

Extracts from various written notes made by Wing Commander Bryan Bell 37375
RAF (retd)

On the 3rd June 1943 I and my crew of F/O RC Rice (BA), WO Selman (Nav), Sgt Gregory (Ag), Sgt Brown (Ag), Sgt Martin (Flt eng) and Sgt Ben Davies (W Op) arrived at Lindholme posted to No 1656 HCU No1 group Bomber Command. My memories of the course are vague except our haste to qualify on the Halifax and get onto 'Lancs' as soon as possible. After flying the Lancaster for the first time I remember thinking I had never flown such a magnificent aeroplane and I still think that to this day.

Having completed our conversion the question of a posting for a Squadron Leader and crew loomed up. I found out the squadrons which had vacancies and saw that there was one in 100 Squadron at Waltham. 100 was commanded by Wg Cdr R.V. McIntyre DFC, I knew him by reputation on the rugby field from Durham School as I had cheered on the 1st XV as a junior. He then went off to Cranwell and I had never seen him since. Thus I applied for posting to 100 squadron and was accepted and took command of 'B' flight 100 squadron RAF Station Waltham. At 100 I was also able to catch up with 'Pedro' Clayton a S/Ldr I had met at OTU and Nipper Davies, John Canham soon followed as a flight commander he had been in Australia with me on loan to the Empire Air Training Scheme.

Our operations began with the first op of the Battle of Hamburg of which there is ample documentation. One interesting trip was Milan 14 August approx. We were part of a small force on a factory outside the city (Breda or Pirelli works?) whilst the main force was on the city. On the way out our oxygen supply suddenly showed nil, only the Flt Eng and myself knew so we said nothing to the rest. Since pre-war flying training included flying up to 20,000ft without oxygen I reckoned that if we flew over the Alps below planned flight we would be OK. We were planned to descend after the Alps to 7-10,000ft to target and climb again after bombing. The thought of going straight on to N Africa as some Halifax's had previously done, returning with bomb bays full of citrus fruits had crossed my mind but then the thought of 'Mac' asking me just how I had got through my wings without a height test to 20,000 quickly dispelled that thought. I told the rest of the crew about the situation as we crossed the Alps on the return journey, some said they were feeling the effects of oxygen starvation but with reduced height we made an uneventful safe return home.

My memories of 100 squadron operations are limited as once an operation was over it was behind me and not thought of again. Leisure time was spent either at 'The Ship Hotel' Grimsby with 'mine hosts' Sam and Mrs Muscat where it seemed Chicken and Dover sole was always available to her boys or more locally poaching partridges at roost on the airfield or nearby fields with .22 rifles, also pheasants in local woods again at roost before last light. Dickie Rice was one of the best shots I have ever met. .22 or 12 bore and I remember the local policeman had to ask 'Mac' to stop him cycling through the village of Waltham with a .22 slung over his shoulder. Another memory of the village is that there was a suspicion that if the sails on the Waltham Windmill were turning then there were ops on that night, I have no idea if this was ever proved or disproved.

At the beginning of November 1943 word went around that Mac was to be posted to North Killingholme when it opened as Station Commander as 100 squadron was to throw off a flight to form a new squadron 550. I applied to join 550 as Commanding Officer but was piped to the post by JJ Bennett from 1 Group HQ who arrived with 'Bluey' Graham DFC. AFC (R.A.A.F.) an old pal of mine and also one of my pupils from Australia. 550 squadron formed and as flight commander 'A' flight I did one trip with them Dec 16th Berlin Crash Night. What a night, low stratus for return and smoke from the try out of Fido at Fiskerton nearly blotted out the whole of 1 group with stratus and fog in other areas. David Halford who had taken over 100 squadron crashed near Waltham as did many others. I must say I thought we'd had it that night.

At the end of 1943 I was posted to Lindholme as Wing Commander Training Air I at No II base under Air Commodore George Banting, Wing Commander John Dilworth had taken over 100 squadron and 550 had moved to North Killingholme. Poor John, an Aussie in the RAF from pre war who had been in Australia with me on loan to the RAAF bought it not long after that.

One of my outstanding memories from that time is that contrary to many books of today Bert Harris did a tour of stations and I remember as many aircrew as possible being scrummed into the Binbrook dining hall. He emphasised the value of debriefing reports. His words were:

"We at command are like a bunch of eunuchs, we know what it's all about but cannot do it ourselves" He told us to respect the daylight raids of the Americans in spite of their small bomb loads, if they could shoot down as many German fighters as possible by day it made our job a little easier by night. He soothed the worries of the air gunners who wanted 0.5 guns. He simply said that at aiming visibility range 4 x 0.303 were more effective than 2 x 0.5. It was certainly a stirring occasion.

At Lindholme the production of crews continued unabated while back at 550 Wing Commander JJ Bennett was completing his tour and being at the supply end Mac rang me from Killingholme to see who among the likely squadron commanders was in the pipe line. A very old friend of mine Pat Connolly was ready. He and I had been at Uxbridge in 1935 on first being granted short service commissions, we had met again at CFS on No 59 course 1938, the last peacetime course. I then went to Australia while Pat went to New Zealand in 1942 he took a squadron of NZ fighters north into the SW Pacific Islands. Pat took command of 550 but unfortunately bought it 2 months later, he was replaced by Alan Sisley a pre war Aussie in the RAF who also bought it soon after taking command.

I had been due to meet Mac and his wife at the Turks Head Hotel bar in Newcastle but the night before he rang me to tell me the sad news that 550 had lost another CO and asked me whom I had in the pipe line. I told him that there were some excellent chaps but given the timeline and the squadrons recent losses no one with that level of experience, he asked if he cleared it with George Banting and 1 Group would I go back and take the squadron, I told him I would be delighted and left it with him fearing that it would not be cleared due to the on going training commitments which were non stop. On return from his leave George gave me his blessing and group followed with their clearance and I went to 550 as Commanding Officer in September 1944.

Thus I took over my squadron which had lost two CO's in rather smart succession. This meant they had to be pulled together and learn that their CO could last a bit longer and see more crews through their tour. The loss of CO's meant that commendations for DFCs and DFMs were in arrears. I did my best to catch up but I fear that several gallant crews went unrewarded and also some well deserved recommendations for commissions went west by default. Being a three flight squadron we averaged 28 aircraft kept serviceable by a very fine Engineering Officer S/Ldr George Cooper. Hugh Gardiner seemed to get more bomb load onto our aircraft than any other Station Armament Officer in the group and we used to take top place of bomb loads delivered. Memory fails me on the sequence of Flight commanders. Those I recall first and foremost S/Ldr Roland Newitt (a Canadian) S/Ldr Redmond who went on to TRE at Defford, S/Ldr Willie Caldow whose nice new 'A' Apple I lost for him! Another great character I remember was another Canadian pilot, F/Lt Dubois and an RAAF flight commander Sqn Ldr Pickles.

So more crews completed tours and the turnover of crews completing rose again. It was the practice for Squadron Commanders in our group not to have his own crew but to take 'raw' crews –to give them confidence. What this did for the Squadron Commander is not recorded.

I remember one celebrated crew was all Australian except the bomb aimer whom they called their 'Pommie Mascot'. The captain was a WO the rest Flight Sgts and Sgts, the bomb aimer was a flying officer. HQ RAAF kept up a running question as to why this crew were not all commissioned. They just kept refusing saying it would kill their luck. They completed an excellent tour. The only black spot was when they had flying control instruction to land "call funnels on approach" on return from ops. Just what they lined up on I don't know, but the next thing I knew they called up as having landed in the Humber in line behind the runway but six or seven miles short.

New Years Eve 1944, 5 or 6 aircraft of 550 out. There was a station dance in full swing when an emergency frost and sleet warning came in. Mac was on leave and I was also acting Station Commander. On the tannoy I called for volunteers, never was a runway cleared so quickly, salt and sanded in time for the boys return, all those on snow clearance were issued with a rum ration for an excellent job.

Come to the night of 22nd February 1945. On making out the battle order that morning I put myself down to take F/Lt Luger and crew, myself as captain. As it was my habit to order a crate of beer to be left out for consumption in the mess by myself and any one else who wanted a drink in the mess on my return. As I did so I remember I paid for it at the time which was not usual at all. I took off and flew to the south coast, here we were quite late on plan. It was my prerogative to go through target in the first wave we always reckoned that this was the best spot before the defences warmed up. As we were late I moved out of the pilots seat and handed over to F/Lt luger, I reckoned that his crew should respond automatically to their own skipper with whom they trained all the while. However unfortunately we got later and later until we were twenty minutes behind schedule as we came up to the last turn east for target.

Unseen a night fighter came in astern and hit the rear gunner which started a fire in the rear turret. We heard his screams and then the intercom burnt out, the wireless op soon had the emergency intercom working. The young mid upper claimed to have got a good burst into the fighter as he broke upwards. Meanwhile the hydraulic fluid supply to the rear turret was burning merrily and the whole turret was ablaze. I decided that we would go straight ahead through target and bomb. The intercom began to fade so I directed the crew that after 'bombs away' the bomb aimer would jettison his escape hatch and prepare to jump. All parachutes on Flight eng to be behind BA but within reach of my boot. Nav to be behind me W/Op to be ready to move aft to the door and pull mid upper out as well. Then the pilot to follow me from the front hatch. I said that on the first shudder I would order OUT, kick the engineer and he would likewise the BA. At the same time I would push and point the nav to the rear. There were pleas that we would stretch to our own army lines nearly up to the Ruchwald forest line. I said that we would not make it as the fire would result in the severance of the whole tail unit. However the question was settled by a night fighter coming in and the unwelcome sound like a hydraulic pick. Luckily no one was hit and I gave the order OUT. We were at about 17000ft and I later learned from the W/Op that indeed the tail came off and that he was catapulted through a ring of fire where the tail had been.

As I dropped out of the plane my count was erratic, 1...2...4...5...8.9.10 then came a jerk and a fluttering white canopy above me. Strangely it gave me a great sense of peace and I can well understand how in post war years parachuting became a popular sport.

I could see the target and hear the last of the raid. The ack-ack died away and the search lights went out by groups. A hun fighter circled and, rightly or wrongly, I thought he might have crack at me however, he sheared off. Then I was able to take a look around me. In the sky to the south was a ball of fire the poor old Lanc, to the east the target to the west and north, a scattered trail of small fires. The night was clear and a half moon rising so that the ground was visible as a dark pattern below me. There was a wonderful sensation of solitude and serenity however the direction was downwards and various exercises previously read about and lectured about were now tried out. Turning left and right, spilling air and side dipping. By now the ground became clearer and trees visible. A large paddock of some sort appeared in the line of flight. It was tree-ed on approach and to port and starboard so that the idea was to drop somehow into the open space. After some haphazard pulling on the rigging lines the approach seemed good and then suddenly the ground could be seen approaching rather rapidly so I just let myself go slack and hoped for the best. With a gentle bump and roll I found myself lying on soft earth with my parachute collapsing ahead of me. Remembering the drill for such an event all was gathered in and I made towards the nearest hedge. On the way I found a large potato clump. Lengthwise it ran parallel to the north south hedge I tucked down beside it away from and screened from the hedge. These continental clumps seem to be much bigger than those I remember in the UK and the gutter around the base wider and deeper.

The sound of feet, instep and dogs barking approached from the south and the other side of the hedge. The men were talking, but not excited or with care. The dogs did not have aggressive barks but rather an "on exercise" note. I cowered in the clump ditch concealing as much of my parachute as possible under me. The sounds passed and died

away by my reckoning it was a reluctant patrol turfed out into the night to look for something they did not believe existed.

Now came the stock taking. My escape wallet of maps and money had blown away in the slipstream on my exit. I still had my box of Benzedrine, biscuits, Horlicks tablets and cheese. My field service cap was still wedged inside my battle blouse and under my belt, I had both boots on and was unscathed. In my pockets I turned out a packet of 4 Players cigarettes, a box of matches-safety-12, 2 plain new handkerchiefs (no laundry marks) and a blank Cox and Kings cheque form. 1 service omega wristlet watch, the small pen knife in my "escape type" flying boots plus a wad of toilet paper (form 0.0. sandpaper pattern).

The bale out would be at about 01.15 hours, it was now 02.15 hours, the casual patrol had not found me so now was the time for a plan of action of some sort. The parachute was buried in the bottom of the clump as best as possible. The fur lined tops of the boots tore off easily as designed thus converting flying boots into shoes. The two tops opened out and with the pen knife I hacked off the zips. These I stuffed into the clump whilst the two fur rectangles I put under my shirt, flat, fur inwards on my chest and back. I had taken Benzedrine before the war, in fact it had been our 269 squadron hangover cure before it went on the dangerous drugs list. Thus I knew its properties and that it would clear my head of all but the object in mind - where to go. The Allies had taken Cleves which I considered to be to my North West so that was to be the direction. In other words, "left hand down from the pole star". Charlie's wagon and the pole star were clearly visible so that gave me the line and off I set.

My landing place must have been on a slight plateau as below from this a burn was visible at the bottom and the copse merged into a wood of conifers. This standing timber was of about 12-15 feet in height, thinned and all ground scrub cleared. Next I came upon a road running about 20 degrees to the north of my course but rather than re-enter timber I took the road. Traffic approached and two or three times the German soldiers in pairs called out "Guten Tag" to which I grunted the same. Two or three solo cyclists did likewise. As the trees grew taller on both sides of the road I heard the sound of a heavy motor vehicle approaching so I moved off to port into the trees and stopped about 30 yards away from the road. A grunting and groaning lorry passed from my direction of travel and went straight on. The sound died away into the distance and it seemed prudent to stick to the timber and get back on course. It was noticeable that the Krauts are good timber growers, there was little or no ground cover, the trees were well spaced and had no lower branches. The branches started at about 12 feet, the stronger ones starting above that. This line of walk was halted by the burn or stream of about 7 yards in width. In the moonlight it showed a fair speed, level banks a foot or so above the water, but quite beyond my long jump ability. I followed the burn upstream and came to patch of young timber. This patch was a rearing area, uncleared, quite closely planted and 7 or 8 foot high. It offered ideal shelter. In I crawled until it became quite dark from knitting of the branches overhead. Once more it time to take stock of the situation.

For the first time I wondered what had happened to the rest of the crew, I was of course already aware the rear gunner was dead, I hoped the rest had managed to get to ground safely and were evading capture. My present position, thought far from pleasant, was dry and secure. I decided to take a Horlicks tablet and sleep on things, as this is a neutral condition, being a creature of habit before bed, relieved bodily functions away from nest.

Then I lay down and curled up and slept. About 3 or 4 hours later I awoke refreshed. The snag was that my joints were all frozen by frost and had to be eased very painfully back into action. There was the sound of some sort of factory in the vicinity and motor traffic up on the road. Men's and women's voices could be heard talking and singing as of parties of workers being conveyed in the back of trucks.

As this disturbance died down I worked my way down to the burn I realised there was no way over the water as it was wide deep and fast flowing. There was also a lot more movement on the road and eventually I was spotted. A line of German troops with automatic weapons advanced upon me, I did what any self respecting pilot in that situation would do and gave up. I was taken to a flak post and held. They at least fed me, the food was terrible, stew, black bread and some sort of tea. I was held overnight and early the next day several other prisoners were brought in Flt Lt Luger and the rest of the crew less the rear gunner and navigator being amongst them. The navigator, we learnt after the war had been picked up by the SS who took him to a field and shot him. A polish slave labourer saw it all from a hiding point nearby. Realising this was not right when all was clear he nipped out and took the nav's identity discs which he gave to the first British troops into the area soon afterwards, a matter of weeks. He had landed away from me and the rest of the crew the latter had all come down in gardens of houses near the flak post.

We were all bundled off to a higher formation, here we had our first interrogation. They also took any articles of service equipment such as service watches although I managed to swipe another from a table. More prisoners RAF turned up here. A Geordie from County Durham among them. I knew he was genuine by his broad accent and dialect which I think I alone understood. In fact we both conversed in the broadest of broad Geordie for this purpose. From here by transport we went to Krefeld then by train to Dusseldorf and eventually to Dulag Luft at Oberursel (the Luftwaffe interrogation centre). Here I spent 12 or 14 days in solitary confinement interspersed with interrogation sessions. We were so well briefed on the Dulag Luft procedure that it was actually a most boring procedure. Whenever I was asked how various radar and navigational aids worked I could honestly say that I did not have a clue. Eventually in exasperation the main questioner slapped the table and shouted "I believe you, you are a bloody rotten wing commander, you should know these things". Ironically on my last day the chief interrogator came into my room and slapped a file in front of me, this was my complete file which contained number, rank, name, squadrons and virtually my entire service history. This was the end of Dulag Luft from here off to Wetzlar, a transit camp, and from there to Nuremburg Oflag XIII-B.

Here I took over command of a compound of mixed USAAF, British and Empire aircrew. I told them we were not going to become "old kriegies" as the war must soon end. Soon our 900 went up to 2000+ as a band of US Army under an Eagle Colonel of infantry marched in. He made me his 2IC and we continued our way of life. They had been moved from Poland and endured a rough ride. He was a grand old fellow, had carried a set of Scottish pipes all the way though he could neither fill the bag nor blow a note. As Patten crossed the Rhine we, including all the other compounds were put on the road for Moosburg, Stalag VII-A. On arrival at Moosburg Colonel Pop Goode my US boss found that he wasn't senior Allied officer. Group Captain Willetts RAF held

that seniority, Wing Commander Dickie Kellett was his 2IC. Squadron Leader Murray shot down the day the war started was also there. Pop Goode requested that I remain as his "RAF liaison officer" and I was accommodated in Pop's room with his supply officer. Say what you like but the Americans exploited the goons to the nth degree and soon the goons were bribed to produce an electric hot plate to boil and cook and from somewhere other comforts appeared. I had freedom of movement throughout the British and American compounds and was able to meet up with some school friends from Northumberland and Durham who were Gunners, Northumberland Fusiliers and DLI. Strangely I did not meet many of own service who I knew.

After General Patten's advance and the liberation of the camp on the 29th April 1945 we were soon on our way home and I flew out of Moosburg on the 7th May 1945 the day before VE Day to Northolt thus ending this rather unpleasant European vacation.

Footnote

April 1945 Stalag VIIA (officially Stammlager VIIA), a prisoner of war camp in Bavaria twenty-two miles northeast of Munich and a half-mile north of Moosburg, Germany. In a sprawling set of tightly spaced rows of drab, rundown, one-story military barracks built to accommodate 10,000 persons, the Germans had crowded together 110,000 prisoners of war: British, Americans, military personnel of every Allied nationality (including 40,000 Russians), Indians, Australians, South Africans, Asians and South Americans.