

Blyth

Interview

with

MR. DENNIS BLYTH

and

Pupils and N.J. Dinsdale of Lady Hawkins' School, Kington

On

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[Recording starts at 0:06]

- Q. What would be a good place to start is if you say your full name, perhaps say where you were born and it would be then perhaps a good way of setting it up to say what you were doing on the outbreak of war, perhaps something about your memories on the outbreak of war and when you joined up, how you felt and then I'll ask some more questions then.
- A. Right. I'm 85 years old, born in Norwich, Norfolk. I was ... '39 the war broke out, didn't it? I was 15 then. I was a shop assistant running errands, taking out orders on a bicycle with a carrier on the front and quite a pleasant time it was then, just as the war started. I think it came home when the raids really started on Norwich; we'd had an air-raid shelter in the back garden and I always remember my father pushing us into the shelter, but he would stand out there watching, and a couple of times I managed to get out there with him and saw the flashes of the bombs falling in Norwich, because we lived on the outskirts. We never had any damage in our street, but there was a delayed-action bomb in the area so we were all evacuated to Earlham Hall (as it was) in Norwich and we were there about four days until they cleared the bomb out.

[2:01]

The Battle of Britain I can't remember much about it, but obviously I knew about it because I was interested; I decided to join the air-training corps which was set up in Norwich, and went there for some basic drill training and general familiarization with different parts of the aircraft and things like this. It gave me the feeling that I wanted to go into the RAF, as opposed to the army, because eventually I received my notification of call-up papers and I opted for the RAF.

- Q. How did you feel about going into the RAF? Were you excited? Did you have friends going into the RAF?
- A. I had a friend who joined the air-training corps with me but he didn't come on to the RAF with me; he stayed and went into the army. I don't know why; perhaps he didn't like the thought of flying or something.

The next thing I know we had an introduction day at Cardigan in Cambridgeshire (which was a three-day course). You had a full medical, and then examinations of different sorts: written examination, oral examinations and finally the interview with the station commander. I'll always remember him because I referred to the RAF as "the raf" and he said, "We do not call it 'the raf'; it's the R-A-F or the Royal Air Force." One of the old school, he was! Anyway, he asked me what I wanted to do and I said obviously my first thoughts were for flying, for a pilot, but I'd sort of changed my mind and decided that signals would be the best thing for me or air gunner, you know. So that's how I got indoctrinated into the RAF.

[4:30]

I went back home then and went back to work and then I had notification to report to St. John's Wood in London in '43, this would be, early '43. I was up there then for six weeks on square bashing and fitting out with kit and all that sort of thing; that was my introduction into the RAF.

Q. By the way, Dennis, I'm quiet for a reason; I'm trying to get your voice on the recording so don't think I'm being rude when ----

A. No, it's all right.

Q. I'll sit back and play dumb. You then trained up as a radio wireless operator.

A. Yes. It was a six-month course in Wiltshire. The radio side of it was quite comprehensive six months and we all had to sit an exam at the end of it. I remember particularly the November losses with the RAF when they went to Nuremberg – I think it was Nuremberg – and they lost, I think it was, 90 aircraft, something like that, 96 I think. Some of the men who should have passed that course failed and I think that's the reason why, looking back, I think, the reason why they didn't want to go flying anymore. But anyway, I was lucky enough and I passed so that was the wireless corps.

The next thing we do is ... At that time they were training wireless operators to act as gunners as well. Later on in the war they just went straight through as air gunners, but I did an air gunnery course up in Stranraer and passed out as a wireless operator/air gunner.

[6:39]

Q. Can I ask you, Dennis, what you were on, on flights? Was it all ground-based, the training or were you ... ?

A. No. There was air gunnery attached to it; you went up in a ... You were chasing a drogue across the sky trying to hit it.

Q. What were you flying in?

A. The Anson, I think it was, up there; yes, the Anson. It's up here, that training, Anson; that was passed on 8/5/1944.

Q. Can you remember how good you were at the gunnery? You passed; you must have had some hits.

A. I passed, but I'd got no idea whether I hit the target or not because the display in the log book was such that I didn't know ... I couldn't read it, you know, and of course the chap flying with you, he pats you on the shoulder and says, "Good show!" you know, and get the next man up. There were always different coloured bullets, painted, to show up on the target if you hit it, but I don't know if I hit it at all. That was that.

Q. So, training, have you got any fond memories of your training, any stories that stand out from training?

A. One training: during the wireless course they used to try and keep us fit with gymnastic exercises of sorts and I know the one day they put us out on a three-mile run, all of us in vests and shorts, you know. That was pretty tough because we hadn't done much of that sort of thing; we'd been moved around in a desk swotting up on wireless procedures and wireless sets. But I was pretty fit in those

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days and in the mad dash for the billet when we got back I managed to win, so that pleased me enormously.

[8:48]

Q. Of the men you trained with, did any of them go on to the same squadron as you?

A. No.

Q. So you were all divided up.

A. When I went into the first ... to be crewed up, I didn't see any of the boys I'd trained with. What happened, I just don't know. Whether it was a different ... We were split up, you know, because we went on to gunnery school and I suppose a lot of the others went straight into air crew as such.

Q. Now, you'd gone through training and you, of course, had specialized as wireless operator. How were you then allocated to a squadron? What was the squadron? Perhaps you could talk a little bit about your feelings and perhaps the first days of being on the new base where you were based, and so on?

A. Yes. The operational training, it was classed as, and this was on Wellington bombers, and you were all stood around in this large hangar. It was all different trades of flyers were there and you just mulled around and somebody would come along and say, "Do you want to be my WOP?" you know; you had your brevvies up and this – I found out afterwards his name was – Flying Officer Rhude, and he was Canadian ... He seemed a lot older than me; he seemed twice as old as me – in fact I think he was; but he was older than me and he'd already picked his navigator and bomb aimer. The navigator was an Englishman, a very stooped appearance, he had; he was young but he was sort of bent forward when he walked. I could never imagine him running, you know, but a very nice type of chap.

[11:11]

The bomb aimer was, let's see, Australian; I think he was Australian, and Darryl Goffener his name was. He was a flying officer, so that was two officers. The navigator was a sergeant. And everybody's looking for an engineer now and he found a Scotsman for an engineer; he was a sergeant rank. And then he was going round searching for gunners now, and funnily enough he finished up with two Belgian gunners, which surprised me a lot, you know, because they had limited English at that time, and why he picked them, I just don't know, unless they were the only two left! But they were great guys, the two Belgian gunners. One was quite stocky, well built, he was the mid-upper gunner; he could never get in the tail gun anyway, he'd be too big. Then the tail gunner was thin and wiry and with a shock of hair; how he kept his hair on in the RAF, I'll never know, but long hair, he had, down the back of his neck; I don't know how he kept it on. He was a one-off, he was. I remember once with him he had an old Rudge motorcycle and we were on a stand-down from operations and he was going round the airfield on this Rudge motorbike and we all ... If you wanted you could be issued with a revolver, and he had it shoved down his flying boot and he was going round the camp firing his gun. I'll never forget that. He got away with it too!

Q. Why was he doing that? Did he think he was a cowboy?

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A. He was real mad.

Q. So he got away with it.

[13:24]

A. He got away with it, yes; he wasn't reprimanded or put in jankers or anything. He got away with that.

Q. So this crew now, put together by Rhude, were you ... did all of you survive? Did all of you remain with the aircraft throughout the 36 operations?

A. No. The tail gunner, the tall thin one, he disappeared. I can't exactly remember during what part of the tour, but I got a feeling it was just prior to Christmas. What happened to him, I don't know, at that time. They gave us an Australian gunner to take over his place. So he was there from just before Christmas until we finished in March. But I did hear later on – I read in the files of losses – that a gunner with the same name had been killed six days after I finished my last op. So I'm assuming that he either was taken ill or something caused him to fall out of the ... you know, to leave the crew and then when he was better again he went and joined another crew, I assume, because it was such a strange name, De Les Partes or something like that, you know; he had a long three-part name, and I assume he was the only one with that name and, as far as I know, he "bought it", six days after I finished my tour, with another crew. It was a very mixed crew but we got on well together and we all did our jobs, you know, as we were supposed to.

Q. It's interesting how many different countries were all represented within your crew.

A. Yes.

Q. Amazing, incredible.

A. Talk about The League of Nations!

Q. Yes, brought you together. You haven't yet said for the recording the squadron. You were first on the Wellingtons.

[15:40]

A. Yes. You go on to Wellingtons for training as a crew. You do a certain time on them and you go further up on to the heavier ones. We transferred then to the Halifax for a while. But that was only for just over a month and they decided then that they needed crews on ... They had more Lancasters coming through then and they transferred us to RAF Hemswell for affiliation flights on Lancasters. And that's how I did my tour on them.

Q. I would probably think that you'd have a strong affection still for the Lancaster?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. What was it about the Lancaster, and perhaps you could contrast it to the Halifax and the Wellington, what was it about the Lancaster ----

A. The Halifax layout was totally different inside. The wireless op was down underneath, sitting virtually underneath the pilot. It was that type of aircraft, you know, and in the "Lanc" I'm sat behind on the

half spar where all the heat comes out to, nice and warm. I wasn't over keen with the Halifax; it was a good aircraft but I wasn't keen about it so I'm glad I finished on Lancasters, in the finish.

- Q. So you started talking about the conditions. It must have been pretty cramped. You were ... Having the spar there meant that it was warmer. That was good. Could you perhaps just describe, I don't know, the rest of the plane, what it was like moving around; were there any difficulties moving around?
- A. Well, I didn't find any difficulty because obviously then I was smaller; I wasn't stout or anything like that. I was quite agile for my size and I could get around in there pretty easy. I mean, climbing over the spar was difficult for some people but I found it very easy, you know, the main spar was ... I was just sitting, just in front of the spar on the left side and then, as you go along the aircraft, the navigator sits **there** and then the pilot and the engineer further up so you're together there in the middle of the aircraft, virtually together, you know. I could turn round and tap the navigator on the shoulder if I wanted.
- Q. Could you then talk a bit about what it was like to be on aircrafts, on operation, perhaps before, before you go off, the briefing perhaps, how you were briefed.? The meals, how you might have felt, how everybody felt, and then taking off and then perhaps the conditions on the flight.

[18:49 – pause]

- Q. So perhaps if you could talk about being briefed before operations, what happened?
- A. The briefing is all the crews together in a large room and they would disclose the target and the met officer would give his report about weather conditions over there and each section would give his report, the gunnery and the bomb load and things like this. Obviously the pilot and navigator would have separate briefings, the same with the gunners; they would have a gunnery officer giving details. The bomb aimer would be given all the bombing load and all details about that. For myself I was never asked to transmit any weather reports back to base, anything like that at all; I wasn't asked to do that. So I was just keeping a listening brief during the operation itself. The first briefing would go up and you'd have a meal, which would have been the usual, egg and bacon, egg and chips and then you'd go out to your aircraft in one of the transports and if there was any delay at all, depending on the length of it, you'd be sat around outside on the aircraft if the weather was tidy, and generally making a fool of yourself, as we do. Some ... The one up mid is the usual thing, to cock his leg up under the rear wheel, things like this, you know.

[20:58]

But I remember the first operation itself; I remember it because it was the most exciting one of the lot. It was Wilhelmshaven, the U-boat pens, and I don't know if it was anything to do with the pilot's delayed action at all, but we got coned with searchlights, and when you're coned with searchlights you'd go into a corkscrew pattern to get out of them. Of course, the pilot threw the aircraft down into the beginning of the corkscrew and I finished up in the astrodome, you know, weightlessness! I got the

pencil and my logbook all up with me, like, in the astrodome. That was a little bit frightening because it was so unexpected, you know, but we got out of it ok; we got away from the searchlights, didn't get hit at all.

Q. Dennis, can I stop you there. We had a lot of noise there, upstairs, just as you spoke. Would you mind saying that bit again about the cones and the corkscrew and then ... Could you say that again?

A. From the beginning.

Q. If you don't mind saying, about Wilhelmshaven, the most exciting, and then explain that. I'm sorry about that.

A. We got actually coned by searchlights and the thing is the pilot throws it into what's classed as a corkscrew, it turns down and then twists away from the lights all together and tries to get away from them. And it was so unexpected because I was on the radio, sat on the radio and the next minute I'm virtually dragged up into the astrodome, which is just above the wireless position, and I'm stuck up there looking out. Thank goodness we got away from the searchlights, so no problem there at all. The pilot did his job well.

I must say that was, to me, the most exciting raid of the lot. The fact that we got coned with searchlights.

[23:12]

Q. Was that the first and only time you were coned?

A. The only time we were coned with searchlight was that one, yes, and, as far as I was concerned, the rest of them were easy peasy. It's strange of course, some of the time I'd be on the wireless and some of the time I'd be up in the astrodome observing, the same as the gunners, you know, trying to look forward and help them at all, but that one was the most ... I suppose because it was the first one it was hair-raising, put it that way. But we never got coned again with searchlights and, to my mind, we never had any trouble at all on the 36 ops after that one; it's queer. They seemed to come and go just easy peasy, you know.

Q. You must have had flack, German night fighters in the vicinity?

A. Never once did the gunners say, "Corkscrew," because of the fighters. They never spotted fighters on our tails. They'd normally say, "Corkscrew port, starboard ..." you know, to get away from the fighters, but not once did they do that. Whether they just ... the fighters just weren't in our area or they didn't see them, but we never had to corkscrew away from them. The flack was, to me, annoying rather than anything. You saw the "phut-phuts" or the flashes and sometimes you felt a shake, the aircraft would shake sometimes, but nothing serious and nothing that threw the aircraft off course at all. So I must assume from all the reports I read from other people who flew, some of them went through everything, you know; they had fighters chasing them, but we were either extremely lucky, or it was just one of those things, that we never saw them.

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Q. Were you ever concerned about the different level flights, flight-paths, and the bombing, did you ever think, “Crikey! If they’re dropping the bombs above us they’re going to go through us.” Did that ever cross your mind?

[25:40]

A. No, no, not me. They said that statistics was that 0.04% was the risk for a collision because you’re all going the same way, you’re all different heights and you’re all different times. You’re in the half-hour slot, or whatever it is, you know, but ... I’d never heard of an aircraft being hit by bombs from the one above, you know. I never heard of it and I never saw it. As far as I know, the gunners never saw it neither, because they were the ones who were on the look-out all the time, wasn’t it. So either we were very lucky or it was just one of those things, you know, that we escaped.

Q. You talk about luck. Were you superstitious? Was anyone in the crew superstitious? Did you have rituals before you flew?

A. The gunners would always pat the tail of the aircraft, like, and urinate on the rear wheel. Some of them ... I don’t remember much about the other crew, whether they had any ... They didn’t appear to have any set way of getting aboard or anything, you know; just a case of climbing on and getting down to it.

Q. As radio operator, could you just explain what your role was and perhaps a little bit about the technology that you had available?

A. Yes. All I had was the transmitter and receiver on my aircraft and we’d receive signals from group every quarter of an hour. We had to listen out for this signal in case there’s a re-call or a diversionary brought in, you know. They might alter the target at the last minute, and things like that.

[27:58]

Other than that, listening out for that, and in between listening out I’d be up in the astrodome observing, trying to help the gunners, like, sort of thing, but, fair dos, I never saw a German fighter or I never saw any air combat. It’s surprising, isn’t it? It’s hard to believe, I think, because the number of planes that were shot down, and yet we never saw any of it.

Q. You say you didn’t see combat. Did you see aircraft crashing, exploding?

A. I didn’t, not personally, no. The gunners told me they’d seen them; they’d seen aircraft behind them, you know, the tail gunner especially had a good view, he’d see one go into flames and go down and crash, but I never saw anything like that at all.

Q. No, because you didn’t really have the view, did you, being the radio operator?

A. I had a little window beside me, which was mainly covered by the main wing of the aircraft and the astrodome was above me, so I’m looking ... virtually forward I was looking, always ahead.

Q. Dennis, conditions on flights. Perhaps you could tell us about how cold it got. What would you do about going to the loo? What about food and drink? How were you provided with that?

A. I never bothered to take any food or drink with me. I never had to go back to use the Elsan. I was, I suppose, young and fit, you know. I mean, in later years, you couldn’t pass a toilet, sort of thing, could

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you! But in those days I was quite happy to sit in my seat, listen to the radio or up in the astrodome and that was it; I never once went back to the Elsan. In fact, where I sat was the warmest place in the aircraft and that's the reason why I stayed there probably.

[30:04]

Q. Did any of the gunners ever come back just to warm up? Were they allowed to?

A. I don't remember any of them coming, either of them coming out and ... No, the two gunners we had were quite good; they stayed in their post and that was it, you know.

Q. Dennis, you were with two different squadrons?

A. Yes: 576 was the ----

Q. And 550. Why were you in two different squadrons?

A. We moved to the first, 576, and then we'd done eight operations as a crew and they decided they would start another squadron up in 550 squadron, which was North Killingholme so they transferred us there, complete with aircraft and everything. We just flew over there and then flew our operations from there. I assume the idea was there were so many "Lancs" coming on line they were developing and building up different squadrons, increasing the strength of them. There were eight at Aylesham and then the other 28 we did at North Killingholme, which was a less basic-type airfield. Aylesham always was quite a modern place, you know, in comparison with North Killingholme, but North Killingholme wasn't bad; it was suitable, you know, for the job, Nissen huts and things like that.

Q. So comfortable enough on base. How about recreation. Of course, you weren't on operational flights every night.

A. No.

Q. You had time during the days as well. Could you tell us some of the stories?

[32:09]

A. Not much recreation going on except in the village; you could walk down to the local pub, which was about half a mile down the road and we could walk down there and join in with the locals. The locals would be playing the old shove-ha'penny-type game, do you remember that? And they taught us how to play that and we'd join in and have a beer and generally relax sort of thing. If we could get off camp we went into Grimsby once from North Killingholme and had a night out, nothing raucous, just a meander round town and a few pints and then getting back to base was the problem, but we managed that, with some kind-hearted people, you know; always somebody around to give you a lift.

Q. Have you fond memories of North Killingholme and the people and always felt that they were grateful and looked after you all?

A. We never met the villagers, as such, but I've met them since, you know, with our reunions, which as you know is going on, but we never met them as such to know that they were people who lived in the area. I got to know the local pub, the landlord's daughter; I got to know her pretty well; she was a very nice girl and nothing naughty about her, but very friendly and I got to like her a lot. But, other than

that, people outside the camp, we just didn't get to know, you know. I remember the one time they had snow and they decided that we'd go out on the runway and clear it and they gave us all a big shovel each and there's literally hundreds of us clearing the snow off the runway and we finished it and nearly cancelled the op then! So we got rather cheesed off with that. I swear they did it just to keep us fit.

[34:28]

Q. I bet they did. How about your aircraft? Did you ... What was the number on your aircraft? Did you have any painted insignia on the aircraft? Did it have a name?

A. We didn't, no. I suppose the squadron leaders types and the aircraft that did a lot of operations, like the Phantom of the Ruhr and planes like that, they did over a hundred so they were given a name and a picture painted on them, but ours was just mostly "'U' for useless!" as my skipper called her. It was "U on-call"; it was "U-Useless" every time. And the WAAFs in the control tower used to laugh their heads off when he came in, "This is U-useless. Permission to land," you know! It should have been "U-uncle."

Q. Excellent. Coming in to land, did you ever feel relieved; feel anything on coming in to land? Were there any hairy moments coming in to land?

A. Not that I can remember from the operations, no; we got back ... The one is a message from base that there was an intruder in the area and would we circle at 2,000 feet. We land now and then they tell me that there's one still up there, so I said, "Why?" and he said, "Well, he went up to 20,000 feet and he's coming down now". So we were all in a mess, we'd finished our meal by the time he got in the mess and his face was red, that WOP – that WOP's face was very, very red.

Q. Went very high up. So the landings were always fine and ----

[36:32]

A. Oh, yes, no problems at all. The only problem I had with landing was a burst tyre, which wasn't on the operation; this was afterwards when I was on training, a burst tyre in taxiing, that's all; the aircraft just swivelled round and that was it. That's the only problems we ever had in my time in the RAF.

Q. Again, did you see other aircraft in difficulties, in trouble?

A. Once.

Q. Did you ever wait for aircraft to come in and watch them come in?

A. No. Operations, once you'd get back, you'd go straight for debriefing and then in for a meal and into bed and, to me, that was a nice time because you go in for the debriefing and there's always coffee and a tot of rum if you want it and some of the crew didn't like rum so they gave it to me and I'd have perhaps two or three rums in with the coffee, you know, and I'd get that down and I'd go to the bed and I'd sleep like a log. No problem getting off to sleep at all. It was a drunken stupor probably, but I didn't realise it at the time, you know! But I never had any trouble sleeping after a raid. One of the gunners would be up pacing around the billet sometimes, you know, and perhaps he'd go out for a walk but it never affected me like that. Probably because of the rum!

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Q. And before, did you have trouble sleeping before a raid?

A. No. Well, before the raid you wouldn't get up till eight o'clock, sort of thing, you wouldn't be on parade seven o'clock like the regulars were; you'd get up when you were ready and you'd have your breakfast and then you'd hang around until you found out whether there was a raid on or not. If there was a raid on then some would try and get some sleep, others would just sit and write letters or whatever, like, you know. I never had any problems that way.

[38:44]

Q. Did you ever get back to Norwich while you were in North Killingholme?

A. Oh, yes. Every six weeks you'd have a week's leave and I'd go home every time.

Q. What was the reception like when you got back home, back in uniform?

A. It was strange because most of your friends that you knew they were in the services, or whatever and it was a case of just ... I had a younger brother, he was six years younger than me and we'd go out together, like, you know, because my elder brother, he was in the army, he was a prisoner of war in Italy, so I never saw him on leave at all. But the younger brother was there. If I was 19, was I, something like 19/20, he'd be 14, see. So we'd find something to do on leave. By the time you got home and the welcome from the family and then you had a good night's sleep and before you could turn round you were on your way back to camp again, you know; the week was up. It didn't seem long in those days.

One experience, we went out Christmas Eve on a raid and coming back we got diverted to, I think it was, Wending, a Yankee aerodrome not far from Norwich, so the skipper said, "It looks like we'll be here for two or three days." The fog was thick at base, you know; the met men said it'll be down for two or three days, so skipper said, "You can do what you like," you know, because he was officer rank so was in a different billet to us.

[40:48]

There were five of us in the sergeant's rank, flight sergeants and whatnot, so I said to the boys, come on, let's go into Norwich then. So we hitched a lift into Norwich and I took them to my home. How they fed us, I don't know, but they did. They fed us well. My father was a regular up the local pub so he said, "Come on, we'll go and have a drink," and we were in flying gear now, flying boots and flying leathers, you know, and we go into the pub and there's uproar, all his mates they all wanted to buy us drinks, you know, us brave RAF boys, you know. We had a marvellous time that night, I think. I think everybody slept well when they got back to my house. My mother was very ... Not a softy, but she was soft and gentle and she sat there as proud as a peacock, you know, her boy was home.

Q. A nice memory. You say Wilhelmshaven stood out as the most exciting raid.

A. Only because something happened, you know.

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Q. So you did 36 operations. Do you ... Looking back on that, how do you feel about having completed the full tour?

A. Naturally I was glad to finish them safely, but to me I never had any problems during the tour, only on the first when we got coned, that was the only exciting one, that was. But I never had any problems otherwise, and I never had to miss a flight because of cold or anything like that, you know. If you had a head cold or anything, you couldn't fly, so I was lucky that way and we stayed together. Except for the one gunner, we stayed together as a crew right through the 36.

[43:18]

Q. Did you keep contact after the war with the crew?

A. No. It's something I regret because we did a lot together, you know, and it was a case of just we all dispersed after the tour to different stations. I went on operational training unit, training other crews coming up, and I suppose the others went on their different training units, you know. I never met the captain again, I never met the bomb aimer or the engineer I didn't meet. I saw the navigator once, I think, just for a short spasm in passing, virtually, you know, but the gunners, I didn't see them again after.

Q. Now you've been to reunions, meeting up with people that you knew ----

A. But I couldn't remember them, no; they were different crews. None of my crew came to the reunions. Obviously the other crews that were there, they were younger versions and when they come to the reunion we're all older! I couldn't say, "Well, I recognize you from so and so crew." I just couldn't, you know. So it was a case of mixing in and getting to know each other and swapping yarns, that's all you could do.

Q. Do you consider yourself, then, lucky to have got through?

A. Oh, very, very lucky when you hear of the stories that were going on, you know. Some crews would disappear on their first op. The first half a dozen was the dangerous time, they say, you know.

Q. You go to the reunions. Perhaps you could talk about why you see it's important to remember those crews that didn't come back and also medals, perhaps, your feelings about medals or rather the lack of medals for Bomber Command.

[45:41]

A. The lack of medal is a very high point with us because we never had a campaign medal and the reason for this mainly is Dresden. Now I was on the Dresden raids but, to us, we were told it was a communications centre with different type industry there as well, an essential communications centre, they stressed, so we had to get rid of it. And it was in advance of the Russians on their way there, you know, and it was to support the Russian advance as well, we were told. Now, I know for a fact – well we all know for a fact – that Churchill said that raid must go on, told Harris to bomb Dresden, and after Dresden he distanced himself away from it, as much to say, "Nothing to do with me," you know. And they never allowed us to have a campaign medal mainly because of that. That was the chief reason, I

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think, and no matter. There's an early day motion in the House of Commons now and is signed by – the last time we looked was signed by – 166 MPs asking for a campaign medal for Bomber Command, but nothing's come of it.

Q. How would you feel if one was issued now?

A. Obviously I'd feel very relieved, you know, and glad because I don't know of any other operational unit, be it army, navy, air force, whatever, that didn't get a campaign medal. Everybody else got medals for everything they did, you know, and Bomber Command is the only one that didn't get a campaign medal. I think that was the main reason, because of the do-gooders didn't want Dresden to be associated, you know ----

[47:42]

Q. It has become a politically sensitive issue.

A. It has, yes. And Churchill was the one who said "It's got to be done," and he's the one who distanced himself and wouldn't support a claim for a campaign medal. That's a bitter thing, that is, for the Bomber Command now. There are not many of us left but to think that we'll all die out without a campaign medal is very frustrating. I mean, we were doing what we were told. If we didn't do what we were told we were charged with lack of moral fibre and tossed off the camp and made to go and wash out latrines and stuff like that, you know.

Q. So obviously the desire is to have a campaign medal. How important do you see it as remembering those crews that were killed?

A. Well, that would be one way of remembering them because the families could take the campaign medals over, couldn't they? Tina and Don and my other sons, they could all keep that in mind and keep alive the memory of Bomber Command, because at that time during the war we were the only ones who were able to attack Germany, as such, weren't we, and we felt we were doing a quite important job, keeping the morale of the English people up for a start and hitting the Germans where it hurt, be it you killed civilians, yes, you did, but so did the Germans. And with that type of bombing you couldn't do anything else, could you, but you're bound to hit some civilians. But I didn't think of them as civilians; I thought of it as a target – naïve probably; I was young and naïve probably but I thought of it as a target, not as civilians.

[49:59]

Q. You probably couldn't do the job if you thought of the civilians, could you?

A. That's true, yes.

Q. You talked about your rear gunner going. Perhaps did he crack up? There must have been men in the squadron who did crack up under the pressure?

A. Yes. They would just disappear off the camp; you wouldn't see them anymore. You'd hear rumours, you know, lack of moral fibre they classed it as, which to me is a horrible expression because, I mean, some people just can't take danger, can they? The same with the soldier in the front line when he's

told to go over the top. Some refused to go over the top; they just couldn't do it and to say they lacked moral fibre, to me, is all wrong. They're in the trench, that's one nasty place to be, isn't it, you know. And the fact that they just couldn't see themselves to go over the top ... And in the First World War they were taken away and shot, which to me was horrific.

Q. Brilliant. I think we're probably pretty much done there, Dennis.

Dennis, you said you went to a US base on Christmas Eve.

A. RAF Wending, yes.

Q. What are your memories of the Yanks? What did you make of them?

A. We didn't see many of them. All we saw was the mess ... The crews in the mess because it was Christmas Eve and I think most of the American squadron was on leave. Probably that's why they diverted us there because there was space in the billets for us, and they gave us this one Nissen hut, a big round Nissen hut, and on the walls all the way round and over and above was these pin-up girls, you know, the big glossy magazines that the Americans had, and they stuck them up and the wall was literally covered with them and you lay in bed and your eyes agog, you know, going round and round.

[52:07]

But the part I remember was the meal. They put everything on the table that you could desire. But the luxury foods, you know, the peanut butter and stuff like that, which myself I just couldn't take; I just didn't like it, you know. And there was everything on this table and we had a massive meal and when we'd finished they came along with a bin and everything went into the bin, the pig bin, you know. What a colossal waste, you know. I hadn't touched the peanut butter and I don't think any of the others did, but it just went in the bin and, to me, that was a colossal waste in a war. But that's the Yanks for you, isn't it? We were there three days, I think it was.

Q. Did they look after you all right?

A. They looked after us marvellous, fair dos; they fed us well and looked after us but ----

Q. Were they interested in your Lancaster?

A. As I say, most of them seemed to be on Christmas, on leave, and I never met a crew, as such. The odd bods were around, you know, and they'd chat with you, but I never met a crew as such that wanted to go over the aircraft or anything. They'd stand and wave up on the runway when we took off to go back to base but that was it.

Q. I think you said you weren't superstitious but you did carry a picture of a film star round with you, didn't you?

A. Oh, I did, yes. And you know the film star?

Q. Come on!

A. For Whom the Bell Tolls, do you remember it?

Q. The Hemingway ... It's the film of the book.

A. Yes.

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Q. And it's ... Ooh, ----

A. Ingrid Bergman. It was in the back of my log-book. It's gone now for some strange reason, disappeared.

Q. Could we have that without me interrupting then? We talked earlier about superstition and mascots and things. If you could just say again on each operation you took ----

[54:17]

A. It wasn't in the log-book when I was flying because the log-book was in the squadron hut, you know, in the squadron office, and the spare wireless op, I suppose, would fill out your log-books for you and I didn't see them. But the picture of Ingrid Bergman I put in the back of the book after the War, you know, when I got back home, like. I fancied her; she was lovely.

Q. Did you carry it with you on raids?

A. Did I say that?

Q. I don't know. I'm asking you.

A. I don't think I did. No, it was probably in the billet.

Q. She was your pin-up. Probably the last question and I don't know if it's an easy one: if you had one lasting memory or recollection or ... what would it be, of the war?

A. After the tour I was on a training camp and it's the only thing I vividly remember. There used to be flights going off, training flights, you know, navigational exercises and things like this, and there's three or four of us stood watching this one "Lanc" take off and I suppose he got perhaps 2000 feet up and just suddenly nosedived into the ground. That's the only one I actually saw crash, but it affected me deeply, that did; to have gone, just like that, one big mushroom of smoke and that was it. It didn't stop me flying; I still went flying but I kept that in my memory all the time, you know, how quick it was to happen. I don't know the reason for it; they never said whether it was power failure or something of some sort but there'd be four or five men on that training and the trainee pilot and then the experienced pilot as well, see, and perhaps a navigator and a navigator's trainer. So there could have been seven or eight on that plane. Nothing was ever said.

[56:51]

Q2. Did you ask about taking the ground crews to see the bomb-damaged cities?

Q. No

A. That was ... We'd taken some of the ground crews across to Germany to see some of the sites and the one I particularly remember was flying down through the Ruhr, through the ... Over Essen and all the big industrial area and the devastation caused, which we'd never seen before, you know; when you're on your raid you don't see it. But to actually fly over there and see the damage that we did do I agree that the ... Minimal damage from our one plane but thousands of planes and three or four raids at a time, it really shocked me, the damage that had been caused. It was only the once I went out on one of

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those, but I was really shocked at how much damage we had done and it's surprising that people survived.

- Q. Looking back now, all these years later, how do you feel about it? Was it worth the effort and all the lives, and so on?
- A. I often wonder that myself but when you think what might have happened if the Germans had landed in this country, where we'd be now, I suppose it was necessary to do what we did. But I can't say I enjoyed doing it; I didn't enjoy doing it. I enjoyed my time in the RAF but I didn't enjoy the raids as such. I didn't come back and say, "Oh, goody, that's another one done," you know. I came back and said "Thank goodness that's done, one less more to do".

[58:57]

- Q. You were always aware of that, were you? You were counting them down?
- A. Oh, I'd be counting them down, and we got down to 28 and the skipper came up and he said, "They've put this tour up to 36," and it was a despondent crew that went on the next two, I'll tell you, because we had visions then of saying, you know, "We'll go on the next one," you know. It was terrible. It was a real dirty trick to play on a crew that had done 30.
- Q. When you'd finished the 36th, did you celebrate? Was there anything done?
- A. No big celebration by us, no. The pilot and bomb aimer, they just disappeared and we went out on a binge, the non-commissioned, you know, and that was it, and then we dispersed to ... well, home on leave first and then back to a training place.
- Q. I think we'll wrap it up there. We've got an awful lot there, thank you, Dennis; that's amazing, really good.
- A. I hope so, because the memory over the years is not always good but some things you can't forget.
- Q. As clear as anything. Fantastic. Thank you very much.

[1:00:11]