

**MEMOIRS OF
WARRANT OFFICER A.F. ANDERSON RAF**



OR
**WHAT DID YOUR GRANDFATHER
DO IN THE WAR????**

Introduction

Over the years since the end of World War 11, I have been asked on occasions by friends and relatives what life was like in the Royal Air Force. I hope that I can convey to the reader the highs and lows of my service life, a service in which I am immensely proud to have been part of.

Foreword

There have been many books written which cover the hazards and achievements of Bomber Command crews during World War 11, but this story has that little extra in that it highlights the drama of being shot down by a German night fighter, the subsequent baling out, followed by capture and the hardships of surviving in a prisoner of war camp.

This is a truly interesting autobiography, which leaves the reader asking for more. A thoroughly good read.

**Eric Woods.
Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators.**

Chapter One

IN THE BEGINNING

When war was declared on the 3rd September 1939, I was in my seventeenth year, living and working in the East End of London. To me the declaration of war was exciting, but I was soon to discover that war was in fact far from exciting and that my previous thoughts on the subject were solely due to ignorance and immaturity. I knew, of course, that if the war continued for any length of time I would be eligible for service in some shape or form but I would be unable to do anything until I was eighteen. I knew also that my choice would be the RAF if possible because flying appealed to me and I just could not see myself as a footslogger, and of course the air force had more glamour attached to it. The thought of joining the army or navy did not cross my mind.

Like many other teenagers I did not have a good relationship with my father and knew that he would oppose any plans I had to join up, so the subject was not mentioned. Early in 1940 the air raids on London were very heavy and soon our house suffered very heavy damage and became uninhabitable. We were forced to move and live with my family's friends in Buckhurst Hill, where we slept on the floor until we were able to find and rent another property. I well remember this period, one Saturday early afternoon (during what was later called "The Battle of Britain") the air raid warning sounded. Very soon the air was filled with aircraft and staring upwards I saw bombs leave the aircraft, which landed a couple of streets away, too near for comfort, and I quickly retired to the "ANDERSON" shelter in the garden. The air raids continued night after night and we got fed up going down to the shelter so that some nights we stayed in bed. One night the raid was particularly heavy so we decided to go down to the shelter. When my brother and I returned to our bedroom we found a kerbstone on our bed, which had come through the roof and ceiling. Had we not gone down to the shelter that night we would undoubtedly have been killed or seriously injured.

When I reached the age of eighteen I wrote to the RAF, volunteering my services, without telling my parents. As you can imagine there were ructions when the papers arrived from the RAF requesting me to attend for a general medical in Romford. At this medical I must have been given a form to complete stating my preference of the trade I wished to follow on enlistment. Having stated that I wanted to be aircrew I awaited a further call for an aircrew medical at RAF Uxbridge pending aircrew selection. The notice to attend RAF Uxbridge arrived in February 1941. The medical was far more stringent than I had expected. Just before I entered the medical room I saw someone being carried out on a stretcher. I asked what had happened and was told that he had fainted when taking the "lung test." This consisted of blowing into a U shaped tube filled with mercury, raising the level and keeping it at that level for one minute, this was to ascertain if your lungs were in good order, which would be essential when flying at great heights on operations. This didn't make me feel very confident knowing that I had to take this test and at my first attempt I failed (without fainting) but managed it at my second attempt. Following a successful report I was then subjected to an intelligence test and interviewed by a panel of officers who put various questions to me to decide whether I was suitable for aircrew selection, I would have preferred to have been a pilot but I had not realised that I had a weakness in the left eye, which restricted the category of aircrew offered to me, and being small did not help in any way. I was finally offered the aircrew category of Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, which I promptly accepted, and was told that I would be notified of my call up date, in due course. Whilst at Uxbridge I chatted to a chap by the name of Dick Benham.

The next time I saw him was in my hut in the prison of war camp, two years later. Eventually I was notified to report to RAF Blackpool on 25th August 1941, where I arrived at about midday to be met by an RAF Sergeant and with another five recruits allotted civilian accommodation. This accommodation was in a house run by an elderly woman and her unmarried daughter who I would guess was in her mid forties and quite plain. The daughter soon discovered that one of the recruits was a young married man and she chased him unmercifully, and I think he was pleased when the course ended and he could get away. The food in the civvy digs was reasonable but I was taken aback one morning when we were served cold tripe. Even if it had been hot I couldn't have eaten it. Of course, with all the exercise given as part of our training we were always hungry and every Sunday after our midday meal we went to Woolworth's to top up with another lunch.



Photograph taken at Blackpool three weeks after my enlistment into the RAF.

The next day we were assembled and kitted out with everything we would need for our service life and instructed to send our entire civilian clothes home. I well remember saying to the sergeant issuing the kit who was throwing it at me "small size Sergeant" and he replying, "all the same bloody size". We then attended a lecture at which it was explained that our training would consist of Morse code plus marching and drilling. We then attended the medical centre for our inoculations (about four or five). In our squad were quite a number of brawny lads who said to me "don't worry Andy we'll look after you". As it turns out after we had our inoculations it was me looking after them because some of them were feeling faint. As expected we were all very unwell following these inoculations and given the following day off. Once recovered we were taught to march and drill along the Blackpool seafront and streets much to the amusement of the holidaymakers. Trying to keep a field service hat on when new was extremely difficult and one found oneself walking with your head on one side trying to keep it on.

After about an hour during one such march the Corporal in charge halted us outside the Winter Gardens (which had been requisitioned for the duration of the war) for a respite. We had only been there a few minutes when we heard aircraft and looking up saw a Botha Bomber carrying out a fighter affiliation exercise with a couple of Defiants (That is, making mock attacks on a bomber). Unfortunately, one of the Defiants, which were single engined two passenger fighters, collided with the Bomber and both aircraft fell, wings flying off, and crashed down on Blackpool railway station with a tremendous bang, killing the aircrew and twenty-five civilians at the station. Imagine our thoughts having volunteered for aircrew and having only been in the RAF for a few days. These thoughts were not improved when the Corporal (knowing we were all trainee aircrew) calmly said, "Does anyone want to re-muster?" Meaning did we want to drop out of aircrew and into some other branch of the RAF! Needless to say we all remained silent although I think some of us were apprehensive because of what we had just seen.

At Blackpool our rank was Aircraftman Second Class (the lowest of the low) with weekly pay of seventeen shillings and six pence (equivalent to today's 87.5p). From this I allotted seven shillings to my mother (which unknown to me, she banked and gave to me when I returned from prison camp) leaving me with ten shillings and six pence to spend - not a lot when stationed in Blackpool. I had not been there long when I discovered an Ice Rink at Squires Gate, a couple of miles down the road. I promptly wrote home to have my skates sent to me. If my memory serves me correctly the entrance fee was one shilling plus three pence locker charge. Going twice a week left me with just eight shillings for my other needs. We had to buy our own boot and button polish and spent many hours cleaning our buttons and boots, Blackpool being on the coast the salt in the air created havoc with our buttons and one had to clean them twice a day. We had to use the old spit and polish method on our boots. I had not worn boots for some years and as a result suffered many blisters until I became accustomed to them. Apart from learning how to clean them we were taught to lace them in the appropriate manner, which would enable their removal in the event of injury without have to undo the laces. To this day I still lace my shoes in this manner. As part of our training we had to learn rifle drill but due to a shortage of rifles at that stage of the war we were forced to carry out guard duty with wooden replicas and we took a lot of good-natured ribbing from the holiday makers.

Never having been away from home before, for the first two weeks I was dreadfully homesick, but I soon settled down and began to enjoy the comradeship, which developed. Once a week we were marched down to the local swimming pool, known as The Derby Baths for swimming practice. The bath would open for males or females only and it was therefore not necessary to wear swimming attire. Derby Baths was used for big swimming events and as such had tiered seating accommodation with walkways at the top. On one of our visits a female appeared at the walkway carrying a tray and a yell went up as she was spotted. You have never seen so many bare arses as men dived into the pool from every angle, even from the top diving board.

The training course in Blackpool lasted three months and concluded with an examination. Having satisfied our examiners that we could transmit and read Morse code at eighteen words a minute we were then given seven days leave and a railway warrant to travel to Yatesbury in Wiltshire after the leave. Some of the lads failed their examination and either stayed on for further training, or were re-mustered into other trades.

Having made friends at this stage it was a good feeling to know that we would all meet up again and continue our training at Yatesbury. The course here would last for three months perfecting our wireless training and increasing our Morse code to thirty words a minute.

At Yatesbury some of our Morse instructors were male civilians who had been radio operators in the Merchant Navy. I was very surprised one day when the instructor entered the classroom and I recognised him as Johnny Hoskins the promoter of speedway at West Ham. As I was a keen West Ham supporter he and I had many interesting conversations, which had nothing to do with morse. As our proficiency with morse code developed we would learn to pick out a signal whilst two signals were being transmitted on the same frequency at the same time. Although the signal you were aiming to record would be slightly louder nevertheless one had to concentrate very hard not to be distracted.

We had a lot of fun whilst at Yatesbury and though we were Under Trainee Aircrew we had to toe the line with regards to keeping our accommodation clean and tidy. We were given polish and utensils to keep the lino floor highly polished and each airman was expected to keep the area around his bed highly polished and woe betide anyone who stepped on his floor space. A bumper was supplied (a heavy weight on a long pole with material underneath) and being the smallest the others decided that I should sit on the bumper and they would pull me up and down to get a good shine on the lino. We were like a group of school kids but it got a lot of laughs besides getting the floor clean and ready for inspection.

It must be remembered that almost without exception we were all teenagers and very immature, and like schoolboys got up to a lot of pranks. One of the favourites was when coming back to the billet in the early hours of the morning after a night out and waking one of the lads up asking him if he wanted to pee. Needless to say he would then have to get up and go to the toilet.

Each week we would bundle up our dirty clothing and send it to the laundry. On one occasion one of the lads got a pair of WAAF'S knickers back in his clean laundry instead of a pair of underpants. The hut was in uproar when he put the knickers on and some of the lads chased him up and down the hut just for a laugh.

On a Sunday we were allowed to lay in bed as long as we liked and usually only got up to go for lunch. If the food was to our liking we would leave the canteen at one end having had our meal and enter it again at the other end for another helping.

During the three months at Yatesbury we were given only one weekend pass and fortunately this coincided with the weekend my brother was getting married which enabled me to be his Best Man. The weekend was in danger of being cancelled because the plugs in the communal washbasins had been stolen and we were told by the Orderly Sergeant that if they were not returned by 5 p.m. nobody would be going on weekend pass. Everyone was very apprehensive but the Sergeant finally relented and we left the camp at the planned time. To this day I cannot understand why anyone would want to steal washbasin plugs. After passing our exams at the end of the three months course, we were given seven days leave and given our Wireless Operators badge (which looked like electric flashes), which was worn on the right arm. We should have been posted to Gunnery School for training but at this stage of the war the Air Gunnery Schools were full to capacity and unable to accept us. We were therefore posted to various RAF stations 'to kick our heels' for a while.

I was posted to Gatwick where I was employed in various wireless duties. One of these, once a week would be to liase with the army just outside Tunbridge Wells and pass wireless traffic. I well remember that the reception was very poor during the night due to interference. Since the war years this type of interference has been eliminated. We would travel to Tunbridge Wells in a van fitted out with wireless equipment and three of us, wireless operators would man the van.

We were supplied with food and blankets but I cannot remember if the van had toilet facilities. Looking back after all these years I am sure that we achieved very little but it was one way of keeping us interested until such times as we were recalled to continue our aircrew training.

It now occurs to me that before being posted to Gatwick where we were billeted in big houses which had been commandeered for the duration and were some two or three miles from the airfield, I spent one week at West Drayton and sometime at Debden in Essex, but it escapes me just why, or the time of year it was. About August 1942 I was recalled and after the usual seven days leave, posted back to Yatesbury for a wireless refresher course, which lasted until October.

This time the course included wireless instruction in the air, and although I was apprehensive having never flown, I was very excited. The aircraft were single engined and the crew consisted of a Pilot and Corporal Wireless instructor, plus four pupils. When we embarked I saw a square tin on the floor and the Corporal proceeded to tell us 'That's for all of you to be sick in!' - 'Charming!' I thought. When we took off it was quite turbulent and within a short space of time the other three pupils had to use the tin and I found it hard not to join them, especially with the ensuing smell. I was more than pleased to land with the contents of my stomach still intact!

Whilst on this refresher course we were individually interviewed by a panel of Officers with a view to being granted a Commission if found suitable. What a farce! The first question was 'What is your father's profession?' to which I replied, 'A lorry driver.' The second and final question was, 'Who do you bank with?' to which I replied, 'The Post Office.' End of interview and I was outside the door very smartly. Although I did not get a commission I was promoted to Leading Aircraftsman at the completion of the refresher course, which was at the end of October. When I think back to some of the lads who were granted Commissions, I have to laugh, but unfortunately this sort of thing happens all the time in all the services.

I was then posted to No 1 Air Gunnery School at Pembrey, South Wales where we flew on twin engined Bristol Blenheims, which by 1942 had been withdrawn from operational duties and were now only used for training purposes. On each aircraft three pupil Air Gunners went up with a Pilot and Air Gunnery instructor. The single gun was loaded with six hundred rounds of ammunition, the first two hundred being tipped with red paint, the second two hundred with blue paint and the final two hundred with green paint. Each pupil was allotted a colour and he then fired his 200 rounds at a drogue (like a windsock) towed by a Lysander aircraft flying parallel at about two hundred yards distance. After the exercise the Lysander would drop the drogue and the holes made by the coloured bullets would be counted. My average hits were 3%, which was in fact one of the best in my group, what chance had we got with such results, against the German fighters on operations? Not a lot! We also had to learn to strip the guns down and reassemble them. I cannot remember clearly but I think we had to do it blind fold so that should we have a stoppage on operations we would be able to clear the guns rapidly in the dark. It was whilst embarking on one exercise I saw an airman standing by the aircraft and realised that it was a school friend, whom I had not seen since leaving school and who was on ground duties at the aerodrome. If my memory serves me correctly our course lasted six weeks and having passed the necessary exams and tests we were promoted to the rank of Sergeant and given our Air Gunners brevet. One of the perks of being a Sergeant was that we could now wear shoes instead of boots and have sheets on our beds. Oh what bliss! Helpful WAAF's quickly sewed our Sergeant's stripes and brevet on and we then left Pembrey for a well-earned seven days leave. Before we left we were informed which Operational Training Unit we were to be posted to. My posting was to No. 19 O.T.U at Kinloss in Scotland.

On arrival at Kinloss I found that all category of aircrew had arrived at the same time, that is, Pilots, Navigators, Bomb Aimers, Wireless Operators /Air Gunners and Rear Gunners. We were all assembled in a large room and after an introductory speech by a Wing Commander we were told to circulate and talk to all the various categories of aircrew to see if we could form ourselves into a complete crew. I first looked for a Pilot and saw one I liked the look of! I said to him, 'I'm looking for a Pilot, would you like me as your wireless operator/air gunner.' He said "why not" and introduced himself as Micky Robinson, we decided to circulate and make up the rest of the crew. We then found Phil Duckham (Navigator), Jim Lowe (Bomb Aimer), and Jack Wallner, Canadian (Rear Gunner). We were very pleased to have completed our crew for our Armstrong Whitworth Whitley Bomber commonly called the Flying Coffin, and a very good description I have to say!

All the aircraft at Kinloss seemed to be past their best and far from reliable as a result of which there were quite a few accidents with some fatalities the three months we were at Kinloss. I was very lucky in this respect because one night I was down to fly with my own Pilot, another pupil Pilot and a Pilot Instructor on circuits and bumps that is taking off, circling the airfield and landing. We had made several landings and on the last landing we heard a continuous clattering and banging from the rear of the aircraft. We quickly disembarked and found a concrete post complete with wire wrapped around the elevators. We never did find how it got there but needless to say that was the end of our flying for that night. I shall always remember one evening having a drink with another WOP/AG who came from Newcastle and who of course had the nickname "Geordy". He refused another drink because he was due to fly that night so I went off to my bed. I had been in bed for some hours when an explosion woke me but I turned over and went back to sleep. Next morning when going into the mess for breakfast I learned that Geordy had been killed with the rest of his crew when both engines failed on take off and his aircraft had ploughed into a surrounding forest and exploded on impact.

On another occasion we were on a daylight cross country exercise and whilst some miles out over the bay of Findhorn there was a loud bang and a big hole appeared on the engine cowling in front of the pilot's windscreen. At the same time the aircraft began to vibrate violently and the starboard engine started surging. The Pilot Instructor looked panic stricken but without hesitation my Pilot took command and shut the engine down immediately and we returned to base on one engine. After landing we saw that part of one blade on the starboard propeller had broken off in flight and had bounced across the engine cowling making the hole.

Although our crew were 'green' having only just completed their individual training, we soon became confident with each other after flying many hours together. Our instructors were in the main aircrew that had completed their tour or operations (thirty operations), which entitled them to six months rest from operations before returning for a further tour.

Once we had satisfied our instructors that we were competent as a crew we were ready to move to a Conversion Unit. This unit was to train our Pilot to learn to fly a four-engined aircraft as opposed to the two-engined Whitley. We had another seven days leave before reporting to No. 1654 Conversion Unit at Wigsley, Notts. At number 1654 Conversion unit the aircraft flown were Manchesters and Lancasters, identical aircraft, the only difference being the Manchester had two engines whereas the Lancaster had four.

When we arrived at the unit our crew consisted of five members but as we were destined to fly Lancasters, which had a crew of seven, we had to acquire a Flight Engineer and a Mid-upper Gunner. Using the same method as before we soon found our Flight Engineer, Bill Boyd, and the Mid-upper Gunner Dennis Parkin. We commenced our training in March 1943 and completed in April, having carried out 8 exercise's on Manchester's and 14 on Lancaster's.

Here again there were accidents - one crew took off on a cross-country exercise and collided, in cloud, with another aircraft - killing all seven crew. I well remember this incident having lent my cutlery to one of the crew and it not being returned, having to pay for replacements. Whilst at the Conversion Unit we were taken down to Barkston Heath (just outside Grantham) to go on an assault course. We enjoyed it because we able to fire pistols, sten guns and throw hand grenades. I have never ceased to wonder why we did this course because we never carried arms on operations.



Our Crew

**Back row left to right: - Dennis Parkin (Mid Upper Gunner)
Mick Robinson (Pilot), Jack Wallner (Rear Gunner),
Phil Duckham (Navigator), Jim Lowe (Bomb Aimer)**

**Front row: - Myself (Wireless Operator/ Air Gunner),
Bill Boyd (Flight Engineer).**

The Lancaster was a beautiful aircraft; it flew like a bird and could take any amount of punishment. However it did have one fault, the heating system. The heating, which was controlled from the Wireless Operator's position, came from the engine system. Unfortunately most of the heat came into the Wireless Operator's office with the accompanying fumes. I would turn the heat down for my personal comfort only to hear over the intercom from one of the crew, 'Have you got that f..... heat on, Andy?' I would protest that it was turned on but they never believed me and told me in no uncertain terms, 'Turn that f..... heat on!'

We were issued with complete flying apparel but the only part I used on operations were the flying boots. However when I arrived home, prior to my posting to Kinloss my mother persuaded me to don the gear and have my photograph taken. It was embarrassing but you know what mothers are.



As you can see from the above photograph I looked a "Right Plonker"

Chapter Two

THE WORKING UP PROCESS

Having completed our conversion course we were posted on 20th April to No. 49 Squadron based at Fiskerton aerodrome in Lincolnshire (a satellite of Scampton). Our crew consisted of two commissioned officers and five NCOs. We five NCOs were billeted in one hut, each hut being able to accommodate about twenty men. During our time on the squadron the occupants of the hut changed continually as crews went on operations and failed to return. We saw new faces in the hut from time to time but shut our minds to the fact that the same could happen to any one of us in due course. I think that the night we eventually got shot down everyone in our hut disappeared! That night my squadron lost four aircraft. Of the twenty-eight men lost that night five became POWs (from my crew), the other twenty-three were killed. The total number of airmen killed that night in Bomber Command was two hundred and forty-six.



Some of my crew outside our sleeping quarters at Fiskerton.

From left: Bill Boyd(Flight Engineer), Mick Robinson(Pilot) and Jack Wallner(Rear gunner)

A typical day on the Squadron would start at about 8 am when we would get up, unless we had been on operations the previous night. We would go to the ablution block to wash and shave before going to the mess for breakfast. (On airfields built during wartime there were no washing facilities at your sleeping quarters.) After breakfast we would be given our orders and invariably it would be to take the aircraft up for a N.F.T. (night flying test) in order that each member of the crew could check his equipment. Before taking the aircraft up we would chat with our ground crew and discuss any problems that we had had with the aircraft previously. After the N.F.T., provided that we had no problems with the aircraft we would go to the Operations office to see if operations were scheduled for that night and if so whether our crew were on the battle order. Whether an operation was scheduled would depend on a number of factors and the raid could be cancelled at anytime. It could be the weather over England at the take off time, the weather expected over the target area, or the expected weather on our return, which could make it impossible to land safely. If ops were not scheduled for that night lectures and training exercises might be planned for the various members of the crew.

Our evenings were free if ops were not scheduled and we would either get the bus into Lincoln to go to the cinema or tour the pubs, or we would stay in the mess playing cards, reading or writing letters, it was a strange life. We would never know until the last moment whether ops were on or not. The raid could be cancelled before going out to the aircraft and I can remember, on one occasion the raid was cancelled after we had boarded the aircraft, any such cancellations were dreaded by both the air and the ground crews alike. The aircrew because they were wound up to go and the ground crews particularly the armourers because they would have to off-load the bombs, which took a considerable amount of time and physical effort. Before briefing time we would try to find out how much fuel was being loaded on the aircraft. For a raid in the Ruhr area I think the load was 1750 gallons. If more than this was being loaded we knew that the target would be further into Germany or one of the occupied countries and this would mean that the bomb load would be scaled down accordingly to compensate for the total uplift of weight. Each aircraft had its own ground crew to maintain it and they took pride in their work and as far as they were concerned it was their aircraft and they only lent it to us to take on the raids. We had a wonderful relationship with our ground crew and on our return from a raid, as we approached our dispersal apron we would see them light up cigarettes which they would hand to us as we disembarked the aircraft. In those days it would seem that smoking was actively encouraged.

One week later, on 27th April, we undertook our first operation which was mine laying in the North Sea off the Friesian Islands. This type of operation was considered to be fairly easy because you were not required to cross the enemy coast and was usually given to new crews to give them experience without too much danger. The success of this operation depended on the Navigator, because we were unable to see anything.

What were my feelings when I went on my first operation, feelings I had in fact on every subsequent operation? The last hour before take-off was the worst, I secretly hoped for a cancellation and there was a great feeling of apprehension. By the time we all boarded the crew bus and reached the aircraft dispersal apron nerves were getting very stretched. One had to force down the feeling of fear, but once the engines started and you moved onto the runway to take off it wasn't so bad. All the crew went through the same feelings but tried not to show it, and once we were airborne with work to do we all began to relax. However, the feelings soon came back when we got to the target area and once again your stomach began somersaulting. This was probably the most dangerous part of an operation because in order for the Bomb Aimer to put the bombs down in the right place he required the Pilot to fly straight and level for about ten seconds. Even though we were flying approximately five miles high the German anti aircraft fire which was commonly known as 'flak' was so accurate that they could predict our position by radar and hit us during that ten seconds. I have met airmen who tell me that they wore their parachute whilst in the target area just in case they were hit. The four thousand-pound bomb christened a Cookie was suspended in the bomb bay immediately under my seat and my heart used to pound for the whole of that ten seconds. We knew that if we should be hit by flak the likelihood would be that we would be blown to bits. This feeling of fear never left you however many operations you flew. As was usual there would be a number of Airmen and WAAF'S waiting near the control caravan to give a wave as you took off, and it was at times like this that I wished that I had been standing with them instead of going off on a raid. Although we knew the danger element we convinced ourselves that it was not going to happen to us and I never met any of my fellow airmen who thought that he would have to use his parachute. I would have treated my parachute with greater care and attention had I known I would eventually have to use it. I don't mind admitting that I was scared the whole time whilst on ops. Anybody who says that he was not, was either abnormal or a bloody liar. I think we all continued to fly because we were more scared of being branded a coward, but I do not condemn any airman who felt he could not continue because every person has a different breaking point.

Before embarking, Mick our skipper would always walk around our aircraft checking the elevators, ailerons, rudders etc. to satisfy himself that all was in order. One day we had done a night flying test and reported a leak in the oxygen system and as we were down to operate that night Mick did his customary inspection around the aircraft before we embarked. He was livid when he could hear what appeared to be a noise of leaking oxygen and our part in the raid had to be cancelled because the fault could not be rectified without a long delay. Had he not carried out his inspection we would have taken off and the possibility could have been our demise, because due to a lack of oxygen we would have lost consciousness at the height we normally flew at. The Airman on our ground staff held responsible for having failed to deal with the matter was put on a charge, this being a very serious offence. We would normally don our oxygen masks at 10,000 feet and this meant many hours of wearing the masks, which were far from comfortable. The masks were fitted with intercom which enabled the crew to converse with one another.

Taking off and getting airborne with a full bomb load was fraught with danger and one prayed that an engine did not malfunction. After leaving the runway we would fly a triangular course over Lincolnshire and Norfolk climbing steadily until we reached our operational height. It was an awe-inspiring sight to see hundreds of four engined bombers, some within a hundred yards of each other. The air seemed to be black with aircraft and although we were apprehensive we were proud to be taking part in each raid. The whole of the time we were over enemy territory was fraught with danger, mostly from night fighters and I spent a lot of my time standing in the astrodome above my head peering into the darkness, three pairs of eyes being better than two. However much you tried it did not relieve the tension.

At the briefing we were told the target, the route to be flown, where to expect searchlights, details of the weather we may encounter on the route, over the target and on our return, together with the colours of the day. Before being picked up by the crew bus, which would take us out to our dispersal apron I would pick up a box of "colours" and a tin box containing two pigeons. I never gave a thought to these birds when we climbed above the height where we needed to don our oxygen masks but can only assume that they were unaffected by the lack of oxygen. The practice of carrying pigeons was discontinued I think at the end of 1943. The "colours of the day" needs a little explanation. Each day the colour would be changed so that if we were challenged by our own night fighters or flak over England we would fire off the colour of that particular day from a Verey pistol to indicate that we were friendly. The pigeons were carried so that if you were unfortunate enough to come down in the sea you could affix a message to the leg of the bird and release it, hoping that it would fly back to base and effect a rescue mission.

If the night's target were announced by the Commanding Officer as one of the towns in the Ruhr a groan would go up from assembled aircrew. The Ruhr being the industrial heart of Germany bristled with hundreds of anti aircraft guns and searchlights and was known to us bomber crews as "Happy Valley". The toilet block was very near the briefing room and immediately the briefing concluded there would be a rush for the toilet. I wonder why?

My second operation was to Dortmund in the Ruhr. As we approached the target the skipper called me up on the intercom. 'Nipper, (my nickname) come up to the front and see the target.' I left my position and went up to stand by him and I could now see what I took to be the target burning furiously about five miles below. Light flak hosing up towards us looked like bright coloured onions as it rushed up but it always seemed to fall short.

This type of flak did not worry us too much. I could see the heavy flak winding its way up and bursting ahead over the target and could smell the cordite. It was frightening and I couldn't see how we could possibly get to the target without being hit. I said to the skipper, 'We're not going into that, are we?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'It's all right.' I certainly was not convinced but eventually we got through without a scratch, much to my relief. I could still see the target well alight when we were about thirty miles away on our return. Another sight I shall never forget was coming back across the Channel just as dawn was breaking surrounded by a gaggle of bombers, some on three engines, some badly shot up and here we all were having survived another bombing operation. What a wonderful feeling this was. We had an agreement in our crew that we would not smoke in the aircraft for safety reasons. Not all crews had this arrangement and often when returning across the channel after a raid we saw (if the aircraft was near enough) cigarettes being lit up.

Our skipper Mick was a damn good pilot but his night landings were far better than his daylight landings. I think this was because at night he had to feel his way down onto the landing strip without seeing the ground. On nearing the English coast on our way back from a raid he would tell our two gunners to relax because they would be extremely tired having been on the alert for many hours searching the sky for German night fighters. A few times our Rear Gunner Jack on getting that message would promptly fall asleep and our landings being so smooth we would have to wake him up to disembark the aircraft. I had complete confidence in my fellow crew members, I never doubted that our pilot would be able to handle any situation, our navigator would never lose us, that our flight engineer would be able to deal with any engine malfunction and that the two gunners would see off any night fighters. In recent years I have learnt to fly on a smaller aircraft and having flown solo my admiration for my former pilot has increased greatly. I would not have had the bottle to dive, corkscrew, or do the things he had to do in a Lancaster on ops.

The Germans had an extremely powerful searchlight situated on the island of Texel on the Dutch coast, so our routes would be planned to take us about forty miles north or south of that point. On almost every raid we would spot someone caught in that searchlight and many times they would be caught by flak and explode in a ball of fire. We would murmur, 'Poor bastard.' It happened to us one night when our compass went u/s (failed) and we were off course all hell was let loose. We managed to get out of the searchlights without being hit but it scared us somewhat. They seemed to site their searchlights over or near their towns and cities and the route planners at Bomber Command H Q would therefore plan routes away from these areas. We would often see searchlights in the distance and see an aircraft coned with the flak bursting around it, and many times we would see the aircraft on fire before it exploded. Our navigator would log the event with time and location and this would be reported at our flight interrogation when we landed.

We were due for our first leave period of ten days on 14th May but to our dismay on the morning of the 13th we found our name on the operations board for a raid that night on the Skoda Armaments works at Pilsen. This target was in Czechoslovakia, a flight of seven hours and twenty minutes. We took off that night obviously hoping that we were going to return in one piece so that we could go on leave. We had no trouble until we approached the target area but unfortunately we arrived before the Pathfinder force who were to mark the target. We had no alternative but to orbit the target until it was marked. Suddenly we were startled when searchlights sprung up and started waving about searching for us. To our horror the master searchlight, which was the most powerful and a vivid blue found us, and immediately all others fastened on to us.

This was scarier than the flak coming up at us. Our Skipper started throwing the aircraft around, diving and climbing in an effort to lose the searchlights, no mean feat with a full bomb load, but without success. Suddenly the rear gunner shouted over the intercom, "All the f... lights are on". No wonder we could not lose the searchlights, what had happened was that the Skipper, in his attempt to lose the searchlights had accidentally knocked a switch on the instrument panel, which turned on the flashing identification lights on the wings and tail plane making it easy for them to follow us. He quickly doused the lights and dived several thousand feet until finally we managed to lose the searchlights. At last the 'Pathfinders' arrived. (The 'Pathfinders' were the aircraft that went ahead to mark the target by dropping flares.) Red and green flares were carried down by parachute, uniformly timed, to create a circle of green lights with a red cluster in the centre. When we saw this amazing sight we had to line up ready for our run over the target to take aim and hit the red cluster. If the cluster of red flares couldn't be seen then we were instructed to drop our bombs anywhere within the green circle of flares. As we ran up towards the target for the bombing run, the bomb aimer would take command and instruct the skipper whether he wanted him to bring the aircraft to the left or right so that he could align his bomb sight onto the target. He would then continue to give instructions and when satisfied would ask for the bomb doors to be opened so that he could drop the bomb load.

Down went the bombs with a shout from the Bomb Aimer, "Share that amongst you! You bastards". Up shot the nose of the aircraft as it was relieved of its load and up came the bomb doors as we turned for home. I left my position and stood looking out of the astrodome (this is a curved dome protruding out of the top of the aircraft which gave an all round view) searching for German fighters in the sky. Suddenly there was a terrific bang as flak burst just under the aircraft, which knocked a hole in the floor by my foot and severed all the wires on my radio, together with my armrest, and had I been sitting down at my wireless station I would probably have lost my left arm or been badly injured. A small piece of flak grazed my wrist drawing blood, and it was such a shock that I felt unable to breathe. I screamed out to the skipper in the intercom that I had been hit. Realising that I was in shock he told me to go and lie on the rest-bed, realising that my radio was unusable anyway. I clambered over the main spar, quite a feat at any time and lay on the bed. It was extremely cold and I could hear the wind whistling through the flak holes in the fuselage. I could also hear the fuselage creaking and it was so unnerving that I decided to go back to my position up front. One of the engines had been hit by flak and as I recall had to be feathered so we flew back on three engines but as we hit the runway another of the three ceased to function, shedding oil everywhere.

After the usual debriefing, reporting everything that had happened to us, we had breakfast. Then instead of going to bed we had a quick wash and shave and went over to our parent 'drome' (Scampton) to draw our pay and the extra gratuity, which Lord Nuffield gave to all Bomber Aircrew when going on leave. Incidentally Bomber crews were entitled to ten days leave every six weeks although it can be said that many did not survive long enough to collect any of this leave or gratuity.

When we returned to our airfield we took a trip out to our dispersal site to have a look at our aircraft. All four engines had been stripped out and our ground staff engineers told us that the engines would never be able to be used again. The fuselage was peppered with flak holes, far too many to count. We realised just how lucky we had been to make it back home.

Our Rear Gunner Jack, being Canadian, had no relatives he could visit and I persuaded him to spend his leave with my family. We caught a train down to London and very soon Jack was asleep, not surprising seeing we had not been to bed for thirty-six hours. He was quite embarrassed when he woke because he had fallen asleep on a girl's shoulder who was sitting next to him.

When we arrived home my Mother, who had seen the morning papers, told us that Bomber Command had lost a lot of planes on the Pilsen raid. We had a laugh when she said that she knew that we wouldn't have been on the raid because we were coming home on leave the next day. We had to point out to her that the RAF did not work that way.

Whilst on leave I would go out with my many girlfriends and Jack would borrow my pushbike and cycle around the Essex countryside with my sister. Jack also liked a drink and some evenings took my Father along to our local pub.



Jack Wallner and myself outside my parent's house on one of our spells of leave.

After our return from leave we went to bomb Dusseldorf on the 25th of May, Essen on the 27th and were scheduled to go to Wuppertal on the 29th. Unfortunately after take off we had intercom failure and had to abort. We had to wait until an agreed time before dropping our bomb load into the Channel before returning to base. Although these three targets not too far into Germany, never the less they were extremely dangerous due to the amount of guns and searchlights.

On the 22nd June, we had to abort on a raid to Mulheim when the port outer engine failed. On 25th June we went to Gelsenkirchen, on the 28th to Cologne, and again to Cologne on the 3rd July and purely by luck the Cologne Cathedral was not hit during the two raids I took part in.

Reading the newspapers afterwards, I think it said that we had been briefed not to hit the Cathedral, what a lot of nonsense, at 20,000 feet you had no idea exactly where your bombs would land except that hopefully they would land somewhere on Cologne. On the 2nd August we took off for Hamburg, I recall it was a very hot night and because of the heat the aeroplane struggled to get airborne. We ran out of runway before we were able to get off the ground and we felt a little jerk as our wheels went through the hedge surrounding the airfield. A shaky do with a full bomb load.

We normally flew at an operational height of twenty thousand feet or above but on this occasion we were unable to climb above fifteen thousand feet and were still in clouds at this height. We ran into thunderstorms and static electricity and ice started forming on the wings, which made the aircraft difficult to fly. I was listening on the radio and picked up part of a message from Group Head Quarters in England, which was recalling aircraft. Although we were not sure if it referred to our squadron we decided that it would be prudent to dump our bombs because we felt that it was impossible to reach Hamburg with any safety. Many of the aircraft on the raid had done the same thing so we did not feel so bad at not having reached the target. It was inevitable that with so many bombers flying towards Germany on the same route there was always the risk of colliding with another aircraft in the darkness. It was frightening to suddenly be thrown almost onto one wing as a result of flying into the slipstream of another aircraft in front of you. I can remember on one occasion when we had to dive to avoid another aircraft above us, which appeared to be losing height and would surely have hit us. Unlike the modern aircraft we had no aids in those days to avoid other aircraft in clouds. All identification lights were extinguished and I always felt very much on edge when flying in cloud, and even these days when flying on modern aircraft I still feel very uneasy.

What I still find extraordinary is that in spite of the number of Bomber Command bases in the Lincolnshire area there were comparatively few collisions of aircraft in the air. Coming back from a raid one night we nearly bought it when another aircraft landed in front of us. An aircraft from Bardney (No. 9 squadron), a base a few miles from our drome, had called up and got permission to land but unfortunately mistook the aerodrome. We were on final approach with our wheels and flaps down when this aircraft landed on the runway in front of us. With all four engines screaming to give us lift we were forced to overshoot and go round again before landing. Needless to say the crew from No. 9 Squadron got a real ear bashing when we landed.

Our next operation was to Mannheim with a flying time of six hours fifteen minutes. The following night we went to Nuremberg and it would appear that this raid was a complete failure because the Pathfinders marking was some miles off the intended target and as a result not many of the six hundred and fifty bombers got their bombs on the target. If I remember correctly our bomb aimer told us that when the film was developed (photograph taken automatically when the bombs were dropped) showed a large racecourse outside Nuremberg. Our compass went u/s (failed) and on our return we drifted off track and found ourselves over London. Our Engineer told the skipper that we had insufficient fuel to get back to base so we called up for assistance from the Royal Observer Corp. The call sign was 'Darkie'. The Observer Corp would give directions to ensure a safe landing at the nearest aerodrome by giving instructions for the searchlights to be switched on in the area. These would then swing away into the area where you were directed to go to. As you got into that area another searchlight would spring up and again direct you until you reached the aerodrome area. Once in the aerodrome area the airfield lights would be put on. Our spirits rose as the airfield lights came on and we prepared to land. The wheels went down for landing when suddenly all the runway lights went out. 'Hell!' we thought, there must be an intruder in the aerodrome circuit. Much to our relief we were told that the lights that had been extinguished were the lights on a dummy airfield put there to confuse the German fighters. Now the Thurleigh Airfield lights came on about two miles away and we were able to land here without difficulty.

Thurleigh, in Bedfordshire, was an American base and they really took care of us, giving us a meal and finding beds for us straightaway. Apart from having a u/s (useless) compass we'd had trouble with one engine and had flown back on three engines. After informing our station of our situation we were informed that they would send squadron engineers down to us the next day to sort out the problems.

Whilst waiting for our engineers to arrive we were inundated with requests from the American crews to be allowed to climb into and examine the Lancaster. They expressed their admiration for us carrying out raids at night whilst we thought they were getting the rough end of the stick flying all their raids in daylight with terrible losses, and we told them so.

The next day one of the squadron Lancaster's flew down with Engineers but it turned out to be a major repair job so while the Engineers stayed to sort things out we flew back with the Lancaster that had brought the Engineers down. On the flight back to base I occupied the mid upper gunner's position. It was a strange feeling, one seemed to be detached from the aircraft and I would have hated to have flown on ops in this position. You felt quite isolated from the rest of the crew but the same could be said of the rear gunner's position.

There is a story, although I cannot vouch for its authenticity, that a Canadian Fighter Pilot, on arriving in England, had been sent up at night on a cross-country exercise. He became hopelessly lost and having been briefed what to do in such circumstances, switched to the 'Darkie' frequency and began calling 'Darkie, Darkie, can you assist me?' This went on for some time without any response until he got very agitated and he was heard to scream out 'Darkie, Darkie, where are you, you little black bastard?'

Wireless Operators were not allowed to use their Morse keys before zero hour (when the first bombs were dropped) except in an emergency. In my opinion this was a ridiculous order because the Germans used to listen in during the day and could estimate approximately the number of aircraft carrying out night flying tests and could rightly assume that a raid was being planned for the coming night. They would know that a raid was imminent as soon as the first aircraft took off so that a wireless operator using his radio before zero hour made no difference. During these times I listened out on the wireless receiver or stood up in the Astrodrome scanning the sky for German fighters. The German Controllers on the ground soon became very proficient at tracking our bombers and vectoring their fighters into the bomber stream by radar.

I think it was about halfway through my tour of operations that Bomber Command came up with an ingenious idea code named Tinsel. A switch was inserted near my transmitter which, when activated, could transmit the sound of one of the engines when I depressed my Morse key. By tuning in my 'wireless receiver' onto the German controllers frequency and quickly retuning my 'transmitter' also to the same frequency, all I had to do was depress my Morse key and the noise of our engine would drown out the German controller's voice. Although I did not understand German, it was obvious that when I did this that the German Controller would become very irate at being thwarted. When I stopped I would hear the Controller cabling furiously in his mother tongue. Whether this cut our losses I could not be sure but it certainly gave us satisfaction to know that we were annoying the Germans and disrupting communication between the controllers and their fighters.

Our penultimate operation was to Milan on 12th August and we knew that the Italians were on the point of capitulating. Although we had to deal with the Alps, it turned out to be the easiest operation ever when compared to all our previous operations. We saw just one searchlight pointing upwards but not moving around trying to find bombers. There was very little flak and we were able to bomb without any trouble. On our way back, crossing the Alps we saw several aircraft way below us and wondered if they were having engine trouble and whether they would have sufficient height to get over the Alps, but we shall never know. There were losses on this raid and the aircraft we saw below us could well have been part of those losses.

The Sunday, two weeks prior to our last operation, I was detailed for church parade. Not being a religious person, I didn't want to go, but regulations demanded it, even if I did not go into the church. You could be made to stand outside whilst the service was in progress. I well remember saying to WAAF Sergeant Trotter, who made out the rosters, 'This is the last church parade you get me on,' and as fate would have it, it was!

On the morning of Sunday 15th August, the squadron was detailed for a practice bombing exercise at Wainfleet Sands near Skegness, where we were to drop dummy bombs weighing ten pounds, which were not explosive. On the bombing range RAF personnel were installed to observe and plot the results. I think our aircraft was the last to bomb and after bombing we descended to fly along the front at Skegness. Flying along the beach we had to gain height to get over the pier, its really exciting flying that low because you really get the feeling of speed. We knew that Butlins Holiday Camp had been taken over by the Navy as an establishment for the Wrens for the duration of the war and was known as HMS Arthur. Leaving the front we flew over the camp just a few feet above the chalets. Unfortunately, unbeknown to us, all the squadron had been doing the same thing before us and immediately we landed we were hauled into the commanding officer's office for a dressing down. Apparently an Admiral had been on an inspection visit that very morning and was furious with our escapade. He had been able to read the aircraft serial number (we were that low) and had sent off a signal to our Squadron complaining about the incident. The signal ended by saying 'The Admiral is livid!' After the dressing down we were told that all the crew would be Court Martialled as we were all implicated. However, it never materialised due to our subsequent absence in Germany!!!!

During my flying career I have only been airsick on one occasion, this happened when we had flown to Wainfleet to carry out a bombing exercise. After bombing my skipper asked me if I would like to go into the rear turret for the experience. I had only been in there for a few minutes when we were joined by two spitfires who indicated by their flying that they wanted us to take part in a fighter affiliation exercise. This meant they would attempt to get on our tail whilst we tried to get in a position to avoid being shot down. Instead of ammunition they were armed with cameras and filmed the action. The film when developed would help them in their training and the exercise would help us in our fight against the German night fighters. In an attempt to get away my skipper started to throw the aircraft around, diving, corkscrewing and doing stall turns none of which were conducive to my stomach and I had to exit the turret double quick to find the Elsan pan to relieve my stomach of its contents. At that time I wore an upper denture with two teeth on it and that followed the contents of my stomach into the Elson. I offered our ground crew half a crown to retrieve the denture but my offer was refused and I had to roll my sleeve up and fish for it myself. It took several days soaking in disinfectant before I could wear it again.

Chapter Three

A CRUEL BLOW, AND AFTER

Now it was the 17th of August and I was to fly my thirteenth operation. Little did I know that this was to turn out to be my last raid. My Pilot, Navigator and Bomb Aimer went to their briefing and the rest of us joined them after our own briefings. I sat down with Jim our Bomb Aimer and said 'Where are we going, Jim?' He replied, 'Peenemunde.' I said, 'Where the bloody hell is that?' and he pointed out on the map that it was situated on the North German coast on the Baltic Sea. The Briefing Officer opened up by saying, 'Right lads, this is a target, which has to be taken out in one go. If you don't wipe it out tonight then you will have to go back tomorrow night and if necessary every night until it is destroyed.' If my memory serves me well I am sure that a member of the Government attended the briefing emphasising the importance of the raid.

For security reasons he said it was a radiolocation station, which was instrumental in helping the German fighters shoot us down. This was not the truth because in fact it was the Experimental Research Establishment where the V1 and V2s were built and tested and had it been leaked that it was a rocket research station, it may well have created panic in England. It was said that it was the intention of the Germans to launch 3000 V1's the first day of launching and this in turn could have delayed the D Day landings. Estimates of anything between three to six months have been suggested as the delay in launching as a result of the raid. We realised it was going to be a difficult raid because we normally operated in complete darkness and bombed at twenty thousand feet plus. Tonight we were operating in bright moonlight and were instructed to bomb at eight thousand feet with an absolute minimum of four thousand feet. We couldn't hide in the darkness so we would be sitting ducks for the fighters. In addition, although we were unaware of it at the time, the Germans were, for the first time, using a new weapon code-named 'Schrage Musik' which consisted of two thirty millimetre cannons mounted to point upwards from the Night Fighter and it enabled the fighter to slip under the bomber, find its blind spot and then aim its shells up into the bomber's wings and fuel tanks. This weapon was to remain unknown to Bomber Command for about a year.

After briefing we went into the mess for our usual meal of egg and bacon. You could either have your meal of egg and bacon before you went on a raid or have it on your return. I think most crews chose to have it before the raid, just in case. After our usual chat we wandered down to the locker room to don our Mae West and parachute harness, having left all our other possessions in the lockers such as letters, money, keys, etc. As we left the locker room to await the crew bus, which would take us to our aircraft, I met my old friend Jimmy Davis (another WOP/AG) whom I had first met at OTU and whose crew followed us whenever we changed stations. He said to me, 'Well Andy you're for the chop tonight.' I said, "Don't be bloody silly, Jim. I'll see you in the morning". He said jokingly, "Well if you don't get it tonight, you'll get it some other night". He must have felt awful when we went missing that night, but sad to say Jim lost his life on the 5th September when his aircraft was shot down on a raid to Mannheim. It is assumed that he hit the tail plane when he left the aircraft because his parachute was found unopened on the ground. On bailing out he was either killed hitting the tail plane or knocked unconscious which rendered him unable to deploy his parachute.

Before going down to the locker room to don our gear we collected a packet of sweets, a flask of coffee and a packet of currency wrapped in a silk map. The currency would be for those countries over which we would be flying. This would enable us to pay for any help if we were unfortunate enough to be shot down, and of course the map would come in very handy. Needless to say when we got the order to bale out we did not have the time to think about anything other than getting out of the aircraft and my currency went down with our aircraft.

We would also pick up what we called “Wakey Wakey tablets”. As the name suggests these tablets staved off the tiredness whilst we were flying at night, although with the danger of flying over enemy territory I don’t think we needed anything to keep us awake, nevertheless I always took one before every op.

We boarded the crew bus, which took us out to our dispersal site and after finishing our cigarettes we climbed aboard our Lancaster. Running up the engines and seeing that all equipment was in working order we notified control that we were ready to take off. We took our place in the queue on the perimeter track and running onto the runway we received permission to take off. Once airborne we saw Lincoln Cathedral in front of us – some 5 miles in the distance.

At this time we didn’t know that eight Mosquitoes had taken off an hour earlier taking the same route, but over-flying Peenemunde and then flying south down to Berlin to create a diversion by giving the impression this was to be the prime target. They dropped their bombs on Berlin and managed to get the fighters into the air. In the meantime we flew low level over Denmark to avoid the radar and climbed up to eight thousand feet nearing the target.

The raid was scheduled to last thirty minutes, split into three waves of aircraft, that is, ten minutes each wave. We being an experienced crew were to be in the third wave. The reader may think that thirteen operations were hardly experienced but during the year 1943 very few crews reached that figure. The Germans were unaware that Bomber Command knew anything about Peenemunde but when the first bombs went down they realised that the target was not going to be Berlin and they had been hoaxed. By this time however, their fighters over Berlin had run short of fuel and had to land to refuel if they were to get up to Peenemunde and get at us. Thus twenty minutes elapsed and they arrived just as the third wave of Bombers arrived.

Being a full moon they could see us clearly just as we could see them and they were like bees round a honey pot. We had German fighters above and below us and the thought went through my mind that we were in a spot of bother. On our port side we had a German night fighter flying alongside us so close that I could see the pilot clearly. We managed to drop our bombs but were immediately attacked by a German fighter. The Gunners shouted directions to the Skipper to dive and corkscrew and I remember them jubilantly shouting that they had hit him and he was going down. We can only assume that a German fighter was underneath us using ‘Schrage Musik’ because we saw what we thought was the port inner engine on fire. (‘Schrage Musik’ were twin cannons adjusted to fire vertically through the cockpit roof and first used on the Peenamude raid. The fighter would fly under the bomber in its blind spot and fire directly into the bombers wings, which contained the petrol. Apparently ‘Scharge Musik’ was not known by Bomber Command for about a year after it was first used). The Skipper gave orders to Bill (Flight Engineer) to shut the engine down, feather the propeller (feather means turn the propeller into the wind’ to stop it turning) and fire foam into the engine to try to extinguish the fire. Unfortunately the fire continued to burn and the flames started creeping along the wing until the whole of the wing was engulfed in flames. We then realised that the petrol in the port wing was on fire and that there could only be one outcome! We heard Jack, the rear gunner shout that he had been hit but were not sure whether he had personally been hit or that his turret had been hit. The Skipper gave the order to bale out. The Bomb Aimer, having pulled up the escape hatch in the nose of the aircraft, shouted out, ‘We’re over water.’ The Skipper quietly said, ‘Hang on a minute, Jim, I’ll bring us back over land.’ Having done that the Bomb Aimer bailed out, followed by the Flight Engineer.

I could not believe what was happening and shouted to Phil the Navigator, ‘Are we going, Phil?’ What a stupid thing to say, it was so obvious that we had to bale out. I can only put this down to shock. The Navigator had taken his flying helmet off and could not hear me anyway.

I watched him go down to the escape hatch and, sitting down on the edge with his legs dangling, he put one hand on his ripcord and put his other hand across his forehead so that he wouldn't bang his head as he went out rolled up head first. Suddenly he was gone!

Everything happened so quickly that I never gave a thought to what might happen when I hit the ground. All I could think of was getting out of the blazing inferno and it never occurred to me at the time that the aircraft could explode at any minute or that the parachute may not open or that I might be attacked by civilians on the ground. I can't recall being frightened because the situation seemed so unreal and felt that this wasn't really happening to me. I snapped my parachute on to the chest harness and quickly went past the Skipper down to the escape hatch. Following the Navigator's example, I went out headfirst. Tightly rolled up into a ball I was caught in the slipstream as soon as I left the aircraft and flung back violently, almost in a horizontal line. Once I got out of the slipstream I began to fall earthwards and the ear shattering noise of the aircraft's engines receded. Now was the time to pull the ripcord.

Unfortunately in the panic to leave the aircraft I had forgotten to tighten my parachute harness to ensure that it fitted around my body tightly. I always wore it loosely so that I could stand upright and move around the aircraft in comfort. As the parachute snapped open it almost stopped but I was still falling so that I caught up with the loose straps, which came up violently between my legs. Suffice to say this "brought tears to my eyes" and it was extremely painful. Having recovered it was very pleasant to gently sway from side to side but still wishing I had tightened my harness before I jumped!!! We had been told at a lecture that if after having opened our parachute we found ourselves being blown backwards, we should attempt to turn ourselves round so that we could see where we were going, so avoiding any obstacles. I tried this several times without success just hoping that I would land without hurting myself.

I saw flak coming up but it seemed to be some way away, although I was still worried that I could possibly be hit by gunfire on my way down as I got nearer to the ground. I could see the target burning furiously and it could only have been a few miles away. In my shocked state I was confused and thought I was over Denmark because we had flown over Denmark to reach the target, in fact I was probably about at least a hundred miles from the Denmark border. Glancing down I saw what appeared to be a forest underneath me and the thought crossed my mind that I might break a leg or be badly hurt as I landed, hitting trees. However I had completely misjudged my height in the full moonlight, thinking I was 2000 feet high when in fact I was probably only about 20 feet and what appeared to be a forest was in fact a field of cabbages. As a result I was quite relaxed when I hit the ground and was completely unhurt but rather shaken. I quickly gathered up my parachute and detached it from my harness and then sat down for a few minutes trying to sort out my thoughts. I felt confused and bewildered and could not think what to do, the thought had never crossed my mind that I may be shot down so that I was quite unprepared mentally. The only thing I remembered from a lecture was to try to hide my parachute to avoid detection. This I started to do, digging with my hands into the soft soil trying to make a hole big enough to hide it. Looking up I saw a civilian coming across the fields towards me holding a revolver. I still thought that I was in Denmark so when he confronted me I said, 'Denmark?' Much to my dismay he replied, 'Nicht, Deutschland.' 'Christ,' I thought, 'I'm really in the sh.....'

Bang went my thoughts of joining the "underground" (resistance groups in the various occupied countries) and thereby returning to England. I could hear the rest of the lads flying overhead and knowing they were returning home to their eggs and bacon and I felt wretched and bewildered. As the civilian had a gun I didn't argue when he indicated, in sign language, that I should pick up my parachute.

He marched me across the field and up the road where he handed me over to two very tall policemen. They searched me and then undid my braces and pulled my trousers down gesturing to me to pick them up and hold them with one hand and with the other hand pick up my parachute, the idea being that I would be unable to escape. They then marched me into the village to a farmhouse, which had been converted into their Luftwaffe Headquarters.

I think I must have been the first Englishman in or around the village because I could hear the chant 'Tommy, Tommy,' from the female population, though nobody came near me, I think foreigners called all British Servicemen Tommy. I was handed over at the gate of the farmhouse to a young sentry who spoke a little English. He asked me if I was uninjured and then took me upstairs and marched me into a room. The first thing I noticed was a big picture of Hitler on the wall. I was told to take my flying boots off and by signs to stand in the corner. It was tiring but each time I sat down the German guard would come in and make me stand up again. I was on my own for some hours and I know I should have been scared, just think, I was at the mercy of the Germans and anything could have happened to me but strangely enough I did not feel frightened and I can only assume that I was still suffering from shock.

A German guard came in to use the telephone and I heard him say "Zwanzig Jahr Alt, Telefunken" and he was obviously informing someone at the other end that an Airman had been captured who was twenty years old and was a wireless operator. It was now about two o'clock in the morning and I was so tired that I couldn't care less! After about three hours the door opened and in walked Bill and Jim. All Bill kept saying was, 'Bloody Hell.' I was very relieved to see them and to know that they had survived. I now had company, which made me feel more secure.

Some time later our skipper came in and when he saw me he said, 'Bloody Hell, I thought you were still in the aircraft. I didn't see you go past me.' I said, 'I didn't bloody well hang about when you said bale out.' Some time later a German soldier came in with a cigarette case and a watch in his hand and I recognised both as belonging to our Mid-upper Gunner, Dennis. He said, 'Kaputt, schlafen (sleeping), nicht gut,' indicating that Dennis was dead but at that time the news did not register. After the soldier left the room Bill and Jim told me that before they got captured they had found a parachute harness with Dennis' name on it and that the straps were torn. Strangely it was four days after that it finally sank in that Dennis had perished. The straps under his legs had broken and he had fallen to his death from about four thousand feet. Bill said he saw our aircraft crash and presumed that Jack had still been in it. We were still under this impression until in 1990 we met his brother who was on a visit to England. He produced a Canadian M.o.D. report that Jack's body had been recovered from the Baltic. Since then we have discussed how this could have happened and can only conclude that when the Skipper gave the order to bale out Jack went immediately, before he heard the Bomb Aimer tell us that we were over water, another theory is that the aircraft that Bill saw crash was not our aircraft and that ours had crashed into the Baltic, hence Jack's body being recovered from the water. Jack was only twenty-three years old and the only married member of the crew, having married on embarkation leave before leaving Canada to come to England. I have a letter in my possession, which indicates that my mother wrote to the RAF to enquire if Jack was flying with me that night.

We had been shot down at about 1.00am but it was not until about midday that we were given a bowl of soup and some bread. It was very unappetising but we were so hungry that we demolished it in no time at all. More RAF prisoners were being brought in from time to time. One of them was an Air Gunner with his head covered in bandages and blood weeping from a number of nasty cuts on his face. The perspex in his turret had been hit by a cannon shell and had shattered the perspex into his face. For many months afterwards he would pick pieces out of his face as they worked to the surface of his skin.

Later in the afternoon we were loaded onto lorries and taken to Grieswald. Our guards were German Air Force personnel and they treated us with reasonable respect. They stopped the lorries in town and bought some pears, which they shared around, a gesture we appreciated. We were then taken to a German garrison, which had punishment cells for the German soldiers. Bill and I were put in cell No. 8 and soon we discovered that Mick our Skipper was in the cell next to us. He understood Morse Code so I spent time conversing with him, albeit slowly. If we wanted the toilet we had to ring a bell and wait for a guard to let us out and march to the toilet watching our every move! There was a window in the cell but it was quite small and so high that we were unable to see out.

The bunk in the cell was wooden without a mattress or blankets and Bill and I had sore backs and hips by the morning. Next day, 19th August, at about 2pm Bill and I were taken from our cell and shown into a room where we were given a meal consisting of boiled potatoes and turnips with Ersatz coffee to follow. Although it was certainly not appetising we ate it, as we were ravenous this being our first meal for over twenty-four hours. Whilst we were 'enjoying?' our meal a German guard brought in an American Gunner who was in a very distressed state. He had a big burn mark across the back of his neck, which had been caused by a piece of his aircraft wing breaking off and hitting him as he baled out. I think he was quite traumatised by the incident and seemed near to tears and said, "He could not eat anything". Bill and I engaged him in conversation and we managed to convince him that he should eat and when we had to leave him he seemed in a better frame of mind, which pleased us. At 7pm we were given a quarter of a loaf and coffee.

The next day we were taken out for exercise by a guard who walked us around the barrack square about four times. He was behind us with a gun and in any event we were not in the frame of mind to attempt an escape and it was pleasant being out in the fresh air. The following Saturday at 7am we were taken by lorry to the local railway station, picking up more RAF prisoners on the way. Amongst them was Phil our Navigator. We hadn't seen him since bailing out and we were more than pleased to see that he had survived. We were still looking for Jack because at that stage we had no idea that he had perished. At the station we were put in cattle trucks and, leaving about 9 pm we travelled through the night, which, with forty-five men packed, into each truck, made the journey very uncomfortable. We had been given some bread to sustain us for the journey, but no water. I think we were able to get a drink of water at some of the stations we stopped at. Before leaving we had our first experience of the German indoctrination of the children. As two young boys of about seven or eight years of age saw each other and instead of embracing gave the Nazi salute. At about 6am we were shunted into a siding on the outskirts of Berlin, where we stayed for the whole day.

As the day wore on we began to get very apprehensive knowing that there was always the possibility that the 'boys' (the RAF) might pay Berlin a visit that night and we could be caught up in a bombing raid. To our relief at about 6pm we moved out and continued our journey south to Obursal, on the outskirts of Frankfurt. The following day we arrived at a station where we were off loaded.

I cannot remember the name of that station but whilst we were waiting for another train in which to continue our journey we were given food and drink by uniformed females who I presume were German Red Cross personnel. I recall that the German civilians were quite hostile and we were pleased that our German guards made it quite plain to the civilians that they were there to protect us.

We arrived at Oburusal at 7am on Tuesday 24th August. (This being the interrogation centre called Dulag Luft.) We then travelled by tram to the centre where I was put in a room with an American. He was friendly and anxious to talk but I was not prepared to open up in conversation with him just in case he was not whom he appeared to be, and in case the room was 'bugged'.

The next day I was moved into a cell on my own at the main interrogation camp - no cigarettes - nothing to read and certainly not enough to eat. It was all very depressing but I realised that this was a method adopted by the Germans to gain a mental advantage over prisoners.

After this treatment you felt that you just wanted to talk and they obviously hoped that when you did you would let slip whatever they wanted to know as they interrogated you. Later that night two army officers came into the cell to question me. They thought that, being woken up from sleep, my defences would be down. They were unhappy when they realised that the only information I would give was my name, rank and service number. They said that they would come back later and if I still refused to give them the information they wanted, they would hand me over to the Gestapo because I could not prove that I was not a spy.



I showed them my dog tags, as shown above, but they said that these proved nothing. I was worried but tried not to show it. The next night a German Air Force Officer, who spoke perfect English, came into the cell to interrogate me. He began by asking for my squadron, the name of my Commanding Officer, and my Signals Leader. I said, 'I am not prepared to tell you anything other than my name, rank and number.' He then told me I was with the 49th Squadron and going through the pile of files in his hands he pulled out one that had 49 Squadron on the outer cover. Handing it to me, he said "Have a look inside, you will find photographs of all your friends in there", I should have refused to have taken the file but having taken it this confirmed to him that I was with 49 Squadron. When I opened the first page I saw the small photographs of some of the lads who had been reported missing from previous raids. We always carried these small photographs, head and shoulders, taken in civilian clothes so that if we were shot down and managed to contact the underground they could be put on false identity cards. The Germans knew this and promptly relieved us of them when we were captured. He asked me what route we had flown, to which I replied, "You'll have to ask the navigator". He then asked about the bomb load and I said, "You'll have to ask the bomb aimer". He then said "What frequency do you use on your radio" I told him that the frequency had been calibrated before I got in the aircraft. He then asked me how many operations I had flown. I told him that I had only arrived at the Squadron that day and that this was my first operation, to which he replied, 'You Englishmen are poor liars.' He then asked what target we had bombed and I can honestly say that at that moment I could not have told him. I had completely forgotten the name Peenemunde. He then told me the name, and it was then that I remembered the name, which Jim our Bomber Aimer had told me at the briefing. However I was not going to confirm his statement. Whilst the interrogation was going on he was feeding me with English cigarettes so I was quite happy for him to stay in the cell until I had smoked two or three cigarettes.

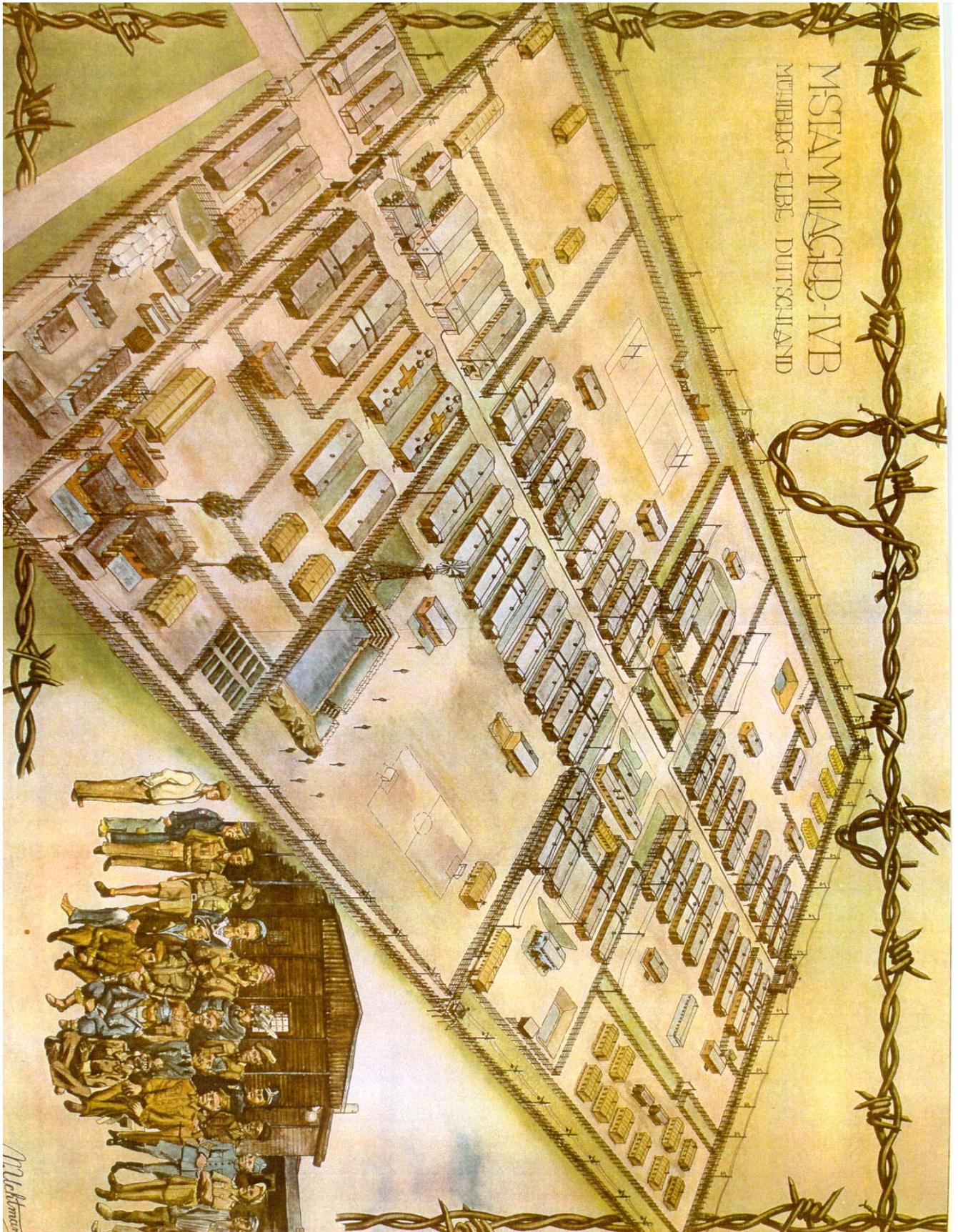
We had previously been given a Red Cross card to send home telling them that we were alive which meant that he knew my home address. He said, 'Let's see - Buckhurst Hill? That's a 38 bus from Victoria.' My mouth must have dropped open because he then said, 'don't look surprised. I lived in Hammersmith for ten years.' He then carried on the interrogation, again asking questions such as what was our bomb load, the route we had flown, the frequency we had used on the radio etc. When I refused to give him any information he picked up his cigarettes and terminated the interrogation. By this time it was quite late in the evening and I decided to get some sleep.

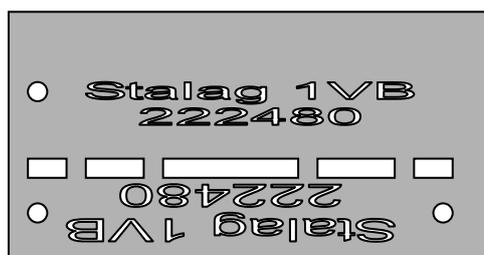
No sooner had I dropped off than the cell door opened and a guard beckoned me to follow him. He indicated that he was taking me to the transit camp. On the way we collected Bill and another prisoner who introduced himself as Lofty Sparks.

The transit camp, as the name suggests, was a holding point whilst we waited to be transferred to a permanent prison of war camp. RAF NCOs who worked under the directions of the Germans staffed the transit camp. A Warrant Officer, one of the permanent staff then gave us some good advice. He said that we had probably kept our mouths shut during our interrogation "So keep your mouths shut whilst you are in the transit camp, don't discuss anything unless its with your own crew because there could be a German masquerading as a British airman amongst you men and the huts may well be bugged". It was there that we were issued with a kitbag, soap, shaving stick, toothpaste, socks, vest and hairbrush, which came through the Red Cross. It was now the 28th August and I was able to have my first proper wash since leaving England on the 17th August. I need not elaborate! On Monday 30th August we left the transit camp at 4am and were marched two to three miles to the railway station - it was raining heavily. Here we were loaded into cattle trucks, yet again (forty-four men to each truck) and without any form of bedding, travelled through the night.

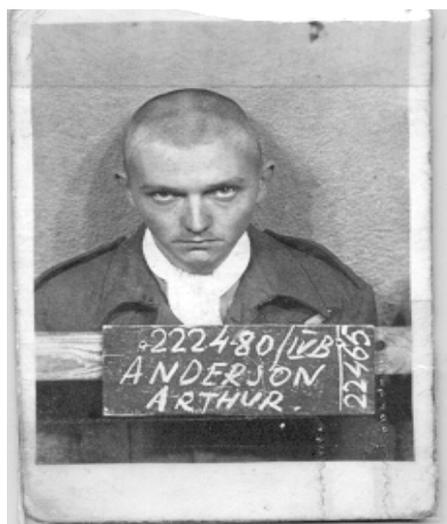
The day passed and the following night we were given some straw. This helped our aching bodies. We had no toilet facilities and had to urinate through the cracks in the side doors of the trucks. With forty-four men in such a confined space it was far from pleasant but strangely enough we all seemed to take it in our stride and our situation became humorous at times. There was no unpleasantness because we were all in the same situation.

We finally arrived at Muhlberg at 9am on 1st September and we marched up to Stalag 4B in the pouring rain. The administration at the camp was far from efficient and we were kept waiting outside the camp gates in the drenching rain for about an hour. One of the lads was taken short whilst we were waiting and promptly dropped his trousers and defecated on the road, which enraged the guards who threatened to shoot him. At this point we were made to hand over our flying boots and some of us objected at first but when I received a kick up the backside (much to the amusement of a Frenchman who was acting as a clerk to the Germans). I gave in, and in return was issued with a pair of Dutch clogs. I can assure the readers that they were bloody uncomfortable but we all had a good laugh at each other as we hobbled away. We had to continue wearing these clogs for some months until a supply of boots came through the Red Cross. Eventually we were marched in and put in a hut where there were insufficient bunks for everyone and some of the unlucky lads were given bedding on the floor. It wasn't long before we found out that the hut was infested with bed bugs - they simply fell on our heads during the night. Whilst in this hut we received our first Red Cross parcels. Some of the lads were pretty stupid and scoffed everything in the parcel and as result became very unwell with diarrhoea and sickness at the same time. It taught them a lesson and after that they ate sensibly.





We were registered as P.O.W's and allotted a number, which was stamped on a metal Dog Tag, which had two sections. If one happened to die whilst in captivity, one half would be sent to the Red Cross. The other half would be buried with the prisoner's body for later identification.



The next day we were marched to the showers after having had our heads shorn.

Like life in the British Service the Germans did everything in alphabetical order so that I was first to have my head shorn. A big wheel had to be turned to operate the clippers and the Russian prisoner holding the clippers indicated that I should sit down, and having done so I said to him “Short back and sides”, “YA YA” he said. Bill began turning the handle and laughed fit to bust as my hair fell to the floor. I however had the last laugh when it was my turn on the handle for Bill's head to be shorn. We were told that it was for hygiene purposes but we felt that it was to knock some of the arrogance out of us. There is no doubt we were arrogant having convinced ourselves we were winning the war. Following our communal shower we were inoculated, vaccinated and photographed. Our clothes were fumigated and we were allotted to a permanent hut, about two hundred and ten men to a hut.

The bunks were in three tiers with two men side by side so that six men occupied the three tier bunks. Each man had one blanket and a mattress, the mattress being hessian sacking filled with straw. There were windows in the hut but the glass had long since gone! Unfortunately for Bill and I our bunk was near the end of the hut, very near the latrine. Every time the latrine was used the door would be opened and the smell would waft in. Remember this was not a water closet and the smell was quite unpleasant. There were two stoves for heating the hut, brick built with a steel sheet covering the top. However the two stoves were insufficient for two hundred and ten men trying to heat their food. Often there would be arguments, sometimes quite violent. Thankfully among the men were men of many talents and one put his engineering skills to good use. Using tins from the Red Cross parcels (after having devoured the contents) he produced a “Blower”. Bill could do anything with his hands and soon set to work and produced a blower for our personal use.



The above blower was made recently by Bill to illustrate to friends what it looked like. Obviously the one he made in camp was not nearly so sophisticated and was made as previously said from used tins and anything else we could find. It was very efficient and enabled us to heat our food when unable to get a space on the stove. However blowers, had one big fault, they belched out smoke with a vengeance. It soon became evident that they could not be used in the hut and everyone who had a blower had to be banished to the communal washroom at the end of the hut. Can you imagine 6 or 7 blowers being used at the same time belching out smoke, you could hardly see each other, you could not breath, yours eyes were streaming. We would stagger back into the hut with black faces and laughing or heads off but at least with hot food.

We were given a billycan and a spoon but we soon acquired a knife and fork - it's difficult to remember all such 'transactions' but I expect this was by trading cigarettes with the Russians. We were not given any plates but as soon as we began to receive Red Cross parcels, which contained tins of food, the tins were flattened out and the edges turned up to form a plate. I sometimes think back and try to figure out just how we managed to keep the plates clean because we had nothing but cold water and no washing up liquid. It was primitive and I think it was only because we were young and fit that we were able to keep free from illness and disease. The blankets were very thin and during the winter months Bill and I would sleep together piling all our clothing on top of the blankets in order to keep warm. It was a miserable time but we managed to keep cheerful, I suppose it was because we were all in the same boat and in any event we could not do anything about it.

Charges to pay _____ s. _____ d.

POST OFFICE

No. _____

OFFICE STAMP

RECEIVED

5
36/0

TELEGRAM

Prefix. Time handed in. Office of Origin and Service Instructions. Words.

5

From _____ EA 159 4.45 LI/T OHMS 48 = To _____ m

PRIORITY CC MRS M ANDERSON 5 CHERRYTREE RISE
BUCKHURST HILL ESSEX =

REGRET TO INFORM YOU YOUR SON 1333914 SGT ANDERSON
A S IS MISSING AS A RESULT OF AIR OPERATIONS ON
NIGHT 17/18 AUG 1943 LETTER FOLLOWS ANY FURTHER
INFORMATION RECEIVED WILL BE COMMUNICATED TO YOU
IMMEDIATELY = 49 SQUADRON +

W.C. P.D. & Co. Ltd.

W.C. PRIORITY

INQUIRY " or call, with this form B or C
possible, the envelope

5 1333914 17/18 1943 49 LI/T

When my Mother was informed by telegram that I was missing she had no idea if I had been killed or had survived. Before she was informed officially through the Red Cross that I was a prisoner in Germany, my Uncle, who was a Roman Catholic, on his return from Mass, told my Mother not to worry because during the Mass he had a vision and saw me coming down on a parachute and that I had survived! Probably he told her this to make her feel better.

A few days later my mother received the following letter confirming that I was listed as missing due to air operations.

No. 49 Squadron,
Royal Air Force,
Piskerton,
Lincoln.

18th August, 1943.

Dear Mrs. Anderson,

I regret to have to confirm my telegram informing you that your son has been reported missing as a result of air operations last night, and I wish to convey to you the sympathy of the members of this Squadron and myself in your anxiety while waiting for news.

Your son was flying as Wireless Operator in an aircraft which set out to attack a most important target at Peenemunde and since then we have heard nothing from it. He is therefore reported missing at present but I hope that at a later date we shall have news that he is safe. In any case, you will be notified by Air Ministry as soon as any information is received.

The pilot was an excellent operational captain in whom the crew had every confidence, and I know he would have done everything possible for their safety.

Your son had been here about four months and had proved himself capable and efficient at his work. The whole crew had achieved a reputation for their ability and the cheerful manner in which they accepted whatever task they were given, and they will be greatly missed.

Your son's kit has been collected and will be forwarded in due course through the R.A.F. Central Depository, Colnbrook, Slough, Bucks.

I am sorry there is so little information to give you, but if there is any way I can help you, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Yours sincerely,

J. Graham Day

Wing Commander, Commanding,
No. 49 Squadron.

Mrs. M. Anderson,
5, Cherry Tree Rise,
Buckhurst Hill, Essex.



The above telegram reads.

FROM AIR MINISTRY KINGSWAY 20/SEPT/43

INFORMATION RECEIVED THROUGH THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS COMMITTEE STATES THAT YOUR SON SGT ARTHUR FREDERICK ANDERSON IS A PRISONER OF WAR IN GERMAN HANDS STOP LETTER CONFIRMING THIS TELEGRAM FOLLOWS=

Life soon settled down with German rations being supplied at about 11.30am each day. These consisted of soup, boiled potatoes and bread. There were several different soups but the ones I remember clearly were pea, beetroot and millet. Rumours were always rife in prison camp but one, which was put around, was that during the First World War the prisoners were given millet soup and when they were released they were impotent. Nobody would touch this soup for some time but eventually hunger got the better of us and we said "To hell with it". I found beetroot so unpalatable that I have never been able to touch it since my POW days. It wasn't long before Red Cross parcels started to come through and this enabled us to eat quite well. Three countries sent food parcels through the Red Cross, England, Canada and America. We rather liked the Canadian parcels because they contained the following:

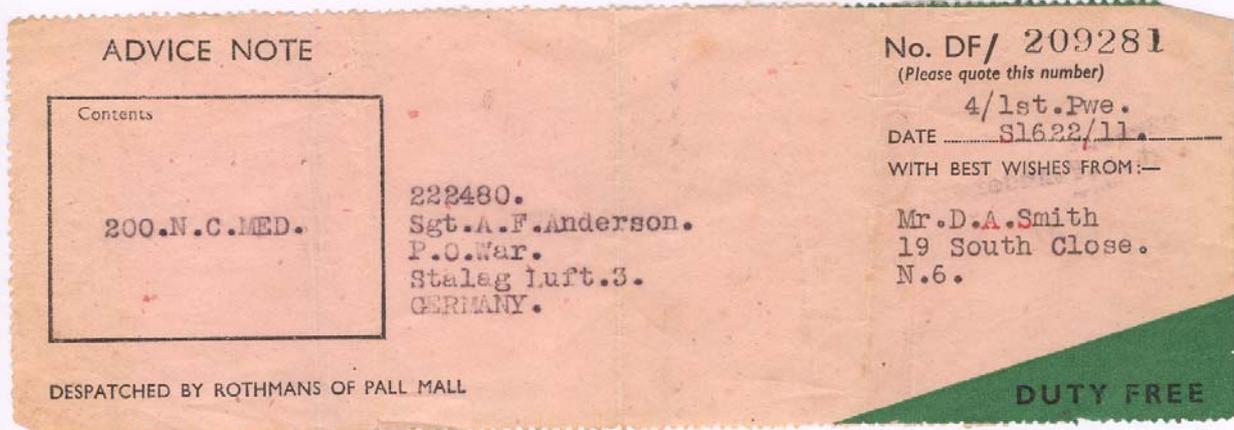
Box of raisins 7oz
Tin of meat roll 10oz
Klim powdered milk ('milk' spelt backwards) 16oz
Coffee 8oz , Sugar 8oz
Tinned prunes 6oz ,Tinned corned beef 12oz
Tinned salmon 8oz, Tinned sardines 3oz
Butter 16oz
Cheese 4oz
Salt
Jars of jam 16oz
Chocolate 5oz
Soap

Although we were very pleased to receive the food we were equally pleased to receive the soap because we soon realised that to keep clean would be one way to keep free from disease. Under the conditions we were living in dirt would increase the chances of disease spreading.

Bill and I being in the same crew naturally became “muckers”, that is, we mucked in together and shared everything. To make the Red Cross parcels last a week we would only open one tin a day and share it, thus we were able to eat every day and not go hungry. The ration of bread each day was a loaf between five men. We formed ourselves into groups of five and the group, which I was in decided to give me the job of cutting the bread into five even portions, not easy when the loaf was an irregular shape. Each day a different member of the group would have first choice and this process could take quite a long time. When it came to my first choice another member of the group would cut the loaf and I seemed to do quite well due to their inexperience. There was no disagreement because the person having his choice that day would be the last one the next day. The following day he would be the fourth, the following day the third and so on. The bread was very dark and sour to taste and we found it unpalatable until we got used to it. Some of the loaves came in tins and the date was marked on the tin, and on one occasion we saw the date 1941. I think this particular loaf had been up to the Russian Front and brought back to Germany when their forces began to retreat.

Most days when we got our ration of bread Bill and I would cut off the crusts and keep them until we had sufficient to make a ‘stodge.’ Where this word came from no one could fathom but it was comprised of the said crusts, raisins, grated biscuits and Klim, all mixed together and boiled. It sounds revolting, but at the time our hunger made it seem delicious and filling at the same time.

Most weeks we received a parcel each with fifty cigarettes and the tins of food. We were therefore able to give some of the German rations to the Russians who existed entirely on German rations without the benefit of Red Cross parcels. We did hear that Winston Churchill had made an offer to Stalin to supply Red Cross parcels to the Russian prisoners but his offer was refused on the grounds that there were no Russian Prisoners of War! Russians were supposed to fight to the death; the irony of this was that Stalin’s eldest son in fact committed suicide in a German prison camp. Whilst at Blackpool I shared civvy digs with an airman named Digby Smith, who wrote to me at my home address and my mother opened the letter and duly informed him that I was a POW. He sent me a parcel of cigarettes but by the time I received it he himself had been shot down and was in German hands.



ABOVE IS THE ACTUAL ADVICE NOTE FOR THE CIGARETTES SENT BY DIGBY SMITH

Most of the Russian prisoners were peasants caught up when the German army advanced into Russia. They had nothing to wash with and as a result were often very dirty and lice infested. Our supplies, though small, were from the British Red Cross and whenever we bartered with them we would try to keep our distance for the fear of being contaminated with the lice, which we could see running around their collars.

The Russians were so hungry that they would retrieve the tins that we disposed of and would lick them out. Often they would climb into the disposal bins and although we asked them to get out before we emptied the rubbish, they would refuse and as a result were covered in dust and tins. One of the privations we had to endure as prisoners was the lack of toilet paper. We used anything we could find, such as the wrappings in the Red Cross parcels and the German newspapers given to us. Just put yourself in that position and ask how you would cope if suddenly you were unable to buy toilet paper.

We were allowed a hot shower about every three weeks, other than that our only means of keeping clean was to bath in cold water. At the end of the hut was a communal washroom with running cold water and every week summer and winter Bill and I would strip off and wash down. Just imagine what it was like in the winter months, no glass in the windows and the wind howling through, it was a nightmare, but we were determined to keep clean whatever the cost. The Red Cross sent uniforms to the camp but these were in great demand so that many of us ended up wearing the same uniform we had been shot down in for the whole of our imprisonment. I think we must have smelled like polecats, but who cared, we all smelled the same so we did not notice.

A roll call was taken twice a day outside in the compound rain or shine. We would not be in any hurry to get out of the hut, particularly if the weather was bad and the German Guards would come bursting in banging on the bunk with sticks, shouting "Raus, Ruas, Schnell, Schell, (Out, Out, Quick, Quick). Many a time the army chaps would be back in their huts and we would still be out in the compound being counted. The army chaps could not understand our attitude but to us RAF Bods it was all good fun giving the Guards aggravation. We were out of the fight but it was our way of fighting the enemy.

We were detailed to line up in five lines to make it easier for the guards to count us. We would deliberately make it hard by moving around and getting out of line and sometimes the count of the 200 odd men would take up to an hour, who cared, we had nowhere to go. If one of the prisoners from our hut had escaped during the night we would attempt to cover it up on the roll call. Someone in the back row near the beginning of the count would be counted and bending down would run down the line to a space left vacant to be counted again so the numbers would appear to be correct. Of course if he were caught it would mean a few days in the cooler, the cooler being a prison within the prison. If any prisoner was sick he would stay in bed in the hut and after counting us outside the Guards together with the hut chief would go into the hut and count the sick prisoners to agree his final total for the hut.

Boredom was something we had to fight against most of the time but sometimes the talk would relate to how one got shot down and what transpired afterwards. One chap related how he came down in the Baltic and after getting rid of his parachute and harness he started swimming towards what he thought was the shore some distance away.

He estimated that he swam for about half an hour by which time he became exhausted and gave up all hopes of surviving so he stopped swimming and sank, only to find that his feet touched the bottom and he had been swimming in about five feet of water. We had a good laugh when he was telling us the story but it must have been a terrifying experience for him at that time.

We would hear on the grapevine that a batch of prisoners were coming in and we would rush down to the main gate to greet them and to hear the latest news from England and to see if any of the newcomers were from our squadron. I well remember when we first arrived at the camp one of the lads from our squadron, who had been shot down prior to us was there at the main gate to greet us laughing his head off, saying “ I knew you would get here”.

In order to alleviate the boredom it was decided to start classes in all manner of subjects. The camp authorities made several huts available for this purpose. One hut was used as a theatre and with the many talents available, prisoner’s enacted plays and musical evenings. The entrance fee was one cigarette and these were then used to hire the clothes and costumes. One of the prisoners would be taken to Berlin with a guard (armed with the collection of cigarettes), where he would then be allowed to negotiate a ‘deal’ to hire the costumes. Instruments were sent by the Red Cross, which enabled the musically qualified prisoners to entertain. The German officers enjoyed the experience of watching, which seemed somewhat bizarre.

I decided to enrol for the shorthand class, which was run by a qualified instructor in civilian life. Looking back, I regret not having enrolled for the German language class, but at the time I was very anti German, as one might expect. Another class I enlisted for was a dancing class, it meant that half the time you had to dance the female part. I can recall that this class soon ended because some of the lads were reluctant to be the “woman”.

Letters from home arrived at irregular intervals and sometimes you would receive one letter at other times you may get three or four together. Our barrack chief would be informed that letters had arrived and he would go down to the German administration office to collect them. We would eagerly await his return and gather around him waiting for him to call out the name of the lucky prisoner, and you would be very disappointed when your name was not called. The letters had of course been censored before leaving the U K and perhaps by the Germans so that many times only about half of the letter was readable. We would read the letters over and over again trying to work out the words that had been censored.

After we had been in prison for about six months the lad who slept above me began to have trouble walking and was in a lot of pain when he did. From conversations I had with him I learned that when his aircraft exploded he sustained injuries in the groin area. He spent some weeks in a German hospital and had a testicle removed. Our medical officer arranged for him to be taken back to hospital and he was again operated upon. On his return to camp he brought back with him, a souvenir that had been taken out of his thigh, a small round lead ball. It was this ball that had been pressing on a nerve that had given him so much pain. The ball came from the trailing aerial which all aircraft carried and was a long wire wound out under the aircraft by the wireless operator. This wire had series of lead balls on it to weigh it down so keeping it away from the underside of the aircraft. The trailing aerial had to be wound back before landing.

The Germans liked to do things in the correct manner and when I was promoted to Flight Sergeant (with effect from 29th November 1943) I was requested to attend at the German administration office to be informed officially that they had been informed through the Red Cross of my promotion. If my memory serves me correctly I was congratulated on my promotion.

It was during my imprisonment that I learned that ‘Lord Haw Haw’ (William Joyce) broadcast from Germany some evenings the names and addresses of Bomber Command personnel who had been shot down and taken prisoner. The Mother of an airman flying with Bomber Command, who lived in Leicester, heard my name and address during one of these and wrote to my Mother to give her the news. (Telephones were not the norm at home in those days).

My Mother then wrote to me to give me the name of the son. Later the son was shot down and captured and brought to our prison camp. He made himself known to me on his arrival. My mother used to listen to these broadcasts and learned of the address of Bills parents in Hertfordshire. We learned later that my parents had visited Bills parents after a tortuous journey, transport being very limited during the war.

In the German military structure, servicemen salute anyone in a superior rank, i.e. a Corporal would salute a Sergeant, a Sergeant would salute a Flight Sergeant etc. The German authority said that as POW's we had no rank, therefore we should salute all the soldiers no matter what their rank to which we replied, "Get stuffed". At a meeting held between our Liaison Officer and the Camp Commandant it was agreed that we would only salute their Commissioned officers. We had no intention of even doing that and if we saw a German Officer coming towards us we just turned our back to him and began a conversation with anyone near us.

On 6th September we heard rumours that Allied landings had been made in Italy and three days later we learned that Italy had capitulated. Now that we knew we were winning the war and I think we all thought that it would be only a matter of months before we were released. What fools we were!!

Within a few miles of the camp the Germans had an airfield, which was a training centre for aircrew and every so often the crews under training would 'buzz' our camp. They (the training air crew) had learned that there were RAF prisoners in the camp and whenever they flew over we would rush out into the compound and indicate with our hands that they should fly lower. At the same time we shouted out, 'Get lower, you windy bastards!' even though it was obvious they couldn't hear us. Eventually they really did start to fly lower and lower, possibly just to show us how good they were. One day an aircraft came over the camp and dived far too steeply. Realising he was in trouble, he attempted to pull out of his dive but at the speed he was flying he just could not stop his tail skidding down and hitting the ground. He hit the ground in the prison compound, losing his tail wheel in the process. One wing took a window out of the guard's sentry box and he promptly fainted. Some of our lads were walking in the compound at the time and a Canadian pilot was killed instantly. The tragedy was that this particular Canadian pilot was shot down on his first operation when flying as a second 'dickie' (second pilot), prior to flying with his own crew on operations, how unlucky could you be? It had probably taken him the best part of two years to get to the stage where he was ready to put his training to good use, only to be killed before getting to grips with the enemy.

Although on the whole life in a prison camp was boring and depressing, the comradeship between aircrews was unbelievable and no similar relationship has ever developed throughout my whole life.

The feeling created in the circumstances in which we found ourselves made up for all the hardships and attempts to demoralise us. It must be remembered that most of us were just out of our teens and some of the things we got up to may seem pretty childish. Many pranks drove the German guards to distraction. An example of this was when the guards came round to make an inspection of our hut, leaving their transport (pushbikes) outside our hut. Sometimes, when they came out, their tyres would be as flat as a pancake or even a wheel would be totally missing. These sort of pranks only took place in the compound occupied by the RAF. The army lads were more mature, ranging say from eighteen to forty five. I think the German Commandant made the remark the RAF were immature schoolboys. I guess he was right because our ages ranged from say eighteen to twenty two and indeed some of the lads had joined straight from school.

The German C.O. was never impressed with this type of conduct and asked us not to do it. He said his guards were elderly men or very young men wounded and unfit for combat and we should feel for them and not make pranks!!!!!! No consideration for us and our conditions...

The Germans were aware that we were stealing coal and potatoes and from time to time random searches were made of the huts and our beds. The German military seemed to have a one-track mind in this respect. If they were told to search for potatoes, they would ignore everything else even though they probably knew the items had been stolen.

One of the German guards was a tubby elderly Staff Sergeant who must have been in his fifties. We called him McAlpine because whenever he was making a search, he always carried a climbing stick, the sort used by climbers. Whenever he entered our hut someone would shout 'McAlpine up' to warn other prisoners. He was quite good-natured and would go red in the face and shout out, 'Nicht McAlpine, me Feldwebel.' (Sergeant Major)

On one occasion the German guards were looking for stolen potatoes and we were worried because we had recently stolen quite a lot of coal. This was hidden in a big Red Cross box under our table and covered over with a blanket. McAlpine pulled the blanket up and pulling the box out said, 'Oh, coal!' and pushed the box back again. He hadn't been told to look for coal so he just ignored it.

On another occasion we had hidden some coal on top of the wooden roof boards, which could be moved easily. McAlpine prodded the roof boards with his stick and as the boards shifted he got showered with coal and dust. He was very unhappy and danced with rage.

One of the guards was probably in his mid twenties and had been badly wounded whilst serving on the Russian front and was no longer fit for active duty. He had very blond hair and obviously nicknamed Blondy. He could be bloody-minded at times and I never saw him smile at any time, but in spite of that we did respect him. He would come into the hut from time to time kicking over anything he saw and ripping down our washing, which we had hung up to dry.

We never lost our sense of humour and as an example when we first arrived at the prison camp we were made to give up our flying boots and were issued with Dutch clogs as I recorded earlier. The floor of the hut was made of house bricks and a visit to the latrine at the end of the hut was so noisy that all and sundry could hear. One night, at about 3am one of the lads had to visit the latrine. The noise he made with his clogs on the brick floor, clipperty clop, clipperty clop, made someone shout out, 'Take that f... horse outside!' The laughter that ensued woke everyone up. There were other occasions when it was not so laughable. One of the lads who slept on a top bunk (about eight feet from the floor) had a nightmare about baling out of his aircraft. He threw himself off his bunk and we heard him scream before he hit the deck with a thud. He was very lucky to get away without serious injury. After that incident, his friends had to tie him to his bunk each night with a rope.

On 3rd December 1943, Bill became ill with a very badly infected throat and I arranged for him to be taken into sick quarters. On one visit to Bill I asked Lofty Sparkes if he would like to go along with me. Whilst we were there the hospital orderly brought Bill a meal of powered eggs and I had to encourage Bill to eat it with Lofty saying, "don't force him". I knew what the bugger was up to, because he was always hungry and was hoping that Bill would not want it and he could tuck in. On the 8th a letter arrived for Bill and I took it down to him. He began to get better from that point on because the letter was from Dulcie, his girlfriend (now his wife). He was back with us on the 15th, on the day I had my first haircut - my hair had grown sufficiently since having my head shorn.

On the 18th December, about one thousand prisoners with German Guards marched into Muhlberg to collect Red Cross parcels, a round trip of about six miles. This was a chore that we did not mind because it gave us the chance to get out of the camp for the first time.

On Christmas Day in the camp an international football match between England and Scotland was organised. The Scots won 4-3. The play was of a high standard because both teams were lucky enough to have some professional footballers on their side. Normally there were two roll calls each day and after the evening roll call you were confined to your hut, but on Christmas day we were allowed to wander around the compound after the roll call.

A game that became very popular was Volleyball (A game not known to the English at that time), which was introduced to us by the Russians and Poles. We soon got the hang of it and spent many hours passing the time during good weather but of course we would only engage in this sort of thing whilst we were getting a weekly Red Cross parcel. When the parcels dried up, so did our energy to play this sort of game.

I received my first letter from home on the 3rd January 1944. On the 7th January I celebrated my twenty-first birthday. At no time in my short life had I expected to 'celebrate' this special birthday in a prison camp. For my birthday one of the 'inmates' presented me with a bar of chocolate. By today's standards this must seem a trifle, but I can assure you it was a gift of great significance and a sacrifice on his part.

Having prisoners from all walks of life created interest in each other and therefore made life almost bearable. Sometimes an inmate would pay the different huts an evening visit to talk about his particular occupation in civilian life. Among the prisoners we had a Broadmoor Prison Warden, a Funeral Director who dealt with murder victims for the Police, a Canadian Royal Mounted Policeman, Professional Footballers etc. Each had a tale to tell of time at home. These talks could be very amusing at times and always interesting, to learn of the way our compatriots lived before this dreadful fate, which had befallen us.

One of the RAF prisoners in the camp with us was Terry Hunt. Terry was in fact a cameraman with Gainsborough Film Unit who flew with the RAF to make newsreels for the British Government. Originally he flew as a civilian until it was pointed out to him that if he were to be shot down he might well be shot as a spy. The RAF therefore gave him a three-day course and officially made him a Sergeant. When he was eventually shot down and arrived at Dulag Luft the interrogating officer started the conversation by saying, 'I don't know whether to call you Mr Hunt or Sgt. Hunt.' Terry showed him his dog tags proving that he was a Sergeant but the officer then said, 'Oh yes, but we know who you really are.' Terry had not been in camp very long before he built a camera, which was installed into a book, the pages having been cut out. He made a viewfinder in one end and carried the book around with him everywhere he went, taking photographs of various things in the camp.

He was taking a big risk and had he been caught would probably have been shot. One may ask how he managed to make a camera and where did the films come from? Cigarettes being the currency of the day and the Guards almost being without cigarettes you could get almost anything you asked for in exchange.

Football was very popular and very soon a football league was started. Each hut formed a team and was given an English club name. Our hut team was Sunderland. Bill played for the team and I gave him plenty of vocal support. Whenever we received a clothing parcel from home it would always contain a big bar of chocolate in concentrated form and even one square would be filling (our stomachs were pretty small).

Bill and I shared whatever we got and whenever he played for the team we would allow ourselves one square each. You can imagine how much I looked forward to the times he played. Now it may seem peculiar, but disciplining how we ate what little we did get was essential, not only to our morale, but also to our health. Eating everything when we got it would mean having nothing at all for long periods. You could receive a limited number of parcels from home, which could be cigarettes, clothing or books. The parcel was collected from the German administration office and a lot of swearing went on when the parcel was opened revealing books when all you really wanted was cigarettes. A library was started in the hut from the book parcels received by the lads. It proved to be popular but unfortunately I always seemed to pick up a book with the first page detailing a meal enjoyed by the characters in the book. It did not help knowing the restricted menu we were enjoying.

As we were always short of fuel for heating our food, parties were organised to steal coal from the coalbunkers within the camp during the dark evenings. However the Germans soon got wise to this and mounted guards to prevent us succeeding. One night they surprised one of our 'coal raiding' parties and whilst one of the lads was inside the coalbunker a guard fired wildly into it hitting the lad in the back. He was taken to hospital with gunshot wounds and died two days later. The lad was Taffy Jones; a Warrant Officer who had been awarded the DFC. The Germans gave Taffy Jones a military funeral but the usual volley of shots were not fired over his coffin because they considered that he had been killed during a criminal act against the German State.

Another sad occasion was early on the morning of 19th March 1944, when a South African soldier was found hanging in one of the washrooms. This was the first recording of a British or Allied suicide in our camp. So far as the Russians were concerned, they kept their dead in their hut so that they could keep collecting his rations. The dead body would be in his bed and would be counted on the roll call so that the number of prisoners would tally. The German guards, patrolling the camp during the hours of darkness would sometimes have a Alsatian dog with them for added security. We heard that on one occasion the dog was enticed into a hut occupied by the Russians and not seen again. The Russians were always on the point of starvation and it is more than likely that they killed and ate the dog.

In prison camp we did try to keep as clean as possible, essentially to avoid disease - there was little or no medical treatment. However this was extremely difficult, we had insufficient clothing and had to wear our shirt, underwear and socks for a week before putting on a clean set. Surprisingly most of the lads managed to keep very clean one way or another, and those that did not were made to wash forcibly, to maintain as clean an overall standard as was possible in such crazy circumstances.

If you were of a mind to escape you had to put your plans to the 'Escape Committee' who would discuss it. If the committee approved they would help by supplying food, tools, maps and money.

Our camp being right in the middle of Germany made it practically impossible to think of escape because you wouldn't get very far unless you spoke German. There were about two hundred attempts during the time I was in the camp and only one lad made a successful escape that I remember and this was his sixth attempt. He was awarded the Military Cross for his many escape attempts.

After the many attempts at escape, the Germans, realising that the escapees took tins of food with them in order to survive, punctured all the tins before the Red Cross parcels were issued to us, making it essential to eat all the food quickly and not save any.

Our liaison officer had meetings with the German Commanding Officer and after a few weeks the practise of puncturing the tins ceased and we could eat our Red Cross food as and when we liked. "Snowshoe Myers" a Canadian was our go-between with the German authorities. Individuals could not approach the Germans with a grievance but Snowshoes would take up the matter with them to resolve the issue. I think most of us were anti-French because they appeared to collaborate much too much with the Germans, making up to them for favours. The French were allowed to work in Muhlberg and worked in many of the German civilian houses, which gave them access to many of the things denied to the 'Brits'. For example, the French would buy chocolate from the British for twenty-five cigarettes (trading was always in cigarettes, this was our currency) and trade them with the Germans for a loaf of bread, which they would then sell to us for eighty cigarettes. This system did not work for us; only the French were favoured in this way, so we could not trade directly for bread. As we only had fifty cigarettes a week each from the Red Cross, it meant that a loaf of bread was two weeks cigarette rations and as most of us smoked this was another hardship to cope with as we obviously needed bread to survive as well as cigarettes to keep our nerves under control.

Approaching D-Day (not that we received any prior knowledge of this event) Flying Fortresses began to fly over the camp on their way to bomb German targets. For we prisoners these were wonderful and exciting events, especially as rumours were going round about an invasion of Europe. This was confirmed on 6th June when we heard it on the radio. The radios were built by our own men and carefully hidden from the 'goons' (German Guards). It is only in recent years that I learnt where the radio in our hut was hidden. It survived searches by the Germans because it had been installed on the underside of the toilet seat. A selected prisoner, who could write shorthand, would listen into the English news broadcast and then visit each hut to read out the news to us. Another illegal activity being carried out was the digging of a tunnel, this was started from under a hut about 10 yards from the barbed wire fence and was kept very secret and I was unaware of it until the Germans discovered it. When they found it they decided to fill it with excreta from the latrines - just to improve on our surroundings and make it impossible to dig another tunnel near it or even use the hut for sometime.

The latrine was a brick built building situated in the middle of the compound. Inside was a long wooden seat with about ten holes and right opposite another wooden seat with another ten holes. You were never short of someone to talk to! All the debris dropped down into a concrete tank, which was pumped out at regular intervals by Russian prisoners. It was pumped into tanks on carts pulled by mules or donkeys. The tanks were then taken out of the camp under guard and the contents used as a fertiliser on the adjoining fields. Needless to say we kept well away whilst the pumping out operation was taking place - the smell was dreadful. I recall an amusing episode, when one freezing cold winter's day I was sitting in the latrine entirely on my own. I looked across to the door where I saw another prisoner looking back at me; I wondered what the hell he wanted. I soon found out when I vacated my seat, he ran in and sat down on the warm seat.

Soon after the invasion someone obtained a map of Europe. This was put up on the wall and as we obtained news of the advance of the Allied troops the position of our advance would be marked by coloured pins. The German guards would come into the hut from time to time and inspect the map and they seemed to accept that our map was more reliable than the news being put out on their own news broadcasts. And so the war dragged on and on and on. We had thought that as soon as our armies advanced through France the Germans would capitulate and our freedom would come within months, but this was not to be.

I shall always remember an amusing character in our hut named Mike Dolan. Whenever the news of the progress of the war was read out you could be sure that Mike sitting on his top bunk would be murmuring in mournful tone "You'll never get out of here". On other occasions he would start a discussion and in no time he would have a crowd around him joining in and this would sometimes develop into an argument. Looking around you could not see Mike because by now he was sitting on his bunk grinning whilst the lads were still arguing and almost coming to blows.

Lofty Sparks was a nice enough fellow but rather naïve so one day Bill and I thought we would wind him up and told him that we were going to be issued with bed sheets. He asked us how he could get some sheets and we told him that he had to order his sheets by submitting his name to the barrack chief. He went tearing off but came back very quickly, very red in the face calling us all the names under the sun having been told to "sod off" or words to that effect. How anyone could visualise having sheets on a wooden bunk with a hessian mattress filled with straw was beyond us.

We RAF personnel in the camp were Sergeants or above and under the Geneva Convention could not be made to work for the Germans. Any rank below Sergeant could be sent out on a work party, which could be to factories, mines, or agricultural. Although we were not made to work for the Germans the hut chief organised hut cleanliness by setting out the tasks and a rota, so that everyone took his share. Sometimes he would ask for volunteers for particular jobs and if that meant getting out of the camp for a few hours he would inundated with volunteers.

Up to the time of the invasion we had been receiving one parcel per man each week. As time went by the Germans needed the railways more and more to move their troops and materials up to the front and as a result our Red Cross parcels took second place and eventually there was only one parcel between two men. These parcels were our lifeline to home and hope of return. Whilst we were receiving a Red Cross parcel per man every week we took as much exercise as we could, walking around the camp daily and taking part in numerous sporting activities. I continued with my shorthand classes and increased my speed to 120wpm ready for my exam. The exam papers came through the Red Cross but my mind was on the Red Cross parcels due to be collected from the railway station at Muhlberg that day (not having received any for some time) and this distraction affected my concentration and I only achieved 90wpm. Eventually the Red Cross parcels stopped completely and we had to exist on the meagre German rations. We lost weight and energy, making it harder to fight on for survival. When we got to this situation we began to lack strength and took to laying on our bunks during the day to conserve our energy.

I think it was about December 1944 that a couple of hundred Polish women and children were brought to the camp but they only stayed a short time before leaving for another camp. We managed to talk to two guards through the wire in their compound who we could see were SS and we asked why they had brought the children into the compound as prisoners. They said they were enemies of the state, to which we replied "nonsense", but how can you alter the attitude of such morons.

As the Allies advanced into Germany more and more Allied aircraft roamed at will above the countryside shooting up anything that moved, particularly the railways and rail traffic. There was a railway line about a mile from the camp and one afternoon American fighters who were now flying over Germany at will let fly at a train travelling on the line. They fired whilst flying above the camp their aim being spot on and within minutes the train exploded showering debris into the camp, which suggested that the train was carrying ammunition.

Unfortunately one day some of our lads who were out of the camp on a wood detail, were mistaken for German troops and were shot up by an American fighter, killing some of them and German guards. Some of the Cannon shells also hit some of the huts and killed one of the lads inside. This prompted our Liaison Officer to meet with the camp C.O. who agreed that we lay out the letters POW in bricks in the compound painted white, for the air fighters to see, so they did not aim their fire at us.

Formations of American bombers usually about twenty or more continued to fly over the camp at will on their way to the targets. One day we saw a formation approaching the camp area but one had dropped out flying on three engines and getting further and further behind. We began to get worried when we saw a German fighter diving in for the kill but as he got within striking distance all the guns on the bomber opened up and blew it out of the sky. The bomber was a decoy gunship and carried no bombs. Having dispatched the fighter he started up his dead engine and caught up with the formation, prompting big cheers from all the prisoners, much to the annoyance of the German guards.

Chapter Four

NEAR THE END

In the early hours of 23rd April 1945 I was woken by loud bangs, as mortars screamed over the camp, there was little sleep after that. It was obvious that the fighting was getting near to the camp. I got up and looking out of the windows saw that the perimeter lights had been extinguished and it soon became apparent that there were no German guards around the camp. By now all the lads were up and wondering what was going to happen next. At about 6am three Russian Cossacks on horseback rode into the camp - what a sight! One was in fact a tough looking female who informed us that we had been liberated. Our Liaison Officer asked about feeding arrangements, only to be told to do what the Russian forces were doing - 'Live off the land.' We organised ourselves into parties and left the camp to forage for food. While foraging we found a barge on the River Elbe filled with tins of cream. Many of the lads made pigs of themselves and suffered as a result by being violently sick. Some of the lads caught a chicken and thinking they had killed it started to pluck it. They got quite a fright when it struggled and ran away but they must have caught it eventually because the smell when it was cooking was something else. Within days of our liberation some of the boys decided to ransack the German administration offices. They found cards for each prisoner with photographs attached and promptly brought them back and distributed them. The cards also had remarks appertaining to the prisoner and I was amused when the remarks on my card were translated. Apparently it said, "This man talks a lot but says nothing". I can only assume that it referred to my interrogation at Dulag Luft when my interrogator failed to get any information from me other than my name, rank, and service number.



THIS PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN A FEW DAYS AFTER LIBERATION
From left to right: -- Myself, Don Sheehy (an American soldier) and Bill Boyd.
A German sentry box can be seen in the background.

Some days later we were formed into units by the Russians, and marched into a town called Riesa, a march of about twelve miles and installed in a German Army barracks, where we stayed for about a week. The Russians tried to keep us in the barracks and we felt that we were still prisoners. Going to the main gate we were turned away by the Russian guard who indicated to us that his instructions were not to let us out but indicated that further down the barracks there was a gate unguarded. He did not want to stop us going out as long as we did not use the gate he was guarding. Having got out we saw a block of flats opposite and got talking to the occupants and learned that two of the women were married with young babies. We felt sorry for them because they were desperate for food for the babies. We told them we would forage for food and they promised to cook for us in return. The arrangements went well and as they were frightened of the Russians asked us to sleep in the flats because their husbands were prisoners of war in England. We slept there for several nights and they were quite distressed when we had to leave.

There was a caretaker in charge of the flats and one day as we left the flats Bill left the gate open. The caretaker came running after us shouting out “ ZUMACHEN, ZUMACHEN” not understanding the words we walked on and he came after us screaming out “ZUMACHEN, ZUMACHEN” until Bill shouted back “ZUMACHEN your f.....g self”. We nearly wet ourselves when he shut the gate. Now we understood, the word meant shut.

The 8th May, which was designated VE day arrived and we were anxious to get home, but General Eisenhower had made a broadcast telling all prisoners to ‘stay put.’ Some days later an American jeep came into the Barrack Square and told us that the Americans had offered to send in transport to take us back to the American lines but the Russians refused this offer. This made us very uneasy and we could visualise our freedom being cut short because we learned that there was trouble brewing between the Poles and the Russians and we could visualise becoming prisoners again. The American Officers told us to ignore the order to ‘stay put’ and gave us a map pointing out where we should head for.

The next morning six of us took off to walk to Grimma, thirty miles away. We stole a bicycle and took turns to ride it, obviously travelling very light. The first day we probably walked twenty to twenty-five miles and, in our poor state of health, suffered badly blistered heels. We arrived at a small village and went to see the Burgomaster to ask for accommodation. He directed us to a farm and told us to tell the farmer he had sent us and that the farmer was to give us a place to sleep. The farmer told us he had no room in the farmhouse because he had displaced persons staying there but he could give us plenty of straw and blankets if we stayed in the loft. The German women in the farmhouse bathed our sore feet, which we appreciated very much. In the evening after a meal we took a walk around the village and found what we assumed to be a pub. The owner apologised that he had no beer but we would be most welcome to a glass of milk.

We set off next day to walk the remaining miles to Grimma, arriving just before 1pm. We needed to cross the river at Grimma to get into the American lines but the bridge had been destroyed and replaced with a single-track bridge. We approached the bridge, which was guarded by Russian soldiers. They turned us away saying that the bridge was operated three hours East to West and three hours West to East and to come back at 4pm. The lads decided that if they wouldn't let us over at 4pm we would swim across late at night. This scared me no end because I was by no means a good swimmer. However we returned at 4pm and it was a glorious feeling to cross the bridge and to be welcomed by the Americans at the other side. They immediately gave us a small meal and although we asked for more they explained that they had been instructed to give small meals to us as our stomachs were reduced in size and heavy meals would make us ill. The next day we were taken by lorry through Leipzig and we could appreciate what Bomber Command had done to the city. Not one building seemed to have escaped the bombs.

We were then taken to Halle aerodrome where we met up with the officer members of our crew who had survived the 'shoot down.' They had been prisoners in Luft 3, a prison camp for officers.

We had to wait here a week due to various factors, but eventually we were flown out on a Dakota to Brussels. Most of the prisoners in the Dakota were army personal and one in particular, full of chatter, who had never flown before. As we approached the aircraft we saw painted over the entrance door "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here". We never heard a word from him all the way to Brussels. On arrival we were deloused, allowed to have a bath - the first for nearly two years, and I can remember soaking in the bath for at least half an hour. We were given a small amount of money and told we could go out on the town provided we were back to fly to England the next day. Bill and I went for a walk and I can remember a female saying to us, 'Hello, darling.' I said to Bill, 'She's friendly,' not realising that she was a lady of ill repute and was looking for business. At that stage I was more interested in a good meal, and remember we had had no contact with females for nearly two years.

The next day we boarded a Lancaster, which by sheer coincidence was one of our own squadron aircraft. We soon let the crew know that we were 49 squadron personnel and soon after the aircraft took off, Bill and I were invited up onto the flight deck for the flight back to England. When we saw the white cliffs of Dover we were near to tears. As we landed we were greeted by a bevy of WAAF'S who made a great fuss of us, giving us cigarettes and chocolate as we stepped off the aircraft.

After a meal we were put on a train to Cosford in the Midlands where an RAF Sergeant greeted us. He told us that if we co-operated he would see us on our way home the next day, Sunday and he used the forces favourite expression, " You play ball with me and I'll play ball with you". We were allowed one phone call home to let them know we were in England, and then to bed. The next morning we were up bright and early and following a medical examination we went on 'pay parade' and we all received our back pay from the time we became prisoners to our release and I recall collecting something between £400 & £500. It was on this parade that I discovered I had been promoted to the rank of Warrant Officer.



Photograph taken for my RAF Identity Card on my return from the P.O.W. Camp.

We were then issued with new uniforms and told to take them to the appropriate workshop to have our rank badges and brevets sewn on. By mid-afternoon we had completed all the formalities, given railway warrants and were on our way home at long last. I was quite composed until I arrived at my home station when I developed the shakes; a peculiar feeling that persisted until I reached home. My Father answered the door and upon seeing me burst into tears. Needless to say the talking went on for hours well into the night. The next day, Monday, I went with my Mother to the Red Cross centre to thank them personally for all the good work they were doing for the servicemen. I told them that I did not think I would have survived without their continuous support during my ordeal.

Food was still rationed in England but because of our poor physical condition we were allowed double rations immediately and given eight weeks leave. After my leave I was posted to West Malling in Kent with other ex-prisoners of war and I had to have my photograph retaken for my identity card. Having been on double rations for eight weeks, my features and weight had altered considerably. We were given a 'rehabilitation course' to help us get back to normality after years of being deprived of our liberty as prisoners. I suppose one likens it to the present day counselling. We were taken on visits to factories in the surrounding area, and the workers, knowing our circumstances, made a great fuss of us - especially the women. At West Malling we had another stringent medical and much to my disappointment I failed on the eyesight test. My flying Logbook was stamped with the words 'Withdrawn from Aircrew Duties.' My hopes of continuing my service-flying career were crushed and I knew that ground duties were not for me.

If you ask me if I feel any guilt about my part in the bombing carried out during the war years by Bomber Command, my answer is no. I lived in London when the war commenced and saw the carnage when the German air force started the bombing campaign killing so many civilians. I am an ordinary fellow, I won no special honours, but I felt that it was my duty to fight for my country and if Germans were killed it was unfortunate, but that is war.

Within weeks of my freedom I bought a motorcycle and my father being an experienced driver took me out to Epping Forest on a Sunday morning and taught me how to ride. After about an hour he let me take control and I drove home with him as my pillion passenger. By that time he felt that I was perfectly safe and in the afternoon with a friend who also had a motorcycle we rode down to Southend on Sea.

Not everyone could be demobbed immediately so we were asked what type of occupation we would like to undertake whilst waiting for our release. I had learnt to touch type before entering the RAF so I applied to take a teleprinter operator's course. For this I was posted to Cranwell in Lincolnshire to undertake a two-month training course following which I passed an examination and I was posted on to Syerston, Nottinghamshire.

On arrival at Syerston Lew Parsons with whom I had shared a hut in Stalag 1VB greeted me. We again shared accommodation in the Sergeants Quarters. I served here for some months until my demob date, when I went to Uxbridge to obtain my release from the RAF. Having joined the RAF at Uxbridge, here I was back to finally leave the RAF.

**ROYAL AIR FORCE
CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE AND RELEASE**

SERVICE PARTICULARS

Service Number } 133914 Rank W/O
TELEP. OP.
 Air Crew Category and/or R.A.F. trade (W/O P/AG)
 Air Crew Badges awarded (if any) A.G.
 Overseas Service P.O.W.
 R.A.F. Character V.G. (see notes on back of certificate on opposite page)
 Proficiency A Super (" ")
 " B Super (" ")
 Decorations, Medals, Clasps, Mention in Despatches, Commendations, etc.
3rd 45. A/CREW D.M.
 Educational and Vocational Training Courses and Results

DESCRIPTION

Date of Birth 7/1/25 Height 5' 5"
 Marks and Scars
 Specimen Signature of Airman A. Anderson

of W/O A.F. ANDERSON
 (Block Letters)

The above-named airman served in the R.A.F.
 on full-time service.

from 25/8/41 to 10.7.46.

(Last day of service in unit before leaving for release and release leave).

Particulars of his Service are shown in the margin of this Certificate.

Brief statement of any special aptitudes or qualities or any special types of employment for which recommended:—

"W/O ANDERSON has served as a Wireless-Op/Air Gunner, during which time he has had operational experience on Lancasters (13 raids). He has also had air operating experience on Manchester, Blenheims, Whitleys and Ansons. Since being withdrawn from flying he has gained experience on Teleprinters and Signals Traffic Routine. He has attended E.V.T. classes to further his knowledge of English and Maths. He is keen and reliable with an excellent character and an exemplary conduct sheet."

Date 20 JUN 1946

Signature of Officer Commanding

J. G. Kellin
 Group Captain

The hand written text reads

W/O Anderson has served as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, during which time he has had operational experience on Lancaster's (13 raids). He has also had air-operating experience on Manchester's, Blenheims, Whitleys and Anson's. Since being withdrawn from flying he has gained experience on Teleprinters and Signals Traffic Routine. He has attended E.V.T. classes to further his knowledge of English and Maths. He is keen and reliable with an excellent character and an exemplary conduct sheet.

Chapter Five

AFTER THE WAR

I returned to work as a clerk with my pre-war employer but found it very humdrum after service life. After about a year, I replied to an advert for Flight Stewards in BOAC and after applying and attending for an interview I was accepted and went to Aldermaston for a course, which lasted several weeks. After satisfying our instructors, I was told that I would be operating from Heathrow.

My first flight was to Cairo on a Dakota with a short stop at Rome for refuelling. Great Britain was at that time still enjoying rationing and I recall that the food on board consisted of a box containing sandwiches and cake. My next trip was again to Cairo but was much more memorable. Whilst over the Mediterranean the First Officer (a pilot) came into the galley for a cup of coffee and a smoke, only to be joined by the Captain a few minutes later. I was taken aback and said, "who's flying the aircraft" only to be told that it was flying on automatic control. I wasn't very happy and ironically some time later I learned that this particular Captain had been killed in an air crash.

I soon found out that in Cairo one could buy items still unobtainable or on ration in the U.K. Near the hotel where we stayed I found a provision shop where I could buy small eggs which the shopkeeper would pack in a cardboard shoe box with rice to avoid breakages. I always enjoyed my stays in Cairo because there was so much to see and do. Visits to the Pyramids and Museums were very interesting and we were also as honorary members allowed to use a swimming club, which was run by the British.

I did one trip on a York aircraft to Nairobi in Kenya before being transferred to flying boats operating from Southampton. We would be bussed from Heathrow to Southampton the day before the flight and stay in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The Flying Boat crew consisted of Captain, First Officer (another Pilot), Navigator, Radio Operator, Engineer, Two Stewards and a Stewardess. During the time that BOAC operated Flying Boats they flew to South Africa and the Far East and all flights were in daylight.

The flights to South Africa had overnight stops at Augusta (Sicily), Alexandria (Egypt), Khartoum (Sudan), Kampala (Uganda), Victoria Falls (Zimbabwe) and finally Vaaldam (50 miles outside Jo'burg). We would then be taken into Jo'burg by coach and have two days off before making our return flight.

On one of my flights to Jo'burg I was flying with a very effeminate Steward (who shall remain nameless) and I had gone down to Southampton the day before the flight. The evening being free I asked him what he wanted to do. He couldn't come up with any ideas so I suggested we went to a local dance. I said there would be plenty of girls there: "Those smelly things" he said. End of conversation. Having arrived at Kampala I had to share a room with him, which turned out to be the Honeymoon Suite with a mosquito net covering the two single beds. To make matters worse he proceeded to put on a hairnet before retiring and as you can imagine I took a lot of leg pulling from the rest of the crew.

We had our usual two days off in Jo'burg but our effeminate Steward was conspicuous by his absence for that period. Whilst preparing the aircraft for departure I asked him where he had been for the two days. "With my boyfriend" he replied. Being curious and I suppose naïve I said, "What do you do" he replied, " We kiss and fondle and go to bed together". The Stewardess hearing this replied, "Well I think it's disgusting" to which he replied "Well dear you can't fight against love".

I enjoyed flying on the boats because we only carried about 30- passengers and therefore we could give individual attention to the passengers. All meals were served "Silver Service" which was appreciated and in turn gave us satisfaction.

On one trip to Jo'burg on a Solent Flying Boat we had as passengers an elderly couple that had saved for 10 years to take a holiday in South Africa. We had served breakfast on the leg between Sicily and Alexandria and the husband remarked to me how much he had enjoyed it. Shortly afterwards he collapsed and knowing from the passenger list that we had a Doctor on board (although at that stage I didn't know if he was a doctor of medicine) I asked if he could help, he readily agreed and examined the gentleman. He then told me that the man was dying and probably had only thirty minutes to live, we made him comfortable but he died twenty minutes later. His body had to be off loaded when we reached Alexandria awaiting a return to England for burial.

On another flight from Jo'burg back to U.K. we incurred engine trouble and had to make an emergency landing at Luxor. On examination by the ground engineers it was decided that a complete new engine was required which would have to be flown out from the U.K. and we were delayed for 3 days until it arrived and was fitted. This gave us the opportunity of visiting the many burial sites and historical treasures including the tomb of Tutankhamun.

On a flight to Jo'burg our touch down at Victoria Falls was on the Zambezi River, which was full of crocodiles. Our passengers would be disembarked by launch and the crew would wait for the launch to return. Whilst waiting we would hear noises from under the hull of the boat which would be the crocs nibbling at the barnacles that had formed. I always made sure when the launch was taking us back to the shore that I kept well away from the side because you could see the crocs following the launch with their noses just showing above the surface of the water.

In July 1949 I began to fly on the Far East route, again on Flying Boats. If the flight was to Hong Kong, if I remember correctly, the route would be Southampton to Sicily, Sicily to Alexandria, Alexandria to Bahrain or Karachi, Karachi to Ceylon or Rangoon and then onto Bangkok and Hong Kong. Any trips to the Far East, or in fact any long trip would be on the "slip system", that is, we would fly one leg of the flight handing over the aircraft to another crew who had "slipped" from a previous flight. We would then wait for the next flight to arrive and take over that aircraft for the next leg of the journey, whilst the arriving crew would "slip". Each time you slipped you would have a day or two off depending on the number of flights scheduled.

On my first trip to Hong Kong we had a young Chinese girl on board flying unaccompanied. During the flight she started being sick and to my dismay I saw a worm coming out of her mouth. I quickly got a newspaper and gathered up the worm, which was about 12 to 15 inches long. I asked the Radio Operator to request medical assistance at our next destination. When we landed we were met by the Medical Authorities who were anxious to have the worm and the little girl was hurriedly taken off to hospital.

On some trips to the Far East we would sometimes fly to Hong Kong, have a few days off before flying on to Singapore or Japan, and then fly back to Hong Kong before returning to the U.K. On trips to Singapore we stayed in the "Sea View Hotel" which was right on the sea front. I have since learned that in recent years so much land has been reclaimed from the sea that the Hotel is no longer on the waters edge. We were told that during the Japanese occupation the Hotel was used as a brothel for the Japanese Officers.

Another trip to the Far East was to Shanghai via Hong Kong and as it turned out it was the last scheduled flight by BOAC before the Communists took over. I remember lying in bed in the Hotel in Shanghai listening to the guns pounding away as the Communist forces pushed South and we were told next morning that the fighting was only 40 miles north of Shanghai. We were very pleased that we were due to fly back to Hong Kong that very morning.

In October 1949 I was transferred back to Heathrow to fly on the Canadair Argonaut aircraft and I remained for the rest of my flying career with BOAC on Argonauts. All my flights were to the Far East with one exception, that was to Argentina. This flight sticks in my mind for not only was it the only time I visited Argentina but flying just off the coast of Montevideo the Captain pointed out the masts of the "Graf Spey" (The German Battleship) which could be seen at low tide, which the Germans blew up after the River Plate battle.

I was scheduled for a trip on the 19th November 1950 to fly to Japan via Hong Kong with a return to the U.K. about two weeks before Xmas. Things went well until we reached Bangkok when we were informed that the ground engineers at Heathrow had gone on strike. Immediately all aircraft movement ceased and all aircraft were grounded wherever they were. All along the route crews were stranded for the period of the strike, which continued for 3 weeks. We were fortunate to be in Bangkok because we were able to go sight seeing and we visited the many Temples, Reclining Buddha etc. and went for trips on the River Mekong where many of the traders carried on their trades on boats on the river. We were made honorary members of the Bangkok Country Club where we could swim and watch Horse Racing. My friend Timber Woods another Bomber Command veteran was the Navigator on this trip and I think it was his suggestion that I uplift the Bar Box from the aircraft and bring it back to the Hotel, exclusively for the crew use, of course.

Way back in time the Royal family in Thailand had many concubines and at that time (1950) there were a number of Princes and Princesses who had royal connections although they had little money and often they had to work in order to live. BOAC employed a Prince as a traffic Manager and a Princess as a Receptionist. Even though the Princess had to work she still had her own servant to look after her needs, that is, housework and cooking. She had a small house within the confines of the Royal Palace grounds and she invited us to a meal there. The floors were made of highly polished wood and we were astounded when the servant came shuffling on her knees into the room carrying a tray loaded with food. We asked our hostess about this practice (Which we found rather embarrassing to us) and the Princess explained that the servant had always to be lower than us and as we were sitting down she had to be on her knees. I can remember saying to the Princess "Why don't you join us at the Country Club for a swim" and she replying "Oh no, Europeans swim in there" which I thought rather odd because I knew that she regularly swam in the Mekong River which was quite filthy and always littered with rubbish.

As we were stranded there for 3 weeks the Prince invited us to a Garden Party at his house. During the evening the Prince asked us if we would like to try a local delicacy called the "Thousand year old eggs". We had no idea what to expect but being British (Polite Buggers) we said we would try them. I think they must have been Ducks eggs because they were very large and upon cracking open the shell we found the yoke was black and what should have been the white was an amber colour. They looked most *unappetising* but we did not want to offend our host and said we would try half each. The taste was horrible and we declined a further helping particularly when our host told us that the preparation was by boiling the eggs in Horses urine. Later in the evening our host took us to a Cabaret where we watched Thai dancing and a floorshow. I danced with our host's wife and can now boast to my friends that I've danced with Royalty.

One evening we went to a floorshow, which we had to approach through a market place. The seats were situated almost up to the stage and featured a lot of young girls so lightly clad that it would not have been allowed in England. Another evening we spent at what was called a "Taxi Dance", why it was called that I have no idea. When you entered you bought a roll of tickets and this entitled you to dance with any of the girls there by presenting her with a ticket. She in turn would collect her commission from the management based on the number of tickets she had accumulated during the evening.

I asked one of my companions where the toilet was and he pointed out a door at the far end of the dance floor. Just as I approached the door a girl came out and I thought I had made a mistake. I gestured to my companion but he kept pointing to the door. Feeling a bit nervous I opened the door and saw on the right hand side of the room troughs for men and cubicles on the left for the girls. The girls would come out of the cubicles and stand at the mirrors combing their hair quite undisturbed by the men going about their business at the troughs. I think the Siamese are more open minded than we Europeans.

The strike finally ended and all the aircraft stranded at the various locations down the route were re-scheduled. Instead of going to Japan we were scheduled to go on to Hong Kong and then to return to the U.K. We only managed to get back to Rome by Xmas day and although it was disappointing not to have been home for Xmas the Hotel pulled out all the stops to make it an enjoyable day. The Hotel produced a gigantic Xmas pudding which the Head Waiter carried in on a tray and he proceeded to pour a liberal amount of Brandy over the pudding but unfortunately quite a lot went over his hands and when he applied a match to the Brandy the flames engulfed his hands as well as the pudding. Everyone burst out laughing at his expense until he managed to put the flames out when he himself burst into laughter.

These were interesting times but having sorted myself out I decided to leave in order to seek a career and settle down. Whilst reading one of the RAF Association newsletters I noticed that a Certified Accountant, who had lost his son on Bomber operations, was willing to take on and train an ex aircrew member in accountancy. As he had only a small practice in Sudbury, Suffolk, he would be unable to pay any salary. Having accumulated some savings I decided to join him. I took lodgings nearby and started work during the day and studying during the evenings. When I passed my first exam I decided to move back home and work for a local accountant whilst continuing my studies. During this time I met Reg Boone, we seemed to meet each other in the examination rooms every time we sat an exam. Eventually after both of us had qualified Reg asked me to join him in an accountancy partnership, I did, and we had an amicable partnership for twenty-one years until my retirement.

Finally, I consider myself to be one of the luckiest people alive. I could have been killed during any of my thirteen operations with Bomber Command, by flak or by German night fighters, or even during my training. Statistically, only one in three aircrew members survived, but on my thirteenth and final operation I know that I owe my life to my Skipper Micky Robinson. It is always assumed that the Skipper is the last person to leave his ship but it takes a very brave person to sit in his seat trying to stop his aircraft from diving into the ground, with the whole of the port wing on fire and the possibility of it exploding or breaking off, whilst the rest of the crew parachute out to safety. Tragically, both Air Gunners were killed after leaving the aircraft and are now at rest in the Berlin 1939-45 War Cemetery.

My memories of the good and bad in the war years are with me always and the comradeship that has ensued until this day is a wonder that is difficult to explain.

EPILOGUE

Since writing my Memoirs I have had the good fortune to be able to visit Germany (this time I had to have a passport and I was allowed to return to the U.K.) For many years it has been my wish to visit the resting place of the two Air Gunners in my crew at the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery. The son of a British Soldier who was a prisoner in Stalag 4B organized with the co-operation of the Burgermeisterin(Mayoress of Muhlberg) a visit to Berlin and Muhlberg. The party consisted of 90 people, that is, 29 Ex- POW's Widows and friends.

We flew to Berlin and stayed one night in a very nice hotel and after dinner a coach trip was organised to tour part of Berlin during which we saw part of the "Wall" which has been retained as a memorial to the separation of East and West Berlin.

The next day we visited the Cemetery where I was able to see the graves of Jack and Dennis and it brought home to me once again how incredibly lucky I had been. Interred in the Cemetery are the remains of 3580 men of the Allied Forces and one cannot be unaffected when reading the headstones and noting the ages of the men buried there, some in their teens. The coach then took us through the Brandenburg Gate and then to the Reichstag, which has obviously been rebuilt since 1945.

We left Berlin for the 120-mile journey to Muhlberg, which during the partition was in East Germany. On our arrival we were welcomed by the Mayoress and her numerous helpers, and she informed us that we were invited to a banquet in the Town Hall that evening put on by the, Initiative Group. The next day we went to Neuburxdorf Cemetery where the prisoners who died or were killed whilst, in the camp were originally buried. When the war ended the Russians occupied this part of Germany and the bodies were exhumed and re-interred in the Berlin Cemetery. A commemoration service was held and wreaths were laid. We then departed to visit the site of Stalag 4B. What a shock!

About May 1945 when all the allied prisoners had departed the Russians took over the camp and used it as an internment camp for German prisoners. A wall was built round the camp and the Germans were not allowed anywhere near the area. The prisoners suffered from cold and hunger, inadequate hygiene and poor medical care, no connection with the outside world was allowed, no letters, no news and relatives were not informed of the death of a prisoner. During the period 1945 to the end of 1948 6765 prisoners died in the camp. The Russians then demolished the camp, trees were planted and the whole area is now a forest. I was able to recognise the area where I was imprisoned purely because the base of the latrine still existed (being too thick to demolish) and I was able to visualise where my hut would have been. When the "Berlin Wall" came down the inhabitants of Muhlberg were allowed into the area and they have kept what remains of the camp as a memorial.

The following day we visited Colditz Castle which during the war years was used as a prison camp for Allied Commissioned Officers whom the Germans considered to be bad boys. It was considered by the Germans to be impregnable because of it's elevated position and its rock foundation. Numerous attempts to escape were made over the years without success for many of the prisoners but nevertheless 11 men made the "home run" between 1939 and 1945. On our way back from Muhlberg to Berlin the Mayoress of Muhlberg had made arrangements for us to visit a German Air Force station just outside Berlin. A meal was laid on for us and the Station Commander made a welcoming and amusing speech which was followed by an interesting visit to the airfield, meeting many of the German servicemen before departing for our return to Stansted.

