F/LT Vern L Scantleton DFC War Experience 1

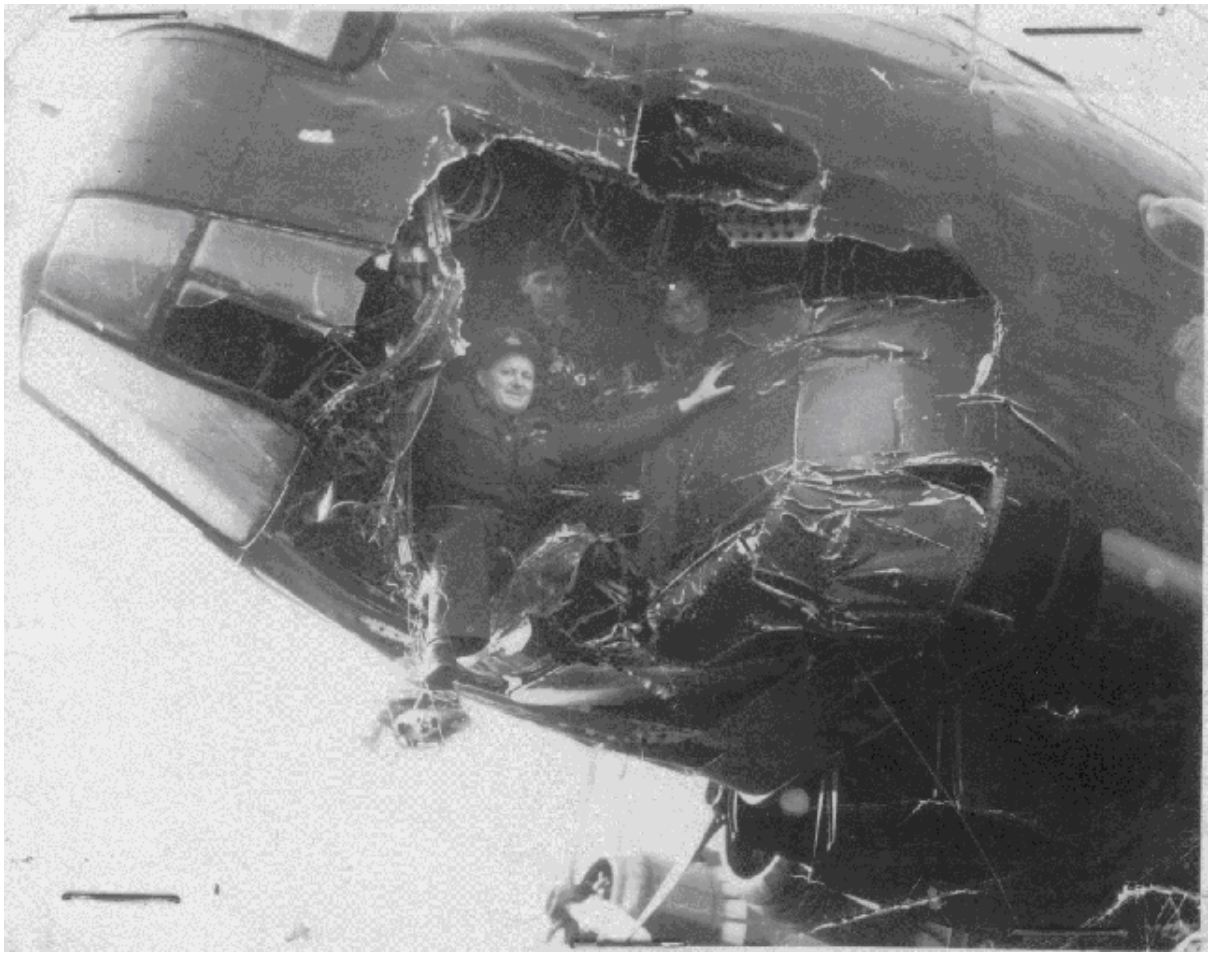
It should be appreciated, when presenting a first person story, it is difficult not to appear to be "shooting a line", as wartime pilots were renowned for their ability to do so. You will have to accept me on face value.

With any story relating to Bomber Command, in World War Two, it is essential to have some appreciation of the difficulties experienced by pilots and crews.

Piston Engine aircraft were greatly underpowered, compared to today's jets and they required every inch of the runway for take off. A standard bomber Command aerodrome was one, two thousand yard runway criss crossed by one twelve hundred yard runway. The twelve hundred yard runway was only used when high winds caused too much cross wind on the two thousand yard one. Bomber Command operated mostly at night, and all dromes had strict blackout conditions. This added to the pilots problems. For instance taxiing a Stirling Bomber with an all up weight of approx 75,000 pounds around a perimeter, on a black, windy, wet winters night with only a few pinpoint lights as a guide could be very demanding.

All Bomber Command raids were carried out with strict R/T and W/T silence from prior to take off time. The reason for this being that any increased R/T or W/T activity could be picked up by listening devices by the enemy, which would alert them to the fact that a Bomber force was about to leave or was already on the way.

My first story relates to a mid air collision which took place on November 6 1943. We took of from Stradishall Airfield at approx 9:30 pm and had climbed on course to a height of approx 7,000 feet over Cambridge. The night was dark and full blackout conditions were in force. Suddenly out of the corner of my eye, I saw a dark object loom up on the port side, Instinctively, I pulled back on the control column and this raised the nose of the aircraft. Almost immediately, the nose of our aircraft collided with the tail plane of a Wellington Bomber. Beyond any doubt, pulling back on the control column saved our aircraft, otherwise the two aircraft would have collided at exactly the same height, with almost certain death for both crews. Because we struck the tail of the Wellington, the pilot would have lost immediate control.



The aircraft would have gone into a corkscrew spin and centrifugal forces would have made it impossible for the crew to bale out. All seven Australians in the Wellington were killed.

Our advantage was that the Stirling was the "Rolls Royce" of aircraft made by Short Brothers, the makers of the famous Sunderland Flying boats. Added to that, the Wellington was only a two engine aircraft and about a third of our all up weight. The Wellington Bomber was affectionately known as the "Wimpy" and played a major role in Bomber Command round about 1942 and prior to the introduction of Lancasters and Hialifaxes. The Wellington Bomber was invented by Barnes Wallis, later to be made famous as the inventor of the Dam Buster bombs. It was later to transpire that at the moment of impact, I pressed the intercom button on the control column and called out "Christ". This exclamation was later to bring a little mirth to the staid Court of Enquiry which was held about a month later.

Immediately following the collision, we were able to ascertain that we still had the aircraft under control, but the starboard outer motor was running roughly, and this motor was feathered. I consulted with the navigator and it was agreed that we should fly back to Base on a reciprocal course and that due to the impact the gyroscopic compass would probably have toppled and be useless and we would rely on the P15 magnetic compass. Little were we to know that the

gyroscopic compass had not toppled and in fact that the P15 had been knocked out by at least 45 degrees and we were in fact not flying a reciprocal course.

After approximately 25 minutes of flying, we became aware that we were lost. To add to our woes we had other problems to contend with. In the impact, the port side of the nose of our aircraft was opened up. At the time of impact, the bomb aimer, who operates in that area, was lying on his stomach, map reading through the perspex viewer. The poor fellow copped the full blast of the impact but miraculously did not suffer any broken bones and in fact was only in hospital for a few days. Unfortunately in the collision, his parachute was ripped open and he was found enveloped in approx 70 square yards of silk which he was manfully trying to repack without any success.

An urgent assessment of the damage which we could determine internally, showed that the airspeed indicator recorded zero, which meant that the Pitot head, which is located externally under the nose had been ripped off. Knowing your airspeed is a vital and essential piece of information needed to fly a large and heavy aircraft as the craft must be kept above stalling speed at all times' in the air except at the point of landing.

The thought of bringing an aircraft in to land with an all up weight of 75,000 pounds, at night, without knowing your airspeed was hair raising to say the least. Whilst a Stirling Bomber had dual controls, the RAF used only one pilot. The bomb aimer was trained to act as second dickie to assist the pilot in take offs and landings. One of his functions on preparing to land was, on the pilot's instructions, to call the air speed every three or four seconds when the aircraft was at a height of about five hundred feet and on the descent in the approach funnel. Without a known airspeed, the only way to bring the aircraft safely in, was under high power and going like a "bat out of hell". An attempt to call Base on P/T proved useless as the set was damaged during the impact. We called, "Mayday", "Mayday", which was the International distress call a number of times but obviously we were only talking to ourselves. The trailing aerial of the W/T set was ripped oft and this meant that the Wireless Operator was unable to transmit or receive messages.

Having decided we were lost, Roy Forbes, our New Zealand Navigator took some Astro shots and determined our position. By some outstanding calculations under extreme pressure, he worked out a course to set for Base, this time using the gyroscopic compass. Roy proved to be an outstanding Navigator and justified the award of the Distinguished Flying Cross after he had completed thirty Operations.

After arriving over Base, we fired a number of red Verey Lights, to indicate our distress situation and hopefully that they would clear the runway for our sole use. We need not have worried; they were already aware that a collision had taken place and with no R/T or W/T response from our aircraft they had assumed that we were one of the planes involved.

At one stage the opportunity was given to some of the crew to bale out but all refused to do so. This was a little surprising as some must have thought our chances of survival fairly grim. As one of the parachutes was useless it meant that in the event of a forced bale out one of the crew faced certain death. Fortunately this terrible decision did not have to be made.

Having decided to land, the undercarriage was selected to be lowered and bad luck again, nothing happened. The huge wheels and the 16 foot Oleo legs of the undercarriage are operated independently by electric motors on either side. As these were obviously unserviceable, we were left with no alternative but to get the wheels down manually. This was a slow, laborious job as it takes six hundred turns for each wheel to be lowered, all this time stooging around above the airfield at a fairly low altitude in an aircraft with unknown external damage.

With the wheels locked down, the time had come to land the aircraft.

The aircraft was brought in under high power and in hindsight at an excessive speed. Over the start of the runway, the throttles were pulled off and we had hopefully expected the aircraft to settle. Instead, our excessive speed would not let the aircraft stall onto the runway and we went tearing down the runway using its length up at an alarming rate. Finally, the aircraft settled onto the runway and it was a great relief to find that the undercarriage did not collapse on impact. Our relief however was short lived. On applying the air brakes they failed completely.

The braking system had been damaged and we had total loss of air pressure and therefore no braking power whatsoever. As it had become apparent that we would overshoot, the only remaining option was to ground loop the aircraft and hope that the Oleo legs would not collapse and that in the wide arc required, we would not collide with some stationary object which, of course we would have no way of avoiding. Fortunately the Oleo legs withstood the stress of a complete ground loop, and we were all pleased to be back on terra firma. We were met by a welcoming party who were all keen to learn what had happened.

I noticed over the next few days that the Senior Medical Officer on the station sought me out in the mess on several occasions to pass the time of day. Was it that he was looking for some twitching of the eyes, or the shaking of the hand which was holding the pot of beer?

Next day the aircraft was considered a total right off and was towed to a remote part of the Airfield. No doubt it supplied valuable spares over the next few months.

Because the collision occurred between two RAF aircraft over England and seven Australians had lost their lives it was deemed necessary to hold a Court of Inquiry. Two Investigating officers interviewed me and also took statements from three senior members of the crew. A date was set for the forthcoming Inquiry about a month after the collision.

A dour Legal Wing Commander was President when the Court was convened. After the preliminary waffle, the Clerk began reading the statements made by the three crew members. The first stated that the first knowledge of the impending collision was when the Skipper pushed the intercom button and called out "Christ". The second statement followed similar lines and again quoted that the first he knew of the impending collision was when the skipper called out "Christ" on the intercom. The third statement was being read and as it got to the part concerning the Skipper's exclamation the dour President held up his hand to stop proceedings, turned to me and said "Mr. Scantleton, tell the Court, was that blasphemy or were you just appealing for help?" Well, I'll leave that for you to decide.

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