
Opening Extract from...

Journey's End

Written by Kevin Wilson

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JOURNEY'S END

Bomber Command's Battle from Arnhem to Dresden and Beyond

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PHOENIX

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ONE

A NEW AGE OF WARFARE

THE final stage of the air war, which would see Bomber Command revive its campaign against the industrial capacity of the Reich's cities, began with a bang that was not of Britain's making, but of the Germans themselves.

The unique sound of a V-2 arriving in Staveley Road, Chiswick, on 8 September, in which the boom of its descent from the stratosphere and through the sound barrier was followed a split second later by the roar of the 3/4-ton payload going off, heralded the rocket campaign against Britain which had been dreaded since the pre-emptive RAF strike against the German's Baltic research site at Peenemünde over a year previously.

To a War Cabinet which only the day before had heard Duncan Sandys, head of its Crossbow sub-committee dealing with the V-1 flying bomb menace, announce, 'Except for a few shots the battle for London is over,' there was a sense of shock. So much so that an immediate news blackout was ordered which lasted until 11 November. It wasn't just to deny the enemy any intelligence about where the rockets were landing; the fear was that the content of the weapon was unknown – perhaps the seeds of a new biological warfare. And it could not be determined for sure whether the new weaponry might soon be carrying atomic warheads. The Americans were after all developing the atomic bomb at this time, only because the Allies had been warned by the philosopher-scientist Albert Einstein in 1941 that the Germans were already working on one. All that was known was that the blinding bright blue flash and ear-splitting bang-bang signature of the V-2 resulted in a deep crater and lateral blast that could immediately destroy a

whole terrace in densely populated areas and spread out to demolish walls and slate roofs up to a quarter of a mile away.[1]

The first V-2 killed 3 people, injured 22 and flattened 6 houses after landing in the roadway of the tree-lined suburban avenue. Rosemary Clarke, aged 3, was killed in the front upstairs bedroom of No. 1 Staveley Road when the payload ripped the house apart just before 7 p.m. Her brother John, aged 6, was in the bathroom at the rear and survived. 'There wasn't a mark on Rosemary,' he later remembered. 'The blast goes up and comes down in a mushroom or umbrella shape. In the process of that my sister's lungs collapsed. I got a piece of bomb casing in the back of my hand which has created a scar . . . The bathroom didn't collapse but one of the bedrooms next to it did, which I found very strange as a boy.'[2]

The V-2 had been launched in Holland five minutes before, from a mobile platform because 617 Sqn of Bomber Command had proved decisively with Tallboy bombs on the huge Wizernes bunker in the Pas-de-Calais in July that permanent rocket sites would be destroyed. The dawn of a new age in aerial warfare, of country-to-country ballistic missiles, had begun. Unlike the reaction to the doodlebugs, shot down by anti-aircraft shell and fighter cannon, this time there was no defence.

It was hoped that one of the benefits of the Arnhem campaign, which began nine days later, would be to seal off the rocket sites. The failure of that campaign and the knowledge that the army would have to wait until spring to launch a major offensive meant that Bomber Command would now be required to contain and demoralise the enemy. Until then it had seemed that the war might be over by Christmas. In fact imminent German collapse had appeared so certain to Allied staffs in August that a plan codenamed En-Dor had been set up to process released RAF and army POWs as quickly as possible.[3] The first indications of that expected flood had been the return of the first RAF and Commonwealth Air Force POWs from Germany, who had been deemed by the Red Cross too sick to remain behind the wire.

Among them was pilot Nathaniel Flekser, a lieutenant in the South African Air Force, who had assisted in digging the tunnels

for the Great Escape from Stalag Luft III in March, then had developed a duodenal ulcer, his weight falling from 205 lbs to 136. He had been handed a *Heimkehrberechtigung bejaht* (Repatriation approved) slip by the Germans, told he was among a batch of 200 prisoners being exchanged with similarly sick German POWs in Britain, and taken to a special unit near Dresden. 'Sick and wounded prisoners began to arrive from POW camps all over Germany,' he later recorded. 'Several were carried on stretchers. In all about 200 were assembled ... some suffered from burns which had melted the flesh of their hands and faces, their lidless eyes sightless.'[4] In early September the party of home-bound prisoners were taken by train to Stettin, then by ferry to neutral Sweden and finally were shipped to England in the SS *Drottingholm*, accompanied to a point mid-way across the North Sea by a German destroyer which then handed over its charges to a warship of the Royal Navy to 'raucous yelps from their horns' rather than gunfire. Back in London Flekser, who had been shot down in 1942, discovered he had £13,000 in back pay and decided to take a suite at the Savoy. It was there he learned all about the new V-weapons, from a WAAF radar operator on leave he met in the bar. He wrote:

> We ate a pleasant dinner in the elegant Savoy Grill Room. Agnes was sharing a pokey room in Soho with two girls. With as much nonchalance as I could muster, I said, 'You are welcome to share my suite.' She looked at me, green eyes probing, hesitated and said, 'Thank you, I would like that.' And so began a whirlwind romance, a time of touching, a time of joy, a time of regeneration. That night as Agnes lay in my arms I experienced, for the first time, a nightmare which was to return for many years. I dreamt I was back in Stalag Luft III, digging an escape tunnel. The acrid smell from the smoke of the lamp mingled with the must of the soil and irritated my nose. I sneezed and heard the roar as an avalanche of sand ripped down and engulfed me ... I awoke shivering.

Over the next few days as the V-weapons continued to fall, Flekser's rehabilitation continued, his WAAF girlfriend introducing him

> to London's monuments, museums, galleries and places steeped in history. We fed the pigeons in the shadow of Nelson's Column, strolled through Hyde Park and punted on the Thames in the late summer sunshine. The theatres were in full swing, featuring artists who I had listened to on records and read about. We saw Noël Coward in *Blythe Spirit*, Gracie Fields and Vera Lynn in variety shows … we danced in the Savoy ballroom to the music of my favourite jazz band – Carol Gibbons and his Savoy Orchestra.'[5]

It was a long way from Stalag Luft III in Silesia, despite the sound of V-2 rockets arriving, including one on the Thames in September which blew out the windows of the Savoy Grill Room for the seventh time in the war.

F/O Douglas Jennings was another airman enjoying leave in London, who also had just returned to freedom. Jennings, a 22-year-old bomb aimer, had been liberated by the American Army near Liège after being hidden by the Resistance since he had been shot down on 21 June on his way with 57 Sqn to bomb the Wesseling oil refinery near Cologne. After a couple of days in Paris he was put aboard a Dakota carrying the King's Messenger. He remembers:

> I was flown back to Hendon from Paris on 17 September 1944, the day Arnhem began and of course all the newspapers were full of it. I was taken straight off to MI9 at the Marylebone Hotel for debriefing. There was a lot of damage in London from the V-weapon offensive and while I was on survivor's leave at my mother's home in Pinner I heard a V-2 actually explode about a quarter of a mile away. There was a huge bang as it arrived without any kind of warning and it knocked down a block of flats. I think people had the attitude, 'If it's going to happen to you, it's going to happen.'[6]

Sgt Laurie Boness, an evader since being shot down in late June bombing a V-1 site at Prouville in France – his first operational trip – was in London after being flown back from Paris the same way as F/O Jennings, but two days before. He savoured each

moment from stepping out of the Dakota at Hendon with other RAF aircrew now safe from the Gestapo.

> Shortly after landing we passed an American PX van where doughnuts were being sold. They smelt so good and were particularly inviting because we had had no breakfast that morning and it was almost noon. 'Why don't you buy some?' asked the girl in the van. We quickly explained our situation – importantly, that we had no money. She disappeared for a few minutes then returned and handed each of us two doughnuts. They were delicious.[7]

That night the young flight engineer, wearing a brand-new uniform stuffed with back pay and adjusting to hearing the unexplained boom of V-2s, was in a hostel in London specially set up by the Air Ministry for returned evaders. He remembered:

> Late in the evening a group of us went for a quick drink in a nearby London pub. In returning to the hostel we somehow missed a turning . . . suddenly one of our group panicked. 'We're lost! We're lost!' he shouted and big tears rolled down his cheeks . . . fortunately a local man, realising who we were, and having overheard the incident, walked up to the distressed fellow, put his arm on his shoulder and said, 'Don't worry, lad, I know where you are heading for,' and guided us back to the hostel.[8]

Within days Sgt Boness was back at his base at Waddington near Lincoln and reporting to 'Dixie' Dean, the engineer leader of 463 RAAF Sqn he had last seen before he took off for Prouville. 'I walked into his office, saluted, went to the operations board and picking up a piece of chalk wrote my name on it once again. Everyone laughed,' he remembered. 'Re-chalking my name up on that squadron ops board was one of the greatest moments of my life.'[9]

But others returning from life under the jackboot found their welcome could have a bitter twist. Sgt George Stewart, a 50 Sqn bomb aimer, was the sole survivor of his crew. He had clipped on his chute as flak began pinging through his Lancaster over Bochum in June 1943. Seconds later the aircraft exploded, hurling the seven

men into the night sky. Only Sgt Stewart was wearing a chute. He says:

> I got a big wound in the front of my head which left an indentation. When I got back home after being repatriated I was only about ten minutes in front of an RAF debriefing officer and he didn't want to know anything. I could have been the bravest man in the crew and he didn't want to know what happened. He just said, 'Oh, you got a direct hit, right.' I was bitterly disappointed by his attitude. He just didn't want to know and I thought: I'm just another number.[10]

THERE was a sense of regrouping in Bomber Command as the weeks unfolded in September, a time for reflection among senior officers after the successes of the summer in which the bomber boys had supported the invasion by knocking out Transportation Plan targets to keep the German Army bottled up in Normandy, by mounting the offensive against oil targets, by directly assisting the armies in the field in taking out strong points, and even by blitzing the Reich's cities at night to keep the night fighters and flak guns in Germany. It was a period of both change and preparation before the bomber crews were launched into the final assault of flak, fighter and the multi-coloured fury of German targets. On twenty-four days out of thirty there were raids by the heavies of Bomber Command, either in daylight or at night, sometimes by as many as nearly 900 on one target.

Tours ended and tours began with fresh blood for the new time of testing. F/O Vic Farmer, the 550 Sqn navigator whose crew raided a German fighter airfield before Arnhem, was one of those now released from operations who had reasons to be grateful to a pilot for bringing them through. He had met his new skipper at Heavy Conversion Unit after he and the rest of the crew refused to fly with the previous one because he had ground-looped his aircraft on landing. F/O Farmer remembers:

> I was the first to meet him, F/O Rhys Thomas. My heart sank. He had a paunch, a twitch in the eye and he was over 30. My first

> impressions proved unfounded. He was an ex-flying instructor, a competent pilot and in fact a superb bomber pilot. He didn't go rushing into anything and as an ex-instructor it was ingrained in him to teach people every detail had to be right before taking off. On two occasions in my opinion F/O Thomas saved us and at the end of our tour he was awarded the DFC, thoroughly deserved especially as he elected to fly operationally, a risk he could have avoided at his age by continuing as a flying instructor. The crew referred to him as Skip; in fact we never knew his first name. We went to Zoutelande on 17 September to complete our tour and the crew broke up as we went our separate ways. We never met again as a complete crew.[11]

There was little opportunity at this time on the RAF bomber bases, which stretched from Cambridgeshire to County Durham, for pilots or their crews to relax. Little chance to laze in station intelligence sections leafing through the latest reports on Luftwaffe techniques, barely time for gunners to carry out their daily inspections at dispersals surrounded by fading wild flowers, or for flight engineers to compare notes in their sections about fuel and engine management which might just save their lives.

When an opportunity arose to get off station as operations were scrubbed it was snatched. Sgt Frank Jones, a 20-year-old flight engineer who was also coming to the end of a tour, had the means of making a quick dash to the pub from his 76 Sqn base in East Yorkshire. He remembers:

> We were two crews to a hut and the navigator in the crew we shared with had a Norton motorbike which we won on the toss of a coin when he was screened. We used it to ferry ourselves backwards and forwards to the pubs in Holme-on-Spalding-Moor and Howden. One night coming back with one of the gunners I think we both fell asleep on the bike because we woke up in a duck pond near where the road curved. The bike started again at first try and we got back to camp, though soaking wet.[12]

Throughout September there was the now routine tabulation of

attrition at the RAF accounts centre at Uxbridge, where daily reports of missing aircrew were filed, as the pressure on Bomber Command to keep squeezing the enemy continued. And occasionally the drama of the war would be brought home to the majority of the personnel on the bases, the 1,500 ground staff at each airfield who never flew, as Lancasters or Halifaxes crashed within sight of them.

Sgt Jack Morley, a wireless operator on 101 Sqn, remembers such a day that month at Ludford Magna, when erks and WAAFs saw three Lancasters crash-land within minutes. The aircraft were returning from a raid on German strong points at Le Havre with a full bomb load because poor visibility and the possibility of hitting Allied troops had caused the master bomber to abandon the raid. Sgt Morley remembers:

> We were first back in the Ludford circuit in the late evening and flying control ordered us to land on a particular runway, 02 I believe. We reported back to them that we could see the windsock and it would have meant landing downwind instead of into it. There then came a voice which we knew was the station commander's saying, 'You will land as ordered.' We knew that with 13,000 lbs of bombs on board it was going to be practically impossible to stop. The skipper told us to take up crash positions. I moved to sit on the floor in front of the main spar with my hands round my head. We were sure we weren't going to make it with the wind behind us. The pilot landed in good time on the runway but could see we weren't going to stop before we ran out of concrete with the full bomb load on, so he ordered the undercarriage up. There was a horrible noise as the belly was being ripped away. A cloud of dust came up and there were sparks everywhere. I thought we were finished. There was a dip at the end of the runway and we came over the top of it, taking all the Fido pipes with us, and crashed down the other side, coming to rest in the bottom just behind the Black Horse pub in Ludford village. By that time the floor of the aircraft had gone.

As we got out we could see another wrecked bomber* wavering on the top of the bank as if it was going to come down on us. The two gunners and me were the first out, as quickly as we could. Don Dale, the mid-upper gunner, was first to go and I followed him. Ginger Congerton, the rear gunner, had done what he was supposed to do by turning his .50 guns to the side and trying to roll out above them. But he was 6 feet 2 inches tall and his harness got caught on the guns, so while this other bomber was still wobbling above us Don and me ran up and I banged the quick release on his harness for him to drop down. The three of us then took off for flying control without waiting for anyone else. We had already had our cup of tea before the rest of the crew turned up in the crash tender. The aircraft was completely wrecked and struck off. It wasn't until the next day we realised how close we were to the Black Horse. A little plaque was put up in the pub years later saying what happened.

Another aircraft also crashed on the aerodrome at about the same time that evening. It ended up in the area of a building known as the White House at the other end of the village beyond our own pub, the White Hart. We lost three aircraft due to the station commanding officer. Shortly afterwards he was moved away.[13]

THE intense effort on a variety of targets throughout September now meant an increasing group of aircrew were experiencing war from a new viewpoint: that of the fugitive from the enemy. As was evidenced by the establishment of the sizeable London hostel for returned evaders, the chances of an airman avoiding capture had soared throughout the summer as Bomber Command was called on to raid targets in France and the Allied armies pushed forward, liberating previously occupied territories. By the early

* This was the aircraft of F/Lt Al Massheder, a Texan serving in the RCAF, who also had to retract his undercarriage to bring his aircraft to a halt. The aircraft, B-Beer, like F/O Harris's Z-Zebra, was also damaged beyond repair, and again the crew were fortunately uninjured.

autumn even airmen downed on raids in Germany itself stood a fighting chance of avoiding capture. Several did so after a raid on the Dortmund-Ems Canal on the 23rd of the month.

The canal, which carried much of the Ruhr's war material along its 165-mile length from the river port of Dortmund to the North Sea city of Emden, had vulnerable points where the water was carried over long aqueducts and so was judged a prize target by the Air Ministry. But it was always a costly one. It had been attacked four times beginning in 1940 when F/Lt 'Babe' Learoyd had won a VC for leading an assault which saw one-fifth of the bombers destroyed by flak units in the fields lining the canal. In September 1943, 617 Sqn – whose aircrew had seen nearly half of their comrades vanish in the raid on the Ruhr Dams four months before – lost another five crews of the eight that set out to try to demolish the banks of the canal at Ladbergen with a crude 12,000-lb blast bomb.

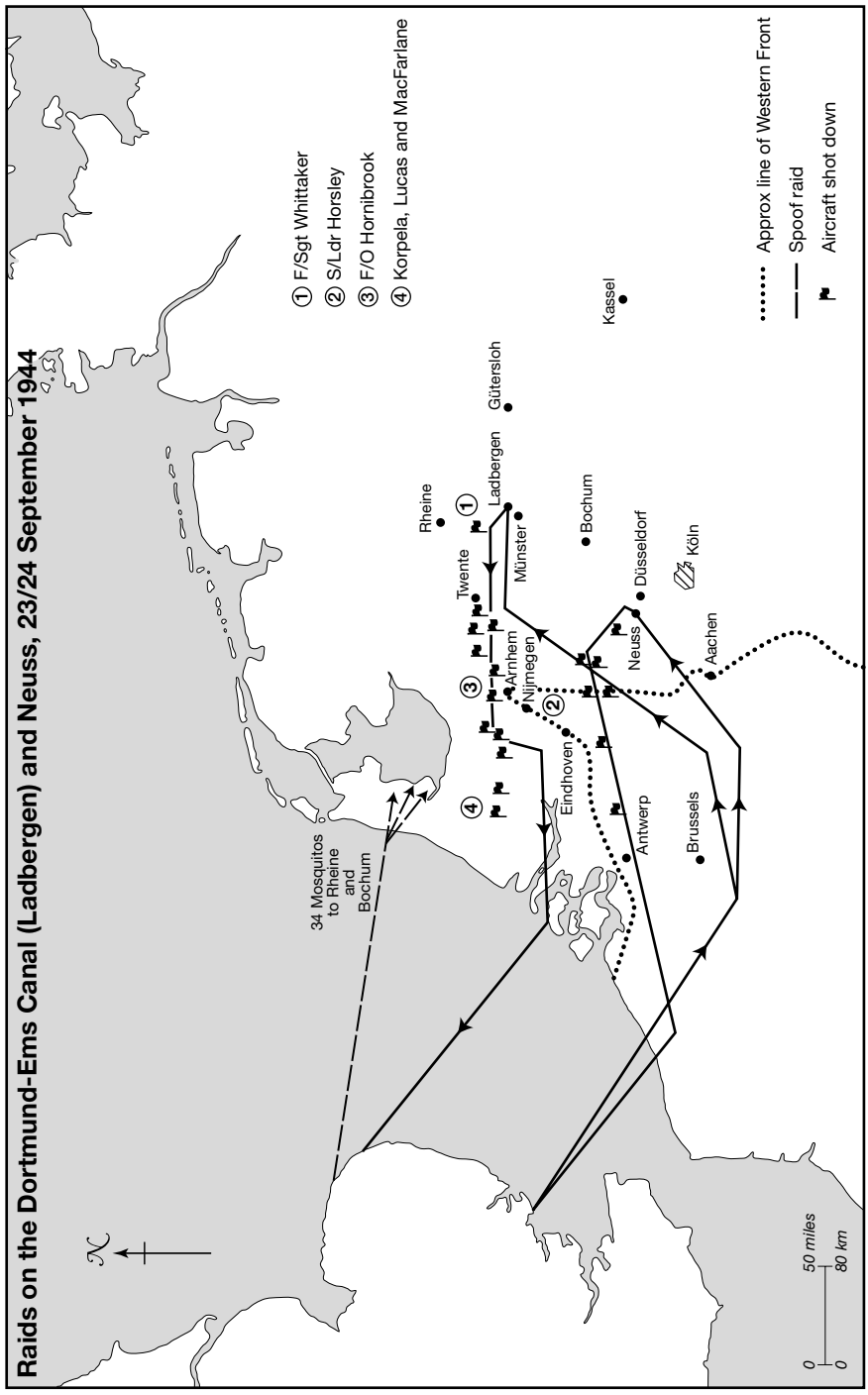
A year later the Dambusters were asked to try again in the same area north of Münster, and not far from the flat lands of Holland, where lay the aqueducts carrying the canal water in parallel branches. This time they were equipped with the 12,000-lb aerodynamic Tallboy bomb which Barnes Wallis had designed and the squadron had used to great effect bombing V-weapon targets in the summer. Their new leader, W/Cdr Willie Tait, would act as master bomber, usually known as MC, for a total force of 136 Lancasters from 5 Group. The force would include Lancasters from 9 Sqn, the only other squadron apart from 617 that had a bulged bomb bay on its aircraft allowing them to carry the Tallboy. Tait had just returned from leading an attack by 617 Sqn on the German battleship *Tirpitz* in Kaa Fjord in northern Norway, from a Russian Air Force base near Murmansk. The last of his crews were still arriving back at Woodhall Spa up to three days before the canal raid.

There was one huge problem in attacking the canal at Ladbergen. Only a few miles away lay a German night-fighter airfield at Hansdorf, near Münster. Any bombing of the canal would inevitably bring them into action, so 5 Group – whose plan it

was – briefed the crews of 107 of its Lancasters to bomb the Luftwaffe airfield at the same time as the attack opened at Ladbergen to prevent the *Nachtjäger* taking off. The raid was laid on for a night when most of the other groups of Bomber Command, 549 aircraft in all, were attacking the Ruhr port of Neuss, on the opposite side of the Rhine to Düsseldorf. It was hoped this air fleet to the south would attract most of the night fighters called to orbit their beacons across Germany. To compound the confusion for the Luftwaffe controller, forty-two Mosquitos of the Light Night Striking Force would attack Bochum in the Ruhr at the same time. A spoof raid would also be carried out by a small force of Mosquitos on Rheine, a few miles to the north of Ladbergen. All the attacks were timed to open at 9.20 p.m.[14]

The operation, like most laid on by Bomber Command at this stage of the war, lacked nothing by way of bluff, counter-bluff and downright devious planning and most of the scheming worked well, the much larger raid, on Neuss, creating considerable damage in dock and factory areas for the loss of only seven aircraft because few fighters reached the inland port on time in the German controller's confusion. But as so often happened it was the most imponderable, the target-area weather, that spoiled the carefully laid plans made hours before and now cost the lives of crews on the Dortmund-Ems Canal raid.

Bomb aimers of the Dambuster squadron Lancasters who arrived over the area of Ladbergen where they expected to see the aqueducts carrying the canal, met the kind of conditions that had prevented a successful attack by their squadron in the past: thick cloud. In this case it blocked any sighting of red spot fires that had been dropped by Mosquitos. F/Sgt Peter Whittaker, a mid-upper gunner in the crew of F/Lt Geoffrey Stout, one of those who had just returned to Woodhall Spa from Russia, later reported to intelligence officers: 'Over the target there was 10/10s cloud. We were to bomb on the red marker, but after tooling around for about five minutes the MC told us to try and make individual runs over the area to try to identify the target . . . we were unable to locate the target and we received orders to abandon the search and return


Raids on the Dortmund-Ems Canal (Ladbergen) and Neuss, 23/24 September 1944
① F/Sgt Whittaker
② S/Ldr Horsley
③ F/O Hornibrook
④ Korpela, Lucas and MacFarlane
34 Mosquitos to Rheine and Bochum
Rheine
Twente
Ladbergen
Gütersloh
Münster
Arnhem
Nijmegen
Eindhoven
Antwerp
Brussels
Bochum
Kassel
Düsseldorf
Neuss
Köln
Aachen
Approx line of Western Front
Spoof raid
Aircraft shot down
0 50 miles
0 80 km

home.'[15] Fortunately others of 617 and 9 Sqns, who like Stout had descended to 7,000 feet to try to find the red flare, did spot a marker and two dropped their Tallboys accurately enough to breach each branch of the canal and others of Main Force then cratered the area, which would make repairs difficult.

But the fatal delay as most of the Lancasters milled around the area of the aqueducts searching for the TIs gave the night fighters time to arrive. The raid on the Luftwaffe airfield of Hansdorf nearby had suffered for lack of a master bomber, who failed to reach the target. There was intense highly accurate light flak hosing in flashing white streams across the airfield and only twenty-three aircraft attacked, most in fact bombing Münster itself. The diversion to keep the night fighters away from the Dortmund-Ems Canal had failed and the Luftwaffe now had its revenge. The night fighters were equipped with Schrage Musik, a development in aerial gunnery which consisted of two machine guns, or more usually cannons, installed in the roof of a twin-engined German night fighter at an angle of 70 to 80 degrees. It allowed the night fighter to creep slowly into the blind spot below the RAF machine and fire, usually with tracerless ammunition, between the glowing exhausts on either wing, thereby setting fire to a petrol tank. After a quick fatal burst the night fighter dived away from the roaring red and yellow glare of the now furiously burning bomber and looked for another victim in the blackness of the night. Schrage Musik accounted for most British bombers lost on night raids at this time and its use was never fully fathomed by the Air Ministry until the war was closing, though they realised by interrogating lucky crews who survived such attacks that aircraft were being fired on at a strange angle by unseen machines.

F/Lt Stout's aircraft became the Luftwaffe weapon's latest victim as he climbed away from the target and the later written report by F/Sgt Whittaker to intelligence officers makes it clear Schrage Musik was used although Whittaker, like the rest of Bomber Command's airmen, hadn't been told about the Luftwaffe's secret weapon. 'Shortly after leaving the target area I heard cannon shells hitting the plane, the intercom went dead and the

pilot started corkscrew action,' Whittaker reported. Crucially, he continued:

> I saw no enemy aircraft about, but also saw no flak. I think we were attacked from below.
>
> I climbed down from the turret, saw flames coming from the bomb bay and with the bomb aimer [F/O W. A. Rupert] went to the scene of the fire which had burst through the bomb inspection window and flames were licking into the fuselage. There was much smoke. I ran into the navigator [F/O Clyde Graham] who seemed to be terribly wounded – he was yelling and searching for parachutes at some of which he was tugging and pulling the rip grips. He ran forward and the bomb aimer handed me a large fire extinguisher which however did not function and there was nothing we could do.
>
> We went forward after putting on our parachutes and found the navigator had collapsed on the forward hatch. We pulled him on one side, freed the hatch, and after fixing a chute to him – he was now unconscious – pulled his ripcord and pushed him out. I spoke to the pilot as I passed him. I do not know whether he had been hit, but he seemed a bit strange. He was groping around for his parachute unsuccessfully and I went back to find one for him. I heard a yell and thinking he had found his chute I returned. As I started to ask the pilot about it he pushed me away and said, 'Get out!' As I baled out I could see two chutes below me.[16]

The aircraft had passed over the border with Holland, but F/Sgt Whittaker's traumas were to continue on the ground.

S/Ldr Hugh Horsley was the skipper of a 61 Sqn Lancaster lost, K-King. He also was an unwitting victim of Schrage Musik, though in fact, unlike most others, shortly before reaching the Dortmund-Ems Canal. After evading and getting back to Britain he reported:

> We did not bomb because on our fourth leg we were hit, probably by flak (which was not seen). Both port engines were put out of commission and the aircraft could not be controlled . . . I gave the

> order to put on parachutes and turned the aircraft west, heading for the English lines. I commanded the crew to jump, but at 6,000ft turned the aircraft east heading back for the German positions in case the aircraft should come down on British lines. At 4,000ft I went down to the front hatch to bale out . . . I landed safely, but I am not sure where, I believe it to be due west of Duisberg, west of the River Meuse. I decided to make a North West course towards the British lines between Eindhoven and Nijmegen. After burying my parachute and harness I carried on until the next morning and finally reached British lines about 1920 hours on September 24.[17]

The keen and resourceful officer made the most of his trek through enemy territory. 'During my walk I made a recce of everything which might be of value to the army intelligence,' he reported, 'and gave details of results to various commands and intelligence officers and to Major Warren of the Inns of Court Regt, who was likely to make a recce of the area I traversed.' Horsley's 22-year-old flight engineer, P/O Charles Cawthorne, also evaded, narrowly avoiding capture by German troops. Back in Britain he reported:

> After giving the skipper his parachute I baled out and above I could see another parachute coming down. I landed heavily on my left knee and my parachute caught in some barbed wire and was billowing out as a big white cloud. This evidently attracted unfriendly attention because I heard people and dogs approaching and then some shots whistled in my direction. I abandoned my parachute and ran for it.
>
> Coming down I had more or less orientated myself by the river and gun flashes and so made off in a generally south west direction, I stopped for a breather after a couple of hours running, by which time my knee was giving me trouble. I had decided to stop in a ditch which had some straw in it and as I burrowed underneath I found another evader's parachute harness. It seemed wise to carry on a bit further. There were no woods or cover at all until finally I came to a barn at about 0400. Here I laid up. In the morning I heard voices, but shelling started in the area and drew the people

> away. After a time I came out of my hide and made a recce to try to fix my position. A few fields away some two truck loads of Germans were laying mines or doing some sort of wiring. I set off then down the road, but came on more Germans so returned to my barn.

P/O Cawthorne realised that German troops might soon enter the barn and even though it was now full daylight he would have to flee its beguiling security. To disguise his appearance he took off his white aircrew roll-neck sweater, soiled it with mud, and put it on again over his battledress. He found an old bucket in the barn, filled it with grass and walked out holding it, hoping he looked like a Dutch farm worker. 'I went off to the nearby village passing Germans and villagers with a "Ja",' he wrote. 'I nearly ran into a German tank.' After an hour and a half of walking, expecting to be found out at any moment, he came across a shack occupied by a young man and his mother. They hid him in a small plantation until the Germans left the area and a few hours later he was able to make contact with a British patrol.

> I was given the choice of waiting for the main body to come up or to go forward with the recce unit. I chose the latter and remained with them until September 24th. While with the British troops the villagers took me to be a Hun prisoner. They cheered the army and booed me. It would have been risky to have moved out alone, although when it was known I was RAF my popularity transcended that of the army![18]

From S/Ldr Horsley's crew two were killed, two became POWs and three evaded, the third being the rear gunner Sgt R. Hoskisson. Within days Horsley and Hoskisson were back with their squadron at Skellingthorpe, on the southern edge of Lincoln and within four months one of them was dead. On 1 February Horsley was taking off from Skellingthorpe's main runway for a raid on Siegen with Hoskisson and a new crew when the port outer of his Lancaster cut. He force-landed on the airfield, but

the aircraft caught fire. Before it exploded the injured Hoskisson escaped from the turret, a survivor again.[19]

For most crews whose aircraft were shot out of the sky by hunting *Nachtjäger* on the Ladbergen and Hansdorf operation on 23 September there was little chance to react before accurately aimed Schrage Musik cannon set wing tanks ablaze, rapidly ending in an explosion of orange and scarlet, killing all on board in an instant or tossing them out into the black sky without parachutes. For a few who did bale out and then evade, their attempts to get back to England would continue almost until the end of the war. One of them was F/O Oliver Korpela, a Canadian lumberjack. The 24-year-old 50 Sqn pilot had bombed the Dortmund-Ems Canal and was on his way back across Holland when his Lancaster appeared as a blip on a night-fighter radar screen. 'A cannon shell exploded in my aircraft setting it on fire,' he reported months later. 'I tried to corkscrew, but the aelirons had been shot away. I then tried to give the command to jump, but the intercom was out of action, so I signalled to the flight engineer (Sgt H. Macfarlane) to jump and then abandoned the aircraft.' In fact the bomb aimer, F/O Charles Lucas, whose position was over the forward escape hatch, had already baled out as whirling flame roared through the Lancaster and the intercom went dead. They were the only members of the crew to escape before the glowing, twisting wreckage hit the ground not far from the Zuider Zee twenty minutes before midnight. Korpela continued:

> I landed in some bushes close to Oudleusen. After burying my parachute and Mae West I started walking south, I came to a river and walked along the bank until I came to a dam which I managed to cross when the German sentry was not looking. I continued on my way until daylight when I found a hut in a field and tried to sleep. However, I was too cold so approached a farmhouse and after considerable difficulties made the farmer understand who I was. He took me in and gave me some food while his wife went and brought back five members of the Underground movement. Later a member of the Dutch police

> arrived and took me to a house in a field about two kilometres away where I stayed for six days.[20]

F/O Lucas had come down at Dalfsen, east of Zwolle. After burying his parachute he also made for a farmhouse, which he watched until daylight for any sign of the enemy before making himself known and being given food. 'About mid-day a Dutchman who spoke English was brought to me and I was told I would be helped and was advised not to make for the fighting at Arnhem,' he reported in his intelligence debriefing. 'That night I was taken to the house of a policeman, where I met my flight engineer, Sgt Macfarlane, with whom I remained until liberated. We remained here in hiding for eight weeks.'[21]

F/Sgt Whittaker, the 617 Sqn gunner shot down shortly after the raid began, discovered as he hit the ground that, like the unfortunate navigator F/O Graham, he also had been wounded, in the head and the right elbow. He later wrote:

> I decided to make for the south west [the Arnhem direction]. After about an hour I came to a farm at which I sought help. It was about 2300 by my watch. The door was opened by a young girl. My reception seemed a bit odd, but I was invited to come into the living room where there were some people. I was in my battledress and my air gunner insignia was clearly visible, also I said 'Englander'. While I was applying my field dressing to my elbow I noticed one of the men leave the room. It seemed to me that he might be off to fetch the Germans and I got up to leave too. The other man in the room got between me and the door and held me up with a pistol. I got him to look over his shoulder and at that moment kicked him hard in the stomach. While he was on the ground I grabbed his pistol and bolted. I ran and walked for a time, still heading south west, when a car came along heading for the farm I had left. From what I gathered later the farm in question was owned by noted NSB (Dutch Fascists) and quite possibly the car contained Germans fetched by the man who had left the house. I understand the family were 'taken care of' by the underground movement.[22]

F/Sgt Whittaker then found a farm building and fell asleep in straw, coming out the next day to the new farmhouse and 'receiving a very friendly welcome. I was given food and my wounds were dressed. A doctor was sent for. He did something to my arm. There was a crack and it was freed from the stiff, fixed position, so that the doctor could strap it up. I gather a shrapnel shard had hit the elbow, also the doctor pulled a piece of splinter from my head.' A few days later a note was smuggled to Whittaker from F/O Rupert,* the bomb aimer in his crew, asking him to join him in his hiding place, a barn in the grounds of a large farm. There Whittaker witnessed a successful arms drop to the Dutch Resistance and was joined by three Arnhem evaders, two sergeant escapers from Stalag IVB near Munich and a private from a Polish tank division. Eventually he was told he was being moved, given a bike and 'went off in a convoy of some 80 to 90 Dutchmen on the run to a marsh in the middle of which was a small island where some sort of camp had been prepared. This camp was a kind of arsenal to which supplies were brought daily.' Inevitably such a large camp was surrounded by the Germans and Whittaker was handed over to the Gestapo. His ordeals and adventures before were nothing to what would happen to him over the next months and for F/O Korpela, F/O Lucas and Sgt Macfarlane too a new, strange, terrifying war was just beginning.

IN the days following the raid on the Dortmund-Ems Canal as WAAF interpreters examined reconnaissance pictures it was obvious it had been a great success. Two Tallboys of 617 Sqn had breached each branch of the canal and caused it to drain over a 6-mile stretch. The barges that had carried a succession of coal and iron ore to and from the Ruhr were now stuck. When the Germans finally repaired the embankments Bomber Command returned in

* All of Whittaker's crew survived with the exception of the pilot and the wounded navigator, F/O Graham – a general's son – who was found by Dutch Resistance men dead at the base of a tree through which he had fallen and hit the ground heavily.

February to drain the canal again. As Bomber Command turned once more to attacking German industry the Reich coal heaps grew higher as a result of its inability to move the fuel the war factories craved. Between August and February as coal production in the Ruhr fell from 10,417,000 tons to 4,778,000 tons actual coal stocks in the Ruhr rose by 415,000 tons to 2,217,000, much of it piled up uselessly for lack of the means to move it to the furnaces.[23] It was a sign of the total breakdown that would eventually overtake the Reich.

But the cost of canal raiding was always high and none more so than on the raid of 23 September. The chop rate had been eleven Lancasters, nearly 10 per cent of the Ladbergen force, including one of the Dambuster squadron's aircraft. The losses were felt most keenly at Skellingthorpe, where both 50 and 61 Sqns were based. Two of 50 Sqn's dispersals were empty the next day and so were four of 61 Sqn, which also lost three Lancasters attempting to bomb the canal and one on the Hansdorf raid.* The next night 50 and 61 Sqns each lost another aircraft on a raid on Calais. The crews of both squadrons were used to spending much of their time in Lincoln, the centre of which was just a short bus ride away from the airfield's main gate and the gaps were noticeable at the bar of their favourite drinking spot, the Saracen's Head Hotel, known as the Snake Pit to Bomber Command.

Within days new fresh-faced airmen arrived at guardrooms to fill the crew rosters. There was no shortage for what lay ahead. A profusion of aircrew was now available to Harris, the anxious search for replacements finally over as average losses fell to 1 per cent because of the Luftwaffe's decline as a result of a lack of fuel and materials, denied by the attacks of Bomber Command and the USAAF. Sgt Boness, for instance, remained on 463 Sqn, but

* This was the aircraft of 20-year-old Australian F/O Albert Hornibrook. The crew, with the exception of the rear gunner, were lost when the aircraft crashed into the Waal. F/O Hornibrook's elder brother, Kevin, had been killed in a Berlin raid in August 1943, saving the life of his bomb aimer. See author's work, *Bomber Boys*.

never took off to engage the enemy again because so many complete crews were now arriving, his operational experience for the war remaining at half a trip. There were now so many pilots docking from the training schools of the Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Canada that there were too few crews to go around and many would-be bomber skippers found themselves remustered. Bomb aimer Sgt Frank Tolley, who was at an operational training unit in September before finally joining 625 Sqn, remembers: 'Our flight engineer, Joe Platt, was a pilot. When he finished his pilot's course there was a surplus of them and he like a number of others was sent down to St Athan to do an abridged engineer's course. He was a very good flight engineer, he could almost tell you to a pint how much petrol we had. He was a bit miffed about not having his own crew, though.'[24] The result of now having an influx of pilot-engineers also dramatically altered the futures of those flight engineers already in training. Many found their courses cut short as they were transferred to the army, to make up shortages caused by post D-Day casualties.

The wealth of aircrew was matched by an abundance of aircraft available to Harris now that the Luftwaffe was in retreat and he was no longer playing catch-up as the scythe was swung nightly among his squadrons. The commander who always believed the war could be won by bombing alone was itching to return to hitting German industry in the cities of the Reich. Since 1 April it had been the staff of Dwight D. Eisenhower, head of the invasion armies, who had called the shots at Bomber Command. As Arnhem came and went and the armies' needs for heavy tactical support lessened there were various factions putting forward different agendas for what direction the now huge RAF and Commonwealth bomber force should take.

Two days after the Dortmund-Ems Canal raid control of Bomber Command was handed back by Eisenhower to Sir Charles Portal, the Chief of the Air Staff, and thereby to Harris. Harris did what he always intended and returned to raiding the Reich's industrial base in its cities, to destroy again what the Germans had managed to repair in the interim of the bomber boys supporting the

invasion armies. 'I was seriously alarmed by the prospect of what the enemy might have been able to do during this six months respite,' Harris explained in his post-war memoirs. 'It was, moreover, a period of critical importance when the enemy was getting into production a whole range of new weapons from jet-propelled aircraft to submarines which could recharge their batteries under water.'[25]

There had been many changes in Bomber Command since last he had conducted a campaign against German conurbations. Not least that techniques had improved so much single groups were now able to operate almost as independent air forces, carrying out devastating attacks on one key community at the same time as the rest of Bomber Command hit another Reich industrial city many miles away. Two aerial armies in particular, 5 Group and 3 Group, demonstrated in October how effective they now were with their own individual style of attacks. They each raided Bremen and Bonn, burning out the heart of both cities. Among the aircrew carrying out the raids there would be the usual tales of tragedy amid the awesome terrible triumph of turning the Nazi dream to ashes.