

## 'FLYING WITH BOMBER COMMAND IN WORLD WAR II'

Gentlemen, I plan to show a series of slides that will give a background for recounting some of the experiences of the Lancaster crew I was a member of 'Flying with Bomber Command in World War II' on RAF Squadron 101 from Ludford Magna airfield in Lincolnshire.

But before I do, under no circumstances should any comments of mine be interpreted as glorifying war. WAR IS EVIL. Heroes and acts of heroism in war may be glorified but **never War**.

So, let me move into my subject.

### OPENING SLIDE

The Canadians restored this Lancaster and had it flying in 2009. The Lancaster of the Battle of Britain Memorial flight has been flying for over 30 years. I took photos of it flying over Ludford during our annual squadron reunions in 1982 and 1988. The gathered old fellows have a catch in the throat as a speck in the southern sky rapidly materialises above us as a Lancaster in all its glory, doing a couple of circuits of the village with the four Rolls Royce merlins roaring and growling as of old and they do roar and growl. And there was the odd emotional tear as that Lancaster once again became a speck in the southern sky as it returned to its base at RAF Coningsby

### AIRFIELDS SLIDE

This slide gives some idea of why, during WWII, Britain was described as a land based aircraft carrier. The 80 plus airfields shown were among the peak number in operation in the closing stages of the war in Europe of 104 airfields that were home to an average of over 2,200 bombers on 128 Bomber Command Squadrons. The U.S. Air Force also used a concentration of airfields, not shown on this slide, in the south east counties. Also not shown are the airfields of Training Command, Fighter Command, Transport Command and Coastal Command. It is not surprising that collisions were a major cause of casualties.

Describing Britain as a land based aircraft carrier was apt.

The aircraft flown in Bomber Command are also featured. The early ones were twin engine planes, (Flash Pointer on -) the Blenheim, Hampden, Whitley & Wellington. From late 1941, the four engine (Point-)Stirling came into service, and later, the (Point-)Halifax and Lancaster. The other plane is the wonder wooden aircraft of World War II, (Point-) the de Havilland Mosquito. It could fly almost twice as high and twice as fast as a Lancaster. With its two man crew, it could carry the same bomb load as a Flying Fortress with a crew of 11. The Mosquito was a Bomber, Master Bomber, a Fighter Bomber, a

Night Fighter, a high flying Reconnaissance Plane for weather and target photos taken from up to 35,000 feet. In all but the night fighter role, it flew unarmed.

### OPERATIONS SLIDE.

The statistics on this and the next slide are backed by official RAF records. They show quite graphically the intensity of the Bomber Command activity. This was most intense from mid 1943 to 8 May 1945, the end of the war in Europe. (Point out the daily averages of sorties and tonnages)

The Nuremberg raid cited was the most disastrous of the war for Bomber Command. Murphy's law applied – everything that could go wrong did so. (Read the comparison with Battle of Britain and stats of aircraft and aircrew lost)

### LOSSES SLIDE.

Aircrew Casualties as per this slide show that, of approximately 125,000 aircrew who served in Bomber Command during the war and of whom 110,000 actually flew on operations, over 60% became casualties. About 85% of these casualties were suffered on operations and 15 % in training and other accidents. (Point to individual figures.)

To quote from a book put out last year by the Canadian Defence Academy - *110,000 flew on actual Bomber Command operations and for every 100 airmen who joined an operational training unit, 44 would be killed on combat operations, 7 more would be killed in non operational accidents and 9 would become prisoners of war. Three would be wounded or injured badly enough to be removed from operations and one would successfully evade capture in enemy territory. Only 24 of the original 100 would emerge unscathed from these arduous periods of combat and complete a tour of operations. But, while Bomber Command's morale faltered on occasion, it never imploded. No other broad element of the western Allied combatants suffered the same enormous casualty rates over a sustained, long term campaign, nor did they face ...the mathematical certainty of their own deaths so routinely and so unflinchingly.* End of Quote

You might well query why, in the light of those statistics, any eighteen year old in his right mind would volunteer in 1943 to join the RAAF with the strong possibility of being posted to a Bomber Command Squadron. One reason is that those statistics, in that telling form, were not known until post war. All that appeared in the media; print, radio and Cinesound; tended to highlight successes and air aces, mostly single engine pilots.

UK print media reports were brief, such as that of our first operation on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1944. To quote - *“Bochum, Ruhr steel and rail town, took well over 3,000 tons of bombs on Saturday night when more than 700 RAF*

*Lancasters and Halifaxes gave the town its heaviest raid. Ten enemy fighters were destroyed. Thirty four RAF Bombers are missing.*” That was all. Never did the reports carry a number of persons killed figure - almost 250 bomber crew would have died that night; nor was there any published collation of such daily reports into an overall statistical form. No doubt for very good reasons of morale, of both flyers and citizens.

So, why would one choose to volunteer for the RAAF? To try and provide an answer, one has to go back in time almost seventy years from today.

Recall that in 1939, Australia’s 7 million people were 95% Anglo Saxon Celtic in forebears; in my case, although fourth generation Australian on both sides, mainly Scottish and Irish. So when the ‘Old Country’, ‘Mother England’, was at war, Australia was at war; as Robert Menzies declared with but minimal public dissent on 3 September 1939. Every day at assembly in primary school in Cunnamulla in Far Western Queensland during the early to mid thirties, we started the day with ‘I salute my flag, I honour my King, I love my God’. Probably up to 40% of today’s Australians would have difficulty with saluting that flag, honouring that King’s successor, and with loving the Christian God! We live in a changed Australia in a changed world. But, having visited or worked in over 70 countries, there is no country where I would rather live.

So, I became a ‘Blue Orchid’, one of the ‘Brylcream Boys’, the less than complementary terms by which the ‘brown jobs’, the army chaps, referred to members of the RAAF.

In February 1943, my initial training commenced. Training was intensive. At every stage, there was heavy emphasis on physical fitness. Mine was a typical career path of an Australian teenager who joined the RAAF.

After eight months pre RAAF part time training as an Air Training Corps Cadet, there was three months full time general training in the RAAF, leading to being allocated one’s mustering. Then there was fifteen months specialised training, seven months in Australia and the rest in U.K., in my mustering of Wireless Operator Air gunner, before joining a squadron. An in house ditty of the day went “The half wing is how they all know him; With AG inscribed on his chest; the A just stands for Another; and G for Gunner Gone West.” Pilots Navigators and Bomb Aimers trained for slightly longer periods, straight gunners for shorter periods.

Bomber Command folklore was that as long as you survived five operations, you had repaid the cost of your training because of the damage to the enemy you inflicted in those five raids. And a Lancaster was said to have covered its production cost if it survived ten operations. The average lifespan of a Lancaster was 15 ops.

## **CREWING UP**

On D Day, 6 June 1944, I arrived at No. 27 Operational Training Unit, (OTU) Lichfield in the English Midlands with the sky covered with aircraft, especially D.C. 3s, each towing gliders full of paratroops. The second front on the main land of Europe was under way.

Once at OTU, one was in Bomber Command.

RAF Bomber Command practice then was to bring together at an OTU 20 Pilots, 20 Navigators, 20 Bomb Aimers, 20 Wireless Operators and 40 Air gunners to form 20 crews of 6 each. At Lichfield, every two weeks, nearly all of the 120 arriving for the next course were RAAF. We were assembled in a large hangar and told, after an introductory talk, to form ourselves into crews. This process was usually finalised within 48 hours and even though most had not previously met, the strange fact is that the system worked very well. Quickly, almost every chap firmly believed that he had chosen the best crew, the best pilot, the best navigator. Had he been drafted into a crew by an orderly room bureaucrat, complaints could well have been never ending and morale low.

Our six man Australian crew consisted of five aged 19 & 20 with the bomb aimer, an old man of 29.

After another two weeks ground training, we commenced eight weeks flying training as a crew in twin engine Wellingtons that had been the front line RAF bombers earlier in the war. They were now past their prime, hence the accident rate was rather high in the hands of trainees. Under quite intensive flying, initially with instructor pilots who had completed a tour of operations, we quickly developed a strong crew spirit based on our high regard for the specialist skills and also the personal qualities of each member. This was gleaned by living closely together in a small very basic Nissen hut, shaped like an inverted half tank set on a concrete base with an ineffective circular stove for heating.

## **101 SQUADRON**

After a further month training on the four engine Lancaster during which time our crew was joined by a Flight Engineer, we reported to RAF Special Duties Bomber Squadron number 101 at Ludford Magna in Lincolnshire, known as 'Bomber County', such was the proliferation of bomber airfields in that county.

This slide shows how a three runway wartime constructed bomber station with its aircraft and standings as well as administration, service and accommodation buildings was molded into the surrounding countryside to minimise the damage from German Air Force sneak attacks. **Point to the**

village complete with church and two pubs; to our living quarters; to the admin buildings; to the aircraft pans and the aircraft and later to Fido oil lines.

101 had an average of 30 crews on strength at all times, 240 aircrew including our Special Duty operators. To support that number of air crew, there were over 2,000 RAF personnel including the key ground crew maintenance teams as well as administration and service people on the station.

The special duty of 101 squadron was that, in addition to a full bomb load, we carried this eighth German speaking crew member whose role was to jam the radio controllers of the German night fighters by putting our engine noise through three transmitters via a key on three different frequencies after listening out and finding three of the 24 VHF spots being used by the Germans to direct their fighters that night. The RCAF chap who joined our crew as 'Special', of the Jewish faith, had been born in Potsdam, on the outskirts of Berlin. He became quite ebullient after each raid, each time he 'Bombed the Boche'.

Because of that highly secret role, 101 was known by the code name of 'Air Borne Cigar' or 'ABC' Squadron. To ensure 101 kites could operate and give ABC cover to the groups operating each night, even when the rest of our group were grounded by weather, Ludford was one of 15 airfields that had 'FIDO', a system for lifting the fog up to about 800 feet to allow us to get back in after an operation. The system involved burning 60,000 gallons of oil per hour through pipe lines running parallel to the main runway for its entire length of over 2,200 yards.

Landing by descending to under 800 feet through the cloud and fog into the glare and heat of that inferno with its turbulence was quite a challenge to the pilot, and nail biting time for the crew sweating it out in the backroom, especially at the end of a long op.

Coincidences abound in life and 101 provided yet another. On my first full day there, although there were only about twenty Australians among the squadron complement of about 240 aircrew, two of them, in different crews, had been one year ahead of me at school in Maryborough, Queensland. They took macabre pleasure in forecasting my likely gory fate based on the fact that, while nearly all bombers observed radio silence on operations, 101 kites had their three transmitters sending out a constant jamming note on which German defences could home their night fighters. The result was that 101 had the second highest losses of any squadron, the total air crew being wiped out more than three times in the last two years of the war after taking on the Air Borne Cigar role. It was known as a 'chop' squadron – 'chop' being synonymous with 'killed'.

In line with Bomber Command policy, after some more training during our initial two weeks on the squadron, the skipper did a trip with an experienced crew, referred to as a ‘second dickie trip’. This was to give him essential background to lead us on our first operation as a crew. That occurred two nights later and it was to Bochum, mentioned earlier. It was an industrial target in the Ruhr, referred to in RAF circles as ‘Happy Valley’. We saw most of the 34 of our planes lost that night go down, victims of fighters and anti aircraft flak guns along the Rhine. After bombing and as we approached that wall of searchlights and flak along the Rhine, the skipper followed the practice of the experienced pilot he had flown with two nights earlier. He slowed our plane down, throttling back close to stalling speed of about 100 miles per hour, until some of our bombers were caught in searchlight cones directly in front of us. Then our nose went down, throttles were pushed through the gate and we were quickly above 300 miles per hour until we were through the wall of lights and flak. Our crew reaction to that first raid was that this bombing caper was a hazardous occupation and intensified crew training became the order of the day.

Searchlights were the bane of all in Bomber Command. One of our more illustrious flyers, known to many of you, Commander of RAAF 467 Squadron, the late Wing Commander Rollo Kingsford-Smith DSO DFC AM is reported to have said of his first op, to Kassel, *‘It was a cauldron of hell, magnificent, awesome, and we had to fly into it and through it. It scared all the self confidence out of me. I remembered how to pray’*. Our crew, along with many others who bombed Kassel, a frequent, distant and difficult synthetic oil target, would, at that time, have shared Rollo’s reaction to searchlights and flak over that target.

## **CABIN LAYOUT OF A LANCASTER SLIDE**

This slide of the cabin layout of a Lancaster is taken from behind the Wireless operator’s position looking forward. You will note the navigator sat side on in the Lancaster at his chart table facing his navigational radar screens and normally with a curtain drawn between his position and those of the pilot and engineer. This prevented light from his essential radar equipment filtering out. You might, and I do now, marvel that we, as a crew, actually went to war in a starched detachable collared shirt and tie. **Point out cabin/dress details**

The cabin was a tight fit, especially on the long trips – our longest was 10 hours five minutes. Toilet facility in the form of an Elsan was towards the rear and most of us held on rather than leave our post while many and varied were the alternatives used by pilots to be able to remain seated at the controls.

A keen Wireless Operator, as I was, (self preservation is a mighty motivator to concentrate and be keen), spent more time as another pair of lookout eyes than at my Marconi Transmitter Receiver, only sitting for the few seconds to take the quarter hourly check broadcasts from base and group. For that look out role, I stood with my head in the Astro Dome, which Perspex bulb was positioned slightly behind and above my seated position. That standing up lookout role I adopted paid dividends several times for us & for me, including one night when a large piece of shrapnel came in on the starboard side, carved up the main spar aluminium covering on the back of my seat, as a large pair of tinsnips would, before exiting on the port side. That lucky escape has allowed me the pleasure of surviving to be around to talk with you today.

Although the war in Europe was entering the last six months, the RAF bomber loss rates high during the 1944/45 winter. The worst sustained loss rates had been in the winter of 1943/44, the time of the 'Berlin offensive' and on the subsequent second 'Ruhr' offensive.

I believe Air Marshal Bert Harris, the Chief of Bomber Command from February 1942 until the end of the war in Europe, was a very effective leader. He was on the job at his headquarters at High Wycombe near Oxford, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for over three years, without a break and made a major contribution to Allied victory.

But like all of us, he was human and, with the benefit of hindsight, it is undeniable he and his team made a few errors. One was due to his absolute belief that the war could be won by joint RAF/USAF round the clock night and day bombing of Germany without the need for a second front land invasion of Europe. His very life costly 'Berlin offensive' of the 1943/44 winter was undertaken as part of that belief.

Although he is now known as 'Bomber' Harris, we, when flying with Bomber Command, referred to him, not in jest, as 'Butcher' or 'Butch' Harris, such was his reputation for ruthlessness. The situation demanded such a leader. The price of victory is often high and the approach and campaigns masterminded by Harris were no exception. He has been much maligned, unjustly, for the indiscriminate nature of area bombing. The decision to use that tactic was made in Air Ministry; Harris was the man who implemented that decision. Admittedly he did so with great determination & dedication for he too believed it was the most practical and effective tactic to subjugate the Hun.

### **LANCASTERS IN SNOW ON LUDFORD SLIDE**

This slide shows a typical scene on a bomber drome with two 101 Lancasters parked in the open, as they always were, year round. Last minute



After our baptism of fire involving such 'Ruhr bashing' to give it the popular colloquial term of the day, a combination of the six days leave every six weeks that operational air crew enjoyed and a bout of tonsillitis suffered by the skipper, saw four of our crew each fly as a spare bod in four other crews during Christmas week with serious consequences for all but the rear gunner who had an uneventful trip. Our Special crash landed in the south of England, our flight engineer crash landed in France, both returning to the squadron safely but, on Boxing Day, the bomb aimer baled out from another plane and was taken prisoner. Thus, there was an understandable aversion that we all had to flying with a strange crew as a spare bod when that crew had one regular member indisposed.

On 2 January 1945, with a new RAF Bomb Aimer whose crew had disbanded after a serious crash, we went to Nuremberg for the first time since the disastrous March 1944 raid and knocked out the M.A.N Automotive Works.

### **SR-H HOW & C CHARLIE SLIDE**

After another oil target on January 6, and our regular kite C Charlie having been written off by another crew crashing it in a snowstorm, we took H How of 101 Squadron on its 100th operation to Munich on January 7, a flight of nine hours.

This slide is a painting of How and our regular plane, our third Charlie. As mentioned, the first Charlie crashed in a snow storm and broke its back; the second Charlie had crashed and been rebuilt so often that it was a 'death trap' in the opinion of our dedicated ground crew Geordie Chiefie mechanic, Wally Stoney. He declared it unserviceable on the few occasions we were rostered to take it on an operation, having a reserve kite bombed up ready for us. We went on our regular six days leave every six weeks later in January and that C Charlie did not return from an op.

Our third Charlie, the one pictured, was a brand new Lanc, delivered from the factory to our waiting crew by a slip of an Air Transport Service girl pilot, flying solo. Wally, the chief of our ground crew, only once allowed another crew to fly that Charlie until we had completed our tour in it three months later.. Earning such loyalty from and showing appreciation to and respect for your ground crew was a key element in survival. Although I would claim not to be superstitious, I still have a four leaf clover, a lucky memento, given to me by that same Wally, early in our tour. These fellows worked in freezing winter weather out in the open.

Reverting to 'H' 'How', because of its age and torrid history, the Munich trip had its moments for us. Firstly, climbing over a cold weather front caused

severe icing to adversely affect the plane's performance; then the Pathfinders were three minutes late getting the sky markers, code named 'Wanganui', down for blind bombing from above cloud; as we had been rostered to bomb at 'H' hour, the time the target markers were supposed to go down, this meant we had to lose time by doing a 360 degrees orbit, never a welcome diversion and especially in that stream of 645 aircraft of which 14 were lost that night. An orbit over a target could be likened to cutting across a busy five lane traffic highway at night without lights and then cutting back in across the same five lanes.

Then 'How's' oxygen supply to the skipper and flight engineer cut out over the target, the inebriated like oxygen deficiency antics of the engineer alerting us before the skipper was similarly affected and we were able to plug him in to an emergency oxygen bottle; then the heating packed up resulting in an icicle of over ten inches long forming below my mouth piece microphone as we climbed back over 24,000 feet to clear the cold front on the way home with the outside temp at minus 41 degrees Celsius and the inside temperature not much more.

As we prepared to land, one wheel would not lock down until we applied an emergency air bottle. But, despite showing the effects of age and the fact that How had completed 25 operations to Berlin in the 1943/44 winter including its first six, we, like so many crews before and after us who flew in How, were sleeping in our nissen hut bed that morning.

Over 4,000 of the 7,377 Lancasters built were lost and only 35 survived to complete 100 operations or more. Despite the high loss rate of 101 Squadron, two of them were from 101, our S Sugar and H How. Both did 121 operations but Sugar was shot down by a German ME 262 Jet fighter on Bremen daylight raid on 22 March 1945. before the escorting high cover RAF Typhoon fighters shot down the ME 262.

On January 14 1945, we spent over 10 hours in the air on a raid on the synthetic oil target of Merseberg near Leipzig, a frequent target as the Germans would bring it back into production and Bomber Command would hit it again. On our attack that night, the only error ever by our excellent navigator contributed to the length of the flight. On return to our base, Ludford, it was closed because of weather and we were diverted to Carnaby, a special crash drome in Yorkshire, well to the north, one of three such emergency crash dromes for returning planes in trouble, strategically placed on different parts of the English coast.

Incorrect co- efficiencies for Carnaby were set on the Nav's Gee box, a key navigational aid, with the result that when the nav. from his enclosed position and reading from his gee box screen, said, 'we are over Carnaby now', the bomb aimer down front, replied 'no, we are not, we are over the North Sea'.

A second time, we again homed on a spot over the North Sea and with the Flight Engineer reporting we were all but out of fuel, the pilot flew west pronto. We went straight in to the first drome we sighted with lights on as we crossed the Yorkshire coast. As we neared a dispersal of what turned out to be a grass runway fighter drome on which we had landed a four engine Lanc, the engines cut out for lack of fuel.

On a post war squadron reunion visit with that RAF bomb aimer at Ludford, he commented 'It was all right for you Aussies but I could not swim' to which the obvious retort was 'A lot of good being able to swim would have been in the North Sea in January.' The average time before being frozen to death was said to be less than five minutes unless you were lucky enough for the Lanc to float long enough for the crew to make it into the escape dinghy all RAF bombers carried. That was an action we practiced assiduously to get evacuation time under 15 seconds in a nearby swimming pool as we also practiced baling out in a gymnasium. Fortunately we never had to employ either escape mechanism in a real crisis.

### **KLEVE SLIDE**

Our seven targets in February 1945 included some memorable ones. On Kleve, the target shown on this slide, where Montgomery's troops were waiting to move across the river, cloud covered the target as we approached. Because of the proximity of the troops, the Master Bomber called the 295 Lancasters, at a very late stage, to dive down through the cloud from 8,000 to 3,500 feet, to get under the cloud and to be able to bomb visually. That was the lowest safe height to drop the 4,000 lb cookies we carried, along with 10,000 pounds of high explosive bombs, for that target. The danger of collision was extreme as 295 bombed up Lancs, each weighing 68,000 pounds all up on takeoff, dived through the cloud.

Montgomery's forces were able to take the town on the morning after the raid and Monty, not known for handing out plaudits that might detract from his own achievements, sent Harris a message of thanks and appreciation. The only problem was that the devastation as shown by the slide meant that his troops had difficulty getting through Kleve despite no real opposition.

### **DRESDEN SLIDE**

Then on the night of 13/14 February, we were in the second wave on the much publicised and much criticised raid on Dresden, pictured in this slide. Dresden was a very legitimate war target. It was a major transport hub for the Russian front, a main government administrative centre as the Germans,

believing it would not be bombed, had moved many government departments there and it was a very important industrial centre. The Zeiss Ikon & Siemens factories between them had over 10,000 employees producing precision instruments for use in the war.

Harris has been wrongly criticised for that bombing as the decision to bomb Dresden, Leipzig and Chemnitz was taken by Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta – the role of Harris was to implement their decision. Churchill was an outstanding wartime leader but, to his everlasting shame, when there was some media criticism of the raid, he resorted to being a politician rather than the great statesman he had been and allowed Harris to bear the brunt of the criticism. And the Americans who bombed Dresden the next day in daylight with almost 1,000 planes had their publicity machine keep their participation under wraps.

After the Berlin wall fell, the early exaggerated claim of 250,000 killed in Dresden was reduced to the correct figure of around 25,000. That is still a very heavy death toll but it should not be forgotten that there were over 80,000 deaths in residential areas of Britain from German air raids on cities, most of no military significance. The indiscriminate destruction by German unmanned V 1s and V2s rockets contributed to that slaughter late in the war.

We had less than four hours sleep after the nine hours forty minute trip for the raid on Dresden before we were again being briefed for the nine hour raid on Chemnitz on the following night of 14/15 February. Sleep was at a premium in mid February for, in a ten day period, as well as Dresden and Chemnitz, we had done two Ruhr targets on successive nights followed the next night by a devastating raid on Pforzheim, shown in the next slide.

### **PFORZHEIM SLIDE**

The two photos on this slide are of two stages of the raid on Pforzheim. Of the more than sixty bombing briefings we as a crew received, including those for raids that were deferred or cancelled, Pforzheim was the only one when we were told specifically that we would be killing civilians. It was a major manufacturing centre for precision instruments, most produced in small factories within a mixed residential area of mostly wooden buildings. German casualties were on a scale comparable to those at Dresden.

The raid by 367 Lancasters and 13 Mosquitoes with 12 lost involved bombing from 8,000 feet instead of our more usual 17 to 20,000 feet. That brought us within the height range of the accurate German Bofors guns. At one stage, we were flying with five Lancasters on fire very close to us. It was the only occasion that there was a misunderstanding between the skipper and navigator over the course to be flown. I was in my usual position of lookout in

the astro dome, when not at my wireless. At the same time as I saw the five planes on fire, I noticed that the planet Venus was on my immediate left. It should have been behind us if we were on the correct course out of the target. 270 degrees was the course I had heard the navigator give the skipper immediately after bombing. My call to check our course revealed we were flying towards heavily defended Stuttgart on 170 degrees.

Just as we have all observed in commercial life, this proved once again the value of a crew working as a team with each member going beyond his prime responsibilities. Once before, we had benefited by my time in the Astro dome when bombing Nuremberg. There, a Halifax was above and slightly in front with bomb doors open on the same course as we were, heading for the same target markers. My warning to the skipper led to us taking the less dangerous but never welcome option of an orbit. With bombers going through a target at a rate, often in excess of thirty a minute, one every two seconds, all tracking for the same target markers, being hit accidentally by bombs, especially scattering incendiaries, from planes above was a frequent cause of damage and even disaster.

While chance played a major role in determining the fate of crews, an alert crew reduced the incidence of the adverse luck factor leading to disaster.

The RAF was rapidly establishing mastery of the skies over Germany and, with losses decreasing, the bombing offensive intensified. We chalked up five operations in the first 8 days of March, mostly synthetic oil plant targets. Knocking out Germany's synthetic oil supply was a prime bombing policy objective and contributed significantly to advancing ultimate victory.

## **COLOGNE SLIDE**

Pictured is the only non oil target of those five raids, Cologne, which we went to in daylight on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1945. That day, the two remaining bridges over the Rhine at Cologne were knocked out as was the railway marshalling yards, all very close to the Dom shown in the centre of this slide. One of the mysteries for many RAF bomber crews is how that 13<sup>th</sup> century constructed Cathedral remained standing through the many effective raids on Cologne, including an early 1,000 bomber raid, in which the surrounding area was absolutely flattened. Today, it remains a concrete slab surround for at least 50 metres out from the Dom as I saw on post war visits. The shadow of the cathedral extending across the Rhine, admittedly a late afternoon reconnaissance photo, gives an indication of the height of the spires that remained standing.

All crews had to bring back a photo, synchronised to the bombs release and to take it, the pilot had to hold the plane level for thirty seconds after

bombing, having already flown straight and level for up to three minutes before bombing as the Bomb Aimer gave heading corrections. When you were sweating out those long three minutes and then another thirty seconds straight and level for the photo when the flak bursts were usually very close, the sound was disconcerting to say the least but when they were so close you could smell the cordite, it was time to check that your chute was readily accessible in its nearby stowage. The words 'Bombs Gone' were truly magic to the ears of the waiting crew.

RAF folk lore, backed by statistics, was that a crew was most likely to be lost on one of its first five operations as training was put into practice and experience gained. The next diciest time, that is 'dicing with death' was the last five trips when tension mounted as the sought 'Tour Expired' status was keenly anticipated and nervousness often developed - so near and yet so far.

Our operation number 27 on 14 April to Potsdam, in the Berlin defence zone, and the birthplace of our Special Duty Operator, Jean Fochs, was one of our most dicey. So often, we had seen a bomber, caught in a 'Blue Light' controlled cone of searchlights, weave around the sky in a vain endeavour to escape before the flak got it or a fighter shot it down. The radar controlled 'blue light' was the master beam on which a battery of lights would close to form a cone with a bomber victim as the centrepiece of the cone apex. And the blue light would pass the trapped plane on to the next blue light, with its accompanying cone and synchronised flak guns, until the plane was shot down.

We had made a crew decision that if ever caught in a 'blue light' cone, the skipper would put the Lanc into a steep spiral dive and the physically strong Nav, before the forces of gravity in the dive prevented him from moving, would go forward immediately. He would then be in a position to help the pilot pull the kite out of the dive.

Just after dropping our bombs on Potsdam from 20,000 feet, a blue light caught us for the first time ever and the plan was implemented. At 5,000 feet we escaped the cone of searchlights with the air speed indicator off the clock at something over 400 MPH against a normal cruising speed of 180 MPH. The straining skipper and nav between them had us flying straight and level at 500 feet above the deck, somewhat lower than one would choose to be over Berlin defence zone at that time. At debriefing that early morning, several crews asked 'Did you see that kite spiralling down over the city?' We basked in the reflected glory of having escaped a blue light cone as we enjoyed our coffee. For those who desired it, the Padre, as the bearer of good tidings and goodies, would add a tot of rum to the coffee.

### **HELIGOLAND – 18 APRIL 1945 SLIDE**

The all but absolute mastery of the skies the Allies enjoyed in the late stage of hostilities and the precision of bombing, with nary a building left

standing, is shown graphically in the before and after shots of the raid on Heligoland, our operation number 29, when there was no opposition from German anti aircraft fire or fighters. There was some extra satisfaction for us in that destruction, especially of the airfield on the adjoining island. From there, so many RAF bomber crews had been attacked and shot down into the North Sea over the preceding five years to join the 20,000 names of Air Force personnel, lost and with no known grave, on the roll at Runnymede memorial. Many were in planes that exploded with full bomb load aboard after being hit on their way into Germany or shot down into the North Sea by enemy night fighters based on that Heligoland drome.

My aim today has been to give an idea of the life of a crew flying with Bomber Command from the Wireless Operator's perspective. Our pilot, as were almost all skippers of the one in four Bomber Command crews who survived to complete a tour of operations, was awarded a Distinguished Flying Cross. This was an acknowledgment of his leadership of a team achievement and even though there were no specific acts of notable personal heroism by any member of our crew. The art of survival was to keep out of trouble if you could, to be a member of an alert, skilled and dedicated crew who never stopped training, to resort to fervent prayer in time of danger and to enjoy more than a modicum of the favours of lady luck.

I spoke of team spirit. The crew or team spirit that existed in a Bomber Crew exceeds anything I have experienced in civilian life, whether on the sporting field or in business.

In almost a year that our crew was together, and despite our very widely differing personalities, never a harsh word passed between us – differences of opinion were resolved amicably.

One essential for survival was to have a gen navigator. We did. Our nav, George, was a farm boy from outside Gulgong. A six footer, he walked and talked like Steele Rudd's 'On Our Selection' character, Dave of 'Dad and Dave'. He could have played the part without rehearsal. But when he took up his position over his charts with his radar screens and his box of fifty razor sharpened pencils before him to plot our position every three minutes, twice the frequency required by RAF edict, he was our passport to a safe return. Our safe returns were due in no small measure to that nav who kept us on track, on time at allocated height at all times. That meant we flew in the midst of the bomber stream experiencing the jolting from the slip streams of the other bombers we could not see, a very reassuring confirmation that we were where we should be. Then it was only the luck factor that might result in our plane, rather than one of the many flying with us, being the one to be hit by the flak or a fighter's canon shell and result in our family receiving the dreaded telegram commencing - 'We regret to inform you...'

## **BOMBER COMMAND MEMORIAL CANBERRA SLIDE**

Despite the acts of sheer heroism that were frequent among bomber crews and, to use a phrase of the time, the other 'dicing with death' experiences I have touched on, I hope that no one takes away from my talk, even the slightest glimmer of glorification of war. Anyone who survived a tour of operations with Bomber Command and witnessed, at very close hand, so many colleagues lose their lives, can only view war in terms of horror, not glory.

Nevertheless, the excellent Bomber Command Memorial in the precincts of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, dedicated in 2005, is a fitting recognition of the contribution made by the people of that Command to the overthrow of Hitler and his henchmen and thereby aided the preservation of the freedoms of the democratic lifestyle we continue to enjoy!

Thank you for your attention gentlemen.