

R F (“Bob”) Jewsbury – his RAF time

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May 2009

Nick and I met with Walter Rowley (Dads’ navigator) on Saturday 14th October 2006, when he kindly filled in some details on the few stories I can remember Dad telling me about when, as a small boy, I asked about the war. Sadly Walter, the last remaining living member of Dads’ crew, died a matter of months after this meeting.

Pilot: Flt.Lt. Jack Dixon DFC

Nav: F/O Walter Rowley DFC

Bomb Aimer: F/O. Bob Jewsbury – service no: 1392004

Fl. Eng: Paddy McShane

Wireless Op.: Harrold Bennett

M/U Gunner: Ted Drew

Rear Gunners: Sgt.H.L.Burt (killed in collision over Chedburgh March 30th 1943), then “dishonourable discharge” guy for two flights, then Mick Ward to 6th November, then Sgt John E. Flack* for last few flights.

The crew stayed together for their time at Chedburgh, except for the changes in rear gunners. They called each other by their Christian names as above - apparently there were no nicknames.

Chedburgh accommodation blocks were on the other side of the main road to the airfield but are now all gone and replaced with an “executive” housing development. The village pub, The Marquis of Cornwallis, whilst often busy, was not much used by Dads crew but I believe that Bury was a very popular destination! Walter, Dads navigator, said that they did not use the Mess much either.

On one occasion, Dad remembers he went into Bury St Edmunds and had such a good time that he came back on his bicycle with a colleague sitting on the handlebars pedalling backwards. They managed to cycle right into the mess like this.

Dad did his initial training in South Africa at 45 Air School, Oudtshoorn from 21st April to 8th Aug 1942 in Ansons and Oxfords. He then went to 43 Air School from 10th to 29th Aug 1942 and this was probably at Port Alfred near Grahamstown where there is still a huge flying school - in 2006 there were about 100 aircraft there and up to 2000 trainees, a major training centre. The only story I can remember was of him and some friends driving out for a heavy session at a bar and then weaving their way back home. They weaved so much that they careered off the road and crashed. One of them opened a door in the dark and promptly disappeared from view – the car was on the edge of a very steep bank, its passage having been arrested by a tree. The rest of them got out rather more carefully!

October 1942 – 14 OTU Cottesmore

Walter trained as a navigator at Prince Edward Island Canada and then came over to 14 OTU Cottesmore where they all teamed up with pilot Jack Dixon. Apparently Jack and Walter were both the quiet ones and stood back whilst all the men, about 140 in one big room, “selected” each other to form crews.

Dad (R F “Bob” Jewsbury) was the quiet, thoughtful, introspective type and I wonder if that is why they were drawn together in the first place as a crew? **

I don’t know at what point Dad did join Jack but he was with him early on and it is likely to have been at that initial OTU “teaming up” meeting. According to his log book his first trip with Jack was 16th November 1942. Curiously, Jack’s log book does not show a trip for 16th, but shows a) Landings and single engined flying and b) single engined and bad weather flying for the 15th Nov with a) Low level bombing and b) Air firing with a pilot instructor on board for the 17th. Apparently it was not uncommon for crew logbooks to differ in various ways.

The crew were part of the first flight to get Wellingtons, previously 14 OTU had used Hampdens. Their first rear gunner was an exuberant Canadian who went into town with a lady of the night and got a dose of pox resulting in being sent off sick – Walter volunteered to sit in the rear turret whilst they were practising circuits and bumps but said it was so bumpy and frantic on landing that he vowed never to get back in the rear turret again and never did!

16th December 1942

Flying Wellington from Cottesmore on an exercise over the Irish Sea near the Isle of Man. The Met forecast was for some cloud but when they got there it was 10/10 cloud! The aeroplane started to ice up and lose height. Everyone was furiously dumping ammunition and anything movable to reduce weight. Dad spent ages hacking at an oxygen bottle with an axe – finally got it off to discover it was aluminium and weighed nothing!! They requested permission for an emergency landing at Squires Gate Blackpool but this was denied because of barrage balloons. They finally landed at Millom (near Morecambe Bay) but burst a tyre on landing. There were no tyres there suitable for Wellingtons so they had to wait for a spare. This took 4 days to arrive during which time it apparently rained continuously day and night. Meanwhile the crew just wanted to get back to base in time for Christmas leave. Luckily the tyre arrived in time and they were able to fly home on 21st December.

3rd January 1943

Jack Dixon's log book says he finished at 14 OTU on this day so guess Dad did too. He was assessed as an "average" pilot in his log on 5th January with 406 hours under his belt. Subsequent history reveals he was anything but "average"!

5th February 1943

They arrive at 1651 HCU Waterbeach (5 miles north of Cambridge) to convert to Stirlings for 1 month. Dads logbook has entries for 1651 from 26th Feb 1943 with Jack as pilot.

19th February 1943

Jacks first logged flight at 1651 accompanying a F/Lt Cope (Instructor) flying as a second pilot on a raid to Wilhelmshaven, bombing on PFF flares. This was Jacks only February flight with conversion training flights starting on 3rd March.

17th March 1943

Dads 1651 summary for the 17th states 22.40 hours day and 10.35hours night flying all in Stirlings. Presumably this is the day they all left for 214.

21st March 1943

Dads logbook restarts with entries from 21st March 1943 which is likely to have been when they all started at 214 Squadron Chedburgh.

28th March 1943

Dads first op. and Jack Dixons first flight as captain – logged as a 5 hour trip. All the crew were happy admiring the views on the way to St Nazaire to bomb submarine pens which had been lit by flares. However as they flew over La Rochelle they had their first experience of flak with shells bursting nearby – all went very quiet on the plane with no more casual conversation! Got them all thinking. Remember Dad telling me that flak looks like the bubbles rising in a glass of beer but rather more dangerous!

29th March 1943 (Walters 25th birthday – born 1918, Pontefract, Yorks)

Only the crews' second Stirling trip "gardening", dropping mines near Texel (an island off the Dutch coast). They had instructions to be sure to positively identify their target from nearby landmarks or bring the mines back – apparently they had on board two mines of a very important new type which were not to be dumped anywhere other than on target. When they got near to the target all they could see was fog, so they bought their mines back. On return to base, and whilst in circuit at 2000 feet over Chedburgh, they collided in the dark with another Stirling losing their port tailplane and rear gun turret. The aeroplane went into a dive, Jack and Dad both had hold of their control columns with feet braced on the control panel trying to lever the columns back and pull the plane out of its dive! The base put up a red flare to say don't land but they didn't have much choice! They did succeed in regaining some control and crash landed on the grass alongside the runway. Apparently Jack sat at his controls for a moment after the landing thinking how lucky they were to survive. The peace was short lived however as, Paddy Mc Shane (flt eng) appeared with a blackened face shouting "For Gods sake get out, we're on fire and there are still mines on board".

Walter says that as soon as the plane stopped he scrambled out of the upper escape hatch standing on Jack who was "enjoying" his moment of contemplation and still at his station under the hatch. The crew sprinted from the aircraft fearing an imminent explosion and indeed Dad says he remembered someone swearing he had overtaken a rabbit in the process! Ground staff standing some way from the wreckage then instructed the crew to return to the plane to evaluate damage which they did with some caution. The cause of the fire was a flare which had ignited within its chute.

After this they were all rather shaken up and were sent on leave to recover, Jack getting a Green Endorsement in his log book for safely bringing the Stirling back to Terra Firma. The "lost" tail turret was discovered the following day just to the east of the airfield near to Rede Farm. Apparently a young farmers' daughter found the sad wreckage with Sgt Burts' body still in the smashed turret. The plane – Stirling BK663 was subsequently repaired.***

The crew of the other Stirling involved, EF362N, managed to bail out and survived except for the pilot (F/O WG Cooper from Solihull) who stayed with his plane and died in the subsequent crash.

Having lost Sgt Burt in the collision they took on a new rear gunner but he didn't last long! On his first flight he announced a faulty turret so the crew had to return to base. On his second trip, the same thing happened and on investigation wires were found to have been pulled - he was discharged! Mick Ward then became their rear gunner and remained with the crew for the rest of their tour until he was shot in the shoulder on the 6th November sortie.

20th April 1943

Ops to Rostock

Flak from the sea. Plane hit and Paddy couldn't get fuel from some of the tanks. Had to divert to Oulton as low on fuel - told to watch out for gliders at the airfield, apparently they were everywhere. They slept the night at the base not at Blickling Hall which was nearby and was being used by some RAF officers.

24th July 1943

Operation Gomorrah! The first big raid on Hamburg with 791 aircraft in the air. 347 Lancs, 125 Stirlings, 246 Halifaxes and 73 Wellingtons. They took off at 22.10 hours but recorded a DCO landing at Newmarket after 6.45 hours in the air.

29th July 1943

Ops to Hamburg. Early days of the use of WINDOW (chaff) by the crew. F/Sgt Simpson with them as 2nd pilot. Apparently their plane was the fastest Stirling at the base some 5 to 10 knots faster than the rest and as a result they got to the target ahead of their planned arrival slot. The Stirling had a much lower ceiling (13,000 feet) than the other planes on the raid (Lancs at 22,000 and Halifaxes at 18,000) who had arrived before them. On the raid Jack felt a thud whilst at the controls and when they arrived back at base an unexploded incendiary bomb was found lodged in one of the fuel tanks in the port wing! Obviously dropped from a bomber above. It was on this raid that Paddy, whilst using the astro dome for observation duties panicked screaming "enemy aircraft" over the intercom, when asked "where" he replied "over there" which did not endear him to the rest of the crew!! They flew all three Hamburg raids AND GOT BACK.

27th August 1943

Ops to Nuremburg.

At 11,000 feet, with bombs gone and whilst still over their target the crew were attacked by 2 fighters. The port outer was on fire and the starboard outer feathered. Eventually the port prop fell off and they were then able to extinguish fire and restart the starboard outer.

This is likely to be the raid when Dad thought he had been shot – he was manning the front turret and the aeroplane was being shot up. Suddenly he had hot sticky fluid in his flying boots which he was convinced was blood. Strangely he felt no pain but assumed he was numb from the excitement of the battle. Later, on carefully peeling back his flying boots, he discovered to his enormous relief that the liquid was hydraulic fluid. A leak on the turret hydraulics had been pumping hot oil onto his boots!

Very low on fuel they landed at Ford.

Pilot Jack records this trip as “Shakey Do” which was probably something of an understatement, either way he was awarded an immediate DFC. Second pilot on this trip was a F/O Carl Puterborough (RCAF).

31st August 1943

Just 4 days later, interestingly and very unusually, Jack whilst on Compass Swings logs “Nervous – no time to be so during the drama of getting back”, suggesting that they were feeling the pressure. August was a VERY bad month for the squadron with 9.5% of all crews failing to return from their missions. July also had been bad at 7.5% lost - these figures were, frankly, unsustainable but thankfully matters improved. As a Squadron 214 suffered the highest % losses in 3 Group.

September 1943

The Stirling was regarded by now as rather out classed by other bombers, flying too low and too slowly - new uses were being sought for them.

It was decided to try them on “Special Ops” dropping arms and bicycle tyres (!) for the French Resistance Forces. These were top secret missions, usually flying at 2000’ in bright moonlight. Crews went into their briefings separately – they never knew where the other crews were going****.

In September, 3 Stirling crews from 214 were selected for attachment to 161 Squadron Tempsford to assess how the aircraft performed in what were to be low level clandestine ops.

Dad flew with Jack as one of these three crews and they were in fact the first crew to fly operationally - in Stirling EF403/G on 18th September 1943.

18th September 1943

“Ops as ordered”

Flying at 5000 feet. Compasses and all nav aids U/S except H2S downward radar. They were lost but found an enormous glow in the sky which they reckoned must be Paris. The crew headed north, found the coast and subsequently made it across the Channel making an emergency landing at Ford (again) whilst very low on fuel. The engines petered out at the end of the runway, even before they were able to get to their “pan” – now that really was low!!

6th November 1943

Special Ops

Their mission was to a marshalling yard in France but at 2000 feet over the target, rear gunner Mick Ward collected a bullet in his shoulder. He left the crew for medical attention to be replaced by a Sgt Flack who shared the crews last two operational trips before their tour was completed. After leaving Jacks crew, Sgt Flack then went off with another crew and was later decorated (DFC) for his actions in saving a crew member when their aeroplane crashed into a public house 2 miles from their runway.

9th November 1943

Dads last Operational flight in a Sterling – “Special Ops” to France. DCO 6.15 hours logged.

Dad and the crew were introduced to the King (limp handshake) and Queen (lovely smile) who were visiting 161 Squadron at Tempsford.

Only one other crew completed a tour of ops from 214 at Chedburgh - the pilot was P/O John Verrall a brilliant NZ pilot. The nav. was Jacky Furner whose skill was well acknowledged by Jack Dixon, Furner went on to become a Master Navigator ending his long career as an AVM. John Verrall actually flew as 2nd pilot with Jack Dixon and Dad on May 18th and 26th – Bombing and Fighter Affiliation.

15th May 1945

Logbook re starts with Jack still as pilot but now ranked as Squadron Leader. They were with 1653 HCU flying Lancasters with four Operational Flights shown, the last on June 1st 1945. Log shows a summary dated 2nd June 1945.

Lancasters moved into Chedburgh with 218 squadron in December 1944

1653 was formed on 21st Nov 1943 at Chedburgh retaining the Stirling for conversions till they all moved to North Luffenham on 27th Nov 1944 on Transport Command duties as not now considered fit for a bombing role. Codes A3, H4 and M9.

NOTES:

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Sgt John E Flack was a long serving Air Gunner with 214 and had two very lucky escapes whilst at Chedburgh.

On 17th February 1943, whilst returning from minelaying, he and his crew including a Sgt Rundle, abandoned their aircraft R9163 when very low on fuel and in poor weather. All survived except the pilot (RNZAF) who tragically was hit by a propeller, his body was found in woodland near Marks village in Hampshire and buried in Brookland Cemetary.

9th March 1943. F/Sgt Delbert (Dinty) Moore RCAF was detailed to take a “spare” crew (his own having been shot down whilst he was hospitalised) on a trip to Munich in Stirling R9358. After a couple of aircraft had left with no problems, a new pilot on a night navigation exercise swung on take off, collapsed the undercarriage of his Stirling and so blocked the main runway. (No clue as to why he was not held until the operational boys had all got away). It was decided to use one of the shorter runways (SSE/NNW) and Dinty duly prepared to leave whilst not very happy as they had experienced their own undercarriage problems whilst on air test.

The laden Stirling lumbered into the air but, with the u/c only partially retracted, clipped some trees, took the roof off a newly built house and finally ploughed in near Chevington – about a mile away. Miraculously the bomb load did not explode and the crew scrambled out of the burning aircraft. A head count revealed “one missing” – Sgt Flack and, without hesitation, Dinty and Sgt Hamish Wilson, their New Zealand rear gunner, went back into the aircraft to find John Flack trapped and upside down in his straps. They got him out suffering severe burns in the process later to be awarded the GM for their gallantry. At a 214 re-union do Dinty was re united with his WAAF nurse and ambulance driver.

John Flack later flew as a gunner in George Mackies crew on B17's from Oulton ending as W/O JE Flack DFC.

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The crew selection process was one of the most successful ideas of the war (today it would probably involve teams of psychologists!). In the main it worked very well, relying on the natural instincts of the aircrews present.

A “balanced” number of trades from AFS would self select to form 5 man crews becoming the next intake for the OTU's (3 group used Wellingtons).

The five would be pilot, navigator, bomb-aimer, wireless op and rear gunner. By then the multi-role trade of Observer (navigator, bomb-aimer and front gunner) had gone as had the sharing of roles (wireless op / air gunner).

After the Operational Training Unit the crew would move on to a Heavy Conversion Unit, which in dads case was 1651 at Waterbeach. At the HCU they would have collected their mid upper gunner and specialist flight engineer needed for the complex systems of a four engine “heavy”. The intensive course, ground and air, lasted for one month.

BK663 was repaired and flew again from Witchford with 196 squadron. She finally came to grief on 28th September 1943 whilst returning to base with problems, flying into the ground near Ely with bombs still on board. There was just one injury. A large scale model of the aeroplane is on show at the Witchford museum.

The operations from Tempsford were under the SOE (Special Operations Executive) and the SIS (Secret Intelligence Service) dropping supplies to the French and Belgian resistance agents who would be waiting at secret locations.

Crews would be expected to fly in at low level under moonlight dropping to as low as 50 to 500 feet when near the target which was usually a small field or secluded wood.

The resistance fighters would hold 3 red flashlights to mark the drop zone. When the plane was overhead they would, with a single white light, flash an agreed signal by Morse code to confirm all was well.

Once the drop zone was located the pilot would gain height to 500feet or thereabouts and throttle back to 125mph for an approach in order to make the best chance for the chutes to open and hopefully land in the right place!

The drop would have been arms, ammunition, food, explosives, wireless equipment or even bicycle parts! These were packed in a dozen or so containers, each of about 300lbs weight. Sometimes agents were dropped also.

The waiting patriots (The Reception Committee, which was usually 8 to 12 strong) would then gather up these heavy containers and haul them off by horse and cart or even stolen German trucks! This was incredibly dangerous for the Committee as the noise of the approaching aircraft would have been all too obvious to any local German soldiers who cared to investigate! The penalty if caught would have been certain interrogation with the distinct probability of torture and then death.

From the aircrews point of view they had the combined factors of flying very low and very slow to a pinpoint target in an area of completely blacked out countryside and then dropping their cargo onto a handkerchief sized target.

A very special combination of Pilot, Navigator and Bomb-Aimer was needed to get all this right and Dads crew must have been very highly regarded as a crack crew to be selected as the first to carry out these duties with a Stirling.

Additional Odds and Sods

Walter says he left to go into Training Command in Nov 43 then to join 100 group (which was Squadrons 141 and 239) to fly Mosquitos from West Rainham. Many ex-operational pilots and navigators teamed up as Mosquito crews as a natural progression, linking up from the same bomber crews on the old boy network. Walter also remembered them finding a bullet hole in Jacks cold weather clothing which was hanging next to his seat. Dad sitting next to him with Walter just behind! Lucky again!! (There was no mention of this in Jacks logbook but it could have been June 11th – Dusseldorf when “flak removed astrodome” according to Jacks logbook. A typical understatement - there would have been a lot of nasty sharp things flying around those up front!!

Jack stayed on as S/L and O/C “D” Tactical Flight of 1653 Heavy Conversion Unit which was formed at Chedburgh in November 1943, he flew as a Pilot Instructor

Did Dad stay on at Chedburgh ? If so he would probably have been on specialised air bombing instruction. Jacks log book for 9th October 1944 states “Air test to Wash. Ammo dumping. F/O Jewsbury and F/O Wright”. This was probably a boys’ day out.

214 Squadron was at Chedburgh from 1st Oct 1942 to 10th Dec 1943. Their aircraft carried codes of either BU or PX. There were about 24 aircraft and crews.

The Stirling was the largest bomber of its day with a 100 foot wingspan and able to carry up to 26 500lb. bombs. Mk1’s were used from April 42 to Dec 43 with Mk111’s being used from Feb 43 to Jan 44.