

The Long Walk Home

By Raymond Barlow

Before his death in September 1993 Raymond Barlow recorded the details of the crash of ED426 (Oct 43) and the subsequent events surrounding his and Don Ware's evasion from capture.

In 1943, three members of the crew died in a crash over France, two were captured, two escaped and with this story Raymond Barlow pays tribute to his friends and dedicates this story to Elmer Hepburn, in order to let his son and daughter know the bravery of their father.

It was 5 p.m. on 5th October 1943. After a routine kind of day, our crew as well as the rest of 49 Squadron were assembled in the briefing room at RAF Fiskerton, Lincolnshire. Now we know where we're going it's Stuttgart, the industrial centre in the south of Germany. The Briefing Officer told us the take-off time was 9.00 p.m. from RAF Dunholme Lodge and there was to be 500 bombers taking part in the raid. The target, a certain factory in Stuttgart - if we couldn't find it - we had to bring back the bombs.

An hour before take-off we arrived at RAF Dunholme Lodge, along with the other aircrews dressed in flying gear and carrying parachutes. Being the Wireless Operator and Air Gunner I also had a box of spare valves and parts for repairing the radio equipment in case of a fault or breakdown. Each of us had an escape kit, in case we needed to bail out. We were elated and thought it was our lucky night when the C.O., told us we were going to fly a brand new Lancaster Bomber and set about doing flight checks etc, only to find out that the new plane developed engine trouble on take-off. The Ground Mechanics worked hard on the bomber trying to get the engines working but to no avail, it couldn't be put right in time. The C.O. told us we would have to take the station's spare Lancaster which had been used for many months by every Tom, Dick and Harry for practising 'circuits and bumps' and was itself, badly in need of new engines. He justified this order by saying that the Air Ministry wanted 500 planes on the mission, not 499 but 500.

The ground crew transferred the armaments from the new to the old plane and fuelled up. By this time we were getting impatient to be off, we had been hanging around for an hour after watching the others fly off towards the target and by now the mainstream would be well on their way to Germany.

Eventually, we were on our way and with its heavy load of fuel and 10,000 lb. bomb the old plane struggled to get airborne and, in fact, just managed it at the very end of the runway. Just reaching 18,000 ft. by the time we got over the Channel. Over Holland we started 'windowing' this involved throwing bundles of strips of silver foil about 10" long and 1" wide, which gently floated downwards to confuse enemy radar and anti-aircraft guns. It was a moonlight night and looking out of the port side window, I could see the mainstream of our other bombers returning safely from their mission homeward bound for England. For them, on reaching base a luscious breakfast of bacon and eggs for which, we would be late.

My thoughts were very mixed, here we were an hour late going over enemy territory, which had by now been forewarned and were on the alert. We were sitting ducks but we wanted to keep afloat, determined to get it over with and claim our breakfast. As we approached the German town six or seven enemy fighters attacked us. Our Rear and Upper Gunners opened up with their Browning Machine Guns, you could hear the "rat-tat-tat-tat" reverberating around the plane and the night fighters soon decided to leave us alone. The nearer we got to the target the heavier the flak and the tension built as the shells seemed to be coming up very slowly towards us and then they would flash by the 'plane at lightning speed. We seemed to be in the middle of a firework display. We were ringed all around and being the only one over the target area, we were given the full treatment and felt very vulnerable indeed, just like clay pigeons. As we looked down at the ground below it was a mass of orange flames stretching for what seemed miles and miles. The bombers who preceded us had done a fantastic job with very accurate target bombing. The damage looked considerable and over a very wide area. Now it was time to make our contribution and Don, Tim and Elmer worked together to line up our bomber on an accurate course for the selected target. Tension was high as Elmer lay full length in the nose of the 'plane ready to drop our bomb (called 'Big Bertha') right on target. I heard Elmer shout "Bombs Away" and she was released. Next Elmer took photos of the inferno below.

What seemed like hours was in fact, minutes, and we couldn't wait to make a quick exit from our uneven battle.

One old Lancaster bomber droning around those alien skies against the spitting anger and venom of dozens of anti-aircraft guns aiming flak, the odds were just not fair, hence our anxiety to get out. With great relief we turned towards home and we all thought we'd got away with it and could breathe more easily.

Just as we thought we were safely away, I heard a hell of a thump on the starboard side then, the 'plane reverberated and shook and my stomach turned. A shell had hit us and the starboard engine was on fire, flames were lapping around and coming out of the starboard engine. Don feathered the crippled outer engine, leaving the propeller rotating but losing power from that engine - lady luck was looking away.

We were still at 18,000 ft. and Don changed to a northerly course, returning to base on three engines. In 10 minutes the fire had spread from the outer engine to the starboard inner engine, so we had to feather the inner one leaving that useless. We all knew how serious this was but nobody voiced the fears we all had. Don was having to struggle to keep control of the 'plane and the joystick had to be held in an unfamiliar position. We were losing height, speed was dropping and with only two engines left to carry us back. My thoughts were of Peggy my lovely wife of ten days and whether I would ever get back to see her smile and hear her laughter again, or I was snapped out of my reverie by Tim our Navigator, who came over the intercom saying we are over Northern France about 100 miles from Dover and at 2,000 ft. I could almost smell the longed for eggs and bacon breakfast waiting for me at base.

At that minute, we hit a ridge of high ground - height 2,000 ft. and all was darkness. As I was coming too, I could hear a cacophony of sounds - a continued shushing - explosions "rat-tat-tat-tat" of firing, what the hell was happening, where was I?

As I regained consciousness I could feel the heat, smell burning in the acrid air. The plane was a blazing inferno, alight from nose to tail, the extreme heat making the 10 machine guns fire their repeated "rat-tat-tat-tat", added to the deafening roars as the oxygen bottles exploded.

"Whoomph," the noise of debris crashing everywhere just behind me. I had to get out and fast if I was going to survive.

Just above my head was the escape hatch and I tried to open it, it wouldn't budge, we had hit trees at speed, which caused the fuselage to concertina and compress, making my task impossible. Not being able to escape, I staggered forward toward Don, choking on the smoke and roasting in the heat of the flames, fear was with me, was my companion, but I had to find the others. I could not see anything of Tim the Navigator or Archie the Engineer, nothing at all of the others, they must have got out. When I reached Don, he was slumped in his seat unconscious. I shook him, called him, shouted at him and slapped his face and, after what seemed an age, he came round to be confronted by our broiling, noisy hot pot, and of course the instinctive urge to escape from it.

On the left of Don was the slide window (used for shouting to the Ground Crew "chocks away"). After a struggle we managed to prise open the window. Not losing any time, Don was the first one out with me following hard on his heels. We landed slap-bang in the middle of burning undergrowth that had been ignited by fuel from the 'plane. We were still not free from the extreme heat engulfing the 'plane and undergrowth. Bullets from the machine guns were whizzing around our heads. This, together with the still exploding oxygen bottles still throwing debris around, all combining to create an unreal situation straight from Dante's Inferno. We had to get away and quick. We could see no other members of the crew so we thought that they had managed to get away safely from this hell, it was imperative that we followed suit.

Don and I stumbled away from the smoky wreckage of the 'plane and walked about a mile or so to hide from the Germans who, from their observation post, had spotted the flames coming from the woodland. We had to scramble into hiding when we saw a German jeep with soldiers on board and just managed to get into the undergrowth as they passed us, heading as we thought to the crash site which, was in a very remote part of France. We had come down in woods near a small village near Commercy, and after making a distance between ourselves and the site of the crash we were exhausted. The night was chilly so we covered ourselves over with the boughs of fir trees and slept back to back to keep warm.

The following day we walked for a while, there was an autumn chill and we were feeling hungry and very thirsty. Hiding in a quarry about 10 miles from the crash, we got rid of our flying gear, tearing off the lapels and badges from our uniforms. Using the knife, which had been hidden in them, we cut away the tops of our boots. Then we had to decide which border to head for the Spanish or Swiss, on the toss of a coin it was Switzerland much to my relief, (I wasn't sure about the Franco regime) so equipped with the compass from our escape kit we struck out south for the Swiss border 400 miles away. We skirted the towns and villages and kept to the woods as much as possible. Stealing apples and drinking from the rivers. We came across fields occupied by farmers and decided to hide in the woods until dark, then make ourselves known. They were surprised to see us but let us sleep the night in a shepherd's hut and we were given food and drink.

We were away again before daylight. Having learned that two of our crew members were alive, with their legs and arms broken they had been captured by the Germans, at least they were alive. We went on our way again, through the woods and fields, stealing food as we went along. The conditions were very cold and damp, but we were free and heading towards the border. We averaged about 25 miles per day. Dodging the Germans we made steady progress, whenever possible getting food from isolated farms. Once we heard a lorry coming in the distance. We wondered whether it would stop. It did, near the woods and as it was getting daylight we could see many Germans jumping out and running into the woods. We ducked and dived and then decided to borrow the lorry to help us.

By this time Don's feet were playing up and we were both suffering from upset stomachs. We managed to get the engine started and were feeling pretty good. We travelled all of ten yards when it stopped. We tried to start it but couldn't and then found out it was running on charcoal. It was the long walk for us again and we had to make a quick exit before the Germans came back for their lorry. At one point we reached a canal thought to be St. Joan. We struggled to get over in cover of darkness. We contacted the Lock Keeper who gave us food and drink after which, we trudged through the biggest woods ever and after five hours lay down at the foot of a massive tree and slept for a couple of hours.

By this time Don was having serious trouble with his feet, so we made for a little village and stopped for food and rest. The local Blacksmith gave us food and the luxury of a bed but we had to be away by 4 a.m. before daylight because the people of the village were very frightened of the Germans. Slightly refreshed we walked about 30 miles. The grass was damp and it was too wet to sleep. My thoughts as ever strayed and were with my wife Peggy. How was she coping with the news she would receive about me? At times being pulled away from our uncomfortable situation by such pleasing memories of our times together, remembering the funny episodes when we laughed together, also, our such tender moments, only to be jerked back into reality and the need to be on the alert.

Keeping to the fields we walked most of the day stealing apples as we went along, we bought beer from a shop in a remote village. At dusk, we came across another village where we asked for food and had a feast of bread cheese and wine. We tried to sleep in a mangle pit at the side of the road but were kept awake by the howling of a mad dog. We made our way again it was a wet and very miserable day. We were spotted by a German patrol and after a harrowing time of hide and seek we managed to get away in the long grass. Exhausted we reached a farm at 5 p.m. and stopped to beg for food.

We were invited in given food and warm hospitality. Had my first shave in 10 days, also a soft warm bed to sleep in (bliss). In the warm comfort of the bed my thoughts once again turned to my wife and in those pleasant thoughts I drifted into a fitful sleep. After a lovely breakfast and with kind generosity we were given coats, which served more than one purpose, cover as well as warmth. We were on our way again, it rained continually for two days and we got very wet, the sheepskin in our boots got quite soggy but we carried on. We managed to find carrots, apples or anything else edible to assuage our hunger. It was the time of year when farmers were storing the vegetables for winter so we made use of the straw they were using for warmth.

At one point we came across a ditch full of snakes, I jumped away shuddering I'd never seen so many. We kept an eye out for them from then on. Reached a village called Vanne and managed to get shelter in the loft of a barn.

After leaving Vanne we crossed a bridge which had been blown up at the beginning of the war at a place called Soing. It was early dawn and we came across German patrol cars, we made a hasty dive into the ditch just in time and breathed with relief when they passed by without stopping. Walking all day we reached fields being tended by uniformed people so decided to hole up until dark. Under the cover of the night we reached a village called Nouvelle le Chateau, got a bed for the night, next door to some German people!

It was now 12 days after the crash and we were taken to Baron Ferons Chateau to hide until the resistance could be contacted. He was living in the basement because the Germans had stripped the Chateau of all the furniture and paintings and the walls had been used for target practice. The Baron gave us food and drink and provided us with money which, he was printing in the basement. These marvellous people made us very welcome and we spent the night in the Chateau, we were no longer on our own in a strange environment. We met Claude a member of the resistance the next day at Velle le Chateau and a celebration was held at the local butchers - everybody invited to the party.

That evening slept at a friend's house in the village. After three days we were still hiding at the village getting rest and plenty to eat but we were anxious to get on our way. We were visited by a French Gendarme and given identity cards etc., The Resistance was very active in this area and blew up two bridges and killed three of the enemy. The plans for getting us away went awry somehow, we were taken in a lorry to Versoul to hide but the Burgermaster was very scared. We stayed with marvellous people in Versoul, plenty of food, drink, and rest. We played chess and went for walks in the daytime; we saw a German camp and R. D. F. post. We stayed in the house and were visited by a Resistance chief who promised to get news to my wife that I was safe and well. I was very worried about Peggy and could not get her out of my thoughts, otherwise everything else going well.

Things progressed well, we managed to hire a lorry and get clothes to cover our by now, dirty uniforms ready to travel to the Swiss border on the following morning. The French had managed to forge German Authorisation Papers and we were given Chemin- de-fer armbands.

The lorry was slow but better than walking. On the way we passed many Germans but thankfully, nobody took any notice of us. We saw a bombed factory at Mountbelliard-Su-Su works and stayed at the Post Office for the night to await the guides who were going to take us over the border. We kept out of sight of prying eyes during the daytime. We were joined by a French Diplomat who was going over the border at the same time, and we whiled away the time waiting until 8 p.m. the hour we were to set out.

On the hour we set out for Switzerland, walked over fields and crept through German frontier posts. A dog barking on the German side alerted the guards that there was something going on, so we had to run for our lives over the fields and in so doing, lost our way. At last we regained the right path and stealthily crept on our hands and knees into Switzerland where we offered up a prayer of thanks. We stayed at a Swiss Farm until 4 p.m. where I tried to persuade Don to carry on to The British Legation, but he decided to give himself up. The Police were contacted and we were put on a train for Porrentruy at Hotel Swiss where we stayed, relaxed in the sure thought of being safe for the first time since we crashed.

Once in Switzerland and the formalities of interrogation completed, Don Wares with others were interned at Lugano. I was lucky and went to Berne where I was able to communicate with my wife Peggy and receive letters from her, we were apart but we were safe in the knowledge that we would see each other again. I worked at the Swiss Embassy a few hours a day handing out clothes to personnel entering Switzerland. On one occasion meeting a chap from Nottingham my home county and we had lots to talk about.

Listened to the BBC Radio and heard the news that the American and British troops had invaded Southern France.

4th October 1944 departed Lausanne at 3.30.

Departed Geneva 5.30 en route to France.

Caught a train to Annecy, went by car to the aerodrome.

Departure was delayed.

5th October, weather no good for flying, was taken by the Marquis to see seven Frenchmen shot for collaborating.

They were buried on the spot in graves dug by Germans.

6th October, left Annecy at 10.a.m.went to Lyon by lorry.

Got a Dakota and arrived at Croydon 6 p.m.

Arrived London 7.30.

Arrived St. Albans at 11.p.m.

I was over the moon ,Peggy was waiting for me at the Station, what a sight for sore eyes. I was home! Some weeks later, I was very proud to receive a Silver Boot given to evaders from the RAF Escaping Society.

Demob came in June, 1945, the war had finally finished. The two crew members taken prisoner of war were released from a camp in Poland. Don Wares went home to Liverpool , Gill Attwood returned to Birmingham and Archi Fitzgerald went to Perth, Australia, where Gill joined him at a later date.