

The unfinished memoirs of Sgt W A Boyd

Dickens wrote in the first line of a tale of two cities, "It was the best of times-it was the worst of times".

In retrospect it seems to me it was just that for young bomber crews of the RAF in 1943. We were all volunteers and, having passed the aircrew selection board exam and medical, one was obviously fit and reasonably bright. Not every volunteer passed. Wearing a white flash to indicate aircrew under training; passing out; awarded wings; meeting the other members of your crew; flying for the first time; night flying tests; cross country's; bombing practice; low-level flying; bullseyes; - all pretty exciting stuff: - The best of times!

I suppose the aircrews of the RAF were looked upon as glamour boys.

The worst was yet to come!

Training over, we were posted to 49 Squadron, Fiskerton, Lincolnshire, flying Lancaster 3's. We were given one week's leave and I remember clearly when I arrived home my father did is something he had never done before - he shook my hand. Perhaps he was proud I had made aircrew. I like to think so. My mother was more restrained, perhaps she felt foreboding.

Our first operation as a crew was mine-laying off the Dutch coast. Fairly uneventful: Flew to a few miles off the Dutch coast and dropped parachute mines from a fairly low altitude. A German flak ship loosed a few rounds off at us but we were well out of range. "Piece of cake" was the expression for an easy trip. My logbook says we were airborne three and three-quarter hours. We must have been back in bed soon after midnight. So it went on through the summer of '43 - Cologne, Essen, Dortmund, Milan, Düsseldorf, etc. Hamburg of course: Ah yes, Hamburg! Three times to Hamburg: Twice with other crews because of an injury to our pilot. I flew to Hamburg with Sgt Edy and crew on the second Hamburg raid. Over the target I got out of my seat to stand by the pilot and watch out for night fighters who like to attack over the target.

A radar controlled group Searchlight moved down the side of the craft, round the nose, down the other side, round the tail and started along the side again. Suddenly he had us and immediately we were coned by 200 searchlights from all around the city. We were at 21,000 feet, say 4 miles, caught in a blizzard of light and ribbons of flak snaking their way skywards to destroy us. Fortunately we had just dropped our bombs so that Edy just stuck the nose straight down and I, standing on the cockpit floor, became weightless - and immediately shot into the overhead canopy. If it had not been there I would have gone out into the night. Edy then pulled out and stuck the nose up. Gravity took over and I was smashed onto the floor. As I scrambled to my feet he stuck the nose down again and up I went trapped horizontally in the canopy. Nose up and again I am smashed to the floor. A side step to port and one to starboard and we are out. Brilliant, quite brilliant to get us out of that situation. It looked pretty terminal at one period.

My intercom had been pulled out of the socket. I plugged it in and asked the pilot if he was okay. He raised his hand and switched on his mike but could barely answer: He was breathless. The effort had been prodigious. We were now down to 11,000 feet. The kite had been thrown all over the sky and we were all pretty well shaken up. However we gradually left the target area climbing to operational height and returned to base without further incident. Over the North Sea and way off our port side we saw aircraft a bit off track, adrift over Kiel or Wilhelmshaven, who looked to be taking a pounding. We were grateful to be clear of trouble. Oddly enough we had dropped our bombs in the target area and had a photo to prove it. Having bombed we had to fly straight and level whilst the camera in the flare chute took a picture of where the bombs would explode. We felt it was during the straight and level 2-minute period that the radar-controlled searchlight was able to lock onto us. I still have the "Aiming Point" award. Each member of the crew was given a picture of a Lancaster with the name of the crew; Hamburg raid; date - signed by the AOC.

[Note inserted by WAB: "There are many books relating to incidents shared by bomber crews on Ops. I would rather write about how I ended up in Stalag IVB; life in the camp; and, after 2 years, release by the Russian Army; and the journey home".]

A hairy moment or two over Hamburg without a doubt - but we had a very similar occurrence over Pilsen in then Czechoslovakia. Our third trip was to bomb the Skoda works at Pilsen. They produced the sten-gun, a much respected weapon in those days. The story was that, in the hands of a good marksman, three shots could be put in the same hole from 500 yards. I wonder! However, our task was to bomb the Skoda works. On our bombing run with Jim our bomb-aimer intoning left, left, right a little, etc we were suddenly found by the blue searchlight and immediately coned. The flak started to snake up. To his credit Jim carried on as if nothing had changed until, to our relief, "Bombs gone"! I immediately closed the bomb doors and just as they closed there was a terrific bang under the aircraft which shook us up. An Ack-Ack shell had burst underneath us and there were holes through the bomb doors, the floor of the aircraft, and through the top of the fuselage. The maintenance fitters counted over 100 holes in the aircraft - the largest as big as a football. They were through the bomb-bay where our bomb load had been hanging 20 seconds before we were hit.

We had descended to some 8000 feet to properly identify the target but somehow Robbie our pilot got us out of the searchlights' glare with some fairly violent but slick manoeuvres. On the way home we were attacked by a night fighter over Holland. Our two gunners Jack and Dennis were battering away at him and claimed he went down. It must have been confirmed by the Dutch Resistance, as they were both given the DFM posthumously. A long difficult night and our first real brush with the "Worst of times". Fortunately we arrived back to base and landed safely. The controls and services on the aeroplane had escaped undamaged. We were lucky.

I could say 17 August 1943 dawned bright and clear, but truthfully I don't remember. By lunchtime there were rumours that there was a big effort tonight. We did a 20 minute NFT in the afternoon. As we walked to the crew-bus after landing, a petrol bowser moved in to refuel. We knew if anything, we were most certainly going. Back in the crew-room we headed for the notice-board. Sure enough, there it was; the following crews to report for briefing at 6 pm. Plenty of nervous excited chatter as we entered the briefing room. Where the hell are we going tonight? The familiar blackboard had the usual map of Europe covered by a cloth so, until the CO pulled the covering off, we could not know the route or target.

Sector Leaders took their seats in the front row: Engineering, Navigation, Wireless Ops, Gunnery; etc - plus the Weatherman. Finally the CO shows up and respectfully we stand up en masse as he takes his place facing the assembled aircrews. His opening gambit was dramatic in the extreme: "Tonight's target is so important that if you do not destroy it tonight you will go back tomorrow night and the night after". Everyone sat up with a jolt as he whipped off the covering on the blackboard. "Bloody hell it's Berlin", were the loudly whispered comments - but wait: The return route started long before Berlin-on the Baltic coast. Wing Cmdr Johnson, our CO, had a sharp staccato voice he delivered in spades: "Your target tonight is Peenemünde on the Baltic coast". Peenemünde? Never heard of it! Stettin and Lubeck on the Baltic - yes we had been there - but Peenemünde? Johnson ploughed on ignoring the murmuring: "This is a very important high priority target and must, I emphasise 'must', be destroyed". The route takes you over Denmark, north to the top of the island of Rügen by which time you have descended to 8000 feet. You then execute a time and distance run to the target and bomb from 8000 feet. The Meteorologist told us the weather was no problem - no cloud. Yes - and a bloody full-moon! The CO said Section Leaders would brief crews in the Conference Room. From my point of view, as Flight Engineer, I needed to know the full load, and the most economical engine revs and boost at the different heights we would be flying. Johnson said take off 9:30 PM and wished us good luck. It was soon over. Off to the Section Leader's briefing which lasted some 15 minutes. Teatime and all those on Ops were entitled to fried-egg. Eggs were scarce and rationed. Powdered egg yes, but fried-eggs a delicacy!

Back in the hut for a short rest. Some guys wrote letters to their wives and girlfriends in case they got the chop. Some of these men were old guys in their 30's, with wives and kids with much more to lose than we 19- and 20-year-olds, with a totally different outlook.

Walk back to the crew room to clobber up. Silk long-johns; flying boots; Mae West ; check the parachute; escape kit, complete with Deutschmarks; flying helmet and oxygen mask; torch - wedged in your flying boot. So many things to remember. Help Jack the Canadian rear-gunner on with his electrically heated suit: Can be hellish cold in the rear turret. [I reminded him of our trip to Mannheim 10 days earlier: It was my job to call every member of the crew every 20 minutes to confirm all was well.

Soon after leaving the target, Jack did not respond. Robbie our pilot asked me to put on the portable oxygen bottle and go aft to see if he was okay. Gunners have been sick in their masks which froze and cut off the oxygen supply. Many gunners lost their lives in this way. However I did as ordered and clambered over the main spar back to the tail of the aircraft, giving the mid-upper gunner a pat on the leg as he swung around in his turret. He had heard the interchange between the pilot and myself so he was aware of the situation. Reaching the rear turret I plugged into the spare intercom socket and called Jack: No reply. His turret was centralised so I banged on the doors which to my relief he opened. I pointed to his intercom plug which he pushed home and, hey presto, contact restored. A gloved handshake and I set off back to my position at the front of the aircraft. When I got there I had the surprise and shock of my life: to starboard an aircraft had drifted over a town, had been coned, and was taking a fearful battering. We thought he went down but could not be sure. More to the point it could have been us and - being at the rear of the aircraft without a parachute at 21,000 feet - is not to be recommended. It could have spoiled my evening].

Into the crew bus with four other crews. The WAAF driver knew the position of all the B- Flight kites parked around the perimeter. The crew-bus was always very quiet - it was getting serious and we all knew it. Time for a little retrospection: I recall Squadron Leader Todd-White being in the bus: he and his crew had been on the station about a week and this was the second trip of their second tour. More of them later. Crews dropped off as they reached their aircraft to shouts of good luck and, "You will never get out of this", from some cynic. Finally, our turn, and out we jump with our gear. There she is: JA 892, ready to go, and the ground crew waiting to greet us. The pilot has a word with the Sergeant in charge. I have a word with the leading Fitter. All instruments working okay? Occasionally, in the final engine run-up, an instrument (with time short and no replacement immediately available) a strip of sticky paper with "U/S" scrawled on it would be stuck on the face of the instrument. If it was an RPM indicator or boost gauge it was no real problem. By keeping the throttle position of the engine with the duff instrument at the same setting as the other three, all went well.

The gunners and the bomb-aimer had a word with the Armourers; and the wireless operator with the Signals. On occasion there had been minor changes to the bomb load - more incendiaries and less high explosive - or vice versa. In that event the armourers worked feverishly executing the change, trying not to delay take-off time. At such times I used to look in the bomb-bay and wonder how the hell we got off the ground okay - packed with high explosives and other nasties and we were sitting on top of it! Some crews were very superstitious. In some instances the pilot boarded first, in others he boarded last. Some rear gunners always peed on the tail-wheel. Other guys took a pair of their wife's or girlfriend's panties out of their pocket and ceremoniously wore them as a cravat.

Finally all aboard and in position ready to go. Thumbs up to the engineers on the ground. Switch on the 2 magnetos per engine and press the starter button on starboard inner. The prop starts to rotate, a puff or two of smoke, as the engine is away and running. Port inner next, followed by starboard outer then port outer. Run up each engine in turn to 2850 RPM. Check the RPM drop is no more than 40 revs when one magneto is switched off. Everything looks okay. Thumbs up all round. It was customary to start the inner engines first as they supplied hydraulic power to the gun turrets, bomb doors and other services generally. This gave the gunners the chance to operate their turrets to ensure they are all working before we leave the dispersal. Our CEO Wing Commander Johnson moves past at our disposal point heading for the runway. He is first off we are seventh. I called to each crew member; a final thumbs up to the ground crew; chocks are pulled away; brakes-off and we move from the dispersal to the perimeter where we join the queue of aircraft waiting to take-off. During the hot evenings, engines tended to overheat which was rather a worry. We are on the runway facing into the wind. The few final checks between the pilot and myself: make sure we are using fuel from the inner tanks; flaps set at 15°; push the throttle levers until the RPM is at maximum around 3000 rpm. Brakes off and we start to roll. Even though the aircraft is pulsating with power we move quite slowly. Reaching takeoff speed, the pilot eases the aircraft off the ground and wheels up. At about 20 feet, there was Lincoln Cathedral - and we were heading straight for it. The same thing on every take-off for the heading on this runway. No worries really, gain a few hundred feet and turn away.

Took off about 9:50 PM. Spent some time in the Wash area circling to gain height. Finally head out over the North Sea climbing en- route and heading for Denmark.

A full moon and as bright as day - not the ideal situation for the night bomber. Very easy for the night fighter to spot you or to follow your vapour trail if you are leaving one. For the moment no worries on that score. We are a long way from German occupied Europe. The first wave is 20 minutes ahead of us in the 5th wave. Even if the German radar has picked them up, they are unsure where we are headed.

We could do a sharp right and head for the Ruhr. We could go for Hamburg or onward over Denmark to Berlin. Several Mosquitoes were sent to Berlin about half an hour before the first wave took off and this did fool the German night fighters for a long time. The night fighters only arrived over Peenemünde as the 5th wave arrived- most of Bomber Command's losses were suffered by the 5th wave.

We rumbled on across the North Sea. I called each of the crew in turn every 20 minutes or so: All okay nothing to report. Subconsciously we were aware that we were moving from a fairly safe area to a zone where it could suddenly become very hairy indeed. We were young, not really interested in politics, surrounded by the drone of synchronised engines and one's thoughts raced through all sorts of diverse paths. Even to thinking that surely at this period in the 20th century there must be another way to settle disputes between nations. Ah yes but he started it. He being Hitler aided and abetted by his cronies Goering, Himmler, Goebbels, etc. No you can't negotiate with this bunch and we are doing it the right way. One's musing is interrupted by the bomb-aimer lying in the nose intoning Denmark ahead. Ever positive Jim was sure we had hit Denmark. A few minutes later in an interchange with Phil the navigator he confirmed that with the bright moonlight he had identified a landfall and we were indeed on track. Phil spoke to the pilot- ' Rügen in about an hour '. At that time Rügen meant nothing to me. When the bomb-aimer called out "Northern Rügen now", the navigator gave the pilot a new course nearly 90° to our present one, taking us down to the Baltic coast of Germany. Jim the bomb aimer continued to call out names and times. I wondered why. Then I remembered a similar performance when we had done a couple of time and distance runs on the bombing range at Wainsfleet on the East Coast.

Perhaps we were doing a time and distance run. It was not until after the war that our bomb-aimer told me we had indeed done a time and distance run, that I knew for certain.

Apparently Air Marshal Cochrane had insisted that 5 group aircraft to a T & D.

We rumbled on South with Jim intoning times and names - presumably Danish islands. We were now almost at bombing altitude, 8000 feet. The navigator gave the pilot a marginal alteration to our course and airspeed. I got out of my seat and switched the fuel valves to the inner tanks. This was normal procedure. There were three tanks in each wing of an operational Lancaster. You took off using the inner tanks. At operational height, or soon after, the 120 gallons was pumped from the outer tanks into the inner, replacing the fuel used in takeoff and clawing the way to 20,000 feet. The immersed fuel pumps were very efficient as it seemed a very short period of time to pump the 120 gallons from the outer to the inner tanks. The flight engineer then switched to the centre tanks - fuel being routed directly from the centre tanks to the engines. The fuel cocks were on the Flight Engineer's panel and were operated by hand. No button-pressing in 1943!

On a bright moonlit night switching tanks was easy. On a dark room moonless we had a hooded torch which we used economically. A shaft of light from a carelessly used torch could alert a prowling night fighter. Some engines had more exhaust flame than others and indeed some German pilots are on record as saying their first sighting of the Lancaster below them was the exhaust flames. The exhaust ports were shielded to cut down the glare and were very effective with most engines. Not a lot could be done. Any tinkering with the throttle controls i.e. closing them a little would result in a consequential loss of airspeed and spending longer time in the bomber stream.

The raid took place only two weeks or so after the Battle of Hamburg.

The hand-written account then has half a page of notes intended to be added in a continuation, including an assessment that more than 4,000 men had flown to Peenemünde – but which was never written. The final entry says, “Do not confuse history with nostalgia!”