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### Supreme and Proud

We had no common bond  
Save that of youth.  
No shared ambition  
Except to venture and survive.  
Until, aloft within that roaring fuselage,  
Each dependant on the others  
We found in war's intensity  
Good cause to say with pride in later years  
To those who chronicled the great events,  
We flew in Lancasters.

- Author unknown



*Ron Dudley's decorations: The Defence Medal, the Air Crew Europe Star, The 1939-1945 Star with Bomber Command Clasp, The Distinguished Flying Medal.*

# Braving the Blitz in London

Ron Dudley was born on August 22 1922, the son of Gordon and Agnes Elizabeth Dudley of 8, Lochaline Street, Fulham, London. W.6.

He first went to school at the Brompton Oratory School for Boys in Chelsea. His secondary schooling was at Salesian College in Battersea Park. Ron was good at maths and liked a game of football, playing for a local team. He and his friends were keen on cycling, riding away to go camping at the weekend.

After he had finished school, Ron found a job as a tool inspector at a local engineering works. But there was a war on, and Ron wanted to become part of it. He had just turned 17 when the war began.

On September 3, 1939, German troops invaded Poland, forcing Britain and France to honour their treaties and declare war on Germany. In the six months after the invasion of Poland, the lack of action on the part of Germany and the Allies in the west led to talk of a "phony war".

At sea, however, the British and German navies faced off in heated battle, and lethal German U-boat submarines struck at merchant ships bound for Britain, sinking more than 100 vessels in the first four months of World War II.

On April 9, 1940, Germany invaded Norway and occupied Denmark, and the war began in earnest. On May 10, German forces swept through Belgium and the Netherlands in what became known as "blitzkrieg," or lightning war. Three days later, Hitler's troops crossed the Meuse River and struck French forces. The soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force were evacuated by sea from Dunkirk in late May, while in the south French forces mounted a doomed resistance. With France on the verge of collapse, Benito Mussolini of Italy put his pact with Germany into action, and Italy declared war against France and Britain on June 10.

On June 14, German forces entered Paris; a new government formed by Marshal Philippe Petain requested an armistice two nights later.

Hitler now turned his attention to Britain, which had the defensive advantage of being separated from the Continent by the English Channel. To pave the way for an amphibious invasion, German planes bombed Britain throughout the summer of 1940, including night raids on London and other industrial centres that caused heavy civilian casualties and damage.

By the end of October 1940, Royal Air Force fighter planes had defeated Germany's air force, the Luftwaffe, in what was known as the Battle of Britain. Hitler was forced to postpone his plans to invade.



*A young Ron with his father, Gordon, Mother Agnes, Aunt Pat and Georgie Woods.*



*Ron is second from left in this school photo.*

Hitler's Blitz on London started in earnest on the afternoon of 7 September 1940 when the Luftwaffe filled the skies in the first major daytime raid on the city. Nearly 350 German bombers dropped explosives on East London, targeting the docks. About 450 people died and 1,300 were seriously injured.

The night-time raids that followed were just as terrible and deadly. Night after night, for nearly two months, the bombers returned. The Strand, the West End and Piccadilly were attacked. St Thomas's Hospital, St Paul's Cathedral, Buckingham Palace, Lambeth Palace and the House of Commons were all hit. Between September and November, almost 30,000 bombs were dropped on London. In the first 30 days, almost 6,000 people were killed and twice as many badly injured.

The most notorious raid took place on Sunday 29 December. The focus this time was the City of London. The area from Aldersgate to Cannon Street and Cheapside to Moorgate went up in flames.

Ron's family were in the thick of it, but escaped the worst. No heavy bombs fell on Lochaline Street, but nearby streets were hit. Ron's Dad, Gordon, was throughout the war a member of the Heavy Rescue Squad of the ARP (Air Raid Precautions) unit, based at Fulham Baths. He would have been busy. For example, in September 1940 there were nights when more more than 1000 fires were burning in London.

Ron's sister, Muriel, his junior by two years and two months, remembers an incendiary coming through their roof, but luckily it failed to ignite and the ARP came and dealt with it. Another time their windows were blown in when a bomb fell close by in Colwith Road.

Muriel's father, who was a carpenter, had built an Anderson shelter in their back garden and the family spent most nights in it during the Blitz. The corrugated-iron Anderson shelters were dark and damp and, although some families slept in them every night, most people were reluctant to use them except after the air raid sirens had sounded - and often not even then.

During 1940-1945 some 60,000 British civilians were killed by aerial bombing (43,000 from September 1940 to May 1941). 71,000 were treated for life-threatening injuries and over 88,000 others were less seriously injured.

The Blitz was still on when Ron turned 18 - old enough to join up. He'd always been keen on aircraft so he went to the Euston Combined Recruits Centre on April 16 1941 and enrolled in the Royal Air Force. He was given the rank of AC2 (Aircraftman 2) and would have been paid 2/6 a day while ground training.

At that time, the RAF's Bomber Command was one of the few ways Britain had to strike back at the Nazis. On August 24 1940 the first German bombs had fallen in central London. On the following night, 25/26 August, more than 80 British bombers struck, for the first time, at Berlin. Since then, bombing raids had continued to pound German industrial centres.

The Prime Minister, Winston Churchill had praised bomber pilots after one raid in August 1941. "The devotion and gallantry of these attacks on Rotterdam " he wrote, "are beyond all praise. The Charge of the Light Brigade at Balacava is eclipsed in brightness by these almost daily deeds of fame."

Ron had to wait until August 23 before starting training in earnest. He was posted to 10 ITW (Initial Training Wing) which was based in Scarborough at the requisitioned Grand Hotel.

The six-week training programme there was designed to improve discipline, physical fitness and mental alertness and provide a basic knowledge of the Royal Air Force. The syllabus included Armament, Engines, Hygiene and Sanitation, RAF Law and Discipline, Administration and Organisation, Mathematics, Meteorology, Navigation, The Principal of Flight and Signals. Scarborough was home to No 10 ITW from 13 Dec 1940 to 18 Jun 1945 for PNB (Pilot, Navigator & Air Bomber) training.

On October 14, Ron was assigned to the Arnold Scheme, set up to provide flying training in north America. Under this agreement, RAF cadets were sent to Canada and the United States to train in clear skies away from the war over Britain. Cadets went first by ship to Canada, then south by train into the US. The usual route was to Halifax, Nova Scotia, then via Moncton, Detroit, Cincinnati, Chattanooga and Atlanta to Montgomery, Alabama for acclimatisation training, then on to other training bases. (Ron told his family he'd been on the Chatanooga Choo Choo!)

By October 26, Ron was at the newly-formed No 31 PD (Personnel Despatch Centre) at Moncton, Canada.



# Training in the Florida sunshine

One of his class colleagues later wrote "From the port we were taken to Moncton, where we were to be the first British airmen to occupy the uncompleted barracks. After the Monctonians discovered we were from England, feverish preparations were made to make our short stay a pleasant one. Dinners and dances were arranged and the more fortunate among us were introduced over the radio."

He went on: "Later - three days train journey to Alabama - Maxwell Fields parades every day with the public invited to attend . . . One of "Luper's Troopers" . . . Armistice Day procession through the town.



*Captioned "Bert, Tom and myself" - taken at Coral Gables.*

"From Alabama to Georgia . . . Flying at last . . . Weekends in Atlanta . . . Washing machine [washed out of pilot training] . . . Moncton again . . . Trenton . . . and now Miami . . . binding, flying and having a great time." [Binding was RAF slang for complaining.]

At Maxwell Field near Montgomery, Alabama, the cadets were given basic training before going to flying schools. Ron had pictures he'd taken of parades in Court Square, Montgomery. Ron was posted to Souther Field, Americus, Georgia on December 17. (In a letter home, one RAF cadet wrote: "Americus once was a one-horse town, but the horse died.")

Ron was probably with Graham Aviation School Class SE-42-F using the Boeing Stearman PT-17 biplane for basic flying training. (That's a Stearman in the drawing on top of the map). The training was strict and cadets could be "washed out" for not coming up to standard in piloting or even for minor infringements of the many rules. At the end of the basic training, about 4 in 10 cadets were re-mustered as navigators or air gunners.

So by February 13, 1942, Ron was back at 31 PD in Moncton. He was sent on to Trenton in Canada, and had a brief stay in hospital before going to Florida to start his training as a navigator.

Ron was in Class 42-4 at Coral Gables, Miami, where RAF cadets were being taught by the navigators of Pan American Airways. The PAA men were thought to be the best because they navigated their famous Clipper flying boats over vast oceans. Coral Gables was a town with lush tropical plants, palatial homes country clubs and swimming pools. It was home to the University of Miami. The PAA Flying Boat Training Station was based at nearby Dinner Key.



Class 42-4 began training in March 1942 with 149 RAF students. William Gordon Bailey was in the previous class - 42-3, and later described his training.

*"We commenced work in earnest . . . maths, meteorology, and navigation. The hours were long. We regularly worked in the evenings, but normally had Sundays free, except when the flying details commenced later in the course. . . . The course requirement was a total of 50 hours (25 day + 25 night).*



*"All flights took place in PAA "Commodore" flying boats numbers 667, 668, 669, & 670, from the PAA Boat Base at Dinner Key. The boats were refurbished as "flying classrooms" with individual chart tables for approximately 12 pupils at a time."*

One of the cadets on the course, Robert H.B Condie, wrote of his experiences 40 years later:

*"The quality of instruction was very high, as one would expect from a major international airline. Some of the ground theory, for example, in astro (celestial) navigation, was carried to what in the circumstances was a fairly advanced level. . . . Apart from acquiring the basics, my other gain from exposure to these long-distance Clipper Captains was the realisation that air navigation is as much an art as a science. Ability to calculate accurately at high speed and under stress was vitally necessary for operational flying, but the development of "intuition" or a sixth sense helped to avoid major navigational blunders."*

But it wasn't all work. The British cadets received warm hospitality from the people of Miami. The

sunshine, warmth and the food was a stunning contrast to the gloom and rationing of wartime Britain. Here they enjoyed fresh fruit, orange juice and an unfamiliar brew - Coca Cola.

Thomas Nelson was in the following intake of students. He wrote about how the British cadets were allowed a great deal of freedom after school was over for the day.

*"Every one of us had a girl friend and without exception we were accepted as "family" by their parents. We went swimming at the Venetian Pool in Coral Gables almost every evening, then to a movie or a soda fountain or occasionally a trip to a night club. We had to be back at the San Sebastian by 11pm. At the weekend we made trips to Miami Beach and the surrounding countryside, even getting as far as Tampa. .... I still marvel at the hospitality and friendliness that was extended to us."*

(Extracts from *The Arnold Scheme, British Pilots, The American South and the Allies' daring plan* by Gilbert S. Guinn.)



Ron was chosen to edit the journal that was produced by cadets to mark the end of the course.

He wrote a foreword.

### Editorial

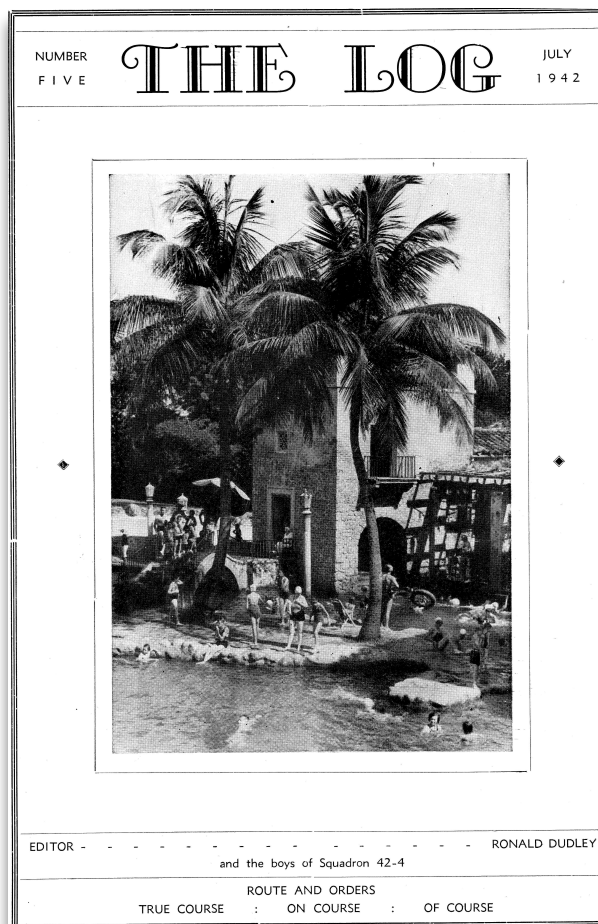
After a very pleasant sojourn here, the time has come to bid adieu, so we take this opportunity of expressing our sincere appreciation to the people of Coral Gables and Miami for making our stay a pleasant one.

Our thanks also, we hope will be accepted by the students and faculty of the University, for the will with which they have accepted our intrusion and also the many facilities they have offered us.

Last, but by no means least, our own officers and the director and his very able assistants of P.A.A. I am sure that at times have found it difficult to keep us "on course," but by dint of ceaseless hard work they have seen us make the grade.

In conclusion, I am sure that now that our countries are drawn closer in unity, many of the friendships begun between the people of America and the R.A.F. will be renewed after the "spot of trouble."

*Ron. Dudley, Editor.*



*The Log - with a picture of the popular Venetian Pool at Coral Gables.*



*Captioned "Some of the girls". Biltmore pool, Coral Gables 29.3.42.*

## Back to Blighty

On July 2, class 42-4 left behind the Florida sunshine, boarded the Silver Meteor train, and went off to Canada and then by ship to Britain.

It was back to the realities of war. Ron came home to his family laden with luxury goods from the United States. His sister, Muriel remembers nylon stockings for herself and her mother, and tinned food - including tinned butter.

By July 30 Ron was at 3 P.R.C (Personnel Reception Centre) in Bournemouth. A couple of weeks later he was posted to 3 (O) AFU (Observer/Navigator Advanced Flying Unit) at Bobbington, near Wolverhampton, to sharpen his skills with about 30 hours flying as navigator, most likely in a twin-engined Avro Anson.

At the end of this stint, on October 19, he was promoted to Sergeant. The next day he was on his way to Scotland, to join 19 OTU (Operational Training Unit) at RAF Kinloss, where crews converted to twin-engined Whitley bombers.



*Ron with his girlfriend Maureen Wainwright back in Lochaline Street.*

As 1943 dawned, the progress of the war had changed in favour of the Allies. Rommel was suffering defeats in North Africa, and by the end of January, German troops were in retreat on the Eastern Front and were surrendering in their thousands to the Russians.

Bomber Command was still hammering German cities, including Berlin.

On January 11, Ron was sent to 10 OTU at RAF Abingdon for more training, most likely in Whitley bombers.



*Ron with Sergeant's stripes and Observer flash in Lochaline Street.*



Above: Ron's pilot, Frank Roberts, with Peter Marsh. Peter Marsh is top right with Bill Parsley below.



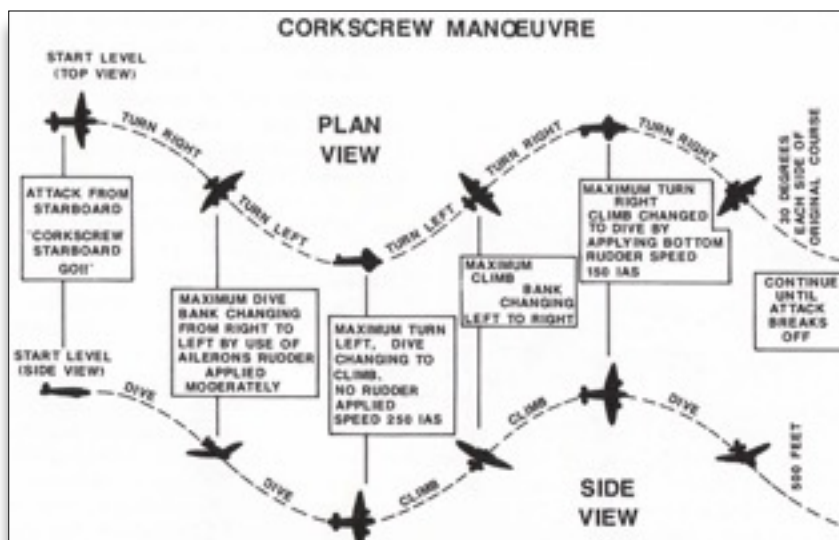
In March Ron went to 1660 CU (Heavy Conversion Unit) at RAF Swinderby, in Lincolnshire. Here he would have been flying in bigger four-engined bombers. On April 30, he was sent to No 467 Squadron RAF Bottesford, Leicestershire, to fly in Lancasters, the RAF's top-line heavy bomber. No 467 was nominally an Australian squadron, but had mixed crews.

Ron was most likely flying with operational crews on training runs during the day. The squadron was bombing Germany by night.

After more training with 1654 CU at Wigsley, Ron joined No. 61 Squadron at RAF Syerston near Newark with effect from June 25 1942. Ron was the new man in a crew that had been flying together at 1661 Conversion Unit at RAF Fulbeck.

His pilot was Frank Roberts, Flight Engineer Sgt SR Arter, Bomb Aimer Flight Sergeant George Young, Wireless Operator Flight Sergeant HJ Blower, Mid-Upper Gunner Sergeant Peter Marsh, an Australian, and Rear Gunner Flight Sergeant William (Bill) Parsley, a Canadian.

Peter Marsh's log book shows he had been training with Roberts since March 1943 at RAF Heyford flying in a twin-engined Wellington bomber. It is probable the other crew members were there as well. Their training flights included low-level flying, bombing practice, and NFT (night flying training).



By the end of May, they had moved to RAF Fulbeck and were flying in the four-engined Lancaster bomber.

Their flights included air-to-sea firing, fighter affiliation, circuits and cross-country "Boomerang" exercises.

They would have practised the standard fighter evasion manoeuvre, known as the corkscrew (pictured), which involved throwing the Lancaster into a series of violent turns to throw off any attacking German.

# First operations

Details of the operations are taken from No. 61 Squadron Operations Record Book (ORB). Details of training flights are taken from the flying logbook of Peter Marsh. The log refers to T.I.s - these are target indicator flares dropped from the leading bombers, also referred to as markers.

In June and on July 1, Ron's crew flew four training exercises from Syerston before their first active mission on July 2 - Gardening Nectarine I. (Minelaying near the Frisian Islands). Minelaying was to give the crews an easy run on their first operation.

*July 2 Lancaster W4766. SGT F J.Roberts, Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer]), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 22.26 Down 02.00. SGT. ROBERTS laid his mines on a Gee (radio beam) fix from 4000 ft.*

This is how the operations appeared when typed into the ORB.

SGT. E.A.HALL.	A.G. 2.			
SGT. E.J.ROBERTS.	CAPTAIN.	2226	0200	SGT.ROBERTS laid his mines on a Gee fix from 4000 f
SGT. WRITER.	FLT.ENG.			
SGT. R.DUDLEY.	NAV.			
SGT. G.YOUNG.	A.B.			
SGT. H.J.BLOWER.	WT/AG.			
SGT. W.A.PARSLEY.	A.G. 1.			
SGT. E.A.MARSH.	A.G. 2.			
F/O. B.LAING.	CAPTAIN.	2225	0345	ATTACK ON COLOGNE. MET : 5/6/10th at 1700 ft.
SGT. P.A.HOLMAN.	WT.ENG.			

On July 3 at midday they had a bombing practice flight. Then it was their turn to join the night bombing attacks on Germany, starting with Cologne.

*July 3/4 Attack on Cologne. Lancaster ED314 SGT F J.Roberts, Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer]), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), W.A.Parsley (A.G.1) P.J.Marsh (A.G.2). Up 23.00 Down 05.00. SGT ROBERTS bombed estimated position of red T.I. after run up from 18,600 ft. Photo. fires and gun flashes.*



Syerston 1943. Crew members from 61 Squadron head towards their Lancaster.

July 5, 6 and 7 three short flights to practice bombing and air firing.

*July 8/9 Attack on Cologne Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), W.A.Parsley (A.G.1) P.J.Marsh (A.G.2). Up 23.00 Down 05.00. SGT ROBERTS bombed from 19,400 ft. He reported the flak was quite intense over the target area. Photo. cloud.*

*July 9/10 Attack on Gelsenkirchen. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), W.A.Parsley (A.G.1) P.J.Marsh (A.G.2). Up 22.41 Down 02.46. SGT ROBERTS' aircraft developed coolout (coolant) trouble in the starboard outer engine, so he proceeded to TERSCHELLING and attacked a heavy flak concentration after a timed run. A glow was reflected on the clouds after bombing.*

July 11 and 12 - Short air test flights.

*July 12/13 Attack on Turin. Lancaster ED314 SGT F J.Roberts, Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1) W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 22.41 Down 09.17. SGT ROBERTS after attacking green markers from 17,000 ft, observed a large pall of smoke to 10,000 ft. Photo. fires.*

July 14, 15, 16, 18,19, 31. Bombing practice and formation flying.

July 24/25 a different crew take Lancaster ED314.



*Ron's photo of the Bomb Aimer's position in the Lancaster. Presumably that is George Young smiling for Ron's camera.*

# Aloft in the Lancaster

J. A. Campbell, a Canadian, was a mid-upper gunner in Lancasters of No. 61 Squadron at Syerston in 1943 and wrote of his experiences in his book *The Airborne Years*.

“The crew entered the aircraft by climbing a short ladder and stepping through a door in the starboard side between the mainplane and the tailplane. The rear gunner, dressed in his flying gear, including an electrically heated inner suit, gloves and boot liners turned left and entered his turret feet first, sliding over the tailplane spar. The mid-upper gunner, similarly dressed, climbed up into his turret by pulling down a moveable step, rising into the turret, and pulling up a drop seat and securing it beneath himself. Both gunners had to stow their parachutes outside the turrets because of lack of room.

The remainder of the crew proceeded forward up the bomb bay steps, and closed an armoured bulkhead door behind them as they clambered over the mainplane spar and entered the heated portion of the fuselage. The forward crew members did not have to wear electrically heated clothing, as their positions were at least above the freezing point.

Of course, there was no pressurisation, and all crewmen wore oxygen masks combined with intercom microphones. The wireless operator's position was next on the left side. Forward from this was the navigator's position, which could be curtained off, as he had to work on his charts with a bright light.

Forward again was the flight deck and the pilot's seat and controls were on the left. In front of him were myriad instruments and controls. The flight engineer had a moveable seat by the pilot, but many of them didn't use it and spent their time standing on the flight deck where they could watch all gauges, and perform their other tasks.

The bomb aimer proceeded down a small passageway into the nose, where he spent most of his time in a prone position. His bomb sight was right in front of him and his release controls and other instruments were at his right-hand side. The front turret, which he operated as necessary, he just stood up in - it had no seat.

The pilot, F/O Woods and his flight engineer proceeded with the start-up: starboard outer; starboard inner; port inner; port outer. This put life in all the hydraulic systems, and gunners tested the



*The Navigator at his table. Below: the rear gunner. IWM pictures.*



turret rotation and gun-laying controls. Crewmen also tested intercom connections and oxygen supplies. At taxi out time the fully laden aircraft moved sluggishly out from its dispersal pad and took its place in the lineup on the perimeter track, as the line moved slowly toward the end of the runway in use. Each awaited the green Aldis signal from the control van at the runway end, before turning on to the run-up spot. The procedure was quite rapid and we were soon turning onto the end.

Brakes held fast, and roaring, straining engines - then release and a surge ahead as the pilot's hand on the four throttle levers applied full power. The aircraft rapidly gained speed as it charged down the flare path, the pilot compensating for torque swing with throttle. The wheels skipped a few times as the tail rose, and the runway lights suddenly slowed up and drew away as we became airborne.”

Nearing the target Campbell wrote: "Searchlights shining from beneath made it quite bright. We could faintly see other Lancasters silhouetted on the cloud. "There were a few air-to-air attacks going on about us, and about five aircraft were seen going down in flames along the route. The straight-in track confused defences — they couldn't believe the force would do that. It also made for a speedy trip to the target. Conditions at the target were unexpected — the cloud cover had broken, and Berlin lay clear and exposed beneath us.

The target indicators were cascading down, the ground was sparkling from heavy flak batteries and the air seemed filled with exploding shells. The concentration of aircraft over the target was extreme,

and we were almost hit by a Lancaster directly above us losing height rapidly.

Woods pushed into a sudden dive and avoided it. In a few seconds the bomb aimer had released the load on a group of indicators, and the ship gave a lurching jump as the bombs left her belly. The navigator called a new course for the pilot and we turned port to make our north leg into Sweden. The concentration of high explosive bombs and incendiaries was terrific; on all operations I flew afterward, I never again saw such fires."

[http://www.raf-lincolnshire.info/books/JACampbell\\_AirborneYears.pdf](http://www.raf-lincolnshire.info/books/JACampbell_AirborneYears.pdf)



*Syerston 1943. WAAFs wave off a 61 Squadron Lancaster.*

## Nottingham was a fun city for us

"Syerston was an older base, and well laid out with permanent type brick buildings. The Sergeants' Mess had the trappings of pre-war comforts, a fine lounge and bar. The actual messing facilities had been moved to a dining hall in another building, because the original mess was too small for such an influx of NCO aircrew.

There was a library and a theatre, which had a change of movies three times a week. There was a little town called Bingham about six miles away, which was our nearest railway station, but when we went to "town" it was to Nottingham, about twenty miles to the west.

There was also a late afternoon bus in, and one returning at 11:30 p.m. Also there was an early morning workmen's bus from Nottingham to Syerston which one could catch in a real emergency. Our route to town took us through a sugar beet growing area near Radcliffe-on-Trent. Nearby there was a prisoner-of-war camp for Italians captured in North Africa — they were only too glad for the safety

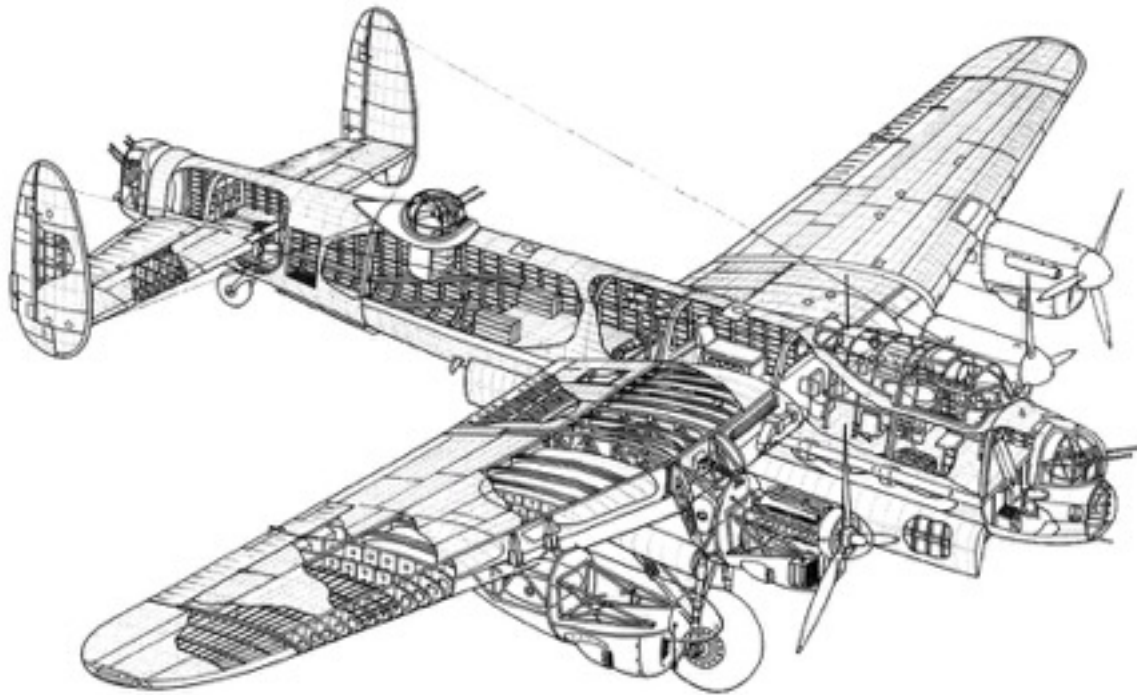
and comfort of the beet fields and their camp facilities. It was amusing when we went by the fields on the bus; all the workers would stop their labour and watch the bus go by. They looked like a bunch of gophers popping up and down.

Nottingham was Fun City for us. There were good hotels and a live theatre with a weekly change of good variety shows.

There was also the Palais de Dance, a large dancehall with a restaurant on the balcony overlooking the floor, and a bar and lounge downstairs from the dance area. Good bands played, and there was even a revolving bandstand to change bands.

Nottingham, being a centre for tobacco manufacturing and textiles, meant there were plenty of pretty girls, as these industries had mainly female employees."

- J.A. Campbell.



## The aircraft

### **Avro Lancaster**

**Type** Four-engined heavy bomber

**Manufacturer** AV Roe and Co.

**In Service** 1942 - 1947

**Engines** Four Rolls-Royce Merlin 224, V-12 liquid cooled with two-stage supercharger

**Maximum Speed** 275 mph

**Cruising Speed** 210 mph

**Service Ceiling** 25,700 ft

**Range** 2,530 miles

**Crew** 7

**Bomb Load** 14,000lb (6350kg) normal and up to 22,000lb (9979kg) for special munitions

**Armament** 8 x .303 Browning machine guns in nose, dorsal and tail turrets

Lancasters flew 156,000 sorties and dropped 608,612 tons (552,124 tonnes) of bombs between 1942 and 1945.

A total of 3249 Lancasters were lost in action and just 35 aircraft completed more than 100 successful operations each.

## The crew

### **Pilot**

Seated on the left side of the cockpit. There was no Co-Pilot.

### **Flight Engineer**

Seated next to the pilot on a folding seat.

### **Navigator**

Seated at a table facing to the port (left) of the aircraft and directly behind the pilot and flight engineer.

### **Bomb Aimer**

Seated when operating the front gun turret, but lying prone when directing the pilot on to the aiming point before releasing the bomb load.

### **Wireless Operator**

Seated facing forward and directly beside the navigator.

### **Mid-Upper Gunner**

Seated in the mid upper turret, which was also in the unheated section of the fuselage.

### **Rear Gunner**

"Tail End Charlie" seated in the rear turret in an unheated and isolated position. Most rear gunners did not see another member of the crew until the aircraft returned to base.



*Ron (kneeling centre) with a crew and ground crew in front of a Lancaster. Location not known.*

August 2. Marsh's logbook shows 2.8.43 flying with Roberts in ED314 air Firing.

*August 2/3 Attack on Hamburg. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 23.46 Down 05.38. SGT ROBERTS found the target identified by four green T.I's and attacked the M.P.I from 13,000 ft. Photo. cloud and fires.*

August 9 A 1.45 hr flight fighter affiliation.

*August 9/10 Attack on Mannheim. Lancaster ED314. SGT F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 23.09 Down 05.49. SGT ROBERTS bombed single green T.I. from 17,000 ft. Photo. fires and cloud. (This flight not shown in the ORB copies but shown in Marsh's logbook.)*

*August 12/13 Attack on Milan. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 21.31 Down 06.08. SGT ROBERTS attacked green markers from 17,000 ft. Photo fires.*

*August 15/16 Attack on Milan. Lancaster JA. 900. SGT F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 20.35 Down 03.30. SGT ROBERTS reported observing four combats, in each case an unidentified aircraft crashing in flames. Lack of pressure compelled him to use the Mk XIV bombsight as a fixed sight when he attacked green markers from 16,000 ft. Photo. built up area, fires and smoke - 5,500 yds west of Aiming Point. (The aircraft landed at Forde).*

(Eight 61 Squadron Lancasters set out on that mission, three failed to return.)



*Lancaster Navigator's table with Gee indicator at the left and the H2S radar Plan Position Indicator and its controller at the right. The receivers and power supplies are under the table in this full-size replica built by the Duxford Aviation Society.*

## The radio and radar race

RAF scientists were working intensely during the war to find ways of making bombing more accurate, even in bad weather and cloud cover. Most electronic bombing aids used radio beams to get an accurate "fix" above the target. But the Germans were also using radio aids - and this became known as "The Battle of the Beams."

**Gee** was a radio navigation system used from 1942 which measured the time delay between two radio signals to produce a fix at ranges up to about 350 miles (560 km) from the transmitting stations.

**Oboe** was a blind bombing targeting system. It used a pair of radio transmitters on the ground to send signals which were received and retransmitted by a transponder in the aircraft. By comparing the time each signal took to reach the aircraft, its location could be calculated.

**Gee-H** was an upgrade of Oboe. Oboe used large displays in ground stations to take accurate measurements but could only direct one aircraft. Gee-H used smaller gear on board the aircraft. It was less accurate but could direct as many as 80 aircraft at a time. Gee-H entered service in October 1943.

**H2S** was a ground-mapping radar mounted on the Lancaster that could be used both for navigation and identifying targets. A rotating antenna showed ground detail on a cathode ray tube - the Plan Position Indicator (PPI) in the navigator's compartment. The Germans developed the Naxos receiver carried by night fighters that homed onto H2S transmissions.

**Monica** was a radar fitted to the tail of Lancasters to warn of enemy night fighters. The Germans recovered Monica sets in crashed aircraft and quickly developed the Flensburg set to home onto the Monica radar beam. On July 13, 1944, a Junkers Ju 88 night fighter equipped with Flensburg landed by mistake at RAF Woodbridge near Felixstowe and was captured. When scientists examined the Flensburg equipment, they realised its purpose. Monica was then withdrawn from all RAF Bomber Command aircraft.

**Boozer** was a passive system which detected the signals sent out by airborne and ground radars to give a warning when the aircraft was being tracked. Since it didn't transmit signals it could not be tracked.

# The Peenemünde Raid

**17/18 August 1943**

596 aircraft - 324 Lancasters, 218 Halifaxes, 54 Stirlings. This was the first raid in which 6 (Canadian) Group operated Lancaster aircraft. 426 Squadron dispatched 9 Lancaster IIs, losing 2 aircraft including that of the squadron commander, Wing Commander L Crooks, DSO, DFC.

This was a special raid which Bomber Command was ordered to carry out against the German research establishment on the Baltic coast where V2 rockets were being built and tested.

The raid was carried out in moonlight to increase the chances of success. There were several novel features - there was a Master Bomber controlling a full-scale Bomber Command raid for the first time; There were three aiming points - the scientists' and workers' living quarters, the rocket factory and the experimental station.

The Pathfinders employed a special plan with crews designated as 'shifters', who attempted to move the marking from one part of the target to another as the raid progressed.

Crews of No 5 Group; bombing in the last wave of the attack, had practised the 'time-and-distance' bombing method as an alternative method for their



*Testing a V2 rocket at Peenemunde in 1943*

part in the raid. The Pathfinders found Peenemünde without difficulty in the moonlight and the Master Bomber controlled the raid successfully throughout.

A Mosquito diversion to Berlin drew off most of the German night-fighters for the first 2 of the raid's 3 phases.

The estimate has appeared in many sources that this raid set back the V-2 experimental programme by at least 2 months and reduced the scale of the eventual rocket attack.

Bomber Command's losses were 40 aircraft - 23 Lancasters, 15 Halifaxes and 2 Stirlings.

This represents 6.7 per cent of the force dispatched but was judged an acceptable cost for the successful attack on this important target on a moonlit night.

Most of the casualties were suffered by the aircraft of the last wave when the German night fighters arrived in force.

This was the first night on which the

Germans used their new *schräge Musik* weapons; these were twin upward-firing cannons fitted in the cockpit of Me 110s.

Two *schräge Musik* aircraft found the bomber stream flying home from Peenemünde and are believed to have shot down 6 of the bombers lost on the raid. (From RAF history website)

*August 17/18 Attack on Peenemunde. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 21.38 Down 04.52. SGT ROBERTS found smoke over the target when he attacked green markers from 7,000 ft. Photo. smoke and fires.*

August 21 Monica test flight. (*Monica was the fighter warning radar installed in the tail of the Lancaster.*)

From here the description of the operation from the *RAF Campaign Diary* is included, when available, before the ORB record of Ron's operation. Parts of the *RAF Campaign Diary* are available on the UK National Archives website.

22/23 August 1943 Leverkusen: 462 aircraft - 257 Lancasters, 192 Halifaxes, 13 Mosquitos. The IG Farben factory was chosen as the aiming point for this raid and it was hoped that some of the bombs would hit this important place. There was thick cloud over the target area and there was a partial failure of the Oboe signals. Bombs fell over a wide area; at least 12 other towns in and near the Ruhr recorded bomb damage. 3 Lancasters and 2 Halifaxes lost, 1.1 per cent of the force.

*August 22/23 Attack on Leverkusen. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 21.21 Down 00.51. SGT ROBERTS returned early owing to failure of Port Outer Engine. Bombs being jettisoned.*

23/24 August 1943 . 727 aircraft - 335 Lancasters, 251 Halifaxes, 124 Stirlings, 17 Mosquitos - despatched to Berlin. The raid was only partially successful. The Pathfinders were not able to identify the centre of Berlin by H2S and marked an area in the southern outskirts of the city. The Main Force arrived late and many aircraft cut a corner and approached from the south-west instead of using the planned south-south-east approach; this resulted in more bombs falling in open country than would otherwise have been the case. The German defences - both flak and night fighters - were extremely fierce. 56 aircraft - 23 Halifaxes, 17 Lancasters, 16 Stirlings - were lost, 7.9 per cent of the heavy bomber force. This was Bomber Command's greatest loss of aircraft in one night so far in the war.

*August 23/24 Attack on Berlin. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 20.19 Down 03.41. SGT ROBERTS attacked green T.I's from 17,300 ft. He reported that the flak at target was slight and searchlights stationary. Photo. built up area and fires.*

*August 27/28 Attack on Nurnberg. Lancaster ED314. SGT F J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), W.A.Parsley (A.G.1) P.J.Marsh (A.G.2). Up 21.09 Down 04.54. SGT ROBERTS bombed green T.I. from 18,000 ft. He reported many fighters workin (sic) in co-operation with searchlights. No enemy aircraft was encountered although many combats were seen. Photo. failure.*

Ron's Pilot, Frank Roberts was promoted to Pilot Officer.

*August 30/31 Attack on Munchen Gladbach. Lancaster ED314. P/O F J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter (flight engineer), Sgts R.Dudley (navigator), G.Young (A. B. [bomb aimer] ), H.J.Blower (WT/AG), P.J.Marsh (A.G.1), W.A.Parsley (A.G.2). Up 23.21 Down 04.18. P/O ROBERTS encountered light opposition when he attacked a red marker from 17,000 ft. Photo. cloud.*

This was the crew's last operation with No. 61 Squadron. The crew were transferred to No. 97 Squadron, part of the elite Pathfinder force. Pathfinders were hand-picked from the best crews of Bomber Command. Crews had to then volunteer for the specialised duty. They had to sign up to fly 45 operations instead of the usual 30, but the posting brought with it prestige and a promotion.

# Joining the Pathfinders

The Pathfinder Force officially came into being on 15th August 1942, in response to the poor accuracy being achieved on bombing raids.

Arthur Harris, Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Bomber Command, had been strongly opposed to the setting up of a separate elite target-marking force, believing this would leave to rivalry and jealousy within the non-Pathfinder squadrons (known as Main Force) who would inevitably resent having their best crews taken away from them. Harris wrote in his book, *Bomber Offensive*:



“I was over-ruled by the Air Ministry. In other circumstances I should not have accepted the position, but we were now faced with the fact that Gee had failed as a bombing aid and that the new radar aids, Oboe and H2S [...] were not now to be forthcoming until the end of the year. For the time being it was essential to improve our methods of finding the target visually and marking it, and this seemed to require the whole time activities of a specialised force.”

Though he had argued against the need for such a specialised force, Harris was shrewd enough to know that once he had conceded the point to his superiors, he would be able to set up the new force as he chose.

It was he who insisted on its name and secured authority for the Pathfinder eagle, the golden badge which was to mark the crews out from Main Force.

Pathfinder crews were chosen for their navigational skills. They had to agree to fly 45 operations instead of the standard 30, but were given a step up in rank and an increase in pay.

The PFF crews included volunteers, while aircrew who showed promise in their training could also find themselves seconded into the force.

Some crews in mid-tour could also be transferred into PFF when numbers were needed. Recruits were given a two week course in marking techniques at Warboys before posting to a Squadron.

## “We signed with gusto”

Bill Davies, D.F.C of Toronto, Canada, remembered his feelings on signing up for the Pathfinder Force.

*“All RAF aircrews were volunteers and had to complete a tour of 30 bomber operations against the enemy. Many never reached that magic number.*

*Generally speaking, the Pathfinders had a higher than average “chop rate” [shot down] than regular aircrews. Once you were chosen to join the Pathfinders, you were made to sign a document agreeing to fly a minimum of 45 operations.*

*We were told that many crews had refused to go along with that stipulation because they felt that the target-marking aircrews had little chance of survival. But when our crew was told that we were the only one selected to be Pathfinders, we signed with gusto. Almost overnight, we were posted to the Pathfinder navigation training unit at Warboys, near Huntingdon in the heart of Pathfinder country.*

*At the conclusion of the extremely intense navigation training classes, I was made Navigator II. I would sit side-by-side with another navigator (no bomb aimer, of course) and I would drop all the target-indicator markers.*

*Sometimes the drop would be made visually, but mainly “blind”—that is, by radar. Many other crews operated only visually, carrying a bomb aimer who dropped the target-marking flares from his position in the nose.*

*Navigation was “king” in a Pathfinder group. That was made crystal clear to us in a meeting with Air Vice-Marshal Bennett, who stressed that accuracy was our key to success.*

*He was blunt when he spelled out what he expected from us. “Remember this,” he said, “I will have no compunction whatsoever in moving you back to the main force if you don’t meet the Pathfinder standards.”*

*From RAF wings over Florida, Willard Largent.*

Ron's crew joined No. 97 Squadron in September 1943. They trained at the Pathfinder base of Uppwood, which ran a two-week course on target marking techniques, before flying to the No. 97 base at Bourn.

Before operations they had a few more training flights. Marsh's log book shows:

September 16 cross-country flight from Uppwood (*Pathfinder training base*) 3hr45m.

September 21 and 22 one flight each day bombing practice.

The following are entries from No. 97 Squadron Operations Record Book. Later entries include descriptions of whole raids from the RAF Bomber Command Campaign Diary before the Squadron details. The Squadron ORB entries are marked with a • .

- 22.9.43 "Y" cross countries, SBA (Standard Beam Approach), fighter affiliation and bombing training. 20 aircraft detailed to attack a target at Hanover and three aircraft to attack Oldenburg. Three aircraft failed to attack Hanover, F/O Moodie dropping bombs on Emden, having oxygen failure. G/C Fresson jettisoned bombs owing to electrical failure, bombs were forced off by hand; and F/S Roberts jettisoned, port inner being u/s also bomb sight u/s. The attacks were made in good visibility. Very little flak reported but many enemy fighters about. Attacks reported scattered but all in built up area. Numerous fires developing. All aircraft and crews returned safely to base.

*JA711Y P/O J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, Sgts R.Dudley, G.Young, H.J.Blower, W.A.Parsley, P.J.Marsh. Up 18.48 Down 23.29. 1 x 4000lb, 132 x 30lb incs. Primary target Hanover attacked. 20,000'. Four red TIs seen to cascade. Built up area and river seen. 3 red TIs in bomb sight at time of bombing.*

## How No 97 Squadron came to Bourn

In January 1942, No. 97 Squadron had converted to Lancasters. On April 17 1942 - in conjunction with No. 44 Squadron, it made an historic low-level daylight attack on the MAN Diesel engine works at Augsburg.

In June/July 1942 it took part in 1,000-bomber raids on Cologne, Essen and Bremen.

In April 1943 the squadron moved to Bourn, seven miles west of Cambridge, and joined No. 8 (PFF) Group and became a "marker" squadron - one of the Pathfinders.

RAF Station Bourn had only been in existence for two years. It was sited on the extensive lands of Bourn Grange, between the Grange itself and what little remained of the buildings of the home farm, Grange Farm.

The prevailing winds at the airfield were south-westerly. It was therefore seldom that the Lancasters of 97 squadron would take off using the shortest runway of all, NW-SE, which meant that just after becoming airborne they would pass over Highfields and Hardwick, close to St Mary's Church.

When they did so, it was an awesome experience for the village folk.

A local man, Bob Plane, recalled the Lancasters straining and labouring to gain height as they came directly over Hardwick:

"They used to come over the tops of the houses, laden with bombs, and one would think 'Please God, let them get over'.

"You would be sitting there with a cup of tea, and when they had gone over the saucer was full of tea and the cup was only half full because of the vibrations."

The bombers would all conglomerate overhead, gathering together before they headed off for Germany, "it was a hell of a noise". Together with the roar of Bourn's aircraft taking off, there would be the distant growl of others taking off from neighbouring airfields, and then the huge pack would set out into the gathering darkness, the roar of their great engines gradually receding.

(From [raf-pathfinders.com](http://raf-pathfinders.com))

- 23.9.43 F/O Wilson on NFT had trouble with undercarriage when coming in to land. Aircraft was circled round the airfield for some while trying to lock the undercarriage. Owing to operations taking place the aircraft was diverted to Newmarket where F/O Wilson carried out a successful landing without damage to aircraft. Sixteen aircraft detailed to attack Mannheim and five aircraft on Darmstadt. Both targets were successfully bombed – flak was negligible but many searchlights were operating with fighters. Visibility was good. Two crews are missing from the attack on Mannheim. F/L Fletcher and crew and W/O Stevenson and crew. S/L Foster and the Gunnery Leader S/L McKinna were with F/L Fletcher. No news has been received since leaving base. All other crews returned safely.

*JA711Y P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, Sgts R.Dudley, G.Young, H.J.Blower, T.Parsley, B.A.Marsh. Up 1927 Down 0118. 4 x 2000lb, 6 x 500lb. Primary target Mannheim bombed. 18,500'. Clear sky, visibility good. Target identified visually by light of flares. No TIs seen - bombed visually. Rather scattered fires seen to be taking hold.*

25 and 27.9.43. Two short flights NFT and “Y” test. (Y = Bomber Command aircraft equipped with H2S)

27.9.43 Brunswick.

*JB227J P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, Sgts R.Dudley, G.Young, H.J.Blower, B.A.Marsh, T.Parsley. Up 1924 Down 0023. 1 x 4000lb, 1080 incs. Brunswick attacked. 19,000'. Clear sky, visibility good. Built up area visually identified – cluster of red TI markers in bomb sight at time of bombing. Fires were starting up as aircraft left target.*

29.9.43 Y training. The crew's total flying for September was 5.20 hours day and 15.50 night.

1.10.43 Y training.

1.10.43 Hagen: 243 Lancasters and 8 Mosquitos. This raid was a complete success achieved on a completely cloud-covered target of small size, with only a moderate bomber effort and at trifling cost. The Oboe skymarking was perfect and severe damage was caused. 2 Lancasters lost, 0.8 per cent of the force.

- 13 aircraft detailed to attack target at Hagen. Owing to 10/10ths cloud over the area this raid was hard to assess. Defences were slight and most searchlights ineffective owing to cloud. All aircraft and crews returned safely to base. “Y” training, bombing and fighter affiliation were carried out in the earlier part of the day.

*JA746M P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, Sgts R.Dudley, G.Young, H.J.Blower, T.Parsley, P.J.Marsh. Up 1903 Down 2356. 4 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 6 x 1000lb. Primary objective (Hagen) attacked. 18,500'. 10/10ths cloud. Cloud thinning. Bombed between two green TIs. Own TIs seen to cascade and ignite. General vague coloured glow seen below cloud.*

October 4 BHT demonstration 1hr15.

October 4/5 ED 938J Roberts crew attacked Ludwigshaven. Ron was not in the crew for that flight, he was replaced as navigator by Squadron Leader Mitchell.

October 7/8. 343 Lancasters despatched to Stuttgart. The first aircraft to be equipped with ABC, (*night-fighter communications jamming known by the crews as 'Airborne Cigar'*), from 101 Squadron operated on this night. The German night-fighter controller was confused by the Mosquito diversion on Munich and only a few night fighters reached Stuttgart at the end of the attack; 4 Lancasters were lost, 1.2 per cent of the force.

- 16 aircraft attacked Stuttgart and four aircraft Friedrichshaven. The target at the former had bad cloud conditions which prevented observation of TIs with any certainty. Glow of fires was seen which were probably from scattered incendiaries. Heavy flak varied from slight to moderate. No searchlights seen and fighter activity was negligible. F/O Cameron's aircraft had damage from incendiaries dropped from above. One incendiary hitting the armour plating behind the Pilot nearly causing disastrous results. At Friedrichshaven there was 10/10ths cloud and no results observed. Defences – heavy H/F, no S/Ls seen, little fighter activity.

*A908N P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, Sgts R.Dudley, G.Young, H.J.Blower, P.J.Marsh, F/Sgt T.Parsley. Up 2101 Down 0413. 4 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 3 x 1000lb. Target Stuttgart. 20,000'. Dark, hazy. 10/10ths cloud. Bombed on centre of group of 6 green TIs – own TIs seen to cascade. Glow of a big fire was reflected through cloud. Black smoke observed above cloud.*

## Fighters attack

October 8/9. Hannover: 504 aircraft - 282 Lancasters, 188 Halifaxes, 26 Wellingtons, 8 Mosquitos. This was the last Bomber Command raid in which Wellingtons took part. 300 (Polish) and 432 (Canadian) Squadrons provided the 26 Wellingtons which operated on this night; they all returned safely. The German controller guessed correctly that Hannover was the target and many night fighters arrived before the attack was over. 27 aircraft - 14 Lancasters and 13 Halifaxes - were lost, 5.4 per cent of the force. Conditions over Hannover were clear and the Pathfinders were finally able to mark the centre of the city accurately;

- October 8/9 21 Lancasters detailed for operations with one aircraft reserve. One aircraft was withdrawn, the navigator being sick, another returned early due to oxygen supply being u/s. 19 aircraft attacked the target at Hanover in clear sky and some haze. Good concentration of fires seen. Generally the raid would appear promising but later smoke and haze prevented observations. Slight to moderate H/F and fighters not so active. 17 photos attempted. P/O Nicolls and crew failed to return from this operation. No news has been received.

*JA908N P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, Sgts R.Dudley, D.Young, H.J.Blower, P.J.Marsh, F/Sgt T.Parsley. Up 2252 Down 0419. 5 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 4 x 1000lb. Hanover bombed. 19,000'. Clear sky, hazy. Centre of cluster of green TIs in bomb sight at time of bombing. Own greens seen to cascade. Big explosion at 01.38 followed by fire and smoke. Many well concentrated fires going well.*



*Focke-Wulf FW 190 of the type that shot at Ron's Lancaster.*

That trip to Hanover was to prove a little more exciting than usual as Ron's Lancaster came under attack from a Luftwaffe night fighter. The incident was noted in an official combat report.

### **Combat report:**

***8/9 October 1943 F/O Roberts and crew. Lancaster JA908N homeward bound 0153 hours, 18,500'. Rear gunner (F/Sgt Parsley) sighted a FW190 in the dark part of sky on starboard quarter, same level, 150/200 yards distant. Rear gunner immediately instructed pilot to dive to starboard. Enemy aircraft opened fire but the burst passed well over Lancaster. Rear gunner did not open fire as his guns were fully elevated and before he could bring them to bear on enemy aircraft, enemy aircraft broke away to port up and was not seen again. Mid upper gunner (F/Sgt Marsh) who was searching on the port side for a possible decoy did not open fire. "Boozer" gave no indication and "Monica" was not fitted. Lancaster undamaged.***

The crew then had six training flights on the “Y” system. During this time, Ron was awarded a promotion from Sergeant to Flight Sergeant along with Young.

October 20/21. Leipzig: 358 Lancasters of 1, 5, 6 and No 8 Groups. 16 Lancasters lost, 4.5 per cent of the force. This was the first serious attack on this distant German city. Weather conditions were very difficult - Bomber Command records describe them as 'appalling' - and the bombing was very scattered.

- 16 aircraft detailed for operations against Leipzig. 14 bombed the primary, one returned early and one aircraft, P/O Painter and crew, are reported missing. Owing to weather, reports are conflicting, some fires were seen and scattered incendiaries. It is doubtful whether all aircraft actually attacked the primary, the raid being scattered. Defence was reported as moderate. S/Ls (*searchlights*) seen to assist fighters – one aircraft had three combats.

*JB299W P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt T.W.Hope, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, Sgts H.J.Blower, P.J.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1755 Down 0030. 7 x T1, 1 x 4000lb, 3 x 500lb. Target Leipzig. Vis good. 19,500'. Target located by ETA. Bombed on centre of glow of fires. Later saw scattered green markers. One glow was seen 40 miles before reaching target.*

Marsh's total flying for October was 15.25 hrs day and 30.50 hrs night flying.

November 3. Marsh's log notes a 1.45 hr flight “Y” practice bombing on Birmingham.

- November 3/4. NFTs and flying training in the morning. 16 aircraft detailed for operations tonight. P/O J.K.McAvoy DFM and Act W/O R.J.Williams reported POW (were missing with W/C Burns crew 31st Aug). F/Sgt T.Lancashire and F/Sgt S.Powell reported POW (were missing with F/L Covington's crew 10th Aug). Operations: 7 aircraft to attack Dusseldorf, 9 aircraft to attack Cologne. At Dusseldorf 6 aircraft bombed the primary target, 1 aircraft returned early due to turrets being u/s. The attack was made in good weather - clear sky, vis good, ground haze with slight to moderate H/F and L/F. S/Ls ineffective. Fighters not reported over target. Fires reported but generally the attack is considered scattered. At Cologne (spoo target) the attack was made in good weather. Defences – desultory, H/F and S/Ls mainly ineffective – no fighters reported. Ground detail was not seen owing to haze or smoke. 14 photos were attempted in all. All crews returned safely.

*JB299W P/O F.J.Roberts, F/Sgt G.E.Dunning, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt D.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1736 Down 2132. 4 x T1, 1 x 4000lb, 6 x 1000lb. Target Dusseldorf. 19,500'. Good moonlight, hazy, no cloud. Bombed on centre of concentration of green T1 markers – in bomb sight. One big fire seen in centre of T1s. Smaller scattered fires also observed.*

## Keeping out the cold at 20,000 feet

Because we were flying at altitude with no real heating to speak of, where outside temperatures could be minus 40C, we had to wear a lot of kit, starting with long johns and long-sleeved vests made from a mixture of silk and wool, our battle dress, a thick white polo neck jersey, sea boot stockings, sheepskin flying boots, bomber jackets, three pairs of gloves - silk, wool and leather - topped off with flying helmets and goggles.

Over the top we wore a Mae West lifejacket, a parachute and harness. The gunners also had electrically-heated suits.

Whenever we went on ops we were provided with flying rations of two packets of chewing gum, two

bars of chocolate, 2oz barley sweets, a tin of Florida orange juice and a thermos flask of coffee. The barley sugars came in handy because by the time you had been flying for several hours your mouth tasted of rubber from the oxygen masks, so we sucked the sweets to take some of that taste away.

As flight engineer, my job was everything mechanical on the aircraft. I would start the engines, and during take-off I would control the throttles once the pilot needed to put hands on the control column. I had to get the wheels up and trim the flaps, and during the flight I kept an eye on all the instruments.

- Flgt Sgt Ed Childs, DFM.

November 5, 7,8 and 10 were training flights, Y practice bombing on Bath and Bristol and fighter affiliation.

November 10/11. 313 Lancasters of 5 and No 8 Groups to attack the railway yards at Modane on the main line between France and Italy. The Pathfinder marking, in difficult conditions, was slightly beyond the target but 200 aircraft brought back photographs to show that their bombs fell within 1 mile of the target and the railway system was seriously damaged.

- Training programme detailed. Letter has been received by the next of kin of W/C Burns DSO DFC stating that he is in hospital in Germany. He has lost his right arm from the elbow downwards. Order was given by him for the crew to bale out, the aircraft being out of control and on fire. 18 aircraft detailed for operations tonight. Some flying and training in the morning. 18 aircraft attacked the primary target at Modane in good visibility and clear sky. Red TIs were well placed and bombed - incendiaries were reported very scattered round the area but generally a good attack is considered to have been achieved. Defences very slight. Most crews report seeing no flak or S/Ls and no fighter activity.

*JB299W P/O J.Roberts, P/O A.J.Coleman (2nd Pilot), Sgt W.J.Whitbread, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt D.Young, Sgts N.Cohen, P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 2119 Down 0450. 4 x TI, 1 x RSF, 7 x 1000lb. Modane bombed. 18,000'. No cloud, full moon, vis good. Bombed on 3 red TIs. Own TIs seen to cascade and land on ground in middle of TI reds. Bombing was concentrated on marked area. Three small fires were observed. Some bursts were scattered on mountains.*

November 11/12 . In another attack on the French transport system, 124 Halifaxes and 10 Lancasters of 4,6 and No 8 Groups to bomb marshalling yards at Cannes and railway installations on the main coastal line to Italy. 4 Halifaxes lost. The night was clear and the Pathfinders marked the target from 5,000ft but the railway yards were not hit at all and the railway workshops suffered only blast damage.

- Operations detailed for tonight. 10 aircraft attacked the primary target at Cannes. Weather - full moon, clear sky, vis good. Fires reported - particularly the railway repair shop was to be seen on fire. An explosion was reported near the entrance to tunnel and another about the same area. Generally the raid is considered successful. Defences were very slight in target area - 3 light guns and two S/L to south. No fighter activity in target area. All aircraft returned safely to base.

*JB299W P/O J.Roberts, Sgt W.J.Whitbread, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, Sgts H.Cohen, P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1839 Down 0246. 4 x TI, 6 x 1000lb. Primary objective (Cannes) bombed. 13,000'. Moonlight, no cloud, vis good. Cluster of red TIs in bomb sight at time of bombing. Own TIs seen to cascade but not own bomb bursts. Well concentrated fires starting up.*

November 14,16 and 17 - three cross-country and bombing exercises.

## How Pathfinders marked their targets

Three methods of target marking were developed by the Pathfinders. These were known by the codenames **Parramatta**, **Wanganui** and **Newhaven** - the names coming from locations in Australia, New Zealand and the UK which had links with Pathfinder staff.

If the Oboe navigation system was used to determine the release point then the word "Musical" was used as a prefix, e.g. "Musical Parramatta".

### **Parramatta**

Parramatta used navigation aids such as H2S radar or Oboe radio signals to drop the markers.

### **Newhaven**

Newhaven used illumination flares dropped above the target area to light it up sufficiently for a visual marking by the Pathfinder aircraft.

### **Wanganui**

Wanganui was used when the target was obscured by cloud, industrial haze, or a smoke screen. Oboe or H2S was used to release the markers over the unseen target.

The target indicators used were on parachutes to give an aiming point that could be seen by the main force. This was also known as "sky marking".

• November 17. P/O Fairlie, Sgt Ball and S/L Parrott reported by IRCC (Red Cross) as killed. W/C Alabaster DFC, S/L Rodley DFC and S/L Sauvage DFC awarded the immediate DSO. Y bombing training, SBA and fighter affiliation. 15 aircraft detailed for operations tonight, target being Mannheim. The attack was carried out in 2/10th cloud, vis good, hazy. PFF Group operated with blind bombing (using H2S), no markers being used. Explosions were seen and fires started and seen on return 30 miles away. From reports of fires and explosions generally it would appear that a fairly good margin of success had been achieved. Defences slight. H/F inaccurate and many S/Ls ineffective. Many fighter flares but no fighter activity seen otherwise. All aircraft returned safely to base. G/C Fresson DFC carried out night training.

JB299W P/O J.Roberts, Sgt W.J.Whitbread, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1722 Down 2257. 5 x 2000lb. Mannheim bombed. 5/10ths cloud. 12,000'. Vis poor. Target located by DR run from Mainz. Bombed on HE bursts and defences. Several red fires were burning close together. Bomb bursts seen among fires.

# The Battle of Berlin

November 18/19 1943 The Battle of Berlin begins. 440 Lancasters and 4 Mosquitos were dispatched. Few German fighters intercepted the force. 9 Lancasters were lost, 2.0 per cent of the force. Berlin was completely cloud-covered and both marking and bombing were carried out blindly; Bomber Command could make no assessment of the results. Major diversionary raid on Mannheim and Ludwigshafen by 395 aircraft - 248 Halifaxes, 114 Stirlings, 33 Lancasters - of Nos 3, 4, 6 and 8 Groups. German fighters successfully engaged the bomber force and 23 aircraft - 12 Halifaxes, 9 Stirlings, 2 Lancasters - were lost, 5.8 per cent of the force. (Ron's crew did not fly that night.)

Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty	REMARKS (including results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.)	Flying Times	
						Day	Night
1-10-43	10:30	P.F.F. 97 Sqdn.	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	Y Training		
1-10-43	1900	H	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	(10) Ops to "Hagen" Backy. M. (1x4000; 4x1000) 6 T.I.	2.20	4.55
4-10-43	11:30	J	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	B.H.T. Demonstration	1.15	
4-10-43	19:00	J	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	(10) Ops to Ludwigshafen (1x4000) HE (6x1000) 4 T.I.		6.30
7-10-43	10:30	J	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	Y Training	1.45	
7-10-43	21:00	N	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	(20) Ops to Stuttgart (1x4000; 3x1000) 6 T.I.		7.15
8-10-43	23:00	N	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	(21) Ops to Hannover (1x4000; 6x1000) 6 T.I.		8.30
13-10-43		N	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	Y Training	1.10	
13-10-43		N	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	BASE - WYTON - BASE	4.5	
14-10-43		N	P/O Roberts	M. U. S.	Y Training	2.10	
TOTAL TIME						108.45	162.40

Pages from the logbook of Mid-Upper Gunner Sergeant Peter Marsh. (Courtesy Marsh family)

## 'For me, the most anxious time was at take-off'

Flt Sgt Maurice 'Frank' Hemming DFM, served as a Flight Engineer with 97 Squadron on Lancasters during 1943. He gave an account what the crews went through during an operation.

*"We were scared, yes. When briefing was over and time for departure arrived, some six or so crews would clamber into the back of a truck with their kit and be transported and dropped off at their aircraft dispersal points. One could look at the crews and tell who wasn't coming back; now, that to me took guts.*

*For me, the most anxious time was at take-off – hurtling down the runway, in the dark, willing the aircraft into the air and hoping against hope that a tyre didn't burst.*

*Once airborne, our trust was in each other. I was very lucky with my choice of crew, led by Sgt D.I.Jones, a 19-year-old pilot who looked as though he wouldn't say boo to a goose, but who proved to be very calm and collected and totally in command of his aircraft at all times and was an inspiration to the crew.*

*On what to us were short trips - to the Ruhr - on take-off, each aircraft had to circle the 'drome, gaining height to 10,000 feet before setting course.*

*This was alright when there was no cloud, but very often it would be cloudy. Having to perform*

*this, knowing that several other airfields' 'outer circuits' overlapped your own and the same was being done by them, involving what could be up to 200 aircraft, made my eyeballs stand out like organ stops, especially when the aircraft rocked in another's slipstream. This was to me the most frightening of times.*

*Our pilot had worked out a wonderful weaving pattern to confuse ground radar control.*

*We were always thankful to see searchlights pop up in a spot of sky we had just left.*

*Often one would see not so lucky aircraft 'coned' and shot down.*

*Once over the target things were a lot more hectic, as it was necessary to fly straight and level, under the bomb aimer's guidance.*

*It was then that ground gunners were able to get a good fix and flak would be thick and heavy, with shrapnel bouncing off the aircraft. This was the most likely time to get coned in searchlights.*

*Another fear at this time was of hitting other aircraft, or being beneath another aircraft's falling bombs".*

*(Extract from the book Night Airwar by Theo Boiten.)*

## Multi-tasking, the Pathfinder way

Every man in a Pathfinder crew was trained to do at least two jobs and sometimes three. A flight engineer, for example, as well as his specific duties was invariably trained to drop the bombs.

The bomb aimer was usually trained as a set operator - helping the navigator to work the electronic navigation equipment.

The navigator or flight engineer might also be trained to fly the aircraft in an emergency. Most navigators and engineers had gone through

elementary flying training, so knew what they were doing.

The idea was that if the pilot were wounded or killed there was someone on board capable of getting the rest of the crew home.

On training missions, bomber pilots would sometimes give the navigator or flight engineer a turn at the controls to keep in practice.

*(From The Pathfinder Companion by Sean Feast)*

November 22/23. Berlin attacked by 764 aircraft - 469 Lancasters, 234 Halifaxes, 50 Stirlings, 11 Mosquitos. This was the greatest force sent to Berlin so far but it was also the last raid in which Stirlings were sent to Germany. Bad weather again kept most of the German fighters on the ground and the bomber force was able to take a relatively 'straight in, straight out' route to the target without suffering undue loss.

26 aircraft - 11 Lancasters, 10 Halifaxes, 5 Stirlings - were lost, 3.4 per cent of the force. Berlin was again completely cloud-covered and returning crews could only estimate that the marking and bombing were believed to be accurate. In fact, this was the most effective raid on Berlin of the war. A vast area of destruction stretched from the central districts westwards across the mainly residential areas of Tiergarten and Charlottenburg to the separate suburb city of Spandau. Because of the dry weather conditions, several 'firestorm' areas were reported. It was estimated that 175,000 people were bombed out.

- 20 Lancasters detailed to attack targets in Berlin. Weather 9/10 – 10/10ths cloud at 7,000' – visibility good. Bombs were released from approximately 10,000'. All TIs were reported as fairly well concentrated and a good and continuous marking was kept up during the attack. Some fires were reported but bomb bursts could not generally be seen. Observation was hampered by clouds but the attack is considered scattered. Defences – heavy and light barrage over target with box barrage at 16,000'. No fighter flares. Two aircraft and crews have failed to return from this operation - they are JB227J F/L Munro DFC (Can) and crew and JB238A P/O McEgan (Aus) and crew. All remaining aircraft returned to base, a few of them with minor flak damage.

*JB299W P/O J.Roberts, F/Sgt S.R.Arter, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt D.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1710 Down 2340. 7 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 3 x 1000lb. Berlin bombed from a height of 19,000'. Bombs were dropped in centre of cluster of three red TIs. On leaving target fires were increasing and clouds were glowing. A big explosion observed lasting 5/6 seconds.*

After the Berlin raid of November 22/23, **Joseph Goebbels**, Germany's propaganda minister recorded in his diary:

*"I just can't understand how the English are able to do so much damage to the Reich's capital during one air raid. The picture that greeted my eye in the Wilhelmplatz was one of utter desolation. Blazing fires everywhere . . . . Transport conditions are still quite hopeless."*

November 23/24. 383 aircraft - 365 Lancasters, 10 Halifaxes, 8 Mosquitos - to continue the attack on Berlin. The bombing force used the same direct route as had been employed on the previous night. The German controllers made an early identification of Berlin as the probable target; their single-engined fighters were gathered over the city before the arrival of the bombers and other fighters arrived a few minutes later. Fake instructions broadcast from England caused much annoyance to the German who was giving the 'running commentary'; the Germans started using a female commentator but this was promptly countered by a female voice from England ordering the German pilots to land because of fog at their bases.

'Spoof' fighter flares dropped by Mosquitos north of the bomber stream also caused some diversion of German effort. Bomber crews noticed that flak over the target was unusually restrained, with the German fighters obviously being given priority. 20 aircraft - all Lancasters - were lost, 5.2 per cent of the bomber force. The target was again cloud-covered and the Pathfinders carried out skymarking, but many of the Main Force crews aimed their bombs through the cloud at the glow of 11 major fires still burning from the previous night. Much further destruction was caused in Berlin.

- 16 Lancasters detailed to again operate against Berlin. Weather was better although 10/10ths cloud, there were patches of visibility. Markers reported to be well concentrated - owing to cloud no details were possible but the attack is considered very scattered. Some incendiaries were seen through clouds. A good red glow could be seen for 20 minutes on route home.

Fires were still believed to be burning from the previous raid. H/F moderate and barrage light. Many fighter flares and fighter activity. F/Sgt Penny and crew failed to return. All other aircraft returned safely to base encountering bad weather and gales. Minor damage was sustained by some aircraft - F/L Riches had two engines shot up over the target but the aircraft was brought back to base safely in the remaining two engines, the third one cutting while still on the runway.

*JB299W P/O J.Roberts, F/Sgt J.Duffy, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1715 Down 2345. 1 x 4000lb, 5 x 1000lb. Berlin bombed from 18,500'. Aiming point located with "Y". On leaving target fires were seen to be causing widespread glow on cloud. Minor damage caused to fuselage by flak.*

November 25/26. 262 aircraft - 236 Halifaxes and 26 Lancasters - of Nos 4, 6 and 8 Groups to Frankfurt. As on the previous night, there were no major diversions and the bomber force took a relatively direct route to the target. The German controller did not know whether Mannheim or Frankfurt was the real objective but he eventually chose Frankfurt, where the flak was restricted to 15,000 ft. 12 bombers - 11 Halifaxes and 1 Lancaster - lost, 4.6 per cent of the force.

- 19 aircraft detailed for ops and night training cross countries which were carried out. The following signal has been received from AOC-in-C: I have received the following message from the Secretary of State which please convey together with my reply to all ranks:

*"My warmest congratulations to you and to all ranks serving under your command on two crushing attacks on the Nazi citadel. Berlin is not only the home of Prussian militarism and the capital of the Nazi government, but it is also the greatest single centre of war industry in Germany. Often before, your squadrons have hit it hard. The most convincing measure of this success has been the huge deployment of the enemy's resources for its defence. Nevertheless your attacks these last two nights have reached a new level of power and concentration and have proved that however much he may marshal his guns, searchlights and fighters, the enemy cannot match your skill and determination of your crews."*

AOC-in-C's reply: *"On behalf of all ranks of Bomber Command I thank you for your encouraging message. The Battle of Berlin progresses. It will continue as opportunity serves and circumstances dictate until the heart of Nazi Germany ceases to beat."*

Out of the 19 aircraft detailed for operations, which were to attack Frankfurt, three aircraft were withdrawn. Remainder bombed in 9/10ths cloud top about 1,800' in thin layer - vis good. Defence - H/F moderate - barrage bursting 16-18,000'. S/Ls ineffective, some enemy aircraft fighter activity. First TIs were fairly well concentrated, later flares were seen wide of target and scattered bombing followed. Fires were scattered over an area of some 8 miles radius. Fires were seen reflected in the clouds from 40 miles away but a good concentrated attack was not achieved. F/L Brown (Can/USA) and crew failed to return. This crew was operating for the first time with this Squadron.

*JA908N P/O J.Roberts, P/O S.R.Arter, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 0025 Down 0600. 1 x 4000lb, 4 x 1000lb. Frankfurt bombed from 18,800'. Cloud obscured target and aircraft was too early on target to observe results.*



November 26/27. 443 Lancasters and 7 Mosquitos to Berlin and Stuttgart (diversion). Both forces flew a common route over Northern France and on nearly to Frankfurt before diverging. The German controllers thought that Frankfurt was the main target until a late stage and several bombers were shot down as they flew past Frankfurt. Only a few fighters appeared over Berlin, where flak was the main danger, but the scattered condition of the bomber stream at Berlin meant that bombers were caught by fighters off track on the return flight and the casualties mounted.

28 Lancasters were lost, 6.2 per cent of the force, and 14 more Lancasters crashed in England. The Berlin Zoo was heavily bombed on this night. Many of the animals had been evacuated to zoos in other parts of Germany but the bombing killed most of the remainder. Several large and dangerous animals - leopards, panthers, jaguars, apes - escaped and had to be hunted and shot in the streets.

- 19 aircraft detailed for operations. 9 of them to attack a target in Berlin and 10 to the secondary target at Stuttgart. 8 aircraft attacked Berlin, 1 aircraft having been withdrawn due to bomb trouble. Weather clear and vis good. Defences - moderate H/F, inaccurate, S/L cones. Some 150 S/L to south-east in outskirts. Much fighter activity.

Attack opened up well on time, but for some scattered markers, a good concentration was maintained. Glow of large fires seen 100 miles away on homeward route. Attack considered to have been very scattered. All crews returned safely to base. 9 aircraft attacked Stuttgart, one aircraft returned early, the mid upper gunner being sick. Vis good but 7/10ths cloud up to 10,000'. Defences slight, H/F inaccurate owing to cloud - fighters not conspicuous. Fires were seen to glow beneath clouds which were visible 60 miles on route home. Crews report much activity at Frankfurt of flak and fighter flares. The attack is considered successful, all returned safely to base.

*JA908N P/O J.Roberts, P/O S.R.Arter, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 1730 Down 0010. 6 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 5 x 1000lb. Primary target (Stuttgart) attacked from 18,500'. Target located by TIs red and green and Wanganui flares. Excellent concentration of TIs observed. A very successful raid.*

## A well-earned rest

Marsh's logbook shows the crew had flown 9 hrs day and 50.45 hrs night in November. They had also flown 30 operations, a full tour for standard bomber crews, which would have entitled them to take some leave.

Ron's sister Muriel remembers Ron coming home on leave - and heading up to Hammersmith Palais to go dancing. On one occasion, Ron brought the whole crew to go dancing at the Palais. When on leave, Ron would take a 15-minute walk into Hammersmith each day to buy an evening paper and catch up on the news. The crew's break lasted until December 16 when they had a short training flight before rejoining the attacks on Berlin. Bad weather kept much of the squadron on the ground until the 16th. Ron's Pilot, Frank Roberts, was promoted from Pilot Officer to Flight Lieutenant.



*A full house at Hammersmith Palais de Dance in 1941. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.*

# Black Thursday

From *Flying through Fire* by Geoffrey Williams.

Black Thursday came one month into the Battle of Berlin, Bomber Command's all-out attempt to win the war by attacking the German capital and other key cities. It was not the enemy which caused the mass RAF casualties of Black Thursday, but Bomber Command's perennial enemy - the weather.

On the night of 16 December 1943, the system for getting RAF bomber aircraft safely back to their bases fell apart.

The survivors of the very large force of 483 Lancasters and 15 Mosquitoes which had taken part in the bombing raid on Berlin reached England safely only to find that the light mist of the afternoon had turned into a deadly pea-souper of a fog, blanketing the country as far up as Yorkshire.

At the Pathfinder stations of Bourn and Gransden Lodge, conditions were probably the worst in the country.

Visibility was dropping with every minute that passed - by midnight, it would be down to 300 yards or less, and it took about 1,000 yards to stop a Lancaster.

By the early hours of the morning, cloudbase at Gransden Lodge was at 100 feet and the fog was meeting up with it. No 405 Squadron, based at Gransden Lodge, had serious problems trying to land their Lancasters - only 5 of the 13 aircraft operating that night would eventually touch down at their home station.

Bourn had 21 Lancasters due to land within the space of about 90 minutes, and Flying Control was stretched to the limit. The airfield was covered in thick fog and pilots descending blind through the clouds would not break into even partial visibility until just 250 feet above ground.

Technical aids for landing in such difficult conditions were in their infancy. Gee, a radio navigational aid, would help the returning aircraft to locate their home airfield, but it was too imprecise to direct them down onto a runway. The only facilities available to land in severe weather were FIDO and a system known as SBA.

FIDO, the Fog Investigation and Dispersal Operation, was operational at only three airfields: Graveley, six miles north-west of Bourn; Downham Market 35 miles to the north-east and Fiskerton, close to Lincoln, 95 miles to the north.

Only one of 97 Squadron's aircraft, that of the Coates crew, would land at Downham Market under very remarkable circumstances - it was to Graveley that at least six of the squadron's aircraft would be diverted.

The electrical beam [SBA] could help the pilots to approach to within 100 or 200 feet of the runway but they were then still flying absolutely blind at over 100 miles an hour with the imminent danger of crashing the aircraft, and killing themselves and all their crew, because they could not actually see to land. Fog over British airfields [had become] more of a menace than flak over Germany.



*FIDO in operation at Graveley. IWM Picture 15271.*

FIDO was designed to disperse the lethal cloud and fog. Vast pipes, carrying thousands of gallons of petrol, had been installed down all sides of the runway at Graveley. The pipes were pierced with holes, from which a fine jet of petrol spurted forth when the pumps were in operation. To fire up each section of the system, a man lit the first burner and then ran like hell when it ignited with a whoosh. The heat dispersed the fog and cloud, and the glow of the flames provided a flarepath.

Less daunting than FIDO but more difficult to use was SBA, Standard Beam Approach, which was installed at all the base airfields, including Bourn. Referred to as 'landing on the beam', SBA employed signals emitted by beacons in line with the main

runway. These beacons sent out a code to the pilot which showed if he was straying off course. The theory was fine but the practice infinitely more difficult.

For the crews who came down out of the safety of the sky, it was to be a terrifying experience as they tried to locate the runway with or without the help of SBA. As the inevitable crashes began to occur, crews still in the air sometimes saw, even despite the thickness of the murk, the burning glow of crashed aircraft as they descended below cloud cover.

This added to the terrible stress that all the pilots and crews would experience that night.

## The view from the back seat

Flight Sergeant Ron Buck was the rear gunner of a 97 Sqn Lancaster trying to land in the fog.

"I saw the glow of fires beneath the fog and knew that aircraft were going into the deck. We were tired and tensed up. It had been a long trip and we were keen to land and get to bed.

A discussion broke among the crew whether to attempt to land or abandon the aircraft. Peter Drane, the pilot, cut the discussion short. 'I'll take her up to five thousand and anyone who wants to bale out has my permission to do so'.

There were no takers and we all decided to stay and take our chances. It was our 18th op and I'm sure we all felt a little ashamed of ourselves. At last came the order 'A-Able you may pancake'. Pete Drane said 'Right, everyone, I'll put this cow down if it's the last thing I do'. I settled down as best I could and concentrated all my attention on the blackness below. We banked and straightened up.

Suddenly I saw the ground and I screamed over the intercom 'Pull up!' There was no hesitation. The nose lifted and we climbed into the night sky to overshoot. Pete Drane came on the intercom and told me we couldn't have been on the deck; he had 300 feet on the clock when I shouted.

It turned out that we had the wrong QFE (airfield height setting on the altimeter) and I believe that many others did the same that night, but they never lived to find out.

Pete called up the control tower, they gave him a new QFE and we started our approach again. We were lucky the second time.

The wind exposed part of the flare path and Pete was able to line the aircraft up. As I felt the wheels touch the runway, I turned the rear turret on the beam, sat back and watched the runway lights flashing by. . . . It was an experience I shall never forget'."



*Bourn to Berlin - a well-travelled route for the Lancasters of No 97 Squadron Bomber Command.*

# Black Thursday: the official account

The Campaign Diary noted the heavy losses on December 16/17 1943 - Black Thursday.

483 Lancasters and 10 Mosquitos on the main raid to Berlin and 5 further Mosquitos dropped decoy fighter flares south of Berlin. The bomber route again led directly to Berlin across Holland and Northern Germany and there were no major diversions. The German controllers plotted the course of the bombers with great accuracy; many German fighters were met at the coast of Holland and further fighters were guided on to the bomber stream throughout the approach to the target. More fighters were waiting at the target and there were many combats.

The bombers shook off the opposition on the return flight by taking a northerly route over Denmark. 25 Lancasters, 5.2 per cent of the Lancaster force, were lost. Many further aircraft were lost on returning to England. Berlin was cloud-covered but the Pathfinder skymarking was reasonably accurate and much of the bombing fell in the city. In the city centre, the National Theatre and the building housing Germany's military and political archives were both destroyed. The damage to the Berlin railway system and to rolling stock, and the large numbers of people still leaving the city, were having a cumulative effect upon the transportation of supplies to the Russian Front; 1,000 wagon-loads of war material were held up for 6 days. The sustained bombing had now made more than a quarter of Berlin's total living accommodation unusable.

On their return to England, many of the bombers encountered very low cloud at their bases. The squadrons of 1, 6 and No 8 Groups were particularly badly affected. 29 Lancasters (and a Stirling from the minelaying operation) either crashed or were abandoned when their crews parachuted. The group with heaviest losses was No 1 Group with 13 aircraft lost; the squadron with heaviest losses was 97 Squadron, No 8 Group, with 7 aircraft lost.

On Black Thursday, the No. 97 Squadron ORB reported that 8 out of 21 aircraft were lost.

- 21 aircraft detailed to attack Berlin. Good concentration of bombing in early stages falling off later. No results seen only reddish glow. 10/10ths cloud tops 3/5000', vis good. Defences H/F moderate to 22,000' and moderate L/F 14,000' - S/Ls ineffective. Many fighter flares and scarecrow flares. F/L Pelletier in Lanc JA960 was attacked by an enemy fighter JU88 and claims it damaged. One aircraft, F/L Brill and crew failed to return - no news heard since.

On returning to base aircraft encountered bad visibility over England and the Squadron had a disastrous night in aircraft losses and 28 aircrew being killed. The following is a brief summary of the return. 8 aircraft landed safely at Bourn and 3 at Graveley. One aircraft landed at Wyton. F/Sgt Coates after being hit by another aircraft's incendiaries and having two engines put out of action on the same side by flak, put out a ditching signal when not far from the Danish coast. With great skill he flew the aircraft back on the two engines and landed safely without further damage at Downham Market.

Two crews, P/O Smith and F/O Mooney the captains, baled out safely over Ely and Wyton. All the crews were uninjured but one aircraft is missing and untraced. S/L Mackenzie DFC crashed at Bourn on the edge of the airfield. Three were killed - S/L Mackenzie, F/O Colson, P/O Pratt, the remainder are either in hospital or sick quarters.

F/O Thackway and crew crashed near Bourn airfield, killing all except Sgt Mack who is in hospital and Sgt Laver who escaped uninjured. S/L Deverill DFC DFM and crew crashed at Graveley, all being killed except for W/O Benbow who is in Ely hospital. F/Sgt Scott and crew crashed at Graveley, all being killed. P/O Kirkwood and crew crashed near Gransden, all being killed. Total loss of aircraft - 8. Aircrew killed - 28, injured 7.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, P/O S.R.Arter, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, F/Sgt H.J.Blower, Sgt P.A.Marsh, F/Sgt W.A.Parsley. Up 16.55 Down 00.15. 5 x 2000lb. Primary target successfully bombed. Visibility good over target area. 10/10ths cloud.*

Ron's Lancaster must have been one of the three forced to divert to Graveley, near Huntingdon, where there was a FIDO flarepath to disperse the fog. Marsh's logbook shows that on December 19 they flew back home. The logbook entry notes just - "Graveley - Base".

December 19 and 20 - two training flights.

December 20/21. Frankfurt: 650 aircraft - 390 Lancasters, 257 Halifaxes, 3 Mosquitos. The German control rooms were able to plot the bomber force as soon as it left the English coast and were able to continue plotting it all the way to Frankfurt. There were many combats on the route to the target. The Mannheim diversion did not draw fighters away from the main attack until after the raid was over but the return flight was quieter. 41 aircraft - 27 Halifaxes, 14 Lancasters - lost, 6.3 per cent of the force. The bombing at Frankfurt did not go according to plan. The Pathfinders had prepared a ground-marking plan on the basis of a forecast giving clear weather but they found up to 8/10ths cloud.

- 19 aircraft detailed for operations tonight. 17 aircraft detailed to attack Frankfurt. One aircraft was withdrawn, one aircraft returned early due to rear turret u/s. One aircraft bombed last resort and 12 aircraft attacked the primary in 8/10th cloud top 10,000' vis good. Identification of reports was not possible owing to cloud. Generally crews reported scattered TIs but some good fires which appeared early in the raid fairly concentrated. Defences slight H/F barrage. Two aircraft were detailed to attack Mannheim. One aircraft was withdrawn, the other attacking primary target. Concentration reported good, many fires burning. Defences H/F. All the above aircraft and crews returned safely to base.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J. Devine, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, Sgts F. Martin, P.A.Marsh, W/O W.A.Parsley. Up 1723 Down 2216. 6 x 2000lb. Frankfurt bombed from 18,500'. H2S (ground following radar) u/s so had to identify target by TIs. Fighter flares on track after leaving target for 70 miles. Combats observed but no results seen.*

Arter and Blower have now left the crew and been replaced by Devine and Martin. Both Blower and Arter had clearly finished their tours because Arter, the flight engineer, left 97 Squadron for 24 OTU on 7th January and Blower, the w/op, went to 84 OTU on 22nd January.

HAMBURG. 1846

SQUADRON *144* A/C NUMBER AND LETTER *64 L* CAPTAIN *W.A. Parsley* NAVIGATOR *Ron* DATE *21.12.45*

FORECAST W/Vs AND AIR TEMPS.						POSITION		SLIP		MOON		TWILIGHT		FORM
STAGE	FROM TO	3,000 FT.		2,000 FT.		1,000 FT.		RISE	SETS	RISE	SETS	A.M.	P.M.	NO.
		Wind (T) Speed	From (T) Speed	Wind (T) Speed	From (T) Speed	Wind (T) Speed	From (T) Speed							
0-0	0000-0400	350	140	260	145	270	60	280	60	290	70			
1-9	0400-0700	230	37	260	40	270	45	280	50	290	50			
2-9	0700-0900	260	35	240	40	270	45	280	50	290	50			
3-9	0900-1200	300	37	270	40	290	45	300	50	310	50			
4-9	1200-1500	350	40	280	45	300	50	310	55	320	55			
5-9	1500-1800	400	45	300	50	320	55	330	60	340	60			
6-9	1800-2100	450	50	350	55	370	60	380	65	390	65			
7-9	2100-2400	500	55	400	60	420	65	430	70	440	70			
8-9	2400-2700	550	60	450	65	470	70	480	75	490	75			
9-9	2700-3000	600	65	500	70	520	75	530	80	540	80			

WATCH	SET AT	GMT. ON	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24

ORDERS *0845* *10:00* *1700* *1700*

*0653.7* *0748.1* *0827.2* *0847.7*

*0730.2* *0739.5* *0756.9* *0855.0*

TIME	ROD TRACK (T)	W/V USED AND COMPUTED DRIFT	Course (T)	VAEN	Course (P)	Compass Course for Devn.	Course (C)	ROUTE		R.A.S.	HEIGHT & AIR TEMP.	T.A.S.	DR. GS	DIST. TO AUN	D.R. TRF	E.P.A.
								FROM	TO							
10.3	104	272	111					0748	178	178	184	219	49	13.4	0653.7	
10.2	112	272	120					178	178	178	184	215	47	12.5	0730.2	
10.1	112	272	119					161	161	161	177	208	22	6.1	0740.5	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0751.4	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	8.1	0759.5	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	10.4	0810.4	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.2	0815.2	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	9.3	0827.2	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	9.3	0826.3	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
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10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
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10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1	0855.0	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	11.1	0847.7	
10.0	112	272	116					161	161	161	177	214	23	7.1</		

# A spectacle of devastation

The *Sydney Morning Herald's* London Editor, A. W. V. King, flew in a Lancaster on a raid over Berlin on December 3, 1943. This is part of what he wrote.

*Superb in the savage beauty of its light, but terrifying as a spectacle of devastation by explosive and burning, was the scene in portion of Berlin as it appeared last night from a Lancaster of one of the Australian bomber squadrons in which I flew.*

*Hundreds of searchlights probed the skies and coned several bombers. "Scarecrow" flares soared up and burst into a cascade of light which turned night into day. Other flares broke into ominous red and green orbs and flak burst in angry blobs.*

*The skies over the target were indeed in turmoil, but the target area itself was in even greater turmoil as 4,000lb bombs - "cookies" - smashed amid the built-up area and thousands of incendiaries cascaded down and took a hold among the blocks of buildings in fantastic alphabetical designs."*

He wrote about the pilot, Squadron-Leader William A. Forbes, 23 from Sydney and bomb-aimer, Pilot-Officer William Grime, of Ealing, London.

*"Then Forbes settled down to hold his plane to the level, undeviating run so essential for accurate bombing. Flak poured upwards, though none burst close enough to "George" to threaten the crew's*

*safety. But these were those few seconds which bomber crews dread and against which they must summon up all their courage, determination, and Imperturbability - a few seconds in which they never know whether the next flak-burst is going to extinguish their life, smash their limbs, cripple their plane, or whether they will slip past the German gunners.*

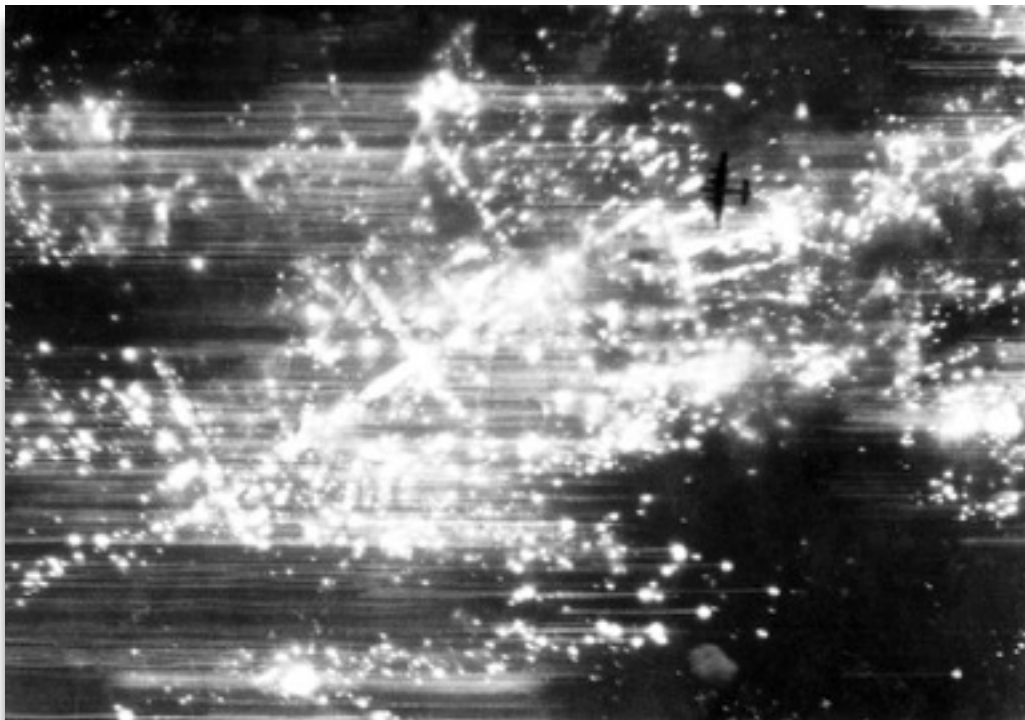
*The flak, to the uninitiated reporter, seemed desperately dangerous, but according to "George's" veteran crew of youngsters, it "wasn't much."*

*Whether heavy or light it failed to disturb "George's" steady bombing run. Over the intercom, from the bomb aimer's compartment came Grime's calm voice: "Bomb doors open" magic words that thrill even the most hardened crews.*

*"Okay," came from Forbes. Seconds passed. Then, from Grime came the even more magic words, in his unruffled voice: "Cookie gone."*

*"Okay," came from the equally unruffled Forbes. I counted slowly to myself . . . one, two, three, four, five. Then Grime again spoke: "Incendiaries gone."*

*"Okay," came from Forbes. We had delivered, free of charge, to Hitler and company, a 4,000lb building-blasters and morale-shaker, and many fire-raisers. This was the climax of the flight. "*



*Terrifying spectacle - a Lancaster appears tiny over the burning city of Hannover.*

December 22 and 23 two training flights.

December 23/24. Berlin: 379 aircraft - 364 Lancasters, 8 Mosquitos, 7 Halifaxes. The bomber casualties were not as heavy as on recent raids, partly because German fighters encountered difficulty with the weather and partly because the German controller was temporarily deceived by the Mosquito diversion at Leipzig. The main force of fighters only appeared in the target area at the end of the raid and could not catch the main bomber stream. 16 Lancasters were lost, 4.2 per cent of the force. The Berlin area was covered by cloud and more than half of the early Pathfinder aircraft had trouble with their H2S sets. The markers were scattered and sparse.

- 17 aircraft detailed to attack Berlin. Two aircraft returned early due to engine trouble and 15 aircraft attacked the primary target. 7/10th - 10/10ths cloud at 8,000', vis good at target. Moderate H/F and L/F barrage. Fighter activity average. Attack appeared well concentrated and a good glow on clouds was seen by returning aircraft for about 50 miles.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt D.Young, Sgts F.Martin, P.A.Marsh, W/O W.A.Parsley. Up 0027 Down 0749. 5 x 2000lb. Berlin bombed from a height of 19,000'. On run in one red TI observed burning on ground. Vis good. 9/10ths strata cumulus (sic) tops at 10,000'.*

On Christmas Eve, Ron had some good news. He was "Temporarily Awarded PFF (Pathfinder Force) Badge." He had proved his worth as an elite navigator.

December 29 - one training flight. The following night operation was to be a dangerous and challenging one, demonstrating the dangers of having so many aircraft in darkness in the same place at the same time.

December 29/30. 712 aircraft - 457 Lancasters, 252 Halifaxes, 3 Mosquitos - returned to Berlin. A long approach route from the south, passing south of the Ruhr and then within 20 miles of Leipzig, together with Mosquito diversions at Düsseldorf, Leipzig and Magdeburg, caused the German controller great difficulties and there were few fighters over Berlin. Bad weather on the outward route also kept down the number of German fighters finding the bomber stream. 20 aircraft - 11 Lancasters, 9 Halifaxes - were lost, 2.8 per cent of the force. Berlin was again cloud-covered. The Bomber Command report claiming a concentrated attack on skymarkers is not confirmed by the local report. The heaviest bombing was in the southern and south-eastern districts but many bombs also fell to the east of the city.

- "Y" training, bombing on range and air firing during day. 18 aircraft detailed to attack Berlin. Two aircraft were withdrawn, one of which had a tyre burst just before the take off which blocked the dispersal of the other. One aircraft returned early, oxygen being unserviceable for rear gunner. 15 aircraft attacked the primary target. Weather 10/10ths vis good. Defences moderate H/F barrage predicted. S/Ls nil, slight fighter activity. Crews report good concentrated attack. Two were shot up by flak, F/L Steven returning on three engines. **F/L Roberts damaged his wing tip over target, another four engined aircraft hitting him.** All aircraft returned safely to base.

*JB229W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, Sgts R.C.Wale?, P.A.Marsh, W/O W.A.Parsley. Up 1716 Down 2400. 3LBTI Green, 3 x TI green, 1 x 5 flares red/green, 1 x 4000lb, 3 x 1000lb. Attacked target from 19,000'. 0/10ths cloud, vis good. An excellent concentration of TIs and good fires burning as aircraft left target. **Starboard wing tip cut off in collision with Lancaster** at 20,000 ft. 1946 hours. Collision occurred as bombing run started.*

## Gloomy mood. Who would be next?

The cost of aircrew casualties was high, many men did not survive their tour. Wireless operator with first No 100 and then No 156 Squadron RAF, Queenslander William Pearce recalled the effect of the relentless loss, night after night, but also how they adjusted quickly to the inevitability of it:

*"Sometimes the 'mood' in the mess, at the meal after an 'op' would be very gloomy. This would be on the occasion of an aircraft having 'failed to return' ... We accepted this, it happened regularly enough, and who was to be next? I guess all we really did was mutter something like 'poor bloody Joe', or Jack or Fred or whoever, shrug our shoulders, eat our meal and go to bed. Then, at the earliest opportunity, we would sneak to their crew's quarters, and pinch what was left of their coal supply."*  
(From Bomber Command by historian Dr Richard Reid, Anzac Portal.)

## 1944

The new year brought no let up in the Squadron's bombing attacks on Germany.

January 1/2. 421 Lancasters despatched to Berlin. Despite a Mosquito 'spoof' raid on Hamburg, German fighters were directed on to the bomber stream at an early stage and were particularly active en-route to Berlin. 28 Lancasters were lost, 6.7 per cent of the force.

- 20 aircraft Lancaster IIIs are detailed to attack Berlin. Two aircraft were withdrawn owing to engine troubles. The remaining 18 aircraft set out to attack the primary target. Weather was 10/10th cloud at 12,000', vis good. Defences moderate H/F to slight – S/Ls ineffective. Slight fighter activity and many scare crow flares. No results of bombing were seen and some scattered markers were reported. It appears that no good continuous concentration was achieved. One aircraft and crew – Captain F/O Mooney DFM is missing, no news being received since leaving base. Another aircraft, F/Lt Owen and crew landed at Tangmere with a burst tyre and damage by enemy action. The rear gunner has been admitted to hospital suffering from a shell wound in the lower right leg. The remainder of crews returned to base.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt C.Young, F/Sgt F.Martin, Sgt P.A.Marsh, W/O W.Parsley. Up 0029 Down 0700. 4 flares, 6 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 5 x 500lb. Berlin bombed from 19,000'. Bombs released by H2S and by the aid of Wanganui flares. No results could be seen.*

January 2/3. 383 aircraft - 362 Lancasters, 12 Mosquitos, 9 Halifaxes - return to Berlin. German fighter controllers followed the bombers all the way to the target. Night fighters were sent to a radio beacon between Hannover and Bremen but these fighters missed the bomber stream and did not come into action until they were directed to Berlin. Most of the bomber casualties were in the Berlin area. 27 Lancasters were lost, 10 per cent of the force. The casualties included 10 Pathfinder aircraft; No 156 Squadron, from Warboys, lost 5 of its 14 aircraft taking part in the raid.

- 17 aircraft are detailed to again attack Berlin. Briefing was in the evening with a very late take off. One aircraft was withdrawn being too late. The remaining 16 aircraft set out to attack the primary target but one had to return after 3 hours owing to trouble. Weather and defences were much the same as the previous raid. Little was seen owing to cloud but the reports show it as a good raid and generally concentrated and successful. F/O Snell claims that his rear gunner, Sgt O.D.Wood, shot down an enemy aircraft believed to be a FW190. The attack was made from astern about 20 miles south of Berlin. All crews returned safely to base.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt G.Young, F/Sgt F.Martin, Sgt P.A.Marsh, W/O W.A.Parsley. Up 0009 Down 0644. 4 x flares, 4 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 4 x 1000lb. Primary target bombed from 16,500. Very good concentration of Wanganuis around aiming point. Cloud obscured results.*

January 4. Training flight - high level bombing Barham.

January 5/6. 348 Lancasters and 10 Halifaxes in the first large raid on Stettin since September 1941. The Mosquito diversion at Berlin successfully kept most of the German fighters away from the main force of bombers. 16 aircraft - 14 Lancasters, 2 Halifaxes - lost, 4.5 per cent of the force.

- No flying training as detailed due to poor visibility. 20 aircraft have been detailed for tonight's operations. Two aircraft did not take off owing to a burst tyre on perimeter track and gyro instruments u/s. The remainder attacked Stettin in good visibility and clear sky. Defences were moderate H/F to L/F, S/Ls ineffective – some fighter activity. Four-engined bombers seen over target laying flares. TIs were concentrated and bombing good. Ground detail could be seen. Fires started early and one crew claim to have seen direct hits on the railway station. Large areas of fire could be seen by crews leaving the target 150 miles en route home. The raid is regarded as being a great success. F/O Anstee and crew and P/O Flack and crew failed to return from this operation. Nothing heard since.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, F/Sgt R.Dudley, F/Sgt C.Young, Sgts F.Martin, P.A.Marsh, W/O W.Parsley. Up 23.31 Down 08.39. 24 flares, 3 x TI, 1 x 4000lb, 2 x 1000lb. Primary target bombed. Visibility excellent. Clear sky. Very good concentration on main town. Main features of town clearly visible.*



*Flying Officer A E Manning and his crew gather by their aircraft, Avro Lancaster B Mark I, W4964 'WS-J', of No. 9 Squadron RAF, shortly after their return to Bardney, Lincolnshire, in the early hours of 6 January 1944, after raiding Stettin, Germany.. Picture from Imperial War Museum.*

The weather was poor in early January and much flying was cancelled.

**Ron was promoted to Acting Warrant Officer. - 1388344 A/W/O R.Dudley Nav 21/22.1.44.**

January 20/21. 769 aircraft - 495 Lancasters, 264 Halifaxes, 10 Mosquitos - to Berlin. 35 aircraft - 22 Halifaxes, 13 Lancasters - lost, 4.6 per cent of the force. No 102 Squadron, from Pocklington, lost 5 of its 16 Halifaxes on this raid, 2 more crashed in England and the squadron would lose 4 more aircraft in the next night's raid. The bomber approach route took a wide swing to the north but, once again, the German controller managed to feed his fighters into the bomber stream early and the fighters scored steadily until the force was well on the way home. The diversions were not large enough to deceive the Germans. The Berlin area was, as so often, completely cloud-covered and what happened to the bombing is a mystery. The Pathfinder skymarking appeared to go according to plan and crews who were scanning the ground with their H2S sets believed that the attack fell on eastern districts of Berlin.

- 21 Lancaster IIIs are detailed to attack Berlin. One aircraft returned early, also one bombed Brunsbuttin, oxygen failure. The remaining 19 bombed the primary. Weather was 9/10th to 10/10th thin cloud at the commencement of the attack with good visibility. A fair concentration was achieved with early arrivals reporting incendiary bombs in built up area. Cloud thickened and no further results were observed although aircraft reported seeing glow of fires 100 miles from target. P/O Wakley and crew failed to return, no news since leaving base.

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, W/O R.Dudley, F/Sgt C.Young, Sgt F.Martin, F/Sgt P.A.Smith, W/O W.A.Parsley. Up 17.50 Down 01.55. 5 flares, 4 x T1, 1 x 4000lb, 4 x 1000lb. Vis good over target Berlin. Wanganuis observed on approach to target but drifted to east. Bombs released on H2S. No results observed.*

January 21/22. 648 aircraft - 421 Lancasters, 224 Halifaxes, 3 Mosquitos - on the first major raid to Magdeburg. The German controller again followed the progress of the bomber stream across the North Sea and many night fighters were in the stream before it crossed the German coast. The controller was very slow to identify Magdeburg as the target but this did not matter too much because most of the night fighters were able to stay in the bomber stream, a good example of the way the Tame Boar tactics were developing.

*(Zahme Sau (Tame Boar), ground and airborne radar guiding night fighter interceptions.)*

57 aircraft - 35 Halifaxes, 22 Lancasters - were lost, 8.8 per cent of the force; it is probable that three quarters of the losses were caused by German night fighters. The Halifax loss rate was 15.6 per cent. The heavy bomber casualties were not rewarded with a successful attack. Some of the Main Force aircraft now had H2S and winds which were stronger than forecast brought some of these into the target area before the Pathfinders' Zero Hour. The crews of 27 Main Force aircraft were anxious to bomb and did so before Zero Hour. The Pathfinders blamed the fires started by this early bombing, together with some very effective German decoy markers, for their failure to concentrate the marking. A total of 58 aircraft (6.9 per cent) were lost. The number of aircraft lost was the heaviest in any night of the war so far.

- Heard definite news of the safe arrival in the UK of F/Lt Covington, F/Sgt Billows, F/Sgt Hesselden who were reported missing August 1943. Some ground training was carried out. Weather unfit for flying, no NFTs carried out for tonight's operations for 21 aircraft are detailed.

16 aircraft attacked the primary target Magdeburg with three bombing last resorts. One aircraft bogged on aerodrome and failed to take off. Weather was 1/10th to 7/10th cloud with good visibility but a little haze. Attack opened well and the target was kept well marked during the attack. Some aircraft identified town features and the main concentration appeared in built up area. The attack was considered to be very successful. Defences were slight to moderate barrage H/F and a few ineffective S/Ls, greater fighter activity was observed with fighter flares from coast in and out.

#### **One aircraft, F/Lt Roberts and crew failed to return.**

*JB299W F/L J.Roberts, Sgt E.J.Devine, W/O R.Dudley, F/Sgt C.Young, Sgts F.Martin, P.A.Marsh, W/O W.A.Parsley. **No times shown – missing.***



Aircraft Type: Lancaster  
Serial number: JB 299  
Radio call sign: OF - M  
Unit: ATTD 97 SQN RAF

Summary: Lancaster JB299 took off from RAF Bourn on the night of 21/22nd January 1944, detailed to bomb Magdeburg, Germany. Nothing was heard from the aircraft after takeoff and it failed to return to base.

A Missing Research & Enquiry team years later reported: "The aircraft crashed at Schmelau, 7 miles north of Wittingen and 35 miles north of Braunschweig. All the crew were killed and they are buried in the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery, Germany."

It was Ron's 38th operational flight. No-one knows what brought their aircraft down, but as noted in the official report, the German Tame Boar night fighters were very active that night.

## What did happen to Lancaster JB 299?

As with most of the aircraft and crews lost from Bomber Command raids over Germany, nobody knows for certain what happened to Ron's Lancaster on that fatal trip to Magdeburg. Was it hit by anti-aircraft fire? Was it shot down by an enemy fighter?

Maybe, just maybe, Ron and his crewmates struck a blow against their airborne enemy that night before they went down.

On that same night, near Magdeburg, the Luftwaffe's top-scoring night-fighter pilot Major Heinrich Prinz zu Sayn Wittgenstein was killed.

His Junkers Ju88 coded R4 + XM was hit by fire from an enemy aircraft, possibly from a Mosquito or Lancaster, resulting in his death. Two of his crew survived when they baled out near Stendal, north of Magdeburg.

Records show the Junkers shot down the first of five Lancasters at 10pm. Ten minutes later, a second Lancaster was shot down.

Observers reported the third Lancaster exploded at approximately 10.30, followed shortly by number four, which hit the ground at 10.40.

During the fifth and final attack, a four-engined bomber was burning when the Prince's Ju 88 came under attack. In the attack, the left wing of the Junkers was set on fire.

Sayn-Wittgenstein ordered his crew to jump, and two parachuted to safety from the damaged aircraft.



*A Junkers Ju88 night fighter.*

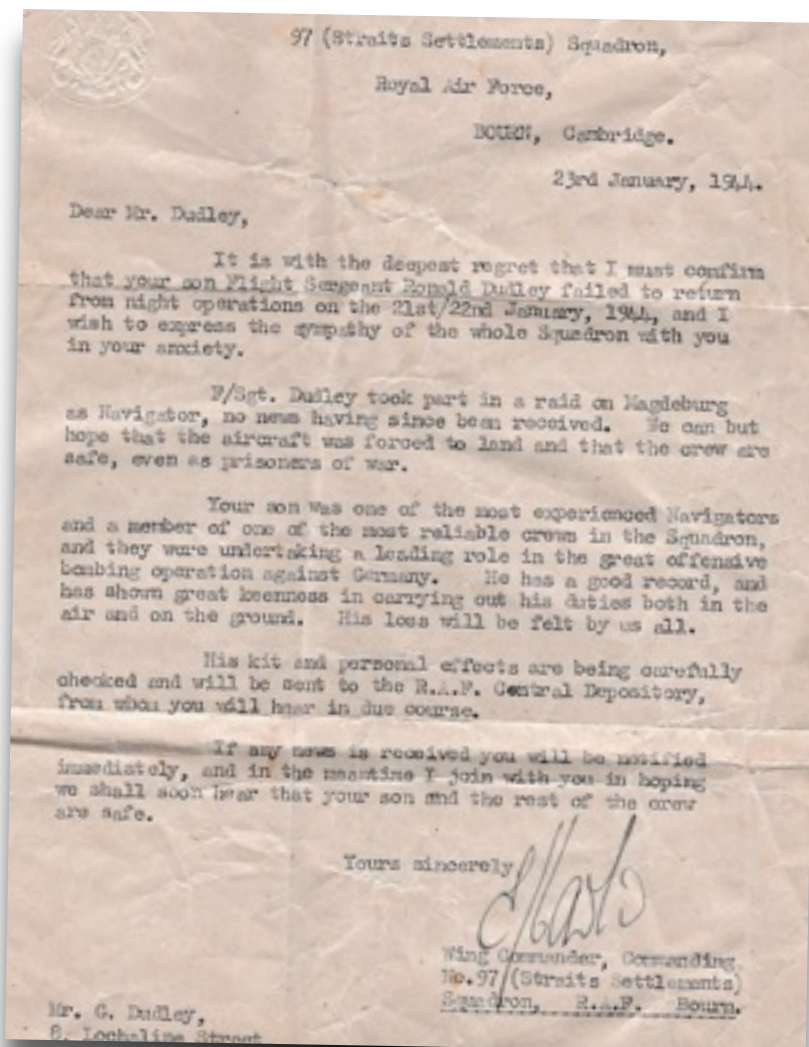
The next day, Sayn-Wittgenstein's body was found near the wreckage of the Ju 88 in a forest area near Stendal.

His parachute was discovered unopened and it was thought he may have hit his head on part of his aircraft when trying to escape. He had shot down 83 Allied aircraft.

Night fighter pilot Hauptmann Manfred Meurer also died on that night when his Heinkel He 219 collided with a Lancaster of Flight Sergeant Robert Butler raiding Berlin and both aircraft crashed near Magdeburg.

*Extract from Bomber Command Losses 21/22.1.44*

*Lancaster III JB299 OF-W. Op Magdeburg. T/O Bourn. All rest in Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery. The two DFM recipients had their awards gazetted on 11 and 15 February 1944 respectively. F/L F.J.Roberts DFC, Sgt E.J.Devine, F/S R.Dudley DFM, F/S G.Young DFM, Sgt F.Martin, F/S P.A.Marsh RAAF, WO2 W.A.Parsley RCAF.*



## The long wait for news

The war was over for Ron, but not for his family. At first they were told that he was missing in action. The news of his death came later.

The missing in action letter, addressed to Mr G. Dudley and dated 23rd January 1944, read:

*Dear Mr Dudley,  
it is with the deepest regret that I must confirm that your son Flight Sergeant Ronald Dudley failed to return from night operations on the 21st/22nd January 1944, and I wish to express the sympathy of the whole Squadron with you in your anxiety.*

*F/Sgt. Dudley took part in a raid on Magdeburg as Navigator, no news having since been received. We can but hope that the aircraft was forced to land and that the crew are safe, even as prisoners of war.*

*Your son was one of the most experienced Navigators and a member of one of the most*

*reliable crews in the Squadron, and they were undertaking a leading role in the great offensive bombing operation against Germany.*

*He has a good record, and has shown great keenness in carrying out his duties both in the air and on the ground.. His loss will be felt by us all.*

*His kit and personal effects are being carefully checked and will be sent to the RAF Central Depository, from whom you will hear in due course.*

*If any news is received you will be notified immediately, and in the meantime I join with you in hoping we shall soon hear that your son and the rest of the crew are safe.*

*Yours Sincerely  
Wing Commander, Commanding No. 97 (Straits Settlements) Squadron, RAF Bourn.*

## 'Fortitude, courage and devotion to duty'

Three weeks after the first letter, the family received the news that Ron had been awarded a medal - the Distinguished Flying Medal.

The letter read:

*It is with the greatest pleasure that I advise you of the award of the Distinguished Flying Medal to your son Flight Sergeant R. Dudley.*

*We trust that soon we shall be hearing some reassuring news of his whereabouts.*

*Yours Sincerely  
Wing Commander, Commanding No. 97 (Straits Settlements) Squadron, RAF Bourn.*

The family was later sent a copy of the medal citation which appeared in the London Gazette. It read:

*As navigator Flight Sergeant Dudley has completed numerous operations against the enemy, in the course of which he has invariably displayed the utmost fortitude, courage and devotion to duty.*

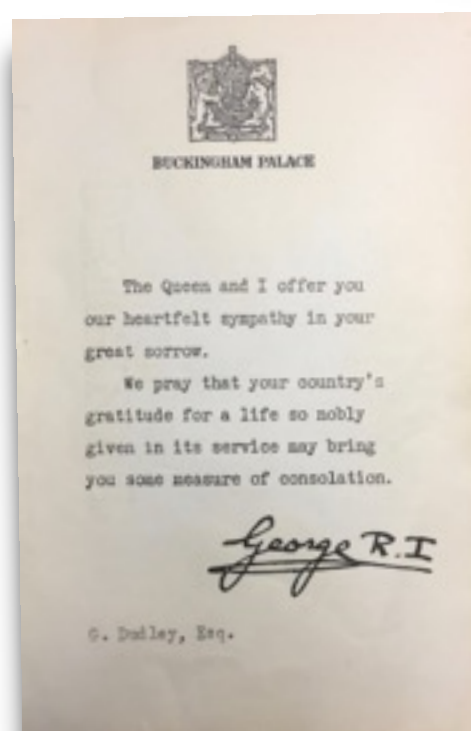
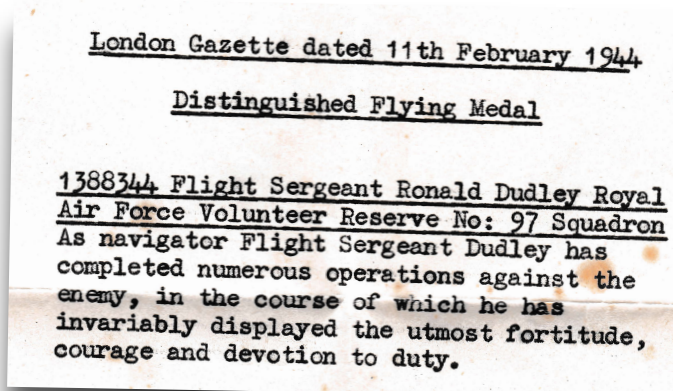
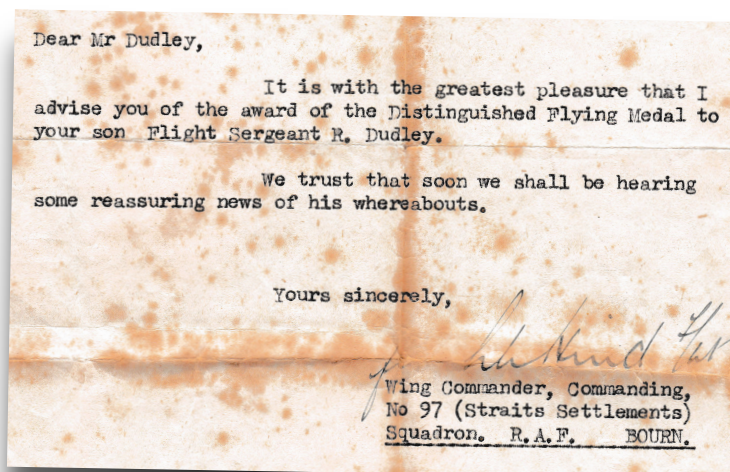
It was a long wait for confirmation of the fate of the Lancaster. It wasn't until November that the families were told the bad news that Ron and the crew were presumed dead in the crash of their Lancaster. Ron was just 21.

Ron's father received a note of sympathy from the King. It read:

*The Queen and I offer you our heartfelt sympathy in your great sorrow.*

*We pray that your country's gratitude for a life so nobly given in its service may bring you some measure of consolation.*

Two years were to pass before the family actually received the medal.



## Shared sympathy

The loss of the Lancaster crew was felt by seven families.

The family of Peter Marsh in Australia placed the following notice in their city newspaper - the *Adelaide Advertiser* of November 18 1944. Peter was just 19.

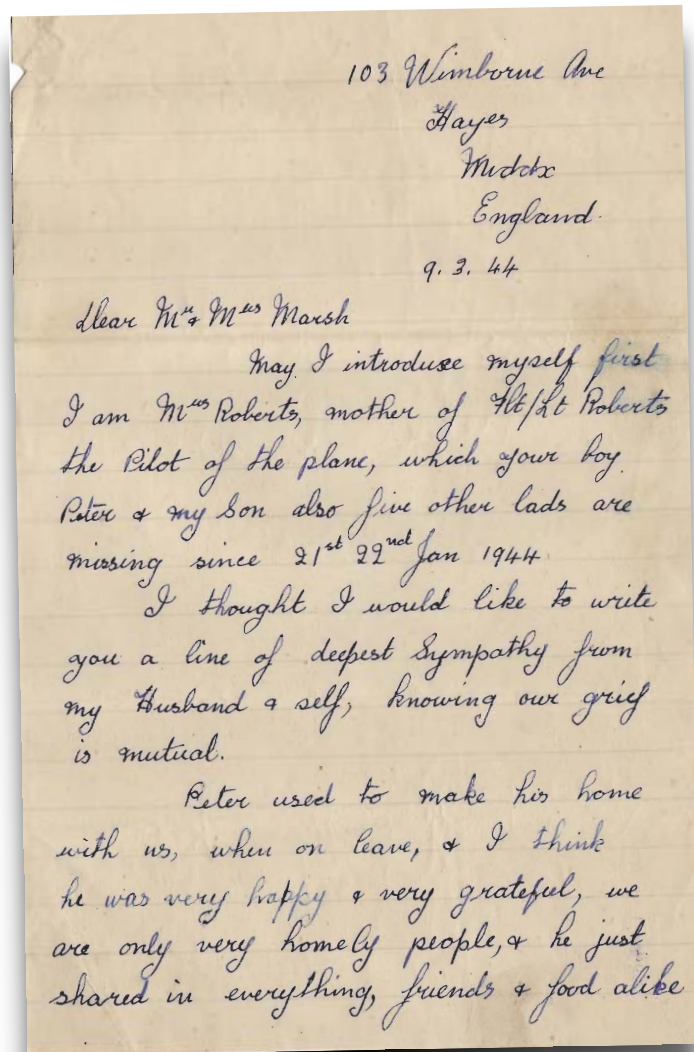
### *Private Casualty Advices*

*Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Marsh, of Kennaway street, Tusmore, have been notified that their elder son, Flt-Sgt. Peter Andrew Marsh, previously reported missing over Magdeburg, is now presumed dead. Flt-Sgt. Marsh, who joined up on his 18th birthday, was a member of a Lancaster Pathfinder crew and had completed 39 operations over enemy territory. He was educated at Xavier College, Melbourne.*

The mother of the pilot, Frank Roberts, wrote a moving letter to the parents of Peter Marsh to express their deepest sympathy.

Being far from his own family, Peter had spent much of his leave time with the Roberts family and they came to know him well.

*(Details courtesy of the Marsh family <http://www.marshes.pac.com.au/pam.html>)*

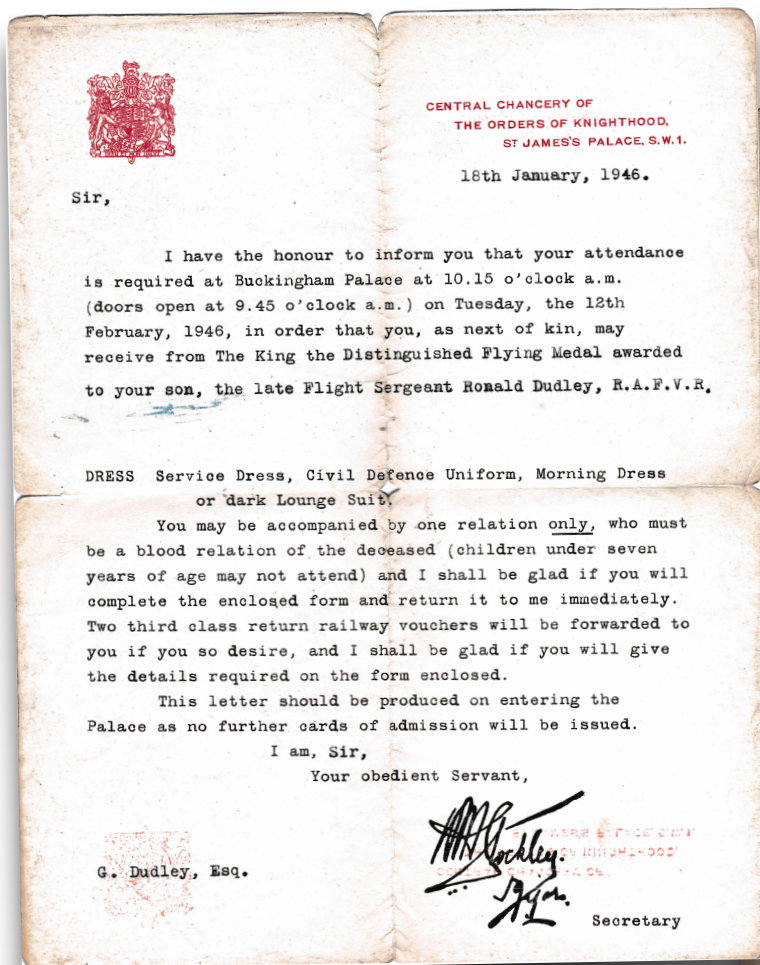


## A cheque from the Air Ministry

In March 1945 Ron's parents were sent a letter from the Air Ministry detailing Ron's estate. This included his balance of pay, Service Post War Credit, a refund on Income Tax, some cash and a Distinguished Flying Medal Gratuity of £20. The total came to £94 pounds, 18 shillings and two pence. That was almost six months' worth of the average wage in 1944.

The letter was sent to Ron's father with a copy sent to Ron's mother. The letter noted:

*Under the English Law of Intestate, the balance in the Service Estate is divisible equally between the parents of the late airman, and an Air Ministry draft for £94.18.2 in the joint names of yourself and your wife will be forwarded to you under separate cover in the course of a few days.*

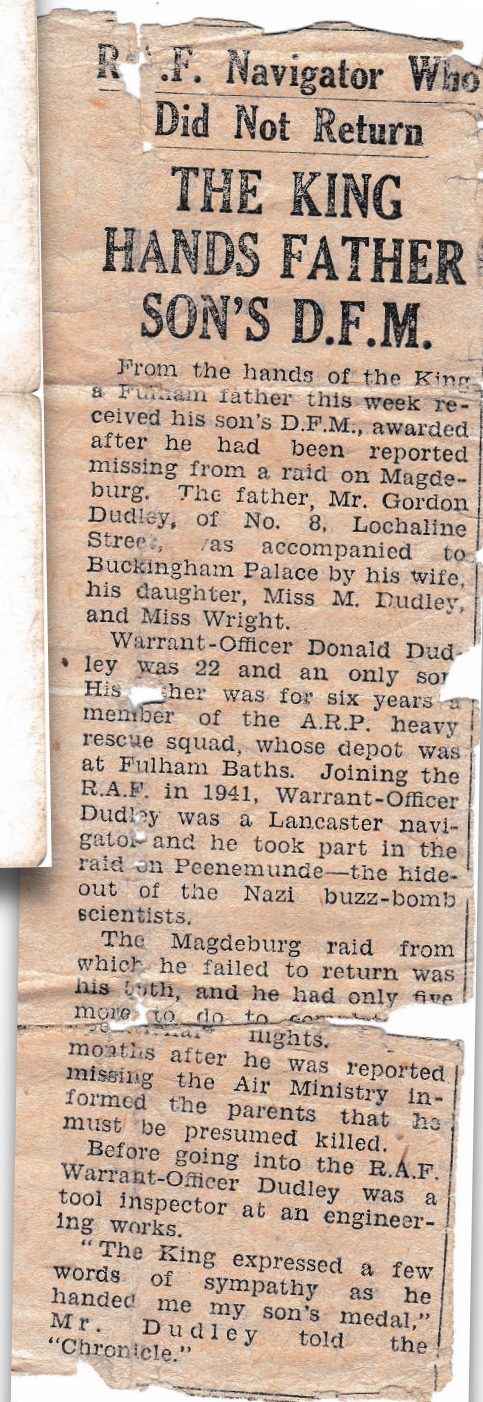


## Meeting the King

Ron's parents, his sister, Muriel and Ron's girlfriend Maureen Wainwright went to Buckingham Palace on February 12 1946 to receive Ron's Distinguished Flying Medal.

Ron's father told his local newspaper reporter:  
"The King expressed a few words of sympathy as he handed me my son's medal."

(The newspaper report got a couple of things wrong - Ron was 21 and Miss Wright was in fact Miss Wainwright. Ron was an acting Warrant Officer, the RAF official documents refer to him as a Flight Sergeant.)



## Family will always remember

The young airman's sacrifice has not been forgotten by his family, even in recent years.

Ron's sister Muriel and his niece, Jan Smith, visited his grave in Berlin in 2003.

Treena Boon, Ron's cousin, and her husband Michael, also visited the grave in Berlin in 2014. With them was their daughter Heidi, her husband Jonathan, and grandchildren Luke (15), James (12) and Abigail (10).

Jan and her partner, John Sharpe, went with Muriel to visit the new Bomber Command Memorial in London's Green Park in 2012.

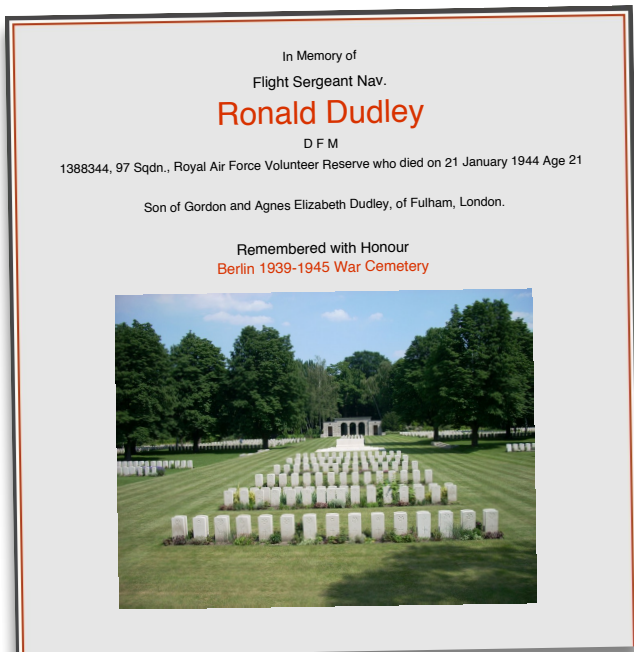
Jan and John also visited the RAF church of Clement St Danes in 2014. Ron's name is recorded there in the RAF Books of Remembrance.

*Right, Muriel and Jan at the Bomber Command Memorial in London.*



*Treena and Michael Boon at the cemetery in Berlin.*

# Never forgotten



Above: a tribute from the Berlin War Cemetery. Right: Ron's name appears on the honours board at his old school, Salesian College in Battersea Park.



Above: Ron's name in the Books of Remembrance in St Clement Danes Church in London. Right: No 97 Squadron memorial window in the church.

## *'The war could not have been won without the men of Bomber Command'*

*From the website of the Bomber Command Memorial.*

55,573 young men died flying with Bomber Command during World War Two.

Most who flew were very young, the great majority still in their late teens. Crews came from across the globe - from the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and all corners of the Commonwealth, as well as from occupied nations including Poland, France and Czechoslovakia.

It took astonishing courage to endure the conditions. Flying at night over occupied Europe, running the gauntlet of German night fighters, anti-aircraft fire and mid-air collisions, the nerves of these young men were stretched to breaking point.

RAF Bomber Command was formed in 1936. At the time, it was argued that a strong bomber force provided a deterrent to aggression, as bombing would result in complete and inescapable destruction on both sides. The reality was very different.

War came despite the threat of the bombers. The Nazi Blitzkrieg in 1940 quickly defeated France, leaving Britain to fight on alone. After the RAF's famous victory in the Battle of Britain, Britain found itself on the defensive everywhere.

To Winston Churchill, and to most of the British people, only the bombers offered a chance to take the fight to the Nazis. Initially the prospects were bleak. Aircraft like the Whitley and Hampden were not capable of launching raids deep into enemy territory, while tactics were primitive and losses were high. Bomber Command was compelled to switch to inaccurate night bombing in an effort to reduce casualties.

It was not until 1942 that Bomber Command gained a real sense of direction, with the advent of Air Marshal Arthur 'Bomber' Harris. Harris was appointed as commander in chief of Bomber Command in February 1942, with a mandate to begin attacking German industry, much of which was located in large cities.

His objective was to destroy Germany's industrial might and create a collapse in the morale of the civilian workforce, breaking Germany's will to fight on.

To understand these intentions, the mood and desperation of the country has to be considered. Times were hard. Victory seemed distant, and chivalric notions of war fighting had been burned

away in the fire of the Blitz. U-Boats were roaming the Atlantic, sinking merchant shipping in an effort to starve Britain into submission.

Harris' promise to make the German people "reap the whirlwind" resonated with a desire to strike back at the mighty Nazi war machine, no matter what the cost.

The prospects of success were uncertain. Morale among British workers had largely held firm in the teeth of prolonged attacks by the German Air Force. Harris, however, firmly believed that through a combination of improved aircraft like the Lancaster and Halifax, better training and navigational aids, and a ruthless will to press the attack, Bomber Command could knock Germany out of the war.

In May 1942, Harris launched his first "thousand bomber raid" against Cologne. The scale of the attacks shocked Germany, but the country continued to fight. Further massed attacks did have a devastating effect on the Nazi war economy. Albert Speer, the German armaments minister, believed that a series of raids like that on Hamburg in August 1943, repeated in quick succession, might well have compelled Germany to surrender. But that did not happen. There were only so many aircraft and so many crews.

From November 1943 to March 1944, Harris launched a series of huge raids on Berlin, promising to knock Germany out of the war in the process. Over 1000 aircraft and 7000 aircrew were lost during the 'Battle of Berlin', but the city struggled on.

The allies would have to invade to finally defeat Germany. Bomber Command switched its attentions to tactical objectives in early 1944, helping to pave the way for D-Day, the allied invasion of occupied Europe.

The war could not have been won without the Bomber Command attacks that forced Germany to divert invaluable men, guns, aircraft and equipment to defend its airspace, effectively opening a second front long before D-Day.

The young men of Bomber Command faced dangers that we can barely imagine, all in defence of our freedom. Their sacrifice and extraordinary courage should never be forgotten.

<https://www.rafbf.org/bomber-command-memorial/about-bomber-command>

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## Thanks

Many thanks to all those who helped produce this book, especially Muriel Mack for her memories and for trusting me with precious photographs and documents showing the war service of her brother, Ron Dudley.

- John Sharpe, August 2016



*The RAF insignia on the wall of the Bomber Command Memorial in London. The motto translates as: "Through adversity to the stars".\**

***When you go home, tell them of us and say  
For their tomorrow, we gave our today.***

*\*Wartime RAF bases often had Astra Cinemas. The translation became: "After work, to the pictures!"*