

Jack Melrose 1921-2008
Military History



On Sunday September 3rd 1939 Britain declared war with Germany.

On Monday September 4th Jack Melrose, went into Glasgow's recruiting office of the Royal Air force and volunteered his services. Three months later he was sent to Padgate in England to begin basic training. He was also sent to Singapore and to Rhodesia and at long last after many months he was sent to Stormydown in Wales for a refresher course before being assigned to an aircrew. In 1942 Jack was sent to Chedbury near Bury St. Edmunds, Surrey where he joined Bomber Command's 214 Squadron and became a mid- upper gunner with a Stirling Bomber crew, which flew with a complement of seven men.

Jack flew three successful night missions over Germany but on 13th October 1942 on his 4th night raid, after bombing the naval base at Keil in northern Germany; his plane was caught in searchlights and then heavily damaged by flak. All the communications went down and the hydraulics and guns were severely damaged. The damaged plane was eventually shot down by a Messerschmitt, which came in at close range and riddled the Stirling with machine gun fire. When Jack realised the plane was going down he clipped on his parachute and baled out. Cameron Campbell RCAF, the rear gunner, was

shot in the foot but he also managed to parachute out. Unfortunately the other five members of the crew perished. They were Pilot Ronald Davidson RAF, Bomb Aimer George Murray RCAF, Flight Organiser Stuart Miller RAF, Navigator Ronald Dempsey RCAF and Wireless Operator Gerard Philamplin RCAF. Miller was the oldest at 30 years of age but the rest of the men were in their early twenties.

Jack landed in the countryside and hid his parachute in a ditch. He could hear men running, dogs barking and see the beams of torches. He saw a dwelling house and decided to hide as he knew the men and dogs were looking for the crew of the bomber. When he tried the door of the house it was unlocked so he entered but at that moment the woman of the house came out of a room into the hall and saw him. She let out an almighty scream and her husband came running carrying a shotgun. While he threatened Jack the woman slipped out of the house and returned with the police who had been searching for him. They took him into custody at a nearby army barracks before handing him over to the Luftwaffe who transferred him to Frankfurt am Main for interrogation. He and many other prisoners were then loaded into cattle trucks on a train and taken to Prisoner of War Camps.

Jack was transferred to a POW camp run by the Luftwaffe in Barth on the Baltic coast. This camp was called Stalag Luft 1. Cameron Campbell, the wounded gunner appeared sometime later having been in hospital having had his badly injured big toe removed. Jack was later transferred to Stalag Luft VI at Heydekrug in East Prussia.

Jack spent the best part of eighteen months in the camps but eventually as Germany was in chaos and the Russians were advancing the POWs were forced out of the camp by the Germans in July 1944 and after a nightmare sea journey from Heydekrug to Swinemunde, dubbed "The Baltic Cruise" they were taken to Stalag Luft 1V at Gros Tychow.

The road to the camp was lined with marine cadets who were shouting and cursing, guards with dogs and men with machine guns at the ready. The men were then forced to run so fast by the cadets that they lost all of their meagre possessions. Retrieving them was out of the question as the cadets were egged on by a major, who looked demented as he stood on the running board of his Mercedes screaming "Make them run until they drop," He became known among the POWs as "The Ice Cream Man" because he wore a white jacket and blue trousers. Jack who was at the rear of the column was bayoneted in the arm and slashed across his back.. This incident became known as "The Run up the Road" and Luft 1V known for its brutality.

On the 6th February 1945 orders were given to evacuate the camp in a few hours. It was snowing and bitterly cold and the prisoners and guards set out to

walk over 500 miles west across Germany taking The Northern Route. Jack and the other prisoners were ill equipped for this weather as he and many others had had their sheepskin flying jackets taken from them the moment they were arrested. They were dressed in whatever they could find to try to keep warm. This march, which the prisoners called "The Shoe Leather Express", took 2 months during which the men endured appalling hardships of starvation, illness, freezing weather and the loss of many men.

After this horrific ordeal the prisoners finally arrived at Stalag X1B/357 at Fallingbommel. The conditions in this camp were dreadful but the men were glad their journey was over, or so they thought, for on the 6th of April 1945 the POWs, who were weak and starving, were told they were to be marched out again back to the East. After one day on the road, Jack had had enough. During a halt in the march Jack rolled into a ditch and managed to escape into the woods. He kept on walking until he met an American sergeant who had also escaped but they hadn't gone very far when they were stopped by a Hungarian soldier who took them to his headquarters where they remained as "guests" for a couple of days until they were taken to a German officer and ordered to accompany him behind the British lines. He wanted to negotiate a cease fire to allow the Germans to leave Belsen Concentration camp and the British to take over so he walked into the British area waving a white flag with Jack and the American, who had no idea what their role was supposed to be, in tow. They were challenged by a guard with a Glasgow accent which caused Jack to yell, "For God's sake don't shoot." They were then taken to a British brigadier and shortly after a large Mercedes arrived with SS officers to arrange the ceasefire. When Jack and the American told the brigadier they had been told to return to the German side he refused emphatically to allow this.

This incident was later depicted in a movie but instead of two sergeants the actors were promoted to officer class.

Jack was sent back to Britain and at long last he arrived home. During his time in the POW camps he received word that he had been promoted from sergeant to warrant officer.

(For a detailed account of the horrors of the POW camps and the dreadful journey undertaken by these brave young men read "The Last Escape" by John Nichol and Tony Rennell.)



In the year 2000 Jack, with the Royal British Legion, visited the war cemetery in Kiel where his former crewmembers were buried and to his great surprise he found not only the five graves but also two empty ones, which had been designated for him and the other gunner, Cameron Campbell. The RAF were obviously not sure whether all the crew had died or not, so knowing that Stirling Bombers had a seven-man crew, left two empty graves for the two missing men.