

The Crew of G George

Where They Came From

Fifty years ago the pubs of Pocklington resounded with many unfamiliar accents as blue—clad young men and women from all parts of the English speaking world serving at RAF Pocklington lived life to the full in their off duty hours.

Much of the real work of 102 Squadron crews was veiled in secrecy. A local policeman was known to see off Pocklington teenagers who tried to watch to closely the daily work of the Squadron from the edge of the airfield. Locals might have thought that life for these crews was one long party.

Friendships were formed. In 1943 Arthur Brown, who now lives in Warrington, arrived in Pocklington to join the ground crew of one of the Halifax bombers of 102 Squadron. He later was to marry a young lady from Pocklington. He now lives back in Warrington, as do his two daughters and four grand children. On the night of 28th March 1943, Arthur was in the Black Bull in Pocklington, in wartime Pocklington "Mabel's Bar" was a popular venue for airman. There he met a 20 year old South African, Myles Squiers, who was the Rear Gunner in another aircraft, 'G-George'.

Like many of the friendships formed at that time, it was to be short-lived. For on the very next night Arthur was to watch 'G-George' crash into the West Green on its way to Berlin, killing Sgt. Squiers and the other six crew members. The inscription on Sgt. Squiers' gravestone in Barmby Moor churchyard reads 'Ave atque Vale' - Hail and Farewell. Both crew and aircraft had only begun operational duties in Pocklington within the previous month. The aircraft, a Halifax B/GR Mk2 Series 1, was newly despatched from the English Electric factory in Preston when delivered to Pocklington.

The crew of 'G-George' was drawn from a diversity of backgrounds, and had something of an international character.

From the prairies of North Dakota came the 27 year old Pilot, **Bill Comrie**. In March 1941, he had crossed the Canadian border into neighbouring Manitoba to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force. This was nine months

before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour brought his own country into the war.

There was also a connection with the USA through **Myles Squiers**, whose father was an American diplomat working in South Africa.

From the slip ways of the Clyde came the 23 year old Flight Engineer **Jock McGrath**.

The home of Bomb Aimer, **William Jenkins**, was in Birmingham but he was born in Pembroke. At the age of 34, he was by far the oldest and one of only a handful of airman in 102 Squadron over the age of 30.

More typical in age was the Navigator, **Douglas Harper**, who was 22. He came from the village of Oadby in Leicestershire.

Originally from the East End of London, the 21 year old Mid Upper Gunner, **John King**, had more recently been serving in the Hampshire Police Force.

From Brighton came the 23 year old wireless Operator, **Frank Dorrington**.

So the crew consisted of an American, a South African, a Scotsman, a Welshman and three Englishmen.



Like most pilots and navigators, Bill Comrie and Douglas Harper did their

initial aircrew training in Canada. Bill Comrie received his pilot's wings in December 1941. At the end of his navigator training in Edmonton Douglas Harper passed out as the stations top cadet. He received his wings from the Lieutenant—Governor of Alberta in the presence of senior officers from the RAF, RCAF and US Army Air Corps. To commemorate the occasion Canadian Airways presented him with an engraved gold bracelet. He was commissioned in July 1942 and promoted to Flying Officer in January 1943.

The crew of 'G-George' was first formed in late 1942 at 10 OTU (Operational Training Unit) in Abingdon. At this stage it had only the five members shown in the group photograph. When a crew upgraded to four engined aircraft a Flight Engineer and Mid Upper Gunner were added to their number. It was at this point that Jock McGrath and John King joined the crew.

At the start of 1943 four engined bomber training was done in Conversion Flight attached to operational squadrons. 102

Squadron took over from the Canadian 405 Squadron at Pocklington in August 1942. It was to the 102 Squadron Conversion Flight that the crew arrived for heavy conversion training in January 1943.

Before the War Douglas Harper had been well known in Leicestershire Scout circles and had been selected to receive on behalf of the county a pennant from the Duke of Kent who was killed in 1942 while serving with the RAF. Shortly after arriving in Pocklington, he bumped into someone he had not seen for quite a while. LAC Stan Jeffrey was in the ground crew of 'E-Easy' and came from the same village, Oadby, They had know each other in the Scouts in 1931. By further coincidence Stan was to be on duty on that fateful at his dispersal point, known as "the piggeries" because it was next door to a pig farm on the main road into Pocklington. From there he was to watch Douglas Harper's aircraft crash onto west Green.

Early Days In Pocklington

In January 1943, Bill Comrie and his crew came to Pocklington where 102 Squadron had a Conversion Flight which instructed crews on four engined bombers after their earlier training on two engined aircraft. This Conversion Flight was to be disbanded on 10 March 1943, when the practice of having Conversion Flights within operational squadrons changed to that of separate Heavy Conversion Units.

Bill Comrie was taken through Heavy Conversion Training by the Flight Commander, W. J. ("Wally") Lashbrook DFC, AFC, DPM, MBE, who has been rated as one of the most experienced Halifax pilots in Bomber Command. In his book 'Terror by Night' Michael Ranaut, DFC includes an account of Wally Lashbrook's remarkable escape after being forced to bale out over Czechoslovakia. By night he walked alone through Germany and into France, There with the aid of the 'Rabbit Run' escape organisation he reached Lisbon where he read in a copy of 'The Times' the notice "Squadron Leader Lashbrook, DFG, missing believed killed". When 102 Squadron Conversion Flight was disbanded, Wally Lashbrook went to the new 1653 Conversion Unit at Rufforth but later went back to Pocklington as C Flight Commander. Although he also operated from Dishforth, Topcliffe, Dalton, Leconfield, Driffield, Marston Moor, Linton – on-Ouse and Rufforth he said that, "I always considered Pocklington as my main airfield". Wally Lashbrook wrote, "I remember Comrie and was very favourably impressed with his abilities".

When the crew had finished their training at Pocklington in early March 1943 the phase of the war known as the Battle of the Ruhr was beginning. It was primarily in this campaign that Bill Comrie and his crew were to be engaged during their time here. The crew would not know it as the Battle of the Ruhr; It was only with hindsight that Sir Arthur ("Bomber") Harris, the Commander-In-Chief of Bomber Command, was to so name it. In the previous five months, the tide of the war had turned in the Allies' favour with victories at El Alamein and Stalingrad. However, the D Day landings were still 15 months away and in March 1943 it was still only the strategic bombing launched from Pocklington and other airfields, which was carrying the war to Germany itself. Bomber Harris was to Call the period from spring 1943 to spring 1944 his 'main offensive'.

The Battle of the Ruhr was to last from March to July 1943. It included the famous Dams Raid of May 1943. Less glamorous were the regular night bombing raids on the cities of Germany's industrial heartland in the Ruhr Valley - towns such as Essen with its Krupps armaments factories and Duisberg with its docks.

That Fateful Night

The fateful night of 29th March 1943 was one of heavy rain, low cloud and icing. March 29th was on a Monday, as it is this year. The target was again Berlin. Tom Wingham who was in the crew of one of the other nine aircraft setting off for Berlin that night takes up the story: "We had visited

Berlin two nights before and the word was that Butch Harris wanted one more crack at it before the lighter evenings made it too difficult. The weather forecast was appalling and unofficially our two Met. Officers at Pocklington were backing a 'scrub'. At the original time of take off, I think about 7.00 pm, a postponement came through since there was an occlusion running north to south right through the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire bases. At the time, it was pouring with rain with cloud up to 16,000 feet. The occlusion was moving more slowly than forecast and a further postponement was made as the new take—off time drew near, which is why we were taking off so late for a trip to Berlin. Having hung about the messes for nearly three hours awaiting a decision no one was really believed that we were going to face this weather and a great deal of incredulity was expressed when we finally found ourselves committed. One of the few nights I can remember when Butch Harris's parentage was in doubt!"

Ten aircraft finally took off from Pocklington after the two postponements. The first took off at 9:45 pm and the last at 10:06 pm. They were to take a northern route across the Baltic. Tom Wingham's aircraft 'Q—Queenie' piloted by Sgt. Hewlett took off at 9:47 pm. and from the moment they took off they were in cloud. Sgt. Hewlett was unable to gain sufficient height and speed and by the time they reached the Flensburg area the perspex in the windscreen and turrets was iced up. They jettisoned their bombs and turned back returning to Pocklington at 3.09 am. After landing, they found that one engine was leaking oil and another glycol. Two other aircraft had to turn back that night. The first of the early returners was Pilot Officer Barker who jettisoned his bombs at 10:32 and landed back at Pocklington at 12:11. Their aircraft appears to have had similar problems to that of 'Q-Queenie' in failing to gain speed. An hour later Flight Sgt. McKinley landed back at Pocklington, having jettisoned his bombs after the failure of his Constant Speed Unit.

The aircraft of wing Commander Coventry (who became the Squadron Commander a fortnight later) had to land away at Hardwicke after being attacked by a German fighter on the way back to Pocklington. The last of the five aircraft which did make the journey to Berlin and back to base, landed in Pocklington at 6:04 in the morning.

'G-George' took off at 9:58 pm. but one minute later, it was to crash into the west Green. Exactly what happened in that minute we will never know as all seven crew members were killed instantly. Crashes such as this were so frequent that extensive enquiries were not held. However, from eye witness accounts a fairly clear picture emerges. There was certainly

no shortage of ability in the crew. As we have seen, the Pilot, Bill Comrie, favourably impressed the Conversion Flight Commander. Dismissing a common cause of such crashes in the early designs of Halifax — "swing on take off" - Wally Lashbrook said, "not with a Pilot of Comrie's ability". The Navigator, Flying Officer Douglas Harper had been the top cadet on his navigator's course in Edmonton, Canada.

Why was it then that an aircraft with a pilot and navigator who had shown such outstanding attainments in training and had survived the flak of the Ruhr Valley earlier in the month, flying in an aircraft only a month old and which had flown to Berlin successfully two nights before should crash so soon? RAF records only state: "Attempting to avoid another aircraft stalled and crashed soon after take-off".

From eye witness accounts including some with expert knowledge of the Halifax and flying control procedures we can elaborate on this. Stan Jeffrey, who happened to come from the same village as Douglas Harper, was working on 'E-Easy' at its dispersal point. He watched the aircraft circle the aerodrome and then crash.

The circling of the drome is explained by Jack Merrick who worked as an R/T Op in Flying Control, as the "aircraft setting course" when the aircraft circled round before all were airborne and could set off together. At that time, the circuits of Pocklington intersected with those of Melbourne and Elvington, but this was subsequently changed. An aircraft from one of these other two airfields got under the mainplane of 'G-George' and the other aircraft's slipstream caused it to turn over.

Tom Thackray, who was serving in 10 Squadron at that time and is now the Editor of the 10 Squadron Newsletter was at Melbourne on that night, said that the story at the time was that G-George "broke cloud and there was another aircraft very close which made them take rapid evasive action and the aircraft stalled or some such action occurred and they had not sufficient altitude to recover."

Jack Merrick was walking back from an evening in Pocklington with his friend, Peter Tranmere, who also worked as an R/T Op in Flying Control. They were to be on duty for the return from Berlin. As they watched the aircraft circling, they saw the navigation lights of one of them turn over. His comment was "B_____ Hell! A Halifax can't do that".

The phenomenon of the lights turning over was also witnessed by New Zealander Eric ("Ned") Kelly, the Pilot of an aircraft which had taken part in the previous night's raid on St.Nazaire. He was walking back in the

drizzle to the airfield with the Roman Catholic padre after an evening at the Oak House Cinema (now Penny Arcadia). In wartime, pictures were shown early. They saw the aircraft navigation lights going overhead. Then – "with one I suddenly realised that something was very wrong. The port red light had turned to green which meant that the plane had turned right over."

The next thing that Jack Merrick and Peter Tranmere noticed was that the aircraft appeared to be heading in their direction, the navigation lights getting wider and wider and they dived into a ditch, just as the aircraft went onto the field opposite. The aircraft was, in the words of Wilf Bell, seen to "side slip" into the West Green.

It seems that not only had Bill Comrie managed to avoid hitting the other aircraft, but had also avoided hitting the town itself. Arthur Brown saw that the aircraft was heading directly for the town and then swerved to avoid it. Arthur believes that it was the skill of the Pilot which saved the town from massive devastation.

This view is endorsed by Jack Merrick who said, "I can confirm that the pilot Sgt Bill Comrie appeared to be making every effort to miss the town". When we saw the navigation lights turn over the aircraft was over the town side of the railway crossing and I thought he was going to hit the town. Then he appeared to be coming right on to us, so he must have managed to get partial control to avoid the town."

The aircraft crash landed in an open field opposite Pocklington School. The explosion was heard not only all over Pocklington, but Tom Thackray remembers hearing it from as far away as Melbourne. With its load of high explosives and incendiary bombs as well as about 2000 gallons of high octane petrol in its wings G-George was soon ablaze. The fire brigade was on the scene within five minutes and fought the blaze for 32 minutes. The road was blocked and Pocklington's leading fireman at the time, (the late) Raymond Slaughter recalled: "It was a very sad night. The seven were laid up dead and the atmosphere was heavy with the smell of aircraft fuel. The inferno and roaring noise could be seen and heard all over Pocklington and we had to work quickly because it was well after black out time and there was the danger of attracting enemy 'planes." ('Pocklington Post' 29/3/90)

The Aftermath

Families of 102 Squadron aircrew killed in Britain had the choice of having the burial here or at their home town. Bill Comrie, Douglas Harper and Myles Squires are buried at Barmby Moor. The funerals of the other four took place in the week following March 29 1943 in their home areas — Birmingham, Brighton, London and Glasgow.

Members of other crews spent little time contemplating the fate of their comrades who had — in the euphemism of the day — "bought it". With the task they had to face, it was no good thinking of such risks.

Also, they tended to stick together as a crew and did not generally get to know members of other crews very well. One exception to this was Flight Engineer of 'G-George', Jock McGrath. Tom Thackray who was serving with 10 Squadron remembers him.

"Jock McGrath was short in stature but full of fun and devilment as was his pal another Flight Engineer Geordie Kent, who was also short in stature and of the same type. ... I don't know which Squadron Geordie was flying with. However I met him in a canteen in York a couple of months after Jock was killed. He was sitting all alone and looking very depressed and low spirited which was unusual for Geordie. Apparently, Jock's death had affected him greatly."

Two of the crew were married. Freda, the wife of Bomb Aimer William Jenkins lived in Birmingham. The Pilot, Bill Comrie, had got married a few weeks before the crash. His navigator Douglas Harper had been his best man. He married an English girl, Grace Balshaw, who lived near West Kirby, Cheshire, where Bill had been based at a transit camp. Bill had told Grace that if anything happened to him she should go to his parents in the USA. This she did. She is described by her sister-in-law as a "brilliant girl" and soon found work in the USA. She later remarried to become Mrs Frank Aston. She had two daughters and has returned on holiday to England two or three times. She is now believed to be living in the Seattle area.

Myles Squiers was engaged but did not get the chance of even a few snatched weeks of married happiness. Had he and his fiancée, Stella Thomas of Ulverston, survived the war they would have gone to South Africa together. Stella has remained single and lives with her sister Monica in Ulverston. John King the Mid Upper Gunner had four brothers, one of them only six years old at the time. Douglas Harper had a younger brother who received the news of his brother's death on the very day that

he himself had joined the RAF. He was given a week's compassionate leave. Frank Dorrington the Wireless Operator had only one sister.

As well as the tragedy of bereavements, the waste of human potential is also evident in this story. Throughout the war, selection tests for aircrew were most stringent. Those who passed all the tests were an elite. We have already seen some of the achievements of Douglas Harper. Mrs Gwen Fairclough of Sheffield had known Douglas very well and kept in touch with his mother until 1950 when she married and moved away from Leicestershire. She received a last letter from him dated 25th March, only four days before the crash. She said "Although he was only 21 years old when he died he had achieved much and I am sure that he would have gone on to be a great leader". Another friend of the family, Philip Austin, had seen him before returning to Pocklington on his last leave a few days before the crash. He wrote, "I must say that Douglas was a fine boy and a gentleman and cannot speak too highly of him". Douglas's younger brother Stephen became the Chief Foreign Correspondent of the 'Daily Express', a BBC broadcaster and author of several books. Even he says that he was always trying to match his older brother's achievements.

In March 1943, Europe from Norway down to Greece was in the grip of one of the most evil tyrannies the world has known. The loss of 'G-George' was part of the dreadful price paid for the freedom and comparative peace which we have enjoyed in the 48 years since the end of the war.

102 Squadron lost 140 Halifaxes during the war and before them 405 Squadron lost 26 Halifaxes and 20 Wellingtons. Hundreds, perhaps over 1000, brave young men went through the main gates of RAF Pocklington on the York Road never to return. We should remember them perhaps so that in the words of Bill Comrie's fellow countrymen Abraham Lincoln 80 years earlier "from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion".