

At this juncture the new aircrew category of Bomb Aimer was now in being, and although the old Hampden was still in active use at the OTU, Wellington 111 aircraft were now in extensive use for senior course training. Altogether they were fourteen of us (Wop/Ag's) attached to No. 52 Course, of which eleven had previously completed a full operational bombing tour of duty. The three exceptions being Sgts, Smith, Young, and Burkill who had spent a period as "staff" wireless operators, but otherwise had no previous operational experience.

Surely there must be something here for the Guinness Book of Records, or its wartime equivalent, as they cannot have ever been an OTU Course of Wop/Ag "pupils", once again the mind boggles, who could boast a total of over three hundred bombing trips over the Reich to their credit, its got to be an OTU record.

The "real" No. 52 Course trainee new boys consisting of pilots, navigators, bomb aimers, and straight Air Gunners were a mixture of Canadian, and RAF types, predominantly Canadians, and ultimately fourteen five man crews had to be formulated by mutual consent or otherwise.

In the normal course of events most OTU course pilots had little information to go on when confronted with the task of picking crew members, so generally it was a hit or miss procedure. On the other hand, however, it was just the same for crew members who had to make a similar hard decision to size up a pilot. The 52 Course pilots, in our case, were very lucky lads as most of them had the choice of selecting a vastly experienced ex-operational Wop/Ag, what an asset to a sprog crew.

One thing was certain, we Wop/Ags were not very enamoured with the idea, but the die was cast, we had to grin, and bear it.

My first choice of pilot was a Canadian Sergeant who politely told me he was already fixed up, he had chosen a pal of mine, Jack Mossop, DFM. After the War I found out that Jack duly finished his second tour on four engined Handley Page Halifax's flying with 76 Squadron in 4 Group, but he was tragically killed during the immediate post war period whilst flying as a radio operator with B.O.A.C., apparently he was involved in a bad crash. What dreadful ill luck after surviving two bombing tours, and ultimately the War.

Following my rebuff I told myself that there was no apparent yardstick, they were all inexperienced pupils, and therefore on a par with each other, so with no degree of optimism I involved myself with an all Canadian crew. Sgt Bill Hartney being the pilot, Sgt. Ben Kilpatrick, navigator, Sgt. Ferguson, bomb aimer, and Sgt. John Ward being the rear gunner. Not a bad set of lads at all, very quietly spoken for Canadians, and in the ensuing weeks, and months we got to know each other in the air working towards becoming a cohesive unit. Following the usual "circuits and bumps", numerous practice bombing sessions, and day and night crosscountries flying in both Hampden, and Wellington aircraft we moved across to the satellite airfield at nearby Saltby, where we completed the final part of the OTU course flying in "Wimpeys" when the emphasis was on long night cross country exercises.

These incorporated what were called "Bullseye" special exercises which were usually of four or five hours duration, and involved contact with our own searchlight units together with night fighter defences. As a crew we completed the course syllabus at Saltby on the 15th November, when all our flying logbooks were counter signed, and respective proficiency ratings were suitably inserted by the officers concerned, we were ready for squadron action, and the air war.

Finally our crew was allocated seven days leave knowing that we would be posted on return, but to where? that was the question, it could be to any squadron in Groups 3, 4, or 5 in Bomber Command. I still have in my possession the No. 52 Course photograph of we fourteen Wop/Ags, and as far as I have been able to ascertain since those far off days only three of them survived to complete that very elusive second tour. The unfortunate Jack Mossop, DFM., B. Nichols, and my old "oppo" F/Sgt Dave Craven who would finish his lot with No. 15 squadron, 3 Group, flying in the four engined Short Stirling, he earned a well deserved Distinguished Flying Medal. Just after the war ended, by sheer chance, I happened to bump into him whilst walking down the main thoroughfare of Stockton-on-Tees, my home town, so we had quite a lot to discuss. Little Davie was one of the lads, a pleasant little chap, we had some good times at RAF, Cottesmore. Strange to relate, but I have never seen him since that day, but I still remember him, and all the many other lads I knew, and flew with, most of them did not survive the War. We were all members of an elite force, that was Bomber Command.

My spell of leave passed very quickly , I returned to RAF Cottesmore on 23rd November to discover that our particular course postings had arrived in the unit orderly room, the time had arrived to move on. In the different squadrons involved it seemed that most crews were designated for either No. 3 or No. 4 Groups. My crew was directed to join No 102 Squadron, based at RAF Pocklington in Yorkshire, the White Rose county where No.4 Group, Bomber Command was situated. I knew that 102 Squadron operated with the four engined Handley Page Halifax heavy bomber, and personally I was quite looking forward to the experience. So ended my prolonged stay at No.14 Operational Training Unit, RAF Cottesmore, I had never imagined my operational "rest" would last eleven months, which had provided for me a real mixture of good, bad, and vivid experiences, with a portion of "bull" thrown in. Prior to being detailed on the OTU course I had recently completed, I only performed the flying part of the syllabus, I had flown a total of several hundred hours participating in instructional day and night crosscountry exercises. These flights were carried out during all types of weather with a wide variety of pilots at the controls. Not all of them were distinctive ex-operational pilots, some being ex-trainees, while others were simply senior course trainees, a mixed bag one might say, so obviously the respective flying qualities varied somewhat. In connection with all those Anson training flights I like to think that my diligent endeavours helped to put the many trainee Wop/Ag's I flew with on the right track for their next step was the ultimate, a squadron role in the Air War. The initial Thousand bomber raids proved an exciting diversion from training duties, and despite the fact that I and many others were supposed to be on "rest" from operational flying, were something of a bonus. The first of these raids, the Cologne attack, was an opportunity I would have certainly hated to miss, it was an experience I would remember always.

The night before I was due to leave RAF Cottesmore I borrowed for the last time the use of a two wheeled steed to enable me to visit the nearby village of Hambleton. Little did I know that a period in excess of two years would elapse before I set foot in this village again. Following a pleasant session in the local, the Finches Arms, I said goodbye to my girl, it was a sad moment for both of us. The moment of realisation had arrived for me, it was indeed a wrench to leave Monica behind, I would miss her terribly. For the most part our relationship would continue via correspondence until the early part of 1943 when she spent a week at my parents home. During that time, when I was also on leave, I popped the question, and we became engaged. Alas, through no fault of my own it proved to be a long engagement as I was shot down some weeks later to become an unwilling guest of the Third Reich.

On 25th November, 1942, with clearance chits all signed up and disposed off, Bill Hartney, Jim Kilpatrick, Fergy, Johnny Ward, and myself left RAF, Cottesmore for the last time to travel by rail up to Yorkshire. Burdened with heavily loaded kitbags we eventually made our appearance at RAF, Pocklington to report to 102 Squadron orderly room. Regretfully, we did not stay very long at this station, and for the time being it seemed we were not destined to fly as a crew aboard the Handley Page Halifax as after a few days we received orders to move a few miles further north.

This final posting meant that our crew had been earmarked to join a newly formed squadron, namely No. 427 Royal Canadian Airforce which was based at RAF, Croft a satellite airfield to RAF, Middleton St George, Middleton St George was a brick built permanent station situated near the town of Darlington. All the local inhabitants and I, being also a local lad, had always known this aerodrome by the name of Goosepool since its construction at the beginning of the War. No. 419 squadron was based at Middleton St George at that period of 1942 having recently converted to the four engined Halifax, and in fact our new squadron, which had only been formed a couple of weeks previously, would be using the discarded Wellington 111's formerly used by the 419 outfit. Our new squadron would operate briefly under the auspices of No. 4 Bomber Group until the also newly formed No. 6 Royal Canadian Air Force Group became officially operational on the 1st January, 1943.

Although I was not personally involved, as I was in the bag by then, perhaps I can disclose that my squadron would be re-equipped with Wellington Ten's, a more powerful version than the mark three, by the end of the month of March 43, but would only retain these aircraft until the last day of the following month of April.

Early during the month of May, 1943 the total complement of No. 427 squadron moved a few miles down the main A1 road to RAF Leeming where they converted on to the four engined Handley Page Halifax mark 5 bomber, changing to Halifax 111's eight or nine months later. The squadron flew their last Halifax sortie early in March 1945, and a week later re-equipped with the Avro Lancaster commenced to wind up its operations against the enemy. No. 427 squadron remained, and operated from RAF Leeming until the end of hostilities in May, 1945 by which time they had logged well over three thousand sorties, losing a total of 88 aircraft in the process.

When we arrived as a crew towards the end of November, 1942 I found that the nucleus of our new squadron had been provided by the now departed No. 419 squadron who had left behind several crews, and a total of eighteen Vickers Wellington 111 aircraft. The Wellington mark 3 was powered by two 1500 H.P. Bristol Hercules engines, carried a bomb load of 4500 lbs, and could operate up to a total of 1500 miles. She had in the rear a power operated turret which housed four .303 Browning guns, and in the nose a two gun turret which the bomb aimer used. Colloquially, and affectionately nicknamed the "Wimpey" by both ground crew, and aircrew lads this kite was a durable, rugged aircraft able to soak up plenty of punishment, its various marks of 1, 3, and 10 served Bomber Command in exemplary fashion as a front line aircraft from the commencement of hostilities in 1939 until the latter part of 1943. Indeed the "Wimpey" was a real war horse.

No. 427 Squadron's code letters displayed on the sides of each aircraft were "Z L". The squadron badge, authorised by King George VI, was a lion rampant in front of a maple leaf. The lion represented England, the maple leaf Canada, and the combination indicated the formation of this RCAF squadron in England. The motto indicated on the squadron badge read "Ferte Manus Certas" meaning "Strike Sure".

Our squadron C.O. was Wing Commander D.H. Burnside DFC of whom I knew very little at that time, although I was well acquainted with his wireless operator, F/Sgt Geoff Keen D.F.M. who, some four months later, earned a further decoration that of the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, well done, Geoff. He and I had two things in common, inasmuch as we were both on our second tour of "Ops", and had a mutual liking for a game of Soccer.

I am not aware of the duration of the Wingco's stay with the squadron, but it apparently was a highly successful one both as a squadron commander, and pilot for at the cessation of hostilities he had been awarded a DSO plus a bar to his DFC.

Our base, RAF CROFT, very adjacent to the town of Darlington, was a typical satellite airfield being a combination of wooden hut accommodation, and Nissen huts, not being very comfortable, being bloody cold, and damp at that particular season of the year. The place reminded so very much of Saltby, RAF Cottesmore's satellite drome, it being a similiar wilderness like complex.

After enjoying the comparative luxury encountered at three previous permanent stations it was certainly an unwelcome change to be roughing it. From the Craft Sergeants mess it was a hell of a long walk, I should say a muddy trek, down to the Flight offices and the hangars by the perimeter track. Each occasion was reminiscent of a long, country walk. Looking across the three concrete runways from the squadron flight offices presented a really bleak outlook, and I reminded myself that my most urgent need was the acquisition of a pair of issue gum boots at the earliest opportunity in order to combat the extremely muddy conditions. During the first weeks of December the squadron organisation worked steadily to attain operational readiness as new crews arrived, and flights grew in size. Training flights increased in tempo involving several sea sweeps together with cross country exercises.

The first squadron sortie made in anger came to fruition on 14th December when three Wellington 3's were detailed to lay mines in the relatively shallow waters just off the East Frisian Islands. The records shew that I flew on this one as wireless operator with another crew, the pilot being Sgt. Gagnon, and the kite we flew in was Wellington Z 1626. We were airborne at 1630 hours, and the two parachute mines we carried were successfully planted in the shipping lane just off the island of Wangerooge. The visibility was very good, and nothing untoward happened, a good pinpoint was made on Wangerooge to enable a timed run to the release point. It was an uneventful trip, and we landed back at Croft at 2122 hours.

This sortie was the first of only three trips carried out by 427 Squadron during the remainder of the year of 1942, all of which were minelaying ventures.

I cannot truthfully state that I settled down on this squadron, and for a month or so I felt really "browned off", in direct contrast to my previous happy existence as a member of a good, experienced squadron in what I thought was the best Group, I mean 5 Group, of course. Rightly or wrongly I was not very impressed with the general set up at RAF, Croft, which at that time reminded me more as an O.T.U than a squadron.

I felt so unsettled during those first five or six weeks that several times I was on the verge of putting in for a posting back to 5 Group, or alternatively to the newly formed Pathfinder Group.

Feeling a trifle bored with proceedings I made several visits to our neighbours at RAF, Middleton St George, and their Sergeants Mess, but these ventures proved unsuccessful, I did not come across any old acquaintances, not even the odd one. The rare camaraderie experienced during my previous two years did not seem to be on such a high plane at Croft, perhaps it improved some months later ... when the squadron had really settled in. Although I got on very well with my all Canadian crew I had that odd man out feeling, and though not too keen on the Station atmosphere perhaps it was the inactivity that gave me that "brassed off" feeling. It was also slightly frustrating in the sense that my Commonwealth brothers, good luck to them, fared better than we RAF types inasmuch as they seemed to make the rank of Flight Sergeant after only six months as a Sergeant. There I was, an old hand, but still only a Sergeant, a slightly aggrieved one too in the circumstances. What rankled me was the fact that some of the Canucks now that they were part of their own Bomber Group were apt to act a trifle cocky without foundation. In consequence it was inevitable that one or two of their numbers were told unceremoniously to "get some hours in", they soon became aware that I was an "old lag" entitled to a modicum of respect. Some time later, however, early in the month of February I heard from an old friend, Jack Mossop, who informed me that my crowns (promotion to Flight Sergeant) had indeed gone through the Orderly Room at RAF, Pocklington, which had been my previous Station. No such details had or did appear officially on my Squadron Daily Routine Order notice board at Croft during the month of February. In the circumstances, despite the apparent Administrative "finger" trouble, I immediately obtained three metal crowns, and sewed them on above my tapes on both battledress, and my uniform sleeves. Auto promotion maybe, but the papers concerned were in the pipeline somewhere, and at once I felt a little more comfortable in my surroundings. Some weeks before I had partly solved my mood of indifference, and began to unwind to somewhere near my former effervescent self by indulging in, and continuing my service soccer career. While doing just this I played for RAF, Middleton St George Station team, and enjoyed quite a few matches at both home and away venues. One particular recollection was a match played at Feethams, Darlington F.C.'s ground, when we opposed a Darlington works team who fielded a particular player of note, namely one of the then well known Hooper brothers, ex Sheffield Wednesday F.C.

Operational flying began in earnest on 1st January, 43 which was the day No. 6 Royal Canadian Air Force Bomber Group officially got off the ground with the following squadrons, 405, 408, 419, 420, 424, 425, 426, 427, and 428. In the main they were not that many in our 427 squadron who had achieved much experience over Germany, but it is fair to state that as a new Group with only several experienced squadrons, with more in the offing, it would be quite a few more months before No. 6 Group would be in the groove operating smoothly, and efficiently with reduced losses. This proved to be the case, and a year or so later it would be acknowledged by the enemy that the two Groups they respected most were No's 5, and 6, I regret very much that I was not around at that time to participate. By early 1944 No. 6 Canadian Group were operating with their full complement of fourteen squadrons, and since their initial start additional squadrons formed during the year of 43 were No's 429, 431, 432, 433, and 434, while one outfit lost to the Pathfinder Group No. 8 was 405 squadron. Theoretically, No. 6 Group was basically composed of all Canadian bods, but a small percentage was non-Canadian i.e. RAF lads like myself.

Returning to the month of January 43 it was apparent that in the Atlantic more German U boats than ever before were operating, and sinkings of Allied ships were consequently on the increase, and so priority was given to bombing attacks on the Atlantic coast of France, namely Lorient, St. Nazaire, and Brest. These ports were easy to identify, and for the most part their defences were not that heavy, although some weeks later the Yank daylight bomber crews would be calling St. Nazaire not as such but "Flak City". a little portion of respect there, I would venture to say.

Lorient was chosen to be the first target on the Bomber Command list, and during the months of January, and February this port, and submarine base was attacked on eight or nine occasions. The bomber force on these raids varied in numbers, and the heaviest attack was carried out by a total of around four hundred, and fifty aircraft. My crew took part in three of these raids up to the end of January,

On each of those trips we had an early take off in the proximity of 1630 hours having a long run down from Croft, one of the two most northerly bomber airfields, down through the Vale of York, and the length of England to the south coast before crossing the Channel on our heading for France. We experienced good weather during the first two Lorient trips in mid January, and successfully bombed our target on both occasions, each sortie proving fairly uneventful, although there was some heavy flak, and searchlight opposition, but I had seen much worse. The third trip to Lorient on the 29th January was flown in Wellington BK 268 when our bombload consisted of nine SBC'S (Small bomb containers) a total of four thousand five hundred pounds of incendiary bombs. This sortie was rather more eventful inasmuch as we narrowly missed colliding with a fully loaded four engined Lancaster as we were in the act of crossing our coastline towards the Channel on our way out in very cloudy conditions. Bill Hartney, our skipper, sat transfixed in his cockpit seat as he stared incredulously, wide eyed with amazement, his mouth slightly open as he glimpsed the large four engined job suddenly float across the nose of our Wimpey to then vanish into the gloom. Initially shocked, he cleared his now dry throat to exclaim over the intercom that we had missed the Lanc by only a whisker. Fergy, the bomb aimer, the only other man up front, also witnessed the Lanc's sudden appearance on our scene with a same degree of astonishment, and with his eyes standing out like organ stops had nervously uttered a long drawn out "Jeesus". The rest of us at our positions inside the cabin fuselage had been blissfully unaware of the near miss, and therefore were not so perturbed as Bill, and Fergy with their eye to eye confrontation. Regardless, we pressed on, with the incident soon forgotten, our chief concern being the weather conditions which continued to be really bad. Upon arrival, Lorient proved to be completely hidden under a thick blanket of ten tenths cloud, we eventually bombed from a height of fifteen thousand feet with the aid of our "Gee" set, Jim Kilpatrick, the navigator, obtaining a radar fix. With the target not visible the bombing must have been well scattered.

Towards the end of the month of February, following the successive attacks of the previous few weeks, the whole of the Lorient area was more or less in ruins, with the probable exception of the concrete bomb proof U Boat shelters. In between these French Atlantic coast port attacks important raids were still being made over the Reich, and on the 19th February the Main Force target was the port of Wilhelmshaven. The place had been bombed the previous night, but on this quick repeat, a much larger force was involved with almost three hundred, and fifty aircraft, the majority of which were heavy four engined kites. The only twin engined bomber still operating was of course the Wellington, and they were well represented on this raid with over a hundred participating.



Our crew flew this one in BK 268 for the second time, although as yet we had not yet been allocated a regular kite, and on this occasion carried a mixed load of high explosives, and incendiaries totalling 4000 lbs. Settling down after take off, which was made at 1800 hours, it was a pleasant feeling to discover that the weather was good with very clear visibility. The trip proved to be a real copybook effort with no hassle, for a change everything seemed to go both smoothly, and according to plan. We were able to dodge all the trouble, and managed to slip through the defences unnoticed, while other kites nearby seemed to be getting clobbered. If only all the trips were like this, but at this game one could not always be in the right spot at the right time, sometimes you were lucky, other times not.

After crossing the enemy coast I was for the most part occupying the astrodome position keeping a keen look out for enemy night fighters, except for the very short time I spent at my W/T set listening out on the half hour Group frequency broadcast. On this second time around of operational flying, my job compared with the old Hampden days was really a piece of cake, a comparative soft touch. Nevertheless, I still felt a preference for my former twin job days, and its busy work rate. The possible exception being the difference in warmth, and comfort. Here I was ensconced inside a warm cabin within the seclusion of a cabin fuselage with no need for all the flying clothing I, necessarily, had to wear whilst flying in Hampdens. In the present conditions I only needed to wear my Irvin jacket over a my white sweated battle dress uniform, and, of course, my black flying boots.

My crew position lighting was more than adequate, I had a comfortable padded chair seat with my Marconi W/T set, and Morse key very conveniently placed for easy working plus a small desk space for my wireless log which I could now make up very neatly, and legibly. Previously in the Hampden I had no desk space there being no room in my confined crew position, my W/T log being composed of a single sheet of paper attached to a stiff clip board. Log entries were made with the board resting on my knee whilst perched on a swing out circular topped stool, and of course that was only half of my job, I was the top gunner to boot. So much for comparisons, now on this second tour of "Ops" I was simply a wireless operator only, unless one of the gunners was rendered "hors de combat", in which case I was a reserve gunner. Additionally, we now had radar aids to assist navigation, the "GEE" set which Jim, our navigator operated, and worked out the positional fixes to keep us on track both to and from our target. This radar set had a range of about three hundred miles, but beyond that was prone to jamming by the Germans. I did not know very much at all about the TR 1335 "Gee" set, it was Jim's baby, as he sat in his navigation cubby hole surrounded by his charts, and tools of work, slightly illuminated by the dark green glow of the cathode ray tube of the set. I was only aware that it concerned a pulse transmitted by a couple of stations which enabled Jim to obtain continual, and accurate positional fixes on the way to the target, and similarly on the way back home. The system was very good, and reliable a great improvement on the hit and miss days of Dead Reckoning navigation. Unless the "Gee" set became unserviceable wireless aids were not required so much, but on Ops one did not quite know what was going to happen next, and assistance for the navigator was always on hand if required.

In my cabined wireless position in the fuselage of the Wimpy I could not see anything of the outside action which did not suit me one little bit. During my Hampden days, and nights, I had been used to eye to eye confrontation with all external happenings over the Reich, and enjoyed the subsequent involvement. Yes, I liked to be in the centre of things, no doubt they were other aircrew bods who preferred not to see too much of outside happenings. Inevitably, over enemy territory I was in the astrodome position as much as was possible in order to keep a good all round lookout, and on this Wilhelmshaven trip we encountered a great deal of searchlight activity, but not so much heavy flak as usual, and that to me spelt enemy fighter activity in the area. Accordingly I kept a keen watchful vigil with a prolonged spell in the old astrodome which afforded a good all round view of the surrounding sky as I stood amidships. This fairly large clear perspex dome was situated on the roof of the fuselage a short distance aft of my W/T position, and while I stood on lookout my body was protected by two armour plated shields which were hinged to a metal stanchion, and therefore could be used to ones advantage. Searching all around I saw nothing likely to trouble us, and over the target it proved to be a black starry night with a total absence of cloud as Wilhelmshaven was well, and truly marked by the Pathfinder boys with clusters of red marker flares. We made our run at 16000 feet, and after one or two late corrections issued by Fergy our bomb aimer, he pressed his release tit when directly over the T.I's, to drop our mixed load of H.E., and incendiaries. A minute or so after bombing I witnessed a terrific explosion down below which lit up the whole area amidst the smoke, and the many other large fires. I learnt later that this was the result of a 4000 lb "cookie" hitting the naval arsenal at Wilhelmshaven, a bullseye for some lucky bomb aimer. We arrived back at Croft without mishap except for a burst tyre on landing which resulted in our Wimpy deviating off the concrete runway with a definite wobble to then finish up on the adjoining grass, but all was well, no sweat.

In the general commotion after debriefing most of the Canadian crews seemed to be in high spirits, and loth to leave the smoky atmosphere of the room as they hung around in groups busily engrossed in light hearted conversations. Normally a fairly quick exit was always carried out with food and sleep always being the overriding factors. It appeared that the reason was the presence of several Canadian news reporters who were mingling with the crews after interrogation. No doubt the news men were on a special visit to acquire first hand information concerning the exploits of their new bomber group for home consumption in Canada, and that night had decided to cover the activities of the "Lion" squadron. During the early part of 1943 No.427 squadron had been "adopted" by the Metro Goldwyn film studios, Hollywood, thus from here on in became universally known throughout 6 Group as the "Lion" squadron, for obvious reasons. The now relaxed crews had shrugged off their tiredness, most were puffing away at their Macdonald cigarettes as their fellow Canadian news reporters engaged them in casual conversation, no doubt concerning the nights operational trip, and how they were enjoying life on the squadron now it was part of an all Canadian bomber group. Alongside me, as I was talking to my crew mates, one of the news men casually asked his interested aircrew audience if any of them had flown a lot of operational bombing sorties.

No reply seemed to be forthcoming so I broke the ice, and spoke up to affirm, quite modestly, that I had accumulated a total of forty "Ops". It made him raise his eyebrows, and he gave a faint quizzical smile, but he was not interested. I was not a Canadian, my stories would not have meant much to the readers of the Toronto Star.

A few days later on the 24th February our crew was on the battle order again when we were briefed to visit Wilhelmshaven once more, in Wellington X 3390. We experienced cloudy conditions this time, and again it was a good trip though uneventful. Although such sorties did not involve a deep penetration of the German mainland, Bill, the skipper was learning more about operational knowhow, and he together with the other members of the crew accepted without any animosity all the tips and advice on operational procedure I had passed on during our first few trips. We were all in this together, and the biggest obstacle was to survive the first five or six sorties, as generally speaking it was during that period that most crews got the chop. Making our run over Wilhelmshaven we could see that the F.F.F. marker clusters were well concentrated over the town, and Bill steered our Wimpey directly over these with the bomb doors open before Fergy, our bomb aimer, eyes glued to his bomb sight then pressed his release tit to drop our mixed load of H.E., and incendiaries. Due to the cloud conditions the results of our bombing could not be observed, but the F.F.F. marking technique was nevertheless very accurate, and everybody seemed satisfied with the outcome.

The war of attrition against the U Boat bases had not yet been concluded, and on the last day of February our crew was once again listed on the board for dicing that night. Bill and I in yet another different Wimpey 3, this time BK 343, put the kite, and the W/T set through the usual night flying test. Later in the afternoon at briefing we learnt that we would be part of the main force of 450 aircraft consisting of Wellingtons, Halifaxes, Lancasters, and Stirlings which would be attacking the Atlantic U Boat base, and town of St. Nazaire.

Lorient had been successfully devastated, and now it was the turn of St. Nazaire, a deep water port situated on the north bank of the river Loire, to suffer a similar fate. The shelters, which housed many U Boats, were beneath a mass of reinforced concrete, and our bombs would have had little impact on this enormous structure, but everywhere else, including the dock area would be badly damaged.

With everybody on board at their crew positions I had to make an impromptu dash down the length of the fuselage in order to contact Johnny Ward tightly ensconced in his four gun rear turret. The reason? I had forgotten to borrow his Elgin wrist watch, a temporary not a usual practice of mine. It was handed over without demur, Johnny was a good crew mate, rather on the quiet side for a Canadian, and thanks to him I was able to keep my wireless log accurately timed. After running up and testing the engines before leaving our dispersal point prior to take off, Bill casually mentioned that one of the engines had a slight mag drop, but he thought it would be O.K. to carry on, famous last words again?.

Ultimately we were speeding down the long concrete runway to be airborne at 1810 hours so there was nothing amiss with the engines at this stage. After circling the drome we set course, climbing steadily on our way down the length of England heading for a point on the south coast before crossing the sea towards the Channel Islands. At this point Bill increased his rate of climb until we steadily attained our operational height of sixteen thousand feet. I reminded Jim, our navigator to avoid the Channel Islands, the German heavy flak gunners based there had acquired a red hot reputation for accurate gunnery, I knew that from past experience, and so did all the 'old lags' of the bomber crews. We made our way through the gap between the Islands and Cherbourg crossing the French coast to head due south on a straight course towards St. Nazaire. Just before our kite left the dispersal point before take off we had been given an extra crew member, why I never did find out. Added at extreme short notice, he was a stranger to me, who apparently had just arrived on the squadron being a Sergeant navigator, and our skipper not really knowing what to do with him positioned our late starter in the astrodome to act as look out. No difficulty was experienced in finding our target, St. Nazaire was easily pinpointed. We made our run in at fifteen thousand feet. It was a dark starlit night, many searchlights were active although they did not seriously trouble us, but the heavy flak was well concentrated, and very accurate over the town, and port.

Mixed with the smoke below was a turmoil of red gun flashes, exploding bombs together with the shimmering shock waves of detonating "Cookies", the white and red glow of burning incendiaries amidst the many fires, it was visibly evident that St. Nazaire was experiencing quite a pounding, and in fact most of the town was destroyed in this attack.

Fergy, the bomb aimer, disregarding the many flak bursts in our proximity had his mind focussed wholly on the job in hand, eyes glued to his bomb sight as he guided Bill relentlessly in, and over the target with the bomb doors open. When the time was right he pressed the tit, and away on its downward trend went our four thousand pound "cookie" to add to the confusion below that was to be a badly battered St. Nazaire.

The heavy flak barrage was still pretty fierce as we made our way out of the target area, when suddenly one of the engines went out of action, whether it had sustained damage from one of the close flak bursts, I will never know. Despite Bill's attempts to get the engine going again it did not respond, and he now had a double handful trying to cope with only one good engine, could we make it back to base? In spite of all the skipper's efforts to maintain height the Wimpey was not up to it, and began to lose valuable height at a steady rate, it looked as if we were right up the creek. Although naturally apprehensive at this rapid turn about of events nobody panicked, the situation was coolly discussed over the intercom. We decided if the circumstances did not get any worse to try and make the return journey over water, and so avoid the land defences.

We commenced to do this on a westerly heading, but in the meantime our situation had quickly deteriorated, the kite was losing height much too rapidly for comfort, at such a rate we would never make it. On the spur of the moment I decided to try, and lighten the load by jettisoning as much loose equipment as was possible. With the help of the bomb aimer I opened the forward escape hatch, under the nose of the aircraft, through which we would eject as much detachable plus loose equipment as physically possible. The Wimpey was still on a downward trend as I, now armed with the hatchet type axe, briskly hacked off rows of oxygen bottles together with other apparatus, in fact anything suitable which could be fairly easily removed was readily disposed off. I passed all such gear down to Fergy, the bomb aimer, who was stationed alongside the open hatch hurling the items out into the slipstream. At that point we were down to a few thousand feet when suddenly the darkness was transformed into brilliant light, as the aircraft was lit up by the vivid glare of several beams from a searchlight battery. In the seconds that followed bursts of light flak encompassed our disabled Wimpey. Bill Hartney, our skipper, instinctively took avoiding action, but must have made a turn on his "duff" engine. With no power available on that side the aircraft went into some sort of spin with Bill doing all he could to remedy the situation, and straighten out the kite. During that unfortunate moment I was in position alongside the skipper's right, and with a downward glance noticed that our bomb aimer, Sgt. Ferguson, was no longer in the vicinity of the front, escape hatch, he had disappeared. The bottom nose of the Wimpey was entirely unoccupied, with a sinking heart I realised the obvious, and concluded that during the sudden violent manoeuvres Fergy must have fallen out through the open hatch. He had certainly not been wearing his parachute pack I knew that much, poor old Fergy had literally vanished from the scene, and I feared the worst, what an appalling turn of events.

Immediately prior to running into this curtain of flak, and searchlights, ~~as we were~~ ~~losing~~ ~~valuable~~ ~~height~~ ~~far~~ ~~too~~ ~~rapidly~~ ~~to~~ ~~successfully~~ ~~make~~ ~~it~~ ~~back~~ ~~home~~ ~~by~~ ~~the~~ ~~longer~~ ~~sea~~ ~~route~~ ~~was~~ ~~to~~ ~~turn~~ ~~about~~ ~~and~~ ~~bale~~ ~~out~~ ~~over~~ ~~the~~ ~~French~~ ~~mainland~~. This we would, no doubt, have accomplished but for running into this sudden violent attack from below.

In our critical situation everything seemed to happen at once, seconds only were involved during which numerous bursts of flak were closing in around our kite. We were now down to around a thousand feet, split second decisions would inevitably mean the difference between life and death. The other lads in the crew had never experienced a desperate situation like this one, and while Bill was fighting what was to be a losing battle with the out of control Wimpey I had no visual or intercom contact with them having been involved in a hectic session with the axe. I presumed they were in the body of the aircraft at their crew positions. At such a low altitude there was nothing I could do for the skipper. I was by his side still holding the axe in my right hand, I did not need it now. I almost held back to the inevitable conclusion despite the accumulated knowhow of two years operational experience telling me it was time I hit the silk. All these happenings were measured in seconds, at the end I recall tapping Bill on the shoulder, giving him a farewell sign, and then clipping the parachute pack on to my chest. Easing my way down towards the bomb aimers position, vital seconds were ticking away, I ripped off my flying helmet, and without further ado dropped through the open escape hatch, the aircraft was on its way down.