

CHAPTER 1

1ST June 1944

Soon the sky would be getting lighter in the east. From their lofty position, of almost 17,000 feet, they would be some of the first people to witness the sunrise over this part of war torn Europe on this the first day of June 1944. Amid the dark war clouds that were overshadowing the civilised world at this time, the weather forecast back in England was for another warm and fine summer's day with a little thunder later in the day. It was yet to be seen if the men at the meteorological office had got it right. The weather ought to be improving by this time in the year. Another 'Flaming June' could be just around the corner.

The throb of the four mighty Rolls-Royce Merlin engines was transmitted through the airframe of the Avro Lancaster Mk. 1 bomber 'C for Charlie', as they winged their way to their allotted target. Yet another raid was almost half over. Their aircraft and others would soon unload a deadly cargo of bombs in and around the railway yards at Trappes, to the southwest of Paris. As a 'rookie' crew they were again forming part of the second wave and would hopefully be bombing a well-marked and clearly defined target area. They were however more prone to attack by fighters being so far back in the bomber 'stream' as they were.

Wireless operator Sergeant Raymond Geoffrey Norris, Geoff to the crew and virtually all who knew him, was just climbing back over the main spar on his way back to his seat in front of the dials on his T1154 /R1155 transmitters and receivers. Beneath him, nestled in the darkness of the bomb bay was their deadly cargo of four 1000lb and twelve 500lb bombs. Out of sheer necessity he had unplugged his earphones and disconnected his oxygen mask to make the difficult and arduous journey to the little Elsan toilet that was situated just in front of the tail turret and tail-plane strut. It had meant leaving the warm and normally comforting surroundings of his little radio cabin to make the journey in all his flying kit. The excursion was doubly difficult because he had always made it a rule to clip on his parachute whenever he moved about the insides of the aircraft during an operation. Like sitting on it at his radios, he found it a comfort to know exactly where it was in case he ever needed it, which he fervently hoped he never would. Without the benefit of oxygen, which was always used above 10000 feet, the 80-foot long return journey had been like an 8 mile run. He had hoped the visit would settle his stomach; he wasn't altogether sure whether it was something he had eaten or drunk that was causing the problem or his nerves taking over.

Tonight, more than any other since beginning operations, he had a deep sense of foreboding. He couldn't put his finger on it nor had he been able to share it with the crew. He was sure they all felt frightened to some extent, but this was something different to the fear they all faced each and every trip. It had come on towards the end of his last leave, at home on the Isle of Wight. He had tried to share his thoughts with some of his friends in Carisbrooke but he had found it difficult to put them into words. If someone hadn't been up here, over enemy territory, they couldn't be expected to even guess what it was like. The last thing he had wanted to do was give even a fleeting suspicion that he was frightened, this especially had applied to his family. His father would have known; having spent The Great War in the trenches of France. Geoff was sure he would have known what this feeling was like. As he reached the curtain beside the radio cabin he glanced at his watch. In the dim glow

from the many dials he could see it was 01.41 and he settled back down in the warm familiar surroundings.

Despite his feelings of doom and gloom, Geoff could gain some comfort in the knowledge that the crew had really come together as a fighting team. Their Australian pilot, Peter Charles Lewis D'Ombain, had certainly had a lot to do with this. He had recently received notice of his promotion to Pilot Officer. Known to the crew as Skipper or The Boss (the latter given him by their young Flight Engineer), this wasn't going to change with his promotion. As pilot, no matter what his rank, he was always the Skipper and in charge of all the crew on the aircraft. Even if Wing Commander Watkins, the Squadron Commanding Officer had been aboard Peter would still be in charge. This promotion had been popular with the crew and one they had celebrated heartily. The Skipper had been their pilot since the original crew of five (Pilot, Bomb-aimer/Navigator, Wireless Operator and two Gunners), had come together to fly a Wellington at the Operational Training Unit at Westcott/Oakley in October 1943. Like many of the Australians that were now serving in the air force he had a strong, determined disposition. He threw himself enthusiastically into everything that they did together as a crew. Sometimes reckless and boisterous on the ground, especially if his national pride was offended and the beer was flowing freely, this had never shown itself in the air. From the moment that they got together at the Operational Training Unit he had begun to lead them with an assertiveness and authority that belied his young age and his all too recent student background. Having grown up in and around the hotel trade back home in Mildura, Victoria he found it easy to mix with most people that he came into contact with. He did, however, look much older than his current 21 years, something he put down to the hot Australian sun, the beers and the hard studies and training needed to reach this lofty position.

Now that each member of the crew knew his own individual jobs far better, the crew would happily follow where Peter led. Each member had faith in the others abilities. With the knowledge that as a tight knit team they alone had the tools for their own survival. Each time they took off on an operation they were fully aware that it was this teamwork and dedication to each individual task within the crew framework that was pitted against the whole of the enemy forces ranged against them. No matter how many other crews were operating on any given mission, each crewmember of each aircraft functioned as a separate entity within the overall framework of that operation. Without their team spirit, each member of those crews could have felt very much alone in the fight, as though each act of enemy aggression, each bullet and shell was directed solely at him personally. They needed each other, for only as a team, working together, smoothly and efficiently, could they all get through this.

Back in the familiar surroundings of the radio cabin Geoff thought that, maybe his fears were unfounded after all. They had already survived two incidents of engine failure during the early training stage. Both times they owed their lives to Peters' skills as a pilot and the sturdiness of the aircraft involved. They had come through the first five operations when most 'rookie' crews were prone to perish. Although this was only their 8th operation, they had already been twice to the very heart of the Ruhr. Known as 'Happy Valley' by the crews it was Germanys' major industrial area, and one of the most heavily defended areas in Hitler's Third Reich. They had returned when other more experienced crews had not. Geoff guessed that, statistically, it was impossible to complete a tour of 30 operations; it didn't take a mathematician to work that out! Yet crews were surviving. Colonial flyers that had volunteered from all parts

of the Empire were allowed to return to their distant homes on completion of their allotted 30 operations. Some took up this option but many, along with their United Kingdom comrades, stayed on to fight again. Many taught at training units, passing on to new crews the knowledge that had seen them safely through. This crew of 'C for Charlie' had assimilated as much as they could, practising hard under the tutors' watchful eyes and then continuing to practice as a team under The Boss's leadership and guidance. If they maintained the disciplines as they had been taught, then surely they would get through, wouldn't they? Why didn't these thoughts remove the feeling of gloom that he felt?

At the very front of the aeroplane New Zealander Flight Sergeant Laurence Jamieson, their Bomb-aimer, was carefully scanning the skies ahead and on each quarter, both above and below. He would be watching for any visible landmarks that he could point out to the navigator and even more importantly for any faint signs of an enemy fighter that could so easily be prowling around. At twenty-six years of age he was by far the oldest member of the crew. Unlike the Skipper, he looked much younger, the others sometimes jokingly and affectionately referred to him as 'Pop'. Born at Easter Skeld in the Shetland Islands, he had moved to New Zealand with his parents when he was 8 years old. Another original founding member of the crew, he was more quietly spoken than the Australians in the crew and retained a faint hint of the Celtic accent in his voice. Pop could usually be relied upon for some fatherly type advice on most subjects, a fact that this young crew had sometimes made use of. However, when they were all in a lighter mood, he was just as likely to be found in the thick of the group, whether they be drinking in the local pubs or on the airfield, kicking or throwing a ball about. He had always enjoyed a game of rugby back home and competed with vigour. These ball games and drinking sessions were always a source of friendly rivalry between the various nationalities that made up the crew and indeed the whole squadron. His previous work for a cycle company also meant that he was much in demand by many on the station where bicycles were the major mode of transport.

Laurence, like most aircrew, had been trained for more than one function within the aircraft. For much of the flight he would occupy the defensive position of front gunner. Few fighter attacks came from this quarter but he was able to keep a sharp lookout at all times, even for friendly aircraft that maybe converging on their course. Nearer the target he would take to the offensive, lying in the very nose of the aircraft as Bomb-aimer. He would return to his turret only after that important task had been completed. Very soon it would be time to exchange this little Perspex bubble of a front turret that housed the twin .303 calibre machine guns, to take up his prone position in the other bubble immediately below. Here he would be looking forward and downwards through the bombsight, right into the holocaust of searchlights, gunfire and explosions. He would have to be in this vulnerable position for what always seemed an interminable time. It was one where the aircraft had to fly as straight and level as possible. It was a sitting duck for all the gunners on earth to shoot at. His precise and deliberate directions to the pilot during these tense moments would ensure that they passed directly over their allocated aiming point. He would then release the bombs at the precise moment to send them screaming down into the very heart of the target.

Geoff knew that with the bomb load gone the aircraft would take on a much livelier feel, her engine note seemed to change and she would become a more graceful flying machine. In the hands of her capable pilot who had learnt to get the best out of

her, she would soon be flying like the bird he had recently described her as. Once through the searchlights and flak and away from the target they would be able to turn and set course for home, their airfield at Mildenhall. Here, following a debriefing by the station Intelligence Officer, they would grab something hot to eat and drink before retiring to their beds; hopefully before an awakening East Anglia was able to interrupt their well deserved rest. No doubt the mighty 8th Air Force would be operating again today. Our American allies continued to pound the German war machine in their part of the round the clock bombing offensive that was now reaching its peak. With their bases spread around the same flat area of East Anglia that was occupied by the RAF, there was no escaping the thunderous roar of hundreds of departing Flying Fortresses and Liberators. It was no good to bury ones' head beneath the pillows for the sound could be felt as much as heard. No matter how exhausted the night bomber crews were, they would be sure to be woken by this mighty aerial armada as it was leaving. When this happened some would get up, there was always a hearty breakfast of fresh bacon and eggs available, a rarity beyond the confines of the base, and copious mugs of steaming tea to revive the flagging soul. Then they would throw themselves into the base activities for the day and prepare to do it all again the following night.

To Geoff, all this seemed a long way off as they headed east by southeast towards their next turning point. 'C for Charlie' still smelt very new, the odours of metal and fabric, paint and oil, of cordite and fuel and all those peculiar smells that identified this aircraft to her crew. Over the course of operations this would slowly change, and although some might think it unnoticeable after a while, it would become 'Charlie's' unmistakable smell. Being factory fresh and having only completed one operational mission so far, the whole crew was hoping that Charlie would remain 'their' aircraft and bring them luck. When they got home one of the ground crew could stencil another, her second, bomb symbol beneath the cockpit windows. Charlie and the crew still had a long way to go to match some of the others in the squadron but then they had only joined from the training units at the beginning of May.

One slightly unsettling aspect within the crew was that they had not acquired a regular mid-upper gunner. There had been four different crewmen occupying the position since joining the squadron. Each had come from a 'pool' of gunners that was available within the squadron. Two had filled in for a single operation each but had not had time to settle in. A third had done three trips but was unavailable for this trip. Tonight, another Australian, Flight Sergeant Stanley Arthur Nystrom, usually known as 'Sam' for some obscure reason, was occupying the position. He had flown with them two nights ago and earlier in the month. Sam had been with the squadron for some time and this was his 19th operation of his tour of duty. The crew had taken to Sam and was pleased he was flying with them again tonight. Perhaps they would be able to persuade him to become their regular seventh member, at least until his tour of duty was finished. Like many of the Australians he played and worked hard and was dedicated to his duty. Although he had a cavalier attitude to life in general, he had the ability to totally concentrate his mind on the job in hand and made a valuable addition to the crew. He would certainly not be brooding over any impending disaster and was probably thinking about the beer and girls who would be attending the dance tomorrow night! From his wireless cabin on the port side of the aircraft, Geoff could look back and upwards and make out the form of Sam's' lower body protruding from the bottom of the turret. In the gloom of the fuselage he could just see it rotating slowly in each direction. Geoff knew he was scanning the unfriendly skies for the enemy aircraft that they all knew must be out there somewhere.

Sam came from Annerley, a suburb of Brisbane in Queensland, the same city as the third Australian member of the crew, Navigator Flight Sergeant Arthur Stephen (Steve to the crew) Long who hailed from the Hawthorne area. Maybe Steve would have a chat with Sam and get him to join the crew for the remainder of his tour. Geoff knew instinctively that they would all get along just fine. From his little cabin next to where Geoff sat Steve reminded Peter of the next change of course. It was 01.45 and they would be turning due south in 6 minute's time. Hopefully, somebody would spot the small lake that was their turning point, but he couldn't be sure they would through the ground mist that was blotting out many of the ground features. He would have to rely on his timings to execute the turn. This turn would leave Paris to their port side as they ran in towards the target. It was an important turn; they would be making a timed run from that point to the target. All the other aircraft of this second wave would also make the same turn. It wouldn't be long now before those looking out from the aircraft would see the coloured target indicators dropped by the pathfinders falling over the target followed by the explosions as the first bombs rained down.

Within the tight knit structure of the crew, Geoff and Steve shared a special bond. They both shared an interest in each other's jobs that had begun their close friendship back in the early part of their training at OTU Westcott. Although they were from different backgrounds, brought up half a world apart, they both shared a passionate love of nature and the environment. Whenever the crew was not flying or training, Geoff and Steve enjoyed long walks in the countryside surrounding the base. The wildlife and landscape was so different from that of Australia. Geoff's knowledge about most of it meant that they could spend many an interesting and relaxing time in the lanes and fields wherever they went. As they ventured further a field on these trips, sometimes using borrowed bicycles from the many on the base, they were often lucky enough to find a source of good local ale in a quieter pub somewhere away from the base. The knowledge of this supply they would keep to themselves. When the base bar and local pub, The Bird in Hand, were running short of supplies, as they so often did, the pair of them would still be able to quench their thirsts and enjoy a chat with the old regulars. Over a few pints in some remote country pub, away from the tensions of base life, they would talk about their earlier lives in Australia and the Isle of Wight. Each was eager to learn about the others past and how different each of their lives had been. Steve never complained about the English climate, for him it was just another part of nature that made this little island such a beautiful and interesting place. It was Steve who had managed to acquire, from somewhere, an Australian issue, pure sheepskin, flight vest that he had given to Geoff in the depths of the previous winter. Geoff had left it at home on his last leave, now that the better weather was here; he felt he would have no need of it through the summer months. How naive and wrong he'd been. Although quite bulky under his flying clothes, it would have been a bonus back at the Elsan earlier; the RAF issue clothing never did seem as warm.

In the cockpit, Peter acknowledged the change of heading that Steve had given him and checked his watch, it was now 01.46. As Skipper he was always courteous but short in his replies, often not repeating the command to save time. He didn't allow any useless chatter over the intercom, a rule that the normally vociferous and sometimes coarse Australians adhered to. They all knew how important the next call might be to their very survival. Any banter might just mean that their pilot missed the first warning call from one of his gunners and a split second lost in execution of the evading manoeuvre could mean the difference between life and death.

Beside and slightly behind Peter stood the only other Englishman in the crew, Flight Engineer, Sergeant Leonard Thomas Gearing. He had joined the crew when they had converted from the Wellington to the Lancaster in February this year. Although a seat was provided for the flight engineer it was impossible to see all the numerous dials and meters. Len, like many other flight engineers chose to stand for most of the operation, except take-offs and landings. Shy and quiet by aircrew standards, he was very good at his job, mechanically minded and methodical in his approach to the demands made on his position. He could always be counted on to have the up to date fuel situation whenever asked and knew a great deal about the workings of his four favourite objects, the mighty Merlin's that were the key to the Lancaster's wonderful load carrying and flying abilities. He and The Boss, as he had taken to calling Peter, worked together to ensure they got the most from these engines. They carefully balanced the need to conserve as much fuel as possible, should it be needed for evasive tactics, and the desire to get to the target on time and then home again as quickly as possible. There wasn't much mechanical inside this great aircraft that Len didn't know something about, except the radios and much of the electrical equipment. That duty fell to Geoff, who alone had the patience to deal with their little idiosyncrasies. During takeoffs and landings Len would sit and assist The Boss by operating the throttles and flaps. He would call out the airspeeds and raise the flaps and undercarriage so that his pilot could use both hands on the control column and all his strength to pull back and get the heavy bomber into the air.

Before a raid Len would be seen hanging around in the dispersal area talking to the ground crews. From the information they were able to give him on the fuel and bomb loads, he could begin to calculate the expected distance to the target. Geoff was another source of this information. He was the only member of the crew who had to go to the aircraft to check out the electronics. None of the other crewmembers understood these and he would be the one to sign off the Form 700 to state that all things electrical had been found satisfactory. As such he got very friendly with the ground crews and could often extract the necessary information to pass on to Len. Armed with this information and any gleaned from other crews Len and the rest of the crew would begin surmising about the possible destination for the coming night's operation. If the fuel load was 1150 gallons it was to be a short trip, 2154 gallons, full tanks, and they were in for a long one. Tonight they had 1857 gallons when they had set off, enough for at least six and a half hours in the air if required.

All the crewmen with outside views spotted the exchange of gunfire some distance ahead as tracer fire ripped across the dark sky. Each spectator then witnessed the resultant fiery death of an aircraft. Mesmerised for a fleeting moment, each watched as it fell, and then they returned to their individual vigils. Each was left with his personal thoughts. Almost certainly a Lancaster from the way it tumbled slowly from the sky, they could only hope that at least some of the crew had managed to escape the fiery wreckage. Up front Pop checked his watch; it was approaching 01.51 and time to crawl below for the bombing run. With a fighter around maybe he should wait just a little longer? No, he had his other job to do and needed to start the countdown to releasing the bombs. He and the rest of the crew hoped that one of the bombers' gunners had got a good shot at the marauder and sent him back to base damaged and licking his wounds. Hopefully he wouldn't rejoin the fray again this night. Maybe too, the fighter would be more careful in future.

However, he could still be out there somewhere, an injured pride at being shot at serving only to heighten his resolve and sharpen his wits. Like an injured animal he

maybe even more dangerous than before. The gunners would redouble their incessant searching. Peter didn't have to say anything to his gunners; he knew only too well that they would be staring into the darkness looking for that elusive shadow, a darker shade of black that might well be an enemy fighter. He had always made his thoughts about defence strategy known to them, they were to fire first and ask questions later calling out to him for the necessary evasive manoeuvre required the instant they saw something.

All was quiet again, save for the drone of the engines and the static hiss over the intercom, especially for the fourth and, literally, the last Australian member of the crew, pipe smoking Flight Sergeant Frank Bruce Reid. His home was in North Geelong, also in the state of Victoria the same as Skip. At this moment he was dreaming of the warmth back home. Sitting cramped into the tiny, freezing confines of the tail turret, some 60 feet behind Skip in the cockpit, he kept his lonely vigil over the night skies. His was certainly the most unenviable position in the whole aircraft. Commonly known as 'Tail End Charlie', none of the crew would willingly swap seats with him. Having joined the original 5-man crew at Westcott as the sole gunner it emphasised the importance of this defensive position to the crew. He was always first to leave the ground, as the aircraft strove to attain flying speed for takeoff and, in normal circumstances, would be the last to land. (*This is the same for all tail-wheel aircraft, the tail is always first to leave the ground.*) He would jokingly remark that his pay should be more than the rest of the crew because he spent so much extra time in the air. This lonely outpost called for all the dogged determination that he readily possessed and the crew was always surprised that he could retain his cheerful disposition. It was always bitterly cold in his turret. Despite the electrically heated flying suit, which hadn't failed on him yet tonight, the numbing cold would penetrate to the very bones. Having had the centre panes of Perspex removed from between the gun mountings didn't help matters, although it did improve his vision out the back of the aircraft. If the suit failed, as they often did, it was dreaming about the warmth back home that would see him through yet another bitterly cold night. The thought of smoking a bowl full of his favourite pipe tobacco as soon as they landed back at base also helped. He was well aware of the fact that most attacks on heavy bombers by fighters were made from the rear of the plane and this heightened his sense of responsibility for his task. With excellent eyesight and good reactions, coupled with precise instructions to the pilot, he alone might be the saviour of the whole crew. So far, he and the rest of the crew had never even seen an enemy aircraft during operations, although like tonight they had often witnessed their results. This did not stop or deter him from his task of scanning the all-enveloping blackness for that elusive, dangerous shadow, with almost certain death and destruction being the results of missing it.

Geoff knew that each member of the crew would be playing their own individual parts in this continuing struggle for survival and that each carried with him similar emotions and feelings, especially those whose homes and family were so far away. His own unsettled feelings began to return once more. There was little for him to do back here in his seat; he was playing no real part in the protection of the aircraft at this time. He had listened to the German fighter controllers on the radio and set up the jamming equipment to obliterate their signals. He could never understand a word that was spoken and would be able to do little about it, even if he could. In his mind's eye he could imagine the ground controllers positioning the fighters to intercept the bombers. There had been no recall signal earlier. They were unlikely to be recalled at this late stage. The briefed wind speed and direction for the flight and over the target had

remained unchanged. These facts he had passed on to the relevant crew - members earlier. It would be some minutes yet before the master bomber would be giving them any instructions regarding the bombing of the target or any change to the briefed marker colours being used. He set the dials to the allotted frequency ready to receive any messages as they came in.

He alone had heard the final desperate shout from the other aircraft and knew that a fighter must be operating out there somewhere. Surely an extra pair of gunnery trained eyes would be helpful when searching the darkness for the enemy, besides which he might feel better watching the raid unfold before his eyes and not just sitting here. He unplugged his intercom and raised himself stiffly from his little seat. Carefully he made his way forward in the cramped confines of the fuselage passageway leading toward to the cockpit. Climbing into the astrodome at the rear of the cockpit canopy, he plugged back into the intercom system, connected the oxygen and looked around. It was now that he began to really feel the cold. As a wireless operator he enjoyed one of the warmest seats within the aircraft as the hot air entered very close to where he sat. He hadn't been back in his seat long enough to warm up much from his previous excursion and the change in temperature was very noticeable. Outside it would be around minus twenty degrees, it didn't seem much warmer up here. He soon began to shiver as the lower temperature penetrated his flying suit, how he wished that he had his Australian sheepskin vest with him now.

Although there was very little light in his cabin, it took just a few moments for his eyes to become accustomed to the lack of light outside. It was too dark to see much below and, anyway, a ground mist was obscuring most of the landscape. What little light there was came from the crescent moon, but this was not enough to show any details, especially from this height. He had never been able to see much of the French countryside from the air, even on the two occasions when they had crossed France in daylight. Once in the early morning when returning late from a raid and again when they had had an early evening takeoff. Being cooped up in his radio cabin as he usually was he had only fleeting glimpses when he peered around the curtain that covered the tiny window. He imagined it to be similar to that of his home on the Isle of Wight.

When this war was over, he was planning to start a smallholding at home and raise chickens and pigs, maybe even a few dairy cattle. He had been planning and saving towards it for sometime, right up until he had been accepted into the RAF. Even now, what little money he had over at pay-day, he would deposit in the bank; it would be put to good use in the future. Whilst maintaining a good lookout, his mind wandered back to the beautiful countryside of the Island, amid which he had been so lucky to grow up and that he loved so much. He thought of Muriel, the only girl he really had deep feelings for among so many that he knew. He thought of her warm young soft body peacefully tucked up in bed at her home near Bournemouth. He also hoped the Luftwaffe weren't disturbing her slumber this night and he offered up a little prayer for her protection until he could return once again to see her on his next leave. Hopefully she would have had the film that he had left with her developed at the chemist shop owned by the father of her friend. It had pictures of the whole crew on it and he had asked her to get him seven copies of the group picture, one for each of the crew to keep. Next time he visited he would ask her if she would consider joining him in his plans for the Isle of Wight farming life he foresaw for them both. He felt sure that the feelings he had for her were reciprocated, he had known her for a long time now. Once qualified, she would easily be able to find work in one of the many chemist

shops on the Island if she wished to continue her career. His body was here in this plane, fighting this wretched war, but his thoughts were far away. First he and the crew would have to get on and get this war won and then these plans for the future could be put into practice. A great wave of homesickness welled up within him. It was no good; he had to get back to his little cabin again.

Buried in the darkness less than 1000 metres to the west and slightly below the bomber stream was the night-fighter. The Messerschmitt Bf110G-4 was being flown on an almost parallel course by Hauptmann Fritz Söthe of Stab.II/NJG4 based at Coulommiers to the east of Paris. Fritz had been born in Lohfeld/Minden and was almost 30 years of age. He was quite a veteran and beginning to make a name for himself within the night fighter force. Once before, in April, he had got this close to two bombers in one night. Could he repeat that previous outcome? He could just make out the silhouette of the other aircraft, another 'viermot', or heavy four-engined bomber, against an almost imperceptibly lighter patch of darkness in the eastern sky.

Flushed with the successful result of his earlier attack he had circled around as his radio/radar-operator, Uffz. Wilhelm Brönies from Hamm/Westfalen, a mere boy at just 20 years of age, looked for another contact on the radar. Their ground controller had originally taken sometime to bring them into a position to make contact with the bomber stream because of the counter measures being employed by the British. They had begun to feel frustrated and in desperation had begun zigzagging around the sky in the hopes of finding a contact without the ground controllers' ramblings. Then by a stroke of good fortune they had flown through the turbulence created by one of the giant bombers and Wilhelm had at once picked up its signal on his radar aboard their plane. They had been much too close and there was little time to plan the attack. It had not been a surprise, because of this close approach, that the intended victim's gunners had spotted him and begun firing back. Pure instinct had allowed him to get off a fairly accurate shot as he dived away from the hail of return fire. Possibly the bomber was beginning the first part of an evasive manoeuvre but it again presented itself to him as he came round 360 degrees of his turn. By now the mid-upper turret was silent, but the tail gunner continued to hose the air with ineffective machinegun fire. Fritz opened fire at the mid-section of the bomber with all his guns. The Lancaster was corkscrewing and rapidly losing height and this second fusillade of cannon shells and machine gun bullets entered the aircraft fuselage and ruptured the fuel tanks in the wings. A small fire started near the port wing root and quickly spread. As Fritz hauled back on the stick to turn for yet another pass, the bomber turned into a fireball and they were thrown about vigorously by the force of the resulting explosion. There was no doubt about the fate of this bomber; it would be his 7th victim.

It had taken a few moments for his eyes to re-adjust following the stark brightness of the explosion. He had turned and, gaining height steadily, had flown westward in the hope that they would find some more prey. Somewhat shaken by this near brush with death, he would take greater care next time and make any approach more carefully. Fritz must have passed right amongst the bomber stream because as he banked to fly east again, as the other bomber had been, he saw what he thought was the faintest flash of light at the very edge of his peripheral vision. At that very instance much further away, lightening from a distant storm flashed vividly across the sky. It was 01.51 and far below, unseen by all, a duller splash of light marked the fiery final end of his previous victim. Also unseen was the lone parachute that drifted slowly down to the damp French soil.

The third member of the night fighter crew was engineer and gunner 21 year old Uffz. Heinz Enke of Rositz/Altenburg. He too had spotted the merest glint that had possibly been the weak reflection on the bombers' cockpit canopy of the markers going down over the intended target. He was also intently watching the same area of sky in an effort not to lose their intended target. He and Fritz both knew that their airborne radar wouldn't be seeing a target that was to their side and so they must not lose their visual contact. The pair also knew that if this took too long they would be very short of fuel for the return to base. They seemed to have spent hours blundering about blindly in the French skies earlier but Fritz was sure he had enough for this one more attack.

Without shifting his gaze from the indistinct shape Fritz carefully banked the aircraft to port and dropped the nose a little. He calculated the direction of his flight to bring the two aircraft into close proximity within this three-dimensional battleground of the sky. As Fritz turned, Wilhelm also picked out the target on his flickering screen, now they should not have any problem catching their intended victim. There was only thin cloud and there was no way the bomber would be able to hide now they had it in their sights. By losing height as he had, Fritz was able to carefully bring the Messerschmitt into the blind spot under the tail of the bomber. Carefully he juggled the throttles until he had matched the speed of the bomber exactly. He was now ready to pounce.

The homesickness, fear and the cold drove Geoff to unplug his intercom and oxygen yet again and begin returning to his little cabin in the bowels of the aircraft. He usually felt more secure with all that machinery and metal surrounding him, but tonight he knew he would only feel claustrophobic within its confines. Perhaps a quick glance in at Steve pouring over his maps, a few shouted words above the incessant noise of the engines and then back to the warmth would make him feel better. He had already seen the markers beginning to fall in the far distance and by now the first wave should be bombing. He needed to be back at the radio in case any messages came through with instructions about their bombing run. Geoff pulled back the curtain beside the navigators' table and tried to lean towards Steve. He found to his dismay that he was unable to move from the upright position. His parachute harness had snagged on some unseen projection as he had squeezed back along the narrow passageway and now he was held firm. For fear of pulling too hard and the pack opening in the confined space he decided to take off the harness, carefully remove it from the aircraft's grasp and then get Steve to help him put it back on again. Steve raised his eyes from the map table where he was plotting their progress and could just make out the contortions of his pal as he wrestled with the pack and he rose to help him.

To be continued.....

CHAPTER TWO

The Early Years

Raymond Geoffrey Norris had been born in the early hours of 6th August 1922. He was the first, and as it turned out, only child of Elsie and Arthur George Norris of 8 St. Thomas Street, Ryde, Isle of Wight. His father, George as he was always known, a butcher by trade, was working for the large and well-established firm of Loaders in the town. George and one of his four brothers, Bert, had followed their father, a slaughter man and butcher, into the trade on leaving school. Elsie, his mother, had been in service for many years prior to marrying George and had continued working into the early stages of her pregnancy to ensure a firmer financial footing for their expected arrival. She was almost 7 years older than George, an age difference that hadn't bothered either of them and they were very happily married. With the birth of their son Elsie took on the dutiful role of housewife and mother. In the tradition of a family where few members seem to be known by their given names, Raymond Geoffrey very quickly became Geoffrey, later shortened to Geoff. As such he was to spend the rest of his life known always by this shortened version of his name, except when at school.

The arrival of Geoff meant that the rooms they rented on the ground floor in St. Thomas Street were no longer suitable and they moved to 25 Arthur Street, Ryde soon after the birth. His early life was both simple and enjoyable for the most part, although his mother was well known as a strict disciplinarian, a fact that was to get worse as Geoff grew older. His father did not earn a great deal of money but as a family they never went without. Fresh meat and vegetables were always available. There were no such things as nursery schools or crèches where children were bundled off to in those days. Consequently he spent all of his early, formative, years in the company of his mother. She was his constant companion until he was old enough to play with the other children from the neighbourhood. His father would have been at home each evening but in the earliest years this would be well after Geoff had been put to bed. Always on a Sunday he was around and about the house and garden. He was an attentive and caring husband and father by all accounts, and took a great interest in his new son as he was growing up.

Loaders had branches in other towns on the Island and George was asked to move to their branch in Sandown. At first he travelled between the two towns by motorcycle, this meant he was away from home for even longer periods each day. It was impractical and more costly and ate into the few pennies pay incentive he had been given to make the move. An alternative had to be found, but until they could find suitable accommodation in the vicinity of the shop in Sandown it was his only option. Eventually a suitable house was found and before he went to his first school Geoff and the family moved to Sandown another seaside town on the southeast coast of the Island.

My father, Eric, has no recollection of the houses in Ryde but remembers visits to the house in Sandown. Eric had been born in Gunville on 22nd August 1922; his father James, Jim to all, and Geoff's' mother were brother and sister, making Geoff my fathers' cousin. As such these two children, from differing backgrounds, were growing up at the same time but in very different parts of the Island. My father remembers the days that they all used to spend at the seaside whenever

the two families got together in Sandown. It would have been a wonderful day out and such a change from his home in the country. He recalls that this seemed to be quite regular especially during the summertime. As with a lot of childhood memories the days always appeared to be long, warm and sunny. The families would take a picnic onto the beach near the pier. Each of their mothers was always resplendent in light, flowery dresses, their fathers in grey flannels with braces, shirt and tie and jackets. If the sun was particularly hot the men folk used to wear knotted handkerchiefs on their heads. There would be sandwiches and cakes, flasks of tea for the adults and homemade lemonade for the boys. All the food would have been homemade, prepared in advance by their mothers and appeared to come from bottomless baskets when it was being handed out. Their parents always rented deckchairs but the boys were quite happy sitting on the sand even though it meant the sandwiches had a gritty consistency on occasions! This was soon washed away with the homemade lemonade.

The boys would build sandcastles and bury each other in the sand, sometimes helped by their fathers. Then they would cool down and wash off the sand in the sea. Their fathers would take off their shoes and socks and sometimes their jackets and roll up their trouser legs and shirtsleeves to paddle at the edge of the sea whilst the boys were splashing around. At the end of these idyllic days there was usually an ice cream to finish off the day as they all made their weary way home. It all adds up to quite a holiday type scene. Many of the men folk had not been back from the Great War for very long and it must have been a great relief to be able to enjoy such fun after the sacrifices of a few years previously. They had fought to ensure these happy times could be enjoyed again by all.

At other times of the year when the weather was not so fine, they would wrap up warmly and stroll along the promenade to take the sea air. All the ice-cream parlours would be shut and the seafront would be much quieter than at the height of the summer season. They would stand and watch the sea rushing up the beach as large waves rolled in from the English Channel. Warm drinks and toasted muffins around a roaring fire would follow these excursions.

The return visits to my fathers' home in Gunville were a different experience for the boys as they grew up. Far from the sea, the walks would be in the countryside that surrounded the little cottage by the railway line in the village. This would have been another great adventure and addition to their education. There were so many new things for Geoff to see that his cousin had on his doorstep. Chickens in wire meshed runs at the bottom of a neat garden that stretched away from the house to the hedge bordering the fields beyond. Over the hedge there were gigantic, to the boys anyway, horses that plodded across the fields towing whatever implement the farmer might be using, according to the time of year. If it was the plough or harrow there would be the familiar raucous sound of the gulls and the new sounds of rook and jackdaw as the birds competed for the unearthed morsels of worms, grubs and beetles. Further out from the village there were sheep and cows in the fields. There were different birds in the hedges and woods. A whole new orchestra of natural sounds that varied with the hour, day and season. At the right time of year there were mushrooms to pick from the fields or berries from the hedgerows. A veritable larder if one knew where and when to look. In the warmer weather, as the boys grew older, the families would take a picnic up onto the rolling downs to the west of Carisbrooke above the Bowcombe valley. They would sit in deep clover scented grass amid the hum of bees and the song of the skylark.

Christmases were another time for large family gatherings that my father fondly remembers from those early days. Along with other Aunties and Uncles, Geoff and his parents always came. Geoff was the only other child. They appear to mostly have been celebrated at his parents' cottage in Gunville. There were plentiful supplies of food and drink. The two boys would have presents to open and toys to play with together. The early life of both boys was very simple compared with today's modernity and complexity and the presents they each received at Christmastime reflected this. A tuneless tin whistle or an imitation bugle that tooted softly rather than blaring. Carved wooden animals that could be added to farm or zoo sets. There were wooden spinning tops with a whip of string that was used to start and maintain the spinning. A metal hoop, with a stick that was used to get it rolling as someone ran alongside it. Everybody having a great laugh as the adult males demonstrated their hoop rolling techniques, charging about the backyard in carpet slippers and slipping on the frosty ground. There were sweets in profusion and fruit in abundance, every one having great fun.

BELOW the earliest found photograph of Geoff, aged approx. six years old.



After the Christmas dinner had been eaten, cleared from the table and all the washing up and tidying up had been done, the adults would retire to the sitting room where a large welcoming fire was ablaze in the hearth. Here they would smoke, talk and play cards whilst the boys would play quietly on the floor.

After they had both begun school in their different areas, they would talk about their schooling, teachers and things that they learnt. Sometimes they would be learning the multiplication tables and so could recite them together. At other times they would be learning different poems and songs and would regale the family with their renditions of popular nursery rhymes and children's poetry.

It was as this idyllic growing up period was slowly advancing, visit on visit, year on year, things for Geoff began to take a downward turn. Unbeknown to either child, Geoff's father had begun to suffer with a yet undiagnosed illness. Medical science was sadly lacking in the depression years between the wars and it was sometime before George was diagnosed as having an incurable cancer. The knowledge that he had such a terrible affliction as much as the effects he was suffering lead to a sharp decline in this steadfast pillar of Geoff's young life. As George literally wasted away, a second and even more devastating blow hit the young family. Elsie had discovered a small growth on the side of her tongue, which, by the time she showed her brother Jim, resembled a small version of the blue coated liquorice allsorts of a popular brand. This developed slowly at first, but was also diagnosed as a form of cancer and it inexorably spread to her throat and face. There was little medication available to treat both parent and each became increasingly sick. George was forced to give up work and was eventually admitted to hospital. Elsie was finding life an increasingly heavy burden and her frustration and anger were beginning to have an effect of young Geoff. With her husband dying in the hospital and no income from his job, Elsie was struggling to support herself and young Geoff. With the imminent death of George she was finally forced to make the decision to move. Her sister, Emily Cooke (nee Reynolds) and brother in law owned a house back at 14 Arthur Street, Ryde and they could have rooms on the 2nd floor there. It was to be a pleasant interlude in what was becoming, for Geoff, a sorrowful beginning to his life. Emily's daughter, Gertie Hunt (nee Cooke), although almost 90 years old could still remember the young Geoff when he went to stay there. She remembered him "as a very handsome little lad, with a sweet and sunny nature" and this despite all the problems he was experiencing.

Some years after this, Gerties' own daughter remembers "a tall fair haired man coming in the back gate of her Grandmothers' garden, then in St Johns Road, Ryde, saying he had come to see Aunt Em". He was in uniform and she believes it was the summer of 1942 when she was 7 years old. Later as he left, he gave her a sixpenny piece "a great deal of money in those days" and said "Goodbye".

George passed away on the 5th April 1932 aged just thirty-nine years. Knowing that there could not be much of a future for Geoff with his father gone and her own illness beginning to take its terrible toll, she visited her brother Jim with a desperate plea for assistance. Would Jim, and his wife Ethel, be prepared to look after Geoff and bring him up as their own until such time as Geoff was old enough and then they could make a formal request for his adoption? Having a good idea of the bleak future the young Geoff was now facing; Jim and Ethel did not hesitate in their reply. They were only too pleased to look after their nephew and he would be a wonderful playmate, companion and brother for Eric. Final arrangements were hastily made and Geoff moved once again, now to live with his Uncle Jim, Aunt Ethel and Eric at 2 Ashen Grove Cottages, Gunville in the summer of 1932 at the age of just nine years. The move, though traumatic at first, meant that Geoff was spared from the horrors of watching his mother decline to her eventual death. Elsie gamely struggled on, but without the love and support of her devoted husband she eventually succumbed to her illness on 11th October 1933, she was 46. It must have been a great comfort to them both, as their lives ebbed away, to know that their only son was with a family who could give him all the love and affection that he would need to get through this awful time.

At this tender and impressionable age of 9 years, Geoff was left mourning the loss of

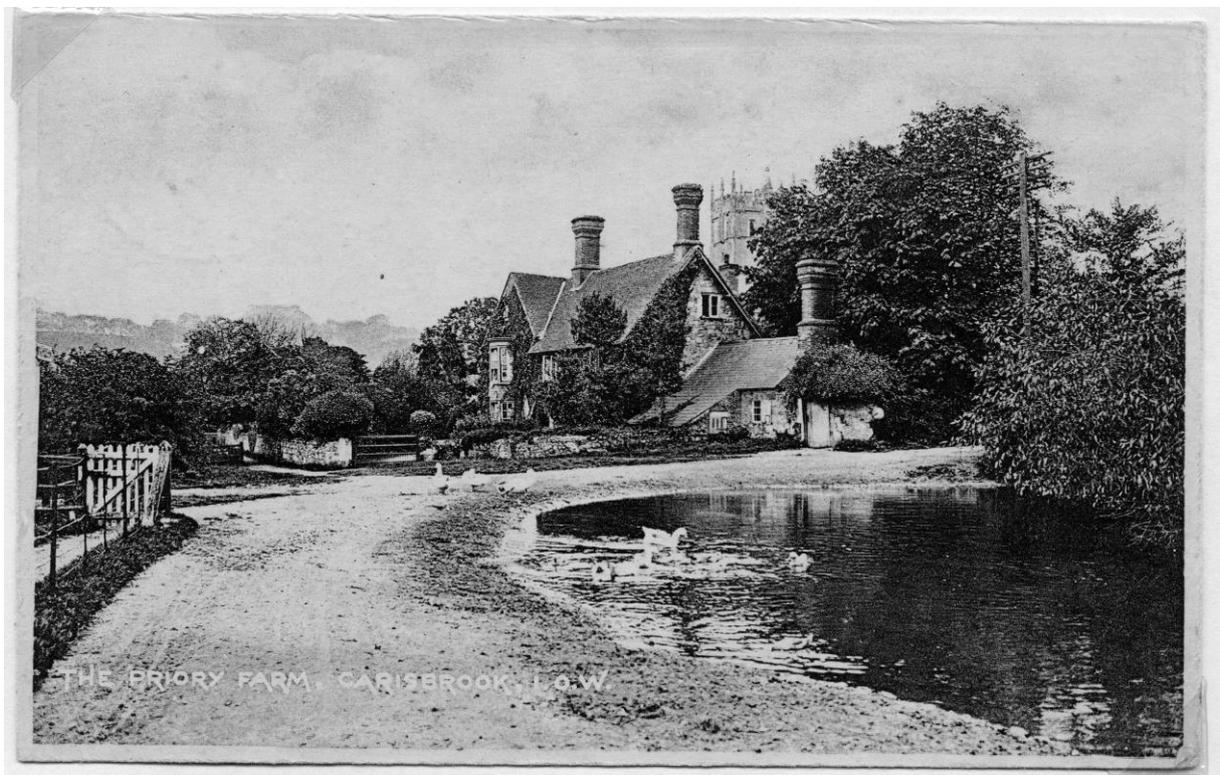
both his parents as only a child can. He particularly missed his father, that great big strong man who had carried him around so gently when he was a baby, had hoisted him high above his head to sit squarely on his broad shoulders as he had grown up. The man with the large strong hands who had caught him and picked him up when he had fallen whilst trying, at first to walk and then to run and finally to ride a bicycle. A devoted father who had listened intently as his little son had falteringly recited his childish poetry, nursery rhymes and songs and helped him fill in the missing numbers of his times tables. No more would they gallop along the road or beach or through the fields where his father would always contrive to lose just at the final bend in all the races they ever had. He missed his mother as well, all those early days of warmth and affection that had slowly given way to mood swings and a temper he had found difficult to understand and she to control. He knew she always loved him, she was always telling him so, but why had she also been so angry? Eventually he was left confused and hurt, even wondering if he was to blame for the events leading to the loss of his parents.

Being deprived of his parents' affection and love at such an early age could well have left him emotionally scarred and damaged for life. For the rest of his life these traumatic events and thoughts about his parents would occasionally trouble him, clouding an otherwise cheerful and happy new life with their dim memories. He had been lucky that his parents had the forethought to place him with his relatives. Now Jim, Ethel and Eric took young Geoff to their hearts and gave him the comfort and strength that he needed so much in those dark days. He was lucky to be entering the bosom of an extremely loving household. One in which he could look forward to calmness, stability and support that he may not have had elsewhere. That other young family who had featured so much in his early life was now going to form the rock on which he could build his new life. It wasn't very long before he began to call his Aunt and Uncle Mum and Dad, a fact that had Ethel in floods of tears the first time she heard it. An extra special bond was to develop between Ethel and Geoff. This bond was to become so strong that they could almost communicate without talking, each knowing instinctively what the other was thinking. Far from feeling left out by the attentions that Geoff was getting, Eric became the brother and closest friend that Geoff had never really had. Geoff had missed this closeness as he grew up, except when the two had been together. Now they were able to spend a great deal of their time together and this would bring new experiences to them both. In this new home the two boys shared the second and only other bedroom of the cottage for the rest of their time together. A strong bond was to develop between the two and they shared in everything equally. With the family's help Geoff soon began to settle into the new life around him.

Jim worked in the maintenance gangs on the Islands railway system. The railway on the Island was far more extensive in those days and he travelled the whole length in working parties making repairs and carrying out maintenance to ensure the system ran like clockwork. He was somewhat lucky in that they lived right next to the Newport to Yarmouth and Freshwater line and could often hitch a lift with one of the friendly engine drivers either to or from work. There was no station at Gunville; the closest was at Carisbrooke, about half a mile away across the fields. At teatime on light evenings Geoff and Eric would hang over the brick parapet and watch as the engine and coaches came along the track to see if their father was going to get off. They would be disappointed when they realised that the train was not going to stop, but they would wave frantically and the driver would give a short toot sending a jet of steam into the air from the whistle just as it passed beneath the bridge.

They would then return to the cottage to await the sound of Jim's hobnailed boots as he walked, with measured stride, down the road and into the cobbled back yard. It would be a race to see who could help get to take his haversack off first. Depending on the time of year he would often take a walk down the garden path just to see how things were coming along in their neat rows to either side. Being a keen vegetable gardener in his spare time, he liked to keep an eye on the crops especially if it was getting near to show time. Both he and Ethel were regular and successful exhibitors at the local Carisbrooke and District Horticultural shows. Jim with his home-grown vegetables and Ethel with her home baking and preserves. Ethel was also very keen on gardening and it was she who tended the neat little borders outside the door of the cottage and in the cobbled yard. With such a winning combination as his new parents, Geoff was assured of good, wholesome home produced and cooked food always being available on the table. Together the family also reared chickens that were kept in large wire netted enclosures on both sides of the path at the very far end of the garden. This ensured an almost constant supply of fresh eggs and often a surplus that could be sold to their neighbours and other villagers. With good management they were able to hatch a few of the laid eggs, so supplying themselves with new chicks and enabling another great treat, fresh roast chicken to be available for special family occasions and especially at Christmas. Here again Jim had his 'special' customers, in the village and around, who would order one of his fine, plump, corn fed birds to grace their table on Christmas and Easter days.

BELOW A postcard sent by Geoff to his Grandfather, Arthur John Norris of 2 Edward Street, Ryde. It thanks him for the soap he had sent, presumably for Geoff's 9th birthday that would have been on the 6th of the month. It is postmarked 21st August 1931 indicating that Geoff had been staying in Gunville at this time.





ABOVE No pictures have been found of Geoff's parents. However, Mrs Agnes Norris, Geoff's aunt, assured me that his father was like a twin of her husband Bert. He is seen here, on the left, with Arthur John, his father and therefore Geoff's grandfather to whom he sent the postcard. They are pictured outside an address in Ryde, possibly Edward Street. Circa. 1932.

With a home life like this and his already developing pleasant demeanour it is easy to see why Geoff was able to shake of the dreadful events of the recent past and settle down to this new and different lifestyle. His character really began to shine through as the time passed. In such a small village community it was not long before Eric or his new Mum and Dad had introduced Geoff to many of its residents, both young and old. He became well known and liked by most that he came in contact with.

Besides settling into a new home and village, Geoff was also faced with the challenge of starting a new school. He knew something about it from his previous talks with Eric, but now he would have to go and join in all the classes. There was no school in the small village of Gunville and the nearest one was again in the neighbouring village of Carisbrooke. This was the Council School in School Lane, towards the top, western end of the village and was about half a mile away. It served to educate the children of both villages and the surrounding countryside from the ages of 7 to 11 years of age and above if, as few did, pass the entrance examination for the Grammar School in Newport. Every school day Geoff and Eric would join others from their village to walk this relatively short distance to the school where my mother was also a pupil. Somewhat of a social occasion, it could be a pleasant walk along a relatively country road. Whenever the weather was fine they could leave early enough to ensure they had plenty of time to enjoy the countryside around them and have fun on the way. Checking out the hedgerows for birds' nests or berries depending on the time of year. The boys having stone throwing contests whilst the girls would pick flowers, making bunches to brighten the classrooms or for pressing in carefully kept books.

Once at school, the children were separated into Boy and Girl play areas, unable to mix sociably, as they had on the way to school, only coming together again when in the classroom or after school. My mother remembers that although there was this segregation, Geoff's blond hair and good looks made him quite a favourite with a lot of the female pupils especially as they all grew older. Geoff soon established himself as a very good, educationally, if somewhat mischievous pupil. Events of the past had certainly not had any dulling affect on his sharp brain and he soon established himself within the higher groups for education. Consistently coming top or near the top of the class in most lessons, he found study and learning easy.

With his good looks, fine brain and mischievous sense of fun he had soon endeared himself to many of his fellow school pupils and the teachers as well. Although, occasionally, he was to find himself in trouble with the teaching staff because of his pranks. More often he was the instigator who rarely got caught and when he was, got away with it by virtue of his innocent looks and charm. Such jokes included items placed above doors that dropped on teachers, flicking items around in the classroom and generally being disruptive in a largely disciplinarian society. There was one occasion that my mother remembers in which most of the class were left on trust to continue their work whilst the teacher was out in the school garden with some of the boys, including my father. It was something that had happened before on many occasions and one that had been exploited by the pupils for some fun and games in the classroom. Geoff, who sat nearest the windows at the front of the class, was one of those who would give the warning if the teachers were coming. The windows were high and wire netted to protect them against cricket and footballs. In order to see into the class without coming indoors, the teacher would take a running jump outside the windows and grasp the wire, thus enabling him to pull himself up and look in at the class. For this act he became known as 'Monkey face'. Geoff would normally hear the quick steps and then the scrabbling of the feet on the lower wall as the teacher strove to raise himself above the lower window frame. On that particular occasion, Geoff was so involved in the games within the classroom that he failed to hear the noises until the teacher was looking in. My mother could see him but was unable to stop the sequence of events or issue any warning, being in full view, as she was, at the other side of the classroom. Hearing a noise at last, Geoff called out in a loud whisper.

"Look out, Monkey face is coming!"

To which came the reply.

"Monkey face is already here Norris! I shall see you outside the Headmasters' office in a minute. In the meantime will the rest of the class kindly get on with their work."

Although he had a cane, the Headmaster at that time was loath to use it, preferring to admonish the wrongdoer by strong but quiet words. Geoff returned to the class sometime later, head bowed, dutifully contrite but with his spirit unbowed. He wouldn't get caught again.

One thing that both Eric and Geoff were nearly caught for was taking homemade catapults to school. Many of the boys had them, using them mainly for target practice on farm gates, posts and other inanimate objects. Few used them maliciously and definitely not for shooting at people or animals except the odd rat that they might see. The school rules expressly forbade them being taken onto the school site, but Geoff and Eric often flaunted this rule as they had some excellent practice areas on their walk to and from school. On this one particular morning, Miss Pitman, a new and particularly strict disciplinarian, was conducting a search of all the boys as they went

into the playground through the gates. She was not very tall and was only visible to the boys at the last moment as they rounded the wall. Luckily she was distracted at that moment and the two ducked back behind the wall out of sight. They then proceeded to hide the catapults about their person so that even she would not dare to look for them in the place chosen. They got away with it and it soon became common practice for many of the other boys as they got to hear of this secret hiding place. Some 30 years later, Miss Pitman was still teaching at the same village school where I too was a pupil. I went home saying what a strict 'old dragon' she was and described her attitude to my Mum and Dad. They said that she must have mellowed over the years having been much worse when they had known her! She soon realised who she was now teaching and recalled the 'catapult incident' without much prompting, recounting to the class how she had kept the school playground catapult free in her time at the school. However, I'm quite sure she arrived at her retirement not even realising that she had been outwitted and was probably still blissfully unaware how it had been done!

BELOW This photograph of Eric, Jim and Ethel Reynolds enjoying the sunshine on a Sunday day out was taken by Geoff after he had been living with them sometime. Circa 1934.



My father Eric was already a member of the choir at St Mary's Parish Church in Carisbrooke when Geoff arrived with the family. Geoff soon realised from talking with his school mates, who were members that this would be another way of meeting new and interesting friends and went along one practice evening to see what it was like and try out his singing voice. The choirmaster was pleased with his efforts and so he began attending all the practices and the Sunday services as the newest member of the choir. Both he and Eric began to take a more active part in the church, training as altar boys and becoming members of the Sunday school. This was run from a hall at

the bottom of the hill in Carisbrooke village. It also provided youth club facilities during the week where its members could play table tennis, darts and other games indoors. Various female members provided soft drinks, lemonade and homemade cakes and biscuits as refreshment during the evenings.



ABOVE A photograph taken at one of the many Choir Summer Camps the boys enjoyed together. This one was at The Brambles, Colwell, summer 1936.

Standing L-R Hubert Brown, John Sheath, Ron Morris, Geoff, John Simmons, Gilbert Bradley, Eric Reynolds + 3 unknown.

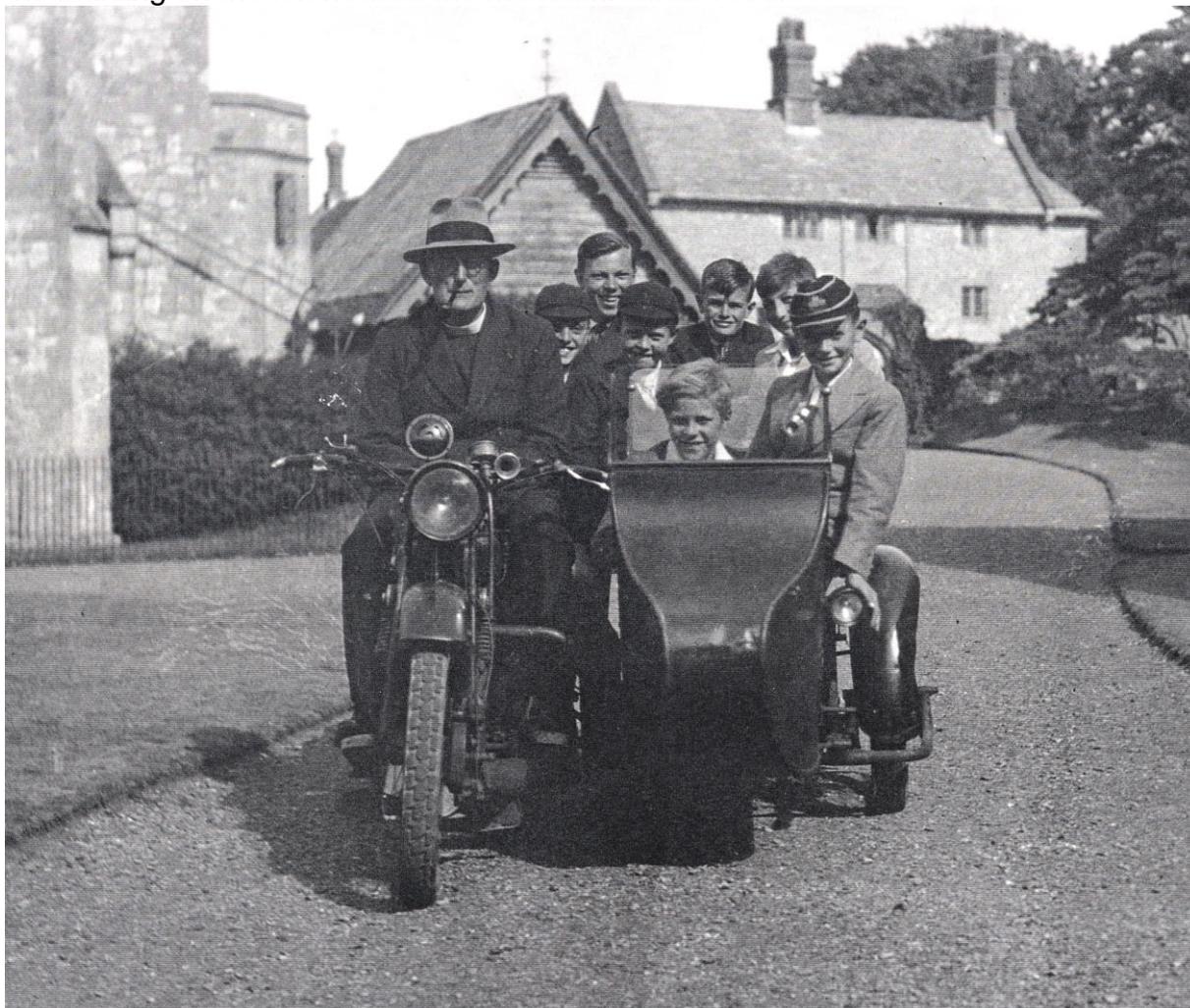
Sitting L-R Unknown, Keith Pitman, 3 unknown, Kenny Watts

The vicar of the church during this time was the Reverend Harold Ewbank, who could often be seen riding his large motorbike and sidecar combination around the parish on his rounds. He was not averse to giving all those members of the boys' choir who could climb on and stay on a lift when they had a service and tea party in the chapel at Carisbrooke Castle, which was part of the parish.

He was also a mean sling thrower as the boys found out one evening in the churchyard. They had been trying, with little success, to get range and direction from a homemade version that one of them had acquired. The vicar, calmly smoking his pipe, appeared around the corner of the church where they were and far from telling the boys off, as they had expected, he proceeded to demonstrate the necessary art. They all stood agog as he stooped and picked up a pebble about the size of blackbirds' egg, inserted it in the pouch and began to whirl it around his head. Seeing their faces, he brought the sling down and related the tale of David and Goliath and how the sling had biblical connections and therefore not unusual that a man of the cloth should know how to use one. He then continued his demonstration, this time releasing the stone away into the distance. The boys clapped, cheered and whistled and he reloaded another pebble to show them that it wasn't a fluke. This time the

stone soared higher into the darkening sky and disappeared from sight over the neighbouring farm wall. Moments later followed by the sound of breaking glass. At which point sling lessons were cancelled for the night and they all returned swiftly to the church to finish the choir practice!

BELOW The 'sling throwing' Vicar on his usual mode of transport with a number of the choirboys aboard as well on one of the summer visits to the Carisbrooke Castle Chapel. The building behind them is the well house containing the donkey wheel and the building on the left houses the museum. Circa 1935.



In Order left to right Rev. Harold Ewbank, Eric Reynolds, George Symons, Geoff, Gerry Matthews, Ted Noldrett, Alan Harvey.

In the sidecar Clem Wells.

The other stalwart of their time in the church and Sunday school was the choirmaster, one George R. Barrett Esq. This gentleman was an eminent person in the village and well known throughout the Island by virtue of his position as a reporter to the Isle of Wight County Press. Together with the Reverend Ewbank these two people probably did more for the children and youths of the church and village than some will ever realise. Many choir and Sunday school outings were organised whilst they held their respective positions and the youth club grew and flourished under their dedication and leadership. The choir, however, has always been of a high calibre for such a small community church and during the '30s it was particularly large and strong of voice. There was one notable occasion in 1936, whilst Geoff and Eric were both fourteen, that it was invited to give a performance of Handel's'

Messiah at the original Crystal Palace. The performance took place just a few short months before it was so tragically destroyed by fire. This performance may have been the most spectacular in its performance and setting, but the choir was much in demand during Geoff and Eric's time to give recitals of other church music. They travelled to many famous cathedrals and cities around the south including Winchester, Portsmouth, Salisbury and Canterbury giving of their best wherever they went. At least four times a year they would sing at the little chapel of St Nicholas, within the walls of Carisbrooke Castle. During the warmer months they would have tea on the lawns beside the well house. The expenses for most of these trips were shared out between the church and the participants.

BELOW The picture (full size) that began my interest in the man. Geoff at 16.



BELOW Two smart lads in their Sunday best.



The Sunday school organised a holiday for its members for a fortnight every year during the summer period. This was usually under canvas and was held at different places around the Island. Those members wishing to go would begin to contribute to a fund during the autumn of the previous year. This fund was administered each year by one of the members and Geoff was nominated to take on the job before his thirteenth birthday. For his age he was both neat with his work and good at arithmetic making him an ideal treasurer. It shows how well respected and trusted he had become by those around him in this, sometimes, tight knit village community, that he was given the position whilst still so young. It was a position he held for quite a few years after his first nomination.

Each week he would collect the monies from those wishing to go, recording the details in a small notebook especially for the purpose and paying the money into a Post Office Savings account where it would accumulate some interest. As the time approached for the holiday he would withdraw the money and accompany some of the adults as they purchased the necessary food and provisions for the weeks to come. Keeping careful records at all times of the items being bought, the amounts

being spent and balancing the accounts to the last farthing. He enjoyed the responsibility and felt he was giving a good service to his fellow members. The camps were always a great success and for some the only holiday they would get in those 'depression' years.

BELOW Two photographs taken whilst the choir was 'on tour'. The lower one being at Canterbury circa October 1939. This trip had been much in doubt as the war had broken out about a month before it was due to take place.



Following the boom years just after The Great War when the country struggled back onto its feet, now 'The Great Depression' was engulfing much of the country, with workforces reduced everywhere and Island manufacturers were not spared. Jim was able to continue his work on the railways and the rural part of the community did not suffer too badly although some larger farms were forced to reduce their labour force in an effort to save costs. So children had to go without also, and family holidays were a luxury that few could afford. Away from their home and family, sometimes for the first time ever, in a tent, in a field was a great adventure for them all. This freedom meant they could all enjoy the time to the full. The children, youths and camp helpers organised a variety of activities in the open air as often as the weather, usually good in August, would allow. They would play football, cricket and rounders, have tug-of-war matches, play 'tag' and generally wear themselves out. Usually not far from the sea, at most points around the coast, they would be able to take a dip to cool off most days. During the evenings they would sit around a large fire singing songs and telling stories before turning in for the night.

Being in the country certainly suited Geoff and Eric, two of their favourite pass-times were walking and cycling around the countryside exploring. Out there together or with a group of their friends from the village, they could spend many happy hours. Unlike the youth of today who can slump into a chair, turn on the television or a computer and play for hours or watch the flickering images on the box in the corner, they had to make their own entertainment. Everything was much simpler and very much geared around doing it for ones self. If they wanted to know about a subject, they either asked somebody or more likely read a book on the subject. They also learned by using their own eyes and ears. Being even more a rural community in those days than it is today, it had a rich variety of flora and fauna, both native and transient. By carefully watching and listening they could build up a deep knowledge of the animals and plants around them. Slowly they built up a record of the countryside of the Island that surrounded them. The names of many of the varied species my father passed on to his own children. Often during the summer they would pack up picnics and take their bicycles along the highways and by-ways all the way to the sea. Brightstone, Brook, Colwell and Compton were their favourite places away from the better-known seaside resorts. Here they sometimes indulged in 'skinny dipping' during the long warm summer evenings before returning home. My father says that he only stood on the beach and held all the swimming costumes. He cannot swim to this day, so I'm not surprised by this remark!

Geoff also took a great interest in the chickens that Jim and Ethel kept at the far end of the garden. He used to say that he would love to run a smallholding when he grew up. Ethel and he would spend many evenings beneath the gas lamps in the parlour discussing where they would have this land. They made plans for the animals that they would farm together in the future.

With this great interest in the outdoors and the countryside, it was not surprising that on leaving school, Geoff went into the employment of Messrs. Fisk and Fisher of St. Cross Mill, Crocker Street, Newport, Isle of Wight. The company was a wholesale farm food merchant and Geoff was in his element. His interest in nature and his personality made him a firm favourite amongst the farming community across the Island.

It suited him to be working outdoors and getting about the countryside that he had grown to love. As with any job that is enjoyable, it is that much easier to do. Geoff's'

pleasant manner allied to this fact made him an excellent salesman and his round flourished. He took and passed a driving test and his employers supplied him with a small black Austin Eight. He used this not only for his job but would take his family and friends around the Island as well.

BELOW Geoff photographed with his 'company car'.
An Austin Eight, it even had a small sunroof!



The photo was taken along Sandown seafront in the summer of 1939. Soon after this photograph was taken the one time holiday beach, along with all the other Channel facing shores, was covered with anti-tank defences and miles of barbed wire to make it unattractive to the Germans as a possible landing area.

Although he could get around faster now, he never lost his interest in the nature of the Island. Often he would drive with the windows open and listen and watch as he drove around the country lanes. If he saw something of interest he would stop to take a closer look and so the days passed by. Geoff kept an eye out for that little plot of land that he wanted to turn into a small holding with Ethel. Part of his weekly wages went into the bank to provide a deposit towards the right piece of land when it came along. He supplemented this income with other little schemes to raise the money. Apparently he would buy chickens from the farmers on his round. These would be the birds that had stopped laying and were of little use commercially to the farmer. He would take them along to his Uncle, Joe Reynolds, who owned a butcher shop in Newport for many years and sell them to him for resale in the shop. Compared with the plump ones that Jim raised in the pens at the bottom of the garden at home, these were scrawny little birds with tough meat through age. Geoff was always kidded by Joe that he must have stumbled across a new and as yet unknown type of farmyard pigeon. He knew that Geoff was saving hard and would give him the best price he could.

Geoff did not neglect his education either and attended night school a couple of times a week. Here he studied shorthand and English in an effort to improve himself still further. He was to find an unexpected use for these skills as his life progressed.

Across the seas in Europe another far more sinister person was also looking for lands to acquire. His expansion was to bring about a far-reaching change for many people right across the planet. As early as September 1938, the Island had practised its Air Raid Precautions and members of its own territorial gunners had manned the coastal batteries in the west of the Island. This exercise had lasted up to nine days with the positions being continuously manned. The terrifying wail of the, soon to become all too common, air raid warning siren had been tested across the Island. The announcements in the press and on the radio had told of Hitler's rise to power and the formation of the Nazi party. To their youthful ears in the tiny community life of the Island this all seemed so far away and of no consequence to them for now. Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich with the, now infamous, piece of paper and promised "peace with honour" and "peace in our time".

Across Britain and France there was a period of 'phoney peace' which lasted through that winter. Then, in the spring of 1939, came the stories of the invasion of Czechoslovakia and Austria as the Germans began to flex their new-found military might. Poland was soon to follow and on 1st September 1939 the Germans forces poured across the Polish borders and a second World War seemed inevitable. It was on this same day that the Isle of Wight County Council was completing plans for the construction of air raid shelters for schools and the public.

Following the formal announcement of a state of war existing between Great Britain and Germany, at 11.15 a.m. on Sunday 3rd September 1939, the Island began to gear itself up for the coming struggle. Ryde carnival (the Countries oldest known of its kind) had just finished its weeklong celebrations and was to be the last major peacetime event that was to take place on the Island for six long, hard years.

Conscription had been re-introduced for the second time that century requiring able-bodied men of certain age groups to enrol in the armed forces. Geoff in the agricultural business and my father, who was by then working for a small engineering company, Smith and Whiteheads of Newport, were both in 'Reserved Occupations' and thus exempted from conscription. Smith and Whiteheads were at the time making, under sub-contract to J.S. Whites of Cowes, parts for motor-torpedo boats, air-sea rescue launches and lifeboats for the RNLI.

At about this same time Geoff came into contact with Mr. Eric Bell, who was billeted with the Attril family in Carisbrooke. The family ran the village bakery that was situated in the first two cottages at the bottom of the parish church steps. Mr. Bell was in the RAF and stationed just outside Carisbrooke where he was in charge of the wartime communication installation on Bowcombe Down, the rolling chalk hills to the west of the village. These installations were so secret and well hidden that to this day some of the villagers are unaware of their wartime existence. He was an accomplished piano player and would entertain in the village pubs for a few beers when off duty. His repertoire was extensive, ranging as it did, from the classics to any tune that was in vogue at the time and all without scored music. He later went to the airfield at Tangmere where he continued in his communications role.

Following the war he was best man at my parents' wedding before he returned to his own home at Pitton, Wiltshire. He could not forget the little cottage at the bottom of the church steps and the friendships that he had made there. Following the deaths of his parents, he returned to Carisbrooke and bought the old village bakery where he had once lodged. He was regarded as a bit of an eccentric person but became well known all over the Island as an extremely talented artist. He settled into the cottage where he had a little studio in the attic. This became his home until his death in 1994.

BELOW This photograph was taken by a, then popular, street photographer on the promenade at Ryde circa 1939.



From left to right

Geoff, Eric Bell, Norman Robins and Leslie Gates

Norman was killed in action June 1944 when, as part of a tank crew. He was killed during the D-Day landings. Leslie Gates and Eric Bell survived the war.

Throughout the early part of the war, the so-called 'phoney war', Geoff and my father stayed at home and continued with their respective careers. One of the choir trips to Canterbury was almost cancelled because of the threat posed by the war. The weather was particularly cold and damp throughout the end of 1939 and into the New Year. The Island became a very grim place with uncharacteristic snowfalls and hard frosts, gales and thick fogs. The people were left feeling very dejected, the endless form filling, coping with the blackout at night and carrying around a gas mask at all times did nothing to alleviate their depressions.

On 9th April 1940 the German Blitzkrieg moved on into Denmark almost unopposed. Landings were also made in Norway, but here, there was strong opposition. An Anglo-French expeditionary force was sent to Norway and landed at Narvik. Heavy fighting continued here until the end of July. The British Expeditionary Force was on the continent and everybody thought that 'the war would be over by Christmas'. Jim had seen it all before, during the Great War, and would have possibly known or thought otherwise. Meanwhile, the German forces rolled on in Europe, on 10th May 1940 they skilfully went round the Maginot Line and across the Belgian and Dutch borders. Holland fell very swiftly into German hands as they were refusing to co-operate with the British and Belgian armies. The German advance steadily forced the allied armies backward towards the channel coast. With their backs to the sea there was nothing to be done except to evacuate the troops and so on 26th May 1940 the

massive evacuation operation (code named 'Operation Dynamo') got underway. Many small ships, including fishing boats, launches, pleasure cruisers and passenger ferries from the Isle of Wight took part in this massive operation that eventually returned 558,032 men from France. Geoff was a witness to this great event from various high points of the Island that overlooked the Channel. The pall of smoke that hung over the French town was clearly visible and the noise of heavy gunfire could be heard like distant thunder on the wind.

By 4th June those that could be saved from the harbour and beaches had been returned to England, those unfortunate enough not to be picked up, but who survived, were in German captivity, where many remained for the duration of the war. Some were to endure the most appalling treatment and conditions in the German POW camps. Italy joined forces with the Germans on the 10th June 1940 and on 25th June France finally capitulated, only 6 weeks after the first attacks.

By the 16th July, Hitler was so confident in his forces abilities that he ordered the final stages in his plan for Operation Sea Lion (the invasion of the British Isles) to commence. For its success this plan relied on the total destruction of the RAF both in the air and on the ground. Hitler ordered Goering to carry out systematic, all-out attacks on the South Coast airfields and radar installations. It was following this that things on the Island really began to 'hot up'.

The German air force (the Luftwaffe) began to put in more frequent appearances in the skies. There were attacks on the radar stations on the southern tip of the Island and their aircraft often over flew the Island on their way to and from raids to the south coast airfields. With the docks of Southampton and the large naval establishments in and around Portsmouth just a short distance away, the island was to witness some very fierce aerial battles indeed. Geoff and Eric used to watch the British and German fighters and bombers as they twirled around the clear blue skies.

These recollections are somewhat clouded by the years as a study of the weather for that period shows that there was not always clear sky. Although most peoples' memories are of hoards of enemy bombers and fighters being clearly visible in the sky, with their white con-trails and those of the opposing fighters showing up against the blue summer skies, this was not always the case. May and June were indeed warm and sunny, with temperatures getting into the 90s towards the end of the period. However, July was cool and wet with below average sunshine. August returned more to the seasonal averages of sunshine and temperature and Septembers' 1st week continued the trend. From then on the weather broke and became much cooler and cloudier.

When not at work during an air raid, they would usually watch from beneath the railway-bridge close beside the little cottages. This acted as their air-raid shelter as they did not have one at home or in the garden. As young men they had a rather detached, even comic book view of the war from this perspective. My father remembers watching the twisting aircraft as both sides scored hits. They had a feeling of elation and pleasure when these hits were on a German aircraft and of anger and disappointment when a British plane was hit. There was one occasion when a Messerschmitt was being chased by a Spitfire and the dog-fight came down almost to ground level around a clump of trees nearby. He recalls being able to look up into the cockpits of both aircraft and see the faces of the pilots as they banked steeply overhead.

The 'official' date for the end of the Battle of Britain is given as 31st October 1940 and things became quieter on the island, at least by daylight. Hitler had postponed the invasion plans until the spring of 1941 but the Island was still to be in the front line of the war. History tells us that the RAF won the day, but with a tremendous loss in both aircraft and manpower, and the Germans were forced to adopt a similar strategy to the RAF and revert to night bombings of our cities and industry. This made for many sleepless nights for the inhabitants of the Island. The air raid warnings becoming more and more frequent as the year wore on. Geoff, my father and all the workers of the Island who were not already in the services had to contend with broken nights sleep, long working days, poor weather and the blackout and also their Home Guard and fire watching duties. As with other parts of Britain their spirits remained high, but it was obvious by now that the war would not be over by Christmas.

The Island was becoming a dumping ground for many German bombs as the Luftwaffe pilots who, unable to find their targets on the mainland, would off-load them as they scurried back to their French bases. The returning planes were often at a very low level and there are numerous accounts of indiscriminate machine gunning of anything in sight as they passed over. This bombing and shooting was far worse than the actual raids that could at least be predicted and in daylight had been visible to the watchers on the ground.

Islanders endured all these hardships through the winter and early spring of 1941, but things did not look like improving. Many young men who were not yet conscripted or whose occupations were 'reserved' began to talk about going to help the beleaguered British and Allied forces against this constant oppression. Geoff and my father, along with many of their ex school and current work friends, were soon called upon to volunteer for service in the armed forces. Just over a month after his 19th birthday Geoff was summoned to Portsmouth for a medical examination. Having lived a good, healthy life in the countryside of the Isle of Wight, it is no surprise that his service record shows him to have passed this with flying colours on the 18th September 1941 as 'Grade 1'. Although I have heard that just to be able to walk into a medical examination was enough to qualify as a pass, this was certainly not the case with Geoff. All that home cooking and the exercise, plus the good, clean air meant that he was extremely fit.

Having passed the medical Geoff volunteered for the RAF, whether his meetings with Eric Bell had prompted this or from watching the aircraft above the Island we shall never know for sure. Many years later, Muriel Barfield (née Gill), his cousin from Bournemouth, recalls that he told her he had volunteered for the RAF to avoid being conscripted into any other arm of the Forces. Although Jim never talked much about the trench warfare of 1914-18, Geoff almost certainly would have heard stories from that campaign and it may not have appealed as much as the cleaner cut and thrust in the open skies above both land and sea.

The war in Europe was now in full swing and the RAF was running desperately short of aircraft, pilots and all branches of aircrew. Although this was not a widely known fact by many at the time, it must have seemed, even to the young Geoff, that things were not all going the Allies way. Their backs were definitely being pushed back against the wall. It is certain that he, like so many at that time, would have wanted to do 'his bit' for the war effort over and above his work in the farming community.

So, with the war raging on through the hot summer of 1941, Geoff had made up his mind to leave the comparative safety of his home and family to join the RAF. The Recruiting Officer would have handed him a small piece of paper that read: -

"A Notice to be given to a Man at the time of his offering to join the
Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve".

He would then have had to sign the oath that read: -

"I, Raymond Geoffrey Norris, swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful
and bear true allegiance to His Majesty King George Sixth,
His Heirs, and Successors,
and that I will, as duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty,
His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity against all enemies,
and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty,
His Heirs and Successors and of the
Air Officers and Officers over me.
So help me God"

He was just 19 years old and should have had the rest of his life to look forward to. A life in which to carry out his many youthful dreams and ideas. All these were now to be shelved until the German oppression had been lifted over Europe. So he returned to the Island to await the next stage of the process.

My father was called sometime later and went across to Portsmouth with the intentions of using his engineering skills and his knowledge of boats in the Air Sea Rescue Service. He remembers being interviewed by an elderly Squadron Leader who asked him what he did for a living. After hearing about the fine tolerances that he worked to in his job, he told my father to return to the Island saying: -

"Don't be so damned modest man, your services are required more there than here, keep up the good work".

Dad returned to the Island and joined the Home Guard, taking Geoff's place. (He had left when he knew he would be going into the Forces proper) Eric now began the seemingly endless task of fire watching from the towers of Carisbrooke and St. Thomas's Parish Church, Newport. They were also tasked with the guarding of the military installations on the downs, this duty he has described to me many times as: -

"Guarding the turnip fields to make sure the Germans didn't parachute men in to steal them".

Jim became a sergeant when he volunteered, mainly due to his service in the previous war. Father and son served the whole war in these posts.

CHAPTER THREE

In The Service of His King and Country

After the medical examination he returned to the Isle of Wight where the German raids continued both day and night. Ryde, his birthplace had already recorded over 800 air raid alerts. Geoff may have considered that he had had a lucky escape when, just two days later, on 20th September, the Portsdown was sunk. She was one of the paddle steamers that linked the Island to the mainland and had hit a German mine in the Solent just after leaving Portsmouth bound for Ryde carrying many service personnel. The death toll was not too large thankfully because the vessel was still near to the shore.

The call came in the November of that year; he was to report to an Aircrew Selection Board at Oxford at the beginning of December. He was advised to take his shaving and wash kits and enough clothing for a three-day stay. On the 4th he dutifully travelled to Oxford to present himself in front of the board where it was decided, on the 5th December, his command of the English language, along with a good speaking voice and his shorthand skills made him an excellent candidate for Wireless Operator (Air) training. He was glad he would be able put his individual skills to good use for the service of his choice. Again he returned to the Island to await his final call up papers, the war was about to take another dramatic turn.

It was just three days later that the Japanese entered the conflict with their unannounced attack on the American Fleet at Pearl Harbour. This had the effect of bringing the mighty United States into the war for real now and a formal joint declaration of war by Britain and America on Japan was issued the following day.

Geoff may have been forgiven for believing the RAF didn't want him, as it was more than six months before he was to hear from them again. Whilst Geoff waited to be called for aircrew duties the RAF mounted the first of its 1000 bomber raids on Cologne on the night of 30th/31st May 1942. On that night 1047 bombers, many from the Operational Training Units and some borrowed from/lent by Coastal Command, took part in 'The Millennium Plan'. This was a definite show of strength against the Germans and was followed by another the next night to Essen. A third massive raid took place the night before he eventually left the Island and joined the RAF but by then only 960 aircraft could be mustered for the attack on Bremen.

On the 26th June 1942 he was to report to 3RC, this was the Reception Centre at RAF Padgate just outside Warrington in Cheshire. Another trainee who passed through here at about this same time was Eric Palmer. He was the editor of the RAF Amateur Radio Society magazine 'QRV' in 1999 when I contacted him. He remembers being sent a postal order for 4s.0d in respect of 'advance of service pay'. In one of Geoff's letters he tells of being allowed to draw 10 shillings advanced pay at this point. From there he was sent to 10(S) RC or ((Signals) Recruiting Centre) on 29th June where he was to be instructed in the ways of the RAF and begin his training as a Wireless Operator for aircraft. For the foreseeable future he would be known as: -
1602554 NORRIS Raymond Geoffrey

by the RAF, and wear the Royal Air Force blue uniform with a white band around his cap or beret to denote that he was a trainee. He would always remain Geoff to all his colleagues and friends.

This training centre was in Blackpool as, like Eric Palmer and another RAFARS member, Frank Flanner, many of the potential W/Ops went there from Padgate. The recruits were billeted in former hotels and guesthouses with the seaside landladies. Before the war they had provided lodgings for the hordes of annual holidaymakers. Frank remembered being billeted in Ready Avenue, Central Blackpool. The trainees were spread throughout the town and their training took place at various points across the town as well. They did their 'square bashing' in the towns' squares and Morse code training at the Winter Gardens. A trainee had to achieve at least 12wpm (words per minute) which is the same as for a Class 'A' amateur radio transmitting licence today! The tests for potential W/Ops were carried out above the Burton's Menswear shop on Blackpool seafront. It is this establishment that is believed to have given rise to the well-known phrase 'gone for a Burton' meaning dead. If a trainee failed to reach the required standards and speeds demanded, they were returned from here to 'civvie street', a reject from aircrew training!

Blackpool was a long way from the Island and it would be some time before Geoff got one week off in every six. This was the rota employed for aircrew on flying duties. The period between leaves would be shortened if somebody ahead of you 'got the chop'. Then everybody down the list moved up one place. He did however manage to get home sometimes and would tell stories about his training and service life. Sometimes he would bring home his service pals so that they too could enjoy the somewhat quieter and relaxed existence of the Island. It was a practice that continued throughout his war service. If, as sometimes was the case, there was more than one person and because the little cottage was so small, his friends would stay with Joe and Barbara Reynolds at Berry Hill, opposite the church in the High Street at Carisbrooke. This was the very same Uncle who used to kid him about the chickens. He and his wife loved having the various visitors and they were always made most welcome and fed well. They would all sample the local beers in the numerous village pubs. There was always good home cooked food to look forward to wherever they stayed, with fresh eggs, chicken and home-grown vegetables.

Whenever he couldn't get home and all through his service life, he would write a letter home to Ethel at least a couple of times a week. Fortunately, a number of these survive today and I am privileged to have them in my possession. Their existence, after all this time, has helped confirm some of the postings that Geoff had. They give a brief insight into his service life as it unfolded around him and give simple comments about the way that he was feeling and where possible what he was doing.

At this time in the war, it was taking about 9 months to train Wireless Operators and Air Gunners. A typical recruit spending 3 weeks at a Recruit Centre, 8 weeks at an Initial Training Wing. They would then spend 20-24 weeks at Radio (or Signals) School followed by 4 weeks at both an Air Gunnery School and an Advanced Flying School. This made a total of 39-43 weeks. Possibly because of bottlenecks in the system, Geoff seems to have followed a slightly different path to that of Eric Palmer. Earlier in the war, bottlenecks at Gunnery School had led to some unfortunate would be W/Ops being assigned to ground W/T duties, some even ended up in the Western Desert as wireless operators in tanks! A Pilot, Navigator and Flight Engineer would be in training for up to 2 years.

BELOW and NEXT PAGE Although Geoff was only at Padgate for three days he wrote to Ethel on the night of his arrival and again on the 28th. Note how the envelope on the left has been used 3 times by the application of sticky labels. This was due to the shortage of paper amongst many other shortages.



Padgate.
June 26/42.

Dear Mums & all,

At last I have arrived here safe and sound. I left Beigate this morning at 6.50 and got to Victoria at 7.30. From there I got a bus to Carlisle and caught the 8.30 train, and finally arrived here at about 1.30, that is at the camp. I had no trouble at all getting connections and it was amazing how easily I managed to find my way about. The train gives me all transport for Lewis etc, was dead accurate.

When we got here we had to hand in our ration cards, identity card etc., and so far have only been issued with a mug, knife, fork and spoon. We had dinner at about 2.30 pm. It was rotten. The meat we found all afterwards was supposed to be liver but it seemed like rubber. The quids were not too bad, but all they seem to stick up with everything is a ~~bit~~ thick unnecessary groy. The Rice Pudding was pretty thick as well. For tea we had 2 angus and of course groy, 2 slices of bread with plenty of butter and plenty of jam. The tea was below and wafery. On the whole it is not so bad, and I am quite happy. I have already pulled up with 2 recent

fellows, I come from London and the other from Lewis and he was at Exford with me last December, as he is in for the same thing as myself it seems likely that we may stick together. The place is absolutely packed with recruits, chiefly new from 36 to 40, and there seems to be very few in for his Lewis. One thing I am pleased about is that they are now issuing 1 pair of light boots and 1 pair of heavy so I have got the lumps over quite a few.

The notices say that as our stay here will be short, we are not to receive any correspondence, so you will be unable to write to me unless I get shifted. Tonight we are going to any to be concert in the canteen at 6.30, and so I shall be soon putting this in the camp letter box. I will write again when I am fitted out and have some more news for you.

So far was all the very best, and I hope that Dad is now well again and back at work.

Geoff.

Padgate,
June 22/42

Dear Mum and all, I hope you received safely the letter I posted to you on Friday evening. Well, the food seems to be cooked ^{well} now, or else we are getting used to it. We are now in about, about 30 of us all told, and we are all (WOP(AIR) and it is surprising that there are very few in for his boys. The bus is not at all bad, and we have a good wireless set, which needless to say is on all the time we are in. Most of the chaps seem decent. So far we have not done much except handing in our ration books, be photographed for our identity cards and draw 10/- advance pay, which will have to last until the next regular pay day.

The sergeant who is going decent says that we shall be killed out tomorrow and probably posted to Beachport on Tuesday or Wednesday if we are lucky. Since yesterday midday we have had a very easy time and

have only been on Church's Parade this morning. As it was Sunday today we did have to get up until 6.30 this morning, this is half an hour later than usual. I am glad to say that I don't find it all difficult to get up as we finished by about 9.30 or 10, as there is nothing else to do.

Yesterday evening we went to the camp cinema which was not too bad, and I expect we shall probably go there again this evening.

As I shall have much more news when we are posted, I will not write again, unless I get a permanent address, and then I shall be able to hear from you.

So for now I will say.
All the best.
Geoff -

Before his final call-up Geoff had also begged his cousin Muriel to write to him whilst he was away so that he would be kept in touch with the family in Bournemouth as well. A strong, long distance friendship grew between them with these letters. Geoff would try to visit her and the family whenever the opportunity presented itself on his leaves.

RIGHT A photograph of Muriel dated 1942. Muriel believes this was one of a number her mother had done to give as Christmas presents to the family. She and Geoff had known each other through childhood and adolescent hood before the war and had visited each other many times. Geoff and Muriel were cousins, related through marriage and circumstances, her mother was Ethel's' sister. She had formed a very strong bond with Geoff which was continued through their correspondence and occasional meetings during the war. They were to keep in touch throughout his service life. When Geoff was stationed at Thruxton during 1943 they were able to meet more frequently, especially when he could not return to the Island.





LEFT. A picture of Geoff, taken about the same time, in the garden of his home in Gunville I.O.W.

BELOW and NEXT PAGE. Two photographs of the recruits whom Geoff joined for his initial training. Although neither of them has a date or other identification, the first one may be at Padgate. The one overleaf is almost certainly in Blackpool itself. In both photographs Geoff is 2nd from the right in the back rows.





Four months later, on the 22nd October 1942, he was on the move once more, this time to 4 SS or (Signals School) at Madley, Herefordshire to continue his training. Most 'Signals Schools' had been re-designated as 'Radio Schools' in 1942 as they now included radar training. The one at Cranwell being designated 'No. 1 Radio School, Cranwell'; however the one at Madley does not appear to have yet made the change. All through this cold and difficult winter Geoff was to learn the skills to take him into the air as part of a fully proficient bomber crew.

The RAF returned to its Berlin campaign with the 1st raid on the city for 14 months taking place on the night of 16/17th January 1943. Later that same month, on the night of 27/28th they carried out the first ever raid using 'Oboe' to the city of Düsseldorf. This device was a blind bombing aid that was being fitted to some aircraft from each squadron to assist crews with target location.

Geoff finally qualified as a W/Op (A) on 1/2/43, just about the nominal 9 months training period. He was awarded the rank of sergeant. This was the usual award to all who completed aircrew training, except to the top third of each course, who were usually offered a commission. He was given a one-week leave with instructions to report to a squadron on his return. As usual he went home to the Island where they celebrated his qualification. Here he was able to stock up on home cooking and enjoy the refreshing quiet of home life for a short spell before returning to service life and conditions.

The Island was not totally peaceful and was still receiving plenty of visits from the Luftwaffe. Their aircraft had by now reverted to daylight 'tip and run' raids. They would fly in low across the channel below radar detection height, climbing to clear the southern cliffs and then cross the Island to their targets at very low level. Occasionally the targets would be Sandown and Shanklin, with the Radar masts on the cliffs above Ventnor being another favourite. Geoff arrived home this February to be greeted by one of these raids in the afternoon of Thursday 4th. It did tremendous



ABOVE Two more pictures of Geoff during his training. The one on the right with another (unidentified) cadet. Possibly taken at Padgate or No 4 Signal School.

Geoff's' orders to report directly to a squadron seem a little unusual as previously mentioned. Normally, newly qualified W/Ops would have transferred to a Gunnery School and then joined a crew at an Operational Training Establishment. The need of Bomber Command for replacement crews was, at this time, running at a high level. It is possible that Geoff had arrived at one of the previously mentioned bottlenecks in the training system and had been transferred to the squadron on ground duties. All research into 297 Squadron has drawn a blank on him ever flying with them. Although the records are rather incomplete, it is more than likely that he continued his W/Ops training at Thruxton but from the ground only.

However, according to his service record he dutifully reported to 297 Sqdn. (code L5) based at Thruxton in Hampshire, on 11th February 1943. This was part of a group of airborne forces squadrons at the time, and was carrying out parachute training with and for the armed forces amongst other duties. It had been formed at Netheravon in January 1942 initially using Tiger Moths. In February of that year it received Armstrong-Whitworth Whitley Mk.V's which were more suited to the parachute-dropping role than its original bomber role. They were to serve well with the 'Secret Squadrons' of S O E doing sterling work on the resistance supply runs and the dropping of agents into occupied territory. The squadron also served as a glider-towing unit as well. It was used to aid front line squadrons in their moves from base to base. It is interesting to note in the Operations Record Book (RAF Form 540) an entry on the 14th April 1943 stating that 4 squadron aircraft had assisted in moving 15 Squadron from Bourn to Mildenhall. This was to be Geoff's eventual destination, but for now he continued his training.

THE FOLLOWING PAGES are photocopied excerpts from some of the 297 Squadron Operations Record Book (RAF Form 540) for the period 1st February to the 23rd May 1943. These cover the activities that 297 Squadron, and others, were undertaking during the period that Geoff was stationed with them. Note that on the day he arrived the squadron carried out a practice of dropping dummy parachutists, a ploy that was later to be used during the invasion of Europe.

R.A.F. Form 540		OPERATIONS RECORD BOOK		Page No. _____
See instructions for use of this form in K.R. and A.C.I. para. 2349, and War Manual, Pt. II, chapter XX, and notes in R.A.F. Pocket Book.		of (Unit or Formation) <u>297 SQUADRON THRUXTON</u>		No. of pages used for day _____
Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events	References to Appendices
THRUXTON	1.2.43		R.F.C. W/O DONALDSON took over command of 297 Squadron	
	4.2.43		exercise "HERMAY I". for practice in dropping troops and containers. Those taking part were 4 A/c of 297 Squadron. (4 A/c of 295 Squadron.) Troops of 6th PARA.BTN. The D.Z. was DUNHILL BOARDS and it was approached in box formation from N to W. 33 troops and 9 containers were dropped. A/C took off 1400 hrs. and last down 1525 hrs.	
THRUXTON	8.2.43		Exercise "PHANTOM". The intention in this exercise was to land troops & equipment from Gliders on SHER A/D. Those taking part were 14 A/C. of 295 Sqn. and 296 Squadron and based at NETHERAVON and 10 A/C of 297 Sqn. (of which only 5 took part) based at THRUXTON. Horse gliders were used. 1st A/C took off 1:30hrs and last at 1243 hrs. Time over D.Z. varied between 1300 hrs. and 1315hrs. A/C landed back between 1325 hrs. and 1346 hrs.	
	11.2.43		exercise "GRATY II". The intention of this exercise was to drop paratroops, containers and dummies. Those taking part were 10 A/C of 297 Sqn. 10 A/C of 297 Sqn. and 6th PARA.BTN. The D.Z. was between WYMOUTH & DORCHETER. A/C took off from base between 0625 hrs. and 0813 hrs. was over the D.Z. between 0920 hrs. and 0928 hrs. A/C landed back between 1050 hrs. and 1015 hrs. 100 Paratroops, 26 containers and 19 dummies were dropped. Two dummies got hung up.	
THRUXTON	13.2.43		exercise "TRYOUT". Troops and containers were dropped on the Br. D.Z. Those taking part were 3 A/c of 297 Sqn. and 6th PARA.BTN. A/C took off from base between 1041 hrs. and 1055 hrs. Over D. Z. from 1115 hrs to 1121 hrs. 27 troops	

BELOW Entry for the 14th April reads: -

4 A/c took off for Mildenhall for G.T.S. on 14th April at 1516-1537 hrs. Glider Transport Service. 4 A/c that went to Mildenhall yesterday transferred 15 Squadron from Bourn to Mildenhall. 4A/c returned to Thruxton at 1853-1908-1956-2045 hrs.

	Exercise for dropping containers, trolleys, and men of 3rd Para. Sqn. R.I.
	3 A/c 297 Squadron took part in this exercise for dropping over Div. D.Z.
	T.O. 1548-49-50 hrs. Over D.Z. 1601-13 hrs. Time down 1604-13-14 hrs.
	Under the impression that he had seen the Green light, one of the stick Commanders ordered his men to jump whilst the aircraft was over the aerodrome
	landed safely.
	at 1,000ft. All 30 men were dropped, 6 Containers and 2 trolleys. Four
	containers and one trolley were not dropped. 1 man refused to amplane.
	Duck Glider Pilot Experiment.
	2 A/C took part; T.O. 2041-54 hrs. Time down 2128-34 hrs. Local flying.
	Glider Pilots taking part:- Sgt. BROWN, Sgt. RICE, Sgt. TORRANCE, Sgt. JOHN SON,
	Lt. SHUTTLEWORTH, / Sgt. WRIGHT.
14.	4 A/c took off for MILDENHALL for G.T.S. on 14th April at 1516-1537 hrs.
	Glider Transport Service. 4 A/c which went to MILDENHALL yesterday transfe
	15 Squadron from Bourn to MILDENHALL. 4A/c returned to THRUXTON at 1853-1908-
	1956-2045 hrs.

Date	Time	Summary of Events	References to Appendices
MAY 7		<u>Exercise "CHILLY" (Contd.)</u> 1 A/c made one journey from BIRNHOPE to BINBROOK, 2 A/c made 3 journeys, 4 A/c made 5 journeys, 5 A/c made forced landings on way home, at WADDINGTON, WICKERBY and WADDINGTON . (1st two with engine trouble and 3rd through petrol shortage.) Land at base - 1809/2020/2110/2159/2125/2228 hrs. Extra A/c (sent to WADDINGTON) landed 9/5/43 at 1559 hrs.	
15		Move of 460 Squadron from BREIGHTON to BINBROOK by A/c and Gliders of 297 Sqn 5 A/c and 5 Horse Gliders took part. 1 A/c made 3 loaded trips, 1 A/c made two, and 3 A/c made 1 trip each from BREIGHTON to BINBROOK. 2 A/c made 6 unloaded trips back, 1 A/c made 3, and 1 A/c made one from BINBROOK to BREIGHTON.	
15		<u>MOVE CONTINUED.</u> 2 A/c made 2 loaded trips and 1 A/c made 1 trip from BREIGHTON to BINBROOK, and on return 1 A/c made 9 unloaded, 1 A/c made 6 unloaded, 1 A/c 2 unloaded, and 1 A/c one from BINBROOK to BREIGHTON. During the whole move 10 loaded trips and 32 unloaded trips were undertaken.	
22		Removal of 169 Squadron from WADDINGTON to WESTERN ZOYLAND - 3 A/c with gliders removed 40/45 men and half ton equipment. T.O. 0905-10-21 hrs. F.T.B. 1140-41-1205 hrs. All A/c returned with empty gliders.	SEE APPENDIX A
23		Move to TREBLEZUE (Cornwall) of 297 Squadron for purposes of exercise - 6 A/c tugging gliders containing stores and personnel left THRUXTON between 0945 and 1045 hrs.	SEE APPENDIX B

ABOVE Although nothing appears to have happened on the day (12/5/43) Geoff took up his next posting at No. 2 Radio School, the final entry on this page reads: - 23 May. Move to TREBLEZUE (Cornwall) of 297 Squadron for purposes of exercise - 8(?) A/c tugging gliders containing stores and personnel left THRUXTON between 0945 and 1045 hrs. It would appear that Geoff left the squadron just before it relocated to Cornwall.

Being so close to Bournemouth meant that Geoff was able to visit his cousin Muriel Gill whenever the opportunity arose. She was living with her parents at their guesthouse at 36 Corhampton Road on the outskirts of the town. Muriel was working at a local hospital as part of her early training to becoming a pharmacist. She had to do three years in hospital work and 'keep her nose clean' before being allowed to continue her training. They had met before the war as her family had originally run a guesthouse at Ventnor on the Isle of Wight. When he knew he had been accepted for service in the RAF he had asked Muriel to write to him as often as she could. He would return the favour along with the regular letters to his family on the Isle of Wight. Now that he was stationed not too far away, a strong relationship developed between them. Later, when he was moved away again, they kept in touch by letter and he would include a visit to Bournemouth during some of his leaves.

As Geoff began this stage of his learning, the RAF carried out its 1st 1000-ton raid on Lorient on 13/14th February. On the following night it had completed the dropping of 100,000 bombs with raids on Wilhemshaven, Bremen, Cologne and Nuremberg. At the end of the month St. Nazaire came into Bomber Commands spotlight. Now that

Lorient, a U-boat base, had been left destroyed and empty they turned their attention to this second base. The aim being to remove the threat of the submarines to the Atlantic convoys by destroying their homeports.

Early March saw the destruction of the Telefunken Works in Berlin where a captured H2S set was being rebuilt by the Germans in an effort to understand its working. Unfortunately, a Halifax equipped with the same device was shot down over Holland during the raid and thus presented the Germans with another set on which to continue their research.

Other notable landmarks in this period included the beginning of the Battle of the Ruhr, the centre of much of the Germans heavy war production. This was greatly assisted by the use of 'Oboe' equipped Mosquitoes that were used to mark the targets and increased the accuracy of the bombing as never before. Unfortunately they were to lose one of these valuable aircraft on a raid to Duisburg on 26/27th March.

The RAF also increased its mining activities until by the nights of 27/28th and 28/29th March they carried out more than 350 sorties over the two nights dropping 593 mines on the second night, this was to be their largest ever total for one night.

BELOW A number of actual aircrew badges as worn by Sgt. Norris. The **left** set is all sewn together, as they were returned to his family after his death. They comprise his Sergeants stripes, as worn on each arm, surmounted by his Air Gunners brevet. This he would have worn proudly upon his chest. Missing from this set is the fist of sparks that he would have worn on his sleeve above the stripes. (He can be seen wearing this in the crew photo later in the book.)

The **right** badge is his Signaller brevet. It came into existence on 6th January 1944.



Geoff still had to undergo further training and his next move sent him to 2RS (Radio School) at Yatesbury on 12/5/43. There was such a great advancement in radio/radar aids for the bombers that he would need training to keep up with these changes. Here he was also re-mustered as a W/Op A. U/I A.G. This meant that he had definitely rejoined the aircrew programme and would subsequently undergo some instruction and training as an air-gunner. It was usual for W/Ops to be trained as air-gunners and indeed the RCAF actually had a crew category of Wireless/Air Gunner

(WAG). Until the 6th January 1944, the RAF category was WOP/AG with these men, including Geoff, wearing the 'fist of sparks' badge on their sleeve above their sergeant's stripes and an 'AG' brevet on the chest. From that date the category was changed to Wireless Operator (Air) when the brevet was changed to an 'S' and the 'fist of sparks' badge removed from the arm. This was because a wireless operator no longer just operated a wireless but was responsible for many other pieces of electrical equipment to do with the aircraft's defences and its target finding abilities. When introduced, there was a severe shortage of the 'S' brevet and some men would painstakingly unpick the embroidery of the new 'B' (Bomb Aimer) brevet to make it into an 'S'. Geoff was not one of these as his badge is an intact original.

Most crew members of any bomber usually had a 'second trade' giving the aircraft a better chance of survival should one or more of its crew become incapacitated during operations. Many crews and aircraft were saved during the war by navigators and flight engineers who had also 'learnt to fly' under the instruction of the pilot and either returned or controlled the aircraft for the rest of the crew to make a safe exit by parachute. Indeed, in Geoff's later crew, the bomb-aimer had originally begun his training as a pilot back home in New Zealand.

Throughout their training, Geoff and the other trainee aircrew would have had their moral boosted by reports about the bomber offensive that they were soon to join. Just 4 days after Geoff's transfer, the now famous, 617 Squadron raids on the Ruhr Dams took place using the Barnes Wallace designed bouncing bomb. One week later another milestone was reached as Bomber Command carried out its 1st 2000-ton raid on the Ruhr.

The next improvement to the bombing strategy was the inclusion of a Master Bomber, and a number of back-ups, to control the dropping of bombs. He stayed in the target area and directed the bomber stream to drop their loads nearer to the markers or ordered shifts in aiming point if too much error was in evidence. The RAF experimented with a raid of 60 aircraft that then flew on to North Africa, this had the effect of confusing the waiting fighters and no losses were incurred. A couple of nights later 52 returned, bombing La Spezia in Italy on the way, again with no losses.

At the end of June and the beginning of July two massive raids were ordered on Cologne, the first of which caused the greatest loss of life so far in the war. (It was later estimated in the region of 4,500). The second saw the first use by the Germans of 'Wilde Sau' defensive fighter tactics (Jagdgeschwader 300). This was where single-engined fighters actually flew in amongst the bombers over the target using the illumination of the search-lights, flak bursts and ground explosions and fires to find their prey. Bomber aircrew thought that they were being fired on by other aircraft participating in the raid. It was some time before the use of this new tactic was discovered. This would bring home to the trainees the importance of this next stage in their learning process.

Geoff was reclassified as W/Op (2) U/T A.G. on 15/7/43 and was moved once more to 8AGS (Air Gunners School) at Evanton. He arrived on the exposed banks of the Cromarty Firth, north of Inverness in Scotland on 16/7/43. As a youth at home on the Island, Geoff had become quite a good shot with both his home-made catapult and an air rifle. His 'father', Jim had been in the Yorks and Lancashire Regiment during the trench warfare of the Great War. Although this was a heavy artillery unit he had become very proficient with a rifle and had learned the techniques employed by the

snipers in the trenches. He had given both his sons the necessary instruction to make them into fair marksmen. They often used to practice on the rats that would invade the hen houses and runs at the bottom of their garden. Without them being good shots the supply of eggs would have soon disappeared! My father also achieved some notoriety as a marksman in the Home Guard shooting competitions during the war.

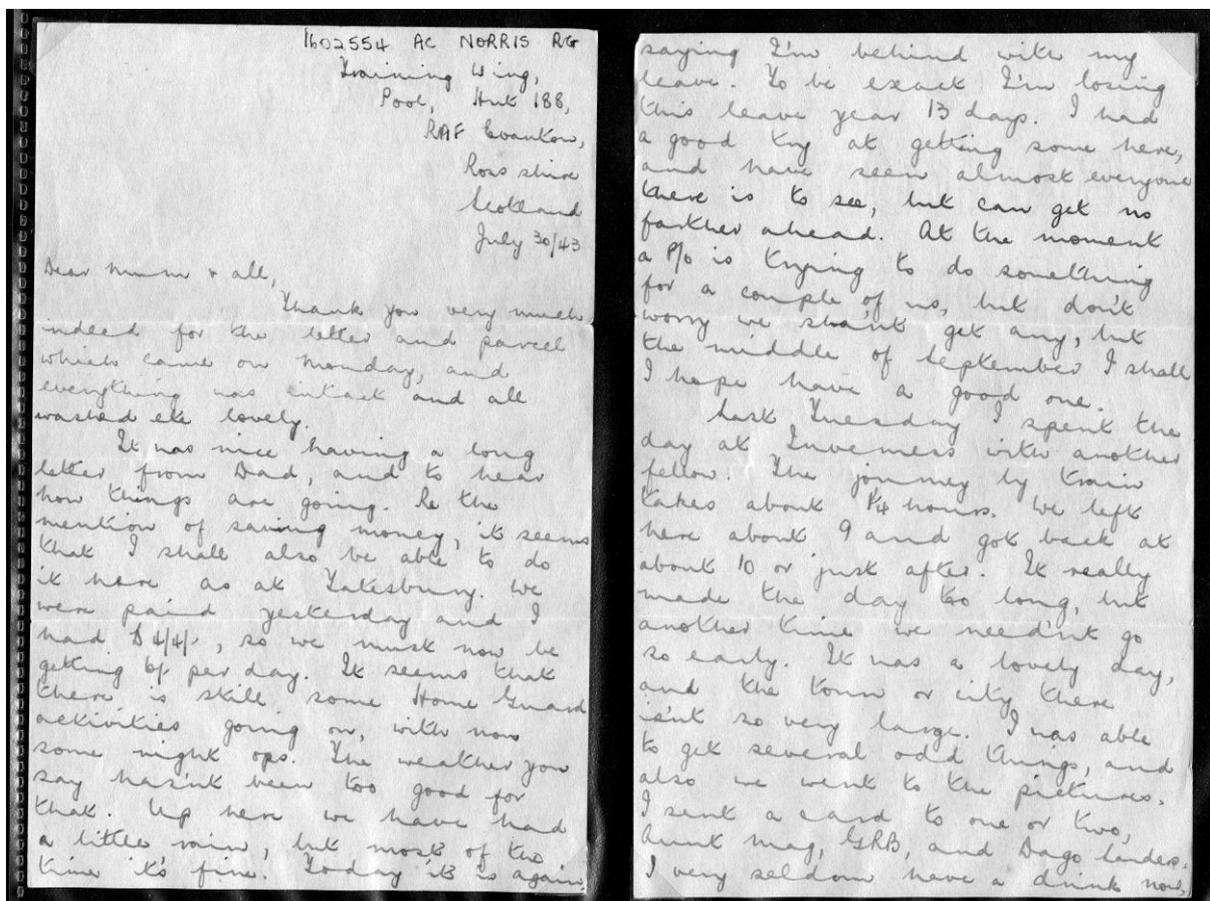
The RAF trained Geoff in the art of air to air deflection shooting. This was a most important skill as the enemy fighter had all three dimensions in which to fly and was not about to fly straight and level to be shot at. The Lancaster would also be moving whilst the gunners were shooting and this made the aiming somewhat different to shooting with any gun on the ground. Despite the fact that the American daylight bombers were bristling with guns this training was not given to their gunners!

Instruction would take place in air gunnery, using a variety of training aircraft that had been fitted with power operated gun turrets, shooting at targets that were either towed behind another aircraft or at ground targets. They would have had classroom instruction (with possibly study of camera gun footage from other air- gunners) all designed to equip the crews with the necessary level of skills for their move into operations.

THE NEXT TWO PAGES

Another remarkable letter (and its envelope) that survives to this day. Geoff sent it home from Evanton after he had been stationed there for a fortnight. It gives a unique insight into his service life as he saw it at the time. Ethel must have been staying in Bournemouth at the time according to the address of the Gill family home.

Note again that the envelope had been used a number of times before.



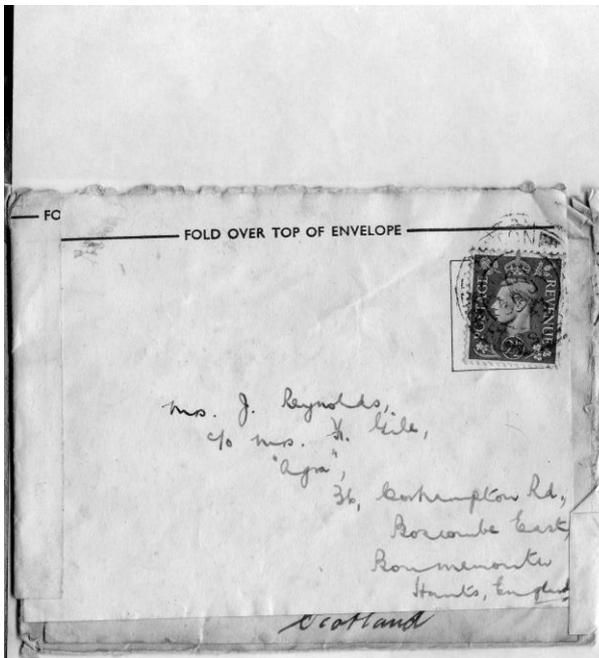
in fact very seldom go out, but
hear that the best up here is
good. We must get out and try
some next Friday. The pits
open during the evenings from
5.30-9, and close all day on
Sunday. What a place to be in!
The pictures on the camp are
good, and tonight a very good
play is on. I'm managing to
leam off wing spans etc, but
my aircraft needs needs a
lot of improvement. Still when
I see some of the people that
pass through, I'm the times
as certain that I can.

I'm addressing this to
Roumemouth and trust that
you'll receive it safely on
Monday morning. Please
remember me to them all,
and also everyone at Reigate.
I do hope you all have a lovely
time, with no work at all, and
plenty of good weather. Eric
I believe finishes his apprentice-
ship any time now, and so
is a fully skilled engineer.

It's a lovely sight to see the mist
changing over parts of the
mountains during the evening,
but it's very soon clear. You say
I'm lucky to have got some new
blue which I agree with.

Waterbury was very easy for
changing, and I know that once
I got anywhere else, the stuff
would have to be hanging off
of me. Here for those things it
is certainly no. Anyway I have
no need to worry now, but some
time I shall be needing some
new socks.

Now that goodness we have
only another week to go before
skating the course. It did
cheer me off, in fact all of us,
after having passed first time
at Waterbury, to come up here
with other fellows who had a
couple of these boards, and for
them to start straight off. Well
it was just bad luck, and soon
I shall be able to tell you how
things are with the course.
Dad is certainly right in



at last, after 7 years of hard work,
I had my old shirt etc back
from Auntie Lou earlier, and
shall be writing to thank them
for it.

Hoping you are all well,
and have a lovely time,
Love and best wishes,

Geoff

In his letter there is a hint of annoyance that he and many of the first time passers out at Yatesbury are all being held up for at least another week before beginning the course. Others who have not got through the training as easily are joining them on the course, presumably to make up the numbers. There is an insight into the sort of things they were learning then when he says that he knows many wing spans etc. but his aircraft recognition needs some work. Obtaining uniform and kit seems to have been a problem and getting leave even more difficult. He had lost 13 days that leave year so far, despite his efforts to get some, it doesn't look as though he will get any until September. He also tells that he has been paid £4.4s. meaning that he is now on 6s. per day and he can continue his savings plan. He mentions that he rarely drinks now, although the local ale is supposed to be good and maybe they will be trying some on the coming Friday. His interest in the countryside continues as he mentions the beauty of the mist hanging over the mountains in the evenings

BELOW and NEXT PAGE

Extracts from the Commanding Officers Reports and Routine Orders for the month of July for RAF Station Evanton.

1. DISCIPLINE / W.A.A.F. Friday 23rd July 1943 will be observed as Domestic Evening and W.A.A.F. personnel will not be permitted to leave Camp that night.

2. DRILL / W.A.A.F. N.C.O.'s. There will be no drill for W.A.A.F. N.C.O.'s on Friday 23rd July 1943.

3. SERVICE BICYCLES. All Officers, airmen and airwomen holding Service Bicycles will report to the rear entrance of S.H.Q. with their cycle for inspection by I.D.O. on Wednesday 21-7-43 at 14.00 hrs.

4. LIVESTOCKS. Sgt. Campbell takes over Inventory 90 vice P/Sgt Mitchell, v.c.i. 19.7.43.

5. DELETED.

6. ARMEN'S MESSING CO. I.P.F.EE A meeting of the Armen's Messing Committee will be held in the Corporals Dining Room on Thursday 22nd July, 1943 at 14.30 hrs. The following Sections are to ensure that their representatives attend:

S.H.Q.	1 Representative.	Servicing Sqn.	- 1 Rep.
Maintenance Wing.	2 "	I.D.O. Section	- 2 Rep.
Training Wing.	4 "		

(One from each course.)

7. STATION MESSING CO. I.P.F.EE. Meeting of the Station Messing Committee will be held in the Station Administrative Officer's Room at 15.30 hrs on Wednesday 21st July, 1943. The following are to attend:

Station administrative Officer	Senior W.A.A.F. Officer	Messing N.C.O.
Station Catering Officer.	Senior Warrant Officer, Messing.	Grocery Bar Manager.
One representative each from:	Officers Mess	
	Airmens Mess	
	W.A.A.F. Mess.	

8. STATION COMMANDER'S WALKING PARADE. Squadrons will fall in on own Parade Grounds at 07.20 hrs. and march on markers on New Parade Ground at 07.30 hrs. on Saturday 24th July 1943, Station Defence Training will be carried out after the Station Commander's Parade. All personnel with the exception of Fire Staff, Duty Crew, Aircraft Pilot, one Duty H.M. Driver, Duty Armourer, one Duty Clerk S.H.Q., Messing Staff, Medical Staff, Duty Telephonist and Duty Signaller will attend the Station Commander's Parade.

9. C.A.F. INSPECTION Inspection of the Station on Friday 23rd July 1943, will be carried out by the undermentioned Officers at 15.30 hrs.

No 1 Area /Lt. Hill.	No 2 Area /Lt. Hill.	No 3 Area /Lt. Saunders.	No 4 Area P/Lt. Rickard.	No 5 Area P/Lt. Houghton.
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No. 75.

Date 21. 7. 43.

STATION ROUTINE ORDERS BY GROUP CAPTAIN F.W.H. HALL
COMMANDING R.A.F. STATION EVANTON.

CHURCH PARADE. The monthly Church Parade will take place on Sunday 25th July 1943. All personnel other than those detailed for duty (i.e. Handling Parties, Messes and Cadets required to carry out training programme) will parade as under:
08.15 hrs. Fall in on Squadron Parade Grounds. Inspection by Flights.
08.35 hrs. Sections march to Theatre Hangar in the following order:
Cadets - Maintenance Wing - Headquarters Squadron.
08.45 - 11.30 Combined Church Service.
08.30 Squadrons will fall in outside Theatre Hangar, march to Squadron Parade Grounds and fall out.

Personnel detailed for duty may volunteer to attend Church Service. They will proceed to the Theatre Hangar under Flight arrangements.

ROMAN CATHOLICS. Roman Catholic service will be held in St. Patrick's Church at 08.30 hrs. All R.C.s will parade on Station Parade Ground at 08.15 hrs. and march to the Church by 08.30 hrs. The Senior R.C. Officer or N.C.O. and will march to the Church by 08.30 hrs.

ZEALAND GENERAL ELECTION. A general election of members of New Zealand Parliament will be held within the next three months. At this election all men and women ordinarily resident in New Zealand who are members of any of the Forces will be entitled to vote even though their name may not be on the electoral roll. This applies also to those under 21 years of age. For the purpose of ensuring that all those in the Service are given an opportunity of casting their votes it is necessary that all should register their names at the date on which they are serving. This information will be forwarded to special electoral officers at Office of High Commissioners for New Zealand, London. Changes of address within the U.K. after registration with units must be notified by persons concerned to special electoral officers.

R.A.F. MAIL. R.C.A.F. personnel are reminded that supplies of special Air Force Forms are obtainable at Station Orderly Room (11/15/Air).

STATION POST OFFICE The Station Post Office is now open at the following times for the issue of mail, registered items and parcels.

Monday to Friday	Saturdays	Sundays
08.00 - 09.30 hrs.	08.00 - 09.30 hrs.	12.00 - 14.00 hrs.
14.00 - 14.00 hrs.	17.00 - 18.00 hrs.	
18.00 - 18.00 hrs.		

INVESTIGATIONS

P/O. Britton is detailed to investigate, report upon and apportion blame, if any, in connection with the loss of Service Document Form 121 for 1143369 Dixon.

P/O. Britton is detailed to investigate, report upon, and apportion blame, if any, in connection with the loss of clothing coupons.

DESTRUCTION OF RABBITS AND RATS. Owing to the great destruction caused by rats and rabbits to Unit garden produce this Season, P.S.I. offers a reward of 1d per rat or rabbit caught by R.A.F. personnel at or near the Unit Garden (a) near the Bomb store. (b) near the Botha Bridge.

DEFICIENCY LISTS. If deficient of any items of kit, airman and airwomen must complete Form 1383 (Deficiency List). This is documentary proof of non-issue and must be carefully preserved until the items are issued.

THEFTS. The pilfering of Government Stores, petrol and rations, continues to give grave concern to the Air Ministry. Personnel are reminded that the Police have power to search tanks, cases, kit bags, etc. at any time to check for stolen property.

UNIFORM - UNAUTHORISED ALTERATIONS. Uniform clothing of the official pattern must be worn, and it is forbidden to make any unauthorised alterations.

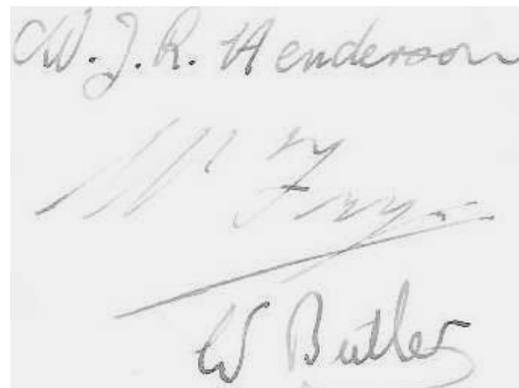
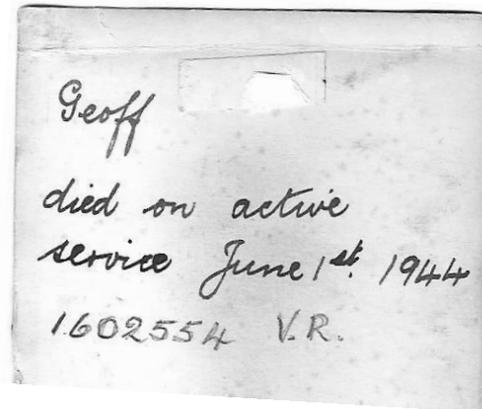
It is interesting to note on this second page near the bottom that a reward (of 1d per animal) is being offered for rats and rabbits caught near the Unit Gardens due to previous losses of produce there due to the vermin.

The RAF meantime continued its operations without Geoff's involvement. In the 'Battle of Hamburg' it first used 'window', coarse black paper and foil strips cut to an exact size (27cm long by 2cm wide) that were ejected in large bundles manually down the flare-chutes of the bombers. They had the effect of 'blinding' the German radar sets making it difficult for them to control the attacking night-fighters. In a series of six major raids over 10 nights this invention is estimated to have saved between

100 and 130 bombers and their crews. Hamburg, Germany's second city suffered appalling devastation especially during the raid 27/28th July when an awful 'firestorm' broke out causing the deaths of some 40,000 people mainly by asphyxiation and carbon monoxide poisoning. Following this raid more than 1.2 million people were to leave the city.

BELOW Two photographs of Geoff in flying kit.

These were almost certainly taken whilst he was at Evanton. (Muriel's recollection) Muriel's copy of the **top** snap is annotated "Just shooting a line" whereas my copy has this simple message. The three lads in the **lower** shot have signed the back as W Butler, W J R Henderson and M Fry along with the remark "a deadly crew" on Muriel's copy. All efforts to trace these gentlemen have failed to net results.



It did not take long for the Germans to recover and re-organise their countries defence and it is argued that the use of 'window' may even have helped with the development of an improved defensive policy. More fighters began to operate independently of ground control and 'freelanced' near or in the predictable bomber lanes to their target. Fighters carried illuminating flares that they dropped to indicate the whereabouts of the main bomber stream. On the Peenemunde raid of 17/18th August when bombers attacked the 'V-weapon' launching sites with great success the Germans replied with a new weapon. Diversionary attacks by the British had confused the night-fighter force and it was not until the 3rd wave that the fighters managed to get amongst the stream. Two Messerschmitt Me110 night fighters equipped with 'Schräge Musik' managed to destroy 6 of the homebound bombers. 'Schräge Musik' (Jazz Music) was the installation of cannon into the wing roots of aircraft that fired volleys of shells vertically upwards. The pilot could approach the bomber in its 'blind-spot' and unleash his awesome firepower into the 'soft' underbelly with devastating results. It was sometime before the RAF was aware of this new fighter tactic. Crews initially thought they were witnessing a new type of anti aircraft shell or flare and these were given the codename of 'Scarecrow's'. It was assumed that they were being used to intimidate the crews, as they so closely resembled the appearance of a shot down bomber. However, it was not long before it was realised that they were actual bombers being shot down!

Geoff and the other aspiring aircrews continued their thorough training to face these adversities. On 17/9/43, according to his service records, he qualified as a W/Op (2) A.G. with the rank of Flight Sergeant. This however is in some doubt, as he never wore the gold crown above his stripes and no other record can be found of this promotion. This award may be the result of a clerical error. The many ground staff that were required to run any operational station were under a great deal of strain and clerical errors on files are not uncommon. Whether or not he had been made up to Flight Sergeant or not, he was due some leave. He returned to the Island, where there was some peace and quiet away from the service life. A chance to recharge the batteries so to speak before the next stage of his training.

The Island was a much quieter place these days, at least in the air. However, many of the downland areas that Geoff had known and loved as a youth had been turned over for use as firing ranges. Many of the future invading forces were encamped across the Island and they were heavily involved in training for 'Operation Overlord'. Some of the sounds that were to awaken the Germans in the following June were heard on an almost daily basis by many of the local inhabitants. Although wearing, most people did not mind and speculation was rife about what it all meant. After the plans were finally revealed in all their brutal ferocity on the beaches of Normandy all knew that they had been witnesses to the practices for that operation.

Following a slightly extended (making up for his lost 13 days as previously mentioned in Evanton letter) period away from the rigours of training and service life, he took up his next posting with 11 OTU (Operational Training Unit, squadron code letters KH) on 5/10/43. This was based at the joint stations of RAF Westcott and its satellite field Oakley, north-east of Oxford. It would have been here at Westcott/Oakley that Geoff would have got together with the crew that he should spend the rest of his operational life with barring accidents, injuries or other unforeseen events to any of its members. 11 OTU had already seen active service when, back in 1942, as part of 92 Group Bomber Command, it had supplied some Wellington bombers for the 'Millennium Plan' (1000 aeroplane) raids on Cologne and other German cities.

Over Germany Bomber Command lost its 5,000th aircraft in a raid on Hanover on the night of 18/19th October. So far they had carried out 144,500 sorties with the loss 5,004 aircraft, this was an average loss rate of 3.5%. However, in their constant war against the night fighters ABC 'Airborne Cigar' (the carrying of an extra member of crew on selected bombers to tune into the night-fighters communications and jam them with noise) was introduced. Because it was unaffected by range, as the earlier 'Ground Grocer', 'Ground Cigar' and 'Corona' had been, it proved more effective especially on deep penetration raids. Later in the month, following various trials that had been going on since 1942, German speaking personnel were employed at ground bases in the U.K. Their broadcasts, using more powerful transmitters, were directed to the night fighter pilots and the ground controllers and brought about a great deal of confusion. Often the pilots would begin arguing with their controllers, as they were unsure of which was the correct voice to follow instructions from.

The normal practice at any OTU was to parade the personnel in a big area, most likely a hanger seeing that it was autumn, and tell them to form up into crews by themselves. The crews to consist of the necessary components, pilot, navigator, wireless operator and the number of air-gunners for the type of aircraft being used. They were now training in Wellingtons so they would have needed a five-man crew. This method of self selection was favoured by the RAF as it was thought that it led to a tighter knit crew. Often the component parts of the embryonic crews knew each other either through the various training establishments or from friendships well oiled in the local pubs and bars.

Here were a mixed bunch of lads, not only from Britain but Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa. Most of the Americans had by this time been lured back into their own USAAF by the smarter uniforms, much higher pay and better conditions. The Australians in particular soon earned themselves a reputation for assertiveness and aggression that was evident both in the air and on the ground. The crew that Geoff formed up with had an Australian pilot, navigator and air-gunner, a New Zealander as bomb-aimer and himself as wireless operator. This international make up of the crews was not at all unusual, especially in the bomber squadrons and was a reflection of the colonial and overseas assistance to the cause.

Another thing that the Australians brought with them were sheepskin flying vests. Geoff acquired one of these and it survives today in my proud possession. These were particularly sought after as the bombers were inadequately heated often with only one outlet. This resulted in one member of the crew, usually the W/Op, sweating whilst the remainder almost froze to death. The gunners were equipped with notoriously unreliable electrically heated suits that seldom worked. The cold at high altitude was often so severe that flight equipment froze and even if the gunners were relatively warm and alert, their guns would not fire, often at a most crucial point. Gunners had to have 'one up the spout' either on the ground or soon after leaving it, as the barrels would shrink as they cooled at the altitudes that the bombers operated. It was not unusual for the temperature to be as low as -20C. at 20,000ft. Other crewmembers were often injured through touching metal with their bare skin. The enemy was not always of the human kind.

Having studied the Operational Record Book entries for 11 OTU at the Public Records Office at Kew, they give an insight into the training and flying that the crews were doing towards the end of their time here. They include 'Nickelling' (leaflet dropping) operations, which were carried out over France, Belgium and Holland. These flights were valuable experience for the crews although classed as 'soft'

targets; they were often used as diversionary feints whilst the main force of Bomber Command was striking elsewhere. Geoff is known to have taken part in these as he mentioned them to people when on leave, but none of 11 OTU records during his stay can be found that mention his or the crews actual involvement. He is also known to have crashed twice in Wellingtons during this stage of his training. Again no records can be found that corroborate this.

During their training period on Wellingtons the crew had been lucky to survive two incidents of engine failure on take-off. Study of the squadron records available has not revealed either of these but my father remembers Geoff mentioning the fact when at home on leave. The Wellington was usually a very reliable aircraft in service and well thought of by the crews that flew her. However, my father recalls that on one spell of leave Geoff told the family that they had experienced and survived these two crashes. On both occasions the aircraft had lifted from the runway and was retracting its undercarriage as one or both of the engines had cut out. Peter D'Ombraim was just able to get the aircraft's nose down to avoid the stall, which so often followed an engine failure, and to get the aircraft back on the ground. Once careering through the perimeter hedging and fencing and both times with considerable damage to the underside of the airframe, nose and wings. The crew got away with little more than cuts and bruises and perhaps some damaged pride. Not all trainee aircrew were so lucky. Indeed, more crews were lost during training throughout the war years than on some of the major raids to German targets.

BELOW The Christmas Menu 1943 for 11 OTU. This contains a hand written and signed seasonal message from the Commanding Officer to all the crews and station personnel.

<i>Christmas Programme</i>	
WESTCOTT	OAKLEY
CHRISTMAS EVE.	CHRISTMAS EVE.
16.00 hours: Christmas Tree and Party for Children, in the W.A.A.F. N.A.A.F.I.	18.00 hours: Cease work.
19.30: Concert by Station Concert Party.	18.00 and 19.00: Recreational bus runs to Oxford.
22.00: Carol Party visits Messes and living sites.	20.00: Sing-Song and Impromptu Concert.
CHRISTMAS DAY.	CHRISTMAS DAY.
07.30 hours: Holy Communion (Church of England)	08.30 to 09.30 hours: Breakfast.
08.00 to 09.00: Breakfast.	09.00: Holy Communion (Church of England) in Hut F, W.A.A.F. Site.
09.45 to 10.45: Hockey: R.A.F. v. W.A.A.F. Football in Fancy Dress: Station Team v. The Officers' Mess.	10.00: Christmas Service, with Carols. Place to be announced.
10.45 to 12.30: Commanding Officer's visit to Sick Quarters, R.D.F. Station, Warpsgrove Bombing Range and Oakley.	11.00: Football Match: Officers v. Sergeants.
11.00: Morning Service and Carols (in Westcott Parish Church). Holy Communion at 11.45.	12.00: Hockey Match: Airmen v. Airwomen.
12.30 to 13.30: Dinner in Airmen's Mess. Commanding Officer's greetings. The Band will play. Dinner served by Officers & Staff N.C.O.s.	14.00: Airmen's Christmas Dinner.
15.00 to 16.30: Programme of Music in Station Library.	15.00 to 15.30: Officers visit Sergeants' Mess.
17.00 to 18.00: Tea.	15.30 to 16.00: Sergeants visit Officers' Mess.
19.00 to 23.30: Social Evening and Dance for all ranks in the Second Dining Hall, Airmen's Mess.	20.00: All Ranks' Dance in Airmen's Mess.
BOXING DAY (Sunday).	BOXING DAY (Sunday).
N.C.O.s' Dance in the Sergeants' Mess.	08.00 to 09.00 hours: Breakfast.
	09.15: Church Services.
	10.00: Start work.

BELOW

The author holding up Geoff's sheepskin flying vest. This is the article of clothing that he was to leave behind on the Isle of Wight at the end of his last leave. The Australians in his crew had managed to procure this for him. The manufacturers label is still sewn into the back and reads: -

BARLAM Pty Ltd
Melbourne Australia



That it survives at all is a bit of a miracle as my father has used it since then as a warm waistcoat when digging in the garden during autumn and winter and worn it under his motorcycling clothes for many years. It was rescued from this fate in 1999 to be preserved in my care for posterity.

Most of the crews in training at this stage were destined for the 'heavy' bomber squadrons as these formed the majority of Bomber Command by now. Since its early faltering steps into the war in 1939, Bomber Command had expanded into a very large and potent force. It was the only major Allied force able to take the battle to the Germans. According to Geoff's records his next posting on 25/2/44 was again to Base 31 now @ 1657 CU. This appears to be when No.1657 CU moved from Methwold to Stradishall to make way for 149 Squadron to begin operating the Stirling from here. Or it could just be an omission from the record of F/Sgt Jamieson. Whatever the reasoning behind it, quite clearly the crew continued their training on the Lancaster bomber here. These 'Heavy' Conversion Units (codes AK or XT) were where the crews were trained to operate in the large, four-engined 'heavies', either the Short Stirling, Handley Page Halifax or the Avro Lancaster. Two further crewmembers, air-gunner Sgt L A Hadder, and flight engineer Sgt L T Gearing, were added to the crew.

Following further training and just short of 2 months later the whole crew was transferred to 3LFS (Lancaster Finishing School) as part of Course No. 24 on 12 April 1944, along with 3 other crews. This unit had been formed at Feltwell on 21st November 1943, initially with just 9 Lancaster's. This was progressively increased to 24 with the amalgamation of 1656, 1662 and their own 1657 HCU (now coded A5) operating Lancaster Mk.1s. These first three crews, led by their pilots, F/O's Mackay and Ward and F/Sgt D'Ombrain, were joined on the 14th of the month by five more crews, making the course up to eight crews. The weather appears to have been poor for the first few days allowing very little flying by any of the courses that were then in training. It was not until the 20th that the weather was deemed good enough for No. 24 course to begin a full flying program. Many more training flights followed as the Lancaster crews were some of the most highly trained of all the aircrews. The intensity of training and the through put at this training stage can be gauged by glancing at the RAF Form 540's for the period of Geoff's' stay. Two more courses, Nos. 25 and 26 began on the 24th with 6 crews in each and on the day when Geoff's' course completed, 29th May, another, No 27 was just being formed.

BELOW and OVERLEAF

Two extracts from the Operations Record Books for No 3 Lancaster Finishing School for the short period that the crew was completing their training. Overleaf is Appendix 24 showing the crews names that had been posted here for Course No 24 and their final squadron postings on completion.

Date	Time	Summary of Events	References to Appendices
1944 Apr. 10.		Local flying for One (1) Crew of Course No. 21. Night programme arranged for the crew. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 2.25 Hours. NIGHT - 4.05 Hours.	Appendix No. 21.
11.		Local flying only. Five (5) Crews posted to Squadrons as follows:- (Course No. 20) Sgt. MCKENZIE and crew to No. 75 (NZ) Squadron. F/Sgt. McLAGHIAN, Sgt. GARSIDE and Sgt. EWERSBY and crew to No. 115 Squadron. Sgt. FENWICK and crew to No. 622 SQUADRON. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 2.00 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.	Appendix No. 20.
12.		Local flying only. Three (3) Crews arrived for Course No. 24, as follows:- F/O MCKAY, F/O. WARD and F/Sgt. DOMBRAIN and crews from No. 1657 C.U. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 2.55 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.	Appendix No. 24.
13.		Local flying only. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 1.50 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.	
14.		Local flying only. Five (5) Crews arrived for Course No. 24, making Eight (8) crews for the Course. F/Sgt. McRAE and Sgt. ROBERTSON and crews from 1651 C.U. 1st/Lt. BRAITHWAITE, F/O McBRIDE and F/Sgt. WHITE and crews from 1653 C.U. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 1.20 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.	Appendix No. 24.
15.		Course No. 22 and Course No. 23 flying, using BASE, LAKENHEATH and MILDENHALL. Night flying cancelled owing to low cloud and rain from South. F/Lt. (A/S/L) D.A.DUNLOP (104431) and F/O W.P.JOLLY (171741) - Pilot Instructors - arrived on Posting from No. 7 Squadron and 1678 C.F. respectively. A.O.C. No. 3 GROUP visited the Station. Station Commander's Parade held. F/Sgt. WHITEHOUSE and crew arrived from 1657 C.U. and held for Course No. 25. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 30.50 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.	Appendix No. 22. Appendix No. 23. Appendix No. 25.
16.		Full day - low cloud and rain - no flying. F/O. R.K.GROWTHER (172732) Wop/Air Instructor arrived on posting from 1678 C.F. F/O. R.M.GOURLAY (172797) Air Bomber Instructor arrived on posting from 1678 C.F.	
17.		Full day - low cloud and rain - no flying except for local flight or two by day. S/Ldr. W.J.R.SCOLLAY (NZ24497) D.F.C. detached to H.Q.B.O. Tactical Course, INGHAM. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 2.05 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.	
18.		Full night programme of circuits and landings, using BASE, BURY and LAVENHAM. F/O. L.HALLEY (156622) and F/O. G.D.L.SEDDON (Aus.41660) arrived on posting from No. 115 Squadron. S/Ldr. D.A.DUNLOP (104431) detached to Junior Commanders Course, GRANWELL. One crew of Course No. 20 (S/Ldr. DEVAS and crew) posted to No. 514 Squadron. FLYING TIMES - DAY - 14.15 Hours. NIGHT - 21.00 Hours.	Appendix No. 20.

RAF Form 1248 C.F. 1. 51-7796

Date	Time	Summary of Events	SECRET.	to Appendix
1944. Apr. 19.		Local tests. Night flying cancelled owing to rain. F/O (A/F/L) G.W. COLLINGWOOD (137220) arrived on posting from No. 149 Squadron for Gunnery Leader duties. Course No. 23 (5 Crews) returned to No. 75 (NZ) Squadron.		Appendix N
		FLYING TIMES - DAY - 2.10 Hours. NIGHT - 1.00 Hour.		
20.		Very good for flying. Course No. 24 on Day flying and No. 22 Course on night flying cross country and landings. Enemy intruders about which attacked a Stirling, and which landed here - no damage done. Four (4) LANCASTERS - R5906, R5846, ED 425 and W4885 arrived. F/O (A/F/L) H.H. WRIGHT (141271) D.F.M. posted to No. 514 Squadron for Gunnery Leader duties.		Appendix N Appendix N
		FLYING TIMES - DAY - 19.40 Hours. NIGHT - 19.05 Hours.		
21.		Course No. 24 on circuits and landings. No night flying on account alleged fronts and rain.		Appendix N
		FLYING TIMES - DAY - 14.00 Hours. NIGHT - Nil.		
22.		Local tests and day flying, including photographs of METHWOLD. Full night's programme arranged, using BASE and LAKEWHEATH. Station Commander's Parade held.		
		FLYING TIMES - DAY - 3.25 Hours (Non-training) DAY - 4.10 Hours (Training) NIGHT - 24.25 Hours.		
23.		Local tests and night cross country programme arranged.		
		FLYING TIMES - DAY - 3.15 Hours. NIGHT - 16.45 Hours.		

A410150	F/Sgt	Dombrain.	P.C.	Pilot.	Attached from 1657
A425328	F/Sgt	Long.	A.S.	Nav.	C.U. wef 12.4.44.
A415836	F/Sgt	Jamieson.	L.S.	A/Bomb.	
1602554	Sgt	Norris.	R.G.	WT/AG.	Posted to No 15
1804649	Sgt	Hadder.	L.A.	M.U.G.	Sqdn. wef 1.5.44.
A429738	F/Sgt	Reid.	F.B.	A.G.	
1893353	Sgt	Gearing.	L.T.	F/Eng.	
A422355.	F/O	McKay.	W.D.	Pilot.	Attached from 1657
152492	F/O	Turner.	J.	Nav.	C.U. wef 12.4.44.
A408476	F/Sgt	Chandler.	W.C.	A/Bomb.	
139402	F/O	Goddard.	K.D.	WT/AG.	Posted to No 15
2209477	Sgt	Hughes.	R.J.	M.U.G.	Sqdn. wef 1.5.44.
R146775	Sgt	Maddock.	F.D.	A.G.	
1872747	Sgt	Peach.		F/Eng.	
126716	F/O	Ward.	J.H.	Pilot.	Attached from 1657
1394818	Sgt	Hedgecock.	H.E.	Nav.	C.U. wef 12.4.44.
A418986	F/O	Steele.	P.J.	A/Bomb.	
979940	Sgt	Gillespie.	I.M.	WT/AG.	Posted to No 115
156998	F/O	Davies.	R.I.	M.U.G.	Sqdn. wef 30.4.44.
R189530	Sgt	Fallum.	W.J.	A.G.	
2209521	Sgt	Snowden.	J.A.	F/Eng.	
817252	Sgt	Robertson.	J.B.	Pilot.	Attached from 1651
1396202	Sgt	McClune.	G.	Nav.	C.U. wef 14.4.44.
1323504	Sgt	Riches.	R.W.	A/Bomb.	
1601268	Sgt	Sturgess.	R.W.	WT/AG.	Posted to No 115
1895226	Sgt	Knight.	S.E.	M.U.G.	Sqdn. wef 1.5.44.
R200002	Sgt	Glaister.	J.D.	A.G.	
1893330	Sgt	Pincott.	W.R.	F/Eng.	
N2415216	F/Sgt	McRae.	J.K.	Pilot.	Attached from 1651
151032	P/O	Lowe.	W.	Nav.	C.U. wef 14.4.44
N2421143F/Sgt		Potts.	T.C.	A/Bomb.	
1034046	Sgt	Booth.	C.	WT/AG.	Posted to No 75
1852080	Sgt	Roffey.	D.A.	M.U.G.	Sqdn. wef 30.4.44.
1365361	Sgt	Cunningham	G.	A.G.	
2211183	Sgt	Patten.	F.H.	F/Eng.	
N2424358	F/Sgt	White.	W.R.	Pilot.	Attached from 1653
137538	P/O	Huddart.	C.S.	Nav.	C.U. wef 14.4.44.
N2415720	Sgt	Scott.	M.C.	A/Bomb.	
1340025	Sgt	Summers.	D.A.	WT/AG.	Posted to No 75
1869732	Sgt	Wheeler.	C.W.	M.U.G.	Sqdn. wef 30.4.44.
1824626	Sgt	Hutchinson.	A.J.	A.G.	
1895236	Sgt	Brown.	S.A.	F/Eng.	
139981.	F/O.	McBride.	C.	Pilot.	Attached from 1653
A420214.	F/O.	Lewis.	T de C.	Nav.	C.U. wef 14.4.44.
A421762.	F/Sgt.	Wright.	A.A.	WT/AG.	
A421125.	F/Sgt.	Robinson.	R.E.	A/Bomb.	Posted to 115 Sqdn
1986001.	Sgt.	Hobson.	J.S.	M/U/G.	wef 1.5.44.
1895997.	Sgt.	Handley.	J.	A/G.	
1757670.	Sgt.	Sherwood.	R.H.	F/Eng.	
0-886224.	1st/Lt.	Braithwaite.	J.E.	Pilot.	Attached from 1653
1365234.	F/Sgt.	Davidson.	R.	Nav.	C.U. wef. 14.4.44.
1444776.	Sgt.	Cloran.	-	A/Bomb.	
R159985.	Sgt.	Sterling.	T.P.	WT/AG.	Posted to 622 Sqdn
R163965.	Sgt.	Bernhardt.	D.F.	M/U/G.	wef 30.4.44.
1381133.	F/Sgt.	Norris.	S.	A/G.	
1819154.	Sgt.	Connor.	-	F/Eng.	

A fair day when promise of night flying arranged to depart from 11.15.44.

Muriel distinctly remembers the last time that she saw Geoff. He arrived on the doorstep at 36 Corhampton Road unannounced on the 26th April. He had a short, 48 hour pass, and could not get across to the Island, so had travelled instead to see her and her family. During the short period they were together, Geoff told her that he would soon be posted to an operational squadron. He also imparted some information that both of them knew at the time should not have passed their lips. Geoff told her of flying over the Dutch Coast during training. This was undoubtedly a reference to the spoofing and feints made by training aircraft as part of diversions to the main bomber forces operations. It may also refer to nickelling or even mine laying operations that also sometimes fell to training squadrons. Many of the necessary squadron records have been found to be incomplete for these areas of Geoff's training and work up to squadron duties. Therefore it can only be a matter of conjecture as to which he may have been referring. Another thing that she strongly recalled is that he showed her, again against the regulations of the time, a photograph of himself in civilian clothing that he had been issued with. It was supposed to be to aid him should he be shot down and need a civilian record for escape and evasion whilst on the ground in Occupied Europe.

Geoff was back at Feltwell by the 29th April when his course completed their training here. The crews now awaited their squadron postings. Of those that had joined Course 24 on the 12th April, F/O Ward was posted to 115 Squadron on the 30th April with F/O McKay and F/Sgt D'Ombrian being posted to 15 (XV) Squadron at Mildenhall with effect from the 1st May 1944.

The squadron is usually referred to as XV Squadron and is also known as 'Oxfords Own', having been 'adopted' by that city. For Geoff, his service career had, in a strange way moved a full circle, having begun his first tentative steps into the service at Oxford almost two and a half years ago. Now he was set to join that city's adopted squadron. Now this young crew was to be allowed to use all the tools that the training had given them and take the war to the enemy. Most had started out as little more than boys and quickly had to grow into men. Would they be fortunate enough to grow into old men or were they destined to become old men in young bodies forever? The time had come when they would be able to put into practice all they had learned.

CHAPTER FOUR



Operational Service

Geoff and the crew joined XV Squadron with effect from the 1st May 1944. With them came the crew of F/O McKay who had also been through the final training stages alongside them.

Wing Commander W. Watkins DSO, DFC DFM was the Squadron Leader at that time and the squadron consisted of 2 flights; 'A' and 'B', each led by a Flight Commander. Geoff and his crew were allocated to 'B' flight, lead by F/L K. Dengate. 'C' flight, which had originally formed a third, had been re-formed into No. 622 squadron on 10th August 1942 and now shared Mildenhall as its base.



Wing Commander W Watkins DSO, DFC, DFM



Frank Dengate DFC, RAAF (far left) and crew. 2nd from left is Fred Coney, the late Honorary Chairman of the Mildenhall Association.

Our crew arrived at the squadron as the team that had been together since their time at 11 OTU at Westcott, where they had originally 'crewed up' back in Oct. 1943.

This consisted of: -

PILOT Flight Sergeant (later Pilot Officer) P.C.L. D'Ombraian an Australian from Mildura, Victoria aged 21 years old.

NAVIGATOR Flight Sergeant A.S.Long also Australian of Hawthorne, Queensland aged 21 years old.

BOMB AIMER Flight Sergeant L.S.Jamieson a New Zealander from Brooklyn, Wellington and the oldest member of the crew at 26 years old.

WIRELESS OPERATOR Sgt R.G.Norris aged 21 years. The only Englishman of the original crew, from Gunville, Isle of Wight.

REAR GUNNER Flight Sergeant F.B.Reid aged 21 years, another Australian from North Geelong, Victoria.

With later additions of: -

FLIGHT ENGINEER Sergeant L.T.Gearing aged just 19 years from Romford, England,

MID-UPPER GUNNER Sergeant L.A.G.Hadder also from England.

who joined them at the Heavy Conversion Unit.

BELOW are the photographs that Geoff had left for Muriel to get copies of. I found seven copies in the original 1944 envelope amongst his belongings.



Left hand picture

Back Row Unknown (possibly Sgt. Hadder or Grant), Sgt. Gearing, P/O D'Ombraian and F/Sgt. Long

Front Row F/Sgt. Reid, Sgt Norris and F/Sgt. Jamieson

Right hand picture

Back Row F/Sgt. Long, Unknown pilot, Unknown, Sgt. Norris, P/O D'Ombraian.

Front Row F/Sgt Jamieson, Unknown (possibly F/Sgt. Nystrom), Unknown RNZAF.

THIS PAGE Various crew shots taken outside their quarters at Mildenhall.

Top Left Geoff with F/Sgt Reid **Top Right** P/O D'Ombain with Sgt Gearing.

Centre Geoff with unknown F/Sgt WAG (RCAF).

Bottom Left P/O D'Ombain with F/Sgt Jamieson.

Bottom Right Sgt Long, Geoff and F/Sgt Jamieson



Nothing more has been discovered about Sgt. Hadder. He does not appear to have served with this or any other crew following his posting to XV Squadron from 3 LFS. I have not been able to find any record for him throughout the whole month of May. During their coming operations the crew would have a number of different gunners occupying this position. They all came from a 'squadron pool' of available aircrew that could be used to fill vacant positions in certain 'short-handed' crews.

These seven young men were now set to pit all their acquired skills against the might of the German forces ranged against them. Their hopes and aspirations would now be to get through their first five or so operations (statistically the worst for 'rookie' crews with a ten times greater chance of being lost to enemy action) and go on to complete a tour of duty (30 operations). On average they would need at least fifteen operations under their belts before their chances of survival reached evens. By the end of the tour their survivability would be increased still further.

For any 100 aircrew of Bomber Command during 1939-45, the survival statistics were: -

Killed on operations	51
Killed in training	13
Killed in crashes in the UK	9
Seriously Injured	<u>3</u>
Total	<u>76</u> . This left only 24 who survived,

some to see out the war in POW camps whilst the others completed their tours.

Bomber Command was now well involved in the preparations for 'Operation Overlord' (the allied invasion of the occupied continent of Europe). A Directive had been issued to Harris on the 4th March instructing him to concentrate his forces against the transportation system of France. The aim was to disrupt and destroy vital parts of the network of roads, canals and rivers and most importantly the railways. Although Harris had his doubts about the use of his bomber force against such pin-point targets, their bombing accuracy was not thought to be good enough, he poured his already well stretched forces into the plan. He still believed that Bomber Command along with the American daylight offensive would still be able to bomb Germany into submission. His current target manifest included the bombing of major cities including Berlin, the important manufacturing areas including the Ruhr, attacks on the V-weapon sites, the U-boat bases and many more. His resources were being stretched to breaking point.

Now the force would be faced with the need to increase its accuracy still further to avoid causing too many civilian casualties (French in particular along with other nationalities who were being used by the Germans as forced labour) and deliver the necessary destruction to these relatively small targets. The need to minimise casualty figures on the ground was of great importance because it was felt that the French people especially might well turn against their would-be liberators if they again had to suffer at the hands of an invading force, who this time were intent on their liberation.

However, with the plans for Operation Overlord so well advanced, it was vital that the means of German re-supply and re-enforcement should be totally disrupted. A wide choice of targets was to be used so that maximum disruption in any one area would not alert the enemy as to the likely landing points. In fact, over 80% of the bombs to be dropped in this period were away from the proposed invasion area. All major

routes for reinforcement were to be attacked. Targeted railway yards included those at Le Mans, Laon, Courtrai, Amiens, Tergnier and Trappes.

The raids were begun on the night of 6/7th March with a raid on the marshalling yards at Trappes. Strangely enough these yards were also the setting for the final raid in the series conducted on the night of 6/7th June and were to be one of the targets that Geoff and the crew were to visit.

With the above directive in mind, XV squadrons' first operation of May was ordered on the night 1/2nd. This was the day that Geoff and his crew arrived. They were not scheduled to take part, they would need some time to settle into the squadron. Thirteen squadron aircraft out of a total of 120 Lancasters, 16 Stirlings and 8 Mosquitos were detailed for the raid on the railway yards at Chambly. All their aircraft returned safely although 3 Lancasters and 2 Stirlings were lost. From the crews reports it was a clear target and bombing results would appear to have been very good. A Master Bomber (also referred to as a 'Master of Ceremonies' or M/C) was directing the attacking aircraft, monitoring the results, and correcting errors if they were needed. The following morning Geoff and the new crew would no doubt have been asking those that participated just what it was like.

Day two at Mildenhall was fairly quiet with very little flying activity. No operations had been ordered for the squadron or for Bomber Command in general. One squadron aircraft went out in the afternoon for bombing practice and a number of aircraft carried out air tests of various kinds.

This is a copy of the Form 540 Operations Record Book for XV Squadron as completed at the time Geoff and the crew arrived for operations. Note the marked entries for 7.5.44 and 10.5.44, the dates of their first two operations.

See instructions for use of this form in R.H. and A.C.I., para. 234, and War Manual Pt. II, chapter XX, and notes in R.A.F. Pocket Book.

Page No. _____

of (Unit or Formation) XV (B) SQUADRON.

No. of pages used for month 7 day _____

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events	SECRET.	References to Appendices
MILDENHALL.	1.5.44.		Thirteen aircraft were detailed for operations, target being CHAMBLY. The raid was successful and all aircraft returned safely.		
MILDENHALL.	2.5.44.		A practice bombing detail was completed by one aircraft in the afternoon, and air tests were carried out. No operations or night training exercises detailed.		
MILDENHALL.	3.5.44.		Air tests and a height and load climbing test were carried out during the day, and five aircraft were detailed for night training exercises.		
MILDENHALL.	4.5.44.		No operations or night training exercises were detailed. Air to air firing practice was carried out by one aircraft during the day.		
MILDENHALL.	5.5.44.		No operations detailed, and a cross-country and night training exercises that had been detailed, were cancelled due to poor weather. Practice bombing at the Rushford range and air to air firing were carried out during the day.		
MILDENHALL.	6.5.44.		Fighter affiliation exercises were detailed, and one aircraft carried out a bombing exercise on Rushford range. Three aircraft were detailed for a night cross country exercise and three for a night training exercise, all of which were successfully carried out.		
MILDENHALL.	7.5.44.		Eleven aircraft were detailed for operations, but one was later cancelled. The target was NANTES. One aircraft failed to return (Pilot P/O Jones T.).		
MILDENHALL.	8.5.44.		Practice bombing at Rushford range was carried out during the day, and air tests were also made. Ten aircraft were detailed for operations against OAP GRIZ NZ. All the aircraft returned safely and the day was a good success.		
MILDENHALL.	9.5.44.		One aircraft was detailed for bombing practice on the Rushford range during the day, but no operations or night training exercises were detailed.		
MILDENHALL.	10.5.44.		Air to air firing and bombing practice on Rushford range were the only day light exercises. Twelve aircraft were detailed for operations against COURTRAI. One aircraft landed at WOODBRIDGE on return (pilot P/O JOHNSON M. NZ.4249) after being diverted due to low visibility. This same aircraft did not reach the target due to fault development in the engine.		

On the third day, there were some air tests by the squadron and a height and load test was made. Five aircraft were detailed for a night flying exercise and Geoff and the crew may well have been expected to participate in this. As a new crew they would have been keen to show their capabilities to the other members of the squadron who would, no doubt, be checking on their performance.

Bomber Command was operating that night against a German military camp at Mailley-le-Camp in Belgium. The whole force of nearly 600 aircraft was badly mauled by night fighters resulting in the loss of 50 aircraft (8.3% loss rate). This was disastrous for the Command, as new aircraft were still only slowly arriving at the squadrons. Replacement aircraft were needed at a faster rate especially considering the heavy losses that had been suffered the previous month.

One squadron aircraft carried out practice air-to-air firing on the 4th which may again have been Geoff's crew (no records of these flights could be found). There were no squadron or Command operations that night or the following one, this due to bad weather. Although earlier on the 5th some practice bombing had been carried out on the Rushford Ranges near Thetford.

A similar pattern was followed on the 6th, as the squadron was not on operations. A successful fighter affiliation practice was flown (this involved mock attacks by friendly fighters on a bomber and served as good practice for both). Three aircraft each did a night cross-country and night flying exercise, all completed without mishap.

Operations were on for others of the Command with raids on the railways at Mantes-la-Jolie and two ammunition dumps at Sable-sur-Sarthe and Aubinge. This latter raid resulted in the capture of Air Commodore R. Ivelaw-Chapman who accompanied the raid as an observer. He had only recently left a job at the Air Ministry where he had been privy to the D-Day invasion plans. Luckily, the Germans did not discover this fact and he was well treated by his captors.

Squadron operations were posted on the 7th for that evening. Geoff and the crew were at last to enter the battle. All their training and experience would now be put to the ultimate test. They were assigned to fly aircraft LL889 code LS-B as part of a force of 93 Command Lancasters including 11 from XV Squadron. (This figure was later reduced to 10 by a late cancellation). 8 Mosquitos were to accompany the force to the German airfield at Nantes. Other raids would be attacking the airfields at Tours and Rennes, where an ammunition dump was also the target as it was at Salbris. There were also attacks on the coastal gun batteries at St. Valery.

Geoff and the crew were briefed to take off at 0010 and duly did so with the mid-upper gun position occupied by a New Zealand Pilot Officer K. Dunlop who had recently been posted to the squadron on receipt of his commission. (As has been covered earlier, there is no explanation for this other than that theirs was somehow unavailable). According to the de-briefing notes, in the squadron records, D'Ombraïn reported that he had bombed the well concentrated target indicators as instructed by the M/C. There was a lot of smoke over the target but results appeared accurate. (Most 'rookie' crews were placed towards the rear of an attack or in the second or last waves. This gave them something to aim at but would mean that their results would be masked by raid smoke and was a more vulnerable position should night fighters be in evidence).

Charts like this were produced daily by the squadrons and were used when giving information to the crews regarding the likely weather for forthcoming flights and raids. For each of the raids that Geoff and the crew went on I have been able to get a copy of a forecast. The squadron records appear to have been well maintained and preserved, certainly in this period. Overall they provide an insight into the weather throughout the whole of May 1944 in the run up to the D-Day landings. Using their judgement and knowledge of previous weather the meteorologists were able to fill in the dotted isobar lines over the continent. Sometimes however, following the discovery and decoding of the Enigma machine and its codes, actual pressure readings and weather could be used from decoded German forecasts!

With such a late return, Geoff's crew would have been grateful that there was little activity on the base on the 8th and they could get a well-earned rest. There were operations posted for ten of the squadron aircraft who would join 20 others from 3 Group in an attack on the coastal gun batteries at Cap Gris Nez from which they all returned safely. Other command aircraft bombed gun emplacements at Morsalines and Bernaval, the airfield and seaplane base at Brest and the railway at Haine St. Pierre. The following day (9th May) was similar with only one squadron aircraft doing some practice bombing. Bomber Command, less XV Squadron, carried out some raids during the night. These were targeted on the coastal guns in the Pas de Calais area, an aero-engine factory at Gennevilliers and a small ball bearing factory at Annecy.

Operation number 2 (for Geoff and the crew) was posted during the morning of the 10th and very little local flying took place. They were to form part of a very large command effort against the railways at Courtrai, Dieppe, Ghent, Lens and Lille. They would join 12 more Squadron and 506 Command aircraft on this night. The aircraft they were to fly was ND958 code H and, with Sergeant R.Hall in the mid-upper turret, they took off at 2201 for Courtrai. The after-raid report states that the crew was able to identify the target from its position by the river and that marking and bombing appeared accurate. A large red explosion was seen as they left the target area, other pilots had also witnessed this. All XV Squadron aircraft returned safely and there were no reports by any pilots about the strength of the defences. One aircraft (ED395-K) flown by P/O Johnstone had to abort the raid following troubles with its compasses, he dumped his bomb-load on the ranges at Rushford and then had to divert to Woodbridge because of flap failure. Woodbridge had an especially long runway and was a 'safe' alternative landing ground for damaged bombers.

Below Another extract from the Squadron records of the crews' operation to Courtrai.

10.5.44	LL.752	A	A421007 F/S. CONNELL J. (P), F/S. RAINTON D. (N), A418797 F/S. BUCKNALL N. (W/OP), H155563 W/O. PIERCY S. (A/B), Sgt. KING E. (M/U), H187588 Sgt. ARMSTRONG A. (R/G), Sgt. GONZALEZ H. (F/T).	2158	11th 0045	Target was clear and bombing appeared accurate. Bombed a Red Spot Fire as instructed by M/O and saw several sticks fall across the target. Marking was very good.
	LM.468	F	A38300 F/L. DOBSON W. (P), F/O. HILLS M. (N), Sgt. DAVIES N. (W/OP), F/S. ROBINSON J. (A/B), W/O. RAD CLIFFE G. (M/U), Sgts. BELL J. (R/G), REES T. (F/E).	2159	0022	Skies were clear but visibility poor. Canal was seen and carried out M/O's instructions to bomb between two white flares. Our bomb bursts could be seen on a burning building on W/E side.
	ND.958	H	A410150 F/S. DOMBAIN P. (P), Aus. 225328 F/S. LONG A. (N), Sgt. NORRIS R. (W/OP), NZ415636 F/S. J. JAMESON L. (A/B), Sgt. HALL R. (M/U), A429738 F/S. REID F. (R/G), Sgt. GEARING L. (F/E).	2201	0041	River could be seen faintly and judging by its position the markers and bombing were accurate. M/O was heard clearly and we bombed markers under his instruction. One large fire started and a big red explosion occurred as we left.
	LL.806	J	NZ417123 F/O. SPARKS M. (P), F/O. ELIAS L. (N), Sgt. TAPPING J. (W/OP), H163689 F/S. SPAINLER E. (A/B), H173646 Sgt. ALMSBURY J. (M/U), Sgt. FRIZZAN N. (R/G), HARTSHORN P. (F/T).	2156	0024	A low haze made observation difficult but photo flashes revealed ground detail and some bomb craters appeared to be in a field to starboard. Bombed Red Tigs as instructed by M/O and saw several sticks fall across the markers.
	ED.395	K	NZ42409 P/O. JOHNSTON M. (P), F/S. KING E. (N), Sgt. PAINE J. (W/OP), F/S. MORRIS G. (A/B), Sgts. HARTLEY A. (M/U), BAKER N. (R/G), MARSH E. (F/E).	2200	0120	Mission was abandoned due to failure of compasses. Fourteen x 1000 lbs were jettisoned on Rushford Range, and landing made at Woodbridge after being instructed to divert there because of failure of flaps.

Geoff and the crew were on the list again the next day (11th May). Again they are briefed on a railway target at Louvaine along with fourteen Squadron and 91 Command aircraft. Geoff, Peter and the crew this time with Australian F/Sergeant S.Nystrom in the vacant M/U position was allocated the same aircraft as the previous night and took off at 22.39. (Stan was quite a veteran having arrived at the Squadron back in September 1943. He had flown with P/O Woodleys crew then and was nearly half way through his tour by this time and was still only 21 years old)

Below is a copy of his logbook (courtesy of his family) showing his operations for the month of May. You can clearly see his entries for 11-31/5/44.

5473...					Time carried forward— 11:45 141:40		
Date	Hour	Aircraft Type and No.	Pilot	Duty	REMARKS (including results of bombing, gunnery, exercises, etc.)	Flying Times	
						Day	Night
1-5-44		LANCASTER E.	P/O FISHER	M/U AG	OPS. CHANDELLE (FRANCE) RAILWAY WORKSHOPS & STORES		03:40
7-5-44		LANCASTER LL784	F/LT. LEE WARNER	M/U AG	AIR TEST.		
7-5-44		LANCASTER LL784.S	F/LT. LEE WARNER	M/U AG	OPS. NANTES (FRANCE) AIRCRAFT WORKS. & AERODROME ^{FULL} MOON		02:20
8-5-44	2237	LANCASTER K	F/LT. FISHER	M/U AG	OPS. CAPE GRIS. NEZ W/T STATION + GUN POSITIONS.		
11-5-44		LANCASTER H.	F/SGT. DOMBRIAN	M/U AG	OPS. LOUVAIN (BELGIUM) MARSHALLING YARDS.		
27-5-44		LANCASTER J	P/O DOMBRIAN	M/U AG.	AIR TEST		
27-5-44		LANCASTER B.	P/O DOMBRIAN	M/U AG.	OPS		
28-5-44		LANCASTER LM.121	P/O DOMBRIAN	M/U A.C.	GUN POSITIONS. OPS ANGERS (FRANCE) MARSHALLING YARDS.		
31-5-44		LANCASTER LM 121.C	P/O DOMBRIAN	M/U AG	AIR TEST		
TOTAL TIME							

They were over the target at 0014 and witnessed a very large explosion which was mentioned by others at the de-briefing. The M/C was probably being 'jammed out' by the Germans as a lot of pilots reported problems hearing his directions. Most reported concentrated bombing on the visible markers and re-markers and one report mentioned the poor forecasting of expected wind force. (Reconnaissance later revealed that much of the bombing had been away from the main target, probably caused by the poor forecast, and the following night other command aircraft were to return here and Hassalt to complete the task).

It was another big night for the Command against the railways at Hassalt and Louvaine, Trouville and Boulogne, gun emplacements at Colline Beaumont and a military camp at Bourg-Leopold in Belgium. XV Squadron lost one aircraft (LL752-A F/L A.Amies) and another (LL854-S F/L O.Brooks) developed W/T problems, aborted, dropping part of its bomb-load on Rushford ranges and brought the remaining five 1000lbs. bombs home safely. There are no reports about the defences and the light losses by all operating aircraft would probably indicate they were light.

Below. More squadron extracts from the 540's for dates 11.5.44 to 18.5.44 and details from some (including D'Ombra) crew reports for the Louvaine raid.

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events	SECRET.	References to Appendices
MILDENHALL.	11.5.44.		The only flying carried out during the day was one air to air firing detail and some air tests. Fourteen aircraft were detailed for operations, against LOUVAIN. One aircraft failed to return (F/S JONES E.T. Pilot. Crew included F/S WATSON R.K. Aus425245, F/S Rank J.G. 4152308, and Sgt. WHITTAKER J. R250965). One aircraft returned early due to the failure of the W/T receiver and transmitter (F/L. Brooks O.DEG. Pilot).		
MILDENHALL.	12.5.44.		Four aircraft were detailed for day cross-country exercises, two were detailed for fighter affiliation and others carried out air tests. Three aircraft were detailed for a night training exercise, and four carried out night bombing practice on the Rushford Range.		
MILDENHALL.	13.5.44.		Two aircraft were detailed for a short cross country exercise, three carried out air to air firing practice, and one aircraft was air tested. Eight aircraft were detailed for operations, but were later cancelled due to poor weather.		
MILDENHALL.	14.5.44.		One aircraft was air tested for acceptance, one carried out a bombing practice detail and two carried out an air to air firing practice. Eleven aircraft were detailed for operations, but were later cancelled due to poor weather.		
MILDENHALL.	15.5.44.		During the day five aircraft carried out fighter affiliation exercises and three were detailed for day training exercises. Five aircraft were detailed for a night cross country exercise.		
MILDENHALL.	16.5.44.		Six aircraft were detailed for fighter affiliation during the day, and two carried out air-to-air firing practice. Two aircraft were detailed for cross-country training exercises. No operations or night training exercises detailed.		
MILDENHALL.	17.5.44.		Four aircraft carried out air-to-air firing practice and two were detailed for a fighter affiliation exercise. One day cross-country training exercise was detailed. No operations or night training exercises were detailed.		
MILDENHALL.	18.5.44.		Six aircraft were detailed for bombing practice on the Rushford range, three carried out fighter affiliation details and two carried out air-to-air		

DATE	AIRCRAFT TYPE & NUMBER	Crew	Duty	TIME	DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT	REFERENCES	
				Up	Down		
11.5.44 contd.	LANCASTER L.7566 F	A421007 F/S. COWELL J. (P), Sgt. RAIFORD D. (N), A418797 F/S. BUCK-JAILL H. (W/OP), R45563 W/O. PIERCE S. (A/B), Sgt. KEMP E. (M/U), R187588 Sgt. ARMSTRONG A. (R/G), Sgt. GONZALEZ H. (F/E).		2241	12:11 0145	Railway and town were visible, and we bombed Green Tis and red spot fire in the bombight. Sticks of bombs could be seen to straddle the town, and much smoke and dust resulted.	
	ND.958 H	A410150 F/S. DOMBRAIN P. (P), Aus 425228 F/S. LONG A. (N), Sgt. NORRIS R. (W/OP), NZ415636 F/S. JAMIESON L. (A/B), A425199 F/S. NYSTROM S. (M/U), A29738 F/S. REED F. (R/G), Sgt. GEARING N. (F/E).		2239	0143	Canal could be seen on run up, and white TIS were bombed under instruction from the M/C. A big explosion occurred at 0914 hrs. so that the target was covered with smoke as we left and results were difficult to see.	
	LL.806 J	NZ417123 P/O. SPARES M. (P), F/O. ELIAS L. (N), Sgt. TAPPING J. (W/OP), R163886 F/S. SPANNER E. (A/B), R173646 Sgt. AIMSBURY J. (M/U), Sgts. FREDIAN W. (R/G), HARTSHORN P. (F/E).		2234	0119	M/C could be heard but interference was bad. Bombed Green Tis, but bursts were not seen. The marshalling yards were clearly visible and many bombs appeared to be bursting short of the aiming point.	
	ED.395 K	NZ424099 P/O. JOHNSTON M. (P), F/S. KING E. (N), Sgt. PALME J. (W/OP), F/S. MORRIS C. (A/B), Sgts. HARLEY A. (M/U), BARKER W. (R/G), MARSH E. (F/E).		2240	0127	White Tis were seen, but M/C instructed that the yellow Tis used for remarking should be bombed. Met winds were very much in error, but most of bombing appeared concentrated. A big orange explosion occurred at 0014 hrs, and many flares followed.	
	LL.781 L	P/O. JARVIS A. (P), F/S. SPRIGGS E. (N), Sgt. SCOTT W. (W/OP), R156197 F/S. MURRAY D. (A/B), Sgts. PARKER G. (M/U), GRANT R. (R/G), HOLLINRAKE K. (F/E).		2242	0129	M/C heard clearly, and white Tis were bombed under his instructions. Smoke obscured ground detail, two big fires were burning and two large explosions occurred at 0014 hrs., flames rising to a great height.	
	LM.827 O	J19777 P/O. BAKER E. (P), Sgt. WELLS J. (N), F/S. SMITH W. (W/OP), F/S. PAGE V. (A/B), F/S. SMITH R. F. (2nd P), Sgt. TEMPLEMAN F. (M/U), P/O. MANGE G. (R/G), Sgt. FRASER J. (F/E).		2232	0125	Green & white Tis were bombed as instructed from M/C could not be heard. Bombing seemed concentrated and southern part of railway yards could be seen after bombing. Three big orange explosions occurred between 0110 and 0112 hours.	
	LM.473 P	P/O. COMPTON L. (P), F/S. BIRNETT T. A. (2nd P), Sgts. HANINGTON D. (N), EVERS R. (W/OP), F/O. BRADY J. (A/B), F/S. KIRK A. (M/U), Sgts. EYRE D. (R/G), WALKER A. (F/E).		2238	0150	Instructions were to bomb Green Tis, but these were not visible; a concentration of yellow flares in the bombight being attacked. Many bursts were seen around the flares, and one large explosion 3 miles N.W. of main concentration.	

The 'regular 6' members of Geoff's crew had now successfully completed their 1st three operations and were due for a weeks leave as part of the seven week aircrew

cycle (6 weeks on and 1 week off). This 7 week cycle was shortened every time somebody ahead of you on the list failed to return from an operation. As was usual Geoff managed to return to the Island where he could get a well-earned and refreshing break. He was very lucky to be able to get back to the Island at all. General Eisenhower had insisted on the tightening of the movement controls in force around the south-east coast-line of Britain in a bid to keep the security surrounding the invasion as tight as possible. All movements to and from the Island were severely restricted and even close relatives could not cross the short stretch of water that separated Islanders from the mainland.

My mother, who was a nurse at that time in a hospital at Lymington, recalls having some difficulty getting home on her days off during this time.

On the weekend before the final great invasion (although this fact was unbeknown to her or many others at that time), she had wangled some extra leave by changing with another nurse. When she finished her shift she made for the ferry terminal, but found that the railway link around to 'The Hard' was not open. With only a little time to spare she set off around the end of the harbour on foot. Insight of the ferry see was brought to an abrupt stop by a guard post. The soldiers insisted on seeing her identity papers and pass and enquired as to her journey. She told them she had to catch a ferry to go home to the Isle of Wight and was told most emphatically that she would not be allowed over that evening. Rather dismayed and annoyed at having made the arrangements so late and now not being allowed to go she argued briefly with the soldiers. Their officer was called and in no uncertain terms told her to return from whence she came, there was no way she was going to the Island that night! She returned to the hospital disappointed and annoyed that she could not go over. For air raid information she had to tell the Nursing sister where she could be found and then made her weary way to a relatives house some three miles away overlooking the stretch of water separating the Island from 'the mainland'. Apparently the sight that greeted her from the garden there was of ships from shoreline to shoreline, all with steam up. The following morning there wasn't even a dinghy to be seen!

Being a service person Geoff was able to get a special pass allowing him to travel. The whole of the Solent was becoming a mass of ships preparing to take the invasion forces across to the continent. It is not surprising that it attracted the attentions of the Luftwaffe bombers. They made their second attack on the anchorage on 14/15th May while Geoff and his family were enjoying their short time together.

The Island was by then seething with troops and even during the height of the best summer season the Islanders were never to see their home Isle invaded by so many people again. With so many service personnel about Geoff would have found little difference from the busy airfield that he had left behind in Suffolk except the colour of the uniforms. It was still a great solace for him to be home and enjoying the better, fresher food, even for all the rationing in place. He was able to unwind a little and to try and relax. He is remembered for singing in the choir at the Carisbrooke Parish Church during this leave, something that he had done little of since leaving to join the RAF. He made a point of visiting many of his old friends, some of these visits were to prove very poignant over the coming weeks.

It was whilst he was on this leave that a change in his general demeanour was noticed by many people. Gone was the boyish glint of fun in his eyes, now darkened

by things that others would never see. The laughter lines of his young face had been replaced by a drawn look. He confided in some of his village friends, but not to any of his close family, that he did not expect to see the Island again! In particular he was to tell Jean Mullins, an elder cousin who lived along Fairlee on the road to Ryde, that he was sure he would never see her or the Isle of Wight ever again.

Almost blind and approaching 90 years of age, she clearly recounted the most moving of conversations that she had with Geoff on one particular day in May 1944. This must have been during his last leave. He never passed by her house, on his way to visit other relations in Ryde, without just popping in. They had walked out into the orchard at the back of her house and were standing close to a rather favourite apple tree. The tree gave a large yield of apples that were a favourite of Ethels and the family's for keeping, eating and cooking.

He suddenly turned to her and said:

"D'you know Jean, I shall never be returning to the Island again?"

Without looking at him she replied:

"Oh Geoff, don't be so silly. Stop talking like that. How do you know?"

"Its true." He continued rather matter of factly. "The odds are so stacked against me and the lads, I know I shall never come back again."

Now she turned to face him as he continued and she remembers how calm he was as he then said.

"You mustn't worry about me, I just know its going to happen and it will be alright you know"

With tears welling up in her eyes she said they then both turned and walked on through the orchard in silence. Jean had been forewarned of his suspicion that he was never to return. Jean gave me a wonderful insight into this person who I have only come to know by virtue of these memories of others. She described him as having a certain presence; she said there was definitely an aura about him. Most of all she said, he had charisma.

Geoff also felt able to confide in the mother of one of his choir friends, Gerry Matthews. Although Mrs Matthews has since died, she had told my father of a similar conversation to the one above that she had had with Geoff the last time she had seen him on the Island.

My father also remembers that as was usual on the morning of the day that Geoff was to return to base he had woken him early to say 'cheerio' before he himself went off to work. On that morning Geoff had got up, hugged, and kissed my father as he left the house. This was very unexpected and out of character for Geoff. Although they had become like blood brothers, this level of closeness had never before been evident. Nobody at the time took much notice of these signs or of his somewhat out of character, morbid predictions, but all was to become painfully clear at the end of the month.

Such were the pressures on these young men that it is not surprising that they got to thinking about their chances of survival. They may not have known the overall statistical facts that we know today, but they had now witnessed at first hand the scenes of terrible destruction and death that the war brought. They had already lost squadron members, witnessed other aircraft falling to flak and fighters, and had only completed 3 operations of an expected tour of 30. By completing their training they had effectively completed one of the most hazardous part of their service. It was

again not widely known that training accidents were top of the list of losses in the service. As we have seen, they had survived two separate incidents during their period of the training. This caused a great strain on the resources of the RAF even before the aircrews had reached an effective point and a large drain of aircraft resources. Loss rates in training were greater than on all combined raids on Berlin, Cologne and Hamburg throughout the war.

Many individuals and whole crews had superstitions, they would always wear the same underwear or carry out a particular task just before flying, and some would not even leave the ground without a certain personal item, talisman or lucky charm. An old schoolmaster of mine, Eric Marston, who had been a Lancaster pilot, once told me that his crew would never be photographed with their aircraft. It was his experience that any crew that did so was unlikely to survive many more operations. Statistically, things of this nature have never been proven or disputed. There do seem to have been what might have been 'lucky crews' or 'lucky aircraft', but one wonders how much of this was down to the skill and training that the crews had or the durability of the machinery they flew in. There is also the fact of the German gunners and fighter pilots, how 'lucky' were they to score hits or even find the aircraft in the first place? I do not know if Geoff or his crew subscribed to any of these or other superstitions. There are definitely no photographs of him with any crew beside an aircraft. Photographs of him and members of aircrew do exist in my collection, those that are without names have been difficult to identify, but with a bit of detective work and help I was able to identify most of his own crew during this period.

Geoff and the crew re-assembled back at Mildenhall around the 18th May where they all got together to recount their leave stories over a few beers. Peter D'Ombrian had finally received notification of his promotion to Pilot Officer that had come through following his posting to the squadron and was effective from the 11th April. Whilst they had been away, the squadron had been very quiet with no operations and only the usual rounds of air tests, practices and training flights to break the routine.

Below Form 540 for period 18.5.44 to 23.5.44. Note details of Duisburg trip 21.5.44.

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events	SECRET.	References to Appendices
MILDENHALL.	18.5.44	contd.	firing practice. One aircraft was detailed for a training cross-country exercise. No operations or night training exercises were detailed.		
MILDENHALL.	19.5.44.		Four aircraft were detailed for bombing practice on the Lakenheath range, two carried out air-to-air firing practice and four were detailed for fighter affiliation exercises. One aircraft carried out a day training exercise. Fifteen aircraft were detailed for operations, target being LE MANS. Three of the aircraft carried second pilots from 90 Squadron, and all the aircraft returned safely, after a successful attack. Practically no opposition was met with. One aircraft (Pilot Air 422255 F/O McKay W.) brought back all but 2x1000 lbs after being unable to identify the target.		
MILDENHALL.	20.5.44.		The only exercise apart from routine tests was an aircraft detailed for a loaded climb. Fifteen aircraft were detailed for operations, but were later cancelled due to poor weather.		
MILDENHALL.	21.5.44.		Two aircraft detailed for a day training exercise, and H.F.T.s were carried out preparatory to operations. Fifteen aircraft were detailed to take part in operations against DUISBURG. All the aircraft returned safely, but a cloud was encountered and reports would suggest that the attack was rather scattered.		
MILDENHALL.	22.5.44.		No flying details were carried out during the day, seventeen aircraft being detailed for operations that night, four of which were sent on a mission near Denmark. The remainder had DORTMUND as a target, but due to encountering heavy icing conditions, five aircraft returned early, one (Op Pilot W/O WARKINS W., DFC, DFM) jettisoning its bombs in the North Sea, and the remainder (pilots P/O Sparks M. NZ41123, F/L PALMER W., Sgt. GIBSON P/S. McRae D.) jettisoning on the Fishford Range. Reports suggest that the attack on DORTMUND was well concentrated.		
MILDENHALL.	23.5.44.		Four aircraft were detailed for loaded climb exercises and others carried out air tests. No operations or night training exercises were detailed.		

Bomber Command had also been quiet following the repeat raids to Louvaine and Hassalt that were previously mentioned. One special operation had been carried out on 12/13th May by 22 Mosquitos, armed with mines, to block a section of the Kiel Canal. The following two nights had seen all operations cancelled because of adverse weather. On the night before their return 29 Mosquitos had bombed Berlin, part of the harassing techniques that were constantly disturbing German peoples sleep and damaging their morale.

Operations recommenced for all on the night of the 19th with fifteen squadron aircraft joining Command aircraft on a raid to the railway at Le Mans. Geoff and the crew were not included in the operation. It was another big night against the railways with other raids to Boulogne, Orleans, Amiens and Tours. Combined with this were operations against coastal gun batteries at Le Clipon and Merville and the radar station at Mont Couple. Three of the squadron aircraft were taking 90 Squadron pilots along as 2nd pilots for experience. This was referred to as a 'second dickie' trip and was usually completed by each pilot before he captained his own aircraft on a mission. All squadron aircraft returned safely reporting good bombing results in general and noting that there was virtually no opposition.

The following day operations were again posted for the squadron but this was later cancelled along with all Command operations because of bad weather. General local flying was all that took place with a load/rate of climb test. Some daylight training and testing was carried out on the 21st and then preparations were made for the coming nights operations that were to include the squadron in a raid on Duisburg. Peter D'Ombraïn was scheduled to do a '2nd dickie' trip, where he would accompany another squadron pilot and crew on an operation. In this case he would be flying with F/L Dengate his Flight Commander, a very experienced squadron member in ED395-K. The remainder of the crew would have to sit at base and hope that he would return safely. It was not unusual that a crew would become split up at this point. Having already completed 3 operational sorties, this was yet another change to the traditional training of an aircraft captain. As previously mentioned he would normally have done one of these trips before he took up his own crew. It was considered by many to be unlucky to get out of step with ones crew during an operational tour. Should this have been unavoidable, crew members would often hitch rides with another crew or volunteer to take another persons place in an aircraft or operation so that they could, as a crew, hopefully complete their tour at the same time.

Below the entry from the Squadron records showing (the now) Pilot Officer D'Ombraïn's 2nd dickie flight with the Dengate crew. As stated before, F Coney is now Honorary Chairman of the Mildenhall Register where I have also had the pleasure of meeting the crew navigator, former Flying Officer Art Cantrell from Canada.

LL.806 J	NZ417123 P/O SPARKS M. (P), J24469 2235 0330 F/O BELLE W. (2nd P), F/O BILLY L. (M), Sgt. TAPPING J. (W/O), 16385 F/S SPANLIER E. (A/B), 1173646 Sgt. AINSBURY J. (M/U), Sgts. FREDAN N. (R/G), HARTSHORN P. (F/D).	No markers were seen on T.T.A. target, but markers fell later and we orbited to reach them. The nose of the aircraft was hit by flak at 0110 hrs and bombs were released half-minute later, though no TIs or markers were visible, only a glow.
ED.395 K	A420813 F/L DENGATE F. (P), A410150 2243 0307 P/O D'OMBRAÏN P. (2nd P), J23749 F/O CANTRELL A. (M), F/S MATSON P. 224 (W/O), J26711 F/O BILLY J. (A/B), Sgts. CONEY F. (M/U), DAVIS D. (R/G), KITCHIN R. (F/D).	Cloud was 10/10 up to 20,000ft. and more. Red sky markers were seen on approach, but burnt out before arrival and the glow where they had disappeared was bombed. Attack seemed scattered at first, but concentration improved.
LL.781 L	P/O BELL W. (P), F/S KELLY (2nd P), 2242 0314 90 Sqdn., Sgts. KIRK C. (N), SWAPMAN P. (W/O), F/S OAKES F. (A/B), Sgts. BRENNAN J. (M/U),	Only two Red TIs were seen in a period of 10-15 mins. We bombed the second one as it disappeared into 10/10 cloud. Attack appeared scattered.

This was the 1st large-scale operation against this German City in 14 months. 22 Mosquitos would also be taking part as they usually provided the marking for the bombers and acted as pathfinders. All crews experienced 10/10ths cloud over the target and the resultant bombing was widespread and poor. Twenty-three aircraft were lost (4.5%) from the Command but all XV Squadron aircraft returned safely and Geoff and crew celebrated the return of their captain. However two pilots reported damage, F/L Purry (LL889-B) an aircraft earlier flown by D'Ombrains' crew was attacked by a night-fighter and the rear gun turret was put out of action. The second aircraft (LL806-J) flown by P/O Sparks had its nose damaged by flak on the run into the target. (This aircraft was repaired and went on to complete 134 operational sorties with the squadron).

Following his safe return from Germany the previous night P/O Peter D'Ombrain was now to lead his own crew, along with Sgt. R.Grant occupying the still vacant mid-upper turret, in a raid on Dortmund. This was another large raid and the 1st in over a year. With the accompanying raid to Brunswick these were to be the last major attack on any German city until well after the invasion. 17 squadron aircraft were to join a force of 361 Lancasters and 14 Mosquitos on the Dortmund raid and over 400 others would be on the Brunswick raid. Meanwhile 4 other squadron aircraft were to take-off ahead of the main forces and lay mines off the coast at Lim Fjord. All these aircraft returned safely to base having completed the operation successfully.

ND958-H with P/O D'Ombrain at the controls left Mildenhall at 2232 and arrived over the target at about 0045. They completed a successful bombing of the markers laid down by the pathfinder aircraft and returned safely, as did the remainder of the squadron. Geoff and the crew had successfully completed their 1st raid on a German city in some very severe weather conditions. Some aircraft had been forced to abort the mission early and turn back because of heavy icing on the flying surfaces. These included W/C W.Watkins DFC. DFM. in ED390-N, whose crew that night included P/O Dunlop who had earlier flown with Geoff's crew. There are no squadron comments about the defences but these must have been bad as the Command lost 18 aircraft (4.8%) on this raid alone. Overall on this night Bomber Command flew 1023 sorties losing 34 aircraft (3.3%) which included 1 OTU Whitley. This was possibly the last operational loss of this long-suffering type.

Below Some entries from the Squadron records for this raid.

Compiled by F/O L.W. Dicker.

DATE	AIRCRAFT TYPE & NUMBER	CREW	DUTY	TIME		DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT
				UP	DOWN	
22.5.44 contd.	LANCASTER R5904 G.	P/O J. TREVIS A. (P), F/S. SPRIGGS E. (N), Sgt. SCOTT W. (W/OP), RL56197 F/S. McEAE D. (A/B), Sgts. PARKER G. (M/U), GRANT R. (OIB) (R/G), HOLLIBAKE K. (F/E).	F/S.	2235	0230	4/10 thin stratus over target. Bombed centre of Green Tls. Several large explosions and fires resulted. Heavy icing was encountered around Base on way out, and off the coast on return.
	ND.958 H	A41050 P/O. DOMBRAIN P. (P); A42528 F/S. LONG A. (N), Sgt. NORRIS R. (W/OP), NZ415636 F/S. JAMESON L. (A/B), Sgt. GRANT R. (958) (M/U), A42973 P/O. REID E. (R/G), Sgt. GEARING L. (F/E).	P/O.	2232	0235	Bombed Red Tls after observing whole sequence of markers. Bombing was well concentrated, and a large blaze occurred at 0056 hrs.
	LL.806 J	NZ417123 P/O. SPARKS M. (P), F/O. ELIAS D. (N), Sgt. HAPPING J. (W/OP), RL63686 F/S. SPANGLER E. (A/B), RL75646 Sgt. ALMSBUH J. (M/U), Sgts. FRENCH N. (R/G), HARTSHORN P. (F/E).	F/O.	2230	2350	Mission was abandoned due to encountering severe icing. Did not set course. Jettisoned 120x30 and 1020x4 Inc. on Rushford Range at 2340 hrs. from 2000ft. 1x4000 HE was brought back.
	ED.395 K	A421007 F/L. COWELL J. (P), F/S. RAINTON D. (N), A418797 F/S. BUCKWALL N. (W/OP), RL55563 W/O. PERRY S. (A/B), Sgt. KEMP E. (M/U), RL87538 Sgt. ARMSTRONG A. (R/G), Sgt. GONZALEZ H. (F/E).	F/S.	2234	0237	Target was clear, but sky markers were seen, and also two Red Tls with a cluster of green Tls between them. Bombed the Greens, and some 4000lb bombs were seen to burst on the same spot, leaving a concentration of fires about 2000ft. across.
	LL.781 L	P/O. BELL W. (P), Sgt. KIRK C. (N), Sgt. BRYANT P. (W/OP), F/S. OAKES E. (A/B), Sgts. BRENNAN J. (M/U), BROOKFIELD E. (R/G), FITCH A. (F/E).	P/O.	2230	0228	Whole sequence of markers was seen, though there was haze over the target and 2-3/10 cloud. Bombed Red Tls which were well concentrated, and bomb bursts were observed all around them.

May 23rd and all the Command squadrons were rested with only very minor raids by the Command and some local testing and exercises.

The rest was short lived as the following day (May 24th) operations were again posted for the first of two consecutive raids on Aachen by the Command. A mixed force of 442 Lancasters and Halifaxes to include fifteen from the Squadron plus 16 Mosquitos were to attack two vitally important railway links at Aachen West and Rothe Erde to the east of the city. This first raid suffered very high losses with 25 bombers failing to return (5.7%) and the bombing results were very poor, despite pilot claims, with the bombing being well scattered. The Monheim factory was hit and the gasworks resulting in a massive explosion witnessed by many of the crews. Later reports from the town estimate that a large proportion of the bombs dropped were duds with an estimated 10% of the high explosives failing to detonate and countless hundreds of incendiaries failing to ignite. P/O D'Ombrain had problems with his aircraft performance and reported that he could only maintain flying speed by continually putting the nose down and was late arriving at the target. They were unsure of their bombing results because of haze and smoke over the target. As previously mentioned, crews towards the rear of many raids would find the target well marked but would be unsure of their personal results because the target could be thickly covered with smoke and dust clouds. It would be down to the photograph interpreters at the Intelligence sections to determine the results of the bombing, either from the flash photography taken by each bomber following their bombing run or from later reconnaissance flights.

Below. The report by P/O D'Ombrain and others on this raid.

24.5.44 Contd.	LANCASTER	ED. 395 K	A420813 F/L. DENGATE F. (P)	2353	0.351	25 th	Haze over target. Red markers were seen and bombed, followed by further Greens & Reds as we leaving in a fairly concentrated area. Bombs were seen bursting on the markers.
	LL. 781 L		F/O. BELL W. (P), Sgts. KIRK C. (M), SWETMAN P. (W/OP), F/S. OAKES F. (A/B), Sgts. BRENNAN J. (M/U), BROOKFIELD T. (R/G), FITCH A. (F/E).	2354	0.352		No ground features could be identified through haze. Green & Red TIs were seen and the latter attacked, concentration appearing to be mainly on the Reds.
	LL. 945 M		F/L. PALMER W. (P), F/S. EASTHOPE J. (M), F/S. HAYWARD P. (W/OP), P/O. BEAUMONT H. (A/B), Sgts. PAUL L. (M/U), F/S. HOOD F. (R/G), Sgt. FAGG J. (F/E).	2356	0.404		Red TIs burnt out on approach, so bombs the Greens. Bursts were seen, but nothing could be distinguished through haze.
	ED. 310 N		W/G. WATKINS DFC DFM (P), A/L. 4288 F/L. MOORE R. (2nd P), NZ416326 F/O. HINZEL E. (N), F/S. RICKELL S. (W/OP), P/O. GROVER E. (M/U), NZ416805 P/O. BURDOP K. (R/G), Sgts. SUTCLIFFE H. (F/E).	0001	0.408	25 th	Town could be seen in light of photo flashes. Red & Green markers were seen, and a triangular bunch of the latter bombed. One bunch of Reds was attacked for two or three minutes with great concentration until smoke covered them.
	LL. 923 Q		A410150 P/O. DOHERRAIN P. (P), A425328 F/S. LONG A. (N), Sgt. NORRIS R. (W/OP), NZ415636 F/S. JAMESON L. (A/B), Sgt. GRANT R. (952) (M/U), A429796 F/S. REED F. (R/G), Sgt. GEARING L. (F/E).	0000	0.410		Speed could not be maintained without putting the nose of the aircraft down, resulting in a late arrival over target. Bombed Red TIs, but though bursts were seen, nothing could be identified because of haze.
	LM. 473 P		F/O. COMPTON J. (P), Sgt. HANINGTON D. (N), F/S. EVERS T. (W/OP), F/O. BLAXALL J. (A/B), F/S. KIRK A. (M/U), Sgts. EYRE D. (R/G), WALKER A. (F/E).	0002	0139		Mission abandoned due to failure of hydraulic system. Did not set course. Jettisoned 71000 Hgs on Rishford range, and brought back 4x1000 and 4x500 Hgs. Jettisoned from 2500 ft. at 0130 hrs.
	LL. 827 Q		F/S. McRAE D. (P), F/S. BURGESS W. (N), F/S. BUSWELL E. (R/OP), R156923 F/S. KELLY J. (A/B), Sgt. BAGGOT R. (M/U), R200096 Sgt. PARKIN W. (R/G), Sgt. FRENCH W. (F/E).	2359	0.402		Markers and bombing seemed to be well concentrated. Red TIs were seen and attacked, other Greens and Reds falling close at the same time.
	ME. 695 R		J19777 F/O. BAKER E. (P), Sgt. WELLINGS J. (N), F/S. SMITH W. (W/OP), F/S. PAGE V. (A/B), Sgt. TEMPLEMAN F. (M/U), F/O. MANGE G. (R/G), Sgt. FRASER J. (F/E).	2357	0.406		Town could be seen in light of flak bursts. A cluster of Green TIs were attacked. Reds falling on same area as we left. Our own bombs were seen to fall on the markers. Two big orange explosions occurred at 0225 hrs.

Several squadron aircraft mentioned the fact that fighters were very active and two reported cannon shell damage (R5904-G and ND958-H flown on the previous raid by D'Ombrain). Other raids over Holland had seemed to stir up a whole hornet's nest of

fighters and these fell upon the mainstream and exacted their revenge. Flak was also noted as being very heavy and effective. Two aircraft had to return early (LM473-P) with hydraulic problems and (LL854-S) because intercom communication was lost with the rear-gunner. (This was a most important link as the rear-gunner acted as 'the eyes in the back of the pilots head' and was the point from which many fighter attacks came). One squadron aircraft was lost with crew (ND955-W F/O W.McKay), this was a sad time for Geoff and the crew as they had been together since 3LFS. Together, they had been posted here to XV Squadron at the same time.

Below. The report from the records of the loss of F/O McKay.

Compiled by F/O D. J. Dicker. By XV (L) SQUADRON. SECRET PAGE No. 17a

FOR THE MONTH OF MAY 1944.

DATE	AIRCRAFT TYPE & NUMBER	CREW	DUTY	TIME		DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT	REMARKS
				UP	DOWN		
24.5.44 contd.	LANCASTER LL.854 S	A421007 F/S. COWELL J. (P), F/S. RAINTON D. (N), A418797 F/S. EUCK- MALL N. (F/OP), A455563 W/O. EMBROX S. (A/B), Sgt. KEMP E. (M/U), H187508 Sgt. ARMSTRONG A. (R/G), Sgt. GONZALEZ H. (P/E).		2355	25th 0154	Mission abandoned due to failure of intercom. to rear turret. Jettisoned 7x1000 Hqs at 5135 N. 0220 P. from 16000ft. at 0116 hrs. Brought back 4x1000 and 4x500.	
	LL.890 T	NZ415223 F/O. PHILLIPS R. (P), F/O. SIMCOX J. (N), Sgt. SCOTT H. (W/OP), F/O. WILSON R. (A/B), A470626 F/S. GLANFIELD J. (M/U), A423112 F/O. GOUGH S. (R/G), Sgt. PARBALL P. (P/E).		2358	0355	Red markers had burnt out on arrival, but target was clear apart from haze and the glow left by the markers was bombed. Several sticks were seen to fall across the same position.	
	LM.465 U	H145025 F/S. THOMSON G. (P), H43734 W/O. McMYLLAN R. (N), Sgt. TRENCH J. (W/OP), A6497 F/S. GORTON W. (A/B), Sgts. STUBBS T. (M/U), MOBBS R. (R/G), PELHAM H. (P/E).		0005	0358	Hazy. No railway could be seen in flash of bomb bursts when leaving. Red & Green Hqs were seen and were well concentrated. Bombed the Reds. Small fires were seen.	
	ND.955 W	A422255 F/O. McKay W. (P), F/O. TURNER J. (N), F/O. BOBBARD K. (W/OP), A408476 F/S. CHANDLER W. (A/B), Sgt. HUGHES R. (M/U), H146775 Sgt.		0003		Missing. Nothing heard apart from a broadcast wind at 0145 hrs.	

All other aircraft returned to Mildenhall successfully.

Over the next two days only one operation was scheduled for eleven squadron aircraft and this was later cancelled due to the weather, as were all Command operations in this period. One aircraft did complete an air-to-sea firing exercise however.

Another big night of operations was on the cards for the 27th/28th with the second of the raids to Rothe Erde railway link where just 170 of the Commands aircraft returned and caused severe damage to the lines. No XV Squadron aircraft were operating on this raid. This time a large proportion of the loads were fitted with delayed action fuses and were designed to hamper the clear-up operations and repairs. It was a very concentrated raid with all the aircraft passing over the target in just 12 minutes but some bombing still strayed into the town hitting a hospital, barracks and stores, 2 police stations and 21 factory premises. Again the losses were appallingly high with the loss of 12 aircraft (7%).

In all that night 1,111 sorties were flown with attacks on the railways at Nantes, an airfield at Rennes, the large military camp at Bourg-Leopold in Belgium and the Coastal Gun Batteries along the French Coast. XV Squadron had put up fourteen aircraft on the raid on the coastal batteries at Turbinhem south of Boulogne. Sgt. R. Grant as mid-upper gunner again accompanied Geoff's crew as they took off in LL889-B at 0009 on the Sunday (28th) morning. (This is the first of the two 'quiet' raids mentioned in his May 31st letter (see end of chapter), although after the German raids this may have been a comparative statement.) They arrived in the target area at about 0110 having followed float flares across the Channel. These were used to make a timed run to the dropping point where green target markers could be clearly seen. Peter bombed to the northern side of these but the rest of the bombing

Sunday duly dawned bright and clear just a few hours after they landed home. It was certainly not going to be a day of rest for either the late returning crews of the Squadron or Bomber Command in general. XV squadron was ordered to send fifteen of its aircraft as part of 118 aircraft raid on the railways at Angers. Geoff and his crew had been allocated a brand new aircraft (as he wrote in his May 31st letter). LM121-C for 'Charlie' would hopefully be 'their' plane for the rest of the tour. Although no station flying took place that day, on one of the previous days they would have taken their new charge up for air testing to be sure it was fit for service.

It was to be an early evening take-off and 'Charlie' left the base at 1848, the last one away from the runway with F/S S.Nystrom in the mid-upper position. As it was still daylight it was possible to see the other aircraft of the stream and one pilot noted in his debriefing note that it was well spread out over a 5 mile radius. The M/C on the raid was directing those that could hear him to bomb the orange T.I.s and this is where most of the squadron dropped their bombs, Peter had his results confirmed by the Master Bomber. However, the marking must have been off target as the final results were poor and a report from the town stated that 254 civilians were killed and 220 others were injured. Almost 1,000 properties were destroyed and almost 7,000 were deemed to be unfit for habitation! One good result was that only 1 aircraft was lost in the raid (less than 1%) with all of XV Squadron returning safely. It had been a gruelling 6-hour flight for 'Charlie's' first operation but she must have performed well as Peter landed back at base as one of the first home at 0147.

Below the raid report for Angers.

ANGERS						
28.5.44.	LL.889	B	A425099 F/L PURRY R.(P), F/O. WELCH J.(N), A410877 F/S GOODRIDGE N.(W/OP), F/S GILLEADE R.(A/B), Sgts. NIXON T.(M/U), CANTWELL C.(R/G), ROLFE R.(F/E).	1808	29th 0141	Town could be seen through haze. Red, orange and white T.I.s seen and the latter bombed. Good bombing on the orange T.I. could be seen, and a large orange explosion occurred at 2352 hrs., followed by two smaller ones when leaving.
	LM.121	C	A410150 F/O. DOWDRAIN E.(P), A425228 F/S LONG A.(N), Sgt. MORRIS R.(W/OP), N2415636 F/S. JAMESON L.(A/B), A425199 F/S. NYSTROM S.(M/U), A429738 F/S. REID F.(R/G), Sgt. GEARING L.(F/E).	1848	0147	Town and river could be seen and was identified by G/ce. Red & Yellow T.I.s were seen, and the latter bombed under instruction from the Master bomber, who reported good results.
	LM.468	F	A78780 F/L DOBSON W.(P), F/O. HILLS M.(N), Sgt. DAVIES N.(W/OP), F/S ROBINSON J.(A/B), W/O RADCLIFFE G.(M/U), Sgts. BELL J.(R/G), REES T.(F/E).	1825	0143	Bombed a Red T.I. Master bomber was not heard. Bombs were seen to burst, and some medium fires were seen on leaving. The retarding marking course at 1000 ft. over the aerodrome with 50 aircraft was a bit risky.
	LL.806	J	F/L FISHER S.(P), F/S GHIMSHAW T.(N), Sgt. CREW J.(W/OP), J24021 F/O. WASTWICKS J.(A/B), Sgt. TRILADY E.(M/U), F/S ALLEN G.(R/G), Sgt. BERRYMAN N.(F/E).	1809	0148	Master bomber gave instructions to bomb Yellow T.I.s. Target was clear, and river and built up area could be identified. Large explosion with much smoke resulted, and moderate fires could be seen.
	ED.395	K	A420813 F/L DENGATE F.(P), N23719 F/O. CANTRELL A.(N), F/S WATSON F.(W/OP), J26711 F/O. ILL J.(A/B), Sgts. CONY F.(M/U), DAVIES D.(R/G), KITCHIN R.(F/E).	1811	0151	River, town and railway could all be identified. Bombed Yellow T.I.s and several bomb bursts were observed on the railway lines. A big cloud of smoke was rising.
	LL.781	L	F/O. STOKES G.(P), F/O. ALBY W.(N), Sgt. BRADBURY E.(W/OP), J25526 F/O. RASTRAY A.(A/B), Sgts. CARSON W.(M/U), GOSWAMI S.(R/G), GARDNER W.(F/E).	1827	0150	Bombed yellow T.I.s as instructed by Master bomber. Town, river and railway could all be identified, and our own bombs were seen to fall across the railway. Other bombs were seen to fall across the

The following day would have been Whit-Monday according to what Geoff wrote in his letter. There were a few training exercises during the day and some routine air tests. A later night cross-country exercise to include bombing on the Rushford ranges was cancelled due to the possibility of thunderstorms in the area that would have rendered the airfield inoperable. Some aircraft that had already left the base were recalled. The weather meant the cancellation of all but a nuisance raid by 31 Mosquitos on Hanover.

Geoff records in his letter that the crew, including some of the ground crew, did a tour of the local pubs that were very crowded on this holiday evening. The beer supply had reached a critical low with most of the pubs running dry. The mess was also limiting drinking as they were saving the beer for a dance on the coming Friday.

On the Tuesday ten squadron aircraft were detailed to take part in a 50 aircraft attack on the gun batteries south of Boulogne again. The crew of 'Charlie' was not included. All aircraft returned safely, although there are only 7 debriefing notes in the squadron records which all report a concentrated attack. Geoff took the opportunity of a long walk (from letter) with Steve (believed to be Australian F/Sgt. Long), and after a meal they managed to find a good supply of beer. His interest in the countryside had not waned as he wrote about the villages and how lovely the gardens looked.

Below is the letter that Geoff wrote to his home during the day on the 31st May 1944.

As before.
May 31/44.



Dear Mum and all,
I must thank you for the family Press which arrived a few days ago and for Mum's letters which came this evening. I was glad to hear that you're all still well, and also that the big military event went off with the other Saturday. Also I was very sorry indeed to hear that Joyce's little boy had gone.
Back here we are still struggling along. We were on Saturday and Sunday nights and both were fairly quiet trips. This evening we're off to get mums cup. At the moment we're using a brand new kite C Charlie and she's fairly wizard and flies like a bird. This morning we did

about an hour's skoge in her and took one of the ground crew lads up. He's a hell of a lad and came out with us during the evening on Whit Monday. All the pubs were crowded then, and since the beer situation has become very acute around the district. They have no beer in the mess so it's being saved for a dance on Friday and a notice is also exhibited from the brewers saying they cannot supply any more than the quota. Several other pubs are dry, but last evening Mum and myself went for quite a walk and after getting something to eat, located a good source of supply. The villages around here are really lovely and seem to be crowded with gardens.
All at Boulogne are still very well, and it came as quite a change to Mrs having to work

on Whit Monday morning. Will she has an extra half day to come for it which she says she'll take when I'm down next. The leave situation isn't bad, and we're still hoping for one in rotation. I haven't had a \$8 now for about 10 days!!
I'm enclosing a couple of food ration coupons. I should for quite a while and forgotten to send you one. I don't think there is so very much more news just now. I'll send down a very few collars towards the end of the week. Barbara I expect is still alive and working hard. I noticed that you had a few bomb ladies in the week, and hope you haven't been missing too much sleep.
Love and best wishes for now,
Geoff

The last day of the month arrived and only some local flying took place at Mildenhall. One of these was by the crew of 'C Charlie' as Geoff wrote in his letter that they had been up for an hour's 'stooge' and taken one of the ground crew Corporals along. They were all very pleased with their new aircraft as he wrote...."she's fairly wizard and flies like a bird".

Now that they had their own aircraft with an allocated ground crew to look after it, further strong friendships would be forming. Ground crews looked on their aircraft and crew as their very own in many cases and would wait faithfully for them to return whenever they were on operations. They were some of the unsung heroes of Bomber Command who often had to work long, unsociable hours preparing and repairing the aircraft only for them to be taken out and at the very least battered and damaged and worst of all, never to return again. Don Clarke MBE, who is now the Honorary Secretary of the Mildenhall Register; was one such man, working on 'A' Flight aircraft, he can remember many of the crew that he served with during the war.

A fairly large Command operation was ordered for the night. 125 Lancasters, including fifteen from the squadron, plus 86 Halifax and 8 Mosquito, were detailed to attack the railways at Trappes in two waves. XV Squadron aircraft were to be part of the second wave over the target. Apart from this raid, there were many others being carried out by a large proportion of the Command that night. Raids had been planned to the railways at Tegnier and Saumur, the gun batteries at Maisy, two further raids on the Mont Couple radio jammer and the transmitter at Au Fevre. Operational Training units were being tasked with mine laying around the coast and in the inland waterways of both Holland and France.

All these raids were planned to bring about maximum disruption to the Germans and the unfortunate people of the Occupied Countries of Europe.

CHAPTER FIVE

May 31st 1944

During the afternoon of 31st May 1944 the crews of XV Squadron were briefed on their target for the coming evening. Geoff, along with the rest of his crew and the crews of all the other aircraft taking part in the raid, would have filed into the operations room. There they would have sat around in small groups until called to attention by the briefing officer as Wing Commander W. Watkins entered the room. The Meteorological Officer and the Squadrons' Intelligence Officer would have joined him on the stage. The crews would have waited with baited breath for the announcement that 'the target for tonight is'.

Speculation would have already been rife as to possible targets and routes to and from the objective. Small talk and dry humour would have covered a certain amount of trepidation, shared by most operational crews. When the target was announced there would probably have been groans and comments from the crews, especially those that had been before. The comments would have depended on their own personal experiences, what the target was and their personal views of their flight.

The squadrons target for that night, along with other aircraft in the command, was to be the railway marshalling yards at Trappes. As previously mentioned many railway marshalling yards had a great importance to the Germans ability to reinforce. They had been attacked before and would be again, even following the Allied invasion.

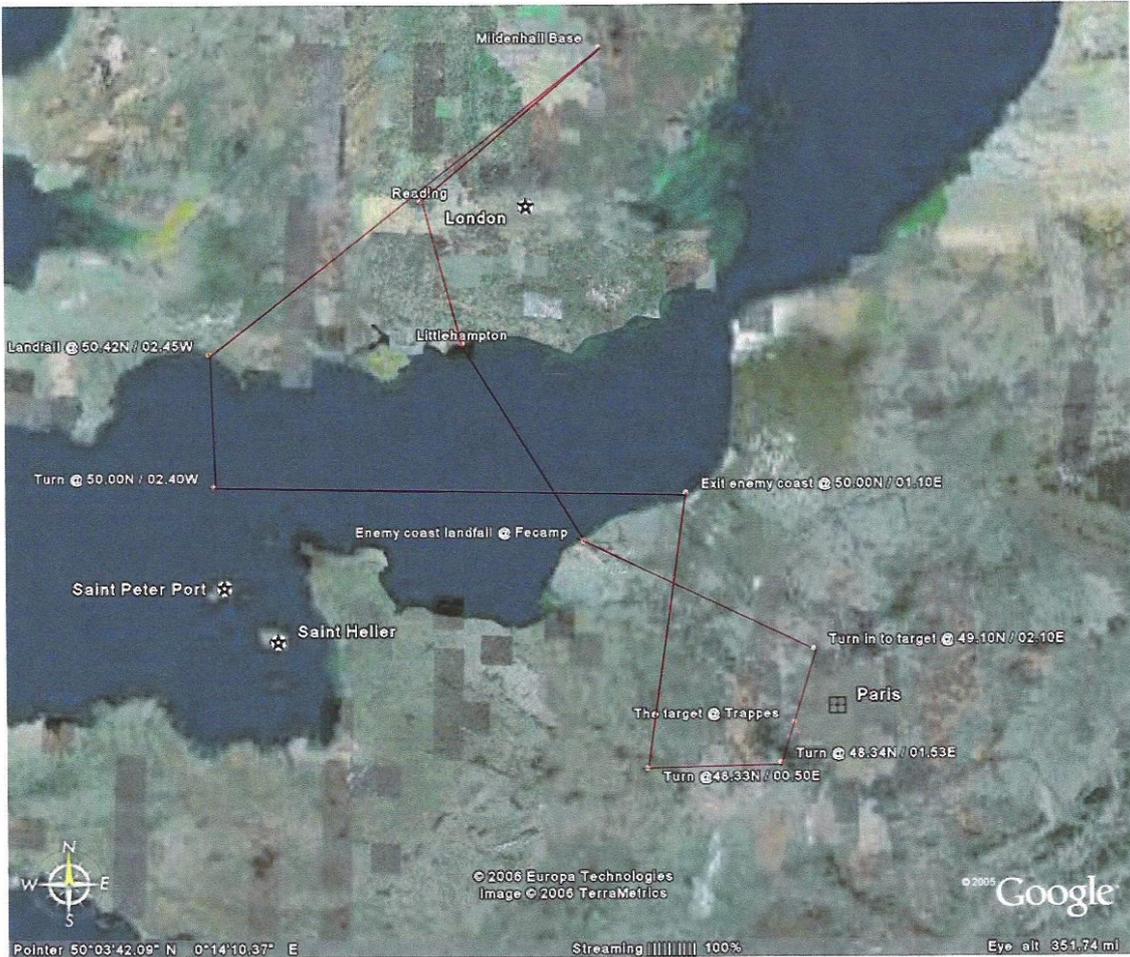
It would be a long 325 nautical mile flight down from Mildenhall to the south-western suburbs of Paris where the target was situated.



(Map courtesy of Expedia.com)



An aerial photograph of the Trappes marshalling yards today.(From almost 12000ft)



(See separate map for clearer view)

The map showed a route, marked by red ribbon, that, outbound, would take them overland to Reading, a favoured town used to form up the bomber stream going south-easterly. Turning southwards they would then cross the English coast over Littlehampton. From here they would have to continue south-southeast to cross the French coast at the distinctive coastal features near the town of Fécamp. At this point the ribbon was stretched in a more south-easterly direction to a point south of Méru, a town to the north north-west of Paris. Here they were aiming for a particularly prominent ground feature, (see picture next page) if it was clear, this would confirm their turning point. If mists or cloud hid the ground features and they were missed they would be reliant on the accuracy of the navigator in each aircraft. From this point the whole bomber stream would head south-southwest on a timed run that would take them over the target at Trappes and then straight on to a point some 20 nautical miles beyond the target. This was another prominent point, as a large wooded area gave way to open farmland. It would put them between the towns of Rambouillet and Ablis. Having successfully negotiated the hazards associated with the straight and level flight over the target itself and the undoubted flak that was bound to come their way, they would begin the long flight home. The whole force would execute a starboard turn to fly due west for 40 odd nautical miles before once again executing another turn to starboard and heading almost due north. This would bring them back almost parallel to the bombing run and would eventually cross the incoming flight path just north-west of Rouen before finally crossing the French coast to the east of Dieppe.

Below. The prominent ground feature south of Méru visible today.



From here they would have hoped for a quick dash across the Channel and then straight across country to home base. Unfortunately, the planners had other ideas for the return route. At this point they would have to turn due west again and fly down through the English Channel, across the top of the Cotentin peninsula, north of Cherbourg to a point due south of Lyme Bay. Here they would turn due north, making landfall on the English coast at a point known as Golden Cap, a promontory about halfway along the coast of Lyme Bay. From here they would turn to starboard yet again across the still slumbering England for Mildenhall and bed. With a bit of luck the returning bombers wouldn't even disturb the slumbering Muriel in her bed at home in Bournemouth.

It was never advisable for returning bomber pilots to put their noses down and race for home at the best of times. Returning aircraft were constantly being reminded to return over designated points along the coast and at a reasonable speed. This was to avoid them being shot at by their own anti-aircraft defences. A number of 'own goals' had been suffered when these rules had been ignored. The only exceptions to this strict ruling was when the aircraft was running low on fuel, often through damage to its fuel tanks or systems; when it had structural damage that was going to make it difficult to reach its base or was carrying injured crew needing urgent attention.

However, there was even more special reasoning behind this extraordinarily devious return route which had a lot to do with the huge build up of ships around the south coast in preparation for the forthcoming invasion. Having negotiated all that the Germans could throw against them; the planners were unlikely to bring the returning bombers home over such a concentration of allied shipping with some trigger happy crews just waiting for attacks. Also, should any night fighters be following the returning bombers, their crews prying eyes would be kept far away from the, by then, quite obvious build up that had taken place. There seemed little point in attracting attention even though the Germans could have discovered the facts in other ways.

Extra time could and probably would be added for fighter and flak evasion anywhere along the route. The whole operation should be completed safely within 5 gruelling hours. Raids had extensively pummelled much of the enemy radar network but they were still actively guiding their night fighters into the Bomber streams where they would bring chaos. Some aircraft carried Radio Counter Measure equipment, there would also be jamming and deception broadcasts by ground and airborne operators all designed to confuse the enemy controllers.

It was to be a busy night for the whole of Bomber Command with over 800 aircraft operating in and around the same airspace that XV squadron would be using as they all left their bases across the countryside of England, all heading for Occupied France. With other raids going to the railways at Saumur and Tegnier, an attack on the gun batteries at Maisy, two others on the radio jammer at Mont Couple and transmitter at Au Fevre it was a busy night for the Command. It would be emphasised that the squadron crews make careful notes of and strictly adhere to the timings and positions that they were issued. All these things were meticulously planned and when orchestrated together could add extra confusion to those waiting to pounce on them from above or shoot them down from below.

With all this in mind they would be given details of the takeoff times, timing over the target and expected return to base times would be given out. The route to and from the target would be pointed out and described to the crews on the large-scale map

This is where the crew of 'C Charlie' sat shortly after 2300 on the evening of the last day of May 1944. In the cockpit P/O P.D'Ombrain carried out the final checks with Sgt. L.Gearing the flight engineer assisting and checking all the dials and switches were in order. Bomb-aimer F/Sgt. L.Jamieson was out of the nose for take-off and crouching in the cramped confines of the passageway behind the cockpit where navigator F/Sgt. S.Long sat at his table. Just further aft Geoff twiddled the knobs of the radios and checked that all his equipment was working well. Above him and still further aft F/Sgt. S.Nystrom was again accompanying them in the mid-upper gun position. Finally, nearly 60ft behind the pilot F/Sgt. F.Reid sat cramped in the loneliest position of all. He was about to experience again his unusual view of take-off and would be the first of the crew to become airborne. The tail of a Lancaster, and any other aircraft with a tail wheel undercarriage, was always first to leave the ground and in most landings was the last to touch down.

There were 219 bombers despatched to the target at Trappes that evening, made up of aircraft from all Groups except 5 Group. The force was predominantly Lancasters with a few Mosquitoes acting as pathfinder/ target illuminators to aid the precision bombing. As previously mentioned, accuracy was of great importance to avoid civilian casualties. 'C Charlie' left Mildenhall at 23.57 (the 4th aircraft away) on the 31st May 1944. With its 10,000lb load and the necessary fuel to reach the target and return safely they would climb steadily to their designated flying height. All over Britain the bombers would be leaving their bases, separated by minutes. Most of the aircraft on the raids that night would be heading for Reading. Here, if they all adhered to their timings, heights and speed each squadron group would form into a much larger group, the bomber stream. This large but compact formation of planes would then head for the south of England. Once over the Channel the gunners would check fire their weapons. With the outside temperature sometimes dropping to -20 C the brass bullets could jam within the steel of the gun barrels. This was due to their different contraction and expansion rates and the gunners and crew needed to know that the machinery would respond should the need arise.

All available eyes began the search for night-fighters as the coast of France passed by below. Apart from an early check around the crew positions to confirm all was well and the request to test the guns, the onboard communications were kept to a minimum, only to be used for emergencies and warnings. Geoff would monitor external radio frequencies for any incoming messages regarding the raid. Any change of wind speed or direction he would note and pass on to the navigator. He listened also for any recall message, although this was unlikely on this trip. Later he would listen for the instructions from the Master Bomber as he guided the crews to bomb at the correct points. He could also tune to the German wavelengths to check on activity there, although this strange language meant nothing to him.

The moon was approaching its full phase. Although this was good for bombing, the aircraft would be fairly visible from above. With light low cloud or mist obscuring the land, which was probable later in the night, it would favour the hunter. Enemy radar stations would vector the defending fighters up to the stream and then their onboard radar operators would help guide the German pilots onto individual aircraft. The pilots had to follow the operators' instructions most carefully but on clear, moonlit nights they would also be keeping a good lookout for any suspicion of a visual sighting.

The Germans would and could make good use of the extensive French internal transport system whenever they moved large quantities of men and machines

around. They knew just how important this system was to them and threw protective cordons of flak around all the important transport links. In the run up to the D-Day invasion, the major centres of these transport highways were being repeatedly attacked.

Without being too obvious, the British and Allied forces were now trying to close down this infrastructure, especially the railways. By selective raids all over the French internal transport system they hoped to render it useless or limit its effectiveness in the run up to the invasion. These operations needed to be carefully planned but appear random so that the Germans would not be given any clue as to the possible invasion landing points. During the time of the landings and for a crucial period afterwards, much of the reinforcements would not be able to move by rail, thus delaying their deployment and providing valuable time for the allies to establish their beach-heads. Unable to cover all the possible targets with the diminishing resources available, the Germans had begun to swamp certain areas with night-fighters in the hope that they would guess correctly and be amongst the raiders as they came towards the targets. Most of tonight's route was planned to avoid large concentrations of flak but nearer to the target this could not be avoided. Here it was necessary for the bomber to be held straight and level on course, extreme avoiding action could not be taken, as it would spoil the aim for the bomber.

The first half of the outward flight had been uneventful. Climbing steadily away from Mildenhall they had formed up with the main bomber stream, this was largely unseen and now they were in a position towards the rear of the 2nd wave attack on Trappes. Occasionally as they flew along they would feel the turbulence of all those other mighty Lancasters as they flew on towards the target. It was slightly comforting to know that others were up here all heading for the same goal and that one didn't have to run the gauntlet alone.

Just over an hour and a half after taking off from Mildenhall the French coast at Fécamp drifted slowly by beneath them, they had entered the 'lions' lair'. The bomber banked gently to port onto its new heading and they droned steadily on across the dark expanse of occupied Europe. Threateningly, but far off in the distance, lightning flashed from cloud to cloud and, unheard by the crews, a distant thunder rumbled across the war ravaged land.

CHAPTER SIX

The Outcome (continued from Chapter 1)

As Steve rose to help his pal with the obstinate parachute pack, the insides of the aircraft became filled with red-hot pieces of flying metal. Cannon shells and tracer bullets ripped through the skin of the Lancaster and in moments, both crew felt the aircraft give a shudder and lurch sickeningly downwards. Neither of them had heard the desperate warning from Sam to the pilot, who immediately commenced the first part of a corkscrew by diving, as Sam had instructed, to port. They could both hear the hammering of the incoming shells and above even this, the answering fire from the turrets just above and behind them.

It was too late. The damage had already been done. Empty shell cases were showering onto the fuselage floor from above. Incoming fire must have punctured the spent shell casing sacks in the dorsal turret and the casings were now falling all around the two pals as they scrabbled around. If that was the case, then it was almost certain that Sam had been hit as well.

In the cockpit, Peter began to wrestle with the controls but that first salvo had done untold damage. The control system was wrecked and now the aircraft refused to respond to the movement of either control column or rudder pedals. Cables, linkages and hydraulic pipes that should have been transmitting the pilots input at the controls to the flying control surfaces had been severed and were rendered useless. The bomber had already begun its death spiral. On top of that the radio equipment and intercom system was smashed beyond use and there was no way that they could communicate either with each other or with the outside world. Not that any of those things was going to save them now.

Fritz had loosed off a near perfect non-deflection shot, this time on a totally unsuspecting victim. No one on the bomber had witnessed his stealthy approach. His aim had been perfect as he rose gently beneath the port wing of the bomber. Cloaked in the darkness, he throttled back to almost match the bombers speed, he managed to position the fighter perfectly in the blind spot and as he slowly came within range, still unseen, he had opened the throttles and given a gentle pull back on the control column. The Lancaster's port wing-root swung across his sights. He had squeezed the firing buttons with the deliberation of a sniper and carefully pushed the rudder bar with his left foot. He raked the exposed underside of the wing and fuselage with one long burst from all his guns.

At the very moment that he fired the Lancasters pilot had obviously got a warning for he had banked the aircraft steeply over to port and commenced a dive which had taken him down across the Germans nose as he had continued to fire. The mid-upper turret had instantly opened fire, shortly followed by the tail-gunner, but Fritz and his crew were passed and away before any of the return fire came close. Almost as suddenly the fire from the dorsal turret had ceased. Now the bomber continued on its fiery, spiralling downward path and he couldn't see it recovering from that. Fire had begun to flicker along the port wing instantly and he felt sure that this was going to be confirmed as his 8th victory. Finally satisfied with his nights' work and not wanting to hang about any longer for fear of not reaching his base, he calmly set

course for Coulommiers. Once there he would relax with a warming glass of Schnapps before retiring to bed. He didn't feel there would be any need to await the confirmation, he was sure it would follow soon enough. The time was 01.55 as he banked the plane towards the east.

Inside the stricken bomber, miraculously, the shells and bullets had hit no one but all was utter confusion. The empty shell cases had been falling because Sam had removed the sack that was supposed to catch them when he had boarded the previous evening. It made his entry into the confined turret that much easier when in full flying kit. Unusually for him he had failed to re-attach this before they had taken off. Now, with the aircraft beyond any control, the survivors within the spinning confines of the fuselage were totally stunned and disorientated. At first they were thrown against the roof and then drooped back to the floor which was now awash with hydraulic fluid along with the spent cartridge cases and ammunition belt clips. As the spin increased so did the gravitational force on their bodies. This mayhem was not something that any of them could have been trained for, nobody liked to think about the time when they would have to leave their aircraft and certainly not in the utter confusion that now enveloped them.

Lancasters were notoriously difficult to exit when flying fairly straight and level.

Eventually they were pinned against the inside of the fuselage as the mortally wounded bomber howled down to oblivion. There was no panic; just the slow awakening that this was to be their final flight. None of the crew could escape now. Even if Geoff had been aware of where the escape hatch was located inside this tumbling, fiery mass of useless metal and other debris, he had no parachute. This had dislodged from its previously immovable position and was nowhere to be seen.

Just a few short moments ago she was a deadly yet graceful flying machine and now there was nothing at all graceful about her but the deadly had come to mean something even more sinister.

As with many that are staring death in the face, all Geoff's' earlier fears had evaporated to be replaced by a calmness and acceptance of his situation. With certain knowledge that, beyond the next few moments, there was to be no future and that all his dreams would never come true.

Blinded by the acrid smoke and searing heat that rapidly filled the interior of the fuselage, visions of his past life began to appear in his mind. These were not like the shimmering black and white newsreel images flashing and jumping across a smoky white backdrop that came before the main feature at the local cinemas. These were in glorious Technicolor, in the most vivid of detail. At first there was only blackness. Then, much as the footlights would come up in a cinema, a pulsing sound and sensation accompanied a reddish glow. There was a rumbling that was felt as much as heard. Feelings of floating inside some watery cavern and yet this was warm and comforting. These sensations all ceased as a great pressure was exerted on his body and the reddish glow was replaced by white light. The screen curtains had been drawn. Gone were the watery sounds, now everything was much clearer. Fluid in his lungs was replaced with air and the soft cradling fluid was replaced by a new sensation, his body was being handled by something quite rough. With the air in his lungs and his throat cleared, his vocal chords were able to work and he let out a cry. Close by a soothing voice reached his hearing.

"There you are Elsie, a healthy bouncing boy, blond by the looks of it and everything's there alright. I'll just wrap him up and you can hold him".

Then another more familiar voice came clearly through the air.

"Oh, he's so beautiful, George will be pleased, especially to know that he has a son and heir".

It was the voice of his mother, so long forgotten. Tears filled his eyes.

No one will ever know what happened in that bomber that night; my story is completely fictitious, but wholly based on real people, with known facts and information gleaned from many sources.

The XV Squadron records simply show the aircraft as: -

'Missing. Nothing heard'.

Detailed by F/O. J. M. P. [unclear] DETAIL OF WORK CARRIED OUT
By XV. (B) SQUADRON
FOR THE MONTH OF JUNE 1944. **SECRET** PAGE No. 1.

DATE	AIRCRAFT TYPE & NUMBER	CREW	DUTY	TIME		DETAILS OF SORTIE OR FLIGHT	REFERENCES
				Up	Down		
5.44	LANCASTER LL.389 B	A42509 P/O. PURRY R. (P), F/O. WELBY J. (M), A41089 F/S. GOODBRIDGE K. (W/O), F/S. CLIFFEADE H. (A/E), F/S. NIXON T. (M/U), Sgts. GANTWILL G. (R/G), ROFFE R. (F/E).	R. (P), F/O.	2350	1st 0512	Smoke obscured most ground detail, but lake could be seen. M/O gave instructions to bomb yellow fires, and several bursts were observed in the fires on the run up. Results should be satisfactory.	
	LM.121 C	A416150 P/O. DOMEHAIN P. (P), Aug 425328 F/S. LONG A. (M), Sgt. KOPPEB R. (W/O), NZ415636 F/S. JAMIEGON I. (A/B), 425199 F/S. NYSTROM B. (M/U), 4429738 F/S. REID F. (R/G), Sgt. GEARING L. (F/E).	P. (P), Aug	2357		Missing. Nothing heard.	
	LM.109 E	721286 F/O. WOODLEY G. (P), A410017 F/S. TURNER T. (M), A423510 F/S. ARMSTRONG J. (W/O), A425083 F/S. WATSON O. (A/B), Sgts. LILLY A. (M/U), BARRIS B. (R/G), HAWHELL G. (F/E).	G. (P), A410017	2358	0500	M/O was not heard. Visibility was good, lake being seen clearly. Red & Green TIs seen and the latter bombed. Attack appeared well concentrated and fires were burning strongly at the E end of lake.	
	LM.468 F	N242409 P/O. JOHNSTON M. (P), F/S. KING E. (M), F/S. PAINE J. (W/O), F/S. WHEATON G. (A/B), Sgts. HARTLEY A. (M/U), BAKER N. (R/G), MARSH E. (F/E).	M. (P), F/S.	2354	0507	Red markers seen on approach, but Yellows were bombed on arrival as M/O considered them accurate. Apart from the lake no ground detail could be identified.	
	LL.806 J	J24469 F/O. LESLIE W. (P), J27580 F/O. FRUDD F. (M), Sgt. ROZIER J. (W/O), J28694 F/O. MONROE E. (A/B), Sgt. NORTH E. (M/U), NZ08409 Sgt. FENNER D. (R/G), Sgt. GURDRIE W. (F/E).	W. (P), J27580	2355	0501	Bombed Red TI, as M/O was not heard. Immediately afterwards the lake was identified, and judging by its position our bombs had fallen short.	
	ED.395 K	F/S. FERGUSON W. (P), Sgt. BOND B. (M), P/O. THROUP H. (W/O), F/O. HARPER B. (A/B), NZ19811 Sgt. SWENT W. (M/U), Sgt. POOLE W. (R/G), SA.186252 Sgt. STEWART G. (F/E).	W. (P), Sgt. BOND B.	2354	0516	Ran in to attack White TI, but had to go to seaward to avoid collision. M/O was then heard to advise bombing the Yellows. Bombing was concentrated producing much smoke. Encountered light air on return, and sustained damage to port engine, fuselage, fixed aerials, std. tailplane and wing attachment.	
	LL.781 L	P/O. BELL W. (P), Sgt. KIEK C. (M), Sgt. SWADMAN P. (W/O), F/S. OAKES E. (A/B), Sgts. BRENNAN J. (M/U), BROOKFIELD T. (R/G), FITCH A. (F/E).	W. (P), Sgt. KIEK C.	2356	0433	Red TIs were seen falling about 10 miles short on run up. Lake could be seen, and M/O instructed that yellow TIs were accurate. Bombed Yellows, and most of bombing appeared well concentrated.	
	LL.945 M	N2415223 F/O. PHILLIPS S. (P), P/O. SIMCOX J. (M), Sgt. SCOTT H. (W/O), F/O. WILTON R. (A/B), A430026 F/S. GILFILLAN J. (M/U), 4427712 F/O. GOUGH S. (R/G), Sgt. PEARSALL E. (F/E).	S. (P), P/O.	0005	0505	Eastern part of lake was obscured by pall of smoke. M/O was instructed by M/C to bomb yellow spot fires, and we saw our bombs burst along then.	

No other aircraft from the squadron reported seeing 'C Charlie' shot down. One other XV Squadron aircraft, ND395 LS-K, was attacked and damaged on the return flight. Subsequent investigations by the Royal Air Force have led to the loss report being completed as follows: -

Place of Loss...	1 Km. W. Lormaison. 20 Km. S. Beauvais
Cause of Loss. .	Night fighter.
Airframe % destroyed	100%
How a/c landed - -	Crashed, burst into flames.

Below. The front and back of the Loss Record card for LM121 which contained so

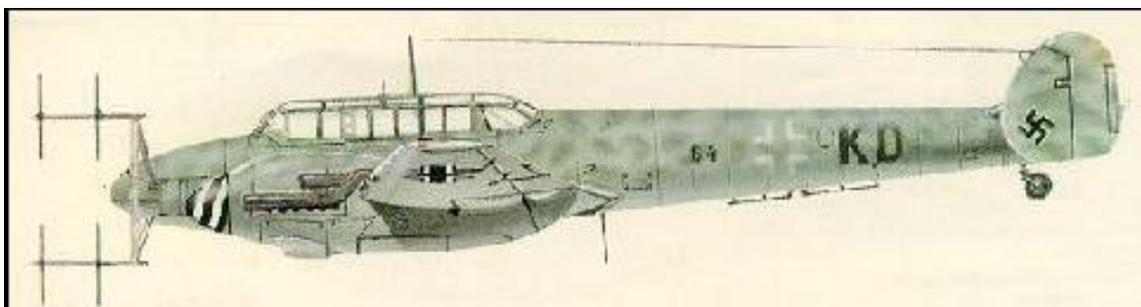
indeed shoot down two bombers in quick succession on that fateful night. According to their sources, the first was shot down at 01.50 in zone TE - UE, a night fighter zone, north of Paris at 3000 metres. The second was some 4 minutes later in zone UE 1; area Méru, no height is given. These victories were confirmed as his 7th and 8th over Allied aircraft in the night fighter role.

1. June 1944: Film Chef für Ausz. und Disziplin: C. 2027. N / Teil II

01.06.44	Fw. Willi Morlock C. 2027/II	3./NJG 1 Anerk: 68	Lockheed	<input type="checkbox"/> 2 km. S.E. Tholen: 2.000 m.	01.10	i.O.
01.06.44	Fw. Willi Morlock C. 2027/II	3./NJG 1 Anerk: 88	Halifax	<input type="checkbox"/> KG 2 auf See: 1.700 m. (off Walcheren)	01.41	i.O.
01.06.44	Hptm. Fritz Söthe C. 2027/II	Stab II./NJG 4 Anerk: 14	4-mot. FlgZ.	<input type="checkbox"/> TE-UE: 3.000 m. (area N. Paris)	01.50	i.O.
01.06.44	Hptm. Fritz Söthe C. 2027/II	Stab II./NJG 4 Anerk: 15	4-mot. FlgZ.	<input type="checkbox"/> UE 1: no height (Méru)	01.54	i.O.
01.06.44	Hptm. Hubert Raüh C. 2027/II	Stab II./NJG 4 Anerk: 4	Lancaster	<input type="checkbox"/> BD 6: 7 km. W. Rambouillet at 3.000 m.	02.05	i.O.
01.06.44	Oblt. Ernst Drünkler C. 2027/II	1./NJG 5 Anerk: 16	Lancaster	<input type="checkbox"/> BD 4-5 links: 2.700 m. (Rambouillet)	02.05	i.O.
01.06.44	Hptm. Paul Zorner C. 2027/II	Stab III./NJG 5 Anerk: 10	4-mot. FlgZ.	<input type="checkbox"/> Villeguines-Anmont: 3.000 m.	02.35	i.O.
01.06.44	Lt. Keller C. 2027/II	9./NJG 5 Anerk: 17	4-mot. FlgZ.	<input type="checkbox"/> RD at 2.200 m. (N. Aumale)	02.52	i.O.
MTO: operations off Crete:						
01.06.44	Ofw. Chlezka C. 2027/II	4.(See)/BFGGr. 126 Anerk: 2	Beaufighter	<input type="checkbox"/> off Heraklion: 80 m. (Crete)	18.10	i.O.
01.06.44	Ofw. Rupp C. 2027/II	4.(See)/BFGGr. 126 Anerk: 3	Beaufighter	<input type="checkbox"/> off Heraklion: 80 m. (Crete)	18.11	i.O.
01.06.44	Ofw. Knorth C. 2027/II	4.(See)/BFGGr. 126 Anerk: 1	Beaufighter	<input type="checkbox"/> off Heraklion: 100 m. (Crete)	18.10	i.O.
01.06.44	Uffz. Häßler C. 2027/II	4.(See)/BFGGr. 126 Anerk: 5	Beaufighter	<input type="checkbox"/> off Heraklion: 100 m. (Crete)	18.12	i.O.

Above, the night fighter records showing the 2 claims made by Hptm Fritz Söthe.

Below, an artists impression of the aircraft that he was using on the night. His aircraft markings would have been 3C +? M (? = either C,D,E,F or G)



Below and Next Page. Two photographs of Messerschmitt Bf110-G showing the



large radar arrays and the gun blisters containing the cannon armament.



Hauptmann Söthe went on to survive a crash on 12th July 1944 at Rozay-en-Brien when he was only slightly injured along with Uffz. Brönies and Uffz. Enke, who was severely injured.

Following a short recovery period, (trained Luftwaffe pilots were by now much in demand), he returned to flying with Brönies and a new gunner Uffz. Christian Sabel from Dusseldorf. Throughout the rest of that summer and into the early autumn this reformed crew continued to shoot down victims. Eventually they amassed over 20 victories and Söthe was awarded the Knights Cross in Gold during September of that same year. By then the night-fighters, along with much of the German armed forces, were being withdrawn towards home soil to make its final desperate attempts at defending the Fatherland.

Below A record of airfields and aircraft used by II/NJG4 from their formation in April 1942 until the end of the war. Yellow highlight shows them stationed at Coulommiers in June, and the blue highlight, their withdrawal during September to German soil.

4.42 - 5.42	Laupheim	XII. Fliegerkorps	Bf 110
5.42 - 9.42	Rheine	3. JD	Bf 110, Do 217
9.42 - 1.44	St. Dizier*	3. JD 4. JD (from 9.43)	Bf 110, Do 217
1.44 - 25.2.44	Fassberg*		Bf 110
25.2.44 - 16.3.44	St. Dizier*	4. JD	Bf 110
16.3.44 - 8.5.44	Dijon*		Bf 110
8.5.44 - 8.44	Coulommiers	5. JD	Bf 110
8.44 - 11.44	Frankfurt/Rhein-Main	Jafü Mittelrhein	Bf 110, Ju 88G
11.44 - 3.45	Gütersloh**	Jafü Mittelrhein	Bf 110, Ju 88G
3.45 - 5.45	?	2. JD?	Ju 88G

Hauptmann Fritz Söthe and his crew were to play only a small part in this final struggle. On 28th September 1944 whilst flying a Junkers JU88G they crashed near Lambrecht, Neustadt a.d. Weinstrasse, Germany. Fritz Söthe was killed outright; Brönies and Sabel were severely wounded and are believed to have subsequently died as a result of their injuries.

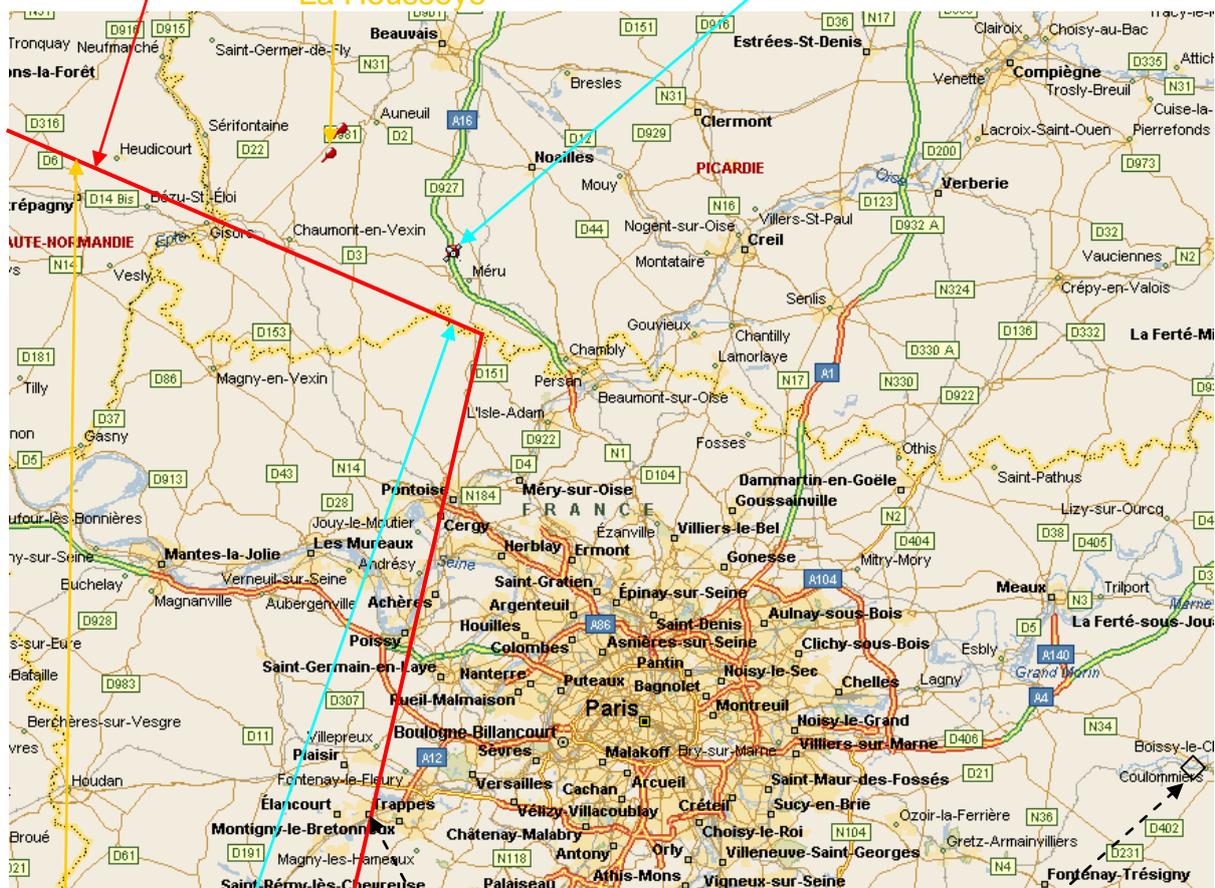
BELOW

This map shows the major points of interest for the night of 31st May/1st June 1944.

Inbound track and bombing run.

Crash site of ND926 between Porcheux & La Houssoye

Crash site of LM121 at Lormaison



Interception points of ND926 and LM121.

Target

German airfield

According to one statistic that I read, the average crew in Bomber Command would manage to complete seven and a half operations.

The 'rookie' crews (less than 10 operations) in the second wave were more likely to get the chop than the more experienced crews.

With almost half of their 8th operation over, having been found by the predatory night fighter, they were destined to become the perfect statistic.



An aerial photograph taken recently of the tiny village of Lormaison. It shows the track of the falling aircraft over the Postolle farm to the point of impact where the modern day A16 Amiens to Paris route cuts the landscape. All the arable land in the picture belongs to the Postolle family today.

The photograph also shows the village cemetery that was their initial resting place and is now the site of a memorial to the whole crew.

So ended the lives of sixteen brave and in most cases, young men who had each fought and died for their countries and causes. Each with his own desires to rid their world of what they perceived as an enemy.

At some moment during their short and hectic lives they had all been brought together in space and time one night in June 1944. In that instant these totally different and unequally matched adversaries had been pitched into a one on one battle. Each was following his orders and was playing to his set of rules, in a set of wartime circumstances they each found themselves. The outcome could have been so very different but the odds on this occasion were definitely stacked in favour of the fighter.

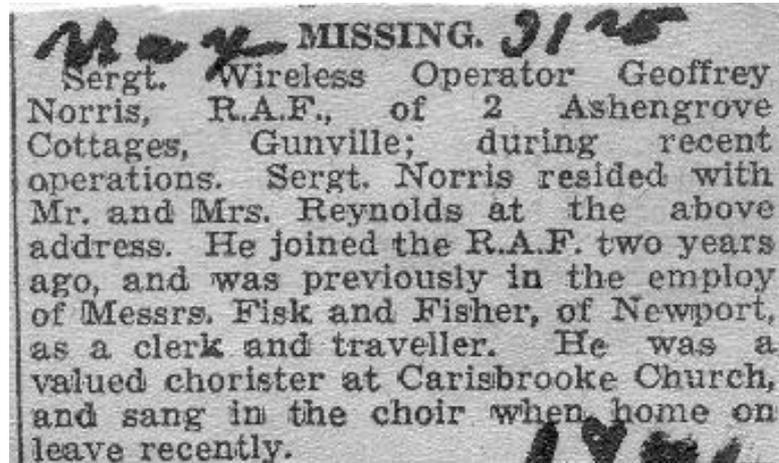
On that night, one might say that the crew of C for Charlie never stood a chance.

However, the story does not end here, in a way, it is just a beginning.

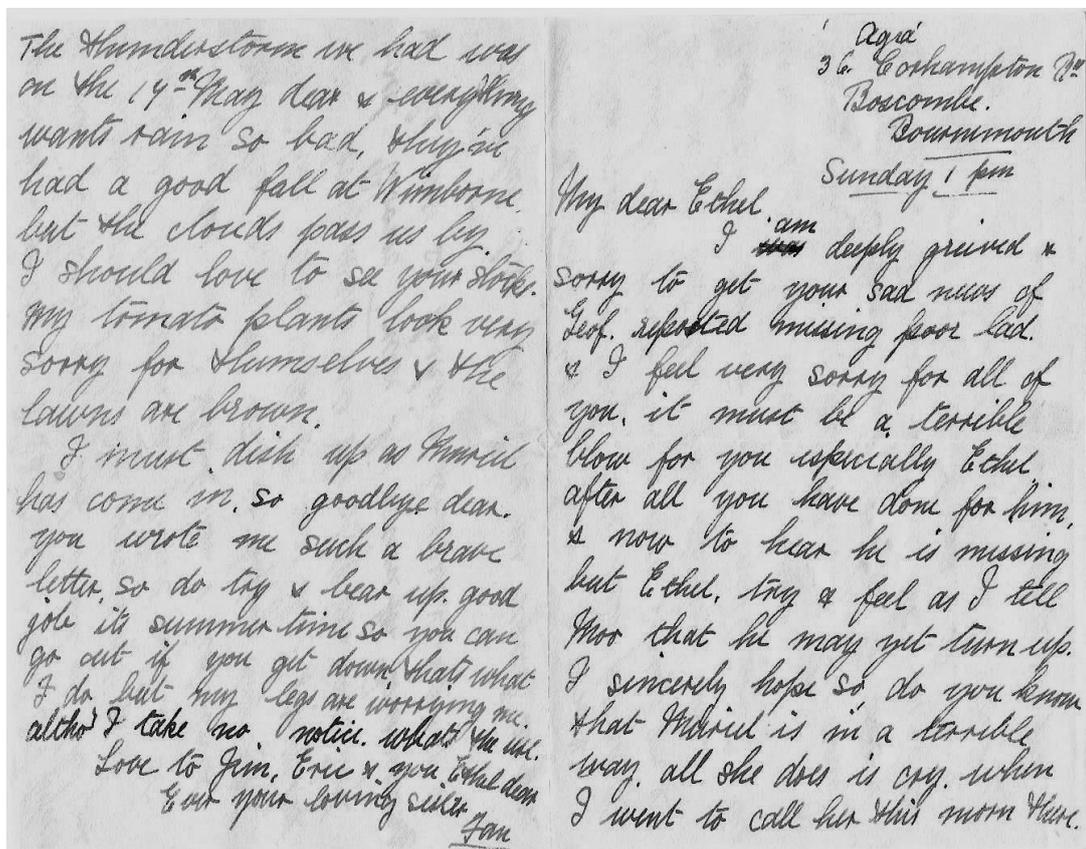
CHAPTER SEVEN

1944 to 1984 and beyond. The real search begins.

Immediately following the notification (by that dreaded knock at the door and the telegram) that Geoff was missing, a small report was placed in The Isle of Wight County Press. A copy of which is reproduced below.



Although Ethel always maintained that she knew he was dead, a missing in action did not always mean that the person was dead. They could be in a P O W Camp, injured or uninjured or evading capture with the help of the Resistance. At first there could be some hope. Ethel wrote to tell her sister (Muriel's mother) in Bournemouth. Her reply, written on the 4th June, speaks of the hope that they should all have. It gives a telling insight into Geoff and Muriel's (Moo, her pet name) feelings.



was awake & ~~was~~ crying. I said dont Moor, lets hope
he may be spared yet. & Geof wouldnt like you
to make yourself ill. she would not go to
church she has taken her friend (who is at
Cambridge) dog out. I think Moor & Geof. loved
each other so, & she was so happy they both
were those two days he was here. & they had
such lovely walks over the cliffs Moor said Geof
loved Boom Town his name for Dourman
& she was so looking forward & hoping to
see him soon.
Well Ethel dear you have no regrets, as you
made a lovely boy of him & a son &
brother you must all have been proud of.
please tell Jim & Eric & how sorry I am &
for you all. but dont give up hope yet.
Fred liked Geof too, & I must write & tell
him. he will be shocked I know.
I am afraid I am not writing this how I
would like too I would like to come &
see you & tell you but its the ban. & I do
feel so sorry for all of you. & its been a
shock to us. Phyllis went over & saw Gell
yesterday & she will be writing to you

Despite having recovered an awful lot of family correspondence from the war years, I have not been able to locate the letter that Wing Commander Watkins sent to all the crew member's families. One will have existed, my Father remembers it arriving, but sadly it has gone missing.

However, during my research, I was lucky enough to come across some of the letters sent to the Australian crew member's families. Although the wording differs slightly on each letter, I have reproduced one on the next page (top left) to illustrate what would have been received at the Reynolds' house in early June 1944. The identity of the other crew member has been deleted to preserve their identity at this time.

Not until the end of December (22nd to be precise) did the family know any further details. Then around the middle of January 1945 came final confirmation by letter from the Air Ministry that Geoff had been killed in action. The Ministry give the source of their information as the International Red Cross. (next page, bottom left)

Another sad entry was made in the Island's Newspaper. (See next page bottom right)

Finally, there came a standard letter from the King, with the sympathies of His Majesty and the Queen. This too is reproduced on the next page (Top right).

Royal Air Force,
MILDENHALL,
Suffolk.

1st June 1944.

Dear Mr. _____

You will by now have been informed that your Son, _____ failed to return from an operational flight on the night of 31st May/1st June 1944. I am writing to express my deepest sympathy with you in your anxiety, and also to encourage you to hope that he is safe.

He was the _____ of an aircraft engaged on an important bombing mission over enemy territory, and after take-off nothing further was heard. It appears likely that the aircraft was forced down, and if this is the case, there is some chance that he may be safe, and a prisoner of war.

In this event it may be two to three months before any certain information is obtained through the International Red Cross, but I hope the news will soon come through.

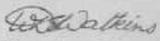
I should be grateful if you would inform me should you receive a prisoner of war card from your Son. My reason for making this request is that a Squadron Prisoner of War Fund arranges a monthly despatch of comforts, and I am most anxious to include your Son's name on the list at the earliest possible moment.

Your Son had done excellent work in the Squadron, and had successfully completed _____ operational flights. He will be very much missed by his many friends in the Squadron.

His personal effects have been safeguarded and will be dealt with by the Committee of Adjustment Officer, R.A.F. Station, Mildenhall, as soon as possible, who will write to you in the near future.

May I on behalf of the whole Squadron express to you our most sincere sympathy, and the hope that you will soon receive good news.

Yours sincerely,

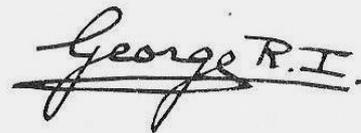

Wing Commander
(W.D.G. WATKINS, DFC., DFM.)



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

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.



J. Reynolds, Esq.

PHONE: GERRARD 9234
Extn. _____

Any communications on the subject of this letter should be addressed to:—

THE
UNDER SECRETARY
OF STATE,

and the following number
quoted:—E. 47092/3/44/P. 4. B. 4.

Your Ref. _____

Sir,

I am directed to refer to a letter from this Department dated the 22nd. December, 1944, and to inform you, with regret, that a further report has now been received from the International Red Cross Committee which confirms that your nephew, Sergeant Raymond Geoffrey Norris, Royal Air Force, lost his life on the 1st. June, 1944, and states that he was buried in Grave No. 234, in the French Military Cemetery at Marissel, a suburb of Beauvais, France.

In order that the Department may be in a position to close your nephew's service estate, action to presume his death for official purposes will now proceed, and you will be informed when this is completed.

In conveying this information, I am to express the deep sympathy of the Department with you in your bereavement.

I am, Sir,
Your obedient Servant,


for Director of Personal Services.

J. Reynolds Esq.,
2 Ashen Grove,
Gunville,
Carisbrooke,
Isle of Wight.



AIR MINISTRY
(Casualty Branch),
73-77, OXFORD STREET,
W.1.

15 January, 1945.

MISSING CARISBROOKE AIRMAN
NOW REPORTED KILLED.

Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, of Ashen Grove-cottages, Gunville, have received a letter from the Air Ministry informing them that a further report has now been received from the International Red Cross Committee, which shows that their nephew, Sergt. Raymond Geoffrey Norris, R.A.F., who was reported missing during operations last summer, lost his life on June 1st and was buried in the French Military Cemetery at Marissel, a suburb of Beauvais. Sergt.-Wireless-Operator Norris is remembered by many in various parts of the Island. His duties as a representative of Messrs. Pisk and Fisher, of Newport, brought him closely into touch with the agricultural community, by whom he was highly esteemed. From early boyhood he had been a member of Carisbrooke Church choir and had taken a leading part in its activities, his outstanding ability and endearing disposition making him very popular.

Although they were aware that a grave existed somewhere in France, sadly Jim and Ethel were never able to visit the grave during their lifetime. Jim died in 1965 and his wife three years later. They did, however, make a donation towards the inscription that is on the headstone today. In the mid-50's they were approached by the Imperial War Graves Commission, the forerunner of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to have an inscription of their choice carved into the headstone. Their chosen text is:

'Not just today but every day, in silence we remember'

Receipts for this have been found amongst my Father's memorabilia and are copied below.

Personal inscription for the headstone for: Sergeant R.G.Norris, R.A.F(VR),
Marissel French National Cemetery, France.

In reply to your letter, I should like to contribute to the cost of engraving the personal inscription chosen by me for this headstone and I enclose. £1.0^s.0^d ✓

Signed J Reynolds Date 12-6-54

From :- J. Reynolds, Esq.,
2, Ashen Grove Cottages,
Gunville, Newport,
Isle of Wight, Hants.

To :-
IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES COMMISSION,
P.I. DEPARTMENT,
WOOBURN HOUSE,
WOOBURN GREEN,
HIGH WYCOMBE,
BUCKS.

17.6.54

17993 PERSONAL INSCRIPTION

RECEIVED *with thanks* £ s. d. *imbe,*
 from *J REYNOLDS* /

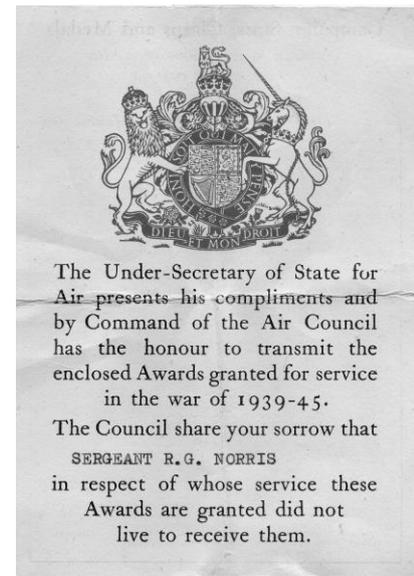
IMPERIAL WAR GRAVES COMMISSION,
 WOOBURN GREEN, Bucks. *8/6*

w6
PO 5 2270-26 NEWPORT
104

As Granddad had never claimed for Geoff's service medals, my Father decided that he would apply for them. He wrote off to the Air Ministry and was finally rewarded when a little cardboard box was delivered to the Reynolds household. The box remains intact to this day, reproduced on next page. The contents, which have, until very recently, never seen the light of day, have now been passed on to me. They are proudly photographed and displayed on the following page, along with the accompanying letter.

There seems some doubt that they are all the correct medals. The accompanying list states that they are the 1939-45 Star, the Aircrew Europe Star and the War Medal. According to one historian the set is complete, but that one (and I don't know which) is not of the correct type for Geoff's service.

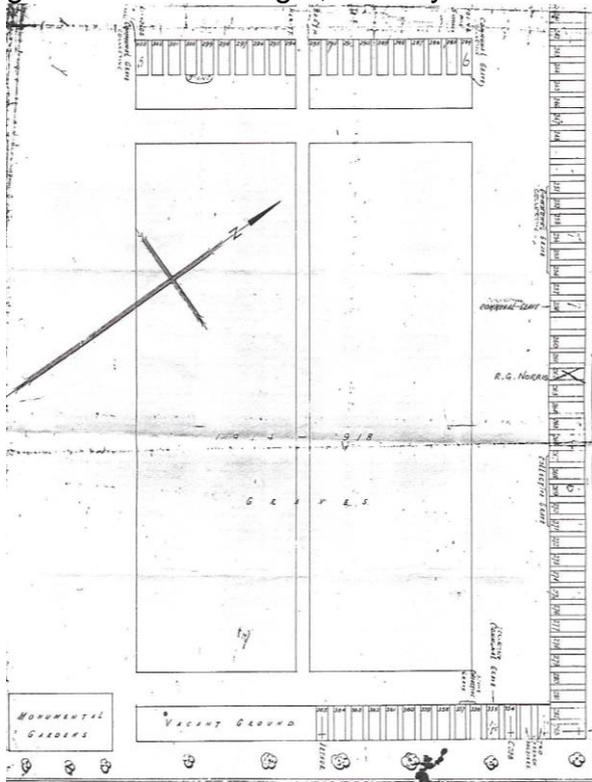
If anyone can throw some light on this, I would be most grateful.



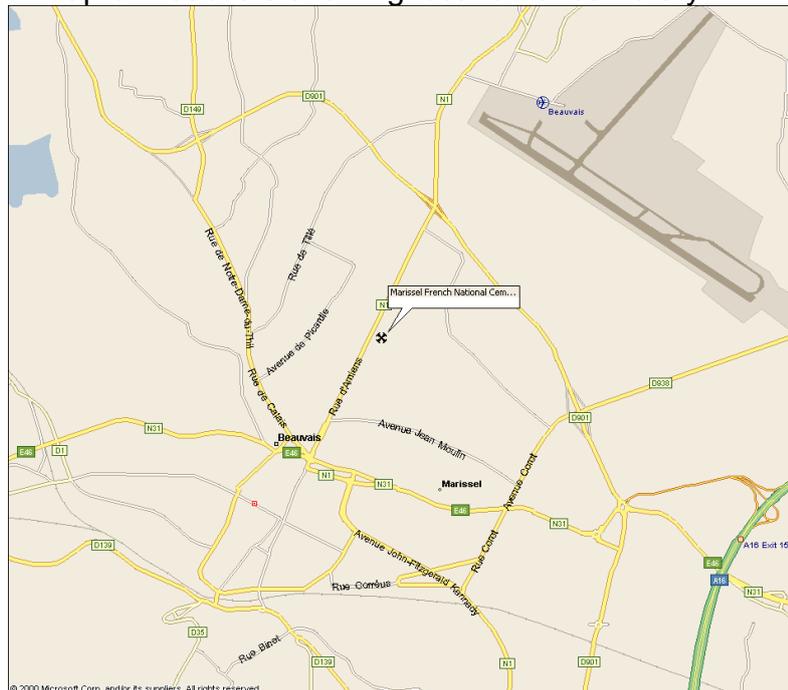
Then in 1984, thanks to the sterling work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission it was possible to locate Geoff's grave. There was some confusing information to get over. Previous paperwork had always referred to the French Military Cemetery, Marissel (1945) or the Marissel French National Cemetery (1954). However, it was discovered that the cemetery was not in the suburb of Beauvais called Marissel (although there is a military cemetery there), but was located to the north east of the city. It was on the east side of the main Amiens road. Armed with the maps of the graveyard and accurate instructions on finding the site they set off. At last, some of my family were going to pay their last respects to Geoff in "his corner of a foreign field that shall remain forever England".

My parents and brother, with his wife, organised a trip towards the end of that year. They took with them some Snowdrop bulbs and planted these around the headstone. These were a particular favourite of Geoff and his 'mother', Ethel.

Below The Map of the cemetery, with Geoff's grave marked on right, halfway down. The headstone as it is today.



A map of Beauvais showing location of cemetery.



It was still some years before I was able to begin devoting a lot of my time to some serious research into my namesake.

In early 1998 I wrote to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to get a copy of the map for myself. I also asked how I could find out more about my Uncle and was passed on to the RAF Personnel Management Agency HQ at RAF Innsworth in Gloucestershire. They very kindly sent me his personnel records and I was, at last, armed with the details to make a more thorough study. (See next page)

My own first visit was eventually timed to coincide with the start of a driving holiday to Switzerland in 1998. By some strange coincidence this was the anniversary of his birthday, the 6th August. At that time I had not begun any research into his life and was totally unaware of this fact.

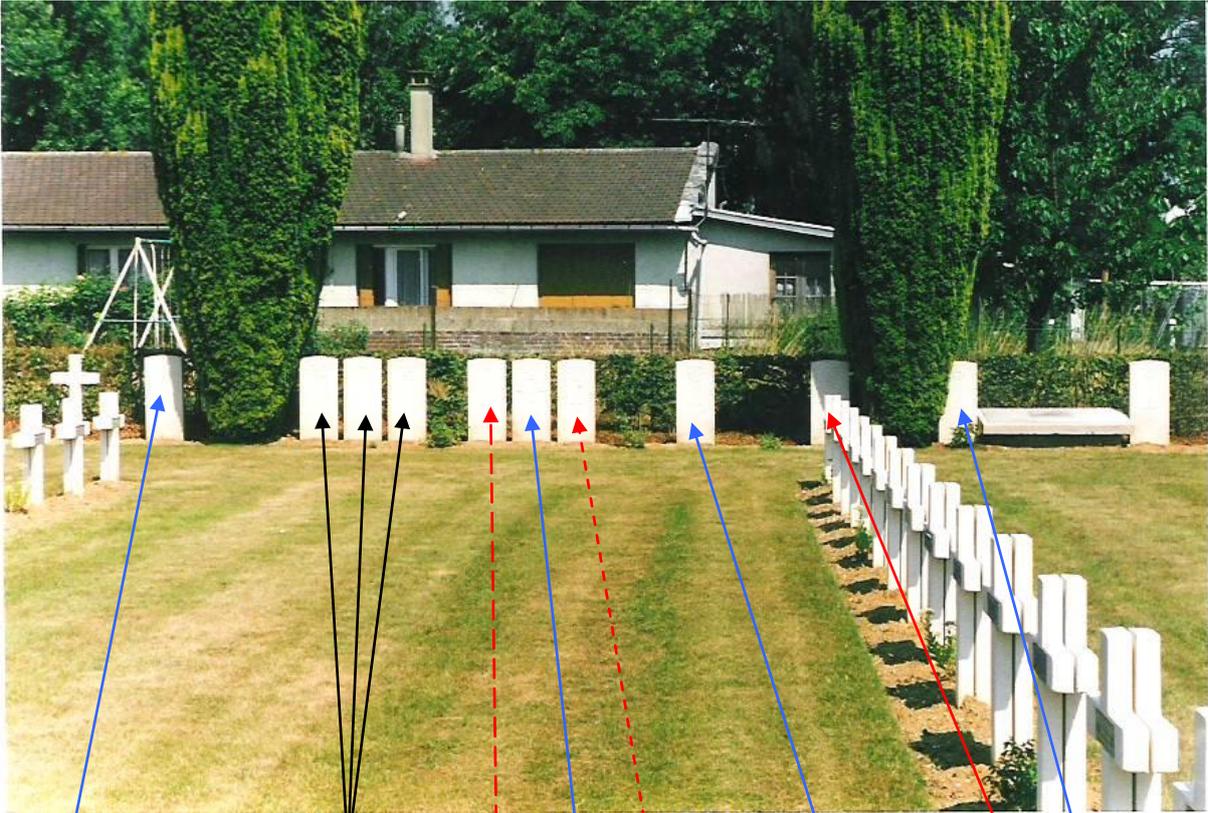
We took and planted a small red rose bush, the emblem of England and as a tribute to a true and loyal Englishman.

In a small drawer in the stone wall beside the graveyard entrance, we found the book of remembrance. Because the other members of the family had not found it on their earlier visit we left the following simple message:

“To ‘Geoff’ on the anniversary of your birthday,
with love from your ‘brother’ Eric and all the family.
May you rest in peace” (6/8/98)

I was pleasantly surprised to find that most of the crew was laid close together as they had fought through those terrible days of war. At that time I did not know the reason why Frank Reid was buried some way from the others. It has only come to light with further investigations.

Below. The layout of the crew graves in the cemetery.



F/S FB Reid

The crew
of ND926
2 per stone

Sgt LT Gearing
F/S LS Jamieson
F/S AS Long

F/S SA Nystrom
P/O PCL D’Ombrain

Geoff

Crew of ND926 are:

F/L FR Randall, F/S S Burns, F/S HS Thoma,
Sgt SL Kelly, F/O WG Cranfield, F/S EG Small.

From my research I believe strongly that they were a very tight knit team. This makes it all the more appropriate that they, along with the crew of ND926, should be together in death as they were in life.

May they all rest in peace now and forever more.

At this point I should like to mention a number of coincidences that have turned up during my research.

My father clearly remembers his mother waking up early one morning and 'knowing' that Geoff had been killed. Of course, over the years he cannot remember the exact date or day, but he knows it was shortly before the time of the notification about the crew loss. This feeling was eventually confirmed by the, normally, dreaded knock of the telegram boy. However, her shock, and that of the family, was somewhat lessened by her prior 'knowledge'.

The fact that my first visit should coincide with the anniversary of his birth. I had no prior knowledge of this before I went.

Then one day whilst I was reading a letter from the Air Historical Branch, my youngest daughter looked over my shoulder and noticed the serial number (LM 121) of the aircraft they had been flying when the crew were lost. Her names are Lucy Marie and she pointed out the coincidence that I had not previously been aware of.

My eldest daughter is called Victoria and we eventually found that two of the Australian crew had come from the state of that name. Another came from the town of Hawthorne, the same name as the avenue my wife used to live in as a child.

Added to this are all the comments and actions made during and at the end of Geoff's final leave which take on a much greater significance with my research and the value of hindsight.

My next port of call in research terms was to use the RAFA magazine 'Air Mail' to see if there was anyone who would remember my Uncle. (Remember at this time, he was the only person that I was researching.) I got a call one day from a gentleman who was a member of XV Squadron Association. He said that the person to contact was, the then, unofficial, historian for XV Squadron. Apparently, what he didn't know about the Squadron and its crews, both past and present, wasn't worth knowing.

I have been delighted to be allowed to join The Mildenhall Register; an association dedicated to the members of the wartime squadrons that had used Mildenhall as a base, which of course includes XV Squadron. My invitation to join came from my very good friend Martyn Ford-Jones who had been assisting me greatly with the research into my Uncles service there. Each year they hold a reunion at the base hosted by the American Air Force that now operates from there. Sadly, despite still getting new members, the numbers are dwindling with each passing year.

At the first reunion I attended, I was so proud to meet those gallant men who had served with the squadrons throughout the war and who had survived to reminisce and recount their tales with their old pals, some from all over the world. When they talk together, it is as though it all happened only yesterday.

Martyn had been arranging to honour the crew of the last Lancaster lost on active service with XV squadron with the planting of a tree and erection of a small plaque. The crew had taken off from Mildenhall fully laden and had suffered engine failure almost immediately. They crashed and exploded in forested land near Mundford, Norfolk. By a further strange coincidence, the bomb-aimer was a lad from the Isle of Wight. Martyn asked if I would help him and take part in the eventual small ceremony that would be held at the crash site. I was proud and privileged to agree to his request. As a special thank you for my assistance in preparing the plaque, I was allowed to include the name of Geoff at the bottom.

On the day, we duly planted the tree and erected the plaque before the assembled squadron members, some of whom had been friends with the crew. In a moving ceremony conducted by Squadron Leader Bob Munns DFC that accompanied this I was asked to read a single, poignant, verse from a poem written by a squadron member, who also attended the ceremony.

Following the ceremony some of us returned to the bar at the 'Bird in Hand' pub, a regular haunt of many a squadron member. It still retains much of its wartime feel and one can only wonder at the memories the bricks and timber of its construction hold.

Those of us who live today can give thanks to these people, who like Geoff gave their lives freely that we might live in a world free of the tyranny they strove to destroy. Many, like me, cannot comprehend the scale of the sacrifice that they made for us. Only those who survive today, who lived and experienced the terrors of that time, can truly express the feelings and emotions that they endured. I have tried, with the help of some of these people; to describe the life of just one ordinary soul, but this should be a tribute to them all.

BELOW 2 Photographs from the 1999-plaque ceremony.



CHAPTER EIGHT

August 2002

Unable to leave the research without attempting to locate the crash site with absolute certainty, in 2002 I embarked on a final determined effort to satisfy that goal. It began with an attempt to map the route that had been followed by the raid on Trappes and therefore the route taken by LM121 and her crew. By using an ordinary road map of northern France and the details contained on the loss card for LM121, I was able to, inaccurately, draw out the route. The known crash site i.e. 1Km west of Lormaison (also on the loss card) was not on the lines that I had drawn. So, armed with the information I had I went along to the local airport to, initially, see if they had any maps of the area and perhaps correct any errors I had made. Luckily, one of the local flying club managers is an aviation history enthusiast and with the added benefit of modern technology and the co-ordinates on the loss record card, we were able to plot the route with absolute accuracy. It still did not pass over Lormaison, which is some 6 miles north of the route thus discovered. When I later received the details for the ND926 crash it would appear that, at least these two aircraft were somewhat to the north of their designated track by about the same distance. There are a couple of possible reasons for this.

One possibility is that they had both pulled away to the north when attacked by the night fighter. In the case of ND926, which was attacked more than once, this may be the case. In its efforts to evade the night fighter, the bomber may have strayed well off course. For LM121 and her crew, nobody will ever know. From eyewitness accounts, LM121 was a flaming mass; travelling almost due west just before it crashed. It has been impossible to tell if any control was attributable to the pilot by then. ND926 blew up in the air and so the wreckage was scattered across farmland between the two villages of Porcheaux and la Houssoye. These villages lie north and south of an almost parallel track that the two aircraft appear to have followed.

The second option follows on from this point. With both of these aircraft being shutdown in a short space of time to the north of the expected route, they may have both been slightly off course due to wind drift. The weather forecast shows that there may have been some wind over the continent that was blowing them slightly to the north of the route they should have followed. Which ever of these two possibilities is the case, it was now obvious that neither aircraft was on its true course when they met their fates. Although to be 6 miles off was probably not too bad with their next turning point only a short distance away.

Having decided that both aircraft were off track, albeit slightly, we set about plotting exactly where 1Km west of Lormaison would be on the ground. From the road and air maps available it was almost certainly going to be where the A16 from Amiens to Paris passed the village on the western side. Now I felt sure that I would be able to visit and photograph the spot when my wife and I were on our holiday in the region. With just over 1 week to go I was checking on some information that I had acquired from the Australian records in Canberra when I discovered that in the case of Frank Reid, the Australians believed that it was ND926 that had crashed at Lormaison. They even quoted the names of the landowner, a Monsieur Postolle, who was the village mayor at the time and the name of Monsieur Letot who had taken away the

wreckage of the Lancaster. Some more frantic detective work was called for if we were to discover the truth after all.

Back to the Internet, e-mails and telephone to attempt in the short time now available, to sort out the muddle. It was soon clear that some errors had crept in during the passage of time. It was just a few days before I learned that ND926 had blown up in mid air, and was promised a copy of her loss record to confirm this fact. Slightly more confident now, I checked more of the Australian records that revealed the mix up over the crew burials at Beauvais. These were to account for the fact that Frank Reid is buried beside the six crew of ND926 and not with his own crew. It also raised the question of where was the seventh member of this other Lancaster crew. Maybe we would find the answers on our trip.

Armed with all these facts and almost certain we would be heading for the correct spot in France we set out on our holiday. We were taking another rose, called Remembrance, to plant in the cemetery just, in case the previous one had not survived. On arrival in Beauvais, the cemetery was the first port of call, it was a hot day and we needed to get the rose in the ground and watered in. We then planned to return throughout the holiday and water it well, as on the previous occasion this had not been possible. The results of our previous labours were obvious; the original rose had not survived.

It was not until Sunday 11th August that we visited the Lormaison area to try to discover and photograph the site where LM121 'C Charlie' had crashed. I took with us all the information I had managed to gather, including the names of the landowner and wreckage remover as supplied in the Australian records. Finding the village was no problem and we drove into the village from the north-east to a crossroad junction in what appeared to be the centre. Here we turned right, being almost westerly, and began to watch the odometer click round in 10^{ths} of miles as we left the village. Sure enough, as we came to six 10^{ths} we began to cross a motorway bridge. Modern technology and old records had come together to put us in the correct location.

We stopped at the far end of the bridge and got out to look around. There appeared to be some large indentations in the ground on either side of the bridge but they did not look very old, they contained quite recent vegetation and small trees. In fact, the whole area close to the bridge looked quite new. Never the less, I walked back across the bridge to the village end and took a series of panoramic shots of the whole scene. The village was clearly visible across the gently rolling countryside, as it was set atop the next crest. Having completed a circle of shots, in which I hoped the crash site and the farm of Monsieur Postolle were visible, I returned to the car. If the investigation netted nothing else, I felt sure that somewhere in those 8-10 shots the reason for our visit must surely lie. We then drove on a little way further west before returning towards the centre of the village. Now I hoped to find La Mairie (Town Hall) and locate the farm so that we would be able to return another day to ask questions. The village had seemed very quiet and deserted when we first drove through, but hopefully we would find somebody to ask.

It was at this point that we noticed, for the first time, a small cemetery on the right of the road on the very outskirts of the village. Taking this to be the one where the crew had originally been laid to rest following the crash, we pulled over and I left the car and opening the iron gates, went inside. It was only a small walled area and it was immediately obvious that there would not be signs, from almost 60 years ago, of any

disturbance here. Returning to the car, I was suddenly struck by the thought that maybe either Monsieur's Postolle or Letot may be buried here. Monsieur Postolle in particular because I knew he had been the mayor of the village during the war and had owned a farm here. My wife joined me in the cemetery, were we began to search all the headstones and tombstones for either name. It was only a short time before Debbie spotted the name of Monsieur André Postolle on a large black stone against the far wall of the cemetery. According to the plaques displayed on it, he had died on 12th June 1972, which was over 30 years ago. Would any family still be around to contact? A further search failed to find any signs of a Monsieur Letot grave. Again we returned to the car, at least we had located one of the two gentlemen mentioned in the records. We prepared to drive away, to find the Town Hall and then return to our hotel. As we did so, a woman was seen approaching from the village and on yet another impulse I turned off the engine and got out to meet her. At this juncture, I should point out that neither my wife nor I speak anything but 'school day' French and that was sometime ago.

We greeted each other with the normal pleasantries and then I began to explain what I was looking for. Sadly, her English was at least as bad as my French was, but we both struggled on. At the name of Postolle, she solemnly beckoned me towards the cemetery gates. I said that I was aware that Monsieur Postolle was buried there, but I was searching for any living relatives, were there any in the village? Again she understood and pointed towards the village.

"Oui"

was the reply.

"Monsieur Bernard..."

and motioned towards 'l'église' (the church), which was visible a short distance away. I began to wonder if his relative might be the vicar. There seemed to be more to it than that, so I asked her to show us where she meant. She willingly joined us in our car and we set off the short distance to the church, here she indicated that we should drive past, so my first thoughts were not correct. At the next road junction she indicated that we drive into, what was obviously, a farmyard. Here we were greeted by a slightly overweight and noisy but obviously not aggressive golden Labrador. Our new found guide got out and ushered us to do the same, leading the way to the door of the house. She rang the bell and when the door was answered she made the initial introductions to a young lady. She turned and called into the house and a man she introduced as Monsieur Bernard Postolle came to the door. I began again in my faltering French to explain about the Lancaster crash and the research I was doing into my Uncles death. Bernard spoke very little English but with the aid of a letter I had translated into French, his two daughters and the little of each other's language we all knew, it became possible to understand the reason for our visit and why we were seeking this information. Bernard began to explain what he knew.

He told us that he had been seven years old on the night it happened. The bomber was heard being shotdown some distance away. He had joined others outside to watch as it came tumbling from the sky. Finally, it had been seen coming down from an eastern direction, passing just south of the farm over the German fuel dump that had been created in the fields on that side of the farmyard. The bomber eventually crashed and exploded on the gently rising ground some 750 metres further west. Many of the villagers began to rush towards the crash site in a vain attempt to help any survivors. There was a large and active resistance organisation in the area and they hoped to spirit away anybody who may have survived. Sadly, as we now know, there were no survivors, but at the time there must have seemed some hope. The

German garrison, who were billeted throughout the village, using the magnificent Town Hall as their Headquarters, was obviously aware that the villagers might take away any survivors and reacted just as swiftly to stop any of them reaching the point of impact. Armed military then herded all the French people back into the village and searched to make sure they were not hiding a survivor amongst them. Bernard's father, being the mayor of the village, had remonstrated with the German Commanding Officer and was eventually allowed to return, with the German, to the crash site. This was, however, sometime after the bodies of the crew had been removed. The coffins containing the remains had later been buried, by the German military, in the village cemetery.

The story followed very closely that told in the Australian records and it was obvious that we were talking to an eyewitness to the events of 1st June 1944. We then asked some questions regarding Monsieur Letot. Who had he been? What part had he played in the proceedings? Why he is not buried in the cemetery?

It transpires that Monsieur Letot was the area 'scrap metal man'. He was instructed by the Germans to recover the wreckage, which they would then send back to Germany for recycling into their own armaments. He had been a resident of Méru and this accounted for the fact that he was not buried in the local cemetery. We then enquired if he had any children whom we might speak to. Unfortunately, although his wife was the area mid-wife, they were unable to have any children of their own. There would be no further enquiries possible in that direction.

Bernard offered to take us out to the field and show us the point where the aircraft had finally come to rest. We would not be able to reach the exact point as the field was planted with maize, but he could show us more exactly. Would we mind waiting just a little while for him to make some telephone calls and then he would drive us out there. Whilst we waited, Dominique Magnier arrived at the house. He is the son-in-law of Bernard, being married to Bernard's daughter Myriam, the lady who had first met us at the door. He was interested to hear about our search and has since provided some information supplied to him by his father.

On the morning after the crash had happened, Monsieur Magnier senior had travelled from his home in Méru to Lormaison to visit the crash site of the aircraft he had seen shot-down during the night. He had taken a camera with him, but was not allowed, by the Germans, to take any photographs. He did, however, manage to pick up a few small articles of debris. During a subsequent house move, these pieces have been lost.

Bernard returned from his telephoning to tell us that his cousin Michel Doutreleau might also have some interesting information for us. We would first go and look at the field and then return to pick up Dominique and drive to Michel's farm in nearby Hénonville. Bernard's other daughter, Florence, was to accompany us out to the fields and assist with the translations, which were becoming slightly easier as time passed. As we drove out of the farm and village back towards the bridge on which we had stood, Bernard explained that there was no evidence at all to see even at the motorway edge. Monsieur Letot had effectively cleared the area in 1944. Then, seven to eight years ago, during the building of the A16, the contractors had unearthed an unexploded bomb, a Merlin engine and various parts of the fuselage! The bomb was successfully made safe by the French military and the wreckage was removed to allow the construction to be continued. He had no idea what had become

of the aircraft pieces, he believed they were almost certainly scrapped. As we approached the bridge, Bernard swung off the road and down the motorway service access road on the left-hand side and stopped. We all got out and he pointed to the centre of the low tree line visible at the horizon. It had been there that the Lancaster had finally and fatally returned to earth.

BELOW A photograph of Monsieur Bernard Postolle (on the right) and the author beside the field where LM121 crashed. The tree line mentioned in the text is visible behind the pair. The crash was at the tree line just to the right of M. Postolle. The lower picture shows the Amiens to Paris (A16) behind the trees.



We returned to the farm via the, closed, Town Hall. Once inside the grounds of this impressive building, it was not difficult to imagine the sound of jackbooted Germans

parading around on the gravel forecourt. One almost expected to be challenged in German as we walked around to the front of the building to where, today, the French flag hung proudly where so many years ago the Swastika would have dangled.

BELOW A photograph of the imposing Town Hall building in Lormaison



Following this little excursion we returned to the farm just across the road from the Town Hall where we thanked Florence for her assistance with the translations and said: - "Au revoir". We collected Dominique for the next part of this unexpected but extremely interesting, guided tour. We were going to be taken to the village of Hénonville, some 6Kms away to the south-east. This is where Bernard's cousin Michel Doutréleau owned a farm and he was expecting us. It was almost certain that he had some information regarding the events on the night of 31st May/1st June 1944. One the way, Dominique began to explain about another crash that had happened outside the gates of Michel's farm and about a memorial that had been erected there in honour of the American crew. It had been a Boeing B17 Flying Fortress named 'Maid to please' of the 447th Bomb Group based at Rattlesden, Suffolk. It had been shutdown on its very first operation and ended up crashing about 50 metres from the gates to the farm. Four of the crew had died, two more were injured but the remainder survived with few injuries, most being captured by the Germans. With the aid of the farm workers and a resistance group called 'Alsace' one crew member had made his escape across France to Spain. From there he had caught a boat that eventually returned him to England.

As we approached the farm, Bernard pulled off the road and indicated the replica B17 propeller that now stands over the monument which is a plaque inscribed with the names of the crew.

Below. The American Memorial outside Michel's farm.



We then got back into the car and were driven the short distance into an impressive walled farmyard containing a huge duck pond, 100's of ducks, a large dovecote and as many pigeons. Michel came out to greet us all, but appeared somewhat guarded as Bernard and Dominique began the explanations. He then turned to me and asked who it was I was enquiring about and what was his relationship to me. I gave the same reasons and quoted from the same letter that I had used when explaining our

visit to the Postolle family. This seemed to satisfy him and we were all ushered into a large room where an enormous wood fire burned in an equally large fireplace. There were two women occupants of the room, but neither of them was introduced to us. We all sat down and began to discuss what each of us knew about the wartime events.

Michel produced some records (in French) that indicated that both LM121 and ND926 had been the 7th and 8th victims of Fritz Söthe. Michel had also been seven years old on the night it all happened. He said that many raids, both day and night, were over flying this general area. By day there were usually some 1000 American planes and by night between 300 and 500 British bombers flying over. There had been around 300 allied aircraft shot down in the locality from all this aerial activity throughout the war. The aerial armadas became even more concentrated in the period running up to and following D-Day when the majority of raids were to targets in France and in particular the infrastructure in the hinterland of the invasion beaches. Just further to the place we now sat there was a V1 manufacturing site. This had been bombed remorselessly until it had been totally destroyed. The Germans had been firing around 340 a day of these unguided flying bombs at England following the allied landings on the beaches at Normandy.

On the night in question Michel remembered hearing the aircraft coming over and had gone outside when the sound of shooting had been heard. He was unsure how the aircraft had been shot down, but was fairly sure the German aircraft was a Messerschmitt by its engine noise. He remembered the time as being about 0100 French time and the fact that both aircraft were shotdown in such a short space of time, recorded as four minutes in all the available records. This finally confirmed all the timings, with LM121 and ND926 both taking off from Mildenhall just before midnight British time. This would have been just before 2300 French time. They had both taken approximately 2 hours to reach the point when they had come into contact with the nightfighter making the French time approximately 0100. With the German records being adjusted to the British time, the two claims for Fritz Söthe were made at 0150 and 0154 that night.

We mentioned that we had planned to visit a small aviation museum at nearby Warluis; Michel said that this was a good idea as they had many items from the war that may be of interest. Michel said he knew (as he seemed to know everybody in the locality personally) the director and went to telephone him. When he returned, he said that as it was now getting into the late afternoon he had arranged to bring 'his friends from England' to the museum on the Monday. He would meet us at our hotel and escort us around. He was sure we would find some useful items there. So with this arrangement made, it was time to bid farewell to Michel and his family and head back to Lormaison. Bernard drove us back to his farm where his daughter Myriam (Dominique's wife) invited us in for a drink before we returned to the hotel. We were sad when we finally said our goodbyes as we had spent a most enjoyable and interesting, if somewhat tiring (because of the language difficulties), afternoon with such wonderful hosts. We hoped we would meet again.

The following day we were met by Michel who insisted he drove us out to the aircraft museum. A short journey followed during which we passed the memorial to the crash of the R101 airship. This had come down on the outskirts of Beauvais in 1930. We were greeted by the curator, who again spoke no English. He tried extremely hard to make himself understood by talking slowly most of the time. The museum was split into various sections for French, British, American and German exhibits. All aspects

of the war in the region were well documented with some very good photographs of the day to show life under the German occupation. There were many aircraft parts in the British section (none from the crash at Lormaison) and pictures of military burials conducted by the Germans. It was explained that the German Military Commander in the region gave every allied fatality this same honour. Geoff and the crew would have been afforded this ceremony when they had been laid to rest at Lormaison.

Finally, we were shown, what was obviously, a wartime propaganda film about a Free French Halifax squadron attack. Near the end, there were pictures of other aircraft on the 'raid' and these included Lancaster's sporting the LS code of XV Squadron! Another strange coincidence. We set off from the museum and as we drove the short distance back to the hotel, I offered to take Michel to the cemetery and show him the graves. He had never been before and we were pleased that we could show him some of the evidence in our search. As we eventually bade farewell to Michel in the car park of the hotel, we knew we had made many new friends here in France and would be keeping in touch with many of them. After another thoroughly enjoyable afternoon, we were not, however, sorry to return to the hotel. All this translating was hard work and had made the research all the more difficult. We vowed we would take French lessons on our return to England in an effort to do better next time.

And there would be a next time. Michel and Bernard had begun to discuss the possibility of erecting a memorial to what they had begun to call "Notre Lancaster"; our Lancaster. The organisation necessary, across the miles, looked a difficult proposition, but their enthusiasm and sincerity was overwhelming. There would be a ceremony!

Despite the language problem I was sure that we had gained all the information that had been lacking before the trip. Piecing all that we now knew together, it is most likely that ND926 was the first to fall victim. This aircraft had set off first and had fallen furthest west of the two victims. German records give this same indication with the times and relative positions. Having shotdown this aircraft, Fritz must have found LM121 almost immediately, by whatever means, and struck his second fatal blow of the night. It is possible that the Germans had saturated this raid with nightfighters because 4 of the six aircraft lost by Bomber Command that night were shotdown on this single operation. This single raid had therefore suffered a loss rate of 1.8%, with the whole night's operations coming out at less than 1%. Compared with the wartime average of 4.5% this was not very high. It was, however, disastrous in a number of respects. Mildenhall lost three of the four aircraft shotdown on the raid (LL782, another 622 Squadron aircraft also being lost), making a 10% loss rate for that base. The 4th was LL936 of 115 Squadron. It robbed the world of many brave young men who had not lived to see the fruits of their labours. Families across the globe had sadly lost one of their relatives and friendships had been broken forever.

On a really personal note, I would have loved to know my namesake. To know whether he could have run that small holding, somewhere on the Isle of Wight. Would all the dreams he had, whilst sitting beneath the spluttering gas lamps in front of the fire in that little cottage at Gunville, have come true?

By completing this research I feel I have been able to answer a lot more than just these questions and come to know the man who I only knew as Uncle Geoff. I'm sure he was the sort of person who could have made any dream come true.

Chapter 9

Epilogue

Within weeks of returning from our holiday I was contacted by Dominique Magnier. He had been given the task of arranging and co-ordinating a ceremony. He was tasked with ensuring that the Lancaster and crew would be permanently remembered. At that time he was just beginning and asked if I would be prepared to be involved. "Maybe you could get some family interest", he simply asked.

Michel Doutreleau had shown us some pictures of the American Memorial ceremony when we had been in France. From these, it had been possible to see that it was not a small ceremony that was planned. Dominique mentioned that Michel would be the driving force behind what was being put together. He was very mindful of the frailties of man and, although it would be the 60th anniversary of the crash in 2004, was pushing for the ceremony to be arranged for the 31st May 2003. This would be a good weekend in France as it was a holiday when more people would be available and it fell on a Saturday. So there it was a simple task; find family, friends and officials to attend in about 10 months time. Dominique would be the French organiser translator, catalyst and go between who would bring it all together. The first task for him was to get a suitable memorial stone that would be erected in the crew's honour.

For me it was time to put in some very determined detective work. No longer could this just be about my Uncle and my search for what happened to him. He had served and died with a crew of six others and they must all have family, somewhere. Then there were the officials whom I might be able to get to attend. Where did one start with something like this.

The first part was perhaps the easiest. They had served in the RAF, so contacting them first seemed a good idea. Letters to The Air Ministry, the RAF, the RAFA, and the current XV Squadron and for good measure, the Royal British Legion were despatched.

There were three nationalities in the crew so letters went to the 3 Embassies, British, Australian and New Zealand.

But most important of all, were there any relatives still alive? I knew my Dad would love to attend, but was already feeling too frail to make such a journey at the age of 81, so what would others be like? How was I to find them around the globe?

I contacted the Archives of the Australian and New Zealand Air Forces and their National Archives and was pleased to get promising replies with advice on contacting the newspapers. Also a throw away line that '....a lot of Australians do not move around a lot, the relatives may well still live in or near where the records for 1944 gave their addresses'. What a bit of luck, I had found an International Telephone directory on the Internet and could look up names, addresses and numbers from that.

Starting with the more unusual names Dombrain (as I knew it then) and Nystrom I picked my time carefully and picked up the phone. Bingo! The first phone call gets me in touch with, of all people, a guy named Geoff. He was Geoff Dombrain to be

more precise, a cousin of the lost pilot. He was amazed that I had managed to find him and that I knew so much. He said that Peter had a sister and that he would make contact with her and we would stay in touch. It wasn't long before I was in contact with Mrs June Schwarz. She was very enthusiastic and informative about her brother. She had visited the grave sometime before and had relatives in England whom she visited. She was sure they would attend with her if all the arrangements could be brought together. June pointed out that the RAF had got Peter's name wrong. They couldn't, it appears, deal with apostrophe in his name and so he had become Dombain, It should have been D'Ombain and she asked that I put that in the story.

Buoyed up by this success I moved to the next name on the list; Nystrom. This was too easy, with another phone call I had found someone related to him too. There was a large family who needed to be contacted, but most used e-mail so I was soon in contact with many. Much information changed hands, but they were afraid, even at this early stage, that none of them would be able to make the journey. A sad fact, but in the end, their thoughts were with us on the day. I was able to get them copies of a video record my wife made of the whole weekend.

Next came Long and Reid. A different pattern began to appear. There were many more to choose from and I began to get blank replies to my question of "do you have a relative who served with the RAF during the war and was killed in action?" Now there were quite a few nos. Then I got a contact by e-mail from my newspaper and magazine adverts for information. The guy was Peter Reid who said his father was a brother of Frank, the tail gunner. He had been speaking to his Dad and they would very much like to attend. Peter very much wanted to bring his son along too; he thought it would be wonderful educational tour for him. Peter had to visit a ball bearing factory in Schweinfurt on business, so they would tie it all together. (He added that he would not tell the Germans what the rest of his European tour was to involve after what the RAF and USAAF had done to the factory and town during the war!)

Then I again struck lucky on the Australian telephones. One more call found Bernie Long, brother of Arthur Stephen Long, the navigator and Geoff's best friend on the crew. He was absolutely gobsmacked to be contacted and couldn't believe what I could tell him from the Australian Archives, much of which he didn't know. He told me that, like others I had spoken to, he had been across to the grave of his brother before, but knew nothing of the crash site. They had a sister who had married another navigator from the squadron. They had another brother, Gordon, another navigator, who served with 115 Squadron. He was lost on New Years Day 1945 over Germany, sadly to friendly fire from an American AA unit. He was hoping to combine a visit to Gordon's grave, accompanied by his sister Audrey and niece, with the ceremony at Lormaison. He told me once that Steve, as he was known, had trained for the air force at some stage with a certain Gough Whitlam who was eventually to become Premier of Australia.

That was all the Australian crew families found and we knew who was attending and who was not. It was still six months till the ceremony and the things were going well. The RAF was going to send 2 Tornado crews over. There was going to be representation from The Australian Air Attaché in Paris and his counter part from the New Zealand Embassy in London. The RAFA Branch in Paris was going to send some representatives and flag bearers. We would have a good official and family representation for the crew. They would not be forgotten. Now to the others.

Whilst all this was going on, I was having no luck contacting what I had thought would be the easiest, family to find, that of Englishman Len Gearing. No results had come back from any of my pleas in magazines and on websites for information. So I contacted the RAF records people who had given me Geoff's records and asked for their help. They agreed to send a letter, which I should write, to the last known address of the family. I was grateful and hopeful that, like the Australians, English people did not move around too much. I waited, there was to be no quick response. Then came the strangest phone call of all. One Sunday morning the telephone rang and a voice said:

"Is that Mr Reynolds, Mr Geoff Reynolds, I believe you're looking for me."

I said:

"That depends on who you might be"

"I'm Bert Gearing."

Was the reply. I nearly fell over.

He explained that the PMA had sent my letter out to the address they had on their records. The people there knew the family had moved many years before and seemed to remember the area they had moved to. They got a telephone directory out and began phoning around, much like I had been doing in Australia. Their memory had served them well and they contacted Bert, They told him they had an official looking letter that they thought he ought to see. He immediately got in his car and, after a round trip of some 40 miles had retrieved the letter. On opening it, he had got on the phone straight away. He and his brother had both been in the RAF at the very end and after the war. They had done quite a lot of research about their brother, but knew few of the facts surrounding the loss. Len had worked for the Ford Motor company in Dagenham before volunteering for the RAF as an engineer. He trained at St Athan in Cornwall before joining the crew. He was a very talented footballer, playing for Dagenham and had played with Alf Ramsey long before he was the England manager and became a Sir. Bert and brother Don, with their wives had visited the grave in Beauvais many times. They were keen to attend for this ceremony.

Whilst bashing the telephone, I tried the same system for the New Zealander Jamieson. This also brought blank replies, but I had another lead from their records. It appeared that Laurence had moved with his parents from Shetland when very young. Maybe there was someone there who knew him. I placed an article in the newspaper there.

A phone call from the Shetland Islands began to fill in the story of the Jamieson family. I was given names and details that eventually, but too late for them to attend, led to Laurence's brother, John in New Zealand and his sister Kathryn in Australia. I was also told of more relatives in this country. They were being contacted and would then contact me to make arrangements to attend. It transpired that 2nd cousins of Laurence lived in England and they made arrangements in the last few weeks before the ceremony to attend. Now all the crew were accounted for. Cousins of Geoff were going to be with me at the ceremony. Sadly, my Father's health prevented his attendance.

Everyone that I had spoken to so far and many of their other family members were very helpful over time with more information about their lost relatives and their families. Without their help I would have had little to write about the other crew members. We have remained friends ever since despite the distances involved. I had found and spoken to more members of my own family than I knew existed. Success.

Now all of us attendees needed a place to stay and congregate before the ceremony. Despite taking French lessons at the local adult education centre, we still weren't up to sorting out all the needs of those who would be attending. I could give travel information based on our prior visits and maps to find places, but that was about the best I could do. Despite very kind offers of accommodation from families in Lormaison, everyone was a little concerned about the language difficulties this might present. Some of the overseas visitors chose to book their own accommodation as it would be part of a European tour or holiday visit to family. Others needed ideas of hotels and transport in the area. I called upon the services of a French speaking friend to book us into a hotel and book a meal for everybody. He also helped me prepare a speech to be delivered at the ceremony outlining why we were all there. It was to be given in French and English and took a great deal of practice. (Eventually, to ensure it was delivered correctly, I cheated and had it written phonetically!)

It was decided that everybody should make their own individual travel arrangements to Beauvais. We should then meet all those who could make it by the day before the ceremony in the Military cemetery of Marissel at 1600 in the afternoon. Then everyone would meet up at the Campanile Hotel where we and others had booked in for a set meal. It would be the first time ever that crew relatives and representatives ever met. My wife and I were intrigued to see how things would progress from there. We were going to video as much as possible and get comments from the assembled group.

My wife and I travelled out early; we had some details to sort out with Dominique and wanted to be sure we knew exactly what was happening. We wanted everything to go well. It had taken a lot of work to get to this stage and it HAD to go well.

We needn't have worried. Dominique had done a wonderful job at his end. Everything was in place and it was all set. Even the weather was looking set to be a lovely warm day. Thank goodness, as it was all in the open air!

On the Friday I met my relatives from the train station and, after freshening up at the hotel we made our way to the cemetery in Beauvais. We were accompanied by Wing Commander Grant Crosland and family and Bert and Don Gearing with their wives. We had some time in the cemetery taking pictures at the allotted time before anyone else appeared. We were eventually joined by Don Reid, his son and grandson who had been travelling across from Germany following their trip to Schweinfurt. Then Peter D'Ombra's sister arrived with her family travelling companions. We took as many pictures as possible and recorded the event for posterity.

Unfortunately and unknown at the time Bernie Long and his sister were delayed because their hire car had broken down. They were also coming in from Belgium having been to visit the grave of their other brother Gordon at the Leopoldsburg War Cemetery, Limburg. We only found this out when we all arrived back at the hotel for the meal. A message was waiting for me there. (Bernie and co. eventually arrived at the ceremony the following day having re-jigged their plans and arrangements to compensate for the car problem.)

Meanwhile, everyone else congregated in the room set aside by the hotel for the meeting and meal. Introductions were made all around and drink and talk flowed freely. My wife and I tried to go round and get a few words from all those who had made it to the dinner. It was an electric atmosphere, and so much talk, it was hard to

hear the replies! All these folk who had never met before gelled in a short space of time; brought together by the sad events of 64 years previous and the act of remembrance together the following day.

In a way we shouldn't have been surprised. At an O.T.U in Oxfordshire in October 1943, many young men were wandering about in a hanger trying to find mates to form a crew. Geoff, Peter, Steve, Laurence and Frank all found each other. As far as I or any other relative can tell they were a happy crew together. And when they moved to the H.C.U., they formed another friendship with Len. Finally at the Squadron they worked with a number of gunners, before Stan joined them on that last operation. They had to get on together. Only team work would get them through. Only an act of fate was to ensure they were together for ever. No wonder then that the family of the crew members should all get on so well.

Saturday 31st May 2003 did indeed dawn bright and clear. In fact a very hot day was eventually in prospect. Most people made their own way to the little graveyard in Lormaison. As the allotted hour of 1430 came along we all took our places on the raised dais or in the invited guest seats facing the west wall. There, covered in a white sheet, stood the stone that the people of Lormaison had erected to the crew of the Lancaster.

Dominique welcomed everybody to the ceremony (in English and French) and then I gave my small speech about the reasons why we were all assembled that day (in French and English). There followed an address by the President of the Lormaison Veterans Association, Roger Sibilleau, about the act of remembrance and the memory of these 7 young men.

A wreath party of the main representatives was then assembled before the monument and it was uncovered for all to see. It was magnificent, black marble with the writing etched out and in gold. Each representative then went forward in turn to lay a wreath at the foot of the stone. After the salute, we returned to the dais.

The Mayor of Lormaison, Monsieur Jean Pierre Lagny, then gave his speech. I had been sent a copy and had prepared (as requested) an English version that I then read to the assembled guests. In his address Monsieur Lagny quoted Sir Winston Churchill when he had said; "I have nothing to offer you other than blood sweat and tears," as he encouraged the people to volunteer to defeat the Nazi scourge in Europe. He spoke of the volunteers from all over the world who came to that call and named all the crew. He spoke of their young age and the fact that they knew the chance of survival was slim. But still, they volunteered and went about their jobs with dedication and determination. Finally he expressed the gratitude and genuine recognition of the sacrifices made by these young men from himself and the people of Lormaison to the relatives present.

The whole cemetery then held a one minute silence.

There followed further speeches from Wing Commander Grant Crosland representing the Royal New Zealand Air Force and Laurence Jamieson in particular. The New Zealand flag was raised to the sound of their national anthem being sung in English and Maori. June Schwarz gave a very moving speech on behalf of her brother and the Australian crew. The Australian flag was raised to the accompaniment of their national anthem. Then Squadron Leader Andy Burton,

representing XV Squadron, the RAF and the English crew, rose and spoke of the international make up of the crew and its similarity with today's XV Squadron makeup which was a very an International outfit. The national anthem was played as the Union flag was raised. Dominique translated all these speeches into French for the assembled dignitaries and villagers.

A bugler then sounded the Last Post before Monsieur Alain Letellier, Consular General of the Canton of Méru and Monsieur Raphaël Le Mahaute, representing the French Government in Oise district, finished the speeches and the strident sounds of the Marseillaise rang out as the French flag was hoisted high.

One white dove of peace was released and then seven more, representing the lost airmen, flew into the sky, circled around and made off to their loft. All the standard bearers then saluted the memorial and departed the immediate area.

With the withdrawal of the standards, the ceremony ended with an invitation from the mayor to join him in a marquee on the lawns behind the Town Hall for a champagne reception. So after the necessary pictures had been taken, the whole throng, numbering some 250 people made our way across the village to the Town Hall. There was much champagne on offer and an exceptional buffet which everybody enjoyed. Villagers came up with stories of the crash, of machine guns from the Lancaster being buried in gardens. The Germans refusal of assistance from the villagers for fear they might smuggle away a survivor. Where there were language difficulties, there was usually someone who could help translate and we all learned a lot about the wartime in occupied Lormaison.

Then Monsieur Alain Ducreux came to me with the pictures of the parts found during the road building in 1997. He presented Bernard Postolle with one of the pieces he had managed to save at that time. It looked like a piece of a spinner, minus all its paint and shined and mounted. (Back home, the pictures were taken to the airfield at East Kirby where the only other working Lancaster in England can be found. The chief engineer there identified the parts in the picture as coming from the starboard wing. He was able to show me the tie down handle under the wing of their aircraft.)

As the crowds drifted away I was offered more champagne by Dominique to drink a toast to a very successful day. I declined because I said I thought I had already had a bit too much. He said not to worry; "most of the Gendarmes are here, there is no one out there to catch you if you have!" Dominique said that Bernard had had a Union flag placed out in the field where the plane crashed and he was happy to accompany anyone out there if they wished. Most of the relatives were pleased to get this opportunity and more photos were taken in the field for everyone's records.

The day finished with the suggestion of a meal at a restaurant. Dominique got his wife Miriam to make a booking for the evening. Those of us who attended had a wonderful time and it was a fitting end to a super tribute to the crew from us all.

Post Script. In 2006 I returned to East Kirby and was privileged to have a taxi run in the Lancaster. It was an emotional experience as I got to occupy the various positions that our crew would have used. Most emotional of all was to sit where Geoff sat and twiddle the knobs on the radio. May their memories live long in our hearts and their sacrifice never be forgotten.

Geoff Reynolds 2008