



*ARCHIVAL COMMENT: As a prelude to the stories by Quentin Snow (Snowy), the scenario should be set. A very apt description of time, place and activities is provided by Encyclopaedia Britannica in the following extract.*

*“Early in 1942 RAF Bomber Command, headed by Sir Arthur Harris, inaugurated an intensification of the Strategic Air Offensive against Germany. For the execution of the program, the significant factors were: (1) The introduction, in March 1942, of the Lancaster, a four-engined plane that was to prove the outstanding night bomber of the war; (2) the simultaneous introduction of GEE, the first radar aid to navigation; (3) the institution in August, of the Pathfinder Force with other improvements in target-finding tactics; and (4) the reorganization of bomber crews, to include a team of experts in support of the pilot.*

*“Already, an exceptionally destructive raid, using the Germans’ own incendiary method had been made on Lubeck, and intensive attacks were also made on Essen (site of the Krupp munition works) and other Ruhr towns”.*

*Quentin has written a booklet A LETTER FROM “SNOWY” for the daughters of his late RAF skipper, Flight Lieutenant Bert Wright DFC. That booklet of exploits forms an integral part of our archives. The following stories are extracts from A LETTER FROM “SNOWY”.*

## **AS IT HAPPENED**

**BY**

**QUENTIN SNOW (SNOWY) DFC**

### **THE RUHR VALLEY**

The Battle of the Ruhr was almost over when we started operations. We did a couple of raids on Cologne, one on each Essen, Hagen and Dusseldorf. At that 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 anti-aircraft batteries firing vertically, with shells exploding from 22 000 feet down to 10 000 feet, and hundreds of searchlights lighting the sky. It was spectacular stuff, but as our skipper 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 meant an instant explosion. Anything nearby sounded like dried peas in an empty tin as pieces of shrapnel peppered the sides or the wings of our aircraft.

The other system the Germans used was when a searchlight picked up a bomber. Another five or six searchlights would target the same bomber and form a 'cone' of light covering a big area of light around the bomber. That would give the anti-aircraft batteries a well-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 result in a big explosion. The searchlights would switch off and the explosion would develop into a slowly dripping mass of burning aircraft parts, and depending on the type of load in the aircraft, 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 an extraordinary pyrotechnic display.

The Germans developed a radar searchlight with a very bluish light that flickered a couple of times and then remained constant. These searchlights always had an aircraft in their beam and instantly had anti-aircraft shells bursting around it. The co-ordination between searchlight and anti-aircraft guns was utterly 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' by searchlights, nobody in the aircraft could see, and the skipper would have to lower his seat, which was an automatic response, and fly only on instruments until we got out of the light. It happened to us on a few occasions and we got out and away from the lights, but it was a very dangerous manoeuvre, as we would lose 5 000 feet or so, and have to dive through the rest of the bomber force which you couldn't see because they were not showing any lights.

As our skipper 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 their cases and become entangled in the turrets. The wireless operator's equipment and the navigator's maps and instruments 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. As with a lot of RAF formulae, it contained the most foul-smelling emulsions known to man.

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

Most crews would jettison and go home like a bat out of hell! Bert Wright did not. That was one of the things which made him a top pilot and leader, and he made us a great crew.

Bert's philosophy was to fly on ops on 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. Going close or having a near-miss was not good enough.

### **ONE MEMORABLE TRIP TO BERLIN**

On one occasion, our aircraft became unserviceable at the last minute. We ended up flying a No. 49 Squadron aircraft from a nearby aerodrome.

Bert had rung every nearby squadron to find an aircraft, then we had to get across six miles to 49 Squadron to man it. Nobody there knew anything about us, however the skipper soon put them in the picture.

We were late, and the second pilot we were supposed to take deserted us at the end of the runway before take-off. We couldn't really blame him for deserting us then, as it was something out of the Keystone Cops. At least he stood by the Runway Signals Van and saw us off.

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

Because of those unknowns, the skipper told the engineer to "Go through the gate" (absolute full power) on take-off. 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 flames and sparks trailed some thirty feet behind the aeroplane.

Naturally, we were all scared witless and really expected the worst, 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 system. All was going well except for the great trails of sparks. He reasoned that we had survived the take-off, had a petrol load and a bomb load, and there was nothing stopping us from going on to Berlin.

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

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 from London to Leningrad could sight us, and no doubt wonder about this new secret weapon that was being launched against them.

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're going around again'. Any one of the six of us would have willingly choked him at that moment, except for the fact that we were scared rigid.

However, that trip was to become a legend on No. 44 Squadron, so too did Bert Wright and crew during our time there.

### **STETTIN - WEATHER BECOMES THE ENEMY**

We had been briefed a couple of times to do a raid on Stettin. It was the end of December 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<sup>th</sup> January 1944. The Met (Meteorology for the uninitiated) people gave us all the latest weather details - it was going to be OK for the duration of the raid.

While we were still over the North Sea, and before crossing the Denmark Coast, we ran into terrific electric storms and had 'St. Elmo's Fire' (a luminous electrical discharge which sometimes happens in electrical storms) running along the aerials, across and along the guns, and generally scaring the daylights out of us.

The skipper and navigator decided that we could climb out of it as we were only at 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 that ice was forming on the

propeller blades, and when it flew off it peppered the cockpit walls and sometimes penetrated them. It also meant that the shape of the propeller blades was slightly altered, thus causing a loss of pulling power. Ice was forming on the leading edge of the wings, tail plane and tail fins, which 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 the cumulo nimbus cloud formation which could reach up to 40 000 feet, and that was 15 000 feet higher than we could reach. However, to turn around would mean a loss of time, so after a brief, nervous discussion, Bert decided that 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. Ice started clearing off the turret, and we came out of it.

To say that these incidents were terrifying would be putting it 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 by instruments. In severe icing, the instruments could pack up and he would have to 'fly by the seat of his pants', that is - fly by 'feel' alone. Many times, under 'seat of the pants' conditions, I would report from my top turret position that we were 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 the 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. That was one example of 'crew cooperation'.

As another example, to help the navigator get a 'drift' reading, the rear gunner would set his turret dead astern at 'zero degrees' on his scale reading which 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 a nominated number of seconds, the navigator would call out "Lock". The rear gunner would lock his turret and then read his scale. The reading would be called for example, "10 degrees red" (port)", or perhaps "15 degrees green" (starboard), and the navigator would know that the aircraft would be flying at that angle to its compass course. It was purely a navigational aid, and helped to determine actual wind speeds and directions against those which were predicted before we took off.

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

On the way to the target we had gone through the icing episode, but on the way back we flew much further north and encountered head winds of 85 miles per hour. That presented a major problem which resulted in a great loss of aircraft and crews. Halfway across the North Sea we were already hearing SOS and Mayday calls by aircraft giving their positions, and noted with some trepidation that they were ditching in the sea.

Bert, the engineer, in company with the navigator, were working out how much fuel we had left, and it was decided that we would be unable to reach our base. We set course for the nearest aerodrome that could take Lancasters and headed for the Norfolk coast and Cotishall aerodrome.

A Lancaster had no gliding ability when all motors cut out, so it was decided to fly just above the sea with the bomb aimer shining the hand-held 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 by how much fuel we had, where we were, and in calling Cotishall to make radio contact. Suddenly we crossed the coast, and the bomb aimer swore that 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. We were out of gas! A tractor came and towed us to a parking area.

Some 20 or 30 aircraft landed at Cotishall that night. They weren't accustomed to entertaining operational aircraft and crews, and their amenities were stretched to the limit. So much so, that some of the crews were not debriefed until we returned to our base at Dunholme Lodge next day.

Bert Wright and his crew had survived to fight again.