

26 May 1995

My dear Sue

Thank you for your letter. Let me say, at the start, you can ask what you like. I don't mind or worry at all in the way you mean. Nowadays there would be counselling ad nauseam – but the best therapy was the PoW camps – especially the air crew ones – where everybody seemed to have had some horrible experience which as you may imagine, we all talked about, and it made one's individual escapade seem small by comparison.

I have thought a lot about how to write this letter and I feel that I'll have to fill in the background of flying in Stirlings, the rest of the crew and how the aircraft worked to try and get across to you the night of 13/14 Sept. 1942.

The Stirling had 4 engines, each using 1 gallon of 140 octane petrol (very high volatility 4-star car petrol is about 97 octane) per minute. That's 240 gallons per hour flying so we should have about 1000 gallons (at least) on board – highly flammable. As we were to fly above 12/14000 feet we had a full quota of liquid oxygen bottles – the cabin was not pressurised – each man had his own oxygen mask and he could plug into the supply as he moved about the aircraft. We were at about 18-20000 feet and the load was 10 tons of incendiary bombs. They were an experimental variety. Usually they were Thermite (powder) but these were filled with sticky liquid which would run down into cellars and ground floors and set the buildings alight from the bottom upwards. (The bomb cases would shatter on impact) We, as a crew, were not told about this. I discovered later in the PoW camp that it was probably Napalm, so you see we were not a good fire risk. I enclose a plan of the relevant part of the fuselage.

The crew comprised 7 men. All sergeants except me. There were 3 Air Gunners – rear or tail, front and mid upper. They were seldom the same three men and I can't remember any names. There was one wireless operator/air gunner who seemed efficient, but as we had to maintain radio silence, he hadn't much to do except stay awake and listen out for incoming messages (none ever came) He rather resented me – as an officer – no one else did. It was always accepted that the Pilot was the Boss and I took care to do so, scrupulously. The Pilot was a good one – a Canadian named Cartmell – rather a rip-roaring type in his way. I felt he should have been a Fighter Pilot – gung-ho and out for a good time off duty. Perpetually "spent up" (He still owes me £3! And I should imagine Ron was let in similarly) I was an Air Observer. An Air Observer was an expensive luxury. He was an Air Navigator, Astro-Navigator, Bomb Aimer and had to be able, in an emergency, to work the radio, take over the gun turret and even take on the flying controls. About mid 1942 the Air Ministry decided he was uneconomic and split his job. A Bomb Aimer was introduced, the Air Observer became just the Navigator. As you can imagine, and A.O. was expensive to train and

took a long time – the training was longer than a Pilot's. A month or two before they decided this, they (the Air Ministry) got rid of second Pilots.

Then there was the Flight Engineer – Ron. He had his own monitoring panel. Each engine had its own dials, rev counters, gauges and so on. He had to keep an eye on the fuel consumption, temperatures and generally take the "engine" side of flying off the Pilot's shoulders. He had to shift the fuel from tank to tank as needed. He had to be constantly on the 'qui-vive'. Ron and I were the only two who were married – so I imagine we were a bit quieter than the rest.

We each had our own duties, as you can see, but in addition we had (as all aircrew had) a duty to each other in an emergency. We had dummy practices at crash landing, ditching in the sea – parachuting, abandoning the aircraft in the air and that seemed at the time to cover everything. Out of this lot, what concerns us now is Abandoning the Aircraft in the Air. If the Aircraft was on fire, try to control the fire with extinguishers. They were in brackets all over the fuselage. At the same time lighten the load by jettisoning the bombs. Open the bomb doors, press the button and away they went - if they didn't then jettison the bombs in their containers. That forced the bomb doors open and the whole lot went as a single unit. Then the Pilot had to decide pretty sharpish if the aeroplane was flyable – if not he gave the order "bale out". There were escape hatches in plenty and you used the nearest one. But a word first about parachutes. You wore a webbing harness all the time. Two straps came over the shoulders, two round the back and up between the legs and two round the sides. At the ends of the webbing straps were metal plates rather like car seat belt straps which fitted into a metal box at the front about the level of your navel. There was a quick release knob on the metal box. The canopy of the parachute was separate and was folded to about the size of a hard cushion. It was enclosed in webbing and at the back of the "cushion" were two metal D rings which fitted on to two large spring hooks (like dog lead hooks only much larger) which were at chest level on the harness. This meant you could carry the canopy separate from the harness, put it in the appropriate stowage and move freely about. Each crewman had his own stowage space – the Gunners in the turrets, the Wireless Operator near his radio, the Engineer above his control panel. The Pilot's was at head level at his side and mine was near the Pilot's. In an emergency you clipped the canopy package on to the spring hooks on your chest and out you went. As soon as you were out you pulled the release – no counting to ten so beloved of the arm chair warriors!

All crew members were in intercom contact – built in head phones and microphone in the flying helmet and a long lead which could be plugged into connections anywhere in the aircraft.

I should mention that apart from me, Ron and the other 5 were fresh from training school. I had been flying – instructing Navigators - and doing a series of odd flying jobs (some very odd) for about a year.

Now we come to the night of 6th/7th September 1942. I don't think Ron would have mentioned this to your mother because he had already told me you were on your way!

We had been to Bremen (yes, same target as a week later) dropped the bombs and were on the way home. Everything fine and normal – all ok, then suddenly an almighty bang – just one and the aeroplane rocked. The Pilot said "Quiet – what was that?" and called each man in turn. Ron first. Nothing had happened to the engines according to his instruments and nobody knew anything. I put out my light and drew the curtains at my side and could see nothing except moonlight. The Pilot said "It's something – she's flying like a brick-built henhouse! We've been hit. But where?" I said "Ron, look out of the Astrodome" and the mid-upper gunner said "I'm looking already, there's nothing amiss up here!" I moved up to stand near Cartmell and look forward. We both noticed a light on the ground and watched it disappear under the wing on the port side. I went back to my station and idly wondered if the light would emerge behind the wing as we flew on. It did, but before the wing had cleared it, it dawned on me that there was a hole in the wing. I reported this and said I'd use an electric torch through the opened window. I put my head and shoulders through the window, leaned out (Ron was hanging on to my knees to stop me going too far) used a torch and there was a jagged hole right through the wing. Ron pulled me back inside and shut the window. I told Cartmell (and everybody else – the intercom was connected to us all) what I'd seen and Ron and Cartmell decided we could fly on but not make any violent manoeuvres. We slowed down a bit, altered course to try and shorten the journey and carried on. Then Ron said "We're losing fuel from the port inner tank – the two port engines are ok but the tank must be holed" A pause "I'll set the pumps to shift what's left into the others" Cartmell said he'd take care of the rearrangement of weight when flying and I chimed in "Keep her level or we'll be going round in a bloody circle!" We crossed the English coast at Orford Ness and were about 10 mins from base when Cartmell got the w/op to call up Stradishall. Then Cartmell (using speech not Morse) said "Request clear the runway. Stand by for lame duck". Whilst this was going on he'd made as sure as he could that the landing gear was ok "We still have wheels" We took up crash landing positions in case she sat down. Cartmell put her down smoothly and that was that.

By 10 am that morning the port wing tip was touching the ground – normally it was the height of the eaves of a two-storey house. That one AA shot had cut the main spar. The main spar was a steel girder which ran from wing tip to wing tip. Where it crossed the fuselage it was a vertical plate (flat) with a door in it. The main spar held the wings and fuselage together. We'd come home with the port wing held on by surface rivets only.

We were all sent off on a week's leave.

I mention all this because the lot of us felt very "Boy's Own Paper-ish" We were fireproof and together we could cope with anything. It was the sort of thing I heard many times from Ps of W later on.

Then came 13th/14th September 1942. Again the target was Bremen. I mentioned the load and so on earlier. It was a fine, clear moonlight night. Over the sea I wanted to use a piece of equipment which fitted onto a hole in the floor, but when I went along I found a camera already fitted (it would work in connection with the bomb release.) I merely thought it was some clever b..... who was checking up on my navigation to make sure we were on target. The cheeky so & so – how dare he – me who navigated over the Atlantic as well as last week!! I never mentioned it.

We were doing the run up and I was moving into the Bomb Aimer's station – just about to go down the steps when we were hit. I plugged into the intercom and saw Cartmell pulling the Control Column towards him, then a voice from the rear of the plane said "We're on fire" Cartmell said "Put it out then!" Then to me "Pass him the extra fire squirts" I opened the door and passed the extinguishers to the W/Op I think. Then Cartmell "Shut that door and jettison the load" He and I, remembering the week before, weren't really bothered and I don't suppose Ron and the rest were. I pulled the Jettison toggle and nothing happened. The shots had cut the cable, so I pulled the other one, containers and all, and it came away in my hand. Cartmell heard me on the intercom and immediately he said "Abandon Ship! Bale Out!" I noticed Cartmell had taken his feet off the rudder bars and braced them on the dash board. He was pulling on the Control column with both hands. I reached up and got his parachute pack and put it right way up on his knees. I noticed that the small patch of bare skin near his cheek bone (between his helmet and oxygen mask) was covered in sweat. I gave him the thumbs up and he winked. (We had been caught in search lights after being hit so we could see alright!) I turned to reach my parachute pack – I had hold of it at face level.....

When I came to, it was 25/35 minutes later. I was on a river bank which seemed to be in a town. I noticed the time because I was wearing my navigation watch and had entered the time on the log as I moved forward. Judging by my bruises and missing skin I figured I had been blown through the side of the cockpit. I was near an escape hatch which probably helped. I had a stiff neck. I had not unplugged the intercom when I parted company from the Stirling – the earphones and mike had pulled out of the helmet. A miracle I hadn't broken my neck, but worse than all that, broken ribs, missing skin, bruises and such like, my flying boots had been blown off! Fancy facing Hitler and his Aryan hordes in stocking feet!

I have a memory that during the 25/35 minutes gap (unconscious) I had a sensation of falling head over heels continuously with a very bright light all round. I had felt warm and cosy – all these are common sensations I am

told, when one is close to dying. My parachute canopy was only attached to the harness by a spring clip on one side.

I don't suppose you want the rest of my rigmarole but I have tried to give you an idea of what your father was like, how he seemed to me and how it was doing different jobs in an Aircrew. Added to that was the fact I was, on occasions sent on other trips without them. I believe they may have done other trips without me.

You mention that you visited your father's grave in 1986. How many of them (the rest of the crew, I mean) were there? I have a vague sort of idea from way back, when the Red Cross and the Air Ministry and 214 Squadron were asking me immediate post war, that there seemed to be someone unaccounted for. The Red Cross wrote to me in Germany asking for details. The senior British Officer and his Security Officer read my short account, blue pencilled some of it and reminded me of the Official Secrets Act.

Ron was, as I mentioned, a quiet type, had a sense of humour something like my own and was good looking with a moustache. I said to your mother (in Leeds at the time you mention) as we sat looking at you "if you could put a heavy moustache on that face, it's Ron to the life" and God bless her, she laughed and agreed.

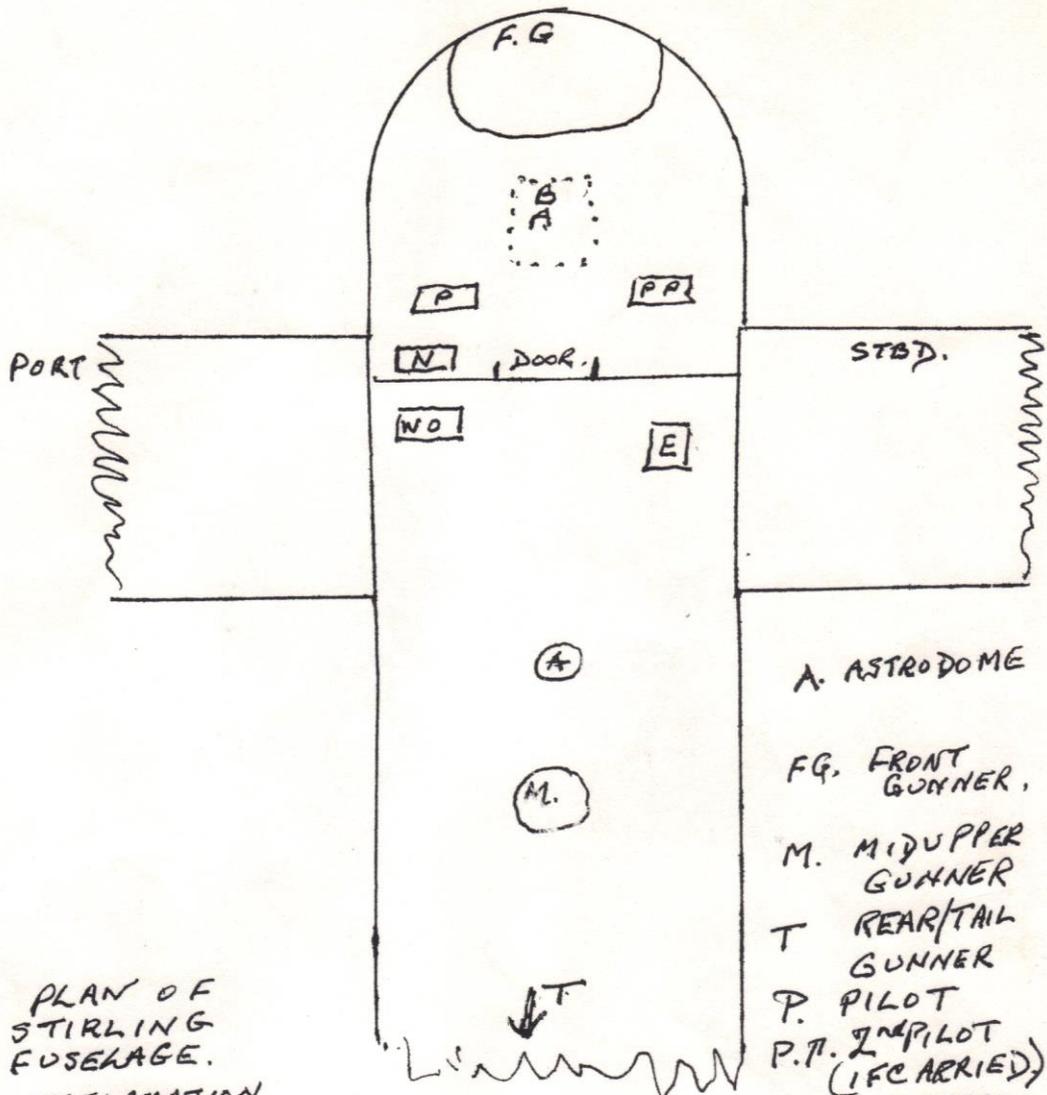
Ron didn't drink much, neither did I. The Yo Ho Ho approach was for neither of us. I didn't think either could have done his job, flying or civilian, if it had been. I remember he always looked smart and clean, even in shapeless flying gear.

I seem to have written an awful lot about me, but I can't avoid it when I try to give you a feeling of what it was like. If you have any questions, please ask them or if anything else occurs to you, let me know.

The one thing that bothered me (and still does) is "why me?" The only satisfactory answer was from a wise old Parson and Man of the World. He said "The Almighty has something for you to do – probably only you can do it – and as like as not, you'll never know what it was."

Yours ever

Tim



PLAN OF
STIRLING
FUSELAGE.
INFORMATION
ONLY
NOT TO SCALE.

- A. ASTRODOME
- FG. FRONT GUNNER,
- M. MIDUPPER GUNNER
- T REAR/TAIL GUNNER
- P. PILOT
- P.T. 2ND PILOT (IF CARRIED)
- W.O. WIRELESS OPERATOR
- N. AIR. OBS.
- E. FLIGHT ENGINEER
- BA. BOMB AIMER POSITION (UNDER)