

## **F/LT Vern L Scantleton DFC War Experience 2**

This is my second effort at putting on paper some of my war time experiences and it is a mixture of observations, comments, nostalgia and my first and only admission of a most stupid and reckless decision made during my flying career.

Whilst most boys of the 1930's were captivated by the great flying feats of Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith, Charles Ulm and others, and had secret dreams of becoming aviators themselves, my doom was sealed when in about 1939 I saw the pre-war film 'I Wanted Wings' which amongst others starred the gorgeous but absolutely dumb blond, Veronica Lake. The film must have made quite an impact as I can still recall most of it today. Needless to say, at the tender age of about eighteen, it was not the dumb blond who mesmerised me but the remarkable at that time B-17 Mk.I. Flying Fortress four engine bomber. This aircraft was featured throughout the film and would have been one of the first four engine bombers to be in service anywhere in the world. Little was I to know as I watched the film in the Kerang theatre one Saturday night, that I would be flying the latest version of this aircraft on my second tour of operation over Europe in 1944.

It was my good fortune to survive two tours of operation relatively unscathed in bomber command. The first tour comprises thirty operations and the second tour, twenty. Actually, I only completed nineteen operations on the second tour as the Station Commander, Group Captain Dickens refused to let me do the twentieth by saying 'you've done your share, you have completed your second tour'. It is rather difficult for a Flight Lieutenant to argue with a Group Captain. Statistically, one had to have a lot of luck to survive two tours as it had been worked out that over a period the chances of survival was about one in thirteen on each raid. This therefore was somewhat akin to playing the poker machines. If you play long enough, you will lose eventually in the end. I was very fortunate in having two very good crews which I must admit I was very severe on regarding training and discipline. With a total crew of ten, this was essential and I was well aware that at times, some of the younger members hated my guts especially as I was only about twenty three at the time.

On the 11th March 1944, I was called to the Wing Commanders office and told that I was to take Flight Lieutenant Cam Lye, a pilot in the Royal New Zealand Air Force and Roy Forbes, my navigator and a skeleton crew and go to Langford Lodge R.A.F. Station in Northern Ireland and fly back a B-17 aircraft. This on the surface looked to be a simple and routine exercise. Pilot Officer George Mackie and crew were to fly us over and wait until we had taken off which was to be the following morning. At this stage it is worth giving a few comments on George Mackie. George was one of the great characters of the Royal Air Force. In 1940, he was studying architecture at Edinburgh University when he joined the R.A.F and gained his wings as a pilot. George was well read, witty, highly intelligent and one of the few to have had his log book endorsed as an exceptional pilot.

On the debit side, he was very bad tempered, argumentative, sarcastic, "red-

ragger" and a true Scot in that he had an intense dislike for the British. He did little to conceal his various dislikes and thus paid a high price as he was only commissioned in 1944. With his ability, he should have won a commission in 1940 and with the passing of time and the loss of pilots, he could have reasonably have expected to have risen to the rank of at least Wing Commander by the end of the war. George apparently has not changed and fifty years later I was to read a humorous letter that he had written to Roy Forbes in New Zealand in which in part, he refers to the fact that his unmarried daughter lives in Spain and collects cats, dogs and men in that order. I well remember the trip across the Irish Sea as it was a beautiful day and as we approached the Isle of Man, George took the aircraft down to zero feet and skimmed across the waves. This is a very dangerous stunt as water is very deceptive and a moment's inattention can put the aircraft into the drink. As we approached the Isle of Man, George raised the nose of the aircraft and we slid across the Island at tree top height, no doubt frightening the hell out of animals and humans alike.

On landing at Langford Lodge, we sought out the Station Engineering Officer and were stunned to learn that the aircraft we were to pick up had been on the station for about four years. It had been flown over the Atlantic and dumped at Langford Lodge and forgotten. He was unable to give us any details and obviously, was only interested in getting it off his hands. He was able to confirm that no maintenance had been carried out and that the motors had not been run nor had the compasses been "swung" in that time. Finally, we were taken to the aircraft and were somewhat staggered to see that it was a Mk.I. which didn't even have the fairing on the tail plane. In other words, it was similar to the aircraft in the pre-war film 'I Wanted Wings'. An interior inspection showed that various spiders and other wrigglies had taken up residence for the duration. The aircraft had no R/T or W/T and as the RAF flying equipment and the American were totally different we would have no intercom communications throughout the flight. On the squadron, we were flying the latest B-17 H aircraft with twin row Wright Cyclone radial motors. The motors in this aircraft were single row of unknown horsepower and capabilities. This all added up to the fact that the aircraft was totally unairworthy and under no circumstances should it have been flown, especially as the return flight was over water and with no means of communication. I have always prided myself that during my flying career I always paid particular attention to detail and did not take unnecessary risks. Why then should I decide to take off in an aircraft which was certainly not airworthy. Perhaps it was because of the discussion with Cam Lye, who was a more experienced pilot than I as he had been an instructor in Canada prior to his posting to the United Kingdom. As Captain of the aircraft, the final decision to take off was solely mine.

On the morning of March 12th, we decided to take off as it was a lovely clear day and the Met. report was favourable particularly over the Irish Sea. We turned the aircraft into the runway for takeoff and gave the motors full power.

We had not gone more than a couple of hundred yards when the combined four motors set up a tremendous scream and gave the impression that we had four

runaway propellers. I looked at Cam. Cam looked at me and we both dived to pull off the motors. By the time we had taxied to the end of the run way, we could find nothing really wrong with the motors or instruments so we could only assume that this was the normal function of these particular motors. We decided to try another takeoff and as we turned the aircraft onto the runway, the yellow Vauxhall control tower van came rushing across the field, lights flashing for us to stop. An Erk got out of the van and was pulled into the aircraft at the rear door. He scrambled breathlessly up to the cabin and said to me "the control officer said to tell you that he has now placed an ambulance at the end of the runway". Hells Bells! That was the last straw. Or was it because we were in Ireland it was just a sick Irish joke. I'll bet very few pilots have ever had a personalised ambulance placed at their disposal on takeoff!!!

By now, the reader will have guessed that the second takeoff was successful and with just a little sweat on the brow, under the armpits and a few other places, we turned easterly and headed for base.

The weather over the Irish Sea was clear but as we came up to the United Kingdom coastline, we could see the clouds forming ahead and soon after passing landfall, we were in thick cloud which was intensifying the further we went. This placed us in a serious situation as we had no communication with the outside world and with an unswung compass, we did not want to "pussy-foot" around in case we ended up in some mountain range. We decided to forget going back to base and at the first opportunity of a break in the cloud, we would go down and land at the first aerodrome we could find. We finally found a break in the cloud and descended cautiously and after time thankfully spotted a drome. This was a fairly small drome and as we had no R/T to call up the control tower, we fired off a couple of verey lights and made sure we had the runway to ourselves and for our exclusive use. We had no wish to risk an abortive landing and have to go around again on landing. We were directed to a dispersal pan near the control tower and were to learn that we had landed at Llandwrog in Wales. On entering the officer's mess that evening, I was delighted to have been met by Geoff Bromley, a fellow pilot who got his wings and commission on the same day as I did at Point Cook. Within a short time, (that is a couple of beers) he informed me that he was getting married to an English girl the following month. My mind had to work overtime as I well recall having loaned him twenty pounds to buy a ring to get engaged to a Melbourne girl just prior to our embarkation for overseas. On our way to United Kingdom, we were billeted for six weeks at Camp Miles Standish in Taunton near Boston in the USA. During this time, Geoff got himself engaged to an American girl. Needless to say, I did not question him as to what happened to the other girls. But boy oh boy, was he a fast worker. But on the other hand, the weaker sex did fall for the boys in blue. Even some of the girls at Benalla married intrepid airmen!!

Apart from the fact that it took an hour and a half to get the four motors started the following morning our return to base from Llandwrog was uneventful. This aircraft of course was totally unsuitable for operational purposes and again, was put in a lonely dispersal pan.

On 16th April 1944, 214 squadron was moved lock, stock and barrel to Oulton on the Oulton Broads just north of Norwich. All the aircraft had to be flown over and as this clapped out old machine was on the squadron inventory, I was given the job of flying it over. Fortunately it was only a short distance between the two dromes, but about half way to our destination, there was a loud bang and the aircraft shuddered violently. It was promptly picked up that the problem was number three engine and this was feathered immediately. On arrival at Oulton, we found quite a number of our aircraft milling around all wanting to land. Again, with no R/T, we could not communicate with the control tower and with a clapped out old machine on three motors, we were not prepared to take risks so fired off a series of red very lights clearly indicating to all we wanted the runway exclusively for our own use. It was subsequently found that a couple of connecting rods had snapped on number three and had punctured the cylinder walls. No wonder, it had kicked up such a racket!

I had always been aware that Grandfather John Scantleton migrated from Northern Ireland to Australia in the 1860's. In more recent years, I was to learn that he left from Moneymore which is very close to Langford. How ironical it would have been if through my foolhardiness, my broken bones had been scattered over a field near where my grandfather had left some eighty years earlier.

For fifty years, I have pondered on why a B-17 Mk.I. aircraft could have been dumped at Langford Lodge and forgotten. This of course would have been before the Americans entered the war. The answer came when I was browsing through some war books in the Maroochydore library last year. I opened a book on the RAF and started to read a paragraph which told how twenty B-17's, that is Flying Fortress bombers, were purchased from the USA in 1940 for use by bomber command. These aircraft were found totally unsuitable by bomber command and were "scrapped". Beyond doubt, this particular aircraft was probably the last to be flown over the Atlantic and by that time, no one wanted it. Those readers who were aware that I was flying B-17's at the end of the war, will have picked up that contradiction exists in the above story so I had better explain.

After Bomber Command "scrubbed" the use of B-17's as a bomber in 1940, they did not use these aircraft again for carrying bombs. By 1943, the invention of radar and other highly sophisticated electronic devices were rapidly being used by both sides. Bomber Command decided that they needed a bomber support squadron in which the aircraft carried no bombs but only specialised equipment which were to be operated by two German speaking operators.

The power needed to operate this equipment had to be equivalent to the output of the BBC pre-war. The only aircraft available that could generate the power required at the time was the American B-17 series G & H. Thus the B-17 was brought back into the bomber command fold. In their great wisdom, the powers that be, selected 214 squadron to be the chosen squadron and so we converted from Stirling bombers to B-17's and the whole squadron and station was

classified top secret. On raids, the squadron aircraft were placed throughout the bomber stream, that is at the head, tail and middle. Our problem was that we had to carry home with us the same pay load that we went out with, unlike the Lancasters and Halifaxes that dropped their load over the target put their nose down and clocked about 270 miles per hour whilst they got to hell out of the target area. For use of the special equipment, the B-17 bristled with antennas and a large perspex blister under the nose. All this impeded our speed so that within twenty minutes of leaving the target, the B-17's were at the tail end of the stream heading for home. Not a good place to be when the night fighters came up.

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