

F/LT Vern L Scantleton DFC War Experience 3

This is my third and final instalment on my tales from World War II. My sponsors have advised that reluctantly they are unable to allow any further advance payments on the next instalment, so we have decided to call it quits. At this stage therefore I would like to thank Jeff Roberts and John Scantleton for their generous time in typing the tapes, and also accepting full responsibility for indifferent grammar and poor spelling.

Following my posting to the United Kingdom, I joined 600 mixed aircrew in Melbourne, and embarked on the 30,000 ton American luxury liner "West Point" for a fast cruise to San Francisco. This ship had been taken over by the military authorities as a troop carrier for the American army. From San Francisco we were railed across the States in a long troop train, in quite good comfort, we all had sleeping berths, and all meals were supplied on the train. Our destination was Camp Miles Standish, Taunton near Boston. We were to be held there until we again embarked on the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. Six weeks later we were taken to New York to join a convoy. I was lucky in that I joined a group of 19 other young officers who were put on the "Esperance Bay" a 15,000 ton cargo vessel that had plied between Australia and England pre-war.

We left the New York harbour sometime during the night, and in the morning we were well out to sea, and to our amazement in the middle of an 85 ship convoy. After travelling together for several hundred miles the convoy split into two; 42 ships left to take a southerly route across the Atlantic, and our convoy of 43 ships headed for a northerly crossing.

At that particular time the German submarines hunting as a "wolf pack" were causing tremendous losses to shipping on the Atlantic run. It thus had developed into a cat and mouse game between both sides to prevent a "wolf pack" getting amongst a convoy. Coded signals to our convoy commodore took our course far north, and finally within a hundred miles of Iceland. Conditions in this area were of course sub-zero, and for three days the convoy sailed through broken ice - large chunks of ice, and we were to observe a number of very large icebergs.

Our convoy did not come through unscathed as two cargo ships hit icebergs in the night, and one a large merchant vessel with steam engines on the deck, which were destined for Russia, had to be scuttled next morning. A Royal Navy corvette also hit an iceberg but managed to limp to a port in Iceland.

We were fortunate in that the "Esperance Bay" only carried twenty passengers, and therefore we travelled in reasonable comfort with three to a cabin. The meals were good, and to ensure we did not suffer from malnutrition we had cocoa and hot scones at 10 am and a pleasant afternoon tea at 3 pm. I assume that Grahame Roberts travelled in similar conditions, when he was on A.I.F. troopships, - perhaps sometime you could ask him?

During the time when we were going through the ice floe, I was literally caught

with my pants down. One of the luxuries we had on board was extremely hot salt water , so one afternoon after lunch I decided to enjoy a prolonged hot bath. Just as I had reached that stage of full contentment, when certain parts of the anatomy, were taking on the colour of a boiled lobster, the alarm bells started to scream, which meant that all the crew take up battle stations, and passengers proceed immediately to allotted positions on deck. I cannot recall drying - dressing - or gathering my survival equipment, but I'm quite sure that had it been an olympic contest, I would have been the winner by far. I have often wondered what the variation would have been between my body temperature in the bath and that of the sub-zero conditions on deck - all of which would have been within a span of a few minutes.

One day whilst getting some exercise on deck, we got talking to the refrigeration officer. He volunteered the information that the ship was carrying 15,000 tons of meat and if struck by a torpedo, it would break and immediately sink like a stone. He also happily continued that we had little to worry about as the water temperature was so cold, it would be impossible to survive more than a minute in the sea.

Whilst we were going through the extreme sub-zero temperature period, every ship became entirely encrusted with ice. It was therefore quite a remarkable sight, to see some forty vessels under certain light conditions, all sparkling white.

After a very slow crossing we finally arrived at Liverpool, and promptly entrained for London, where we spent the night at a hotel taken over for the duration for officers in transit. We were sitting around in the lounge that evening, when a R.A.F. Wing Commander came in and joined us. He was able to tell us that he was on the convoy which took the southerly route, and that a "wolf pack" had got amongst the convoy and 14 out of the 42 ships were sunk over a period of several days, and that all in all it had been a tenable ordeal. His own personal loss had been heart-breaking, as during that 48 hour period, he had lost his wife and two little girls. He and his family were returning to England after he had completed a posting to the Royal Canadian Air Force.

If I were to be asked who were the unsung heroes of World War II, I would unhesitatingly say men of the merchant navy - particularly those who were on the Atlantic crossings, the convoys to Malta and other Mediterranean ports, and of course the virtual suicidal convoys to Russia. How they were able to get sufficient men to man these ships voluntarily, under such dangerous and difficult conditions is beyond me, and I can only assume they were well paid to do so. It is a severe blot on successive British and Australian Governments, that these men did not receive the recognition they deserved, though it is pleasing to note, that in recent years this has changed somewhat, and they now receive more benefits in line with those applicable to service personnel.

Many service personnel throughout the war spent periods of boredom through isolation, and generally waiting for something to happen. In my case I was fully

occupied either training, operational flying, instructing, other duties and travelling. However I must admit I spent one month that I disliked intensely.

Following the completion of an operational tour, a compulsory period existed before anyone could go back and do another tour. After my first tour I was posted to 1699 Conversion Unit which was where all future pilots for 214 Squadron were converted onto B17's (Flying Fortress). I disliked instructing and decided to get back onto the old squadron for a second tour as early as possible. My chance came when the morale of the 21st Squadron started to fall and it was decided that a few experienced crews could help raise the level. Group Captain Dickens granted my application to return on the proviso that I first did a month long administration course at the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell.

This was a bit of a surprise, as those sent on the course would normally have administration leanings or thoughts of a permanent airforce career. G/C Dickens appears to have had a little fatherly interest in me in that he had previously mentioned to me that I should consider an airforce career - and no doubt this was intended as a push in that direction. Having entered the hallowed gates of the college, I immediately became aware of an unpleasant odour, and within a short period of time, I realised that this was due to the generous dose of "bull-dust" that was spread throughout the establishment. Throughout the course we did not leave the cloistered grounds, and it was virtually run on peace time conditions, although it was apparent that many of the staff were in the 50-60 age group. No doubt the powers that be were well aware the R.A.F. would still have to carry on after the cessation of hostilities.

The course started one morning at 8 am, and I was staggered to find that we started off with an examination, it was explained to us that this was an exam in reverse, in that we were being tested not on what we knew, but rather what we did not know. Each morning at 8 am we started with an exam, and I have no doubt I passed through with distinction - in that I recorded the worst performance of anyone who had passed through the dignified portals.

One day we each received a printed invitation to an "at home" in the station commander's home at 12 noon one Sunday. Hells bells, I didn't know what an "at home" was let alone the correct procedure on how to reply.

The station C.O. was an Air Commodore aged probably about fifty years. In the 1920/30's Britain had some protectorates in the middle east countries, and had squadrons based out there. At that time anti-British desert tribes had a nasty habit of not killing captured British infidels but instead with a sharp knife promptly rendering them incapable of any further reproduction. About 1927, the Air Commodore, then only a young officer was forced down in the desert and unfortunately found by a Bedouin tribe who smartly reduced him to the status of a eunuch. The C.O.'s wife was an outgoing vivacious person with more make-up on than an Apache warrior, no doubt to hide the fact that she was much older than she wished people to think.

At the "at home", I was talking to a couple of other young fellows, when she gushed over with obviously a story to relate. For some reason I did not get the thrust of her story initially, but then it hit me like the Spirit of Progress, at full speed. What she was describing in some detail was the valiant attempt of her young adopted four year old son seducing the young daughter of the Wing Commander from next door on the back lawn, all of which she was observing from the bedroom window upstairs. In 1944, ladies did not discuss such delicate matters with gentlemen - in fact I did not know they discussed such things at all. I relate this story, to show how innocent young men's outlook on life was rapidly broadened in the services!!!

During the 1939/45 war there were three raids by the allies, which surpassed anything else in devastation and loss of life. Two were the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the other was the combined raid on Dresden by Bomber Command and the U.S.A.A.F. bombers in the European theatre of war.

For the next fifty years and longer people will research, debate, argue and write emotive and inaccurate articles on this raid. As I flew on this raid, I believe I am entitled to at least have my two bobs worth for whatever it is worth. The simple facts are that approximately four thousand tons of high explosive and thermite incendiary bombs were dropped on Dresden over a fourteen hour period and due to accurate bombing a fire storm of unprecedented size was to devastate the entire centre of the city.

Because of the influx of refugees, fleeing before the advancing Russian army, only an estimate has ever been given of the total loss of lives, and this has been recorded at between twenty three and twenty five thousand. This beyond doubt is the most controversial raid carried out over Europe. Whilst we are all great arm chair critics with various views, it is almost certain that the real reason for the decision to carry out the raid will never be known. The book "Dresden - 1945" written by Alexander McKee should be read with a grain of salt. Apart from the fact that he was anti Sir Winston Churchill and Air Chief Marshal Sir Arthur Harris (Chief of Bomber Command), he also claims that the total loss of lives was 135,000. The disparity between his figure and the official figure, greatly dents his credibility, and suggests he wrote the book with the dollar sign flashing before his eyes.

Three separate raids were carried out:

1. Bomber Command at 10 pm on 13th February 1945.
2. Bomber Command at 1.30 am on 14th February 1945.
3. U.S.A.A.F. Bombers at noon on 14th February 1945.

Suggestions have been made that this raid was a deliberate reprisal by Churchill and Harris for the bombing of British cities and the loss of aircrew over Europe. This must be considered total rubbish and should be consigned to the waste paper basket. The real question to be answered is to what extent it was political

and not military.

Dresden was a beautiful city, world famous for its pottery, porcelain and other works of art. It did not have any factories of much military value. I and my crew flew with 200 Lancasters of No. 5 Group in the first wave, and as mentioned in a previous story we did not carry bombs, but were in the stream as a support bomber with sophisticated equipment.

Of the many briefings before takeoff that I attended this is one I clearly remember, as someone got up and asked the Intelligence Officer what was the military objective in this particular raid. This was most unusual as I had never previously known anyone to query the objective of a raid. In this case the Intelligence Officer's reply was, amongst other things, the railway marshalling yards were an important strategic target, and that the German Government had, and were continuing to transfer important officers to that city from Berlin to carry on the war. At the time of this raid, the Russian army had broken through, and were rapidly advancing Westerly. Much discussion in the mess centred on when would the Russians stop, or more importantly what would make them stop. Churchill, Roosevelt and their advisers must have been very worried at this point of time, as they would well have known that whatever area the Russians over ran they would not give up readily. It is of interest to note that Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met at Yalta only three days prior to this raid. At the time of this raid the Russian army was only fifteen miles from Dresden. Was this raid designed to show the Russians, the destruction power and the combined striking capabilities of Bomber Command and the U.S.A.A.F.? I rather think it was.

It is now my view that the initial raid was fully justified as a military target. It is doubtful whether the second raid should have been carried out, and beyond any doubt the U.S.A.A.F. raid should have been cancelled, as reconnaissance photos would have clearly shown the destruction.

Such is war and I guess there is little I could have done about it.

On 1st June 1945 I flew my last aircraft. This was a daylight flight, in which we took ground crews to view various cities that had been bombed. On operational squadrons, ground crews were allocated to individual aircraft dispersed in pans around the perimeter. An affinity quite often developed between the aircrew and ground crew on a particular aircraft, and a loss of an aircraft often visually affected these men.

The cities flown over included Calais, Brussels, Leverkusen, Wupertal, Dortmund, Essen, Cologne, Dusseldorf, Gladbach, Dunkirk and others.

I will never forget flying over Cologne and viewing the devastation, and to my amazement, seeing the majestic Cathedral standing amidst the ruins.

If I can get sufficient information on "FIDO", it is my intention to add an addendum to this third instalment.

Vern Scantleton
(F/Lt. R.A.A.F)
214 Squadron
Bomber Command