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(1919 to 1982) (617 & 49 Squadron)

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Memoirs

Education ! Not for me. Despairing of ever being able to assimilate the mysteries of algebra etc., I decided to leave the secondary school, where I had spent 3 years, and possibly to avoid expulsion after a fracas with some female students, I left in August 1936.

Impressed with the idea of overseas travel and to emulate my brother who had joined the Army, I applied for enlistment in the ground trades of the RAF. I was told that the minimum joining age was 17½, and, as I was at that time barely 17, I left my name on the list to be called up when I became "of age".

In the meantime I tried a variety of temporary jobs from mixing fruit in a huge bath and then packaging into 1 lb packets, to labouring, making tiled fireplaces. Finally, I obtained a job as a petrol attendant, leading to training as a mechanic, where I remained until March 1937 when I joyfully received a letter from the RAF to report for enlistment.

With the speed of a gazelle I packed a small suitcase with my minimum wardrobe, carried my raincoat, and off to RAF Recruiting Station at Uxbridge.

I was to remain there for a 3 month basic training course, square bashing etc., but after a week, all new arrivals were to move to RAF Station at Henlow, near Bedford. Although confined to camp until leaving for Henlow, I decided to break camp and nip home for a visit. Consequently, after an evening with a girl friend I missed the last tube back to Uxbridge. Returning on the first tube next morning I was charged with being absent without leave and was "awarded" 7 days confined to camp to be carried out at Henlow.

It is ironic, in view of my later association with Fire Brigades, that I spent my first 7 days at Henlow scraping and repainting Fire Buckets. On completion of my punishment, I, along with about 100 others, had to attend a 3 day pre-selection course to decide in what manner we were best to be employed by the Government, to protect and maintain the Empire.

During the 3 days of questions and interviews, and because I managed to hold a screwdriver better than a pen, it was decided I was best qualified to become a mechanic. With the 3 months basic training over, and a proven ability to march in step and hold a rifle, 20 of us were moved to RAF Manston, to the fitters mate training course of 4 weeks. My aptitude seemed to lean towards engines instead of air-frames. After the 4 weeks course was successfully completed, I emerged a fully qualified fitters mate, enroute, once again, to Henlow for 9 months, to be trained as a Flight Mechanic (E).

The period at Henlow was "hard-yacker", but by determination I was able to complete and successfully pass the 9 month course emerging as an AC2 Flight Mechanic (Engines), and my first posting January 1938 was to 48 (GR) Squadron at Manston - between Ramsgate and Margate.

In view of the impending war, and with a huge expansion programme for the RAF, 48 Squadron was halved into two squadrons and I was posted to Eastchurch, near Sheerness, still with the Avro Anson

aircraft. After a few weeks at Eastchurch notices appeared on the board with regard to overseas postings and as my original intention in joining was to travel, I applied for a posting to Iraq. A few months wait and I was finally rewarded with an overseas posting to No. 84 Squadron at Shaibah, Iraq and left England in December 1938 via the troopship Gloucestershire outward bound to Basra.

Life aboard a troopship turned out to be four weeks of boredom, only relieved by port stops at Malta, Port Said and Calcutta. Four weeks of sleeping in hammocks, with sea sickness for the first 4 days, but monotony was somewhat relieved by the incessant games of cards and Crown and Anchor. It was a relieved ship's complement when we sailed up the Red Sea to Basra. An 18 mile journey by truck across the desert took us to what was to be our home for about a year - Shaibah RAF Station.

Peace time service overseas was a pleasant enough life. Work hours were 6 am to 12 noon, with a break for breakfast from 8-9. Lunch was followed by compulsory siesta in darkened barracks until tea at 5 pm. Then the evening was spent filling in time with outdoor cinema, booze and more booze.

My RAF pay had risen from the early 14/- a week (of which I allocated 5/- to my mother), to 18/- a week, so it can be seen that outside entertainment was strictly limited by finance. Beer and cigs were all duty free with a bottle of beer about 10d. We used to save our money until we had sufficient as a group to have a Saturday in Basra. Normally about every 2 months.

The only transport to Basra was by taxi in groups of six. We would proceed the 18 miles across the desert, through Zubair, a "Wog" village, which could be dangerous if you stopped in it, and on to Basra. Roads were non-existent and you roared across the desert, South-East, making your own tracks. It looked like an armoured charge with about 12 taxis all roaring over the sand to Basra. The afternoon would be spent boozing in bars, a trip to the so called cabaret in the evening, culminating in sexual adventure on the roof of the cabaret at 5/- a time and your arse winking at the moon.

The biggest problem in such a posting was the killing heat, where temperatures reached 130 F with 100% humidity and the ubiquitous mosquito. Malaria was prevalent so one had to sleep under mosquito nets and always wear long-sleeved shirts in the evening. I have known occasions when one could take off his shirt in the outdoor cinema and wring the water out.

Flying in the first half of '39 was with the old Vickers Vildebeeste aircraft - a biplane which was so highly useful in tribal desert skirmishes. Mid 1939 and in preparation for war, we were re-equipped with Blenheims, an all metal monoplane which used to bake in the summer heat, and an egg could be fried on the Mainplane. Refueling was carried out by 4 galls which were lifted aloft to the wings and then poured thru' a chamois leather filter and would take 2 or 3 hours to complete for each aircraft and was certainly a test of strength and endurance.

The main purpose or task of 84 Squadron at Shaibah was the 6 monthly checking of landing grounds in the Persian Gulf. These landing grounds were provided all the way down the Gulf as emergency landing grounds for Imperial Airways.

They consisted of an airfield marked out in the desert, the only building being a concrete blockhouse which housed petrol and spare parts etc.

I was lucky to be away for 3 weeks in mid 1939 to carry out one of these inspections. We took off in 3 Vickers Vincent aircraft with a pilot and one ground crew in each aircraft. We carried out our inspections of airfields at Kuwait and Masirah Island and Shinas, Al Qatif, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi, Muscat, and then our trip was cut short when one of the aircraft crashed on landing at Ras al Had slightly injuring the two crew. This brought problems because it was necessary to get the injured crew out for hospital treatment and so it was decided that Steve (a Sgt. engine fitter), and myself, would be left behind whilst the two remaining aircraft made the 2 or 3 day journey back to base. We were to guard the wreck, salvaging all serviceable items for later transit.

They left us all the food and booze, a rifle each and 50 rounds of ammunition. We rigged up a

makeshift shelter from the sun against the wall of the concrete blockhouse, and settled down for a week. As the natives were classified as unpredictable, we loaded our rifles and waited.

First 2 or 3 days were O.K. We ate, drank the booze and generally had a good picnic, seeing or hearing nobody. About a ½ mile from our shelter was a deep wadi, and on the third day we were concerned to hear voices, and on looking, we could see heads moving along the wadi. Eventually they emerged, and turned out to be about 50 local armed tribesmen who then made their way towards us. We were scared, but there was not much we could do than to check our rifles and wait. For 2 days and nights they sat about 100 yds away gesticulating and generally making a lot of noise. We did not close our eyes for 2 days, and all the time the tribesmen were edging forward and getting closer and closer. When they were about 40 yds away, we could see, thankfully, that they were carrying beads which meant they were friendly, and ultimately we opened up tins of food and we were soon best of pals, but it was a relief on the following day that the three aircraft arrived to pick us up and back to base.

Flying training was intensified in 1939 in preparation for war, and in January 1940 we were warned of an immediate departure for Egypt. Finally, the move was on and Vickers Valencia transports moved the ground crews etc., 300 miles north to RAF Habbaniyah, where Bombay transport aircraft moved them to Egypt. A convoy of new trucks left on the 700 mile drive from Baghdad to Haifa by way of the oil pipeline, and I volunteered to travel by this method. At least it taught me how to drive. After about 10 days of hard driving, we arrived in Egypt to RAF Amariyah Base Camp to regroup and prepare to move forward to the war in the desert.

Our first move was to a desert airfield at Fuka where the squadron operated raids on enemy bases in Tripolitania. All living in the desert was under canvas and was of a minimum standard. One would work from sun-up to sun-down, and exist on a daily diet of corned beef and biscuits. Corned beef was the staple diet and was fried, stewed, curried and cooked in so many ways in an effort to disguise it, but it still tasted like "Bully Beef" whatever the cooks did. Daytime in the desert was very hot and sandy, but at night it turned very cold, and the frequent night guard patrols were unpleasant.

The war at this stage was progressing well for the Allies under Wavell's command, and as territory was gained, so the RAF operating squadrons moved forward.

Airfields in the desert were just a patch picked out in the desert suitable for air operations, and so we moved in, erected tents and settled down for a couple of weeks. Whilst at Fuka, I was ordered one day to fly up to a forward landing ground at El Adem where one of our Blenheims had landed whilst on his way to raid Sidi Barrani, the pilot having claimed that his engines were running rough. Along with a tool box and change of plugs, they shoved me into a Blenheim piloted by an Australian, to go and fix the engines. To reach El Adem, we had to go past Halfaya Pass and Tobruk, enemy held territory, and this Australian thought he should take me over it to see the real war, which he did, and after a little flak was thrown up, I reminded the pilot that he was alright having a parachute, but I did not have that advantage, so we finished our flight by the inland route away from any action.

On arrival at El Adem, I checked the engines and found nothing wrong, but to mollify the pilot I changed the plugs and still the pilot refused to fly it. It finally turned out that he had lost his nerve and was taken off flying for that all too common disease LMF or "lack of moral fibre", another term for scared stiff.

Our next move was west to LG75 where we took over an airfield recently evacuated by German and Italian troops. The living accommodation was in caves cut in the sandhills and left intact when the enemy departed in a hurry, so we ended up with many supplies and just about everyone had a two-stroke motor bike or van to run around in. Some caves were full of female clothes and make-up etc., proof of the Italian servicemen's penchant for taking women to war to keep them company.

As LG75 was a forward bombing base for raids on Tripoli and further west, life became hectic with flying all day. Three Blenheim squadrons occupied the airfield with aircraft parked all around the place

to minimise enemy strafing etc.

One of my aircraft was having a 30 hr inspection and I was working on the engines when the alert was sounded for a Wing raid on Benghazi involving 6 aircraft from each of the 3 squadrons. When the eighteen aircraft started their engines and warmed them up, the propellers started a miniature sandstorm. We were sitting on the main plane of our aircraft to watch the take off of the eighteen fully bomb-laden aircraft.

The controller had given the pilots' instructions to take off when ready. Being no wind conditions, aircraft took off any way they wished and we were presented with the horrendous disaster of two formations of 3 aircraft taking off towards each other, but unable to see because of the sand blown up by propellers. Just as they got airborne they collided and the whole lot blew up with all crews killed. One of the fate's of desert operations.

Towards the end of the year the squadron decided to send a truck back to Amirayah to pick up booze and goodies for Christmas. I volunteered of course, and with two other blokes in a 3-ton truck we set off for Alexandria a few hundred miles back east.

After loading up with beer and stores, we set off again for El Adem taking the coast road, in fact the only road. During our absence, the situation at the front had changed and the Allies were once again retreating, so it was no surprise when we were stopped by MP's at Sidi Barrani and told to turn round and go back. Not knowing how far to go back, we stopped about 20 miles east of Sidi Barrani, opened up the truck and started to have a few beers. We were joined by many troops on the retreat who all joined in for a drink until eventually our own squadron ground troops caught us up, and it was decided to use the truck load of booze for the retreating troops. We eventually arrived back at Alexandria and then Cairo with very little left.

Our squadron was re-assembled at Ismailia, and then the Italian invasion of Greece took place, so we were bundled off to Greece and were the first British troops to arrive there. The ground crew travelled over by the Navy and I went over on the cruiser HMS York, landing in Piraeus Harbour after about 4 days journey. Our destination was to be Tatoi aerodrome, just a little north of Athens. This had been the civilian airport for Athens, and for once we were to have barrack type of accommodation instead of tents. The squadron suffered greatly in Greece because our aircraft, the Blenheims, were outclassed, in particular when the Germans entered the fray with their ME109's and 110's. We lost all our original aircraft to the enemy and half of our replacements during the 6 month stay.

During our first month in Athens, it was as good as a holiday. We had the run of the town and spent all our time in town, with no hotels placed "out of bounds". We played sport with the Greeks, and the Air Force soccer team played the Greek National team at the Olympic Stadium losing 3-2.

My mate and I went into Athens one day after a game of soccer to have a beer and went into a cafe near the Britannic Hotel. Cafe's like France, sell all drinks, and it was whilst buying beer that we heard a middle-aged woman speak with a Liverpool accent, so we spoke to her and it turned out that she was governess to daughters of the Managing Director of the Greek National soccer team. Two daughters were her charges and she was buying coffee for the girls and we were introduced. They were named Lela and Rita Maze, 18 and 19 years old and they were beautiful, so of course we were interested and wanted to follow up the introductions, but the governess said they were not allowed out without her. However, we made a date for the next day and a few more days. At one of our meetings the governess said that she had told the girls' father about us, and as a consequence we were not to see them until the father had met us. We were invited to dinner out at their huge house at Kafisia, an Athens suburb, and after dinner and drinks, the father wanted to know our intentions towards his daughters. Well you can guess our intentions, but we told him we were interested in them and he asked us if we would be prepared to marry them after the war. He offered, when the war was over, to set us up in business if we married and remained in Greece, which we said that we were prepared to do. For the remainder of our time in Greece, the girls were allowed out un-escorted and we had a great time. As the war worsened and Athens was placed "out of bounds" to all troops, the affair was

terminated by our sudden evacuation to Crete.

This is getting ahead of myself. With the entry of the Germans into the arena, the war took a nasty turn and we were being shot at.

The early war in Greece was so unreal as to be unbelievable. Prior to Germany declaring war, the Germans were everywhere you went in Athens, and it was amazing to see the British, American, German and French Embassies with armed sentries outside, and yet Britain was at war with Germany. The bars were full of all nationalities, and it was nothing to find yourself having a beer, or being bought one, by Germans and sitting at the same table. Strange.

When Germany declared war on Greece, the action started and in a period of two or three weeks, the Germans overran the country. With the increased activity, it was decided that all permanent buildings would be evacuated and personnel moved to the northern end of the airfield, under canvas, and hidden in the trees. The airfield was just within range of the German fighter ME 109, and it became a regular occurrence for the airfield to be strafed by six 109's every morning at 6 a.m. Each strafing run by the Germans would leave a couple of our Blenheims on fire. We organised resistance by the use of Browning machine guns from wrecked aircraft. These were placed along the eastern Boundary on the edge of slit trenches and elevated so that the strafing planes had to fly through the hail of bullets. For about two weeks, we blazed away every morning, and sad to say never accounted for one aircraft.

Time was running out and the Squadron was placed on alert for evacuation. During this period we were astonished one morning at about 4 a.m., when a conglomeration of aircraft came in from the north, and our first thought was that the Germans were invading with paratroops, but, in fact, it was the Royal family of Yugoslavia evacuating. They were ultimately sent on to North Africa escorted by six Hurricanes that had landed the day before. These Hurricanes were the first modern fighters to arrive in Greece, and were sent to assist our front line troops. They did not go to the front and this was the cause of bad feeling between the RAF and Dominion troops, because they felt the RAF had let them down.

Evacuation day came nearer, and it was decided all available aircraft would evacuate to Crete with as many people as they could carry. On grounds of priority, maintenance personnel, (of which I was one fortunately), were the only ones to be evacuated as they were needed back in Egypt. When we did finally evacuate, we only had 9 long-nosed Blenheims left and each one took off with 9 people aboard instead of the usual 3, and headed for Crete. We travelled light, no gear at all, and this was to have a bearing later in my career, when after having been shot down over France in 1943, the interrogating officers at Dulagluft were able to confront me with all prior information from these documents captured in Greece.

We landed at Heraklion, a coastal airfield in Crete, and were then transported by truck over the hills to Suda Bay. All troops were gathered in this area for evacuation to Egypt by boat and air. I spent about 7 days living in the orange and olive groves awaiting my turn to evacuate, and then, because all aircraft tradesmen had priority, I managed to leave on the last Sunderland flying boat for Alexandria in Egypt. The trip was fantastic because we took 91 people, grossly overloaded, but managed to arrive safely.

The next few weeks were spent re-grouping at Ismailia, until replacement aircraft arrived, and then we were ordered to Habbaniyah, near Baghdad in northern Iraq because of the Iraqi insurgent uprising. We were then deployed north to Mosul and spent a few weeks under canvas carrying out operations over Syria and Lebanon, and when this was accomplished, we were moved back again to the Western Desert for this next campaign. This would be about August 1941. A couple of months was spent up and down the Desert, and then Japan attacked Pearl Harbour, and our squadron was withdrawn and ordered to the Far East at Singapore.

Here I had a fortunate stroke of luck, because, prior to moving East, personnel who had served their

original two years overseas, were given the choice of volunteering to go to the Far East or wait in Cairo for a boat home. I was tempted to go East, but elected to stay and await a boat home. This decision was a momentous one because the squadron went East and arrived in Singapore in time to be taken P.O.W. by the Japanese when they over-ran Singapore. They were all then shipped to Japan as P.O.W.'s and landed up in a P.O.W. camp on the outskirts of Nagasaki. I believe all were killed when the first atomic bomb was dropped on the city, so, luck of the draw.

Meanwhile I settled down in Egypt and was sent to an underground maintenance unit at Tura Caves on the outskirts of Cairo whilst we lived in barrack accommodation at Heliopolis Airport. This huge maintenance complex was built underground and extended for miles into the hills, and here aircraft, engines, trucks and tanks etc., were refurbished for further use. I spent about 7 weeks at Heliopolis and having a great time in Cairo, when I was finally informed I was to sail home on the Viceroy of India, unescorted, because it was a fast liner, and we were to go via South Africa. Our job on the way home was to act as guards to 2000 German P.O.W.'s from the Africa Corps. It was not a pleasant journey as the German P.O.W.'s were truculent, and, apart from sleep, all our time was spent on guard duties. The huge liner, capable of 20 knots, was to sail well out into the ocean and make a fast run. It was an interesting experience to listen to Lord HawHaw on German radio claiming to have sunk the Viceroy of India in mid-Atlantic with the loss of all lives. The boat left Port Said, proceeded down the Suez Canal into the Red Sea and then hugged the East African coast, finally putting in to Durban after about 10 days. Here we had a 4 day break and were really royally feasted by the South Africans in their homes. Altogether a delightful interlude.

About 2 weeks later, we docked at Liverpool and were all sent on leave to await our next posting.

BACK TO EUROPE

After 3 weeks leave, I received notice that I was to report to 59 Squadron at North Coates Fitties, an airfield in Lincolnshire, just outside Grimsby. The squadron was engaged in Coastal Command operations, and I spent about 3 weeks there before the squadron was transferred to Gosport in Hampshire, to be re-fitted with the new American Liberators, and it was whilst there that requests were promulgated for qualified ground crews to be trained as flight engineers for Bomber or Coastal Command operations. As I suited the qualifications I immediately applied and was accepted, and shortly moved to St. Athans Training School in South Wales for my two month course.

After two months solid training, and passing the necessary examination, I became Flight Engineer and received my wings. Then came the decision whether to opt for the quiet but boring life of Coastal Command, or the more exciting but decidedly more dangerous Bomber Command, and it was interesting in the manner in which the authorities made their decision. The 80 budding newly qualified engineers were all assembled in the conference hall and as there was a week to spare, volunteers were asked for different types of fatigues during that spare week. The twenty or so people who opted for the easiest type of fatigue were recruited to Coastal Command, and the balance of 60, of which I was happily one, were posted to Bomber Command. I was more than happy to be one of these as Bomber operations over Germany promised to be more exciting than 18 hr. boring submarine patrols over the North Atlantic.

I was then posted to a Conversion Training Unit in Lincolnshire to begin training on Manchester twin engine bombers, as a prelude to joining a Halifax or Lancaster bomber squadron.

Before training, all newly passed-out aircrews were assembled in the hangar to mix and meet each other, and where possible, to sort themselves out into crews. I was approached by one of the older pilots to join his crew, and as he struck me as being mature and experienced, I was quite happy to join him and that was how I met my pilot Geoff Bull, known as Chuffie, and from then on, we were moving around the other crews and gathered in our Navigator, Bomb Aimer, Wireless Operator and 2 Gunners, so when assembled our crew was as follows:

Warrant Officer G. Bull (Chuffie)	-	Pilot
Sgt. C. Chamberlain (Mick)	-	Navigator
Sgt. C. Wiltshire (Charlie)	-	Engineer
Sgt. J. Stewart (Stew)	-	Wireless Op.
Pilot Officer ? (Prune)	-	Bomb Aimer
F/Sgt. McWilliams (Mac)	-	Mid-upper Gunner
Sgt. D. Thorpe (Don)	-	Tail Gunner

Chuffie had been a peace-time pilot and member of City of Edinburgh 603 Squadron and so was an experienced pilot. Charlie Chamberlain was a school teacher, Jack Stewart a Scotsman from Fifeshire - an electrician by trade. McWilliams a school teacher, Don Thorpe - Canadian and P/O Prune, I cannot remember his name, was a fellow Londoner and straight out of school.

Once assembled we were sent to No. 49 Squadron based at Fiskerton in Lincolnshire, and thankfully equipped with Lancasters, and so began our operational career.

Training continued, and then on Thursday June 24th we were detailed for our first operational bombing trip over Occupied Europe. Speculation was rife as to destination, and excitement ran high up to briefing time at 6 pm when the target would be disclosed. The crew were all keen and I could not detect any nervousness, and everybody looked forward to it and wondered how it would be and what would happen.

We assembled at 6 pm in the Operations Room and, when all crews were assembled, the Commanding Officer removed the cover from the chart and all was revealed; a large red arrow pointed to Wuppertal, an industrial town in the centre of the Ruhr Valley. The Ruhr area was known to all aircrew as "Happy Valley" because it was very heavily defended, and was the heart of German

industry. As all new crews hoped, we thought we might get an easy coastal target, but no, smack bang in the middle of the Ruhr for our first taste of anti-aircraft fire and fighters.

The Ruhr Valley would probably be the most heavily attacked target in Germany, and was under attack on and off for a long period. If German industry could be crippled, so might the war be shortened. Briefing details were to take off about 9.45 pm, climb to operational height - 23,000 ft, and cross the enemy coast at the Friesian Islands and continue to just west of Osnabruck, and there turn southwest and commence our run-up to target. We encountered our first flak at the Dutch coast but it seemed harmless and well below us. On the raid were 500 bombers comprised of Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters. We were the elite with the best aircraft because we could climb to 24,000 ft, whereas the Stirlings and Halifaxes operated much lower, and consequently they received the majority of the enemy action.

The night was clear and we could see the opposition ahead attacking the leading bombers and it certainly looked ferocious and we wondered how we would ever get through it. However, as we approached and settled down to our bomb run, things seemed quieter and down went our bombs - 1 x 4,000 lb bomb and hundreds of 2½ lb incendiaries - to stoke up the already burning fires. With the bombing over, we left the target and headed northwest and home. We landed safely about 2 am, debriefed, had breakfast and went to bed. One down and it seemed easy.

Next day, slept until 10 am, got up to be told that we were on again that night, and at briefing at 6 pm, we found that the target was to be the Ruhr again, and a town not far from the previous night and known as Gelsenkirchen. It is amazing that 700-800 bombers can take off from such a restricted area as central and eastern England and yet, apart from initial take-off, one never seems to see another aircraft. The only time one is aware of other aircraft is when you see one attacked by a fighter or hit by flak and it catches fire and dives to earth, or else blown up in mid-air. Mid-air crashes between bombers did occur, and often the presence of a bomber ahead would be indicated by turbulence caused by its slipstream. The trip to Gelsenkirchen was uneventful, usual amount of flak, no attacks by fighters, target area bombed and returned safely. Two operations to our credit; only 28 to go before we complete our first tour of operations and have a rest. Inclement weather interrupted flying for a while, and it was not until July 5th that we carried out our next trip. This trip turned out to be the first 1,000 plus bomber raid, and the target was the City of Cologne in the central Ruhr Valley. Uneventful trip really except that the flak was very intense, but safely through and home. I think losses for the night were about 25 bombers, and we witnessed about 3 or 4 go down flaming, with very few parachutes seen.

Unknown to us, the technical radar specialists had evolved a system of counteracting the German air defence system, and it was not until July 25th, that we were to learn all about this new system. We assembled in the Operations Room for briefing and were told that for the ensuing week, or as long as required, we would operate every night in an effort to "wipe-out" Hamburg. This was to be a maximum effort, and we were to use, for the first time, the new anti-German defence invention. It was code-named "Window" and consisted of thousands of metallic strips which were dropped in bundles by every aircraft, the theory being that the German radar would be nullified, and, therefore, German defence would be rendered ineffectual, and so it turned out to be.

We took off at 2300 hrs for our first raid on Hamburg to climb to our operational height of 23000 ft. The raid was by 1,000 plus bombers, but our aircraft failed to get above 14,500 ft and consequently, we ran into more flak and searchlights than anticipated, but no problem, we carried out our bombing run and returned safely to U.K. The raid is to be remembered, because with the use of "Window", the defences were all at sea, as seen by the useless meandering of searchlights, and haphazard flak. Certainly the introduction of "Window" was an instant success and resulted in losses of only about 2%.

During the whole of the next week, the attacks were greatly successful and permitted the annihilation of Hamburg. Towards the end of the Hamburg battle for that week, our losses increased slightly each raid, indicating that the Germans were slowly counteracting the effects of "Window". By the end of the

week, our losses were almost back to what they had been before the introduction of "Window", but certainly its use did allow Hamburg to be wiped out.

On our return from Hamburg at 0408 hrs on July 25th, we complained bitterly of our inability to reach our operational height of 23000 ft, and whilst we slept, the ground crew carried out a check of the aircraft and found no obvious defect, so we were cleared for our next trip on July 27th. Because Hamburg was cloud covered, we were sent to Essen in the Ruhr. Our aircraft once again failed to get above 14,500 ft, but we bombed O.K. and returned safely to base. We complained once again about the aircraft's performance, and a further check revealed nothing so we took off again on July 29th, with our target once again - Hamburg. We were airborne at 2230 hrs, and, confident that after the second check the aircraft was O.K., we expected to enjoy the trip from our anticipated height of 23000 ft. This was not to be - we floundered around the 14,500 ft. level and consequently brought more activity upon ourselves at the lower height. Hamburg could be clearly seen at this low height, and the pummeling and pounding was obvious because buildings, factories and houses, could be seen burning, and the crew were highly elated and excited. From the aloofness of height one gave no thought to the women and children being incinerated. War was war, and that was what we were there to do.

Our elation was short-lived, because, still flying about 14,500 ft. we attracted many more searchlights and flak until about 10 searchlights coned us and we could be seen for miles. This situation was dangerous because a night fighter can attack by vision whilst our own vision is affected by the lights. We tried all the evasive tactics in the book, but could not shake off the lights, so we levelled out for our bombing run, dropped our bombs, and as soon as they were gone we noticed the flak was getting more intense and creeping closer, so the skipper yelled out for us to hang on as he was going to dive to ground level in an attempt to shake off the searchlights.

He threw the aircraft into a screaming dive, but for a while the lights and flak followed us down getting nearer all the time, and it was during the dive that Don Thorpe in the tail turret yelled out that he had been hit. At that point we got clear of the lights and the flak dropped away and we levelled out at low level to reorientate ourselves. I am convinced that had the skipper not made the dive to ground level, we would have been blown out of the sky. Once we had levelled out and were heading roughly northwest (not really knowing where we were due to all the evasive flying), the skipper told me to go down to the tail turret and attend to the tail gunner, and then to take his place in the turret. I did not think much of this idea, because I felt a lot safer in the cockpit where I could see what was going on, rather than isolation in the tail. I made my way aft, picking up Jack Stewart, the Wireless Op on the way. We got Don from the turret and took him to the rest bed. With his face bleeding profusely, he looked in bad shape. As it turned out, his injuries were of a minor nature, the bleeding being caused by perspex splinters hitting his face when shrapnel splintered his turret. The skipper ordered me to remain in the turret against further attack. Little did he know how useless I was down there, because I had never kept myself up to the task, thinking that it would never happen to me. Let me digress whilst I explain the turret.

With turret facing fore and aft, two sliding doors are opened to permit entry. The socket for aircraft communication hangs down under the seat and movement of turret and guns are controlled by a type of motorcycle handlebar arrangement. When the handlebar is pushed to the left, the turret will turn to fire to the right and vice versa. To elevate the guns up or down you turn the twist grip on the handlebars. A panel light is installed whereby the pilot can signal a flashing light in a pre-arranged code for urgent messages should there be a communication failure. I have explained all this because in darkness and panic when I entered the turret, I could not find the communication socket, and, furthermore, could not get the doors to close, but I decided that I had better learn how things worked in case we were attacked. Imagine my horror when trying to edge the turret carefully to port, it shot round faster than anticipated (of course it has to be fast), and left me looking thru' the open doors at the ground whizzing by at 280mph. I immediately and carefully edged the turret back to its fore and aft position and sat there petrified. I salute all "Tailend Charlies" because the feeling of isolation and loneliness is absolute. I hesitate to guess what would have happened had a fighter attacked, but I guess I would have somehow made it work. A fighter attack was unlikely because we found ourselves over Bremen at low level and heading fast as we could for home.

By this time, the skipper had become concerned because I was not answering his calls (not plugged in). After flashing the light at me and getting no answer, he, unbeknown to me, had sent Jack Stewart down to find out if I was in trouble. As I later learnt, he had said, "Go down and get the stupid bastard back up here in the cockpit where he can do no harm". Of course when Jack came down, I was sitting with my back to the open doors, and to get my attention, he hit me in the back and I nearly jumped out of my skin, I thought I had been shot. Jack then took over the turret and I returned to the safety of the cockpit and my engine dials. We finally landed back at base at 0330 hrs with a slightly injured gunner, my soiled underpants, and a very hostile attitude towards the ground staff who we blamed for being unable to reach our operational height, and, therefore, landing us in trouble.

During the next two days, and in view of our complaints, the aircraft was given a 30 hr inspection, and a full load test flight using dummy bombs. The test was carried out by a Canadian crew and pilot W.O. Hales, who after carrying out a full and efficient cockpit check, easily got the aircraft to 24,000 ft. Speaking to him after the test, it soon became obvious as to what had caused the bad performance, and our inability to reach 23,000 ft.

Before any take-off, the pilot and engineer carry out a cockpit check. Chuffie and I had become lax in our checks, and because of this had caused our own problems. There is a lever on the left of the pilot which controls hot or cold air to the carburettors, and this should always be in "Cold" position and locked with light locking wire. Under extreme icing conditions, the locking wire is broken and the lever placed in "Hot" position to stop the carburettors from freezing.

What had happened was that on it's last inspection, the ground crew had locked it in "Hot" and of course, on our checks, seeing the locking wire in position, we hurriedly assumed things were right. On the test flight, the crew had trouble getting above 15,000 ft, did a thorough check, broke the locking wire and returned the lever to "Cold", and easily got 23,000 ft. From then on I was known as "Hot-air Charlie" for a slipshod display of crewmanship, which whilst humorous at the time, could have cost our lives, and very nearly did with the tail-gunner. We were now ready for our next trip which was to be the final one on Hamburg.

We assembled in the Operations Room at 10 o'clock on 2nd August and although weather reports were not the best, it was decided to put the raid on, and although not very successful, it was to finish Hamburg.

Weather conditions over the North Sea and all the way to and over the target were lousy with storms and high cloud. We gained some compensation because we were now able to climb to 24,000 ft and all seemed well. Finding the target was simple because, from a hundred miles away the "firestorm" over Hamburg could be clearly seen, and as we approached the target, cloud base was about 15,000 ft, but towering above it all was smoke and "firestorm" caused by the burning city of Hamburg from previous fires. The centre of the firestorm, coupled with a stationary thunderstorm, caused very turbulent and dangerous conditions and I believe half the aircraft returned without bombing, but we carried on and shovelled some more bombs into the fires. The centre of the storm was the colour of ashes and the whole thing seemed to be boiling like a witches cauldron. It was an awe inspiring sight and we wondered how anybody could have survived on the ground below - the 4 raids claimed 30,000 dead. Approach to the target was very bumpy, and once in the "firestorm" spiral, the aircraft was thrown all over the place, but we dropped our bombs into the ashy cloud and emerged like a grey ghost with cockpit vision obliterated, which cleared as we headed home. It was frightening to be in the centre of the smoke and heat, and hard to believe that the smoke and heat was caused by a town and people burning.

Fortunately not many have witnessed such a sight and what we saw was indescribable, and although some pity was felt for those on the ground, war is war, and such a raid might shorten the war.

We then had an eight day break before we carried out raids on 10th August to Nurnberg (our farthest into Germany) and Leverkusen on 22nd August. Between these two, we carried out a raid on Milan in North Italy, which, because of scenery, bears a little mention. About 300 bombers took off to bomb Milan and had an uneventful flight across France and over the Alps before dropping down to the

target. The breathtaking views when crossing the Alps were indescribable and opposition over the target was minimal. Very few aircraft failed to return and altogether a very successful sortie.

Around about this time, a signal was received from No. 5 Group Headquarters to all squadrons (Lancasters) inviting crews to volunteer for duties with 617 Squadron (Dambusters) to replace crews lost in the Dams raid. The criteria laid down was that only crews with a minimum of 15 operational flights could be considered, but, nevertheless, we decided to put ourselves forward. We heard nothing for a while, and in the meantime did not do any more trips, and, because of poor response, a second signal was sent out. Once again we volunteered and this time we were called up for an interview to 617 and were interviewed by W/Commander Leonard Cheshire.

He interviewed each crew member individually, and as there were no dissenters we were accepted. Flying with this squadron was considered dangerous, and life expectancy was not at all high, but the chance to fly with the experts was attractive and different from the run of the mill bombing raids. Had anyone of the crew expressed doubts, we would not have been accepted, and I think the person who had the hardest decision was Mick Chamberlain, as he was the only married man, but unwaveringly he accepted, and we were posted to 617 for special operations.

Special operations were few and far between, and we spent all our time training over the length and breadth of Britain with the emphasis on low-level flying until we became expert. Great fun was had in roaring over Axis POW's working in the fields who scattered on seeing a Lancaster roaring down on them.

We took off one day on a low-level map reading exercise and flew around at about 50 ft on the radio altimeter. After roaring over Lincoln as low as we could get, we turned west and came down as low as possible. Being a map reading exercise, the Bomb Aimer, Norman Batey, Navigator, Mick Chamberlain and myself had maps in our hands to try and follow the route by low-level map reading. This was a very exacting task and requires skill, obviously an attribute that none of us possessed to any degree, in fact, I did not have a clue. We could see a train a few miles ahead and a railway junction and Chuffie asked us all the name of the station and junction and of course, none of us knew, so in exasperation he grabbed my map, and flying the aircraft one handed, he was explaining where we were and why we should know where we were. Whilst he had my map I busied myself in reading and recording all engine readings, which were done every 15 mins. and when finished I glanced ahead to see an oak tree in our path and yelled to the pilot to pull up. He immediately yanked the aircraft up, but it was too late, and we ploughed through the top third of the tree with a resounding crash damaging the nose and one engine. We were not carrying parachutes, and so hastily looked up the nearest airfield. This happened to be, I think, Digby, which was a fighter airfield, and our request for an emergency landing was refused so Chuffie decided to return to base, skilfully flying the aircraft on three engines.

On arrival over base, we asked for emergency landing and ambulance for the wounded Bomb Aimer. He had been cut around the face when the perspex nose shattered on impact with the tree, and we did not know how serious it was. We came in to land and our speed seemed excessive, and I remarked so to Chuffie, and he replied that the instruments showed correct speed, so we landed. Flaps appeared to work O.K. but, unbeknown to us, the brakes were damaged and we ended up with a hair raising landing and skewed off the runway across the grass, pulling up at the airfield perimeter and just short of a ditch. The damage to the aircraft cost us a 2 pound fine (to the Xmas party fund), which we were never to take part in.

Training carried on in a reserve aircraft whilst ours was repaired, and we were mainly engaged in a dummy low-level attack down a mountain side (near Bangor) and attack a boat at anchor. Obviously this was in preparation for the attack on the Tirpitz in a Norwegian fiord, but in fact, it was practice for an attack on the Modane Dam in Italy, but we were not to take part in this raid as we were shot down over France in a few weeks.

On Thursday 11/12th November, the squadron was detailed to carry out a raid on Antheor Viaduct in

Southern France, near Cannes and Nice. This viaduct carried all troop trains etc., to Italy, and had to be destroyed. This was the first time that the 12,000 lb bomb was used, a fact that had some bearing at our subsequent interrogation after we were shot down in December. The raid itself was carried out at 8,000 ft and by 617 only, and we were certain of a hit, if not, a very near miss. We bombed from the Mediterranean Sea and then turned round and flew south to land at Blida Airfield in Algiers. Weather then delayed our return so we had a couple of days rest in Algiers. When we took off for U.K. each aircraft carried two escapee P.O.W.'s from Italy back to U.K. We had two navel bods, and it was a long and arduous flight up the Atlantic back to England. Uneventful for us, but one aircraft (Ted Youseman) failed to arrive, and the crew plus their two P.O.W.'s were lost, presumably downed in the Atlantic.

Daily training continued, and it was not until about a month later that we had our next and final operation.

In early December, a request was received from 161 Squadron for assistance with their duties, due to lack of aircraft and crews through losses. This squadron was located at Tempsford near Cambridge, and was engaged in all facets of underground assistance, such as dropping of agents and supplies, arms etc., to the European underground units. They operated solely on full moon nights because trips involved low level flying and visible map reading.

617 was requested to supply 4 aircraft and crews, and of course, everybody wanted to go to break the monotony of our daily training. We were lucky to be sent along with (pilots names) - Flt. Lt. McCarthy (American), Flt. Lt. O'Shaughnessy, W/O Weeden, and of course us. We flew down to Tempsford, on I think, the 8th December, 1943, arriving late afternoon. Our job was going to be to drop canisters at low level to a designated field in France, near I believe, Tournon. Because Halifax aircraft were normally used to drop these canisters, we had to wait whilst our Lancasters were modified, and the trip was finally laid on for 9/12/43, but fog blanketed Tempsford that day and operations were cancelled. Being so near to London I requested permission to go home to see my wife whom I had married on October 27th at Stamford Hill in North London - a white wedding but necessarily quiet being wartime - also to see my parents. Permission was granted, so along with Chuffie, Mick, Don and Jack, we went to London. They had a night on the town whilst I went home. The morning of 10th December dawned with still the very heavy fog and I doubted whether the trip would be on. I said goodbye to Doreen and hinted I would probably be home in the evening unless the weather lifted.

After a slow trip by train to Tempsford, we attended briefing in the afternoon, but the trip was in doubt because of fog. The briefing was a bit misleading because the Army major who dealt with anti-aircraft positions had said that the trip would be a "milk run" because the route had been planned in such a way that we were totally clear of all anti-aircraft emplacements - how wrong he was. I think that because of the delay thru' weather, information had been leaked to the enemy because they were waiting for us. Tempsford of course, was a top security airfield, but because of the many "foreigners" engaged in this type of work, information could have been leaked. We were due to leave about 8 pm at 10 minute intervals in the following order:- McCarthy, O'Shaughnessy, Weeden and Bull. We were last because we were a non-officer crew. However, take off was all mucked up due to delays in fitting the canisters, and we finally took off at ½hr. intervals. We were the only four aircraft operating that night, therefore, the radar defences only had our one batch of aircraft to follow. Being as the trip was to be at roof top height, we debated whether to take our parachutes, but decided to carry them. A good job we did.

We finally took off at about 2040 hrs. in Lancaster 111 No. ED 886 for a Special Duties operation over France to drop canister supplies in the Boulogne area near a place called Doullens. We headed over the Channel at wave height to keep below the radar, and crossed the French coast at a point west of Boulogne. We then turned S.E. flying at 50 ft. on the radio altimeter to pick up our dropping field in the Doullens area. We came to a small village in I think the St. Pol area, and on approach we climbed to about 300-400 ft. so as to recognise the village and make sure if it was our turning point. It must be understood that navigation was by visible map reading, and, therefore, to find our dropping field meant extra surveillance especially at turning points.

As we approached the village and climbed a little, we saw a fire burning ahead and possibly should have given some thought that it might have been one of the three aircraft ahead as it certainly turned out to be. Had we thought of that eventuality, we could possibly have foreseen the ferocious flak attack we were about to be subjected to. We climbed to about 350 ft when suddenly light flak batteries opened up on our starboard bow and I watched the incendiaries heading our way, but they seemed to be drifting below and I immediately rammed the throttles to give maximum power to enable Chuffie to take evasive action.

Being full moon we could see the houses on the ground, and as Chuffie threw the plane around the skies I watched the shells coming and I watched the last incendiary shell go under and I yelled out, "We're through", but that last shell hit the inboard port petrol tank and the whole wing went up in flame. Chuffie immediately gave the "bale out" orders and flashed the signal lights to all crew positions in case their intercom was not working. Immediately the order was given Norman Batey (bomb aimer) opened the nose hatch and jumped followed by Mick Chamberlain (navigator) who pulled his 'chute in the cockpit which I bundled into his arms, and followed by the mid-upper gunner and then myself. Prior to going I had attempted to clip the pilot's parachute on, but every time he eased his weight on the controls, the aircraft tried to slip away down to port, so in the end the pilot told me to go as he could not hold it airborne much longer, so I went and it is miraculous to me that Chuffie was able to get his 'chute and jump to safety because by this time the aircraft was diving and very low. He landed in a church graveyard jarring his knees, dropped his parachute into a water barrel and crawled from the church-yard on hands and knees into a pair of jackboots, and for Chuffie the war was over, but we met up later.

Meanwhile, Mick, Norman and I landed in the same field and gathered together and decided which way to go. Somewhere near us, McWilliams, the mid-upper gunner, must have landed but he took off on his own and from all accounts made himself known at the nearest house and was soon back in England - 6 weeks. We, having taken notice of escape lectures in England, decided to do things by the book, headed South, opposite way to what we could be expected to go, and decided to avoid all houses like the plague. I suppose we walked a couple of hours when Norman, who had lost a shoe on his descent, began to feel the effects of walking on snow covered fields and told us to go on as he could walk no further. We decided not to leave him but go into a village in the hopes of picking up a shoe of some sort.

We made our way into a small village and decided to try the church where at least we could bind his foot with a leather hassock. We entered the church to find that the congregation area was boarded off, probably used for war supplies, so as it was now about 3 am, we decided to climb to the belfry and lay up for the day and then decide on what to do. We climbed one behind the other up a spiralling iron staircase until we got to the landing where there was a short 8 ft ladder to the belfry itself. I went up the ladder first, followed by Norman with Mick bringing up the rear. As I climbed up and put my head through the hatch into the belfry, a voice spoke from the darkness and I could not understand him so I tried him in French and English. This bloke was in a queer position because he could tell by the noise we were making that he was outnumbered, but kept talking away until Mick Chamberlain said, "Christ, it's a bloody Gerry". We promptly did an about turn and climbed all the way down whilst the Gerry blew a whistle to attract attention. We stepped out of the church and then the Gerry in the tower put a bullet over our heads which stopped us. A couple of minutes later two Panzer troops, armed with sub-machine guns, came round a corner and took us prisoner.

We were marched to a sort of guard room where we were searched and watches etc., were removed, but we were treated well, fed and given smokes before being locked up in a room. Later on that day we were taken by truck and slung into Amiens gaol. We lay there all day and about 4 pm a Luftwaffe feldwebel (Sgt) and two airmen arrived to take us to Paris and then by train to Dulagluft (Air Interrogation Centre) near Frankfurt. All three of these Germans spoke English and tried to get information from us, but to no avail so they gave up. We suffered no ill-treatment, and about midnight our guards came to the cell and said, "All out we are off to Paris by truck". We went out of the gaol and climbed into the back of the straw filled truck and a voice yelled out, "Get off my bloody legs". It was Chuffie. He had been held in the same gaol.

The truck drove us to Paris arriving about 6 am and then we used public transport to move from one station to another for the train to Frankfurt. We were hoping that the underground would rescue us etc., but no one seemed to take any notice. The train journey took quite awhile, but our captors were friendly, but at no time were we allowed out of the carriage on our own, and so we finally arrived at Frankfurt station, made our way outside where we had to wait for a tram. The German people weren't friendly and threw things at us, but guards did their job well and we boarded a tram and headed for Dulagluft which we reached in about ½ hr.

On arrival we were documented, photographed, finger-printed and thrown into a small cell and left to think about our position. We were not near each other, in fact we were not to see any of our crew until we were finally released and taken to the P.O.W. camp.

Over the next 15 or so days, cannot remember how long, we were in these little cells, subtle methods to get us to talk were tried but to no avail. For the first three or four days, we were left alone and were given a form to fill in. It included lots of information regarded as secret, such as Squadron Number, where stationed, targets etc. All this stuff we ignored and just filled in our No. rank and name. These forms had been dropped in our cells by a very nice chap who said he was from the Swiss Red Cross and if we would fill in the forms he would let our next of kin know we were safe. He was very nice, gave us cigarettes and sweets etc., and said he would be back the next day to pick up the completed forms. When he arrived next day I gave him my form and he said, "Oh come now, you have not completed the form", so I said that I had filled in all I was required to do and the other information we did not have to divulge. He then said that he would leave it another day as my parents and wife would be notified sooner if I gave all the information and really it did not matter, they knew all the answers anyway. When he came back the next day and saw I had not completed the form, he became a raving maniac, screaming and shouting and demanded that I stand in front of a German officer. I remarked, "How can you be a Red Cross rep one day and a German officer the next?", and he stormed out cursing blue murder. We had been warned in England of false Red Cross reps and to only give number, name and rank. As they got no information from the four of us, they then commenced a series of interrogations to last about the next 2 weeks.

I must explain that we were in small individual cells and had no contact whatsoever with any other members of the crew. The cells were fitted with heaters and our first 2 or 3 days we were treated well, fed, and no disturbances at night.

I had one interrogation on the second day, and it was held by a psychiatrist in civilian clothes. It did not amount to much and I gave the usual number, name and rank. He did not pursue matters much except that I may as well tell him what he wanted to know because they knew it anyway. He tried to convince me by saying my squadron number (which they can tell by the aircraft letters), and base and various operations I had been on. What they really wanted was the weight (confirmed) of the bomb we had used on our previous raid on the Antheor Viaduct. After several repeats of number, name, rank, he said, "Oh! take him away and soften up" - all in English. From now, although I suffered no physical interference, the mental anguish was quite acute. The cells had no internal toilet buckets, so if you wanted to go you had to turn a handle on the door and a flap would fall and the guard would eventually arrive and take you to the toilet. It was the way they played it which caused the anguish, because after being put in the cell I waited until I wanted to go and then turned the handle, but it took the guard about an hour to come for me. Next time I turned the handle very early and he arrived immediately and abused me because I did not really want to go. It was the mucking around which upset people.

Another way was to interfere as much as possible with our night's sleep and one way of doing this was cell heating. I would go to sleep in underpants because it was warm with cell heating on, but about 1 am they would turn all heating off so I would wake up, put all my uniform on and all the blankets, and finally after about an hour get back to sleep. Then the heating would go on full and you would wake up sweating and disrobe again only to have the heat go off.

This went on all night and you can imagine that one went to his daily interrogation feeling like a "wet

week”.

On my third day's interrogation he went through the usual questions and threats but gained nothing. He then said we would all probably be killed because we were saboteurs and spies. Apparently the supplies carried in the canisters contained money, clothing, arms and ammunition which made us supporters of saboteurs. You can imagine the worry it would cause because you saw nobody else to discuss it with. On the third interrogation, the psychiatrist had a secretary with him and he began his usual questions and I gave my usual answers, and then he made me go and sit in the corner and then for the next hour he dictated to his secretary my life from the time I joined the RAF until mid 1942 - the time of Crete. He had all the details, where I had served, courses I attended and marks attained, my parents address etc. He even had a record of athletic races I had won in Iraq in 1939. The purpose of all this being to get you to talk because they knew it all anyway. Of course part of the technique at this time was insufficient food, no books etc., just all day to lay on our bed and think of whether they really could shoot us or not.

On my fifth visit my interrogator was a thuggish looking chap in uniform, and he questioned me and issued threats but got nothing in return. He said, "You may as well talk because some of your crew have already talked and have been sent now to a P.O.W. Camp and away from all this nastiness". I disbelieved it of course and went back to my cell. Next meeting was with the bloke in civilian clothes and he wanted to know the weight of the bomb. Whilst being interviewed he had a meal sent in and ate in front of me, but offered me a meal if I would confirm the weight of the bomb. From this moment on, the type of questioning changed because the questions asked were of the type that required a yes/no answer, and these clever psychiatrists were I am sure able to read the answer to these questions by your manner of answering or your eyes. He would ask a yes/no question and you had to look at his eyes when you answered.

A new innovation was that a photograph of the bomb was placed in front of you, propped up, and he would say, "Have a good look at the photo", and then would say, "Look at me". He would say, "That's it isn't it?", and I am sure it would show yes or no in your eyes. It was a photo of the bomb and taken on our base, but where they went wrong was they had the figures 5,000 kgs on the photo and I would not have known whether 5,000 kgs was 12,000 lb or not.

Succeeding interrogation carried on in the same manner until about the 15th day (I think), and they said we were to be released and sent to normal P.O.W. camps. On our release a big feed was put on for the number being released and then we were on our way to Stalag IV B at Mühleberg about 20 kms from Leipzig on the eastern side of the River Elbe. The stay in Dulag Luft must have been controlled by the demand for space. I know at the time we were released they had a general clear out and it occurred at the time that air losses were reasonably high, and, therefore, they had lots more captives to interrogate.

My memory of the period of release from Dulag Luft to the arrival at Stalag IV B is a bit hazy and I cannot remember whether we travelled together as a crew, but somehow think I met them on arrival at IV B. I know that I was in the same block as Chuffie and we sort of got together, but I do not remember having much to do with or indeed seeing Mick and Norman.

Stalag IV B was an international P.O.W. Camp by the fact that all nationalities were incarcerated there and were normally non-commissioned. I would guess that the camp held 20,000 minimum which included 2,000 RAF, 2,000 Russians and French, Belgians, Dutch, South Africans, Indians, Canadians, Americans and so on.

RAF prisoners were normally sent to Stalagluft, which were camps for flying people, but as the Stalagluft were full, we were supposedly temporarily imprisoned at IV B although we never did get our move to a Stalagluft.

It was obvious that the war for us was over, and so we all had to re-adjust and make the most of it. The RAF compound at IV B housed only RAF or Dominion Air Force personnel and was a compound

on its own separate from the rest of the camp. This compound was full on our arrival, so we lived in blocks exclusively Army and mainly people taken P.O.W. in the Desert, Italy, Greece or Crete. Having served in that area myself, I felt quite at home with the other captives. The camp was composed of huge wooden blocks which housed about 200-250 people sleeping on wooden 3-tiered beds. A straw palliasso was used as a mattress and 2 blankets and pillow were the issued bedding.

Toilet facilities were outside, and consisted of about 20 long-drop holes surrounded by wood in which the seats were cut. A night toilet was provided inside the barrack block which posed a problem when several people might want to use it at night. The floor was dirt, and down the centre ran two big stoves enclosed in brick, fired by wood and these were our means of cooking. Rations were issued twice daily and were drawn from the cookhouse, and divided up in each barrack.

A typical day's ration would be:

6.30 a.m. Acorn coffee, part of a loaf of stale brown bread. (Portions varied as the war continued, and whereas, in 1943 the daily ration was 2 men per loaf, by 1945 it was 15 men per loaf).

12.00 Hot water masquerading as soup. I did one day find a little bit of fat and a small portion of cabbage.

5 p.m. Couple of rotten spuds in their jackets, sauerkraut (rancid cabbage), and maybe a small piece of sausage or cheese. Once a week we might get a little blob of jam. And that was that.

Of course, in 1943 and 1944 we were well served with Red Cross parcels and these emanated from all over the world and contained everything needed. Issue in 1943 was one parcel per man per week. The most popular parcels were those from Canada, but English and Scottish were also well received. Parcels contained a good supply of every day items such as 50 cigarettes, (greatly prized, and if you could exercise the will power, they were used as currency in dealings with the Germans), jam, porridge oats, butter, milk, tinned foods, chocolate, tea, coffee etc.

Parcel issue in late 1944 and 1945 were a luxury because operations after "D" Day interfered with supply from Switzerland, and one might get a 15th share of a parcel at intervals. This is when conditions became bad as we had to exist on decreasing German rations.

In the days of plentiful parcels we used to give our German issue to the Russians through the wire, because they did not receive any Red Cross parcels, and were by far the worst off of all P.O.W.'s. When parcels ceased of course the Russian situation became worse as they died like flies. These days we ate all our German rations, therefore having nothing left to give away. The Russians were housed in a compound next to ours and used to crawl under the wire to scrounge food from our waste bins, and many times I have seen sentries kill Russians in the process of sliding under the wire to beg for food. A roving sentry patrol was around the camp day and night, and one day whilst we were playing cricket in the compound, the ball went about a foot under the warning wire and one of the players asked the sentry if he could retrieve the ball and when the sentry said he could, the chap put his arm under the wire and without hesitation, the sentry shot him through the head. We noted who the sentry was, but because no more Red Cross official visits took place before the war ended, we were unable to get him removed. The same sentry was hacked to death by the Russians on our release, but more of that later.

We had a German Sgt in charge of our compound, nick-named "Slim" because he was tall and thin. Quite a decent bloke and I am sure that through him any bad treatment was kept to a minimum. More of him later.

To feed oneself and to make the most of the food, we formed ourselves into combines varying from one man on his own, to combines of 20, with the most popular being combines of 5. Chuffie was a

lone wolf and kept to himself and as he was a non-smoker, he lived well by buying extra food with his cigarettes. I went into a combine with 4 army blokes and this lasted until May 1944 when Chuffie and I made our escape, but more later. In the combine of five, we had a duty cook on a weekly roster, and it was his job to draw our parcel entitlement, German rations, and cook and prepare food for the week. Whilst cooking he had to remain by the stove, otherwise our food could be stolen, particularly when food became short. People became expert cooks, and porridge oats became cakes, German millet or maize soup was made into cakes and doctored with sugar and jam to make a sweet. Each man drew his own chocolate and cigarettes from the parcels to use as he wished. This worked very well until parcels ceased to be issued and each drew and ate his own food.

Many arguments broke out when loaves had to be cut between fifteen, potatoes had to be shared evenly etc., and of course, with no cigarette issue tempers rose.

Chuffie approached me about March 1944 to ask whether I was interested in an attempted escape during the summer weather, and I said I was, so we started to discuss ways and means of doing it. The camp of course, had an escape committee, headed by a Canadian Air Force Warrant Officer, nicknamed "Snow". He also occupied the position of "Man of Confidence" for the whole camp, and, therefore, was the official liaison between the prisoners and camp authorities for the correct running of the camp. He ran the escape committee unofficially, and the committee itself was made up of all nations. If a person wanted to escape, he asked for an interview with the escape committee, submitted his plans and if they were accepted, he was assisted as much as possible. No escapes, to my knowledge, were ever made from IV B because it was so large and well protected, that it was virtually impossible. But IV B was the centre of the area from which working parties were sent out to work on farms, factories etc., and that is another reason why no escapes were attempted at IV B as it was easier to send people out to work on an unguarded working party. I must explain at this stage that all personnel of Sgt. and below were required by the Geneva Convention to work in the host country, but not work which could aid the war effort. Therefore, work parties left daily, and through the escape committee identity swaps could be arranged for someone who wanted to go outside. The German authorities did not allow RAF personnel to go out on working parties, because they were lectured to escape, and, therefore, it was necessary for us to change identity with a couple of Army privates scheduled to go out to work. We worked out how we intended to escape, route to be taken etc., and put our plans to the escape committee which was accepted, and the committee arranged for us to change with Privates Taphouse and Williams of the Royal Berkshire regiment, and they would assume our identity and move into our barrack. We first had to meet the two blokes, learn all about their families, where they were captured, in fact all their details. When we were ready to swap, the committee arranged the swap after curfew at 9 o'clock at night. We changed over one night, exchange identity discs, and left the next morning to our work place. I was now Private Taphouse from Reading, and Chuffie was Private Williams from the same town.

We left about 5 am the next morning to join a working party at, I think, a place called Chemnitz, south of Leipzig, and we were to be employed in a brick factory. We were to live in a converted inn about a mile from the brickworks, and the job for our little group was clearing the land to allow the brick factory to be extended. We lived upstairs in the inn, with bars on the windows, and numbered about 30, all Army, or ostensibly so, but not quite, as I shall explain later. The German Hauptman and his two staff lived on the ground floor. At five o'clock each morning, except Sunday, we were woken for breakfast, and at six were marched up to the brickworks and handed over to a civilian guard (unarmed), who guarded us for the rest of the day until the Army guard arrived at 6 pm, to take us back to the inn.

Ten of us were grouped into a party, and our job, working in pairs, was to clear land, shovel all the earth etc, into metal skips and push these on lines down to marshy land where the earth was tipped to reclaim the land. As each pair filled a skip, they would push it down, and accompanied by an old boy in charge of us, tip it into the water and push the skip back and start again.

This went on all day, but was not hard work, and we were fed better than in IV B to enable us to do the work. We noticed at the end of the line a piece of wood was laid across and tied to save the skips from over-running into the lake. When we arrived each pair was filling about 20 skips a day and we

decided that on the rations we were getting the work was too hard, and we told the foreman but he said, "You will carry on and do it". Talking to the other blokes in our group we decided on a little sabotage and arranged with another couple that when they emptied their skip they would loosen the tie on the line and then when we went down next, we could push our skip into the water, about 4' deep. That of course was what happened and all hell broke loose, but we insisted that it was an accident as the tie must have loosened, but work was suspended for the day until grappling irons could be brought in to remove the skip, which took about 4 hours. We then left it for 3 or 4 days, and then one day Chuffie and I loosened the ties and the next two put their skip in the water. Another day wasted, and after consultation with the guards, we managed to get the rate of work reduced from 20 skips per day to 14, so we slowed down work after all. We worked on this job for about 2 weeks, and during this time we became suspicious of two blokes who did not appear to be Army, and, therefore, must be on the same racket as we were. We did not want to disclose that we were "swaps" but, not wanting them to go before us, we spoke to them, and sure enough they were a couple of exchanged identities like us. It was now necessary to take them into our confidence and arrange it so that, if one pair went, the others could go at the same time.

We all four decided that the best time to disappear was at night during one of the many air raids. If a raid occurred at night, we were all assembled and marched from the inn to the brick factory's underground shelter, and then returned to the inn after the all clear. We kept our packs handy and slept in our clothes and decided that the next dark night when the alert was on, we would disappear between inn and factory, but if the all clear sounded whilst going to the factory, cancel our going to another night. We had noticed the guard did not bother much, and we were not counted on our return to the inn. This night, when the alert went, we grabbed our packs and were marched up the road, but when we got halfway, the all clear sounded so we were marched back to the inn. We noticed on our return that the other two had disappeared, but no count was taken on our return to the inn, so the Germans were unaware that they were two short. The next morning the Hauptman walked up and down the parade to count us, he could not believe that two had gone. They were picked up the same morning and returned to their base camp and that effectually ruined our chances, because procedures were tightened up. We decided that our chances were now minimised but in spite of that, we would not declare ourselves, and the opportunity may occur again. In any case, life on a working party was better than life at IV B. We could have declared ourselves and gone back to IV B and start again, but decided to carry on working.

About a week later, the Hauptman announced at the 6 a.m. parade that 10 volunteers were required to be sent to the Leuna synthetic oil plant to work, but as you can guess, no one wished to volunteer for such a dangerous job. One hundred Frenchmen had been killed the week before by an American bombing raid and so, no volunteers. The Hauptman said that as there were no volunteers he would say who would go and therefore I will start with the trouble makers, and as you can guess, Williams, Taphouse, Levett, Collins and 6 others were detailed. Practically the whole ten that caused the trouble with the skips.

Off we went the next morning to Leuna working camp determined to get away as soon as possible before the next air raid. As luck would have it, weather prevented flying for about a week so we had time to reorganise. We lived in a camp about 1½ miles from the oil plant, and our job was to clean up rubble from the air raid amongst the houses. The Frenchmen who had been killed worked in the factory itself, but we refused to do war work, so were put on rubble clearing.

The Frenchmen had no choice because their land was occupied, and under threat of reprisals to their families, they had no choice. Each morning we were marched by an unarmed civilian to the site of the wrecked houses, and were put to work clearing rubble and bricks for re-use. It was easy work, and as many of the houses still had clothes in the cupboards, we would have no trouble getting disguised. Our next job was to soften up the civilian guard, and somehow get him to allocate a day's work to each pair and then go home to his house in the village. At first he stayed all day and watched, and we fed him cigarettes and chocolate, or maybe coffee, and slowly step by step, he began nipping home for lunch etc. We could see his house from the work site, and we convinced him he could watch us from home while he worked in his garden, and so he used to take us in the morning, set a pile of bricks to be cleaned, and then go home and return to pick us up at night. This went on for about a

week, and meanwhile we had collected civilian clothes in one of the bombed houses and all was set to go in suitable weather. It was essential that we go early after the old man had gone home to give us a few hours start. One morning after the old man had given us our day's work and left for home, we went to our stored clothes, changed and walked out. We had worked our time to coincide with shift change at a local factory, so we joined the crowd, packs on our backs and walked out of the village. As soon as we were clear, we laid up in a drain until nightfall, then we continued west. We walked at night, hid by day, having in the first couple of nights covered about 47 miles to Gera. Looking back now, we would have been better off by going south to Czechoslovakia, and might have stood a better chance, but to escape from central Germany was well nigh impossible. Anyway our scheme was twofold. First, steal an aircraft and fly home. Tough, but could be done. Secondly, jump a goods train going our way. We had a list of code colours used for trains to show destinations. We intended getting a train in Switzerland or France direction. More later about that.

On our 3rd day (night), we covered about 30 kms to Jena, but so far had not seen a railway. Walking in the early morning to get out of Jena, we found ourselves by an airfield, but no aeroplanes were in view, so we carried on walking. After we got clear of the airfield, we entered a cornfield to lay up and sleep all day. It was June and quite warm, so we stripped off and lay in the sun for a sleep. We were woken about 10 a.m. by the noise of an aircraft, to see a small aircraft circling our position. Probably thought it was a couple having a "naughty", but we did not wait to see, but got dressed and took off west towards Weimar. We did not like the idea of walking by day but had no choice, but it must have looked suspicious to the people we passed dressed in old-fashioned clothes and carrying an Army pack on our backs. We did not have time to hide and we approached before we realised it was a village, and as we went through the main street, we could see a man approaching accompanied by a 12 year old boy in Hitler youth uniform.

It was obvious that the boy was telling the man to stop us and he did not want to, but as we approached he did stop us. I let Chuffie do the talking but his German was not good enough, but we managed with his German and my French (the man had been in France in WWI) to tell him that we were Auslanders (foreign workers), and we were going from Jena to Weimar to repair air raid damage. The boy kept saying to the man, "Ask for the papers", but the old man would tell him to shut up. However, as had to happen, the old man had to ask to see our papers. We explained that we had to get to Weimar in a hurry and had forgotten our papers. He asked why we had not travelled by transport and we said that was practically nonexistent in war-time - he agreed - and we had hoped to pick up a lift. He said that it was very dangerous to travel around Germany without papers, and then said we could go. We got out of the village as soon as possible and hid until night time. We started towards Weimar when darkness fell, but decided to camp short of Weimar and settled in an old disused barn to sleep. We were awakened about 2 a.m. by the sound of trucks going past, and looked out to see lorry loads of troops and thought they were looking for us, but probably they were on manoeuvres, and as soon as they were past, got up and left for Weimar which we reached about 5.30 and decided to walk through.

The town is quite large and must have been a garrison city for SS troops because they were everywhere, and I had the greatest trouble in keeping Chuffie off the pavement. On a couple of occasions, troops had pushed him off the pavement and he wanted to retaliate. We realised by other people walking in the road, that Auslanders had to move off the pavement out of the way of the SS troops. We ambled through the town looking in shops and cinemas, were never once spoken to, and made our way west on towards Erfurt. This would put us about 180 miles from Belgium, but Erfurt was one of our objectives as it was a big rail centre. We rested about 5 miles east of Erfurt and settled in for the day time. We continued on our way about 7 p.m. arriving Erfurt at dusk, and made our way to the railway centre but before getting to the station, we came across lines and lines of goods trains, and decided to wait until it was dark before having a closer examination to try and decide which train to jump on for our exit.

About nine o'clock, we started down the trains examining destination labels with matches, when suddenly we saw a railway worker coming along swinging a light, so we jumped into the nearest wagon which was a liquid carrier of some sort which had a brake van at one end. We sat down on the floor and hung our packs over the brake handle. After a while, the train started to move and carried

out a lot of shunting movements. We realised we had been shunted off, but thought that we may as well wait until it stops and then start again. Whilst sitting there we heard footsteps running alongside, and a hand reached through the open window to put the brake on to slow down the wagon. Of course, with our packs over the handle, he could not put the brake on, so we removed our packs and he started to slow down the wagon as it seemed to be approaching lighted workshops. We put the brake fully on and stopped the wagon to be confronted by this little man who was ranting and raving and saying we would have to return to the station with him so as the police could deal with us. We argued and he realised he was outnumbered and accepted our suggestion that we would stay under the yard light whilst he went and got the police. We let him get two or three hundred yards away, and we took off in the other direction and tore across the lines, jumped over a wall and out into the streets. We made our way to the outskirts and hid in a ditch and after about ½ an hour, cars and motor cycles came out searching and then returned, having not found us, and we set off west again. We laid up the next day about 10 kms from Gotha/Erfurt, and during the day we could see planes landing and taking off near Gotha/Erfurt, so we decided to move to Gotha at night, lay up near the airfield to give the place the "once over". About 8 p.m. we set out to reach Gotha, but came across the airfields about 2 miles east of Gotha and there were two airfields. One was a dummy airfield and the other one was a Messerschmidt factory airfield where new planes were tested.

We noted on the Luftwaffe airfield that there were several planes, JU 88 and 87's and Heinkels, so we decided to inspect them at night, whilst on the other airfield (camouflaged), the latest jets were being flown. What an impressive sight they were, and we decided, if Germany had this type of weapon then the war was lost. Had they used these aircraft in the right manner, it would certainly have delayed the war's ending. At night we made our way to the planes on the unguarded airfield, and found they were all dummies, and the field was used as a decoy to take our aircraft away from the nearby aircraft factory.

All these days we had been living on chocolate and biscuits we carried with us, and occasional forays for fruit and vegetables on the way, but as our food was getting short, we decided that in the next town we came to, we would try and replenish our food supply from a working party, so we carried on that night on our way to Eisenach, about 20 kms away. We laid up the following day and decided to enter Eisenach in the evening. We set off about 4 p.m. and arrived in the small town of Eisenach about 9 p.m. and after wandering, we came across a sign which indicated that a French working party was ahead of us. We made our way to the working party to find that the French P.O.W.'s occupied a "bierhaus" as their barracks, so we boldly knocked on the front door at about 9.30 p.m.

The door was opened by a middle-aged frau, and we asked whether we could come in and talk to the French P.O.W.'s and get some food. The pub was still being used as a pub, but half was boarded off to house the P.O.W.'s. The frau ran the pub, and her husband was on the Russian front, however, stop, I am getting ahead of myself. The frau let us in the front door and then a middle-aged German in Wehrmacht uniform joined her and asked who we were. We told him we were French workers and asked if we could meet the prisoners and he agreed, so we were taken into their half of the pub and were made very welcome, given a feed and two pints of beer and after about an hour, we were given food and prepared to leave.

The guard returned and would not let us go and asked for identity discs. After a bit of an argument I showed him my disc and said as we were British P.O.W.'s he would

have to return us to the military. Here we ran into a snag because Chuffie had lost his identity disc, and the guard was all for handing him over to the Gestapo and me to the Military Police. This could have resulted in very serious consequences for Chuffie so a long argument took place, but the frau intervened, and said both should be handed over to the Military. The guard was adamant about Chuffie going to the Gestapo, but after this long argument he agreed to hand us both to the Military. Probably saved Chuffie's life. Apparently this guard lived in with the woman and was on a good thing because she said to him that if he did not hand us both to the Military, the guard would not grace her bed anymore, and he could stay in his little room with the French P.O.W.'s. He did not want to lose the good thing he was on and so he phoned for the Military who came and picked us up and took us to a normal P.O.W. Camp at a castle which I think was Mulhausen.

On arrival at the castle, we were flung into solitary confinement for 7 days whilst enquiries were made, presumably back to our base Stalag IV B. I had decided that I would admit that I was not Pte. Taphouse, but give my own identity, so as to be able to return to Stalag IV B and catch up on mail etc. Chuffie decided he would stay as Pte. Williams and remain out in a working party.

Presumably they checked us out and after our 7 days solitary was over I insisted, as an Air Force Sergeant, on being returned to IV B. The Commandant interviewed us and although I admitted my true identity, he said, "No way, you are Private Taphouse and you will work". They took us out with two armed guards to the town centre and put us to work digging air raid shelters, but I refused to work on the grounds that (a) it was work which assisted the German war effort and (b), as an Air Force Sgt., they could not compel me to work. The guard became a little bit menacing, but I stood my ground and eventually I was marched back to the castle and another interview with the Commandant. He ranted and raved and told me I had to work and I was sent out again to dig. I still refused and the guard had said that I must work and the Commandant did not want me brought back again. However, back I went again to more threats etc., but did finally do a bit of work before being put in solitary again for 7 days. In the meantime, Chuffie had been moved back to his working party as Pte. Williams. After my stay in solitary, I was returned to IV B, changed back with Pte. Taphouse and stayed at IV B until the Russians overran us. Meantime, Chuffie as I suspected, was not given any escape opportunities, because he was watched too closely. I did not see him again until after the war on our return home. Life continued as normal for a P.O.W. thru' the winter of 1944 and into Spring 1945.

Spirits were high as our troops advanced, but physically our health deteriorated, because German rations were reduced and Red Cross parcels ceased as convoys could not get thru' from Switzerland, and the winter months were cold and hungry.

Early in April 1945, I developed a severe sore throat and put my name down for sick parade. After seeing the French doctor it was pronounced Diphtheria, and placed in isolation in the "Krankenrevier" (hospital sick quarters), along with many other nationalities. Whilst in there, the war news improved and we could hear Russian artillery in the distance. We used to cheer every time an American bombing raid took place in our vicinity, and we watched the "smashing" of Dresden (about 20 kms away), by the Yanks and the R.A.F.

Fighters were now making forays in our area, and we hardly saw a Luftwaffe aircraft. Tragedy occurred one day when a party of 30 P.O.W.'s went outside in the forest to collect wood. They carried the wood on their heads and were returning to IV B when two Thunderbolts spotted them and dived down to strafe them and killed about 20. This was about 2 days before release. Such is the fortunes of war.

The Thunderbolt pilots must have seen the sun glinting on the bayonets of the guards that were "escorting" the wood party. It was obvious that the war was drawing to a close because we could hear artillery in the east and the Yanks appeared to be flying at will. Late in April and whilst I was still in hospital, the camp authorities assembled all P.O.W.'s and marched them out of the camp after telling them that they would march them west to meet the allies at the Elbe. As I found out later, they only marched them a few miles away and then left them in a paddock to await transport.

Meantime, back at Stalag IV B, the only P.O.W.'s left were those in the "Krankenrevier" and the French P.O.W. doctor said that we were not to leave because we were under quarantine.

About 2 days after the main camp had moved, we could hear the Russians getting nearer, and we were surprised one day to hear horses approaching, so we rushed out to the wire in time to see a Russian Cossack patrol on horseback led by a hard-faced woman officer. They galloped past with sabres drawn, and we could see them attack 2 German soldiers outside the camp entrance who were holding white handkerchiefs and they killed them and galloped on. They ignored us P.O.W.'s at the wire as they were obviously a front line patrol and the advance had to go ahead.

Us P.O.W.'s that were left in the "Krankenrevier" (about 30 in all), held a meeting and decided that in view of the Russian barbarities, we would not wait for them to release us, but make our own way to the Elbe. We picked a party of 5 of us and headed west. The remainder stayed in the hospital to await official release. We decided 5 was too big a party and split into a 2 and a 3. In our group of 3, we had a Yank Top Sergeant, who was to prove to be very useful later on.

We set off, making our way slowly west and stopping here and there to get a little food from German houses. The biggest danger now was from the rabble of Russian troops who were drunk everywhere and looting and raping as they went. We walked for about 3 or 4 days until we came to a large river, but more of that later. Back to the walk. Everywhere we went we were approached by Germans to protect them from the Russians, and for our overnight stops, we had no problems in staying in German houses. We stayed in one house overnight, and all night long could hear the screams, and next morning our hostess told us that the Russians had raped two girls ages 11 and 12 to death.

After about 4 days, we arrived at this huge river which we took to be the Elbe and we were confronted by armed Russian sentries at the eastern end of the Bailey bridge, whilst we could see the Yanks at the western end. The Russians would not let us across (and rightly so as we may have been Nazis), but took us to the guardhouse about 40 yds away. The surrounding fields were full of people waiting to be cleared and allowed to cross the bridge. Of course at the guardhouse no one could speak English and the guard commander made signs for us to join the crowds in the fields. Whilst we were standing outside the guard hut, we noticed a jeep coming across the bridge so we turned round to see if it might contain someone to help us. The jeep came off the end of the bridge and turned right and then suddenly stopped dead in it's tracks and reversed up to us. On board the jeep was a Yank, Russian and British Officer, and the Yank Officer had recognised the Yank we had with us and, therefore, was able to vouch for us, and we were allowed across to the allied lines. We were given a feed and interrogation and then flown by Dakota back to England. I believe we beat the main camp people home by a couple of weeks.