

## Warrant Officer P J (Jim) Copus 97 Sqn



A few minutes after 7 pm on 22nd March 194 I took off on what was to be my last operational sortie as the mid upper gunner of Lancaster OF-P ND351. By the end of that night I was a prisoner of war, having bailed out of the aircraft as it fell crippled and burning, the victim of a German night-bomber. This is the story of that night and the year in captivity that followed.

We have made our turn to the south over Hanover at 18,000 ft. The target, Frankfurt is now directly ahead of the aircraft and already burning. My attention is elsewhere however, the Flak which we can do nothing about anyway, has stopped, a sure indication that fighters are up. An 'own goal' by the flak crews would mean a double quick transfer to the Russian front! Any night-fighter attack will come from the rear of the aircraft. Only the rear gunner and myself can offer return fire, so we are the fighter's primary targets in the hope that he can silence our guns and finish off the aircraft without risk. We are well aware that the odds are stacked heavily in his favour.

Each of our Lancaster's four Merlin engines produces a double row of exhaust flames, we have shiny turrets which can reflect any stray light. The fighter pilot can quickly re-position

his aircraft to improve his view of anything suspicious, whereas we have a full bomb load and can only manoeuvre very gently, for fear of tearing the wings off the aeroplane.

Should we be spotted then we must see the slender, head on fighter profile before he gets within range, a very tall order indeed considering that we have to search all that volume of the night sky within our range of vision to the rear of the aircraft. Our rifle-calibre machine guns mean that the best we can hope for, should we be attacked, is to put the fighter pilot off his aim or maybe even make him break off his attack and perhaps lose us again in the darkness. However, since it is possible that the fighter was equipped with radar, that he used to find us in the first place, there is no reason why he shouldn't be able to find us a second time. In an exchange of fire, we are at a severe disadvantage, since the fighter has 20mm cannon as well as machine guns and the resulting weight of far exceeds our own. Taking all these factors into account means that our chances of survival depend almost entirely on the size of the night sky, which although apparently empty, contains our friends and our foes in unequal proportions; there are many more of the latter, ground based as well as airborne, who are determined to prevent our reaching the target, as we are to get there. The element of surprise is no longer a factor, other aircraft in front of us have already released their bombs and the target is literally sprinkled with fires. The fighters will be more concerned with preventing additional attacks than shooting down aircraft that have already bombed. The chances of being seen in silhouette against the ground fires by a fighter pilot increase as we draw nearer the target. Of course height and speed were all fixed before we took off in order to reduce the chances of not only a collision over the target but also of bombs falling on aircraft at a lower level. In spite of these precautions, instruments inevitably have minor calibration tolerances and variations of a few hundred feet are possible. We all know that both these scenarios

have occurred. It is as well that we are all to preoccupied to think too carefully about the multitude of situations quite apart from the enemy action that could kill us in the blink of an eye.

**The Beginning:** Our training as a complete crew had involved many 8 hour flights around UK, almost always at night on what were primarily navigation exercises. However, their indirect purpose was to get us all functioning as a team. Apart from that, we gunners were just along for the ride. On completion of training in Lancasters we were posted to ..... a Stirling station! In that remarkable manner which seems only the Military can achieve, we had been wrongly directed and no-one knew anything about us. Our pilot F/O Cooper told us to stay put and that he would arrange something. He disappeared for 2 days. On his return he announced that he had fixed us up with a Pathfinder Squadron, No 97.

That is how, one day late in December, we arrived at Bourn in Cambridgeshire. Only a fortnight earlier, on the night of 16/17th December, known ever since as 'Black Thursday'. Bomber Command had experienced its worst bad-weather losses of the war, a tragedy which cruelly emphasises the fact that the enemy lurks not only in the human form. We were posted to Bourn as a contribution towards making up 97 Squadron'



A mid-upper gunner in his 'office'

**The Attack:** That night 22nd/23rd March no-one saw the fighter, a Messerschmitt Bf110, in time. His first attack was probably at the end of a gentle climb from behind and below. The climb reduces the speed differential that the fighter needs to catch the target thereby avoiding the risk of an overshoot or even a collision. This tactic also meant that the bulk of the Lancaster on top of which I was sitting, hid the fighter from my view and even the rear gunner's view downward is restricted enough to hide the approaching fighter. In any event that initial attack knocked out the hydraulics which operated the turrets. I was then in the embarrassing position of being able to do nothing but watch the '110' flying alongside, straight and level, slightly below us and 200 to 300 yards off our starboard wing. The '110's relative position enabled their gunner, facing aft in the rear of the cockpit to fire bursts from his machine gun with zero deflection into our fuel tanks and number three and four engines. The results were exactly what one would expect, both engines burst into flames. Some of his rounds, passing within inches of my head shattered my turret at about the same time as our pilot ordered over the intercom 'Prepare to abandon aircraft' and then very quickly afterwards 'Abandon aircraft'. All members of the crew acknowledged the order including the rear gunner, who by some miracle had survived the initial attack. The bomb aimer jettisoned the bomb load. We were on our way down, both starboard engines blazing furiously.

**The Escape:** I tear off my oxygen mask, intercom leads and harness and folding my small seat upwards and out of the way, manage to drop from my turret into the aircraft's fuselage where it is pitch dark.. Although we gunners wear the parachute harness at all times in the aircraft, there is no room for the parachute pack itself in any of the turrets and my own was stored on the port side of the aircraft, aft of my position and opposite the rear fuselage hatch. It took only a few seconds to find my parachute and to clip it onto the harness. The rear hatch was my emergency exit

and I began wrestling with the release handle. The door was jammed! More determined wrestling. The handle broke off in my hand. I had to scramble virtually the whole length of the Lancaster's fuselage encumbered by parachute, heavy flying suit and boots. In pitch blackness! Although the entire fuselage is extremely confined and packed with equipment, this is nothing compared to the gymnastics required to wriggle over the wing-spar. All this must be achieved in the dark, making sure that the parachute rip-cord does not get snagged and cause premature deployment and with the knowledge that at any moment the aircraft could steepen its dive, suddenly flip into inverted flight or simply explode as the engine fire touch off the fuel tanks in the wing. It is also possible that the fighter could attack again. Any chance of hiding in the night is now gone, our demise highlighted by sheets of flame. There are numerous other scenarios, none of which is likely to improve our chances of survival. I dismiss these thoughts and continue floundering towards the under-nose hatch, now the only means of escape. The hatch is in the very forward part of the aircraft and access to it is achieved by crawling under the pilot's instrument panel to the right of his seat. The manoeuvre can be likened to crawling through the knee hole of a writing desk. The pilot is still at the controls, I can see him clearly. This forward part of the aircraft is illuminated by way of a hole in the fuselage admitting light from our engine fires. As I duck under the instrument panel I tap him on the leg and indicate that I am about to go. He nods briefly in acknowledgement. There appears to be no-one else in the aircraft, because I am able to walk upright towards the nose, still in pitch dark of course, until I simply plunge feet first through the open hatch! None of us is well prepared for the experience that follows. Training for bailing out had been limited to a little more than a few minutes, jumping from a bench in the Gym and attempting a landing roll. After all, we all knew for certain that it was only some of the other crews who would

have to face the experience. That sort of thing only happens to the other chaps.....

This night, however, it is not the 'other chaps'. It is us. Our lucky mascots, our youthful confidence in ourselves and each other, our training, all now useless. What happens next is uncharted territory! The slipstream seizes me and whirls me around furiously and noisily. During one of my violent gyrations, I catch a glimpse of the aircraft as I free-fall away from it. I have kept hold of the rip-cord handle and knowing now that I am well clear of the aircraft, haul on the handle. The parachute explodes out of the pack as the airstream seizes it. The opening shock is immediate and extremely violent and I am wrenched into an upright position, completely winded and in some considerable pain from the contraction of the parachute harness. The sudden peace and quiet is extraordinary. The only noise is my own laboured breathing. I am hanging apparently nearly motionless. It is cold, very cold! We were flying at 18,000 feet when attacked and I imagine the aircraft was down to 15,000 feet when I bailed out.

Surprisingly my all-consuming thought is it will take a long time to get back home from this operation!

The descent takes an enormous but unquantifiable time. I know the ground will be covered in snow and therefore easy to see. Straining my eyes I can see a vague brightness below. I brace myself and wait for the shattering crash of the landing. Nothing happens! What I take to be the ground is a thin layer of low cloud. Just cloud. As I begin to relax a little, comes the landing; surprisingly gentle. I am in a ploughed field covered with snow. My only injury is some bruising and scratching on my face as a result of pitching forward on impact with the ground.

To borrow the Germans' own favourite expression in these circumstances 'For me, the war is over'.

## A Prisoner of War

The field in which I had landed was only yards from a row of houses. Their occupants were on me immediately I landed and I was dragged into one of the houses amid much shouting and bravado. It was widely known that German civilians were not not exactly welcoming towards aircrew fell into their hands and I was very nervous about the whole situation. They shoved me into one corner of a room. My 'chute' had been gathered into an untidy bundle and was dumped beside me. In the other corner were grouped a cross-section of the neighborhood. They were gesticulating and shouting at me in unintelligible German. Some of the shouting, however, needed no translation! In the circumstances I did not feel at all like a 'Terrorflieger' as the Nazis called RAF bomber crews. Some young wide eyed children were among the crowd. As a gesture of goodwill I took some chocolate from my flying-suit pocket and offered it to them. They recoiled hastily, either not knowing what it was or suspecting it was poisoned, perhaps. To prove it was safe I ate a little myself and returned the rest to my pocket but the atmosphere was tense and I hoped that some sort of authority had been alerted and would remove me, before something unpleasant happened.

Fortunately, the civil police (they were referred to as 'gendarmes') arrived promptly and I was hauled off to the local police station, where I was thrown unceremoniously, without food and water, into a damp cell in which the only furniture was a bed. There was not even a blanket. I attempted to sleep but it was extremely cold. In an attempt to keep my feet from freezing I managed to squeeze both into one flying boot.

At some point during the night I was dragged out of the cell and upstairs to an office where I was confronted by the local Burgermeister (Mayor). There were, he told me, the bodies of

several aircrew in the mortuary. If I would tell him the names of my crew he would let me know if any of them were among the dead. I felt unable to cooperate in this 'kind offer' which was, of course, a fairly transparent ruse to get more information out of me. My response was perhaps equally transparent but served well enough to show that I knew what he was up to. The crew I had been flying with, I told him, were completely unknown to me. My presence on the aircraft had been a last minute arrangement as a substitute. However, I added hopefully, I would be prepared to go to the mortuary and point out anyone I recognised. This offer was refused and I was returned promptly to my cell. In the morning, after an uncomfortable night I was brought a cup of ersatz coffee and something unidentifiable to eat. Shortly afterwards I was dragged out of my cell and outside, where a horse and cart was waiting. Surprisingly my 'chute' was returned to me and as I flung it into the cart saw Lund, the bomb aimer, already aboard. He had a leg wound. As I started to climb up into the cart with him, I was pulled back and told that I must walk behind, thus presenting the entire populace who had turned out to watch, with another opportunity to shout and scream abuse as we plodded slowly through the town.

We arrived eventually at some sort of holding area, a single room in an official building into which we were directed. Shortly after, Lund was taken off to hospital. My parachute was not returned to me and I suspect provided underwear for a 'Hausfrau'.

It was not for many years that I discovered that the rear-gunner, Ron Hindle, whom we knew as 'Slick', although he had acknowledged the order to bail out, had in fact been killed. Clearly something had gone wrong and as I discovered there was ample capacity for The Unexpected! The aircraft crashed in woodland outside Hanover and Ron is buried in Hanover War Cemetery.

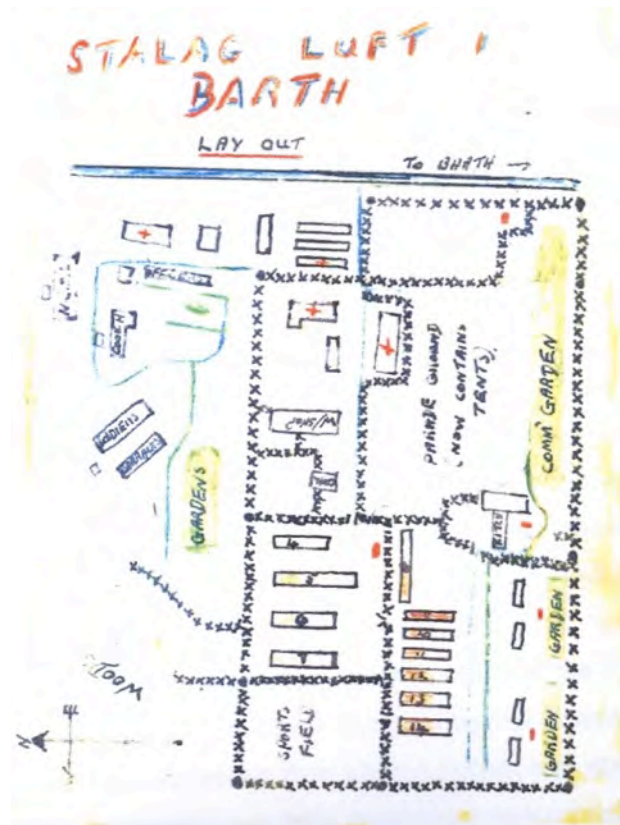
When the holding area reached a certain number of inmates, we were moved out for transfer to a permanent camp (Stalag). The first step in the process was to get to Frankfurt. Accompanied by two guards I was shoved on to a train for a two day trip. Progress was very slow, the timetable somewhat upset by Bomber Command's constant re-arrangement of the rail network! The guards were pleasant and pointed out landmarks along the way. During one of the halts one of my guards announced he was going to get some water. In due course he returned and sat down sipping his water bottle. After a while he offered me the water bottle. 'Wasser?' he asked. I took a gulp. Schnapps!

Thus I was delivered to Frankfurt station where a large number of weary and disconsolate aircrew were already gathered. The station was a mess! There were hardly any buildings standing, just several platforms. I did not feel the need to point out that this had been our handiwork! We were crammed into cattle trucks, 30 per truck. We had no idea where we were going or how long the journey would take. We travelled day and night. There were occasional stops when we were given food and water. three days later we arrived at Stalagluft 1.

The POW camp Stalagluft 1 was close to the Baltic coast near a town called Barth. There were British and American aircrew there numbering 10,000 in total. The days were spent walking about, playing football, talking and reading. There was a lively black market trade based on Red Cross food parcels. It was not unknown for the guards to join in, running the risk of joining short-sighted Flak crews and other defaulters in Stalingrad!

It can be imagined perhaps that for young men used to an active, adrenalin-fuelled life, the resulting boredom was a special form of torture. We had no idea how long this would go on nor how it would end. One of the original inmates of the camp had been shot down in mid Sept 39, only a few weeks into the war.

How were we new arrivals to know that our own confinement wouldn't last just as long...or longer!?! But for the resilience of youth and the comradeship, it would have been easy to fall into hopelessness and despair.



*Jim's map of the camp*

One of the first people I met on entering the camp was a chap who had been on the same gunnery course as me on the Isle of Man. Two weeks after my arrival, our pilot, Fg Off Cooper turned up. Although I was unaware of it at the time, he had been wounded in the back when we were shot down and had been in hospital since that time.

The most senior German officer whom we saw regularly on his 'rounds' of the camp was Major Mueller. He was a decent chap, clearly one of the 'old school'. He was not above joining in and on one occasion after watching some Americans fencing, took over one foil (actually a stick) and showed them how it was done! Of course, the camp was run entirely by the Luftwaffe, much preferable to the

Wehrmacht we thought. There was empathy between airmen, albeit on different sides.

The Germans routinely produced their version of The News riddled of course with propaganda: a rain of V1's and V2's had reduced London to rubble: the Wehrmacht was pushing the Red Army back into Russia: an attempted Allied invasion had been pushed back into the sea whilst a German invasion was imminent and so on. Fortunately we had our own sources-the BBC via an illicit radio hidden somewhere in the camp. It was not therefore entirely unexpected when one night, 30 Apr 45, after we were locked up, all the Germans fled! We already knew, as they did, that the Red Army was approaching. We were not overjoyed at being liberated by the Russians and were somewhat concerned by what might happen. Had we known then, what is known now about how the Russians sometimes handle these situations, we would have been even more concerned!

For some days after the departure of our guards, the only sign of our liberators were in the distance. In the meantime our own officers advised us not to venture outside the camp confines. Free to explore the whole camp we discovered a hoard of Red Cross parcels. This windfall allowed us to celebrate in some style. The Russians' eventual arrival was marked by an hour long speech, delivered in Russian by a senior officer. Since hardly anyone understood a word we were obliged to follow the speaker's lead and applaud or cheer at what appeared to be suitable pauses in the oratory. Thereafter we saw little of our liberators.

It was two weeks before we were picked up. The Russians had intended us to go to Odessa from where we would be shipped home. However, the British and American did not believe their stated intension and a mission to pick us up was initiated. The suspicion was that the Russians would hold us hostage to increase their bargaining when it came to dividing up the spoils of war!

We were marched in batches to the airfield to the south of the town. On the way we passed within yards of the perimeter of a concentration camp. The occupants did not appear 'liberated'. It was probable that they had just swapped one captor for another. We knew of the camp as some had escaped as the Russians arrived and came begging food.

I returned to England in a USAF B-17. We were eventually taken to Biggin Hill, where we were told none of us would fly again with the RAF, and given two weeks leave to make up our minds whether to stay on or not. In a 'Land fit for Heroes' there was little on offer in the way of employment and so I elected to stay in the RAF and chose to join a transport unit. Here I learned to drive and acquired my driving licence which stood me in good stead for my eventual transfer to 'civvy street'.

Just to remind you:

*A few minutes before 7.00pm on 22 Mar 44 I took off on what was to be my last operational sortie as the mid upper gunner of Lancaster OF-P ND351.*

*By the end of that night I was a Prisoner of War having bailed out of the aircraft as it fell crippled and burning, the victim of a German night-fighter.*

*This was the story of that night and the year of captivity that followed.....*

*WO James Copus 97 Sqn*