Air Force Days

G V Hancock

On my eighteenth birthday on November 19th 1940, I caught a bus into Manchester from my home in Handforth, Cheshire, and at the recruiting office in Dover Street, joined the Royal Air Force. Afterwards, being too excited to return home immediately, I saw a show at the Palace Theatre.

I could have waited another year or so before being called up, but like so many of my own age I was anxious to be involved. France had fallen in the summer of that year and although the threat of invasion was receding, our situation was a desperate one, few people outside this country giving much for our chances. Night after night our cities were being attacked by the enemy bombers and although a substantial part of our army had escaped from the Continent through Dunkirk, it was desperately short of arms and equipment. Yet though the situation seemed hopeless, there was a marvellous determination in the country not to give in. People of my generation were fired by it.

I joined the Royal Air Force because I had long been fascinated by the story of flight and partly, no doubt, because being an incompetent and unenthusiastic swimmer, the Navy was clearly not for me. The Army I never considered. I wanted to serve as a Wireless Operator/ Air Gunner, but because there was a shortage of pilots at the time and because I was the proud possessor of a Higher School Certificate, I was persuaded to take a pilot's course. It was a decision about which I had misgivings and one which, knowing my mechanical ineptitude many would share. I was sent off to R.A.F. Padgate for physical and aptitude tests. These I passed. My mother, horrified at my joining the Air Force was, nevertheless, pleased that I had passed the exacting physical requirements demanded of air crew, since as a young child I was not considered very strong.

It wasn't until May 31st in the following year that I was told to report to Babbacombe to begin my training. The weather was beautiful as I travelled down by train. I remember very clearly how lovely the countryside seemed with so many rhododendrons in flower and the boats bobbing up and down in the water as we ran alongside the River Exe. I spent a month or so in that pleasant resort. We did a lot of drill and a lot of P.E. and by the time our course finished I was fitter than I had ever been. From Babbacombe we moved to Newquay in Cornwall. Our quarters were in a hotel by the sea. We even had our own private staircase down to the beach and I believe this to have been the only occasion in my life that I enjoyed swimming. It was great fun being there and I remember thinking that if this was war, I didn't altogether mind it. It was in Newquay that I fell madly in love for the first time. The young lady in question whose name, alas, I cannot remember, unfortunately fell in love with someone else and for a time I suffered greatly. However, I soon recovered!

Having successfully completed our examinations at the end of our Initial Training Course, we waited to be posted to our flying schools. To our great delight we learned that we were to be trained abroad and soon we were on our way to R.A.F. Wilmslow where we were to be kitted out. There we were issued with tropical kit. The method of deciding what size uniform we should have was rather a novel one. The Warrant Officer responsible for this lined us up, made us stand to attention and then, walking briskly down the line, shouted a series of numbers to an underling as he passed each of us in turn. The result of this was that I spent part of my time abroad with a tunic that was far too small and a suit jacket that was far too large! The camp at Wilmslow was less than two miles from my home in Handforth and I naturally anticipated spending quite a lot of time there.

However we were only in the camp three days. They did allow us out once and I took half a dozen of my friends home with me. Mother gave us all a marvellous meal. I don't think I realised it at the time that most of the family's weekly ration went on that meal, and I don't think either that I gave much thought to the anxiety felt by my family at the sea journey ahead of me, at a time when large numbers of British ships were being sunk by German U Boats.

Just before midnight on September 3rd 1941 we left R.A. F. Wilmslow at the start of our journey. At this time, we had no idea where we were going; ordinary airmen were not trusted with such important information. In three long columns we marched to the station, at our head two men carrying lanterns, and each man sagging under the weight of kit bag, knapsack and respirator. There was a full moon which cast an eerie light on the strange procession. Early next morning found us in Glasgow and it was here that we learnt that our destination was North America. The ship we travelled on was "The Pasteur" a French liner of 30,000 tons. After one false start we sailed down the Clyde in the evening sunshine. We were all very excited at the great adventure ahead of us and some of us were much moved by the splendid scenery on either side. Out to sea my decision not to join the Navy was amply justified by prolonged bouts of seasickness. Mind you, our quarters didn't help. We were down in the bowels of the ship, over a hundred of us crammed into a room in which half that number would have been a crowd. In that room we ate and slept and the atmosphere was appalling. Sleeping wasn't easy since we had to make do with hammocks. The gift I now enjoy of being able to fall asleep in any place and at any time had not then been bestowed upon me and I suffered some discomfort.

We crossed to Halifax, Nova Scotia, in only six days, our speed keeping us safe from U-Boats. As our ship towered over the quayside the Canadian dockers far below asked if we had any British money and a shower of coins sped in their direction. My other memory of Halifax is of the splendid peaches we bought with the first of our Canadian dollars. Soon we were on a train on our way to Toronto, a journey that took us the better part of three days. Much of the country through which we passed was superb. We were also greatly impressed with Toronto and were sorry to leave it after only a short stay there. Our new destination was the American state of Arizona. We crossed the border at Detroit and headed south through Kansas and New Mexico. On the way we passed through El Paso and alongside the Rio Grande which sadly failed to impress. Since the United States was not officially involved in the war we had to masquerade as civilians and we all therefore exchanged our Air Force blues for two-piece grey flannel suits. As all these were exactly the same so we might just as well have kept our uniforms on. Our base was Falcon Field in Mesa, Arizona. The weather was glorious, the hospitality of our American hosts almost overwhelming and the scenery, absolutely breathtaking. Orange groves surrounded the airfield on three sides and on the fourth was the desert and in the distance Superstition Mountain. The desert fascinated me. No doubt we were somewhat alarmed by the rattle snakes, tarantula spiders and scorpions which abounded there, but the beauty of the desert plants and shrubs, the remarkable sunsets and the haunting sound of the crickets are an abiding memory to me.

We were not there, however, to admire the scenery, but to learn to fly, and here, I am afraid, I did not distinguish myself. Perhaps with more time I might have managed, but time was short, there was a war to be won and I made progress too slowly. The only vehicle I had handled up to that time was a pushbike and I found the co-ordination of hand, foot, mind and eye a difficult one. It was

landings that really did for me. Take-offs and aerial manoeuvres such as getting in and out of spins I found I could manage all right, but judging the height at which to level out on coming in to land I found difficult. I would either level out too high and drop with a great crash on to the ground, or leave it too late and proceed in a series of kangaroo hops across the airfield. This was not considered good for the aircraft, or indeed, the nerves of my instructor. So in the end it was decided that my contribution to winning the war would have to be in another direction, and very sadly I climbed aboard the train at Phoenix station to return to Canada. After over seventy years my failure still rankles!

Christmas, 1941, was spent in Monckton, New Brunswick, the hot sunshine of Arizona having been replaced by the snow and ice of a Canadian winter. I remember one walk I took there. It was evening and I walked alongside a small lake where children were skating. Someone had lit a fire and there was a smell of wood smoke. While we were at Monckton some kindly Canadians took us out for the day and tried to teach a friend and me how to ski. I remember vividly my first effort. I bent down, pushed vigorously with my ski sticks and fell flat on my face, my companion having stepped quietly on to the back of my skis as I attempted to take off!

We sailed home on the tenth of January, 1942. When we climbed on board our ship, the "Stratheden", the pipes had frozen and it was bitterly cold. I've always had a fondness for a good stew and the one the ship's galley provided for us on this occasion lingers pleasantly in the memory. We travelled with one other merchant ship and two rather ancient destroyers that the Americans had leased to the Navy escorts. Once again, we were untroubled by U boats but we did meet a tremendous storm. We were in mid-Atlantic and I, who had abandoned the charms of a hammock for a place on one of the mess tables, spent the night sliding from one end of the table to the other while all around kit rained from the racks above our heads and from the nearby galley came the crash of crockery. One of my friends was nearly killed when a grand piano broke free in a room he was crossing and went hurtling across the floor. A lifeboat was washed away and when dawn came there was no sign of our escorting ships.

A night or so later as our ship rounded the southern coast of Ireland, I found myself on guard duty. It was my task, armed with rifle and bayonet, to guard the Orderly room, the R.A.F.'s office. Quite who was expected to attack this noble institution so far from the nearest land was not explained to me, but Leading Aircraftman Hancock, his not to reason why, marched bravely up and down the deck and from time to time looked at the twinkling lights of Ireland and thought of home. From Glasgow we travelled by train across an ice bound Britain. The journey to Bournemouth took us twenty five hours and during that time we had no food, the heating having broken down on the train. Another splendid stew on our arrival raised my spirits considerably. I remember, too, the phone call I made from the Winter Gardens telling my family of my safe arrival home and the pride and joy with which on going home on leave I poured out in front of them the tins of food I had bought for them before I left Canada. By this time in the war there were great shortages of food in Britain.

There had been some criticism in Britain of the high standards of flying demanded by our American instructors and the serious failure rate, so most of us were offered a chance of another flying course. A number accepted, but I declined with thanks and asked to be trained as an air gunner. After some weeks flitting between Bournemouth, Hastings and Regents Park in London where we

were quartered in flats later made famous by the Beatles, Abbey Road, we went north to Bridlington to begin our course. Two pleasant months of Spring and early Summer followed in this interesting town and then on we went further north still, to Morpeth in Northumberland for the flying part of our course. There we trained in a quite extraordinary and somewhat alarming aircraft called the Blackburn Botha. To reach the gun turret of this aircraft we had to crawl on hands and knees along a narrow passage and worm our way into the turret. Once there the sense of being trapped was rather an unpleasant one. From that turret my fellow gunners and I fired our Browning machine guns at targets floating in the coastal waters or at drogues towed by positively heroic pilots - many were the stories of towing aircraft being shot down by over enthusiastic gunners. When we passed out at the end of the course and received our coveted sergeant's stripes and gunner's badge, the comment on my efforts was, "Theory: above average. Practical: average." Quite par for the course!

Early in August, 1942, I arrived at Waterbeach near Cambridge. This was a Conversion Unit where pilots, trained on two engined aircraft, were taught to fly a four engined bomber. Here also crews were put together. I discovered that apart from Bob Henry and me, ours was a New Zealand crew. I count myself singularly fortunate to have been a member of such a crew. Our captain was Lin Drummond, a most friendly chap. An excellent pilot; cool under pressure. I owe my life to his great skill and courage. George Patrick, the navigator, on deck was a bundle of nerves, but once aloft remarkably calm and efficient. Bill Harvey, the wireless operator, was, like Scotty Craw, the rear gunner, a farmer's boy. Both were very fit and very tough. I recall Bill, on a bitter January morning when most of us were cowering in our bunks, flinging open the barrack room door and, clad only in a shirt; breathing deeply the arctic air and exclaiming with every sign of satisfaction, "Ah, Fresh! Fresh!" He, like our bomb aimer, Bob McNary, was to lose his life later in the war. Finally, Bob Henry, the flight engineer, was a most amusing and cheerful character, infinitely skilful at getting the best out of the engines in his charge.

At Waterbeach we were introduced to the aircraft we were going to fly. This was the Short Stirling, the first of the R.A.F.'s four engined bombers. Those who flew in it became very attached to it. It was capable of withstanding a great deal of punishment and still getting home, but it had serious faults, one of which was a rather unstable undercarriage. Unless you kept it on a straight line on landing or take-off there was a danger of the undercarriage snapping. Its most serious fault, however, was its low ceiling which made it more vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire than the Lancasters and Halifaxes. When the Lancasters were bombing from twenty thousand feet, we were hard pressed to get to fifteen. Mont Blanc, the Swiss mountain is some fifteen thousand feet high and I well remember our anxiety when we sought to clear that height as we passed close to the peak in several bombing raids on Northern Italy.

However, there we were at Waterbeach in a lovely August, learning all about our new aircraft. We happened to be there at a particularly bad time. There were a number of accidents. Most of them involved collapsed undercarriages, but the most spectacular of them I shall never forget. A number of us were standing by a N.A.F.F.I. van having a cup of tea and a Lyon's Fruit Tart, or as we would have said "a cup of char and a wad", when someone shouted, "Look!" As we turned we saw that two Stirlings were taking off on different runways. The wind had changed during the lunch hour and one of the pilots who had been flying in the morning was unaware of the change of runway. There

was a dreadful inevitability about the way the two aircraft, each doing about ninety miles an hour, met at the intersection of the runways. There was the most tremendous crash. One aircraft cartwheeled over, the other with about ten feet or so of its nose torn off went round and round in a circle on the tarmac. One of those who died in the crash was the rear gunner of one of the aircraft. The rear turret had to be turned sideways on take-off and no doubt from this position he was the first to see what was going to happen. Opening the doors at the back of his turret he flung himself out of the aircraft seconds before it crashed. Had he stayed where he was, he would almost certainly have survived the crash. As it was he had no chance and when I, one of the first to reach him, looked down upon him, he was already dead. I saw that he wore a crucifix about his neck and it made me think of the crucifix given to my father by a dying German soldier in the mud-lined trenches of Flanders during the First World War. I felt I needed forgiving for thinking as I stood there, "Didn't do you much good". On the bus into Cambridge that night there were a number of the survivors. I expected them to be subdued, but they were noisy, excitable. I soon learnt how differently we all reacted to danger.

For a week or two we were sent to Marham in Norfolk for further instruction. There I took part in my first duty flight. We were to search part of the North Sea for a bomber crew whose aircraft had ditched. For several hours we flew back and forth over our section looking for that tiny yellow dinghy in that great expanse of sea. As we searched, we also kept a good look out for enemy aircraft. Just as we were about to abandon the search a fighter plane suddenly appeared out of cloud behind us and dived toward us. Our instructions were clear in such cases and the rear gunner and I prepared to open fire. At the last moment we recognised it as a Spitfire and waved instead of firing as it soared over us.

On our return to Waterbeach we took part, or nearly took part, in our first bombing raid. It was round about this time that Bomber Command was mounting a series of mass raids, partly to impress Germany with our growing aerial power, but also to give a lift to home morale suffering badly from the constant German air raids. To raise the force necessary for these raids Command used not only its regular bomber squadrons, but also training aircraft. These latter were manned mainly by instructors, although a number of raw crews such as our own were also sent. The first of these raids, to Cologne, had taken place the night before we reached Waterbeach, a fact of which I was made grimly aware when I was told that the bed allotted to me had belonged to another airman who had failed to return from that raid. Our target this night was Bremen. Strangely I remember very little of the preparations for that raid, but I remember very clearly how I felt as we neared the Dutch coast and saw ahead of us the anti-aircraft fire and searchlights brightening the night sky. I know that my knees were knocking against the ammunition tanks in my turret and I wished most sincerely for home. Perhaps someone had pity on me for soon after, when the first of the enemy fire began to play about us, Scotty in the rear turret reported over the intercom that his turret had broken down and that it was impossible to move it. Since this would have made us a sitting duck for any night fighter, the captain decided to abandon the raid and return home. I tried hard not to be too disappointed about this decision!

Later we became hardened to it all and although I cannot say that I was ever unafraid, like all the rest I was able to do the job I had been trained to do without too much thought for the risks that we ran. The risks were great indeed. Bomber Command casualties were the highest of any branch

of the allied services. Six out of every ten airmen became casualties. Of the 125,000 members of Bomber Command aircrews, 47,268 men were killed in action, 8,195 died in flying accidents, 9,836 became prisoners of war, 4,200 were wounded by the enemy and another 4,203 were injured in domestic accidents. As the months passed by we became accustomed to the disappearance of entire crews from the Mess and the routine clearing out from the barrack huts of their personal effects. No one dwelt long upon the fate of those who had gone from amongst us. This may seem hard, perhaps even callous, but I think that most of us knew instinctively that if we thought too much about what had happened to our comrades we might have found it difficult to continue.

Perhaps at this point it might be appropriate to say a word about the work on which we were engaged. In recent years it has become fashionable to criticise the bombing campaign directed against German cities. Looking back on it all after nearly seventy years I must admit to feelings of some discomfort about what we were doing. Yet at the time no such thought confused me, or anyone else, for that matter, with whom I came into contact. We had been assured that our survival as a nation depended on our ability to strike hard at the enemy with ever; weapon we could muster. There was no doubting the effectiveness of this weapon. In any case I had stood in the burning ruins of London and Manchester as the German aircraft roamed overhead. Going home on leave I had to pick my way through the crowds of men, women and children bedding down for the night on the station platforms of the Underground, their refuge from the German bombs. There was a universal desire to which I heartily subscribed, to give the enemy a taste of his own medicine. It's difficult when the enemy is at the gate to subscribe fully to the Christian ethic.

Two days after our abortive trip to Bremen our crew was posted to Lakenheath in Suffolk to join 149 Squadron. Formerly equipped with two engined Wellingtons the Squadron had recently moved from Mildenhall to Lakenheath and was now equipped with Stirlings. In the next four and a half months I took part in twenty raids over enemy territory. The first of these was to lay mines in the sea off the Frisian Islands; an operation with the code name 'gardening'. The mines dropped from about eight hundred feet were laid in the main shipping channels used by the enemy. It took us three and a half hours to fly there and back and the comment I made in the little notebook I kept in those days recorded "a quiet trip". I know that the sun was setting as we flew out across the Suffolk coastline and the golden light upon the fields and houses below us somehow enhanced the feeling of excitement that we all felt.

Twenty four hours later we were off to Lubeck, the German Baltic port. This involved a long journey there and back of seven hours and forty minutes. On our way across Denmark we met almost continuous enemy fire, a near miss from which splintered the perspex covering of my turret. The German defences on this and other occasions were quite spectacular. You saw first the flashes of the big guns on the ground and then some seconds later the explosion of the shells. Climbing up towards you were the long lines of coloured tracer from the smaller guns. Every now and then the aircraft shuddered as a near miss rocked it. When this happened you could smell the cordite from the shells. Worst of all on this particular trip was our first experience of being coned by searchlights. This was really a frightening event. You feel quite naked. It's almost impossible to see anything outside the aircraft and while the pilot flings the aircraft all over the sky to try to escape, you hope and pray that the gunfire will not cease, for if it does you know there's an enemy fighter about and if it attacks while you are blinded by the light, then your chances of survival are small.

However, survive we did and flew back over the North Sea to our base. There we found thick fog and it was impossible to get down, so we were diverted to Topcliffe in Yorkshire. There I spent what was left of the night sleeping on the floor of the Sergeants' Mess before flying back to base a few hours later. A few days after, the target was Osnabruck in the Ruhr, or as the R.A.F. knew it 'Happy Valley'. After that we were off across France and down the Atlantic coast to lay mines off Biarritz. When I see a holiday photograph of this most popular resort, I sometimes think of us circling overhead, much hampered by thick cloud in trying to find our target area. Coming down below the cloud layer we caught sight of the Spanish town of San Sebastian and used it as a marker. Spain was of course neutral and so the town was brightly lit and we marvelled at this, used as we were at this stage of the War to the blacked out towns of Britain and Germany. There was some machine gun fire from a jetty as we began our bombing run and Scotty and I fired a few bursts in reply. When we got back to base there was more fog and we spent a long time trying to get down. We kept sighting the runway, then losing it as we did a circuit. Eventually after nine and a half hours flying, we landed safely. Many crews came to grief in circumstances like these when men were exhausted after such long journeys.

Cologne followed three nights later and then more mine laying to Bayonne and Bordeaux. There was nothing regular about our sorties. The weather was often the key factor. If it was good, then the squadron might be busy for a few nights. If it was bad, then we might be kicking our heels for a week or so. Out for minelaying on November 6th, we were off on a long haul to Genoa in Northern Italy the next night and two days later to Hamburg. Then we did nothing for over a fortnight. The trip to Genoa was notable for the crossing of the Alps. Visibility was good. As we flew close to the city of Geneva, the neutral Swiss, anxious not to provoke the wrath of the Germans fired a few shots at us. It was the view of the R.A.F. that the Swiss, sympathetic to our cause, made sure that they didn't hit us. The snow-capped mountains were a marvellous sight with Mont Blanc towering in the distance. Our enjoyment of the view was, however, spoilt by the great difficulty we had in getting high enough to cross the mountains. This was due to heavy icing of the aircraft and in the end, we had to jettison some bombs in order to get across.

The journey to Hamburg was much more hazardous. After bombing the target, the navigator set the course which should have taken us quickly over the sea and away from the German defences. However, unknown to the bombing crews, the wind direction and speed had changed dramatically from that given to us by the experts at home. The result was that our aircraft crabbed down the North German coast as far as Frisian Islands, getting a fearful pasting from the defences below. Fortunately, Scotty and I were able to get a glimpse of the coastline of Holland on our right hand side and after a spirited argument with the navigator who swore by all the gods that it was impossible, finally persuaded him to alter course. Our troubles weren't over, however. Coming into land at base about half past one in the morning we ran into some trees. The captain had lined up the aircraft on the runway, the altimeter was reading six hundred and fifty feet. Then bang! The altimeter had stuck and we were a great deal lower than appeared. We were very lucky. Had we not hit the tops of the trees, we should have gone straight into the ground well short of the runway. As it was there was a tremendous crash and I saw from my mid-upper turret the tops of trees flying by on either side above us. The bomb bay was full of branches and hundreds of fir cones. However, our captain lifted the nose of the aircraft slightly – any more violent a manoeuvre at landing speed and with flaps down - would have stalled the aircraft, - and took her round again. I

marvelled at the calmness of the man as he reported over the radio, "We appear to have hit an obstruction!" We held our breath at the next approach, fearful that the damage to the undercarriage might cause it to collapse, but all was well.

On the following day occurred an incident that I am unlikely ever to forget. Visiting Britain at that time was a Russian heroine of the Soviet Union. Operating with guerrilla forces behind advancing German troops, she was credited with having killed some three hundred of the enemy. Now on a good will visit to this country she was brought on this day to Lakenheath to see something of R.A.F. Bomber Command. With her were a number of high ranking R.A.F. officers. Having inspected the station, she and her escort took up their positions on top of an air raid shelter to view a low level fly past by one of our aircraft. There was some delay in getting the aircraft away. One of the gunners was missing and I was asked to take his place, but by the time I had got my kit, the missing member of the crew turned up and I was stood down. As the aircraft took off, the starboard outer engine caught fire and the aircraft crashed in flames not far from the airfield. All the crew were killed. I shall never forget the embarrassment of the senior officers standing there on top of the shelter, nor the reaction of the woman soldier. Short, stocky, unsmiling and tough as old boots, she burst into tears and sobbed like a child.

For nearly three weeks after this we did nothing. Perhaps the weather was unsuitable and I rather fancy that somewhere in that period I had some leave. Anyway, it was not until the 28th of November that we set off once more. This time it was to Turin and I remember the occasion very clearly because it was on this sortie that one of our squadron, Flight Sergeant Middleton, won the Victoria Cross. The main attack that night was on Turin itself, but three other aircraft from our squadron had a special target, the Fiat works, just outside the town. The three crews were those of the station commander, Middleton himself and our own. It was a difficult target to bomb. For reasons that now escape me we had to attack from just over a thousand feet, perhaps the most dangerous height for an aircraft to do so. We kept seeing the factory and then as we circled round to begin our bombing run, losing it. We spent forty minutes over the target, Scotty and I exchanging fire with the enemy. I recall vividly a beautiful white stone palace on a hilltop over which we passed several times. When we had got rid of our bombs, we set off home. Turin, of course lies at the foot of the Alps and we had to climb quickly to cross them. The Stirling, admirable aircraft though it was in many ways, was not a speedy climber and we had some anxious moments as we laboured up one of the valleys with high mountains on either side,

When we landed at base after an eight hour flight, we enquired about the other two crews. The station commander was on the circuit coming into land, but the news about Middleton was disquieting. His aircraft badly damaged and short of fuel, he was hoping to ditch in the Channel. Later we heard that he was hoping to make landfall and that the lights at Mauston in Kent had been switched on for him. He never got down there, though four of his crew survived to tell the tale of what had happened. They'd had great difficulty crossing the Alps and had used up a great deal of fuel to do so. Like us they ran into very heavy fire over the target. Suddenly a shell had exploded near the cockpit blinding Middleton in one eye and badly wounding him in the legs. He passed out momentarily and it was the second pilot who seized the controls, jettisoned the bombs and turned the aircraft for home. Middleton came to and amazingly insisted on resuming control. He then flew the aircraft across France through more heavy fire which further damaged it. With the engines

misfiring through lack of fuel, he coaxed the aircraft across the Channel and having made landfall, ordered the crew to bailout. To avoid any chance of the aircraft crashing into housing he turned it out to sea. Four of his crew landed safely, two more landed in the sea and were drowned. It was the opinion of the survivors that Middleton's injuries were such that he could not have bailed out and that he deliberately went down with his aircraft. Just before take-off that evening we had heard him calling Control over some minor engine trouble, but then we heard him say that all was well and off he went. A quiet, modest man, he had been recommended for a commission which is why his simple gravestone in Beck Row Churchyard Mildenhall, has him down as Pilot Officer Middleton. There are many graves of R.A.F. aircrew in this churchyard. Most of them are of airmen from the Commonwealth and most of them died in their early twenties.

Manheim, Turin again and Duisberg were our next targets. Over the first we caught sight of an enemy fighter but it came not near us. Over Duisberg, a full moon enabled us to see the great River Rhine and one of the steel bridges crossing it. It was on the way back from this raid that a rather strange thing happened. We had been warned before we set out that a British convoy would he passing down the Channel. "Keep well away" was the advice given, the Navy having a reputation among the bomber boys for firing first and asking questions afterwards. It was thought however that by the time we were recrossing the Channel the convoy would have passed on its way. But the weather changed, and strong tailwinds sped us home in under four hours. Now the strange thing about these night sorties of ours was that although you were part of a large bomber force, you rarely saw any of the other aircraft, except over the target. In fact you seemed to be flying all by yourselves. On this night while I was gently brooding on life in my turret and thinking of the eggs and bacon waiting for me back home, there was a series of flashes down below on the sea and soon some heavy stuff started to arrive about us. Bill Harvey grabbed the Verey pistol, already loaded with the colours of the day, and spurred on by all of us, fired them off. These star shells designed to identify us to the Navy below produced this evening two green stars and very pretty they looked, too. And then to our amazement the sky was full of green stars. Wherever we looked, above, below, on either side, there was the night sky lit by these green stars, and suddenly it came to us that we were indeed surrounded by a great fellowship of fellow airmen. The Navy, far below, was, no doubt, laughing its socks off.

I think it was somewhere about this time that our bomb aimer, Bob McNary, was involved in a ridiculous incident that later cost him his life. To get out of our aircraft we had to climb down a short aluminium ladder. Doing so one day Bob slipped and fell to the tarmac, cracking a bone in his wrist. Typically he made nothing of it and wanted to continue flying, but the Medical officer wouldn't have it and Bob missed half a dozen flights with the crew. It was the practice at the time for each crew to do thirty operational flights and then have six months rest as instructors at the training stations. When our crew had completed their thirty trips, Bob had done only twenty four. They would have let him off at that, but it so happened that another crew with six trips to do had lost its bomb aimer. Bob offered to help them out. On the last of those sorties they were all killed. I still marvel at the unkindness of fate that could make a man pay so high a price for so small a slip.

Between December 20th, 1942 and January 14th 1943, we made no sorties. I rather fancy that I spent Christmas at home. I've sometimes wondered since how my family felt about my going back after that leave. Details of Bomber Command's operations were always broadcast on the radio and

inevitably ended up like this: "Twelve of our aircraft are missing". Then it was a matter of waiting and wondering if young Hancock was in one of those aircraft. On our return from leave we took part in some formation flying practice and what was called fighter affiliation. Looking back on this, for us, unusual activity, it seems to me that we were being prepared for a rather alarming job that the powers that be had in mind for us. I may be wrong about the timing, but I think it was about this period that the German Fuhrer was to make an important speech in one of the Baltic towns, Restock or Stettin. I think it was thought that a daylight raid while he was so engaged would strike a considerable blow at German morale. Ours was among the crews chosen for this task. I still find it hard to believe that those responsible can have seriously believed that the Stirling bombers would have been anything other than sitting ducks for the German fighters in daylight conditions. However, ours was not to reason why, so we prepared. I seem to remember being hauled out of bed with Scotty and some armourers to change the ammunition on the turrets. It was necessary to replace the night time tracer with daylight stuff. We were in the queue of aircraft taxying towards the runway for take-off next morning when over the intercom we heard Control telling us that the operation was off. Loud cheers all round.

It might be worthwhile at this point saying something about these bombing sorties, or "ops" as we called them. Unless we were required for flying we were left very much to our own resources. We were not much troubled with parades or kit inspection, so prominent a feature of other branches of the service. We were not allowed, of course, to leave the station during the mornings in case we were needed. If there was to be a raid we were summoned by the tannoy to be informed of this. At this stage we were not told what the target was to be. We then took the aircraft up to test it for the night's work. As far as practicable we kept to our own aircraft. For many of our flights this was B-Beer. You'll see from the photographs that it bore on the nose a spirited painting of a tankard and from it, drops of beer representing the various trips we had done in her. We became very attached to that aircraft. After our crew had completed their tour of ops it passed into other hands and was eventually lost in a raid on Bochum in May 1943. On the flight test everything was carefully checked. Scotty and I would fire a few bursts from our guns on an area of waste land not far from the airfield. On our return we gave the guns a final cleaning.

Later in the afternoon we would attend the briefing at which we would be informed of the target and given information about it. As far as I can remember, we would be shown a large scale map of the town we were attacking. On this, part of the town would be ringed off and we would be told that in that area was the largest concentration of vital targets, war factories, railway marshalling yards, that sort of thing. Nothing was said or asked about homes, schools or hospitals or other non-vital targets that lay within that ring. We would be told about the strength of the enemy defences and what sort of weather we might expect. After the briefing we would return to our quarters or to the Mess to fill in the time until our departure. Although I wouldn't consider myself as better than average in the courage stakes, I don't think I fell unduly terrified of what lay ahead, possibly because a common fellowship lifted us all, and also because having got over our early terrors we were now fairly experienced and knew what to expect. We also, I think, had confidence in each other. Mind you, many of us had our own little quirks. You'd be surprised how many liked to keep to a certain ritual in preparing for take-off; putting on one's kit in a certain order, for example, or carrying some kind of lucky charm. I always flew with a metal cigarette case that had belonged to my father. This I carried in the left hand breast pocket of my battle dress in the fond hope that it

might stop a bit of flak heading for my heart. In the light of subsequent events I would have done better to have sat on it! A number carried keepsakes of their girlfriends, rather like the knights of old. Bob Henry, our flight engineer, always took with him a rabbit's foot, and I well remember one night when he was responsible for incurring the wrath of the dispatching officer for setting off a few minutes late. We were just about to taxi from dispersal when he suddenly realised that he hadn't got his precious talisman. Grabbing a bicycle from one of the ground crew he pedalled like mad back to his quarters to collect the blessed thing. No one tried to stop him; a wizard with the engines, Bob was too important a member of the crew to upset.

When it was time, we got dressed. This was quite a performance. Over our battledress and large white sweater we wore two flying suits, an inner and an outer. During the worst of the winter we also wore an electrically heated waistcoat with leads which ran down into our flying boots and also into our gloves. I think we wore three pairs of the latter as it got very cold at fifteen thousand feet in those unheated aircraft. A flying helmet with headphones and mike attachment completed the outfit.

I ought of course to have mentioned the oxygen mask necessary at such altitudes and that reminds me of the fun and games involved in going to the loo during the course of such flights. For me this involved taking a few deep breaths of oxygen, unplugging the tube, disconnecting my electrical leads, pulling out the split pin that held my seat in place and then climbing backwards down the steps that led to my turret. Having arrived in the main fuselage I then had to make my way down to the tail of the aircraft where the Elsan was stored. Near this was another oxygen point. It wasn't easy to get there on a few breaths of oxygen and understandably I made sure on these sorties that I didn't have to leave my turret!

Ready for battle, transport would take us out to the aircraft parked along the dispersal tracks. Once more we hung around and this was always the worst part of the business. Eventually the order to climb aboard was given. I would park my parachute in a rack just below the turret and worm my way up my little ladder and into my mid-upper turret. There I would do a few last minute checks of my guns and sight and wait for the engines to start up. Over the intercom I could keep in touch with the other crew members whom, of course, I could not see. After a while we would taxi away from the dispersal and join the line of bombers making for the runway. As we were not allowed to stay in our turrets during take-off because of the danger of being trapped if the aircraft crashed on take-off, I had to climb down to the fuselage and wait there. In those rather daunting moments in the dim light of the fuselage I used to whistle various tunes. Two especially were great favourites and still give me a rather funny feeling when I hear them today. One was "0 Star of Eve" from Wagner's "Tannhanser", the other, that Ivor Novello piece from the 'Dancing Years', called 'Fold your wings of love around me' which seemed to me both appropriate and slightly ironic at the time.

When eventually we turned onto the runway there would be a last test of the engine pressures and then a green light from the flare path caravan and off we would go. There was something enormously exciting about the great surge of sound from the engines as we headed down the runway. Fully laden with fuel and bombs, it was ages before the aircraft lifted from the runway and time and again it seemed as if we would run out of runway before we became airborne. There was a profound sense of relief when we got off the ground and set course for the coast. Flying as we often did, in the evening sunset the countryside below looked beautiful and I used to watch

fascinated at the ordinary common a day life unfolding beneath me - people cycling along the roads, cattle grazing in the fields and men digging in their gardens. There was a strange feeling of remoteness from reality up there. Soon after crossing the coast, Scotty and I would fire a few bursts into the sea to check that our guns were all right. Sometimes when we did this in the dark, I used to hope that there were no fishermen at work below. As we flew out across the sea there wasn't a great deal of chatter on the intercom; occasionally a word or two from Scotty and me about things seen that might help the navigator pin-point our position. Ahead of us, as we neared the enemy coast, we would see the searchlight and the splendid firework display of the defences. Occasionally as we flew over them, we would see one of our aircraft caught in the searchlight cones, for all the world like a fly in a spider's web. Often the aircraft escaped; sometimes we saw it on fire spiralling to the ground. Then it might be our turn, and with it the smell of cordite and the puffs of smoke drifting passed my turret and the sound of metal on metal. It was my job and that of Scotty's to maintain a constant watch for enemy fighters and to this end I kept my turret on the move, searching every portion of the sky. One of the few things that I learned in the Air Force that proved useful to me in teaching was the ability, acquired in that hard school of Bomber Command, to see out of the corner of my eye. Fortunately for us, no fighter plane ever attacked us and so we never had the opportunity to find out if all those hours of practice with our equipment would have borne fruit.

On our way back from the target the mood in the aircraft was lighter; a few small jokes, a little leg pulling, but still the need to keep a careful watch. The worst part for me was flying over the sea. I always breathed a sigh of relief when we made landfall, even if it was the enemy's. At least over land we had our parachutes. Not that in our crew we were particularly enthusiastic about using them. I remember one occasion, over Hamburg I think it was, when all four engines cut out and there was a distinct possibility of our having to abandon the aircraft. We all held our breath while the aircraft lost height, but no one led a rush to the escape hatches. The sweet sound of all four engines starting up again was music to our ears.

Once back over the English coast I relaxed somewhat and started to work on my refreshments. These consisted of coffee, little bags of nuts and raisins and Horlicks tablets. Sometimes we also had little tins of orange juice, the gift it was widely believed of some benevolent millionaire. Probably, just standard issue!

The landing back at base sometimes presented problems. The Stirling was heavy on the controls and an abiding memory for me is the heavy breathing of the skipper as he fought to keep the aircraft on the right line as he approached the runway. Tiredness led to a lot of accidents and I remember on one occasion the skipper coming in with the brakes on. There was a nasty screaming noise and a lot of expensive smoking of the tyres, but all turned out all right. Others were not so fortunate. One of my worst memories is of an aircraft corning in too fast, overrunning the runway, crashing and bursting into flames. No one could get near the crew to save them. All the way back safely from Berlin only to perish on their own airfield.

We nearly lost our own aircraft through fire on one occasion. We had landed and were looking around for flak marks when someone noticed that one of the wing bomb panels was still open. Visible inside was a can of incendiaries that had not dropped with the rest. When the switch was pressed to close the panel, the incendiaries dropped out on to the tarmac and in next to no time

there was a major fire around the port main tyre, threatening any moment to reach one of the main fuel tanks in the wing. The aircraft was saved by the quick thinking of the sergeant in charge of the ground crew. He fastened a rope between the tail wheel of the aircraft and the bus that had come out to collect us and hauled the aircraft away from the fire.

Once safely down and the aircraft parked at dispersal, we went straight to the Intelligence Room. There we would be closely questioned about what had happened and what we had seen, but before a question was asked, we were given a steaming mug of tea. Then it was back to the mess for bacon and eggs and a great deal of chat about the night's events, before we made our way to bed. It was a dangerous job with the odds stacked heavily against us surviving unscathed, but how fortunate we were to return each time to our own comfortable billets. I sometimes thought, as I snuggled into bed, of those who served on arctic convoys, or like my father in the First World War who had endured the nightmare of trench warfare.

To return to my story. On January 14th our target was the massive U Boat pens that the Germans had constructed at Lorient on the Brittany coast. "Bad weather all the way" says my note on the night's events. We passed through a most unpleasant electrical storm and over the target we were caught in a group of searchlights at twelve thousand feet. The captain threw the aircraft about all over the place, but it wasn't until we had dropped to five thousand feet that we escaped. Much the same happened the following night when Lorient was once again our target. A fortnight later it was Hamburg and on the following night, Turin. My note on the latter rather scornfully says, "Poor inaccurate flak; many useless searchlights", underlining the feeling that trips to Italy were a soft option compared with those to Germany.

Two more trips to Lorient followed and then on February 15th, 1943 came my last operational flight. We were to lay mines in the estuary of the Gironde, not far from Bordeaux. This involved a long journey across Brittany and down France's Atlantic coast and I remember having to look for two islands that lay off the coast, the Isle de Re and the Isle d'Oleron. There was a full moon that night and all looked very peaceful as we arrived over the target, beautiful, too, with the moonlight on the water below. We came down to one thousand feet, the height at which we had to lay our mines.

Nothing stirred as we circled round and the bomb aimer lined us up for our run in. The mines were released in sequence and the first one was just about to go when all hell broke loose. Guns from both sides of the estuary and from ships beneath seemed to open fire at the same moment.

On such a night and at that low altitude they couldn't miss and didn't. We were hit repeatedly. Scotty and I fired back, aiming for the starting point of the tracer. The front gunner joined in, too, but it wasn't long before both front and rear turrets were out of action. Scotty had a lucky escape when a bullet grazed his flying boot and some of the ammunition in his turret started to explode. During the attack some thirty large holes were made in the aircraft and more than two hundred small ones. One shell had apparently gone straight through the aircraft without exploding. Typically the skipper refused to budge from his course until the last mine had gone and I remember how agonisingly slowly those mines were counted off. Once the last one had gone the skipper stood the aircraft on its nose until we were at wave top height and flew it away up the estuary until he was clear of enemy fire. When he came to set the course, he found that all three compasses were

reading differently. Part of the wireless operator's equipment had exploded and Bill himself had been wounded in the forehead. Despite his injuries he managed to get some radio fixes that greatly helped the navigator to get us home. At some time during the attack the intercom system was put out of action so that those up front had no idea what had happened to Scotty and me. When they got clear of the target area, someone, Bob Henry, I think, came back to check and met Scotty coming forward from his wrecked turret. They found me collapsed unconscious over my guns, removed me from the turret and carried me forward to the emergency bed we had amidships. Then Scotty climbed into my turret, the only working one, and kept watch from there. He must have had a rough journey home since most of the perspex covering had gone and this was February.

I had been firing my guns when a small calibre shell exploded at the side of the aircraft below my turret. It was like being kicked in the pants and I was flung against the front of my turret from shrapnel that hit me in the buttock, knee and hip. I am a little vague about the sequence of events after that. I think I tried to continue firing, but then the aircraft went into the steep dive that I've already described. With the intercom dead and knowing how much damage the aircraft had sustained, I assumed that it was going down out of control. Not fancying being trapped in my turret when the aircraft hit the water, I tried to get out. In the state I was in I couldn't undo the split pin that held fast my seat and prevented me from leaving the turret. After some moments of struggling with it, I lost consciousness. I came to after they had taken me forward and remained so on and off during the course of the long journey home. It took four hours and very long and unpleasant hours they were for me. My crew did the best they could for me in what must have been terribly difficult circumstances for them. I was in a great deal of pain - the injury to the buttock had damaged the sciatic nerve - so they tried to inject me with morphine, but this didn't seem to do much good, when you've never done it before, in an aircraft bucking about all over the place.

People who lose a great deal of blood become very thirsty and the memory of that thirst overshadows all the other recollections of that journey home. That night we had all been issued with a tin of orange juice and my kindly crew collected all the tins and poured them one after the other down my throat. When at last we came into land it was feared that after the damage the aircraft had sustained, the undercarriage might well collapse and so the crew took up crash stations. I couldn't do this, of course, so Bill Harvey spread his body across mine, pinning me down so that I shouldn't be flung off the bed if the aircraft made a rough landing. For his work that night Bill Harvey was awarded the Distinguished Flying Medal. A year later, with another crew, he was posted "Missing, believed killed." Our other medal winner that night, Lin Drummond, awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his great skill and courage, happily survived two tours of operations, and looked in on us a number of years ago in the course of a visit to Britain, still as cheerful and pleasant as ever.

To finish my tale, we landed safely. The Medical Officer and an ambulance were waiting at dispersal. "Where are you wounded?" the officer asked. "In the arse, sir", I was about to reply, in the language of the day, when I recollected myself and said, "In the right buttock, sir". Just before we set off in the ambulance for the R.A.F. hospital at Ely, I was asked if my home address was the right one to send the news of my injuries to. I said it was and then suddenly remembered that the telegram would almost certainly be delivered when my mother was alone at home, so I asked them

to send it to my father at the bank in Portland Street, Manchester where he was manager. It's one of the few things that I've done in my life of which I'm proud!

Later that day the telegram was delivered to my father. He knew very well what this buff coloured envelope with the blue "Priority" flash was likely to contain, and he told me later that he sat and looked at it for some time before he made up his mind to open it. It read, "Regret 1085457 Sergeant Hancock G. V. dangerously ill in R.A.F. hospital, Ely, with gunshot wounds to right buttock and left knee". The wound in the buttock was so deep and I had lost so much blood that for a while it was touch and go whether I would survive. It wasn't until a month later that my parents received a note from the hospital saying that I was finally out of danger. The wound took a long time to heal and the damage to the sciatic nerve caused many problems, so that I spent the better part of a year in hospital, much of that time in bed. After a number of operations, I returned to the Air Force on light duties, worked for a time in the Intelligence Section at Lakenheath, and as an instructor at a gunnery school at Husbands Bosworth. When more problems arose with my leg I was finally invalided out of the Air Force in December of 1944, and went up to Oxford in the following January. A further operation at the end of my first year there enabled me to dispense with the leg calliper which I had worn for nearly two years.

A year or two ago I came across a book that listed all of the sorties made by Bomber Command during the war and turned with some eagerness to February 15th, 1943, to see what they had to say about the exciting events of that night. Under the heading, "Minor Operations", the greatest adventure of my life appeared thus. "Four Stirlings laid mines in the river Gironde. No aircraft was lost"!