THE LAST FLIGHT OF STIRLING MARK I R9166
Royal Air Force, Bomber Command, 214 Squadron
13/14 September 1942

This account is based on information obtained from the records of 214squadron.org and from the recollection of the late P/O Tim Fussey, the sole survivor of the mission, as recounted by him in a 1995 letter to the daughter of Sgt. Ronald Dicks, who was killed in the flight.

The Crew:
● **Pilot/Officer Robert Joseph 'Bobby' Cartmell**, J/15883, Pilot, Royal Canadian Air Force, Canadian, KIA 14 September 1942, Aged 24
● **Sgt. Stanley Watson**, 1133624, Air Gunner, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, United Kingdom, KIA 14 September 1942, Aged 30
● **Sgt. Roy Frederick Reynolds**, 1265583, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, United Kingdom, KIA 14 September 1942
● **Pilot/Officer Harry Edward Orr**, J/15865, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, Royal Canadian Air Force, Canadian, KIA 14 September 1942, Aged 19
● **Pilot/Officer P. 'Tim' Fussey**, Royal Air Force, United Kingdom, POW 14 September 1942
● **F.S. Joseph George Spouler**, R/71030, Wireless Operator/Air Gunner, Royal Canadian Air Force, Canadian, KIA 14 September 1942
● **Sgt. Ronald Dicks**, 1121218, Flight Engineer, Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve, United Kingdom, KIA 14 September 1942, Aged 29

The Story:
In mid-1942, 214 Squadron of RAF Bomber Command was stationed at Stradishall Airbase, in Suffolk, England. Having previously flown Wellington bombers, 214 Squadron converted to Stirlings in April, 1942. Missions were flown constantly for nighttime bombing of cities in northern Germany, primarily Hamburg and Bremen, starting in the spring of 1942. P/O Fussey's letter provides background on the Stirling bomber and crew:

"I have thought a lot about how to write this letter and I feel that I'll have to fill in the background of flying in Stirlings, the rest of the crew and how the aircraft worked to try and get across to you the night of 13/14 Sept. 1942. The Stirling had 4 engines, each using 1 gallon of 140 octane petrol (very high volatility 4-star car petrol is about 97 octane) per minute. That's 240 gallons per hour flying so we should have about 1000

gallons (at least) on board – highly flammable. As we were to fly above 12-14,000 feet we had a full quota of liquid oxygen bottles – the cabin was not pressurised – each man had his own oxygen mask and he could plug into the supply as he moved about the aircraft. We were at about 18-20,000 feet and the load was 10 tons of incendiary bombs. They were an experimental variety. Usually they were Thermite (powder) but these were filled with sticky liquid which would run down into cellars and ground floors and set the buildings alight from the bottom upwards. (The bomb cases would shatter on impact) We, as a crew, were not told about this. I discovered later in the POW camp that it was probably Napalm, so you see we were not a good fire risk.

  "The crew comprised 7 men. There were 3 Air Gunners – rear or tail, front and mid upper. There was one wireless operator/air gunner who seemed efficient, but as we had to maintain radio silence, he hadn't much to do except stay awake and listen out for incoming messages. It was always accepted that the Pilot was the Boss and I took care to do so, scrupulously."

P/O Fussey had a colorful description of his pilot, P/O Bobby Cartmell:

  "The Pilot was a good one – a Canadian named Cartmell – rather a rip-roaring type in his way. I felt he should have been a Fighter Pilot – gung-ho and out for a good time off duty. Perpetually "spent up" (He still owes me £3! And I should imagine Ron was let in similarly)."

His description of the crew duties and training on the Stirling continued:

  "We each had our own duties, as you can see, but in addition we had (as all aircrew had) a duty to each other in an emergency. We had dummy practices at crash landing, ditching in the sea – parachuting, abandoning the aircraft in the air and that seemed at the time to cover everything. Out of this lot, what concerns us now is Abandoning the Aircraft in the Air. If the Aircraft was on fire, try to control the fire with extinguishers. They were in brackets all over the fuselage. At the same time lighten the load by jettisoning the bombs. Open the bomb doors, press the button and away they went - if they didn't then jettison the bombs in their containers. That forced the bomb doors open and the whole lot went as a single unit. Then the Pilot had to decide pretty sharpish if the aeroplane was flyable – if not he gave the order "bail out". There were escape hatches in plenty and you used the nearest one. But a word first about parachutes: You wore a webbing harness all the time. Two straps came over the shoulders, two round the back and up between the legs and two round the sides. At the ends of the webbing straps were metal plates rather like car seat belt straps which fitted into a metal box at the front about the level of your navel. There was a quick release knob on the metal box. The canopy of the parachute was separate and was folded to about the size of a hard cushion. It was enclosed in webbing and at the back of the "cushion" were two metal D rings which fitted on to two large spring hooks (like dog lead hooks only much larger) which were at chest level on the harness. This meant you could carry the canopy separate from the harness, put it in the appropriate stowage and move freely about. Each crewman had his own stowage space – the Gunners in the turrets, the Wireless Operator near his radio, the Engineer above his control panel. The Pilot's was at head level at his side and mine was near the Pilot's. In an emergency you clipped the canopy package on to the spring hooks on your chest and out you went. As soon as you were out you pulled the release – no counting to ten so beloved of the arm chair warriors!

"All crew members were in intercom contact – built- in head phones and microphone in the flying helmet, and a long lead which could be plugged into connections anywhere in the aircraft."

Just one week prior to their fateful mission, the crew's plane had survived an incredibly close call after receiving a flak hit over Germany which punched a large hole in the port-side wing, the immediate effect of which was the loss of large amounts of fuel, forcing P/O Cartmell to nurse the plane back to base with unequal weight distribution and minimal fuel. But only the next morning did the crew realize the true extent of their danger. As they found the bomber with its left wing sagging its tip all the way to the ground, it became apparent that the flak damage had actually severed the main spar, which is a large metal beam extending from wing-tip to wing-tip, through the fuselage, and providing the main support for the wings. Their return flight had been possible only by the rivets attaching the left wing to the fuselage!

As a result of surviving the close call, the crew was feeling bold, perhaps even indestructible, a common reaction, according to P/O Fussey, as he later learned from fellow POW's in Germany. But it was not recklessness that brought about the tragic events of the following week, as described by P/O Fussey:

"Then came 13th/14th September 1942. Again the target was Bremen. I mentioned the load and so on earlier. It was a fine, clear moonlight night. We were doing the run up and I was moving into the Bomb Aimer's station – just about to go down the steps when we were hit. I plugged into the intercom and saw Cartmell pulling the Control Column towards him, then a voice from the rear of the plane said "We're on fire". Cartmell said "Put it out then!" Then to me

"Pass him the extra fire squirts". I opened the door and passed the extinguishers to the W/Op I think. Then Cartmell said "Shut that door and jettison the load". He and I, remembering the week before, weren't really bothered and I don't suppose Ron and the rest were. I pulled the Jettison toggle and nothing happened. The shots had cut the cable, so I pulled the other one, containers and all, and it came away in my hand. Cartmell heard me on the intercom and immediately he said "Abandon Ship! Bail Out!" I noticed Cartmell had taken his feet off the rudder bars and braced them on the dash board. He was pulling on the Control column with both hands. I reached up and got his parachute pack and put it right way up on his knees. I noticed that the small patch of bare skin near his cheek bone (between his helmet and oxygen mask) was covered in sweat. I gave him the thumbs up and he winked. (We had been caught in search lights after being hit so we could see alright!) I turned to reach my parachute pack – I had hold of it at face level…….

"When I came to, it was 25/35 minutes later. I was on a river bank which seemed to be in a town. I noticed the time because I was wearing my navigation watch and had entered the time on the log as I moved forward. Judging by my bruises and missing skin I figured I had been blown

through the side of the cockpit. I was near an escape hatch which probably helped. I had a stiff neck. I had not unplugged the intercom when I parted company from the Stirling – the earphones and mike had pulled out of the helmet. A miracle I hadn't broken my neck, but worse than all that, broken ribs, missing skin, bruises and such like, my flying boots had been blown off! Fancy facing Hitler and his Aryan hordes in stocking feet!

"I have a memory that during the 25/35 minutes gap (unconscious) I had a sensation of falling head over heels continuously with a very bright light all round. I had felt warm and cozy – all these are common sensations I am told, when one is close to dying. My parachute canopy was only attached to the harness by a spring clip on one side."

P/O Fussey was captured by the Germans and eventually interned at Stalag Luft III, the POW camp from which the real-life "Great Escape" of film fame occurred. He did not know the fate of his fellow crew members, though he assumed all were lost in the explosion and crash. In truth, five crewmen of R9166 are buried at the Rheinberg War Cemetery at Rheinberg, Germany, and the sixth, the mission's pilot, P/O Bobby Cartmell is buried at Sage War Cemetery at Oldenberg, Germany.