine's Point".

When this sank in to mean off the Isle of Wight imagine the surprise after they had been convinced that they were off the Yorkshire coast. The 'drag' had taken them in a huge curve, heading down the English Channel into the open sea - luckily their fuel supply had run out when it did.

Just to complete the saga, it took nearly two hours for the MASB to reach Gosport harbour, one of their two Packard engines becoming u/s on the way back. When the pilot of the Walrus visited them in Haslar Royal Naval Hospital the next day they realized just how lucky they had been. He said that he had been doing some 'circuits and bumps' in the Solent and had decided to go out on a short dog leg and by chance spotted the dinghy.

There have been other versions of the crew's rescue - one that they were rescued by a longboat and coastguards from Ventnor. A longboat did put out and the MASB picked them up on the return trip - allegedly allowing the longboat crew to claim the rescue so as to receive their fee of 2s 6d.

Bomber Command War Diaries reports that of 98 aircraft, 67 claimed to have bombed the target in difficult conditions. The city reported only a light raid with two buildings destroyed and fifteen damaged, some railway damage, one wounded and fifteen people bombed out. After returning to RAF Scampton, and having some leave, the crew took their ground crew out to the village pub to celebrate their return - and particularly to thank the fitters of the starboard engine which had held out for so long.

After a pint - or two - the ground crew confided that the squadron had never been able to keep a G for George, but of course could not mention this to the aircrew. As it was, the aircraft was lost but the crew were saved.

The crew of Hampden AE397 - G for George

Rafe, as F/L RAP Allesbrook DSO. DFC, joined 617 Squadron and sadly on the 24th trip of his second tour, was killed on the 15/16th September 1944 on the last of the squadron's low-level raids, when five out of eight aircraft were lost on the Dortmund-Ems Canal raid, largely due to low mist and fog.

http://www.49squadron.co.uk/personnel_index/detail/Allsebrook_RAP

For details of his loss please see.....

http://www.bomberhistory.co.uk/canal_raids/ladbergen43

Jack, Sgt JW Wilkinson, was killed on the 10/11th April 1942, still on 49 Squadron, a member of F/O Reg Worthy's crew, together with Wop/Ag Tom McGrenery, shot down by a night fighter flown by Reinhold Knocke over Holland whilst returning from a raid on Essen. Jack is buried in Stavanger, Norway.

For details of his loss please see.....

http://www.49squadron.co.uk/personnel_index/detail/Wilkinson_JW

Jimmy, F/L RLA Woolgar DFC, after instructing at the Central Gunnery School, completed a second tour as Gunnery Leader of 192 Squadron, 100 Group, and later joined the Movements Branch at Air Ministry in the Middle East finally flying with 38 Squadron at Ein Shemer in Palestine, before returning to the U.K. in September 1947.

http://www.49squadron.co.uk/personnel_index/detail/Woolgar_RL

Bob, Sgt PT Stanbridge is known to have survived the war but Jimmy's many attempts to locate him over the years have proved unsuccessful.

http://www.49squadron.co.uk/personnel_index/detail/Wilkinson_JW