

"FOR YOU: THE WAR IS OVER"
As Remembered By: Stan Keirle

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Stan Keirle
11th December 1992.

CHAPTER 1
OPERATIONS 100 & 550 SQUADRONS, WALTHAM.

Our first job after joining 100 Squadron was to be driven to Binbrook to ferry a new replacement aircraft back to Waltham, at the same time, carry out an airtest to ensure that there were no major snags in the aircraft itself or it's equipment.

The next day 23rd November 1943, we were informed that we were now members of "C" Flight and subsequently were briefed for our first operation and "Jeff's" thirteenth. Am not sure now whether we had been allocated our mid upper gunner or not at this point but certainly, we did not as yet have our own Flight Engineer. It was Berlin, a major target for the first op, oh well, might as well get a big one under our belt to start with!

As it happened, the aircraft was somewhat faulty and we were only able to attain sixteen thousand feet at the enemy coast with little likelihood of gaining more, so, it was decided to abort the trip and return to base. The "Cookie" and incendiaries were dropped over the North Sea and we touched down at Waltham after a frustrating flight of just over three hours.

On the Twentyfifth of November, 550 Squadron was formed out of "C" Flight, 100 Squadron and continued to operate from Waltham until 3rd January 1944.

We flew on the first operation of 550 Squadron and our own first (Jeffs thirteenth) on 26th November, just one day after the Squadron was formed, to Berlin a trip of exactly eight hours for us.

On the 28th and 29th, we were allocated cross country exercises which lasted for four and a half hours each.

On the night of 2nd December, we were briefed for Berlin, but again, we had to turn back because we were sixteen minutes behind the last wave to cross the coast. It was almost certain that we would have been picked off had we continued into enemy territory. The reason for this fiasco was that Harold our Navigator, was flying his first Op. He was a very conscientious but very nervous type and somehow, he got himself on the wrong track and we found we were heading off to Iceland when he eventually asked me to obtain a QDM (course to steer). Obviously, he slipped up in one of his calculations but it never happened again, in fact, his navigation after that episode was superb.

That month we flew three more trips to Berlin, One to Frankfurt-on-Main and one to Leipzig on third of December. I specifically single out the Leipzig trip because an Accounting Machine Operator colleague in civvie street, was also operating from Waltham on 100 Squadron, a chap named Frank Palmer. His crew was shot down on this Leipzig trip and it was at that point that I finally came to terms with the reality that we were doing a dangerous job. Although we had lost other crews from Waltham, I don't think I had given the matter too much thought before.

We first flew in LM425 N NAN on 16th December in a thirty minute air test, thereafter, she was ours. That night we flew in N Nan to Berlin, a trip lasting seven hours and fiftyfive minutes according to my flying log book. That was a ghastly trip and subsequently became known as *Black Thursday* to all crews who flew that mission. The operation over Enemy territory went without incident, the trouble started for us about midway over the North Sea on the return journey.

On all trips, the radio operator of each aircraft listened out for *Group* messages at half past each hour, and for *Bomber Command* messages on each hour. It was the *One Group* message that came over reading something like this, "All one group aircraft, Height of cloud base six hundred feet, balloons flying at five hundred feet in the Hull & Humber areas, descend through cloud over North sea". In other words, the weather had closed in over our airfields and we were going to have a hard time to get home.

We started our descent over the North Sea and on breaking cloud, were suprised to be greeted by flak. We were directly over a convoy and the escorts were obviously shooting first and maybe would ask questions later. The skipper ordered me to fire off the colours of the day but that was not quite as easy to do as it sounds! I had been so busy (my excuse), that I had NOT replaced the cartridge I had loaded incase we were coned by searchlights over Europe with the one for the current colour code. I hastily consulted the chart, withdrew the old cartidge from the Veray pistol, loaded the new one, then fired. It made no difference whatsoever, the light flak was still streaming upwards but was falling quite short. I think that it was just warning fire, the boys in dark blue didn't like the idea at all of having someone cruising around over their heads. I'm sure if they had been really serious, their fire would have been much more accurate. Nevertheless, we took the hint and buzzed off back into the cloud. We learned later that several other crews had also been suprised in the same manner. A little later we cautiously crept downward again and broke cloud in the region of four hundred feet or so.

Arriving over the coast at just over the five hundred feet mark to avoid the balloons if any were still flying, we were still in cloud. Gently and slowly, Jeff got lower and lower. SUDDENLY, Jimmy in the tail and George in the mid upper yelled simultaneously, "Get up, we are only just above rooftops", which meant we were very low indeed over Grimsby. The skipper said later that the altimeter was reading zero at the time! Knowing where we were and not being too far from base, Jeff called for permission to land and was told that we were something like the sixth or seventh in line as far as I can remember, we were also told to steer a course of ...degrees for ...minutes and to return on the reciprocal! That was all very well but we could not see anything because we were in cloud the whole time and knew there would be aircraft all around who like us, were unable to see what was going on. We steered the given course and luckily, spotted a beacon flashing through the cloud. Reading the flashes we then knew we had an exact bearing and at that point, Jeff decided to make another effort to break cloud, keeping the beacon in sight. We saw several aircraft milling around, obviously, they too were intent on the same exercise. We broke cloud at somewhere around two hundred feet then steered a course for base. Jeff once again asked for permission to land and was given it and almost immediately we were over Waltham airfield and made a normal approach and landing in heavy, very misty conditions.

We had touched down and were about halfway down the runway, when Jimmy in the tail shouted out with some urgency, "Get off the runway quickly, there's another kite right up our tail" Without asking any questions, Jeff, swerved off the runway, then a dirty great Lanc. went whizzing by. Seemingly, the guy had spotted the runway and decided that he was going to get down come hell or highwater and had just arrived without having landing permission. He had just about enough fuel left to make the touchdown and that was all! Luckily, the point at which we went off the runway was firm ground so we were able to taxi back to dispersal without further incident. We were walking from the aircraft to the crew transport which was waiting to take us back to the crewroom when there was a tremendous sound of grinding metal followed by a flash and loud explosion. Two Lancs. had collided almost directly overhead with the loss of the fourteen chaps on board. In another incident one chap; I think he was from Waltham as far as I recall, whilst

attempting his descent apparently belly landed on a gentle rise in the landscape. When he realised what had happened, he throttled back and called it a landing and a day with nobody in the crew even scratched, but the plane was a little the worse for wear!

25 Lancasters were lost over enemy territory, 5.2 percent of the 483 Lancasters despatched. A further 29 or 6.0 percent of that force plus a Stirling from a minelaying operation were lost over or close to England due to the extremely bad weather conditions, most crashed or collided and some crews abandoned their aircraft presumably because like the guy who had landed up our tail, had run out of fuel; no one jumped from an aircraft without good reason! Total losses of 11.2 percent was a heavy toll.

Between ops., we were detailed to fly an air test of N NAN and to carry out a practice bombing exercise on the local bombing range. The two "Jefferies" and I were a bit miffed at that, the reason being that we had flown quite a lot that month and as relaxation, had planned a trip to Grimsby that evening if there were no ops., and now that was out. En-route to the bombing range, the skipper came up with the idea that we should fly down to Grove after finishing the bombing exercise.

Apparently it was just a hop, stride and jump from Grove; an American base, to his home at Wantage. Said he felt like a break and that seemed to be the only way to get one and we as a crew readily agreed. As it happened, we had two, maybe three, members of our ground crew with us on this little jaunt and they were happy to guard the aircraft whilst we were away and take it in turns to visit the PX for supplies! And so to Grove where we cadged the use of a Jeep and drove off to Jeff's home to be treated to a smashing tea by his mother. After that we strolled around the village for a while, looking up some of Jeff's friends, before making our way back to the airfield and our aircraft. Jeff managed to start the engines on the internal batteries and we headed back to Waltham but, as it was already dark, had to request the lighting of the flarepath to enable us to land. Having parked the kite, we went to our billet. Suddenly, the Tannoy burst into life and requested that F/Sgt Jeffries and crew report to..... We dallied awhile, not wanting to face the music but did in the end and Jeff explained all to the interested party and all was well after receiving a wiggling. The thing was that we had disappeared off the face of the earth, not anyone knew what had happened to us. The Observer Corps had been asked if there were any reports of crashed aircraft that afternoon and the Air-Sea Rescue people had been alerted. In fact, our absence had caused quite a catiffle! The next night we went to Berlin and the Grove incident was forgotten and became history.

On Christmas Day, Operations were scheduled, everyone was miserable about it, hoping even praying that it would be scrubbed, our hearts were just not in it. Luckily, the Ops. were cancelled and I for one, went back to the billet, took a shower, dressed in best blue, then off to enjoy serving Christmas dinner in the Airmen's Mess to the Boys and Girls who were so vital to keeping us airborne and the kites fault free as much as possible. They were a great bunch and I for one will be for ever grateful to all of them for being so dedicated, quite often under extreme weather conditions, in that winter of 43/44.

I have no recollection of New Year celebrations but I'm sure we did something about it! The next Operation was to Berlin on the night of January 2nd. We were about halfway across the North Sea when on listening out to the Group broadcast I received a message to abort the operation, to drop the payload over the sea and to proceed to an airfield in the West Country. I have forgotten which airfield it was now, think it might have been either Exeter or St. Eval. We had a crew conference as to what to do because we could not understand why the trip would have been cancelled. We were in one of the early waves this particular night so it was vital to decide what to do before

crossing the coast. The options open to us were two really; to follow the directive without further question, or, to continue and await the next Group broadcast in one hour to see if the abort message was confirmed or cancelled, but, by that time we would be deep into enemy territory. We thought it would be rather stupid to get ourselves exposed to enemy action when we had been definitely instructed to ABORT. Still somewhat mystified, we decided to carry out the orders received, so, we dropped our load and set a general course towards Devon & Cornwall.

Whilst en-route to the West Country, the next broadcast from Group CANCELLED the previous broadcast instructions and told those who had already aborted to return to base. We landed after a flight of two and a quarter hours and found that several other Squadron members had also arrived back prematurely having acted upon the radioed instructions. I do not know how many crews aborted, but it must have been quite a lot which surely caused panic stations at Group H.Q. Apparently the message should have been sent to the aircraft who were either on a mine laying trip, or, on a diversionary raid somewhere or other. There is no mention of this MESSAGE SENT IN ERROR in the BOMBER COMMAND WAR DIARIES, my assumption being that it was hushed up. I wonder how many other boo-boos received the same treatment?

The following day, 550 Squadron moved from Waltham to North Killingholme.

CHAPTER 2
550 AT NORTH KILLINGHOLME, LINCOLNSHIRE.

At 1445 hours on January 3rd, N-NAN took off from Waltham for the last time, on board were the full crew and their kit, two or three of our ground staff, their kit and sundry odd items such as personal bicycles. It would be a pity to leave without saying goodbye in the proper manner Jeff thought, so he climbed for awhile then turned around and dived at the airfield Control Tower. I was standing looking out of the astrodome at the time watching proceedings. We flew very low indeed over the tower then climbed rapidly and headed for the new home of 550.

I think some false wind speeds were recorded at Waltham that day because as we passed over the Control Tower, the rotating cups of the anemometer suddenly started to revolve at a tremendous speed! When I mentioned it over the intercomm, deep chuckles could be heard throughout the airplane. We enjoyed our flying and the reluctance to leave a cosy billet and a good base close to civilisation in Grimsby was being expressed in the beatup.

The flight to North Killingholme lasted about thirty minutes. From the air the airfield was completely bare and looked very unattractive indeed. On landing, the first impressions were confirmed, the whole place was a mudpile which obviously had been continually churned up by the construction people and their equipment. It was a completely new facility built on farmers fields way out in the wilds of nowhere in particular and open to the influence of all weathers from the North Sea with absolutely nothing between the airfield and the coast to act as a barrier. We felt and in fact were, totally exposed to the elements. Looking around we could not see any other aircraft as far as I can remember, we must have been one of the first Operational aircraft to touch down there. We were directed to a dispersal and parked N Nan and unloaded our gear. Having reported our arrival to the Admin. bods, we were allocated a Nissen Hut on a dispersed living site some way away from the airfield itself. To get to that living site we had to walk along a footpath across fields which in places were deep mud, but at least the whole crew were together in one hut with no one else to bother us in our free time. We quickly settled in and the two Jeffs and I decided we would go and investigate the local pub which we found out was in the village of South Killingholme, a mile or so up the road. We were the first aircrew from the Squadron to visit the pub and were given a great reception, drinks kept arriving from all points of the compass. One man in particular talked to us most of the evening and when the pub closed at ten o'clock, invited us to his home to have supper with his family. I am ashamed to say that I have forgotten his name but the continued kindness of the whole family to our crew during roughly three months at North Killingholme has never been nor will be forgotten. It really is simply due to the fact that I have a rotten memory as far as names are concerned and all my life I have suffered periodic embarrassment because of it. I do however know that George Upton, our mid-upper gunner visited the family after his return from being a guest of the Third Reich. He told me that, during one of the occasional lunches we had together in London during the Fifties.

Having corresponded with Charles Whitters who was mid-upper gunner in F/Sgt Maxwell's crew on 550 at the same time as we were, he told me that he had a home from home with the Williamsons of South Killingholme and still writes to their son Maurice. He also said that our skipper was well known to the family and they were sad when we failed to return. The name Williamson does ring a bell so I must find out if it was Maurice's parents who were guilty of treating us so very well back in '43!

Gradually, we and all the other crews began to settle

down and make the most of what we had. To a large extent we managed to accept the muddy underfoot conditions as normal, once we had done that, life seemed to be more acceptable than when we were continually aware of the discomfort of it. Slowly, the place became liveable and the odd evening in the mess when we were not flying helped to establish a rapport with all the other folk on the station and we found life quite pleasant at times.

On January 14th, the first operation from North Killingholme was mounted, it was to Brunswick, a trip of five and three quarter hours. During that trip we were coned by searchlights whilst over Texel. That was a most disturbing experience and one where I felt as naked as a new born baby. We jinked and dived all over the place but seemingly there was no getting rid of being focussed in the centre of several strong beams of light. The feeling is that the whole world has concentrated its gaze upon you and the only thing you can do is to twist and squirm without having any effect whatsoever on the situation. Jimmy, the rear gunner, along with many others of his ilk, had a theory that if an empty bottle was tossed out of the aircraft when one was coned by searchlights, it would simulate bombs dropping by creating a whistling effect as it approached the ground. Whether or not that was true, he always had a bottle or two in his turret just in case! On this occasion he tossed out his whole stock and ever after claimed that it was his action that got us out of the mess we were in. I remember how for the next few days he busied himself finding a fresh supply of empty bottles, with the rest of us kidding him along, but the quest was a very serious one for him.

The airfield had no electrical runway illumination at all at first, we were taking off and landing at night using Goose neck flares. Allied to this was the fact that there were no glide path indicators to assist the kite drivers with the right angle of approach. We took off on the 27th for the second trip from Killingholme and had to return early. We just couldn't gain sufficient height and I have no recollection now as to what caused it. On return to base we had to wait for the goose neck flares to be lit. On the landing approach, Jeff misjudged the angle and suddenly was face to face with the village water tower straight ahead, he somehow lifted one wing over the tower but dunked the other wingtip in the tree tops. We landed in one piece but on inspection, it was found that the main spar had been bent which necessitated repairs before we could fly N NAN again. On the night of 29th and the 30th of January we were off again to Berlin, both times in NO403 G GEORGE.

Somewhere around this time we were granted leave for which I was most grateful. I was anxious to see my father who had been desperately ill with pneumonia which for him was a very serious problem. He had been exposed to mustard gas whilst serving in France during World War One and was eventually medically discharged because of it. In the last letter from my mother, she had hinted that although he was no longer in hospital, he was not functioning properly and seemed to have fits of mental depression and acted in a disturbed way. I was quite concerned! In fact, Dad was back in hospital and I visited him as much as I could during the few days I was at home. At times he was quite lucid and we discussed many subjects but on other occasions he was unreachable. One thing he did insist on was that there was a plump cockerel in a pen at home, he gave me instructions that I was to kill it and we, the family, were to have it for our Sunday lunch. Despite living in the country all my life and having spent most of my schoolboy holidays on my Grandfather's farm, I had never been called upon to slaughter anything by hand, using a shotgun - yes; but never by hand. I looked at that strutting bird, he was so alive and alert that I just could not bring myself to tackle the old devil, so, our Sunday lunch feast had to be re-thought and the old boy continued with his lordly ways for a long time afterwards I'm told. I returned to North Killingholme with father very much on my mind but Operations, again to Berlin on February 15th and to Leipzig on the 19th, both times in JAV12 D DORIS, soon brought me back to reality.

On the night of the twentieth February, we had N NAN back for a trip to Stuttgart. On the way out to the target, one of the starboard engines caught fire and had to be shutdown. Four days later we were off to Schweinfurt, the ball bearing manufacturing centre of Germany, a trip of eight hours and ten minutes. We landed at Gransden Manor, a Canadian base as far as I recall. I think that the reason for landing away was weather over Killingholme which had turned unfriendly whilst we were away on business! We flew back to base the following morning.

North Killingholme was a satellite to Kirmington as was Elsham Wolds if I remember correctly! From time to time new aircraft were needed to replace those lost in action and they had to be ferried from Elsham Wolds, it was only a ten minute trip. It was our turn to ferry in LL747 P PETER on 27th February and LL851 V VICTOR on Ninth of March.

Had a fun day on the 14th. We were assigned to a formation flying exercise followed immediately by a dinghy search exercise in co-operation with Air-Sea rescue boats operating in Bridlington Bay. The boats positioned a dinghy at sea then radioed us to go and find it. When we found it, we radioed the boat to that effect and would then disappear until they called us in again to find the dinghy in it's relocated position. Left to our own devices, I'm afraid we just went looking for mischief. Along the coast we found an exercise going on with fighter aircraft diving and attacking a ground position. Couldn't pass that up without taking part, could we? Wonder why some folks scattered when they saw our Lanc. diving down at them? That little episode over, we toddled off inland at low level just for kicks, until the radio buzzed, which was our signal to gain height so that I could read the message from the boat we were exercising with. On return to base everyone was in good spirits having spent a couple of hours away from the grind and tension of Operations, we felt good!

On the Fifteenth of March we visited Stuttgart and Frankfurt-on-Main on the Eighteenth, both were routine trips.

The Twentysecond saw us off to Frankfurt-on-Main and once more there were problems with engines. The starboard inner went completely u/s and the starboard outer developed both coolant and oil leaks which meant that once again we had to abort which was most frustrating. There is no doubt that there was a weakness of a mysterious kind in the starboard power plants which had bugged us for quite sometime, I wonder, could it have been Gremlins at work? Next, we were off again to Berlin on 24th a seven and a half hour trip this time, nothing special about it as far as I recall. Two nights later on the Twentysixth, the target was a closer one; Essen in the Ruhr. It was the first major attack on a Ruhr target since the earlier so called BATTLE OF THE RUHR. As we approached the target, the clouds cleared and every aircraft was leaving contrails in the moonlit sky. One could perhaps say that we were making our own cloud cover so that we could hide from the ground defences, but, that did not take away from the feeling of being completely exposed to all who cared to look. At the back of all our minds I suppose were the tales of the strong Ruhr defences which had been handed down from the crews who took part in the earlier attacks. Apart from that rather disturbing period whilst over the target, all went well.

Jeff was getting close to the end of his first tour, if I remember correctly, Essen had been his twentyeighth complete trip which meant there were just two more for him to complete before being screened. I'm sure it was in all our minds that we would have one hell of a party even though the rest of the crew would still have about ten more to reach the same plateau, BUT, no one mentioned it, we did not want to be the one to jinx the whole thing. Yes; aircrew were a superstitious lot, I think most had a mascot of some kind without which they hated to fly, I certainly did!

CHAPTER 3 THE NUREMBURG RAID

Each of the Berlin raids had been long trips, in the region of Eight hours in duration. The Nuremburg trip we were being briefed for was to be even longer, really deep into the southern part of Germany.

We took off in N-NAN at 21.45 hours and climbed to our briefed height and set course on the first part of our journey. All went well for the first couple of hours although there was some consternation up front that the skies had completely cleared and we were breezing along in bright moonlight, not a good sign at all! We liked our skies well matted with dense clouds to fly in and out of as ideal weather, then for it to clear just before the target was reached so that the PFF boys could use their ground markers for the benefit of the main force.

The bright moonlight obviously would be advantageous to the night fighters who would certainly be infiltrating the bomber force. I had our MONICA equipment switched on and was scanning the screen for any fast moving dots which would indicate a fighter in the vicinity. All other crew members were scanning the skies hoping to spot any intruder before he spotted us.

Just before midnight, I switched the main radio over to the frequency for the midnight Group Broadcast, still keeping one eye on the MONICA screen. Suddenly, the airplane was jinking all over the sky. Being off the intercomm circuit, I had no idea what was going on but soon learned that we had been attacked by a fighter but not hit as far as was known. I certainly had not seen him approach on the MONICA screen so assume that he was already in the stream, just toddling along at the same speed as the bomber force. The fighter that had attacked was now sitting just below us. We knew that sometimes in clear conditions two fighters would act in tandem, one sitting just out of range attracting attention whilst the other would attack from another quarter, so, all eyes were peeled on the surrounding sky expecting to see a second fighter appear. I returned to attend to the midnight Group broadcast and almost immediately, all hell was let loose.

Rather surprisingly, we had been mortally hit by FLAK! It must have been the predicted kind because as far as I can remember, there was no sign of flak when I had looked out a little earlier. We had been hit in the starboard wing, the outer engine was on fire. Jeff and the engineer used the fire extinguishers and tried to feather the prop, I don't know whether they managed to do that or not. Jeff ordered parachutes on, I found mine in it's stowage compartment and clipped it on my harness. By this time I was back on intercomm and stood up looking out of the astrodome. The engine fire died down for a short while, then broke out afresh with increased intensity and crept back into the wing itself which burnt through very quickly.

I stood there and actually watched the outer engine and the wing outboard of that engine fall off and disappear. N-NAN immediately dipped a wing and started to spiral downwards with the remaining engines sounding as if they were at maximum revs. The G force was tremendous, I remember floating through the air past the navigator's position and getting my feet tangled up with the cockpit controls. Skipper Jeff was in his seat and in the fleeting glimpse I had of him, he appeared to still be struggling to control the plane. He perhaps did not know that he had lost the engine and all outboard of it! I was thinking quite clearly and calmly and concluded that the situation was hopeless, regretting that my mother would have to handle the news of my being notified as missing whilst my father was seriously ill. I then

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passed out!

What happened next is a very vague memory which could even be imagination; I found myself in open air with wind rushing past my face. Slowly, the realization came that I was falling through space and that I should pull the ripcord of my parachute. The chute pack was not on my chest, found it dangling around my feet. Having hauled it in via the loose harness, I pulled the D ring and something came up and hit me under the chin, knocking me out again.

I woke up to find myself tumbling through trees and at the same time sensed that my right arm was entangled in a bulky object. I finally landed on my back with the object I was entangled with across my back, my behind and legs on one side and my head and shoulders on the other. I think I passed out again. Gradually my head cleared enough to know that I was stretched across something and that all around was quiet except for the thunder of aircraft engines overhead. At that moment the truth dawned that I was still alive and that the noise overhead was the bomber force on it's way to Nuremburg. The canopy of my chute was caught up in a tree, I could not breathe too easily, left leg was doubled up under my backside and hurting quite a lot and my back was extremely painful. Slowly, so very very slowly, I managed to turn over and tried to release my arm from whatever it was entangled with. My arm had punched a hole in the cockpit cupola and I had taken down all ten feet or so of it with me. Having straightened myself out I felt considerably more comfortable. I lay there for what seemed to be ages before the noise overhead faded into the distance. Thought to myself "Go get em fellers!" then about my escape kit, that I should get rid of it, so threw it as far as I could which must have been all of ten perhaps twelve feet, felt a bit stupid and hopeless to be so inept.

Very soon I began to feel cold, then started to shiver but could do nothing about it. My back felt very painful and I could only move very slowly, certainly not enough to keep warm or to walk and find shelter. Nobody would find me in this forest even if they knew a body was in there I reasoned and for the second time that night, thought that the outlook was not too rosy. I wondered how the other fellows had fared but was fairly convinced that their chances of survival were slim and reckoned that I was very lucky indeed to be alive.

At that point, I became determined that I was going to survive come what may and set about evaluating the situation and at the same time to try to keep warm. Sometime later, I saw what appeared to be a torch waving about, so blew the whistle attached to my battledress tunic. Gradually the light got closer and then shone directly on me, a German soldier was holding the torch. Using sign language, he asked if I had a gun. When he was satisfied that I was telling the truth, he propped me up against a tree and proceeded to gather sticks and wood and lit a fire in a clearing. That soldier carried me to the fire and made me as comfortable as possible. When I had warmed through, I remembered that I had a packet of cigarettes in my tunic so I offered him one and despite the fact that I was not breathing too freely, we smoked together. He spoke no English and I no German but we did manage to communicate a little and I learned that he had found two others close by but said that they were "KAPUT". The soldier left me for a short while as dawn was breaking. When he returned, he picked me up and carried me across his shoulder for some distance to where he had a motorcycle and sidecar parked. He dumped me in the sidecar and off we went. I think that must have been the most painful ride I have ever experienced. I was taken to a village and put in what appeared to be the village hall, there I was joined by George Upton our mid-upper gunner and bomb-aimer Dennis Jeffrey, who, I seem to remember was limping badly because of two sprained ankles, also, he was without boots which had disappeared when he baled out. George had hit a tree on landing and was bloodied around the face. An officer appeared, Gestapo I think, who obviously

was not pleased to see us. We were smoking and talking when he entered the room and that upset him. He went into a rage immediately, ranted and roared for a long time and smacked a couple of us across the face then left, never to be seen again.

We left this village in the back of an open top truck with a civilian driving. The truck was brought to a halt in the middle of a town and the German guards who were riding in the back of the truck with us toddled off somewhere. Seeing this, the driver scrambled up alongside us and started to urgently jabber away in French. He was a Belgian and was offering to try to spirit us away before the guards returned. By this time I was apparently somewhat delirious to the concern of my crew mates. They turned down the offer to escape I learned much later, in the hope that we would be taken to a place where I could receive medical attention. The guard soon returned and we continued our painful journey, finishing up in Aachen I believe. I say believe because by this time I was apparently in a bad way and Dennis and George were having to support me to walk.

I think it was George who told me after the war that we were made to walk through the streets of Aachen which had been attacked that night as a diversionary raid to the main force. Seemingly, the civilians were angry and wanted to get at us and the guards fixed bayonets to their rifles in case of trouble. He told me that I was shouting back at the people, calling them all the names under the sun and they, Dennis and George, could not shut me up which did not help the situation at all. I remember nothing of that walk!

I was taken to a hospital in Aachen and put into a small wooden building in the grounds of the hospital, whether my two crew mates were there or not I do not know. Being still reasonably fit I suppose they had been taken somewhere else and later sent to Dulag Luft the interrogation centre for downed aircrew which was at Wetzlar, close to Frankfurt-on-Main. I did not see them again whilst in Germany.

As a matter of interest, I learned very much later that N-Nan had exploded in mid air. George told me that he was trapped in the mid-upper turret and then, found himself still sitting in the turret in which the whole rear end of the plane was gently drifting downwards, there being no sign of the front end. Apparently, he unstrapped himself, climbed out of the turret, walked to the edge of the fuselage where the front end had been and jumped into space, pulling his ripcord as soon as he was clear of the remains of the aircraft. He touched down very soon afterwards, his face hitting a tree trunk as he dangled from the swinging end of the webbing by which he was attached to the parachute canopy. He estimated that he must have been at the bare minimum height to be able to parachute safely, 500-600 feet perhaps!

Crew members of N NAN who survived were:

961931 Sgt. George Upton, mid-upper gunner.

1339840 F/Sgt Dennis Jeffery, bomb-aimer.

and myself 1335551 Sgt. Stan Keirle, wop/ag.

Those crew members of N NAN who, in those few minutes of sheer hell lost their lives were:

*** 1313283 F/Sgt Arthur (Jeff) Jeffries, pilot.

***** 1329560 Sgt. Robert Paxton, flight engineer.

1549784 Sgt. Harold Simpson, navigator.

978030 Sgt. James (Jimmy) Whitley, rear gunner.

*** Jeff was awarded one of only two CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY MEDALS (FLYING) granted to members of 550. Interestingly, the recommendation was made on 17th March 1944, just thirteen days before he was killed. It was a so called NON-IMMEDIATE award and was ultimately promulgated in the London Gazette on 21st November

1945 which was a little over one and a half years after he died.

***** Robert Paxton was not a regular member of the crew of N NAN. He was flying in place of Sgt William Bull, our regular flight engineer, who had been grounded for the night's operation because he was suffering from a very heavy cold. He was a very lucky man indeed. He completed his tour, was awarded the DFM and was eventually demobbed with the rank of Flying Officer.

It is my sincere hope that historians will eventually prove that the loss of their lives was of benefit to mankind, if that is NOT possible, it was a tragic waste!

The main part of N NAN crashed at Gileppe, about 8 kilometers East of Verviers and was No. 4 down that night out of a total of 95 aircraft lost beyond British shores, that were sent to attack Nuremburg. Bomber Command quoted the total losses as 13.6 percent of the Lancaster and Halifax force despatched. That was the greatest loss in a single operation for the whole of the war. Martin Middlebrook in his book *THE NURENBURG RAID*, states that historian Alfred Price has described it as "the greatest air battle of all time".

There were additional losses, again quoting Martin Middlebrook's book; Ten were a total loss after crashes in England and one was written off due to severe battle damage. Seventy more sustained damage ranging in severity from two bombers that were six months being repaired to the many that had only small Flak holes to be covered over.

CHAPTER 4 GUEST OF THE THIRD REICH

It must have been several days before I became interested in my surroundings again. Day by day I felt better as the cuts healed and the bruising everywhere came out. My skin had many shades from dense black, through purple all the way to yellow, changing almost hourly, and eventually became normal again. By this time, I had a plaster cast on my left foot and the left leg was strapped to a wooden board, presumably to keep the damaged knee as still as possible, but it was my back that was so painful. I was the only patient in this out-building to the main hospital as far as I could tell, with just one guard in attendance, a youngish chap who seemed to be quite friendly. He tried to talk to me but we could only resort to sign language, sometimes it worked and at other times not.

One night, air raid sirens started to wail and I could already hear the sound of Merlin engines. Within a couple of minutes, all hell was let loose with the whistling of falling bombs and the crunch of them exploding. Then it became impossible to detect individual bombs falling, it was a cacophony of fiendish screaming and explosions. What to do? I decided that the safest place would be under the bed rather than on it and somehow I managed to do that despite being unable to move around very much. A four pounder incendiary bomb popped through the wooden roof and landed alongside my bed, somehow I managed to pick it up and toss it through the window, no idea whether it was a dud or not, just didn't wait to see! I was violently bounced up and down many times, eventually the roof of the building collapsed but I was saved from being squashed by the bed I was sheltering under. Gradually the horrendous noise faded away. After a while I could hear scraping noises, it was the German guard searching the wreckage for me. He eventually managed to clear away enough debris to be able to haul me out. He carried me over his shoulder to the basement of the main hospital building and found a bed for me. Obviously my good luck was still holding, I was none the worse for the experience, also for the second time, had been lucky enough to be the responsibility of a German soldier who was courteous and kind, despite the fact that the city had just received a massive battering from those of my ilk. I have thought about those events and the circumstances under which they took place so many times since and still cannot believe that I could continually be so lucky.

That raid on Aachen took place on the night of 11th/12th April 1944 by a force of just over 350 aircraft I learned later. Apparently it was a concentrated, successful one which caused widespread damage and fires in the central and southern parts of the city. It has been listed as Aachen's most serious raid of the war. The railway marshalling yards which were almost next door to the hospital were severely damaged. 1525 people were killed, including 13 Prisoners of war also 10 Foreign workers, which I think emphasises how lucky I was.

In the main hospital basement bed I kept absolutely quiet, not daring to talk in case the German people milling around would resent my presence and do something about it. I suppose I stayed there for several days before being told one morning to dress and was put on board a small truck with three or four other people, Polish I think, and was driven to a railway station. En-route to the station I could see some of the damage that had been inflicted during the raid a day or two earlier, which seemed to be quite considerable.

The guard put us into a carriage equipped with wooden seats and after a very slow journey of several hours we arrived at Bonn. From the station we walked mainly uphill, eventually arriving at the gates of Stalag VI6 which was high on one of the hills which overlook the city. During the

walk from the station I kept collapsing, my back was giving me absolute hell. In the end, two of the chaps were told to support me, one each side and they virtually carried me the rest of the way. Later I was taken to a hospital in the city for X-Rays of the back which revealed that I had three fractured vertebrae, in the lumbar region. The cure at Stalag VII was to be strapped to a wooden bed for several weeks. For company in that room, was one other Englishman, Les.....(name now forgotten), who had crashed to the ground still inside his aircraft and survived, albeit with multiple fractures of both legs. Later, we were both at a medical rehabilitation unit at Loughborough College and I was glad to see that although somewhat handicapped, he was mobile again. There were I think, five American fellows suffering from different ailments, all Flying Fortress(B17) crew members. One of them had apparently walked for miles on frostbitten feet whilst trying to find his way out of a thick forest, with the result that he lost all his toes and had splintered numerous small bones in his feet. Others had bullet wounds, some were fracture cases of several differing parts of the anatomy.

We were under the care of an elderly, apparently quite famous Polish surgeon from Warsaw who eventually died in POW camp so Leslie....(English multiple leg fractures) told me. He was a fine gentleman and did all he possibly could for us. Every morning he visited, our KRANKENZIMMER sometimes with German medics in attendance. When he could, he spent a few minutes practising his English which was quite good anyway. Only wish I was as fluent in any language as he was in English!

Our constant companion at this time was Aldo, an Italian soldier who somehow had become a Prisoner of War in German hands. He was our batman cum nurse, his English was terrible and our Italian non-existent. With that combination there were bound to be mixups and misunderstandings and there surely were, some of which were wonderfully humorous and Aldo always saw the funny side. He was always cheerful, a great chap. I hope he returned to Italy and led the good life that he seemed to be constantly trying to tell us about!

Early in June 1944, I was judged by one of the German medics, to be fit enough to be sent on my way, which was by train to Frankfurt-on-Main, arriving at Dulag Luft on 11th June where I was immediately put into solitary confinement to await interrogation. I became distinctly nervous and very apprehensive when, after several days in solitary, I was escorted to a fairly big room to be faced across a large, rather untidy desk by an interrogator whose first action on entering the room after leaving me alone for several minutes which seemed like hours, was to remove his revolver from its holster and place it on the desk. Before speaking, he offered a cigarette which after being in solitary without and now facing uncharted territory, I accepted, then immediately regretted, thinking that he would think I was weak and would be like putty in his hands. When I refused all but Name, Rank and Service Number, he feigned anger that I had accepted his friendly gesture of the cigarette and was now acting in a very unfriendly manner. He pooh-poohed my stupidity and proceeded to tell me that they knew all about 550 Squadron, naming the C.O and others together with other surprisingly accurate information. He also said they had known the raid on Nuremberg was to take place before it actually happened and therefore were well prepared for it. Whether in fact they did or did not, I suppose will never be known for certain. The matter has been discussed at some length in Martin Middlebrook's revised version of his book *The Nuremberg Raid*.

After that rather useless interrogation exercise, I was taken out of solitary and moved to a tented area where we were allowed to mix with all and sundry. All were aircrew of many different Nationalities, American, Canadian, British, Australian, New Zealanders to name but a few, all of whom had recently been put out of commission and who had been told by the interrogators at least once, "FOR YOU; THE WAR IS OVER".

Sometime later in June, a whole group of British and

Commonwealth KRIEGIES; as we were forever after to collectively know ourselves, were assembled for transportation to a Prisoner of War camp, which one we did not know. We were told that the German population were a little annoyed at our past activities and should we be foolish enough to try to escape, we would be well and truly looked after by them! Of course he hinted, that pre-supposes that we would escape without being shot by the guards who, he assured us, had strict orders to show no mercy if anyone should attempt to do so. I think we were an apprehensive lot that left Wetzlar that day wondering what was in store for us down the road.

On the train there was a guard in each compartment, inevitably we indulged in a little guard baiting also pumped him to try to get him to tell which camp we were going to. Our fellow was quite talkative but was clever enough to parry all questions about our destination. He blew his top quite frequently at our insinuations that the Third Reich was Kaput, that Germany had started the war etc., etc. In fact at one point he became annoyed to the extent that he brandished his gun in a menacing manner. That subdued the conversation somewhat and we excluded him from further chit chat for quite a while!

We arrived at Bankau station in Upper Silesia at Intake (Trupp) No.4 on 20th June 1944 and I became inmate No.119 of Stalag Luft VII. It was obvious even at first sight that the camp was a completely new one. We were allocated six men to a small wooden hut and were issued with a palliase and one blanket (not sure now, perhaps it was two), a bar of soap, razor blades and one fairly large metal jug per hut. The huts were about five abreast surrounding three sides of a square, the centre portion was open intended as an exercise and/or games area, the centre piece being a hand operated water pump. The fourth side of the compound consisted of the cookhouse at the back of which were the guardhouse and entrance gates. The whole had been erected in the middle of a field full of stubble and was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence with elevated guard towers at intervals around the perimeter. Inside the high fence was an area forbidden to all kriegies which was marked by a single strand of barbed wire fixed to posts about eighteen inches high and was known as THE WARNING WIRE. Go into that forbidden area and one became fair game for the tower guards to take pot shots at! As it turned out, this place was to be our home for the next seven months or so.

Gradually, we got to know our hut mates and to settle into life behind the barbed wire. The weather was consistently sunny and warm with just a very occasional short, sharp shower. Almost daily, the population of this Third Reich holiday camp increased and quite soon there was every nationality from Britain and the Commonwealth represented. That was good because all kinds of activity developed, some needing and receiving equipment from the Red Cross, others not.

Baseball became a favourite activity and many a body who knew nowt about it previously, soon learned the game and all the jargon that goes with it. Cricket too was popular and those that did not play one or other of these games became ardent fans or organised teams. During the summer there were cricket Test matches played between Australia, England, New Zealand, South Africa and maybe others too. International baseball (Softball), was heavily supported with matches between Canada, Australia, Britain and New Zealand that I can remember and probably other representative teams also took part. The non North American baseball players generally speaking could not get used to the fielders single glove, so, to the absolute astonishment of the Canadians, it was bare handed fielding, mostly to a very high standard, the Australians were particularly good at it! From what I remember, due to limited space, either baseball or cricket could be played, not both at the same time. League games between mainly baseball teams took place frequently, so there was usually some activity to get one outside into the fresh air.

The other main outdoor activity during hours of sunshine in these summer months was to take a shower under the water pump

mentioned earlier. It needed two to Tango, one to shower whilst the other pumped the handle up and down. When there was a line up for the shower, one pumped for the guy ahead with the guy behind pumping for you when the chap ahead had finished his ablutions. It was a sight for sore eyes some days to see a long line of starko men waiting for their turn at the pump. Those who had showered would be gamboling around drying themselves in the sunshine before putting on makeshift shorts of somekind, usually homemade from underpants.

As the camp developed, educational and library books arrived from the Red Cross. Classes in many subjects were organised and because of the broad cross section of humanity represented in the camp, it was not too difficult to find someone to act as instructors, who had specific skills in the subjects being studied. Societies of all kinds were founded some with common interest, others being centred on locations such as the Mancunian Society, The Scottish Society etc., etc. Whist drives, a cribbage tournament to find the camp singles and pairs champions were initiated and many like activities. Those with theatrical interests, organised themselves and eventually put on a super show in the cookhouse building with the Camp Commandant and his staff present.

Not too long after arriving in the camp, news of the state of the war in general and particularly of the invasion of Europe by the Allied forces, began to leak through. Someone or a group of someones, had managed to put a radio together and had it successfully hidden from the many searches the GERMANS frequently carried out. Daily, bulletins were listened to and written out for news readers to surreptitiously repeat to representatives of a small group of huts gathered together for that purpose. Small groups so that their gathering together in one place could be made without causing suspicion. Whilst the news was being read, a careful lookout was kept just incase a ~~FEAR~~ managed to evade the camp warning system and suprise the assembled gathering. To the best of my knowledge, there never was a breakdown in the security of these almost daily newscasts. One humorous result of this clandestine knowledge was that on one occasion, the Camp Commandant addressed the whole camp during one of the twice daily head counts know as Appel, and announced that there had been an Allied attempt at invading Europe which had been repelled. It was put over in the manner of "Sorry chaps, but you're going to be here for an awfully long time!" At the end of the Commandant's announcement, there was stunned silence for a short while, then, some wag yelled out something like "Yeah, Hooraaaaay", followed by a wild sounding laugh which was taken up by all present. One could visibly see the Jaws of each German present drop a whole mile, followed by a hasty, non-military retreat from the parade ground. Have often wondered since, what the thought process of the Commandant was as the cheers and laughter broke out. I'm sure it would have been lovely to have had a listening device to hear those wheels churning at that particular moment!

An escape committee had been set up and various activities were taking place under cover most of the time, the type of activities that have been amply described in many books. I think it would be fair to say that escape was the subject of many conversations each day throughout the camp and to a certain extent was a game played almost daily and was known as GOON BAITING. Periodically, when the goons(erretts) suspected something was going on, there would be a sudden invasion of the camp by oodles of guards and we would be instantly banished from all the huts to the quadrangle area where we would have to stay until the search for whatever it was that they were looking for was completed. We used to say that one could have a tank or aircraft in the hut which would remain untouched if the orders were for them to find maps; for example. Maps it was and nothing but maps it would be, seemed to be the philosophy. At every opportunity we would tease the goons and nearly always they rose to the bait. An example would be, and this actually happened; In this rather primitive camp, there was nowhere to dispose of the empty tins from the Red Cross parcels, which at that time we were receiving on a fairly regular basis. One afternoon, a goon arrived at our hut armed with several shovels. He ordered us out of the hut and took us to a site

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close to the warning wire and we were told to dig a large hole for disposal of the empty tins. We jumped to it and dug quite happily, to have the physical exercise was quite welcome. Whilst digging, we were chatting away and someone suggested that if in some way we could create a diversion, we should start a dummy tunnel heading towards the wire at the bottom of the hole we were digging, then a few days later, start a rumour that a tunnel was underway within the camp. The goon disappeared for a while leaving us digging, think he went off either to attend to the needs of nature, or, for his afternoon cuppa, maybe for both! We started to tunnel like mad, we were deep enough for the tower guards not to be able to see what we were up to. Before the goon returned, we had hastily buzzed around the local huts and arranged for them to dump any empty tins they had in the hole and with those already piled up awaiting disposal, we managed to cover the horizontal excavation. Because the hole was in full view of the guards in the towers, this excavation could not possibly be a serious attempt at an escape tunnel. The goon returned and was very pleased that we had finished the job and in his strong New York accent congratulated us on a fine job. For the next few days the hole was used to dispose of empty tins. We made a wooden sign and wrote on it "Danger - Tunnel" and placed it immediately alongside the hole. Nothing happened for a day or two then in came the expected invasion of troops who went straight to the hole and excavations started with tins flying all over the place, whilst we were once again banished to the Quad. We cheered the troops on their departure of course!

Another example of GOON GAITING was on the occasion when the Germans realized that there were a number of chaps in the camp who were not aircrew who also held ranks below that of Sergeant. The Geneva convention to which all nations at war in Europe with the exception of Russia were party to, stated that those below the rank of Sergeant could be put to work to earn their keep but Sergeant and above could not. The fellows in the camp who were below the rank of Sergeant were mostly captured in the North African campaign and one or two in Italy. One day at afternoon Appel, an announcement was made that the following people should report to the Forlager the next morning ready to be put to work. That evening there was lots of activity in the camp, rooting out those who were due to report. An exchange of identity disks meant that next morning those people wearing the identity disks of those who were supposed to report, paraded next to the Forlager. The Germans being smart, had their little box of cards at the ready showing the identity number of each person alongside a photograph. Each photograph was compared with the person wearing the identity disk and found to be wanting. Each wearer of the right disk having the wrong face, hotly claimed that he really was the person to whom the identity disk rightly belonged. It dawned on the officials that perhaps they really did have their records somewhat mixed up. A photographer was quickly found and ordered to take a new picture of each guy on parade. The fellows were then taken off for the labours of the day. That evening on return to the camp for the night, identities were again swapped and the morning farce was repeated, but, by this time the penny had dropped that they were being duped. There were angry folk around that day organising a complete new set of pictures of everyone to set the record straight. I heard a rumour later that even at this new photographic session, some chaps swapped identity disks so probably, the record never was straight ever after that. The main point was that the Germans never again bothered to segregate the fellows whom they were entitled to put on working parties and in achieving that, a lot of disruption to camp security and control had taken place which had been fun for those in residence and thoroughly enjoyed by everyone except of course the Germans who were quite sullen and unforgiving about the whole thing.

The Summer of 1944 passed with something of interest each day such as I have tried to describe above. By late Autumn, the large wooden buildings in an adjoining Lager were having the finishing touches put to them and the security fences and guard towers which surrounded them. Those buildings were to be our permanent billets and we were moved into them around October time as far as I recall. My friends and I became the occupants of Barrack 42 Room 3 (Division 1), which was much more civilized than the small

wooden hut we had just left. I think there were fourteen, maybe sixteen men to a room, each having either a lower or upper bunk bed consisting of a number of bedboards which supported a straw palliasso. Periodically, a tax was levied of one bed board per person which were for use in the latest tunnel activity. It only took a night or two to get used to the new bed board arrangement, but, I have read of others in camps which had operated for several years where the bed board tax had removed the majority of the boards so that sleeping on the few that were left became a very precarious operation. Can you imagine it? One for the ankles, one for the bum or thereabouts and one for the shoulders!

The weather became gradually colder and the sports scene changed to Soccer and the preparation, mainly by the Canadian boys, of an area that could be flooded later to form an ice rink. The Red Cross continued to supply books, food parcels and sports gear of all kinds including ice skates, ice-hockey pucks and sticks. After the first freezing, the Canadians had their rink in operation and entertained the more hardy spectators with their skating skills and dexterity with a hockey stick. I enjoyed that because I had been a fan of Harringey Racers and Greyhounds in pre-war years and had come to like the game very much even though my skating ability was very limited indeed.

At the onset of the cold weather, we were issued with fuel for the stove which was just inside the door of each room. Occasionally, a volunteer wood gathering party was escorted into the nearby forest to obtain supplies which was there in abundance. Christmas came and went with daily news of the advance of the Allied forces in the West and the Russians in the East which generated a certain tetchiness in the guards and goons. One day there was an air raid warning which stretched over the lunchtime period. The All Clear sounded in the distant town which we could hear, but, we had strict orders that we were to remain within the confines of our barrack rooms until the All Clear was sounded at the camp. This particular day, a Canadian chap on hearing the distant All Clear sounding, made a dash for the cookhouse with the communal jug in hand, presumably with the intention of being the first in line to draw the soup ration for his room-mates. He was gunned down by one of the guards who knelt down on one knee to get an accurate shot at him and the bullet pierced his chest; he died shortly afterwards. That action was tantamount to murder in the view of all in the camp, whether that particular guard was ever arraigned for his deadly action against an unarmed man I have no idea.

The Russians were advancing rapidly so at 3.30 a.m. on the morning of Friday the 19th of January 1945 we left Stalag Luft VII and Bankau on foot. Our Camp Leader who was also known to the Germans as "Man of Confidence" was an Aussie, P/O Peter A. Thomson. We had been warned a couple of days earlier to be ready to leave at short notice and at the same time, Peter was informed by the Germans that for every one man who fell out of the column on the march, five men would be shot.

When one is a Kriegie, everything has a value, nothing is thrown away that has even the remotest chance of being useful. There were many who had packed the whole of their worldly goods in blankets to take with them including those items that "May be useful sometime". I was one of those who packed all. After walking for several miles, a rest period was called soon after daybreak. Most including myself re-evaluated the situation, realising that we would be unable to hump that lot too much further, so, much was left by the roadside! We walked 32 kilometers that first day, 12 the next followed by a long night walk of 42 kilometers to cross the bridge over the river Oder. The day after we crossed the bridge it and many others were blown up in an attempt to stop the Russian advance. It meant that the Russian army was just a couple of days at the most behind us. There was an almost continual distant rumble sounding rather like an approaching thunder storm.

The trampo across Germany lasted 21 days, ending at Luckewalde which was a few kilometers South East of Berlin, where we became inmates of Stalag IIIA. The main group of those who left Bankau arrived there

on the 8th of February, very hungry and thoroughly exhausted. I say the main group because a few had taken the opportunity to escape somewhere along the way which no doubt had a very high risk factor at that particular time. Others like myself, had broken down on the walk either through injury or sickness. In my case, the injuries to my left leg and the fractures of the spine took their toll and made it impossible for me to continue on foot at the necessary pace.

On 28th January, twenty-two sick or injured including myself, were taken from the stopover point at Pfaffendorf and evacuated to Schneidnitz. We eventually arrived at Stalag Luft III Sagan, which was the camp from which the famous "Wooden Horse" escape had taken place much earlier. The compounds were deserted, all residents had also been marched out several days earlier heading westward. Stayed there overnight, then were made to walk to the station where we were put in an open wagon of a goods train with two guards. Had a very uncomfortable journey for what seemed to be a very long time, I have no idea how long it actually took.

We arrived at Stalag IIIA Luckenwalde, well ahead of the main group who had walked 240 kilometers by 5th February and then were put into railway cattle trucks, 55 men to a truck. They were in those trucks from the morning of 5th February until the morning of 8th February in the most appalling conditions. There were numerous cases of dysentery by that time and only occasionally were they let out to attend to the call of nature. The majority had no water for two whole days and only the most meagre of rations. As can probably be imagined, it was obvious why those men arrived at Luckenwalde very hungry and thoroughly exhausted.

We in the group of 22 lesser mortals were welcomed to the camp by a group of Irish soldiers who had been incarcerated since the days of Dunkirk. They fed us from their own rations at first and helped us in numerous other ways. By the time our buddies arrived on February 8th, we were sufficiently established to be able to provide our respective room mates with food and essential supplies on a limited basis. We had always shared everything equally.

It has been estimated that in February of 1945 there were about 76 thousand British P.O.W.'s on the roads in Germany. There are I'm sure many stories that have not so far been told of those days on the road, together with hundreds of thousands of civilians who were also carrying their entire worldly possessions with them. We at least had the hope of returning to some kind of orderly life back home wherever that was, but those civilians were refugees in their own country! It is my hope that the story of the walk across Germany by the boys of Stalag Luft VII will be chronicled by Roy Crompton from Merthyr Tydfil who I know has been researching it, collecting information, corresponding with ex Kriegies of Luft VII and generally working on it for some considerable time. It should be a very interesting document and tell of some amazing experiences if and when it is published therefore, I will not attempt to comment on it any further.

The next major event at Luckenwalde, was the arrival of a number of men who were in the Glider Pilots Regiment, also, many members of The Parachute Regiment. These chaps had been captured during the Arnhem actions and there were quite a lot of them, obviously things had gone badly wrong during that escapade.

Early in April 1945, the Soviet forces were very close, one night the camp was strafed, presumably by Russian aircraft. Another night we seemed to be in the middle of an artillery battle, shells were flying in both directions passing directly overhead. It was a tense period for everyone and anything could have happened. A day or two later all German personnel had disappeared, presumably they were hastily discarding their uniforms and getting into civilian clothes and joining the ranks of refugees trying to make their way westward away from the advancing Russians. The first we saw of the advancing forces was on Saturday 22nd April, a Stalin tank followed by infantry

riding in Chevrolet trucks. Hey what's this? They have women with them and tough, gun toting babes they looked too! Obviously we thought, this army does other things than just march on it's stomach. Hmmm!!

These Russian(Soviet) forces immediately released all their countrymen from confinement within the barbed wire and they immediately headed for the local town and went on the rampage, we were told. There were rumours of terrible happenings, pillaging, murder, rape and the like but how true these stories were I have no idea. Can there be smoke without fire?

We were now quite sure that it would not be long before we were homeward bound, after all, the Soviets were our allies and surely, they were intent on their drive towards Berlin and the glory to be had in capturing the Capital City of Nazism. They just would not want to have us under their feet when such lofty goals were at stake, now would they? ~~WRONG, WRONG, WRONG~~

The Soviets insisted that everyone be registered to start with and that was a very slow process indeed, going on for several days and as far as I know, never was completed. We did not expect to be bogged down by bureaucracy but we were 'completely wrong' Food was scarce at this stage, it being quite amazing that under the circumstances the Soviet forces were able to conjure up food supplies at all. The situation was deteriorating day by day and rumours were rife. We heard that the manager of the local water works would lose his head if he did not have the water supply flowing by next morning. True or not, the water was flowing by the rumoured deadline!

On or about 5th May, an American Officer representing Supreme Allied Headquarters arrived in the camp with instructions to evacuate the American P.O.W's first, then the British, but the Russians refused him permission to do that. He had ambulances to take the sick and injured and a convoy of trucks for all others standing by in the local village, we were told by a couple of people who had been out to see what was going on. Later when an attempt was made to carry on with the evacuation, armed troops were used against the Americans to prevent their leaving camp. It was even said that tanks were lined up and threats made to use them unless the American convoy assembled for the evacuation left the local village. In the end, the vehicles left carrying severely sick and wounded only. Rumours began to fly that the intention of the Soviets was for us to be repatriated by them at a price per head to the Allied Governments and that the repatriation would take place via Odessa. That was bad news!

A conference between those of us who had lived together in the room at Bankau made five of us decide to try to get out of the camp and make for the American lines. I had some doubts about my fitness and wondered whether I should risk going and perhaps become a burden to the other guys if my back gave out or my left leg packed up. On the other hand, I certainly did not want to hang around and just take a chance with these Ruskies. I felt they had shown their true colours once too often for my liking. I decided to go along with; Jack Mills from London, Freddy Bird from the Brentwood area in Essex, Jack Feraday from Cannock in Staffordshire and Ronald (Spike) McGraw, an American in the RCAF from Chicago.

We did not know how far away the American lines were so decided that if we were successful in breaking out of camp, we would stay in the forest to avoid roads as much as possible initially, travel only in daylight and head towards Juterbog, then to Wittsburg where we hoped that the Americans would be on the south banks of the river Elbe.

There were numerous holes in the barbed wire fences by this time so getting out was no problem. We broke out from one side of the camp and were turned back by an armed patrol who acted threateningly. We decided immediately that we would try our luck on the other side. There too was a vehicle patrolling up and down the dirt road which was just outside the wire. In the back of this Jeep like vehicle was a guy riding shotgun as it

were, manning a nasty looking machine gun. DECISIONS, DECISIONS...

We watched the patrol along with many other camp inmates as they went up and down the road, we waited until they had almost reached the turning point at the far end, then, we five ran across the road and scampered into the forest and kept running as fast as we could. Very quickly we heard the Jeep affair rushing back along the road, then bullets were flying all over the place making that zinging noise as they ricocheted off tree trunks. There is nothing quite as effective as those rat-tat-tat and zinging noises to make the legs and feet work just a little faster than normal! Thinking that we may be followed, we kept running for the longest time and were now deep in the forest. The rapid fire of the machine gun had died away some while ago and we reasoned that we were safely away from the camp. After catching our breath, we walked at a steady pace then came across a clearing and were faced with a burnt out group of vehicles with corpses draped over and around them. Some were grotesquely disfigured by the effects of fire and others outwardly unmarked but all were decomposing. We hurried on but were more than a little nervous that there might be land mines in the area but had no way of knowing or even finding out unless someone trod on one! "We had made our bed and now had to lie in it" as the saying goes, so, we pressed on hopefully!

I just cannot remember where we slept that night of 7th May, or if we slept at all but certainly as night fell, we holed up somewhere. We had a map of the area with us, gleaned from the escape organization within the camp at Bankau and calculated that we were close to Juterbog. Being now well clear of the camp, we decided to reconnoitre the roads to try and judge whether it would be safe to use them. We lay hidden and watched for a while, almost all traffic was on foot with an occasional horse drawn dray or cart piled high with personal belongings of the folk accompanying it. Now and then a military vehicle of some kind would rush by making everyone stand aside for it to pass.

We decided that we would be inconspicuous travelling with these people so joined them. Passing through a small village, there was a lineup for freshly baked bread, the four others joined the lineup whilst I kept guard on our worldly possessions which were piled up on a sled we had procured somewhere. Wonderful, the lads came back with several loaves which was enough to keep us going for a while. A bite of the new bread for breakfast, then we were off again.

I should mention that back in Luckenwalde, we had heard that it had been known for Soviet soldiers to demand the ring on a person's finger and if it would not remove easily, the finger would be chopped off to get at the ring!! I have no real grounds for saying so but I'm sure there was truth in it. Because of that, we had hidden our normally visible possessions such as rings and watches just to avoid problems should we be confronted with a like situation. Way down the road, a lone Soviet soldier beckoned for us to go over to him which we did en-block. With sign language, he hinted that he wanted to know whether we had any jewellery. We shook our heads in unison but produced cigarettes and gave him several. In turn, he offered each of us a shot from his bottle of Vodka which was like firewater. We lingered awhile until we thought it safe to wander on waving him a cheerful adios! We arrived in Wittemburg that afternoon, found that all the bridges had been blown up and there was no sign of any Americans on the opposite bank of a fairly fast flowing river Elbe. We were bitterly disappointed but had to regroup and decide what to do next. Many of the buildings in the town were empty, so, we wandered into a tall block of flats, went to the top floor and found an empty apartment where we stayed for the night.

During the night there was rifle fire and screaming on the street below. We looked out of the windows very cautiously and saw a girl running as hard as her high heeled shoes would allow her to, being fired at by what seemed to be a drunken soldier from just outside the building we were in.

The girl got away without being hit as far as we could see. Next morning, two of the chaps went out to see what the prospects were for crossing the river, they came back to report that the chances of crossing without being detected and perhaps shot were very small, so, we decided to stay put for that day and night. There were more disturbances that night but we kept a very low profile.

Next morning one of the other chaps and myself went out to reccy the place and found that all and sundry were being allowed to cross the river by stepping over the wreckage of the bridges that had been blown up. We hurried back to our pals and in a very short time we had joined the mob crossing to the south side of the Elbe. We were very relieved and walked on quite jauntily. Passing through a small village, many women were standing in doorways chatting, probably discussing the current situation at some length with their neighbours. A convoy of Soviet military vehicles appeared around the corner at the far end of the village and suddenly, all the women had disappeared and the doors were slammed shut. Many of the folk who like us were en-route somewhere, also miraculously disappeared leaving what seemed at that moment, just the five of us gawping at the vehicles and men. I know that for one, I felt quite naked at that time. Suppose it was the fast disappearing act we had witnessed that generated the feeling of isolation. Nothing happened and gradually people reappeared in doorways and on the street as if nothing untoward had taken place previously. That episode did illustrate two things to me. First of all that there was an absolute dearth of menfolk and secondly, how much of an unknown situation the local residents were facing, they were really scared stiff of the Soviet soldiers, probably with good reason!

We pressed on and in the late afternoon, stopped to chat to a lady who seemed to be friendly and offered us drinks. She spoke a little English, with that and our combined limited knowledge of German, we were able to understand most of what the other was trying to say. She told us that the Soviet Administration had already demanded reparations from every household and so far, had taken her sewing machine and her laundry tub. She expected that there would be many more demands as the days passed such as bicycles and other household items. She had two young daughters and was very apprehensive for their continued welfare. They had experienced many disturbances at night and were frightened that one night they would be harmed. She then asked us to stay the night in her house, we could sleep in the loft, we agreed. During the night there was furious hammering on the outside door accompanied by loud, seemingly drunken shouting. The lady of the house appeared at the loft opening almost begging us to go and chase the men away. We were of course sleeping fully dressed, so, we pulled on our boots and the five of us trooped off, opened the front door to be confronted by two, maybe three really drunken Soviet soldiers who demanded entry. When we opened the door they were suprised to be confronted by five men, which subdued them. We chorused for them to buzz off, maybe in stronger terms too, and when they saw that we were determined not to let them pass they sloped off, tails between their legs so to speak! I don't think there is much doubt that had that family been alone they would have suffered harm. The lady was so very grateful and next morning asked me if I would take a letter to her sister who lived in Cologne and post it to her when we reached Britain which I was able to do a little over a week later. I have no idea whether that letter arrived safely or not, never hearing another word concerning it from that day to this. Have wondered many times since, as to how that family survived and whether when THE IRON CURTAIN came down, that lady was able to get together with her sister, hope so!

That day we continued our walk towards Bitterfeld and joy of joys, there were the Yanks on the other side of the river. Spike hailed a G.I. who seemed to be on some kind of guard duty at the other end of a broken bridge and he cheerfully invited us to cross after calling to his Russian counterpart on our side and somehow communicating that it was alright for us to cross, we couldn't get over there fast enough for our liking but did eventually make it. This little scene was being repeated every few minutes it seemed, very quickly a small truck that the G.I. had told us to climb into, was full of guys of many different nationalities. We were driven to an American

base close to Halle where we were able to shave and wash our filthy selves even though water supplies were very limited. We were given American field rations and advised not to scoff everything at one go even though supplies were plentiful. It was for our own good they said and if we did not want to be ill, we should take it easy for a couple of days which we did, despite the tremendous temptation to devour everything in sight. In fact, our stomachs had obviously contracted because our capacity to eat quantity was severely limited. It became obvious that all those dreams and earnest discussions in the various camps about food and how we would treat ourselves to voluminous quantities of our favourite meals when we reached civilization again were destined to be just talk. Gradually we became used to regular meals of very limited quantity once more and began to put on lost weight. The combined effect of having our freedom, quality food to eat and water to wash with made me feel a lot more like a human being than I had for quite a while.

After a day or two, we were taken to the airfield at Halle, where we joined a long lineup of men. Every few minutes Dakotas (DC3) were landing and disgorging munitions and supplies of all descriptions which were piling up everywhere on the airfield despite the fact that there were bodies of trucks loading and carting this stuff away to untold destinations. When the aircraft had unloaded, the leading group of men in the lineup, were ushered aboard and the planes took off for we knew not where. Our turn eventually arrived and we were flown to Rheims in France. There we were segregated into parties by Nationality. Spike, although American was sorted into a Canadian group because of his being a member of the RCAF when captured. We bade him adieu, swearing that come what may, we would somehow get together again fairly soon.

At Rheims airport, we were loaded onto the back of an articulated truck with sides about two feet high, it was standing room only and we were packed in quite tightly. The driver and his mate were hearty black G.I.s who were cracking jokes and consumed in loud laughter most of the time. A convoy of similarly loaded trucks set off quite sedately but as the journey progressed the pace picked up until we were barrelling along at tremendous speed, each truck racing all the others. It was a nightmare in the back particularly for those who were on the outside, at every corner we were swung to the left then to the right, or vice versa as the vehicle straightened out of each curve. In the end, we were all yelling our heads off for them to slow down but it had no effect at all. Amazingly we arrived at our destination safely but there were many whose nerves were completely shattered for the next few days. The clowns up front were still guffawing.

To the best of my recollection, it was that same afternoon that Lancasters arrived at this airfield we had been taken to and we were flown, about thirty bods per plane to RAF Benson. We were given a marvellous reception by RAF personnel and very pretty WAAFs, the like of which I had dreamed about but had not seen for so long! We were granted a free telephone call to our relatives. As my home was not on the phone, I called a near neighbour and left a message that I was back in UK safe and well and would be home in a few days time.

CHAPTER 5 SOME FACTS, STATEMENTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS.

Spike and I eventually met again in August 1990 in Toronto whilst we were both visiting Canada: roughly 45 years later after being out of touch for many years. In fact, whilst commuting weekly from Toronto to Wausau in Wisconsin via O'Hare airport in Chicago in the late seventies, I had scanned the Chicago telephone directories whilst waiting for connecting flights and made numerous phone calls to many McGraws in the area without locating Spike. He later told me that he lived in a suburb of Chicago and the telephone directories at the airport would not have covered the area where he lived. In August 1991, Spike, his wife Grace and I attended a reunion of the ex-P.O.W. Association held at Warwick University, unfortunately my wife Betty was not well enough to be there too. We were together quite a lot during that week of activity but apart from resuming our old rivalry at cribbage for a couple of hours; about which we are still discussing who cheated and who won the three games played, we did not mention our time together in Germany and I don't suppose ever will.

When Betty and I lived in London in the immediate postwar years, we occasionally met Jack Mills and his wife Babs. On one occasion, we had dinner in a Chinese restaurant close to Piccadilly Circus. We also attended the first Bomber Command reunion held in the Albert Hall as a foursome. Later, they and we had a daughter each, theirs Barbara and ours Paula. We had one holiday together when the girls were about three or four years old. Eventually, we both moved and lost touch with each other for many years. It was through Ray Crompton of Merthyr Tydfil that I was eventually able to contact Jack and Babs again but although we have spoken on the phone, as yet we have not actually met again. Sadly, Babs died earlier this year.

Fortyfive years after being at RAF Cosford together, Jack Fereday and I met in the Conservative Club at Cannock. We did not recognise each other when we were first re-introduced by a mutual friend of many years standing who previously did not have an inkling that Jack and I had known each other during the war years. Very soon Jack and I were chatting away as if it were only yesterday that we had last met.

I have written to the last known address of Freddy Bird so far without reply. It would be marvellous if someday, we five could get together again if only for a short while, we saw and went through so much together.

From the diary kept by Jack Fereday, listed below are the names of the fellows I was with Barrack 42 Room 3 in Bankau, and hope to have the pleasure of meeting one or two more of them sometime:-

Jack Comfort from Scotland - pilot.
Bob Bethel an Aussie - wop.
Ginger Cleary from Leeds - navigator.
Ron Sloane an Aussie - gunner.
Snowy Dowding an Aussie - pilot
Bob Hall an American - pilot
Spike McGraw an American in Canadian clothing - gunner.
Henry Vogel a South African - wop.
Taffy Morgan a Welshman - engineer.
Freddy Bird from Brentwood - engineer.
Jack Mills from London - navigator.
Charlie Medland from Exmouth - pilot.
Harry Knott from London - engineer.
Alf ??? from Chester - engineer.
Terry ??? an Aussie - gunner.