*To Valerie and Alison,*

# *A letter from*

# *"Snowy"*


*"The King's Thunderbolts are Righteous"*

**Cover**

Skipper Bert in Doorway
From Left to Right Alf….Vic….Freddy….Snowy….Bernie….Bob

**Valerie**

**Alison** **(standing)**

**Skipper**

**Snowy**

# *A letter from "Snowy"*

*Valerie and Alison are the daughters of Bert,*
*an English pilot and Snowy's skipper*
*for almost three years in RAF Bomber Command.*

*After Bert's death in 1993,*
*the girls were at a loss to understand*
*and know of their father's wartime experiences.*
*Like thousands of others*
*Bert never spoke much of his exploits,*
*so they appealed to Snowy to enlighten them.*

*Valerie was four years old*
*when Snowy first met her in Bolton,*
*but never met Alison, who was born just after the war.*
*However, there is a strong bond now.*

*This is his reply,*

*Josephine Brown BA.*

## A LETTER TO VALERIE AND ALISON

When you asked me about your father's squadron experiences and service life, I imagined writing a few pages to cover the most pertinent points. But when I got started I found myself detailing so much that I was virtually unloading myself of the memories and some nightmares that have been locked away and suppressed for 50 years, in some cases.

I sincerely hope you can understand that, although it is all written in the first person, it is Bert's story too – also the rest of the crew's. The details and the gory incidents happened, and we lived through them. I have put them down on paper for you in the hope that you will appreciate why, perhaps, he never talked to you about it. We could talk to each other and others in the same situation, but to those who hadn't experienced these things and especially your own family, it was most difficult. I think most of us felt it would be unbelievable.

I myself would have nightmares, war-based, especially when my children were quite young, and would have to check on them each time to make sure they were safe in bed. In the end I had some counselling and a bit of treatment and eventually it faded away – never forgotten, but easier understood.

When your dear Mother died I knew it would be a terrible blow. My heart really went out to your Dad – to me, they were so marvellous.

Although we had kept in touch a bit erratically over the years, it was the reunion in 1984 that meant so much to me. Bert stopped on in the village pub near Waddington with me after all the others had gone home and we just drove around and had a look at the old airfields and talked.

We discussed the animosity that had developed toward "Bomber Harriss", the man in charge of Bomber Command during the war, the protests that were made about erecting a statue of him in London. He was the only senior wartime commander who didn't receive a peerage at the war's end – Montgomery, Alexander, Portal etc were all made lords, but it was common knowledge that Harriss's bombing of Germany didn't go down very well with the Royal family because of their very close ties with Germany. On only a few occasions did any Royals attend the Annual Bomber Command reunions.

We talked, too, of the young historians who had come out of the woodwork since the war and told us that we didn't do this or that and what was right and what was wrong. They were too young to have played any part in it and all their information had come from someone else's statements.

It is amazing these days, to watch adults on television proclaiming that the Holocaust never happened, that it was all propaganda. I would love to be able to take them back to May and June 1945 to see some of the victims we flew home on our Exodus mercy flights from the POW camps and concentration camps.

The bombing of Dresden, late in the war, has been a favourite topic for the critics. Dresden was a target because it became a huge transit centre as the allied armies pushed across southern Germany. But I have to say it was more a political target, with the Russians putting severe pressure on Britain and America to ease their problems on the eastern front.

People seem to overlook the fact that Russia had the power to put pressure on our side, as they had losses almost twice the total of our combined forces.

To those who condemn us for what we did, let them be reminded that Germany started the "Blitzkriegs"; we finished them by doing it

bigger and better. The names of Warsaw, Lidice, Rotterdam, Conventry, London, Belsen, Dachau and Auswich will always remind me of the motto of the 44 (Rhodesia) Squadron – Fulmina Regis Iusta - the King's thunderbolts are righteous.

We talked, too, of the raids we liked and the couple we didn't like. That isn't exactly what I meant; we didn't "like" any of them. It should have been raids that were genuine targets and raids that were anti-personnel, but we'd be told, at briefing, these targets were vital. Just before take-off we'd find out the bomb load. All 1,000 lb bombs or 500 lb bombs to us meant "elimination" bombing.

Unfortunately, we experienced a couple of these. Bert and I talked of them and quietly cursed the "heads" for having put us in such a position of having to re-live, in nightmares, what we were forced to do, but I cannot recall your Father ever saying if it had affected him. I don't think I told him that I had sought treatment, but I do know that he really cared.

I'm not sure how you will receive all this, but I can tell, honestly, that I feel so good about it. I have never written or talked about the events in the following pages in such depth before. I hope it fills a void in your life. Your Father was one of the finest men I ever met.

# CHAPTER 1 – "GET FELL IN"

Your Father was always "Bert" to me and the crew, except when we were flying, and then it was strictly "Skipper". I knew he was "Albert" to your Mother and his parents and his old friends, but this was Air Force and we were taught to say the least possible and only when necessary. Anyhow, that's one story. We called him Bert because it was easier and said with great respect. I got called "Snowy" from the first day in the Air Force and I was a redhead, anyhow, who would want to be called "Quentin" in a Sergeants' Mess?

I had finished my training in Australia in November 1942 and was posted to England via the United States and enjoyed a glorious three months in Camp Miles Standish near Taunton, Mass. We were held there because the Queen Mary had collided with an American destroyer and was laid up for repairs. We had to wait for an alternate troopship, which turned out to be the Queen Elizabeth, which we boarded in New York and landed four days later in Greenock. There were 300 Australian airmen, some Canadian Air Force and Army and the remainder were US Army – all up, 20,000 persons.

We had nothing to do while in the US except accept the hospitality of the natives, and I visited Niagara and caught up with some relatives of mine in Hartford, Conn. My great-grandfather had left a son and daughter there when he took off for Australia in 1868. They were adults when he left there and he was a widower. Anyhow, he settled in Australia and remarried and started a new family – hence me.

Having arrived in the UK we were soon put in the picture that there was a war on and I was posted to OTU (Operation Training Unit) at Kinloss in Morayshire, Scotland. There were eight Australians (all

Air Gunners) on this posting. We had all been together throughout our training in Australia and were pretty good mates.

Our introduction to the Royal Air Force was an address by a real pukka pre-war permanent Air Force officer, who referred to us as "you colonials". You can imagine how this made us bristle, especially as he kept it up throughout the course. He certainly did not endear the RAF to us.

However, after doing a lot of flying and gunnery and dropping leaflets over Heligoland, which we thought was just one step from suicide as we were not crewed up and flying twin-engined Whiteleys (the "flying coffins"), we were informed to proceed to the neighbouring airfield, Forres, and pick ourselves a crew! So we eight "bloody colonials" got on our pushbikes and rode off to Forres – and destiny.

We were directed to an operations room and there was a huge blackboard marked out with pilots, navigators, bomb aimers, wireless ops and gunners, and all places had been filled except for one gunner each. So we stood back and perused this great list.

One of my mates picked out pilot Sgt Kidd because Captain Kidd had been a famous pirate and should know how to handle things. We others made similar decisions. I picked out Sgt Wright, because I had a great friend back home called Frank Wright and my Father had performed the wedding ceremony for Frank and his bride when Father was a lay preacher. Despite all the technology, red tape and you-know-what the RAF could put you through, it ended up just writing your name on a blackboard in your chosen blank space. There was no leader saying, "you should fit in here", or there or elsewhere.

But I was right when I picked "Wright", as two of our eight were killed at Kinloss on training flights before we left there.

The next thing was to meet our crews. As we were all sergeants, off to the mess we went. The sight of eight gunners in navy blue uniforms walking in together caused a lull in the mess conversation, broken only by murmurs of "Jeez – bloody Australians" and similar words of welcome.

A veteran Warrant Officer stepped forward and wanted to know what our "caper was, then?" We explained our presence and then we were asked, "Where's your chits, then?" A chit was any piece of paper, signed by anybody, authorising the bearer to do anything (or nothing, as the case may be). You would need a chit for a late meal, to change your clothing, to get a new boot brush, to apply for leave. They were everywhere and a real pain, but the RAF couldn't survive without them!

Of course, we had no chits so he called out the pilots we had selected, and that was how I met your Father – a meeting I shall never forget, nor the circumstances, as up to this time we "colonials" had just about had a gutful of this supercilious superiority.

From that day on, we were a crew and Bert and I became real mates. I know at times he used to despair of me and some of the antics the Kiwis and Rhodesians and us Aussies got up to. But he never had cause to pull me into line regarding lack of discipline, crewmanship or flying, as we only let our hair down (violently) on nights off.

Anyhow, Bert had been around. He did his pilot training in the US in Florida, and had mixed with all sorts while there. The Yanks were training Poles, French, Dutch and others there, and a lot of the instructors were civilians in private enterprise at that time.

Our navigator was a Canadian, Arty from Seskatchewan, about 28 or 29 at that time, a terribly nice bloke but after about eight trips with us on 44 Squadron, he was declared medically unfit. He

suffered badly from arthritis, and at times we had to almost carry him out of the aircraft. He was sent back to Canada as an instructor. Bert told me in 1984 that Arty had died only a short time before, so he must have contacted him after the war.

The bomb aimer, Bernie, was from London and was a real ladies' man. He was also ambitious, and had obtained his commission during the early days. He was a great bomb aimer and later went on to do a leader's course. He was one of the original members who didn't come back on the second tour with us. He was the emergency pilot, in case anything happened to the skipper, who had given us all some flying time, but concentrated on Bernie, should the need arise. When we met up in 1984, he was well into local government and expected to be voted mayor of his area, so he still had plenty of ambition. Your Father told me that Bernie fell victim to the recession and was finding things a bit tough, and never turned up at a later 44 Squadron reunion at Waddington.

Our wireless operator was Vic, and he came from Peckham, London, where his father had a butcher's shop. He was another good mate, straight as a die, and went out of his way to make me feel at home in England. I spent some time with his parents whenever I had a day or two in London.

When we were posted to 44 Squadron, he met up with Vera, who was a transport driver in the WAAFs on the station, and many times she was the one who took us out to our aircraft and picked us up on our return.

They were married some time after our first tour, and when I met them again in 1984, they were just the same couple as of old. We keep in regular touch as she has a sister in Perth, Western Australia, a niece in Tasmania, and they have had a couple of trips out here.

Vic missed flying a couple of trips with us because he broke his wrist and had it in plaster, which made it a bit awkward to tap a

Morse key, but he caught up by flying as an "odd bod" with another crew whose wireless operator was not available. Flying odd bod was not welcomed at all, as you had to fly with a crew you didn't know and they had a very bad habit of not coming back. I know, as I flew a couple myself, with crews who were brand new to the squadron. You virtually had to tell them when to put their hand out to turn right or left!

Our rear gunner was Freddy from Conventry, a bit of a "hard case", very popular, very efficient; no lass was safe from our Freddy. He had been in the RAF for some time and had been a ground staff armourer and had transferred and trained as aircrew, so he knew the ropes.

But he had one bad habit, and I woke up to it one night when we were coming back over the North Sea in pretty bad weather and low level. I could smell smoke, and I called up from the top turret and asked the rear gunner to look up the fuselage and see if something was burning. As quick as a flash, he replied that everything was OK, and a couple of seconds later, I felt someone tugging my boot.

Besides frightening the living daylights out of me, a voice from the intercom said, "Quiet", and then a torch shone up into my turret. I got out of my turret and it was the rear gunner. He had been sitting under my turret on the bomb bay having a smoke. Of course, he didn't want the skipper to know, and he confided in me that he was terrified of the sea and couldn't swim. He had got out of his turret and come forward when the skipper had decided to fly low level to avoid the weather. It was a known fact that when Lancasters ditched in the sea, they broke off at the end of the bomb bay. The tail section, with turret, would sink in seconds.

I could of throttled Freddy at that moment, but decided to say nothing to the skipper. After we landed and had been debriefed, I took Freddy aside and told him I wouldn't say anything to the skipper if he allowed me to teach him to swim. He knew he would

be in serious trouble for leaving his post, but I was amazed at his eagerness to learn. He and I would cycle a couple of miles to a disused quarry where they had an old Manchester fuselage stuck in the water for dinghy drill instructions. After about four or five lessons, Freddy was cured, and there was never any further trouble.

When we were back on our second tour I told Bert about this escapade and how I taught Freddy to swim. He said, "Yes, I know all about it. I knew he got out of the turret".

I was dumbfounded as I thought it was a big secret. When I asked Bert why he didn't do something about it, he replied, "I didn't have to do anything because I knew you were looking after it". Do you wonder why we admired this man so much?

I was intrigued to find out how Bert knew. He said that when the question about "smelling smoke" cropped up and Freddy gave the all clear, he pressed the emergency button that was linked to the two gunners' turrets. These were used when the intercom packed up. The gunners had to press a red button to take evasive action to port and a green one to take evasive action to starboard. A white light was a signal back from the pilot to each turret.

Bert pressed the rear turret white button and got no response, so he knew Freddy had got out. Unfortunately, after our first tour, we never heard from Freddy again. None of us know whether he finished the war or not.

So this was the crew that started flying together in March 1943, flying the "deadly" twin engine Whiteley. They were a terrible aircraft and had no top turret. I acted as the dogsbody. Whenever the wheels wouldn't come down automatically (most of the time) I would crank them down manually. Whenever we had a "bomb hang-up" on the training bombing range, it was me who had to crawl into the bomb bay and take out the inspection covers and try to release the bomb manually. After a couple of these episodes, I

found the easiest way was to take to the offending piece of equipment with a fire-axe. Not according to the procedure laid down in the manual, but much quicker and easier!

It was a great relief that we finished at Kinloss and were being posted to Winthorpe, near Newark, Notts, at the end of March and had a few days leave on the way down. Bert invited me to go home with him for a couple of days. I gladly accepted, and that was when I first met your Mother, at number 2 Brookside Road, Tonge Moor, Bolton.

By a remarkable coincidence, your Mother said to me that their neighbours next door had an Australian staying with them, too, and lo and behold it was a mate of mine named Flint. We had gone through all our training and played football together but had split up after we arrived in England. I cannot recall the neighbours' name, nor the reason why Flint was staying with them, but he was shot down around July 1943.

I very much enjoyed my stay and your Mother, being the lady she was, made me very welcome. I was taken to meet Bert's parents and numerous relatives and felt something of a show-pony, as Australians were not all that plentiful. I remember at night, Irene would get out the photo album and they would go over all the cycling tours they had done. We would sit in front of the fire in the lounge with an odd pint – what bliss it was!

The posting to Winthorpe, which was a Heavy Conversion Unit, meant that we were going into heavy bombers. We started flying the twin engined Manchester which were virtually the early edition of the four engined Lancaster, and of course we were all praying to do well here and be posted to a Lancaster squadron.

Some squadrons had been operating Lancasters for a few months. These were considered the Rolls Royces of heavy bombers: they could climb higher with a bomb load, carry a heavier bomb load, go

further and faster etc. However, we were still flying these Manchesters, and each of the crew members had to learn new techniques and attend short courses on nearby aerodromes such as bombing and gunnery and wireless operating while Bert was being instructed on the Manchesters.

Then after a week or so we were all together again as a crew, doing practice bombing and night flying and mock-up raids to the north of Scotland, with RAF night fighters doing dummy attacks on us. They used cine-camera guns instead of bullets, and the next day we would view these and either be told we had been "shot down" over York or Dundee, or we had spied the fighters and evaded them.

We had quite an experience one night, when we were about to land, the skipper found we had no hydraulic power – so no brakes or power to operate the slow-down flaps. This meant we would be landing very fast, and going a long distance. We called up the tower and told them of the trouble but got no response. We circled around for a while but got short of fuel so Bert decided to land anyhow. It went off quite well. We rolled and rolled and ran out of runway and kept going and eventually ended up in a swampy depression. We couldn't see the control tower, so waited and called up. Still no response and nobody came to pick us up.

After half an hour, Bert decided to fire off a red flare. Ten minutes later there was still no response so I said I'd take the flare gun up on the rise where I could see the control tower, and fire one off. I didn't tell Bert I was going to fire it straight at the control tower! Didn't we get some attention then! They pulled the Manchester out of the bog, held an inquiry into the whole debacle and put me on a charge for "endangering life", but that was quashed when the skipper explained it was just an accidental firing.

Despite all this, we were selected to convert to Lancasters immediately, so we spent the rest of the time at Winthorpe learning

all about them and flying them. This bought us up to Spring 1943, the time of our posting to a squadron to start the serious business.

The skipper called a crew meeting in the back lounge of the Spread Eagle pub in Newark. He told us we could pick a squadron we would like to be posted to, so we all had a say and a drink and a say and a drink, and a drink, then sang some bawdy songs and poured jugs of beer down the back of the piano. A couple of us tried to pick up a couple of Army girls. We were doing OK too, until their Army boyfriends' came in and one thing lead to another and a "breach of the peace was occasioned".

Bert and Arty, the navigator, had left earlier when they realised we weren't going to come to a decision. They got back to camp pretty early, so we were left to the tender mercies of the Army Military Police, a body of very large men not overly endowed with the gift of compassion. Your Father had to get out of bed at midnight to identify us at the guard gate, where the MP's had graciously dumped us. The skipper wasn't all that impressed, but kept his counsel. When he saw us at breakfast, and the state we were in, I think he thought that sufficient justice had been dispensed.

The decision about selecting our squadron was talked of. There was talk of a new squadron forming – 617 (which later did the Dams raid and lost nine out of 19 aircraft) or an Australian squadron 467. But I was pleased eventually to go to 44 Squadron and mix with the Canadians, Kiwis, Poms, Rhodesians and the odd Pole.

The decision about the squadrons we wanted was not ours to make, as we were to be sent to any squadron that needed replacements, to make up the number for those who had been lost.

We were selected, with one other crew, to join 44 (Rhodesia) Squadron at Dunholme Lodge, just north of Lincoln, part of 52 Base, Scampton, where the Dambuster 617 Squadron was. The 49

Squadron at Fiskerton, only a few miles away, made up the three squadrons for the base.

Ironically, 44 Squadron had just been kicked out of Waddington to make way for the newly formed Australian Squadron 467 – Waddington and Scampton were both pre-war stations – two storey barracks and all the conveniences possible. Dunholme Lodge was a nest of Nissen huts with duckboard pathways, pot-bellied stoves in the middle of each barracks housing two crews (14 men).

These Nissen huts weren't lined. During the winter, when you lit up the stove, the condensation off the inside of the roof would run down and drop on to your bed and clothes hanging in open spaces (no wardrobes). You could get the old potbelly red hot; but those beds near it would scorch, and the beds at the far end would freeze. You have no idea what a let-down it was, but we only had time to find the right hut and bed and unpack our gear before being called to the flights office to meet the CO, Wing Commander Joe Nettleton VC.

## CHAPTER 2 – "THE KING'S THUNDERBOLTS ARE RIGHTEOUS"

Wing Commander Joe Nettleton VC was a charming South African in the RAF. He won his VC for leading 44 and 9 Squadrons on a low-level daylight raid on the engineering works at Augsburg. He and his crew were the only survivors of 44 Squadron flight and 9 Squadron lost six aircraft. But the raid was a success.

The "Rhodesia" part of the squadron number was purely political, as in those days it was "all for the king and country" and "the glorious British Empire, upon which the sun never sets" stuff. The Rhodesian government had probably financed a squadron and been thus honoured.

There were very few Rhodesian aircrew who went through the squadron; this was probably a good thing, as they were the wildest bunch of jokers I'd ever met; terribly generous and genuine, but tough as nails. I'd be very surprised if your Father hadn't told you something about Palmer and Welensky, two Rhodesians I mated up with, who were also gunners. We did have a couple of South African CO's and the entire ground crews were Rhodesian or South African, with some English etc.

From the very first day at 44 we were under way, and we started flying, doing a night flying test and then a "bullseye" (mock raid) up and down England.

The next night the skipper went on a trip to Cologne as "second dicky", with an experienced crew, to gain some knowledge of what the "real stuff" was all about. Second dicky was a new pilot who hadn't flown on ops before, and would act as second pilot to the experienced pilot he was flying with.

The skipper came through with flying colours, and we were briefed the next day, as a crew, to do another raid on Cologne.

At this stage I'd better introduce Bob, our flight engineer. He joined us the second day we arrived on the squadron, another Londoner, just 19 years old, straight from engineer's school, and had never flown in his life. We couldn't believe it! Posted to an operational squadron, and not had five minutes in the air!

But your Father took him under his wing and they more or less spend the rest of the war (and some time after) together. Next to Bert, he was my favourite too.

It would be hard to expect you to appreciate this "crew" thing that stuck with us, and stuck us together. When I first met Bert and Arty, they were quite old – both about 28. I was 20, Laker was 21, Freddy Garrett was 22, Soper was 21, but it was Bert's manner, his integrity, his seniority that kept us almost in awe of him. If he had decided to go the Hell and back, it would have been OK. Come to think of it, we did!

The other crew that was posted to 44 with us had been with us in Kinloss and Winthorpe, and their pilot and Bert were good mates. One of his gunners was Pat Galligan, one of the eight Australian "colonials". Their pilot also did his second dicky the same night as Bert, and came back OK, and was included as a full crew to go to Cologne again.

Unfortunately, they didn't come back, so they were lost on their first raid. You can imagine how we all felt, especially having just started on operations. To make it worse, I tried to contact Pat Galligan's brother, who was on 61 Squadron on the other side of Lincoln. I received a message back from their adjutant that Ted Galligan had been shot down a couple of nights before. This was to be the pattern for the next eight months. Fellow pilot mates of Bert's, some on different squadrons, would be lost. By about

November 1943, I was the only one of the "eight colonials" left and I still had some 10 trips to do to finish the tour.

There were a few more Australians, who came to the squadron, but none survived, and I was the first Aussie to finish a four, at that time. Several did, later on, but none before. One particular Aussie, Terry Dowling, wasn't one of the eight, but I had known him before. He arrived in July 1943 and still had a couple of trips to do when we finished in January 1944. As I was at Base at Scampton instructing and had a bit of influence, I had arranged for him to come with me, but it wasn't to be, as he was killed on his last trip together with all his crew. His pilot, Harding, had been with Bert in the US when they were doing their flying training. Terry Dowling was another good mate who had flown on two trips with us, as rear gunner, when our rear gunner was unavailable. As a matter of fact, I named by eldest son Terry, after him.

The Battle of the Ruhr was almost over when we started operations. We did a couple of raids on Cologne, one on Essen, Hagen and Dusseldorf. At this stage the Ruhr Valley was the most heavily defended area in Europe.

It didn't matter what target was selected and aimed at, the whole Ruhr area would come to life with searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, and they would put up a box barrage of fire, with different batteries firing up vertically with shells exploding from 22,000 feet down to 10,000 feet and hundreds of searchlight lighting the sky. It was spectacular stuff, but you had to fly through that, and as Bert would say, it was 90 percent good luck at these moments. A near miss could turn your aircraft on its back. A direct hit was instant explosion. Anything nearby sounded like dried peas in an empty tin, as pieces of shrapnel peppered the sides of our aircraft or the wings.

The other system the Germans used was when a searchlight picked up a bomber. Another five or six would light on the same bomber

and form a “cone” of light covering a big area around the bomber. This would then give the anti-aircraft batteries a specific, lit target to concentrate on.

If you didn’t get out of that cone of light within a minute or two, you were gone. We saw it happen many times. The first few bursts would be a little low or a little high, but the next would be bang-on and a great explosion. The searchlights would switch off and the explosion would develop into a slowly dripping mass of burning aircraft parts, and, depending on what the aircraft was carrying, there would be great trails of red, green and orange wax-like icicles dripping earthward.

If hit, aircraft carrying any of the many different types of target indicator flares would explode in a pyrotechnic display equalled only by today’s fireworks.

The Germans developed a radar searchlight with a very bluish light that flickered a couple of times and then remained constant. These always had an aircraft in their beam and instantly had anti-aircraft shells bursting around it. The co-ordination between the searchlight and the anti-aircraft was very precise.

The only way to get out of the cone of searchlights or the blue light was to instantly dive at full power and turn sharply. When “coned”, nobody in the aircraft could see, and the skipper would have to lower his seat, which was automatic and fly only on instruments until we got out of the light. It happened to us on a few occasions and we got out of them, but it was a very dangerous manoeuvre, as you would lose 5,000 feet or so and have to dive through the rest of the bomber force – which you couldn’t see.

As Bert said many times, “it was 90 percent luck”. It wasn’t only very dangerous, it was bloody unpleasant. Flying straight and level then diving at 60 degrees at 300 knots in a turn caused everybody aboard to be thrown about and injured, at times. The ammunition

belts would jump out of the cases and become entangled in the turrets. The navigators' and wireless operators' maps and equipment would be tossed everywhere, and worst of all, the "Elsan" (our tiny toilet) would stay in place, but throw its contents all over the rear of the aircraft.

Typically, as with a lot of RAF formulae, it contained the most foul-smelling antiseptic emulsions known.

It was common practice for pilots to jettison the bomb load in these circumstances, but our skipper never did. I recall on three occasions, after escaping the searchlights, we had regained as much composure as possible and done an orbit of the target and came in again – at the correct height, on the correct course – a little later, perhaps, but we bombed the target!

Most crews would jettison and go like a bat off home. This was one of the things that made Bert Wright a top pilot and leader, and he made us a great crew.

Bert's philosophy was to fly on ops at every opportunity, to get our tour finished. Once we were airborne, hell or high water wouldn't stop us from getting to the target and bombing it – not go close or near miss.

I think I told you the story about our aircraft being U/S at the last minute. We ended up flying a 49 Squadron aircraft from a nearby aerodrome. We were late, the second dicky we were supposed to take deserted us at the end of the runway before take-off. But at least he stood at the signals van and moved us off. We couldn't really blame him for deserting us then, as it was something out of the Keystone Cops.

Bert had rung every nearby squadron to find an aircraft, then we had to get across six miles to man it. Nobody there knew anything about us; however, the skipper soon put them in the picture. The

bomb load was different to what we were briefed for, and of course we never heard how the aircraft flew or any of its bad habits.

Because of these unknowns, the skipper told the engineer to "go through the gate" on take-off (ie, absolute full power). Well, the old girl didn't like that at all, and halfway up the runway there was a great explosion in the port inner engine and a great shower of flame and sparks trailed some 30 feet behind it.

Naturally we were all scared witless and really expected the worse, but the skipper got her off the ground and airborne, and after a few moments of frozen silence, he informed us that we had lost a few manifold studs on the engine's exhaust systems. All was going well, except for the great trails of sparks. He reasoned we had survived the take-off, had a petrol load and a bomb load, and there was nothing stopping us from going onto Berlin.

I was sitting in the top turret, scared rigid, unable to see past this great trail of sparks on the port side, knowing that every German night-fighter from Murmansk to Milan and London to Lenigrad could sight us and no doubt wonder about this new secret weapon that was being launched against them.

On our return, we learned that the 20-odd personnel who watched the take-off at the signals van, including our elusive second dicky, all managed to fit into a slit trench built for six, when they saw our predicament.

As a matter of interest, this particular aerodrome was fitted with FIDO (fog investigation dispersal operation), a pipe system the entire length of the main runway, positioned each side, with spaced outlet valves that released a jet of low-grade fuel some 30 feet high. When ignited, this was very spectacular. The heat generated would lift a fog up to 800 feet and allow aircraft to land.

However, it was a bit dicey for Lancasters, as they required 1,000 feet to do their final circuit and approach the "funnel" of the runway. They would be in the lifted fog at 1,000 feet, and coming out of it, heading for the runway, was like taking a blindfold off. Many times this called for some split-second manoeuvring.

But it was certainly effective, not only for lifting fog, but with a little additive, the fuel went reasonable well in the odd motorbike and car (unofficially, of course).

Anyhow, we got to Berlin unscathed half an hour late, and had the whole place to ourselves. With the smoke, fire and clouds, the bomb aimer was having trouble finding the right target, so the skipper said, "Keep a good look out, we are going around again". Any one of the six of us would have willingly choked him at that moment, except for the fact we were scared rigid. However, that trip was to become a legend on 44 Squadron; so, too, did Bert Wright and crew, during our time there.

As you will see in Bert's logbook, we went on the Battle of Hamburg and the Battle of Berlin, to Milan and Turin, Magdeburg, Hanover, Leipzig etc and no trip was without incident of some sort. We lost an engine over Celle on the way to Hanover, and we relied on this engine to supply power to the hydraulic system that powered to mid-upper turret and some flight controls like lowering flaps etc. This wasn't a problem until we had to land.

The engine had been hit by flak and caused a glycol (the coolant used in the radiator) leak, so the engine was shut down to save it seizing up. Naturally it slowed us down and we did lose a bit of height, but we bombed the target and got back. We had to land at an aerodrome in Norfolk that had extremely long runways to cope with aircraft in trouble with brakes or flaps (that pull the aircraft up). It also meant that I had to try to manipulate the turret and the guns by hand – hard enough on the ground, let alone at 20,000 feet

and minus 30 degrees. Fortunately, we didn't run into any fighters that night.

We had been briefed a couple of times to do a raid on Stettin, and it was the end of December 1943 and the weather had been foul. It was supposed to have been the worst winter for 50 years. Anyhow, we were eventually sent to Stettin on 5 January 1944. The Met people gave us all the latest weather – it was going to be OK for the duration of the raid – while we were still over the North Sea, before crossing Denmark we ran into terrific electric storms and had St Elmo's fire running along the aerials, across and along the guns, and generally scaring the daylights out of us. The skipper and navigator decided we could climb out of it, as we were only about 15,000 feet, so we climbed and climbed but nothing got better. We were really getting thrown about. Next thing we started to ice up. This meant ice was forming on the propeller blades, and when it flew off, it peppered the cockpit walls and sometimes penetrated them. It meant the shape of the propeller blades was slightly altered, and caused a loss of pulling power. Ice was forming on the leading edges of the wings, tail plane and fins, which also affected the shape of these items and changed the aerodynamics, causing loss of control by the pilot.

The normal procedure, in these circumstances, was to try to turn 180 degrees and get out of this cloud formation (cumulous nimbus) which could reach up to 40,000 feet – 15,000 feet higher than we could reach. However, to turn around would mean a loss of time, so after a very brief, nervous discussion, Bert decided we would dive forward, losing a bit of height, but maintaining time. We didn't have a clue what was ahead of us, but it was crisis-time and desperate measures were called for. When Bert Wright asked his flight engineer, sitting next to him, to check his safety straps and parachute harness, we knew things were grim. My turret was completely iced up and I couldn't see out of it at all. After losing about 5,000 feet, things started happening. The aircraft walls were

hammered with broken ice, and it started clearing off the turret and we came out of it.

To say these incidents were terrifying would be putting it very mildly, but, once again, our skipper had made the "Wright" decision. When you flew into these conditions, or in totally normal cloud, or even on the darkest night when you can't see a horizon, the skipper would have to fly entirely on instruments. In severe icing, these could pack up and he would have to fly by the seat of his pants – by the feel. Many times, under these conditions, I would report from my top turret position that we were actually flying port wing low, or starboard wing low – not that I had any horizon to gauge by, but by disengaging the mechanical drive to rotate my turret, it would go into neutral and the weight of the guns and ammunition would let the turret swing to the lowest side. If they remained pointing dead astern, we were flying straight and level (just a little point in crew working together). To help the navigator get a drift reading, the rear gunner would set his turret dead astern on zero degrees on his scale reading that went 90 degrees to port and 90 degrees to starboard. The navigator would drop a white flare out from the front of the aircraft, and as it came out under the rear turret, the rear gunner would follow it in his sights. After so many seconds, the navigator would call out "Lock". The rear gunner would lock his turret and then read his scale. It would be 10 degrees red (port) or could be 15 degrees green (starboard) and the navigator would know that the aircraft was flying at the angle on its compass course. It was purely a navigational aid and helped determine wind speeds and directions against those that were predicted before we took off.

However, this Stettin raid was not over yet. When we were approaching the target we had a brief engagement with a German night-fighter and had to corkscrew our way out of it. He broke off after tracers were seen to fly off him. I think we got credit with an "enemy aircraft damaged".

On the way to the target, we had gone through the icing episode; on the way back, we flew much further north and encountered head winds of 85 miles per hour. This presented a major problem and resulted unnecessarily in a great loss of aircraft and crews. Halfway across the North Sea we were already hearing SOS and "Mayday" calls from aircraft giving their position and notice that they were ditching in the sea.

Bert, the engineer and navigator were busy working things out as regards to how much petrol we had left, and it was decided we would be unable to reach our base. We set a course for the nearest landfall that could take Lancasters, and headed for the Norfolk coast and Cotishall aerodrome. A Lancaster had no gliding ability when all the motors cut out. It was decided to fly just above the sea with the bomb aimer shining the Aldis light on the wave caps and with our landing lights on to warn any convoys or Royal Navy ships that we were "friendly". (They had a horrible habit of firing first and asking questions later.)

The skipper, engineer, navigator and wireless operator were all totally absorbed in how much petrol was left, where we were and calling up for Cotishall to identify itself. Suddenly, we cross the coast and the bomb aimer swore we trimmed the hedges. Immediately we fired a couple of red flares and just as quickly an aerodrome lit up under us. We wasted no time in formal introductions and landed straight on the runway, turned off it and taxied about 50 yards when all motors petered out – out of gas. A tractor came and towed us to a parking area.

Some 20 or 30 aircraft landed there that night and the Cotishall amenities were stretched to the limit. They weren't used to entertaining operational aircraft and crews. Some of the crews weren't debriefed until we returned to our base at Dunholme Lodge the next day.

It was Bert's policy that, as crew, we entertained our ground crew once a month at the local, the Black Bull in Welton village. The boss of our ground staff was a grizzly ex-mines engineer, Sgt Jack De Beer from Rhodesia, who ruled his fitters and armourers with a rod of iron and a kind heart. We all got on very well, and they would go out of their way to help you out.

When the word went out about 10.00 am each day that ops were on that night and briefing would be at 3.00 pm or such, only a very few would know the target until 3.00 pm, but the armourers and refuellers would be told what bomb load to attach and the aircraft, and how many gallons of fuel was to be aboard at take-off time.

So it was a case of mounting the trusty bicycle and cycling around the perimeter track to your aircraft, to ask the ground staff what the bomb load was and how much petrol was to be loaded.

The powers-that-be worked on an "all up weight system". When we first started, it was 65,000 pounds, ie, the aircraft empty, plus bomb load, plus petrol load. Out petrol tanks (three in each wing) held 2,000 gallons, and the bomb load was 15,000 pounds. So if we had a light bomb load and full petrol tanks, we knew it was to be a long trip. If it was a heavy bomb load and small petrol load, it would be a short trip – probably the Ruhr area. A long trip was probably as far as Berlin. Full petrol tanks and a "top up" was a bloody long trip, to Italy or such. A top up was carried out when you had got to the end of the runway, before take-off and the refuellers would put in whatever you had used to warm your motors and taxi to the end of the runway. The engineer would use the petrol from only one tank for these purposes, and so cause the least delay in topping up, which was usually around 60 to 80 gallons.

It was a highly dangerous game, and everyone aboard and on the ground was petrified when it was carried out. As soon as the refuellers had finished and got off the wings, we would be on our way.

We never had any casualties with this caper, but a squadron nearby at Fiskerton had an aircraft blow up, causing a chain reaction with two other aircrafts lined up. The casualties were horrendous – aircrew, ground staff and a group of all ranks watching the take-off. We were lined up at Dunholme Lodge, some six miles away, when it happened. We thought an aircraft had dropped its "cookie" (a 4,000 pound bomb that could blow a city block apart). We could see a great ball of fire and smoke, but never knew the full story until we returned from our raid. Having that happen didn't instil a lot of confidence, just before take-off.

Your Father always maintained that take-off was always the worst part of flying. You had to rely entirely on all four motors to lift your aircraft off the ground, mostly overloaded with 2,000 gallons of high octane and 15,000 pounds of bombs. It was always a great relief to hear him order the engineer, "Wheels up".

About this time we had done six operations, and were due for some leave. It was off to London for me.

# CHAPTER 3 – GETTING "SOME" IN

Bomber Command's love affair with continuous night bombing of Germany intensified greatly in the latter part of 1943. Aircraft and men were being pushed to the limit. Newer engines for the Lancasters were Packard Merlins, the Rolls Royce engine made in Canada and America by the Packard Motor Co.

Improvements all round meant that we could go further and carry more bombs, but Bomber Command still wanted more. To enable this, they removed the armoured doors that protected the front crew from the rear. They replace them with plywood doors to keep the hot air up front.

The amount of gunners' ammunition was decreased, but worst of all was the declining ratio of petrol to bomb load – less petrol and more bombs. It proved to be fatal and didn't help morale among the crews.

The Stettin raid I mentioned earlier was one of the heaviest bomber losses, but not admitted by Bomber Command because they never counted as a "loss" an aircraft that had called up and identified itself as a "Mayday", or a ditching aircraft.

A similar event was experienced on 16 December 1943, on returning from a raid on Berlin. Five hundred and eighty nine aircraft took off; 24 were shot down and 30 were lost through ditching, crews baling out when they ran out of petrol or couldn't land at their bases because of rain and very low cloud.

These losses would amount to a 9.3 percent casualty rate, but that's not the way Bomber Command saw it. The figures I'm quoting from are extracts from the "Bomber Command War Diaries", first published in 1985. It was written and compiled by a mate of mine, Martin Middlebrook, and his historian mate Chris Everitt, who

spent 5 years going through all Bomber Command records, German records and interviews with survivors on both sides. They record every day and every event from 3 September 1939 to the blockade of Berlin: all the aircraft that took part, the losses, the damage caused and the civilian casualties etc.

I had first communicated with Martin Middlebrook of Boston, Lincs, in the late 1960's when he was seeking information about various raids. He wrote about ten books on such battles as Hamburg, Berlin, Peenemundi, Nuremberg, even "The first day on the Somme 1916".

When I went to England in 1984 for the 44 Squadron reunion, I met up with him and stayed a couple of days with him in Boston. Some weeks later, he and I, Chris Everitt and six others hired a minibus and toured northern France and Belgium for two weeks and visited the old World War I battlefields, where my Father had been in 1917 and 1918. He was wounded in September 1918 at Messines, Belgium, and spent some months in England after the Armistice in November.

However, I digress. Christmas 1943 was coming up and we had already been to Berlin a couple of times. Berlin was the "big city", the ultimate target, with every efficient defences, mobile heavy anti-aircraft guns and hundreds of searchlights. We had been there on 16 December, and because of the snow-bound airfield, couldn't go again until 24 December. Then we bombed at about 3.30 am Christmas Eve and got back to base about 8.00 am.

After a few hours' sleep, we were told to attend a two o'clock briefing. You wouldn't believe it, but they said we were "on", and Berlin was the target, to be bombed on Christmas Day!

Emotions ran high. Even the Germans, who really invented Christmas, didn't deserve this. The two flight commanders spoke up against it, as did several others. Bert had his say and finished off

by saying, “We were scrubbed from flying on Friday 13 in August, but they want us to fly on Christmas day!”

The briefing went on and the preparations were carried out, but the reaction by other squadrons was the same. The Base Commanders must have felt likewise. They put pressure on Bomber Command, and the operations were cancelled at about ten o’clock Christmas Eve. The bar had been closed because ops were on, but it only took one and a half minutes to declare it open. Someone told the barmen, “because of the mess up and the fact it was Christmas Eve, all drinks were free”.

What a night! I must have hung my sock up, because when I woke up about 11.00 am, there was a small cigar in it and two pieces of coal, love from Bert.

Bert had applied for a commission a couple of months before, and talked Bernie and me into doing the same. As with all things RAF, it entailed a lot of paperwork and time, but Bert’s came through at the end of August, Bernie’s about November and mine on 23 January 1944.

Bert should have been commissioned right from the start, as he was born officer material, a leader and organiser, and had shown all this from the first days on 44 Squadron.

He had taken over temporary control of “B” flight when its commander had gone missing and had been their right hand man when they were in control.

In about November 1943, it was put to us, as a gen crew, to leave 44 Squadron and go to a Pathfinder squadron, with a view to Bert becoming a flight commander in his own right. In a typical important crew meeting, Bert laid all the cards on the table, and the pros and cons.

We were the senior crew on 44 Squadron at this stage, having completed 20-odd trips, and only had a few to go to finish our first tour and have a rest period. By going to Pathfinders, we would fly until we reached 45 trips all told, straight through, and would not be required to fly on ops again for the duration. Normally, you would do 30 trips on the first tour and have at least six months rest, and go back to do 20 more, a total of 50 trips. Not a lot made it.

Pathfinders only wanted the best crews, ones that were prepared to take the odds and identify targets, sometimes at low level, drop the target indicator flares and markers for the main force to bomb, then stooge around and drop more markers if the originals had drifted too far off target. They carried no bombs, generally, put plenty of petrol for the extra flying.

These was one big snag: the Pathfinders had a diabolical casualty rate at this stage. They were the first over the area, had to find the target, mark it, accept all the light and heavy flak, and hope like mad that some of your own blokes didn't drop something on you from a great height.

So, after consideration, we said OK, we join the Pathfinders. We accepted a posting to 97 Squadron PFF, and as usual we had to go through all the red tape to get clear of 44 Squadron. Remember me telling you about those chits? Well, it takes two days and a bucket full of those to leave a unit.

That night, 44 Squadron went on a raid without us. The three squadrons in the base (44, 619 and 49) lost 16 aircraft, five from 44 Squadron. Amongst our losses were a flight commander, gunnery leader and the navigation leader, so the wing commander cancelled our posting to 97 Squadron and put Bert in charge of a section in "B" flight.

We cannot tell what would have been; we can only say it must have been for the best, because we did finish up OK, and Lord only knows what would have happened had we gone onto Pathfinders.

I may have told you both about your Mother not knowing about us being on operations, but thinking we were still on training. I just can't recall how she found out. I think Bert's uncle or a neighbour saw something in a newspaper about the Stettin raid. Anyhow, once it was known, I'm sure we saw a more relaxed skipper, perhaps a much more tense Irene!

It didn't stop Bert from breaking one of the cardinal rules of aircrew mythology or superstition – whatever – that was, never to invite your wife or girlfriend to stay at the local pub in the village. It was OK to have them in Lincoln or further away, but never at the local, the Black Bull in Welton, which was only 200 yards from the sergeants' mess.

I can't recall how many times, during our time there, that someone had to go and inform the poor souls that their love had been lost the previous night, but it was quite a few. Naturally, Irene was made very welcome, and we all had a great time. She was delighted to meet all Bert's crew and other squadron members. Of course, I got a scolding for keeping the secret. However, for the next couple of ops, we didn't forget about the omen. Bert, of course, and typically, took it all in his stride. I doubt whether he gave it a second thought, so we proved the omen wrong.

However, 1944 started off with major offensives by Bomber Command. The Battle of Berlin had started, and the whole crew were very tense. We were living on our nerves, smoking too much, some of us drinking too much, playing up too much, and the fact we were heading toward the end of our tour put more pressure on us. I know I was having premonitions about some trips that were coming up.

To get so far and see all your mates and crews go was getting to us. Fellow-pilot mates of Bert's were being lost, not only on 44 Squadron, but also throughout Bomber Command. Being an Australian, 12,000 miles from home, was bad enough. It was always a pleasure when another Australian arrived on the squadron, but none of them lasted.

A special friend of mine who was at high school with me in Murwillumbah came to the squadron just as we finished and had met Kelly, my girlfriend in the WAAF who worked in the operations room at Base. We had arranged to get married on 28 September 1944 and asked this chap, George, to be our best man. It wasn't to be, as he disappeared in April 1944 on a raid over France. To this day there has been no answer to his fate, and one can only assume they went into the sea.

On one occasion, we had gone into the target a bit lower than usual, and had copped a bit of shrapnel and been thrown about a bit. After we left the target area, we had to fly along these fighter lanes. The Germans used illuminating flares and lit up the whole path we were to fly, making us easy targets for their night fighters.

From my top turret I could see something on the starboard wing, but couldn't make out what it was. I was too busy, at that stage, to find out. However, when we cleared the area, I had the wireless operator shine the Aldis lamp, and discovered we had four incendiary bombs stuck through the wing above the petrol tanks. You can imagine the reaction of the crew. Someone, above us, had dropped their bomb load and we had collected some of them. These weighed only four pounds and were about 18 inches long and two and a half inches in diameter. They were full of phosphorus plus a detonator.

Fortunately, these things we'd collected hadn't fallen far enough to detonate, but we weren't to know what they'd do, so it was a very edgy crew that flew with them for another four hours. When we

landed, we were banished to a far side of the airfield. Bomb disposal were called in and successfully removed the offending items after all the fire and rescue trucks and ambulance vehicles had screamed out to us.

The normal bomb load we carried on these trips was one 4,000 pound "cookie", and up to 12,000 pounds of these incendiaries (about 3,000 of them). When they were released, it was like throwing confetti out of a moving car. Once again we had survived, but it did nothing for our nerves.

In the early part of our tour, June 1943, it was the custom to take off and orbit around our own aerodrome and climb to 20,000 feet, then set course. This manoeuvre generally took about an hour. In our case, we had three aerodromes with circuits that overlapped. You could have 20 aircraft from each aerodrome – 60 in all – milling around each other in the dark and cloud. Of course there were collisions, before even having set course. Seeing the explosion of two aircraft colliding and falling in a fiery mass did nothing for morale. It was the same thing when we came back and had to circle around, waiting to land.

On returning, one night, we were told we might not be able to land at our base because of fog. Sure enough, there was a bit of fog about, and just enough to make the aerodromes illuminated letters a blur. Several aircraft had landed and we were desperately trying to land on our own aerodrome. The bomb aimer was trying to identify these letters, and picked out "EM" which was ours, but Fiskerton next door was FN. Because of the fog, he made an error. We had already called up on radio and got permission to land, and proceeded to do so. Just as we were about to touch down, I spotted the letters FN. A quick call to the skipper and it was full power and off we went again, moved west six miles, and landed at our own Dunholme Lodge.

Not so lucky was one of our aircraft landing behind us at FN. He actually landed and was told to turn left at the end of the runway. He did so, and taxied for 20 yards, then dropped into a concrete canal. No lives were lost, but there was a very embarrassed skipper and crew, and the Lancaster was written off. Had he landed at Dunholme, the "turn left" direction would have put him on a concrete taxiing circuit.

That concrete canal went for miles around Lincolnshire and was to crop up again later.

The radio pattern between the various skippers and the control towers was interesting. They were telling aircraft "OK to land", and seeing no aircraft; the other control tower had aircraft landing and taking off again without permission, and one filling part of their canal. However, we kept mum about the whole episode, and just told Dunholme control we'd had to go around again.

There had been a few aircraft accidents on the squadron, not necessarily connected with operations or enemy action, but most disturbing. The old saying about "hosing out the air gunners" from their turrets did occur, and unfortunately happened a couple of times early on our tour.

It was the natural plan of a German fighter pilot, first to knock out the bomber's defence, which were the air gunners. This happened often, but with the advent of the top mid-upper turret, the manoeuvre proved less popular. It wasn't a pretty sight to see the rear turret and gunner half blown away.

There was an idea amongst some rear gunners that they could bale out of their turret. Their parachute was stowed right alongside their turret and they could reach it from there. They would clip it on, then put their turret abeam (at 90 degrees to the aircraft), slide open the doors behind them and lean backwards, pull the rip-cord – and the parachute would pull them out.

It had actually happened once or twice, but mostly it decapitated the gunner or the open parachute didn't pull the gunner out, but jammed him in his turret, being side on, and the open parachute made the aircraft uncontrollable. Of course, the aircraft must have been in some sort of trouble in the first place for anybody to bale out, but the wrong procedures didn't help.

During the winter of 1943 the squadron was on standby, when we would normally do an air test on the aircraft – about one hour flying, checking out everything: engines, guns, landing gear, bomb doors etc.

We had just landed and an aircraft landed behind us. Its brakes failed and it shot past us just as we turned off the runway. It skidded off the runway, the undercarriage gave way and collapsed, and the aircraft slid sideways for some 100 yards and wrapped itself around a tree, one of about six in front of a little wood. The aircraft hit the tree between the rear turret and the mid-upper and squashed the fuselage together. All the crew got out before the fire started, but the rear gunner was trapped. His turret was still astern and it was impossible to move to extract him. He couldn't be rescued from the inside.

Within minutes, the fire brigade was on hand, but was busy stopping the tanks from exploding. At the rear, the rescuers had hooked a tractor onto the turret to pull it off the aircraft, to no avail. The fire was well under way and ammunition from the bomb aimer's compartment and the mid-upper turret was exploding.

The medical officer arrived, and after a brief conversation with the CO, the MO was placed in the back of a van and backed up to the rear turret. We could only assume the MO gave the gunner a shot, as his cries stopped before the flames engulfed him.

The rear turret had a narrow sliding panel of perspex between the two sets of guns that just allowed the MO to do his job. Nobody

felt very hungry at lunchtime, but we went to briefing that afternoon and no mention was made of the "incident" – but all the "incidents" were carried in the back of the mind, for later.

It wasn't too long before another incident was to shake us rigid. We had a night off and were enjoying a few beers in the mess. The operational aircraft were taking off and creating a din.

Suddenly, there was a gigantic explosion. Everything shook violently. We could see flames outside, and were standing, absolutely frozen, when somebody raced in and shouted, "Get out, a Lanc had fallen on the officers' mess!" which was only a car park away from us.

We took off out the farthest windows. I thought I was last out and slammed the iron-framed window behind me, but Welensky was behind me with a tankard in hand, and copped the edge of the window across the nose. He dropped like a brick and his face wasn't a pretty sight, but a couple of us dragged him about 50 yards away where we all fell into a ditch about six feet deep, half full of water and personnel.

We fully expected the Lancaster was operational and had a 4,000 pound bomb on board, and were waiting for an explosion that would wipe out the whole village, but about half an hour later, somebody cycled by, shouting "It's OK, it was a training aircraft". It wasn't really OK, as there were eight aircrew on board and six WAAFs on duty in the mess. They were all victims.

I didn't see Bert until the next morning. He had been up at the aerodrome watching the take-off. But we had the duty of going through the wreckage and trying to sort out what was what, and whose foot it was still in a charred flying boot, and which WAAF was which. A couple were killed by the blast and fuel explosion. They were intact, but burnt beyond recognition.

An amazing part of this incident was that no rear turret or occupant was found then, but a couple of months later, the farmer who owned the fields adjacent to the accident site came across the whole turret, with the rear gunner inside, when he was harvesting. How or why it got there was never explained.

December 1943 was a memorable month in many ways. Because of the severe winter, we didn't get many ops in, but they certainly caught up with in January. The Battle of Berlin had started towards the end of November, and a few ops had gone there in December, but we flew six trips on 2, 5, 20, 21, 27 and 28 January. I can assure you we were all exhausted, mentally and physically. Twice we had flown two nights in a row. You weren't allowed to do three in a row, but others went in our place.

It was during January that Bert was promoted to flight lieutenant and awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Both the promotion and the award were well warranted. He had already been doing the flight commander's job for some time, and the constant losses of suitable and existing personnel were the cause for making changes.

Bert's DFC was what we called an "immediate award" – awarded on the squadron while still flying on operations, but I can't remember if he told us or showed us the citation. It would have appeared in the squadron orders of the day, but I just can't pinpoint it.

What I can say is that they could have picked at least half a dozen occasions to reward him for.

So it was a very tired and tense crew of some experience that welcomed the respite that come when we were unable to fly because of the harsh winter and snow of Christmas 1943.

# CHAPTER 4 – FINALITY AND FUTILITY

Your Father had been on to me to go home and have a bit of time with him and Irene. As such breaks were scarce, I made the most of them.

Getting away from the squadron for a while was a great relief, and a chance to get to London. I'd check up on my Australian mates: who was still alive, who had gone –and have a steak at Greasy Joe's and a beer or two at Codger's.

It was during this break, in late December, that I went to Bolton with Bert and stayed a few days, and went on the train to Wakefield to see Kelly's parents. I conveniently go snowbound there and was forced to take a couple of days extra!

On our return, we had to take another rear gunner, as Freddy was unavailable for some reason. This happened to be Derek Welensky, one of my mad Rhodesian mates. It was to be his last trip. His original crew had gone missing while he was away on a gunnery course, and he had to fly odd-bod to get his 30 trips in.

He was determined to survive this last trip. He reported seeing night fighters and firing off his guns from the time he crossed the enemy coast going in, until he crossed it coming home. Actually, we did have a couple of combats, but I never saw any others. But what Welensky reported he saw, we had to take action to evade. Poor Bert bore the brunt of flying these continuous corkscrew actions – very heavy work on the pilot. In the end Bert was totally exhausted, and remarked, "Thank God we don't have to fly with Welensky again".

When we finally landed safely at Dunholme, Welensky got drunk for three days. Although I wrote to him in Rhodesia later, I never hear from him again. Bert didn't want to!

To explain the corkscrew manoeuvre, if a fighter was attacking from the starboard, the gunner would call the skipper to corkscrew starboard, ie to turn into the attack by diving to starboard then climb starboard, then roll and climb port, then roll and dive port.

The idea was when you finished one complete corkscrew, the aircraft would be back on the original track and height, and the fighter would have been shot down. If not, the poor old skipper would have to go through the whole thing again. You can imagine the strain on the aircraft when fully laden, and on the pilot. There were no computers in those days.

A set of circumstances had arisen at the end of January 1944 that was to be vital to our future, as a crew. Once again we had to salute our skipper for being what he was.

It was put to him that the heads wanted him to leave 44 Squadron and take a position at a new training unit at Wigsley. It was a unit that placed pilots straight into squadrons and needed men of Bert's calibre to do the job. However, it meant he would be leaving his crew behind, and they would have to finish their last couple of trips as odd-bods, which was about the last straw.

Another factor was the morale was very low on the squadrons. A lot of losses, the continual Berlin raids and the losses among senior crews meant no crews were getting through their allotted 30 trips. The top brass started taking notice.

Much to Bert's credit and our admirations, he knocked back this posting and said that if they wanted him they would have to allow the whole crew to finish, too. This gave them something to think about. While they were thinking we did a trip to Magdeburg and two Berlin trips on 27 and 28 January, which made it nine "Berlins" for us and a record in V Group Bomber Command at that stage.

When we took off on the night of 28 January, it was to be our last trip, and we would all be finishing our first tour together.

When we landed back, in the dawn of 29 January, we were greeted by photographers, reporters and some top brass. Our story and photograph appeared on the front page of the Sunday Graphic on 30 January.

There was much rejoicing and I, as a warrant officer, had been awarded the DFC. As a matter of fact, a little later the rest of the crew were decorated and the recommendations could only have been made by one man, the skipper.

Having finished our tour, we were granted a 10 day leave, and we all made the most of it. Bert already had his new posting organised with this new unit at Wigsley, and he was taking the engineer with him. I was going to our Base at Scampton, only a few miles away, where there was an aircrew school for air-gunners, similar to the school Bert and Bob were going to for pilots and engineers. Scampton was a pre-war station with all the mod cons, and my future wife Kelly was stationed there. It took some wangling, but it is amazing what you can do when you know who is doing what at Australian Headquarters in London!

During the next 12 months, I saw Bert quite a few times, and it wasn't hard to find an excuse to have a long weekend pass and meet up in Nottingham or Lincoln. Things got a bit tighter leave-wise, about D-Day (6 June 1944) but the heads didn't call on us to help out – just yet.

I had got my commission, went on the gunnery leaders course, went to the US Eight Air Force on liaison work for six weeks, got married at Wakefield on 28 September 1944 attended by Bert and Irene, then went to the Lakes for a week's honeymoon. We called in and stayed a night at Bolton with the Wrights.

Back at camp, we collected our mail and found Kelly was posted to Syastern, near Nottingham and I was posted home to Australia. That was the end of our honeymoon.

Just for the record, I phoned and called on everybody I could think of to get off this posting back to Australia. It was just too early for me. However, I was sent to Brighton for embarkation home, but I was still kicking and screaming and going up and down to London to get out of it.

The night before I was to board ship at Southampton, I was told I was off the draft home, and to proceed back to my former station. It was with great relief that I arrived back in Lincolnshire.

However, after some time at another unit near Newark, I sensed that to ensure my staying in England, it would be wise to volunteer for a second tour of operations as we were obliged to do. We had already had an extended rest period (normally six months) so I contacted Bert and put it to him. He and I met with Bob, the engineer, and we decided to ask Vic and Alf, who had become our permanent navigator at the end of December. We got another bomb aimer, an Australian Bert had got to know, and a rear gunner, a real Cockney I'd met.

We all had a bit of catching up to do, and went through a training program. Eventually we were posted to Fulbeck, to 49 RAF Squadron, one of our sister squadrons when we were at Dunholme Lodge with 44 Squadron. They were then at Fiskerton – remember the Lancaster landing on the wrong aerodrome and dropping into the canal? However, 49 was now at Fulbeck, not that many miles away, and had this great concrete canal going through it.

I think we only did one operation from Fulbeck. It was a long trip to Pilsen in Czechoslovakia, and it was amazingly uneventful for us, except that the other Lancaster that shared our dispersal area came back with a great dent just forward of the mid-upper turret. The

mid-upper gunner reported it had been caused by a falling airman. Apparently he had baled out and his chute hadn't had time to open or had failed. An inspection in daylight confirmed it. It was very disturbing, especially for that mid-upper gunner, but worse was to follow.

Shortly after, the squadron was ordered to move to Syerston, which, like Scampton, was a peacetime permanent station, and likewise, all the mod cons. Inevitable, this sort move called for great rejoicing and the whole station had a big party on the last night.

Early next morning we loaded up the aircraft with our gear (kit bags, flying suits, bicycles and whatever) to fly the 10 or so miles to Syerston.

The wing commander took off first and set the pattern by doing a long sweeping turn, screaming over the aerodrome at about 50 feet. Four or five more followed him. We took off and had started the long sweep around when we could see the aircraft in front of us was in trouble.

His turn was much too tight and he wasn't doing anything about it, and very slowly losing height. It was apparent that something had fouled and jammed the control cables that ran along the inside of the fuselage. It could have been a bicycle or kit bag, but we were never to find out.

The skipper pulled our aircraft up and we were abeam and slightly higher, when the other aircraft hit the top floor of a two-storey brick workshop and ploughed through, taking all with it, then struck the parachute-drying hanger which was about 100 feet high. The lower floor of this building housed all the pyrotechnic equipment (all the different coloured flares, sea-marking powders, signal rockets, emergency landing flares etc). Then the aircraft blew up and caused a massive explosion.

In the shadows of the parachute tower, a pay parade was being held for the WAAFs. They were also witnessing the shoot-up by the aircraft, but were unable to see the doomed aircraft coming in on the other side of the buildings. They were engulfed in the fireball and those not immediately killed, but on fire, jumped into the canal that ran right alongside their parade and the other doomed buildings.

The wing commander immediately called up and told all airborne aircraft to land immediately and those not yet airborne to switch off and vacate their aircraft. His first thoughts were of sabotage, as we had been aware of some incidents on aircraft.

When we got to the scene some 40 minutes later, it was horrific. I had never seen anything like it. The first brick wall the aircraft had hit was still standing – with the cutout impression of a Lancaster, front-on view, in the brickwork. The rest of the building was demolished from the ground up, as were the others. The remains of the aircraft were enmeshed with the steel fabric of the parachute building, and there were hundreds of bits of silk blasted everywhere.

The canal was about 40 feet wide and 10 feet deep, had about three or four feet of water in it. It was a mass of ruins and a slowly moving tide of red, blue, green, yellow and orange – the exploded remnants from the pyrotechnic store – all this mixed with the blood and bodies of the WAAFs not yet recovered.

One of the four engines had catapulted some 70 yards and penetrated the brick wall of the stores office, and was just balanced on the brickwork about six feet off the ground.

Other parts of the aircraft had penetrated the roof of this building and started small fires, which were readily extinguished; however, it was about a month before they found the pilot's body, which had

gone through the roof and was concealed, high up, on a pile of mattresses.

Altogether, about 38 persons perished most of them WAAFs. It was an incident and a scene that haunted me, and was one of the subjects that was significant when I saw fit to seek psychiatric help in 1963 – almost 20 years after the event. This help was given through the Repatriation medical system for veterans and lasted about a month, at a repatriation hospital. I was amazed at the number of mates I met while there.

It is significant, certainly to me, that one of the head psychiatrists of that unit committed suicide 12 months later in 1964. I honestly believe he had listened to too much and cared too much. Of course, to us he was "the man"; the one we could talk to and let all our feelings and emotions flow.

As I write now, I realised that this is the only time I have ever written or talked about these deep-rooted things. Even my wife is unaware of most of it.

Naturally, I have often wondered how Bert and the rest of the crew came through those years after the war. When we met up in 1984, we knew we all had some ailments, but no one boasted about being treated by a "shrink".

But the show had to go on and we settled into Syerston, and weren't called on to do many ops. We got sick of being briefed to do ops then have them scrubbed at the last minute, depending on how the different armies were going in Europe.

We were briefed to go to Flensburg in northwest Germany about six times, day after day, and had them cancelled. The heads believed the German High Command had shifted there.

Politics were really taking over now. Montgomery was poised to enter Berlin from the north; Patton from the south; and the Russians from the east. Montgomery was told to hold back and allow the Russians the honour of taking Berlin, which, of course, was all worked out at Yalta with Rossevelt and Churchill when they divided up the whole of eastern Europe and East Germany, with Stalin demanding and getting his way.

We did the raid, in daylight, to Berchtesgarten, which was Hilter's castle, high up in the Alps. It was to be the last V Group Bomber Command raid of the war in Europe. It was a spectacular experience, as we flew only a few thousand feet above the Alps, along the length of them.

We had crossed them before at night, on raids to Italy, and I couldn't help remembering on one of those raids, seeing a crew bale out. They were never heard of again and later we found out that they were mates of ours. The pilot was in one of Bert's course in the US, and the rear gunner was a mate of mine who went into the RAAF the same day.

As the armies were advancing across Europe, they were releasing prisoners from the POW camps. We found ourselves doing Exodus trips to France, Belgium and western Germany, picking up 24 ex-POW's per trip and bringing them back to England. It was a very satisfying job, and we were rewarded to witness the joy on their faces as we hit the white cliffs of Dover on the trip home.

So the war in Europe was over by May 1945 and there was still Japan to think about. The RAF were not being called on, but the Australian and New Zealand aircrews were being whisked away to form Tiger Force, which consisted of a few squadrons of Lancasters converted for tropical conditions. They would be used from Okinawa for long-range bombing of Japan. I joined up with a New Zealand crew and we flew out to North Africa and Egypt on

training flights, but the whole project ended with the dropping of the atomic bombs in August 1945.

I went and saw Bert and Bob in November 1945, just before I left for Australia. My wife followed in June 1946. I understand Bert and Bob were together for sometime after that, and I'm not sure what happened. Bert's logbook would detail his flying. My wife made eight trips back to England after 1946 and called on your parents and stayed with them on occasions, but it wasn't until 1984 that I went back for that reunion – another memory equal to all others.

With regards to your Father's citation for his Distinguished Flying Cross, I would suggest you get in touch with 44 Squadron Association, of which he was a foundation member, and they will inform you how to go about having a copy of it available.

I would think that Bert would have received his DFC at an investiture at Buckingham Palace.
In my case, when I was ordered to attend an investiture there, it fell at the same time as our wedding. It took half a ton of red tape to get out of it and have it postponed.

A lot of the citations were pretty straightforward, such as, *This airman has completed many successful operations on 44 Squadron, and has shown remarkable skill, foresight, courage, devotion to duty and crewmanship.* In some cases this would be followed by some particular incidents, submitted by your skipper, or in Bert's case, by his flight commander.

I know that Bert's incident report for me went something like, *As a mid-upper gunner in my crew, this airman was responsible for actions that ensured the safety of fellow crew members and the aircraft. After leaving the target of Hanover, on the night of 08/10/43 and having survived a fighter attack, he realised that the rear gunner was not responding and asked the wireless operator to*

*investigate. The wireless operator found the rear gunner unconscious with this oxygen supply frozen up and was attempting to extricate him from the turret. After some minutes of silence, the mid-upper gunner realised something was amiss and went to investigate, and found the wireless operator slumped over the "Elsan", his emergency oxygen bottle exhausted. He dragged the wireless operator back to the rest bed and plugged him into the systems oxygen and he rallied. The mid-upper gunner went back to the rear turret and place the rear gunner on emergency oxygen and dragged him forward to the rest bed and the wireless operator attended to him, having revived. The mid-upper gunner requested I descent to about 10,000 feet, to avoid compulsory use of oxygen as the oxygen system in the rear section appeared to be faulty. He was returning to his turret when the aircraft was hit by flak, which caused damage to the hydraulic lines, and leaking oil became a serious fire hazard, but prompt action with the fire extinguisher eliminated any danger. He also found his parachute damaged and useless. The remainder of the trip was flown at 12,000 feet, and was uneventful.*

Just to add insult to injury, the claim I had made for "enemy aircraft destroyed" from the initial fighter attack was reduced to "enemy aircraft damaged" because nobody saw the aircraft blow up and hit the ground.

During the floods we endured in 1954 and 1956, we lost a lot of service photographs and records and sentimental items. Some things can be replaced or copies obtained, but the other things are just memories.

The memory of 35 full crews and aircraft, plus a couple of fatal aircraft accidents and accidents to our ground staff, will always be most vivid. Those were our losses during our first tour of operations. We were only the fifth crew to complete a tour over that period of seven and a half months.

I have often wondered who won the war. It wasn't the service personnel, certainly. A few heroes, perhaps; a few shipping magnates, the munitions makers and some politicians, but it wasn't the poor servicemen and airmen who refused to face the enemy and were branded LMF (lack of moral fibre) because they were scared, but brave enough to admit being scared and face the possibility of being incarcerated in Lincoln Castle. In World War I, they could have been shot!

My Father served in France for two years in World War I, and went through the horrors of living in mud trenches with rats, lice, bugs, the decomposing bodies of friend and enemy alike, the constant shelling bombardment, seeing his mates blown to pieces and going mad with shell shock.

As a boy, I could never understand his deep moods of depression and his continual pacing up and down our verandah, hour after hour and night after night. I wish I had known then what I was to learn later, as I would have had a better understanding of the problems.

But who can really understand anything about the outcome of war?

The Allies spent billions of dollars and millions of lives to flatten all those cities and defeat the enemy. Immediately after that, we spend billions building them up again, and made them the top industrial countries in the world – and we went broke!

The futility of it all is pretty obvious, but the understanding is very much harder. But I hope that you both can accept what has been written and see your Father in another light – a very honourable light.

We found out "for whom the bell tolls". It tolled for all those involved, in one way or another.

Yours most sincerely,

## *Cover Picture from Left to Right*

F/SGT Alf Holden DFM
Navigator RAF
Bolton, England

SGT Vic Laker DFM
W/Operator RAF
Peckham, England

SGT Freddy Garrett DFM
Air Gunner RAF
Conventry, England

W/O Quentin Snow DFC
Air Gunner RAAF
Murwillumbah, Aust

P/O Bernie Soper DFC
Bomb Aimer RAF
Hounslow, England

F/Lt Bert Wright DFC
Pilot RAF
Bolton, England

Sgt Bob Bateman DFM
F/Engineer RAF
St Albans, England

The crew of "C…Charlie" on their return from "The Big City" … Berlin, for the ninth time and the last trip of their first tour of operations (30 raids) in the European Theatre. Accredited photographers took this photograph in the early hours of 29 January 1944. It appeared on the front page of the London "Sunday Graphic" 30 January 1944. The crew flew with 44 (Rhodesia) Squadron from Dunholme Lodge, Lincolnshire for five group, Bomber Command, during 1943 and January 1944.

After a rest period and instructurial courses, Wright, Snow, Holden, Laker and Bateman, with two others, crewed up again and went on a second tour of operations with 49 RAF Squadron and were still operational at the end of hostilities in Europe. Snow then had a brief period, with a New Zealand crew on "Tiger Force", testing long range, tropicalised Lancasters. All the above crew survived World War II.

This aircraft was a Mark 3 Lancaster, Series ND514 fitted with four Rolls Royce "Packard Merlin" engines MK.38, with 44 Squadron markings KM C. It was a brand new aircraft when this crew flew it on it's first two operations both to Berlin, then handed it over to another crew who flew to Berlin the following nigh, but were badly shot up and tried to crash land in Germany, with dire results. Both aircraft and crew were destroyed. The crew had flown six previous raids … the aircraft's operational life was four days.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

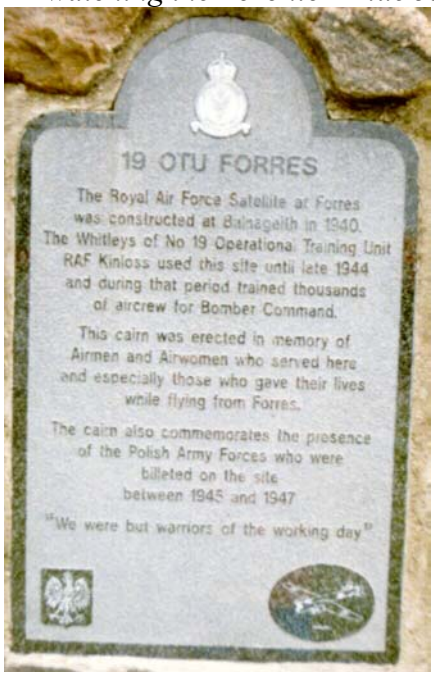
Quentin Francis Snow was born in Bangalow, NSW on 1 July 1922. The eldest son of Cecil James and Amy Amelia Snow. The family moved to Murwillumbah in 1922 when Cecil took a position as manager of the Tyalgum Sawmilling Co, indulged in Christian and civic affairs, becoming an alderman and the last mayor of the Municipality of Murwillumbah, 1946.

Quentin was educated at Murwillumbah High School and on leaving followed all aspects of the building and construction trade, as a supervisor, divisional manager and construction foreman, with companies such as Kern Bros, Hornibrooks and Citra Constructions, in many varied places … Darwin, New Guinea, Sydney, Mary Kathleen, Mount Isa, North and Central Queensland.

He enlisted in the RAAF in July 1941 and was called up a few months later. After some preliminary studies at Murwillumbah High School, he trained in Australia for 12 months at Sandgate, Maryborough, Evan's Head and then was posted overseas to Great Britain to serve as an Air Gunner in RAF Bomber Command. Completing his first tour on 44 (Rhodesia). When hostilities ceased in Europe, he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, as a Warrant Officer on 44 Squadron, commissioned in January 1944, and was completing his second tour of operations on 49 RAF Squadron.

He returned to Australia in December 1945 and was discharged 28 January 1946, his English bride "Kelly" and baby daughter, Christine, followed in June 1946. Second Daughter Robin and sons Terry and Robert were born in Murwillumbah. He followed the building and joinery trade up to his retirement settling in Murwillumbah.

*"Mac". Valerie's Husband and the Skipper at the Toronto Skydome watching the Toronto "Blue Jays" win the World Series 1992*

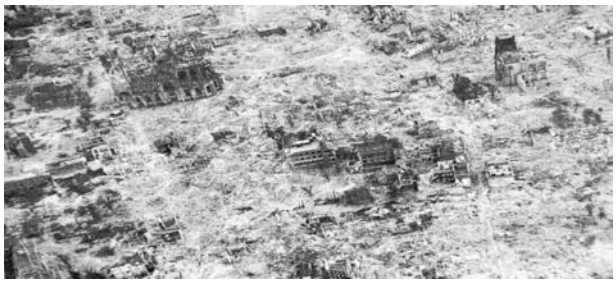



*19 OTU Forres Morayshire Scotland*
*Where I first met the Skipper*


*Taken at Waddington Reunion of 44 Squadron at the doorway of the Historical Flight Lancaster, re enacting the Crew shot of the whole crew taken in 1944 …. Vic, Snowy, Skipper and Bob …. Bernie was in the area, but missed being in the photo, But got into the other one. This was taken in 1984.*

*A Lancaster flying over Lincolnshire countryside*

*Photo of Dunholme Lodge Watch Office, taken in 1972*



*Krupps of Essen*

*Rhur Valley*
*City of Wesel*

*'Desolation of War'*

*'Good Luck' Typical scene at take off time!!*

*A Lancaster down in Germany*

*A ME110 down in Great Britain*

*"In the air they were mortal enemies….in death, they are all warmly embraced to the bosom of mother earth….each in a corner of some foreign field"*

My sincere thanks to “Jo” (Josephine Brown BA) who got me started on “The Letter” and kept up the pressure until I got it all together.

My sincere thanks too, to my grandson, Tony and his wife Tina, whose marvellous efforts produced this book, as you see it now. Of course, Valerie and Alison and their families played a significant roll too.

To the remaining members of my crew, I just hope this takes you back to the days when we were a full crew and enjoyed the fellowship and comradeship of our skipper Bert, Arty, Alf, Vic and Freddy ….. The “Gen” Crew.

Thank You.

Snowy.

**Post Script**

After 53 years of searching for any news or the whereabouts of our rear gunner, Freddy Garrett, I received a letter from RAF Personnel Management Agency, informing me they had found a recent address of Flying Officer Garrett, but departmental regulations prevented them from supplying me with the same!! However, if I wrote a letter to Freddy, C/O them, they would forward it on. Which I did, and ten days later Freddy was on the phone to me from his home in Kenilworth, Warwickshire. You can imagine the thrill. All had gone well for him after he left us in January 1944, he did another tour on Halifax's and spent a bit of time in India, gained his commission and Distinguished Flying Medal.

We exchanged mail and family photographs etc, for twelve months, but a few weeks before Christmas 1998, I received a letter from he and his wife Audrey, that he had a colon cancer removed, but too late as it was now in his liver. Naturally, Bob, Bernie and I lent all support we could, but he passed away early in the New Year of 1999. We who are left can only say "Thanks for our flying time together and the last year of your life".

"Snowy"
20th August 1999.

*Freddy and Wife Audrey*

*Freddy*