

Chapter Two

Bournemouth to June Sixteenth

We landed in Scotland, then went by train to Bournemouth on the south coast of England. That is where all the air crew from the Commonwealth were first stationed, all raring to go. There were air crews from all over the former British Empire, plus a lot of Americans that had come to Canada and joined the RCAF. We did a little training to keep busy and were given gas masks and clothes that we needed in England. We had more shots, in the arm or in the behind. It always seemed that when there was nothing to do, we got more shots.

The town of Bournemouth was a deluxe summer resort which became fully occupied with air force personnel during the war. The town was made up of hundreds of hotels of every size and a lot of very large homes. The RCAF had taken most of them over to billet the airmen. Every once in a while the Germans would send a few bombers over and bomb the place, which got everybody very serious about the blackout. The beaches were covered with rolls and rolls of barbed wire as well as hundreds of large concrete

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blocks, all laid out along the ocean edge, in case of an invasion. The blackout was very strictly enforced and not a light could be shown. All the drapes were fully pulled, with no lights allowed to show through. No car lights or bicycle lights were permitted, which was very important. The Home Guard and the A.R.P. (Air Raid Precautions) went around and made sure this law was strictly enforced.

We were transferred from Bournemouth to a small holding station, Evesham, which was in south central England. We were there only a few weeks until there was room for us in Aircrew Flying Unit (A.F.U.).

Then off to Staverton, No. 6 A.F.U. which was a small air station. We were in No. 77 Air Bombing and Navigation Course. I was still with all the Bomb Aimers from the course in Canada. At that time we had been together for a year and had not been formed into crews. We did a mixture of bombing and navigating practice both by day and night for a month.

We were next sent to OTU (Operational Training Unit) in Long Marston near Stratford upon Avon, to be formed into crews. We had no choice as to which crew we were assigned but most of them worked out well. Ours was great! Our pilot was Bill Smith, known as "Smithy." We nicknamed the navigator, Bill Gardiner, "Gardy"; our Wireless Air Gunner (W.A.G.); Mike Baran, was a Warrant Officer #11 (WO2). Our tail gunner was Glen Taylor and the mid-upper gunner was Sid Wilson. Bill Smith had been in England for a few years. Although he was a Canadian

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who had joined the RAF and had just transferred to the RCAF. He was proud of being more English than Canadian. He had been flying Whitney's, pulling gliders around Africa, so he had a lot of experience to his credit. He was a Warrant Officer 1st class (WO1), and received his commission as a Pilot Officer soon after we met. We were very fortunate to get a pilot with that much experience. All the rest of us were sergeants except Mike Baran who was WO2.

Once we had formed a crew, we did everything together. We slept in the same bunk house which was usually a Nissen hut. We would eat together, fly together and generally go out drinking together, except Glen, who didn't drink but always made sure we got home. Sometimes in a blackout, finding one's way home could be a problem. We would even go on leave as a crew. That bonding was very important to allow us to know what each other was thinking. We knew we were going to be in some tough spots together.

We did our crew training on Wellingtons, known as "the Wimpies". We flew all over England, and attended lots of lectures about the many problems we would run into. Before flying... across English Channel we practised in the air over England to make further trips as safe as possible. A lot of our instructors were fellows who had completed one or two tours of operations. An "Op" was a bombing trip to Germany or over occupied Europe, and a tour was twenty five to thirty trips or Ops. So few crews survived a tour without being shot down that 25 to 30 trips was quite an

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achievement, causing the rest of us to look up to those who had completed a tour.

In December we moved from Long Marston to Honeybourne, an operational Training Unit, to finish our training. It was here that I met my wife-to-be, Ginger. The first day I went into the mess hall, there was this cute little Welsh girl whom I soon got to know. I like pepper and I was complaining that there was no pepper. One day Ginger brought a 5 pound tin and plunked it down in front of me and said "here is your goddamn pepper." We had a lot of fun together. On one of our leaves, I went home with her to Wales and they all gave me a great time. We were married in March the next year. Things moved very fast in those days. We were enjoying ourselves quite a bit at this time. Many of us who started training in Edmonton (a year earlier) were still together. I can remember one night, Bill Ritchie, a fellow Bomb Aimer (who I'd been friendly with since we first started training in Canada), was with me in the canteen, drinking. We got feeling very good and decided to go to a dance in a small town a few miles from the camp. We were not sure of the way but we had a good idea where it was so, off we went on our bicycles! However we didn't do very well because we'd had a little too much too drink, more than we thought, and we never got to the dance. We were resting on the side of the road; perhaps we had a little sleep. Well, Bill got sick and heaved up a little, losing his false teeth on the ground. We were looking all over for them when I suddenly spotted them! Oh! too late! I had already started to take a step. You know how,

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sometimes when you see something while walking, your mind has already told you to take the step. Well, that's what I did, right on Bill's teeth. Of course I broke them. I think he thought I did it on purpose, but I didn't. That sort of finished the evening; the prospect of a dance was over. So, we went home. On Christmas day 1943, I was sitting in the mess feeling no pain. (I had a few too many drinks) I had gone into the kitchen (as Ginger worked there) and I got a turkey carcass to chew on. The cooks always cut most of the meat off the turkey in the kitchen and never served the bones in the mess.



*Fig.2a Picture of the crew, less Bill Gardiner.
Taken on Squadron*

The Meteorology Officer (the fellow who tells us all about what weather to expect) and I were discussing his job. I said: "The only thing you can tell us

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accurately was why it had rained the day before.” He and his pals promptly tossed me out of the window. I was glad it was on the first floor, and that I had had a few drinks, so it didn’t hurt me.

Two nice things about being stationed in Longs Marston were firstly, courting Ginger, and secondly, I knew all the mess staff very well. So, if I ever overslept in the morning I could always get breakfast in the kitchen, even after the dining room was closed. There were always a few little extras one could get. The instructors and senior NCO’s were mostly RAF types and they did not think it was right for senior NCO’s to be fraternising with the female staff in the mess. But that never stopped me!

One night we went to town to do a little pub crawling. We had arranged for a taxi to take us home because, if you didn’t arrange it ahead of time, you couldn’t get one. After a few drinks, we got confused between the Black Swan pub and the White Swan pub where we were to meet the taxi. In the end, we were waiting at the wrong Swan and never did see our taxi. As we started walking back to base, we ran into the station ambulance just a little way out of town. The driver was waiting for the medical officer (called the “MO”) who was a bit of a boozier. We told the driver that the MO had gone home a long time ago, so he said to hell with it and went back to base, taking us back with him in the ambulance. The MO was very mad but never found out who told his driver that story. It was eight miles and the MO had to walk.

Our graduation flight was a trip to France, to give us a little experience flying over enemy territory. Our

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first mission was to deliver leaflets telling the people what was going on in the war, as the Germans' explanation was far from the truth. It was also an effort to divert the German fighters away from the main bomber stream that night. We therefore headed across to southern France while the main bombers headed on a northerly direction. The Germans would direct their interceptors toward us, while we would drop our leaflets and head back to England before they got to us. The mission was similar to a bombing run but only a short distance inside enemy territory.

Our first trip was sort of scary. There was full radio silence and no lights. You really felt all alone. When you saw the first big searchlights in the distance and the first anti-aircraft flak exploding in the air, you knew you were not over friendly territory. We felt sure that every shot was aimed at us. When one crew got lost and broke radio silence, the Germans homed their guns on them and shot them down. It was awful to get "the chop" in training, before you even reached a squadron. However, with our youthful confidence we all knew it was going to happen to someone else, not to us. Our trip to deliver the leaflets did not work out so well. The bomb bay doors were supposed to open, then the container should have opened, to let the leaflets drop out. Instead, the whole container dropped out. I have often thought of that night, imagining some poor Frenchman looking up in the sky to see the leaflets coming down, containers and all.

We were now finished with the Operational Training Unit and were ready to go to a conversion

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unit for experience on four-engine bombers. We next went north to Yorkshire where we started converting to Halifax bombers. The conversion was almost finished when along came the Canadian Mark 10 Lancaster bomber, the newest four-engine bomber, on which we now retrained. They were brand new and smelled like a new car.

We took many chances, probably because most of us were under twenty. Bill Gardiner, Glen Taylor and I were just twenty years old, while Bill Smith, who was twenty-eight, was considered real old. It was great to be young and dare-devils! For example Bill Baran, our wireless air gunner, liked to take pictures. One day we were on a practice flight near the Cliffs of Dover and he wanted to get some pictures of the birds nesting in the high, steep face of limestone. So, there he was, standing up in the mid-upper gun turret with his camera, taking pictures. He kept telling Smithy our pilot, "Get closer, get closer." I'm sure we were only a few yards away from the cliffs.

We used to have some wild parties in the canteen. One day, a fellow came out of the canteen, which was on the second floor, fell down the stairs and broke his shoulder and hurt his leg and as a result he was declared "wounded in action." I cannot remember if he got posted home or not! We could just see his mother telling everyone about her poor son who got injured in action, flying overseas on a bombing mission!

Ginger and I had decided to get married before being posted to an operational bombing squadron. Since I was only twenty years old, I had to wire my

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mother: "Please, send permission for me to get married". And it wasn't a shotgun wedding either! Since this meant that Ginger would be leaving Wales and her family after the war, her family was not too pleased with her getting married to an airman from the "Colonies" and I guess if a British girl married a Canadian, she would move far away and they may never see her again. In Britain, anyone from Canada, New Zealand, Australia or any of the so-called colonies, was considered a colonial. This attitude did not go over too well with most Canadians. Canada seemed very far away because in those days it meant a trip of ten days on the boat and another six days on the train. I think the British had heard a lot of different stories about us and the "Colonies" and I guess that they thought once she went that far away, they may never see her again.

In preparing for the wedding, Ginger asked me: "Do you want to have the reading of the banns?". I said, "Hell no, we just want a small wedding. Why do we need a band?" I didn't know that "reading of the banns" was the notice to get married, to be read in the church, for three weeks in a row and was the same as getting a marriage license. I think you also needed a license but we did not have to pay for it, as her mother had the banns read. There wasn't too much specific training while at the conversion station as we concentrated getting used to a four-engine bomber by doing general flying and doing take off and landings. We were getting more general practice flying together as a crew. We were getting very close to the big thing, that is, flying with a big load of bombs into

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Germany. Most of our training focused on getting there and dropping the bombs, but getting back home was very important to us also. After the main excitement was over, Smithy used to say, "Getting off the ground with a full load of bombs is half the trip." The next part of our training was a Commando course. We were all told that it would be tough, but it was a lot tougher than we were told. So Commando course, here we come. Three weeks of very tough training to get us ready in case we were shot down. Our duty was to avoid capture, keep as many Germans busy looking for us as possible, contact the Underground one way or the other and get back to England. The Commando course was run by the British Army and, as they were mostly regular army, they were real tough and wanted us to know it. They felt aircrew were real soft types and called us "Brylcream Boys" because of the popular Brylcream hair dressing of the time. First, we were all reduced to privates, regardless of what rank we actually held. Although we had been in training for over a year, we had done very little physical work, having been either sitting in class, flying, or going on leave.

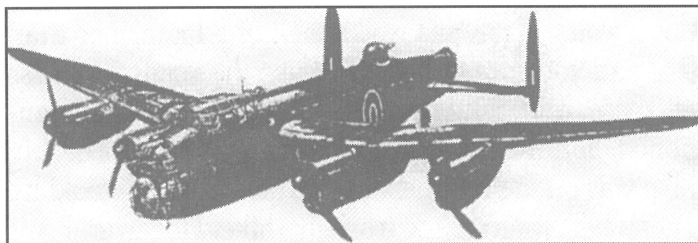


Fig.2b Lancaster Bomber

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On this course everything was done with a whistle, all on the double, no walking. We had to run all the time. No bicycles, no rides. They had us climbing ropes, running through ditches, over hills, through pipes, culverts, lots of mud and water. They wanted it to be like the real thing. They did a good job. I think they, were in their glory. Believe me, after a day of Commando training we sure slept at the end of the day and didn't go far from our barracks.

After the first week, they took us 12 miles into the country and dumped us off. We now had to get back to our base on our own, without using the roads or getting caught. Of course, they were out looking for us, and if we were found in a pub or on the road, they would take us back a few miles and we would have to start over again. If they found us in a taxi, they would get really angry and take us all the way back to the starting point.

At the end of the second week, we were taken twenty-five miles out, repeating the return to barracks all over again. Except now, we were in a bit better shape. By the end of the third week, it was the "big one." that is forty miles (which everyone talked about). We were instructed: "If you ever got shot down, you will have to walk a hell of a lot farther than that and you sure as hell can't use the roads." I guess all these things helped me later on but, as I mentioned before, I was about to get married. The big hike was on the Wednesday and the course would be over when we got back from the hike. However, I was to be married on the Saturday. It did not seem like a very good idea to go on the hike and I wanted to get

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out of it. Therefor I decided to go to the orderly room to see the Captain. I knew he was a tough miserable character but you never get what you do not ask for, especially in the armed forces. I explained to him, "Captain, I am getting married on the weekend and I do not feel a forty mile hike will help my honeymoon. I would like to get out of it". He said: "No way can I give you permission, but I'll tell you something. Your two week pass is already made up. It is in the top drawer of my desk and I am going for tea". The British always have their tea. I didn't say anything and it took me a few seconds to get what he was trying to tell me. Then it came to me. I saluted him and said, "Thank you Sir." I waited until he had gone for tea, took my pass, and off I went. I did not question him, and sure got out of there in a hurry!

I headed to Tredegar, in South Wales, where Ginger's family lived and where we were to be married. As soon as I got there we went to get our marriage license since we had to have it three days in advance. Everything went well until the license clerk asked me for the Air Force permission to get married. I looked at him dumb. He said: "You have to have it as there have been too many servicemen getting married who were already married in Canada." We thought things over for a few minutes, then he said: "I will issue the license with today's date on it, but I cannot give it to you until you show me the permission". Things were not going to be that easy. I was suppose to be on the big forty mile hike. All my crew were on it. I phoned the orderly room and explained what I needed, but I did not tell them where I was. They told me they

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would make it up. Then I had to phone the squadron headquarters, to which my crew was returning and left a message for them to pick up the letter with the permission to get married. When they picked up their passes at the orderly room, my crew was supposed to let me know if they got it without any problems. Then Saturday arrived, my big day to get married. All of my crew were coming there on Saturday morning. Bill Gardiner, my navigator, was going to be my best man. I had not heard a thing from them. I had stayed in a hotel in Tredegar on Friday night as it was supposed to be unlucky if you saw your bride after midnight before the wedding. I got up Saturday morning and was not feeling too bright. Ginger's father, brothers and brother-in-laws had taken me out on a stag party and I was never one to leave a party before it was over, especially if it was my last night of being single. I went down to the bus station to wait for my crew, worried about the permission. When the bus arrived they all clambered off, without a worry in their head. The guys had picked up the permission, but never thought of phoning me! We proceeded to grab a taxi and got the marriage license from the license office. The wedding was to take place in the Chapel. Ginger's Mother arrived late, since she had been attending to Ginger's wedding gown etc. I was waiting, already standing up in the front of the Church. With all my crew in the front row just behind me Smithy, my pilot, kept whispering to me: "It's not too late, let's get the hell out of here." Then he said to the crew: "I knew we stayed too long on that station;

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we should have got a posting before this thing got too serious."



Fig.2c Ginger and I

But before I could say any more, the organist started playing, "Here comes the bride". Ginger came down the aisle, wearing the most beautiful dress I had ever seen. In fact I hadn't known what she was going to wear. She wouldn't tell me. I don't think I had ever seen her in civilian clothes before, and she looked really different out of a uniform. We had the reception in the Mountain Inn pub across the road from Ginger's parents' house. In Wales, a reception includes a lot of drinking beer and singing, so it was a very active day. Our honeymoon started immediately afterward with a bus ride of a few hours to the town of Gwent. The trip was memorable since, as we had

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rushed from the reception to the bus without a visit to the toilet, my kidneys almost burst. I survived, however, and we used up the rest of my two weeks leave wandering around that part of the country. We finished the trip back at Tredegar where I found Bill, my Navigator and best man, still there, as he had developed a great liking for Wales.



Fig.2d The full crew at my Wedding

On my return from my honeymoon, I found we were off to Yorkshire to convert to Halifax bombers, the main four-engine aircraft used by No. 6 Group's squadrons. Up to now, we had been flying two-engine aircraft, Ansons and Whitney's. Much of the training with our larger aircraft consisted of doing "Circuits and Bumps", which were take-offs and landings. This include landing with three engines and flying with

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two or three engines to help prepare us in case we were damaged while on a bombing run over Germany. 419 Squadron was based in Yorkshire, near a small town called Middleton St. George. The Squadron was called the "Moose Squadron" after Dave "Moose" Fulton from Kamloops BC, the squadron's original commanding officer. The City of Kamloops was our squadron sponsor and it still is to this date. Dave Fulton was always talking about moose, so he was nick-named "Moose Fulton". He had been shot down before I arrived at the squadron and he never made it back. "Moosa Aswayita", the squadron motto, means "Beware of The Moose." On August 11, 1944, the King of England officially presented the moose emblem to 419 Squadron. This Squadron became the most decorated unit in the RCAF during World War II and is now based in Cold Lake, Alberta.

We were a very close crew by now, having flown together since we first met back in Honeybourne, seven months previously. We only flew once with another pilot and during that flight we were diverted to a station in southern England because of bad weather. As a result of this, it took us a week to finally get back to our home Squadron. We had landed in Linton, where, because of the heavy rains, the dirt runway had become too soft for our heavy bomber to take off. As Linton was a test squadron, all the air crew were officers. Our crew, however, were all NCO's so we had a ball in their mess and got very spoiled by the WAF'S (Women Auxiliary Air Force).

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On our way home we had to go through London to get back to our squadron from Linton. There, people stared at us as we were still wearing our flying suits and carrying our parachutes. We had signed them out so we were responsible for them. I think a lot of people thought we had crashed some place and were walking home! It was always considered bad luck if we flew with another crew. But then again, my friend Bill Ritchie lost his crew during the first part of his tour when he was sick, and his crew flew without him.

They got shot down but he completed his tour of operations as a spare Bomb Aimer, having a different crew every night he flew. Whenever a Bomb Aimer in another crew was sick or could not fly, he substituted for them. He is now living happily in Virden, Manitoba. Our operational bombing mission started on a particular night, and followed a certain pattern which we soon got used to. The day preceding a night bombing mission was filled with a schedule of tasks which we routinely followed. If it was "go" for our crew, we would have to go to the Dispersal Area, where our aircraft was kept. They were put in small groups all around the airfield. They would never keep too many planes in one place in case we were bombed. There would be a truck to take us out to our plane. The gunners would check their turrets and the guns, making sure they were working perfectly and had plenty of ammunition. I would examine the camera and the bomb sights, and verify the front turret, the guns and shells. The navigator would look at his instruments and his radar, (such as it was in those

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days). It was my job to plot our position. I always liked to use the star Betelgeuse, in the constellation Orion.

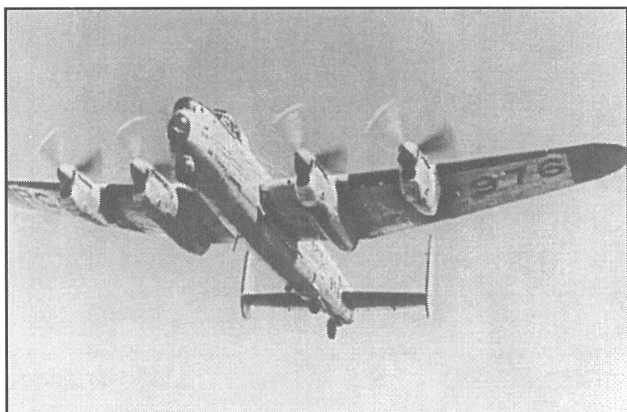


Fig.2e Lancaster in flight

The wireless air gunner would test his radio. The pilot would verify all his controls and the plane in general. The engineer would examine the controls and the different things to do with the engines. The ground crew did a great job of keeping the plane in shape, but it was our neck up there, not theirs. Once we had taken off, it was too late to complain. We were all posted from there, some to become Instructors and they seemed very happy, although I would have hated it. Often the trip would be cancelled. When it wasn't the weather, it was sometimes intelligence that had found out something at the last minute. Each trip had special bombs matched to whatever target we were going after. The next thing we had to do was go check out our parachute. There was no way of testing that. You had to have full faith in the group that were

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packing them. The big joke around the parachute depot was: "If it does not work, bring it back, we will give you a new one!" About 2 p.m. we would start our briefing. All the crews would be there. The Commanding Officer would give us a few words of encouragement to the assembled crews, telling us the importance of this particular bombing raid. (All the raids were very important).

Then he would take the cover off the large map on the wall, show us where our target was for that night, and tell us what we were going after.



Fig.2f My crew's picture taken by me on Squadron

There was generally lots of "ahs" of one kind or another. If it was a short trip or not into the Ruhr we would all say: "A piece of cake". However, if it was in

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the Ruhr, we would all say, "ah" because the Ruhr was always a very hot target. A lot of flak from the anti-aircraft guns would be fired at us, exploding at a given height. Generally, the German gunners tried to guess what height we were flying and just keep pumping the flak at us.

They also had big search-lights which they kept moving around the sky. If you got caught in one, you had to get out of the cone of light before the gunners down below spotted you and locked their guns on you. To get out of the search-lights, the pilot would have to corkscrew, diving to the right and then up to the left. There were generally many of our own bombers around, so you had to watch very carefully not to collide with one. The Germans always had lots of fighters defending the Ruhr, because that was where their main steel factories and much of their ammunition manufacturing was located. Everyone looked out for fighters. We would first see them when they were just a spot in the sky. They flew very fast, and if they saw you first, they were after you. The gunners went into full swing and the pilot would start to corkscrew. It could be a very busy night. If the trip was to Berlin, that was going to be very exciting, as this city was very well protected, with lots of flak and searchlights. Most of their fighter aircraft were there or in the Ruhr. Because it was a long trip, we would take "Wakey Wakey" pills, as we called them, to keep us from falling asleep. Later, when we got back and finished the interrogations, which would be early in the morning, we would take sleeping pills to go to sleep. The Navigation Leader would then give a talk

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on the flight times to the points where we were to be at certain times and the exact time to be over the target. It was very important that we all stayed together. If you got behind or strayed off course, a fighter plane could easily pick you off.



Fig.2g A big one, on the 1,000 sortie.

The Navigator Leader gave out all the maps of the area we would be flying over and described the navigation aids that may be available. We would be given the exact height to fly with stacks of bombers arranged 1000 feet apart vertically.

The meteorological officer would tell us what weather to expect, where winds were blowing from and how strong they were, both of which had a great effect on our navigation. He also forecast the cloud cover. The worst conditions that we anticipated would

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be a full moon without clouds in the sky for cover. We were up there, like clay pigeons, for the Germans to shoot at. But, if you cannot see the stars, you can't navigate with them and then you have to depend on your radar, which wasn't too good in those days. The meteorologists had a hard time to give us the exact weather as they had very few reports on the weather far to the east. But, I guess, in general, their forecasts were reasonable. One night, for example, we were flying deep into Germany. They told us that we would have cloud cover all the way, but it was as clear as a bell with a full moon. That was a very scary night, but we were very lucky as there weren't many fighters around.

The Bombing Squadron Leader would familiarise us with the type of bombs that we were going to drop, tell us what our code name would be and advise us what the Pathfinders were going to drop over the target. The Pathfinders were a squadron of highly experienced flyers who mostly flew Mosquito aircraft, a fast two-engine fighter bomber. They flew very low over the target and dropped different coloured marker flares, showing us where to bomb. They would keep changing the selected colour and moving the aiming point. If our code name was "Daisy", the Pathfinder would call out: "Daisy, hit the red! Hit the red!" Then later they would change colour and say: "Daisy, hit the green! Hit the green!" Everything would be lit up like a Christmas Tree. As the target got hotter with more flak and more fighters, they would shout out, "For God's sake, you guys, let's get going! We have to get home tonight. Bomb on the

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blue! Bomb on the blue!" The role of the Pathfinder was very dangerous as the Germans were shooting at them from the ground and we were dropping bombs around them from above.

The Intelligence Officer would tell us various things such as what the Underground was doing and what area we were flying over. He would give us our escape kit, in case we got shot down. They consisted of maps, printed on silk, of the area that we were flying over and a chart of the different languages that we might run into. We were taught phrases such as: "I am British, can you hide me?" or "Can you give me something to eat?" We also received a package of the various currencies for each country, a few chocolate bars for energy and concentrated foods to last a couple of days. We did not take these things very seriously as it was always going to be the other guy who got shot down, not us. We were told it was our duty to escape if we got shot down and we were to do our best to get back to England. If we were captured, we were to try and escape again and keep as many Germans busy looking for us as possible. The more Germans we kept busy, the less manpower they had in the front line.

The Gunnery Officers would give us an idea of what we could expect from the German fighter planes. They would have all the reports from the last flight over that area based on information gathered from crews returning from previous bombing trips. Generally, the planes went to one or two targets, but at times a smaller group would head to another area ahead of the main bombing group, to confuse the

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fighter defence. Many times the Germans would try new tactics and we would be told of these tricks.

Following these briefings, we would then split up into separate groups. That is, the pilots, navigators, bomb Aimers, wireless air gunners and engineers would each go over everything in more detail. There was a lot of work and detail to a bombing run. We had been trained for over eighteen months, flying a plane worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, and our own lives were at stake. Often a whole crew, with a brand new plane, would go down the first night. The statistics of a crew lasting a full tour of “Ops” weren’t too good. As I said, it was always going to be the other crew that was going to be shot down.

After all these preparations, it would be time for dinner. Aircrew were always treated well. It was always a custom to give us eggs and sometime steak before a bombing run. After we ate, we would get our flying gear on and report to the squadron room. A truck would then pick us up and take us out to the aircraft where we would make all our final preparations. Everyone would be tense and excited, joking with each other and with the other crews. The Padre would come around to the plane before we took off to wish us good luck. They would hand out candies and “Wakey Wakey” pills. These pills were often necessary by the time we got home. We often on the go for maybe eighteen hours and, with the high altitude, the tension of the situation and the drum of the motors, we were very tired by the end of the op.

It was always a long drag returning home, across the Channel, back to base, sometimes circling the

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base for an hour or so, waiting for our turn to land. Often a plane would come in, having been hit, with engine trouble, or low on gas. If that happened you had to let it land ahead of you. About the worst that could happen on your return was for your airfield to be fogged in and have to go to another base which was clear. After landing you would have to taxi to your dispersal area and your ground crew would be waiting for you. They had to tie the plane down, check for any damage or any mechanical trouble and then fully service the plane, making it ready for the next day. The ground crew were very proud of their plane so they looked after it very carefully. Every aircraft that could fly had to be up in the air. If not, someone had to give a good reason why.

With our aircraft, we had to wait for a truck to pick us up and take us to the Squadron Room where tea or horrible English coffee with a bun or cookie would be waiting. Then we had to take our turn to be debriefed! All the Squadron Leaders would be there. We had to report everything that happened or did not happen, what we saw on the way there and the way back, and what happened over the target. Did we hit what we were after? Of course they had the pictures the next day from the cameras connected to our bomb sights, which showed where our bombs fell. We would report any planes we saw shot down and where we saw them. Did we see any parachutes open up? How many fighters were there? How much flak did we see? Where was the flak? If there was a lot of flak, was it all in one place? If so they would send some fast bombers over to try to knock it out. But in most cases the

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German anti-aircraft guns were positioned on railway cars or trucks and would keep moving so they could not be pinpointed. We also had to put in a report on the mechanical workings of our plane. We would be very tired by now but we all would wait around to make sure everyone got back. Sometimes one of our planes would have to land at another field for some reason, but they would get in touch with the squadron and let us know. We would then head for the mess to eat a big plate of ham and eggs, plus a steak sometimes. Then off to bed, with generally a sleeping pill, and God protect anyone that disturbed us! We still did a lot of training flights all over England. There was always something one of us was weak on, or something new which needed learning. However, a lot of the time England was covered with low clouds so it was kind of nice to go above the clouds and fly in the sunshine.

Jack Friday was always a good one with which to make this agreement because his father owned a drug store and would always send him licorice and other candies. If you went missing, those things were neither sent home nor kept until you got back. They wouldn't keep. So, I got Jack's articles, but then someone else got mine.

On the Squadron base we lived in Nissen huts curved metal buildings, very bare and cold. They were scattered around in little groups with a semi-closed washroom in the middle, called the ablutions, with no glass in the windows. The British who designed these were very hardy people! Many times there was little or no hot water, so you wasted no time

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doing whatever you went there to do. Each crew lived in one hut, heated by a little stove in the middle that burned coke, of which you could get a bucket every few days. That was from November to May. If it was a cool Spring, that was too bad. Then we would steal farmers' fences or anything else that would burn. When the guards were not on duty, we 'liberated' coke from the coke shed.



*Fig.2h Lancasters on the Runway,
ready for take off*

Our beds were little cots with a spring hung like a hammock from a metal frame. Instead of a mattress, we had three cushions about two feet square, called "biscuits". I never found out why they were made that way. If you were a Private (or I guess ground crew), you had to take your bed apart and pile your "biscuits" at the end of your bed with your blankets carefully folded on top. We, as air crew, never did this ceremony. We never made our beds, except on the day we had our sheets changed, which was weekly. I

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guess if we had made our beds every day we would have had a more comfortable sleep. We would often sleep in our flying suits to keep warm.

Being in Bomber Command was dangerous not only when flying over enemy territory but from the moment the bombs were loaded on the tarmac. One night we were sitting on the tarmac, the area where the aircraft lined up before take off. One of the crews, who we knew very well, got to the end of the runway taking off and something happened. They blew up in front of us! The control tower flashed the red light, stopping everything for a very short time. They changed runways and started flashing the green light for take off, not giving us time to think about it. You could not dwell on things like that, or you might get nervous about what you were doing. Strangely, I can't think now who it was that crashed that night on the runway.

In the Spring of 1944, we began our operational missions with short-range missions into western France but by March we were flying deeper into Germany. The target for our first bombing run was a railway yard in Ghent, Belgium where the Germans had a large marshalling yard. It was a little frightening as it was our first major target, but we were "eager beavers". There wasn't very much flak and not too many fighter planes. We just nipped across the Channel into Belgium and out again.

Our second flight was to Boulogne, France. We met a lot of flak and fighters over the target and ran into a thunderstorm on our way back. Smithy was stretching his legs and wanted to go back to see what

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it was like at the gunner's station. I was "flying the plane" when suddenly the aerial around the plane was lit up like a neon sign. We were bouncing all over the place. We were flying over the English Channel and generally considered ourselves safe as we were almost home. The odd time a German fighter would follow us, knowing we would be off guard, then attack us. But this time all went well. Smithy came back to the controls and he flew back to base.

One night when we came back there was no visibility because of heavy fog over Yorkshire. We were trying to land and missed the runway a little. I looked out the window and could see the barracks right next to us. We sure pulled up and got out of there in a hurry, with all of us hollering at Smithy. We got back in the circuit again, but it was too foggy to land at home base, so we finally landed at another station and went back to the squadron in the morning.

D-day, the 6th of June, was a very exciting night. Everything that could fly was up in the air bombing everywhere, trying to keep the Germans in suspense. We drew the late shift and took off very late at night to bomb Coutance in Normandy. It was a cloudy night and we could not see much of what was going on down below. Every once in a while the clouds would break and we would see all the boats down below. We were night bombers but it was almost dawn when we started for home and, by then, we could see all the American day bombers getting into the air. There were so many planes in the air we had to land at a base in Southern England, called Colerne.

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After we had a little sleep and had breakfast, we were sent back to our squadron for debriefing.

A few days after D- Day, the Army was having trouble with one particular area which we had to bomb at low level. It was a bright night and we were following the railway lines. We found our target and bombed it, but we were flying so low that, when the bombs hit, the concussion blew us straight up in the air. It scared the hell out of us because we were not expecting it and we didn't know what had hit us. We got back on track and got home safely. I think we all were a little scared that night, we all peed our pants a little.

The Americans flew Flying Fortresses which had a lot of armour and fighter planes flying escort. They would fly in a group and bomb in a group. We flew in a group, sometimes as many as 500 bombers, but each plane was totally on its own. We did our own navigating, found the target and bombed the target all on our own. Sometimes we would not see another aircraft, but we knew they were all around: above us, below us or at either side. Sometimes over the target, when everything was lit up like a Christmas tree, we could clearly see the planes below us, but had to watch for the planes above us. We didn't want them to drop their bombs on us.