

## HEMSWELL

Lincolnshire, of all the counties in England, with its vast area of level land, lends itself to the establishment of airfields and so became the home of No. 5 Bomber Group, consisting of the three operational stations of Waddington, Scampton and Hemswell. From afar Hemswell's four vast hangars were visible, each housing a flight with two flights to a squadron. Our sister squadron was 144 but our working days centred on our own crew room, housed in one of the hangars. Each flight, after the departure of the Blenheims, was equipped with 6 Handley Page Hampden Bombers. The crew was made up of pilot, observer, wireless operator and rear gunner. The plane's narrow fuselage meant that in the event of the pilot being wounded it was nearly impossible for him to be replaced by another pilot and it was also apparent that pilots did not like the onus of acting as navigator. This arrangement was also very acceptable to the observer, as he in turn did not wish to be the rear gunner. Each crew member only doing the job he was trained for, was unique among bomber groups and so each crew member was very aware of his responsibilities. Later there was one occasion when I flew as rear gunner and we finished up over the Firth of Forth, which was a long way from our crossing point of Skegness

My first day on the squadron was memorable. Having reported to the C.O. as 'Acting Sergeant, Acting Observer, 580504 Wright G.' I made my way to the mess for lunch. All eyes turned in my direction to view this baby-faced sprog with three stripes on his arms. Spotting a vacant place at a table I hurriedly sat down with lowered head – a silence fell over the place – I heard footsteps approach me from behind, pause and then walk away to another place. It had been God in the form of the Station Warrant Officer and I had occupied his usual seat! The old sweats enjoyed their meal!

Life in the peacetime Air Force was wonderfully varied, interesting and mostly concerned with flying and related activities such as lectures and exercises. Morning parade and colour hoisting for the whole station was at 9 a.m. and after dismissal we filed off to our various duties, in our case to the crew rooms to read DROs and AMOs and peruse the day's flying orders. Sport was encouraged, especially rugby and boxing, leading up to inter-squadron matches. Later, when war came, these arrangements were disrupted and the C.O. decided that as our life style did not include physical fitness, Wednesday afternoons would be devoted to cross country running, or in other words, you will run round the perimeter of the aerodrome including all dispersal points. From the lofty height of the control tower he espied us with his field glasses and I was not the only one to do a re-run.

One of our most memorable flights was to Avignon in the south of France, a trip lasting about five hours and many a voice gave a rendering of a well-known folk song as we circled above the chocolate brown fields with the blue Mediterranean in the distance. Our sister squadron went to Le Bourget aerodrome near Paris for a three-day stay. The returning crews were not a pretty sight with their bleary, bagged eyes showing evidence of their French counterparts hospitality all in the cause of entente cordiale – it was not to be repeated.

Our C.O. at that time was nicknamed 'Charlie' and in order to fulfil the regulation minimum flying hours he had to do one or two flights a month. Bull-like in appearance and with a temper always on a short fuse, it was comical to watch from afar the efforts of a cohort of bodies trying to launch him into the air. Everything would be in the wrong order, the curses would fly forth and enough hot air was exhaled to hoist a balloon. His landings were akin to a kangaroo coming down the runway. His time was nearly up and he retired shortly after the war began which must have been a relief to the authorities.

Everyone remembered 'The Dance' held in one of the hangars to which all and sundry were invited. Charlie, as befitting a commander, paid his courtesy call at one point. It was dark when he returned to his car and on opening the door discovered a couple doing what couples often do in the back seat of a car. Storming back to the dance with eyes blazing and fists clenched, the great cry erupted, "Stop the dance! Stop the dance! There's fornication going on in the back of my car!" However, lashings of diplomacy made for appeasement and the warrior retreated to everyone's surprise, because Charlie could not tolerate the new ideas that were coming into vogue. Just the mention of WAAF's was like a red rag to a bull. "Not in my lane Old Boy!"

But all was gaiety and light and soon one's mind was jolted into remembering that flying was a serious business, sometimes with tragic consequences. One day a plane, when taking off, stalled at the perimeter's edge and crashed onto the escarpment below bursting into flames. A pall of smoke was visible in the distance and before the rescue services arrived, four friends had perished. That night I was part of the guard that was mounted around the smouldering remains. Three days later shots were fired over the draped coffins as their remains were laid to rest in the small hamlet of Harpswell, nestling at the foot of the Wolds. I have since returned there and it gladdened one's heart to see the loving care that is given to those and other airmen's graves. 'For our to-morrows they gave their to-days. Lest we forget.'

'Practice Camps' were operations looked forward to by the majority of personnel, especially those of us who were single. These were occasions when the whole squadron moved to an aerodrome providing facilities for air-to-air firing and target bombing. Leuchars, in Fife, was one such place and it was to there in the summer of 1939 that we 'flitted' with both ground crews and aircrews, some travelling by road, others loaded into the Hampdens. It was the most picturesque of sites situated at the mouth of the Firth of Tay and skirted by the sea on two sides with the ancient town of St. Andrews across the water.

The weather was fine for the flight, navigation was easy and we soon landed on the short runway that heads out to sea. Soon we were into our daily routine, sometimes trying to bomb the triangular targets marked out on the beach below or at other times flying on a parallel course to the drogue-towing biplanes. The bombing accuracy was recorded by ground observers and the shot up drogue dropped on the runway. Thus our marks were recorded and assessed. But the experience that remains in my memory is of another kind of mark that I obtained and a black one at that.

We had been told before leaving Hemswell that we were to be concerned not only with our flying duties, but with those of the host station as well. One of these duties that fell to my lot was that of being orderly sergeant for the day. Part of that duty during the morning in question, was to appear at the head of the parade ground, station myself against the flag-pole and on the order from the parade commander be ready to hoist the flag as the assembled ranks came to attention. At about twenty minutes past eight I had barely roused myself from the frolics of the night before and was about to depart for a hearty breakfast in the mess, when there was a peremptory knock at my door. "Sergeant Wright – the C.O. wishes to see you in his office. Pronto!" The condemned man was not to receive his hearty repast. Duly knocking on his door, I was invited into the presence of the Leuchars Station Commander, seated behind his desk and hardly wearing the most pleasant of smiles. He barked, "Where were you at eight o'clock this morning sergeant? Do you realise man that at 8 a.m. on the parade ground, when I called the parade to attention and gave the order, Hoist the Flag, no-one was there to do so?" The awful truth of the situation dawned on me – a truth that was later to give me many nightmares. "Sir," I stammered, "on my own station we always have breakfast at 8 a.m., parade at 9 a.m. and then proceed to the hangars for work." His reply was harsh. "Do you realise there are such things as Daily Standing Orders and that they are posted up for stupid people like you to read and digest?" I could but agree with his statement. He twisted his moustache, reflected for a while and uttered his concluding statement.

"You are young, you do come from a different station. Thank goodness you are only here for a short time. This time I will let you off, but think yourself a lucky man. Dismiss!" I meekly turned and was glad to close the door on what I realised had been a very close shave or, as we would say in bombing parlance, a very near miss.

Sad to relate we did lose a crew during air-to-air firing. This was due to the comparatively slower speed of the towing aircraft. The Hampden, having formed and flown on the same course as the drogue aircraft, did not increase its speed when turning off at the end of the run and spun into the sea. I think the crew members were either buried in the local churchyard or returned to their homes. The plane was L4107 with PO A.G. Newton, Sgt. G.H. Fawcett and AC1 R.G. Thomas as crew.

Flight-testing was carried out most mornings by the pilot himself. One morning my pilot made a spectacular landing, emulating the landing of one of the wild geese from the nearby nature reserve. As his wheels touched the grass they gently folded back with the plane coming to an inglorious halt much to the amusement of myself and others, but not the chief fitter. The plane was L4114 with PO K.A. Porter as pilot.

In our free time at the week-ends, my pal and I loved to wander over the adjoining reserve or spend time walking over the East and West Lomond Hills, looking down on Loch Leven and discovering little villages like Freuchie, the pronunciation of which, to us, was impossible and our attempts to do so caused merriment among the locals. Dundee was the town where we spent our evenings dancing in places like Green's Playhouse. Catching the last bus or transport back to base was sometimes a problem for a young lad who, having found a willing partner, was delayed by her charms. One story that went the

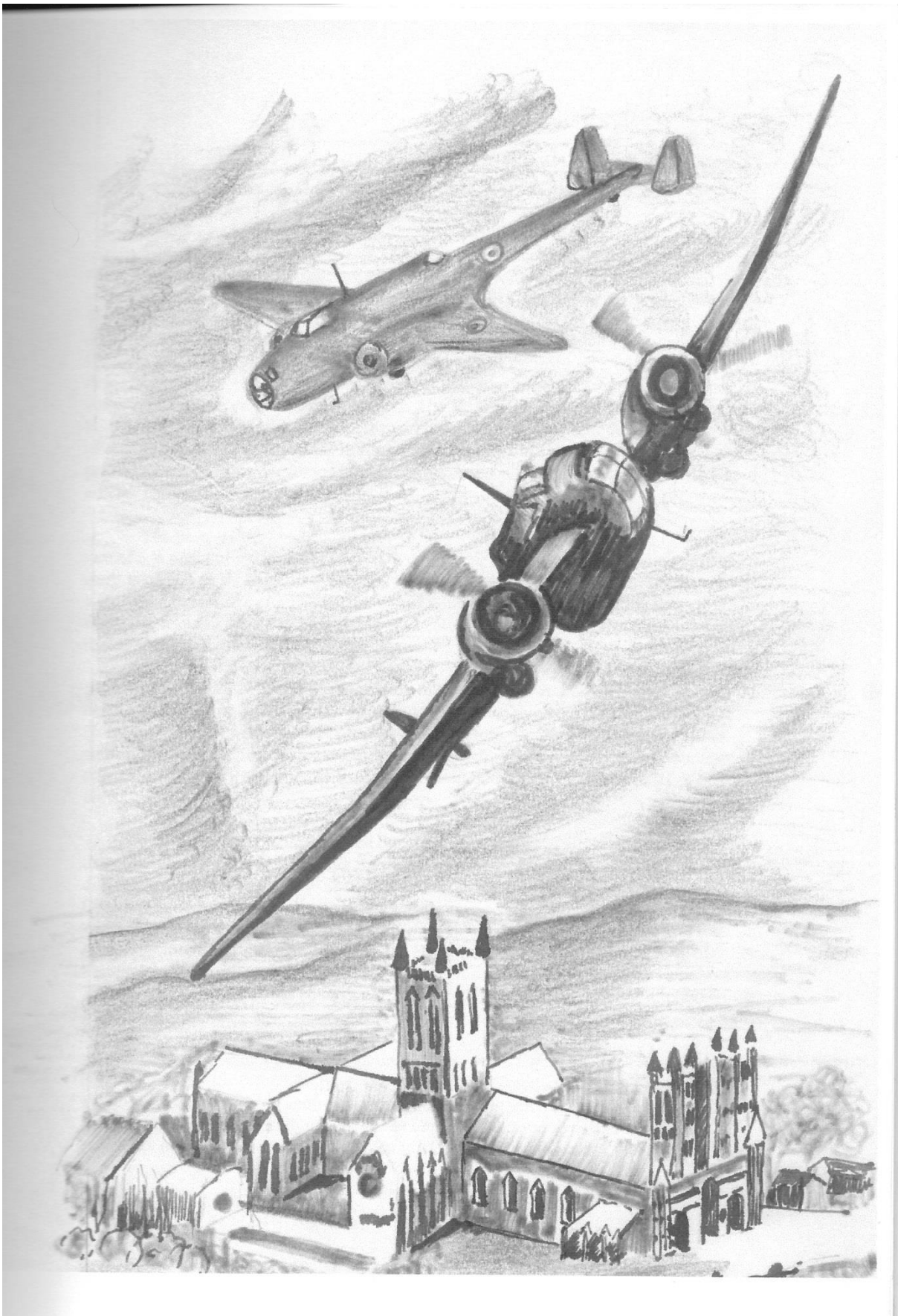
rounds concerned such a fellow who was faced with the walk back to Leuchars, for no way would his money run to the cost of a taxi. Nearing midnight he set out to walk, the most direct route being across the railway bridge spanning the River Tay. When about half way, he heard footsteps and saw the lamp of an approaching guard. Being quick on the uptake, he turned around and slowly proceeded back towards Dundee. When overtaken and challenged as to "What the hell do you think you are doing on this bridge?" he related how he had secured a late pass and was on his way to his girlfriend in Dundee. Dreadful curses rent the midnight air and a dire warning that if he didn't bloody well get himself back from whence he came he would be for the chop! Reluctantly the bright boy turned, muttering his dissent but inwardly very happy to comply with his wishes.

The billets given to us at Leuchars consisted of long concrete buildings incorporating a dark central corridor, with green painted doors leading off on both sides to small rooms and toilets, there being no signs to differentiate one from the other. On one particular night some of the crew members had enjoyed a heavy session in the mess and returned to their billets in roisterous form. Not wishing to disturb the other sleepers by switching on the lights two or three bright boys opened the door of what they presumed to be the urinal and allowed the water to gush forth. Suddenly the stillness of the night was rent by a great shout. "What the bloody hell's going on? Bleep. Bleep!" Sounds of anger and laughter intermingled as the general exodus took place until eventually the peace of the night returned once more to the airmen's quarters by the shore of the great North Sea. So another small addition was made to the folklore of 61 squadron and another tale to be retold many times. In the said toilets, tubes of a white cream were available to all users. This was something new to us and we thought how kind of the Medical Officer to supply us with an ointment for abrasions. After a lapse of days our ignorance, youth and innocence were realised when a long time serving sweat informed us of the true nature of the ointment and he didn't mean 'clap your hands'.

All too soon our northern safari was over and we returned to base, leaving the bonnie highlands for the flatlands of Lincolnshire. The fates were to decree our next flight to Scotland was in time of war when we flew to Wick to wait in violent weather for a reconnaissance aircraft to contact some German battleships reputed to be endeavouring to escape into the Atlantic and beyond.

July and August saw us back at base and once more into a routine of flying exercises, lectures and discussions and at times just sitting on the grass outside the crew room enjoying the warmth of the sun as it poured down on us from cloudless skies. But dark clouds were looming on the horizon, the talk of war got ever louder and on September 3<sup>rd</sup> we realised that we were no longer boys playing their war games, but that we had become men 'at the front of the line'. Life now would be both sweet and sour. It was a quiet beginning with the odd air raid siren and some difficulties in navigating the roads to Lincoln, Gainsborough or Scunthorpe in the blackout, on the pillion of an Ariel Square Four motor bike. The fates decreed it was to be our sister squadron which got the chop when twelve aircraft of 144 squadron under the leadership of Wing Commander Cunningham took off to attack shipping in the Heligoland Bight. The attack on two





destroyers was a failure and resulted in five Hampdens being shot down in flames for the loss of two enemy fighters. Only one member of each of the five Hampden crews survived.

The scope of the disaster came as a rude awakening to the realities of war, though some good came out of the resulting enquiry with the armour plating for the pilot's seat, twin Vickers guns at the rear instead of a single gun and improvements to gun mountings. The latter modification was urgent because it was realised that the fact that the Hampden couldn't fire on the beam was known to the enemy who had flaunted his knowledge by flying in close formation, safely sheltered in the arcs of no firing. Even local engineering firms, such as Roses of Gainsborough, were called in to hasten the work of improving the verge ring mountings that carried the guns. The perspex nose of the Hampden appeared to be the least protected position but in the case of Jock Galloway, one of the few survivors of that raid, it probably saved his life for it shattered on impact with the sea and he was picked up unconscious by some German sailors – we met again later the following year in a POW camp.

The poor Hampdens had not only to face the fire of the ME109s but in December two of a Waddington formation were shot down near North Berwick by Spitfires. The story goes that as some of the survivors, who had been picked up by a fishing vessel, were being landed at Leith Docks, the crowd which had gathered, thinking them to be Germans, shouted, "Throw the buggers back into the sea!" Some of the survivors replied to this suggestion in very plain Anglo-Saxon!

In April 1940 six out of a formation of twelve were shot down by fighters and flak during a daylight raid off Norway. 61 squadron had also done daylight sweeps to the Norwegian coast, but fortunately or otherwise, on these occasions we sighted neither ships nor fighters. These major losses, some of which were still being caused by beam attacks, resulted in the Hampden becoming a night bomber, much to the relief of all crews.

One factor in '39 that curtailed our freedom was that of aircraft dispersal. In order to minimise losses from enemy attacks on our aerodromes it was decided that we should disperse the aircraft at night to other landing areas. The first place we tried was nearby Doncaster airstrip but with the short landing area we wrote-off three aircraft, fortunately without injury to the crews, my pilot Ken Jones flying one of them. He later said that Doncaster made him more proficient in the art of crash landings. For a while we tried Finningley, but because of its close proximity it was as tempting a target as Hemswell. Then at the other side of the country we discovered Speke airport to the south of the Mersey estuary.

Towards evening we would mount up and twelve aircraft in line astern would head westwards. I was the lead navigator in the Flight Commander's aircraft with the awesome responsibility of getting us from A to B. Navigation at times was aided if the balloons at Sheffield were flying above the clouds, but there were hairy moments, especially on the homeward flights, when low cloud descended over Lincolnshire. This

entailed either finding a hole in the cloud or going out over the sea and coming in under the cloud layer.

Normally we would fly into Speke from the SE but on one never to be forgotten occasion we were detailed to fly to Blackpool Tower, turn south and proceed up the Mersey estuary. Ours being not to reason why, this we proceeded to do even though we had to avoid balloons. All was going well until puffs of white smoke began to appear in the vicinity of the planes – the awful truth dawned – Merseyside ack-ack were using us as a moving target and firing the real thing! Very lights were fired and eventually we all landed intact apart from one aircraft with holes in the fuselage. Before going out for a drink in Garston we were warned to say nothing about the shooting and imagine our amusement when we read in the local paper, 'Raid on Liverpool – enemy aircraft driven off.' The subsequent enquiry revealed that A thought B had phoned the defences about the change of route and B thought the onus was upon A.

Life was not easy for as darkness approached we had to take part in the guard that was mounted, for apparently, even in those days, there were threats of attack from the IRA. Night guard out on the lonely dispersal points with the fog swirling in from the nearby river was the antithesis of having a drink with the boys in the safety and warm seclusion of a Scunthorpe inn. Speke was also being used as a training base for young women training to join the ATS. We would stand and watch them march past and eventually the wits among us were warned to cut out the ribald remarks that were intended to cause confusion in the ranks.

Mornings would see us flying back to Hemswell again and I think it was eventually realised that we couldn't keep us this arduous routine and it was better simply to disperse the aircraft on our home base. In my time it only suffered one raid and when it occurred we were away on exercise and by the time we landed the small craters had been filled in.

Early 1940 was the phoney period of the war when, if our target was cloud covered, we were not allowed to drop our bombs in case we killed civilians. Such a raid was one on the Tirpitz in Wilhelmshaven with the alternative target being the aerodrome on the island of Sylt. One could only conjecture the almighty hole that would be created by a 500lb armour-piercing bomb.

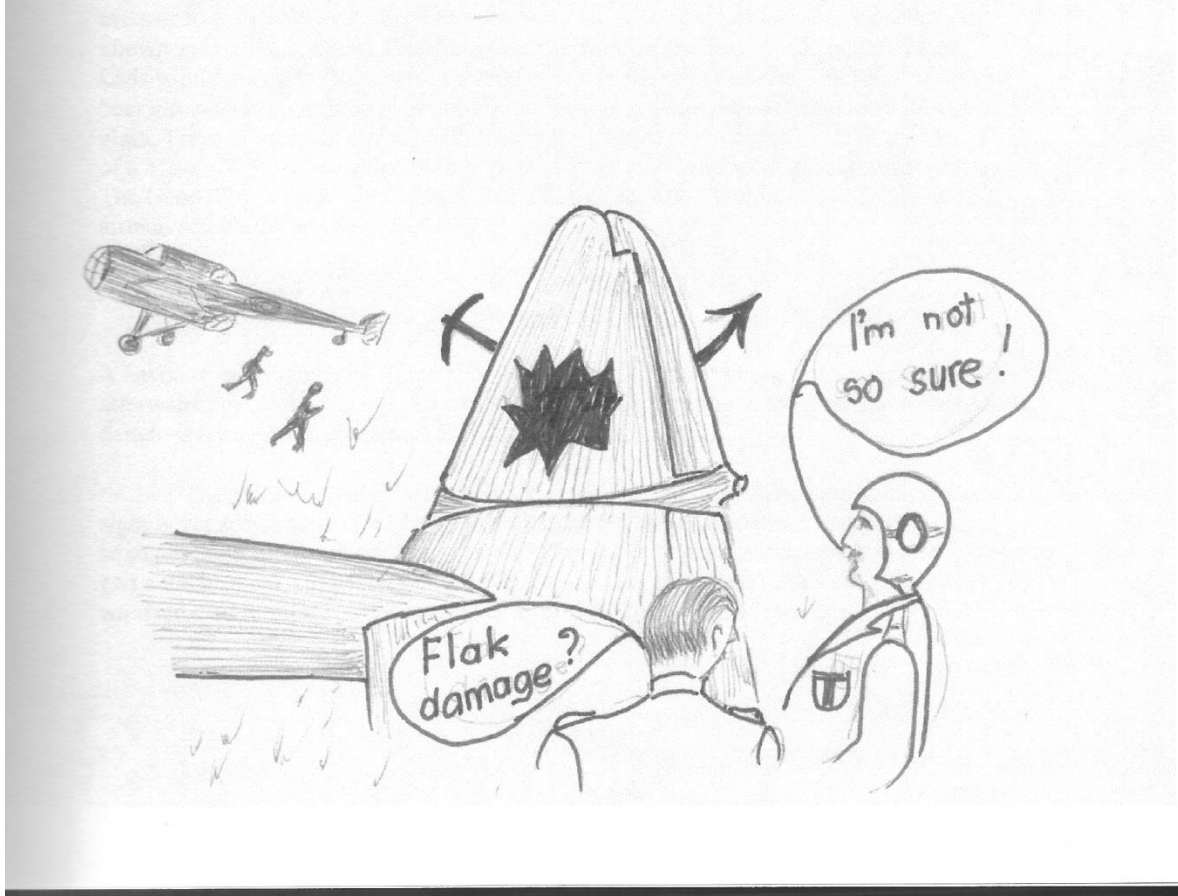
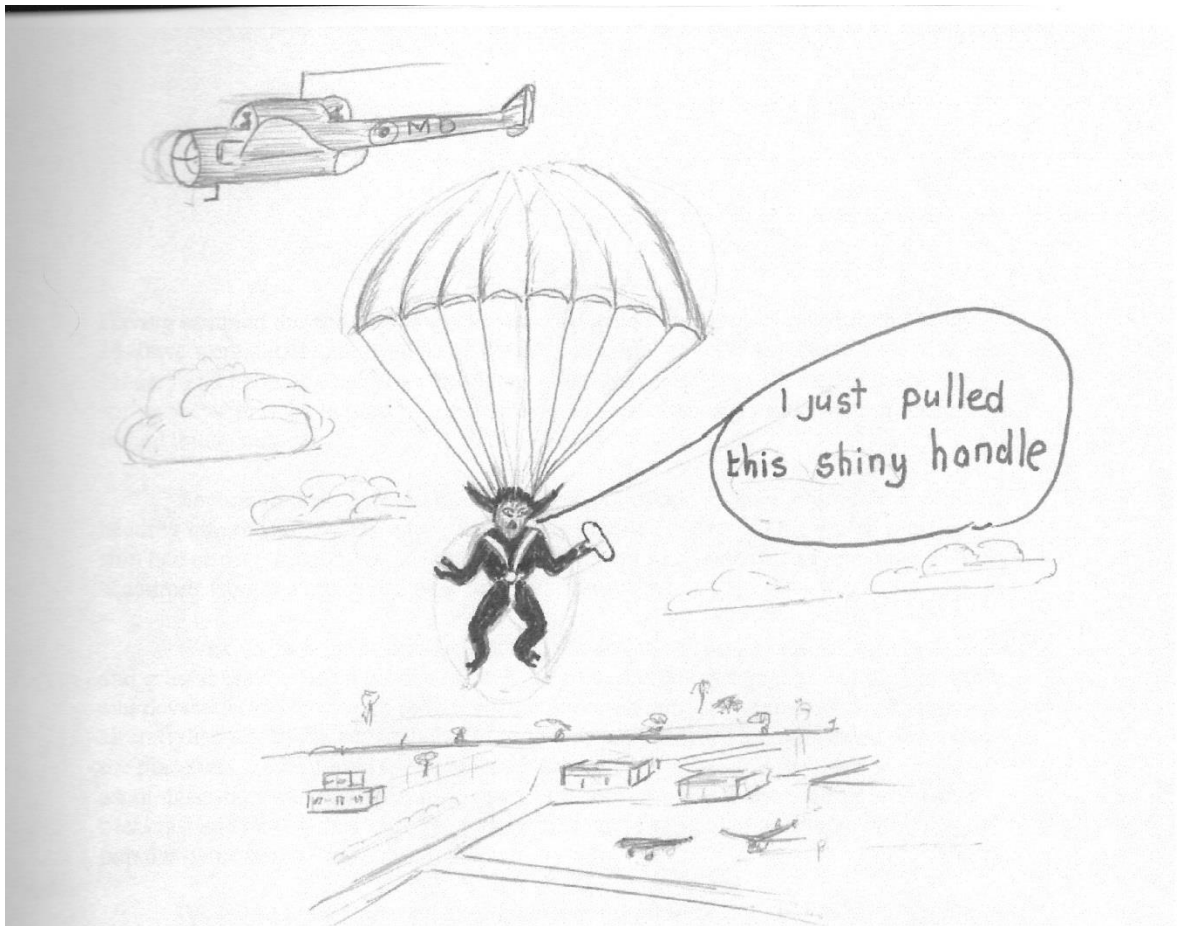
It was at this time that we embarked on mine laying expeditions in the German estuaries. The mines in question were from naval sources and simply consisted of a huge ten foot cylinder of cast iron loaded with 750lb of explosive and with a parachute packed into one end. Air Vice Marshal Harris, the Air Officer Commanding 5 Group, was confident in the ability of his crews to drop mines with the required degree of accuracy from 500ft on moonlight nights. The mines had to be dropped into a depth of water between five and twelve fathoms and they would remain on the seabed until fired by any violent change in the surrounding magnetic field. The code name Gardening was given to the operation with the mines being referred to as vegetables, which were planted in areas named after vegetables, flowers and shrubs.

The greatest freedom we had as a crew and especially from the navigational aspect, was that of choosing our own route to a target. At briefings we were supplied with certain information regarding enemy defences and this, together with geographical features such as islands, lakes or rivers, as well as his own previous experience, helped the observer when consulting the Captain as to the best route to be taken. Some awful navigational errors were made but taking into account the aids available to us and the strict radio silence which was enforced, on the whole I think the ability shown was of a very high order, especially when carried out by the observer and not some second pilot who was naturally more interested in his pilot duties. The major difficulty arose when having nearly reached the target area, becoming disorientated through carrying out avoidance procedures such as diving or climbing with rapid changes of course to avoid being held in the searchlights' glare, then trying to pin-point one's position in order to set an exact course for home. Perhaps some navigators had a homing pigeon awareness but it was those who checked and double checked their calculations who seemed to have the most success. We did derive some help from loop aerial bearings of German transmitting stations and although their call signs changed on a daily basis it was always a source of amazement that our intelligence services could keep us up to date.

By now we had also established ourselves as a permanent crew and were happy working together and trusting in each other's abilities. Our most memorable mine laying operation was a long trip to the island of Bornholm in the Baltic Sea. The night began fair and our mine was duly dropped into the estuary without any opposition from sea or land. When we climbed for the return journey to a height of 12 000ft we encountered violent thunderstorms. The aircraft propellers became giant Catherine Wheels and so thick was the ice accumulating on the wings that we had to lose height. We would then regain our height but suffer the same atmospheric. It was at this time that Jack Lawrence, our wireless operator, burnt his hand from flashes that were arcing over his set. After a 6½ flight never was a glass of beer so appreciated at the debriefing table.

During the April moon period Hemswell alone planted sixty vegetables and the Gardening continued and bore fruit. Several ships were reported sunk including train ferries, a troop carrier and even a cargo ship carrying 815 tons of slaughtered pigs. By the end of the first six months of the mine laying campaign in the area of the Danish waters and the Baltic, about forty ships had struck mines.





## WICK

Having sampled the delights of a peacetime safari to Leuchars in Scotland, in March 1940 we were detailed to head much further north to the outlandish aerodrome of Wick. January and February had provided Arctic conditions but now with the approach of spring we were to be blasted by hurricane-force gales, exposed as we were on this storm-lashed lonely outpost.

Reports indicated that two German battleships had avoided observation and were heading into the Atlantic to wreak havoc against allied convoys. One armed merchant ship had already succumbed to their attack. It was to be a major effort and other squadrons from the group had been sent to Lossiemouth.

Wick was a huddled encampment and the arrival of two squadrons with both flight and ground crew added a burden of catering and accommodation that was both hilarious and devastating. We were to remain here at full alert until such times as reconnaissance aircraft discovered the whereabouts of the two enemy ships. The rain lashed down and the place was a sea of mud as we moved from billet to billet until daytime accommodation was found for us in one of the local schools. Here we adjourned after breakfast and card games were the order of the day, from poker to bridge with the most popular game being Chase the Ace.

Wick was a dry town and after sundown the alternatives were either to stay in the mess or to stroll into town and visit the local fish and chip shop located in a cellar and known as 'Hell's Kitchen'. Returning later to the mess the beer would begin to flow. Lads would get up to dance with each other and in the crowded space tables, laden with beer glasses were knocked over until the floor was awash with McEwans and broken glass. Trials of strength and football matches all added to the scene to make this one 'Hell of a Mess'. With skins full of the amber liquid, voices turned to ribald songs and ditties. The Good Ship Venus sailed across the northern seas and a taunting description of an airman's paradise was often voiced:-

*Only one bar* (Groans)      *Two miles long*      (Cheers)  
*No WAAF's* (Groans)      *Only a Land Army* (Cheers) etc. etc.

A haven of peace could be found by attending the Sunday evening church service where, afterwards, everyone was invited to a social evening, chatting to the girls and munching delicious home-made cakes and drinking lovely cups of tea.

The gales continued with unabated ferocity – the propellers were being turned – a sight never seen before. Two hangars took off from their foundations and perhaps the strangest sight of all was an Anson aircraft coming in to land that finished up on top of a gun emplacement. Contact with the enemy was never made and after such a mad week we were glad to return to the ordered calm and relative peace of Hemswell.

