



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

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THEN AND NOW

THEN.....

During World War 2, at just 20 years of age, I was one of thousands of young men from all parts of the globe, particularly those countries marked pink in the world maps of the day - the former British Empire. I was a member of aircrew operating in the European Theatre of War.

I was serving as a navigator with NO. 467 (RAAF) Lancaster Squadron based at Waddington in Lincolnshire (UK) on a date in December 1944. In company with the rest of the squadron our crew, flying in F-FOX (using the phonetic alphabet of that time), had been briefed for a night attack on German railway marshalling yards at Munich which was heavily defended with anti-aircraft batteries, some of which were linked to specific radar-directed searchlights. That was a formidable combination for aircraft of a bomber stream required to fly straight and level on the bombing run to the target to achieve an accurate result.

Aircraft in a bomber stream were allocated specific heights (levels) to fly on bombing runs. Some were staggered in height, but because of the numbers of aeroplanes involved, others were allocated the same height, but were separated by time - a very small amount of time. In that circumstance, time accuracy was essential, particularly for any 'turn-on' to the bombing run. At such a critical time, if an aircraft was even seconds early or late on turning, it could become a collision hazard to blacked-out aircraft at the same level.

We discovered the truth of that operating procedure when another Lancaster turned into us as we were on our bombing run. It chopped about six feet (two metres) off our starboard wing, including the oil line to the starboard outer motor which had to be feathered to stop the propeller 'windmilling' and upsetting the airflow over the wing.

We were unable to continue on our bombing run as the pilot and engineer battled to keep our wounded aeroplane flying on three engines. Normally, the Lancaster could be flown easily on three, but with part of the wing missing, our situation was not normal.

The next problem to be overcome was the jettisoning of our bombload which was a 4000 pound (1800kg) 'cookie'. Operating difficulties inside the aircraft required us to use a fire axe to cut a hole as an exit point for our massive bomb. It may sound strange to speak of

an inanimate object this way, but it hurt us to deliberately chop into an old friend already suffering an indignity of amputation.

Having disposed our bombload in accordance with the moral rules of jettisoning, we headed for home fully aware that we were not out of the woods yet. Crossing our fingers (military aircrew were/are innately superstitious) we hoped that we would not experience Murphy's Law which stated 'anything which can go wrong may go wrong and probably will'.

With difficulty and with superb flying by our Skipper, ably supported by our Engineer, we were able to maintain our briefed height for our homeward flight which took us across the lines of opposing ground forces. The Allies had retaken France which for us was friendly territory. But as we first had to negotiate the last bit of enemy-held territory, Murphy's Law took over as both German and American anti-aircraft gunners opened up on our blacked-out aircraft. Our crossed fingers worked as we survived that onslaught, but Murphy was not finished with us yet.

The overworked inner engine on our wounded starboard wing caught fire, presenting our Skipper with an impossible flying situation, forcing on him the decision all pilots hate as he made a call to all crew members "Abandon Aircraft".

The crew responded to his call and we all survived, landing in an open field near the hamlet of Felcourt in the Champagne region of France, grateful that our 'cookie' was no longer in the aeroplane which crashed nearby.

We were picked up by locals in farm vehicles and taken to one of the larger homes in the village where the populace still lived in fear of the Germans whose lines were only 50 kilometers away. Apparently, we were to be hidden in the cellar of the home if the Germans investigated the house. The Germans didn't come but the whole crew was interrogated for eight hours by American Intelligence Officers on suspicion of being spies. I told them the aircraft serial numbers and after they confirmed the numbers from a section of our crashed aircraft, they lost interest in us and left us to our own devices. We made contact with a British Army Signals Unit nearby and we arrived back at our base in time for Christmas, nine days after take-off.

After our recovery, we were allocated another Lancaster, flying seven more missions before the European War ended.

.....AND NOW

My wife Thelma and I recently planned a visit to the UK to visit her family. We had met in Lincoln while I was celebrating my 21st birthday all those years ago, and had married 15 months later.

The passage of time has been kind to us and Rotary International is one of my interests to the extent that I am a former Rotary District Governor. By chance, a friend and fellow Hollywell (Gold Coast) Rotarian, Jim Scott who knew of my WW2 experience, had been to Felcourt on an earlier visit to France. He had met the curator of the local aviation museum who was excited to have contact with someone who knew one of the airmen connected with that 1944 incident which was a very big event in the area at the time. That visit was the trigger for a deal of correspondence between the curator, Bernard Pauzie and myself.

Our planned trip to the UK seemed the perfect opportunity to revisit Felcourt and meet the museum curator. Thelma and I were treated like royalty on the visit, meeting the local mayor and other villagers who could remember the incident. We met a former housemaid

of the house which was our temporary haven at the time. It was she who told us of the cellar hiding place plan if the Germans had arrived at the house.

The aviation museum is extensive for such a small place, detailing all the aviation incidents which had occurred in the area. Felcourt hosts reunions of German and British airmen every year.

In a gesture of friendship, I carried gifts for the Mayor of Felcourt from Gold Coast Mayor, Garry Baildon and received reciprocal gifts from Felcourt's Mayor.

Visiting the site of our crashed aircraft was a very emotional experience for me. Memories which I had thought buried in the recesses of my mind flooded back to put pressure on my tear ducts. To cover my embarrassment I searched around for some remaining evidence of 'F-FOX' and found a jagged piece of metal which I believed to be from its wreckage. It currently holds pride of place in the study of my Hollywell home.

Some bonds remain with us always!