

When I and my fellow Wop/Ag's arrived at Finningley towards the end of the month of February I soon discovered that it had recently been an operational station, but was now preparing for what would prove to be its major wartime role, a training unit. No. 25 Operational Training Unit was therefore newly formed, we would be part of the first course which, I was informed, would commence officially on the first day of March, 41.

The bomber squadron which had recently departed was No. 106, a unit I would subsequently join up with a few months later. This squadron equipped with twin engined Handley Page Hampdens aircraft had been part of the Finningley scene since October, 1939. 106 Squadron's initial role was its use as an instructional unit responsible for training aircrews for operational squadrons in No. 5 Group, Bomber Command. However during the early days of September 40 the training role ceased, and 106 Squadron switched to operational duties. Its Hampdens were made ready to participate mainly in minelaying sorties directed against the many hundreds of miles of the enemy controlled coastline, which involved such places as Brest, St. Nazaire, and Lorient as well as further afield ports like La Rochelle, Kiel, and the estuary of the River Elbe. At that stage of the War No. 5 Group pioneered RAF minelaying operations, and 106 Squadron laid about one hundred and fifty mines out of a total of some four hundred and fifty by the RAF during the period September, 1940 up to early February, 1941. The official code word for minelaying operations was "Gardening", the mines were "vegetables" minelaying was "Planting", and the designated area was the "Plot".

It was during the month of February, 41 that Royal approval had been given to 106 for the adoption of the squadron badge, which I can describe as "A lion sejant, rampant, holding a banner charged with an astra crown" based on the crest of the County Borough of Doncaster. The motto at the foot of the badge read "Pro Libertate".

As the squadron was then based near the town of Doncaster, the borough crest was consequently used as the basis of the badge design. The local connection, however, was severed when the squadron was placed on to full operational status, and moved to RAF Coningsby, Lincolnshire on 22nd February, 41 to embark on a long, and illustrious wartime bombing career continuing as part of No. 5 Group, Bomber Command.

Finningley, a brick built permanent RAF station, situated about six miles from Doncaster, was one of the many bases that came into being during the RAF's expansion period a few years before the start of the War, being officially opened during September, 1936.

Five very large steel, and concrete hangars skirted the perimeter track alongside the then grass airfield. The Sergeants Mess was very comfortable, the unanimous opinion was that the food was very good, and the Mess "De's" lively but excellent, at that time the N.C.O. in charge of the Mess catering being very proficient at his job. I thought RAF Finningley was a very good, well organised station during the period I spent there, perhaps it carried on being so despite the fact that the establishment remained a training base for the remainder of the War, principally as an O.T.U.

All the trainee aircrew, at this last stage before the real thing, were billeted outside the camp, and in this connection two large houses had been requisitioned by the RAF for sleeping accommodation. Along with many other course trainees I found that Rossington Hall was to be my abode, our North Coates fivesome were able to stick together to share a large room at the Hall. This palatial establishment was locked after by several "erks", and in a short space of time Ramsay, Bob, Doug, Frank and I negotiated a satisfactory deal with these lads on a monetary basis which involved a late night supper service i.e. a hot drink, and a small meal.

Although this would prove to be a good arrangement we would be absent for quite a few nights during the following two months or so, owing to night flying duties. It is fair to comment that being billeted outside the Station would have its advantages during the nights when we were not flying, as on these occasions we were to be found gadding about the night spots of Doncaster until the early hours of the morning, having to make it back to our billet, Rossington Hall, by way of taxi. These jaunts were enjoyed without any hassle, which we certainly would have encountered residing on the Station.

On the 1st March 41, RAF, Finningley officially commenced its long career as a training base, and for the few weeks, as a member of No. 1 OTU course, I underwent a mixture of classes, lectures plus ground, and flying exercises as far as we Wop/Ags were concerned, until crewing up arrangements were made. I was then teamed up with Sgt. Jordan as pilot, Sgt. Hartnett, Observer, and my fellow Wop/Ag was Ramsay Joiner, we had been together since Cranwell wireless school days. We were all fully qualified individuals at our own trades, and over the following two months or so would begin to know each other better after shared experiences in the air, to finally emerge as a fully trained crew on Handley Page Hampden aircraft, at least that is what should have happened in the ordinary course of events, but fate sometimes decrees otherwise.

Inevitably, the No. 1 course Wop/Ag photograph was taken during one bright, sunny morning when our group of twenty smiling airmen took their places outside one of the large hangars, some sitting others standing, as we posed for the cameraman. Eight of these lads, including myself, would eventually find ourselves members of the same operational squadron at RAF, Coningsby, some would not survive, and these would include old "oppos" in Doug Wightman, Bob Thompson, and Frank Kerr, and in fact, as far as I am aware, only myself, and P.O. "Ginger" Combie successfully completed a first tour of Ops.

It was about this time, within our first month at Finningley, that I was put on the "Fizzer", my first, and only disciplinary charge during my RAF career, and incredibly it was all over a game of Soccer. The circumstances concerned my participation in a soccer trial match which had been arranged to effect a selection for the Finningley Station team. In all good faith I had accepted the information that permission had been obtained for me to take part in the match. The unit C.G.I. (Chief Ground Instructor), a very conscientious Squadron Leader, however did not agree, and the following day I was singled out to be subsequently paraded before him in his office. I stood there, on the carpet, totally immobile like a war memorial, as the Squadron Leader proceeded to tear various strips off me in respect of my absence the previous afternoon from course activities. He looked me up and down, and overbearingly remarked "Dont you know there is a bloody war on, Sergeant?". Of course I had no answer to that question, and after a very short silence a concise, sharp lecture followed. What had I to say in return!, not very much I would venture to say I could only acquaint the C.G.I. of the respective circumstances, which of course cut no ice, silently I told myself that I would not be so credulous next time. Needless to say I did not get away with it, and the proceedings concluded with me being confined to camp for a total of seven days. This meant that I had to report to the Guard Room each appropriate day at specified times during evenings, an embarrassing procedure for a now senior N.C.O. .

HALBERT

This episode did not deter my keenness for the game of soccer, but henceforth, during the remainder of my stay at Finningley, I obtained my own permission when necessary, and during this period I enjoyed several games with the Station team, which were all played with official permission.

I would have cause to remember my stay at Finningley for a number of reasons, but the most pleasant recollection was the day of the 6th March, which was my twenty first birthday. To celebrate such an auspicious occasion Ramsay, Bob, Doug and I set out during the said afternoon, and made tracks for nearby Doncaster, During the late afternoon we decided to try the Odeon Cinema restaurant, sat down at one of the tables, and the lads duly informed our waitress that it was the occasion of my 21st birthday, and followed up this information with a bout of whispering, what was going on? . Our smiling young lady departed, and after a short space of time returned with a colleague, and presented me with a cake complete with candles, what a nice surprise . I felt really chuffed at such a nice gesture from two very nice girls. I realised then what the lads had been whispering about, they had laid it on, but the girls bless their hearts, had done all the wangling. I felt really at home, and the event turned out just like a party with plenty of laughs. Afterwards with the local hostelrys having opened their welcome doors for the evening sessions we then commenced to do the rounds which included the "Danum" , ^{DONCASTER'S} largest hotel, which was a popular aircrew rendezvous, though more especially with the commissioned ranks, and a few jars of best Yorkshire bitter was duly disposed off in the process. After a noisy session, and feeling reasonably well topped up we got our heads together when it was around 8 pm to plan our next move. We decided to attend the second house at the local theatre where the top of the bill was Henry Hall and his orchestra, apparently it was his "Guest Night" . Unfortunately it looked as if it was a full house as we were unsuccessful in our attempts to book four seats. Nothing daunted, and full of dutch courage, after all we'd had a skinful, Bob Thompson hit on a new plan which meant invading a nearby telephone kiosk. The cheekiest of our foursome, which left me out, then rang the theatre, and asked to speak to the manager. A big "line shoot" followed, when it was pleaded that the four of us concerned had been over Germany the previous night, and one of us was tonight celebrating his 21st birthday, could he possibly book seats for the last show. The Manager reiterated that all the seats had been taken, but in the circumstances if we came to the theatre, and made ourselves known he would let us in to see the show, but we would be standing at the rear of the circle. Off we dashed at the double, and just made it for the commencement of the show after profusely thanking a very much amused theatre manager. Despite our standing room only pitch Henry Hall's Guest Night went down very well indeed, and set the seal on a memorable 21st, a fitting climax to an eventful day.

The day was not yet over for us the grand finale being a meal of egg and chips at the local YMCA, and as midnight approached we boarded a taxi which dropped us off at Rossington Hall, a pleasurable day. In all we had some very good nights out in Doncaster, when we were not flying, these were a combination of stag nights, and or female company when it was either the cinema or tripping the light fantastic at the Ritz dance hall, but in either case the evening always commenced or terminated in the pub adjoining the dance hall.

The badly bent Hampden with both propellers now well and truly buckled ploughed along the grass on its torn belly creating deep furrows, with the speed gradually falling away from what was formerly a rate of between ninety and a hundred mph. The kite eventually finished up on the perimeter tarmac road amidst a great shower of sparks, and the harsh screaming noise of tearing metal. Fortunately for we occupants the aircraft by then had lost all momentum, and came to a shuddering stop almost in front of one of the hangars with the Observer's position at the front a shattered mass of perspex. Along with the other damage I have previously described, it presented a sorry sight. The Station fire tender, accompanied by the "blood wagon", always standing by ready for action, were on the spot in seconds. Hanging on in the top gunners position I moved very smartly and quickly jeffersoned the perspex cupola, climbed through the open space to coolly jump out and down on to the tarmac, just missing a shower of white foam as the lads from the fire tender sprayed our badly buckled Hampden. The station firemen were taking no chances, an abundance of smoke was evident, but I did not see any flames I guess I was too interested in my own and Ramsay's well being to bother about anything else. My "oppo" Ramsay was only a second or so behind me, and jumped down from the same top exit as I did a narrow escape for both of us, our pilot Sgt. Jordan also escaped without mishap. During the ropey take off I was occupying what was always my accustomed position in the top rear of the Hampden, standing on the firing steps situated on each side of the fuselage floor. These were raised positions being nine inches or so above the level of the floor, the bomb bay being immediately below. Standing thus above the floor level may have saved me from injury to my feet as everything below the floor was torn off. Ramsay, my fellow Wop/Ag, was behind me, sat down reposing against the rear bulkhead door during the take off, and without any visual contact, but very much aware of the violent buffeting the fuselage was experiencing plus the noisy accompaniment of tortured metal, must have thought he'd had his chips, the episode really shook him up. His ventral gun position, the "Tin", had vanished completely all that remained was a twisted mass of crushed metal. My recollections following the crash concerned my sheer relief to be standing upright in one piece on terra firma, nevertheless it's a good crash when you can walk away from it. The M.O. had a good look at the very pale features of a shaken trio, and eventually came to the conclusion that, apart from being shaken up, it was not really necessary for us to accompany him to the sick bay. If I had been ignorant of the fact before the crash I was now aware that a Hampden tended to develop a swing on take off. Apparently most pilots corrected by leading slightly with either the starboard or port throttle to neutralize the swing, but I was not aware of this fact till much later on. My friends and fellow Wop/Ags in the crew room I had vacated minutes before had witnessed our take off, and subsequent pile up. They told me afterwards that they had put their thoughts into words to utter "There goes poor old Ted, it looks as if he is going for a Burton", while one or two of the other onlookers apparently stood transfixed with their mouths open, and eyes wide in disbelief. They all agreed that the event had looked that bad from their spectator vantage point, but later were happy to find out that we had emerged unscathed, physically that is. Episodically it only remains for me to state that the once airworthy Hampden was a write off, and only good for cannibalization. After some time had elapsed, and we had fully regained our equilibrium it was inevitable that we three would have to carry on with our interrupted programme of take offs and landings, more especially to prove that the old nerve had not gone.

Sure enough another Hampden was made available, there was no escape, we had to carry on regardless, but my wop/Ag crewmate Ramsay opted out, he did not feel up to it, and as far as I know did not fly again. I do not know what happened to him subsequently, and often wondered how he got on afterwards, Ramsay was a very nice chap, and a good "oppo" always.

I would stress that I was not looking forward to the next take off so soon after our crash, being only human I most certainly had a slight case of "ring twitter" as I entered the new kite by way of the rear bottom hatch of the "Tin". Undoubtedly I was not my usual phlegmatic self as I slammed the "Tin" hatch door shut, and climbed up to my top W/Op crew position. Meanwhile Sgt. Jordan calmly progressed through his cockpit, and engine drills, and fully satisfied proceeded to taxi slowly towards the take off point, with myself being the only other occupant of the Hampden.

As the kite moved off, and steadily accelerated my mouth, and throat was really dry, my knuckle white hands were gripping the top gun mounting with a sense of gloomy foreboding, but during this crucial first take off everything seemed to go perfectly. No swing developed, and pleasurably we encountered no trouble of any sort as the Hampden sped down the line of the flare path straight as an arrow. The butterflies in my stomach slowly subsided as we became airborne, and climbed up to a height of one thousand five hundred feet to then fly a few circuits around the drome before preparing for our first landing. We accomplished several further take offs and landings during the following ninety minutes, and no problems of any sort were encountered, in all it was a smooth performance, it seemed as if the pilot's confidence had returned.

A couple of nights later we were scheduled to perform a programme of dusk, and dark landings. Aboard the Hampden, Sgt. Jordan and I made ready for our first take off during the half light of dusk, received our green from the flare path control caravan, and away we sped down the line of glim lamps, but inauspiciously it all happened again with a swing developing when we had picked up speed. The kite swerved violently off the illuminated line of the flare path, and plunged into the semi-darkness, but this time Sgt. Jordan sensibly throttled back to slow down the Hampden. Despite this adjustment the undercarriage had buckled once again under the strain. In the gathering gloom the aircraft crunched along the grass on its belly to finally slew around on the port side, and come to a slithering stop at a much slower pace than the previous occurrence.

Both Sgt. Jordan, and I were O.K., but this time there was a very strong smell of high octane petrol in the air, fortunately there was no fire, nevertheless we both kept a discreet distance from the wreck.

Having written off two Hampdens, Sgt. Jordan, who I thought was a good pilot despite his failures to correct take off swings, was subsequently taken off this type of aircraft, I heard later that he was transferred to another unit to fly "Wimpeys" (Vickers Wellingtons), I did not meet up with him again.

On the face of things nothing was going right for our crew, we had lost Ramsay, and now our pilot, but the run of bad luck continued. To really finish things off our observer, Sgt. ^{Halbert} ~~Harlett~~, disappeared over the North Sea while navigating with another crew on a sea sweep, all the crew were lost. The grim news meant that only myself remained of what was once a full Hampden crew of four, a one man band, and I could not help wondering what would now happen to me, a spare Joe. I was kept busy, and flew for a time as a spare W/Op, my services being utilised by several different pilots from 5 Group Hampden squadrons, who were at that time at Finningley on short first pilot's or captains course's, as they were called then. During the early part of 1941 this shortlived procedure arose from the fact that some 5 Group squadron pilots initially flew several operational sorties as second pilots, but carried out the duties of navigating, and bomb aiming before undertaking a fairly brief captain's or first pilots course at an Operational Training Unit.

During my period as a spare W/Cp I accompanied such a pilot, who hailed from 50 Squadron, on a detail of night circuits and bumps. It was a pitch black night, and after an hour of such repetition we were negotiating the Finningley circuit when suddenly below us the whole station was blacked out including the flarepath. Apparently German aircraft were in our immediate vicinity, and sure enough from my position at the rear of the Hampden I could discern a Dornier 217 bomber about a hundred yards or so behind our kite at more or less the same height. I immediately informed my pilot of the situation, and at the same time all sorts of things flashed through my mind, but I kept a watching vigil, and no shots were fired. It was a black starry night, and both plane silhouettes were of a similar appearance, the Jerries in the Dornier probably thought we were one of their comrades, at least that was what I was hoping at the time. Anyway prudence paid off as nothing untoward happened, and soon after we lost him, much to our relief. In the prevailing circumstances my pilot thought it was not healthy to hang around and promptly decided to attempt a landing in the darkness. It proved to be more than a bit "dicey", but his approach was bang on, and we got down okay in one piece without bending the Hampden, naturally a few bumps were encountered when we hit the deck, but he was a really skilful lad that certain pilot from 50 Squadron.

During that period of 41 German long range intruder aircraft were frequent night visitors attacking aerodromes around the area. There was no doubt that they were old hands at the game who seemed to be very familiar with locations, and proficient in their airfield beat ups.

I should hazard a miscalculated guess that they originated from No. 1 Gruppe using Junkers 88's, and Dornier 217 "flying pencils" probably based at Gilze Rijen an airfield in occupied Holland. One of their number certainly put the breeze up me one particular night at Finningley after I had just landed from a night flying exercise. On that occasion I had just left the Watch Office, and commenced to walk across the perimeter track towards the line of hangars. Out of the darkness a Junkers 88 swept low and fast across the drome on a strafing run with guns blazing after which he dropped a stick of bombs. When the rear of the Junkers Jumo engines hit my ears I did not stop to look up, but put my head down, and ran at top speed with the adrenalin now working overtime as I made for the cover of the nearest hangar. In the most readily available corner of this hangar was stashed several iron beds, and with alacrity I dived headlong underneath the small pile of beds for protection. I had only twenty or thirty yards to travel, but when I heard the rattle of machine gun fire, and then the whistle of the bombs on their downward trend I was definitely moving in top gear. The Jerry kite overshot the flare path, and thankfully the hangar, in which I was hugging the floor, was unscathed, but one of the other four hangars sustained damage as did a parked Avro Anson aircraft, and another bomb created slight damage to some living quarters, it could have been much worse. The Junkers 88 did not make another run he was away like a flash, and was in all probability heading for RAF Lindholme, these German intruder boys seemed to have a regular run between our two dromes.

I somehow think Hitler did us aircrew lads a good turn when he tactlessly stopped all his long range ^{night} intruder operations towards the end of 1941, although these attacks were resumed during the year of 43 in an intermittent manner, a more extensive use of such tactics could have caused chaos around our bomber airfield circuits.

Still soldiering on as a spare bod I was detailed one Saturday to fly as wireless operator on a local exercise with a certain Pilot Officer of No.1 course, but for some reason I was replaced at a very late moment by another Wop/Ag. The Hampden in which they were flying, somehow or other, strayed into the Sheffield balloon barrage, and hit one of the cables. Part of one wing was cut off, and the kite went down out of control to subsequently crash into the ground. Only the pilot managed to escape by parachute, the other crew member was killed. The luck of the draw again, someone was looking after my welfare, but who?.

The city of Sheffield, not too far away from our drome, was certainly a place to avoid during those wartime days. Most flyers approached the area with caution, nevertheless the location was easily distinguishable, because the city was always hidden under a vast circular pall of thick grey industrial smoke which was visible from a distance. Of course the main reason for giving the place a wide berth was the protective balloon barrage. Normally a warning sound emanated from balloon barrages which came through our aircraft's R/T system, and thus told the pilot he was in the vicinity of balloons, and their lethal cables.

These balloon sirens, or "squeakers" as we called them, emitted a low siren like sound which fluctuated up, and down, and was ominously recognised at once when heard. The obvious remedial action when this sound was heard was a very quick alteration of the aircraft's course, and direction, so it is hard to formulate the circumstances of that ill fated Hampden I have previously mentioned.

My OTU days, up to that point, were proving anything but placid, and my luck certainly seemed to be holding up, but could it last!

Yes, indeed it could and certainly did during one bright, spring morning when I was suddenly summoned to report to the C.G.I.'s office as quickly as possible. I guessed, something was in the wind, and sure enough, much to my relief I was informed that my "odd bod" days were at last over as I was privileged to be crewed up with a 106 squadron pilot who had arrived at Finningley for a short first pilots course.

When I entered the office I had noticed a Sergeant pilot standing in close proximity to the C.G.I.'s desk, and this serious, dour looking Scotsman was introduced to me as Sgt. R. L. Mooney who would now be returning to his squadron at the end of his short course with a full crew, one of whom would be me. How wrong I proved to be with my first impressions of Bob, who turned out to be a smashing fellow, and a long flying association of mutual trust, and friendship developed between us over the following two years. Two more spare bods were added to make up a full Hampden crew. The first of these was Geoff Allsebrook, a Sergeant Observer, who I gathered had been kept back a few weeks to undertake further training. He had also been a member of No. 1 course. Geoff had made the long journey from South Africa to join the the RAF, and was said to have achieved this objective the hard way by working his passage aboard ship. He was a big, tough looking individual well

over six feet in height with close cropped hair, and a moustache, I did not know much about Geoff at the time.

The remaining crew member was Pilot Officer "Ginger" Combie. I had seen him about, but otherwise did not know very much about him, but we soon became well acquainted, especially as he was the possessor of a small "jalopy" in which as many of us as possible would pile in on free night boozing expeditions to various spots outside Doncaster. On our O.T.U Wop/Ag course photograph, seated in the centre of the group, "Ginger" was conspicuous by virtue of the fact that he was the only commissioned officer amongst a galaxy of Sergeants. He was considerably older than the rest of us. Small in stature, bald on top, he sported a ginger moustache, and was said to have been a former officer in the Indian Army. During those early OTU days I always thought he was a Wop/Ag, but I never at any time saw him attempt any wireless operating either then or afterwards when he was on the squadron. I think he must have been a direct entry Officer Air Gunner, several of whom were about at that specific period of the war, most of them being around the age of forty or thereabouts. On that evidence "Ginger" certainly fitted the bill, he would be the permanent bottom gunner in our crew, a bit of a lad was Francis "Ginger" Combie.

Feeling quite pleased with the turn of events that had given us a more or less seasoned campaigner as our pilot we very soon settled in as a crew, and during the following weeks of constant flying we quickly developed as a cohesive unit.

During this period we completed our quota of high level bombing exercises, several day and night cross country flights to finally conclude our crew training by carrying out three night North Sea sweeps, each being of five hours duration. Working confidently as a team we were then deemed ready for squadron action. During one of these sea sweeps we were almost shot down by our own anti-aircraft defences as we passed over ~~Elm ^{Spurg}~~ Head on our return flight to Finningley. The multiple shell bursts were too close for comfort, but, strangely no outbursts of profanity came from any crew member, it seemed that a very surprised crew were ~~rendered speechless at such a fervent welcome home from our own~~

rendered speechless at such a fervent welcome home from ^Tour own side.

During the early part of the month of June we left No.25 OTU,Finningley,and duly arrived at RAF Coningsby to report to 106 Squadron,and its Orderly room. Bob had returned to the fray complete with his own crew,he had already completed eight operational trips as second pilot (navigator),and as the bombing tour in those days constituted a total of two hundred operational hours it followed that Bob would finish his tour before the rest of us in his crew.

No. 106 squadron at that time consisted of eighteen or more Handley Page Hampden bomber aircraft,and the squadron code letters on the side of each aircraft was "ZN" followed by a single letter for individual identity.The squadron was divided into three flights A,B,and C,abd was commanded by Wing Commander Bob Allen,DSO,DFC.

At the time the respective Flight commanders were Squadron Leaders Nelms,^Tudor,and Tommy Boylan,DFC.