

JACK BROMFIELD'S WAR

The transcript below records conversations between Jack and Steve Bond in 2005/7/9. Much of the story appears, with those of many other airmen, in their own words in Steve's book "Heroes All". In this Steve provides an invaluable insight into the thoughts and feelings of combatants of six nations in WW2.



I am most grateful to Steve Bond for allowing us to print this transcript and to Ruth Bromfield for agreeing this. To help the flow I have put Steve's questions etc in italics; the rest is Jack's own story. Jack died on 13 September 2012.

ANDY CORNWELL

Chapter 1: Joining, Training.

"I volunteered for aircrew. If you ask my sister, she'll tell you I did it out of spite. (Laughter) 'Cause I always wanted to be a locomotive man, always, never thought of anything else. My Dad wouldn't let me."

"He said the filth, the hours; you go cleaner – fireman – driver – finish. If you go into the traffic department, which I did eventually, as a train reporting boy, you can go signalman, right up through the classes, up to signalman's inspector, it's endless. But I wasn't happy. I used to go out and see all lads of my age, on the way to London with a shovel in their hand, and I used to think, you know, if it hadn't have been for my old man, I would have been there with them. But that's beside the point."

"So without telling him, I hived myself away to Northampton and volunteered, for aircrew duties. And it was strange; because I'd only been back about two weeks and an envelope come to go to Bedford, for a medical. So I went to there, presented myself to this guy with, I think he was a Major, and he didn't even look up! He just, 'Bromfield?', 'Yes sir'. And I thought, is he going to look, or is he not bothered? And he said, 'Any preferences for Regiment young man?' And I said, 'Yes sir, Royal Air Force.' And then he looked up, and there I am, a Sergeant in the Air Training Corps, (laughter) which didn't go down to well; he thought I'd been wasting his time I suppose."

"Anyhow, I still went through the medical, and they passed me A1. Not long after that, I had another one come to go to Cardington, but it said 'Be prepared to stay for three days and two nights'. I thought, well Mr Collins the Station Master, is not going to be best pleased now is he. So I hived myself away to Cardington."

"I presume your Dad knows about it by now?"

"Oh he knew about it now, and he wasn't talking. There was no conversation at all. It was a maddening, a bit fraught, and Mum was in the middle you see. Mum was the ping-pong ball, because it was, 'Tell him, I want...' It got a bit naughty. But the job was done, there was nothing he could do about it then, I'd been accepted and that was it. The Station Master wasn't pleased, because he explained that I'd chucked in a reserved occupation. Still you do what you want to do, don't you? What you want to do, not what other people want you to do. But my old Dad, there was one thing he always said to me, 'Accept people for what they are, don't try and make them what you want them.' Which I thought was sound advice in later life."

"Eventually, that buff envelope came through the door, from King George, and away I went to the Aircrew Receiving (Reception) Centre at St. John's Wood. And I lived in a block of flats in Grove Court, in Hall Road; I was there for about two and a half weeks. You know where The Beatles made their records?"

"Abbey Road, yes."

"In Abbey Road Studios. The other side, if you ever go down there, is Abbey Lodge, which is a big block of flats; that was the Medical Centre. So you went in one end, with everything off except your singlet and your underpants, with your hands on your hips, and all your other clothes draped over your arm, and every time you went through a doorway, somebody had you with a syringe. (Laughter) There were blokes passing out; the bigger they were, the more they seemed to keel over. Regents Park, which it backed on to, looked like a battlefield, all these bodies lying all over."

"We had about two and a half weeks there, and then we were posted to Bridgenorth, No.19 ITW, which was strict. There was no doubt about that, the discipline was tight. There we did a couple of hours square-bashing a day, a couple of hours Morse a day, how to dig a latrine, everything was done the way the Royal Air Force wanted it done."

"And what made me laugh, was my clothing card, because I no longer owned a pair of boots. I had 'boots, ankle, leather, black, left, one; boots, ankle, leather, black, right, one.' 'Vests, Airtex.' Let's start at the bottom; we had four pairs of socks, two pairs of boots, three pairs of underpants, three vests as they called them, or singlets, three shirts and six collars, a pullover. We had two dress uniforms then, not battledress, didn't have a battledress. 'Masks, gas.' (Laughter) And a big kit bag; and the one that made us laugh was 'Coats, over.' (Laughter) I couldn't believe it really. I thought well, you know, is this the Royal Air Force that we were cheering when they were winning the Battle of Britain, you know."

"I did nine weeks there, and some way or other there I became Senior Man; which meant I fell 'em in in the mornings, before the drill pig got to you. It was a nice place to be, but it was a strange town. My best mate, Bill Birkby from Barrow, we went down to the Sally Army in Bridgnorth, you know, game of snooker, or game of darts. And we picked up with two girls. So we said about the dance that was advertised on Saturday night. When it came to Saturday night and we were together, they wouldn't speak to one another, because one came from high town and the other came from low town, and they didn't communicate apparently. Well we couldn't stop laughing, it was really funny; but the people in Bridgenorth were lovely, you know, they really were."

"Nine weeks, passed out, and then we were posted to No.2 Radio School at Yatesbury, for 26 weeks, of which you did sort of half, and then a week's leave, and then the other half. The first half was sometimes four hours Morse a day. And it was beginning to get to some, you could see them at breakfast in the morning, the pint mug in this hand, knife, fork and spoon in this hand, rattling Morse on the mug, you know. Fortunately, I seemed to have a bent for Morse Code you know, I picked it up. I suppose it was working in the telegraph office on Bletchley station, which ran on a kind of Morse."

"At the end of the first session, the first half of the course, came home on a week's leave, and Dad took me out for a pint. It seemed to have settled a little bit, you know. And I had a lovely week's leave, nice weather, and I went back. First thing we do when we get back – flying kit! Go and get dressed up, woo-hoo! Suits, Kapok; Suits, Sidcot; (laughter) masks, oxygen; all the kit, and these beautiful boots. And then among all these other things, a Browning gun, still a fair bit of square-bashing, and discipline, RAF Law, 'cause you had to pass out on everything, you know; you couldn't get away with it. And the next thing we know, we're booked to fly. What did we fly in? Dominies."

"The funny part about that was, we were sort of real novices as far as aeroplanes went. But these things had got a wooden propeller on one of the inboard struts, which made the power, so until you were tail up and hammering down the grass, you hadn't got any power! It worked once you were airborne, and suppose there were maybe five students and an instructor, and the driver of course. And you had about 20 minutes on the set, which was on a card and you just contacted those VF stations. Just for practice, that's all it was."

"At the end of 26 weeks, if I remember right, we'd lost four of the original 30, 'cause there were 30 in a billet in those days. We'd lost four, because at the end of every month, you had an exam. And an intake came in every two weeks. At the end of the first month you had an exam; if you didn't pass, you were FT – Further Training. Now you could manage two FTs before you were scrubbed, and then of course you had the choice – ground crew or straight air gunner."

"Then we were posted – oh, I had indefinite leave, and waiting a telegram. When the telegram and everything came, I was posted to No.8 Bombing and Gunnery School, which was 50 miles north of Inverness. But I didn't know where Evanton was, I didn't have a clue, and I thought the best place I can go is the telegraph office. They had a register of every station in England. So I went, and that's where I found it was beyond Inverness."

"So then I thought well, this is going to be a miserable journey. I had to go from Bletchley to Crewe, Crewe to Glasgow, and then Glasgow to Perth and Inverness, and then change again to go to Evanton. Can you imagine what it was like? So I trolled up to the station."

"How much warning did you have when the telegram came?"

"About four days. I'd got to be there at 23:59 hours on such and such a date. I went up to the station, found out where Evanton was, and then I had a brainstorm. I thought, I'll go and see Mr Collins, the Station Master, and tell him, you know, would it be possible to travel on the down Inverness, which left Euston at 7.40 in the evening, and left Bletchley at 8.40? And it went all the way through. And he said 'You'll never get on there my boy, because all the sleeping berths will be full of naval officers, and all the compartments will be full of matelotes going to Scapa Flow.' So I said, 'Well, what about the guard's van?' 'Ooh, no, no', so I said 'Well, can't we write to somebody?' And he said 'Oh, all right'. So he rang the passenger manager's office at Euston, and they sent me a letter to say that I could travel on the down Inverness, in the guard's van if necessary."

"Matelotes, there were matelotes everywhere; asleep in the toilet, on the racks, under the seats, on the seats. I think there was enough for four battleships in there, oh dear o dear. (Laughter) Of course, most of them had been on the sauce, hadn't they, in Euston and wherever they were. And that was twenty to eight when we left Bletchley, in the evening, and it was eight o'clock in the morning when we got to Inverness. Of course, I was the only one to de-train wasn't I; I got off, nobody else got off. But then with the matelotes, they just put another engine on and off they went, right up to wherever they went, Wick or Thurso, I don't know where they went; just up into the wilderness. They could have gone, I suppose, up to Invergordon, which was a naval base wasn't it?"

"The beauty of it was, that the railway ran almost through the camp. And so I just put me kitbags over me shoulder and walked off down. Came to the guardroom; 'Bromfield', and I was the first. Eventually Paddy Marsden arrived, and my particular mate Billy Birkby, from Barrow, and they'd been training nearly as long as I had, because they'd kept changing. I went from Bletchley to Inverness in one hit; it was good really."

"We did eight weeks there. Quite a lot of flying, and what we would do, three of you would go up with an instructor, in an Avro Anson, with a Blenheim turret. Now, I don't know if you've ever seen a Blenheim turret in operation, but it only has 45 degrees of traverse from dead astern. And then you've got two foot pedals, and you press the pedal and the gun goes round and your head goes round with it. I suppose it gives you another five degrees of traverse."

"But the comical thing was when you got in, there was only a square hole in the bulkhead of the Annie. And you had like a motorbike seat you sat on, with two handles. If you slipped and grabbed it, this seat went up and pinned you to the top of the hole. (Laughter) Because the

seat went up and down with the traverse, you see, as the guns went up, you went down. You only had one gun, and what we would do is each have their own belt of ammunition, the three of you; and one would be blue dye on the tip, red dye or green dye. So what you would do is to load your belt in your ammunition, some were about 250 / 300 rounds. Anyhow, they fired about 20 a second, so you didn't have much firing time, and it was good really, because the guns were clapped out, I think the bullet went like this up the barrel, (indicates an erratic course) I don't think it went straight (laughter). And when your hits went through the drogue, it would leave this coloured dye, so they could tell which of you had hit, and how many."

"As we progressed, it was strange. Because they would utilise us, because there were only about half a dozen of us on the course, the rest were AC Plonks straight from ITW, you know, their course was so short. So they go to ITW and then straight to Air Gunnery School. And they were using us who had done a few hours by then, as a sort of overseer, you couldn't call us instructors, 'cause we didn't know any more really than the Air Gunners. And I do remember one trip, I went with two lads who were Air Gunners, and we went through the whole drill before we got in the aircraft, with the instructor. And then we were going to go with three of them and me; then when they had fired, I would do mine."

"We went through the whole drill. No.1 stoppage; the cocking stud right at the front of the slot, take your cocking toggle out of your flying boot, cock, and fire again. No.2 stoppage; stud would stop half way back; same process, cocking toggle, cock and fire again. No.3 stoppage, where the breach block is right at the back, you can't cock it. So what you do, is to get your cocking toggle and jam it under the rear sear, which is like a freewheel pawl, and it will go forward and you start all over again. And the young lad that went in last had a No.3 stoppage. So, instead of jamming his cocking toggle under the rear sear, he lifted the breach cover. So the gun went forward and fired and he had a black face. Frightened the life out of the poor lad."

"When we got on the ground, of course the pilot was a bit miffed with this explosion in the turret. The instructor said to him, 'We went through with you right at the beginning, if you weren't certain, why didn't you ask?' He said to me, 'What would you have done?' I said 'Rear sear up the back, release it and it would fire.' Anyhow, I think the whole course passed out with more or less flying colours. Yes, the whole course. But that was where me and the other guys changed, because we took our S brevet down and put an Air Gunner brevet up you see. Because we were told when we were at Yatesbury, there would be no more WOp/AGs. They were just going to be Air Signallers. And if you work it out how many gunners they needed on a Wimpy or a Hampden, there you've got two. And on a Lanc or a Hali in any case, or a Stirling."

"Then we were posted, the NCOs on the course, the WOps, to Madley, down near Hereford. (No.4 Signals School) And we had four weeks, because we'd been trained for speech radio on the TR.9, which was phased out, and the 1196 was in. So we did a quick refresher course on the 1196, and then we were posted to Bishop's Court in Northern Ireland." (No.7 [Observers] Advanced Flying Unit)

"You got about didn't you!"

"Oh dear oh dear! Well, we went to Hereford Station, and there in the station is a coach in LMS colours, on the LMS tracks, Great Western you see. It was like that in those days. And we hooked onto the back of this express, and I remember we trolled all the way up through the Welsh borders to Crewe. At Crewe they unhooked this coach and put it on the back of the Stranraer boat-train. So then we get there, tell you what we sailed on, the 'Princess Victoria'. She went down just after the war in the North Channel, when the rear door for the ferry smashed in in high seas. Went down between Stranraer and Larne. I can remember reading it in the paper and thinking, 'Christ, I went on that boat.'"

"That was something else, in Northern Ireland. All they sold in the Sergeant's Mess, was Guinness, Irish whisky, or milk, they didn't sell any beer. So we found out there was a guy down the road who had his front parlour as a bar; he sold beer. So we went down and we got quite friendly with this guy and we used to have the diddly-da music every night you know, with the Irish dancing, and oh dear. It was probably the funniest course I ever did, because outside schooling hours was fine. You know, if you went down to see Shaun in this pub it was hilarious. Everybody used to turn up, and it was surprising how many could sing, how many could play an instrument. They were such lovely people, they really were, I had the time of my life in Northern Ireland."

"But flying was a bit hairy. Because if the pilot was a bit browned off, and you were coming down the east coast of Northern Ireland in the old Annie, instead of a gentle turn, suddenly you'd do one like this. (Indicates very steep turn) And he said, 'We were nearly over the Free State border then.' Because it was not far from...if you look at...you won't find Bishop's Court, you'll find Ardglass if you look on the map, and then look at the Mountains of Mourne, which you've got to miss in any case, and then it was the Free State."

"So what was the course then? You've done your wireless at Yatesbury, and then the update at Madley, and you've done the gunnery at Evanton."

"This was Advanced Flying Unit, where you were on your tod. There was a pilot, and an instructor, who was generally a nav, you'd have a pupil nav, a pupil bomb aimer and a pupil WOp. Well all the WOp did was do his own thing. He just got his book of words out and thought 'Ah, Limavaddy', look for the call sign, tune it all in, call Limavaddy, they would answer, you logged it. It was just practice, that's all the WOp did really."

"How long were you there for?"

"Eight weeks. I passed out there, but it was the time of me life, it really was. Then I was sent an indefinite leave. I came all the way back on the boat, all the way from Stranraer to Bletchley, and I waited for the telegram, and it said 'Report to No.21 Operational Training Unit, Moreton-in-Marsh.' And I thought that can't be bad, summer time of the year, and Bromfield's going to the Cotswolds, where all the pubs are thatched, and you can drink your beer in the sun. This is going to be good this is!" (Laughter)

"I turned up, because I thought I can't be bothered to go to Euston and then across to Paddington, and then down to Moreton. I thought, well I'll go to Oxford, 'cause when you got your instructions, you went and got your travel from the RTO in some causes. That's what I did, and they said 'Euston - Paddington', and I said 'No, Oxford. Oxford and then direct to Moreton, it'll save me going all the way through London.' 'OK, fair enough.' So I get there, and as my train was pulling out, another one pulled in, and that had come from London. All these bods piled out, there were all sorts, Aussies, Canadians, South Africans, New Zealanders, Englishmen, Irishmen, Scotsmen, like a League of Nations it was. And they got the transport organised, and away we went, got booked in."

"And we had a fortnight's Ground School at Moreton when I was there. I don't how other OTUs or what did it, but we had a fortnight's Ground School, refreshing the whole of what you had done. Then, the pilots had carte blanche to go and listen, to any lecture, you see, look around. And then at the end of the two weeks it was a sort of tea and sticky-buns day, and the pilots just went around and selected their crew. And I got crewed up with Arthur Robertson, Flying Officer Arthur Robertson. He was a Canadian regular, his trade was armourer, so the gunners couldn't pull the wool over his eyes could they?"

"They was such a mixture there, and I finished up, I was the only Brit in a Canadian crew. The pilot was Flying Officer Robertson, he came from Brandon near Winnipeg, the navigator was Tip Tyler, he came from Toronto – or 'Toron'a' as he called it – the bomb aimer was Garfield Cross,

he came from Vancouver, the mid-upper Gerry Marion from Lethbridge out on the prairies, and the rear gunner was Ed Rae from Ottawa. Well, we did a fair bit of flying; you had an instructor, then you went solo. So it was like the pilot's courses all over again, you know. You had an instructor then the instructor tells you when you can go solo, but this it's a bit bigger than a Tiger Moth, or whatever you'd trained on." (Laughter)



Jack's Crew, 21 OTU Moreton-in-Marsh August 1944

"They were mostly Wimpy 3s and 10s, and it just sort of went on from there. You just started flying, but we lost the navigator. Apparently, (they didn't say a great deal about it to the NCOs in the crew, there were only three of us, the two gunners and me), apparently he couldn't cope too much with night flying. He was a very quiet man, and the others were very boisterous you know, typical Canadians."

"Was this the guy you had; this trip that you told me about before?"

"Yes. Well we were supposed to go as far as I can remember, and sim-bomb with the old infrared thing at Rhyl, then up to Ramsey to do again, and then from Ramsey - we were coming in a westerly direction to Ramsey - bomb, and then go up over the Mull of Galloway and then across to a lat and long in the North Sea, down to another lat and long off the Wash more or less, and then back to Moreton. And I sort of carried on, and I knew when we'd turned, I knew when we turned into Ramsey, but after Ramsey we didn't turn. And I thought, I wonder what's gone wrong? Have I read the flight plan wrong, you know, is it me, or what?"

"So I looked over his shoulder, and the plot finished at Rhyl. So I thought well, it's a difficult life isn't it? There's me, and five Canadians, you know, I'm bottom of the pile. But I did lift up the pilot's helmet, I didn't want to yell over the intercom, so I lifted up his helmet, and said 'The plot finishes at Rhyl.' And if course it was dark, I couldn't see what the expression on his face was, but he called the bomb aimer. The bomb aimer went and looked and said 'Yes, it does.' So what do we do? We need some means of getting home, because apparently he'd just lost it."

"So what I did, I don't know if you've ever seen in aircraft, you see the two needles, with left and right, and they topple? Well I'd also got one in my compartment you see, so I found a beacon. All over England were radio beacons, which transmitted the figure 7, a letter, and a figure 7. And you had them in lat and long you see, on a flimsy. So I found one at Limavaddy, so I checked with the pilot, 'There are your needles, now turn around', and they all went

'What!' 'Turn around, fly towards it until the needles come up again, and then when the needles do that – and that (indicates), we're at Limavaddy in Northern Ireland.' And then the bomb aimer looks on the map and gives you a rough course to steer."

"Well, we'd got a Q Code book; they still use QFE and all this don't they? Well the one we used mostly was QDM, and you would send INT all as one symbol; two dots, dash-dot and a dash, all as one symbol, not three separate letters. And that was barred, it had a bar over the top of it in the book, and that meant interrogative, you were asking a question. So I sent IN Tock, QDL, QDM, which means 'I intend to ask for a series of bearings, with zero wind, to reach you.' 'Cause we didn't know the wind did we?"

"And they would give me a bearing and rough estimation, and then they looked at the take-off wind, and 10/10ths cloud, you know, you couldn't see a great deal. And suddenly, it was like coming off the end of that table. And there it was, no cloud, and there was the River Severn. So I then called Moreton-in-Marsh and their call-sign was B9T, I called Moreton, and up went the searchlight. And there we were."

"So I presume that nav finished then?"

JB – "He finished. I don't know what happened with the next one. We flew with him once, he was a very quiet Yorkshireman – Percy – but we lost him as well. So that kept putting us back on the course, you know, going backwards. And eventually, introduced to this new guy who was Flight Sergeant Tom Laurie, a Scotsman, so quietly spoken it was untrue. Very quietly spoken, he seemed a very private man, you know, that's how I sussed him out for a start. 'Cause the two gunners were quite boisterous, and I was not far behind, you know, for a giggle, anything for a laugh. But he turned out to be the bees-knees, he really was a good nav. And I used to love, when I wasn't busy, to go and look over his shoulder. And every twelve minutes, on his mercators chart would be a box, and I'd never seen such small writing, and yet still be legible, unbelievable."



"We whipped through the course like wild fire, and we almost caught up, you know, to where we should be. From there we were posted to No.6 Group Battle School, which was at Dalton, up near Thirsk. So I thought 'Ah well, going to 6 Group, going to the Canadian Group.' And there we had the talks by people who had evaded capture, we had a dear old lady, she must have been in her seventies, who was trying to teach us a smattering of French and a smattering into English. By the time, we had her out for a lunch in the Sergeants' Mess and back again, she only spoke Dutch – of the double variety!" (Laughter)

No.6 Battle School, Dalton.1944.

Left to right: Tom Laurie, Ed Rae, Gar Cross, Jack Bromfield, Arthur Robertson, Gerry Marion

"Dear old lady she was, but she said, if you could learn to count in German, you can progress from there quite easily if you take note. And she taught us all to count in German. French, well you know it might well have been Japanese, to all these idiots, I think half of them were asleep!" (Laughter) "She did teach us to count in German, and I can still count in German, ein, zwei, drei, vier, fumpf. But it's surprising you can, you can pick up little pieces, but not much. Not that it mattered a lot, because they'd took the bloody signposts down same hadn't

they, the same as we did! The one we did was 'ein treten verboten' – 'don't go in there', you know, that was the one you thought about."

"But we did two or three of those capers where they took you out in the middle of the night and chucked you out on the Yorkshire Moors, and said 'Find your way home'. And what they would do was to take your cap away from you, and your money, take everything out of your pockets. An airman without his cap sticks out like a sore thumb. And so anyhow we got to that stage, and these exercises on the Moors were good because you only used your loaf. The Police, the Fire Service, the Home Guard, any Army unit in the area, were on the look out for these blokes on these courses, and if they caught you, you had to sign their chit, and I believe they got ten shillings. So you know, you've got to keep your wits about you, or you'd get caught."

"But also they took your money away, so my rear gunner, being a thinking lad, he said 'Well, what if we come across a pub?'" (Laughter) "So what we did, we tucked a pound note up our tie, and then tied it, you know, put it up there, so we'd got 'em - a pound a piece! Got our beer money!"

"So you were dropped off as a crew were you?"

"No, in threes, because we had picked up a Flight Engineer by then. So the pilot, the bomb aimer and the nav went together, and the three idiots went together into the pub you see! And the thing was, because on those days you didn't have belt loops on your trousers, and all these adjustable tops, so you wore braces didn't you? So the idea was to take your battledress jacket off, turn it inside out, hang it over your shoulder, just walk down the road in your braces. And take your tie off, and your collar, so it looked like a farm labourer didn't it? So you could walk about reasonably with not too much bad neck trying to see who was following you."

"Well when we got back, we got back to Dalton, and we made it home. Every time the three of us went out, we made it home without getting caught, so we thought we were learning something. And then we were posted just a couple of miles down the road, to 1659 Heavy Con Unit at Topcliffe. Halifax IIs and Vs, Merlin-powered. The difference between the II and the V is the undercarriage, one has Dowty, the other has Messier, that's the only difference between the II and the V."

"And there we flew long night cross-countries, circuits and crash landings, you know, circuits and bumps!"

"You picked up the Flight Engineer there did you?"

"It was there that we picked up the Flight Engineer, a little guy named Cyril Goldstein (3030855), a Londoner. He never gelled with the crew somehow or other, like the rest of us did. The rest of us never went anywhere without one another, you know we all always went, and I think he was a teetotaller, which probably didn't help. I think he was of the Jewish faith, I'm not quite sure." (Laughter) "But I think he was, Goldstein, I think he came from, Golders Green, or somewhere. I don't know, but he never really seemed to join in, he was always drawing something. He had a drawing board and a T-square, and he would sit in the corner drawing, and I looked at it several times, and I saw this thing, and I claim it looked like a Wankel engine. And I said to my pilot about it, and he said 'Well, if that's his bag, let him do it.' But what he'd drawn looked like a Wankel engine, he was obviously a very, very skilled engineer, besides being a Flight Engineer. He knew his stuff as a Flight Engineer."

"By then, the other six of us had been together some time, you know, it was beginning to get that crew feeling, that gell. And we finished there, and were posted to 158 Squadron at Lissett, 4 Bomber Group. Crew were a bit upset because they thought they were going to 6 Group, the Canadian Group, which of course had Mark VIIs. But we went to 158 with IIIs, which meant

another Conversion Unit, another conversion on the Squadron, because you were Hercules-powered, which meant that the fuel system and the hydraulic system were slightly different."

158 Squadron Lissett 1944.
From Left: Jack Bromfield, Ed
Rae, Gar Cross, Arthur
Robertson



"But there again, we got over that problem, and then because we were a night bomber Squadron, were scheduled for our first raid, and where did we go, to Julik (16.11.44, troop concentrations) in daylight!" (Laughter) "And that frightened the bloody life out of me! I've never seen so much flak in all my life."

"Baptism of fire then."

"Oh, it really was. And the Lancs on that day went to Duren. From what I could gather from the briefings, was the fact that there were two big crossroads, where if we could shut those crossroads out it would stop the armour from going whichever way they wanted to go. That was my first."

"But we gelled as a crew, but rather than except with Cyril, who always seemed to be on the outside looking in. You know, it was strange, because I don't think he liked the beer, I know he didn't smoke, while we smoked like chimneys, because boxes of three hundred Sweet (Caprals?) kept coming from America with Mike from Canada with my name on. Because once I'd joined the crew, they asked me where did me Mum live you see, and she got food parcels."

"An honorary Canadian then."

"I was an honorary Canuck, yes, I really was. But especially myself and the rear gunner, we were very close. And then we went to Mannheim, Cologne, Koblenz, Sterkrade, when we went after the oil refineries, you know, the usual run-of-the-mill targets."



"Then of course on the 5th of January 1945, the Grim Reaper. We were attacked by a night fighter, which I found out from the rear gunner was a Ju.88 (flown by Hauptman Heinz Rökker Knight's Cross with Oakleaves, a pilot with NJG2 based at Twente in Holland, who ended the war with a total of 65 victories), but other than

that we didn't know a great deal except that there was a hell of a lot of bangs and thumps and crashes. And then the fire started, because there's a rest bay in a Hali, between the two spars, and the changeover cocks for the fuel tanks are underneath the rest bunk. It's quite different

in a VII, they had a common sump, all their tanks drained into there." (Jack's Halifax was MZ432/NP-Q)

"If I can remember, and if the old brain works, we used to take-off on tanks one and three, use x number of gallons, then shut off tanks one and three and put on tanks two and four. I think that's right, to balance the wing loading, and then you used so many out of two and four, and went back and drained one and three. I always remember, shut that tank off before you turn the other one on. Because the WOp was supposed to have a lot of training to back-up the Flight Engineer. I don't know if you'll find it in the log book, that I'd signed that I was conversant with the hydraulic and fuel systems of a Hali."

"Now the Bomb Aimer of course, would back up the Nav, the Flight Engineer was supposed to be the spare driver, or sometimes, well Cyril, I don't think, would have flown a Hali, because he was a very, very small man, although I think our Bomb Aimer would have been alright there. Now, besides backing up the fuel changeover cocks, the WOp was far as I was concerned, I backed up the other two in the turret as well, because I was a trained Air Gunner."

"So all of a sudden all hell breaks loose."

"Yes, there were bits flying off here, there and everywhere. And I didn't know until some days afterwards that I'd been shot. My flying boot, it hit there, on the outside of the foot, and there was a mark about that long. (Indicates) But my feet were so bloody cold I didn't feel it. Anyhow, things went from bad to worse, but the aircraft didn't do anything strange, it was just losing height. I looked past my curtain at the pilot, and he looked at me and pulled the control column backwards and forwards and said 'I've got no control'. So the pilot said 'Right, time to go.'"

"So I opened the hatch between me and the nav, that was where the nav, the bomb aimer and I would go out, and I would give the pilot his parachute, because it was stowed next to mine on the starboard side, and when we'd gone, he would go. The mid-upper, the rear gunner and the engineer, would go out of the rear door."

"So the main reason he was saying time to go was he hadn't got any control?"

"No control, you know, when you did this (indicates pulling the control column backwards and forwards), nothing happened, so the controls must have been jammed, in the sort of dive position. It was only a shallow dive, the aircraft was still quite steady on its feet, you know, it wasn't rolling or whatever. But there was no point in staying with it if we put the fire out, 'cause it just wouldn't come out of the dive. So out we went."

"I went though two lots of cloud, not thick cloud, but I went through two lots of cloud and the it was white, just a white-out on the ground. And then came the tricky bit, because as I got closer and closer, and I was so bloody cold, I couldn't control, you know, do the things they said to stop the 'chute doing what it was doing. But I could see the target burning, and I could see flares going down, so I knew we weren't far, but the bombs were still on when we left her; we hadn't bombed."

"And I thought, those two black lines, one was a bit shiny, and the other one was dull. Thinking lad you see, and I thought well the shiny one is the river, or canal or whatever; the other one is the road. And I can't steer this bloody thing, and I'm going straight down the river. So I thought well, training, turn the buckle and hit it. And I did, and I fell out of the harness, straight on my arse in the middle of the road; the shiny one was the road, it was like a sheet of glass Steve. It was, it was like a sheet of glass, and I'm skating down the road." (Laughter) "But I was grateful, because only about twenty or thirty yards away was a mucky old canal, a little narrow canal. I thought well, if I'd gone in there, no chance, especially if the broolly had sat down over the top of me."

"I thought well, I'd better bury me 'chute and me harness for a start. And it was wooded, like when we went to see Heinz (Rökker). That area, it was a very wooded area, so I buried all the gubbins, and I kept me Sidcot, although I didn't want to walk in it because it was... So I thought it would be good to lay on the ground to sleep on if I'm having a kip. And having seen the direction of the target, I know which was south, east and which was west, so I just buggered off in a westerly direction, thinking I might bump into somebody, you know. But I didn't see a soul."

"As you were coming down you didn't see anybody?"

"I didn't see another 'chute, I didn't see anything at all."

"Because one of the blokes didn't get out did he?"

"We don't know, we think he didn't get out and yet a steward up at Bletchley Park has been to see the mid-upper in the last twelve months, in Nelson, and he heard from a Yank that he was captured with, that the engineer was shot, trying to escape from a German hospital. Whether that's fact or not I don't know, but it was his first trip with us, George Dacey."

"You see Cyril didn't go that night, he'd disappeared, and we don't know where he went, or what happened to him. I bumped into him at Cosford, but only got 'Hello, goodbye', because I was going ear nose and throat, and he was going to wherever he was going. And it was just 'Hello, goodbye', as quick as that. But what happened to George Dacey the Flight Engineer, we really don't know. But his name is on the Runnymede memorial, therefore he has no known grave. So we've come up against a brick wall. It's possible that if he was shot, he was just buried, you know, wherever, we don't know."

"I had eight days on the run, and I thought I was doing quite well, you know, where I went

"You were hiding up in the day?"

"Walked at night - but I gave that up after two days because I got fed up of tripping over tree roots and falling down ruddy ditches in the dark. So I was walking in daylight, but I think it was about the third or fourth morning, I can't remember really, but I was walking just off a road in the woods, and I heard voices; and I could understand what they were saying. And I thought 'Some other members of the crew', you know, and I thought well I'll be cagey, just in case it isn't somebody in the crew. And I got towards the edge of the wood and looked down the road, and there's two blokes with shotguns and three blokes standing like this." (Indicates hands up)

"They were Americans, you could tell by their flying boots who they were. They were funny little things they used to have compared to ours. So, discretion the better part of valour, so I went deeper into the woods and just kept on walking and never saw anything of them again."

"And on the eighth day, I was following a little single-line railway, and it was going more or less westerly, which suited me down to the ground. And I don't know if you ever remember seeing in England the old potato clamp, where they used to put the potatoes and then turf them over? Well I saw something that looked like that, and I thought well do they in Germany, do the same as we do, because I was getting bloody hungry by then. And I went and I was silly, really was, without thinking it out first, I was just hungry. Where the railway track, there was this and then a stand of pine trees, and when I was scratching about in the bottom, I think they were swedes when I got there, but they would have been better than nothing."

"And I felt something in the middle of my back, and a voice said 'Hande hock!' So I hande hocked, you know, and I turned round, and there was this guy in a railway uniform. Just round

the other side of the stand of trees there was a small station, and I hadn't seen it. Then two guys in a clapped-out Beetle, from the Luftwaffe, they came and off we went."

"And I was taken to a night-fighter station. Well I didn't know where it was, but there was a guy, I didn't know who he was, that brought me some porridge; the first real food I'd had, and it had got cherries on it. And I tried to make him understand 'Where am I?', and he cleared off a bit quick. So they locked me back in the cell again and then I wanted to go to the toilet. So I rattled on the door and the old boy came, and he wasn't in any arm of the service, and he was dressed like Air Ministry wardens in a navy blue uniform; he was the guy in the office."

"Have you talked to Les Giddings yet? He was on 102 Squadron and shot down on Leipzig in February '44, and he was chucked in the same cell as I was. Anyhow, this guy takes me to the toilet. Well I found out later on, that he was on jankers! (laughter) He was a sort of AC2 Luftwaffe type, and he was on jankers, so he was earning his keep you see, ferrying me backwards and forwards. When I was ready to come out of the toilet, you went through two doors into the toilet, not just a door and into it, but through a door and a door. Before we came out, he gave me a little piece of paper; I just sort of screwed it up. And when I got back in my cell I looked, and it said 'Diepholz', and that's where I was."

"Well I knew then, I knew I was on a night-fighter station because I could hear the aircraft (Me.410s), and of I stood on the end of the bed and looked through the little slit window, I could see, I could see the aircraft taking off."

"I had about two, three days in there. One guy came in and he was obviously a pilot, and he gave me some cigarettes, and they brought me some bread and sort of sausage sandwich, you know, sort of thing. And he did a bit of interrogating, but he didn't get very far, so he wasn't an interrogator, so he cleared off. And then this little guy comes, and I thought he was fighting everybody all by himself. Because, he was about four feet twelve tall, and he's got a Mauser rifle, he's got a small Walter pistol, and a machine-carbine."

"Luftwaffe?"

"He's Luftwaffe, and he'd got a big pack on his back, and his gas mask and whatever else he carried. And 'Kommen ze mit', so off I kommen ze mit. And they gave me a loaf, under there (indicates under one arm) 'cause they'd handcuffed me then. And I said 'Geneva Convention', 'Oh we're not worried about the Geneva Convention'. And I said some Tappel margarine under there. (the other arm) And I'll tell you what that was like, when I was in Luft I, if you boiled off the water and melted it, we used to stick a bit of our braces in there and that was a light to play cards by. (Laughter) So you can tell what the margarine was like."

"And I got this other thing. You remember the old Turkish Delight wooden boxes? It was round like that, and it said 'Fish Kaiser' – fish cheese. So I'm like this (indicates loaded up under each arm) so I had to walk like this, and off we went. We went to the station, and then we went through Hannover, which was the target! And the siren went, and I thought 'Oh shite, that's all I need!' You know, here am I, in RAF uniform, with me wing on and me stripes, and Bomber Command comes when Bromfield's on Hannover station. That's all I needed."

"But this idiot, when the people, the civilians, asked who I was, 'Englischer flieger', and there's a siren going! So I lost me bread, they didn't take the fish cheese away; (when I opened it, it tasted, smelled like rat shite that had gone off, it was evil). So no wonder even the Germans didn't take that. But I was rescued by a guy, I think he was, is it a Gefreiter? Some rank about a Sergeant or somebody, obviously aircrew, and I couldn't speak German at all. But I got the gist of the message, that 'it's your job to get him to Dulag at Frankfurt, sound in wind and limb so we can interrogate him; not let these idiots have him.' So you know, I was grateful to him."

"So we caught the train, we went to Dulag, what a forbidding place that was! It was just grim huts and barbed wire; lots of Kreigies (PoWs) wandering about inside. And there they just chucked you straight in a cell; there was nothing said, they just chucked you straight in a cell, no doorknobs or anything, only on the outside. There was a knob inside, which, when you turned it, a little signal arm came out which means you wanted to go to the loo, and you would hear them push it back you know, that'd make you use the bucket."

"There they turned the heat up 'til you cooked, then turned it down 'til you were freezing cold. Three o'clock in the morning was their favourite time. And they had about an A4 sheet, and one corner, I can't remember which way round it was, they had Red Cross Geneva, and Red Cross in German in the other corner. Then it had Number, Rank, Name, Squadron, Aircraft, all lots of other gubbins. Did the usual thing, put your number, rank and name down, scrub out the rest, which made them a bit peevisish. And this just went on, and on, and on, and on, you know. We weren't getting any sleep, and I thought, well you know, I've got this far. They obviously know a lot more than they let you know, so why just compound it, keep playing them dumb."

"And that lasted, I should think I was there, about 11 or 12 days. Then suddenly the doors opened, and everybody was ushered into a big room, and given a couple of slices of bread and a cup of black coffee, you know, that ersatz coffee. And then you just milled around, and the next thing I know is that we're being marched out and taken down to Betslaw, which just southern, into Frankfurt itself, and then we were on the train to Stalag Luft 1." (Below).



"The others had apparently all been captured the next morning; and it was what, nearly a month, perhaps more. What was it, March?, when my Mum got that telegram, so six weeks probably, before anybody knew. 'Cause they thought I hadn't made it, they hadn't seen the Engineer or me. And there they were, and that was strange really, because they were in this compound, and I wasn't put in that compound. If I can remember right, it was like a letter L backwards, that was the North. The West compound was British, Dominion and Allied aircrews as far as I could remember. Where the two legs joined that square, was the Vorlager where the German offices and living quarters were, and then North 1 and 2, which were American – remember that guy at the Forum (Norm Rosholt) he was in one of the North compounds; and I went in there. I didn't think that was very good in there. I'm not running them down, but their billets were like pigsties, you know, there were fag ends on the floor."

"Anyhow, I made a request to see the Senior British Officer, Group Captain Weir I think his name was. (Group Captain C T Weir was shot down in 49 Squadron Lancaster PB300EA-K from Fulbeck, while attacking the Mittelland Canal on 21 November 1944. He was blown out of the aircraft and was the only member of the crew to survive). I went see him, and he said 'What's your problem?' I said 'Well I'm stuck up in the American compound, and I'm not too pleased about that.' And a couple of days, and I was told to pick up what I'd got, and marched through the Vorlager, and then I was put into Block 11, and there in a room up the corridor were the other three; Doc, we didn't know where he was, the mid-upper. And apparently, bailing out he was pretty badly wounded."

"By now it's March – late March – I suppose?"

JB – "Yes, March, bitterly cold. And then in May, we went to kip one night, because you didn't have a bed, you slept on a shelf you see, six of you, like sardines in a tin. And we went to bed this particular night, 'cause a lot of times at that stage in the war, you couldn't do anything in the evenings because it was dark. But there were no lights on, only the floodlights in the compound. There was no light in the billet, you know."

"We heard these bangs, and thumps. 'Cause it was pitch black, all lying next to one another, and somebody said 'That's the Russian guns.' And a voice said 'Don't talk bloody daft'. And somebody said 'Why?' He said 'I was at Alamein, and that's not artillery fire.' Somebody said 'How do you know?' He said 'When a big gun goes off, you get the crack of the gun, and then the thump of the shell. And if you listen, it happens continuously like that, the bang and the crack, the bang and the crack', he said, 'but these are only thumps.'"

"When we got up next morning, there were Russians in the compound! Because you see, the Germans locked us in at sundown, shut the shutters, and put the bar across. And they didn't open that then until sun up. And then there was a lot of conversation going on outside between the Commissioned types in the camp and the Russians, and then they cleared off, they were an armoured column, and then the infantry came through. And then they went on, and just left us to our own devices."

"The Germans had obviously all buggered off?"

"They'd gone. But the thumps we'd heard, were them blowing up the buildings on the airfield, because there was a flak school the other side of the wire. And they were blowing up the buildings, but they hadn't got enough sense to blow up the runway! The runways were intact, because I think I was still behind the wire really, when VE-Day was. But then suddenly this hoard of B-17s appear and land, skittering down the runway. They turned round and came round the peri-track, and that's what I flew home in, in a B-17. And I landed at Ford, down near Littlehampton, which was a Fleet Air Arm 'drome then. Then came the funny bit; they took us down to the railway station, under guard."

"Under guard?!"

"Yes, because they were frightened we might scarper." (Laughter) "We were taken down to the railway station, and I think the bloke that built the Ark built the carriages, and they locked us in these carriages, and they put us in this train. You couldn't get the windows down, but they thought we'd scarper you see."

"So we then went the most tortuous route you imagine. We went to Littlehampton station, to Cosford, up in the Midlands. I know we stopped three, maybe four times, and there were people on the platform, and the WVS, bless the ladies, were there with mugs of tea and a bun or a sandwich. Then, we got into Cosford, the station's almost in the camp, isn't it? So then we troop down there, and there were these WAAFs there, who'd sort of look after us. But then

they found that everybody was lousy. We were all standing there like a chimpanzee!"
(Laughter)

"So they then took us to this big – can you remember they used to have athletic meetings at Cosford in them big hangars? Well I can remember them hangars, I don't know where we went, but we were supposed to chuck all our clothing in this incinerator. Well, no way were they having my operational battledress were they? Me jacket, no that had been with me a long time. So I thought 'What do I do?', so I just bundled it up; they took everything. 'Cause I'd still got the pants on that I was shot down in; I hadn't changed, I hadn't had a bath! No, I hadn't had a bath or a shower."

"I hung on to my old battledress, and I saw this guy with the DDT, so I held my jacket up, he sprayed it and it looked white, all this powder; I gave it a good shake. And I went to work in that old battledress until about 1950. Eventually I think the sleeves fell off." (Laughter) "So I kept my old battledress jacket, and we were sent home on eight weeks leave, on double rations, and extra eggs and milk. They looked after us well, there was no doubt about that."

"We were on this POW repatriation course at Wittering, so we went on a visit, 30 of us. Where did we go? A silk stocking factory in Leicester; within ten minutes there wasn't a bird or a bloke to be seen anywhere. So then we went to a tart factory. There was a chap there, we didn't know much about him, he had terrible nightmares every night. He'd been on Stirlings and I think there must have been a fire; we all felt really sorry for him. I don't know what happened to him."

"And then eventually you finished...?"

JB – "I went back to Cosford for a medical. And they said that at the time I was 'unfit aircrew', and I thought 'I expected that.' And then they sent me home on indefinite leave, and I was home for another two months. The money kept coming!"

"Then I had information come that I'd got to report to Melksham, School of Technical Training. Because when we had an interview after the first eight weeks, they had a big sheet, and they'd got all these trades. But I really was a bit of a burk really, because I didn't fancy going back to school, but there was engine fitter, airframe fitter; I didn't want to be a stores clerk, or a pay clerk, or whatever. Right at the bottom, it said MT driver. So I thought, 'I'll let 'em teach me to drive.' And I went to Melksham."

"I did about six weeks training there; they taught us to drive; that was hilarious. All these ex aircrew blokes on these night convoys, all these three-tonners parked up outside the pubs. Oh dear, they sent rescue parties out..." (Laughter) "And I passed out there – now this was hilarious – I was posted to No.21 Maintenance Unit, Linley Mine, near Walsall. I can't remember the name of the station I actually got out of, but it was sort of between Walsall and where this Linley Mine was."

And it was chucking it down with rain, one Saturday evening, and there's a dear lady on the platform, and she said 'Where are you for kid?' And I said 'Well I'm going to Linley Mine, my dear.' 'No good you going there, it's closed.' And I said 'Are you sure dear?', and she said 'My husband worked there all through the war.' So I thought, 'Well, what do I do now?'"

"So then she suggested I go back to Walsall, go out of the station and go to the Military Police Depot. So I went in and this Corporal said 'What can I do for you?' and I told him the problem, because I said 'There's no RAF anyway are there?' and he said 'No.' So he sent for the officer, and this Lieutenant came round, and he said 'What's the problem then?' 'cause by that time, I'm a Flight Sergeant. And I explained to him, and he said 'Well we can't do anything tonight and especially a night like this', he said 'We'll find you a bed and we'll get you some food.' Which they did."

"Next morning, in a Bedford 15 cwt on Sunday morning, we go to Linley Mine and sure enough, it's barbed wire, and all the windows are boarded up. So back we go to 'Was'll' again – that's what they call it up there apparently – and they ring RAF Melksham. Now my mate that I was on the course with, Stan Aldiss, he's swanning about in that part of the world somewhere, and they said 'Well hang on and we'll call you back.'

So they rang back and they said 'Oh! What does it say on his information?' So we read it, RAF Station Linley Mine. So they said 'Well he should have gone to Fauld', which was just outside Tutbury, which was 21 MU. It was the place that blew up in 1944, when the bomb dump blew up. So, on the next morning you see, the Lieutenant and a driver, and Bromfield, we all get in this Bedford 15 cwt, and we all drive out to 21 MU at Fauld."

"And there were no SPs, only on nights, there were Air Ministry wardens. It was like a big country house, and there I went to see the Adj, and he was a Mossie navigator, Flight Lieutenant, Aspley I think his name was. And he said 'Where the hell have you been then?' I said 'Well I've been on a Cook's Tour of the West Midlands.' (Laughter) He said 'Well we told them weeks ago not to send anybody to Linley Mine, because it's all been transferred to here.' And there I spent my time until my demob number came up as a heavy goods driver. Had the time of me life."

"So when did you finally finish then?"

"Right at the beginning of '47, just after New Year's. So I'd had a year and a bit swanning around in this truck. It was strange really, because there was a lot of civilian drivers on that camp, and they didn't like nights away from home you know, if they'd been out on a long journey. It didn't make any difference to me, just went to the nearest RAF Station and asked for a bed. By that time too, my WO was through. I didn't think I'd get it, because an edict came out you know, telling us all to strip down to Sergeant. Did you know about that?"

"No, I didn't know about that."

JB – "All NCO aircrew dip down to Sergeant. Well the Groupie, I can't remember his name, but he was a delightfully gentleman, he was an RFC pilot. And he said 'You've had this information, haven't you?' So I said 'Yes.' He said 'You earned that, you leave it where it is.' So I got demobbed as a WO. They didn't dock our money, I think it was a lot of incoming ground crew that were getting a bit peevisish because there were a lot of Flight Sergeants and WOs wandering about doing nothing."

"But that place, just as a matter of interest, was an alabaster mine. Ruthie and I went up there about ten years ago; we just went up and had a ride around and stayed bed and breakfast there. And we stayed not far away, so we saw this signpost for Fauld, and I said to Ruth, 'I was stationed there.' She said 'Well let's go and have a look.' We couldn't get in, because it was an industrial complex then, it had gone back again, it was gypsum that they mined. But where we stayed, the waitress, her husband had worked there all through the war. So we heard a little bit of history."

"And then Dave the thatches gave me a piece of paper, and it said on this television programme, there were two 15-minute segments, and one was RAF Fauld."

Apparently it blew up because they shipped a lot of stuff out as soon as they'd got a beachhead: rockets, bombs, and everything else, over to the other side of the Channel. Then, as things settled down over there they were checking this stuff, and some of it was a bit iffy. So they brought it back and put it down the mine again, and it blew up. There was some young boys killed, there was a farm on top which they never found."

"It was a hill, it was a big hill. When you went into Fauld there was only one road, except the little ones that went into the MT and wherever, the NAAFI and the Mess. The officers lived off station, we go in a wagon and pick them up in the mornings from Doveridge. And then there was a hole; and RAF Bomb Disposal people were running around trying to find the bombs that went up and came down and didn't go off.

When you came from Sudbury, which is where the big Polish camp was, back to Fauld, and came round this country road, there was a house out there in the sticks with a lump of alabaster in the front lawn, in a big lump. When you went passed at night with your headlights, it all sparkled, and it was in this guy's front garden. Twenty yards one way and it would have been on top of his house."

"That was one hell of a bang then."

JB – "Oh, they said it was colossal; it was felt miles and miles away. When I was there, people still talked about it if you were in the pub. Perhaps you'd go into Burton, into the Staffordshire Knot, and the dart throw there was only six feet you know, not nine, it was six. And you'd go into the pub there, and they'd say 'Where are you?' and you'd say 'Fauld', 'Oh I remember when that blew up.'

But that was a hell of a place to drive through; you go down the main street, and the level crossing gates would close, the little tank engine with the brewery wagons would go across the road, and before you could say Jack Robinson, there was another one coming the other way. There were all these crossing gates down the main street, from the breweries. There was an Ind Coope and 'Allslops' (laughter), and Bass, Marstons."

"What a place to live eh?"

"Yes, what a place to live. Well they still call the football team the Brewers, don't they?"

"I see in your log, in your list of aircraft types in which flown, you've got Mossie in there."

"That shouldn't be in there. (Laughter) Because before I was sent on a driving course, I was posted to Cranfield as a dog's-body. Yes, I was in charge of the coal party, you know, that took the coal to the married quarters. And of course it was part then of Boscombe Down wasn't it, Empire Test Pilots' School. So I went down to there and back one day without anybody's knowledge! Yes, in a Mossie."

"Well thanks for that Jack, that was terrific."

[The following are other reminiscences by Jack from Steve's notes]

"When Bob O'Dell and I got to one of the training units, neither of us being religious, when it came round to Sunday Church Parade, we thought what can we do? So we decided to say we were some obscure religion that was exempt you see. Anyhow, we were all lined up, and the Corporal's calling out, 'Church of England over here, Roman Catholic over there' and so on, 'til eventually there's only Bob and me left.

And the Corporal says to us 'What are you two then?', 'Seventh Day Adventists Corporal'. 'Seventh Day bleedin' Adventists!' Just then the Sergeant comes up and the Corporal says to him 'These men say they're Seventh Day Adventists Sergeant. 'Alright lads, fall out for a smoke break' says the Sergeant, and that was that, we'd got away with it!"

"Anyhow, when we arrived at our next camp, as we were marching in, Bob says to me 'We're in trouble now Jack, look', and there was a sign for a Seventh Day Adventists' chapel. Blimey, now what do we do? I know, Jehovah's Witness! So at the Church Parade, same thing, 'CofE over there' and all that, 'til again we were the only two left. 'What are you two?' says the Corporal. 'Jehovah's Witnesses Corporal.' 'Alright, fall out for a smoke.'"

"On a cross country from Moreton we'd got two gunners in a Wimpey, but only one turret. Halfway round they would change over. And on that last long straight leg, they would tell the pilot 'Ready for the exercise', and he would do gentle S-turns. Well one of the gunners reeled out the drogue, which was sort of fishtailing behind you, and the other gunner shot at it – couldn't hit the side of a barn if he was in it!" (Laughter) "On this particular night, Robby had told the rear gunner to stream the drogue, because Doc was in the turret."

"Th skipper called me up, he said 'Have you got communication with Doc?' I said 'Yes', he said 'I can't get anybody.' So I said I'd give him a shout and I called Doc in the rear turret and I said 'Has he streamed the drogue yet?' 'I can't see any drogue, he should have streamed it 15 minutes ago.'

Well what's going on now, so the skipper said to me 'Disconnect, walk down the back and have a look.' And I saw this little short man; he'd stepped back to admire his work and gone through the canvas; his legs were hanging outside." (Laughter) "We missed the best bit didn't we, Robby should have told me to go down and tell him when to start running!"

"New crews, you would not get your own aeroplane for a while. Z-Zombie was quite well known on 158; she'd done quite a few."

"So as a new crew, you got the tiredest aeroplane did you?"

"You got an aeroplane with a lot of bombs painted on the side."

"And did you?"

"No, Sugar hadn't got many. We flew Queenie once I think, but Sugar was the one we normally had."

"How many did you do before you got 'your' aeroplane?"

"About four I think. My job was to listen out for transmissions at set times, you know, recall, diversions, any information. Normally you'd hear nothing, just a long dash and a time signal, and in between those ten-minute segments, you were given a section of the 1155 dial to search.

What you were looking for was 'Achtung Nachtjager, Achtung Nachtjager.' What you would do then is tune your transmitter exactly to the frequency you were listening on, throw a little switch and press the key, and your set was then connected to a carbon mike in the starboard outer engine. So he'd just get engine noises on that frequency, so he'd go somewhere else."

"I'll tell you who don't get the praise they really deserve – the ground crews. What I remember was our WOM, and I think she lived in a hole in the ground somewhere near the dispersal. You could be taxying round the dispersal and not see a soul, and as soon as you got out of the aircraft she was stood there! Where did she come from? She was a little WAAF, she was about five foot nothing.

"It must have been tough when a crew didn't come back."

"It was, because it was their aeroplane, not the guys that were flying it; it was the ground crew's aeroplane that had gone missing. What used to get me was seven empty beer glasses on the shelf."

"When you got back, how soon would you know that somebody else hadn't got back?"

"Next morning, breakfast. You'd expect to see seven blokes sitting at that table and they weren't there. And then you sat around for a while, wondering have they landed away from home; by dinner time you knew.

"Theirs was a little less personal than being on a single-engine squadron. You were one of twenty-odd blokes, and you knew them all; it became a personal thing then."

"When you arrived on the squadron, you went to the Signal Section, went down to the flights, and nobody said how many you'd done, or what you'd done you know, you were just accepted as one of the lads."

"You'd got up at five o'clock in the morning, gone to briefing, than gone out for five and a half hours over Germany somewhere, then got back, had your meal and gone to bed. Being woken up in the middle of the night with blokes coming into the billet; always the padre with a couple of military policemen, to collect the effects of blokes who hadn't come back. That was tough. You couldn't get back to sleep after that."

Epilogue

During one interview Jack said: "The memories; they're there all the time. You can go maybe two weeks and think nothing; there's a little snippet in the paper or on the television and suddenly it all starts to wind up again. Or somebody mentions a name, you've forgotten about him for years, and suddenly you remember about him".



Steve Bond investigated the identity of the German night fighter pilot who had shot down Jack's Halifax. In July 2004 Jack, (left) previously a Warrant Officer RAF, met Heinz Rokker. Rokker was previously a Hauptmann in the Luftwaffe (awarded the Knight's Cross with Oakleaves). As a pilot with NJG2 based at Twente in Holland he ended the war with a total of 65 victories. The two airmen had met briefly in passing on the 5 January, 1945, when

Jack's Halifax was on its way to Hannover and Heinz, in a Ju 88G night fighter, shot him down. When asked how he felt on meeting Heinz Jack simply said, "Wonderful!"

Sadly, Jack died on 13 September 2012, aged 88. He outlived all his Halifax crew.

© Steve Bond