



AS IT HAPPENED

BY

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ACTION CAMEOS

Like my contemporaries, many of my wartime flying experiences remain locked up in a memory vault and are not often revealed for discussion. Generally, the pleasant thoughts of past flying activities, particularly the humorous ones, are those which come to the fore as stories are related over a glass or two of comradeship.

Our archivist has used his powers of persuasion to encourage me to release some of the recollections of wartime flying which have remained submerged in my memory bank. Strangely, I feel better for bringing these thoughts out from their hiding place and exposing them to the light of day.

I recall two night operations to the heavily defended German naval base at Kiel during April/May 1945. The first sortie was a fairly uneventful outward trip until we were nearing the target, about 80 kilometres north of Hamburg, arriving close to our estimated time of arrival (ETA). As navigator, that was satisfying to me. On the run-in to the target, we experienced the expected heavy flak from the anti-aircraft batteries, but fortunately we got through unscathed. As soon as the call of "Camera finished" was made, the skipper vacated the target area very rapidly and we headed for home with no further drama.

'Running in to the target' or like term is a euphemistic expression which can be used and thrown away so that aircrew members do not have to relive the tensions and stresses associated with painful situations. I will present a short description of the 'run-in' just this one time, so that its content can be put back into its cellar of bad memories, never to be brought forward again.

When the pilot says "Turning on", the eyes of the mid-upper and rear gunners are released from their ever-vigilant lookout for night-fighters, but not from searching for other blacked-out aircraft of the bomber stream which may stray into our tiny piece of personal airspace. They are particularly concerned at this stage with the proximity of flak bursts, of which they have a dress-circle view.

The pilot is busy maintaining a straight-and-level line to the target, responding to calls from the bomb-aimer "Left, left, steady. Right, steady" as well as responding to aircraft involuntary movements actuated by too-close anti-aircraft fire. He and the engineer are both constantly aware of searchlight coning. Paradoxically, there is almost a sense of relief when some unfortunate Lancaster ahead is caught in a cone, for that means that the

forces on the ground are concentrating on someone else. This is survival time, with the aircraft at its most vulnerable. It is also tension time for the navigator and wireless operator whose roles are in suspension for the run-in period.

Sudden fear spreads through the crew as a close flash and burst rocks the aircraft. I will make an out-of character statement that anyone who says that he does not experience fear at this critical time either lies in his teeth or is a bone-headed fool.

There is momentary relief at the bomb-aimer's call of "Bombs gone", but the tension recurs as we continue straight and level as the cameras roll to record the bomb bursts for the statistics (Intelligence) gatherers back home.

Fear is replaced by hope at the call of "Cameras finished", and immediate aircraft activity indicates that 'homeward bound' is just around the corner. We are not out of the woods (or the flak) yet, but the target run is over, our job is done, and we can concentrate on getting home safely.

Our next visit to Kiel was four nights later. Our briefed route took us across northern Denmark to the Baltic Sea. The strategy was to attack from the east. In the briefing room, that looked good. The whole force of several hundred Lancasters would stream westward across Kiel Bay to the target which was about 50 kilometres south of the Danish border, drop their loads and be homeward bound.

Ah! 'The best-laid plans of mice and men.'.

We experienced Murphy's Law to the fullest extent during that flight. Firstly, our radio became unserviceable early in the flight, but we pressed on, deciding to stick to our briefed route and attack plan. Murphy's next test was to introduce us to an horrific storm with severe lightning and crashes of thunder so loud and close that we could virtually 'feel' the sound.

Murphy seemed to be concentrating on navigators that night. In the midst of the storm our two radars crashed. With only an occasional glimpse of the stars during an odd break in the heavy cloud cover, I had no means of getting a positional fix. I did manage to get one astro position line which was as much use as you-know-whats on a bull.

Just on ETA, we spotted the target markers which had been placed by the Path Finders, but we were way out of position and our timing did not match the attack plan. To reach the target anywhere close to our briefed bombing time, we would have needed to turn ninety degrees and cross the flight paths of the whole blacked-out bomber force streaming in from the east. Not even Biggles would have tried that manoeuvre.

After carrying our bomb load all the way to the target, all that was left for us to do was to jettison the load 'live' into Kiel Bay, turn around and battle our way back to base through the hellish storm which was waiting for us over Denmark. In the frustration of our forced abortive sortie, no-one had a cheery word on the way home.

Two nights later, we were again on the 'Battle Order'. The navigation briefing was held an hour ahead of the main briefing, and we learned that our target was Potsdam, about twenty kilometres south-west of central Berlin, and part of the heavily-defended Berlin target area. The planned navigational route involved many different legs to take us around most (but not all) known flak areas. We knew that Berlin would not be an easy target, and that on our routes, both in and out, we would spend the greater part of our nine-hour trip over enemy territory with the ever-present threat of night-fighters.

As I recall that sortie, which I have not dwelt upon for over half a century, my heart beats a little faster and I reach for a (small) glass of scotch to get me back on track.

The flight to Berlin was nothing extraordinary, the devious route kept me busy, and only a few pockets of flak were experienced as we droned on in the bomber stream. In the target area, the anti-aircraft batteries were very busy and very accurate. The Path Finders had marked the target well and we were on our bombing run spot-on ETA. Tension eased momentarily as the bomb aimer called "Bombs gone".

There was no time for tension to build again during the straight-and-level camera run, for almost immediately we were hit! The mid-upper gunner yelled "Fire in the starboard inner". The flight-engineer activated the built-in fire extinguishers and feathered the engine. The pilot put the aircraft into a dive to evade the searchlight cone which was a prelude to the 'blue light' linked to the anti-aircraft batteries. In addition, he wanted to put the fire out. I was amazed at how quickly we lost ten thousand feet. When we pulled out of the dive, to our great relief, the fire was out. We made some rapid fuel calculations as we turned for home on three engines, and the skipper elected to head for an emergency airfield on English soil, close to the coast.

Apprehension was the keyword on the homeward journey because we were a lone crippled aircraft, separated vertically from the main force by ten thousand feet, making us a prime target for any roving night fighter to be vectored on to us by the German air defence network. Fortunately, they must have been otherwise engaged, for our flight was incident-free.

Our pilot made a good landing and before long we were tucked up in a reasonably comfortable bed in the emergency airfield's transient quarters. Those of us who thanked the Almighty for our safe return, dropped off to sleep in the middle of the one-way conversation.

The fast approaching end of the European conflict resulted in a quite remarkable unpublicised co-operative effort between the German and Allied forces to supply food to areas of Holland where the civil population was starving.

Some two weeks or so after our last Berlin operation, we undertook two food drops to The Hague ('s-Gravenhague). A dropping zone was organized by the occupying German forces, and specific flight corridors were designated by the Germans. Any Allied aircraft which strayed outside those corridors was regarded as 'hostile' and liable to be fired upon by German anti-aircraft batteries. I had a deep sense of satisfaction in taking part in that operation. We were in the business of helping people to live instead of killing them.

I have many memories of both World War 2 and Vietnam, but these WW2 cameos are the most prominent in my memory. The strong bond of camaraderie that still exists with military aircrew and ex-aircrew is tremendous. For me, visits to the UK to attend squadron reunions, and being with wartime crew members as well as receiving the odd telephone call from my former Squadron Nav. Leader all help to cement these long-standing relationships.

A VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

During my post-aircrew service as a Royal Australian Air Force Intelligence Officer, I spent a two-year tour of duty in the UK, working at the Joint Air Reconnaissance Centre and at

the British Ministry of Defence. When I arrived back in Australia in February 1967, I learned that that I was to be posted to Vietnam by mid-year.

In the fullness of time, I arrived at Tan San Nhut Air Base which was the Headquarters of the United States Air Force (USAF) 7th Air Force, and home to many USAF combat squadrons. My posting was to Headquarters Australian Force Vietnam (HQAFV) for Intelligence Duties with the USAF 7th Air Force. Specifically, I was assigned to the 16th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, which was part of the 460th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, operating Phantom aircraft.

Serving with the 16th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, I observed and supervised USAF and US Army photo-intelligence personnel, assisted in formulating operating instructions and helped monitor the work flow through the Photographic Processing and Interpretation Facility (PPIF), officially titled 'Weapons System WS-430.

In addition I worked with aircrews from all Photographic Reconnaissance Squadrons, assisting them in mission review requirements and promoting interface between crews and photo-intrepreters. I found that particular aspect of my work the most rewarding because my previous operational aircrew experience gave me the capacity to understand problems faced by the Phantom aircrews. That also proved invaluable in creating mutual trust and comradeship.

The PPIF was an air-transportable system designed to support photographic requirements of Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons. It consisted of some twenty laboratories and shelters. The facility was tasked to process and interpret aerial film, prepare and release 'Flash' and 'Immediate' reports, print duplicates for immediate use by a variety of agencies, and supply supporting Intelligence functions.

My first view of WS-430 had been at the Wright Pattison Air Force Base Ohio (USA), during a visit en route home to Australia from the UK. During that period, I also had the opportunity to visit other US bases in Carolina, California and Honolulu, so I was familiar with much of USAF standard operating procedures.

The WS-430 was comfortable to work in, although in common with all air-transportable facilities, space was at a premium. However, that was offset by full air-conditioning. Generally, work proceeded smoothly, being interrupted at times by small arms, mortar and rocket attacks. Some of those attacks pierced the outer skin and inner linings of the laboratories. The main effect of those attacks was to temporarily make the air-conditioning ineffective. Resulting working conditions inside our sealed units was almost unbearable.

JOHN AND THE 'TET OFFENSIVE'

The smooth running and orderly activity normally associated with our operations was interrupted when Tan San Nhut Air Base came under heavy Viet Cong (VC) attack during the 'Tet Offensive' in 1968.

But I am a little bit ahead of myself. Let us go back to the eve of the 'Tet Offensive'.

I was accomodated in Bachelor Officers' Quarters (BOQ) some distance from the Base, and travelled to and fro by military bus. I was waiting at the military bus stop on Tan San Nhut Base after a twelve hour shift, when a staff car pulled up and offered me a lift. Having a comfort-seeking frame of mind, I naturally accepted.

The occupant turned out to be a military mortician (undertaker). We had an interesting conversation on our way to the BOQ, and when we parted, his last words were "Sure hope I don't meet you professionally".

Next morning at about 0530, I awoke in my windowless room, to the sound of small arms firing and explosions. I got myself ready for the day's toil, and without breakfasting, started to walk the two kilometres to the military bus stop when I realised that the streets were empty. That was most unusual. As I wondered about the situation, a South Vietnamese Policeman suddenly appeared from behind a tree (because of their uniforms, they were known as 'White Mice'). He pointed his rifle in the direction of a building and said urgently "Viet Cong. VC. Charlie". I took cover behind another tree as an exchange of fire took place.

After some minutes, I decided to chance my luck and run from tree to tree, dodging bullets as best I could, running to the safety of a senior officer's quarters. There is no doubt in my mind that, with the adrenalin rush I experienced, I could have qualified for a start in the Stawell Gift sprint. I was welcomed at my haven and offered breakfast. Fighting took place all morning, and again I was offered a meal at lunch-time. By mid-afternoon, fighting had tapered off, so I decided to return to my BOQ. I must admit to being very, very cautious, but I got home without incident.

On arrival, I was greeted by other occupants who were mainly transient US aircrew. They had been unable to move all day, and were without food and water. When they asked me "Where the Hell have you been"? I replied "I just popped out for a bite to eat".

Fighting continued in the streets and we were besieged for two to three days. Fortunately, I had a few items of canned food and several cans of Fosters to keep me going. Others had nothing. The building had a guard contingent and there was a nearby US Navy crew manning a .5 calibre machine gun. Between them, they kept our quarters free from VC. Even so, the VC entered an adjacent building and mounted a light machine gun on the roof during the siege.

After three days, some of my US Army boys, heavily armed, arrived in a truck to transport me back to the base. There was much damage at Tan San Nhut Base and numbers of aircraft had been destroyed.

During the period of the Offensive, we improvised a great deal. We slept on the floor of the laboratories which became our home as well as our workplace. We washed there, we shaved there, we got in each others' way, tripped over each other, ran out of food, felt very hungry and were most uncomfortable as we generally made do and got on with life as best we could.

It was all very dramatic at the time, but we did manage to get our all-important intelligence reports out to aircrews and launch our aircraft.

JOHN GOES HOME (SORT OF)

My tour of duty in Vietnam ended in February 1968. Looking forward to heading straight for home, my instructions were to travel to Singapore for another task! Feeling a bit deflated, I managed to get a lift to Singapore in a Royal New Zealand Air Force Bristol Freighter (known universally as Bristol Frightener).

Some of my fellow passengers must have travelled 'Air (Bristol) New Zealand' on a previous occasion. I was intrigued that they were carrying umbrellas which I assumed

were Asian souvenirs. When we ran into a rain storm en route to Singapore, all became clear. The aircraft leaked like a sieve, and only those with umbrellas remained dry.

On arrival, I was greeted by several RAF members whom I had met in the UK last year, during my previous posting. They very courteously took me to their married quarters and fed me well. I was also able to have my first bath for a long, long time.

After I completed my task, I was inveigled into giving three unplanned lectures. From Singapore, I flew to RAAF Butterworth in Malaysia for travel home to Australia, relieved once more to enjoy its culture and civilized life style.