

As Bob had now departed from the operational scene it meant that our crew was now well split up, previously we had lost Ginger Combie to a Gunnery Leader's course, so only Geoff and I remained to find ourselves allocated to different crews in our own "B" Flight. I joined up with Sgt. Healey with whom I would fly for my remaining sixty hours or so of my first tour. I knew him fairly well, Gray Healey at that time was more or less halfway through his first tour of two hundred hours. He had a good squadron record, so obviously I knew I was in good hands once again. Sgt Gray Healey was a quietly spoken man with an air of complete unflappable confidence. Gray and I got on very well with each other although we never attained the very close degree of friendly attachment Bob and I had shared.

Sgt Tommy O'Hare, was the Observer (navigator/bomb aimer) a good one too, and making up the crew foursome was Sgt. Snelling, W/O p/Ag, who was the 2nd W/Op, and therefore the bottom gunner. No doubt he would step up to first wireless operator when I eventually left the crew. Our "B" Flight commander was now Squadron Leader Stenner, D.F.C. in place of S/L Tudor D.F.C. who had recently left the squadron having been selected to take command of No. 83 Squadron, which was based at RAF, Scampton, Lincs, and also belonged to No. 5 Group, Bomber Command, it was a really good squadron. My first trip with Sgt. Healey took place on 15th September when HAMBURG was the main target. This occasion was the first time for several months that we had attacked this city, perhaps due to the short summer nights.

Hamburg, as always, proved to be very heavily defended with great concentrations of heavy flak batteries in, and around the city. In common with other well defended German targets these batteries included a great many of the renowned, and much respected 88 millimetre heavy guns. Besides being a formidable anti-aircraft gun the 88 would also prove to be a deadly anti-tank weapon, it was surely the most versatile heavy gun of the War.

Additionally, the many flak batteries had the assistance of what seemed to be hundreds of searchlights, easily understood when one German searchlight unit contained three batteries, each of which was equipped with nine or more 150 C.M. searchlights.

Over the centre of Hamburg it was like hell on earth with the sky brightly illuminated by the numerous searchlight beams as they converged on many of our aircraft with their dazzling glare, together with the innumerable black bursts of the many heavy flak guns. The combined effect of this powerful defensive pattern forced some crews on to fringe bombing. Fully exposed, our crew pressed on over the centre of the city, at fifteen thousand feet it was well lit up, just like daylight. Other bombing aircraft in our vicinity were clearly visible to me, and a Hampden close by was hit badly, and went down. I believe the pilot of this aircraft could have been Sgt. Richardson from our squadron, I did not see anyone bale out, but I know Sgt. Richardson survived to be a P.O.W.. During our bomb run we were on the receiving end of a hot reception, but nevertheless managed to drop our bomb load successfully on target, and then, quickly abandoning the straight, and level tactics of our bomb run, we attempted to make a rapid exit. It was no easy job eluding the many searchlight batteries that were lighting up the sky, meanwhile all the crew shared the same silent thought that they would be bloody glad to leave this red hot inferno that was Hamburg. On our way out as we made a beeline for the outer darkness of the night sky two night fighters made a diving approach on to our rear. I saw them both a good distance away, and had already given the skipper the necessary instructions to avert an impending attack. Sgt. Healey's violent, evasive actions took us into the protection of the dark section of the sky well outside the well lit up city. I did not see the night fighters again, I am glad to say. Collectively, I do not think that the raid was very successful, due entirely to the strength of the Hamburg defences, it certainly looked to me that bomb loads were scattered far and wide with no concentration being achieved, the intense searchlight glare undoubtedly upset the aim of quite a few bomb aimers. We were airborne for eight and a half hours, and landed safely back at base at 0305 hours. About two hundred bombers of all types took part in this raid with eight being lost, two of which were Hampdens. Our next trip did not take place until 28th September when we attacked Frankfurt on Main, and the "hairiest" part of this sortie occurred on our return journey during which I received a diversion message on the half hour Group frequency broadcast which directed us to land on return at a Yorkshire aerodrome, namely Linton-on-Ouse. Upon making it back, and crossing our coastline it seemed that most everywhere was covered by a blanket of extremely thick fog, and when we at last reached the York area the conditions had not improved, the fog was equally as bad as anywhere else. We flew around the area for a considerable time looking for a hole in the "clag", as the time passed it seemed to be a hopeless quest. Eventually we found ourselves on the Linton circuit to be in R/T contact with their Control. Our skipper made several tentative approaches during his attempts to land our aircraft, but when almost lined up lost the flarepath time after time as the swirling fog thickened, it was almost down to the deck. It was a tense, and nerve wracking experience descending slowly through the fog, especially for our skipper, our lives were in his hands, but after many fruitless attempts he finally made it to scrape in by the skin of his teeth. The old Hampden bounced a few times when it hit the deck, but who cared, we were down. Gray Healey, our skipper, had displayed his usual skill. As we slowly taxied off the runway a weary, and bleary eyed crew certainly heaved a great sigh of relief. In the end to ease our difficulties, apparently several of the Linton ground staff had lit several bonfires along the length of the flarepath to help us get down. We had been airborne almost nine hours, and must have spent ninety minutes of that time attempting to effect a safe landing on terra firma. The time was 0735 am when we finally touched down, and after all those nail biting efforts we certainly enjoyed our breakfast. Several crews were not so lucky, as a number of returning aircraft belonging to other squadrons, and Groups crashed, whilst attempting to land at various other dromes, in the extremely foggy conditions. It was eleven am before the conditions improved sufficiently to enable us to take off for our return journey to Coningsby, but we had made it at twenty minutes past noon, just in time for dinner, a few hours sleep would follow. During the month of October we carried out a further six sorties, the first of these was Essen, with the Krupps works being the main target.

Our squadron had sixteen Hampdens operating being part of a total force of around one hundred aircraft. My crew was aboard AD 785, and we carried our usual load of 2500 lbs of H.E. We took off at 2355 hours, and the trip was as expected, a real tough one, the formidable "Happy Valley" defences lived up to their deadly reputation that night. Our aircraft was soon on the receiving end of a heavy pounding from the many fixed batteries, and their radar assisted heavy flak barrages. Standing on the firing steps at my open top position I was encompassed by numerous shattering "Krumps" as the shells burst with their accompaniment of large black puffs of smoke, to send large jagged pieces of red hot shrapnel in all directions. The same old familiar smell of cordite permeated my nostrils as instinctively I ducked my head behind the protection of my gun mounting, and its strip of armour plating. On both sides of me the very thin metal skin of the fuselage did not afford much protection at all, but I somehow remained unscathed. Despite the fierce barrage we sweated our way through somewhat apprehensively to finally drop our bomb load from a height of 13000 feet. Our much relieved skipper responded vigorously deviating rapidly from straight and level flight with throttles open he made a quick exit from the Essen shooting gallery. Tommy O'Hare gave him a course for the Dutch coast, and we were homeward bound. Very thankfully we landed back at Coningsby at 0545 hours. During the following debriefing session drawn, weary faces emphasised the tension, and stress crews had undergone during the previous six hours or so. Some time later that morning as ~~many~~^{many} as forty holes were counted in and around the fuselage, tailplane etc of our kite AD 785. Other crews suffered similar shrapnel damage to their aircraft, one of whom was skippered by F/O Loftus, his Hampden was riddled with no less than a total of fifty holes, I somehow think he took first prize. The ^{overall} net result being more than a few kites out of action, and in deck for a few days needing bodywork repairs. During the early afternoon of that day, following a few hours sleep, I discovered that there was nothing doing that night so I and several "oppos" made tracks from our billet at Argyle House, and headed for Boston to spend a calm, peaceful few hours. After the previous nights caper we needed to wind down, the cinema, and then a few drinks at the White Hart hotel would prove to be just the job. Up at the flight offices, on the following morning of 12th October, I could see that twelve crews were listed on the battle order board, including ours. During the main briefing later that day it was revealed that almost a hundred 5-Group aircraft comprising Hampdens, and Manchesters (mostly Hampdens) would be attempting for the second time to bomb the rubber factory at HULS, which was situated just north of the Ruhr Valley. Carrying a mixed load of H.E., and incendiaries we took off at 0040 hours in a new kite AE 151, our previous aircraft being under repair for flak damage. The memory of our first attempt at this rubber factory four weeks previous was still fresh in my mind, which did not alleviate things as this second attempt turned out to be another fiasco, but this time the really bad weather conditions were to blame. Upon arrival in the target area we found that the whole region was completely covered by ten tenths cloud, we could not see a thing below. This Jerry rubber factory was proving to be a real "Jonah" as far as I was concerned. In the prevailing circumstances, there was no point in wasting a bomb load, our skipper, Gray Healey, decided to turn south, and deposit our load on the Essen area. It was an heavy industrial region, so we could not miss doing some damage, but the density of the heavy "ironmongery" being flung up was a bit offputting to say the least, especially as we could have been the only silly so and so having the temerity to encroach such a heavily defended area singlehanded. Needless to say in spite of the cloud conditions, and heavy flak we readily disposed of our mixed bomb load, and made a quick exit, it did not pay to hang around. During our return journey over the North Sea I received a diversion signal from Group H.Q., which was transmitted on the half hour broadcast, instructing us to land on return at RAF Cottesmore, the home of 14 OTU. This we managed to do at 0650 hours, all in all not a very successful night. During the nights operations a total of 340 Bomber Command aircraft were in action, and besides our target HULS, other places attacked were Nuremburg, and Bremen, with a total loss of thirteen aircraft.

A week later we returned to North West Germany, and flying in Hampden AD 749 participated in successful attacks on Bremen on 21st October, and then Kiel on the 23rd, with our squadron laying on eighteen aircraft on each occasion with the total force being well over a hundred respectively. During the last week of that month Hamburg was our target on the nights of the 26th, and 31st. The first attack was successfully accomplished in moonlight conditions, but the remaining sortie did not produce good results owing to very bad visibility over the target area. After those two Hamburg trips I had then completed a total of twenty eight sorties, all as first Wop/Ag, an old hand, and at this point, generally acknowledged as the "sweating" stage, I had only some twenty hours to go in order to complete that elusive total figure of two hundred operational hours, a first tour! At this stage I cannot recall being bothered by the close proximity of my EVENTUAL accomplishment, in fact I can honestly state that I never at any time thought deeply about the issues, I took everything as it came.

On 4th November we had a welcome change from the usual bombing routine as our crew was detailed for a "Gardening" (minelaying) trip in the area of KIEL BAY. In addition to the two thousand pound magnetic mine, with parachute attachment, we carried two 250 lb H.E. bombs, one of these was carried under each wing. The bombs were of course destined for any enemy shipping we might come across in the area of Kiel Bay. The night operations were only on a small scale, our Group had between thirty and forty Hampdens only in action, and their duties were shared between shipping patrols, and minelaying in either Kiel Bay or the Frisian Islands. Our squadron had fifteen aircraft involved out of that total, their duties being shared as described above. We were airborne at 0040 hours in Hampden AD 749, this kite was now our most regular aircraft. On our outward journey the weather was very bad over the ever rough North Sea, and gave cause for a very bumpy ride, it was a stormy night with lots of turbulence. By the time we had crossed the German mainland just below the Danish border the weather conditions had deteriorated even more so.

Flying around Kiel Bay we spent some time searching around, but due to the low cloud conditions Tommy O'Hare, our navigator, was unable to locate the primary target position, the magnetic mine could only be dropped in the pre-allocated spot, so in the end we had to give Kiel Bay a miss. Nothing daunted, we turned to fly in a south westerly direction to eventually find that the weather conditions were much better around the alternative area, codenamed "Nectarine", which was the East Frisian Islands. Our navigator made sure of his position before successfully dropping the parachute mine in one of the enemy shipping lanes very adjacent to the island of Wangerooge. After a brief search of the area we found some shipping, and chose to attack a medium sized motor vessel. We made our run from a height of two thousand feet, but unfortunately Tommy O'Hare missed with his two 250 lb wing bombs, undershooting by some thirty to forty yards, from my rear position I saw it all. In all not a very successful night, but we cannot win them all. On the return journey home the intermittent cloudy conditions were not too bad, and when crossing our coastline it was a very pleasing sight, as always, to see quite a few red beacons flashing their two letter recognition signals, in effect winking a welcome home to all returning kites. Each navigator had in his possession a flimsy which contained a list of the two letter codes, and the aerodromes they represented. In very bad weather conditions, thick low cloud etc, and in cases of emergency when lost, shot up, or short of juice, the system used during late 1941 was code named "Darkie". This was put into motion by the pilot who called the words "Darkie" "Darkie" over the TR 9 radio telephone system in the aircraft. The nearest aerodrome control would then reply, and would work from then onwards in liaison with the various local Army anti-aircraft units, and appropriate searchlight crews. These crews then assisted the aircraft in trouble by placing their searchlight beams in a vertical position before dropping them horizontally pointing the beams towards the nearest aerodrome. The searchlight crews would then douse the lights, and repeat the whole procedure. This emergency system was a great help to all Bomber Command aircrews in various predicaments following a long, hard grind over the Reich. Our crew only had cause to use this service on one occasion, but on numerous return journeys I witnessed many other crews using it during the Autumn, and Winter nights of 1941.

The penultimate sortie of my first tour was a special 106 Squadron only operation laid on by the Admiralty through Bomber Command, and ^{CONCERNED} involved Oslo Fjord, Norway. Due to the distance involved it was not possible to fly the sortie from our own base at Coningsby, so an advanced base was necessary. RAF Wick, in the far north of Scotland, was the base earmarked, this was a Coastal Command station, the nearest airfield to Norway, and we would fly up in squadron strength. The day before the anticipated date of the sortie, 5th November, saw our contingent of sixteen Hampdens take off, and fly north hugging the coastline as we made for Scotland. It proved to be quite a pleasant jaunt as the gaggle of widely spread Hampdens flew along the coast to ultimately pass over the mainland of Scotland, I for one quite enjoyed this "busmans holiday", and the picturesque scenery viewed during the final part of our flight up to RAF Wick. If my memory serves me right I somehow recall that the town of Wick was "dry" at that time, but in any case we did not leave the base, or the Sgts Mess after landing, and furthermore the operation which was originally planned to take place on the night of the 6th November was postponed until the following night.

On the night of the 7th November all our crews were informed at the main briefing that the job was a special minelaying venture in the Oslo Fjord, and I recall that it was in some way connected with the Tirpitz, the latest German battleship, and its sheltering in the Norwegian fjords. Our aircraft was AD 749, a familiar Hampden to us, and besides the two thousand pound magnetic mine we were carrying two 250 lb H.E. bombs, one under each wing with which we would attack any shipping we came across in the fjord. The met forecast was not good for the outward journey, but their "Gen" men promised clear weather, and skies over Norway including the Oslo area. Only thirteen crews were briefed for the trip, and we would take off from Skitten, which was the satellite airfield attached to Wick, at 0130 hours of the 8th. Prior to and during the early hours of that morning the weather conditions looked really bad the inky black skies were thick with ominous looking clouds.

It was freezing cold as we waited our turn to take off, it seemed to me as though we were the last in line, but finally with the brakes off we moved off at 0145. Half way down the runway at the cross section ~~an~~ unrecognisable aircraft suddenly appeared apparently taxiing across and towards our take off path. Sgt. Healey instinctively pulled back his control column, and we all prayed, had we enough take off speed. The loaded Hampden lurched off the deck, and luckily did not sink back to the ground, but held to remain airborne, the little beauty. We must have missed the other silly bugger, whoever it was, by the proverbial

whisker. Only our skipper had a birds eye view of the incident, and must have almost suffered a heart attack, he had certainly acquired a few grey hairs, but undoubtedly his split second reactions saved the day. Myself, positioned with my back to the engines was blissfully unaware of the occurrence not having any visual contact, but immediately heard all the comments over the intercom system, none of which were complimentary towards the other pilot. Another narrow escape, for without doubt those magnetic mines at that period were pretty sensitive items, positioned just below the floor of my position, and certainly it would have resulted in a devastating explosion on impact. We would not have known very much about it if that had been the case. Logically the incident lends credence to that old Air Force adage "Only birds and fools fly, but even the bloody birds don't fly at night", an oft repeated wartime aircrew expression.

Settling down after that "hairy" take off we were quickly over the coast cliffs, and the sea. Quietly deliberating, but thankful to be in one piece, we then set course on a more or less straight line across the cold and pitiless North Sea on a heading for Stavanger on the Norwegian coast, at the same time climbing steadily. The flying conditions were atrocious, and it was bitterly cold at height, the temperature must have been about fifty below. There was absolutely no doubt that the weather conditions were by far the worst I had experienced so far, and I had seen my share of night bombing sorties. Most were carried out without due regard to the weather conditions, as long as one could take off, and land back at base without undue hardship. Of course the "Met" boys were not always right by any means with their weather forecasts, not by a long chalk.

On this particular night of the 7/8th November, 41 crews soon discovered that the cloud conditions were to prove much worse than expected. It certainly turned out to be a real "dicey" trip we were now flying in a dense black cumulo-nimbus cloud expanse which proved to be bottomless.

Some of our crews attempted to find their way underneath the gigantic cloud mass, alternatively other crews tried to climb through the murk to get above it, but the thick cumulo nimbus clouds, heaped upon each other, proved to be dense up to and above twenty thousand feet. The aftermath of this operation would reveal that not many were successful in their efforts. Our skipper, Sgt Healey elected to fly through the middle of this front at a height of about eight thousand feet. In the process of doing so we found ourselves in a tense battle against the elements, hair raising to say the least, with ice forming solid chunks of it being continually flung off the propellers to rattle against the fuselage, a nightmare journey. Severe turbulence persistently tossed the kite about, and sparks of static danced all round the wireless aerials. These conditions prevailed as tenaciously we laboured on in the darkness during our long, and uncomfortable sea crossing. During that tense period the distinct lack of conversation between crew members emphasised the uneasiness experienced by all, we had our fingers crossed. However our spirits rose when Tommy O'Hare clicked on his mike to announce that we were approaching the Norwegian coast.

The Met boys, who had not achieved very good marks up to now, were certainly correct in their Norwegian forecast as we ~~had~~ emerged into clearer weather, and skies.

Tommy, our Observer, had no difficulty pinpointing Stavanger, and so we crossed over the Norwegian coast at this point on a straight course for Oslo. Just prior to approaching the port of Stavanger I had the extreme good fortune to witness for the very first and only time in my life a truly marvellous sight. Looking out over the port side of my top gun position facing the extreme north I could see the Northern Lights, or Aurora Borealis, a spectacle which seemed to fill the northern sky down to the horizon with its shimmering incandescence. What a fantastic visual experience to behold, it was certainly one which I have never forgotten being logged in my memory banks along with all the other wartime flying episodes of different character.

With clear skies over the Norwegian mainland the snow covered mountains presented a panoramic picture in direct contrast to the dark perils of the German night skies.

On our way to the Oslo area I reverted to my normal role of keeping a close watching vigil of the surrounding clear sky, but this final leg of our course proved uneventful except perhaps for the visual outlook below, the snow covered grandeur of the enemy occupied Norwegian landscape.

Our target area was the shipping channel which led towards the outer harbour of Oslo, situated at the head of this extremely long fiord which in all stretched away sixty miles or so out to sea. When we arrived in the locality of this Norwegian capital city and port the early morning weather conditions were excellent, but the ultra bright visibility besides suiting us would also assist the defences. All seemed quiet as we circled around at a point further down the fiord from Oslo to take stock of our surroundings whilst preparing for the minelaying run.

Tommy O'Hare had made his visual pinpoint, and ensuing calculations in order to accomplish his timed run thus enabling the mine to be dropped in the exact position designated. Meanwhile, whilst we were circling at our vantage point, I was able to see one of our Hampdens, clearly silhouetted, in the act of making his low minelaying run.

This kite was really running the gauntlet, the opposition was really intense from the many light 20 MM, and medium 37 MM flak gun positions. The aircraft seemed to be enveloped in numerous criss crossed lines of tracer shells, it was a really heavy barrage, and I did not see the Hampden emerge from this curtain of fire. From my view of the proceedings it looked as if the several small islands near the west side of the fiord housed these strong defensive gun positions, and the Germans had been sending it up thick, and fast. After witnessing that attempt I knew what to expect, we did not want a second run, it had to be right first time.

At the point of release we had to be down to a height of at least seven hundred feet above the sea to drop our electro-magnetic mine, which by virtue of its rear end parachute dropped into the water vertically, ~~and xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx~~ ~~xxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx~~. Hopefully the mine would be eventually activated by a ships hull passing over it.

With preparations now completed the various intercomm clicks affirmed that all the crew were ready for action, down below the path we would take seemed ominously quiet. Sgt. Healey in his usual soft-spoken manner said "O.K., lets go", and immediately banked the Hampden to commence his run at speed, nose slightly down, until he levelled out at approximately seven hundred feet. We were now on our minelaying course, and flying at a steady speed of nearly 200 mph with bomb doors open. At the right moment Tommy O'Hare would press his tit to release, and drop the mine, although planted was the official RAF term.

During the minelaying run our aircraft was heavily engaged by all the light, and medium flak gun positions, situated on the side of the fiord, at fairly close range. Shells of various calibres continued to burst all around, and to the rear of the Hampden. Streams of red and yellow tracer seemed to be heading straight towards my mid upper gun position as I stood on the firing step hunched behind my traversed twin Vickers machine guns. Instinctively, at each appropriate moment, I moved my head behind the protective strip of armour plating fitted on the gun mounting, but the projectiles seemed to curve away at the last moment, and whip past me. Our predicament was made much worse as we were then caught to be well illuminated by the blinding glare of several searchlight beams aimed obliquely at our kite as we continued our low run. With bomb doors now open, Tommy O'Hare, positioned in the nose of the Hampden, concentrated fully on dropping the mine in the right spot, he must have thought this night was November 5th again with all the fireworks that were on display. Meanwhile our skipper was having a difficult time, he was almost blinded by the powerful and dazzling effect of the searchlights. He had to, somehow, shrink, and in a wriggling fashion try to lower himself in his seat in order to maintain sight, and be able to read his instrument panel, more especially his altimeter plus artificial horizon. The cold sea below was much too close for comfort so it was essential that the aircraft retained straight, and level flight, our skipper did not fail us. Although hard pressed he was, nevertheless, always in control, and found time to shout instructions over the intercom when he implored the bottom gunner, and I to "Shoot out the bloody searchlights, I cannot see a thing". Despite the heat of battle I heard his instructions, but I was much too busy to answer, he was a few seconds too late, I was already hammering away. The searchlight positions were easily discernable, and during the short spell of illumination I fired two hundred rounds, the full contents of my two pans of ammunition. At the same time Sgt. Snelling, the bottom gunner, was busily engaged too, and it seemed to me that at least one searchlight was extinguished, the others wavered to lose contact. Being at such a low level, a mere seven hundred feet, our aircraft presented a vulnerable target clearly visible from the German defensive positions overlooking the shipping lane, and to this day I do not know how we got away with it such was the volume of tracer aimed at our aircraft, it was truly a formidable barrage. Whilst firing with my twin Vickers guns swung well over the port side of the Hampden I seemed to be encompassed by the enemy's many lines of fire. Thankfully, following those many seconds of violent, nonstop action, we found ourselves all in one piece, Tommy O'Hare had successfully planted the mine, and after holding the run for a further few seconds Sgt. Healey quickly turned away to bank, then put the Hampden into an upward climb flying in an easterly direction to leave the deadly gun positions well behind. He then circled what seemed to be a quiet area of the fiord, our job was ^{not} quite finished for we still had the two 250 lb wing bombs to dispose of.

Several ships were observed along the length of that particular area of Oslo fiord, Tommy O'Hare chose to attack a medium size vessel which was making its way along the eastern side of the fiord, a location we deduced to be a quiet area. Needless to say we failed to sink the ship, in fact we did not achieve a single hit. The vessel was not a large target, but Tommy O'Hare was not too pleased with his two very near misses, a slight overshoot from what I could see from my position at the rear as we passed over the ship after bombing. The vessel could not have been armed, or perhaps the crew were caught unawares, as they did not fire a shot, although our Hampden was moving pretty fast at low level when we made our bombing run. A much relieved crew foursome unanimously agreed that we had been really fortunate to finally emerge unscathed, it was "Home, James". Sgt. Healey eased back his control column to place the Hampden into a steady climb to eventually attain a safe height of ten thousand feet, and commence our return journey. Tommy O'Hare passed on a course to our skipper, and avoiding the city of Oslo we headed for Stavanger, on the west coast of Norway, homeward bound.

The return journey across the Norwegian mainland was once again a piece of cake with no flak, and no aircraft sightings at all as we cruised effortlessly along over the snow covered landscape. The straight leg from the port of Stavanger back across the North Sea however proved to be a bit tricky, though not so "dicey" as the outward leg, the bright, clear weather we had experienced over Norway was now well behind us. The thick, ominous, black mass of clouds was still in situ over the cold, desolation of the North Sea, but were more broken up than hitherto. Once again we experienced a high degree of turbulence, it was anything but a smooth passage, but we did not run into any serious icing problems along the way, as we plugged on towards the northern extremity of Scotland, and RAF Wick.

It was a long haul, and some way across the "drink" I commenced to work the local D/F station at Wick to obtain several homing bearings, and we eventually reached our forward base to effect a landing at 0850 hours, having been airborne for a total of seven hours, and twenty minutes. The subsequent debriefing session revealed that this special minelaying operation had not been very successful. Due to the atrociously bad weather conditions only four of our Hampdens, which included our crew, had successfully

completed the mission in Oslo Fjord. Additionally due to the intense enemy opposition encountered around the target area, three other of our crews were lost. Two of them, those of F/Lt Henderson, D.F.C., and P/O Firth were apparently shot down in the fjord, while the other, F/Lt Herd, and his crew almost made it back to Scotland before their luck ran out. F/Lt Herd's wireless operator was heard transmitting an S.O.S. message when their Hampden was only a distance of fifty miles or so from Wick on the return journey. This last desperate message which was heard at 0845 hours stated that they were in distress, and the pilot was endeavouring to make a crash landing in the sea. As soon as it was possible for the remainder of our squadron aircraft to be made ready after returning from our Oslo trip, we and other 106 crews took off, and flew out to sea. A square search was then carried out in and around the area where F/Lt Herd's crew had presumably ditched, but sadly without success. . . . no trace of the **CREW** was found. All were very experienced operational fliers, Horace, the first Wop/Ag, in this crew was an old friend of mine from OTU days at RAF Finningley. Their odds against surviving in the freezing cold, merciless North Sea at that time of the year were pretty slim indeed. The North Sea would continue to reap its harvest, and by the end of the War had become a graveyard for a vast number of bombers, and other types of aircraft of both sides.

In its entirety the night of the 7/8th November 41 was catastrophic as far as Bomber Command was concerned, and out of a total of four hundred aircraft involved in the night's operation as many as thirty seven were lost. The main attacks of this ill fated night were centred on Berlin, Mannheim, and various targets in the Ruhr Valley, plus of course our squadron's special minelaying venture in Oslo Fjord, where three of our aircraft were part of the thirty seven kites ^{REPORTED} missing. This was the heaviest loss of any night's operations during the whole of the year of 1941. The atrocious weather conditions no doubt contributed to the severity of the casualties, and quite a number of the aircraft came down in the North Sea when they ran out of fuel.

It is worth relating that the weather conditions during the Autumn, and Winter months of 1941/42 was said to have been the worst flying weather experienced for over ten years. I was not aware of this fact at the time, but from first hand experience I knew the conditions were bloody rough. During the months of October and November I certainly had to wear additional flying clothing to compensate for the freezing cold blasts that came my way via the wide open positions at the rear of our Hampden. Such extra gear included a new crew issue of Thermal type long sleeved vests, and long johns plus my furlined Irvin jacket which I somehow managed to squeeze on over my Sidcot flying suit. On terra firma before aviating this was quite a laborious, and perspiring job of work to say the least, and finally I looked ~~too~~ corpulent I resembled Mr. Michelin. The suitably attired I could only just manage to turn around with great difficulty in the very confined space of my W/Cp position. During this winter period the temperatures we had to contend with were a very long way below zero, frequently down to fifty below at a height of fifteen or sixteen thousand feet. No doubt the intense cold was a problem, and I had heard at that time that the lads who flew in Whitleys and "Wimpeys" laid particular emphasis on how cold the rear turret was in their aircraft. While not disagreeing with this at all, I can only emphasize that the rear confines of the Hampden were even colder as we Wop/Ag's at the rear had to contend with two large wide open apertures which were the top, and bottom gun positions. The adverse weather conditions persisted throughout the month of November, and consequently many intended "Ops" were scrubbed, and I had to wait patiently for three whole weeks before finally embarking upon what would be the last trip of my first tour, but at long last it took place on the night of the 30th November. It was Hamburg again, I was getting to be a regular visitor, nevertheless it was still a hard one to finish on. Fourteen kites were ladd on by 106 with the total Command force being in the region of two hundred aircraft, of which thirteen were lost on this mission. We took off at 1620 our target being the Blohm and Voss shipyards for which we had 2500 pounds of high explosives. Despite this being my final trip I was never at any time apprehensive about the outcome, especially as we flew this one in my old kite AD 802 which I thought was something of an omen, a lucky one, of course.

This kite had never failed me, Bob, and the other two crewmates on twenty two previous excursions to the Reich, and on this auspicious occasion of my 32nd, and final trip simply carried on with the good work. Despite the usual intensive flak, and searchlight opposition we successfully bombed from twelve thousand five hundred feet, and thereon we weaved, and jinked our way out of the target area, luckily avoiding all the trouble that inevitably other crews were involved in, and there was always plenty of it over Hamburg. Tommy OHare gave our skipper a new course to fly, we would not be in the clear until we had crossed the enemy coastline. Now surrounded by darkness on this very cold, and black night we flew over the invisible North Sea heading for the Lincolnshire coast, and home.

During the early hours of 1st December at precisely 0050 hours we were making our final circuit prior to landing with the old Hampden AD 802 decelerating as our skipper applied flap, and selected undercarriage down. Below us the glittering circle of the Drem lights, the curve of the entrance funnel, the clear amber beam of the glide path indicator, and the extending glow of the line of the main flare path lights presented a really welcome sight for our, or anyones crew, the end of another trip for my three crewmates who were moving ever closer to that finishing figure of 200 operational hours. Of course it meant much more than that to me, I had finished my quota of trips. Having been airborne for eight hours, and 40 minutes the faithful old kite AD 802 bar "O" for Orange had done it again having brought Bob back on his last trip had now done the same for me. This 32nd "Op" meant that I had well and truly accumulated a total of 205 operational hours.

Phew, I had survived a first tour, not many accomplished the magic figure during those days at 106.

After we had emerged from our kite, which was now standing in its usual dispersal point, I was surrounded by the smiling faces of my crewmates, and a couple of our ground crew staff, they seemed to be more delighted than I was. I guess my reactions were similar to Bob's after his last trip. The sense of elation at our accomplishment had not quite sunk in at that particular moment. The true meaning would be evident the following night when the occasion would be well and truly celebrated in the White Hart Hotel, Boston.

The month of November was noteworthy for more than the vile weather as 106 squadron losses for that month amounted to eleven percent of the total sorties carried out, which were the highest since February when the squadron became fully operational.

Looking back to those days I suppose I was the steady, unruffled type, never got too excited, certainly never despondent for the comradeship of squadron life was unsurpassable, and is still prevalent among my contemporaries in squadron reunions despite the passage of time. I remain convinced that I was in my correct wartime environment that was operational flying. I liked my twin specialist jobs, and, frankly, performed them with the degree of expertise which came from experience following a groundwork of first class training. To reiterate I certainly had no qualms about the overall bombing campaign in which I participated before I was eventually shot down during 1943.

After my end of tour spell of home leave during which I celebrated my good fortune, bending the elbow as it were, I returned to Coningsby, and was approached by "Chiefy" Hales who asked me if I would like to remain on the squadron in an instructional capacity in the Signals section. Feeling really flattered I gave the offer very serious consideration, I had always felt really at home as a member of 106 Squadron, and normally would not have taken any persuading as they were happy days. Nevertheless I reluctantly decided against, simply because Bob and I had previously elected to try, if at all possible, to stick together, and endeavour to team up again for our inevitable second tour.

To help achieve this objective I therefore hoped for a posting to No. 14 OTU at RAF Cottesmore in order that I could rejoin my former pilot, and friend. Unfortunately I was only able to achieve one of these aims inasmuch as I duly obtained a posting to Cottesmore, and teamed up with Bob on numerous flying occasions, but, alas, due to unforeseen future circumstances we were fated not to return to "Ops" in the same crew.

I spent the remaining few weeks of December hanging around Coningsby helping out in the Squadron Signals section assisting new Wop/Ag's, and spending the evenings living it up in Boston whilst awaiting my posting.

During this short period an horrific crash took place in the centre of the airfield when a 97 Squadron Manchester aircraft, piloted by the Squadron commander, crashed badly whilst trying to effect a landing. The crew had apparently been on a daylight operational sortie to Erest, and the kite had been damaged by flak. Sadly, one of the Wop/Ag's who died in the crash was an old "oppo", Frank Kerr, who had trained with me at every step from Cranwell days up to a squadron. He was one of our North Coates fivesome, when we were awaiting our OTU posting, and I was the only one of that five to survive a first tour.

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