The Green Button Crew

Robert Learmond's memories of World War II

Glossary & Abbreviations

Ack-ack: anti-aircraft fire

E-boat: British name for the German Schnellboot (S-boot), a small, fast torpedo boat

F/L: Flight Lieutenant

F/O: Flying Officer

F/S: Flight Sergeant

Flak: anti-aircraft fire. Derived from the German word 'Flugabwehrkanone' (aircraft defence cannon)

(Junkers) JU88: Luftwaffe twin-engine multi-role aircraft

Luftwaffe: official name for two of the four German air forces, also a generic German word for 'air force'

ME110 (abbreviation for Messerschmitt Bf 110): German twin-engine fighter aircraft, the major night-fighter aircraft of the Luftwaffe

Pathfinder Force: squadrons that located and marked targets with flares, which a main bomber force could aim at, increasing the accuracy of their bombing

P/O: Pilot Officer

U-boat: anglicised version of the German word 'U-boot', a German military submarine

WAAF: Women's Auxiliary Air Force

Joining the RAF

World War II started for me on the night a whisky distillery near the Hearts Football Ground in Edinburgh was bombed. Edinburgh had experienced bombing in World War l; on that occasion a distillery in Leith was the target. Did the Germans detest whisky, or did they believe Scots morale would be affected? It certainly was a demoralising sight to see whisky flowing through the streets.

Just that week I had volunteered for service in the RAF as a navigator. It was April 1940. I had turned 18 in March and so, despite my father's protests, I volunteered. I possessed the necessary qualification – a Higher Leaving Certificate – and within a few days I was called up.

I was told to report to Padgate, but I'd never heard of such a place - I had only been to England once! It turned out to be near Warrington in Lancashire, and I arrived there at nearly midnight. There was an air raid in progress so we spent the next four hours in a tunnel at Warrington railway station.

Padgate was not an attractive place. We saw no aircraft, but we were introduced to drill routine by overbearing Corporals and Senior Warrant Officers. We either drilled and marched or polished shoes and buttons! Now kitted out we were transported to Blackpool and had our first shock. Some of us had expressed a desire to train as pilots, navigators or wireless operators, but we now found ourselves introduced to training as wireless operators, and the drilling and marching continued. Needless to say we had to accept the decision of our masters and so our training commenced in Blackpool tram sheds - a cold and draughty spot in winter.

Our living quarters (billets) were private houses run by Blackpool landladies who did their best to make a profit from the rations allowed. The result was we were always hungry and sought to replenish our lack of food by visiting the many church canteens. Luckily the entertainment in Blackpool was excellent, with several good theatres and many cinemas. The Tower Ballroom had fantastic bands and organ recitals: Reginald Dixon and the Sydney Torch Orchestra often played there.

Admission to all shows was usually between 8p and 1 shilling – cheap, yes, but our pay was only 14 shillings per week.

After 6 to 8 weeks we were tested for our proficiency in Morse code. The test was conducted in a gentleman's clothing outfitters – Burtons the Taylors. This was how the phrase "Gone for a Burton" started; later the phrase meant you got the chop (meaning you were missing from an operation). If you passed the test and were medically fit for aircrew you were posted to Yatesbury in Wiltshire. Those unsuitable for aircrew became ground operators and were posted to the nearby base of Compton Bassett.

Ford, Sussex

To put it mildly, training was in a state of confusion. Yatesbury could not accept any more Wireless Operator/Air Gunners (WOP/AGs) so some of us found ourselves being trained for Air Defence. After very basic training we were posted to Ford on the Sussex coast – a big improvement on Padgate and Blackpool, but not the type of service we wanted in the RAF. The airfields on the south coast (Ford, Thorney Island and Tangmere) were attacked frequently by hit-and-run raids.

The Ground Defence unit personnel were all fairly sports-minded and many of us were good footballers, and so competition was keen to be members of our unit team. We reached the final of a local competition, to be played on the Littlehampton Football Ground. However, several days of rain plus a heavy storm resulted in the ground being flooded and the game was abandoned. Someone suggested we visit a local pub called The Windmill in Rustington. After a few glasses of 'War Time Beer' we made our way to a local tennis club dance.

Little did I realise that by going to this dance my life would change completely. Before joining the RAF my main interests were athletics and football; my contact with girls was very limited and so the thought of asking a girl to dance filled me with trepidation. Nevertheless, I did approach one – somehow or other I managed a series of "moves" that resembled a quick step without crippling her – I remained with her for the rest of the evening. I discovered that she was a children's nurse, and so I accompanied her back to the nursing home when the dance finished

then made my way back to Ford. Luckily transport was not a problem - there was a fair amount of coastal traffic at night.

Nina Jennings and I had arranged to meet again so the dancing lessons continued. At first she had difficulty understanding my Scots accent – I don't think she had ever met a Scotsman before! Nina had lived on Hayling Island near Portsmouth, where her parents had a shop. They'd lost both their home and shop when a German bomber dropped a land mine after leaving Portsmouth. The nursing home, where she now worked, was about 300 yards from the beach, which was heavily mined. She told me that soldiers of the Royal Engineers stationed nearby tried to "chat them up" as they carried round unfused mines on the panniers of their bicycles.

Nina was looking after evacuee children from London. They had been sent down to the coast for greater safety but it didn't occur to the bureaucrats that Rustington was at least 20 minutes nearer the Luftwaffe airfields in France. Also, Portsmouth was a prime target just along the coast and Tangmere, Ford and Thorney Island, important RAF bases, were nearby. The elderly had also been evacuated to small towns along the coast, but fortunately no air raids causing casualties took place (although Poling, an important radar station, was bombed).

The boredom of ground defence duties at Ford continued. About 75% of the personnel had originally volunteered for aircrew and some had lost interest and spent much of their time in local pubs. In Littlehampton or Arundel a 48-hour pass meant that Brighton was accessible. Fortunately, I had found a girlfriend and our attachment to one another increased, but we were still very young.

When I met her mother at the Star Inn in Horsham the idea of getting engaged had not occurred but the thought was there. The word LOVE in 1941 meant something then!! We could have become engaged and I could have remained at Ford, in relative safety, possibly to the end of the war but I was determined to remuster as aircrew. Again, three of us (Tom, Jimmy and I) applied (previous requests had been ignored or turned down) but this time the officer in charge arranged for us to be posted to, of all places, the Shetland Isles. This was indeed a shock: I had met a lovely girl who was in love with me (I cannot think why), and

I feared that once I left I would soon be forgotten with all those Canadians around.

Nina was obviously disappointed with the news. We had grown accustomed to meeting at least once a week and it would be at least 3 months before I saw her again. Life at Sullom Voe in the Shetlands would be depressing and Tom, Jimmy and I felt we were being unfairly treated.

Sullom Voe, Shetland Islands

The journey from Ford to Invergordon would take at least 36 hours. However, we managed to miss our train connections and this enabled us to spend time in Edinburgh, Falkirk and Sunderland. On arrival at Invergordon we had to wait for a further 3 days for the ship to Lerwick. The crossing from Scotland across the Pentland Firth is notorious – the crossing was even rougher than expected and I was sick for most of the voyage.

We arrived in Lerwick in driving rain and gale force winds. The journey on a narrow and muddy road took nearly 3 hours through a rather depressing landscape with no trees! The flying boat base (Sunderlands Caralinas) was not a welcoming sight. The wind and rain never ceased – you walked leaning into the wind or you let it carry you along! The football field was a muddy quagmire. Entertainment was provided by an ENSA concert party: they all seemed to be geriatrics. Nina had nothing to fear on this station; there were no girls! Why, WHY did we make a nuisance of ourselves at Ford?

Several months went by, and then one day we heard an announcement offering the chance of aircrew training as Air Gunners. The bomber force had expanded with the introduction of Stirlings, Halifaxes and Lancasters (casualties had also increased) so we decided to apply and our applications went off to Edinburgh.

The boredom of Sullom Voe affected my relationship with Nina – there was nothing to write about. Leave (for seven days) was not frequent, and I had to wait 6 months for leave. Back in the 1940s, before you could think of marriage you had to be able to offer a girl something for the future. The possibility of seeing her again was remote: now that I had

been accepted to aircrew what was my life expectancy? As well as that, one could not ignore the likelihood of her meeting someone else who lived in Horsham. And so, before departing from Sullom Voe, I wrote to Nina breaking off our friendship making the excuse that I had met someone else.

The day for our departure from Sullom Voe arrived - a glorious cloudless day with little wind and a smooth crossing to Scotland. On our few visits to Lerwick we realised the relationship with the Scandinavian countries was still evident – many of the shops had Norwegian names and many of the Viking traditions were still celebrated (in peace time of course). The journey south was slow, stopping at nearly every station. However, the hospitality at Aviemore was unbelievable: despite the fact that we arrived there after midnight a tireless band of WVS members were ready with refreshments.

The aircrew medical seemed a formality. Our next destination was St Johns Wood in London – quite a difference from Sullom Voe! We spent a week there before posting to the Initial Training Wing. During that time I was tempted to contact Nina, but having broken off with her I thought my visit would not be welcome.

Yorkshire & North Wales

The Initial Training Wing at Bridlington in Yorkshire was so different from Blackpool – we lived in requisitioned houses. We were well treated (although still drilling and marching) and had frequent lectures on first aid, escape procedures if shot down, aircraft recognition, and treatment of prisoners of war. However, the lectures were not entirely successful, for after drilling and marching we'd be ushered into a darkened lecture hall, and in the darkness we'd all fall asleep! With the knowledge acquired after two years' service in the RAF, Tom, Jimmy and I knew many of the "tricks" in the service.

The most popular spot as far as we were concerned was the local Methodist Church. They served excellent refreshments and one of the volunteers, a middle-aged lady called Hilda, made a special fuss of us: the two Scots and the "Geordie". We had also discovered the Spa Ballroom.

Frequently I've said history repeats itself. It did one night at the Spa Ballroom when I asked a girl to dance with me; like Nina, she was friendly and helpful. Following that night we went to the local cinema and walks along the "Prom". Obviously Joan Milner's parents were anxious to meet this airman she had met. Imagine my surprise when Joan took me to her home; her mother was Hilda who I had met at the Methodist Church, and she greeted me as though she had known me for years! To Joan's surprise she described how she had got to know us (Tom Brownless could charm the ladies), although Hilda spoilt it all with a Yorkshire comment "the way to a man's heart …etc". For the remainder of my stay in "Brid" I became a regular guest with the Milners – they were extremely kind to me – perhaps it was just as well that our stay in Brid would be brief.

Our next posting was Llandwrog near Caernarvon in North Wales. How different after the generosity of Yorkshire. Tom and Jimmy had both been invited out by local people in Bridlington, but here at Llandwrog there was no social life. The main aim was to finish our course and get to an operational training unit. However, the instructors were excellent, all had done a tour on Bomber Command, and the atmosphere was cheerful and relaxed.

We did all our target practice on drogues towed by Fairley Battles. We fired from Blenheims, and all three of us gained excellent results – Jimmy especially! We then received our 3 stripes, an increase in pay and 7 days leave, extended to 10 days with instructions to report to RAF Hixon (Staffordshire). Once again we had to find the nearest railway station; Jimmy and I spent two days there. Our next destination was RAF Wymeswold near Loughborough. There we said goodbye to Tom; we had been together since 1940. Unfortunately it was a final goodbye to Tom as he was shot down on his 12th operation.

The Green Button Crew

Whose idea was the green buttons? It was either Ron Pharo's or Ted Dutton's. Both died some years ago, so we'll never know.

To form a crew was a haphazard affair. All the new arrivals at Wymeswold were instructed to report to the Sergeants' mess where we were told to find our other crew members! In the midst of this were groups of Canadians playing cards. Ted Dutton was standing next to me – his comment was "I don't like the look of some of them". He was an Air Gunner with a London accent but living in Spalding (he had joined the RAF as a regular so knew all the dodges).

Ron Pharo (Navigator) from Rochester and Doug Cullen (Bomb Aimer) from Liverpool were deep in conversation - both had trained in the USA. We now had to find a pilot and a Wireless Operator / Air Gunner, although they had both met one another. Ken Mountney (pilot) originally came from Durham (Jarrow) and Harry Bartlett (Wireless Operator / Air Gunner) from Cramlington; both Geordies, although Ken's parents now lived in Walthamstow. We all made our way to the "billet"; a Nissen Hut. It was there that someone gave me a packet of green buttons to sew on my battle dress. The bright green buttons did stand out and in no time at all we became known as the "Green Button" crew. Green was thought to be unlucky, so we were tempting the "Gods".

Ted was an extrovert and very popular. Harry Bartlett was friendly with a dry sense of humour, and quietly efficient as a Wireless Operator. Doug was like you would expect of a Liverpool ex-policeman. Ron was a pharmacist; he was the old man of the crew, at 26. Ken was the baby of the crew, soon to fly a four-engine Halifax, but unable to drive a car. Doug and Ron loved a glass of beer, as did Harry and Ted. Ken rarely touched alcohol but loved dancing; I tended to go out with Ken at that stage because I was not a heavy drinker.

Ken had to accustom himself to Wellingtons after flying Ansons, and Ron and Doug had to get used to navigating in the dark (there was no black-out in the USA). Our first few days were spent on take offs and landings - then daylight cross-countries, then night landings and cross

countries. Sandwiched between this intensive training we had bombing practice, Air Sea Firing, and Fighter Affiliation. We spent 3 months at Wymeswold and Castle Donnington (now the East Midlands Airport). At the completion of our training we were given 7 days leave, ration cards and much prized petrol coupons (one of the perks received by aircrew presumably because they thought our life span would be brief).

Marston Moor, Yorkshire

At the end of our leave we reported to Marston Moor (Yorkshire) – again a widely dispersed station and you constantly needed a bicycle. Flight Sergeant Ellis' crew joined us – their navigator had trained in the States with Ron – one of the gunners came from Cowdenbeath, a mining village in Fife.

Once settled in our Nissen Hut we explored the airfield on our bikes. In one of the hangars a Halifax was undergoing repair (a common occurrence we would discover), and we asked the Flight Sergeant in charge if we (Ted, Harry and I) might go on board. Once on board, everything seemed so much larger than a Wimpy – I had only flown in a Blenheim, a Whitely and a Wellington. The Flight Sergeant in charge was talking to an officer, a Group Captain, and to our dismay they climbed on board. The Group Captain saw us but did not ask any questions about why we were there; he only enquired how long had we been at Marston. Instead of criticism he suggested we blindfold ourselves and get to know the aircraft in the dark, saying "your life will depend on it". Simple but obvious advice. Later we learned that the Group Captain was the Station Commander (the youngest in the RAF) Leonard Cheshire VC, DSO, DFC – later to be commander of 617 Squadron. We carried on with our inspection noting that the mid-upper turret had only a canvas flap for a seat!

Our training at Marston went without a hitch – just a few Air Firing exercises, working with a camera gun and low flying practice before our posting to a squadron.

102 Squadron – Pocklington, Yorkshire

Arriving at Pocklington, in Yorkshire, after 7 days leave, Ken's first remark when we settled in was "Well, we made it". Our Liverpool policeman Doug brought us back to earth with the answer: "Yes, but for how long?!"

At Marston we had picked up the seventh member of our crew, Harry Proctor (Flight Engineer). Unfortunately, he never seemed to become a member of the team: he had plenty of ability but was not reliable.

Our first exercise was a Command "Bullseye". This exercise was made up with a group of Heavy Conversion Units and "Rookie" Squadron crew to gain experience of operational conditions. The route could take you on an approach to the French and Dutch coasts then flying on pre-arranged routes with possible "dummy" interceptions en route. Near Pocklington there were two other stations: Elvington (77 Squadron) and Melbourne (10 Squadron) – landing back at Pocklington could be confusing because all three fields were close together. Luckily we avoided any confusion that evening as we had engine trouble and were diverted to Middle Wallop. The next morning we flew back to Pocklington.

The next day, just after lunch, my name was called out over the Tannoy (loud speaker). I was instructed to report to B-Flight immediately. I couldn't think why; I would soon know! Ken accompanied me. The Flight Commander and Gunnery Leader informed me that I would flying that night with F/L Gibson – this was his last op and a member of the crew had gone sick – I was tempted to ask, why me? I suspect the answer was because it was considered lucky to have a Scot in each crew.

Operations begin

(1) Elberfeld: 24/25 June 1943, Rear Gunner

I made my way out to K-King[1] still wondering why I had been selected. The ground crew chief (very wise) said he thought the target would be the Ruhr (maximum bomb load was the clue) - this meant a short trip, and briefing at 5pm confirmed the ground crew's forecast. The target was Wuppertal/Elberfeld. At briefing I met the rest of Gibson's crew – Gibson had been present at the Flight Commander's office. The crew were friendly, although a bit worried about my good luck charm of green buttons! The Mid-upper Gunner and Gibson both expressed the wish that I fly as Rear Gunner.

As usual we enjoyed our bacon and eggs. Ken came across wishing me good luck, then came the collection of parachutes and donning of the flying suits, then at last our transport out to the aircraft. How superstitious were aircrew, with such a variety of good luck charms and mascots. I wore my school scarf (that scarf travelled with me on every op for the next two years), and I also had a gold boomerang that I hung round my neck. My Uncle Ian had worn that charm in the First World War – he bequeathed it to me and told me to bring it back – it was pure gold (typical Scot). Eventually we climbed aboard with our orange juice, sweets and escape kit etc.

Wuppertal, the sister town to Elberfeld, had been attacked the previous week and a miniature firestorm had occurred; Elberfeld would suffer the same fate tonight. As we taxied out to the take off point I witnessed a scene that was to be repeated over the next 6 months: a crowd of thirty or more Airmen, WAAFs, and MT transport drivers had assembled to wave us off! I won't say goodbye! Foremost in the crowd was the base commander – Air Commodore Walker (Gus) a former English Rugby International. He was an inspiration to 10, 77, and 102 Squadrons. He had completed at least one tour then lost an arm trying to rescue a crew in a burning Lancaster; what a shock it must've been to such a sportsman to wake up in hospital with only one arm. Gibson's crew were all on edge – this was their last trip – but the North Sea crossing and the Dutch

[1] The aircraft identification mark

coast all went according to plan. We picked the sky markers and commenced our bombing run "dead on track". Bombs released we beat a hasty retreat then just as the searchlights passed over us I spotted an ME110 fighter and ordered Gibson to corkscrew. This he did violently; so successful were our evasion tactics I never saw the ME110 again. Perhaps I was just too slow or inexperienced? The other gunner opened fire but the corkscrew made taking aim difficult. I just wished that Ken could have been with Gibson as second pilot - he would have learned a lot.

We crossed the English coast near Flamborough Head. Gibson's crew were the first crew to finish for 3 months – hardly a good omen for us!

I met Ken at debriefing and his trip was without incident. Gibson's crew were celebrating and they did not forget to thank me; in fact they made me feel one of them, not just a spare bod. Debriefing was a new experience for me. The Gunnery Leader made me feel that for a newcomer, I had acquitted myself well. He introduced me to Gus Walker the Commanding Officer of the Pocklington clutch and also the station Chaplin. The next morning, Ken, Doug, Ron and I visited the intelligence section where we met Flying Officer Allen. He was intrigued by the green buttons – he had spotted them on Ken after returning from Elberfeld. He showed us where we had been and indicated the likely area where we had encountered the ME110. F/O Allen was helpful and encouraging; he would later prove to be a valuable friend.

I guess on one of our free days we visited York – Doug and Ron had already heard of Betty's bar, a popular pub visited by 4 Group Squadrons. Soon after our arrival at Pocklington I must have made my way to Bridlington to see Joan and her parents. Foolishly, I cycled there on a pushbike with a saddle needing replacement, which resulted in considerable discomfort and the resulting embarrassment and comments from Ted and Doug in particular. As usual the Milners made me feel welcome. However, they informed me that they were moving from Bridlington to a small town called Brighouse in West Yorkshire (famous for its brass band) so this would be my last visit to Bridlington.

Back at Pocklington the weather had improved and there was an air of expectancy that we would be operating. I visited intelligence with Ted to

find out about the Flak ships near the Dutch coast. Valuable information and advice had never been properly given to us so we did not know what to expect. I spent some time in one of the turrets, because I had not managed to open fire on that ME110. I mentioned to Ted my experience with Gibson's corkscrew – it was so violent that I wasn't prepared – should we discuss this with Ken?

Ted had gone on ahead to lunch when I was accosted by the Station Warrant Officer, and pointing with a finger directed at my green buttons he ordered "Remove them!". I felt like saying "Not bloody likely," but restrained myself. I explained that if I removed mine six other aircrew would do the same. Just at that moment around the corner walked Gus Walker; he guessed the reason and dismissed me, and dealt with the SWO.

(2) Cologne: 28 June 1943, Mid-upper Gunner

Ken was informed that we would be on our first trip that night – the target as yet not known – so Ted and I used the time with a visit to our aircraft. I was still puzzled why my reaction had been slow when attacked by the ME110. We also used the time to find out about the Flak ships near the Dutch Coast. The Ground Crew with their knowledge informed us that it was a short trip due to the full bomb load instead of full tanks, so their guess was somewhere like Essen. Sure enough briefing confirmed it was a short trip: Cologne. Cologne in 1943 had been attacked many times, with the main target being the railway station. A short distance from the target stood the Cathedral – only the glass was damaged!

Everything went well that night. We settled on our course on track and on time, and reached the target without incident. De-briefing with F/O Allen in charge was a relaxed affair and we realised from remarks made by other crews that a non-incident trip to the Ruhr was a rare occurrence! We realised how inexperienced we were: survival without experience was 90% luck.

In some ways Ron acted as captain of the crew. Ken was the youngest and as a pilot he was excellent, but as I have mentioned it was a strange world with a pilot of a 4-engined bomber who could not drive a car. He was conscientious and careful but not mature enough to deal with Harry

Proctor our Flight Engineer. Ron was at least 4 years older and meticulous with his navigation.

(3) Cologne: 3 July 1943

Once again the target was Cologne. Before briefing Ron, Ken and I went across to the intelligence block. I was particularly interested in the route followed on our first trip and we asked F/O Allen about flak batteries we might have encountered. Briefing was the usual but somehow there was never enough time to absorb all the details. The time before take-off was taken up with our flying meal (eggs and bacon), writing letters and a short rest before making our way to the flight office to collect parachutes, food rations, escape kit and flying suits.

Take off was at 11:20pm on V-Victor. We had the same crew as before with the same WAAF driver. Immediately after seeing us on board she made her way to the caravan (take off point) to join the small contingent waving us goodbye. Like our first trip, we had a smooth trip. I thought the flak was pretty intense but there was no doubt about hitting the target for the river was clearly visible.

On this trip we had a new device fitted to the rear of the aircraft, a radar warning device called "Monica" that was supposed to warn us of enemy aircraft in the vicinity. Later we discovered the Luftwaffe used "Monica" for homing on to bombers!

(4) Gelsenkirchen: 9 July 1943, Mid-upper Gunner

This time the target was Gelsenkirchen where there was a synthetic oil production plant. I had an uncomfortable feeling about this trip. The Pathfinder Target indicators were scattered and just as our bombing run started we suffered damage to the fuselage from an anti aircraft shell that exploded too close. Ken sent Harry Proctor down to ascertain the damage. Harry left his mike on with Doug starting his bomb run, and soon he cried out "I've been hit!". Harry Bartlett went to help Proctor but Bartlett's knowledge of first aid was very limited. Thankfully the injury was not serious; it was just a bit of blood that looked worse than it was. Ken or Ron told Proctor to switch off his mike – not too politely!

Somehow or other Doug continued with his bombing run. Thankfully with the run completed we set course for home and not worrying about

petrol consumption, but we were suddenly confronted with flak too close for comfort. Harry B had dragged, pulled and pushed Proctor to the rest bed when Doug noticed one of the port engines was overheating. Harry Proctor was helped from the rest bed to check on the engine and confirmed Doug's verdict, so that engine was feathered.

By this time we were down below 10,000 feet and, most importantly, crossing the Dutch coast. It seemed a long way from the coast to Flamborough Head, and we were still losing height with engines starting to overheat before seeing the Pocklington beacon. During the crossing I had left the mid upper turret to find out what damage had been caused. There was a large hole in the elsan (toilet) and the contents were all over the floor, some of the liquid dropping out through holes in the aircraft. My word - would the ground crew be pleased!

What did we learn from our visit to Gelsenkirchen? Next morning we discussed the trip. We had been unlucky with the "flak" damage but it could have been a lot worse. The bombing run had shown our lack of experience yet Doug, despite the confusion, had bombed the target. Harry Proctor's wound was not serious but our lack of first aid skills could have been serious – we all should have paid more attention to earlier lectures on first aid!

Ted was the one who faced facts. He criticised Harry Proctor for leaving his mike on. Leaving a mike on could be disastrous by resulting in panic, but Doug with his usual unflappability had saved us. Harry Proctor resented this criticism, and we made our wishes clear to him that communication should be kept to a minimum. I remembered what Gibson said to me after Elberfeld: good crews had a chance of survival with good discipline.

(5) Aachen, Rear Gunner

Here there was very heavy industrial damage. Many public buildings had been destroyed, and 28,000 people fled from the town.

We took off at 11:15pm and for us it was an incident free trip but unfortunately we lost the squadron commanding officer, Wing Commander Coventry. I met Mrs Coventry 50 years later in New Zealand. She never remarried but became a priest in an Anglican church

near Lower Hutt. F/L Hogg (the squadron Gunnery Leader) also lost his life. Only that day he had suggested I should apply for a commission.

(6) Montbeliard, Mid-upper Gunner

A French town near the Swiss Border, and our target was a Peugeot or Renault car factory. Unfortunately the pathfinder flares were dropped in the wrong place, 700 yards from the factory. There was confusion regarding markers so Doug decided on a "dummy run", getting out of the stream and then re-entering stream. It was a hair-raising experience – aircraft seemed to come from several directions at once! We were carrying a war correspondent from the Daily Express with us and I wonder if he ever went on a bombing raid again?! It certainly was a long and uncomfortable trip (7 hours and 45 minutes), sitting on a flimsy canvas seat!

(7) Hamburg: 24-25 July 1943, Rear Gunner

This operation was the opening of the Battle of Hamburg (Operation GOMORRAH). The target was to be the U-Boat shipyards and aircraft factories. Our 2nd pilot was Lt Kadane, Czech Air Force.

The reception would be very different to our previous target at Montbeliard. Briefing indicated only 50 miles of flight over land, and the introduction of *window*[2]. The Germans already possessed *window* but they were reluctant to introduce such a weapon as it would wreck their radar when we retaliated. The introduction of *window* was a morale booster, and certainly for this trip it was! 791 aircraft took part – 12 were lost. Many factories were destroyed including the U-boat yards and aircraft factories, and also the city hall, the main telephone exchange and the city zoo (which resulted in many wild and terrified animals escaping!).

Briefing and pre-flight followed the usual pattern. Our WAAF driver delivered us to our aircraft with time to spare. This young girl showed great loyalty to us, but at times she was somewhat embarrassed by Ted

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[2] *Window* – strips of paper-backed aluminium foil that bomber crews hurled out by the hundred from the flare chutes of their aircraft, to create a blizzard of false echoes on the German *Wurzburg* and *Lichtenstein* radar sets

urinating on the tail wheel. Ron warned him not to perform on the main wheels – his urine would rot the rubber!

There was an air of expectancy about this raid. Gus Walker (our Commanding Officer), the Met man, F/O Allen and Ground Crew WAAFs were all stationed at the caravan waiting for the "Green" take-off signal. Harry Bartlett commenced his *windowing* (one bundle per minute) as we approached the Dutch coast. Immediately after the *windowing* commenced we observed that the searchlights were waving aimlessly round the sky. Harry Bartlett, back on his radio (Proctor now *windowing*) reported cries of alarm by radio transmission – they reported thousands of aircraft approaching the other coast. With the German radar in such confusion Pathfinder Force markers excelled themselves with their accuracy – although "Creep Back" did occur. Main stream bombers in this situation were more accurate.

Great fires had already started in Hamburg. Soon they enveloped large areas of the city giving the Germans a taste of what they had dished out to Coventry, Liverpool and London, Rotterdam and Warsaw.

The short trip (50 miles) to the coast was accomplished without incident and soon we were circling base. Lt Kadane had been a great help relieving Proctor and Bartlett with *windowing*. Debrief followed the usual procedure. Crews were buoyed up with the success of *window*; sadly the optimistic hope of fewer losses would not last for long.

(8) Essen: 25-26 July 1943, Mid-upper Gunner

'Bomber' Harris (commander of Bomber Command) did not believe in a respite for the Germans. The following night 705 aircraft were sent to Essen (the industrial heart of the Ruhr); the main target was Krupps, which we knew was well defended. Flying into the barrage of Flak and searchlights required a great deal of courage or stupidity. On a well defended target Pathfinder Force suffered heavier losses – their markers were scattered. Main force crews selected the wrong markers to bomb and others bombed early thus causing "Creep Back".

Once again Ron had done a good job. We had just started our bombing run when another Halifax loomed above us; cautiously I asked Ken to alter course on Doug's instructions to either port or starboard. This incident only took a few seconds but it showed our growing confidence.

All this time Proctor and Bartlett had been *windowing*. The Germans were reorganising to cope with *window* – already they were hunting for bombers near the edge of the stream.

We crossed the English coast near Bridlington then picked up the welcoming Pocklington beacon. Once again we enjoyed our debriefing, happy that we had survived two big raids in the space of two nights.

(9) Hamburg: 27-28 July 1943, take off at 11:30pm

This was the most decisive attack. The streets were on fire, the fires became a hurricane, and the smoke reached a bombing height of 10-14 thousand feet. The spectacles that we viewed made us feel sorry for the Germans! In fact, there was further damage to city: we bombed with a thunderstorm approaching, and after our departure the city suffered a severe storm. July was a disastrous month for German civil defence.

Of the 787 aircraft that took off we lost 87 aircraft (60 were shot down by night fighters). About 46,000 people were killed and nearly a million people lost their homes in the firestorm[3]. At the port, 26 U-Boats were destroyed.

Thus ended the Battle of the Ruhr.

(10) Milan: 12 August 1943

Take off was at 8:05pm by 477 aircraft. I remember this trip for the beauty of the crossing over the Alps. We crossed coast near Beachy Head on our return.

(11) Peenemunde: 17 August 1943

Take off was at 9:10pm, by 596 aircraft (a huge force for such a deep penetration).

Briefing that evening was initially a shock when the target was unveiled, it looked like Berlin. No-one had heard of Peenemunde! The frightening route took us over 700 miles of hostile territory to bomb a small target

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[3] These figures are from Neillands, R. (2001), *The Bomber War : the allied air offensive against Nazi Germany*, and differ to those Robert had cited in his log book.

100 miles north of Berlin: a secret weapons establishment. Important scientists had gathered there, and the aim was to destroy the secret weapons establishment and kill as many scientists as possible. We were not to bomb below 5000 feet, but we were told nothing about rockets. Mosquitos and Beaufighters were engaged on the intruder action over airfields in Holland, and a squadron of Mosquitos was briefed to attack Berlin. Finally we were warned the raid must be a success; failure meant a second operation the next night. This was the background to one of the most important raids of the war.

Ken and I had made a habit of visiting the intelligence section. We had learnt a great deal about the flak ships off the Dutch coast and Flensburg, a dangerous German town near the border with Denmark. We had acquainted ourselves with as much information as possible after the Hamburg raids, guessing that one night we would be briefed for Berlin.

Always before a big raid there was insufficient time to absorb information. By 7.30pm we'd had our meal – a solemn occasion because losses were expected to be heavy – then we collected our parachutes, orange juice and escape kit, and donned our flying suits. This time our drivers took us out to R-Robert because our original aircraft had developed trouble in one of the engines. Somehow the tension of this raid was felt by the ground crew. Our faithful MT driver hung around the aircraft until we started our engines, then she made her way to the caravan as aircrafts were already taxiing down to take-off. The supporting crowd watching take off was much larger than usual.

We quickly settled down to routine and reached the Dutch coast slightly off track – the Met man had been correct when he stated that winds would be variable. Approaching the Danish coast we drew fire from a flak ship, or shore battery. Then, just as we thought the danger had passed, a searchlight lit us up: we were over Flensburg. At that height, between 9 and 10,000 feet, we were an easy target. Ken put the nose down and I opened fire without hope of success. The searchlights went out, we didn't know why. We discovered the answer 43 years later.

Meanwhile we had lost height and were down to about 5,000 feet. The sudden dive had resulted in Ron losing much of his equipment – he was crawling on the floor looking for pencils, slide rule etc – Ted and I had warned him about looking after his equipment!

In the midst of this confusion Doug calmly said, "Does anyone know where we are? We don't want to end up over Kiel or Rostock!". Ron, luckily, had reorganised himself. We were somewhere over the Baltic; Doug had recognised two islands off the coast so Ron gave an alteration of course. If he was right he said we should be about 5 minutes late over the target: being late on the target increased the likelihood of encountering night fighters. We climbed back to 7,000 feet, when to our amazement, Ken saw some markers go down. Doug confirmed our position – but getting back into the main stream would be difficult and risky so we decided to approach the target with a time and distance run. Everything went smoothly and we made our comparatively short run into the target. Doug obtained an almost perfect picture (smoke screening in one corner).

Our run home was without incident although I did observe several aircraft shot down. The Luftwaffe had returned from the diversion raid to Berlin; the late arrivals suffered heavy losses (at least 44 aircraft).

I have mentioned our miraculous escape on the outward journey to Peenemunde and that 43 years later we discovered why. Ron was in the habit of spending his holidays in Corsica and while there in 1986 he became inebriated with Corsican brandy one night and got talking to a German. The German had been a student in Flensburg during the war, but at night he took his turn as a searchlight operator or Flak gunner. He recollected that on that particular night, they had coned (caught between two searchlights) a bomber when suddenly tracer and armour piercing struck the searchlight battery. Two operators were wounded and the master searchlight struck, so the other lights went out and the guns stopped. If it was us, we certainly had a guardian angel caring for us: it wasn't skill from Ted and me, but mostly luck!

F/L Allen debriefed us – no mention was made of the time and distance run – officially we knew nothing about this new technique! We related our experience over Flensburg, a notorious city, but unfortunately we could not tell them why the searchlight went out.

Pathfinder Force Interview

The next morning we were summoned to the Flight Commander's office. He informed us that we would be withdrawn from operations to attend a

course on H_2S, a new piece of navigational equipment which would assist us in locating the target, and accuracy in bombing. Harry Proctor would be sent on a series of lectures for Flight Engineers and the Wireless Operator and two gunners would attend a gunnery course involving camera equipment. I was also informed that I would have to attend a "basic wireless refresher" course. For this we would be transferred to Leconfield (North Humberside). We were the first crew of 102 Squadron selected for this course – quite a feather in our caps! Beverley, moreover, was an attractive town about 20 miles to the south.

Our Flight Commander then informed us that we would be interviewed by a high ranking officer from Pathfinder Force. We met Wing Commander Hamish Mahaddie – a Scot from Edinburgh – after lunch; he turned out to be the Flight Commander from Benmelt. We thought immediately that someone had 'rumbled' our time and distance run at Peenemunde. However, this was not the question he put to us but, "how do you feel about joining Pathfinder Force?". No-one said anything for a few seconds, then Ron (the eldest of our crew) said that he was not interested in 45 straight trips; Doug said much the same! Ted, never reluctant to speak his mind, said that from what he had heard every Pathfinder Force "op" was a Peenemunde. Still a bit overawed, I said I would be happy to do the 45 trips but with a rest period in between, to increase our chance of survival. The two Harry's agreed with the comments made by us all. Ken, faced with the crew's decision, was not prepared to join Pathfinder Force. Mahaddie gained no recruits from 102 Squadron. However, we found him friendly. I met him 43 years later in Adelaide at a Pathfinder Force reunion – a function I should not have been attending bearing in mind the rivalry between 616 Squadron (Cheshire) and Pathfinder Force on the efficiency of target marking!

We enjoyed our stay in Beverley, where there were some good pubs. I received basic training as a wireless operator – my Morse code was still good. It was a hectic course.

On our return to Pocklington we spent a week flying cross countries at night using H_2S. This new piece of equipment would have been a godsend at Peenemunde (showing us coastline and rivers, e.g. The Rhine and Elbe). During our week of Ops we were joined by three Canadians who, like us, had come from Marston Moor arriving at Pocklington at around 10am. The pilot was informed that due to squadron losses and

special training courses he would be flying that night as a second pilot. He spent the day at briefings before taking off at 9pm. He was missing that night, and a few weeks later we learnt that he had been taken prisoner. In 24 hours he had left a training station, moved to a squadron, been shot down, and then taken to a POW camp.

Return to operations

(12) Hannover

We returned to operations with a new aircraft, HX150 DY/N, the first H_2S Halifax in 4 Group. Ron was anxious to test his new piece of equipment, and his joy was evident when he plotted our exact position when we crossed the Dutch coast. He had learned his lesson and had now secured his bits and pieces so he wouldn't be picking up his navigational equipment off the floor. Doug had reported sick and our bomb aimer replacement was Squadron Leader Abels (a Jew), Bombing Leader of the squadron. Ken was quite nervous en route because Abels was a senior and well-experienced officer. Our navigation was again first-class. The target marking by Pathfinder Force looked inaccurate and Abels commented on the bomb creep. Shortly after leaving the target we were picked up by a searchlight. Ken dived very steeply – we lost several thousand feet – pulling out of the dive with the help of Abels. This was a fault on the Halifax that would have been fatal with our bombs on board. This fault was later corrected by Leonard Cheshire, who suggested an alteration to the fin and rudder. Poor Ron and Bartlett must have been very uncomfortable in their little cabins ('kennels') when we lost height so rapidly.

(13) Mannheim: possibly 23 September 1943

Again we had a tough target, and after briefing I paid a quick visit to Intelligence. Like Hannover, night fighter presence in the area was high and searchlight and anti-aircraft fire was expected to be intense. Doug was fit again and we were carrying a second pilot.

When airborne, Ron, Doug and Ken reported trouble with the master compass. Harry Proctor had seen a large quantity of *window* near the rear-hatch so the first job for our second pilot was to move the pile of *window* then check the master compass. This meant a delay of several minutes – I think we were the last aircraft to take off that night.

Despite the initial confusion, the outward trip to the target went well. A few minutes from the target I spotted an ME110 shadowing a Lancaster (confirmed by Harry and Ted), it had taken up a "blind spot" position under the Lancaster. Harry Bartlett (from the astrodome) and Ted in the mid-upper position observed the ME110 gradually gaining height. Alarmed by this situation for no given reason I watched the progress of the ME110, then saw a violent explosion from the fuel tanks of the Lancaster. Shaken by this experience, we commenced our bombing run but fortunately everything went smoothly and the flak ceased as we left the target area. Instantly we were aware of the presence of night fighters, and I spotted another ME110 on our starboard quarter, fairly low down. With Ken constantly banking we watched his approach, and as he made his climbing approach we gave the order to corkscrew. Ken's initial dive, then climb, out-manoeuvred the ME110 and Ted and I opened fire. Ted must have scored several "hits" on the target, for he broke-off the action. In view of what happened on the way to our target, was this the same ME110 that had destroyed the Lancaster?

This sighting of the ME110 was something different, and within a few days it was confirmed that the Luftwaffe were fixing upward-firing cannon (known as 'Schräge Musik') to their night fighters. Debriefing that night was therefore a lengthy process – the group Intelligence Officer was present and he was very interested in our report. The positive outcome of the whole trip for Ted and me was the confidence shown by Ken, Doug and Ron on our banking and weaving tactics.

(14) Hannover

It was our second visit to Hannover within a week. Once again our approach to the target was uneventful; we bombed on time, and then turned for home. No ack-ack – but sure enough we spotted a JU88 – once again we immediately corkscrewed and opened fire, so close that we couldn't have missed. Ken had improved his corkscrewing ability and his handling of the aircraft enabled us to scare off two German fighters in one week.

On our return we were diverted to Shipdam. F/S Ellis and crew were missing, we knew them well at Wymeswold, Castle Donnington and Marston Moor. Ron had actually done one trip with them. Gordon Buchannan (one of Ellis' crew) had flown with us when Ted was sick.

(15) Kiel Bay

A further test for our H_2S equipment: mine-laying ('gardening'). This was low-level dropping of mines in waters frequented by German patrol boats. H_2S proved very useful in locating small islands occupied by German ground forces. The flak was sporadic during the trip.

(16) Kassel

Kassel is an industrial city and during wartime had aircraft factories. This proved to be a very successful attack. The Pathfinder Force was very accurate with markers concentrated on the target, so there was no "creep back" by late arrivals over the area. A firestorm developed and a factory making flying bombs was heavily damaged. On leaving the target, we spotted a twin-engine aircraft (few Wellingtons were now on raids). Ted was uncertain; was it a JU88? We took evasive action (a corkscrew) and then opened fire. To our dismay, after taking evasive action we recognised it to be a Mosquito – what was it doing in such a position? We reported our error at debriefing and luckily no further action was taken!

(17) Mine-laying (gardening)

Low-level dropping of mines in different areas – uneventful trip.

(18) Hannover

This was our third trip to Hannover. It was a straight-forward trip with plenty of ack-ack. Tyre factories were destroyed, and chemical works were damaged, resulting in large clouds of black smoke.

(19) Kassel: Possibly 22/23 October 1943

Fires continued in Kassel from our previous raid. This trip resulted in further damage to industrial targets. On our return to base we discovered that shrapnel had made a large hole in the fuselage floor area: the elsan had been holed and the remains of the contents were on the floor near the entrance to the rear turret. A lucky escape for Ted!

Off on leave.

(20) Düsseldorf: 3 November 1943

Take off 5pm. We suddenly realised that we were the most senior crew at Pocklington – only one crew had finished their tour since August. We were two-thirds of the way through our tour and wondered how long our luck would last.

Briefing indicated our target was somewhere near Kassel – certainly the Ruhr area – so we knew what to expect. The damage to our aircraft, M-Mike, had been repaired – a new elsan! We were again back up to Pathfinder Force. Carrying special flares and mainly incendiaries the "backers up" selected from the main force were made up of experienced crews, the idea partly to discourage the inevitable "creep back" that occurred on heavily defended targets. One other change awaited us; a further portion of the rear turret perspex had been removed to aid vision.

After 7 days' leave we were all a bit nervous. Our WAAF driver was there as usual, she had developed a 'soft spot' for Harry Bartlett! However, the raid itself was routine and everything went smoothly.

(21) Cannes: 11 November 1943, take off at 6pm

The selection of Cannes as a target was a mystery; Cannes was a high-class holiday resort. Our target was the marshalling yards and the aim was to disorganise railway communications between France and Italy. This was one of many targets attacked that night.

We had virtually no opposition, just a few searchlights and ack-ack. We bombed on Pathfinder Force markers and made for home. However, Harry B received instructions to divert to Ford; Pocklington was obviously covered in low-lying mist. I was interested in this diversion to Ford (having spent nearly 18 months there), but it turned out to be a minor disaster. Having landed we waited for 20 minutes for transport (which only arrived when Ken and Harry contacted flying control). The debriefing team seemed uninterested in our report. We then had a hasty meal, by which time it was about 4 am. Our hut accommodation was anything but clean; Ted and I slept in our flying suits. We slept until late morning, had a quick lunch and took off (we wanted to get back to Pocklington as soon as possible).

Ken decided to fly at about 2000 feet. Ron had plotted a route taking us north between Guildford and Horsham. Arundel Castle was an imposing sight and we circled it twice then set course up the Arun valley, and on reaching Guildford we set course north for Yorkshire. Although the diversion to Ford was a minor disaster, the flight round Arundel Castle evoked memories of Nina. Little did I realise that as we flew round Arundel it was in this part of England I would spend most of my teaching career.

(22) Mannheim

Another Rhineland/Ruhr target. Plenty of ack-ack and searchlights but a quiet trip.

(23) Leverkusen

We had few losses but still a disappointing result due to thick cloud. We were approached by a JU88 (a Luftwaffe bomber) and opened fire, then found ourselves in convenient cloud. On our return there were cloudy conditions at Pocklington, and we had a near-collision with 77 Squadron.

(24) Berlin: late November or early December 1943

Again we had thick-cloud conditions but blind marking by Pathfinder Force was excellent. Considerable damage to housing and government buildings in Berlin resulted. On return I reported sick to MO with suspected frostbite.

(25) Frankfurt: possibly 20 December 1943

Late take-off; back up to Pathfinder Force. Usual flak and searchlights. There were a large number of night fighters in the target area but these caused no interference for us. Night fighters mingling with bomber stream over North Sea. On return Ted went to sick bay with frostbite.

(26) Stuttgart

Again we were back up to Pathfinder Force. The temperature in the rear turret meant that we were threatened with frostbite on every trip. Icicles formed on my oxygen mask and mike. During this trip there was some flak damage to rear turret.

(27) Berlin

Although there were cloudy conditions all the way to the target, there were clear skies over the city. Night fighters in large numbers and the target was obvious, so they were waiting for us. Several aircraft were shot down over the target, with heavy losses sustained by Halifaxes. Particularly effective searchlights on our return flight silhouetted us against the cloudy conditions. We arrived back absolutely frozen and were too tired to eat our meal, but enjoyed our rum!

(28) Leipzig

The last eight trips had been a nightmare, and this was another long trip (9 hours). The piece of perspex removed from the rear turret caused us to turn into blocks of ice and it was difficult to move out of the turret when we arrived back at base. The cold crept into your bones and your brain turned numb; worst of all you just wanted to go to sleep. Ken had given Doug the job (after the target) of calling us up to ensure that we didn't go to sleep. Ted and I had coped well by flying alternate trips in the rear turret.

Losses in 4 Group Halifaxes were again heavy, and we picked up a JU88 who attacked us from starboard – twice he made an approach, on both occasions we opened fire – finally a great bank of cloud enabled us to escape. Despite the distance and the cold, marking by Pathfinder Force was first-class. Large areas of the city were destroyed and many thousands made homeless.

(29) Skagerrak and Kattegat mine-laying

This operation was low-level, so we wouldn't be cold. We crossed the North Sea at low level to avoid radar, did two time-and-distance runs to check dropping areas, and then headed back to Pocklington.

Tour finished (24 December 1943)

Our last operation was something of an anti-climax but we were grateful for a quiet departure. We had done 18 trips on M-Mike and she would do at least 12 more before being shot down.

On many raids to German cities there was a heavy loss of civilian lives, and hundreds of thousands (no exaggeration) of civilians were made

homeless. In 1943 we had already been at war for four years – generally the news of progress was not good – and Bomber Command was our only means of retaliation. We suffered heavy casualties and received a great deal of criticism from people far removed from danger.

Only four crew finished their tour in the period June to December 1943 at Pocklington. The pattern was the same for sister squadrons 10 and 77 at Elvington and Melbourne. We lost ten crews in two nights at the beginning of 1944. Forty aircraft were missing from Peenemunde – that is, 280 aircrew – but their sacrifice bought time and delayed the V2 rocket attacks on London, and enabled the invasion to be launched in June 1944.

Memories of Pocklington and the Green Button Crew

Our meal of bacon and eggs before take-off, the "last supper" for many. You would look around the dining hall and wonder which crews would be missing in the morning.

The green light from the caravan at take-off point; the crowd waving goodbye to us.

The words "Bombs gone" from Doug – the aircraft immediately moved more responsively.

On the return journey, Ron's announcement "2 minutes to the Dutch coast" then a later announcement "I can see Flamborough Head".

The loyalty of the WAAF MT driver who took us out to M-Mike and brought us back to the crew room.

F/L Allen (Intelligence Officer); his advice and help with maps, and his helpful debriefing after a raid.

Off duty – did we spend much time together as a crew? Ron and Doug were older than the rest of us and frequently went to Betty's Bar in York. Ken and I sometimes went with them; Ken frequently went dancing. Ted enjoyed fishing. Harry Bartlett was friendly with several WAAFs. Proctor had an attractive girlfriend.

I was fortunate to have maintained my friendship with the Milner family who were now living in Brighouse near Leeds, and I frequently visited them. I received great kindness form Harold and Hilda; I owed them a great deal, and I am sure they assisted my survival. I spent a lot of time with Joan, and her parents certainly saw me as their future son-in-law when I completed my tour on 24 December. Now I could view my future with greater optimism, but I was reluctant to commit myself!

Normally I left Brighouse for York around 6.30 or 7 am. Joan always insisted in giving me breakfast before accompanying me to the station. One morning, less wide-awake than usual, she saw me to the train – the wrong train! That particular train was bound for Sheffield. Fortunately I realised my mistake and quickly changed trains, this time to one for York!

Shortly before the end of our tour, Ken was commissioned and Ron and Doug were recommended for commissions. After the loss of F/L Hogg I had not followed up my application for a commission, but the new Gunnery Leader wanted me to submit an application on my return from leave. News then came of our postings: Ken was posted to Boscombe Down (an experimental station in Wiltshire), Doug and Ron to HCU in Yorkshire, Harry Bartlett to 6 Group (Canadians), Ted and I to Moreton-in-Marsh (Gloucestershire). Proctor, we lost track of. Ron and Doug would have preferred Moreton whilst I would have been delighted to remain in Yorkshire (at Rufforth or Marston Moor).

As a complete crew we would never meet again. After the war Doug went to America, Ron to Birmingham, Ted to Huntingdon, Ken to Kingston-on-Thames and later to the Isle of Man. We met for reunions on several occasions. We lost track of Harry Bartlett and we never saw Harry Proctor again.

Ken received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) – decorations were a touchy subject. My DFC had to wait until 1945 – many operations later, plus my mention in dispatches (oak leaf).

The Green Button crew, c.1943. From left to right: Doug Cullen (Bomb Aimer), Harry Bartlett (Wireless Operator / Air Gunner), Robert Learmond (Air Gunner), Ron Pharo (Navigator), Edgar (Ted) Dutton (Air Gunner), Ken Mountney (Pilot). Absent is Harry Proctor (Flight Engineer).

Enstone

On arrival back at Pocklington, Ted, Harry B and I prepared for our departure. Harry took some "ribbing" – how would a Geordie communicate with a Canadian and vice versa? Ted was looking forward to our posting in the Cotswolds. I can't help thinking how fate plays a large part in our future life.

Moreton was a pleasant station similar to Pocklington, with an attractive town nearby. Unfortunately my stay there was brief; I was transferred to the satellite station Enstone. It was a very basic station, but the countryside was attractive, Woodstock and Oxford were not very far away, and the local pubs were very friendly establishments. Life was enjoyable.

The Gunnery section was made up of two officers and two non-commissioned officers. The other three members had all operated on Wellingtons in North Africa. The Officer in Charge had previously served at Moreton for two years. Nothing much had changed at the Operational Training Unit as far as gunnery was concerned – more could have been done to prepare the "young" gunners for what lay ahead. At Pocklington F/L Hogg had tried to remedy this defect, his replacement F/L Ward had followed his initiative.

Archie Rudd, Barry Payne and I worked well as a team. However, F/L Miller, the Gunnery Leader, showed little interest in the new crews, and seemed to lack the leadership to influence F/S Payne and P/O Rudd. F/O Bowman (an ex 102 Squadron pilot) was also on the staff, as a newly married officer living out with his young wife. He was reluctant to stir up a hornet's nest!

My duties were undemanding. I brushed up on my skills as a Wireless Operator and spent some time in the bombing section. In mid January 1944 I was detailed to accompany a crew on a cross-country, and one of the instructors was acting as a co-pilot. We hoped to practice fighter affiliation and corkscrews. Many of the Wellingtons could be classed as "geriatrics", so it was no surprise when one engine packed up, forcing us to make an emergency landing at North Luffenham. On my return to Enstone I went up with (now) F/L Bowman. At Pocklington he had

acquired the reputation as a frustrated fighter pilot. He built up speed on the runway – to make a climbing take-off on this aged Wellington – but nothing happened so he was forced to pull up the undercarriage to stop!! All sorts of questions were asked but luckily Bowman was a popular character.

I was offered a few days' leave, which I accepted. I had heard from Joan that she had enlisted in the WAAFs and was stationed in Blackpool. I called in to see her on my way north to Edinburgh and Stirling.

Luckily my old friend Jimmy Masson was on leave – he had finished his tour at Little Snoring (there is such a place) so we had a night out visiting several pubs in Falkirk. He left me outside the bus station. I then discovered the last bus to Stirling had already left, there was a later one but it only went part of the way. I joined the queue – not looking forward to a long walk – in a slightly inebriated state. A girl in the queue came to my rescue, she offered me a bed and then apologised for her choice of words. She explained she was a nurse in a hospital in Lambert, but she didn't at that stage tell me that it was a mental asylum! She fixed me up with a bed and a key to lock the room, and even brought me breakfast.

My parents lived on an estate several miles from the nearest town (Stirling). I had no friends there but I did have my issue of aircrew petrol so my father was able to make use of his car. I usually tried to visit my Auntie May and Uncle Ian – they treated me like a substitute son (my cousin Ian had died fairly recently). Their daughter Irene was a lively character. When I came to Edinburgh she cancelled any dates she had so we could spend time together. On my way south I called in to see Joan for one night and then back to Enstone the next day.

On my return to Enstone, Barry had become engaged to a WAAF in the parachute school. Also there was a new Commanding Officer, an ex-76 Squadron Halifax pilot. He made it obvious that training should be improved, stating that conditions over Germany were now very different to the early days of the war. In addition, as I've mentioned, many of the others were ex-Middle East, the signal officer Flt Lt Bowman and I were the exceptions.

One morning I was called before our new Commanding Officer. He asked quite a bit about my stay at 102 Squadron. What sort of tour did we have? He had been a Flight Commander under Leonard Cheshire. To my surprise he then asked me if I would be interested in talking to the newly arrived air gunners. Rather than a request, this was an order. He had quickly realised that I was very much the "new boy" at Enstone but I could be helpful to the trainee air gunners, especially because I had just finished a tour. I accepted his offer but commented that the Gunnery Leader might be displeased with me for accepting this offer without informing him first. His reply was fairly blunt – he would deal with that!

The next day I was asked to meet four air gunners who were about to finish their training. They had been instructed to attend a talk in the small intelligence unit. I was surprised when two full crews, plus the Commanding Officer, presented themselves for my impromptu talk. Obviously I can't remember what I said, but I'm sure I must have started by mentioning my meeting with Leonard Cheshire at Marston Moor and his advice of getting to know the aircraft in the dark by being blindfolded – advice which had proved invaluable to me. I related the incident when Harry Proctor had his mike switched on when he was injured by shrapnel – when Doug had started his bombing run – and the confusion that could have arisen (and very nearly did). I also talked about the upward firing cannon from ME110 (the new crews had never heard of the upward firing cannon) and JU88 (how they approached the "blind spot") and I was asked a few questions at the end of my talk. I felt "limp" after this experience. The Commanding Officer thanked me and was delighted by the attendance of the two full crews. He obviously thought the experiment a success; he would contact F/L Miller again and arrange for me to repeat these talks. (I didn't realise then that for the next 33 years I would be teaching!)

If these informal talks were to continue I realised I had to prepare my presentation carefully, with nothing complicated, just good common sense (for example, the right attitude in dealing with the ground crew, and ensuring that co- pilots adhered to crew discipline). If I continued on this task it was also necessary to keep up-to-date, especially now that Berlin was a frequent target. To these "untried" air gunners the removal of some perspex would be a shock to them!

I had now settled down to an enjoyable routine. It was easy to hitchhike to Stratford, where I found the canals fascinating. Oxford was equally interesting but spoilt with the presence of too many Americans. Barry, Archie and I visited most of the pubs in Charlbury, Woodstock and Hook Norton.

The idyllic way of life was soon to be shattered.

One of our Wellingtons had landed at Upper Heyford with engine trouble. One of the Enstone Wellingtons was due for an Air Test so it was arranged for us to fly over to Heyford with a "skeleton" crew, pick up the Wellington the next morning, and come back to Enstone. We had just become airborne when one engine lost power and the inevitable happened: we crashed. I had taken up position behind the two pilots, which was fortunate for me, and we scrambled out with the aid of an axe. Barry Payne was in the rear turret unconscious but two others had managed to get out of the aircraft, we dragged them free both badly injured but alive. Two were still in the aircraft we believed unconscious.

The petrol tanks had been ruptured and the smell of the 100 octane fuel was very strong. Despite the efforts of the fire brigade which had arrived, fire broke out. At that stage, as far as I can remember, our first task was to get Barry out of the rear turret which had been dislodged (usually this one of the safest spots in the aircraft in a crash of this nature). Barry's injuries were serious. He was taken by ambulance to Oxford (The Radcliffe Royal Infirmary) and later diagnosed with serious head, spinal and leg injuries. Back at Enstone, Janet Wright (Barry's fiancée) was full of questions but I was unable to reassure her on Barry's chances of recovery.

I visited to the Medical Officer, who gave me a clean bill of health. Unfortunately I couldn't forget what happened – I still think of it today!

The Medical Officer arranged a visit to the hospital. Janet insisted on coming with me; nothing I said could discourage her. That visit was a nightmare. All the patients had been involved in accidents. Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders and 8th Air Force; all were serious cases, and many never to walk again or were very disfigured. Wives and girlfriends all reacted differently, some were very distressed, unable to face the future with a cripple as a husband.

Barry didn't suffer for long, he only lived for a few days. Another of my close friends had gone!

I was given leave. The station adjutant arranged an interview with the Commanding Officer before I went on leave. They were both very sympathetic and understanding about my reluctance to continue flying on Wellingtons. I enjoyed the work I did with the new crews but not fighter affiliation on Wellingtons. Could I go back to a squadron? I was fortunate to meet these two officers, and with their best wishes I went on leave. What a contrast these two officers from Enstone were to ones I had met earlier in my service.

I really didn't enjoy that leave. I never mentioned the crash to my parents, nor to Joan, and I kept quiet about my plans for a transfer to a squadron in 5 Group. Transfer to a Bomber Squadron was usually a temporary one.

With the knowledge that I would soon be back on a squadron, I had the feeling that perhaps I had used up my "quota of luck". I wondered whether I should continue to subject a girl, and her parents, to further anxiety and I felt I could not make any firm commitment. The memory of the crash at Enstone and my lack of confidence in the future made me decide to break with Joan. I had first met her in November 1942; did she hope for greater commitment when I finished my tour at Pocklington? I had treated her and her parents badly, but somehow the affection (or love) had cooled. Nevertheless, I felt ashamed of my behaviour.

Return to a squadron

The time for the long hoped for invasion was fast approaching. Heavy casualties were expected in Bomber Command. I was informed that I was going to 617 Squadron at Woodhall Spa near Boston. I knew that going there was no soft option.

Woodhall Spa was a very different station. The town/village was completely different to any other part of Lincolnshire.

It was the custom to be welcomed by the Commanding Officer, who was none other than Leonard Cheshire, an ex-member of 102 Squadron. I now began to understand how the "old boys" network functioned. Before Marston Moor, where I first met him, he had been C.O. of 76 Squadron. The C.O. at Enstone had been one of his Flight Commanders. The previous C.O. of 617 Squadron (before Cheshire) had been Wing Commander Holden – ex C.O. of 102 Squadron. Sadly, Holden was shot down on his first operation with 617 Squadron. The first C.O. of 617 Squadron was Guy Gibson and his deputy on the Dams Raid had been Dinghy Young ex 102. McCarthy was another ex-member of 102. My astonishment increased when Cheshire mentioned Marston Moor - this information had been passed on from Enstone.

C.O. Cheshire asked me a few questions. One I thought was a trick question: what is the purpose of your trip? I thought for a second or two; to come back safely was one answer. However, I answered: "if you're going all that way across Germany, make sure the bombs hit the target!"

After the interview with Cheshire, I was placed in a pool of gunners and encouraged to continue as a substitute wireless operator. I flew with several different crews, mainly as mid-upper or front gunner. Not only was there great experience and talent on this squadron but a completely professional attitude. Accurate bombing was the number one priority. The term 'creep-back' was never mentioned!

The invasion and Saumur (June 1944)

For several weeks before the long-promised invasion, we practised bombing. From 10,000 to 20,000 feet the standard of accuracy was now

within 50 yards. Day after day we did a great deal of precision flying, constant airspeed and constant orbiting (down to the last second), and no deviation in navigation. Only Cheshire, Martin and David Shannon knew our duties.

On 4th June we were summoned to the briefing room. We were informed that we would be dropping special *window*. We couldn't believe our ears! The top-squadron of Bomber Command dropping aluminium foil! This was to be performed at a constant speed and regular orbiting course; split-second timing was essential and we had to break away before dawn.

On 5th June we were confined to camp; no phone calls were permitted and you couldn't even post a letter! The first wave of aircraft took off at 11pm, the second at 3 am. About 20 Lancasters took part in this operation. Each aircraft consisted of a 12 man crew, including an extra pilot, navigator, wireless operator/air gunner, rear upper gunner, and wireless operator. Three other crew members dropped *window* at 4 second intervals.

The exercise went off smoothly. We returned to Woodhall to learn that the invasion had started. Troops had landed about 150 miles to the west of our diversion operation. Our exercise was a spoof-attack to give the impression of a large invasion force approaching the French coast, under cover of *window*. Just before the second wave altered course for home, the German coastal batteries opened up, and E-boats came out to attack the phantom armada near Dieppe.

Later that morning (6th June) Cheshire and Martin stopped a truck with boilers for the cookhouse, which actually turned out to be tallboys (12,000 lb bombs) to be used 48 hours later at Saumur (France). Cheshire and Martin were planning a raid on Saumur tunnel – tallboys were the weapons. This was the first time the armourers had installed tallboys in the aircraft.

Just after midnight (8 June) Cheshire launched the attack. His Mosquito set flares by dive-bombing the markers dropped at the tunnel mouth. The Lancasters waited 10,000 feet above, ready to drop the first earthquake bombs. The accuracy of these bomb aimers was unbelievable – all the bombs except one struck the target – a radius of about 80 to 90 yards. The one that landed outside the target landed in a cemetery (no

casualty!). The bomb that created the greatest damage landed outside the tunnel entrance and somehow exploded inside the hill and blew the entire hill up! It took the "bomb damage" squad several weeks to clear the debris. The bomb squad cleaners were all foreign workers (Dutch, French, Poles, and Belgians); when they finished the Canadians arrived. Some of the Panzer tanks were trapped in the tunnel. They were delayed sufficiently to reduce the threat to the invading armies.

617 Squadron continued to attack the rocket sites in the Pas-de-Calais – the VI and the V Boat pens at Lorient and Brest. Large numbers of E-boats were destroyed at Le Havre. The flights were short and we didn't spend much time over enemy territory. Bill Reid's (VC) Lancaster was struck by a bomb from another Lancaster. Bill survived, becoming a prisoner. Cheshire and Martin continued to mark the targets at low level by using the Mustang or Mosquito as a dive bomber. As well as marking the targets, Cheshire and Martin also acted as Master Bombers with assistance from Shannon and Munro. Near the end of July came the news that they were all off operations. The new C.O. was Willie Tait.

Losses were few. However, new crews continued to arrive, so the "pool" of spare Air Gunners, Navigators, and Bomb Aimers were posted back to their previous units. I was one to depart Woodhall after operations – I did not fire my guns once!

195 Squadron & the last days of war

I had a generous leave period then went back to Moreton-in-Marsh unsure of what I would be doing. Ted Dutton had left. He had gone back for a second tour on Fortresses in 100 Group. This was a special force engaged in disrupting Luftwaffe communications.

Now living in the Officers Mess at Moreton, I was approached one day by F/L "Baz" Forster, who had permission to go back on Operations. He was an interesting character; before the war he had been a racing driver at Brooklands. He used his influence to obtain more training for me as a Wireless Operator. I had now flown in the front, rear and mid-upper turrets and could function as a reliable Wireless Operator. Baz had also recruited his navigator Ron Bunting, who came from Sheffield. There was a spare bed in Ron's room, which I moved into. Thus started a valued friendship.

Baz was a popular figure at Moreton – recruiting a Bomb Aimer and a Wireless Operator was not a problem. Once again they were all friendly characters. We needed another Air Gunner. Joe Dickenson was ex-Pathfinder Force and didn't suffer fools gladly. Baz gave him the post of rear gunner; this left me free to be a substitute wireless operator or front or mid-upper gunner. We were all posted to 3 Group Conversion Unit, where we picked up our Flight Engineer, a pleasant and friendly Cockney on his first tour.

The Heavy Unit Conversion course went smoothly. I think it was probably a shortened course – Circuits and Bumps – some cross-countries, day and night. We then moved to another station, Feltwell (Norfolk), to train as a G-H[4] crew – before moving to 115 Squadron – again. This would be a temporary move. At 115 Squadron we practiced

[4] G-H was a British blind-bombing device that used signals transmitted from ground stations. It was a very sophisticated system to be used in daylight when blind-bombing in cloud. We had to maintain a constant speed and height to ensure the bomb sight functioned properly. Sixty aircraft in 3 Group were equipped with G-H, and virtually all our bombing instructions came from England (Orfordness and Kent). It was particularly similar to German beam radar.

formation flying. About four crews in this squadron were G-H trained. Now that Ron Bunting and Alan Dickenson were G-H trained, Harry Myles had also been introduced to the equipment. We made practical use of this new navigational aid, generally flying in formation.

We were virtually the first crew on 195 Squadron. This First World War Squadron was formed from C Flight of 115 Squadron at Witchford near Ely. Around this same time (July 1944) I was granted a commission and therefore became Flying Officer.

We started operations[5] in late September 1944 with a successful attack on Solingen (1). We lost two aircraft that day. This was followed by a successful attack on Kaiserslautern (2) on 27/28 September 1944 (over a third of the town was destroyed) and then Essen (3). We were now engaged in the second Battle of the Ruhr.

Two near-disasters

Our next trip ended up in trouble. On our run into the target over Bonn (4) we were badly damaged by ack-ack fire. We lost two engines and a third was overheating. We managed to get within a short distance of the English coast before ditching in the wash – at low tide some areas were large sandbanks. It was not very comfortable sitting in a dinghy in wet clothes, knowing that the area was used by 5 and 3 Groups for bombing practice! Fortunately we had sent out a standard distress signal.

We had a short spell of leave. On our return to Wratting Common (West Wickham), our new base, Saarbrucken (5) was our next target. Again ack-ack was lethal and we suffered damage losing an engine. Tom was worried and he feathered a second engine. Now on two engines, we took a chance and made for the nearest French border, losing height all the way. At about 5000 feet German ack-ack opened up, so Myles fired off the German colours of the day (or night). More ack-ack fire resulted, this time from the Americans. As we were still losing height, Baz gave the order to bale out. We had plenty of time to leave the aircraft. I can only

[5] Numbers in brackets following place names refer to the estimated operation number carried out by this crew in 195 Squadron.

guess how difficult it must have been to escape if the aircraft was in a steep dive – our chance of survival would have been much reduced. We reached the ground safely uncertain of where we were. Fortunately it was friendly territory, the American troops were in combat gear. We were taken to an Air Force Unit for debriefing, then a quick flight to England on a DC3. No leave this time on our escape! Back to more formation flying.

Life at Wratting Common

Baz Forster had been promoted – now he was senior Flight Commander with the rank of Squadron Leader. Ron Bunting made Deputy Navigation Leader with a rank of Flight Lieutenant, and I became Gunnery Leader. Joe Dickenson declined the offer.

This crew was a friendly bunch – Baz and Joe had cars so we did not need to hitch lifts or travel in service transport. We frequently went out together, to dances at the City Hall. Myles and Alan Dickenson were, according to Ron, the Casanovas of our crew. Ron and I were frequently amused by Alan's activities with the fair sex. Myles (a likeable character) was a rival to Alan; the difference being: Myles was married! Now that Baz was deputy C.O. of the squadron he had numerous lady friends. Ron and I enjoyed the dances at the City Hall and Ron did in fact meet a delightful girl there and he became very fond of her.

I often discussed with Ron my relationships with Nina and Joan. Like me he had no job to go back to after the war. He had been "the office boy" so he had nothing to offer any girl – especially this lass he had met in Cambridge. Ron's mother was a widow living in a small council house in the outskirts of Sheffield. He had a girlfriend there who he had known from his primary school days.

I often thought about Nina and how I had treated her when I was stationed at Sullom Voe in the Shetlands – my lack of thought for her feelings. I had loved her. Unbeknown to me, Ron had discovered Nina's address and had written to her. A letter came back from Nina – I can't remember if it was sent to Ron or to me – the news it contained deflated my ego... She was engaged to a Canadian!

Crew of 195 Squadron c. 1944. Numbered crew are (1) Sergeant Herbert, (2) Meyer (Wireless Operator), (3) 'Floss', (4) 'Baz' Forster, (5) Ron Bunting (Navigator), (6) Alan Dickenson (Bomb Aimer), (8) Joe Dickenson (Air Gunner). Third from right is Robert Learmond. Unnumbered men are ground crew.

Operations of late 1944 and early 1945

All this took place against a background of frequent operations. The first of these was Homburg (6), where the target was synthetic oil production. After the attack on Homburg, all production of synthetic oil stopped. Further raids took place in rapid succession: Duisburg (7), Hagen (8), Witten (9), and Bonn (10) (returned early – port engine unserviceable). Then, just as we thought we might get some leave, the Germans launched the Ardennes offensive. The 8th Air Force (the Americans) was grounded, unable to operate because of fog and snow, and so 150 Lancasters were sent to Trier (11), the nearest town to the front. Our target was troop concentrations. Next operation was to Bonn (12) (this time we reached the target), then St Vith (13 & 14) twice, a vital transport junction for the advancing German army. This was followed by operations to Cologne (15), Castrop-Rauxel (16), Krefeld (17), Saarbrucken (18), and Mönchengladbach (19). Under the onslaught the German army ran out of fuel: the crisis was over.

On many of these operations flown by 3 Group the new G-H equipment gave us great accuracy, even if attacking above the clouds. Wratting Common and nearby airfields of 3 Group were responsible for these raids. We were indebted to the ground crews of all trades who cleared the runways.

Our losses were small – we never saw a German fighter aircraft – only Cologne (20), Krefeld (21), Duisburg (23) had any flak. The weather was bitterly cold, but we now had 'electric suits' so the rear gunners did not suffer the cold so much. For most of this tour I had occupied the mid-upper turret or the front turret. On all the daylights so far we had rarely seen the Luftwaffe; we were well protected by Spitfires or Mustangs. However, the German ME262 (jet) occasionally attacked. On quite a number of those trips we were Group Formation Leaders for 3 Group. It was quite an unforgettable experience leading the formation with perhaps 150 aircraft behind us.

There was still no news about getting some leave. Baz promised us that if there was a chance to slip in a 48 hour pass he would do so. I must have written to Nina about the problem of our delayed leave, although I didn't know if she was still engaged to the Canadian!

Our next target was Dortmund (23) although this time there was very little flak – no night fighters. On our return Baz gave us a travel warrant and a few days' leave. He remained at Wratting Common in charge of the squadron. I think it must have been on this leave that I managed to meet Nina (more later on meeting Nina).

On our return we attended briefing for the most controversial raid of the war: Dresden (24) (13/14 February 1945). Harris and Bomber Command have been blamed for this raid, although we'll never discover the truth. Some of the research today lays the blame on Churchill, some on Roosevelt (a very sick man), and Stalin got what he wanted. The 8th Air Force (Americans) said they were interested in precision bombing – they hit a target 40 miles away that day – when their destination was Dresden. If Harris, Churchill and Roosevelt were to blame – think of the strain they had suffered over the previous 6 years. At that time we were too scared to worry about the German civilians. If we were over the Ruhr, Hannover or Berlin the Luftwaffe tried so hard to knock us out of the sky.

It was a long cold trip to Dresden, 9 hours to control your bladder!

Chemnitz (25) was our next target, another nine hour trip. The weather unpleasant and there was poor visibility over the target. Blind-bombing and marking by Pathfinder Force – I shared duties with Harry Myles as wireless operator and there was no opposition. Following this Baz promised us leave early in March.

Our next operations were: Wesel (26) (an operation by 3 Group to support the British Army in the crossing of the Rhine); Gelsenkirchen (27) (a much easier trip than 1943, no searchlights or flak); Cologne (28) (yet again, and we were Group Formation leaders); Wanneikel (29) (Group Formation leaders); Wesel (30) (second attack, again as British Army support); and Helgoland (31) (final operation of the war).

On 8 May 1945 the Germans surrendered unconditionally, and the war in Europe ended.

Peacetime operations

The Manna Operation (29 April – 8 May 1945)

Before the war finished a temporary truce was agreed with the Germans. The Dutch (who were foremost in their resistance to the Germans) were starving, and to survive they were reduced to eating bulbs.

For the operation we were selected to lead 3 Group, carrying supplies of flour, potatoes, vegetables and even meat. It was an unforgettable experience to fly over German AA gun emplacements with their guns covered. The large crowd of Dutch people formed the words 'thank you'.

Years later we met a Dutch family in Dronten (which was on reclaimed land). They told us they could still remember the smell of bread baking. The wife said her father spent three years clearing bomb damage created by the RAF throughout Germany.

Return of Prisoners of War

Another pleasant task we enjoyed was air-lifting British POWs from Brussels airport. We arrived in Brussels at about 4pm and were met by members of the Belgian Resistance, then taken out for the evening. We collected our POWs the next day and flew them back to England (RAF Mildenhall, in Norfolk). For some of our passengers it was the first time they had been airborne.This was followed by Operation Baedeker, a low-level tour of the Ruhr with a skeleton crew and ground crew taken as passengers. We also included at least four WAAFs on one of these trips. We flew over West Kappel, Mönchengladbach, Cologne, Solingen, Wuppertal, Hamm, Dortmund, Wanneikel, Gelsenkirchen, Essen, Duisberg, Wesel, Rotterdam.

Around this time, Robert was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Ron Bunting

Ron and I became great friends during our six months with 195 Squadron. We visited Kings College Chapel on two occasions. We had hoped to attend Kings College at Christmas but that was a hectic period (due to the German Ardennes offensive). We did receive invitations to two of the college dances – as I've mentioned earlier we frequently went to the City Hall dances – the dance bands there were very good.

When the war finished Ron flew off to India. I went north to Hull, expecting to be posted to the Far East. However, the Atom Bomb was dropped and the Japanese surrendered.

Ron was transferred to Transport Command. He spent his time flying to RAF bases in India and Ceylon before returning to England to be demobbed, and he married his girlfriend. He had applied for a Teacher Training Course and was accepted; but unfortunately we lost touch with one another. However, nearly twelve years after the war finished he contacted me in Horsham. By chance, he had been reading a copy of The Times Educational Supplement and saw my name as a newly appointed Headmaster at Southwater in Sussex. He cycled up from Brighton to meet us again. Unfortunately his marriage was a dismal failure and they were on the point of a broken marriage when Ron was diagnosed with cancer. We tried to visit him several times but his wife was lacking in friendliness (we called at his house but she would not let us see him). Ron, for his part being such a sensitive individual, was reluctant to admit to the failure of his marriage.

We regret we didn't see more of Ron. Like us he had a family and very little money, because teachers' salaries were poor. I was particularly impressed with the number of ex-pupils attending his funeral. Of my RAF comrades who survived the war, he was my closest friend. It was Ron who brought Nina and I back together.

AIRMAN AWARDED D.F.C.

FLYING OFFICER ROBERT LEARMOND, SAUCHIEBURN.

Twenty-three-year-old Flying Officer Robert Learmond, R.A.F.V.R., son of Mr and Mrs George Learmond, Old Sauchie, Sauchieburn, has been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Enlisting in September, 1940, Flying Officer Learmond was commissioned in July last year. Prior to joining up he was employed by Messrs Baillie Clifford, Edinburgh, after finishing his education at the Heriot Watt College, Edinburgh.

He has taken part in many operations over enemy and enemy-occupied territory. Some of the places visited include such notorious targets as Cologne, Bremen, Hamburg, and Essen.

During the closing stages of the war in Europe, he was engaged in transporting food to Holland, and later in bringing home British prisoners of war from the camps liberated.

Flying Officer Learmond, who is the wearer of the 1939-43 Star, has already had his service officially recognised, when he was mentioned in despatches in 1943, and is entitled to wear the Gold Leaf emblem.

A keen athlete, he was a member of Edinburgh Northern Harriers and the 51st Company of the Boys' Brigade (Edinburgh).

Twenty-three years of age, he was born in Edinburgh and was educated at Flora Stevenson's School and the Heriot-Watt College, Edinburgh. Before joining the R.A.F.V.R. in September, 1940, he worked in the foreign investments department of Messrs Baillie & Gifford, Edinburgh.

Flying-Officer Learmond was commissioned in July last year. He also holds the 1939-43 Star, and was mentioned in despatches, which entitles him to wear the oak leaf emblem. Operational flights have taken him over practically all the enemy-occupied countries in Europe, and some of the bigger targets including Cologne, Berlin, Hamburg and Milan, and he has also engaged in mine-laying work. More pleasant tasks recently were the conveying of food to Holland and the transport to Britain of prisoners repatriated from Germany. Flying-Officer Learmond was a gunner and also acted as spare bomb aimer.

The award of the D.F.C. has been made to him following numerous operations against the enemy, in the course of which he invariably displayed the utmost courage, fortitude and devotion to duty.

Article from the Edinburgh Evening News, c. May 1945