

R.A.F. Coningsby was then a fairly new, brick built permanent station, situated in the very flat fens country of South East Lincolnshire, about ten miles north west of Boston which was the nearest town, and the possessor of the most prominent landmark in the area, the tower of St. Botolphs Church more commonly known as the "Boston Stump". In the year of 1941 Coningsby was entirely a grass surfaced airfield, and would remain so until the late summer of the following year when concrete runways were constructed. The station was adjacent to the village of Coningsby, and the landmark in the immediate vicinity of the drome was Tattershall Castle. At night the landing lane on the grass was marked with oil burning goose neck flares along the length of the airfield. There was also a system of outer markings, and approach lights as a lead in to the landing lane, which was known as Drem lighting. Also at night the visual identity of the station was made known by a beacon light which continually flashed a two letter code in Morse, every operational aerodrome was in fact recognised by their own two letter flashing beacons. From the operational point of view the Handley Page Hampden was well liked by myself, and most of the lads that flew in them, it had a varied choice of nicknames, such as the "Ham-bone", the "Flying Suitcase", or the "Flying Tadpole", nevertheless the kite had superb manoeuvrability, and an unequalled range of vision which benefitted both pilot, and crew. Its big failing was the utter lack of comfort for the crew, especially the Wireless Operator/Top gunner who, during operational flying, in extreme weather conditions, had to contend with an open top cupola in temperatures of varying minus degrees of up to fifty below, when the poor old W/Op's fingers were liable to frostbite, I know that from personal experience.

The only heating available was a hot air pipe with which I was constantly warming both face, and hands during the Autumn, and Winter months of 1941. Although I, as first Wop/Ag, had a marvellous visual outlook from my standing position on the firing steps my working space was very confined, and the numerous spare pans of ammunition that were fixed to the immediate sides of the fuselage did not help matters. With all the flying clothing I found necessary to wear in order to keep warm there was hardly any room to turn around, the slender fuselage in my locality was only about three feet wide.

Underneath the W/T apparatus racks was a large aperture big enough to crawl through, and just below this was a step down from the fuselage floor of about two feet in depth into the bottom ventral gun cupola position, which we Wop/Ags colloquially called "The Tin". The vertical face of this step was cushioned as a back rest for the bottom gunner who sat facing the rear with his legs stretched out behind his twin Vickers gun mounting. He too was bloody uncomfortable, just as cold as I was, except his position was wholly claustrophobic to say the least.

The rear entry, and exit, door or hatch which we all used except the pilot, was situated on the port side of the "Tin", and a low stooping action was obviously needed to clamber aboard. The Observer (navigator/bomb aimer) had the best crew position in the

"greenhouse" nose compartment, and seated at his fold-away chart table no cold, icy draughts bothered him, the lucky fellow. The pilot though was not very comfortable, and once ensconced in his cockpit seat, sat on his pack parachute, was immobile until he landed the Hampden back at base.

If he required to relieve himself he had to somehow or other use a tube connected to a bottle, and remember the duration of some of our bombing trips was as much as nine, and even ten hours. The armour plated back of the pilot's seat in the Hampden fully retracted backwards, and could be used this way to extract the skipper if, god forbid, he was badly wounded, and speculation on what would occur next if that happened would have definitely been in the lap of the gods. Thankfully, as far as our crew was concerned that situation never did arise, but it did to one or two other crews.

Despite the shortcomings I have already mentioned, the Hampden bomber gave stalwart service throughout its wartime operational career with its two very reliable Bristol Pegasus XVIII 1000 H.P. 9 cylinder radial engines. Some of them could readily attain somewhere near the maximum ceiling of twenty to twenty two thousand feet, and another feature of the Hampden was that it was fitted with balloon cable cutters on the wings. Although slightly smaller in size than its contemporaries, the Whitley, and the "Wimpey", the Handley Page Hampden was faster with a top speed of around 250 mph, its cruising speed being between 140, and 150 mph. Indeed, it was a common occurrence, which I witnessed many times when returning home over the North Sea from the Reich, Lincolnshire bound, for our Hampden to overtake, and pass with ease the Whitleys of No. 4 Group stooging along in their familiar posture, nose slightly down, and tail up. Aircrew lads belonging to other Groups were not very complimentary in their remarks concerning the Hampden, why I cannot imagine, for despite the cramped crew conditions the "hambone" was a really good aeroplane, ideal for evasive action, fast in the prevailing conditions of 41, and 42, and furthermore operational losses in 5 Group were slightly below the average for the Command as a whole during the period mentioned. I would say that one of the reasons for this was the important fact

that we Wop/Ag's at the back could see everything that was happening, and act accordingly.

When we arrived as a crew at Coningsby, the sister squadron, who shared the airfield, was No. 97 Squadron, a unit which had arrived during the month of March, 41, a month or so after 106 Squadron, who were the first flying unit to operate from RAF, Coningsby.

97 Squadron, at that period, was equipped with the latest 5 Group aircraft, the Avro Manchester, a kite with a dubious reputation, and not very popular with the lads who flew in it. Due to the apparent shortcomings of this aircraft, 97 Squadron only operated intermittently in small numbers. Naturally there was intense, but friendly rivalry between our two squadrons, and we lads of 106, for obvious reasons, always referred to our 97 rivals as the "Glider Squadron", a friendly jibe which they did not like one little bit. The reason was simply that our 106 Hampdens were operating at full stretch going out three or four times per week during that summer period when Bomber Command operations were being really stepped up. In direct contrast 97 Squadron's Avro Manchesters hardly got off the ground. In fact, because of the various faults encountered, the Manchesters were grounded for a spell of five or six weeks, sometime around July 41, consequently a new nickname was conjured, the "97th Foot", but it is fair to say that during that period some of their crews flew operational sorties using our Hampdens. During the late summer several of my Wop/Ag pals were posted from 106 across to 97 Squadron, a move definitely not to their liking, and the result was that one or two of them seemed to very despondent about their immediate future, having no confidence whatsoever in the Avro Manchester. One of these lads was an old mate of mine, Frank Kerr, who sadly did not survive his Manchester days. Consistently unreliable, one simply did not know what the Avro Manchesters engines were going to do next, several times I witnessed the engines of this aircraft burst into flames whilst running up immediately before take off.

The Avro Manchester was equipped with two Rolls Royce Vulture engines which proved to be very unreliable, and could not produce a worthwhile operational altitude due to lack of power. They also had a poor rate of climb, and at night would emit a trail of fiery red sparks which were visible, and could be easily seen by enemy night fighters. The lack of confidence in the machine's unreliability shown by some of the crews was borne out by the heavy losses sustained by Manchesters on operations. During my tour I witnessed quite a few Manchesters get the chop most of them were caught in searchlight cones initially before heavy flak got them, and quite a few simply blew up after direct hits. It was to be another year before the Avro Manchester was finally taken off operations altogether to be replaced by the Avro Lancaster, which was more or less a four engined version of its predecessor. In hindsight what a difference it would have made to Bomber Command if it had been designed primarily as a four engined job.

During the early part of 1942 97 Squadron moved a few miles down the road to a new airfield at Woodhall Spa, and commenced a hectic wartime career operating in Avro Lancasters, later on they became a Pathfinder Squadron for a time, but returned to RAF Coningsby, and 5 Group in April 1944 and remain until the end of hostilities.

During my first few weeks at Coningsby I got together with several old acquaintances from my training days including Doug Wightman, Frank Kerr, Pat Lavin, Jock Brown, and Horace Sell, and at the same time quickly got to know new faces, I soon settled down happily amidst the camaraderie of squadron life. The Sergeants Mess at Coningsby was very comfortable, and the outer walls of the Ante Room were lined with large comfortable armchairs which were ideal for reclining in complete relaxation. For me they served a two fold purpose. In the early morning after partaking of breakfast the pattern followed was a gentle perusal of the morning papers, I never at any time followed the antics of "Jane", intermingled with the blissful tones of the radiogram which was always in action at that time before our early morning drift up to the flights to see what was due to happen that night. I think they were only three records in the kitty as only that number seemed to be played over and over again. - At times I I can still hear them in my head even now, "Amapola", The Ink Spots, and the other was the Andrews Sisters rendering in their own inimitable style of "Apple Blossom Time". The second of the aforementioned two fold purpose was, the always easy to come by after dinner nap, an accomplishment at which everybody was not adept, at least judging by Coningsby standards. When the time arrived for the afternoon jaunt up to the flights, and the N.F.T.'s (night flying tests) Bob, my skipper, usually had to wake me up just after two p.m. always performing this in an ungentlemanly and abrupt fashion.

Sleeping accommodation on the station was at a premium, and about twenty ^{OR THIRTY} aircrew N.C.O.'s of which I was one, were billeted outside the camp in a large requisitioned house situated in the village of New York, which was a few miles down the road from Coningsby in the general direction of Boston. Noteworthy residents of this establishment, named "Argyle House", were

Allen Wiseman, Frank Elliott, Jock Hunter, Curly Watkins, Chuck Charlton, and three "old lags" who were also Wop/Ag's, namely P/Sgt Popay, P/Sgt Hammati, and P/Sgt McKenzie, second tour men who all wore the ribbon of the D.F.M. The only pilots I can recall were Sgts Tilbury, McGinley, and Bill Dashwood.

Argyle House was conveniently placed just across the road from the village store, and fortunately very adjacent to the Lincolnshire bus stop for visits to Boston, what more could one ask. The house was cared for by a couple of "erks" who lived on the premises, and their job was to keep the old domicile spick and span, and as I eventually proved to be a long term resident I saw quite a lot of aircrew lads billeted there, come and go having got the chop. This was something which in the course of time I got used to, and eventually

it ceased to bother me, the process was something inevitable, and I realised that one night it might even be me who would not return to his bed the following morning. The empty beds which had been occupied the day before were always re-occupied by someone newly posted to the squadron, and so the system continued. I was in residence at Argyle House for over six months, a well known face, so it follows that the "erks" who looked after the house knew me very well indeed. The esprit de corps was complete, and every time I rolled in from Boston during the late hours I knew I would always be provided with a good late supper which usually consisted of either tea or cocoa plus a hefty bacon sandwich. On appropriate occasions we would gather a few mushrooms from the adjoining fields, it was then bacon, and mushrooms, very tasty indeed. Yes, it was a free, and easy existence at Argyle House, if, and that was the operative word, one could survive the operational "diceing" stakes. Our off station residence was very ^{handily} placed for reaching the town of Boston which was the nearest town in which to spend our off duty moments. This busy market town, situated a few miles inland from The Wash, combined all the necessary amenities for aircrew beds such as dancing, movies, pub crawls, and singsongs, but finally let us not forget the female company although the priorities were not necessarily in the order I have mentioned. The Gliderdrome was the main dance hall, and in the main this establishment was usually the last port of call following the normal drinking sessions, but the main drawback was the departure of the last bus at 11 pm. Needless to say I was one of many that missed this bus on many occasions, and it was a bloody long hike along the dark country roads back to Argyle House, and the village of New York. I know that emphatically because I have covered every single yard of the distance on what were finally very tired feet.

On the threshold of our operational career, Geoff, "Ginger" and I had every confidence in Feb, in our eyes he was a good, experienced skipper, and we settled down very well as a crew. We had been assigned to "B" Flight, which was commanded at that time by Squadron Leader "Mary" Tudor who had allocated AD 802 "Bar O" for Orange as the Hampden aircraft we would use on operations. Following several familiarisation flights the eagerly awaited first trip as an operational crew came to pass on 27th June when we were briefed to carry out a minelaying, or as it was officially codenamed "Gardening" sortie, off Terschelling: one of the West Frisian group of islands. At a given point in the midst of the off shore enemy shipping lanes we would drop a 2000 lb mine. This was a magnetic type mine, cylindrical in shape it was about ten feet in length having a parachute attachment. Minelaying by Bomber Command aircraft was being carried out during most nights in the enemy near shore shipping lanes on a gradually increasing scale as the war years progressed and as the coast line defences correspondingly grew in intensity modifications to the aircraft mine later on enabled it to be dropped from a much greater height than 700 feet. In all throughout the war over forty thousand sea mines were dropped, and well over one thousand enemy ships of all types were sunk as a result.

The day of the 27th June proved to be a very prolonged, and busy one for me as our aircraft AD 802, had just been fitted with a new modern wireless set ^{REPLACING} the old 1082/1083 apparatus which was being withdrawn from general use. The new set which had just been installed was the Marconi 1154/1155 transmitter and receiver with magic eye tuning, an excellent combination, its performance would prove to be far in advance of the awkward set it was replacing. All my wireless training had been carried out on the 1082/1083, which, of course had been the standard bomber aircraft W/T set, and indeed had been a complicated piece of apparatus needing a lot of knowhow and experience to operate so the newly introduced Marconi set was more than welcome as far as I was concerned.

Of course I had not set eyes on the new set before that day, and I had to work it on operations that same night, so naturally I had to undergo a crash course in the Signals section during the late morning. Time simply flew by until I realised I had spent two hours of intensive practice working the set, and during that time found it to be a brilliant piece of W/T apparatus, easy to work with no vices, I was soon at ease with it, being confident that all would be well that night. Later on in the afternoon I flew with Bob in AD 802 on a night flying test, and while he was putting the kite through its paces I gave the Marconi set a good and thorough air test which proved that everything was in tip top working order, so all was well for the nights caper.

To give a short description of the Marconi W/T set, the 1155 receiver was of a modern style with a full visual calibrated dial, and with the aid of its yellowish-green "magic eye" was easy to back tune. The 1154 transmitter with its differently coloured clickstops had four ranges, three of them covering ranges from 2.5 to 16.7 megacycles on H/F. The fourth covered the M/F range of 200 to 500 kilocycles, and six frequencies could be pre-selected by simply moving the tuning handle. This Marconi set had three times the power of its predecessor the 1082/1083, and direction finding fixes were possible to obtain at much greater ranges, a big asset. The new set was to prove a big step forward as far as W/T communications were concerned, and was at that time in the process of being fitted as standard equipment to all Bomber Command operational aircraft.

My busy day was now well into its last quarter, our crew had been briefed on all aspects of our first "Op" together, and our take off was scheduled for 2300 hours (11 pm).

On this particular night of 27th June the main Command target was the port of Bremen, so our diminutive "Gardening" effort could hardly be termed even a side-show, but that did not worry us we were keen to get the first trip over. The sortie was a typical "freshman" trip, not of long duration, generally it was said that minelaying ventures were a piece of cake, but we never took much notice of such anecdotes. Although some "gardening" trips proved to be uneventful some were hazardous with many crews running into trouble from groups of flak ships who were heavily armed with different calibres of anti-aircraft guns. The flak ships, which were mainly converted trawlers usually around five to six hundred tons, regularly patrolled the area of the Frisian islands more especially they seemed to be always lurking in the vicinity of the enemy near coast swept shipping lanes. Our navigation had to be spot on, for the mine had to be dropped in the right place from a low, and therefore dangerous height which was around seven hundred feet in those days. The magnetic mine when dropped descended by parachute, and at that period of the war any higher than that height would probably have caused the mine to break up on hitting the water. At such a low altitude the very presence of flak ships in the target area could mean disaster, we would present an easy target, and suffer a real shellacking from these floating gun platforms. In fact that is exactly what happened to us, for as we dropped our mine in the appointed spot a Jerry flak ship below opened up with a real firework display, our baptism of fire. Fortunately for us they all seemed to be near misses, although several bullet holes were found afterwards which must have just missed Geoff, our Observer, in the nose of our Hampden. "Ginger" Combie, our bottom gunner in the "Tin", had an eye to eye confrontation with the many gun flashes below him, and he uttered a few blasphemous remarks over the intercom, but he was so surprised at the sudden attack that he never fired a shot in retaliation. From my top gun position amidships it was not possible to see the flak ship below, but I could certainly see the lines of tracer shooting up alongside me on both port and starboard sides of our Hampden, it was a short, sharp fusillade.

Bob opened up the throttles smartly, and we swept out of the area a hell of a lot quicker than we came in to leave the flak ship well behind, soon we were heading across the sea homeward bound to land successfully along Coningsby's well lit up flarepath, the time was 0240 hours of the very early morning. The trip only lasted a mere three hours, and forty minutes, and I had very little to do in connection with my new W/T set, the only entries in my wireless log were the mandatory Group broadcast details.

During each Operational sortie respective Group headquarters, 5 Group in our case, transmitted every half hour, and on the hour. To listen out to these broadcasts was a must, an omitted broadcast could have been an important one. Preceded by the Group call sign these messages, if any, usually concerned either recalls or diversion instructions concerning landing at other aerodromes due to bad weather at home bases.

If there were no instructions to be sent the transmission consisted of only a series of call signs, but each half hour broadcast had to be listened in too, and logged.

After landing, and dispersing our aircraft, the usual routine was a truck ride back to the crew rooms to deposit our flying gear, parachute harness etc before we attended the debriefing session.

This was the normal procedure following a sortie when all returning crews, bleary eyed, and weary after periods of acute tension were interrogated by an Intelligence officer.

As a crew we sat down at one of the tables, invariably cigarettes were lit up, and slowly exhaled as the various questions concerning the trip were put.

These normally consisted of information regarding the bombing of the target, description of contact with enemy fighters, knowledge of any of our aircraft shot down, any bale outs observed, where enemy flak, and searchlight concentrations encountered.

In our case the information required concerned the location, and positions of enemy flak ships, and the exact spot where we dropped our mine.

Normally, on completion, all the squadron details of the sortie went through each appropriate Bomber Group, in our case 5 Group, and thence to Bomber Command Headquarters. Here they were all collated to produce a more or less true picture of the nights operations.

Following the debriefing sessions our crew sampled the usual operational breakfast in our Mess which was the usual bacon, and egg, and then it was off to bed, it has been a long, busy twenty four hours. Sometimes the pre, and post operational periods without proper sleep were even more prolonged.

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A couple of nights later on the 29th June we were part of a Command force of just over a hundred aircraft detailed to bomb the town, and port of Bremen, our first German mainland target. Our squadron provided only nine Hampdens on this occasion, and we took off at 2310 hours. I wouldn't say I was overawed by my first experience of ~~concentrated~~ heavy flak concentrations, and the many searchlights trying to cone our aircraft, but one had to learn quickly at this game to survive. One had to be extra vigilant right from the moment of take off until the final shut down of engines on return to base, and at every minute of the hours between. Bob thought it was a fairly quiet trip, it certainly could not be termed uneventful, those sort of trips were almost unknown to bomber crews, something was always happening. In this instance Geoff was unable to identify our specific target, and instead, after one or two deliberations our load of high explosives was dropped on some warehouses on the west side of the river Weser despite the close attention of various searchlight batteries, and the usual accompaniment of many heavy flak bursts.

Geoff and Ginger both having a good sight of the target below were unanimous that our bomb load started a few large fires. We landed back at base at 0530 hours, having been airborne six hours, and twenty minutes.

A total of seven aircraft were lost on this raid.

During the summer months of 1941 Bomber Command attacks grew in intensity with ever increasing numbers of aircraft being involved. During most moon periods we operated three, and at times four nights per week taking full advantage of the brilliant moonlight visibility to press home our attacks. From my open position as first Wop/Ag, with the spring loaded perspex cupola reposing in its fully pushed back position I had my head and shoulders more or less in the open sky, therefore I could discern everything around in in a 180 degree arc.

Height never bothered me in those days, it certainly would now. Besides witnessing many red, and gold sunsets, and just as many kaleidoscope daybreaks it must be said that the grandeur of the night skies visibly encountered on journeys over the North Sea were at times fantastic to behold. Typical examples were flying along great canyons between the various types of cloud masses of all shapes, and sizes, the moonlight glint of the sea below, the snow covered mountains of Norway, the magnificent aura of the Northern Lights which I was privileged to marvel at only once during the following winter.

At height the only indication of speed when flying straight and level was when the kite had topped a great blanket of strato cumulus, fleecy cotton wool like clouds, and flew along the crest similiarly to riding the waves, this was always a marvellous experience, indulged in many times. Alternatively they were just as many nights when the sky, and weather conditions proved nothing to enthuse about when we would encounter thunderstorms, and lightning, heavy rain, severe icing, gale force winds, and the biggest enemy, fog. Nevertheless, not to be confused with all the hell let loose in the skies over the enemy held European mainland, and German target areas, their air defences were formidable to say the least, and kept on increasing as the bombing war went on. More sorties were flown during the months of June, July, August than in any other month of 1941, and our crew flew six trips during the first ten days of July, all of them in bright moonlight conditions. The first of these was a visit to DUISBURG, and was notable as this was our introduction to "Happy Valley", the Ruhr Valley to the uninitiated. One of the most heavily defended regions in the Reich with the really heavy flak of the box barrages supported by hundreds of searchlights. Our Hampden was one of thirteen, which was 106's contribution to the Command effort. The weather was fine, our kite AD 802 carried the usual load 2500 lbs of H.E. which we dropped from ten thousand feet, despite the target being partly obscured by persistent low clouds. Our squadron lost two aircraft out of the thirteen provided towards the effort. The Cologne raid on the night of the 4th July was of special significance inasmuch as the six aircraft provided by our squadron must have been one of the smallest forces of Bomber Command ever to bomb the German mainland. The main force of the Command that particular night were detailed to attack the naval bases of Lorient and Brest on the French Atlantic coast. In this connection our squadron were providing eleven Hampdens, but for some reason, no doubt a "brilliant" late idea from a chairborne whizz kid at either Group or Command H.C. six of our kites were withdrawn from the Lorient target. Our crew was one of the six, and at a separate briefing our six crews were instead detailed to attack different targets in the Ruhr Valley area, each crew being given a specific area to bomb. My crew were designated to patrol the area between Cologne and Bonn, and spasmodically drop bombs on these two targets in a prolonged attack, an intruder mission no less. It seems that the idea was to effect a drawn out "red" air raid warning in order to get the workers in the shelters for a few hours. We would be aboard our own kite AD 802, and our bomb load was four at 500 lbs, and two 250 lb pounders, one under each wing. On the face of it the prospects of our six crews did not look very rosy, detailed as nuisance raiders in moonlight conditions of almost daylight visibility, and as the only RAF aircraft over the entire German mainland meant we had to face the whole of the enemy's fighters, and ground defences. Some time after we had returned from briefing during the course of what seemed a very long evening a few very worried faces were observed in the Ante room of the Sergeants Mess. They belonged to two of our crews who were deeply engrossed in conversation as they passed away the time before their night flying supper, and eventual take off, four more hours had yet to tick by.

Several of the lads to be involved obviously viewed this forthcoming "Op" with trepidation, and indeed four N.C.O. members of one crew did not fancy their chances of survival at all, and said so quite openly. Their premonitions, sadly, were to prove correct as this Sergeant pilot, and his crew did not return, along with two other of the six crews detailed. Leisurely spending an hour or so relaxing in the Ante Room of our Mess, whileing away some of the time before take off, I could not help overhearing the remarks of these four lads as they discussed all aspects of the sortie in a more or less fatalistic vein. I cannot say their obvious apprehension made any difference to my usual unruffled outlook. It was their own problem, and the crews apparent ~~agitation~~ ^{ANXIETY} did not put me off, although I knew it would be a rough trip. Stretched out in a comfortable armchair I carried on enjoying my moments of relaxation, I never gave the episode another thought, and it never occurred to me at any time that I had just listened to

what was probably the last conversation this crew would ever have in our Sergeants mess Ante room. From a personal point of view I would not say I was never afraid inwardly, but I suppose I always had a smile, and soldiered on phlegmatically doing my job as well as I could. Although one saw crews, and mates come and go, missing that is, the longer one survived the ensuing train of thought was always "It will never happen to me", but of course these famous last words were often proved wrong.

So we lost three out of the six crews that took off at 2300 hours on a moonlit summer night from Coningsby to the Ruhr area, a high price to pay for a insignificant nuisance raid. As far as our crew was concerned it was certainly a nail biting experience, we expected it to be. From the moment we left the Dutch coast line behind the visibility was really brilliant. We had to be one hundred percent vigilant, I know I certainly was, and in the process sighted quite a few enemy night fighters at long range, I could see for miles. My skipper was well informed on their whereabouts, frequent running commentaries enabled him to steer clear of trouble, but these were tense moments, and it was also bloody hard work. With quite a number of German night fighters patrolling the area of the air space between Cologne and Bonn it was understandable that the heavy flak fire was only spasmodic, and never gave us much trouble, but on the other hand the many searchlight units were very active all around us. We were frequently temporarily blinded by the dazzling glare when they momentarily caught our aircraft, but we were able to weave out of the beams to escape being comed. Despite the "dicey" conditions we stuck to our task tenaciously, and followed the bends of the river Rhine, conspicuously visible below, to meander up and down between the two targets dropping a couple of bombs at intervals. With an ever present feeling of acute nakedness, that periodic illuminator the full moon was displaying its usual baleful glare on the proceedings. The tension was really intense over this long period which seemed like an eternity, but was actually around sixty minutes. It was a period of constant surveillance and evasive action to avoid being shot down by the many night fighters who were obviously scouring the skies for our whereabouts. Ginger, at his ventral gun position in the "Tin" was not the only crew member whose patience was wearing a trifle thin when he nervously uttered "Bugger this for a game of soldiers, Bob, its about time we left this bloody place and made tracks for home". Good old Ginger, however the short Pilot Officer did not have long to wait, and it was a sweet feeling of relief all round when Geoff dropped his last bomb. Without further ado it was "home James", Geoff had given Bob his homeward course so we turned smartly, and headed on our return journey towards Holland. Ultimately we crossed the Dutch coast well south of Rotterdam using our operational knowhow to avoid the coastal defensive hotspots to then steadily lose height across the North Sea, Lincolnshire bound.

The other two surviving crews, those of Sgt. Lockyer, and Sgt. Daniels had indeed landed almost an hour before we touched down at Coningsby when the time was 0510 hours. On the face of it, I therefore thought that perhaps our crew had been rather over persistent, and far too conscientious in our seemingly prolonged efforts over Cologne and Bonn, but we had lived up to that old aircrew motto "Press on Regardless".

Three crews lost out of six was disastrous by any standard, and was the highest loss as yet suffered by 106 on any one night. It transpired that one of the missing aircraft signalled an S.O.S. on its return journey, but subsequently crashed into the waters of the Thames estuary, they were no survivors. The other two missing crews were evidently shot down around the Ruhr area. Our other squadron aircraft, five in all, who were part of the main force attack on Lorient all returned safely. I was not at all surprised at the loss of half of our small force in such circumstances, and I cannot recall the experiment being repeated

although a few months later small numbers of aircraft were used spasmodically performing daylight cloud cover intruder raids, and another innovation at about the same period, was the use of six to eight Hampdens, on a squadron rota basis, carrying out searchlight suppression activities when the bombing force targets were in the Ruhr area. These special details assisted the bombing force by going in at more or less low level amongst the beams with both gunners busily machine gunning the many units operating in the German searchlight belts. Our squadron took its turn to participate in these activities, but our crew did not indulge, and frankly I cannot say I was sorry. I can recall these searchlight suppression attacks were not persevered with for very long.

Two nights later on 6th July we had a change of scenery, geographically speaking that is, when we flew in a southerly direction, instead of the usual eastern route, the main force objective being the enemy warships SCHARNHORST, and GNEISENAU berthed in Brest harbour, familiarly known to all aircrew bods by the code names "Salmon and Gluckstein". The Germans, adept at the art of subterfuge, used a gigantic smoke screen to obscure the exact whereabouts of the two capital ships skulking in the harbour. In the circumstances our bomb load was deposited on the dock area despite very heavy flak opposition. Our squadron lost only one Hampden out of the thirteen we had contributed to the total effort of over one hundred aircraft. The Brest sortie was noteworthy inasmuch as one of our crew's landed back at Coningsby after the raid, minus their bottom gunner. Apparently his departure, only noticed during the return journey, was something of a mystery. Horace, the first wop/Ag of this crew, was an old acquaintance of mine, and he disclosed that their Hampden had been in no difficulties whatsoever, and no order had been given at any time to bale out. The missing bottom gunner, it seems, had very coolly discarded his flying helmet, and oxygen mask, calmly placed them in a neat pile, took his flying rations, and then very quietly baled out via the open cupola of the "Tin", in all probability somewhere over French

territory. I never did find out what happened to him then or subsequently for that matter, another one of wartimes many bizarre mysteries. Our hectic spell of operating continued on the very next night 7th July, it was the jolly old Ruhr Valley again, and the lethal box barrages. The reception was as expected, hotter than hell, and over the town the air was thick with bursting red hot shrapnel sent up from the many heavy flak batteries in the area, the local gunners at Munchen Gladbach were real professionals, being always spot on. The old Hampden did not afford much protection, the pilot had armour plating protection to his back as he sat in his cockpit, and I, as W/Op top gunner, had a detachable strip of shaped armour plating which slotted in, and fitted across the gun mounting to give a modicum of protection. The twin Vickers gas operated 303 machine guns traversed on a half circular shaped metal rail giving a hundred and eighty degree arc of fire. The gun mounting had been modified to operate electrically with the aid of a small motor, being previously hand operated.

During those tense, and nerve wracking moments over Munchen Gladbach, the many heavy flak bursts were much to close for comfort, the old familiar smell of cordite bore witness to this, so as a means of protection I placed my helmeted head between the twin Vickers guns, and thus behind the strip of armour plating, in such a position at least one important part of my anatomy was guardable. Besides having to contend with the countless razor sharp fragments of red hot ironmongery which was being scattered all around the surrounding air space following the shell bursts, there was an additional discomfort. The awareness of standing a few inches above a load of high explosives hidden inside the bomb bay awaiting release, a direct hit, and it would be goodbye all.

Amidst the steady "Krump" "Krump" of the heavy flak bursts we dropped our load from ten thousand feet, but things were much too hot to observe any results the main object was to get the hell out, and find some peace and quietness, a hard task. On our way out of this maelstrom of hot steel a large rectangular lump of red hot shrapnel went through the centre panel of Bob's cockpit wind-screen. To all intents and purposes it should have decapitated him, but the lucky so and so was at that moment looking out and downwards over the port side of his cockpit. Naturally it scared the living daylights out of him, and for a moment he was speechless. It all happened in a flash, and when Bob looked forward in the next instant he was confronted with a completely shattered front screen, in the middle of which was a jagged hole and a hell of a draught as the cold air stream blew through the aircraft. Lucky Bob, no wonder he went pale, lucky for us too, I thought. The skipper's front screen was reputedly bullet proof, but that jagged hunk of flying hot shrapnel was no mere bullet. Bob now had to contend with a bloody cold draughty wind blowing in his face all the way back to base, but after this lucky escapade that was the least of his worries. After the hunk of shrapnel had passed through our skipper's windscreen, fortunately for me at the back it had made its exit through the side of the fuselage, I guess we were a lucky crew that night. The squadron lost one on this raid out of twelve taking part, and we landed back at base at 0450 in the early morning. Whilst the moon period was still in being the momentum was maintained, and a couple of nights later we were in action once again, but this time in a replacement Hampden AD 760 as our own kite AD 802 was, of course, unserviceable, and now in the maintenance hangar under repair to be fitted with a new bullet proof centre windscreen. Our ground crew, a real good set of hard working lads under Cpl. Rasmussen, managed to get hold of the replaced shattered windscreen with the large jagged hole in the centre, and presented it to Bob as a memento of a very narrow escape. On the 9th July our names were once again prominent on the crew room board for dicing that night, and during the afternoon Bob and I tried out AD 760 on the usual night flying test with the kite coming through with flying colours, mind you I would have rather been in our own AD 802 one got attached to one's own kite, it was part of the crew, sentiment or no.

At the main briefing later on, we learned we were to attack AACHEN which we were informed was the ^{area} Nazi party H.Q. at that time. I recall that this sortie was a 5 Group only effort, and an early concentration raid, if I can call it that, though not to be compared to such later efforts either in numbers or minimum of time over target. In this case around one hundred aircraft, including seventeen from 106, constituted the total force. Once again brilliant moonlight conditions, and good visibility proved to be just as forecast by the Met boys, and I kept my usual constant surveillance for enemy night fighters. In the favourable conditions navigation was no problem, we were dead on track, and somewhere near the Dutch Belgian border I saw two Messerschmidt 110's but each time my running commentary enabled the skipper to keep out of their way. At that period of the war Aachen was a new target, it did not seem to be heavily defended, no heavy stuff was encountered only a smattering of light flak, and many of our aircraft attacked the town from a very low level.

the victims of any surprise attack right throughout the long summer operational grind when the visibility was, for the most part, brilliant with no place to hide. During this period because of my very sore eyes I had great difficulty in sleeping after each trip, and because of this I was usually up and about before mid-day. If there was nothing on that night I, and a few of the chaps billeted at Argyle House usually made tracks for Boston where the agenda was a meal, a visit to the local cinema, and finally a few drinks, inevitably just making the last bus back to the village of New York. I wonder who gave it that high falutin' name?

After a night of relaxation the following day 11th July saw us once again listed on the crew board for the nights Operation along with eleven other crews. This time we were bound for North West Germany, namely the naval base at Wilhelmshaven in our old faithful AD 802.

We took off at 2330 hours to set course, and as we passed over Skegness were climbing steadily on a north easterly heading. After crossing our coast, and settling down to the sea crossing it was always necessary to give our convoys, and the Royal Navy a wide berth.

Why? one might say. Well, simply because the Navy shot first, and left discussions for afters. Although it was standard procedure during pre-operational briefings for us to be informed on the positions of our North Sea convoys it was always possible to drift near to or over such ships as things did not always work out as planned. Alternatively, friendly ships were not always in the exact position given to us at the briefing session. It was a fact that the Navy gunners were definitely a trifle trigger happy, and regardless of a small item, namely aircraft recognition, usually fired away at any aircraft approaching or near at hand.

It was no joke being shot up the rear by your own side, and having to take evasive action whilst carrying a full bomb load. Our usual response was to fire off the Verrey pistol, loaded with the appropriate "colours of the day" cartridges denoting we were a friendly aircraft. It was a bit rough on us being used as an Aunt Sally when either going out with a full bomb load of H.E., or when returning feeling "shattered" following a hard, tough slog over the Reich, but at the same time I could understand their logic, even though a few obscene "adjectives" were always voiced by irate aircrew members against the matelots with the itchy trigger fingers.

It was a good job they could not hear some of them, if so they would have been wholesale checking up of birth certificates. However, on this trip we were not interfered with by any of our North Sea convoys, but later on during our tour we were on the receiving end of a few near misses on several occasions.

Meanwhile, well out over the North Sea heading for Wilhemshaven we eventually reached a height of fifteen thousand feet, all now ~~on~~ ON oxygen, having switched on the supply when we had reached the usual height for its use, which was in excess of ten thousand feet. Bob, taking it easy on the sea crossing, had now disengaged "George" (Automatic pilot) as we were now approaching the German coastline.

A little earlier our navigator Geoff had disclosed to his pilot that he had inadvertently forgotten to bring his target map, the dizzy chap, but as things turned out it was not needed. Big Geoff, our very tough looking six feet plus South African Observer was essentially a man of very few words, he was certainly not a chap to tangle with on terra firma. He was not exactly the worlds best navigator, and I do not think he ever appreciated the fact that he had a good wireless operator at the back, but the skipper did, and that was all that mattered as far as I was concerned.

Geoff was the only bod in our crew who smoked cigarettes whilst flying on Ops, and in this connection he was a bloody nuisance. I never knew for certain how he disposed of his cigarette stubs from his position up in the perspex nose of the Hampden, but I always witnessed the finishing effects. During the course of these very frequent occasions his burning cigarette end remnants ejected into the slipstream passed me at the rear as a shower of red sparks giving a tracer like effect, which always startled me even though I was keeping my usual sharp look out, so conversely, many were the rollickings I subsequently gave him over the intercom, which however did not make the slightest difference to Geoff.

Meanwhile as we approached Wilhelmshaven the natives were anything but hostile, in fact everything seemed to be ominously quiet, and peaceful, but this situation did not last for long as numerous searchlights groped around to finally pick us up. The whole crew was momentarily blinded by the dazzling glare as the whole interior of our kite was lit up like Chrystal Palace as twenty or thirty beams determinedly tried to cone the aircraft. Heavy flak was now bursting all around us, and several other aircraft that were in the vicinity. Suddenly a vivid, violent explosion, too close for comfort, and without doubt a direct hit on one of our kites close by, blew our Hampden up and over causing it to go into a spin. Bob quickly gathered his wits, the bomb load was immediately jettisoned, and without a spoken word he instinctively went through his drills as he fought to pull the aircraft out of its downward spiral. During these tense moments we lost about eight thousand feet before Bob finally managed to straighten out the Hampden and achieve normal straight and level flight. At that point we were down to a height of six thousand feet, sweat over for four very relieved crew members. We found ourselves well out over the seas somewhere in the locality of Jade Bay having left Wilhelmshaven well behind us.

Obviously no pinpoints were available, and Geoff, our Observer, had no idea of our position, it looked, once again, a job for the back up man, the wireless operator. I soon got to work, to tune in my 1155 Receiver on to a known frequency, and pick up a certain wireless beacon station I knew was located in Lincolnshire. Listening out for its call sign I obtained a good, strong bearing, and using my D.F. Loop Aerial together with the visual needles meter I was then able to home our aircraft all the way back across the North Sea on this beacon bearing. My pilot had a duplicate needles meter on his dashboard panel in his cockpit, and in a nutshell followed the aforesaid procedure.

Visually, the key to keep an appropriate homing course was crossed needles in a centralised position. Ultimately we made landfall, to cross the Lincolnshire coast near Skegness, more or less bang on track of the wireless beacon station.

Although we used this procedure several times, the usual practice was to assist the Observer to obtain his position lines by taking ordinary Loop bearings from the various wireless beacon stations situated round our coast. Even now after four decades I can recall the call signs of three such beacon stations which I used regularly, and very successfully in those days, these were AA7, BB7 and CC7.

From that well known landfall of dear old "Skeggie", it was an easy run in of a few miles to our base at Coningsby where we lobbed down at 0620 hours to then undertake the usual debriefing interrogation, an operational breakfast of bacon and egg, and then depart for a few hours kip, what more could one ask.

Thus ended a very tense, and a much to hectic ten days during which our crew had operated on no less than six nights. It was a good job that this work ratio was not a regular feature, and to put my case very bluntly, I was "knackered" both physically and mentally, my overworked red rimmed eyes badly needed both a rest, and a change of scenery being so sore they felt like balls of fire. No doubt Bob, Geoff, and Ginger shared the same symptoms. Fortunately for us all, our first spell of leave on the squadron was due, and thankfully we duly departed to take different geographical directions to partake of what we thought was a well earned seven days furlough, the date was 13th July. Air crew leave on a operational squadron was an entitlement of seven days every six weeks, a liberal allotment one might think in comparison with other services, but deservedly earned I would say. Our squadron losses were averaging seven crews per month, and many of the lads that got the chop did not live to enjoy much leave, some did not see any at all.

During the years of 1941, and 42 it was only Bomber Command that was capable of any sustained offensive action against the Germans, and this was carried out relentlessly several times per week, despite the fact that they did not seem to be much future in it, many were the casualties, and not a lot survived to fulfill the contract of a full tour of bomber operations over the Reich. In saying that, not all night bomber Ops were life, and death struggles, but most trips were pretty rough with the odd easy one coming now and again, but even on these so called "milk runs" some crews were always unlucky, and got the chop. During the continual nightly penetration of the lethal European night skies, carried out in all types of weather, death was always close at hand to the crews of Bomber Command.

From a personal point of view Bomber Command operational flying held a peculiar fascination which was compulsive, it was a sort of love, hate relationship topped by the unique spirit of squadron comradeship.

Meanwhile, back in the fold with batteries recharged ~~af~~ following our refreshing week long furlough I met up with Bob, and the remainder of our crew in the "B" flight office.

Collectively we were very relieved to find out that there was nothing doing, no war that night, so without further ado, following a few words with my crew mates I ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ left the flight offices to board an M.T. vehicle which would take me, and any other N.C.O.'s back to our billet at Argyle House.

Before I could settle down on my "pit", a fellow resident Sgt Bill Dashwood, a Kiwi pilot, walked in the room, and said "Do you fancy going down to Boston, Ted? We'll have a meal, and a few drinks". I did not take much persuading, and within the hour we were on our way by virtue of the Lincolnshire bus service. Apparently that certain day was his birthday, as good an excuse as any for carrying out a square search of that towns many locals. During that long evening which stretched into ~~the~~ night the occasion was well, and truly celebrated, so much so that we lingered at what would prove to be our last port of call, the name of the pub escapes me, our legs would not respond further.

Bill Dashwood, now inebriated to the extent of throwing caution to the winds, insisted that we would now sample a measure from every bottle displayed along the upper rear of the bar. I can only remember commencing this with a "Green Goddess" liqueur at that fairly late point of the nights proceedings, and finishing up hanging precariously from a metal rail on the rear platform of the last Lincolnshire double decker bus as we headed back towards the village of New York, inevitably I was as sick as a dog. I cannot remember what happened to Bill, he certainly was not teetering on the rear bus platform alongside me, happy days.

Some months later poor old Bill Dashwood and his crew failed to return one night, but the New Zealander was later known to have survived as a P.O.W.

Forty six years later I met Bill Dashwood again when he and his wife visited the U.K. to attend a 106 Squadron reunion at Woodhall Spa, obviously we had a good natter.

Returning to the aftermath of the birthday binge I must say that I was a very pale looking Wop/Ag who emerged from the Sgts Mess the following morning. My head felt like it belonged to someone else, as I seated myself very gingerly in one of the Mess ante room armchairs. Slowly I laid back, closed my eyes, and listened for half an hour or so to the dulcet tones of the Andrews Sisters, a record which was played over and over, before eventually making my way up to the Flight offices. I saw that our crew names were listed up on the board along with twelve other crews. Frankfurt am Main was the following nights target, and we took seven and a half hours to accomplish a successful, but uneventful trip.

Two days later, during the morning of 24th July, the grass surrounds of the Squadron flight offices looked to be a hive of abnormal activity, something was in the wind, but whatever it was had not reached my shell like ears up to that point. However I soon found out that 106 would be participating in their first ever daylight bombing raid that very morning, a momentous occasion for the squadron. Most crews, including ours, were not involved in the proceedings. Only our C.O. Wing Commander Bob Allen, and five senior crews took part in the operation as far as our squadron was concerned. They ~~led~~ led a formation of eighteen Hampdens of No. 5 Group, the target being the battleship Gneisenau lurking ~~in~~ Brest harbour.

The formation of Hampdens, who had a fighter escort, were followed in by the main bombing force of almost a hundred Wellingtons from Nos 1 and 3 Groups. Very heavy flak opposition was encountered, and all 106's Hampdens ~~were~~ suffered hits from shrapnel, but despite the intense barrage managed to keep formation during their bombing run, but ~~were~~ were unable to observe any results, the ~~reception~~ reception being much too hot. From the 5 Group Hampden formation two were shot down.

The force of "Wimpeys" which followed the Hampdens lost eleven aircraft in their attack, mainly at the hands of enemy fighters. That certain day proved to be a very busy one at Coningsby for in addition to the daylight effort nine crews, including ours, were scheduled for the night operation with KIEL being the Command's target. It would also be a long, and busy day for the hard working ground crews of all trades, who were always a cheerful bunch with their humorous backchat, and obvious pride in their jobs. Our

ground crew under Cpl. Rasmussen were such a good set of lads, the liason was always spot on, we never had any trouble with our aircraft AD 802 thanks to them.

After the usual pre trip preliminaries we took off on a splendid summer night at 2210 hours, and set course for the long jaunt across the "drink". It was still pretty light, so we were able to fly in some sort of formation with two other squadron aircraft until eventually the night darkness closed in, and we lost each other at which point we were not very far away from the North West German coastline. Kiel was easily located, and over the target the visibility was excellent, therefore our bombing was fairly accurate, but the flak barrage was really fierce, and very soon after we had disposed of our two thousand pound bomb we were caught to be well and truly coned by about twenty searchlight beams. Lit up like a Christmas tree with all our crew no longer concealed, and dazzled by the blinding glare, we were held at the apex of the cone, there was no hiding place for us as Bob frantically put the Hampden through various twists, and "split arsed" turns, but all to no avail.

We were well, and truly right in it, the flak picked us up then, the Germans had our height, and commenced to pile on the agony. Immediately, innumerable dull krumps sounded all around our kite with great black, and red puffs of smoke accompanying each burst. Again there was that very strong smell of cordite, you know its really close then, and it certainly was as during one of these close bursts our wireless aerial was shot away, and this was very adjacent to my top crew position. Bob then did the only thing possible, he pushed his control column well forward, down went the Hampden's nose as the kite hurtled earthwards in a screaming dive from fifteen thousand feet during which it must have achieved a speed of very near 400 miles per hour, it was amazing that the wings remained intact.

If I had been told to bale out this would have been an impossible task, I could not move a muscle, the "G" force had me rooted to the floor of my crew position.

~~All the loose equipment duly finished up way back in the front part of the fuselage, including my Irvin parachute pack so even if I had b~~

During our violent headlong descent all the loose equipment finished up way back in the front part of the fuselage, including my parachute pack, so even if i had been able to move freely I would never have been able to make any sort of a bale out. Needless to say we eventually managed to evade the many searchlights that had previously coned our aircraft, but only after a perspiring Bob, using every trick in the book, had strenuously carried out a series of desperate, and violent evasive actions. During that time I had to stabilise myself by hanging on grimly to my twin gun mounting, tense and unhappy moments indeed they were, with an ever present feeling of acute helplessness when one wonders if this it.

During those action filled moments multiple ground gun flashes, and the glaring lights from the many searchlights seemed to gyrate before my eyes, such was the effect of our desperate evasive tactics. Although timed in minutes it felt like an eternity before we eventually eluded the formidable Kiel defences, and Bob was then able to gradually ease the Hampden out of the headlong swerving dive, and ultimately steadily the kite, we were then well out over the sea with its protective darkness. We thought it was the Baltic, but it was actually the northern fringe of Kiel Bay.

During our desparate, twisting and diving manoeuvres to avoid being shot down we had lost tēn to twelve thousand feet, and having found ourselves in the now quiet darkness above the sea circled around until, everybody had regained their composure. By this time the gyro compass had stopped spinning around, and I had retrieved my precious parachute pack from the depths of the fuselage. Breathing more freely, and savouring the total absence of searchlights, shot and shell, we flew around the area in a serene fashion as Geoff, our Observer, searched for a pinpoint in order to try to establish our true position. Around this area there was no shortage of identifiable landmarks, for in reasonable proximity were several small islands belonging to occupied Denmark. Up front in his "greenhouse" nose position Geoff finally established our position to then calculate, and give Bob, our skipper, a course to fly. He had spotted Fehmarn Island. After affirming it was "Home James", Bob eased back his control column, the Hampden climbed steadily until we reached a safe height of ten thousand feet on this first leg of our long journey back to base. We had aimed to cross the German mainland some way north of Kiel, but south of the Danish border, the idea being to avoid the known defensive trouble spots before eventually leaving the enemy coastline to then settle down to the tedious sea crossing. Now on the second leg we flew through the gap between the North Frisian Islands, and Heligoland, and now that the tension had eased, although I kept my usual watching vigil around the skies, we gradually began a slow descent until Bob switched to straight and level flight when we were down to a height of five thousand feet, heading in an approximate southwesterly direction for the Lincolnshire coast. Finally unbuttoning my oxygen mask I then commenced to enjoy my flask of coffee, the nectar like drink went down really well, and a more than usually dry throat was, thankfully, adequately lubricated. It was an apt moment for meditation, truly we had been very fortunate to escape from the Kiel defences. At this point with well over two hundred miles to go I got to work on my W/T set, to obtain a series of Loop bearings, having tuned in to one of my favoured beacon stations. I passed these on to Geoff for him to plot, and eventually he gave our skipper an amended course which, he thought, would be bang on track for The Wash.

After an uneventful, but long sea crossing we landed back at Coningsby at 0530 hours, the trip had been a "shaky" do, but nevertheless it was another seven hours, and twenty minutes towards that elusive final total of two hundred operational hours. Following this harrowing experience over Kiel, inevitably my thoughts centred on my parachute pack, and the logic of another old phrase "Familiarity breeds Contempt" kept flashing through my mind. That dodgy Kiel episode had triggered what had hitherto been a dormant complacency, and now made me acutely aware that I, along with one or two fellow aviators, were not treating this potential life saver with the respect it deserved. In this connection several parachute packs were usually left laying around in the crew locker room to be picked up haphazardly when required for Operational flying. I was one of the guilty offenders, and readily admit that I never knew whether the pack I took with me was really mine or not. I had now seen the light, so accordingly my response was immediate, the very next day I took the chute pack along to the Parachute section to hand over to one of the WAAF personnel for repacking.

The pack was certainly in a battered, and dishevelled condition, but of course it had been buffeted all around the fuselage of the kite during our Kiel escapade. The pleasant looking young airwoman gave me a smile then opened up the pack on the long table inside the parachute store, examined the parachute with a practiced professional eye, and then returned to the counter to give me a long, hard look.

In a disapproving tone of voice she told me that the chute pack had traces of oil inside and in all probability might not have opened correctly if I had been forced to bale out in an emergency. On hearing her remarks I must surely have given a sickly smile, or was it a grimace, and simultaneously gone a whiter shade of pale at the sheer thought of what might have been during almost two months of operational flying on the squadron.

Walking back to the Sgts Mess I gave a sigh of relief, it was a lesson well and truly learned, thereafter a somewhat chastened Wop/A g looked after his Irvin parachute pack very well indeed, locked it away religiously after each flight, and scrupulously took it in to the Parachute section at the correct intervals for repacking.

Ultimately, I would have good cause for blessing the lovely WAAF parachute packers for their diligence, and expertise on our behalf, but I will come to that much later in this narrative.

The month of July 41 proved to be a record for 106 squadron, inasmuch as attacks on the enemy were made on no less than twelve separate nights with a total of one hundred and fifty seven sorties being carried out against a loss of seven Hampdens, and their crews.

During this period of 41 an experiment was carried out on several sorties, when the targets were situated well inside the German mainland, which was code named "Razzle". These were phosphorous strips stored in cans of water, the strips being dropped or disposed off over woodland areas of the Reich with the definite idea of creating fires. Each crew Observer had the job of disposing of these items by means of a chute fixed in the floor of his front compartment in the perspex nose of the Hampden. These phosphorous strips were dropped either on the way to or from our targets. The idea hinged on the weather conditions that followed hours later when the "Razzle" strips eventually dried out under the sun's rays to supposedly ignite, and so cause fires. At least, theoretically, that was the object of the exercise. I can only recall our crew participating once in Operation Razzle, and that was early in the month of July when we paid a visit to Munchen Gladbach in the Ruhr Valley. Somewhere along the route, over German territory, Geoff disposed of a time or two of "Deckers" which were a larger form of "razzle" strips. Operation Razzle was not persevered with by the upper echelon of the R.A.F. so obviously the venture could not have proved very successful. On odd occasions we would be given a consignment of small canvas bags each containing a limited amount of tea, which we disposed off as we passed over Holland on our way to German targets, a present for some lucky Dutch people. No doubt greetings from the sender were attached to the small bags of tea, and whichever way one looked at this project, it was not a bad propaganda exercise.

During the first two weeks of August our crew was in action twice with KARLSRUHE, and then KIEL being the main targets. The Karlsruhe sortie proved uneventful, but tiresome it being an eight hour touch. On the night of the 8th it was our old favourite Kiel, always a hot target, we would be very wary following our previous effort here. This time however we were able to avoid a repetition of that night's events, as different tactics were employed by Bob. He executed a glide attack from a height of thirteen thousand feet with both throttles eased right back, and low revs on order to fox the sound detectors. This manoeuvre was one of our skipper's favourite mode of approach, he was certainly very adept at this tactic, though Geoff's bombing runs were always much too painstaking, and in my humble opinion, too excessively prolonged for safety.

The Germans were no fools, and a long, straight bombing run was to their advantage, they then had plenty of time to bracket the offending kite with a steady barrage of heavy flak. I was aware of this, but Bob was the skipper, and it was his prerogative to expostulate, but in that connection I cannot recall him admonishing Geoff. Nevertheless we carried out a successful attack, and Ginger, our bottom gunner, observed two large flashes in the target area after we had dropped our bomb load. We were airborne eight hours, and twenty five minutes, and landed safely at Coningsby at 0615 hours.

HANOVER was the scene of our next trip being another of eight hours duration, and at this juncture we could count ourselves as an experienced crew, having then successfully carried out a total of thirteen operational sorties. At this point in time our skipper figured very prominently near the top of the "B" Flight ladder in respect of petrol consumption per sortie. Various pilots had their own mannerisms, some flogged their machines, and liked to get back first, but Bob was a steady type who adroitly manipulated his throttles, and revs throughout. That does not mean we made slow progress, far from it, but during long trips, bad weather conditions or the presence of enemy intruder aircraft around our base, our crew always knew we would have a reserve of juice to fall back on in the eventuality of either diversion or having to orbit around a flashing beacon for a certain time before being permitted to land.

During the late morning of the 16th August the large board in our crew room at the Flight offices was more or less completely full of names so it certainly looked as if a maximum effort was in the offing as far as 106 Squadron was concerned. A total of nineteen crews were in fact listed for participation in that night's operation. During the early afternoon our N.F.T. proved to be a rather extended affair simply because our skipper had previously arranged to give a lift home to one of our ground crew fitters, namely Dickie Spooner who was departing to enjoy a spot of leave. This extra long night flying test entailed flying to, and landing at RAF Thornaby, a Coastal Command station, very adjacent to Stockton-on-Tees which happened to be my home town as well as our passenger's. Due to the very close proximity of the Teesside balloon barrage it was no small feat to approach, and land the Hampden safely, but Bob managed it quite expertly.

After leaving the main runway Bob taxied our aircraft around the perimeter track, and was then instructed to marshal our Hampden on the grass surround adjacent to the Watch Office. We left all our flying gear inside the fuselage of our kite, and while Bob was in attendance inside the watch office I could see that the aircraft in use at Thornaby were twin engined Lockheed Hudson's with their individual Boulton Paul dorsal gun turrets being particularly conspicuous.

Being more or less on the doorstep my skipper insisted that he, Geoff, and myself should pay a visit to my home. The idea was typical of Bob, but even so I hesitated, and acquainted him with the stark fact that visiting my home residence would entail a four mile journey from the aerodrome. Time was the overriding factor, we would drop a real clanger if we failed to return to Coningsby before the main briefing concerning the night's operation. Nevertheless, despite my halfhearted show of apparent logic Bob was not to be thwarted, and so we took the chance making our exit through the main gate of the Station, we had informed the Guard Room of our intentions. At the head of affairs I set a brisk pace, after all I was the only bod who knew where he was going. Our grateful passenger, Dickie Spooner had left some time previously, he would be well on his way home.

My parents had a pleasant surprise, and were really pleased to meet my crew mates in person for the first time, and we enjoyed a quick meal before making it back to Thornaby aerodrome. Looking back I must say we were a very fortunate crew to escape censure as we did not land back at Coningsby till around four thirty pm, and very nearly missed attending the main briefing in respect of the nights sortie, just making it by the proverbial short head

As far as we crews at 106 were concerned our target that night was DUSSELDORF with about sixty 5 Group aircraft being involved, but during that period of 1941 Bomber Command frequently attacked two or three different targets on the same night. That night of the 16th August was such an occasion, and apart from Dusseldorf also on the agenda were raids on Cologne, and Duisburg with a total of almost two hundred aircraft participating altogether. We took off at 2210 hours in our own AD 802 carrying the usual 2500 lb bomb load, one of the nineteen Hampdens despatched by 106 on this particular sortie.

All seemed to be going very well on our way out, Orfordness was pinpointed below as we set a new course across the North Sea steadily gaining height, but just before crossing the Dutch coast our Hampden started juddering, the fuselage was vibrating like hell, obviously something was amiss, but what? Geoff, Ginger and I, technically, did not have a clue as to the cause of the sudden fuselage vibrations. Bob, our skipper, however discreetly kept his thoughts to himself, and as both engines were functioning in really first class order he decided to carry on to the target, but it was a worrying time for all. We struggled on to Dusseldorf after weaving our way through the defensive searchlight, and fighter zone (The Kamhuber Line as we called it), and bombed successfully from fourteen thousand feet. On our way out of the target area we were attacked by a Messerschmidt 110 night fighter.

The 110 had previously been attacking another of our bombers, but suddenly made a quick pass at our Hampden from the rear, and slightly to the port side to bank smartly then speed away into the dark part of the night sky. I spotted his dark silhouette, and fired a long burst as the 110 swerved away from our kite, the tracers seemed to indicate I was on target but he vanished into the inky darkness, and did not return. We did not suffer any damage, the action happened far too quickly for any evasive manoeuvres.

That spot of excitement temporarily took our minds off our problem as we continued on our homeward journey, but the fuselage vibrations now seemed to be getting worse. We were certainly apprehensive of the eventual outcome, all had our fingers crossed in the hope that we would make it back to base without mishap, nobody could diagnose the trouble, but the engines were still running sweetly. Bob steered clear of the known coastal flak concentrations, and we successfully crossed the Dutch coast unmolested, and despite the continuing fuselage vibrations we made it back to Coningsby to land safe and sound at 0340 hours, a very much relieved crew. Two of our Hampdens were lost on this raid with 5 Group losing five in all but the Command loss for the whole of the nights operations was 14 aircraft.

At the debriefing session I claimed hits on the ME 110 night fighter, and apart from all the other details of the sortie the constant fuselage vibrations of our aircraft were also reported.

Subsequently our kite AD 802 was subjected to a rigorous examination later that day which was organised by our "B" Flight ground staff "Chiefie", Flt/Sgt Burnham. The squadron Engineering officer later informed our skipper that in his ^{expert's} opinion we had indeed been bloody lucky to get back in one piece, apparently the inspection had revealed that one of the bolts holding the tail unit together had in fact sheared, hence the juddering vibrations, another one of the proverbial nine lives had been cross ticked off the slate. It was little wonder that Bob had now acquired a few grey hairs amongst his thick black thatch. Needless to say AD 802 was in dock for a few days for repairs to the said tail unit, and two days later our crew visited Cologne in another kite X 2921, but the feeling was not quite the same we were naturally attached to our own aircraft, all crews felt this way. It was generally recognised that aircraft had their own personalities, our Hampden AD 802 certainly had this quality, with no vices it was an essential part of the team.

Following a spell of four or five days in the maintenance hangar our trusty kite AD 802 was returned as good as new, and was back in its customary dispersal point to see us through the last nine days of the month of August when we carried on the good work to make successful attacks on Mannheim, Cologne twice, and Duisburg. Our squadron lost seven aircraft, and crews during the month when 150 sorties accumulating 1060 operational hours were flown. 142 tons of bombs, 9 sea mines, and 3040 incendiaries were dropped in the process. During the three month period ending in August the Command as a whole had flown a total of about ten thousand sorties which was more than ever before with a total of almost three hundred aircraft missing. It had certainly been an hectic summer, and our crew had now managed to complete twenty trips which I thought was pretty fast going for a nine week period.

On the Cologne trip of the 26th August we had broken in a new bottom gunner, namely Sgt Haste Wop/Ag. he would be filling in for a couple of Ops only before moving to another crew. Perhaps he would have good cause for remembering this first trip with us, but he would get back to Coningsby quite safely. Approaching Cologne we descended below the clouds. Bob had already decided to execute a glide attack using low revs. Our bombing run had already commenced, and we were down to a height of 7000 feet, which I thought was much too low for comfort over this heavily defended area. How we got away with it without being well, and truly clobbered was astonishing, not a salvo was fired at our aircraft during the long run in. In a state of high expectancy I stood at my position with bated breath.

Geoff, with his eyes glued to the bombsight directed Bob on to the target then finally pressed his bomb-tit to utter the magic words "bombs gone". Geoff had at last got his finger out for we were really tempting providence at that height. Bob immediately pushed both throttles forward, a fast quick exit was imperative, but nothing happened the engines failed to respond, and our kite continued to lose valuable height, ~~our~~ ^{the} Hampden was performing like a glider. There was little wonder that Bob went pale, so were we at the back. I did not know what had gone wrong, but guessed that not enough juice was flowing through the system at that particular moment, no doubt due to the overlong use of low revs, but after a few seconds, they seemed like minutes, Bob's subsequent efforts managed to persuade both engines to function at full power, it was sweat over for a very relieved crew. Miraculously we were ignored by both flak, and

searchlights, other kites were not, but they were operating at a greater height than our aircraft.

I was never a fan of these overlong glide approach bombing runs especially after this incident, but that Cologne trip proved to be the last time we would carry out such tactics.

We had said goodbye to Pilot Officer "Ginger" Combie, his last trip with us had been the Mannheim sortie of 22nd August. He had left Coningsby to join a Gunnery Leader's course at RAF, Manby, but he would return to Coningsby at a later date, and remain with 106 Squadron for quite some time. Later on during the year of 1942,

no doubt in his new role of Gunnery Leader, it seems he had achieved the big time being the mid upper gunner on several occasions of the then Squadron C.O. Wing Commander Guy Gibson DFC, and Bar, later to add a DSO, and ultimately the V.C. leading 617 Squadron on the renowned Dams raid.

Francis "Ginger" Combie was quite a character, I enjoyed his company both before, and during the nineteen trips we flew together. He was a good bottom gunner during our Hampden days despite a tendency at times to see things that were not there in the night skies above the Reich. When I required to contact him, instead of switching on my "mike", I would give him a gentle tap on his helmeted "bonce" using my right flying boot. In his confined position in the "Tin" his head was more or less level with the floor of my W/Op crew position, hence the teasing inclination on my part to give him a tap now and again to make sure he was awake, and on the ball. This was one way of making contact, but he never took umbrage, at no time did he object to this indelicate treatment, if I had been in his place I certainly would have.

I can recall two incidents concerning old "Ginger" which have always stuck in my mind, one could be said to be of a bizarre character with the other being rather amusing, to me that is. The first of these could have presented serious complications, and happened immediately after take off on a certain night during August when our crew was bound for a Ruhr Valley target. During the minutes that followed our take off I was puzzled by the steady continuance of a powerful blast of cold air which was shooting up from the "Tin" area, and whistling by my booted feet as I stood in my W/Op crew position. Withdrawing my intercom plug I knelt down to check the bottom gun position so the rest of my crewmates did not hear my surprised voice mutter "bloody hell". I had discovered that the "Tin" door, or entry hatch, had somehow or other flown open, and would remain so throughout the entire duration of the trip.

This metal skinned hatch door was now held rigidly in its fully extended outward position by virtue of its supporting metal stay. This was an odd, and very rare occurrence which presented an impossible situation that could only be remedied on the ground. Reestablishing intercom contact I had put Bob, our skipper, in the picture on all aspects of the wide open bottom hatch door dilemma. He did not seem unduly perturbed, and decided against landing back at base. Rightly or wrongly he had promptly made up his mind to carry on to the target despite the handicap, which of course we could do nothing about.

Perhaps I can reiterate at this point that for safety reasons, during both take off, and landing, the bottom gunner always sat behind the wireless Op using the bulkhead door in the fuselage as a backrest. It was very fortunate that "Ginger" was doing just that in this instance.

Obviously he could not now man his bottom gun position, to do so would have meant him sitting precariously alongside a large, gaping aperture, the apex of a veritable space abyss ultimately measuring many thousands of feet, a real death trap. Any form of near violent evasive action would have pitched him out into the black void.

We did not want to lose poor old "Ginger" under those circumstances so the little bottom gunner sat out the entire trip behind me propped up either against the rear bulkhead door or the main spar, more or less a bloody passenger. There was no doubt he felt really "brassed off", but one thing was certain, Ginger was very relieved in this instance not to be sitting behind his twin guns in the "Tin".

As we pressed on relentlessly towards our Ruhr target, and "Happy Valley", the hatch door mishap was temporarily forgotten despite our rear defensive limitations. I, necessarily, had to be really extra vigilant that night with "Ginger's" twin guns of no use at all. My eyes scoured the surrounding night sky constantly, they had to, mine were the only pair of eyes at the rear of the aircraft, but my night vision was very good during that wartime period. In the prevailing circumstances it followed that the old eyes went on a sort of automatic pilot, they would lock on any essential sightings, missing nothing as we plugged on to continue the mission. During my lone vigil at the upper rear of the Hampden it was really bloody cold, and draughty at fifteen thousand feet having to contend with cold air streams buffeting me from two sources, the wide open bottom hatch plus my own top cupola gun position. Suffering acute discomfort I had to endure these conditions for five and a half hours, but at the same time I was far too busily engaged with my dual jobs to worry about such trivialities. Conversely, idle "Ginger" was not too badly off at all, sitting there reposing against the bulkhead door comparatively comfortable, but certainly a victim of an untoward circumstance.

Of course we landed back at our base without too much trouble with the "Tin" door still rigidly in its wide open position, at first glance a rather unsightly looking Hampden.

Without doubt that trip must have been the only operation throughout "Ginger's" tour in which he was a passive onlooker, he only went for the ride.

If that incident had happened in mid winter I would have been frozen stiff, but realistically if that had been the case we could not have carried on with the operation in very low sub zero winter conditions. Nevertheless, with the object of cutting out the icy blasts from below, a draught door was available which fitted the aperture between my own, and the bottom gunner's position, but I had never used it at any time during my operational career on Hampdens, so obviously we were not carrying such a door, although it was standard equipment. In this connection other first Wop/Ag's on the Squadron had the same train of thought as myself.

The other story I thought was quite a laugh, but perhaps it was my peculiar sense of humour, I know "Ginger" did not think it was particularly funny. This incident occurred during the Karlsruhe "Op" during the month of August which was an eight hour trip. Some way out on this sortie I thought I detected a strong pungent odour in my locality of the rear fuselage, and "Ginger" was strangely quiet throughout. At the ultimate conclusion of this trip when we had landed safely back at Coningsby shortly after six am in the morning an embarrassed bottom gunner revealed to his crew mates that at some time during our sortie he had experienced an unfortunate accident, the poor bloke had apparently ~~s~~ hit himself. Sitting in his bottom gun position the excrement had literally caked around his posterior beneath his cumbersome flying clothing, poor old "Ginger" had stoically endured many hours of uneasiness, and must have been really uncomfortable. Bob, after turning off the flare path upon landing taxied our Hampden to the nearest point of the drome that was close to the Officers Mess, we would have to attend the debriefing interrogation without our bottom gunner. Naturally "Ginger" wanted to make tracks for his living quarters to do what was really necessary, partake of a bath, and a change of uniform, he smelt abominably. Very gingerly he alighted from the bottom rear hatch, closed the door, and I could not help but laugh, rotten type, as he lurched off across the grass towards his Mess with that wide, stiff legged gait which is peculiar to that particular condition. Poor old "Ginger" never lived that down, he ~~never did~~ ^{failed to} see the funny side of it. Francis "Ginger" Combie remained in the RAF after the war in a ground capacity, and our paths did not cross again until the year of 1953 when we got together in London at a 106 Squadron reunion where understandingly we had a lot to talk over. Due to various circumstances it is amazing to relate I did not attend any further Squadron reunions for three decades until I came across Allen Wiseman, who had been a fellow Wop/Ag on 106 Squadron at more or less the same period as myself. After regularly corresponding we agreed to attend the 1983 reunion at Woodhall Spa, Lincs, and the number that attended the function proved that even at this late juncture the old wartime Squadron camaraderie is as effervescent as ever it was. Blissfully unaware I mentioned the name of Francis "Ginger" Combie during one of the nostalgic sessions when one of the chaps informed me that he had passed away quite a few years previous, fond memories, Ginger.

Moving back to wartime Coningsby during the month of August, 41 we had a visit from a party of United States Army Air Corps officers. They turned up in our Squadron crew room one night as we crews were preparing for the night's operation. All our crews were noisily donning flying gear, and making final preparations prior to leaving on the crew bus for our various dispersal points, and eventual take off. No doubt they were making observations on our operational procedure, and seemed very interested, and highly amused to see me carrying a couple of empty beer bottles.

They asked me what was the idea behind the bottles, and I remarked that it was just a personal touch to add to the general proceedings, and in fact the bottom gunner would lob them out over the other side of the water, on a German target of course, where the offending articles on their downward trend would emit a whining whistle similar to a falling bomb. It was a new one on them, but it brought a smile of amusement. In later years the bottle lobbing process died a natural death.