

Excerpt from 'Men Behind the Medals ' by Graham Pitchfork.....

### The Magnificent Seven - Sydney Smith

Just after midnight on the night of 25 September, 1942, Lancaster R 5724 of 61 Squadron was crossing Denmark after a successful mine-laying operation in the Baltic Sea when an anti-aircraft shell smashed into the rear of the bomb bay. Sitting just above the fierce fire which broke out was the mid-upper gunner, Sydney Smith. Over the next four hours, he and his six young colleagues fought to bring their severely damaged bomber home.

Sydney Smith, of Bolton, Lancashire, had enlisted in the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve as a Wireless Operator/Air Gunner in late 1940, shortly after his eighteenth birthday. Qualifying as an air gunner in early 1942, he joined 61 Squadron at RAF Syerston on 9 September, after completing his training at 19 Operational Training Unit and 1654 Heavy Conversion Unit.

Equipped with the Lancaster Mk I, the Squadron had just returned to bombing operations after a short period operating from St Eval in Cornwall on anti-submarine patrols with Coastal Command. During this period, the aircraft that is central to this story had become the first Bomber Command aircraft to sink a U-boat.

With five other young Sergeants, who had all joined the Squadron together, Sydney Smith was crewed with Flight Sergeant Paul Campbell, an experienced captain with twenty-two operational sorties already to his credit. On the night of 19 September, they took off for Munich on their first sortie. With the starboard inner engine failing, Campbell decided to jettison his bombs in the North Sea and return to base three hours after take-off. Five nights later, with his novice crew of five and Sergeant Mike Gunnell flying as second pilot, Campbell took off at 2100 hours, heading for the Baltic on a 'Gardening' sortie. The 'vegetables' were dropped in the briefed position and the bomber turned for home returning over Denmark. Flying over the town of Viborg at 6,000 feet, the aircraft was engaged by the anti-aircraft batteries and two shells hit R 5724 with devastating effect.

The first shell hit the rear part of the bomb bay starting a major fire as flares and distress signals ignited. Simultaneously, another shell burst in the nose, blowing in all the perspex and the majority of the perspex of the pilot's cupola, with the exception of the front windscreen. The bomb aimer, Sergeant F. Bunclark, was blown back alongside the pilot and Sergeant Gunnell, the second pilot, was knocked to the floor, landing by the navigator's compartment. Both pilots and the bomb aimer, as well as Sergeant E. Corbett the navigator and Sergeant C. Coakley, the wireless operator, received facial burns.

The aircraft was full of smoke, preventing the pilot from seeing his instruments, and, as the crew started to assess the situation, two fighters attacked the damaged bomber. Cannon and machine-gun fire struck the aircraft, with cannon fire hitting the rear turret, seriously wounding the gunner, Sergeant S. Thompson. Further hits were registered on the mid-upper turret setting off the ammunition and causing serious burns to Sydney Smith. The aircraft stalled and lost 2,000 feet before the smoke cleared sufficiently for the pilot to regain control. He immediately dived for some cloud just below them in order to escape the fighters and the anti-aircraft fire.

By now there was a big fire in the fuselage and ammunition was exploding in all directions inside the aircraft. The rear gunner had a broken leg and was unable to leave his turret. Sydney Smith left his mid-upper turret and started to beat out the flames with his flying jacket and his hands, at one point attempting to smother the flames by throwing his body on the fire. With the help of the navigator and the bomb aimer, Smith then fought his way through the fire, pulled the rear gunner out of the turret and carried him to the rest chair. The fire was still of considerable proportions and the floor of the fuselage was largely burnt away. Their efforts were then re-directed to getting the fire under control, which they almost achieved before the last of the fire extinguishers was emptied, leaving the fire to smoulder for the rest of the flight.

With the perspex missing from the nose and most of the pilot's cupola, there was a constant gale blowing through the aircraft. All the maps, navigation and wireless logs had been blown out of the aircraft when the shell exploded in the nose. The wireless operator, Sergeant Coakley, immediately set about trying to raise his home base. He transmitted an SOS over the Danish coast and gained contact. He then obtained a succession of bearings which the pilots steered throughout the long crossing of the North Sea. With no navigation aids, these bearings were to prove vital for the safe return. Throughout the return flight he remained at his post despite considerable burns to his face and hands. His captain was to describe his work as 'absolute wonders, especially as it was his first operational trip'.

The second pilot, Sgt Gunnell, nursed the engines and the petrol supplies before taking over the controls to give the captain some respite from the intense cold. He was to remain at the controls for two hours before exhaustion forced him to hand back to the captain just as they crossed the coast at Mablethorpe. The searchlights were waiting for them and they were directed towards the Wash. Despite lowering cloud and bad weather, the Wittering searchlight canopy was identified and Flight Sergeant Campbell decided to attempt a landing.

On arrival, the crew discovered that the hydraulic system had been shot away and, despite using the emergency system, the undercarriage and flaps could not be lowered. With most of the parachutes destroyed by fire, a belly landing was inevitable. The captain ordered crash positions and Sydney Smith immediately placed his wounded body over the seriously injured gunner in a selfless act to protect his comrade. Despite his wounds and fatigue, the captain made a perfect crash landing without further damage to the aircraft or injury to the crew.

The next morning the true extent of the damage to the Lancaster could be seen and reports at the time spoke of a 'miracle landing' and the Wittering ground crew were 'baffled that this aircraft could fly'. A local paper reported that 'it was amazing that any plane could have got home in such a condition'. The aircraft had completed its twenty-fifth and final war sortie and was declared 'beyond economical repair'.

Sydney Smith and the rear gunner were to spend time in Rauceby Hospital recovering from their wounds. The captain compiled his report and of Sydney Smith he wrote, 'He did exceptional and courageous work in getting under control a very serious fire at great personal risk and in getting Sergeant Thompson out of his turret, over the fire and to the rest bunk where he remained to comfort and protect him'.

Within a few days it was announced that the Commander-in-Chief of Bomber Command, Sir Arthur Harris had approved the immediate award of the Distinguished Flying Medal to all seven members of the crew, an almost unprecedented event. In addition, the captain was awarded an immediate field commission.

The legendary Group Captain Gus Walker, Station Commander at RAF Syerston, wrote in the recommendation for Smith's DFM that he had displayed 'outstanding gallantry and devotion to duty.' Most unusually, Air Vice Marshal W. A. Coryton, the Air Officer Commanding 5 Group, added to all seven recommendations a hand-written comment:

'After having inspected this aircraft, I strongly support this recommendation. It is almost inconceivable that any crew could have carried on for the four-hundred-mile sea crossing and land without further incident.'

A few months after this incident, it was announced that a new medal had been authorised for gallantry in the air. There can be little doubt that had the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal been available, then the captain and most of his crew would have received this award which is second only to the Victoria Cross for non-commissioned aircrew. On 24 November, 1942, Sergeant Sydney Smith attended Buckingham Palace to receive his medal from His Majesty the King.

Tragically, his captain, Flight Sergeant Campbell and Sergeants Bunclark, Coakley and Corbett were not with him. Five days earlier they had been killed attempting a crash landing in Devon while returning from a minelaying operation in the Bay of Biscay in their badly damaged Lancaster.

On 6 December, Sydney Smith returned to operations with 61 Squadron. With Flying Officer Foster as captain of Lancaster W 4236, he took part in the attack on Mannheim. Three nights later he was over Turin. However, it was clear that he had not fully recovered from his injuries and he was rested for six months during which time he served in a ground appointment with 49 Squadron.

After refresher training and a course at 1652 Heavy Conversion Unit at Marston Moor, he joined 78 Squadron operating the Halifax from the 4 Group station at RAF Brighton in East Yorkshire just as the Battle of Berlin was opening.

Flight Sergeant Sydney Smith's first operation was on 31 August, 1943, the second major attack against Berlin, but engine failure forced a turn back over the North Sea. With Sergeant W. H. Scott as captain, he took off in Halifax Mk II, JD 417 ('Q') on 5 September for Mannheim, which was bombed from 18,000 feet. They returned safely, but the Squadron was to lose three of its aircraft on the raid. During this period the casualties among the heavies of Bomber Command was on the increase as the Luftwaffe night fighter force developed tactics to combat the increasingly sophisticated aids and deception methods of the bomber force. However, Sydney Smith was to complete three more bombing sorties without incident. On 8 October, Sergeant Scott's all Sergeant crew took off in LW 236 at 2236 hours to join 503 other heavy bombers for an attack on Hanover. After take-off, nothing more was heard of the aircraft or its crew.

On the night of 8th October, the Luftwaffe air defence control system had been badly confused by the RAF's tactic of attacking two major cities (the other being Bremen) on the same night. Among their few successes was Halifax LW 236 which had been shot down near Diepholz as it approached Hanover. The rear gunner, Sergeant L. W. Colman, parachuted to safety and capture, but Sydney Smith and his five comrades died. They rest together in the British Military Cemetery at Hannover-Limmer. Three days later Sydney Smith's 21-year-old brother Jack was killed as he stormed Monte Cassino in Italy.

Courage was no stranger to the Smith brothers. During the First World War, their father had been awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field. Today, neighbours in Blackburn Road, Bolton still remember the smart, cheerful and gallant Sydney Smith and his brother.

CONFIDENTIAL.

RECOMMENDATION FOR IMMEDIATE AWARD.

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Christian Names: Sydney,

Surname: SMITH,

Rank: Sergeant,

Official Number: 1128846

Command or Group: No. 5 Group,  
Bomber Command.

Unit: No. 61 Squadron.

Total hours flown on operations: 8.15

Number of sorties: 1

Recognition for which recommended: Immediate D.F.M.

Appointment held: Mid upper gunner.

Particulars of meritorious service for which the recommendation is made, including date and place.

Sgt. Smith was mid upper gunner to F/Sgt. Campbell on the night of 24/25th September, 1942. When the aircraft was hit by A.A. and fighter fire his turret was set on fire and ammunition was bursting all around him. He immediately went to the scene of the main fire in the fuselage and was the first to attempt to extinguish it. He was considerably burnt about the hands and face and body before he attacked the fire. Nevertheless, he stripped off his flying clothing and fell on top of the fire on his clothing. He then greatly assisted in extracting the rear gunner from the tail turret and played a major part in getting the fire under control. Despite his injuries he returned to his post for the remainder of the trip.

It is considered that Sgt. Smith displayed outstanding gallantry and devotion to duty and contributed greatly to the safe return of the aircraft and crew.

Date... 27/9/42

*J. Walker*  
GROUP CAPTAIN, COMMANDING,  
R.A.F. STATION, SYERSTON.

Remarks by Air or other Officer Commanding. *After having inspected this aircraft I strongly support this recommendation. It is almost inconceivable that any crew would have carried on for the four hundred miles the way they went without further incident.*

Date... 30/9/42

*W.A. Cooper*  
Air Vice-Marshal,  
Commanding No. 5 Group, R.A.F.

The recommendation for Smith's Immediate DFM endorsed personally by Air Officer Commanding No 5 Group