

My recollections of a night bombing raid upon
Mailly le Camp, France, on Wednesday 3rd May 1944
By Ron Eeles



The morning of the 3rd may commenced as any routine day at RAF Fiskerton the home of 49 Squadron in 5 Group, Bomber Command.

The crew of Lancaster ND647 (EA-N) in "B Flight" was:

Pilot	P/O	G E Ball	(Ted or Skipper)
Flight Engineer	Sgt	E Wardman	(Eric/Ricky)
Navigator	Sgt	G Millar	(George)
Bomb Aimer	Sgt	G A Rae (RCAF)	(Ray)
Wireless Operator	Sgt	J Kernahan	(Ian)
Mid Upper Gunner	Sgt	E E Quick	(Speedy)
Rear Gunner	Sgt	R H Eeles	(Squiggle)

The five original members of the crew, excluding the Flight Engineer and the Mid Upper Gunner had been together since late July 1943 when "crewed up" at 29 OUT Bruntingthorpe, Leics on Wellingtons with completion of training in October following a leaflet raid (Nickel) to Orleans on 8th October.

Conversion to Sterlings took place during December 1943/early January 1944 followed by No5 LFS (Lancaster Finishing School) with posting to 49 Squadron, Fiskerton in late January in company with Sgt Bert Shinn and crew who had been in the same training programme with our crew since posting to 29 OTU in late July.

My pilot's first squadron operation was as "second dickey" with W/O Jupp to Berlin on 15th February 1944 whilst due to a shortage of rear gunners I flew on this same operation with P/O Meggison in ND412.

Sgt Ball was commissioned after this operation and the first operation as a full crew was to Schweinfurt on the 24th February 1944.

This was followed by:

Augsburg	25 th February
Stuttgart	1 st March
Stuttgart	15 th March
Frankfurt	18 th March
Frankfurt	22 nd March
Berlin	24 th March
Essen	26 th March
Nurenburg	30 th March
Toulouse	5 th April
Danzig Bay	9 th April
Tours	10 th April
Schweinfurt	26 th April
Oslo	28 th April
Toulouse	1 st May
Mailly Le Camp	3 rd May

The day was uneventful until we were advised that operations were on for that evening. I cannot recall whether a NFT was carried out prior to briefing. The briefing details stressed the importance of Mailly le Camp which was a training camp for tanks and the need to destroy it in company with 1 Group.

As a crew we were apprehensive of the raid arrangements in view of the planned concentration of aircraft over the target in a short space of time, particularly as crews were given bombing heights with only 100ft variations in altitude which obviously increased the risk of collision.

Our individual bombing height was to be 7100ft and the target was to be marked by W/C Leonard Cheshire in a Mosquito aircraft. Our bomb load was high explosive bombs only.

A F/O Martin DFM (AG) was to accompany us. I understand his task was to observe anti aircraft activity. As for us I recall he was not attached to Squadron strength.

Our take off time was 21:57 with the usual "wave off" by Station personnel at the end of the runway. I had a sense at this time that something was different, as I did not have the usual exhilaration when taking off on full power. Due to this feeling of foreboding I thought I would not be coming back and that something was going to happen. What also struck me as strange was that when I entered the turret at dispersal for the first time ever the wireless operator closed the turret doors behind me as they were difficult to close oneself with full flying clothing due to the restricted space and I had thanked him.....the last time I was ever to speak to any member of the crew.

The flight to the target area was uneventful. At the lower than usual operational height I found my electrically heated suit was unnecessary and I kept switching it on and off to maintain a reasonable temperature.

On arrival at Mailyly we were directed to proceed to a point some fifteen miles away and there to orbit a yellow marker. After a few minutes we did not like this at all and the crew were worried as visibility was clear and good and we knew from experience the dangers of hanging around enemy territory any longer than absolutely necessary.

We were circling this flare for approximately half an hour and becoming increasingly worried as it appeared impossible to receive any radio instructions due to an American Forces Broadcasting Station blasting away. I remember only too well the tune, "Deep in the heart of Texas", followed by hand clapping and noise like a party going on. Other garbled talk was in the background but drowned by the music.

Whilst this noise was taking place I was suddenly aware from my position that several Lancasters were going down in flames, about five aircraft and the fire in each was along the leading edge of the mainplane. I saw some of the planes impact on the ground with the usual dull red glow after the initial crash.

My job was to keep my eyes open for enemy aircraft so I did not dwell for more than fleeting seconds on those shot down planes.

At this stage I did not see any night fighter activity nor anti aircraft fire but with regard to the latter we were still orbiting fifteen miles from Mailly.

At about 00:30hrs my pilot commenced his run in to the target and I could then see several planes burning on the ground. I do not remember hearing any instructions to the pilot from outside sources but obviously he would have obtained clearance to proceed with the bombing.

During the bombing run, with the bomb aimer directing the pilot, there was a sudden huge bang and a blinding pink/red flash along the port side of the aircraft, followed immediately by the pilot saying (not shouting), "Christ put on chutes chaps". Within a second of this the plane was hit again by flak along the fuselage. There was a sizzling sound in the intercom system and then it went dead. The pink red glow on the port side persisted and I assumed we were on fire.

I was disconnecting my electric suit plug and leaving my flying helmet on the seat when I now come to a point that has always mystified me, and to this day I still think of it at times.....I had a vision of my Mother's face outside of the turret and she was saying 'Jump son, jump', I was at this stage about to vacate the turret anyway. My experience of this vision may not be believed and that is why I have never recounted it to anyone before, but I can assure anyone it is perfectly true.

On leaving the turret and attaching my parachute I saw the mid-upper gunner (Sgt 'Speedy' Quick) already opening the door with an axe. As I reached him he jumped; I could see nothing in the fuselage as it was full of smoke and the plane seemed out of control. I rolled out the door in the recommended way although my legs brushed along the underside. Fortunately my flying boots stayed on."

I have no recollection of pulling the parachute's "D" ring although I had it in my grasp as I baled out. I have simply no idea when it was pulled.

Being at a low level the descent did not take long but it was quite a pleasant sensation whilst it lasted. I was unaware of any noise but would have been a distance from Mailly. I came down somewhere in the area of Rheims.

On looking down during the descent I thought I was heading towards what I thought was a small lake surrounded entirely by woodland. Suddenly and unexpectedly I landed heavily in what turned out to be a clearing and not water.

Although I did not realize it I was actually floating backwards but on hitting the ground my head was protected by the padded area of my Taylor suit otherwise I would probably have been injured about the head.

On the ground I could hear bangs, maybe bombs in the distance and shouts and dogs barking in the vicinity. I freed my parachute harness and discarded my Taylor and inside electrical suits. The chute drifted across the open space and came to rest against the nearby trees. I tore off my beret and Sergeants chevrons and placed them in my battle dress pocket.

I made no attempt to hide or bury the chute and left the area. I recall at this time a Mosquito flying past very low and fast in the direction of Mailly presumably to take a last look at the target.

For the remainder of the night I kept walking and at dawn, heard voices in a nearby field by a large fire. As I was uncertain if this was a crashed aircraft with military or merely farm workers I gave the area a wide berth. At this time an Observation plane approached at low altitude and slow speed very close to where I was. I hid behind a tree and do not think I was noticed,

Walking on, I came to the outskirts of a village and saw German troops and motorcycles and sidecars manned by soldiers. Cautiously approaching the end small cottage in this village I rushed through the front door. A very elderly Frenchman and his yapping dog were naturally surprised and he tried to push me out shouting, "Allemandes, Allemandes."

In view of the noise and perhaps his fear that I was in his cottage, I immediately left and ran out of the village. All I really wanted to know was where I was as I had my silk escape map with me.

I next remember coming up towards an isolated large house but remember nothing further. Although I was not injured in any way I must have passed out. I suppose it was probably about 9am.

When I came to, I was lying on the ground and I was being kicked about the body. On opening my eyes a German officer was pointing a pistol at my head and I was surrounded by several soldiers.

I was walked back, I believe to the same village I had left, searched in some presumably Army HQ and then taken to a cell. Whilst there I was told a rear gunner had been taken out of the turret of a crashed plane and was badly injured. I asked if I could see him but the request was refused.

After two days I was taken to another town where I was placed in a cell with a Navigator from 50 Squadron - his name long since forgotten- but after a few hours we were separated. He was shot down on the Maily raid also.

Thereafter I was taken under guard to an Interrogation Centre near Frankfurt. Arriving in Frankfurt in the late evening a bombing raid was in progress and I was taken by my guard into a large air raid shelter. Local inhabitants did not seem concerned although there would be no doubt that I was a shot down flyer.

After twelve days in solitary confinement apart from two interrogations, I was passed out to the transit camp. There I met "Speedy" Quick who had become attached to the small HQ Staff working in the kitchens and distributing clothing and Red Cross food etc. He had no news of the other members of the crew and we concluded that they must have all been killed.

I was then moved to the RAF Officers camp at Stalag Luft 3, Sagen in Silesia. My POW number was 4912. There were about a dozen aircrew sergeants in this compound of some 7/800 RAF officers. We were attached to the kitchens to collect rations, distribute soup and generally be useful.

In January 1945 the camp was evacuated due to the Russian advance from the east. We were part walked, part entrained in cattle trucks in dreadful winter conditions to a Kriegsmarine camp between Hamburg and Bremen.

Late March saw us on the march again in an easterly direction because of the Allied advance. We would walk during the day and be herded into the fields at night. Many times our marching columns would be subject to attack from Typhoon fighters and casualties were sometimes incurred.

For about three days we were billeted at a large farm where we were liberated by Comet tanks of the British army. We were then taken by road to an airfield and then flown home by RAF Lancasters. We were then transferred to the Rehabilitation Centre for aircrew POWs at RAF Cosford where I again met "Speedy" Quick on the railway station steps.

One subsequently learned that on the Mailly le Camp raid 42 Lancasters were lost out of 346 dispatched. 5 Group losing 14 planes and 1 group 28 planes out of 173.

The crew of ND647, less the two gunners managed to return to base in a severely damaged aircraft following an attack by a night fighter after the anti aircraft damage. The pilot was awarded an immediate DFC.

The crew, with two other Squadron gunners went on to fly operationally, but towards the end of their tour they were shot down on the 7/8th July 1944 during an attack on a V1 site at St Lue d'Esserent (Criel).

Written by Ronald Hubert Eeles