

## **OPS IN A FORTRESS 1944**

By Gerhard Heilig

Six months earlier we had been treated as the crème de la crème of budding aircrew at Initial Training Wing at Bridgnorth in Shropshire, a well laid out station where the sun shone all day in a glorious late summer. Then, at the beginning of October, we had found ourselves at Number 4 Radio School Madley near Hereford. After the first few days of sweltering in greatcoats (regulations demanded that these be worn from 1 October regardless of the weather), the skies turned grey and bleak and our body temperatures dropped below boiling point. At the first parade our flight commander, himself a 'penguin', told us in his welcoming address that we had no cause whatsoever to consider ourselves as anything special. In his opinion, aircrew were no more than a necessary evil in the Royal Air Force!

The physical conditions of the camp were no picnic either. We had to walk a mile from our sleeping site fully equipped for the day's work before we could wash and shave at the messing site. Then interminable marches from one working site to the next with a fiendish system of constantly retracing our steps from one instructional site to the next with a dash back to the messing site for our midday meal. We were not a very happy band, and when 'Flight' announced one morning that anyone with a knowledge of German was to put down his name in the flight office, several of us fell out with glee at the vague chance of escape from this depressing life.

But the weeks stretched into months and there was no letup in the treadmill. Then one Saturday, it was the 11th March, we were having our evening meal when our corporal came into the mess hall and shouted for Johnny and I to report to the flight office immediately. This could only mean trouble, but for once neither of us had a guilty conscience. One thing was certain, someone was out to sabotage our one day off in the week. We were puzzled and relieved when, instead of being detailed for some unpleasant duty, we were ordered to report with flying kit to the airfield the next morning. Due to bad weather our intake had barely started flight training and even the flight instructors could not tell us why an exception should have been made for just the two of us. Being airborne as a crew member certainly more than made up for our lost day off.

Lacking definitive orders, we paraded as usual on the Monday morning for normal duties. As we were about to march off, 'Flight' came rushing out of the office shouting: "Heilig, Herzog, why the hell aren't you at the airfield?" Well, no one had told us to and we weren't sorry to make a quick escape from the usual drudgery.

Having lugged our flying kit miles to the aerodrome, we were told that due to bad weather there was to be no flying that day anyway. However, the Chief Instructor wanted to see us, so off we went to add yet some more mileage to our peregrinations. On arrival we found another dozen or so cadets waiting to see him, having been ordered unexpectedly from their various classes. We were filled with apprehension and foreboding about our impending fate. Seeing no reason for preferment, it could only mean trouble. Then I had a brainwave. "Do any of you speak German?" I asked. They all could. No one said a word, but by the expressions on their faces it was obvious that all had the same vision of little figures dangling on the end of parachutes on sinister and dangerous missions behind the enemy lines.

Before I had time to collect my shattered wits, Johnny and I were ordered into

the Chief Instructor's office. "You two are required for immediate posting to a squadron. I do not know why. Can you get your tests and flying finished by Wednesday?" We were not due to complete our course for another three weeks, in fact it would take longer than that to finish our flying and there was a bottleneck on further postings and the thought of facing the ordeal of our final examinations had not even crossed our minds. But here was an opportunity to pack all that into the next 48 hours and, while we had no doubts about our ability to pass the tests, it's always a good thing to have the instructors on your side. We were being offered a short cut to - what? But the long way round is not necessarily safer, in fact, usually fraught with more uncertainties. All this flashed through our minds and we answered with a firm "Yes Sir!"

"Alright then. There's no flying today so go and get your exams done right away. Report tomorrow morning at the airfield for flying."

We did not have to stand and wait. The instructors pounced on us like a flock of vultures and by mid-afternoon we had passed all our tests. We then wallowed in the luxury of quietly ambling back for tea as almost free men while the rest of our intake had their noses well and truly strapped to the grindstone.

The next day was no different. No sooner had we poked our noses into the flight office, we were whisked off for our first flight of the day. While cadets from previous intakes sat around getting bored, we were up and down like yo-yo's and finished the day with our air qualifications in our pockets.

On Wednesday morning we ambled along to breakfast in our own good time and then paid a visit to our flight commander. He handed us our signaller's wings and sergeant's stripes, wished us luck and told us to get cleared and collect our marching orders for our secret destination. The date was the 15th, the Ides of March. Six years to the day since my father had been arrested by the Gestapo in Vienna. Ominous - but for whom? Well, I'm still alive and kicking, more than 50 years later. But our first thought was a visit to the tailor to get the visible signs of our new-found glory sewn on our uniforms. So far everything had worked like greased lightning, but now bureaucracy reared its ugly head. It took us until Thursday afternoon to get through all the bumph and be issued with our travel warrants for Fakenham in Norfolk - to report to 214 Squadron at Sculthorpe. However, our time was spent quite pleasantly. There was no one to chivvy us and everyone was very polite. The weather was mild and we luxuriated in no longer having to wear a greatcoat buttoned up to the neck and hump our small kit around all day. Passing Service Police no longer held terrors for us. To their smart "Good morning Sergeant," we replied with a gracious "Good morning Corporal." We were really very, very pleased with ourselves.

Johnny and I arrived very late one night at Fakenham station, wondering what we'd let ourselves in for. It was Friday 17 March 1944 and we'd been humping our kit since early morning on a wartime train journey in fits and starts across country. They'd been most helpful in seeing us on our train in Hereford. We'd had to fend for ourselves during the interminable changes to our destination and here we were, surrounded by our kit on a deserted platform. However, a phone call to the station soon had us bouncing along deserted lanes in a transport to our new home. We were bursting with curiosity, but all we could get out of our driver was: "It's all very secret, you'll have to find out for yourselves." He would not even tell us what type of aircraft the squadron was equipped with in case we turned out to be German spies in disguise.

Our quarters were in a hut accommodating about two dozen NCO aircrew in one long undivided space. To reach the two vacant beds at the far end we had to run the gauntlet of our new companions who eyed us with undisguised curiosity. We

had heard tales of scruffy, devil-may-care aircrew, but what we saw here out of the corners of our timid eyes were immaculate uniforms of Warrant Officers, Flight Sergeants and the odd Sergeant, nearly all sporting the 1939-43 Star and some even the DFM. We felt very small indeed.

"Just been posted in?" said a voice.

"Yes."

"Where have you come from?"

"Radio School."

"Been instructing?"

"No. Just passed out."

There was a deathly silence.

"How many hours have you got?"

"Ten and a half," said Johnny. "Eleven," said I.

Another deathly silence. We felt like crawling away into a hole.

"Ah well, never mind. You'll soon get into the swim of it. Better kip down for the night and we'll show you around in the morning."

One of the lads took us to the Sergeants Mess for breakfast next morning and told us to check in with the PMC, then report to the Adjutant. We had no idea who or what a PMC was, so he enlightened us that he was the bloke who ran the mess and if we wanted feeding we had better go and say hello to him. The Adjutant proved the efficiency of the system by expressing great surprise at our arrival. But being a man of infinite resource, as well as of a generous nature, he promptly sent us on seven days leave. That very same Saturday evening saw us wallowing in the flesh and other pots of London.

However, someone or other had evidently tumbled to the fact that our posting to the Squadron had been of a very urgent nature and on the Tuesday we received an immediate recall to duty. This time they were ready for us. We were informed that the sole object of the Squadron was to carry special operators like ourselves along in the main bomber stream and that it would be our duty to find, identify and jam enemy fighter control transmissions, causing havoc and confusion to their defences. The whole thing was so secret that not even the Commanding Officer knew what it was all about.

No time was wasted in getting us trained on our equipment. It consisted of a control unit with a cathode ray tube scanning the German fighter frequency band and any transmissions would show up as blips on the screen. We would then tune our receiver to the transmission by moving a strobe spot onto it, identify the transmission as genuine (this was where our knowledge of the language came in as the Germans were expected to come up with phoney instructions in order to divert our jammers), then tune our transmitter to the frequency and blast off with a cacophony of sound which in retrospect would put today's pop music to utter shame.

The transmitters were standard T1154 mf/hf transmitters modified to operate on 38-42.5 mc/s. Later on, specially designed equipment was to be used. The Squadron was not yet operational, having recently been converted from Stirlings. The B17 Fortress had been chosen for the job, later to be followed by B24 Liberators for 223 Squadron, as the American type bomb bay was better suited for the installation of the planned equipment than the British underfloor bays. As there were not enough special operators to go round, we were allocated to whoever happened to be flying until our establishment would be complete and allow permanent crewing up.

We soon made friends and found our favourite crews. The old hands, a number on their second tour, made us welcome and we soon lost the feeling of being

intruding greenhorns. Training went on apace and we all felt it could not be long now before we became fully operational.

One day Johnnie and I were called to the adjutant's office. He advised us that our German names would put us at considerable risk in the event of being captured by the enemy and that arrangements could easily be made to change them to something more innocuous. Johnnie took him up on his suggestion, promptly opting for the innocent sounding one of Hereford, but I was not so sure. What were the options? First of all, they would have to shoot me down. Secondly, I would have to survive and thirdly they would have to catch me. My innate optimism, or more likely ignorance, told me that none of this may ever arise. But supposing it did and I was captured, might it not be just my luck to be interrogated by some former school fellow who would recognize me and brand me as a spy sailing under false colours? On the other hand, we had been told that under the Geneva Convention all we were required to reveal, and in fact obliged to do, was number, rank and name, and so long as we did this with a correct military bearing, the Germans were not likely to press for more.

What finally decided me was my father's example. When the crunch came at the time of the Anschluss he unhesitatingly decided to face the music - and, though sorely tried, got away with it. Of course, luck had also played its part but when does it not, and does not fortune favour the brave, at least part of the time? One day, during his time in concentration camp, the head of the Gestapo and SS, Himmler, had come on a tour of inspection and had all the prominent politicals from Vienna paraded for his particular attention. Amongst others, he stopped to address my father.

"What were you," he asked.

"Journalist."

"Do you know where the publisher of the Stimme is?"

"I last saw him at the Gestapo headquarters in Vienna."

After Himmler had passed on, my father realized how that man's ignorance had saved him from a difficult, if not potentially fatal situation. The publisher is only the business head of a newspaper, the man Himmler had been looking for was the editor, the man responsible for what was actually written - and he himself had been the editor! It had been a close shave.

Another instance of facing things boldly came to mind. In the early twenties my father worked in the editorial office of a Budapest paper and this frequently involved a lonely walk home in the early hours of the morning. The direct route home would take him past the headquarters of the Arrow Cross party, an anti-Semitic and fascist-oriented organization, which, being a Jew, could well involve him in an unpleasant and perhaps even downright dangerous situation. The alternative was a lengthy detour which he was averse to taking at the end of exhausting working day, or rather, night. There were invariably a pair of sentries in front of the house and his first instinct was to slink past in the shadows on the opposite side of the street. But they would hardly fail to notice his surreptitious passage and, if only to relieve the boredom of their stint, hail him if only to amuse themselves at his expense. No, he decided to put a bold face upon it all and march past under their very noses as if they did not even exist, though inwardly he quaked. To his utter amazement, they not only allowed him unhindered passage, but jumped to attention and gave a smart salute as he passed. This happened on each subsequent occasion and it was only very much later that he discovered the reason for this unexpected mark of respect. He bore a superficial resemblance to one of the senior members of the party and his bold approach had convinced the sentries that it must indeed be he. Had they taken a

closer look at the shadowy form across the road it would have been a different story.

No, I would not change my name. I had calculated the risks and decided to follow my father's example. He had borne his name with honour and not deviated from his true course; I would do no less and place my trust in providence.

Johnny and I had been on the Squadron a month when someone had the kind thought that, being now fully trained, a spot of overdue leave would not come amiss. It was the afternoon of the 20th April and we were getting our things together when we were called to report to our section immediately. There we were told that we had been selected, along with two others, to take part in the Squadron's first operational flight in its new role before proceeding on leave the next day as planned. Some of my special chums were flying that night and I had the pleasure of getting teamed up with Canadian Jake Walters and his crew. Forty-one years later I would be in touch with them again, but that's another story.

The target was the railway marshalling yard of La Chapelle in Paris. We did not know it at the time, but strikes against focal points of transport were part of the prelude to the Normandy landings. I had celebrated my 19th birthday on the day before and today was another birthday, Hitler's. I thought it rather appropriate that I should have the opportunity to start settling a personal account by helping to deliver an appropriate gift to That Man.

We had an uneventful trip and after a few hours sleep Johnny and I caught the train to London for our week's leave. As the train rolled south carrying two very self-satisfied young airmen, a travelling companion remarked with a knowing smile: "You boys had a busy night last night!" For a moment we were horrorstruck. How on earth could he have known that we'd been on ops last night? Then we realized that he meant the RAF generally and not ourselves in particular. "Ah yes," was our noncommittal reply. "We try to keep the ball rolling."

I can't remember many details about my time with 214 Squadron but I have deep and lasting impressions of a happy unit with a high morale and a great sense of professionalism. Survival in war is largely a matter of luck, but it has always seemed to me that the high standard of airmanship on 214 must have had something to do with the fact that of the twenty-odd crews I knew, only four were lost. 214 Squadron has certainly always had a very special meaning for me.

The Squadron moved to Oulton on 16 May. One of our specialities was spoof raids, small groups of aircraft shovelling out great quantities of Window (aluminium foil strips) to simulate a bomber stream. Following the pattern of attacks on French railway marshalling yards, several of these had been flown over France giving the real raids to Germany a clear run while the German night fighters were chasing Window. Then one night we flew a spoof to the Dutch coast while the real attack consisted of a force of Mosquito night fighters over France. The Germans fell for it and flew straight into the waiting guns of our Mossies. Another spoof was in support of the D-Day landings. Months later I was told that in the late autumn of '44 some twelve aircraft of 214 and 223 had stood by for 48 hours, waiting for some particularly nasty weather over Germany. Due to our intruder raids, German aircraft were not allowed to approach their airfields without prior clearance as all unidentified aircraft were immediately fired on and they had instructions to bale out if they failed to get permission to land. The spoof force flew a Cook's Tour of enemy territory and

the threat forced their night fighters up into the murk. Our aircraft returned unscathed, while many of the enemy either came to grief in the filthy weather or had to abandon ship as we fouled up their communications.

On one of my leaves I had lunch with my father at a Czech émigré's club in Bayswater. Amongst the group of his friends there was a WAAF sergeant and I made polite conversation with her. To my opening questions she replied that her work was so secret that she could not even tell me where she was stationed. However, before many minutes had passed, I knew that her job was my own counterpart on the ground with 100 Group. When I started to grin, she told me indignantly that it was nothing to laugh about, it was all terribly important, but she was mollified when I told her that I was in the same racket. She then told me the following story.

Receiver operators passed Luftwaffe radio traffic to a controller who then issued co-ordinated false instructions to transmitter operators designed to cause confusion to the enemy. One night there was nothing happening whatsoever. Then the controller was roused from his torpor by repeated calls for a homing, which evidently remained unanswered. Mainly in order to relieve the utter boredom of a routine watch, he decided to give the lost sheep a course to steer - to Woodbridge airfield in Essex. The German pilot had been faced with the prospect of having to abandon his aircraft and was going to buy everyone concerned a beer on his return to base. He came down safely - to find himself a prisoner and could hardly be expected to keep his promise to stand drinks all round. The aircraft was a Ju 88, stuffed with the latest German equipment, quite a catch for Intelligence. The capture of this aircraft was made public at the time, but not how it had all come about.

I did three more trips with Jake Walters, the last of which finished his tour. Meanwhile I had also flown with other crews and had got very pally with F/O Jackson's. In mid-July we had reached our full complement of special operators, which enabled us to be crewed up permanently and I joined Jacko's. We had all done the same number of trips and I could expect to finish my tour with him. His mid-upper gunner was Dave Hardie, a nephew of the actor Leslie Howard, to whom he had quite a marked resemblance. We did our tenth op on July 17 and two days later I was told that I had been posted to 101 Squadron of 1 Group along with Johnny and an Australian whose name I believe was Bluey Glick. 101 had pioneered airborne jamming and had continued the job as a sideline, they were short of specials and for some reason had priority over 214. Three of us had to go and the powers that be had decided on us. I protested and pleaded to no avail, I had to pack my bags and leave my cherished friends to finish my tour with strangers. In fact, this probably saved my life. Jackson and his crew were lost some weeks later.

July 22 saw me airborne in a Fortress for the last time when F/Lt Bray took us to fly on Lancasters at Ludford Magna in Lincolnshire.

**Source : Gerhard Heilig**