

Extract from Warrant Officer Ward's unpublished memoirs "Personal Observations" written in 1982

26 January 1942

Harry Ward joined RAF Stradishall in November 1941 as an observer/bomb aimer and during a six week period found himself pilotless whilst his pilot was on sick leave. During this time he was required to take part in local flying and various other practices. However, he was greatly relieved from this somewhat boring time to be allocated to George Webster's crew to replace Eric Self who had reported sick.

The date was 26th January 1942 and the target was the dockyards at Brest where the battleships Scharnhorst and Gneisau and also the cruiser Prince Eugen were anchored. My father says of George Webster that he was a Canadian, "A tall cheery lad with a few ops to his name". He says that the rest of the crew were all sergeants all of whom he had got to know through his friendship with Eric Self.

Harry mentions that whilst dressing for the op in the locker room, the crews were introduced to a reporter, Colin Bednall from the Daily Mail who had been commissioned to write an article about the raid. This, perhaps, would be quite an interesting account for the family of George Webster who went missing on this next op on 28th January 1942.

Airborne at 1949 hours and the met forecast of clear skies and land brilliantly lit by the near full moon was extremely accurate. As they crossed the Channel, George Webster reminded the two air gunners to be more watchful than usual for fighters because of the clear conditions. Harry remembers seeing the light on Start Point flashing brightly as they steadily climbed. At this stage, Harry changed places with the second pilot, Frank Tait and stood next to George, map in hand and looking ahead for the first sign of the French Coast on the port bow. He says that he was aware of the elevated front turret guns rotating as Sergeant Truscott kept a sharp lookout for enemy fighters. Flak was bursting in the sky ahead as they flew at 16,000 feet. Harry recalls that map reading was a simple task on that clear night, but he had difficulty in seeing the coastline where George was sitting on the port side, so he decided to fly a few miles south of the entrance to Brest before making a 180 degree turn to bring the coast line on to his starboard side and thus into view. George "jinked" the aircraft very slightly, nothing vigorous.

As they turned in towards Brest at the exact point plotted beforehand, Harry climbed down to the bomb-aimers position, plugged in the intercom and oxygen tubes and settled down over the bombsight, left hand cupped over the height bar, looking at Brest very clearly ahead and slightly to port. He gave George the necessary corrections and then was surprised to see about a dozen flashes on the ground, the firing of a dozen flak guns. He mentions that if the gunners had tracked and sent off their predicted fire, then the fortunate correction of course earlier had put F-Freddie about 20 seconds away from their target.

At this stage, the docks were running directly down the drift wires and when the two pointers on the bomb sight were in line with the docks, he pressed the bomb tit. Six semi armour piercing bombs fell away from the aircraft in a perfect stick. He then announced "Bombs Gone" after actioning the jettison bar. 10 seconds later Frank Tait released the photo flash as Harry set the camera in motion. With great composure, George flew on steadily awaiting the explosion of the flash at which moment the photograph should be secured. A sharp 180 degree turn back to port followed and turned way from Brest the way they had arrived. They saw no explosions as semi armour piercing bombs made very little flash. They tried for another photograph of the entrance to the harbour, but as usual no results were recorded. Harry points out that photography in those days was a very hit and miss

affair! Harry was delighted that the long flight back to Stradishall in perfect weather and a congenial pilot allowed him to practise astro navigation, a vital tool for all navigators.

The subsequent newspaper article by Colin Bednall was something of a disappointment to all crews in its briefness, particularly that the loss of four aircraft that night gave no epitaph to the couple of dozen fit young men lost that night.

The next day, 28th January 1942, they were informed that ops was on again that night - destination Hanover. Harry was still without a pilot and was informed that he was to fly with Flight Sergeant Klassen's crew. Although Klassen was an excellent pilot, Harry was somewhat disappointed that he was not with George Webster, and that Chris Irwin was to be George's navigator instead. Harry's op with Klassen's crew was a memorable occasion having been rescheduled for Munster following a mechanical fault which necessitated their returning to base and hence recommencing the op about an hour later than the rest. Harry was greatly saddened on his return to learn that Pilot Officer Webster's plane was missing. He says that he could remember quite clearly as he rode out to their dispersal before take-off, seeing George Webster and his crew standing beside F-Freddie. Chris Irwin was in front of the plane in his Irvin jacket smiling broadly as he waved them on their way. Like so many others before them, Harry recalls that nothing was heard of them again.