

THR REAL WAR

On our return from Wick we entered a new phase of operations. Gone were the sweeps over the North Sea and leaflet raids of which AVM Harris was later to say rather disparagingly, "The aim was to supply Europe with toilet paper." Now we became bombers in the real sense of the word and began dropping 250lb and 500lb bombs on a variety of targets in the industrial Ruhr and around Hamburg. The 15th May was the beginning of the strategic bombing offensive with 99 bombers taking part and was followed on subsequent nights by raids on Hamburg and Hanover. But shortly, the German land offensive began and soon the British Army were in full retreat. Targets were switched to railway marshalling yards and trains in an attempt to hinder the advance. Trains were easily visible at night and perhaps unsportingly we enjoyed flying at low level, first attacking with bombs and then machine gunning the engine, shown up by the glow from its fire box and steam. These raids ceased on June 4th when the last British soldiers left Dunkirk.

More spectacular raids seemed now to be the vogue with a view to raising the country's morale after the recent setbacks in France. One such raid was on the Dortmund-Ems Canal, which linked the Ruhr to north-west Germany, and, at Emden, to the sea. The particular target was where the canal split into two aqueducts, which carried it over the River Ems, and allowed the giant barges to pass each other.

For weeks our daytime flying consisted of flying at tree top level over the narrow canal of Lincolnshire in the area of Spalding. Seated in the plastic nose shroud of the Hampden, the observer had the most thrilling and frightening of rides, more so than any fairground spectacular. Ours was to be the first attack on this particular section of the canal. The aim was that a group of 18 aircraft would attack as two groups of nine, each group targeting one aqueduct by following part of the canal before dropping their mines in the appointed spot, where the river flowed below. If successful this would cause the aqueducts to empty and make the rebuilding of the damaged structures a lengthy affair.

It was a brilliant moonlight night when we set course over the North Sea and it was vital to obtain an accurate pinpoint on crossing the Dutch coast before continuing at such a low height. We duly arrived and to our great surprise there was no opposition from ground batteries. Great was the elation when we arrived back at base and compared accounts with other crews. Imagine then our chagrin when a reconnaissance aircraft next day brought back a photograph showing that only one aqueduct had been holed – our faith in the efficiency of the mine was beginning to waver.

With the uptake in bombing missions, casualties were mounting – known faces were disappearing and new ones appearing. With our eighteen missions we were among the veterans of the squadrons and with no rest system established as yet, we knew our future was limited. But our youthful minds were not too concerned with such misfortunes and we were used to people being posted, even if sometimes, their destination was eternity. In any case we had little time for reflections other than that we were alive and our minds were occupied with thoughts of our next mission.

We were fortunate that in Ken we had a good skipper and pilot, competent and calm under pressure. It was not so with all pilots and active service had been revealing – some of those who had been the most skilful in peacetime were now found to be fearful and lacking the fibre to press on to the target regardless of enemy opposition. With such a complicated piece of machinery as a bomber it was too easy to find a defect somewhere in its systems – perhaps a slight lack of oil pressure in an engine or something wasn't synchronised – some cause that justified him turning back and aborting the mission. This could be done once or twice until it became obvious to others where the trouble lay. It became the rule that if this happened then you would be automatically included in the next mission. The appellation 'lack of moral fibre' or LMF had yet to become an established aspect of character. One officer pilot asked me in confidence one day if I thought he was yellow to which I had to reply that I could not answer such a question. So just as some pilots, though extremely skilful, seemed to fade in wartime, others, not so skilful, seemed to blossom and become more macho in their outlook. Rank seemed to have nothing to do with it and non-commissioned and commissioned pilots could be equally good.

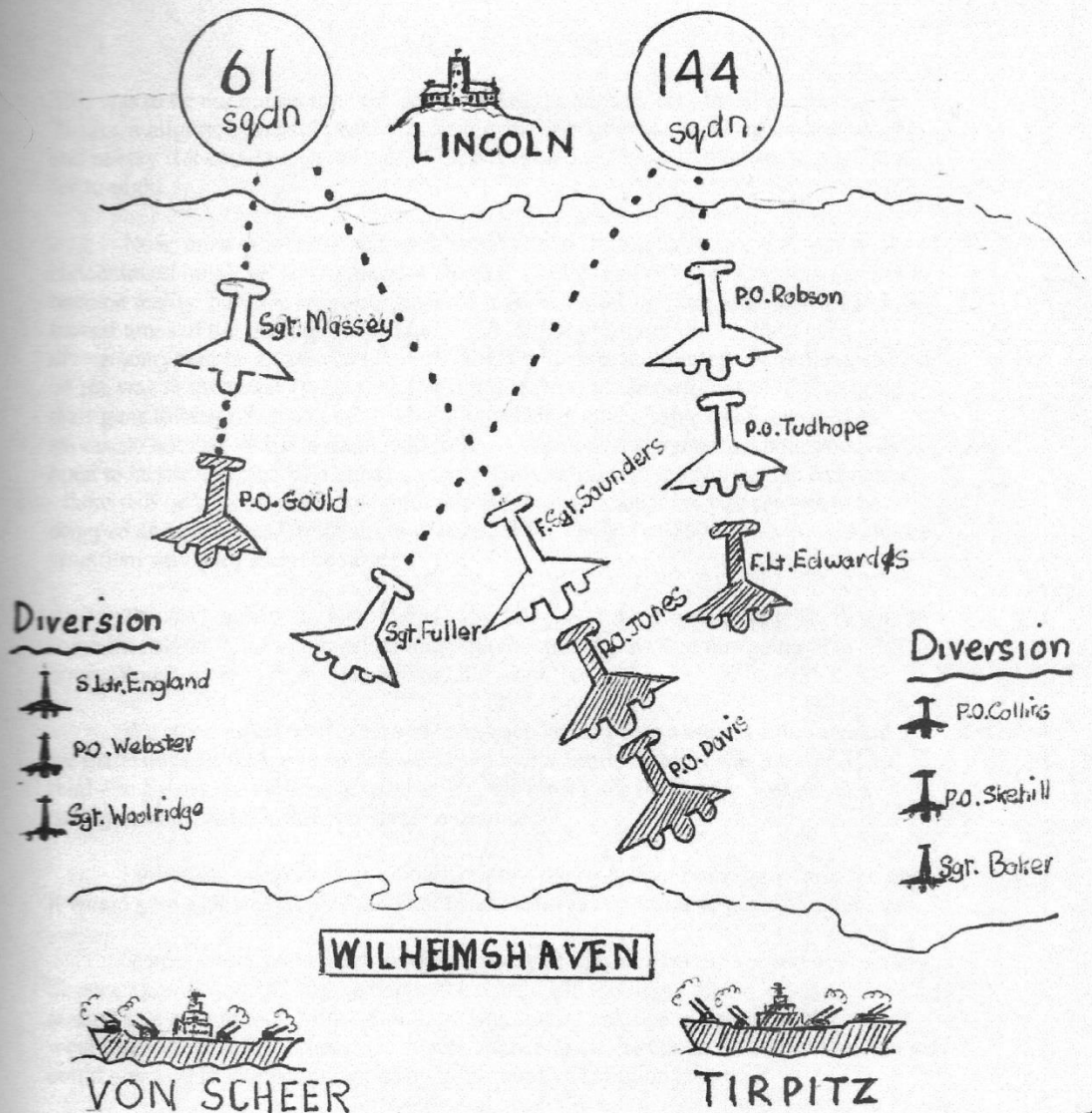
Fortunately Air Ministry Orders now stated that sergeant observers could be recommended for promotion direct to Flying Officer rank. I was chosen from 61 squadron for such advancement and in the process had to appear before 'God' – i.e. Air Vice Marshal Harris who was then in charge of 5 Group. Perhaps being in awe of him, I remember nothing of the meeting and in my case was shot down by the enemy about a week later. Everyone was pleased that wireless operators and rear gunners were now promoted from their lowly rank of AC1 or LAC to sergeants and so just as we faced the same dangers together then we could mess together and socialise and drink together. It had also seemed parsimonious to pay a lad only sixpence a day for facing the enemy.

In order to remain alert, especially on lengthy mission of six hours or more, we were able to avail ourselves of caffeine in the form of small white pills, which we carried in small white boxes. These were found by the Germans on some aircrew taken prisoner and their propaganda machine pushed out the information that RAF aircrew were taking drugs to give them the courage to fly. Our one complaint was that on going to bed after a raid, sleep did not come until the drug's effect had fully worn off.

Many aircrew were superstitious and often carried some small token to ward off the evil hand. It was considered to be fatal to have your photograph appear in newspapers or magazines and we all tried to avoid such publicity. At the debriefing one night we were gathered around a table holding bottles of beer to quench our thirst, but when a photo of us appeared in 'Picture Post' the said bottles had disappeared. But drink we did, for most of us were single and our pockets did jingle and as the night wore on inhibitions disappeared. The worst happening was to come back to your billet to find no bed and realise some of your pals had placed it on the roof of the wooden building. To be sure of getting back from the mess in the blackout, sometimes a trail of toilet paper was laid. Stupid? Yes, but at least our superiors were aware of our precarious lives and let us have our fling.

5 GROUP HEMSWELL 20/21 July 1940

Operation by verbal instructions of A.O.C. Harris



P.4358	P.4344	P.4343	P.4367
P.O. GOULD. A.H	P.O. JONES. K.	P.O. DAVIS. DH	FL/LT. EDWARDS
Sgt. COWAN. J.F	Sgt. WRIGHT. G	P.O. TAGG. M.R	Sgt. DINGLE
Sgt. PRENDERGAST. J.N	Sgt. BONSON. R	Sgt. WALTHO. F.S.	B.N
P.O. CARNEGIE D.S.	Sgt. CAIN. D.	Sgt. COCKBURN. A.M.	Sgt. WYLIE. W
			Sgt. GILES. A.J

Crews shot down

DEATH or GLORY or - - -

This was to be our nineteenth raid. At the end of the slipway the almost completed Tirpitz, a mighty, powerful pocket battleship, capable of wreaking untold havoc, death and misery if it could reach the world's seaways on completion – this was to be our target for to-night.

Now, once again after last week's raid on the Dortmund-Ems Canal, our weeks of concentrated low-level flying practice above the canals and rivers of Lincolnshire was to become reality. So there we were, gathered together in the briefing room listening to the factual tones of the Intelligence Officer – “‘A’ flight will carry out a high-level diversionary raid on Cuxhaven while ‘B’ flight will skim the rooftops of Wilhelmshaven on the way to the target - - - at such low altitude the Germans will not be able to bring their guns to bear down on you - - - the ship is fitting out and should be unarmed as sailors do not mix with a civilian workforce - - - once over the inner harbour you will be open to attack from the Von Scheer, a battleship damaged in the Norwegian campaign - - - there will be balloon cables and dockside defences - - - the mine you carry is to be dropped as near to the Tirpitz as possible and from a height of 100ft - - - you will choose your own way back from the target.”

The C.O. now takes over. “This is the big one chaps. Do your best. There will be some moonlight. You will attack at one-minute intervals, the first one going in at 23.00 hours. Your supper is ready” He omitted the word ‘last’.

We stood together in groups of four, each group being a crew. Little was said as we made our exit for we knew full well deep in our hearts that this was the end of the road – to fly over battleships at mast height. On most raids the gamble was about a twenty to one chance – this was surely a dead cert

I told Ken, our pilot, that I would remove the high-level bombsight from the nose; it would give a clearer view of the target and would save a valuable piece of equipment.

Supper was a silent meal for our crews in ‘B’ flight; likewise the trip out to the dispersal point. And as I climbed on to the wing I told the rigger that he wouldn't have an aircraft to maintain to-morrow. Kamikaze was a word not then in our vocabulary but it would have been apt, for there was simply a quiet determination to do our jobs as best we could – any other alternative not being in the book of common prayer.

I slithered down the chute below the pilot's seat and into my small perspex cabin making up the nose of the Hampden, lowered my table and unpacked my charts, log and instruments. Below and in front of me the machine-gun with its limited arc of action. To the right the awesome little black tit similar to that found on a bedside light. Once the pilot opened the bomb doors then the responsibility for the correct moment of release would be mine. With a slight shudder down to the water would go the mine, its descent slowed by a parachute released from its tail. Long, black and cylindrical these mines, which because of their size, we carried but one, had been used by us on many previous

occasions but not on such a target as this one. Of naval design, their proficiency was in doubt after many a dud one had been used, especially in the canal raid. They carried a soluble fuse which provided a delayed action once in the water, but were so unpredictable that once airborne we were not allowed to bring them home to 'mother' but had to jettison them in the waters of the North Sea.

With the pilot's words of "Here we go" we accelerated down the flare path until, with maximum power, we were airborne and heading for the church, in our case Lincoln Cathedral from where we always began our journey along our recognised corridor to Skegness on the coast, by which time we knew our wind speed and direction and be at operational height for crossing the North Sea. The Pegasus engines had settled into their comfortable rhythm as we looked down on the waterways of Lincolnshire and thought of the village people down below preparing for the night's sleep in their comfortable beds, perhaps giving thought and prayer to the throbbing above their heads and especially wives and girl friends who would know the score because of our absence.

One never ceased to be fascinated by the sight of waves at night with their phosphorescent gleam. From above, especially the waves that broke on the beach, it gave the impression of being a city with its myriad twinkling lights. But now as we flew on we were alone with the moonlight and stars. Our first landmark was the Terschelling Lighthouse off the coast of the Zuider Zee and then we set course for the first of the long line of Friesian Islands. Doubts about the speed of the given wind forecast were now doubly confirmed and we had a tail wind of 60mph instead of the given 15mph. While not placing us in a desperate situation it meant we had to stooge about out to sea on several reciprocal courses as it was important that we hold to our given time over the target. Then, at last, the slow torture of deviation was over and the heat was on. 'Into the valley - - -'.

We had descended to sea level on a southerly course when there, before our eyes, we saw a burning aircraft, straddled with tracer fire, fall to earth. Spires and chimneys now rushed past us – alarming, breathtaking and heartstopping. The inner harbour and on the far side the long shape of a battleship – tracer bullets and flak – bomb doors already open – press the tit. Wham – we've been hit – I've been hit. Blood down leg – blood over hand – perspex nose gone – no intercom – no lights – generator gone. Slide back up behind the pilot – give him course for home – we're away. Then message – rudders damaged – elevators ripped – decide what to do if we reach the coast – rear gunner wounded with shrapnel.

But we are flying – somehow the pilot shoves it along – then whoosh! – the fireworks begin again – tracer zipping past – thudding into the plane – and then the ultimate – fire on the starboard wing – we are on fire at 100ft above the deck. With a sickening crunch all becomes motionless. The flames are growing – get out you idiot. Try the hatch bolts – can't with my wounded hand. Now the pilot appears, reaches through, releases the hatch and drags me down to the port wing and we slither to the ground. It's mayhem – like watching a play but we are the actors.

He drags me across the grass and shouts to the gunner who in turn is dragged out – back for the wireless operator but he is already gone. The flames now roar and shoot upwards, ammunition explodes and oxygen bottles follow, but the grass on my face is cool. Soon come voices and some country people approach – “Wasser bitte” says Ken – whoever knew he could speak German – soon I am drinking from the proffered bucket. And then louder and more raucous voices - those of authority. “English Swinehund. For you zee war is over. Stand up and salute me you dog!” barks out the braided man. “He is wounded. How can he?” shouts Skip. The pistol slips from its holster and there is a click. “Stand up you pig!” Again Skip tells him and shows him the blood. The officer slowly relents now that others have gathered to witness the farce.

Now I’m in bed under the glare of lights. Nurses are stripping off my clothing – bandaging my flak-riddled posterior – my useless finger. David, the rear gunner and I are now in cool beds – German officers try to question us – they know quite well where we have been and sleep comes at last. Little man you’ve had a busy day.



21st July 1940

This shows Ken on the morning after – he looks ‘flak happy’ or is he just glad to be alive. The photograph was taken at Jever Aerodrome where we were taken after crash landing and falling into the hands of the Germans. I never saw Ken again to speak to as he was taken off to Dulag Luft near Frankfurt. David Caine, rear gunner, and I were eventually taken to the Naval Hospital situated near the docks at Wilhelmshaven where we were placed in an isolated part of the hospital. David nearly died from septicaemia associated with fragments of shrapnel and was repatriated back to England about 1943.

The photograph below shows the burnt out remnants of P4344 and shows the damage done to the rear elevators when flying through the flak barrage surrounding the docks.



Herewith are accounts of what happened to other participants in the raid, which were gleaned at a later date.

P4358 P/O Gould. Neil Prendergrast's Account

We made an approach from the south, flying low over pylons and poles, rapidly drawing nearer the target – fire from light flak surrounded us, caught as we were in the near-horizontal searchlight beams – now we felt the thuds as shells hammered home – then the port engine is on fire and soon I shouted over the intercom, “The other bugger’s on fire too...” A shell hit my radio taking away the perspex canopy as it thudded through – it was hellish – my lower gunner was hit and as I bent down to help him I passed out, scorched by the blistering heat. (The lower gunner had decided to get out of the plane before he was burnt alive, but his parachute did not open and he tumbled down on to the mud flats. When his body was recovered the next day it lay at the end of a trail of marks on the mud which showed he had died in attempting to drag himself back to the blazing wreckage and his comrades.)

My pilot had meanwhile jettisoned the mine when he saw we were ablaze but we were now an unmissable target for the flak and as both our engines faded he made a wheels-up crash landing on the mud flats. Our navigator had the easiest exit because the perspex nose had shattered and so he could walk straight out on to the mud.

Perhaps it was the impact on the mud that brought me back to consciousness – and a determination to get out of the inferno – I tried all other exits and eventually realised that the astro hatch was the only one available to me – I had to release the bolts of the double door and in spite of wretched hands managed to do so. Clambering out on to the wing I slid down onto the mud and crawled away to a safe distance. The air around me was alight with tracer and I could hear other Hampdens roaring low across the docks. The cold night air was biting into my burns. Then I vaguely remember being carried on a stretcher and soon sleep came to lead me into another more peaceful state to eventually wake up in the sanitised atmosphere of a hospital ward where, next day, arrived Wilbur and David from P4344. It had taken only twelve hours to be transported from a crew room in Lincoln to a hospital ward in Germany – but as they say, “Where there’s life, there’s hope.”

P4343 P/O Dudley Davis

As he approached the dock he too encountered the wall of cannon fire which transformed his aircraft into a searing mass of flame as shells poured in. Ahead of him was the Tirpitz and although he knew his aircraft was doomed he pressed on with his attack. He released his mine then pushed the throttle wide open in a bid to escape but it was too late, for the flames were already into the inside of the fuselage. He slid the cockpit hood back and clambered out onto the wing to escape from the inferno – the aircraft began to roll – he was flying at fifty feet- pulling his ripcord he held on to the cockpit – the parachute canopy streamed out in the slipstream and plucked him off and he began to swing downwards – in seconds he felt a thump as his body made contact with a hard surface – it was the dockside road – the splutter of flaming wreckage on the water of the dock marked the end of P4343 and his comrades. Perhaps his was the luckiest escape in wartime aviation.

Aftermath

Those who survived as prisoners of war, eight in all, were awarded the DFC or DFM. Neil was awarded the M.B.E. for sending much coded information back in his letters home when a 'Kriegie'. Harry Moyle in his book 'The Hampden File' states:-

“The Hemswell Operations Record Book summed up the result thus – ‘The half success of this spectacular operation was purchased at a heavy price – four valuable crews.’ From the point of view of causing damage to German warships, the raid achieved nothing. The heroism of the pilots who actually carried out the attack is beyond question, as the density of light flak over Wilhelmshaven must have been greater than above any other target in Germany. Over 400 guns of between 20mm and 40mm of Marine Flak Division 262 defended this naval dockyard, in addition there were many heavier calibre guns in use against aircraft flying at a higher altitude.”

No doubt if the raid had been successful it would have helped to raise the country's spirits after the debacle of Dunkirk. That some mines were placed on target is certain, as had happened in the past. One must ask, therefore, if many of this type of mine were of faulty design and would we have been better armed with torpedoes?

P4343 P/O Dudley Davis

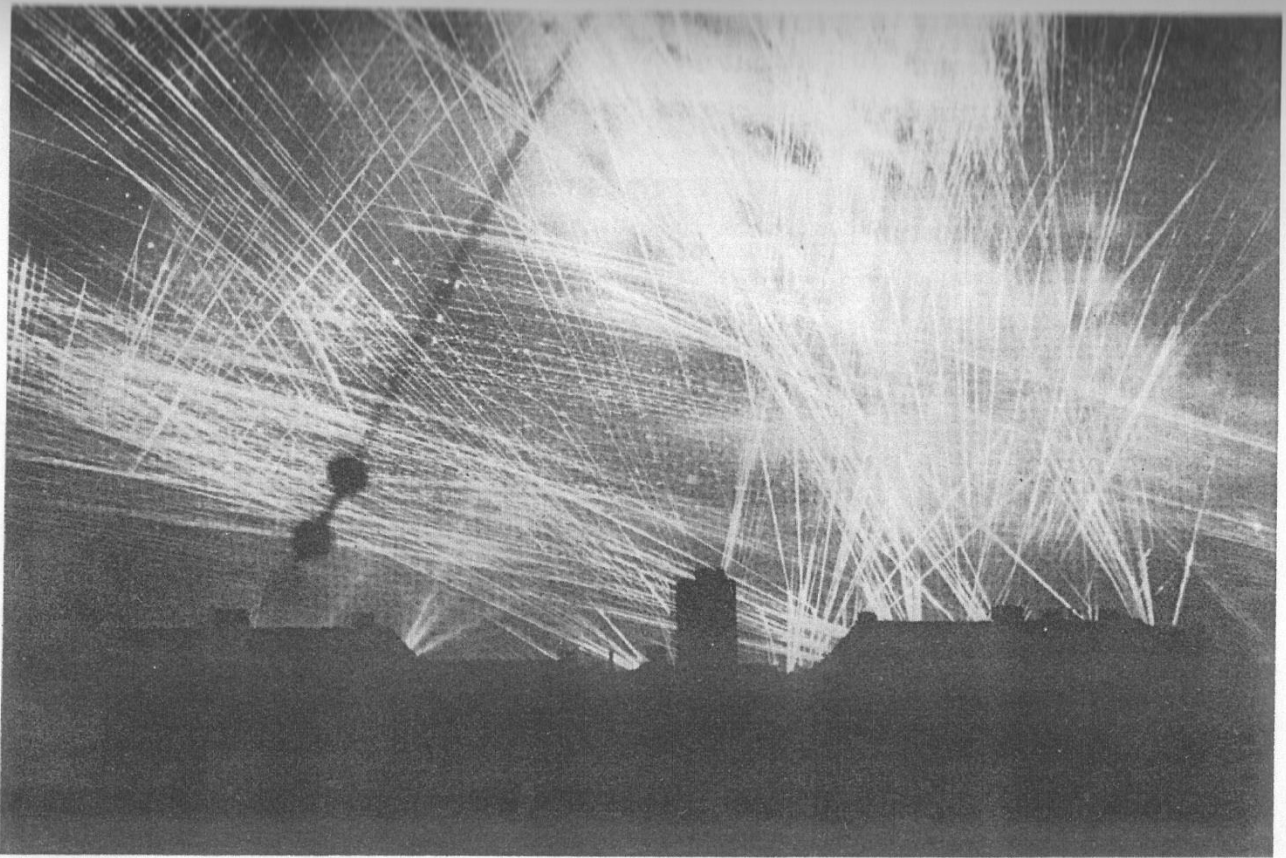
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The sky at night, Wilhelmshaven, 20/21 July 1940. The rectangular tower to the right of the centre of the photograph was the Town Hall, headquarters of Navy Flak Group 262, which was responsible for the defence of Wilhelmshaven. It had over 400 light flak guns available for use against low flying aircraft and many batteries of 105 mm and other heavy guns to deal with high level attacks. (Photo: F.A.Greve)

The day dawns in our new antiseptic world; helpless and hopeless we survey the comings and goings of groups of uniformed attendants. Back at base our absence will be the topic of mess and NAAFI chat for a day as the cost of the raid in men and machines is assessed. The non-return routine will come into action; someone will pack up my personal effects, a telegram to my parents confirming what they hoped would never happen. Post-war talk with my mother gleaned that she had dreamt that she had seen our plane going down in flames but she knew I was still alive even though it wasn't until four months later that they received Air Ministry confirmation that I was alive and a prisoner of war.

Depression mounts for David and me as we listen to the strange Germanic voices and a vague uncertain future opens out before us. Our wounds are again inspected and more paper bandages and wadding applied. We are lifted on to wheeled stretchers and out through corridors into the open air where an ambulance awaits. A pretty blonde nurse is in attendance. The doors close and we move off to an unknown destination. A conversation begins with the caring creature who speaks in her schoolgirl English. Her name is Peters and she lives not far away. The ambulance eventually comes to a halt, she opens the doors and after a short while re-appears with a small group of civilians. "Mamma. These are the English fliers." And they all smile at us in our distress as though we are creatures from another lesser planet, but they are solicitous of our welfare.

Away we go again and after a short while we draw up in front of a large cloistered building. It is a convent hospital belonging to some religious order, for once inside, to our great amazement, our bandages are being removed by the gentle hands of nuns in their white habits. Our hearts and minds perk up at the great good fortune that has befallen us – this surely can't be true – we are living in a dream world – and so it turns out to be for within the hour we are parcelled up and placed back in the ambulance again. We shall never know why we were given the glimpse of paradise.

Again we are on our way until eventually, by the sound of surrounding traffic, we know we have entered the thoroughfares of a very large town. We are outside a large institution and the sight of so many sailors in their uniforms makes us realise that this is our destination and that it is a large naval hospital surrounded by dockside cranes and buildings and that it is Wilhelmshaven!

Soon we are wheeled into a room in a small building standing apart from the main hospital. Being prisoners and foreigners we are to be kept isolated and under constant guard. Here we meet Neil, the Wireless Operator of the crew that we had seen hurtling down in flames. His words of greeting were muffled for his face and hands were swathed in bandages. His shooting down had been horrendous and it was only after several weeks of, what for him, was painful chatter that I gleaned his story.

Also in the small ward were three British sailors, the pitiful remnants of three crews who after days at sea on a raft had survived the sinking of their destroyers. Their ships had been making periodic sailings to part of the North Sea approaching the Danish coast to lay mines. One night they had sailed themselves into a German minefield. The

first destroyer hit a mine and began to sink; the second destroyer, in going near to pick up survivors also hit a mine and a third destroyer attempting to retract from the area, in its turn hit a mine. It was a great tragedy for out of hundreds of men there was but a handful of survivors of whom these were three. After days afloat many simply gave way and slid into the water, whereas others survived to be picked up by a German torpedo boat. They remained with us for a week or two before being taken to a Kriegsmarine Camp leaving David, Neil and me in the arms of Faith, Hope and Charity.

After a week or two and as the acuteness of our pain subsided we settled down into a pleasant routine of little to do but plenty of time to think about our good fortune and predicament. The day began early with the arrival of Frau Hoffman, our foster mother, sneaking into the ward and trying to rip off our top sheet and hopefully expose our nudity. She prepared our meals with rations brought from the main hospital. Having a son and husband in the German Navy, she was fully sympathetic to our plight to the extent that on several occasions she stole fruit from the central kitchen for David who of late had become seriously ill. She would lead you down the corridor for a bath but show no intention of leaving the room until you accepted the situation and got on with your bath. The changing of the guard every two hours became a ritual in itself. The two new guards enter the room.

"Heil Hitler," sez they.

"Heil Churchill," sez we.

"Churchill nix gut," sez they.

"Hitler nix gut," sez we.

End of conversation usually, apart from Neil's ability to prolong it with his knowledge of schoolboy German. They said that the RAF come over at great heights, but Neil was able to counter with the evidence of our last raid. Young, boyish looking officers who came to the group were pompous and boastful saying how they would be in England shortly and if we gave them our home addresses they would contact our parents.

A most beautiful visitor was a sun-tanned physiotherapist who, when she smiled, displayed a full set of gold dentures. She was great fun to talk to until we received a warning from one of the German officers about fraternisation with the enemy and her visits decreased. For the visit of the hospital doctors we had, where possible, to sit to attention in bed and only speak when spoken to. We had always understood that medically, the Germans were among the best in the world, but our experience was to the contrary. If pus was showing through your paper bandages they would simply place another piece of wadding on top.

During many nights the air-raid siren would go causing the utmost inconvenience. We had to shuffle across the lawns to the basement of the main hospital with shrapnel raining down on us from the nearby ack-ack guns that were blasting forth. We were met by the frenzied activity of the orderlies and nurses as they carried downstairs the patients from the wards above. At first we were put into a small room where we sang and joked until one night we were told by the Commandant that the Germans treated the raids seriously and that while down in the cellars they thought of their loved ones at home and for our sins we were placed in a padded cell where we could bawl our heads off if we so

wished. Eventually the all clear would go and in the reverse order the patients were carried back upstairs. Sometimes it only needed the sound of a single plane to raise the alarm, sometimes several planes at intervals. It was a luxury to have an undisturbed night's sleep and if one applied this scenario of sleepless nights to hundreds and thousands of habitations these flights must have contributed in no small measure to the war weariness of the inhabitants.

Neil's burnt face and hands caused him immense pain, especially if the facemask was removed and with the hot weather he was the first to admit he did not smell too sweetly. The doctors appeared to enjoy long weekend leaves when we were left in the hands of orderlies. One weekend the orderly placed a piece of sticking plaster over one of David's shrapnel wounds on his upper arm. By the Monday his neck and arm had swollen rapidly and when he was eventually seen by a doctor he was rushed off to the operating theatre. Tubes were inserted from his neck to elbow to drain off the accumulated pus and some of his muscles had deteriorated. He appeared unto us with his arm in a wing-like contraction and poor lad he was in a bad way simply due to negligence. He was going downhill fast and we constantly tried to rouse him by swearing and cursing and telling him to "Pull your - - - self together." One particular day when his padding was removed out fell hundreds of larvae. He was included in the first repatriation via Sweden, of severely wounded prisoners.

From the rest of the boys I became known as Flak Arse because of the seventy or so small pieces of shrapnel lodged in my buttocks none of which, fortunately, became gangrenous and so were allowed to remain. My hand was shot through and I had lost the use of my index finger, the surgeons saying it was impossible to repair the missing ligaments and knucklebone.

In rooms along the corridor of our hut were some German sailors who had been picked up from the sea when their ship was sunk during the Norwegian campaign. They complained bitterly to us about how some of the British had shot at them while they were floundering in the water. Some wore hairnets to go to bed in and this we found to be effeminate in fighting men.

Outside our window and away from the view of the main hospital was a small arena where those Germans on 'jankers' had to undergo their punishments. It consisted of them squatting on their hunkers holding a rifle above their heads and hopping around for lengthy periods of time – at least it did provide us with some entertainment if not the sailors.

One morning, after about a three-month sojourn, two officers and Frau Hoffman appeared in the ward. The officers were to escort me by train to the main POW receiving camp (Dulag Luft) situated near the town of Frankfurt Main. It was sad to say farewell to this wonderful caring lady. In front of the officers she gave me a glass of schnapps and said, "George, I hope all goes well with you." I said goodbye to Neil and David and shakily stepped forth under escort to that harsher, unknown world of the POW Camps. Now I really was a prisoner.