LANCASTERS AND OTHER PEREGRINATIONS 1944 - 1945

By Gerhard Heilig

The last chapter had originally been written as a story complete in itself and, as it seemed to be a nicely rounded tale of this period of my life, I decided to leave it as it was. There is little else to tell about this period apart from one significant event.

On 25 April I got news that my mother and brother were safe in a displaced person's camp behind the British lines. I went along to the squadron adjutant, explained the situation and asked if it might be possible to transfer an allowance from my pay to my mother through some local service channel. This was quickly arranged and so I was able to provide her with some comforts. It wasn't very much in the way of cash, but it turned out to be of far greater value than could be expressed in mere monetary terms as I would hear some years later.

When Italy had capitulated some six months previously, the authorities of the camp where my mother was being held threw open the gates and told the inmates that they were free. They could stay on if they wished, but German troops were on their way to take control and it was up to each individual to do what they thought best. Mother did not fancy being caught up in the approaching Nazi maelstrom and so she packed a few essentials, and together with my brother made her way south towards the Allied lines. They hid where they could and eventually, as the Germans retreated, they went to ground in a hayloft and waited for the battle to pass them by. When things had quietened down they emerged from their hideout to find themselves safe behind the British lines. They made themselves known and were taken to a displaced persons' camp where they were provided for.

A little while later she received a note advising her that an allowance from her son was awaiting collection at the local RAF station and she went along to pick it up. At first she was looked upon with askance as another DP on the scrounge. But when she explained her purpose she was given a family welcome - as the mum of one of our boys! She got more than just my modest money, she was given all sorts of comforts and some of the lads would visit her with titbits she could never have obtained otherwise. This warmed her heart and when she told me about it made me more convinced than ever that I had done the right thing in joining up. If anyone concerned should ever read these lines, let me express my heartfelt thanks for their kindness to a courageous lady.

About this time I started to spend part of my leaves in Bournemouth, in Southbourne to be exact, where two cousins of mine were living. The elder, Gerti, was married to a Czech who was serving in the army. He was a baker by trade, had established a bakery and they were now setting up the Czech Restaurant in Boscombe which was to prove a well known and flourishing establishment. The younger cousin Susi, only a couple of months older than myself, was at this time living with her and we became very close friends. She later became a schoolteacher, married a Welshman working at a radar establishment at Highcliffe near Christchurch, and made her home there.

My time with 214 Squadron had left such a mark on me that I had been less than happy about my involuntary transfer to 101. I made no real friends with the crews but this may well have been my own fault. I had not wanted to go there, but this posting had probably saved my life. I spent most of my time with the radio mechanics and one of these, Ken Bradshaw, became a close friend. He introduced me to Mrs Knott, a middle-aged lady living in a lovely house on the

fringes of Louth. Her husband was away in the army and I became a frequent visitor to her home. I had become a keen theatre goer and she gave me an old leather bound volume of Shakespeare's plays which her brother, a merchant navy engineer, had carried all over the world on his travels. It is still one of my treasured possessions.
Another souvenir of my time with 101 are two small pieces of German anti-aircraft shell and a one-inch square piece of cladding which had been punched out of the fuselage about a yard from where I had been sitting. Altogether my aircraft was hit by flak on three occasions, but I cannot recall which of these my mementos are a reminder of. The first time was on 18 August over Sterkrade in the Ruhr, which put the starboard outer engine out of action. The second time was on 5 September over Le Havre and the third was on 12 September over Frankfurt when the Starboard inner engine packed up.
On 6 September our target was the German pocket of resistance in Le Havre. Bombing had to be extremely accurate lest we hit our own troops who were only a few hundred yards away from the enemy lines and due to bad visibility we had had to abandon our mission. Jettisoning our load was out of the question over the Channel crowded with allied shipping and so we brought our bombs home. Back over England my duties were finished and I emerged from my post to enjoy the scenery from behind the pilot's seat. Our heavily laden state proved too much for the pneumatic system of the Lancaster and we had brake failure on landing. As the end of the runway loomed up at an alarming speed, I saw the twisted wreckage of another aircraft beyond and we were about to join it. I curled up in a ball and waited for the imminent crash. As we overshot the runway the pilot pulled up the undercarriage and we slid to rest on our belly. I shot aft to the door and followed on the heels of my crew, running until we had reached what we considered a safe distance before the plane blew up. Well, it didn't.
I found myself clutching two parachutes and two helmets, my own and the navigator's, and I realized at what utter speed my mind had been working in the seconds following the crash. When I had picked myself up my first thought was to get out quick, abandoning my personal equipment, which would be no trouble to get written off. Or would it? There would be no questions, but there would be forms to be filled in and the nuisance of going to stores and drawing replacements. I had never been a believer in unnecessary effort so why not take it along? On my way I decided to grab the navigator's 'chute and helmet as well, why not save a friend some bother? I had thought it all out quite logically but it could not have taken more than a split second, for I could not have got out of the aircraft any faster without climbing over someone's back - and that would have been another unnecessary effort to say the least. It was an amazing experience of how fast a human mind can work.
Ludford Magna was one of the airfields equipped with FIDO (Fog Investigation and Dispersal Operation), a method of clearing fog by means of petrol burners along the sides of the runway. The piping along the main runway was only too obvious for all to see but no one seemed to know what it was all about. In the small hours of 5 October, soon after we had crossed the English coast on our return from a raid to Saarbrücken, we saw the glow of a fire up ahead. As we got closer we realized that its source must be at, or very close to, our own base and we feared the worst, thinking that Ludford or one of its neighbours must have been the victim of a massive enemy strike. When we joined the circuit our relief was great that this had not been the case and we marvelled at the sight which presented itself to our eyes. I had closed down my equipment after

crossing the English coast and, as was my usual habit, had taken up my stance behind the pilot for a final look around.
Within the blanket of fog which covered the countryside for miles around was a gaping hole, cut straight as with a knife on the upwind side of the gently moving air and billowing in a great curve on the other, the parallel lines of flaming petrol below and a billowing cloud of cumulus above like some monstrous bonnet. It was an eerie feeling as we made our approach, it was like a headlong plunge into a flaming furnace, but all went perfectly smoothly and along with many others we made a safe landing, albeit with no little relief.
Many years later a fellow ex-refugee, George Clare, asked me how I had felt up there, not only about the chances of being shot down and possibly killed, but also about the risks of one of my background being captured. The latter I have already dealt with and as for the former, it's difficult to say. How does a soldier feel in the heat of battle, or a sailor in U-boat infested waters? Of course we were scared, and there were constant reminders when on waking we saw the vacant beds of those who had failed to return. In general we resorted to the time-honoured belief that 'this sort of thing only happens to others but never to oneself' and lived from one day to the next and the devil take the hindmost. While on actual operations, however, it was different. There was a job to be done which demanded all our concentration and vigilance and, although it was a very much of a gamble (is it not the same for a soldier or a sailor?), our chances of survival also depended very much on our keeping our wits about us in order to help us cope with untoward and unpleasant occurrences. There was fear and apprehension of course when called upon to brave the enemy's skies and we brazenly called it 'dicing with death', but we hoped not only for good fortune but also on our own skill in cheating the grim reaper at his deadly game of cards by keeping our wits about us. The story about my reactions during the crash landing I had been involved in is perhaps an illustration of this theme.
Just as a curiosity, the nearest I came to coming a cropper myself was when a V2 exploded prematurely a few hundred feet directly over my head - on my very doorstep while on leave in London.
At some time my father had taken a course as a turner at one of the government training centres and had then gone to work in a factory producing components for tanks. It must have been in early 1944 when he got a job with OSS (the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA) in their propaganda department. This work was well suited for his experience as a journalist. We usually carried bundles of leaflets which were scattered when the bomb doors were opened over the target and I had always pinched a few samples to show to my father. It turned out that some of these had been written by himself, a nice example of father and son co-operation. Some weeks after the D-Day landings my father's office was transferred to France in the wake of the Allied progress and he was given a uniform, without military rank but with officer status. Later on he took some part at the Nuremberg trials, then in summer 1947 he left the American service and returned to his old stamping grounds to edit a paper in East Berlin. Although a dedicated communist, he remained as outspoken as ever and did not hesitate to criticize where he felt that this was due, and as a result he was relieved of his duties in August 1952. But even here he was lucky, he was merely silenced and put on ice. For the rest of his life, he died in 1968 aged 80, he made a fair living doing translations from Hungarian.
I completed my tour of thirty operational flights on 25 October, safely and without major excitements. I had been granted my wish to deliver my full quota of nails to Hitler's coffin, I had done my utmost that each should be well and

truly driven home, but I had done it without malice. For me, fighting the Germans had merely been the sole available means of striking at Hitler, his kind and all they stood for, but for Johnnie the enemy had been the German nation as such. He had been less than happy at subsequently being posted to the control commission and his early letters had made plain his distaste at having to rub shoulders with the members of that hated nation: "keeping them strictly at arm's length!" I had been amused as he discovered that "the odd one is quite human", then: "some of them are quite decent", "I've found some really good fellows amongst them" and "they're not so different from the likes of us, bound to have some black sheep anywhere!" After a while he ceased to elucidate and I all but laughed out loud when, on my return home for demobilization, I discovered that he had got engaged to a German girl and would be bringing his bride to be to London. QED!
After my end of tour leave I briefly returned to the Squadron to get cleared before proceeding on indefinite leave pending further posting. On the very next day I went down with mumps, a dangerous illness for an adult male. I blew up like a balloon in more places than one, but fortunately the swellings subsided in due course and I was left with no lasting after-effects.
About this time my father was about to leave for the continent and we gave up our rooms in the basement of Windsor Court. We had made the acquaintance of a Mrs Dunn who had a flat on the first floor and she now offered me a room for use during my leaves. Her son was a Hurricane pilot in Burma and she had her daughter, whose husband was a prisoner of war in Japanese hands, and her children living with her. This was to prove a long family friendship.
The beginning of January saw me at Brackla near Nairn in Invernesshire. It was the hutted camp of ACAC, Air Crew Allocation Centre, a clearing house for tour expired aircrew. In spite of heavy losses, far more of us had survived than could be used for further flying duties and it was quite a problem finding suitable niches for all.
It was a pleasant time and I met up with a number of people from my old squadrons as well as making new friends. Apart from having to submit to a number of tests and interviews designed to determine our future employment, we were pretty well left to our own devices. We spent the weekends in Inverness and on my first Saturday there I met a bonnie lassie by the name of Mona MacKenzie at the local hop. As frequently on such occasions, I was invited to her home and, together with an Australian chum, I became a frequent visitor to the MacKenzie home for the rest of my stay in those parts. Mona had two brothers serving in the forces and on my last weekend there she got Fred and myself to don their kilts and have our photos taken. I still have a snapshot of Fred and myself in front of Flora MacDonald's statue at Inverness Castle but the one showing the two of us in kilts has regrettably gone astray. It did not seem to matter at the time but as, many years later, the Garb of Old Gaul was to become a frequently used garment, it would have been nice to have this memento of my first attempt at being a braw laddie.
At the final interview we were given a long list of available vacancies, all ground jobs, and invited to give three choices in order of preference. I did not want to be grounded and asked for a flying job, only to be told that there was nothing doing in that line. But I was determined to remain airborne and insisted on putting my name down for pilot training, Transport Command and, as the next best thing to flying, Link Trainer instructor. "If I can't have any of these you can do with me as you please," was my final comment. With a shaking of heads at my stubbornness I was dismissed and sent home on indefinite leave.

A week later I got my posting to 109 OTU (Operational Training Unit) of Transport Command. Although I had failed to get my first choice of pilot training, my pigheadedness had paid dividends and I was going to remain airborne with the prospect of lots of flying ahead. On 5 February I reported to Crosby-on-Eden near Carlisle for my introduction to the Dakota, the Service version of the legendary Douglas DC 3.
At the beginning of April I was promoted to the rank of Flight Sergeant. A few days later I had arranged to meet a chum in Carlisle for an evening's outing but when I was about to set out for town I suddenly felt weak as a kitten. Eventually I managed to drag myself along to keep our tryst, but I wasn't up to it and went straight back to collapse on my bed. I was no better the following morning. Even getting dressed proved to be a major effort and I had to take a rest between putting on each item of clothing. I dragged myself along to the mess for breakfast, but all I could face was some neat tea and I decided that I was definitely a case for the doctor.
For some obscure reason, sick parade was timed for an unearthly hour well before the usual time for reveille, and as I could not face the long drag to the guardroom for the regulation special sick report I went straight to the sick quarters and demanded to see the medical officer in charge. This non-standard procedure made me anything but popular, but I pointed out that sick quarters were for the sick and that I was under the circumstances undoubtedly one of these. The MO took a look at me but he failed to discover anything definite which might have helped him to diagnose my case. Temperature, pulse, in fact everything appeared to be perfectly normal. As a last resort he asked whether I had been in the tropics or other outlandish places, but I hadn't and so he couldn't even put it down to some obscure disease. He must have thought I was malingering, prescribed a tonic and sent me on my way.
My health did not improve and I dragged myself around in a state of utter lassitude. Each day I presented myself at sick quarters only to be sent away after being given another tonic. I celebrated my birthday by being sick as a dog during a night cross country exercise, the only time I have ever suffered this malaise during flight. This was it. About mid-morning the next day I packed my 'small kit' and once more made my way to the sick quarters.
"You again?"
"Yes, and this time I've come to stay. You can start making up my bed. There's something radically wrong with me and I'm not leaving again until I'm cured of whatever it might be."
The medical orderly was horrified and fled to inform the MO of my impertinence. That worthy was as puzzled as ever but had a sudden inspiration. He summoned the Dental Officer who took one cursory look at me, said "jaundice," and returned to his chamber of horrors, muttering to himself. I got my bed. The following day I was so yellow all over that it could have put any Chinaman to shame.
I had been put on a fat free diet but this was easier said than done, for wartime restrictions had caused suitable nourishment to be at a premium. Fresh fruit would have been ideal, but this was almost unobtainable. Then one fine day the station got an allocation of oranges - for aircrew only and no more than a couple apiece. "The very thing" I cried, "get me more, lots more!" I might as well have asked for the moon but I got them, a huge bag full.
It was a dull and boring time. I felt perfectly well as long as I remained horizontal and the days dragged interminably. There were never more that three or four of us in the ward, none of us serious cases, and I helped to pass the time

by inventing an imaginary dog under my bed for whose delectation I demanded bones and other titbits to the exasperation of the nursing staff. Especially so where the senior nurse was concerned, a bit of a humourless dragon who spent half her time chasing real or imaginary specks of dust and other intruders on clinical hygiene. To complete her ideas of immaculate perfection she insisted on our blankets being tightly tucked into the mattress so as not to show even the tiniest crease. I found this straightjacket-like imprisonment most uncomfortable and, no sooner having been tucked in, kicked myself free again to enjoy the comforts of loose bedding. She struggled against my rebellious nature for a while but had to give up in the end. The junior nurse was much more amenable and in fact gave every sign of having taken quite a fancy to me and I flirted with her outrageously. With hindsight it was only too obvious that 'all systems were on go', but I was too young and inexperienced at the time to realize this and make the best of the opportunities on offer.
I was well on my way to recovery when the war in Europe came to its close and the CO sent round a bottle of beer per man to enable us to at least make a gesture while everyone else celebrated madly. Beer was of course poison for a man suffering from jaundice, but the doctor relented to my desperate pleas and allowed me just one sip. Of course it did not remain at that, and when later on that night there was a knock on the window and our pals handed in a whole crate of the stuff there was no holding us. The following day my fellow inmates were tight and I had turned a bright orange! Back to square one!
It was the middle of June before I was well enough to leave the sick bay for three weeks convalescent leave which I spent in London and Bournemouth. Johnnie, my pal from Madley, 214 and 101 Squadrons had been posted to the Disarmament Commission in Germany and I visited Ernie Philips, my erstwhile room mate from Madley at his home in Birmingham. Early July saw me back at Crosby to resume my interrupted training for Transport Command.
While rummaging through papers, log books and brief diary notes to help me reconstruct my experiences I came across two short essays I had written at this period. I had clean forgotten about these and was surprised to find that after all these years they were still readable and so I decided to include them in my story. Here they are, for what they are worth. I have seen those empty 'dromes. I saw one not a hundred yards from the railway when I came on leave from Carlisle. I saw it again just now on my way to Birmingham and I shall see it again on Monday when I go back to London. It was empty, stark staring empty. Runways, perimeters, dispersals, with not one aircraft on them, hangars and workshops silent of the clamour of mechanics. Flying control, station headquarters, but none of the wearers of braid and ribbon. They have gone. In the mess the last morsels have long ago been eaten by the mice. Yes, even the mice have gone. And the quarters, once neat and inhabited by those proud possessors of pin-ups and noisy radios? They too are empty, the floors dull, the windows dirty and broken, the walls hung with cobwebs. Empty.
But it had not always been like this. It must have been on my way to Inverness, only last January, when I saw those silver Fortresses on it and heard the air alive with the hum of planes. Those days were different. Shortly after passing that 'drome the guard had come along the corridors drawing the blackout blinds and reminding the passengers to do likewise. The war was on then. The war against Japan is still on but the one against Germany is over. The Americans must have been on that 'drome, as on many others, for some time now. Their flyers had fought the Hun, some had been killed, others gone back home. Some perhaps are fighting again, only this time in the Pacific. Their ground crews too,

those men who slaved night and day to keep the men and planes flying and the Hun cursing. Perhaps there was a pretty WAC nurse, an English wife, perhaps more than just one.
This 'drome had probably belonged to the RAF before the Yanks came. They were very much the same kind of people, only they wore blue instead of khaki, and though they spoke the same language it was with a different accent. They didn't have Fortresses but perhaps Wellingtons, Hampdens or Blenheims. But they had fought that same Hun. They too were flyers and ground crews. They also had pretty nurses and English wives. They also fought and died, went home and fought again in the Pacific.
All these people have gone but they are not forgotten. Just ask the landlord of the little village pub or the proprietor of the cafe at the corner or the parson at the church. They'll remember. But now the field is empty, silent and decaying. No, not silent, for its thousand voices are crying out. What of the future? Think of those men who have gone. You'll need them again. If not for armour bristling bombers then for comfortable liners, but you'll need them again. The fight's not over yet. There is peace and prosperity to be won. The real fight is only just beginning.
A newspaper flutters by in the wind. "Tomorrow is polling day," it says. Think of those men, you'll need them.
Summer 1945 I'd just arrived in Birmingham and was finishing my tea in a cafe when two women sat down opposite me. They were thoroughly disgusted with the chipped state of their cups.
"They could replace them now the war's over and they ought to. It's a disgrace" they said.
I felt tempted to say something but didn't. The war's over indeed. The boys in Burma would have an answer ready for that. A chipped cup will hold tea as well as any, but a chipped roof wouldn't keep the rain out. And there are many chipped roofs. Let us replace them first. Yes, as Mr Andropus said in The Skin of our Teeth last night, "War is easy, you have something to fight and you can fight it, but peace is different. You cannot solve its problems as easily as you can drop a bomb."
It's funny, those are the very words I said myself only a few days ago. And how true they are. It is easy to kill a man, it can be done in a split second with a squeeze of a trigger. How much harder it is to make a man. It takes about twenty years of hard work.
The elections will be here in a few days. I wonder if the new government will realize the promises made during the campaign? It should be remembered on polling day that it was the people who fought and gave their blood, and that it is they who are entitled to life. Summer 1945
Social life was very pleasant at Crosby. I would go along to various local hops and at one of these I had my first experience of an eightsome reel. For me at that time it was merely a mad melee, in later years I was to revel in these and other cantrips. There was a large lake nearby, Talkin Tarn, and during the summer I would frequently cycle there for a swim and a romp. One of the characters on my course was Warrant Office Sammy Cronshaw from Oswaldtwistle and I would meet up with him again in Singapore. Another one was an elderly sergeant instructor who used to spend his time walking aimlessly around the camp. One day he appeared unexpectedly in our classroom.
"Your instructor is detained elsewhere and I've been detailed to take his place. I'm no good at instructing so I'll tell you a few stories from my life instead. I used to be a radio officer on flying boats with BOAC. It was the radio officer's

duty to slip the buoy when the aircraft was ready to taxi out and the captain gave the signal to do so by blowing a silver whistle. I'd been out on the binge and as I hung out of the hatch the following morning I was still suffering from the very granddad of a hangover. Sir came aboard with a boy trotting along behind carrying his briefcase and he settled himself into his seat and put on his white kid gloves.
"Ready to start engines Number One?"
"Ready to start engines Sir."
"Start engines Mr. Engineer."
"... Number 1 running Sir."
"At this critical point of the proceedings my shaking hands slipped on the rope and our aircraft started to drift away from its moorings. What was I to do? I could think of nothing except shouting: 'Hey skipper, you'd better blow your bloody whistle - we're off!'
"The captain was not amused. The next day I handed in my BOAC uniform and the day after that I was issued with the one I'm wearing now. Transport Command was the obvious posting and that's how I came here. I had to fill in the usual arrival form and in the appropriate space put down my flying experience - some 10.000 hours. When they saw that they decided that I could not possibly be a pupil and made me an instructor instead. But as I said, I'm no good at instructing and so I pass the time as best I can. All right chaps, time's up. Off you go."
I met him again years later at Croydon where he was flying for Morton Air Services as far as I can remember.
I was finally crewed up with 'Mac' Buchanan, a New Zealander. On the 13 August we finished the course, got our posting to India and left Crosby-on-Eden for two weeks embarkation leave.
One of my stamping grounds in London was the Stage Door Canteen, run I believe by the acting fraternity, which provided not only refreshments suited to the pockets of servicemen on the loose but also laid on dances. At one of these I met an attractive young ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service, the precursor to the Womens Royal Army Corps) girl and quickly became very enamoured of her. Her name was Evelyn, she was stationed in London and we spent a lot of time together during the rest of my leave. The days passed far too quickly and the end of the month saw me at Morecambe to draw tropical kit and receive my final marching orders.
There I met old pals from my squadrons and we had a rare old time together. Discipline was lax and I managed to scrounge a 48 hour pass which I spent with Evelyn who was home on leave with her mother in a small village in Warwickshire. Eros scored a bull's eye and I revelled in having a girl to leave behind me. I often wondered whether I might not have dodged that fatal arrow if I had not been on the point of leaving for far distant places with little prospect of an adequate and satisfactory social life, but then some other missile might have found its mark - sooner or later anyway. It certainly felt good to leave some tangible roots behind.
I got my orders on the 8 September and left for London on route for Lyneham in Wiltshire, my starting point for the Far East, where the turmoils of war had also lately ended.

Source : Gerhard Heilig