

John Backhouse Topham

John Backhouse Topham (“Johnny”) was born probably at Cowpen near Blyth, Northumberland on Saturday 9th December 1916, the first and only child of Frank and Margaret Ann Topham. He was named after his maternal grandfather, John Backhouse and indeed it is likely that he was born into his grandparents’ household as, at the time, his mother had little means of support. Frank Topham, his father was fighting with the Yorkshire Regiment in France and Belgium in WW1 and his mother, Margaret may not have been in work. After the war, Frank Topham probably returned to Blyth (his family home was Pocklington, Yorkshire) and tried to settle there with his new family, possibly employed in his pre-war job as a butcher. Many hasty wartime marriages failed and that of Frank and Margaret Topham may have been one such; they had only known each other for a maximum of 7 months before they tied the knot. After only a year as a civilian, Frank Topham re-enlisted into the army and disappeared from the lives of Margaret and John, his wife and son. Apparently, Margaret never talked of him and of the few remaining family photographs, none portray him.



Figure 1: John Topham, the footballer circa 1929. He appears to be a big centre half and the last line of defence.

John Topham was brought up by his mother in a small terraced house at 38, Lynn Street, Blyth with his grandparents close by. He attended New Delavel Senior School (which may also have been known as Sherwood Broadway) in Blyth and there formed a good relationship with his schoolmaster, Mr R. P. Redford. He played football for local teams and he left school after the end of Form 4 in the spring of 1931. He was 15yr old and he immediately (May 1931) began work as a garage assistant with Mr R. Wilson at Caudwell Lane, Monkseaton but left there shortly afterwards, in December, probably to take similar work elsewhere.

After school John attended “Battalion School Evening Classes” and remained in touch with Mr Redford whom he used for testimonials and who may have been a surrogate father figure. In retrospect, John may have emulated his father by becoming a member of an army cadet club at Delaval school. Mr Redford may have had been a military man and may have instructed the cadets and introduced them to the Battalion School afterwards. It is likely that Mr Redford wrote a letter of introduction to accompany John’s application to the Coldstream Guards.



Figure 2: Coldstream Guards on parade at Windsor Castle

It is hardly surprising that John was accepted into the Guards; he was 6ft 3in tall with brown hair and eyes, a chest measurement of 37in and a weight of 14st 11lb. At some stage he acquired the nickname of “Tiny Topham” and he was enlisted into the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards as Guardsman J B Topham 2656112 on 8th September 1933. He was based at the old Victoria

barracks at Windsor (demolished in 1988) and must have paraded in front of royalty, senior politicians and foreign dignitaries on many ceremonial occasions including trooping of the colours and changing of the guard. Indeed he may have been on parade at the funeral of George V on 28th January 1936. After more than 3 years of service and at the age of 20yr, he purchased his own discharge on 4th May 1937

Whilst contemplating his exit from the Coldstream Guards, John applied for employment with the Northumberland County Police Force but was rejected on 10th February 1937. He had more success with his application to the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Police Force and was accepted by them on 7th May 1937. His starting salary with the police was 62 shillings/week; he served as Constable J B Topham (number 87, A Division) until shortly after the outbreak of war. Whilst serving with the police, he lived with his elderly maternal grandparents, John and Elizabeth Backhouse (now retired) and his now widowed mother at the new family home of 2, Amberley Gardens, High Heaton, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

With the outbreak of WW2, John joined the RAF and was placed on the Volunteer Reserve List on 9th May 1941. He continued as a policeman until he was struck off on 21st August in time for his mobilisation 4 days later. He was chosen for Pilot Training and given the rank of Aircraftman 2, the lowest rank possible. At that time, pilot training took 18-24 months to complete and trainees had to travel frequently, far and wide, to access all the technical courses and flying experiences necessary for qualification; 50% of trainees were sent abroad to Canada, USA, South Africa and to India to get the flying hours they needed. John was no exception; his training took him abroad and to such diverse places as RAF Watchfield in Wiltshire and to Heaton Park, Manchester. He was promoted to Leading Aircraftman on 7th November 1941. On Saturday 25th April 1942, whilst at Heaton Park, John married Margaret Tait, a spinster and teacher and a home town sweetheart. Mirroring his parents' wartime marriage, the wedding appears to have been hastily planned and took place exactly 1 month before he departed for further training in Canada. The couple married in St Margaret's Church in Prestwich near John's base in Manchester.

Where John trained in Canada is unknown but the only photograph of him from this time was taken at San Angelo in Texas. The first intake of pilot cadets began training there in September 1942 and John may well have been amongst this initial number. He was awarded his Pilot's Flying Badge on 1st January 1943 and he returned from Canada later the same month on 25th January. During 1943 he gained familiarity with British combat aircraft; he was at Whitley Bay, Northumberland in March and RAF Watchfield in June. On 1st January 1944 he was promoted to Flight Sergeant and he progressed to fly the big 4 engined Wellingtons and Stirlings, at the Heavy Conversion Unit at RAF Stradishall near Haverhill, Suffolk.



Figure 3: John, San Angelo, Texas 1942 - he wrote on the print "love and all the best John". Copies of the photograph were probably posted by him both to his wife Margaret in Bedlington and to his mum and grandparents in Newcastle.

On 14th March 1944, he was posted to RAF Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire as an operational pilot with 514 Squadron, Bomber Command. 514 Squadron was formed on 1st September 1943 at Foulsham, Norfolk as a heavy-bomber squadron flying Lancasters. It moved to Waterbeach in November of that year. John Topham served 143 days on active service with 514 Squadron during which time he completed 26 successful missions and endured 1 crash landing.

He flew on average 1 sortie every 5 days for nearly 5 months when many succumbed on their first raid: there was no more than an even chance of survival for any raid. The courage required to engage and function in one such task is difficult to comprehend; the mind-set to repeat the exercise so many times is unfathomable, particularly for those of us living in an era when avoidance of workplace stress is so prominent.

A detailed account John Topham's flight on a mission to bomb Le Mans, France on 19th May 1944 is presented as appendix 1. He piloted Lancaster LL670 on another night time raid to Aulnoye, France on 19th July when he successfully bombed the marshalling yards there.



Figure 4: A daytime bombing raid by Lancasters of 514 Squadron

For centuries, the London Gazette has been the medium for announcing military honours and promotions (John's notices are shown in appendix 2). John Backhouse Topham was promoted to the rank of Flying Officer on 20th June 1944 and his commission was "Gazetted" on 22nd August whilst he was missing in action.

On 3rd August 1944, whilst participating in a daytime raid to bomb a Flying Rocket (V-1) facility at Bois de Cassan, France, John's Avro Lancaster 111 (call sign: LL716 A2-G) was accidentally and severely damaged by bombs dropped by a higher flying Allied aircraft whilst both planes were over the target. With great skill, John crash landed his plane near the town of Beaumont and luckily both he and his crew survived the impact. The escaping crew became separated as they fled the scene and began their attempts to elude the German military. Flying Officer John Topham, suffering leg and other injuries, was found by the local Resistance Movement and taken to a place of safety. A Gestapo search risked his discovery so he was buried in a temporary grave and left to breathe through a hollow tube. The grave was 4ft deep and his interment was prolonged for 36hr because posted German guards prevented his earlier rescue; when dug out he was in a very poor state. He revived somewhat but not before returning German troops warranted his reinternment; he refused to repeat the horrors of the grave and instead accepted the risk of capture. Discovered by a single Gestapo Officer, John shot the man dead and buried him in the self-same plot that he himself had recently occupied. Now he was at risk of instant execution both for himself and probably for several innocent villagers; he was lucky that advancing Allied forces liberated him the following day, 1st September.

A full and detailed account of John's time hiding from the Gestapo in occupied France and his crew's hardships in Buchenwald Concentration Camp is given in Colin Pateman's book "Unshackled Spirit". Several books detailing the exploits of 514 Squadron in WW2 can be accessed online through the 514 Squadron bookshop.

With the impact of the crash landing, John suffered a broken left leg and a damaged right knee. He was treated in various French Hospitals until he boarded a ferry at Cherbourg and sailed to Southampton on 8th September. In the UK he was filtered through the hospital system until he ended up in RAF Weeton Hospital, Preston, Lancashire. He was discharged from there on 23rd September with 28 days sick leave. He was requested to report to MI 9, the RAF's secret service and was debriefed by them on 10th October. John's secret "evasion from capture" report is displayed in appendix 3.

John's career as a bomber pilot ended with his escape from France; he had endured great hardships and was stood down. For the skill he displayed as a bomber pilot in combat and for his bravery whilst in occupied France, John Topham was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and this honour was published in the London Gazette on 6th February 1945.

DFC London Gazette 6 February 1945 - A/FO John Backhouse TOPHAM (178865) RAFVR 514 Sqn: 'In air operations, this officer has displayed courage, fortitude & devotion to duty of a high order'. The gazetted citation, which was for public consumption was deliberately guarded but the following recommendation has been extracted from National Archives file AIR 2/9648: 'Flying Officer Topham has taken part in twenty six successful operational sorties as pilot & captain of Lancaster aircraft. These sorties include a wide variety of attacks on heavily defended German targets & important targets in enemy occupied territory. He is a most determined pilot & has set a praiseworthy example by his keenness to take part in operations. During a daylight attack on BOIS-DE-CASSAN, his aircraft was struck by falling bombs from one of our own aircraft & was so extensively damaged that Flying Officer Tophamm had no alternative other than to make a crash landing in enemy occupied territory. The landing was very skilfully executed & the crew escaped injury, except Flying Officer Topham whose legs were injured. In spite of his injuries he managed to get away from the aircraft & evade capture & after a considerable period of waiting during which he endured amazing hardships, he made contact with a resistance Organisation & was cared for by them until our advancing armies captured the place where he was hiding. Flying Officer Topham is strongly recommended for the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of his great courage & his excellent operational record'. The raid on Bois-De-Casson, a flying-bomb supply depot, took place on 3 August 1944. Six of Topham's crew (Lancaster LL716) were taken prisoner, with only himself & the mid-upper air gunner (F Sgt F W Dennehy) evading capture. Topham always believed that he alone survived being captured. The above recommendation refers to 'amazing hardships' & one of these was to be buried in a makeshift grave for some 36 hours, breathing through a narrow tube. Contact was made with the advancing Allied Forces on 1 September 1944 & the full story emerged. His Station Commander at RAF Waterbeach, on seeing the intelligence debrief, lost little time in recommending Topham for IMMEDIATE DFC.

Figure 5: Citation for the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross

On 7th September, and whilst still in France, John's liberation determined the RAF to transfer him to the Personnel Holding Unit of Technical Training Command. He remained there during his recovery and until 3rd April 1945 when he was posted to No.105 (Transport) Operational Training Unit at RAF Bramcote, near Nuneaton, Warwickshire. Here he flew Vickers Wellingtons and Douglas Dakotas before being posted to Transport Command Holding Section at Morecambe on 1st August. From there, a week later, he flew to join 229

Group in Burma. What route he followed and how long the journey took is unknown. Possibly a flight to a British base in North Africa followed by subsequent legs to Cape Town, Calcutta and Rangoon.

229 Group was the transport division of The Tactical Air Force (Burma), a force that was formed on 19th December 1943 to conduct air offensives against the Japanese. The Japanese were defeated in Burma in July 1945 so when John arrived a month later, he was only required to fly supplies into British forces in the jungle and to fly casualties out. The Douglas Dakota was the workhorse of Transport Command in Burma.

Flying in Burma was difficult and John experienced problems much different from those of occupied Europe. Away from the coast and rivers, good landmarks were few and navigation difficult. Maps were small scale and of variable accuracy; sorties were flown at about 50ft over rivers and open country and 150ft over jungle – from a greater height nothing of value could be seen. Supplies were delivered by air landing on existing airfields or on airstrips constructed by ground forces or by air dropping. Air dropping could be “free fall” or by use parachute containers (for fragile materials). On locating a dropping zone, which was usually very small, the aircraft made 8-10 circuits to deliver parts of its load with each pass. Aircrew ejected containers from a side door on red/green light signals directed by the pilot. During the monsoon season, pilots flew below the giant cumulo-nimbus clouds as much as they could; this involved flying down small valleys with high mountains vanishing into cloud on either side.



Figure 6: The Douglas C47 Dakota Aeroplane

Pilots reckoned that all operations in Burma would have been quite impossible without an aircraft like the Dakota. It was extremely robust and reliable and despite its large size it was a delight to fly and could be handled like a fighter.

John returned from Burma on March 26th 1946 and was transferred back into Technical Training Command, this time into No. 104 Personnel Dispersal Centre at Hednesford, Staffordshire. This unit dealt with the demobilisation of all RAF returning from overseas. He was released from service on 13th April 1946 and his last day of service was 25th June.

Between release from the RAF and his cessation of service, John negotiated a return to his old job as a police constable with the Newcastle force. His return to civilian duty commenced smoothly on 26th June 1946, he was now PC 413, A Division. This must have seemed like a demotion after the authority he commanded as the captain of a bomber crew and a supply pilot in the Far East.



Figure 7: John with an unknown lady who might well be Margaret Tait

His marriage to Margaret Tait failed; they had been married for just 4 years and had spent little time together. John undoubtedly enjoyed home leave

when in UK based pilot training and particularly when he was posted to RAF Whitley Bay in 1943. His attachment to 514 Squadron at RAF Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire was no impediment to home leave in 1944 but his overseas duty in Canada for 8 months in 1943/4 and in Burma for a year in 1945/6 was. Possibly the long separations and combat stresses changed John's feelings for Margaret. Like his father, war probably affected him greatly (he had been buried alive) and both world wars were bad for the institution of marriage.

On his initial return to Newcastle John probably resided with Margaret at their home of 112, Rothesay Terrace, Bedlington before marriage breakdown led him to move out and find accommodation again with his mother and grandparents at 2, Amberley Gardens.

John began a love affair with Bertha Hall, a nursing sister at Newcastle Royal Victoria Infirmary sometime shortly after his return to Newcastle in July 1946. A Hall family recollection suggests that the couple met in London but it seems more likely that they met in Newcastle and spent time together in the capital. They may have attended Buckingham Palace to receive John's DFC. It is a remote possibility that the couple knew each other in a professional capacity during John's first spell as a police officer in 1937/41.

Bertha fell pregnant in March of 1947.

The aftermath of WW2 like that of WW1 left many military men trapped in hasty loveless marriages with no means of escape from faithful wives. Consequently rates of bigamy rose after WW1 and rates of divorce more than doubled after WW2. Husbands were reliant on wives divorcing them on grounds of adultery and when in the late 1940s wives refused to comply, new female partners changed their surnames by deed poll to give a semblance of respectability to their co-habitation with a married man. Such behaviour led the Church of England to write a report to the Lord Chancellor denigrating the practice and requesting legislation.

John and Bertha were typical of their era; Bertha legally changed her surname to "Topham" in September 1947 so that when her child was born in the November, she and John could live together with their baby as a Topham family. Margaret Tait, for her own benefit or to accommodate John's wishes began divorce proceedings against him and was granted a decree absolute on

11th August 1948, just 9 months after Bertha's untimely death in childbirth on 13th November 1947. Both Bertha and a younger male twin were lost and only Nigel John Topham, a healthy boy, survived. Had Bertha lived, there seems little doubt that she and John would have married before 1948 was out.

Late 1947 saw John Topham stunned and confused after the loss of 3 people he cared about deeply – both of his grandparents he had lived most of his life with and the girl he loved. He was left as an unprepared single parent with a dilemma as to how to proceed. Throughout the next 3 years he visited his son, Nigel at Oxford House, Middleton-One-Row where he was born and where his Hall family were caring for him. He took Nigel to Amberley Gardens when work allowed and with his mother he cared for him for limited periods. Joanna Hall or her middle aged spinster daughter, Hilda, corresponded with John informing him of Nigel's progress and sending him photographs.



Figure 8: Nigel at Redcar in 1949, a photograph sent to John and keep by him throughout his lifetime

Eventually, John fell in love again, this time with Doris Hunter another Newcastle girl and he became disillusioned with the police service.

It is likely that John never lost his love of flying and that he was constantly seeking an opportunity to return to the RAF. However, an incident saw him, in the course of his duty as a policeman, on a charge in court and when the case against him was proven; he became headline news in the local newspaper, The News and Chronicle on 16th March 1949. This episode may have influenced his decision to resign from the Flying Squad.



Figure 9: PC 413, John Backhouse Topham circa 1947. His medal ribbons are clearly displayed above his left breast pocket.

On 22nd February 1949, John responded to a 999 emergency call and rescued a mother and baby from the River Tyne. As there was no ambulance available, he rushed the pair to hospital whilst a colleague gave first aid on the back seat. He drove along Northumberland Road “at a fast speed” sounding his horn loudly and repeatedly. A number of people had begun to cross the road at the Belisha beacons on Saville Road when John sped by. A complainant, 68yr old Mr Saville Bell, a retired antique dealer, told the court that as he made his way over the crossing, the police car approached “at violent speed” and as he jumped for it he could feel the swish of the vehicle behind him. He said “I take great exception to anybody driving in such a manner whether a member of the public or of the police force”. Constable Topham in his defence said that most pedestrians had stopped and waved him on. Mr William McKeag (Defending Counsel) submitted “it was a case of dire emergency and I suggest that Mr Bell

did not have his crossing interrupted and that the other people waved the car on". The case was proven but dismissed under The Probation of Offenders Act because Constable Topham was "exceptionally concerned and worried in the execution of his duties".

The turn of the decade saw John make several life changing decisions. He proposed to Doris Hunter, a Newcastle secretary and the pair were married on 16th September 1950 at Newcastle Register Office. They moved into a new home together at 112, Stephenson Road, Heaton, Newcastle within walking distance of his mother now alone in Amberley Gardens. John then resigned from the police for a second time on 19th May 1951 and was released by them on 31st May 1951 to accept another commission in the RAF. Finally, John agreed to allow his son Nigel to be adopted by his maternal grandmother, Joanna Hall and through a formal process Nigel John Topham became Nigel John Hall on 28th November 1951, a fortnight after his fourth birthday.

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE POLICE.	
"A" DIVISION.	SPECIAL REPORT.
	Saturday 19 May 1951.
Re <u>Resignation of P.C. 413 John Backhouse Topham.</u>	
Sir,	
I have to report that I have received notification from the Air Ministry that I have been accepted for a Commission in the Royal Air Force and a request that I take up my duties as soon as practicable.	
In consequence of this I respectfully tender my resignation as a member of the Newcastle City Police Force and request that some indication of the earliest date of my release from my appointment as Constable in this Force be given.	
I am, Sir,	
To/ Supt. Weir.	Your Obedient Servant,
	<i>JB Topham.</i>
	P.C. 413.
<i>Submitted</i>	
<i>[Signature]</i>	

*Resigned
C. Weir
19/5/51
19/5/51*

Figure 10: John's second resignation letter to Newcastle City Police

Possibly John felt drawn by his love of flying and his last chance of a happy marriage. Undoubtedly he lacked the where-with-all to nurture Nigel as a single parent in fulltime work and his new wife might quite reasonably have had reservations about committing herself both to John and to a 3yr old step son. Additionally, John could see that Nigel was well looked after by his Hall family in a household that comprised of two fulltime caring women (his grandmother and a maiden aunt) and two bachelor uncles both bringing in a living wage. The extended family within the village of Middleton provided extra female support and children of a similar age for Nigel to play with. John may have felt that with the best will in the world, he could not match that safe and healthy environment.

Nigel was now of an inquisitive age and it might have been felt (by the standards of the day) that if John could not provide him with a home, then, in order to prevent confusion and distress, it was best for him to retire from Nigel's life completely. It is believed that John offered financial support for Nigel but it is unknown whether this was accepted. Certainly, there is no evidence of acrimony in the settling of Nigel's upbringing and John is known to have visited Nigel on at least one further occasion several years later.

John's renewed commission as a pilot with the RAF required him to report for duty with Transport Command at RAF Hendon, Surrey. He recommenced his career as a pilot on 14th June 1951 with his old rank of Flying Officer; the same day the London Gazette published his commission as a short term appointment of seven years on active service and 4 years in reserve.

3 weeks later he was transferred from Hendon to Oakington, Cambridgeshire and there he retrained at 101 Flight Refresher school under the jurisdiction of Flight Training Command. After 2 months, on 19th November he was once again posted to Transport Command initially with 242 Operations Conversion Unit (OCU) at RAF Dishforth. He remained at Dishforth for 7 months and then on 9th June 1952 he was posted to 53 Squadron at RAF Topcliffe, North Yorkshire. At both Dishforth and Topcliffe he flew Handley Page Hastings transports. He remained based in Yorkshire for 38 months which must have allowed him to commute to his home in Newcastle; Doris seems to have remained working at Newcastle and continued to live at 112, Stephenson Road.



Figure 11: Flying Officer John Topham (2nd right, front row), OCU, RAF Dishforth 1951/2



Figure 12: The Handley Page Hastings transport plane

On 13th December 1954 John left 53 Squadron and Transport Command and was posted to the Far East Air Force to participate in the Malayan Emergency of 1948-1960. This campaign constituted a guerrilla war fought between the Commonwealth and the Malayan National Liberation Army, the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party. Hostilities began in earnest in January 1955 and eventually led to the RAF dropping over 2,000 bombs into communist positions in the Malayan jungle. John Topham was probably sent because of his experience in flying over the Burmese jungles in 1945/6. He was re-acquainted with the Douglas Dakota and probably flew it on photographic missions, supply drops and casualty evacuations. He served there for 18 months and Doris apparently spent some time there with him.

The Malayan Emergency of 1948-1960 was the campaign that gave rise to the popular film of 1969 – “Virgin Soldiers”.



Figure 12: John (far right) and Doris (3rd from right) at an RAF Halloween Party Hounslow, Essex, circa 1956/60

On 17th July 1956, John returned to No. 5 Personnel Despatch Unit, probably at Blackpool before going on extended leave until 26th August. The following day he reported for duty with 511 Squadron, Transport Command, based at RAF Lyneham, Chippenham, Wiltshire; he was back flying the Handley Page Hastings. It was whilst he was serving here that John made the newspapers again when he volunteered to fly a mercy mission to deliver an iron lung to a woman in respiratory failure in Cyprus (see newspaper cuttings, appendix 4).

511 Squadron moved to nearby RAF Colerne before it was disbanded and re-numbered 36 Squadron on 1st September 1958. John's commission was made permanent on 12th September 1956 and he was promoted to his ultimate rank of Flight Lieutenant on 12th December 1958. He ended his flying days with 36 Squadron and left them on 25th January 1960 to become a student on the 82 Joint Air Traffic Control Course at Shawbury, Shropshire. Inexplicably, he was withdrawn from this course after 2 months and on 5th April he was transferred to No. 49 Long Photographic Interpretation Course at RAF Upwood, Cambridgeshire. He completed his 2 month training at the Joint School of Photographic Interpretation and was finally sent to RAF Cottesmore, Rutland no doubt to examine aerial photographs taken as part of the cold war with the USSR. This last assignment brought him full circle as he was again a member of Bomber Command. He remained at RAF Cottesmore for 6 years and there with his wife Doris he made plans for retirement. He was sent on 2 pre-release induction courses to the Licensed Trade's Residential Training Centre at Buxton, Derbyshire and left the RAF on 28th October 1966.



Figure 13: The Black Bull, Market Overton, Rutland, John and Doris's home for 7 years.

It seems that John and Doris lived at 112, Stephenson Road until John was posted to Malaya; the property then appears to have been rented out to a series of married couples whilst Doris lived with John in RAF married quarters. In preparation for retirement, John and Doris sold their home in Newcastle to Christopher and Claire Hardwick and either acquired the lease on the property

or bought The Black Bull pub at Market Overton still in Rutland and not far from Cottesmore. Hopefully John and Doris enjoyed their time as the convivial hosts and landlords of this quaint country inn. Doubtless, the enterprise was tiring and the hours long but as least they could supplement the pub income with comfortable military and police pensions.

Next, John's mum Margaret became homesick and returned from her retirement home in Hastings to her roots in Blyth; John and Doris left the Black Bull and returned to Newcastle. By 1973 the couple were domiciled at 49, Brookfield Crescent, Chapel House Estate, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and John was employed as the proprietor of a garage, work he last enjoyed as a teenager. He and Doris became great friends with a family called Dunford who ran a garden nursery nearby on the estate.

Tragically, John Backhouse Topham was killed on 18th July 1975 when he stepped out of his parked van into the path of an overtaking lorry on Stanhope Street. He was on his way to the bank to deposit the day's takings from his garage; his accompanying pet dog, Peter, a black Labrador remained seated in the vehicle and was unharmed. Sadly, the dog spent many subsequent hours sitting outside John's front door patiently waiting for him to come home. His funeral was held at the West Road Crematorium on 24th July and his ashes were scattered in the garden of remembrance there. His name is displayed in the book of remembrance every year on the anniversary of his death – 18th July.



Figure 14: Doris Topham circa 1985

Doris survived him and lived as a widow at Brookfield Crescent until she too died on 4th September 1993. John died intestate and probate was granted to Doris in a ruling made in Ipswich in late 1975. Doris wrote a will leaving her personal effects and estate to neighbours, nephews and nieces. Memorabilia provided by her beneficiaries has helped greatly in the telling of the Topham story.

As beneficiaries of Doris's will, Leonard and Doreen Twizell, her next door neighbours, offered John's medals for sale 15yr after Doris died. Leonard, then elderly himself, wanted them to go to someone who would treasure them. In the event, Corbitt's, Newcastle specialists in medals and coins sold the medals in an auction held on Saturday 27th July 2008 at the Swallow Hotel, Gateshead. The medals with the provenance of John Topham's wartime heroic exploits went to an unknown bidder for the sum of £2600.



Figure 16: John's medals (left to right) DFC, 1939/45 Star with clasp France and Germany, Defence Medal, War Medal 1939/45 and General Service Medal (E11R), clasp Malaya. He received no campaign medal for Burma as he served there after hostilities ceased.

According to his daughter Michelle, had Leonard Twizell known that John had a son he would have not have hesitated in giving the medals to Nigel.

Nigel has no recollection of his father visiting him as a young boy yet his cousin John, six weeks older, a village resident and at the time a regular visitor, recalls

John Topham appearing at Oxford House and him being ushered away when he was about 7yr old. From John's movements, it seems likely that the visit took place between November 1951 and December 1954 when John was stationed in nearby North Yorkshire and before he was posted to Malaya.

It cannot be a coincidence that John kept a black Labrador dog called "Peter". Surely when he courted Bertha Hall and the couple were preparing for the birth of their child, they introduced each other to their respective families. John must have visited Bertha's home at Oxford House, Middleton-One-Row where the family kept a succession of black Labrador dogs all called "Peter". John was familiar with dogs as his mother, Margaret kept Alsatians. It seems inevitable that John and Bertha walked with Peter along the picturesque banks of the river Tees and that these sojourns left John with lifelong happy memories of a very emotional period in his life. It is comforting to think that John abandoned Alsatians and instead kept a black Labrador called Peter as a private tribute to his lost love, Bertha.



Figure 17: Bertha Hall, student nurse circa 1936

Appendix 1: The Chaperone on a terror ride, the bombing raid 19th May 1944



Figure 18: A Lancaster Bomber from 514 Squadron at Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire.

It's the evening of Friday 19th May 1944. At RAF Waterbeach, Cambridgeshire, the crews of 514 Squadron detailed to fly tonight are making their final preparations. The day has dragged for all, especially for the rookie airmen; many have wiled away the anxious, difficult hours, reading, playing cards, smoking cigarettes and writing their final letters home. They have attended a briefing by the base commander and the squadron leader and know what is expected of them. The target tonight is the Renault works at Le Mans, France.

Le Mans is protected by anti-aircraft guns and by a squadron of Focke-Wulf Fw 190A fighters based at a grass airfield there. The anti-aircraft cover consists of Acht-Acht (meaning "88" as they fire 88mm shells) Flak 18 canons; Flak being the abbreviated German for "aircraft-defence canon". This canon is a frightening weapon that can hurl 15-20 shells per minute to a height of 30,000ft. Aircraft release tinsel or "chaff" over targets to confuse enemy radar and therefore buy crews a few more precious minutes before the Flak gunners find their range. Flak gunners patiently await the right moment to fire their 20lb shells above, below, in front and behind a formation to create a "killing zone". Allied bomber crews dread the 88s even more than the Luftwaffe

fighters as the 88mm shells burst in a spray of metal that tears through planes and men alike. The “88” rarely, if ever, jams.

The original “flaming onion” was a 37mm revolving anti-aircraft gun used by the German army during WW1; to maximise the chances of striking an aircraft, all 5 rounds were discharged as rapidly as possible giving a “string of flaming onions effect”. The term “flaming onions” was adopted by bomber pilots in WW2 to describe incoming Flak. “Scarecrows” was the term used to describe the flaming debris of exploded planes falling out of the sky.

Our aeroplane tonight is Avro Lancaster DS842. It is 70ft long with a wingspan of 102ft; it can fly to a ceiling of 25,000ft with a cruising speed of 250miles/hr and a range of 2,500 miles. With a full bomb load its weight is approximately 30 tons. It is powered by 4 Rolls Royce “Merlin” engines and it is armed with eight 0.303 Mark 2 Browning machine guns; two in the front turret, two in the mid-upper turret and four in the rear turret. The air-cooled machine guns fire 400-600 rounds of 0.303in (7.7mm) ammunition per minute with an effective killing range of 1,500yd or just under a mile. There are 1000 rounds per gun.

DS842 is fully fuelled and its 33ft long bomb bay is loaded with ten 1000lb and four 500lb general purpose high explosive bombs.

The crew consists of:

The Bomb Aimer, Flying Officer J E Chapman (Canadian Airforce); his position is in Perspex cupola in the nose of the plane. His primary position is prone on the floor of the aircraft looking directly down at the ground; he has access to the bombsight controls and the bomb release selectors. With his unobstructed view from the cupola he also assists in navigation and he mans the front turret machine guns.

Above and behind the nose cupola and sitting above the bomb bay is our pilot, Flying Officer, Edward Alexander Campbell (Canadian Airforce) and to his right and on a lower collapsible “dicky” seat is our captain and “skipper”, Flight Sergeant J B Topham. This seat is usually occupied by the flight engineer but tonight John Topham sits there to chaperone the new crew through the traumas of the upcoming raid – with nothing to occupy him, his is the hardest job.

Behind "Alex" the pilot and "Topsy", the skipper is a curtain and behind that curtain sits Sergeant E F Garland (Canadian Airforce) the navigator and he shares a chart table with Sergeant A R Lyons, the wireless operator. Several radios are mounted on the table as is an instrument panel showing information including airspeed and altitude. Above these men is a hemispherical transparent "astrodome" for visual signalling by the radio operator and for celestial navigation.

At the rear end of the bomb bay is the access to the mid-upper gunner's turret and in this turret sits Sergeant F F Jones (Canadian Airforce). He is suspended in a canvas sling, legs dangling, with a 360 degree view over the top of the aircraft. Behind the mid-upper turret is the main entrance to the aircraft on the starboard side of the fuselage. A chemical toilet is located near the spars for the tail plane.

At the extreme tail-end of the fuselage the rear gunner, Sergeant S A Harvey (Canadian Airforce) sits in his exposed position similarly suspended in the tail turret; the central Plexiglas panel of the turret has been removed to improve visibility. The turret is entered through a small hatch and the space is so cramped that Sergeant Harvey leaves his parachute outside on a hook on the fuselage near the turret door.

Neither the mid-upper nor the rear gunner's position is heated and the gunners wear electrically heated suits to prevent hypothermia and frostbite. At the initiation of combat, many disconnect their suits to prevent entanglement in the event of an emergency bale-out.

The flight engineer is Sergeant W A Donaldson and relieved of his seat by the skipper, he finds space where he can. His role is to resolve mechanical issues particularly those generated by combat damage and to act as the front gunner when the bomb aimer is otherwise occupied over the target.

In emergencies, the crew can escape through the main entrance, through open bomb bay doors and through a hatch in the floor of the nose cupola.

The normal crew compliment for a Lancaster is 7 men but tonight the rookie crew is supported by the combat experienced Sergeant J B Topham who

although outranked by both the pilot and the bomb aimer is the man in charge.

As the time for departure approaches, activity at the aerodrome increases. Airmen start to board their aircraft and take up their positions; ground crews make final checks in the dark. Pilots fire up their engines and radio activity is brisk as chocks are removed and planes taxi from their hardstands to take their places at the start of the concrete runways. There are 3 runways; 2 for take-off and 1 for landing. They are concrete rather than grass or asphalt as Fenland ground can become boggy when wet.

At 2221hr, Alex Campbell looks down the dark concrete strip and brings his engines to full throttle, the airbrakes are released and Lancaster DS842 thunders down the runway, the fuselage rattles and shakes and at about 1000yds it takes to the air and ascends at a rate of 250ft/min to rendezvous with the rest of the squadron at about 10,000ft. Here the air is thin and oxygen masks are needed to keep the crew fully conscious and alert. The outside temperature is well below zero and there is cloud cover from about 8,500ft upwards.

The squadron orbits the airfield until the formation is complete and then the navigators instruct a compass bearing and the planes set off for the North Sea and France. Navigation is by "dead reckoning" and Sergeant Garland observes the airspeed and knowing the distance to the next course correction, he simply sets his stopwatch to the required time. On a clear night, navigation is aided by overflown landmarks, by the stars and by sight of other crews flying close by. Whilst Sergeant Garland navigates, Sergeant Lyons communicates with the rest of the flight and Sergeant Donaldson, listens intently to the hum of the engines and regularly inspects the fuel, temperature and oil pressure gauges. In the event of mechanical failure or combat damage, the lives of the crew are as much in the hands of the flight engineer as they are in the hands of the pilot. The plane can fly with 2 engines out and with luck might remain airborne on 1 engine alone.

The approach to the North Sea brings the possibility of challenge by enemy night fighters and so Alex Campbell instructs the gunners to test their equipment; each gunner rotates his turret and fires a short burst from each of

the 8 machine guns. The turrets are hydraulically operated and the mid-turret is so constructed that the gunner cannot accidentally shoot at his own tail. The gunners are in constant radio contact with the pilot and they relentlessly search the skies for possible trouble. On sighting a fighter they will shout “fighter” and the direction of approach – “port”, “starboard”, “high” or “low”. On receiving the call, the pilot will “corkscrew” erratically away as the gunners prepare to open fire.

Luftwaffe pilots are encouraged to shoot down Allied aircraft by the promise of the award of the Iron Cross once they achieve 30 points. 1 point is granted for each ratified fighter kill and 3 points are given for every bomber confirmed as destroyed. Bombers are worth more than fighters as they have the capacity to inflict more damage on the Third Reich.

German fighters typically search out planes with mechanical problems or battle damage straggling behind the heavily defended formations; they prefer to approach unseen from below initially taking out the rear gunner before coming in for the kill.

On board Lancaster DS842 progress is good and the atmosphere is better now that each man has something to concentrate on and the flight seems little different from the many previous training runs.

All this changes on the approach to Le Mans and as the squadron’s arrival is detected by German radar and fighters are scrambled. 30 miles from the target a Junkers Ju 88 night fighter approaches and Sergeant Harvey, the rear gunner fires a short burst and it disappears. Le Mans is reached too early and DS842 has to go into a holding pattern, circling to await its turn to attack. This is a tense time; the crew want nothing more than to drop their bombs and exit the combat zone as soon as possible. After an agonising few minutes, the radio bursts into life and the message to begin the bombing run is given. At this stage, the pilot, Alex Campbell takes over the commentary –

“The pilot from a seasoned crew from C flight was assigned to accompany me and my crew on our introductory trip. F/S “Topsy” Topham occupied the flight engineer’s seat on my right as we took off for Le Mans on this auspicious outing. Approaching the target (at 7,500ft) we came under heavy anti-aircraft fire. For the first time we saw glowing tennis balls floating lazily up towards us

till suddenly with a burst of speed they went streaking on past us. I saw this mesmerising curtain of fire cascading right up in front of us with no chance of getting through it.

I hollered something like – “what’s the form Topy?” He yelled back – “straight ahead!”

We did.

A few seconds later, I saw a huge explosion ahead of us. On my exclamation – “there goes a plane!” Topy replied – “That’s flaming onions”. “They’re like scarecrows.”

I didn’t have time to say that I had just seen part of a Lancaster undercarriage go tumbling past us.

The bomb aimer (Sergeant Chapman) was giving us directions for the bombing run. He said “bomb doors open!” “Left, left, steady, steady – bombs gone – bomb doors closed!” (The time is now 0028hr, 20th May).

This last phrase was greeted by audible sighs of relief from the crew.

The navigator now gave me a course heading to begin our homeward journey.

We had just settled onto our new heading when over the intercom burst the words “Fighter, Port, Go!” The gunner’s mics were always left open for just such urgencies. This attack was by a (Messerschmitt) Me109 which we endured by the prompt action of all concerned (the mid-upper and rear gunners opened fire and claimed several hits). This was followed by another Me109 attack and finally (at 0059hr) a (Focke-Wulf) FW190 appeared about 250yd away but was lost in the clouds.”

Avro Lancaster DS842 landed safely back at Waterbeach at 0310hr, 20th May 1944 after 4hr 49min in the air and in danger.

Not all the 514 Squadron crews that night were so lucky. On its way home, Avro Lancaster LL641 Ji-K piloted by Flight Sergeant Shearing managed to safely jettison into the North Sea a 1000lb bomb which remained hung up in the bomb bay but then crashed (for unexplained reasons) near Newmarket killing all but 2 on-board.

At debriefing the following day, Flight Sergeant J B Topham reported the events of the raid and surmised that the attack had been good. He was promoted to Flying Officer 1 month later on 20th June 1944.

The following night (21st May 1944) on a raid to Duisberg, Germany, 514 Squadron lost 3 crews to night fighter attacks. Of the 21 men lost, 17 were killed, 2 were taken prisoner and 2 evaded capture.

Pilot Alex Campbell was lucky on a subsequent flight when at the call of "fighter" he put his plane into such a steep climb that he ended up flying backwards upside down. He quickly righted the plane and then effected a lateral turn to bring him back into formation at the back of the flight. He was not the only pilot to do a "loop-de-loop" in a Lancaster and he was very fortunate in so doing not to suffer a head-on collision with an oncoming crew or to side-swipe another in making his corrective turn.

Alex Campbell was 21yr of age and married when he first flew into combat with John Backhouse Topham (aged 27yr). He completed 25 sorties and John completed 26; both were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for their bravery.

Alex Campbell was shot down on 28th July by a Junkers 88 which came at him from below and opened fire at a range of only 50yd; he survived the crash and escaped. John Topham crashed 6 days later and also lived to tell his tale.

In WW2, Bomber Command suffered an extremely high casualty rate - out of a total of 125,000 aircrew, 55,573 were killed – a 44.4% death rate. A further 8,403 were wounded and 9,838 became prisoners of war.

Alex Campbell described his feelings on each day looking at the bulletin board in the Officer's Mess. "Alphabetically – Armstrong, Baker, Campbell. Oh boy, we're on! In a way that lets the tension off and in another way it starts a sense of terror. Your stomach acts up and your throat's dry but you're making jokes all the time, just silly jokes, keeping our spirits up."

It is difficult to overestimate the valour of these very young and very brave men. Their fortitude was as inspirational as that of the young boys who stood up in the trenches of WW1 and blindly walked into the machine guns and shells of "no man's land".

Edward Alexander Campbell celebrated his 70th wedding anniversary with his wife Hazel in October 2014; he died the following year at his home in Paris, Ontario, Canada aged 92yr.



Figure 19: Alex Campbell and Lancaster bomber showing the forward turret and the bomb aimer's position in the Perspex cupola.

Appendix 2: Extracts from the London Gazette

Numb. 39292

3987



SECOND SUPPLEMENT TO The London Gazette

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE, 22 AUGUST, 1944

3873

18th May 1944.

1323196 Harold Leslie CHANDOR (178707).
1529081 Peter Edward FAHY (178529).

20th May 1944.

1439479 Norman BRADBURY (178514).
1389182 John David MEEK (178655).
968197 James Carmichael MENTIFLY (178715).
1217627 Anthony William HUNT (178496). 21st
May 1944.
932373 Kenneth Jock WHITCUTT (179062). 22nd
May 1944.

24th May 1944.

982583 Frank BLOOR (179197).
1320701 Howard George William BROWN
(178998).
1258771 Harold Brown STEWART (178654).

25th May 1944.

1317319 George Stephen MURRAY (179082).
1091377 Sidney Laidler GRANVILLE (179003).
1457713 Douglas Robert ROBINSON (178961).
1270914 Michael Anthony MacNAMARA (179143).
1334350 Ronald Leicester YOUNG (178786).

18th June 1944.

1285201 Ivor Douglas COURTNEY (178518).
1496978 Wilfred James HARTLEY (178988).
1532007 William Guy Gilmore HUDSON (178814).
1393165 Frederick David IRVINE (178975). 19th
June 1944.

20th June 1944.

1488860 George Archibald KERRUSH (178829).
1564491 Andrew David MACKENZIE (178802).
1476474 John Backhouse TOPHAM (178865).
1113960 Ian LADLEY (178490).
1576951 Dacus Patrick Reginald STOKES
178791).
1140086 William Peter HOPWOOD (179041).
1455338 John Anthony WHITWOOD (178864).
1330096 Alfred William James SMITHERS
(178944).
1452520 Cyril Martin ROSAY (178835).

21st June 1944.

1577719 Raymond Joseph COOKE (178710).
1324717 Ivor JONES (178880).
1800668 Arthur Owen PEARSON (179178).
1335679 Leonard James WILSON (179176).

Figure 5 Promotion to Flying Officer

760

SUPPLEMENT TO THE LONDON GAZETTE, 6 FEBRUARY, 1945

the shattered windscreen caused great physical distress to the pilot. His hands became frozen and it was with the greatest difficulty that he was able to use them. Nevertheless, he held doggedly to his task. He came down considerably in altitude and afterwards flew the aircraft to base. In most painful and distressing conditions this officer displayed exceptional fortitude and determination.

Flight Lieutenant George Thomas PYKE (124834).
R.A.F.V.R., 550 Sqn.

aircraft sustained severe damage. Control was temporarily lost. Flying Officer Marks quickly regained control and afterwards executed a precise and determined attack. His resolution was typical of that which he has shown throughout.

Acting Flying Officer John Backhouse TOPHAM (178865), R.A.F.V.R., 514 Sqn.

In air operations this officer has displayed courage, fortitude and devotion to duty of a high order.

Figure 6 Award of the DFC

OF FRIDAY, 20th JULY, 1951

Published by Authority

Registered as a Newspaper

TUESDAY, 24 JULY, 1951

Air Ministry, 24th July, 1951.

ROYAL AIR FORCE.

Air Vice-Marshal W. E. BARNES, C.B.E., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., D.T.M. & H., is appointed Honorary Surgeon to the King in succession to Air Vice-Marshal F. J. MURPHY, C.B., C.B.E., M.B., B.Ch., D.P.H., who vacates the appointment on retirement from the R.A.F. 13th May 1951.

As Flight Lieutenant, short service (seven years on the active list and four years on the reserve):—

John VERNEY, M.B.E., D.F.C. (131568). 17th Apr. 1951 (*seniority 17th Apr. 1951*) (substituted for notification of 29th May 1951 (p. 2937, col. 2)).

As Flying Officer, short service (seven years on the active list and four years on the reserve):—


John Backhouse TOPHAM, D.F.C. (178865). 14th June 1951 (*seniority 8th June 1950*). 

Figure 7 Commission reaffirmed

TUESDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER, 1956

CENTRAL CHANCERY OF THE ORDERS OF KNIGHTHOOD.

St. James's Palace, S.W.1.

25th September, 1956.

The QUEEN has been graciously pleased to approve the award of the George Medal to the undermentioned airman:—

2782130 Aircraftman 2 Raymond Edward MARTIN, Royal Air Force, No. 22 Squadron.

Aircraftman 2 Martin is a National Service Airman who entered the Royal Air Force in January, 1956. He has served with helicopters since April, 1956, and is at present employed as winchman of a helicopter of No. 22 Rescue Squadron. On the 5th June, 1956, the helicopter was called out from Royal Air Force Station, Thorney Island to the assistance of a yacht reported sinking off Hayling Island. At the time, the winds were of gale force and the yacht was foundering in heavy seas. When he arrived at the scene of the wreck, Aircraftman Martin was aware that there had just been an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the crew of the yacht by another helicopter of his Squadron. This attempt had failed because the rescue strop from the helicopter had fouled the yacht's rigging, tearing the winch out of the helicopter, which had perforce to return to land. Aircraftman Martin, having complete disregard for his own safety, was lowered to the deck of the yacht, which was being battered by heavy seas, and of whose crew of two, one was unconscious and the other, a woman, in dire straits. He placed the unconscious man in the rescue strop and superintended his being hauled to safety. While the helicopter was taking the man to the nearest land and returning to the yacht, Aircraftman Martin remained with the woman on the sinking yacht, where he had to cling to the rigging and at the same time support the woman in order to prevent their being washed overboard. On the return of the helicopter, he placed the woman in the rescue strop and was then hauled with her into the aircraft. By his calm efficiency in the most testing circumstances, this young airman was able to rescue two people. His courage and bearing in most dangerous conditions were of the highest order and reflected great credit upon him.

Air Ministry, 25th September, 1956.

ROYAL AIR FORCE.

GENERAL DUTIES BRANCH.

Appointment to commission (permanent).

As Flight Lieutenant:—

Kenneth HAYES (2607783). 3rd Apr. 1956 (*seniority 26th Nov. 1953*).

As Flying Officers:—

Derek BALL (3132029). 1st Oct. 1955.

Geoffrey Lionel BATES (2600700). 20th Aug. 1956 (*seniority 25th Mar. 1954*).

Transfer to a permanent direct commission (scheme A).

As Flight Lieutenant:—

Michael WALTERS (3035600). 14th June 1956.

As Flying Officers:—

David (Afanfryn) HILL (3103054). 9th Feb. 1956.

John Ernest WAITING (3044549). 14th June 1956.

John WARD (3045892). 25th June 1956.

12th July 1956.

Alex Stanley CARDER (3510749).

Raymond Dennis Derek SMITH (4038872).

As Flight Lieutenants (Branch List):—

Kenneth Robert Bleakley JONES (195084). 17th Apr. 1956.

Kenneth Albert (Arthur) MUNN (193266). 15th May 1956.

Kenneth Bruce Gwyn EVANS (59584). 5th June 1956.

6th June 1956.


Thomas Anthony PHILLIPSON (200627).

William Dalziel WALKER (3001784).

Joseph DAVIDSON (200548). 16th June 1956.

Thomas Howell JAMES (181517). 11th July 1956.

As Flying Officers (Branch List):—

John Backhouse TOPHAM, D.F.C. (178865). 6th Apr. 1956. 

Alan William MOYLE (188689). 19th Apr. 1956.

Edmund George SHEARMAN (1597167). 5th June 1956.

Figure 8 Appointment to a Permanent Commission

Appendix 3: Evasion of capture report

SECRETL. I. 2/S/1.C. (-) 2651.EVASION CAPTURE IN FRANCE.

The information contained in this report is to be treated as
SECRET

STATEMENT BY

173865 F/O. John Backhouse TCMIA, 514 8th., Bomber Command, R.A.F.

Left : CHERBOURG, 7 Sep 44.

Arrived: SOUTHAMPTON, 8 Sep 44.

Date of Birth : 9 Dec 16.

Peace-time Profession: Policeman.

R.A.F. Service : Since 25 Apr 40.

Private Address: 112 Rothsey Terrace,

Post in crew : Pilot.

WINDLINGTON,
Northumberland.

3 Aug 44,
Crash-landed
near NEVILLE.

We took off from WATERBEACH at 0930 hrs on 3 Aug 44 in a Lancaster aircraft. I crash-landed at 1400 hrs in a wood about 5 km. South of NEVILLE (N. W. EUROPE 1:250,000, Sheet 7, S 0269). I was injured in the crash.

I left my parachute, harness and gun west in the aircraft, which was burning. I crawled away from the aircraft and met F/O. BAXTER and Sgt. READ of my crew, a few minutes later. We crawled further into the wood where we hid until dusk. During this time we heard other members of our crew blowing their whistles, but we could not reply, as there were Germans in the vicinity.

4 Aug 44,
NEVILLE.

After dusk we began walking to NEVILLE where we arrived at 0930 hrs on 4 Aug. F/O. BAXTER left Sgt. READ and me hiding in a wood on the outskirts of NEVILLE while he approached a house. A short time later F/O. BAXTER returned to our hiding place, accompanied by two Frenchmen.

4 Aug -
1 Sep 44,
BEAUMONT.

F/O. BAXTER, Sgt. READ and I were taken to another part of the wood, where we were given food and civilian clothes. Later that day a doctor was brought to our hiding place and he treated our injuries. The doctor then took me in his car to an address in BEAUMONT (S 0375). F/O. BAXTER and Sgt. READ were left in the wood with the Frenchmen. I did not see them again.

1 Sep 44, made
contact with
Allied Forces.

I remained at the address in BEAUMONT until about 20 Aug, when the doctor took me in his car to another address in BEAUMONT. I remained there until 1 Sep, when I made contact with the Allied forces.

/From 1 - 7 Sep

- 2 -

From 1 - 7 Sep I was in various hospitals in FRANCE. On 7 Sep I was brought by hospital ship (an old Boston ferry boat) to the U.K.

I arrived at SOUTHAMPTON on 8 Sep. I was sent to various hospitals in ENGLAND and discharged from WEEPON R.A.F. hospital on 23 Sep on 23 days' sick leave.

On 9 Oct I received instructions to report to the Air Ministry, and on doing so was instructed to report to M.I.9.

/ FROM 1 - 7 SEP

INTERVIEWED BY: I.S.9(W).)
O.R.S., Bomber Command, R.A.F. } 10 Oct 44.

Distribution of this report by M.I.9:

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I.S.9(X). I.S.9(A.B.). I.S.9(W.E.A.)
(2 copies). M.I.9(D). M.I.19. M.I.5.
(Lt.-Col. Seyser). M.C.1(S.F.)(Lt.-Col.
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APPENDIX A.

Distribution: I.S.9.
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APPENDIX B.

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Appendix 4: Newspaper cuttings

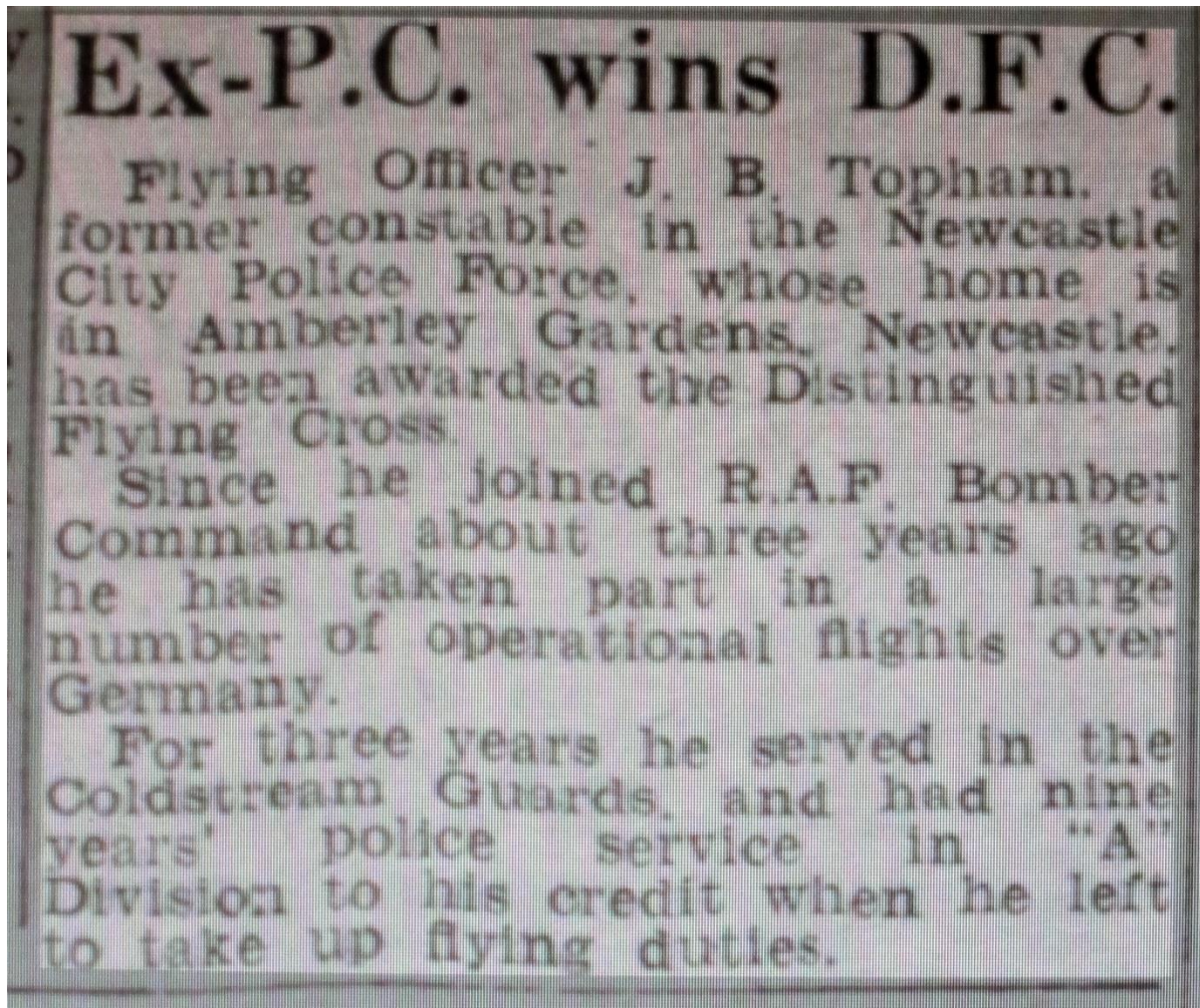


Figure 9: The Journal February 1945

BURIED FOR 36 HOURS

Duped SS Saluted 'Grave'

"HERALD" REPORTER, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Thursday

PC JOHNNY TOPHAM, six-ft.-two member of Newcastle City Police flying squad came back on patrol here this morning demobbed from the RAF.

As he drove through city streets friends hailed him with "Why, Johnny Topham's come back to life!"

The truth behind those words is today being revealed for the first time by the flying-squad PC.

Until now one of the most outstanding escape stories of the war—it took Topham to the grave and back—could not be told for security reasons.

It began when Topham, piloting a Lancaster over Normandy, saw a hail of bombs come down upon him from another Lancaster and a Stirling.

With his crew of six, he made a crash landing at Beaumont, in the German lines.

Buried Alive

All escaped injury but Topham himself, who had his left leg broken and his right knee damaged.

Two of the crew carried him into a wood. From here he was taken to a schoolhouse occupied by Mlle. Lysandre and her 15-years-old niece, who cared for the crippled airman for eight weeks.

When it became known that the schoolhouse was to be inspected by SS guards, Topham was taken to the house of a shopkeeper named Duval.

Duval decided to dig a grave in his garden in which to conceal the airman.

So, in the darkness, a four-foot-deep grave was dug, and Topham

placed inside it, with a rubber tube through which he could breathe.

Duval, telling him it would be all over in half an hour, covered him with loose soil and put a few flowers on the "grave."

But, in this horror chamber Topham remained in suspense for a day and a-half.

Duval told him afterwards that the Germans saluted the flowered grave, and posted two guards, who remained there 36 hours.

Then word came that the Germans were still suspicious and a further inspection was to be made.

Topham decided to shoot it out this time, and when an SS guard stepped inside the doorway of the little cottage Topham shot him dead.

Today he rejoined the City Police after five years—"back from the dead."

In the D-Day decorations Flying - Officer Topham was awarded the DFC.



P.C. Topham

Figure 10: A Herald Reporter, probably for The Daily Express, Wednesday June 26th 1946

He Came Back from the Grave

DEFENDING a Newcastle-on-Tyne policeman, against whom a summons for failing to give uninterrupted passage at a pedestrian crossing while driving a police car was dismissed by Newcastle Magistrates yesterday. Mr W. M'Keag said the policeman was a former bomber pilot who was "buried" to hide him from the Germans and was later "exhumed."

The policeman is P.C. John Topham, who holds the D.F.C.

"Here is an officer," said Mr M'Keag, "about whom nothing but good can be said."

"He flew in the war against both the Germans and the Japanese. In 1944, when he was piloting a Lancaster bomber over France, a bomb dropped on his plane from another plane and he had to crash-land."

"To hide him, French people

'buried' him in a grave with air-pipes to breathe through. Germans who came to look for the crew of the bomber were shown the grave, saluted it, and went away."

"Later Topham was 'exhumed' and made his way back to Britain."

Footnote.—Mr M'Keag did not explain that Topham lay in the grave for thirty-six hours. After he had been "exhumed" he shot an inquisitive German, who was buried in the vacant grave.

Figure 11: The Press and Journal Wednesday March 16th 1949



P.C. John Topham, D.F.C.
Raced to hospital

Constable Topham's dilemma

News Chronicle Reporter

A CHARGE against a Newcastle police car driver of failing to give free and uninterrupted passage to pedestrians on a Belisha crossing was found proved before the city magistrates yesterday.

But the case was dismissed under the Probation of Offenders Act, because Constable John Topham, the 32-year-old Flying Squad man before them, had been "exceptionally concerned and worried in the execution of his duties."

The squad car had been called out on a 999 call on Feb. 22 to help rescue a woman and her baby son from the River Tyne.

Constable Topham, ex-bomber pilot and D.F.C. winner, was at the wheel.

Before ambulance

The police car got there before the ambulance, and Constable Topham decided to rush mother and son to hospital.

The car travelled up Northumberland-street "at a fast speed, sounding its horn loudly and repeatedly," said Mr. C. A. Smallwood, prosecuting.

A number of people had started to cross at the Saville-row Belisha crossing.

The leading pedestrian went on and "had to jump for it." Others had to stop half-way to let the car pass.

"Pedestrians must be protected," Mr. Smallwood declared. "The fact that a police officer is in a hurry does not entitle him to pay no attention to people on the crossing."

Man who complained

Mr. Saville Bell, 68-year-old antique dealer, of Reidpark-road, Newcastle, had laid the complaint.

He said that as he made his way over the crossing the police car approached at a violent speed, and as he jumped for it he could feel the swish of the vehicle behind him.

"I feel it a public duty to be here today," he said. "I take great exception to anybody driving in the public of the police force."

Constable Topham said in evidence that most of the pedestrians had stopped and waved him on, and Mr. William McKeag, defending, submitted:

"It was a case of dire emergency. I suggest that Mr. Bell did not have his crossing interrupted, and that the other people voluntarily waved the car on."

[Constable Topham's winning of the D.F.C. was a war-time hero story. Brought down over France in 1944, he dodged the Germans by getting a French family to put him in a grave with a breathing tube to the surface. The Germans came along, respectfully saluted the grave, and went off.]

TEMPERS LOST OVER PAINLESS BIRTH BILL

By the Parliamentary Correspondent

THERE was a really bad-tempered row in the Commons yesterday after Mr. Aneurin Bevas, Minister of Health, had made a statement about his plans for the relief of pain in childbirth.

His claim that all that was necessary could be done under the National Health Service was not accepted by Mr. Thorne-

Figure 12: News and Chronicle, Wednesday 16th March 1949

D.F.C. who was buried alive

A NEWCASTLE policeman who figured in one of the most remarkable escapes of the war has re-enlisted in the R.A.F. in his old rank of flying officer. He is P.C. John Topham, D.F.C., of Stephenson Road, Newcastle, a member of the City Police mobile force.

After crash landing in Normandy, towards the end of the war, Topham was taken under the wing of the French Resistance and for eight weeks was looked after by a French school-mistress and her 15-year-old niece. One day they were warned of the coming of a German search party. Topham was handed over to a French shopkeeper who dug a four-foot grave in his garden and buried Topham alive with a rubber tube to provide an air supply. The grave was then covered with flowers.

The intention was that he would not be in there for longer than half-an-hour. But the German inspection party posted sentries who were not taken away until some 36 hours later. The German officers saluted the grave and left, and Topham was then "exhumed." He resolved that he would not repeat the operation, even if it meant shooting his way out. Later he returned to England through French Resistance channels.



1944: Light blue.

FLYING SQUAD DFC GOES BACK TO FLYING

Express Staff Reporter

POLICE-CONSTABLE JOHN TOPHAM.

6ft. 2in. member of Newcastle-on-Tyne's flying squad, who was once buried alive for 36 hours, becomes Flying-Officer Topham, D.F.C., again next week.

Police Constable Topham has often been in the news.

IN 1944 he was piloting a Lancaster attacking flying-bomb sites in Normandy. A bomb from plane above hit his Lancaster and forced a crash-landing.

His crew was captured. He hid all night, was later concealed by a schoolteacher.

Then, when the Resistance heard of an S.S. hunt, they buried him alive in a flower-topped grave "for an hour or two." He breathed through a rubber tube.

But the Germans, suspicious, stayed in the area for 36 hours. Topham stayed buried. Finally, German officers saluted his grave and left. Half dead, Topham was dug up and smuggled to England.

'HIS DUTY'

IN 1949 he drove his squad car two miles through Newcastle at speed while a policeman in the back gave first aid to a baby rescued from the river.

A civilian who had to jump for it complained. But the magistrates decided: "Topham was concerned with the execution of his duty."

Topham, married, thinks the R.A.F. offers a better future than the police force. And he thinks flying is better than the flying squad.



1951: Sports jacket—but light blue again soon.

Figure 14: Daily Express Friday 25th May 1951

City pilot leads air mercy mission

TO POLIO WOMAN IN CYPRUS

A NEWCASTLE R.A.F. pilot who was saved by the French in 1944 was last night leading a mercy dash to Cyprus to save the life of a woman suffering from polio.

F/O John Topham, D.F.C., who became a Newcastle policeman after the war but returned to flying a few years later, had in his Hastings transport when he left Lyneham, Wiltshire, last night, electrical apparatus to work an iron lung.

With him were an Army doctor, Captain R. G. Willison, and a nursing sister, Lieut. J. C. White.



The War Office had earlier told the Air Ministry that an Army officer's wife was being kept alive only by manual operation of the iron lung by Army personnel working non-stop.

F/O Topham.

OTHER END

The Hastings was ready on the runway in less than an hour waiting for the equipment to arrive from the Royal Military Hospital, Wheatley, near Oxford, and was airborne soon afterwards.

Ten years ago F/O Topham was at the other end of a "mercy mission." He was pilot of a Lancaster forced down north-east of Paris, and was picked up by the French underground movement and hidden in a school.

The Germans searched the village, so his guardians dug a grave in a garden, lowered him into it, and boarded the top, over which they scattered earth. A funnel was inserted to enable him to breathe and flowers were strewn across the top.

Without food or water, F/O Topham lay like a corpse for 36 hours. From then until the liberation, he was looked after by the principal of the school and a doctor.

Figure 15: A Newcastle Newspaper 1954

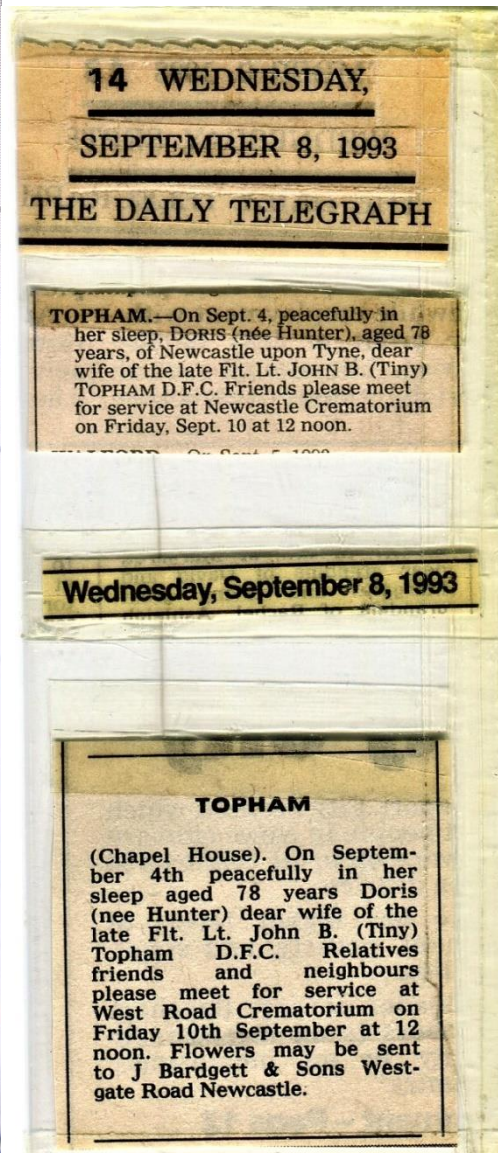
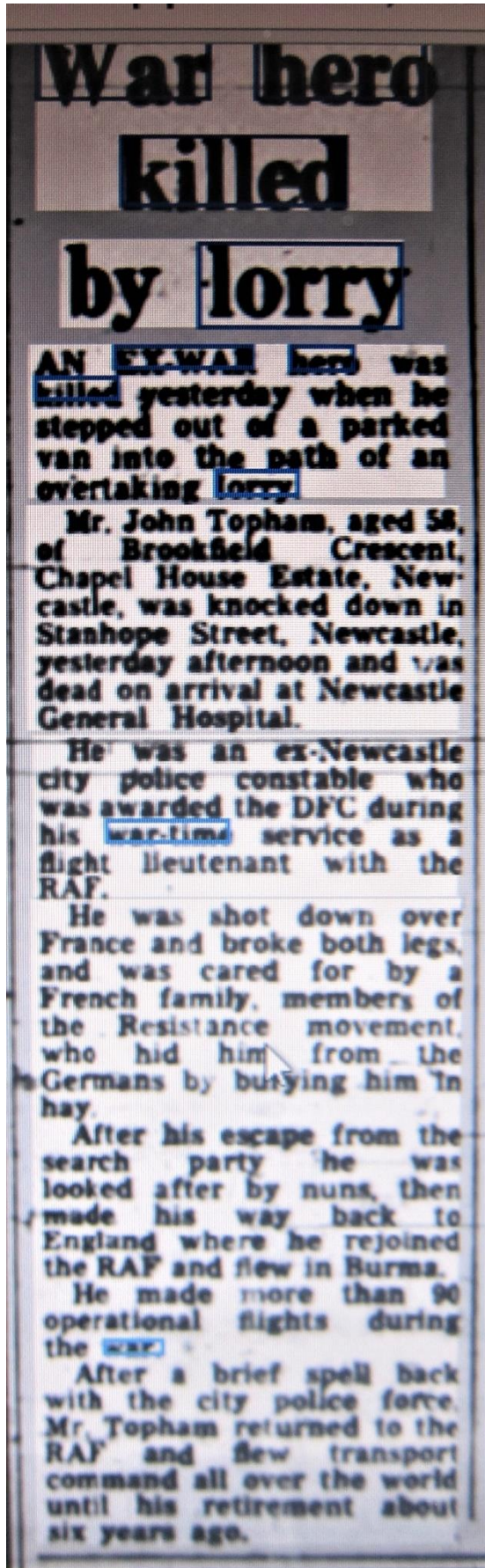


Figure 16: Newcastle Journal July 19th 1975 and the Daily Telegraph September 8th 1993

journalive.co.uk Thursday, July 24, 2008 THE JOURNAL



Picture: Lewis Arnold www.journalive.co.uk/bujaphoto ref: 01130509

MEDALS UNDER HAMMER Corbitts valuer Richard Vincent with the medals of Flight Lieutenant J P Topham DFC, right.

Hero pilot's medals under the hammer

Figure 17: Top half of full page spread, The Journal Thursday 24th July 2008

Buried alive for 36 hours to evade capture

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MEDALS won in a boy's-own story of wartime heroism are up for sale in an auction this weekend.

Bomber pilot John Topham survived crash-landing in France before being rescued by the Resistance and buried alive to survive capture by the Gestapo.

Ft-Lt Topham was freed from his grave and was then forced to shoot dead an SS officer - who then took the pilot's place in the tomb.

The details of his remarkable wartime story emerged as his Distinguished Flying Cross, other medals and memorabilia were put up for auction by Newcastle specialist medals and coins firm Corbitts at the Swallow Hotel in Gateshead from 11am on Saturday.

The collection is expected to fetch

more than £2,000. Ft-Lt Topham, who was living in Bedlington in Northumberland when he enlisted, was a Lancaster bomber pilot with 514 Squadron.

He was attacking a German flying bomb site in Normandy in August, 1944, when his Lancaster was crippled after being struck by a bomb from a higher-flying aircraft.

Ft-Lt Topham skillfully crash-landed the bomber near the town of Beaumont, suffering a broken leg, and was found by members of the French resistance.

He was hidden in a schoolhouse where he spent two months, but as the Germans prepared to occupy the building he was smuggled into the home of a M Duval.

With SS troops conducting house-to-house searches, the 6ft 2in pilot was hidden in a four-foot deep grave dug in the back garden.

He was given a length of rubber tubing through which he could breathe and the grave was decked with flowers. SS officers, who were told that the burial was that of a British pilot who had been shot down and killed, saluted the grave.

Ft-Lt Topham was told he would only have to spend half an hour in the grave while the search went on.

But the Germans posted two sentries nearby and he was entombed for 36 hours before he could be freed. Corbitts managing director David McMonagle



LOT 161 The medals, including the DFC, awarded to J P Topham.

said: "He had no way of knowing if Mr Duval had been arrested or shot and if he would be left in the grave."

But Ft-Lt Topham's ordeal was not over. As he recovered in the house, an SS officer was seen to return.

The pilot refused to go back into the grave and was instead given a loaded pistol. As the German entered the room, Ft-Lt Topham shot him dead and he was buried in the garden grave.

The pilot was later liberated by advancing Allied forces.

The citation for his DFC comments on the "amazing hardships" endured by Ft-Lt Topham, who had flown on 26 sorties before coming down in France.

He returned to his pre-war job as a constable with Newcastle police, before rejoining the RAF transport command.

He eventually settled in Chapel House in Newcastle, but was killed in 1975 aged 58 after being knocked down by a lorry in Stanhope Street.

Comment
 << 10

ONLINE

Tell us your wartime stories - go to www.journallive.co.uk and click on the 'Send us your stories' link

DRUMMER BOY

ALSO in the Gateshead auction is a Battle of Waterloo medal won by drummer boy William McNall.

William, who lived in Gateshead, had enlisted under-age and fought with Wellington against the French at the battles of Vittoria, Nieve, and San Sebastian - where he was wounded - and then Waterloo.

He died in 1864 after falling and striking his head at Walker pit in Newcastle.



FOR SALE Waterloo medal.



WARHORSE A Lancaster bomber over Eyebrook Reservoir, in 2003.

Figure 18: Bottom half full page spread, The Journal, Thursday 24th July 2008

WWII DFC group of six to Flight Lieutenant J B Topham, RAFVR, a Lancaster pilot with No 514 Squadron who survived being brought down in German occupied territory & who successfully evaded capture. DFC Geo VI - 1945 additionally engraved 178865 J B TOPHAM 514 Sqn, 1939-45 Star, Aircrew Europe Star, clasp France & Germany, defence Medal, War Medal 1939-45 & GSM (EIRR) Clasp Malaya (Flt Lt ...RAF). Sold with DFC presentation case, Buckingham Palace forwarding slip for the DFC, Commissioning parchment, AOC-in-C Transport Command commendation, photograph & press cuttings etc. DFC London Gazette 6 February 1945 - A/FO John Backhouse TOPHAM (178865) RAFVR 514 Sqn: 'In air operations, this officer has displayed courage, fortitude & devotion to duty of a high order'. The gazetted citation, which was for public consumption was deliberately guarded but the following recommendation has been extracted from National Archives file AIR 2/9648: 'Flying Officer Topham has taken part in twenty six successful operational sorties as pilot & captain of Lancaster aircraft. These sorties include a wide variety of attacks on heavily defended German targets & important targets in enemy occupied territory. He is a most determined pilot & has set a praiseworthy example by his keenness to take part in operations. During a daylight attack on BOIS-DE-CASSAN, his aircraft was struck by falling bombs from one of our own aircraft & was so extensively damaged that Flying Officer Tophamm had no alternative other than to make a crash landing in enemy occupied territory. The landing was very skilfully executed & the crew escaped injury, except Flying Officer Topham whose legs were injured. In spite of his injuries he managed to get away from the aircraft & evade capture & after a considerable period of waiting during which he endured amazing hardships, he made contact with a resistance Organisation & was cared for by them until our advancing armies captured the place where he was hiding. Flying Officer Topham is strongly recommended for the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross in recognition of his great courage & his excellent operational record'. The raid on Bois-De-Casson, a flying-bomb supply depot, took place on 3 August 1944. Six of Topham's crew (Lancaster LL716) were taken prisoner, with only himself & the mid-upper air gunner (F Sgt F W Dennehy) evading capture. Topham always believed that he alone survived being captured. The above recommendation refers to 'amazing hardships' & one of these was to be buried in a makeshift grave for some 36 hours, breathing through a narrow tube. Contact was made with the advancing Allied Forces on 1 September 1944 & the full story emerged. His Station Commander at RAF Waterbeach, on seeing the intelligence debrief, lost little time in recommending Topham for IMMEDIATE DFC. Topham was born on 9 December 1916. A pre war constable with the Newcastle City Police, he enlisted in the RAFVR on 25 April 1940 declaring his home as being Bedlington. He was commissioned on 20 June 1944 & left the Service on cessation of hostilities. He returned to the Newcastle City Police but in June 1950 re-enlisted into the RAF, gaining promotion to Flight Lieutenant on 12 December 1958. He served until 15 November 1966, seeing service in the Far East, with his last few years being employed on ground duties as an aircraft controller. He died prematurely at the age of 58, being killed in a traffic accident in Stanhope Street, Newcastle in 1975. All medals in VF/EF condition. An excellent, emotive group to a gallant pilot.

Figure 19: Corbitt's Auction Sale description of the lot of John Backhouse Topham's medals, Saturday 26th July 2008

Appendix 6, miscellaneous photographs



Figure 20: John in a flying suit circa 1951-54



Figure 21: John messing about with his mates before the Halloween Party, Hounslow

